

The Agricultural Education Life

by John Ricketts

On those days when I used to wake up early to feed hay while the ground was still hard, and then head off to fix fence until lunch time, followed by an afternoon of working cattle, it was easy to see why living a life of agriculture is endearing to so many people across this country! Growing up and working on the family farm in Middle Tennessee provided some of the most rewarding experiences of my life. However, there is another awesome agricultural way of life – the job of an agriculture teacher. Living the life of an agriculture teacher has provided me just as many if not more rewards than did those glorious days on the farm. Ag teachers, as many of us affectionately refer to ourselves, are rewarded every day with a “satisfying career” in agriculture. A satisfying career in agriculture could be defined as a career (1) that you love, (2) that allows you to live comfortably, and (3) that allows for several opportunities for advancement. As I recruit students for a career in agricultural education, these three points (not the only good reasons to be an ag teacher) seem to be the ones that spark the most interest among potential University of Georgia Agricultural Education majors.

A Job You Can Love

One of the first things that is important to relay to students considering a career in agricultural education is the importance of having a career that you can wake up to every day and love. Have you ever dreamed

of having a job that you love? Let me just tell you, “life is good when you enjoy your job.” I was an Agriculture teacher for several years, and I am convinced it is the best career you can have. Many times it is just downright fun. No day is ever the same, and the energy gleaned from students is contagious. Whether you become a Young Farmer teacher helping students and members of the community with beef herd problems, or a Horticulture instructor training students for a competition in Floriculture judging, it is easy to love a job that combines working with people and working with agriculture.

A Comfortable Living

The next point that is important to share with students considering a career in agricultural education is that teaching is also a viable career option in terms of financial security. I know you are not going to build any Trump Towers on an agriscience instructor salary, but in many states and especially in my state, Georgia, the paycheck is an excellent recruiting tool for a career in agricultural education.

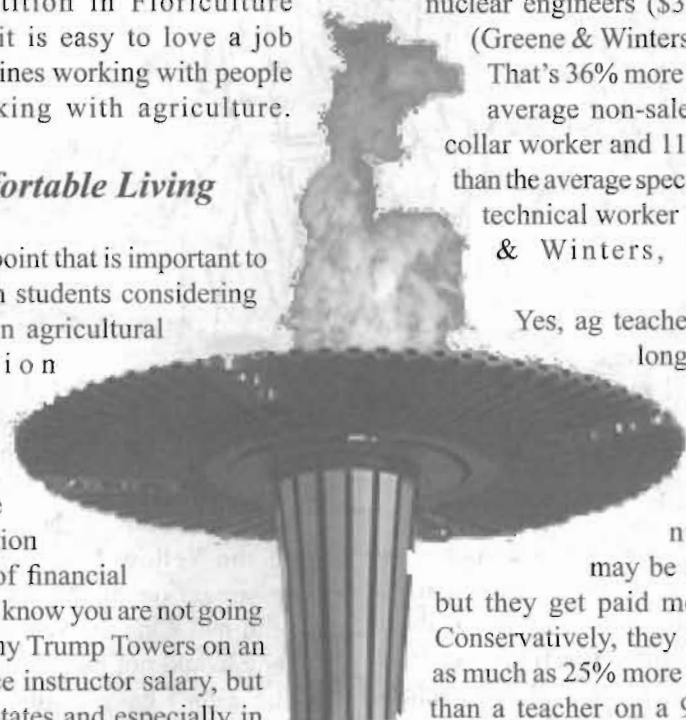
Not that money is everything, but Agricultural Education is a career that offers very adequate salary ranges. You could start right out of college with salaries over \$40,000

per year in Georgia. If you compare that number to the median annual earnings of the average American, 25 years of age or older (WikiAnswers, 2008), which is \$32,000 per year, you can begin to see the financial adequacy of ag teaching. In fact, the average public school teacher’s hourly pay (\$34.06/hour) is higher than the average biologist (\$28.07/hr), mechanical engineer (\$29.76/hr), or chemist (\$30.68/hr) and is actually competitive with computer scientists (\$32.86/hr), dentists (\$35.51/hr), and nuclear engineers (\$36.16/hr) (Greene & Winters, 2005).

That’s 36% more than the average non-sales white collar worker and 11% more than the average specialty and technical worker (Greene & Winters, 2007).

Yes, ag teachers work longer hours so these

numbers may be skewed, but they get paid more too. Conservatively, they get paid as much as 25% more per year than a teacher on a 9-month contract, but in situations where ag teachers are paid for extended day activities and/or supplements the percentage rises. Salaries can climb by the thousands during a career as an Agriculture teacher, based on further degrees and/or years experience. The benefits package associated with working for the school system is also



another advantage. Almost everyone would agree that teachers have better health and retirement benefits than other professionals. You would be hard-pressed to find another career with benefits that allow you to take such good care of your family.

Opportunities for Advancement

Agricultural Education is a career, not just a job. As an Agriculture teacher you can advance your position with continued education such as a Masters degree, a Specialist degree, or maybe even a PhD. In fact, online education programs offered by universities these days allow you to acquire an advanced degree while keeping your current position. These advanced degrees put more money in your pocket, but more importantly they open doors such as school/county/district administration, working for departments of education, teaching at the college level, or entrepreneurship as an educational consultant, etc. The possibilities are endless.

Helpful Hints

As an ag teacher you have the ability to influence your students and their career decisions. Do you love your job? I know teaching has a unique set of challenges, but don't all jobs? If you love your job, then let your students know through your words, but also through your actions. A study by Park and Rudd (2005) identified a list of specific encouraging practices [actions] that agricultural educators can employ to assist students in discovering the *joys and discomforts* of the agricultural education life (See Figure 1).

So, on those days when you wake up early to get to school before the rest of the teachers to check on the greenhouse or the pigs in the barn make up your mind to find some future ag teachers for the profession. When you close the door to your office to put the finishing touches on your lesson plans for the day, remember the many positive aspects of your job and share them with your students. Agricultural education is in dire need of motivated and competent young professionals to provide agricultural education to the next generation. This article tried to present a practical

set of reasons for teaching, but the most important reason to teach is to make a difference in the lives of the young people you work with. The agriculture teacher is second only to mom and dad in terms of the level of influence they have on students. Use your influence wisely and be thankful for the agricultural education life.

References

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- Have a program for students rather than just a class to take
- Serve as a positive example and role model for teaching
- Encourage student involvement in FFA
- Exhibiting a positive attitude about teaching agriculture
- Demonstrate your enjoyment of teaching agriculture
- Take time, show interest, and care for students
- Gain students' respect
- Conduct a comprehensive (FFA, SAE, Class/lab) program
- Provide lots of leadership development opportunities
- Visit students
- Be prepared to teach students each day
- Keep current with resources and technology
- Care for students and their personal goals
- Show students the "fun" in agriscience teaching

Figure 1. Practices for encouraging students to become agricultural educators (Park & Rudd, 2005, p. 87).



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