

Agricultural Communications Curriculum: Perceptions Of Ohio State Graduates

by **Barbara E. Cooper**
and **Blannie E. Bowen**

This study was designed to determine the perceptions of Ohio State University graduates regarding the agricultural communications curriculum. Specific objectives were to determine the graduates' demographic characteristics, satisfaction regarding the curriculum, and perceptions of academic experiences needed for future agricultural communicators. A mailed questionnaire went to 131 agricultural communications alumni. The response rate was 57.1%. Ohio State agricultural communications graduates tend to be white females, who earned under \$25,000. Graduates are satisfied with courses in agriculture and journalism/communications, and less satisfied with basic education requirements. For future agricultural communicators, graduates place more importance on journalism/communications classes than agriculture classes.

Agricultural communications became a major offering at Ohio State University in 1969. However, because the major has no graduate component and few faculty members are involved in administering the major, limited research has been conducted in this area. No research is available on agricultural communications graduates of Ohio State. This study was conducted to determine the perceptions of Ohio State graduates regarding the agricultural communications curriculum.

Related Literature

Until the 1950's the preparation of agricultural journalists was not a major concern of educators and employers. However, Mitchell's 1956 nationwide survey of employers revealed that the topic was a major concern and that there was substantial disagreement about the preparation needed by agricultural journalists. Thirty-eight percent of Mitchell's respondents said they preferred employees with training in agricultural journalism if possible (1956). However, 34% said an agricultural degree was desirable, while 19% said an agricultural degree was a "must" for hiring an agricultural journalist (Mitchell, 1956). Forty-two percent of the employers expected employees to have a farm background (1956). A year later, Duncan (1957) surveyed

Barbara E. Cooper is now a free lance editor in Lafayette, Indiana. Blannie E. Bowen is Rumberger Professor of Agriculture, Pennsylvania State University. When this study was conducted both were faculty members—associate and assistant professors, respectively—with the Department of Agricultural Education, The Ohio State University. Bowen is a 9-year member of ACE; Cooper has been a member for six years.

200 agricultural communicators to determine courses they would recommend for agricultural journalists. More than half recommended specific courses in agriculture.

The qualifications of agricultural communicators have evolved as technology and job requirements changed. Thirty years ago, farmers were still the primary audience of agricultural communicators. Now, however, agricultural communicators are trying to reach urban audiences, consumers, and the business world.

These changes were reflected in a 1973 study by Kroupa and Evans. Their survey of 1,105 agricultural communicators gave nearly unanimous support to the importance of communications skills and human relations in the agricultural communications curriculum (Kroupa and Evans, 1973). Further, in a 1974 survey of practicing agricultural communicators, Kern and Kelly (1974) found that a high number of agricultural communicators were seeking new communications skills or knowledge through short courses and night classes. When Evans and Bolick (1982) compared agricultural journalism curricula of 1981 with those of the 1950's, they found that the 1981 programs were much more communications-oriented in their purpose.

More recent information indicates that universities are requiring practical experience in communications (LPC, 1988). Both Purdue and Michigan State require on-the-job experience in communications through supervised internships (LPC, 1988).

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The primary purpose of this investigation was to do a follow-up study of Ohio State University alumni who majored in agricultural communications and who graduated with a bachelor of science degree in agriculture. Specific objectives were to:

1. determine selected demographic characteristics of the graduates.
2. assess the graduates' level of satisfaction regarding their undergraduate courses and selected academic experiences.
3. assess the graduates' perceptions of courses and academic experiences undergraduates need to be successful agricultural communicators.

Methods and Procedures

A questionnaire was designed to collect data needed for this study. Likert-type scaling was used to assess the graduates' satisfaction with their undergraduate course work in agriculture, communications, journalism, and basic education. Also listed on the questionnaire were academic experiences commonly associated with a major in agricultural communications. Graduates rated their satisfaction with the courses and experiences using a scale, where 1 = very unsatisfied, 2 = unsatisfied, 3 = satisfied, and 4 = very satisfied. A 4-point scale was used to assess the graduates' perceptions of the importance of those same courses and experiences for future agricultural communicators.

Content validity of the questionnaire was established by a panel of faculty and graduate students at Ohio State with professional experiences in some phase of agricultural communications. Seven undergraduate students majoring in agricultural communications completed the questionnaire to detect problems related to wording, clarity, and format.

The population for the study included 131 agricultural communications alumni identified by Ohio State's College of Agriculture records. Because

the population was small, a census was taken. All graduates were mailed a copy of a cover letter, the questionnaire, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope on November 25, 1987. They were asked to return the questionnaire within two weeks. A follow-up letter and questionnaire were mailed to non-respondents. Sixty-eight out of an accessible population of 119 graduates responded, yielding a 57.1% response rate.

Problems associated with nonresponse error were handled with procedures recommended by Miller and Smith (1983). Graduates who responded within the first three weeks (46) were compared with those responding within the last three weeks (22). The two groups were not significantly different ($p > .05$) in terms of annual salary, highest degree attained, marital status, gender, Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) membership, whether an OSU College of Agriculture magazine staff member, and job satisfaction. However, older graduates did tend to respond faster than younger graduates ($p < .05$).

Findings

Demographic Characteristics

Almost two-thirds of the graduates completed their degrees after 1978. Twenty-two students graduated during the 1984-87 time period, in comparison to the 12 students who graduated during the first five years during which the major was offered (1969-73).

Forty-one percent of the graduates were 30-39 years old, and another third were 25-29. All respondents were white, 70% were females, and 61% were married. Ninety-one percent had a bachelor's as their highest academic degree.

Twenty-two percent of the graduates earned less than \$15,000 per year. An additional 17% earned between \$15,000-\$19,999, while another 17% earned \$20,000-\$24,999, and 13% earned \$50,000 or more per year.

Twenty-two percent of the graduates held positions classified as business-marketing. Another 22% held public relations positions, and 18% were in writing-editing positions. The remaining third of the graduates held a variety of positions, including positions not in agricultural communications.

Curriculum Satisfaction and Importance

The graduates were asked how satisfied they were with their undergraduate courses and selected academic experiences. Also, they were asked about the importance of such courses and experiences for future agricultural communicators. Their satisfaction and importance ratings are presented in Tables 1-3.

As shown in Table 1, 62 students had taken courses in agricultural economics, 61 in animal science, and 54 in agronomy. Forty-nine of the graduates had taken courses in agricultural communications. All courses shown in Table 1 received ratings of 3.00 or higher, indicating that the graduates were satisfied with their courses in agriculture. In terms of importance of such courses for future agricultural communicators, mean ratings ranged from 2.61 for poultry science courses to 3.75 for agricultural communications courses. Courses in agricultural economics, food science, and animal science also received mean importance ratings over 3.00. A ranking of the 12 course areas by mean importance rating is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Graduates' satisfaction with undergraduate agriculture courses and importance they placed on such courses for future agricultural communicators.

| Course Area | Satisfaction ^a | | | Importance | | | Rank |
|----------------------|---------------------------|-------|-----|------------|--------|-----|------|
| | n | Mean* | SD | n | Mean** | SD | |
| Agri. Communications | 49 | 3.16 | .69 | 60 | 3.75 | .47 | 1 |
| Agri. Economics | 62 | 3.50 | .57 | 63 | 3.52 | .56 | 2 |
| Food Science | 26 | 3.50 | .71 | 60 | 3.22 | .61 | 3 |
| Animal Science | 61 | 3.43 | .53 | 63 | 3.14 | .59 | 4 |
| Natural Resources | 14 | 3.07 | .47 | 62 | 2.97 | .65 | 5 |
| Agronomy | 54 | 3.19 | .68 | 64 | 2.92 | .72 | 6 |
| Agri. Education | 40 | 3.45 | .50 | 59 | 2.92 | .75 | 6 |
| Horticulture | 33 | 3.42 | .66 | 62 | 2.87 | .65 | 8 |
| Dairy Science | 19 | 3.79 | .42 | 58 | 2.84 | .59 | 9 |
| Plant Pathology | 6 | 3.50 | .55 | 59 | 2.69 | .70 | 10 |
| Agri. Engineering | 14 | 3.43 | .51 | 56 | 2.63 | .84 | 11 |
| Poultry Science | 7 | 3.14 | .90 | 56 | 2.61 | .73 | 12 |

^aRanking not provided because of extreme variation in number of students who took courses.

*Means based on scale of 1 = very unsatisfied; 4 = very satisfied.

**Means based on scale of 1 = very unimportant; 4 = very important.

Data in Table 2 show the graduates were satisfied with all courses in journalism and communications. Mean satisfaction ratings ranged from a low 3.29 for editing courses to a high 3.47 for broadcasting courses. However, only 19 students had taken courses in broadcasting. In terms of importance of courses for future agricultural communicators, mean scores ranged from 3.33 for broadcast courses to 3.91 for writing courses. Editing and public relations were the next highest rated course areas. Rankings of the course areas in terms of mean satisfaction and importance scores are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Graduates' satisfaction with journalism/communications courses and importance they placed on such courses for future agricultural communicators.

| Course Area | Satisfaction | | | | Importance | | | |
|------------------|--------------|-------|-----|------|------------|--------|-----|------|
| | n | Mean* | SD | Rank | n | Mean** | SD | Rank |
| Broadcasting | 19 | 3.47 | .70 | 1 | 61 | 3.33 | .63 | 6 |
| Photography | 54 | 3.39 | .76 | 2 | 64 | 3.50 | .56 | 5 |
| Public Relations | 60 | 3.38 | .74 | 3 | 62 | 3.77 | .42 | 3 |
| Writing | 65 | 3.38 | .74 | 3 | 64 | 3.91 | .29 | 1 |
| Advertising | 28 | 3.32 | .82 | 5 | 62 | 3.52 | .67 | 4 |
| Editing | 59 | 3.29 | .64 | 6 | 64 | 3.83 | .38 | 2 |

*Means based on scale of 1 = very unsatisfied; 4 = very satisfied.

**Means based on scale of 1 = very unimportant; 4 = very important.

As shown in Table 3, graduates rated social studies (3.27) and natural science courses (3.20) as their most satisfying basic education requirements. Humanities courses were rated least satisfying. In terms of basic education requirements for future agricultural communicators, graduates perceived foreign language courses to be least important. Business and economics courses were perceived as most important. Rankings of course areas in terms of satisfaction and importance are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Graduates' satisfaction with basic education requirements and the importance they placed on such courses for future agricultural communicators.

| Basic Education Requirements (BERs) | <i>Satisfaction</i> | | | | <i>Importance</i> | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|-------|------|------|-------------------|--------|-----|------|
| | n | Mean* | SD | Rank | n | Mean** | SD | Rank |
| <i>Old BER Course Areas</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Social Studies | 63 | 3.27 | .57 | 1 | — | — | — | — |
| Natural Sciences | 65 | 3.20 | .64 | 2 | — | — | — | — |
| Mathematics | 65 | 2.75 | .88 | 3 | — | — | — | — |
| Computers | 45 | 2.47 | 1.01 | 4 | — | — | — | — |
| English/Communications | 64 | 2.36 | .60 | 5 | — | — | — | — |
| Humanities | 65 | 2.14 | .60 | 6 | — | — | — | — |
| <i>Proposed BER Course Areas</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Business & Economics | — | — | — | — | 64 | 3.77 | .42 | 1 |
| Computing | — | — | — | — | 64 | 3.52 | .59 | 2 |
| Government | — | — | — | — | 64 | 3.41 | .53 | 3 |
| International Affairs | — | — | — | — | 62 | 3.24 | .69 | 4 |
| Political Science | — | — | — | — | 62 | 3.10 | .59 | 5 |
| Foreign Languages | — | — | — | — | 64 | 2.58 | .71 | 6 |

*Means based on scale of 1 = very unsatisfied; 4 = very satisfied.

**Means based on scale of 1 = very unimportant; 4 = very important.

Graduates were asked to name beneficial classes, what they would do the same or differently if replanning their curriculum, and for what job responsibility they felt unprepared. For their most beneficial elective, 34% of the respondents listed a journalism or communications class, while only 18% listed an agriculture class. The remaining half listed either a humanities class or another elective. For their most beneficial required course, 32% of the respondents listed writing or editing classes. The remaining 68% listed other journalism or communications classes.

If they could plan their curriculum over, 40% of the respondents would enroll in more journalism or communications classes, while only 18% would take more agriculture courses. A third (34%) would like to have taken either management, marketing, or other business course work. Half (49%) would plan to take the same journalism or communications classes. Regarding the job responsibility for which they felt unprepared, 71% listed management, marketing, and business. One-fourth said their curriculum did not prepare them for communications responsibilities.

The graduates were satisfied with selected academic experiences. Their most satisfying experiences involved the College of Agriculture student magazine, advising and counseling, and the Agricultural Communicators of

Tomorrow student organization. The graduates rated their overall undergraduate experience as satisfactory (3.30 on a 4.00 scale). Internships, career exposure, and advising and counseling were experiences rated most important for future agricultural communicators.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Agricultural communications graduates of Ohio State tend to be white females with a bachelor's degree. More than half of the agricultural communications graduates earn annual salaries under \$25,000. Business and marketing, public relations, and writing and editing are major areas of employment for agricultural communications graduates. Agricultural communications graduates are very satisfied with their undergraduate courses in agriculture, journalism, and communications and less satisfied with their basic education requirement courses. For future agricultural communicators, the graduates perceive courses in journalism and communications to be more important than agriculture or basic education courses. The graduates are satisfied with selected undergraduate experiences and perceive such experiences to be extremely important for future agricultural communicators. This study's findings parallel those cited in the literature about 1980s agricultural communications curricula, which tend to focus on communications preparation rather than agriculture courses.

Recommendations to agricultural communications faculty include:

1. Intensifying efforts to recruit minority students;
2. Studying positions held by the graduates and salaries earned by professional agricultural communicators to better advise students;
3. Discussing the findings of this study with their advisees to help them understand the importance agricultural communicators place on communications, agriculture, and basic education courses;
4. Implementing strategies to enable undergraduates to develop a stronger appreciation for basic education courses in the curriculum;
5. Reviewing the findings of this study relative to the importance agricultural communicators place upon co-curricular activities; and
6. Conducting similar studies to determine if Ohio State graduates are typical of agricultural communications professionals in other states.

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