

Beth Forbes  
ACE Professional Award  
June, 2020

When I look at the list of attendees, I am disappointed as you all are that we are not meeting together, but I do welcome you into my home! However, we in ACE have been socializing from a distance for many years. I always enjoy when my ACE colleagues reach out to me for advice or to share expertise at any time. We are not often in the same room, but we are often in similar situations and I have learned much from my ACE colleagues, many whom I count as great friends.

I can remember the first ACE conference I attended now 20 years ago. I immediately found a kinship with this group of people who were all working in similar roles. If this is your first conference, I hope that you will reach out to those you “meet from a distance” and stay in touch.

I have listened to many colleagues whom I greatly respect as they gave this speech. I never thought that I would be called on to provide my own thoughts in this manner, and I am humbled to now be among the many thought leaders who have taught me so much. Thank you to those who nominated me and supported me for this award.

Today I'd like to share what has been my passion for the past few years and that is public engagement specifically with regard to science and agriculture.

I can remember being in a meeting at Purdue and discussing why it is that so many people are dismissive of science-based information. For many in the room, the answer was “they just don't understand the science: they need more education.” To which, I shared some thoughts from one of my mentors who many of you know – Chris Sigurdson. He used to say “You can't educate the public. They don't want to be students and they're not paying tuition!”

So I turned to science communication research, to help explain this complex problem.

As it turns out, people disregard science information for many reasons. It may go against values that they hold dear; they may mistrust scientists and the corporations that fund science research; they may hold religious, political or cultural beliefs that differ from science; or they may just feel that science isn't reliable – how many times have we all seen conflicting news stories with differing scientific advice?

At around that same time, I was approached by one of the associate deans regarding our students' Ag Week activities. A cartoonist for the student newspaper took the opportunity to poke fun at the ag kids – some of whom were in cow costumes looking more like they were at a Halloween party or a barn dance than part of a learning opportunity on a college campus.

I remember telling him that when our students were out “advocating for agriculture” they were not adequately prepared for truly engaging with their university peers. We all avoid difficult conversations. But this generation avoids conversations in general – they text, email or on social media. Social media is really a poor arena for engaging on controversial issues. It’s an echo chamber where we seek people similar to ourselves, and usually end up preaching to the choir.

From that meeting was born an idea to train ag students not in advocacy but in engagement.

Now some would say that we land-grant institutions have been engaging with the public since our beginnings. But, I say while we have been sharing university knowledge with the public, we have not always truly engaged. That requires dialogue where we listen as well as share; where we are open to the public’s ideas and willing to find common ground from which to develop solutions to problems.

At Purdue we formed a team, including both ag comm faculty and professional staff, and other experts. At that time we found no existing program that encompassed the many factors that go into engaging on science topics – so we created our own. ACE members Mark Tucker and Abigail Borron now at Georgia were among those of us who formed “Issues 360” to train students in how to engage on controversial issues. Others on the team include animal scientist Marcos Fernandez whom some of you may know and Linda Pfeiffer, ag com professor of science communication.

The idea was to create an experience that prepared students in how to listen; think critically; manage conflict and emotions; understand the media’s role in controversial issues; and how to have difficult conversations -- among other skills.

We just completed working with our 7<sup>th</sup> group of Issues 360 fellows as we call them. We meet with them regularly for a year, which we find is about the right amount of time for them to absorb the ideas associated with science engagement. Some come in skeptical and we ask them not to judge the program until they have completed it. We generally have a small group of students – around 20 – so that they can build trust within their group. We attract students from across the college of agriculture so that we can have a group with diverse beliefs and backgrounds. We also require them to complete an engagement project.

Many in agriculture say “we just need to tell the public our story.” I say no. I tell students and others that we have to bring the public into the story of agriculture. They have to see themselves as part of agriculture – not separate from it. We have to be people they can relate to – parents, and consumers who also want safe and healthy food. It’s not about how well agriculture feeds the world, it’s about how well they and agriculture can feed their families or save the environment.

It’s always great to see the growth in the Issues 360 students. Our research on the students indicates that they do increase in competency in many key skills important to engagement. And

are often surprised what they learn when they have real conversations with people who think differently than them.

Ironically, engagement can also make you a better advocate for agriculture. One of our fellows won the national FFA extemporaneous speaking competition a couple years ago. Just this past spring, one of our students won the American Farm Bureau National Collegiate Discussion Meet. The Issues 360 Fellows are taking these skills into careers in the ag industry and in ag policy sectors.

Issues 360 is not our only effort. We have added courses on science communication and engagement that are taken by students across the university. We work not only with undergrad students, but with graduate students. New Extension educators are trained as well. And we are conducting research to better understand how to engage with the public.

We would be happy to share what we are doing at Purdue with any of our colleagues to help give you ideas about ways you might improve engagement efforts for your campus or organization.

Thank you again for this wonderful recognition and opportunity. Have a great conference!