

**OPINIONS OF INSTRUCTORS, PRACTITIONERS, & ALUMNI CONCERNING
CURRICULAR REQUIREMENTS OF AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATION
STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA**

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Abstract

Since the debut of the University of Florida's agricultural communication program in 1990, no study had been conducted to determine whether the curriculum adequately prepared graduates for the agricultural industry. The purpose of this study was to determine skills and knowledge needed by graduates of the University of Florida's agricultural communication program for successful professional service in fields related to agricultural communication. Personal interviews were conducted with six instructors of the program's required journalism and communication courses, four instructors of the required agricultural communication courses, 14 agricultural communication practitioners in Florida, and six alumni of the agricultural communication program. All groups said instruction about Florida agriculture on a broad level (including commodities, trade/economics and policy/law) was important. However, all said that communication skills were more important than agricultural knowledge. All groups said students must have versatile communication skills and learn to network with others. Instructors and alumni emphasized in-depth communication courses. Practitioners and alumni stressed desktop publishing. Instructors and practitioners underscored internships and training in issues management. Only instructors emphasized electronic media/inter-net. Incorporation of these findings into the curriculum will help ensure that students graduate equipped to excel in their careers.

Never has the need been greater for connecting the work of the academy to the social and environmental challenges beyond the campus (Boyer, 1990). Unless colleges nationwide keep abreast of the changing needs of society when preparing curricula, graduates will not be prepared to assume the essential roles for which they were educated and are needed (Erpelding & Mugler, 1987). Because the food, agriculture, and natural resources field is dynamic, curriculum needs to be reviewed often to meet the demands of evolving technical information, technology, changing demographics, dwindling resources, and the occupational requirements of the discipline (McAlpine 1994; Wrye & Terry, 1993).

Competencies needed by an agricultural communicator have changed with technology and job requirements, indicating a need to examine the curriculum to make it applicable to students and their future employers. Given the changing face of agriculture, an inspection of the University of Florida's undergraduate agricultural communication curriculum (established in 1990) will help ensure that students graduate with knowledge and skills that Florida's agricultural industries require. Several curriculum review studies have been conducted for agricultural communication (e.g. Bailey-Evans, 1994; Miller, 1973; Terry & Bailey-Evans, 1995; Terry, Lockaby, & Bailey-Evans, 1995; Terry et al., 1994). It is, however, important to know which combination of qualifications is

unique to Florida, since answers to curricular questions must be institution specific (Erven, 1987).

Examination of the competencies needed by professional agricultural communicators will help planners design curricula that enable graduates to be more competitive in the marketplace. Students should be qualified to enter the workplace upon graduation and to excel in their careers. Curriculum planning should involve all who are affected by the program (Diamond, 1989; Sledge et al., 1987). Thus, teachers, students, administrators, employers, and employees should participate in planning and evaluation. All five have essential roles for input, development, acceptance, and outcome of curricular revitalization efforts (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1978).

Duley, Jensen, and O'Brien (1984) wrote that the recognition of agricultural communication as an area of study at the university level began when colleges of agriculture developed an extension function early in the twentieth century. As of 1991, more than 30 agricultural communication programs existed in the United States (Doerfert & Cepica, 1991). Agricultural communication graduates learn to disseminate agricultural information to both rural and urban audiences through multiple media. The curriculum is intended to help graduates qualify for a wide range of job opportunities in the career field by providing them with varied course work. In 1990(b), Reisner noted that curricular designs were similar to those described in 1982 by Evans and Bolick.

Tucker and Paulson (1988) found that agricultural communication students were most interested in public relations, followed by radio/television production, although students expressed greater interest in agricultural classes than communication classes. Bowen and Cooper's 1989 study found that students perceived courses in journalism and communication to be more important than were agriculture or general education courses. Kroupa and Evans (1976)

showed that professional requirements of a particular communication job are more important than the major area of study in college in determining necessary skills and knowledge.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine skills and knowledge needed by graduates of the University of Florida's agricultural communication program for successful professional service in agricultural communication. Guiding questions for this study were as follows:

1. What knowledge and skills related to agricultural communication do University of Florida faculty in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication and the College of Journalism and Communications teach in the courses required of agricultural communication majors?
2. What knowledge and skills do practitioners believe are vital to effective work in agricultural communication?
3. What knowledge and skills do University of Florida agricultural communication alumni believe to be essential to their work in the field?
4. How can the University of Florida's agricultural communication program be modified to better equip students for agricultural communication careers?

Procedures

The research project was a qualitative study. The researcher selected participants for study based on what they could contribute to the understanding of the topic (Merriam, 1988; Moon, Dillon, & Sprenkle, 1990). Through purposive sampling, the researcher selected sample elements judged to be typical or representative of the population (Ary,

Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1990). Coffey (1987) said that curriculum designers must strike a compromise between the vision of the faculty at a particular institution, the wishes of the student, and the needs of the employer. Consequently, the population in this study consisted of instructors, practitioners, and alumni of agricultural communication in Florida to achieve triangulation. Triangulation increases the validity or “trustworthiness” of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988). Consistency in overall patterns of data from different sources “contributes significantly” to the credibility of the findings (Patton, 1980, p. 33 1).

Four instructors in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication taught required agricultural communication courses. Six instructors from the College of Journalism and Communications taught required communication courses. All were interviewed in person. Six of the 18 alumni of the University of Florida’s agricultural communication program were working in the field. The researcher was interested in the opinions of only these alumni because they alone could identify the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum in the field. All six participated in the study; half were interviewed in person, half by telephone.

About 20 practitioners presided on the board of directors of the Agriculture Institute of Florida; a sample of 14 was selected to represent the broad spectrum of Florida agriculture. (This group embodies the major agricultural organizations, corporations and agricultural support organizations in Florida.) All selected practitioners participated in the study. Because of distance and scheduling constraints, eight in-person and six telephone interviews occurred. When responses of the two groups were compared, no difference in interview quality, depth, or length emerged. Prior to interviews, a questionnaire and letter of intent were sent to all participants.

The standardized, open-ended, long interview schedule consisted of a set of questions pertaining

to agricultural communication professional competencies; questions were based on existing literature in the field. Methodical sampling using structured questions assured that data adequately represented the population being investigated (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

To establish content validity and face validity, a panel of eight faculty in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida reviewed the instrument. Pilot tests occurred with two agricultural communication instructors, journalism instructors, practitioners, and alumni. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. The researcher used qualitative research methodology as described by LeCompte and Goetz (1982), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Merriam (1988) to achieve dependability (i.e., reliability), credibility (i.e. internal validity), and external validity.

The researcher transcribed tape-recorded interviews, grouping them by category--instructors, practitioners, or alumni. Next, the researcher made a matrix of questions and participant names (Bogdan& Biklen, 1992). Within each cell, the researcher jotted notes and key words from each response to each question. When the matrices were complete, similar words and words expressing similar themes were circled and connected with lines. Overarching themes that represented the substance of the interviews became clear. Then, the researcher studied the transcripts again, this time for words that captured the essence of emergent themes.

Findings

After triangulating the responses of instructors, practitioners, and alumni, four themes emerged across all groups:

1. A broad overview of Florida food, agriculture, and natural resources including commodities, trade/economics, and policy/law is essential.

2. Communications skills are more important to the job of an agricultural communicator than is agricultural knowledge.
3. Students need to be versatile, able to do many communications tasks thoroughly.
4. Networking is an integral component of agricultural communication.

Common themes also emerged from the responses of two of the three groups. First, instructors and practitioners said that internships were critical for agricultural communication students. Second, they said that students need to learn how to manage issues, especially in the area of activism and environmental regulation. Third, they envisioned a majority of future agricultural communication students working in public relations.

Practitioners and alumni strongly emphasized the need for desktop publishing skills and other computer applications (but not electronic media/internet). Instructors and alumni said that in-depth communications courses beyond the introductory level were a must for graduates to be prepared for the workplace. Instructors alone emphasized the importance of electronic media/internet to the future of agricultural communication.

Discussion

Instructors, practitioners, and alumni agreed that writing skills are the most valuable communications skills. These form the foundation for success in other areas of communications. An agricultural communication instructor said:

First and foremost, students are not agriculturalists primarily but communicators. They really need to have rigorous training in communication, taking courses beyond surface, introductory so that they will truly have

expertise in a whole array of areas, key among them the ability to handle language well and to write well.

Similarly, Reisner (1990a) found that writing was the most essential core course for agricultural communication majors. Practitioners described the model graduate as one who had excellent communication skills, but unfortunately, those who had worked with interns said their writing skills were lacking. This observation agrees with Diamond (1989) in that employers typically find that college graduates cannot write effectively. Alumni wanted to be prepared for writing similar to what they would find on the job.

Alumni felt qualified only to be agricultural writers, not versatile communicators who can thoroughly shoot and edit videotape, write and produce a newsletter or magazine, and carry out an advertising or public relations campaign. Alumni and instructors recognized the need for students to be as competitive for positions in communications as graduates from the College of Journalism and Communications. They wanted students to take in-depth communication courses, where projects run from inception to completion. Alumni said communications ability will get them a job, not agricultural knowledge. Similarly, Bowen and Cooper (1989) found that students considered journalism and communication courses to be more important than agriculture courses.

Still, agricultural communication instructors, practitioners, and alumni made it clear that knowledge of food, agriculture, and natural resources was greatly needed because of the diversity of Florida agriculture. Agricultural communication instructors thought the technical agriculture requirements were fine, yet agricultural issues, economics, and politics would be good to add. Practitioners greatly emphasized international trade, issues management, economics, and politics beyond what is covered in one course on U. S. food and agricultural policy. They also strongly

suggested a broad overview course on Florida agriculture. Alumni believed that the current food, agriculture, and natural resources offerings should be modified to better prepare them for their careers. They also desired a sweeping look at Florida agriculture in every aspect. They wanted to know the economics, politics, production, and issues surrounding commodities that are essential to the state. As one alumnus said, "One gaping hole is that there isn't one class an inch deep and a mile wide about agriculture, not just in Florida but across the country and throughout the world so you have a bigger idea of the scope."

Through their internships, students should be solidifying and expanding on knowledge and skills learned in course work. When alumni were asked to identify education or experience that prepared them for their careers, however, only one mentioned the internship in addition to other experiences. One would expect that most all alumni would value their internship experiences highly. After all, all practitioners and communications instructors said internships were important for a potential employee to have. Evidently, alumni felt that their internships fell short of the ideal experience as perceived by instructors and practitioners.

Practitioners and instructors emphasized training on issues management and influencing public opinion since they deal with these areas regularly. Kroupa and Evans (1976) also found that practitioners strongly supported course work in public relations. One person summarized the sentiment of practitioners as follows: "(Students) need to study the environmental movement and its activists-how they think, how they are funded, how to deal with them. These represent the single largest threat to the continuation of American agriculture." Alumni believed the combination of communications courses insufficiently equipped them with the abilities needed to be successful, diversely trained agricultural communicators. Networking with other professionals, a skill

recognized by instructors, practitioners, and alumni to be important for agricultural communicators, gives students extracurricular experience in relating to various publics.

All 10 instructors who teach the required agricultural communication and journalism and communications courses emphasized the importance of electronic media/internet to the future of communications and society in general. Indeed, a 1982 study by Evans and Bolick indicated that agricultural communication curricula nationwide were moving toward an emphasis on computer technology. In spite of the instructors' interest in emerging technologies, only 2 of 14 practitioners and one of six alumni working as agricultural communicators spoke of the need for training in this area. Apparently the need is not yet great enough to cause agricultural communicators to value it above other tools. Most practitioners and alumni would agree that desktop publishing skills are much more important to their work than electronic media/internet skills. As one practitioner said, "The technology is still available to a relative few. You can't focus on that to the exclusion of those strategies that will reach a far greater number of people." It is understandable that instructors would perceive the need differently, because university faculty typically have been at the forefront of innovations that permeate society.

Summary and Recommendations

In general, agricultural communication students at the University of Florida are prepared only to be agricultural writers, not communicators. Instructors, practitioners, and alumni agreed that students need in-depth training in all aspects of communication beyond introductory classes.

To broaden the agricultural component of the degree, rather than semester-long introductory courses in specific commodities, students should take classes that teach the essentials of Florida agriculture and natural resources. Those classes

would encompass the basics of every commodity of significance to the state, as well as those with national and international significance. They would cover environmental issues facing the state, agricultural law, and basic economics surrounding each commodity. Reisner (1990b) found that agricultural communication students nationwide were not required to take courses designed to teach cross-cultural global perspectives or public policy, similar to the situation at the University of Florida.

Evans and Bolick's 1982 study and Reisner's (1990b) study showed that in agricultural communication programs across the country, flexibility was a key characteristic. Students had freedom to pursue areas of interest within agricultural communication. On the other hand, the curriculum at the University of Florida has limited flexibility to accommodate individual interests in specialized areas such as journalism, public relations, advertising, or telecommunications. Creating condensed, overview courses to replace some of the cursory, introductory, knowledge-based courses in communications would allow room for students to pursue interest areas.

The curriculum should include ways for students to become acquainted with people in the industry. An advisory council of practitioners would provide networking contacts. Students should participate in clubs on campus designed for students with career aspirations in this area.

For further research, it would be beneficial to know if and how agricultural communication training varies depending on the segment of the industry where graduates are employed. A study should be conducted to examine why only 33 percent of University of Florida agricultural communication alumni are employed in the field. Employment needs of agricultural communication graduates should be compared with those of mass communication graduates to develop a greater understanding of the educational needs of both. Finally, studies similar to this one should be

conducted on agricultural communication curricula in other states to determine whether these findings suggest local, regional, or national phenomena.

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