

Course Work Offered in Agricultural Communication Programs

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A survey of 30 universities found that 16 institutions teach agricultural communications courses. Collectively, they offer micro-level courses (communications skills taught in the classroom), advanced micro-level courses (practical experience outside the classroom), macro-level courses (courses examining communication transfer among aggregate populations), and professional-orientation courses (preparing students for the job market). In the past six years, agricultural communications faculty have started 27 courses, nearly one-third of all courses taught. Macro-level courses are growing at the fastest rate. The academic base of programs has grown over the last 15 years to include both micro- and macro-level course work.

Relatively few studies have examined what courses are taught in agricultural communications (Evans & Bolick, 1982; Duncan, 1957; Nash, 1928). Hence, administrators and faculty have relatively few comparative guidelines for developing new agricultural communications programs or for contrasting their programs with others. This paper outlines what courses are offered in agricultural communications and examines the overall pattern of growth in the last six years.

Related Literature

Professionals have proposed two different ways to organize courses offered in agricultural communications. Evans (1972, 1975) has sug-

gested that agricultural communications curricula should include both communications skills (micro-level) courses and agricultural communications systems (macro-level) courses. In separating the two kinds of course work, he argues that most agricultural departments (such as agricultural economics) justify the validity of their disciplines as distinct academic units by concentrating on the unique system studied (agriculture) in the basic subject matter area (e.g., economics). In communications, then, agricultural information systems should be a major focus of study.

In contrast to Evans' proposal, which suggests building an academic base around both macro- and micro-

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level courses, career professionals emphasize the micro-level practical skills courses (Kroupa & Evans, 1973, 1976). A survey of various agricultural communicator groups indicated that these professionals considered human relations and communications skills courses highly important and agricultural communications systems and agricultural subject matter relatively unimportant (Kroupa & Evans, 1973). Professionals added that students should have more practical experience.

Methods

A mail survey was conducted during April and May of 1987 and a telephone survey in May and June of 1988 among 30 institutions with faculty members on the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow mailing list (See Author—for more details). Each respondent provided a list of courses (with brief descriptions) offered in agricultural communications and identified courses developed in the past five years. In the second survey, respondents added new courses developed during the 1987-88 academic year. The telephone calls (second survey wave) were also used to elaborate such questions as the perceived need for agricultural communication course work and the reason why agricultural communication programs were sponsored by departments from disciplines such as agricultural education.

Of the 30 schools, three had no programs, and one offered a major in agriculture with a minor in speech communication. These schools were excluded. Because the goal of this study was to determine the range and variety of **agricultural** communications courses, the respondents

were asked to identify those communications courses that had an agricultural emphasis.¹ All others, including courses identified by either course title or description as primarily home economics communications courses, were excluded.

The courses were divided into four groups: basic-skills, advanced applied-skills, macro-level skills, and professional skills. The basic-skills category included courses in writing, visual arts (photography, film, exhibits), broadcasting, advertising, and media/message planning (e.g., campaign strategies courses). The advanced applied-skills category was composed of internships and special problems courses, where students have the possibility of working outside a formal class structure.² The macro-level category included both introductory survey courses that included an overview of agricultural channels, sources, and audiences, and courses that concentrate on aggregate populations. Examples of these types of courses include agricultural information systems, rural-urban communications, and agricultural product promotion. The professional category was composed of courses that teach job-entry skills such as resume-writing and interviewing.

To classify specific courses into categories, I drew upon my knowledge as a teacher, at both the University of Illinois (faculty) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (graduate student). (These universities collectively offer 45% of all courses taught in agricultural communications.) These two universities and more than half of the remaining schools in my study sent detailed course outlines that were used to assign courses to the above categories. For the rest of the institutions,

I classified their courses by using the course descriptions in the universities' courses and catalogue handbook. When the descriptions were unclear, I contacted the faculty members and asked them to classify the courses based on the above category descriptions.

To determine if the course work corresponded to the structure of the sponsoring department, I grouped agricultural communications programs into four basic structures: a) programs sponsored by the college of agriculture, but housed in combined units (departments sponsoring at least one other major in another discipline such as agricultural education), b) programs sponsored by the sole communications department in the college or university, c) programs sponsored by the college of agriculture, but not associated with a specific department, and d) programs sponsored by agricultural

communications departments in a college of agriculture.

Findings

Sixteen of the 26 agricultural communications programs offer courses in agriculture, 87 courses nationwide. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of Wisconsin-Madison programs offered 45% (39 total) of all courses. Programs sponsored by agricultural communications units offer the highest average number of courses, eight per institution (See Table 1). However, this number is highly skewed because of the number of agricultural courses (26) offered by the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Agricultural combination units collectively offer 47 courses (54% of the courses offered in agricultural communications), an average of four to five courses per institution. The number of agricultural

Table 1
Number of courses offered by type of academic unit (structure).

No. courses offered	Academic units (structure)			
	Agr./ ^a comb.	Agr./ ag. comm.	Comm./ ag. comm.	Agr./ admin.
	No. inst.	No. inst.	No. inst.	No. inst.
0	1	1	5	3
1	2	0	2	0
2	0	1	0	0
3	0	1	1	0
4	1	0	0	1
5	2	0	0	0
6	3	0	0	0
13	1	0	0	0
26	0	1	0	0
Total courses	47	31	5	4

^a Abbreviations are as follows: Agr./comb., units in the college of agriculture that offer at least one major from a different discipline (such as agricultural education) in addition to the agricultural communications major; agr./ag. comm., agricultural communications departments in a college of agriculture; Comm./ag. comm., agricultural communications programs in communications departments; agr./admin., college-administered programs in colleges of agriculture.

communications courses drops dramatically for programs that are sponsored by either communications departments or colleges of agriculture. Only three communications departments offer any courses in agricultural communications (5 courses), while only one college administrative unit offers any formalized instruction.³

Description of Courses Offered

Skills. More than a third of the agricultural communications programs teach at least one course in agricultural writing (See Table 2). Agricultural communications programs offer six courses in visual

skills, most commonly photography courses; three courses in audio skills, usually broadcasting production and writing; three courses in advertising, five planning-skills courses, and 22 advanced-skills courses. Ten of the 16 schools that offer courses in agricultural communications offer at least one course in agricultural writing, fully one-fifth of the total agricultural communications course work nationwide.

Systems. Six schools offer introductory courses that discuss media channels, sources, and distribution. One-half of the agricultural communications programs offer courses that analyze agricultural

Table 2
Total and New Courses by academic unit (structure)

Course description	Academic units (structure)										
	Agr./ ^a comb.		Agr./ ag. comm.		Comm./ ag. comm.		Agr./ admin.		Total		
	C	N ^b	C	N	C	N	C	N	C	N	
Beginning skills											
Visual	3	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	2
Writing	7	4	9	0	1	0	2	0	19	4	
Audio	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	3	1	
Advertising	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	3	2	
Planning	4	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	5	1	
Advanced Skills											
Internships	5	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	8	1	
Special Problems	8	2	4	1	2	0	0	0	14	3	
Information systems											
Introduction	3	2	2	0	1	1	0	0	6	3	
Information systems	9	7	2	1	0	0	0	0	11	8	
Other											
Professional	6	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	3	
Research	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	

^a Abbreviations are as follows: Agr./comb., units in the college of agriculture that offer at least one major from a different discipline (such as agricultural education) in addition to the agricultural communication major; Agr./ag. comm., agricultural communications departments in a college of agriculture; Comm./ag. comm., agricultural communication programs in communication departments; Agr./admin., college-administered programs in colleges of agriculture.

^b Columns under C represent number of courses offered, columns under N represent number of new courses developed in the last six years.

communications systems.⁴ Furthermore, two types of skills courses commonly include information about communications systems. Planning-skills and advertising courses both examine various communications channels (or systems) to target specific audiences, a practical application of analyzing communications systems.

Professional Orientation

Four schools offer professional courses, most of which teach entry-level skills—writing resumes, interviewing, and conducting job searches. However, most also include information about agricultural communications as a profession, including agricultural communications' history and professional organizations.

Course Work Development

In the past six years, faculty in agricultural communications have started 27 courses, one-third of the 87 total. Slightly more than half of the new courses (14) are in micro-level skill development, an indicator that departments are still focusing most of their classroom instruction on developing student's individual communications skills. Writing courses were the most frequently added beginning class (four courses), followed by visual skills (two courses), advertising (two courses), audio (one course), and planning (one course). All of the newly established writing courses were in combined agricultural units. Both advertising courses were established in older programs that already offered large course listings (University of Wisconsin-Madison and University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).

Eight agricultural information systems courses and three introduc-

tory courses were established. These new courses represent nearly three-fourths of all information systems courses and half of all introductory courses. Macro-level courses represent 40% of all the new courses developed in the past six years. (Only the number of agricultural advertising courses and professional courses are growing as rapidly.)

Course Distribution by Administrative Structure

All of the programs administered in agricultural colleges, although not every institution, offer writing skills, internships, and special problems courses for agricultural communicators. Combined agricultural communications units offer the highest number of courses. These programs offer more than half of the special problems and internships, and all of the professional courses. Furthermore, combined agricultural communications units offer half of the introductory agricultural communications courses and more than three-fourths of the information systems courses taught nationally. Combined units also offer a large share of the writing, visual, audio, advertising, and planning skills courses.

The group offering the next largest number of courses (agricultural communications programs sponsored in agricultural communications departments) concentrates on micro-level skills, including visual, writing, audio, advertising, and planning skills. The programs administered by agricultural colleges or by departments which are the sole communications program in the university offer few new courses, primarily agricultural writing, internships, or special problems.

The largest course work expansion, both in absolute number and in

type, has been in the combined agricultural units. Of the 47 total courses listed in combined agricultural units, slightly more than half have been started in the last six years. These units have developed new introductory, information systems, visual skills, writing skills, audio, advertising, planning, professional, internships, and special problems courses, nearly 90% of all new courses and nearly 80% of information systems courses.

Philosophical Differences

The variation in course work relates to substantive philosophical differences between institutions on the necessity of agricultural communications course work. Several communications faculty members said that they believe agricultural communications course work wasted university resources. These faculty members generally gave the impression, and some stated specifically, that communications schools teach the skills necessary to cover a wide variety of topics, agriculture among them. Specific programs for agricultural communications students were unnecessary. The reaction from agricultural faculty members was, not surprisingly, different. While agricultural faculty felt that agricultural communications courses were important, several mentioned that limited university resources or higher level administrators' reluctance to invest in agricultural communications severely limited their program's growth potential.

Program Directions

Agricultural communications programs appear to be taking different directions in developing instruction. Ten schools that offer an agricultural communications program

(nearly 40% of the total) offer no course work specifically designated as agricultural communications. Five of the 16 agricultural communications programs offer exclusively skills courses (an average of two per program.)⁵ Ten schools offer a mixed curriculum of micro- and macro-level courses, and one a macro-level course only. Schools that have chosen a mixed option design have the highest average number of courses per program, between five and six courses per institution.⁶

Discussion

More than a third of the programs that offer agricultural communications do not offer any courses specifically designated as agricultural communications. Agriculture-specific communications course work, then, does not appear to be an essential part of building a program that will attract majors. However, in the last six years, agricultural communications programs have developed a stronger base in macro-level courses and the number of courses offered is increasing. Thirty percent of the courses now taught in agricultural communications were not offered six years ago. Programs in agricultural communications departments and programs which combine agricultural communications with at least one other agricultural discipline are largely choosing a mixed development path, adding both micro-level courses and macro-level courses. The latter courses are increasingly important in terms of percentage of course offering, particularly in combined units.

The various programs' administrative organization is related to real and substantive differences in the number and kinds of courses available to agricultural communications

students. Students wishing to have specific classroom instruction in combining agricultural subject matter and communications skills should enroll in either the combined or communications units in agricultural colleges. In general, programs sponsored by communications departments and schools and programs sponsored by the administrative units of colleges of agriculture offer relatively little course work.

While agricultural communications and combined agricultural units have the largest number of agricultural communications courses, the two academic structures are building slightly different academic bases. The majority of agricultural communications units' courses are skills courses, while a larger share of the combined agricultural units' courses are introductory and systems courses.

The present curricular developments follow agricultural communications professionals' recommendations for communications training both in and out of the classroom. The majority of courses offered in agricultural communications focus on communication skills. Judging by numerical frequency, writing is the essential core course for agricultural communications majors. Additionally, special problems and internships are a major curriculum component of programs nationwide.

Agricultural communication programs are now devoting a substantial proportion of their course work to teaching introductory and systems (macro-level) courses. Such courses as educational campaign strategies and advertising also teach systems analysis as a part of developing student skills. The large number of agricultural communica-

tions systems courses suggest that many agricultural programs now include agricultural communications systems in their academic base as recommended by Evans (1972).

"Ideal" Curriculum

Abstracting from the national course offerings, the idealized agricultural communications curricula has three basic components, plus an additional component offered by three of the 26 schools. First, agricultural communications programs commonly offer micro-level courses that allow students to combine agricultural subject matter with communications skills. Most commonly these courses develop writing skills. Second, almost all program types offer students advanced micro-level skills courses that allow students to work outside the classroom, often in professional settings, to gain practical experience in agricultural communications. Third, many agricultural communications programs are now offering systems courses that deal with communications transfer among aggregate populations within agriculture. While the systems courses have traditionally been the weakest program component (Evans 1972, 1975), macro-level courses currently are the fastest growing curriculum area. Finally, three schools now offer professional orientation courses (6% of all courses), career-oriented seminars that examine the agricultural communications profession.

Endnotes

¹For example, two departments that offer agricultural communications programs, Cornell University and Iowa State University, are the primary communication department for their university.

Although both are associated with the college of agriculture, neither department offers courses that emphasize agricultural communications. Hence, no courses from either school were included.

²As one reviewer noted, special problems courses are also often used to teach experimental courses or for other institutional purposes. However, the course descriptions uniformly described special problems as offering the possibility of students developing their own projects and did not include a description of the institutional usage.

³Part of the difference between the agricultural administrative and the communication course offerings is an artifact of administrative procedure. Agricultural communications students in all cases are free to choose internships in agricultural communications. However, only college of agriculture internships specifically mention agriculture in the course title or description.

⁴The macro-level communications dimension potentially encompasses a wide range of course work: international development, agri-communications information systems, rural-urban communication. The most commonly offered macro level course is agri-communication systems.

⁵Three of these schools offer only one course, one school offers three, and one school offers four.

⁶This excludes the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which offers a full academic sequence in agricultural communications.

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