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# Today's Curricula

## In Agricultural Journalism and Communications

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In 1956 William G. Mitchell found a serious lack of agreement among professionals about the kind of education needed for a career in agricultural journalism and communications. His survey revealed two distinct and opposite schools of thought. Employers of agricultural journalists and communicators placed greatest emphasis on formal education in agriculture whereas employees emphasized education in journalism and communications. [Mitchell, 1956 p. 42].

Differences in points of view also appeared in a 1957 study by Clyde H. Duncan. When he analyzed the transcripts of 31 successful agricultural journalism graduates from Iowa State College he found that agriculture coursework comprised 27 percent, journalism coursework 27 percent and other coursework 46 percent of their study programs. Transcripts of 39 successful agricultural journalism graduates from Kansas State College showed an average of 16 percent agriculture coursework, 27 percent journalism coursework and 57 percent other coursework. And when Duncan surveyed 200 professional agricultural journalists

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for their suggestions about agricultural journalism curricula, they recommended 43 percent agriculture coursework, 32 percent journalism coursework and 25 percent other. [Duncan, 1957 pp. 56, 86, 99].

Findings by Mitchell and Duncan emphasize the fragile balance for which curriculum planners must search as they develop study programs in this interdisciplinary field. Other results of surveys by Mitchell and Duncan also illustrate differences of opinion about what these study programs should be called and, indeed, what the professionals themselves should be called.

The research reported here was designed to examine the current features of education programs in this field of study, particularly in terms of changes during the past 25 years.

**The Study:** A mail survey was conducted during May, 1981, among 24 colleges and universities that had been identified in a 1978 nationwide survey as offering degrees in agricultural journalism, agricultural communications or other programs of similar titles.

The original request, plus follow-up by mail and telephone, resulted in 21 completed responses (88 percent).

Each respondent was asked to provide the name of his or her institution; title of curriculum; degrees granted; year of origin for the degree program; a description of requirements for the curriculum; a brief statement of philosophy behind the requirements for the curriculum; and the number of students enrolled in the curriculum as of spring term, 1981.

Most respondents also provided detailed material, such as brochures, sections of college catalogs or fact sheets. In some cases, information was clarified by telephone, or non-respondents were contacted by telephone to obtain required information.

**Findings: Levels of education.** Results showed that most of the education programs in agricultural journalism and communications operate at the undergraduate level. All 21 schools reported offering undergraduate degrees, either at the bachelor's level or associate level.

Only the University of Wisconsin-Madison reported offering a graduate degree specifically identified with this field. A Master of Science degree in agricultural journalism was established on that campus in 1914. At the PhD level, the

University of Wisconsin program is similar to those on some other campuses where students can follow agricultural interests within communications programs offered by schools of journalism and communications.

*Type of degree granted.* A bachelor's degree in agricultural is the most common among the schools. As Table 1 shows, 17 of the 20 bachelor's degree programs are based in agriculture units; only 3 are housed in journalism units. One responding school, the University of Minnesota Technical College at Crookston, grants an associate of applied science degree in rural communications.

Table 1. Type of undergraduate degree granted.

Degree granted	Number of Institutions	Percent
Bachelor's Degree in Agriculture	17	81 percent
Bachelor's Degree in Journalism	3	14
Associate of Applied Science Degree	1	5
Total	21	100 percent

*Title of study programs.* Agricultural journalism is the most common title for degree programs in this field of study, followed by agricultural communication(s).

Eleven institutions (51 percent) use agricultural journalism as the title of their degree programs. Five (24 percent) use agricultural communication(s) as the title. Four other institutions use communication(s) in the title, but in combination with different, yet related, descriptions. (Table 2).

Table 2. Title of study program

Title used	Number of Institutions	Percent of total
Agricultural Journalism	11	51 percent
Agricultural Communication(s)	5	24
Agriculture and Natural Resources Communications	1	5
Technical Journalism	1	5
Rural Communications	1	5
Agricommunication	1	5
Agribusiness (Communication Emphasis)	1	5
Total	21	100 percent

Most (64 percent) of the programs established since 1960 are identified with the term communication(s) rather than journalism. A trend toward using the broader term may reflect the wide scope of such degree programs, which often include options in advertising and other types of communication activity not usually described as journalism. Indeed, communication(s) probably more accurately reflects the variety of coursework offered by most programs.

*Date of origin of programs.* Duncan observed in 1957 that "Since 1905 when the first Agricultural Journalism curriculum was established at Iowa State College, courses have sprung up here and there in various institutions, and now and then a full grown curriculum has come forth. Interest in the study of Agricultural Journalism both at the undergraduate and graduate level is gaining each year as educators realize that this is a specialized field demanding the very best in thought in curriculum planning." [Duncan, 1957 p. 182].

Results summarized in Table 3 reveal the now-and-then, here-and-there nature of the program development that Duncan described. They also support his predictions about growing interest in such study programs during the late 1950s. Most of today's degree programs are fewer than 20 years old; 11 of the 21 programs (51 percent) were formed during the 1960s and 1970s.

Table 3. Period of origin for study programs.

Period of origin	Number of institutions	Percent
1970 - 1979	6	28 percent
1960 - 1969	5	23
1950 - 1959	2	10
1940 - 1949	2	10
1930 - 1939	-	-
1920 - 1929	1	5
1910 - 1919	-	-
1900 - 1909	2	10
Not identified	3	14
Total	21	100 percent

One should note that during the 80-year period reflected in Table 3, some other institutions may have originated, then dropped, their degree programs in agricultural journalism or communications. For example, Duncan reported that 11 schools had specific degrees in agricultural journalism in 1957. [Duncan, 1957 p. 144]. Of those, two institutions are not among the current list of 24 believed to offer such degrees. Similar results appear in comparisons with findings of a 1952 survey by the Professional Improvement Committee of the American Association of Agricultural College Editors. [AAACE, 1952].

A number of respondents said they could not answer the question about the year of origin for the agricultural journalism or communications degree at their schools, or indicated that they were giving an approximate answer. A problem with obtaining an accurate answer to this question was that some programs started on a modest level and were makeshift, so exact beginnings are difficult to identify. Even approximate answers, however, showed the relative youthfulness of the majority of programs.

*Size of programs.* Among the 21 institutions, the most common level of enrollment during Spring 1981 was 10 to 19 students; about one-fourth of all institutions had enrollments in that range. (Table 4).

Table 4. Number of students enrolled in agricultural journalism or communications per institution, Spring Term 1981.

Enrollment per institution (number of students)	Number of institutions	Percent
1 - 9	2	10 percent
10 - 19	5	23
20 - 29	3	14
30 - 39	2	10
40 - 49	3	14
50 - 59	3	14
60 - 69	-	-
70 - 79	2	10
80 - 89	-	-
90 - 99	-	-
100 - 109	-	-
110 - 119	1	5
Total	21	100 percent

Enrollment per institution ranged from fewer than 10 to more than 100 students in undergraduate agricultural journalism or communications programs. Largest enrollment was at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which reported about 110 undergraduates enrolled in various options of the agricultural journalism major.

*Curricula.* Based on survey results, the following features of such curricula can be noted:

1. From 124 to 133 semester hours (or equivalent quarter hours) are required for graduation from the bachelor's degree programs.

2. Most institutions require a basic core in agriculture, plus electives, to provide a total of about 24 percent of a student's undergraduate credit hours. The agriculture course requirement on various campuses ranges from a low of about 15 percent to a high of about 38 percent of the total hours needed for graduation.

3. Most institutions also require at least one basic option, or core group of courses, in journalism or communications. Requirements for such courses average about the same as for agriculture coursework: about 24 percent of a student's total undergraduate credit hours. Journalism/communications course minimums on various campuses range from about 16 percent to about 28 percent of total credit requirements for graduation.

Of the 30 to 33 semester hours of journalism/communications coursework required, about one-half involve electives.

4. Journalism requirements tend to be heavily weighted toward the skill oriented courses (such as photography, reporting, broadcasting) rather than toward courses such as law, history, ethics and others.

5. Required internships are rare. Only 3 of the 21 schools reported that they require internships for graduation.

*Courses.* The various campuses differ considerably in the amount and kinds of agricultural journalism or communications coursework they offer. Many institutions offer no such courses; they rely completely on the combination of agriculture courses and journalism or communications courses.

However, some of the larger, longer-established programs offer specific courses in agricultural journalism or communications. Samples of such courses include:

Agricultural and Public Affairs Reporting; Writing for Agricultural Media; Agriculture and Its Publics; Broadcasting in Rural America; Agricultural Communications

Strategy; Farm and Home Radio; Agricultural Advertising; Information for Agriculture; Photography in Agriculture; Rural Communications Seminar; Promotion of Farm Products; Communications in International Agricultural Development; Advanced Agricultural Writing.

**Discussion:** 1. In general, results of this survey show that most agricultural journalism or communications programs are designed to pursue the best of two worlds, to produce graduates who know the basics of both agriculture and journalism. Graduates are taught to disseminate agricultural information to farm or nonfarm audiences, through various media. Such curricula, therefore, are intended to help graduates qualify for a wide range of job opportunities in the career field.

To that end, programs on all campuses provide students with varied coursework. The curricula are geared to expose students to a wide range of courses and knowledge. In addition, programs on most campuses require or permit students to gain highly specialized knowledge in agriculture and communications. On the agriculture side, a student may choose to specialize in a field such as animal science or agricultural economics. On the communications side, a student often follows an option (such as news-editorial, advertising, broadcast). Harold Swanson noted the latter type of development in a 1977 analysis; his observations are supported in the current study. [Swanson, 1978 p. 2].

2. Flexibility in course selection is another similarity among the programs examined. In a broad sense, all schools have similar requirements and allow a great deal of latitude in electives. At least, none of the 21 schools has a curriculum vastly different from others. This is not to say that different schools do not have differing approaches.

The fact that such curricula are relatively similar across the country indicates that current curriculum planners are more sure than were their counterparts 25 or more years ago. Today's planners of new or expanding programs have access to more help and experience than did their predecessors. Also, accreditation requirements influence such curricula because many current agricultural journalism or communications study programs are affiliated with accredited programs in schools of journalism and communications.

3. One finds in survey responses little sentiment that sweeping changes are needed in most agricultural journalism or communications curricula. There does, however, seem to be a shift toward an emphasis on coursework in economics, marketing and computer technology.

4. Findings of this survey suggest that current curricula in agricultural journalism or communications are not yet based on well developed educational philosophies. Respondents had trouble describing the philosophies underlying the study programs at their respective schools, especially in terms of course offerings and structure of curricula.

5. Compared with agricultural journalism study programs of the 1950s, programs in 1981 seem more communications-oriented in their purpose. Whereas Mitchell found in 1956 a serious lack of agreement about whether to orient students more toward agriculture or toward communications, more respondents to this survey indicated that their major purpose is to prepare professional communicators. Some made the point, in particular, that their programs are intended to provide skills equivalent to those of journalism school graduates. One example: "We adopt the philosophy that an agricultural journalism student should have a firm liberal education background, should have a general background in agriculture (perhaps with some specialization) and should have as strong journalism training as those in 'straight' journalism."

6. Some problems identified in the 1950s no longer seem so visible. For instance, a study conference on "Curricula in Agricultural Journalism" at the University of Missouri during 1955 identified two problems that sound less urgent in 1981:

- a. The study program for agricultural journalists is controlled too much by the general system of academic requirements adopted by the institutions.
- b. Duplication of offerings among state universities and state colleges is discouraged, so in some states the state colleges hesitate to offer work which parallels that in state universities. [Duncan, 1957 p. 8].

On the other hand, some problems expressed by educators and practitioners at the 1955 conference continue to sound familiar:

- a. It is difficult to get everything needed into this curriculum.
- b. Many general journalism graduates do not identify themselves with farm people and do not seem to know

agricultural news sources or fail to recognize news of agricultural significance.

7. It seems clear that 1981 study programs in agricultural journalism or communications are more flexible than earlier programs, especially in terms of agriculture coursework. Reasons for such a trend may be suggested by findings of a 1973 national study among 1,105 professional U.S. rural communicators about courses they would recommend. They expressed "overwhelming general support for knowledge of agricultural subject matter," but only a few rated specific agricultural courses as critically important. [Kroupa-Evans, 1976 p. 27; Kroupa-Evans, 1973 pp. 31-38].

8. The research reported here did not examine agricultural journalism or communications courses in detail, but the material supplied by responding schools suggests a noteworthy development in the types of such courses offered.

A 1928 report by Vernon Nash about education in agricultural journalism listed some of the courses being offered by various institutions at that time. Course titles included: Agricultural Writing, Agricultural Editing, Agricultural Advertising, Agricultural Publicity Methods and The Agricultural Press. [Nash, 1928 p. 54].

When one compares such courses with those offered in 1981 (listed earlier), one can see interesting changes. Some 1981 courses involve communications skills which the student can apply in agriculture-related settings. In addition, however, some 1981 courses are more broad in their approach. Examples include studies of rural-urban communications, rural media systems, communications in international agricultural development and promotion of farm products. They may represent new potential for teaching not only future professional rural communicators but also future agriculturists and others who have a vested interest in the role of communications in agriculture.

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