

AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION AND AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS: STRIKING A PROPER BALANCE IN THE ACADEMY

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Abstract

From its beginnings in the early 1800s, the profession of agricultural communications was born out of the practical need to share important farm and home information with isolated rural audiences. Some 200 years later, agricultural communications has evolved into a diverse industry responsible for developing and disseminating news and marketing information related to food, agricultural, and environmental systems. Professional preparation for such careers is often provided through academic programs that are housed in departments of agricultural education. This administrative arrangement provides both benefits and challenges to the future development of agricultural communications programs, which need to strike important balances in teaching, outreach, and research programs and in collaborative relationships within and outside of the academy. The potential for success is greatly enhanced if agricultural communications development strategies are coordinated with agricultural education to build synergies between the programs while maintaining unique strengths. This philosophical paper uses elements of the sociology of education to address some of the benefits and challenges posed by agricultural communications' close relationships with private industry and other academic departments, including agricultural education. The paper concludes with a list of implications and courses of action recommended for discussion by academicians in the two disciplines.

Introduction

Professional preparation for careers in agricultural communications is commonly provided through academic programs that are housed in departments of agricultural education. Because of their relatively small size and reliance on other academic units to deliver curricula, agricultural communications programs face special challenges to future development in the university setting. This philosophical paper addresses some of the major benefits and challenges posed by agricultural communications' close relationships with private industry and other academic departments, including agricultural education. The paper begins with a brief overview of the agricultural communications industry and its academic programs. Elements of the sociology of education are used to frame the discussion

and develop implications for future dialogue among academicians in agricultural education and agricultural communications.

Agricultural Communications as an Industry

The origin of agricultural communications in the United States can be traced to the first decade of the 1800s (Marti, 1979; Lee, 1965). One of the prominent characteristics of the profession's early decades is the dynamic and influential leadership that helped define the field. The early editors and writers who pioneered agricultural communications were not only outspoken leaders within the fledgling profession, but also national leaders of agriculture. They relied on their reputations as well as their publications to argue for a number of important social and political causes aimed at improving farming both as a business and as a way of life.

By the 1900s, the agricultural communications craft had evolved into a highly competitive industry requiring knowledge of business practices and editorial skills as well as farming (Burnett & Tucker, 2001). Although the rate of attrition for farm publications had always been relatively high, the economic cost of failure was significantly higher in the late 1800s and was becoming greater each year. Publication entrepreneurs were increasingly limited to those able and willing to invest full-time energy and significant start-up capital.

A major development fueling competition in the communications marketplace was the introduction of new media for news and entertainment, including movies and radio in the 1920s (Evans & Salcedo, 1974). While movies did not compete with farm publications for content, they were enormously popular through the 1940s and did compete for audience time and money. Likewise, radio revolutionized news and entertainment for Americans during this period, but was not viewed by the farm publications industry as a threat to its profitability (Evans & Salcedo, 1974).

In the 1980s, a dramatic downturn in the farm economy led to a prolonged period of retrenchment in the farm publications industry. Farm magazines, which had coped for years with the problem of dwindling agricultural audiences, were now faced with shrinking revenues due to major reductions in agribusiness advertising. In response, editors trimmed staffs and pages from their publications. Some publications did not survive the weak farm economy, while others were bought out by larger media organizations and stayed in business under new management. Such consolidation has become commonplace in agricultural and mainstream media and has been criticized by some media experts.

A well-publicized case of agricultural media consolidation occurred in 1987 when Capital Cities/ABC, Inc., acquired 12 state farm publications from Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. A critical first-person account of the acquisition was written by displaced *Michigan Farmer* editor Richard Lehnert for the *Washington Journalism*

Review in 1991. Of the changes, Lehnert wrote:

“... *Michigan Farmer* would no longer be a magazine solely about farming in Michigan; there would be very few dedicated state farm magazines left after this buyout. Instead, at least a third of *Michigan Farmer's* content would come from other states, shifting from issues of concern to Michigan farmers interested in the agricultural leadership and infrastructure of the state to testimonials and recommendations about crops such as corn and soybeans common to many states” (Lehnert, 1991, p. 20).

Lehnert's article is indicative of the frank discussion about the state of the profession that has become increasingly prevalent in agricultural communications in the last 20 years (Boone, Meisenbach, & Tucker, 2000). At issue is the willingness and ability of agricultural communicators to report on controversial topics and important social and economic issues that could threaten their relationship with agribusiness (Logsdon, 1992; Pawlick, 1996; DeVault, 1983).

Despite these criticisms, agricultural communications continues to be a viable career option for students combining university course work in science, agriculture and communications (Wargo, 1993). One of the primary ways that the profession creates student interest is through the strong recruitment efforts of several agricultural communications organizations. Examples include groups such as the Agricultural Relations Council, National Association of Farm Broadcasters, and Livestock Publications Council that sponsor a variety of internships, scholarships, and mentor programs to attract qualified students.

Agricultural Communications as an Academic Field

One of the extraordinary accomplishments of the early leaders in agricultural communications was their success in defining and building a profession nearly 100 years before university teaching programs existed to support their craft (Tucker, 1996). The first

course in agricultural journalism was offered by Iowa State University in 1905 (Duncan, 1957). Much of the early course work was offered by newly established schools of journalism that employed professional writers and editors from private industry. A number of textbooks were published during this period to support education in the growing field (Ogilvie, 1927; Crawford & Rogers 1926). Despite this growth, schools of journalism would soon phase out agricultural journalism course offerings to pursue other curricular priorities. In response to this development, several colleges of agriculture in the Midwest assumed responsibilities for agricultural journalism education at their institutions. Due to a lack of resources and other pressing priorities in colleges of agriculture, these early agricultural journalism programs were limited in scope. Students in these programs, primarily men, often pursued a "mixed" curriculum that included course work in science, agriculture and journalism. Students often received academic advising from information specialists in colleges of agriculture whose primary responsibility was to assist agricultural scientists in developing and disseminating farm information to rural audiences (Kearl, 1983). These staff members usually fulfilled advising and teaching roles in addition to editorial and other responsibilities. In other cases, students received advising from faculty members in deans' offices.

Despite their modest beginnings, academic programs in agricultural communications grew in number and scope throughout the 1900s. Recent research shows that academic programs in agricultural communications continue to attract a relatively small but steady number of students desiring careers in this specialized field (Wargo, 1993; Cooper, & Bowen, 1989). Doerfert and Cepica (1991) identified more than 30 academic agricultural communications programs across the United States. During this same period, Reisner (1990) found that 629 students were pursuing agricultural communications as a major in the 26 academic programs she identified. Most of the programs were fairly small, averaging less than 30 students. More than three-

fourths of the programs were housed in colleges of agriculture, and about half of these were located in combined departments that included agricultural education (Reisner, 1990). Weckman, Witham, and Telg (2000) found in their study of 22 programs that combination with agricultural education was still the predominant arrangement, although departmental names and configurations varied widely. They also found that the programs were not only growing, but that faculty expected continued growth in the next five years. To support this growth, new faculty positions have been created in a number of agricultural communications programs nationally.

In the 21st century, academic programs in agricultural communications continue to fulfill an important role in preparing professionals for a variety of communications careers in both the private and public sectors. Demand is especially high for qualified communicators trained to address such complex and controversial contemporary issues as food safety, environmental conservation, and genetic modification of plants and animals (Burnett & Tucker, 2001). Because of its applied social science orientation, agricultural communications course work also offers an appropriate venue to incorporate topical general education concepts into the undergraduate curriculum, including media literacy, multicultural awareness, and critical thinking skills.

To meet these demands, academic programs will need to attract qualified faculty, continue to develop and improve curricula, and build research programs to support teaching and outreach efforts. Achieving these goals requires a more thorough understanding of three entities that have largely shaped the current structure and orientation of academic agricultural communications programs: the home department or unit, journalism and mass communication units, and industry. Each of these entities is briefly discussed in the following section. Principles from the sociology of education (Ballantine, 1989) are used to identify the role each may play in assisting and/or hindering the development of needed capacities in teaching, outreach, and research.

Home Department Influences

The quality of professional life in the academy is profoundly influenced by relationships among programs and individuals in the home department (Ballantine, 1989). The trend in higher education is to place smaller and lesser developed programs such as agricultural communications into departmental homes with other disciplines, particularly agricultural education and, increasingly, other disciplines or programs such as rural sociology and leadership development. From the sociology of education perspective, agricultural communications would be expected to be heavily influenced from its placement in an academic home with a larger, more established discipline such as agricultural education. New faculty, particularly at the assistant professor level, are likely to be hired, mentored, and/or evaluated by members of the dominant discipline. It is also reasonable to expect that teaching, outreach, and research programs of the less established discipline would assume some characteristics of the larger discipline, particularly in their early development.

In the context considered here, the dominant position of agricultural education within many home departments appears to have greatly influenced the structure and orientation of agricultural communications programs, particularly in the dimension of teaching. With its strong emphasis on undergraduate education and teaching methods, agricultural education has probably improved the methods of instruction for agricultural communications students. Obvious benefits have accrued from having department access to colleagues with expertise in curriculum development, evaluation, and teaching methods. Similar benefits have also likely spilled over into agricultural communications outreach activities.

However, the agricultural education influence on agricultural communications' teaching has potentially negative impacts, as well. One possible negative impact is a tendency to emphasize teaching at the expense of other valuable activities, such as research. The motivation for doing so is based on two factors. First, agricultural

education as a discipline is concerned with the enhancement of pedagogy, curriculum, and evaluation, so it is logical that its contribution to agricultural communications would be in fostering development of its courses and curriculum. A second reason for the emphasis on teaching is that the generation of student credit hours benefits the department and college to which the hours accrue. By virtue of their large service-course offerings, most agricultural communications programs generate relatively large numbers of credit hours per faculty position. Unfortunately for agricultural communications, individual programs usually do not receive a direct return from credit-hour production.

A more clouded picture emerges with regard to the home department's direct effects on agricultural communications research programs. It is important to note that communications is central to a variety of human perceptions and behaviors, so it is natural that other disciplines and scholars would have occasional involvement in its conduct (Rogers & Chaffee, 1983). The fact that many agricultural communications graduate programs are relatively new and understaffed further necessitates involvement by faculty members from other disciplines, such as agricultural education, for service on graduate committees and related activities (Boone, Paulson, & Barrick, 1993). However, there is little evidence in the literature that agricultural communications research has been influenced in any direct way from the discipline of agricultural education compared to other social sciences (Boone et al., 2000; NPAC, 1960). Research in the two areas tends to be published in different outlets, to rely on different theories, and in general, to serve different purposes.

Because journalism and mass communication have been greatly influenced by sociology (Anderson, 1987; McQuail, 1985), there appears to be excellent potential for agricultural communications to benefit from increased interaction with rural sociology. The potential for synergistic research exists regardless of whether the two programs are housed in the same department.

*Journalism/
Mass Communication Influences*

By its nature, agricultural communications is an interdisciplinary endeavor that relies on foundational concepts in both agriculture and communications (Sprecker & Rudd, 1997). Of all the academic units involved in delivering agricultural communications curricula, schools and departments of journalism and mass communication are among the most essential (Wargo, 1993; Cooper & Bowen, 1989). How well the academic division of labor is coordinated between agricultural communications and journalism/mass communication is one of the most important factors influencing the nature of the undergraduate agricultural communications curriculum at a given institution. The type of courses offered through journalism and mass communication units, the level of student access to such courses, and the overall support of journalism and mass communication faculty are major factors influencing the structure and quality of undergraduate agricultural communications programs.

It is important to note that academic departments are largely autonomous and as a rule are not obligated to enter into cooperative agreements with departments in other colleges or schools. In addition, it is often not economically feasible to do so. From the sociology of education perspective, the degree of cooperation between two departments is likely to depend primarily on the benefits that accrue to both as a result of the cooperation. Benefits can occur in the form of increased opportunities from pooling of resources, increased access to economic or intellectual resources as a result of collaborating, or increased visibility or prestige resulting from association with a high-profile department or unit. In the context considered here, agricultural communications realizes obvious benefits from collaboration with journalism and mass communication in the form of a dramatically enhanced curriculum. However, these benefits are not mutual because journalism and mass communication units generally do not permit their students to take substantial

course work in agricultural communications. The cooperative arrangements that exist between agricultural communications and journalism and mass communication are based primarily on professional courtesy and tradition rather than formal or binding agreements.

A different situation exists relative to agricultural communications outreach and research. While journalism and mass communication faculty would certainly make meaningful contributions to such programs, the need for their collaboration is much less urgent than for delivering the undergraduate curriculum. If additional expertise is needed in a given project, it is likely to be available in the home college or department. For instance, agricultural education faculty can serve as valuable resources for research involving theoretical concepts related to teaching or learning. Agricultural communications faculty also compare well to their journalism and mass communication counterparts in terms of access to financial resources to help launch outreach and research programs. By virtue of their appointments in colleges of agriculture, many have access to direct funding and competitive grant programs from extension, agricultural experiment stations, or both. Those who do not can collaborate with colleagues in the home department or college who do have access to such support.

Industry Influences

In higher education, collaboration with private industry in assessing content or delivery of a curriculum is viewed as a delicate issue to be entered into cautiously, if at all. One reason for this reluctance in higher education is that decisions about course and curriculum content have traditionally been viewed as issues to be determined solely by faculty. Academicians from all fields historically have been unwilling to relinquish control over what they teach in their classes or how they teach it. In addition, some faculty may view industry participation with suspicion because of its potential to be self-serving or commercially motivated.

It is reasonable to expect that faculty members with an academic specialty in the

applied sciences would be more likely to solicit feedback from industry than those in less applied areas. One reason is that the focus of the work, including the education of students, has a direct application in private industry. Such is the case in both mainstream journalism and agricultural communications. Faculty from both areas have traditionally accorded private industry a major role in helping define their teaching mission and curricular priorities. This is not surprising given the early history of journalism education in which leaders from private industry were often tapped for university teaching positions. For decades, many journalism departments continued to recruit industry professionals to serve as instructors as opposed to doctoral-level assistant professors. Anderson (1987) points out that journalism maintained an almost singular focus on undergraduate education well into the 1940s. But while contemporary journalism has retained a heavy emphasis on developing students' practical skills for the job market, there is now markedly less reliance on private industry's sanction of their programs than there was in previous years.

Meanwhile, agricultural communications faculty generally have maintained close relationships with private industry on several fronts. For instance, the national student organization for agricultural communications students, the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT), holds its annual conventions with professional organizations in agricultural communications across the country. These meetings are usually attended by faculty advisers who may hold full or associate memberships in the sponsoring organizations. In addition, academic agricultural communications programs regularly coordinate awards programs for professional communications organizations, such as the Livestock Publications Council and the American Agricultural Editors' Association. Such projects usually are undertaken as a service contribution to the profession and to provide learning experiences for participating students. Finally, industry often exerts a direct influence on academic programs through alumni committees and advisory boards that

are empowered to provide feedback and recommendations on agricultural communications curricula and desired competencies of graduates.

The sociology of education perspective suggests that the continued prominence of private industry involvement with academic agricultural communications programs is based largely on the perceived need for legitimation of the programs. It is important to note that no accreditation procedures exist for agricultural communications programs as they do for agricultural education, journalism and mass communication (Tucker, Whaley, Whiting, & Agunga, 2002). In addition, graduate and research programs are relatively modest or non-existent in most of the nation's academic agricultural communications programs. Therefore, criteria used to judge the programs are usually limited to measures of undergraduate program quality. Industry will likely continue to be a dominant influence in agricultural communications under these circumstances. The feedback provided by industry representatives is likely to concentrate heavily on the program's performance in providing practical skills perceived as necessary for entry-level employment in the field (Bailey-Evans, 1994). Because of their preoccupation with communication skills training, industry representatives may be less likely or less qualified to provide feedback in helping meet broad educational objectives, including those related to the mastery of liberal arts and humanities.

Industry may prove to be quite helpful in providing feedback to fine-tune outreach activities in agricultural communications. Their familiarity with industry needs would enable them to provide expert advice in the planning of outreach priorities and strategies. Relative to research, industry has the potential to play a significant role in suggesting new lines of inquiry in agricultural communications. The already close collaboration between academic and applied agricultural communications could quickly become much more meaningful for both parties if mutual research objectives could be identified and pursued. Because some sectors of the industry might also offer funding opportunities for different types of

social science research, it is in the best interests of academic agricultural communicators to explore such possibilities.

Discussion and Recommendations

Agricultural communications appears on the surface to be at a stable juncture in the university setting today with its programs easily justifiable on the basis of industry demand and growing student enrollments. The growth of such programs is appealing to faculty who interpret it as one measure of maturation for an academic field struggling for visibility and recognition. However, to capitalize on this growth and advance the profession, agricultural communications faculty will need to address two important issues. The first is that academic agricultural communications programs traditionally have focused energies and resources on undergraduate instruction at the expense of building capacity in other areas, such as graduate education and research. More discussion is needed as to the proper balance of teaching, outreach and research efforts in agricultural communications.

The second issue facing agricultural communications programs is their reliance on other academic units to help deliver and administer their academic programs. While these arrangements offer efficiencies among programs and help avoid duplication of course work, they also remove control from agricultural communications faculty in managing their programs and planning for the future. Collaboration with journalism and mass communication is further complicated by the fact that these programs are dealing with their own academic and financial difficulties (Fedler, Carey, & Counts, 1998).

In addition to negotiating sometimes uneasy relationships with journalism and mass communication, many agricultural communications faculty must also cooperate closely with other disciplines with which they share an academic home, particularly agricultural education. The merging of agricultural communications into larger departments typically puts them alongside more established disciplines with higher numbers of faculty. A critical disadvantage of this arrangement is that important

program decisions about agricultural communications may be dictated largely by faculty with little or no knowledge of the field. This situation is particularly serious considering the relatively high proportion of non-tenured faculty in agricultural communications today.

To cope effectively with these challenges, agricultural communications faculty need to be proactive in establishing more regular dialogue with agricultural education faculty on the nature of the collaborative relationship between the two academic programs. A number of calls have been made in the agricultural education literature for increased collaboration between agricultural education and agricultural communications. Deeds and Dorris (1987) encouraged agricultural educators at both the secondary and university levels to consider what they termed "agricommunication" as an alternative opportunity for student numbers and career placement as the production agriculture and agribusiness job market continued to shrink. Lockaby and Vernon (1998) argued that "agricultural communications and agricultural education have become effective partners and ... are rapidly becoming integral parts of each other" (p. 17). While it is clear that close working relationships between agricultural education and agricultural communications offer the potential for synergy in teaching, research, and outreach, faculty need to ensure that the programs are permitted to develop independently so as to reach their full potential.

Agricultural communications faculty should consider undergraduate education as one of several important dimensions to be developed in an academic program. While undergraduate education should be a priority, principles from the sociology of education suggest that other dimensions, such as graduate education and research, are equally important to gain more recognition and prestige in the academy. Feedback from advisory committees, alumni groups and other private-industry stakeholders can be a valuable source of information in strengthening curricula and competencies of graduates. However, this feedback should be viewed and evaluated in the context of the

program's larger goals and priorities. Likewise, in assessing prospects for collaborative research with industry sources, academic agricultural communicators should consider factors other than just the project's value to private industry. They should also consider whether the research will advance the state of knowledge in the discipline, whether it will contribute to the scholarly and/or outreach literature and lead to the promotion and tenure of faculty, and whether it will help build the graduate program, if applicable.

The future viability of agricultural communications in the academy depends on the ability to strike important balances in teaching, research and outreach programs, as well as building constructive collaborative relationships with other academic programs. The potential for success will be greatly enhanced if agricultural communications development strategies are coordinated with agricultural education in such a way as to build synergies between the programs while maintaining their unique strengths. Agricultural communications, like agricultural education, has the potential to provide unique and valuable contributions to the teaching, research, and outreach efforts of combined departments. Its full potential may best be realized by allowing it to develop with a greater measure of independence.

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