

## **Are We There Yet? Toward an Agricultural Communications Academic Organization**

As an academic discipline, agricultural communications has made great strides since the first course was established at Iowa State University approximately 100 years ago. Now there are 48 identified programs with an average of 69 students per institution (Miller, Large, Rucker, Shoulders, & Buck, 2015), up from an average of 36.63 students in 2000 (Weckman, Witham, & Telg, 2000).

Initially, agricultural communications' research home was in the Association for Communications Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE), the host organization for the *Journal of Applied Communications (JAC)*. ACE currently hosts a half-day research conference in conjunction with its annual conference that some faculty members have traditionally attended. However, in the past few years, it seems like many agricultural communications researchers have scattered. Some have stayed with ACE while others now present research at the conferences of the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE), Southern Association for Agricultural Scientists (SAAS), North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture (NACTA), Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), and other organizations. Some faculty attend a combination of meetings, but for as long as we, the authors of this manuscript, have been coming to research conferences (at least 10 years), side conversations have focused on this issue of us not having a designated "home" and some have sought to determine where we as agricultural communications academics should be. A collection of faculty members holds fast to ACE as our original research home. Others feel the discipline has evolved and grown beyond ACE and should explore other outlets for gathering and presenting research.

At the Agricultural Communications Vision Consortium in February 2016, event organizers posed this question to the group of approximately 60 participants: "Where should agricultural communications have its academic home?" A graduate student with the task of being the observer for the consortium made notes of the comments in this discussion. Common comments included frustration with ACE and the short amount of time allowed for research presentations. However, some people supported staying with ACE because of our history with the organization and obvious ties to JAC. There were also concerns with affiliating with AAAE, as some have not felt welcome, yet others noted a change in AAAE being open to agricultural communications research and participation. Other suggestions included SAAS as the national agricultural communications research conference, while a small, but vocal, group promoted the idea of hosting a research conference at Ag Media Summit.

Since the event in February 2016, three other vision meetings have occurred as well as several conference calls. The face-to-face meetings were before the National Association of Farm Broadcasting's convention in November 2016, before SAAS in February 2017, and at ACE in June 2017. The goal of the meetings was to look at the future of the agricultural communications academic discipline. Productive discussion with potential outcomes occurred at each meeting, and follow up conference calls have occurred since. Benefits, drawbacks, and ramifications of affiliating with certain organizations, or possibly creating a stand-alone agricultural communications academic organization have been discussed.

## **What Do We Need?**

Do we need a host organization for our research home, or have we reached critical mass to fly the proverbial nest and create our own organization? Don't we have unique enough needs and concerns that should be addressed by agricultural communications scholars without needing to meet as a special interest group at ACE or AAAE? Possibly. And the reason we are thinking so is based on the comments received in a post-event evaluation following the February 2016 vision consortium.

Numerous comments addressed the need for more cohesion. One person commented that we are "scattered," and an academic organization for agricultural communications could unify us. Before reading on, we simply ask that you have an open mind and consider these ideas. For this manuscript, we allowed ourselves to dream on paper and think about all the things an agricultural communications academic organization could be. We will not be able to do all the ideas below right away, and the conference calls mentioned above have generated some great ideas for small steps. Collectively the group might not want to do some of these ideas at all. Just read the ideas below with a positive attitude and open mind. Make a list and allow yourself to add to the ideas. Also, keep a list of the negatives, just don't allow them to become reasons to scrap this idea altogether. You will find a list of pitfalls further down in this article, and we can use this list for a future conversation where we acknowledge potential pitfalls, address them, and hopefully be stronger as we move forward.

## **Are We Ready?**

As we allow ourselves to dream, however, we must also stay realistic. Is this the right time, are we really ready to step out on our own, or is it time to look into rounding up the herd in a venue we already have? It cannot be stated enough that there currently is segregation in our discipline, and for us to move forward we must come together.

As we researched several organizations that are related to agricultural communications and looked at their missions, purposes, and functions, we found that most of them are, essentially, associations that support members' professional interests in teaching, research, and service. If we did decide to form our own association, there would need to be bylaws, officers, committees to address different needs (we might call them divisions, interest groups, or something else), a mission statement, and a strategic plan. But there are other ideas well beyond the following lists. We looked at AAAE, ACE, AEJMC, NACTA, Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education, Association of Leadership Educators, Broadcast Education Association, and The National Communication Association. Through our searches, we found several ideas that could be incorporated into our organization. We obviously could not do all these in the beginning, but these are some ideas to consider working toward.

### **Annual Meeting/Conference**

Think of how nice it would be for us, agricultural communications faculty members, to have control over the agenda of an entire conference. We could do so much more and meet specific needs of the membership if we did not have to work within the confines of another organization's agenda. Several people commented on the post-event evaluation that we did not have enough time at the consortium. If we were in charge of our own schedule, we could make time to have these strategic conversations, rather than force them into a pre-existing conference.

We could dictate how many research papers we would like to accept, design the parameters for a poster session (if we choose to do one), select speakers and/or panelists relevant to our interests and needs, and possibly add industry tours.

Although we are proposing our own conference agenda, we do not necessarily have to have a stand-alone conference. One idea is to meet in conjunction with ACE, AAAE, SAAS, NACTA, AMS, or AEJMC on a rotating basis. This way we could have the benefit of networking with professionals, department chairs, other faculty, industry, and faculty from journalism and mass communications. We would still be in charge of our association's conference agenda, but we could also *possibly* have the benefit of hearing the cooperating conference's keynote speaker(s). Also, we would not have to have a team to scout and negotiate a venue, catering, and other contracts.

### **National Research Agenda**

At the moment, there is not an agenda that is specific to agricultural communications, and some researchers have suggested a need for one. Several researchers utilize AAAE's agenda as a guideline, but it is very broad and encompasses teacher education, leadership, extension, as well as communications. If we had our own organization, we could cohesively create our own national research agenda that is specific to agricultural communications. Such an agenda could provide direction in the research we conduct, guide master's and doctoral students that are looking for a direction for their careers as researchers, and aid in the creation and development of theory.

A research agenda could provide that direction we need to advance ourselves as researchers that are desired and possibly hired by the industry to conduct research. Further down the road, if funds permit, we could create a small grant program to provide seed money for faculty members wishing to conduct ambitious research that would develop theory or curriculum.

### **Scholarship**

A big decision that we would need to make concerns the *Journal of Applied Communications*. *JAC* is ACE's publication, and we are unsure if ACE would relinquish ownership of the journal to a new organization. *JAC* is currently in its 101<sup>st</sup> volume, and we are certain no one wants to see the journal wither away. However, ACE is currently facing some financial hardships, and *JAC* is an expense they may be willing to let go. ACE's financial status has several people wondering if the journal is secure anymore. With this in mind, we as agricultural communications researchers may be at a time in our history where we could acquire the journal, but we would need an association to manage, fund, and distribute it.

A stand-alone organization could further contribute to scholarship through an online forum to publish conference papers and poster abstracts. Currently, ACE does not publish the research papers presented at its conference on its website, but this could be a priority for the new organization.

Another idea borrowed from other organizations that we could work toward is organizational research. Several groups host an online data warehouse regarding undergraduate and graduate student enrollment, starting salary, employment statistics, and others. Professors are frequently asked about starting salary ranges for graduates, and national data would be extremely helpful. True, this would take additional funds, but it is a goal to work toward.

## **Membership**

We can address the question of a dues structure if this idea materializes. However, after researching what other organizations offer, there are lots of options. Active membership (full benefits of publishing, voting, holding office, and participating in awards programs); institutional membership (departments, colleges, and/or universities can join to support the organization); affiliate membership (category for practitioners or companies to join and support the organization / would receive all communication and publication from the association); lifetime membership (full benefits for life with one payment); student membership (steeply discounted rate to involve graduate students and encourage continued participation following graduation); and/or emeritus membership (steeply discounted for retirees with a wealth of tacit knowledge to continue participating).

## **Service to the Members**

This is a broad section, but it substantiates the need for an organization that is specific to agricultural communications academics. There are countless ways an organization can be of service to its membership, but it ultimately comes down to the question “how can this association help its members advance themselves in their respective campuses and careers?”

The organizations we researched offered various interesting services that could be transferred to our discipline. One that was particularly interesting, and a topic many faculty ask about, is promotion and tenure support. Some organizations have a formal program of pairing early career faculty with those already tenured, others have a set of resources online specific for faculty pursuing promotion and tenure.

Lots of organizations offer teaching and research resources. Sometimes they are online through a list of links to relevant resources; however, this idea could also be incorporated into a conference. If we have our own conference with an agenda that we control, the ideas are endless for ways to develop and exchange ideas related to teaching, research, and service. NACTA’s conference is completely about exchanging teaching ideas – some of it is rooted in theory with data to reinforce the claims, but other presentations are simply an idea presentation followed by discussion.

Several associations offer professional development outside of a conference through small regional workshops or webinars. University of Florida’s Center for Public Issues Education already offers regular webinars that are extremely helpful, and this could be expanded if the center is interested.

The website would need to be a critical component of this association. Many groups have online communities for syllabus sharing, idea swaps, and collaboration opportunities. AEJMC has a listing of both federal and private foundation grants that may be of interest to its members. Almost all related organizations’ websites have job boards.

The website could also be supported by social media to promote when new materials are posted. Facebook is a great forum to pose questions and seek feedback on topics such as emerging trends, grant collaboration needs, creative teaching needs, and more.

## **Awards**

Many of us have received awards through ACE, AAAE, NACTA, and others, but our own organization could allow us to create awards that are specific to what we do. We would also not be confined to another association’s award structure. Some off the cuff award ideas could include teaching, research, service, advising, and honorary memberships, but we could go

beyond this somehow. Graduate student awards and recognition would also be important as we work to incorporate future active members.

### **Pitfalls**

This is a big dream, and we are not so foolish to think that there are not major concerns. There are some obvious pitfalls and alternative ideas as well. The most obvious pitfall is cost. An organizational management company would probably be the best way to get us off the ground without over-working the founding members. However, these companies cost money, so the startup cost is a big prohibitory factor.

Another issue that was mentioned previously is *JAC*. Would we want to request to move it, or should it stay with ACE?

Do we have enough people to do this? Although 41 programs have been identified as agricultural communications, can we definitively say they see themselves that way? Some are more environmental communication or equine communication, others are a specialization in agricultural education or colleges of journalism. Would they see themselves as part of this group? Would they participate? AAAE's membership lies right under 500 and they struggle to host regional meetings of 40 people and national meetings at 200. These numbers also make it more taxing on members, as they have to volunteer time to run the association as it is not big enough to hire out services. We do not even have 100 faculty, and those we have are mostly in one or two person programs that are stretched as it is. With only a small number of full professors, can we really ask our young faculty to take on such additional work? We already struggle to have enough active reviewers for our conference papers and *JAC*. Will we have enough if we pull out on our own? With 500 members AAAE struggles, can we do it with a fifth of that? Our peers in animal science, agricultural economics, and journalism have thousands of members. Would the best option be to agree upon a temporary solution while working toward this ideal?

### **Conclusion**

One thing is clear: this is not a decision that should be taken lightly. ACE houses *JAC* and was the initial academic home for agricultural communications researchers. Do we want to walk away from that organization? Yet should we turn our backs on AAAE, which is the academic home for many of our administrators, teacher education, agricultural leadership, and extension education co-workers? AAAE has made lots of effort to include agricultural communications in its journal, conference, and awards in the last few years. Its new strategic plan is very inclusive of agricultural communications. Many, including some of our administrators, have asked why we couldn't just all go to one meeting to cut costs and be a part of our campus departments? It harms us for administrators to see us segregated. If most of us are in departments of agricultural education – and 61.5% of agricultural communications programs are (Miller et al., 2014) –, shouldn't that be our conference? Do we want to move away from SAAS, which has more agricultural communications research presentations than any of the other research conferences where we present? Should we consider AMS, where we could have the opportunity to present in front of industry professionals as well as our undergraduate students?

## Are We Really There Yet?

If we do not fly the proverbial nest and go alone, or if we form an association and meet jointly with another organization, where should we go? We cannot afford to go to four meetings and *not* have a joint meeting where we collectively move forward and push ourselves. The evaluation from the vision consortium showed that we all agree we need to move toward more challenging methodology and theory development. That means we cannot wait.

As we move forward with this discussion, three major things must be considered. First, if we want to grow and move out on our own, we need more tenured faculty. How do we get that? We need tenured faculty to write promotion and tenure letters. Many agricultural communications faculty are already tied together in some way, making some ineligible to write a letter. Consequently, who will write those much-needed letters? Unfortunately, our friends at ACE or AMS cannot do that. For that reason, an affiliation with AAAE or even AEJMC could be a solution.

Second, who can offer us an outlet to grow? Who will give us research and teaching professional development? Do we need our professional development to be in the area of teaching pedagogy, is it skill development, or is it both? Finally, who needs to be at our meetings and seeing our research for us to be visible at our universities? If our chairs are somewhere else, is it politically advantageous for us to be there as well? With budgets tight, we know our administration will not travel to a lot of conferences just to go with us and see what we are doing. If those chairs are opening up their association to us should we accept? If we get enough numbers will we still be the “stepchildren” in that association? We would argue no. But not all of us are in agricultural education departments. Is there a perfect solution? No.

It is going to come down to us setting aside our personal opinions, our past experiences, and decide what is best for the majority of our faculty around the country. Not one solution is perfect, but we can no longer stay segregated. Let’s work toward a decision. ACE’s journal’s tradition and history is something we cannot ignore but we also cannot limit our growth in spite of it. We must look at all the solutions. Could we make SAAS our national meeting leaving ACE our national association and journal? Could we affiliate with AAAE and start a new online journal? Do we stand on our own? Should we join Science Journalism within AEJMC? Is there a different solution?

As we position ourselves as a mature discipline we must be seen clearly unified with a set purpose on our campuses and to our potential funders. These discussions we are having will be tough, but we must have open minds, put our bias aside, and be willing to compromise. We are not only shaping our futures but the future of our research, our theory, and our field. We appreciate open-mindedness and futuristic thinking on this very important topic.

Miller, J.D., Large, M., Rucker, J., Shoulders, K., & Buck, E. (2015). Characteristics of U.S. agricultural communications undergraduate programs. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 99(4). 76-90.

Weckman, R., Witham, D., & Telg, R. (2000). Southern agricultural communications undergraduate programs: a survey. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 84(4), 41-50.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Erica Irlbeck is an associate professor in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communications at Texas Tech University.

Emily Buck is an associate professor in the Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership at The Ohio State University.