

An Overview of Agricultural Communications Programs and Curricula

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Agricultural communications faculty and administration must periodically reexamine programs and curricula. A survey of 30 universities examined current program structure and curricular requirements in agricultural communications programs. The study found that the programs' most predominant characteristic is variety. Four different types of administrative units, in colleges of agriculture, liberal arts, and humanities, offer agricultural communications majors. Agricultural curricular requirements vary from highly prescribed to no specific required agricultural courses. All schools require a core communications curricula plus electives. The program requirements closely parallel professionals' curricular preferences, but fall short of recent curricular recommendations by agricultural deans and directors.

Most agricultural colleges have not seriously revised their curricular requirements in the past 25 years (Sledge, 1987). The North Central Region Deans and Directors of Resident Instruction Curricular Committee has called curricular redevelopment a necessity for all agricultural programs, adding, "We do not question whether our curricula should be revised and revitalized; we accept as given that they should be" (Wharton, 1987).¹ The need for agricultural communications faculty to examine their curricula is particularly acute.

In a relatively short timespan, changes in the amount, speed, capacity, and relative importance of communications have affected agriculture so profoundly that some researchers have argued that farming is being transformed from an industrial age to an information age (Sonka, 1985; Dillman, 1985).² But, while an in-depth assessment of present curricular offerings is a necessary base for curricular revision (Larson & Hoiberg, 1987; Sledge, 1987; Kroupa & Evans, 1976), only a few detailed studies of agricultural

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communications curricula exist (Duncan, 1957; Nash, 1928; Evans & Bolick, 1982). The goal of this paper is to start such an assessment.

Related Literature

In 1987, the North Central Region Deans and Directors of Resident Instruction reviewed the curricula for the North Central colleges of agriculture. According to this review, the major limitations of current curricular requirements for agricultural students are the following: inadequate preparation in oral and written communications skills, inadequate understanding of business skills, primarily in accounting, finance, and marketing; and inadequate emphasis on cross-cultural, global perspectives. Other limitations include the lack of introduction in agricultural systems analysis, values and ethics in agriculture, problem-solving, public policy, and leadership (Larson & Hoiberg, 1987).

A survey of agricultural communicators indicated that professionals believe that the most important academic areas for agricultural communicators are communication skills, communication systems, and human relations (Kroupa & Evans, 1976). Specifically, professional agricultural communications specialists recommended training in news writing, feature writing, editing, and photography for most careers in agricultural communications (Kroupa & Evans, 1973). Farm magazine editors and publishers, public relations practitioners, and advertising employees added agricultural economics to the list of critical courses. Farm magazine editors and publishers specified courses in agricultural science (Kroupa & Evans, 1973), agronomy, and veterinary science (Kroupa & Evans, 1976). In general, however,

professionals indicated that agricultural communications systems and agricultural subject matter courses were less important than courses in communications skills, communications systems, or human relations.

As a whole, professional agricultural communicators felt that students should take some agricultural course work, although, with the exceptions outlined above, they did not specify particular courses. In view of these recommendations, Kroupa & Evans (1973) concluded that agricultural communications programs should adopt a highly flexible curriculum design, particularly for students' agricultural subject matter.

The most recent study (Evans & Bolick, 1982) found that institutions required from 124 to 133 semester hours (or equivalent) for graduation. Of that total, most institutions required basic core courses in agriculture and in communications plus electives. The total class work in each area averaged about 24% of students' total undergraduate credit hours. The researchers suggested that the agricultural course work requirements were more flexible than earlier curricular designs, and that programs may be shifting to an increased emphasis on economics, marketing, and computer technology. The required communications courses, about half of the total communications course work, emphasized skills.

Methods

A mail survey was conducted during April and May of 1987 among 30 colleges and universities with faculty members on the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow mailing list. This list included schools with agricultural communications programs and schools with faculty

who had an active interest in agricultural communications, but no program. The schools are identified through annual fall surveys of campuses of all land-grant institutions plus all others identified as having interests in agricultural communications.³ The original request, plus follow-ups by mail and telephone, resulted in 29 completed surveys. A second telephone survey was conducted during May and June of 1988. All 30 schools responded.

Faculty members answered questions on program title, degrees offered, and program size, including numbers of students interested in agricultural communications as a career. They also returned descriptions of agricultural communications students' curricular requirements and program organization. These descriptions formed the data base for this article.⁴ The information on courses and curricula was supplemented, when necessary, from the universities' courses and curricula catalogues, and telephone contact.

Findings

Twenty-six institutions have undergraduate degree programs that combine agriculture with communications.⁵ Four institutions do not. Of these, one school offers an agricultural degree with a minor in speech communications. The remaining three schools are in the process of developing agricultural communications programs; one is building a service program, another a degree for majors. The third has eight students who are combining a major and a minor in agriculture and communications, but, while the adviser would like to start a program, administrative support seems doubtful.

Degrees Offered

A bachelor's degree in agriculture is still the most common type of degree offered. Twenty-three of the 26 institutions grant bachelor's degrees in agriculture; only three degrees are from other colleges.⁶ Only the University of Wisconsin-Madison offers a complete undergraduate sequence in agricultural communications. All other programs depend on communications departments to teach the majority of the students' required communication skills.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison has a graduate program specifically identified as a master's in agricultural journalism; six schools offer a master's that allow students to combine interests in agriculture with communications.⁷ The University of Wisconsin-Madison jointly administers a doctoral program with the School of Journalism and Mass Communication in which students receive a doctorate of philosophy in Mass Communication.

Administrative Units Sponsoring Agricultural Communications Programs

Ten of the 26 programs are in the departments that include other agricultural majors such as agricultural education, extension education, and adult and youth education majors (Table 1). Most combined units added the major when college administrators decided to develop a departmental base for students interested in agricultural communications. According to faculty members in combined units, agricultural education was the academic discipline most closely aligned, academically and philosophically, with the interests of

agricultural communicators.

Four programs are in agricultural communications departments. Four colleges of agriculture also sponsor agricultural communications program sequences, but the students have no departmental home. These colleges either treat agricultural communications as an individualized major in the college or as a curriculum option under general agriculture.

Eight agricultural communications programs are placed in communications departments that offer a complete program sequence for communications majors. Most of these programs have a technical degree option in which students can specialize in a topic area such as agriculture. In one program, students take the same courses as the jour-

nalism students and the agricultural college adjusts credit requirements. In another program, students take a double major, one in an agricultural discipline and another in mass communications.

Size of Programs

Undergraduate. Overall, 629 students in 26 programs were planning careers in agricultural communications in 1988 (See Table 2).⁸ Nearly 75% of all schools had less than 30 students per institution. Three schools have more than sixty students.⁹

The number of students per institution tends to increase in relationship to how closely the program is identified with a distinct discipline in agricultural communications. The largest student enrollments per in-

Table 1
Academic units administering agricultural communications programs (structure).

Titles	No. programs
Agriculture: Combination	
Department of Agricultural Education	3
Department of Agricultural Education and Mechanization	2
Department of Agricultural and Extension Education	2
Department of Adult and Youth Education	1
Department of Extension Education	1
Office of Agricultural Communications and Extension Education ^a	1
Agricultural: Agricultural Communications	
Department of Agricultural Communications	2
Department of Agricultural Journalism	1
Department of Agricultural Communication Service	1
Agriculture: Administration	
College of Agriculture	4
Communication: Agricultural Communications	
Department of Communications ^b	1
Department of Communication	1
Department of Journalism ^b	1
Department of Technical Journalism ^b	2
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication ^b	2
Department of Mass Communication, Speech Communication, Theatre Arts	1

^a Now Office of Agricultural Communications and Education.

^b These departments are not in agricultural colleges.

stitution were in agricultural communications departments, with an average of 37 students per program. Agricultural communications programs administered by agricultural departments which also administer other agricultural degree programs average 30 students per program; agricultural communications programs administered by communications departments, 21 students; and agricultural communications programs administered by agricultural college administrative units, nine students per program.

Graduate. The University of Wisconsin-Madison had 39 master's students and seven Ph.D. students enrolled in the spring term of 1988. The other six institutions that offer master's programs that combine agricultural interests with communications had between one and five

students in each program.

Curricular Requirements

Agriculture. Agricultural requirements (See Table 3) range from a low of 6% to 10% to a high of 31% to 35% of students' course work. The majority of programs (18 of 24) require that students take between 16% and 30% of their course work in agriculture.

Agricultural communications programs organize agricultural requirements into three curricular designs: highly regulated, specified core, or area specialization. The five schools that have chosen a highly regulated program specify more than three-fourths of their students' agricultural courses. All require students to take courses in a wide variety of agricultural disciplines.

Ten programs require a specified core of courses in several agri-

Table 2

Number of students per institution planning a career in agricultural communications during spring term 1988.

Enrollment per institution	Academic units (structure)			
	Agr./ ^a comb.	Agr./ ag. comm.	Comm./ ag. comm.	Agr./ admin.
	No. inst.	No. inst.	No. inst.	No. inst.
1-9	3	0	2	2
10-19	2	0	2	1
20-29	0	3	2	1
30-39	1	0	0	0
40-49	2	0	1	0
50-59	0	0	0	0
60-69	1	0	0	0
70-79	0	0	0	0
80-89	1	1	0	0
Total students	301	147	146	35
Average no. students per program type	30	37	21	9

^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./agr. comm., agricultural communications departments in a college of agriculture; Comm./agr. comm., agricultural communications programs in communications departments; Agr./admin., college-administered programs in colleges of agriculture.

cultural disciplines. The majority of these schools allow students to choose the rest of their courses, although six schools require several upper-level agricultural courses. (One school requires that students specialize in an agricultural discipline in addition to the core courses.)

The third type of curricular organization (nine programs) does not require specific courses. Six of the programs with this type of design require students to develop at least one intensive area of specialization in an agricultural discipline. Another school recommends that students take a wide variety of courses, and another specifies general areas in which students must take courses. In addition, four of the nine programs require students to take a

minimum number of upper-level courses, and two require that students take agricultural courses outside their area of specialization.

Three universities offer different options in agriculture: agricultural production, natural resources, agricultural business, and agricultural science and social science (science writing).

Specific course work. Although all programs require agricultural courses, slightly more than half of the schools do not require specific agricultural production courses. One requires students to take a third of their required agricultural courses in agricultural production, two programs require 75%, and the rest require students to take between 50% and 74% of their agricultural

Table 3

Requirements as percentage of total requirements by administrative structure.

Percentage of total course work	Academic units (structure)			
	Agr./ ^a comb.	Agr./ ag. comm.	Comm./ ag. comm.	Agr./ admin.
	A C AC	A C AC	A C AC	A C AC
0	0 ^b 0 4	0 0 2	0 0 6	0 0 4
1-5	0 0 4	0 0 1	0 0 1	0 0 0
6-10	1 0 1	0 0 0	2 0 0	0 0 0
11-15	0 2 0	1 0 1	0 1 0	0 0 0
16-20	3 3 0	1 2 0	2 1 0	3 2 0
21-25	0 4 0	1 0 0	3 4 0	1 2 0
26-30	3 0 0	1 1 0	0 0 0	0 0 0
31-35	2 0 0	0 0 0	0 0 0	0 0 0

^aAbbreviations 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.

^bColumns labeled A represent number of institutions requiring row level of percentage ranges in agricultural course work, columns labeled C represent number of institutions requiring row level of percentage ranges in communications course work, columns AC represent number of institutions requiring row level of percentage ranges in agricultural communications course work. For example, reading row 1 for combined agricultural units, zero units require no agricultural courses, zero units require no communications courses, and four units require no agricultural communications courses.

requirements in agricultural production.

All programs that require specific course work require agricultural economics.¹⁰ Four require students to take between 10% and 24% of their agricultural course work in that subject area, eight require between 25% and 50%, one requires 50% and two require 100%. The most commonly required production courses are animal sciences (ten schools), agronomy and courses related to plant care (seven schools), or entomology (five schools). Only two schools include veterinary science. More than one-fourth of all programs require courses that farm editors and publishers did not consider essential: soils (seven schools), agricultural engineering or mechanics (five schools), food science (two schools), and conservation and natural resources (two schools).

Communications requirements. Currently, all schools require core courses in communications plus electives. The percentage of required communications courses runs from a low of 10% to 15% to a high of 30% to 35% of the students' total course load. Most schools (18) require agricultural communications students to take between 16% and 25% of their credit hours in communications.

Options. A generalized major in agricultural communications is the most common option offered to agricultural communications students (13 schools), followed by a news-editorial specialization (12 schools), broadcasting (nine schools), advertising (six schools), and public relations (four schools). All options concentrate on production (skills) courses as opposed to courses that fit communications into a wider historical or social context. The

generalized agricultural communications option, the news-editorial option, and the public relations option require roughly parallel sequences, including news writing, reporting, photography, and editing. The broadcast option sequence generally drops the reporting and photography requirements and adds introduction to broadcasting and broadcast production. Only advertising has developed a distinctly separate sequence of required courses, including introduction to advertising, advertising writing, advertising layout and production, creative strategy and tactics, and media planning.

Discussion

Agricultural communications programs' most predominant characteristic is variety. Liberal arts and humanities colleges as well as agricultural colleges offer agricultural communications programs. Within agricultural colleges, three distinct units (agricultural communications departments, combined units, and college administrations) house agricultural communications programs. The variety of administrative organizations probably reflects the diverse paths that agricultural communications programs have taken during their development. However, the trend seems to be to move agricultural communications majors into a combined unit, commonly from a college-administered major into a departmental home.

Agricultural course requirements fit closely with agricultural communications professionals' suggestions. Institutions generally either prescribe a set number of core requirements in different agricultural disciplines or they allow students to select their courses, but require that

students concentrate on a specific discipline. The current curricular designs are similar to those described in the Evans and Bolick study (1982) in that the key characteristic of the majority of agricultural curricular designs is flexibility. However, the Evans and Bolick (1982) study indicates that the agricultural curricula are "geared to expose students to a wide range of courses and knowledge" (p. 35). The second type of curricular design found in this study concentrates more on developing depth in a particular agricultural discipline.

Agricultural course requirements most commonly specify agricultural economics, which is the topic most highly recommended by professionals. The most commonly required agricultural production courses are similar to those courses suggested by professionals. Overall, the communications curricular requirements show a more cohesive agreement on essential courses than the agricultural curricula. The communications courses are primarily focused on writing skills, photography, and communications law. Advertising sequences, in addition to writing and production requirements, also include various strategy and media planning courses.

The average agricultural communications student takes between two and three more communications courses than the average agricultural student.¹¹ The North Central Region Deans and Directors of Resident Instruction Committee's general criticism that agricultural curricular requirements inadequately prepare agricultural students in oral and written communications skills does not appear to apply to agricultural communications majors. However, the agricultural communi-

cations' curricular requirements fall short of other recommendations made by the committee. Agricultural communications students are not required to take courses specifically designed to teach cross-cultural global perspectives, agricultural systems analysis, values and ethics in agriculture, public policy, or leadership. Nor are they required to take courses in problem-solving and systems analysis.¹²

The lack of required in-depth courses in such areas is problematic in light of agricultural communicators' intimate involvement in communicating agricultural public policy about global and national issues in agriculture. Additionally, agricultural communicators of all types should be familiar with ethical issues, particularly those affecting agricultural production and technology.

One solution would be to require or encourage students to take courses in these areas from outside departments. Given the limitations of resources and faculty with expertise in these areas, encouraging students to take courses from other departments may be the only option. However, 11 agricultural communications programs now offer agricultural information systems courses in agricultural communications, a development which addresses the North Central Region Curriculum Deans and Directors of Resident Instruction Committee's concern that students take more course work in agricultural systems (Reisner, 1990). These courses have the double advantage of being specifically designed for the agricultural communications student and of strengthening agricultural communications programs course offerings beyond teaching individual skills (Evans, 1972, 1975).

Endnotes

¹The parallel calls have also recently been made for journalism and mass communications (Murphy, 1989).

²According to Sonka (1984), in the technological age, the most innovative and successful farmers were those who most rapidly adopted new technologies. In the information age, the vanguard farmers are those who most effectively manage information resources.

³Two departments were identified that were not on the ACT mailing list. One was the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, Department of Agricultural Industries, which offers a major in agribusiness (36 credits) with a minor in communications (24 credits). The second was the University of Minnesota-St. Paul, which offers a Bachelor of Science degree in technical communications from the Rhetoric Department in the college of Agriculture. Agricultural communications is one of the options of a technical communications degree. The bachelor's degree requirements specify that students take a minimum of 37% of their total requirements in communications and 11% of their requirements in their technical elective. The Rhetoric Department teaches two courses specifically associated with agriculture: Humanities: The Land in American Experience (developed in the past five years) and Humanities: Agricultural Heritage (an older course that examines significant events or periods affecting rural agricultural peoples, including major changes in values, attitudes, and philosophies). The University of Minnesota-St. Paul also offers a Master of Science in Technical Communications.

⁴The institutions surveyed were Auburn University, California State Polytechnic University, Colorado State University, Cornell University, Iowa State University, Kansas State University, Louisiana State University, Michigan State University, Mississippi State University, North Carolina State University, North Dakota State University, The Ohio State University, Oklahoma State University, Oregon State University, Purdue University, South Dakota State University, Southern Illinois University, Texas A&M University, Texas Tech University, University of Arizona, University of Flor-

ida, University of Georgia, University of Kentucky, University of Illinois, University of Missouri, University of Nebraska, University of Tennessee, University of Wisconsin-River Falls, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Washington State University.

⁵The individual programs have various degree titles (c.f., agricultural journalism, agricultural communications). However, for convenience, all programs are referred to as "agricultural communications."

⁶The programs are in the following colleges: College of Liberal Arts, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences.

⁷The master's degrees are in the following universities: Iowa State University, a master's in communications with an agricultural emphasis; Cornell University, a professional master's; Texas Tech University, a master's in agricultural education with a communications emphasis; Mississippi State University, a master's in extension with a communications emphasis; The Ohio State University, a master's in agricultural education with a communications core. Michigan State University has an arrangement with its journalism department for a master of arts in journalism with an agricultural option.

⁸Because agricultural communications students are enrolled in a variety of programs, often with students not interested in agriculture, the various programs' enrollment figures do not reflect the interest in agricultural communications as a career choice. (For example, Cornell had 316 students enrolled in the department for the academic year 1987-88. Only six of these students are interested in agriculture.) To judge more closely how many students are actively interested in agricultural communications as a career, the faculty members estimated the number of students actively planning to become agricultural communicators.

⁹These schools are the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Texas Tech University, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

¹⁰One school requires either an agricultural economics or an agricultural social science course.

¹¹This separation is actually higher than the numbers indicate. The North Central Curricular Committee Project report included all English requirements, while this study grouped basic English and speech courses under general university requirements—not communication requirements.

¹²The exception is the advertising media sequence, which includes problem-solving and systems-analysis skills.

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