



Address

The Spirit of St. Louis: A Conference Report

Gwil Evans

For three days in mid-February 1985, seventy-some participants met in St. Louis for a national conference called "International Agricultural Programs and Agricultural Communications—Partners for International Development," sponsored by the Association of U.S. University Directors of International Agricultural Programs and ACE. This report looks from the communicator's perspective at the character and outcomes of that meeting. It was one of the most stimulating and personally satisfying professional gatherings I've attended.

Who

I mentioned that more than 70 persons attended. Mostly, they were administrators of international agricultural programs at land grant universities or communications professionals at such institutions, but not all of them were. Some represented the Agency for International Development; some, the USDA; two participants were from the National Association of State

Gwil Evans, director of agricultural communications at Oregon State University, presented this report at the 1985 National ACE Conference in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC); others were from the World Bank, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and other agencies; Hal Taylor was there from ACE headquarters. Then there was Mason Miller, our experienced communications colleague currently serving as communication officer for Winrock International. And, now, having mentioned Mason, let me recognize the key role he played in this meeting. Mason chaired the planning committee, but more than that, I understand he was a principal source of initiative. He perceived the need, created an opportunity, and acted.

What

Mason's committee organized a program intended to catalyze an exchange. For communicators, it was an opportunity both to analyze communication needs of a client (international agricultural programs) and to help that client learn what communicators can contribute. For international agriculture administrators, it was an opportunity to consider systematically the several dimensions of communications in development work. I want to mention a few highlights of the program.

- A keynote address by Fred Hutchinson, then executive director of BIFAD, in which Fred identified key audiences and the messages he believes we should help deliver.
- A session about on-campus communications needs and mechanisms in which representative administrators of communications and international agriculture spoke. Delmar Hatesohl did us all proud with his thoughtful, carefully articulated recommendations that, if followed, would make communications support effective for our colleagues in international programs.
- A report from Paul Yarbrough on the extent to which communicators already are involved in international agriculture projects.
- An evening session on teaching communications skills to foreign students—in both credit and noncredit situations.
- A session on how we tell the international agriculture story to our constituents. This covered local, state and national dimensions and provided substantive success stories, models that can be adapted for use elsewhere, and dramatic

evidence of the need to better tell the international agriculture story. Jim King related a remarkable success story of community relations for a nitrogen fixation project in Hawaii. Jack Hamilton demonstrated how it is possible to make the international story one of local news—and thereby get attention in domestic newspapers.

- An afternoon workshop examining the communicator's role as a part of the project team. This session was a learning experience for communicators and international ag leaders alike. It helped those in each role more fully appreciate the other. Don Esslinger's experienced, practical "how to" ideas were success-oriented and complemented what Harold Mateson had to say about what it takes to succeed in international agriculture.

- An evening session on how technological developments affect international work—especially communications—with dramatic reports of how current technology is being applied in development projects today.

- A concluding session entitled "Support for Communications Abroad." The title didn't do justice to the substance and significance of that final morning. I am compelled to describe Jim Evans' thoughtful paper as a blockbuster!

In the remainder of my remarks, I wish to explain why the conference meant so much to me—and possibly to our profession. That inevitably will lead me to more comments about what Jim Evans said.

Why Now?

The conference helped me understand why international agriculture—or call it development work, if you will—is entering the professional lives of more communicators now, not earlier or later. I learned there are at least two major reasons.

First, the fruits of Title XII. For you old hands, this will be familiar, but for others like me to whom development work is new, it's important to understand that legislation Congress passed in 1975—now known as Title XII—is the foundation. It has stimulated universities' involvement in international technical assistance programs. That's because

- it acknowledged *applied science* as a key to solving food and nutrition problems of developing countries;

— it recognized that research and support must be *long term*; and

— it acknowledged that if universities were to fulfill the role anticipated for them in development they needed and deserved national support to *strengthen their capacity*.

The St. Louis meeting signaled that communicators are being recognized as essential partners on the university teams addressing the challenge laid down for them by Title XII. The other reason why international work is entering our professional lives in a big way is because those conducting the work are now fully realizing that transferring technology simply isn't enough—it alone doesn't do what must be done. Those in charge are recognizing that change is a social process, that it involves interactions between and among people. It is as much a matter of knowledge and attitudes and beliefs as it is one of hard science or machines. They are realizing, too, the importance of communicating with domestic audiences in the United States. What is needed in development work is, essentially, the stuff of which our profession is made.

What It Meant

St. Louis was pivotal for me because it allowed me to see our profession in a new light. By talking about what international agriculture needs, I gained a better perspective on the needs we're meeting domestically. What I hadn't expected was that someone would come along and neatly wrap up the stimulating ideas of the conference and present them to us—communicators and international agriculture professionals alike—in terms that we all could understand. Yet that is precisely what Jim Evans did. And he went one step further. He looked into the future and challenged us with a course of action.

Jim's paper was entitled "International Communications Education and Training: A Look to the Future." It was that but a great deal more. I hope you read it in the April-June 1985 issue of the *ACE Quarterly*. Let me draw your attention to a few of its points.

Jim told us the scholarly basis of our profession is only in its adolescence. He noted that the subject-matter base of our profession is being drastically redefined and broadened. He

went on to cite seven examples of that broadening. Jim's examples echoed what we had discussed earlier in our St. Louis sessions—he correctly anticipated and summarized them for us.

First, Jim said, the program people we support “. . . are looking, sometimes unconsciously, for counsel, expertise and help on the *human* side of that balance.” Second, “Development program leaders seem increasingly willing to involve communicators earlier in the decision-making process.” Third, Jim identified pressure on communicators to “provide new kinds of inputs.” For example, he sees us “. . . collecting, processing and analyzing information that can help guide decisions involving audiences, channels, message strategies and other elements of the planning process.”

Jim went on to note that instead of being defined as *mass* communicators, as we have been, the traditional boundaries will fall. We will become increasingly involved in *personal* methods of communicating—and the strategies we employ will encompass *all* methods of communicating. Fifth, not only are new technologies changing how we do things, he foresees our being increasingly involved in technology *testing*. Sixth, he sees our work and our influence extending beyond traditional agricultural audiences. Seventh, Jim's work confirms that land grant communicators “. . . are being challenged to extend their thinking beyond the state and nation—to agricultural communications throughout the world.”

Jim's paper is rich in ideas. He proposes a distinction between an information unit and a communications unit: one that I find easy to subscribe to. For that distinction and the other rewards to be found in Evans' ideas, I refer you to the published version.

In sum, then, St. Louis offered rich and rewarding interaction with international agriculture professionals in which I learned a great deal. It confirmed there are many new opportunities in international agriculture ahead for most of us:

- One, helping on-campus offices reach selected audiences;
- Two, consulting and training during temporary overseas visits;
- Three, conducting on-campus training for participant foreign nationals; and

- Four, accepting long-term international assignments.

The meeting offered an opportunity to see our profession from a new perspective and in a setting in which I found myself and others putting into words much that we usually take for granted. Finally, I found in Jim Evans' blockbuster a reminder that we are part of the land grant team only because we contribute importantly. If we are to contribute in the future, then we must work together as professionals, sharing the leadership necessary to assure timely changes in our profession. Evans offers us concrete proposals. We ought to continue to mine his paper for ideas—and to act on them.