

## Some Pains for Growth of Agricultural College Communicators

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**T**ime permits me to share only a small part of my reaction to this useful study by Lloyd Bostian and Bill Reed.<sup>1</sup> I want to use some of their findings as a starting point to discuss what seems to be one of the major professional dilemmas of agricultural college communicators. Then I want to suggest some directions which we are taking — and need to take — to ease the dilemma.

It takes the form of a certain touchiness. We see signs of professional touchiness in the Bostian-Reed study. For example:

- opinions among communicators that administrators and specialists don't understand them.
- indications that administrators think communications staff members are sufficiently involved in making administrative decisions, but that communicators believe otherwise.
- indications that communicators in the agricultural colleges have a weak hold on the academic ladder. A minority of agricultural college communicators hold academic rank, and most of those lack tenure.
- feelings among many staff members that they are not getting ahead; that they are not their own bosses; and that they have little influence on important decisions within their organization.

This touchiness is not new, of course. One needs only look back through the professional literature and convention programs of AAACE to see that agricultural college communicators feel uneasy about their professional status. Their counterparts in industry and government scold them for being so defensive about their profession.

One irony, of course, is that agricultural college communicators apparently have the best of all worlds today. They are part of agriculture, which enters a new era of respectability as the world focuses attention upon the

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<sup>1</sup> Speech to the American Association of Agricultural College Editors, San Antonio, Texas, July 12, 1976.

grim race between population levels and food supplies. And, on the communications side, few curricula on our campuses have shown more rapid growth during recent years than those related to communications.

The agricultural college communicator's dilemma, of course, grows directly from neither of those matters. Instead, the dilemma arises from a unique institutional setting. As members of the academic community, agricultural college communicators face an uncomfortable combination of pressures.

They are expected to provide **communications services**. In that role, they support the educational and informational programs of others. They serve their colleges by writing, editing, shooting, taping, designing, printing and applying other technical skills. Often they act upon request, so in the service role exercise little control over their work. This "service" role is traditional among agricultural college communicators, beginning with the earliest publication editors. Those editors usually weren't responsible for identifying the need for publications. They didn't gather the contents and write the manuscripts. They edited and published the material, as a service to the authors.

The second role fits into what we could call the **academic expectations** which confront agricultural college communicators. New colleagues soon learn that they are working in a setting which rewards scholarly research, teaching and publishing. This setting affects their relationships with other faculty members. It affects the kinds of work they feel compelled to do if they want to advance in salary, rank, prestige.

A third role involves the expectations associated with our **parent discipline: communication**. It is a fairly new body of knowledge — still highly sketchy and scattered. But we are learning from it. Communication emerges more and more as a complex, interactive process which forces the communicator to take an active role in analyzing communication situations, carefully identifying and studying audiences, planning media strategies, and so on. The more we know about communicating, the more uneasy the agricultural college communicator feels about applying specific communications skills and services in isolation. Bring us into the early stages of planning, says the communicator to administrators and subject matter specialists. And please treat communication as a body of subject matter as important and substantive as livestock feeding, weed control, family economics or human nutrition.

Note what happens when these three sets of expectations work on an agricultural college communicator. Often they are not compatible, so they put the communicator under pressure. For example:

- He or she often can't fare well in the academic promotions system because of limited time available for research and teaching.
- He or she risks alienating the Extension staff by resisting a passive service role when it conflicts with sound communication principles.

—He or she searches for a stronger application of total communications planning at some risk of seeming to threaten the client specialist. It is impossible to meet all these expectations.

My main goal, however, is not to identify the dilemmas of agricultural college communicators. Instead, I want to argue that current agonies are a sign of professional vigor.

In an academic sense, agricultural college communicators are newcomers to the scene. They began a century ago, carrying out a narrow range of communication activities. Think of the growth and changes: new communications technologies, new audiences, an explosion in amount of knowledge to communicate, new understanding of communication processes and systems. Moreover, I believe that the agricultural colleges are ready to take advantage of growth in our profession. The Bostian-Reed study offers some evidence. Also, let me share a recent personal experience. **Extension program leaders of the north-central region spent nearly three days early this year studying the role of communications in Extension.** Their study led them to envision — and call for — communications programs which are much more broad and varied than the programs of today. In fact, what was the main concern of Extension communicators who attended the meeting? It was that communication staff are not fully qualified yet to do what is envisioned.

In short, I am optimistic about the opportunities for professional growth of communicators within Extension programming. That growth may take several directions.

1. Communications support for agricultural colleges will become even more diverse. Publishing services and services to the mass media were our original domain. Now we are moving strongly into support for the more personalized forms of Extension programming. Agricultural college communicators of the future will work in a much broader range of media — of audiences — and of subject matter. They will provide a much fuller range of communication expertise.

As a side issue to this point, I believe that we will achieve broader gauge expertise **not** by making communications strategists of everyone. A more promising approach is to seek a diverse mixture of talents within our groups. We now have persons with specialized talent in graphic design, writing, photography, broadcasting, and so on. Soon we also will have specialists in media research, audience situation analysis, instructional consulting, information campaign planning and other emerging functions. All such efforts require specific skills, none of which is inherently more worthy or important than others. I like this perspective, partly because it seems more feasible than trying to make each person an expert in everything. Also, by emphasizing the skills required for each function, we can perhaps side-step the establishment of peck-orders. This perspective doesn't set planners on a scale above doers — because planning is an

action, a skill. Planning may come prior to writing or design in the process, but it is just another vital step.

A broader definition of our communications support probably will prompt some changes in terminology. For example, the time may be here to identify the heads of our Extension communications units as "communications leaders" rather than "Extension editors." Titles for other agricultural college communicators also should reflect their roles as communications specialists with particular kinds of expertise.

2. A second prediction is that stronger communications planning will force us to conduct more research. I say this with positive enthusiasm because we will use research as an everyday guide for decisions about communications strategies. Decision-making research — practical, important, and rigorously conducted by qualified researchers.

3. The more we learn about the communication process, through research efforts within our units, the more knowledge we will have available as a body of subject matter for teaching. That body will encompass many of the "micro" aspects which we already teach (for example, skills in using various media). It also will include an expanded range of "macro" aspects. Some examples include teaching about specific communication systems in agriculture — their structure, operations, and effects; about rural-urban interactions; and about the role of communication in development.

4. The stronger our academic base (through expanded research and teaching activities) the more comfortably the agricultural college communicator can fit into an academic setting. I refer here to more than opportunities for personal advancement. I refer also to new opportunities for in-service teaching among Extension staff members, for degree programs and for expanded instruction on our campuses. Also we might visualize the time when Extension will provide well-developed continuing education programs in communications — just as it offers education in more traditional subject areas. The agricultural college communicator will serve, side-by-side, with other subject matter specialists in Extension.

5. As agricultural college communicators seek more balance in services, research and teaching, they will add more substance to their parent discipline.

In summary the Bostian-Reed study identifies some professional dilemmas of agricultural college communicators. It also helps us recognize some dynamics of the profession. Where there is pain, it seems to be the pain of growth. I believe that the agricultural college communicator is being integrated into the total academic setting through a broadening of responsibilities. In the process, we will recognize more clearly that the traditional academic call for research and teaching is fully consistent with a role of communications support. Agricultural college communicators will need more research to guide their decisions — and in the process will build a stronger base for communications teaching and practice.