

# Understanding Whence We Came: Role of the Association for Communication Excellence in the Development of Agricultural Communications during the Past Century - and Future Implications

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## Introduction

*To understand where we are today, we must first try to understand whence we came. – C.G. Scruggs and Smith W. Moseley (1979, p. 22)*

On June 14, 1913, editors from six colleges of agriculture met at the University of Illinois in an informal way to discuss six questions focused on their role in the dissemination of information via the media about agricultural issues. After several fruitful discussions regarding the questions at hand, the men decided this type of gathering was important for their future. As such, they voted unanimously to make the conference an annual activity. This was the first meeting of what is now the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE).

The discipline has changed greatly since this initial conference, as has the organization it represents. The need for skilled professional communicators is as evident today as it was at that first meeting of college editors.

At a time when demand is at an all time high for graduates with degrees from agricultural communications programs, it is good to reflect on how our discipline has reached this point. How has our discipline evolved during the last century? What role has the Association for Communication Excellence played in the development of the agricultural communications discipline?

Winston Churchill once said, “The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you can see” (Mansfield, 1995, p. 200). In an attempt to follow the words of Churchill as well as Scruggs and Moseley, this analysis seeks to renew our understanding of the past as well as keep a keen eye toward the future of agricultural communications as an academic field.

## Problem Statement

There is currently no literature looking at the role of the Association for Communication Excellence in the development of agricultural journalism/agricultural communications as an academic discipline.

## Purpose

The purpose of this research is to provide a historical overview of the role of ACE in the growth and development of agricultural communications as an academic discipline as well as a

professional field of practice. In particular, the analysis will focus on historical data from ACE publications and documents, showcasing the growth of the discipline as it relates to the land grant mission of teaching, research and service.

## **Research Questions**

The following questions guided this study:

- 1) What were the significant historical contexts through the Association for Communication Excellence surrounding the development of teaching programs in agricultural communications?
- 2) What were the significant historical contexts through the Association for Communication Excellence surrounding the development of research in agricultural communications?
- 3) What were the significant historical contexts through the Association for Communication Excellence surrounding the development of service efforts in agricultural communications?

## **Methods and Procedures**

Historical inquiry research methods were used to address the research questions, which guided this investigation. Davis (1991) noted seven guidelines for researching and writing curriculum history. These guidelines are: authority, interpretation, significance, context, representativeness, perspective, and style (p. 79-80). These guidelines, along with the six steps for conducting historical research by Busha and Harter (1980), were used in the development of this historical investigation. In particular, both primary and secondary historical references were used to obtain the information needed. Primary sources included journal articles, newsletter articles, conference reports, conference proceedings and other publications. Secondary sources included selected books, national project reports and other online publications. The information was collected through the library resources at Oklahoma State University and the University of Illinois as well as the Agricultural Communications Documentation Center (ACDC) and other online resources.

The major search process, which occurred using the ACDC, identified 1,255 articles in ACE periodicals from 1919 to date. The authors subjected all references to internal and external criticism to ensure the authenticity and accuracy of the source (Key, 1997).

In this analysis, the term “agriculture” is used broadly to encompass the food enterprise (from research, production, processing, marketing, policies and trade to consumption, diets and nutrition for health); feed for animals; fiber for clothing and other uses; renewable energy; natural resources and conservation; rural community development, rural affairs and other related aspects. “Communications” is used broadly to encompass all intrapersonal, interpersonal and mediated means by which humans interact and otherwise gather information, consider options and make decisions in pursuit of their wellbeing.

## **Findings**

### ***1. Development of teaching programs in agricultural communications***

Agricultural Journalism programs were at the forefront of journalism education in the United States in the early 1900s. From their roots in technical journalism departments, these programs have gravitated toward agricultural colleges as the journalism programs shifted to a more general focus

(Jarnagin, 1966). The profession of agricultural communications/agricultural journalism has seen a major growth in the last century. Similarly, academic programs in this field have seen tremendous growth and development. Today they offer a dynamic range of course offerings while experiencing increasing enrollment. New programs seem to sprout roots on a regular basis and existing programs are seeing major growth spurts in relation to student numbers and curricular offerings as the need for communicating agricultural issues to an increasingly agricultural illiterate audience becomes more and more important.

In the early days, ACE was fighting for status as an organization and academic programs were searching for a focus (Jarnagin, 1966). Few agricultural journalism and communications programs existed, much less curriculum to support programs. Just more than 100 years ago, in 1905, the first agricultural journalism course was offered at Iowa State College (Boone, Meisenbach and Tucker, 2000). Today, many programs offer up to 10 or 15 core courses within the department.

Iowa State University was the first to offer a four-year curriculum in agricultural journalism, beginning in 1920. The University of Wisconsin established the first Department of Agricultural Journalism in the world in 1908 (<http://lsc.wisc.edu/home/>). From this point forward, there was a steady increase in the number of degree programs in agricultural journalism with 14 schools offering the equivalent of a major by 1952 (Report of the program development conference, 1952). By 1982, 20 universities were offering undergraduate degrees in agricultural journalism, agricultural communication(s), agriculture and natural resources communications, technical communications, rural communications and/or agricommunication (Evans & Bolick, 1965). Today, Web searching reveals more than 45 U. S. colleges and universities with an identified program in agricultural journalism or agricultural communications.

In the early years, few students sought a degree in those agricultural journalism programs. In 2011, USDA reported nearly 1,500 students seeking an undergraduate degree in agricultural communications/journalism at land grant institutions in the U.S. More than 130 were pursuing a master's degree or doctorate in this academic field (USDA, 2011).

### ***Early ACE - learning, training and finding a place***

The early years of ACE saw members trying to figure out how they fit in with the academic community. ACE provided members an opportunity for professional development and sharing of ideas. With the passage of the Smith-Lever Act, which established the Cooperative Extension Service, many universities faced reorganization. Editors were organized to manage information services beyond the research publications associated with their original Experiment Station work (Report of the program development conference, 1952). They were charged with taking that information and delivering it via this new formal Extension system to the people. Growth of communications need broadened their responsibilities beyond the editing and publishing focus to serving also as public information officers and specialists.

Throughout the 1920s, editors served as providers of information (Report of the program development conference, 1952). In addition, there was a strong focus on how editors could assist Extension agents. As the role of editors grew, there was an emphasis placed on editorial improvement and continuing education. At the same time, demand continued to grow for well-trained writing staff. This demand has been the driving force behind the growth of academic programs. There was a need – which continues today – for skilled professional communicators who are informed about and interested in agriculture. Programs have grown and had success because of the increasing job

opportunities for well-prepared graduates who are indeed trained in agriculture and journalism/communications. The “agriculture” part of that combination has broadened tremendously, as has the “journalism/communications” part.

The mid-1920s through the early 1930s brought about more change as radio came onto the scene. Now, not only were communicators serving as writers and editors but also they faced a distinct need for broadcasters and on-air talent. This advancement in mediums continued to increase the demand for a broadly trained communicator. As such, professional development was a strong need for those already employed in the field (Kansas Draws on Student Talent, 1933; Report of Committee on Professional Training, 1934).

“What should be the professional training of men and women to become agricultural and home editors?” Andrew Hopkins asked in a 1934 issue of *ACE* newsletter. His article addressed the question, “Are we, as editors, alive to our responsibilities?” (Hopkins)

This surge in the need for professional development and continuing education for professionals continued to emerge, along with a training ground for new staff.

### ***A national project for professional development***

As editors and staff struggled to have the appropriate skill set to meet the information demands of society, *ACE* leadership began a project titled Operation Boot Strap, which was a continuing education training effort.

Again, *ACE* was shifting in focus and need. Operation Boot Strap served as a catalyst for the broadening of undergraduate degree programs as well as the early development of graduate programs during the 1950s. The struggle continued as professionals continued to seek additional training options. This struggle for training, both pre-service and in-service, ultimately led to the development of a proposal for the National Project in Agricultural Communications (NPAC).

*ACE* and the American Association of Land-Grant Colleges and State Universities sponsored the NPAC project jointly. It was funded primarily through grants from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, plus payments for services provided to the various land-grant institutions of the country. The proposal for a five-year project was approved by Kellogg Foundation during early 1953 and the new NPAC project director began work on the project during late 1953.

During the project, one focused teaching approach was the Balanced Agricultural Training Program. This program was designed with a goal to train the trainer.

From time to time during the 1950s *ACE* members reported on ways in which they supported students on their campuses. For example, in an *AAACE* article Margaret McKeegan of Michigan State University explained how five students helped in Extension television programming. Former student assistants reported how their experiences helped them gain credentials for employment, learn about communications and get acquainted with the workings of an Extension information office. McKeegan summarized by saying, “I can see no better way to entice communicators into our field than by training them while they are undergraduate students (McKeegan, 1956, p. 3).

### ***Support for expanding academic programs***

As teaching and research programs emerged and grew on campuses across the nation during the 1960s, *ACE* members discussed the extent to which departmental status and academic appointments were important to them and their field of interest. They realized that research agendas and creative endeavors would be important for moving in that direction.

With the advancements of radio in the 1930s and the evolution of television in the 1950s, educational programs continued to shift, although student numbers and program size didn't take a huge jump until the last three decades leading to the ACE century celebration.

By the late 1960s, ACE members were embarking on a project that combined their roles as learners and teachers. The first edition of *Communications Handbook* was published by ACE in 1967 (*Communications Handbook, 1976*). Members wrote, designed and edited this resource for students, educators and practitioners. Topics ranged across communications concepts, speaking, writing, radio, television, photography, graphics, exhibits, meetings and more. New editions of the popular handbook were published in 1970, 1976, 1983 and 1990.

Beginning in the 1970s, advancements in technology became the driver for the evolution of academic programs, along with a decrease in an agriculturally literate public. Academic programs began to broaden their approach and many programs changed from agricultural journalism to agricultural communications, providing for a more broad-based education focused on public relations and other areas beyond the basic tenets of journalism.

### **Fitting service with academic roles**

As members of the academic community, agricultural college communicators were facing an increasingly uncomfortable combination of pressures (Evans, Some pains, p. 4). They were expected to provide an increasingly broad and diverse array of communications services while fulfilling academic expectations in teaching, research and publishing. Their parent discipline, communications, drew upon a fairly new body of knowledge, still highly sketchy and scattered. Evans suggested that current agonies are a sign of professional vigor. He argued that diverse services will force stronger communications planning and more decision-guiding research. The added research will increase knowledge as a body of subject matter for practice and teaching. The added research and teaching will help ACE members fit more comfortably into their academic settings (p. 5-6).

Indeed, ACE members became more engaged with student teaching during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1977, for example, Arland Meade noted in an *AAACE* article that "a trend seems abroad in the land: for more AAACE members to take up formal teaching – teaching academic credit courses in their respective land grant universities" (Meade, p. 24). He explained his own experience in developing and teaching two courses at his university: "Extension Organization and Policy" and "Cooperative Extension Communications." He suggested that "a few more of us might create a teaching slot that will get Extension closer to the students – and force us, a bit painfully, to burn more some midnight oil to keep ahead. I recommend the experience (p. 27)."

### **Maintaining connections**

In the 1990s, many of the academic programs remained relatively small (Doerfert, Cepica, Jones, and Fiel, 1991), making them vulnerable to many challenges. One huge challenge faced by some programs was their consolidation with other academic disciplines. This consolidation challenged curricular decisions along with program abilities to maintain a focused identity. Faculty had to develop new working relationships with colleagues from other disciplines. Additionally, larger programs began to face challenges with student access to courses in journalism/communications schools. These internal struggles continue today as smaller programs try to emerge on campuses with resource and identity challenges.

Consolidation of academic disciplines led, on some campuses, to separation of the agricultural

journalism/communications faculty members and students from the communications professionals. Those situations weakened connections among ACE members, students and faculty teachers.

However, ACE members continued their pursuit of professional improvement and their support for students and the academic mission in agricultural communications. Special Interest Groups of ACE became more vigorous during the 1990s. They were “building a body of work that’s pushing open doors of opportunity for all ACE members,” said ACE President Janet Rodekohr in 1996 (Rodekohr). “Nobody’s kicking sand in our faces any more.”

### **New approaches to professional development**

On another front, ACE members introduced their first “super workshop.” Nearly 80 members attended a two-day workshop, “Mastering the Web: positioning yourself for the future of electronic publishing” (Liss, 1995). The large turnout for this workshop proved especially encouraging as participants paid \$375 to register for it. Regional ACE groups also picked up on this theme, providing more in-depth workshops to enhance or replace the concept of “meetings.”

Other initiatives for professional development during the 1990s, and since, included introducing ACE Professional Development Fellowships; considering greater use of distance education in the face of changing demographics, dwindling resources and other forces (McAlpin, 1994); exploring the possibility of establishing a professional accreditation program (Donnellan, 1998); and offering more professional development sessions at annual meetings (Morgan, 2006).

In various ways, and across the nation, professional development initiatives such as these helped strengthen the broader academic mission as well as the effectiveness of individual members. Sometimes individual ACE members have been instrumental in establishing degree programs. A recent example was reported during 2006. Gordon Graham explained in *Signals* how some University of Arizona students suggested a major course in communications. “With the help of the journalism department we established an agricultural journalism major. Students in that major soon organized a chapter of Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow” (Graham, 2006).

Such initiatives by ACE also helped put at rest the long-time debate among scholars and practitioners in this field about which is more important – agriculture or communications – for students who are preparing for careers in it. At the 2004 Agricultural Communications Summit, Jim Evans observed, “The uniqueness and main contributions of our professional study programs lie in helping students prepare to become skilled professional communicators – communicators who uniquely bring to their careers an understanding of, and interest in, agriculture, broadly defined” (Evans, 2004, p. 6).

## **II. Development of research in agricultural communications**

Communications research did not appear in the position descriptions of pioneer ACE members, as editors of agricultural publications. It surely was not a mandate. Early ACE newsletters reveal that editors described their roles mainly in terms of serving the larger agricultural research agenda. Clark Wheeler, speaking at the ACE conference in 1919, described the editor’s role as choosing to “turn the light of publicity upon his fellows and their good work, contenting himself with making the light and directing it” (Wheeler). However unassuming, the early ACE members clearly were interested in using editing skills effectively. They wanted to present information in ways their farm readers could understand and would value.

That early interest laid the foundation for what we see today as a substantial body of research in agricultural journalism and communications, a growing cadre of skilled researchers and a national

framework and agenda for research in this important field.

### **Modest early progress**

Progress in communications research began modestly, mainly through a newsletter, plus discussions and reports at annual meetings. For the first 40 years, *ACE* newsletter was one of the main connecting links among members “for all but about four days of every year” (Jarnagin, p. 9). *ACE* was initiated in 1919, containing abstracts of publications and talks along with news of the organization and member activities.

Sometimes progress on the research front took the form of inspiration. President F. H. Jeter explained in 1920 that *ACE* “can become one of the leading instruments for the advancement of agricultural knowledge among the general farm public.” The editor will do so, he said, through “making great the work of this institution” (Jeter).

By 1926, *ACE* members were paying close attention to emerging research about readership of agricultural information. C. E. Rogers reported during the annual conference that “What the farmer needs is no longer a matter of conjecture. Scientific study of the subject has provided concrete data.” He cited examples about farm readership of Experiment Station bulletins in Kansas and Nebraska (Rogers). Also at that time, the Office of Cooperative Extension Work in the U. S. Department of Agriculture was conducting studies of information sources used by crop growers. *ACE* members understood that what rural people read is of vital interest for the agricultural college editor.

### **Mixing curiosity, doubt, hope and planning**

Several themes seem apparent in communications among members during the 1930s.

Curiosity was one apparent theme. It appeared in newsletter articles such as one in 1934 entitled, “Are we, as editors, alive to our responsibilities?” Author Andrew Hopkins raised eight questions for *ACE* members. One of them was: Is there opportunity for research in the field of farm and home economics editing? (Hopkins)

Doubt seemed a second theme. An example of it appeared in an *ACE* article during 1933. In an article entitled, “Will to do research appears to lie dormant,” the unidentified author observed that “little of burning fever of research is running rampant in the association” (Will to do research).

Hope and Planning seemed a third theme of the 1930s. An article, “Exploring the land of fact,” in a 1932 issue of *ACE* offered an example of both. The author acknowledged absence of trained researchers, modest budgets, time pressures under which editors work and little accurate, scientific data unearthed. However, the article continued with a suggestion that the association could forward the progress of research on problems of interest to its membership. Readers of the article found a detailed outline of a foundation on which to build a research program – organizing the “fact finders,” financing the search for facts, scheduling the labor, creating bibliographies and identifying studies for attention. Such studies would address techniques, publicity media and methods, and publicity campaigns (Exploring the land, p. 7).

During 1933 the Resolution Committee of *ACE* recommended appointment of a research committee. Identified responsibilities included these: Study the editorial problems that need investigation, suggest methods of conducting such research and maintain contact with individuals who were doing research work of interest to members (Resolution Committee, p. 3).

At that time, members were sharing information about radio listenership studies, how to gain reader interest, trends in publication editing (length, illustrations, use of features or news) and mea-

surement of Extension results.

### ***Bubbling interest and growth***

Interest in research bubbled and expanded throughout ACE, beginning in the late 1940s, a dynamic period following World War II. A report about that period noted that agricultural editors had tended to come from newspaper reporting backgrounds. It explained that the concept of information as an aid to the educational portion of agriculture grew rather gradually. Agricultural editors became more involved not only in producing information in a form that would get space in the paper but also in helping others plan materials and projects that fit the educational objectives of a specific program and were meant to capture and 'educate' potential learners (NPAC, 1960, p. 3). The report noted that ACE was unable to offer its members much help with those challenges.

"At the same time," it continued, "the area of communication theory and research was beginning to emerge as a combination of several disciplines such as sociology, psychology, engineering and social psychology, particularly at the research level. Some agricultural editors saw this combining of research and theory as a potential source of solutions to their everyday practical problems. So they began seeking ways to get such help (p. 3).

### ***Catching a larger vision***

At the 1951 annual meeting members authorized the Professional Improvement Committee to investigate establishing a nationwide project in professional improvement. During a follow-up meeting of that committee, the members laid plans for proposing a national project. It included a research agenda in the form of collecting and exchanging information, including professional literature.

At a program development conference in 1952 it "was generally agreed that the greatest value of research for agricultural editors would be in helping individual editors find specific answers for practical problems. This means that communication of present communications research is one of our greatest needs. Much work of potential value to the agricultural editor has already been done but either has not been reported in an outlet that reaches him or has not been offered in a form that he can apply" (p. 32). So the conferees called for an inventory of communications research, as a starting point. They also noted that research may be part of a training program, through the research projects involved in supporting graduate study and research (Report of the program development conference).

Out of the conference came identification of six fields in which research was needed: (1) Study of all available materials, through literature search, an abstracting service of past and current research, and the most satisfactory type of professional journal. (2) Basic research of methods of influencing people, including audience reactions. (3) Tests of effectiveness in techniques between given media and within the same medium. (4) Development of techniques for keeping county Extension agents informed of latest developments in subject matter and methods. (5) Determination of the potential role of agricultural communications specialists and basic standards necessary to enable them to fulfill that role. (6) Investigation into needs for and present methods of research reporting, including cooperative research between USDA and the states (p. 34).

Those planners of a national project recognized difficulties in developing an organization to direct and handle the research agenda. Difficulties included financing, procuring competent personnel and developing understanding about the value of communications research. Planners recommended establishing a director of communications research, using graduate assistants at various land-grant

colleges, gaining library, statistical and other consultant services, and gaining administrative endorsement.

ACE leaders clearly were catching a new and larger vision of potentials for members. Andrew Hopkins (among the founders of ACE in 1913) observed in 1951: “The role of the agricultural journalist may be an exceedingly important one, far reaching in its influence and highly productive of significant results. Much will depend on the attitude and capability of the individual and the opportunity...for creative work.” The agricultural journalist may, he said, be a “scientist in communication delving into the mysteries of influencing behavior of individuals, groups and crowds” (Jarnagin, p. 66).

### **Research agenda of NPAC**

Research initiatives of NPAC began with employment of a research director in September 1954 and an identified agenda of five jobs:

- Find out who is doing communication research and what is being done that is applicable to agricultural communications
- Encourage more and better new research on the part of individuals, regional groups, the USDA, state experimentation stations and others
- Encourage understanding of, interest in, and application of research results
- Do “housekeeping” research for, and contribute to, the development of NPAC programs
- Leave the NPAC research activities in such condition at the end of the grant period that they can be carried on in some productive, self-supporting fashion

By early 1960 (nearing the end of the project) abstracts of about 2,500 research studies had been completed, with bibliography cards available on about 5,000 studies. Summary digests had been published in four areas: radio, diffusion, readability, and type and typography. Five volumes of a research newsletter, *SEARCH*, had been published with a paid circulation of about 1,000. Also, six regional committees on research had been established – two in the South, two in the Northeast and two in the North Central regions. Several research projects had been developed by those regional committees, with others in progress (NPAC, 1959, p. 4).

ACE President George Round challenged members during 1956 with “things that need DO-ING” in the next 10 years. Several of the needs he emphasized related to research. One need, he said, was for greater use of mass communications and increased skills in using mass media wisely. He also called for establishing a professional journal to help ACE in “reinforcing our desires for more ways and means to raise our level of professional competence.” Other needs with research implications included: (1) recognizing fully the value of graduate work and encouraging more members to take advantage of opportunities in this field, (2) establishing more departments in colleges where agricultural and home economics journalism or communications are taught and (3) attracting more bright young men and women to agricultural journalism and related fields (Round, 1945).

“The crop of well-trained communications research editors is growing and the training itself has reached a desirable high level,” noted Charles G. Grey in 1959. He also observed that through NPAC “the nation has become cognizant of agricultural communications and the need for doing research in it (Grey, 1959). However, having looked through 13,000 experiment station projects he found only a few dealing with agricultural communications. “The case of missing communications

research” was the title of his article.

At the beginning of the 1960s, responses from 18 editors revealed what author R. L. Reeder described as a surprising variety of sources of research information. His article, “Ag editors put research to work,” revealed more than 20 ways ACE members in those states were using research in their activities. Those research efforts ranged across publications, radio program services, use of visuals, use of commodity letters, audience feedback, effectiveness of county staff as communicators, reorganization of agricultural work and other areas (Reeder, 1960).

During the 1960s, ACE members were consistently reporting on their research at annual conferences. For example, two research sessions at the 1962 conference featured topics such as communication behavior of innovators and other adopter categories, communication behavior of farm families and county Extension advisors, manuscript testing and using graphs and tables (Miller, 1962).

In a 1962 article, “Establishing some bases for communications research,” James H. McCormick asked why communications research in agriculture is not further off the ground. He mentioned neglect, lack of time, lack of resources and lack of “capable people with burning desire for such research” as challenges. “Or is it want of clear definition of the problem areas in the communication field...?” (McCormick, p. 4). He encouraged teamwork, especially with rural sociologists.

Another challenge of that period (as the NPAC project ended) came from Hadley Read in a 1962 *AAACE* editorial, “Our dilemma in an academic world.” He argued that ACE members are professionals in an academic world with academic standards. He suggested that “many more of us, whether experienced or inexperienced must acquire the ability to carry out disciplined scientific research in our fields. And we must publish the results of our research so that new knowledge becomes a part of the literature of our profession” (Read).

### **Broadening the research agenda**

Growth of teaching and research programs in agricultural communications probably surprised those in the 1970s and beyond who equated this field with declining farm populations, disappearance of some highly-visible farm magazines and fewer newspapers and big-market broadcast stations employing farm reporters. Part of what they missed was the explosion of agricultural knowledge that had more than doubled between 1945 and 1975 (Evans, 1975, p. 17). As a result, more increasingly-specialized information needed to flow through more channels to more audiences. The combination helped drive demand for research to guide those efforts.

Also, as the 1970s arrived ACE members in the faculty ranks were taking a new look at the academic base for agricultural communications. Similarly to teaching efforts in journalism and the agriculture disciplines, agricultural communications instruction began with a focus on skills. Early agricultural journalism courses focused on skills such as writing, editing and design. Beyond those “micro-oriented” skills, by 1970 agricultural communications teachers were experimenting with “macro-oriented” studies such as agriculture and its publics, communications systems in agriculture and communications in agricultural development. They were exploring research to help students examine the implications of an explosion of new communications technologies, changing audience structures within and beyond agriculture, changing economics of communicating, rapid growth in the quantity of agricultural knowledge, changes in sources of agricultural knowledge and the increasingly international character of agriculture (Evans, 1972, p. 33-34). Such experimental courses revealed new agendas for research in agricultural journalism and communications.

These research agendas were not to be confined to ACE members who worked with agricultural

communications programs as faculty members. “There’s a place for the practicing agricultural editor in communications research,” suggested William Carpenter in a 1978 *AAACE* article. He identified five roles the practicing editor can play: (1) encourage associates to carry out research, (2) advise students, especially for graduate programs, (3) carry out simple evaluation studies, such as inviting feedback from media about usage, surveying subscribers and reviewing clipping services, (4) take part in research teams and (5) conduct research as a full-time or part-time responsibility (Carpenter).

Research dimensions of the organization grew more visible in October 1978 when the *AAACE* periodical became *ACE Quarterly* and took a format similar to many scholarly journals. Also, during 1979, the ACE Communications Process Task Force took steps to help communications specialists work from a “fragmented and incomplete theoretical and research-based literature (Kern, 1979, p. 7). The committee proposed formation of a national commission to examine the operation of the communication/information system related to land-grant/USDA missions involving agricultural, forestry, home economics, youth and community development. The committee sought to develop communication models, organization, training and other elements that would enhance the effectiveness of the system.

Size and nature of the body of literature about agricultural communications became clearer during the early 1980s. A bibliometric analysis of such literature during 1981 revealed a substantial body of widely-scattered literature that grew about 14 percent a year between 1970 and 1979. Findings showed that among 336 periodicals that contained references about agricultural communications, the top-ranked periodical provided only six percent of the total. Authors concluded that growth of the expanding literature base makes such information increasingly important (Prabha, 1982, p. 28-30). These findings prompted establishment in 1982 of the Agricultural Communications Documentation Center as an international resource and service, based at the University of Illinois.

Looking back in 2005, Larry Whiting observed that between 1960 and approximately 1990 perhaps two dozen well-known faculty members from across the nation were accomplishing excellent research in this field, and were simultaneously active in ACE. NPAC may have marked a golden era of agricultural communications research, he said, but “other such eras are ahead of us” (Whiting, 2005).

### **Continuing to provide practical information**

“What kind of research information do communications practitioners need?” John Pates asked in a 1987 *ACE Quarterly* article. Reporting on suggestions he had heard, he identified four categories of need: (1) Audience-type questions, such as information needs, promoting media attention, how much people will pay for information and reaching the desired audience. (2) Gatekeeper concerns, such as why are large papers devoting less space to agriculture, what the media want, guidelines they use. (3) Administrative matters, such as how information services are helping in the Experiment Station and Extension mission, and how to help administrators keep out of political hot water. (4) How to get the biggest bang for the buck (Pates).

The *Journal of Applied Communications* emerged in 1990. It replaced *ACE Quarterly* as the official periodical of ACE. *JAC* continued to pursue the long-time goal of providing practical information to help ACE members grow professionally in their day-to-day work. It also identified and helped provide direction for a growing body of research across a wide range of developments, issues and opportunities related to agricultural communications.

ACE members and other authors addressed a broad range of topics during the 1900s. Examples

of those serving professional development included use of video news releases, electronic transmission of news, communicating agricultural safety, uses of the internet, news about agriculture in newspapers, communicating about food biotechnology, reaching diverse audiences, consumer attitudes about food and agriculture, publication readership, ethical issues facing agricultural journalists and applications of video conferencing.

Sample topics of the period related to teaching and research included reviews of agricultural communications courses and curricula, writing and the productive agricultural scientist, designing in-service communications education for Extension personnel, using the Internet for college credit courses, working with local survey researchers, “Who’s out there?” (audience analysis), how agricultural journalists write, working with local survey researchers, social science perspectives of agricultural communications research, using informant-directed interviews, sustainability of scientific journals and decision data services within communications units.

Since 2000, part of the research attention has been directed to the *Journal of Applied Communications* itself. Researchers Traci Naile, Tanner Robertson and Dwayne Cartmell looked at the mix of research orientations in the journal. In particular, the researchers wanted to learn to what extent the Journal of Applied Communications continues the long-time purpose of serving the needs of practicing communicators. Their approach involved examining the content of *JAC* from 1990-2006, totaling 222 research and non-research articles. They found that more than 300 authors published in the journal during that time period, representing more than 70 universities, agencies and private businesses. Twenty-seven percent of all articles were non-research in nature, leading researchers to conclude that the journal “is a leading outlet for scholarly literature while also meeting its purpose as a professional development resource for educational communicators” (Naile et al., 2010, p. 57). They also found a considerable range of research tools used during that period. Methods included surveys of various kinds, focus groups, content analyses, case studies, interviews, testing and multiple methods (p. 54).

Another team (Leslie Edgar, Tracy Rutherford and Gary Briers) examined research themes and methodologies in *JAC* from 1997 through 2006. Researchers identified 21 primary research theme areas and 28 secondary theme areas among 91 articles published in *JAC* during that period. Findings led the researchers to conclude that agricultural communications may still be searching to find where it fits. That wide variety in research themes was perhaps excessive, the researchers observed, in terms of the relatively small number of research articles published (Edgar et al., p. 29-30).

Topics addressed in *JAC* from 2000 to 2013 continued to serve a combination of professional development and teaching/research needs. As in earlier decades, most addressed current media, methods and issues. Samples included effectiveness of college of agriculture news releases, answering food safety questions on the World Wide Web, labeling genetically modified food, translating science-based research for public consumption, newspaper coverage of swine production issues, ethical concerns within the agricultural advertiser-media-reader triad, preparedness for managing crisis communication on land-grant campuses, critical thinking dispositions of agricultural communications students, using social media, framing mad cow media coverage, reaching older adults and people with disabilities, Salmonella and the media, using blended e-learning tools, managing media relationships and advocacy in agricultural social movements.

### **Expanding resources and a national framework**

By 2013, ACE members with an interest in research had a substantial resource available for

their efforts to identify and assess this mushrooming, diverse body of literature. The Agricultural Communications Documentation Center had grown to more than 38,000 documents involving agriculture-related communications in more than 170 countries. Each document included both aspects – communications and agriculture, broadly defined. ACE members and other users from throughout the world could identify these documents through an open online search system. They could gain access to documents of interest by online or other means. Staff members of the Center were available to provide individual support in locating and providing access to materials.

Also, by 2013 those interested in agricultural communications research were examining and experimenting with a new conceptual and planning resource. During 2005, ACE helped develop a national and international research agenda for agricultural communications. The agenda was developed through an interdisciplinary project in which ACE was a partner, with four ACE members on the development team. Agricultural knowledge management served as the framework for this integrated, comprehensive research agenda. It identified broad areas for research effort in this field, posed questions to address in each area and suggested some priority research initiatives. One intent for it was to help any agricultural communications researcher identify where his or her efforts fit into a larger national and international agenda (Doerfert et al., 2007; Osborne, n.d., p. 6, 9-11).

### ***III. Development of a special service dimension in agricultural communications***

Nearly 43 years of support for the national student organization, Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT), represent one of the most substantial and enduring ACE services to academic programming. This relationship traces back to 1969 when the American Association of Agricultural Communicators in Education approved a petition to serve as parent organization of a new national student group. The request came from a team of agricultural communications students and faculty advisers from Iowa State University, University of Illinois and University of Missouri. They had met twice in Burlington, Iowa, to discuss possibilities and lay groundwork for forming a national organization of students interested in careers in agricultural journalism/communications.

Their plans were guided by results of a national survey during 1968 by students at the University of Illinois. Findings from 22 universities indicated that more than 250 students were enrolled in such programs at 15 universities. Respondents indicated interest and value in a national organization of students in agricultural communications. At that time, students majoring in this field on some campuses had formed professional groups, such as agricultural journalism clubs. However, students had almost no interaction among campuses. A coalition of agricultural college student magazines was their only connecting body. Agricultural College Magazines Associated (ACMA) served as a center for advertising and editorial help.

By early 1969, the student planners had identified a name for the organization and the goals it would serve for members. They had also drafted a constitution and bylaws (Nikolai, 2002; Formation of ACT, n.d.). They saw value in affiliating with a parent professional organization and identified two criteria for doing so. They desired a parent group that represented professional interests across a wide range of communications skills and activities related to agricultural journalism and communications. They also sought a parent group with members represented on-campus, to provide continuing local interactions with students. ACE met both of those criteria, prompting the request by students during the ACE conference at the University of Missouri during mid-1969.

A report in the AAACE newsletter during late 1969 alerted members to the emerging student

organization. The article explained that success of this effort would rest heavily upon support from them on campuses throughout the nation (Evans, 1969).

Twenty-three students from seven universities met with ACE at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, in July 1970 to form ACT. They ratified the proposed constitution and bylaws, adopted Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow as the official name, conducted the first ACT communications contest and elected officers (Hutson, 1970). Another important topic of discussion was whether ACMA would become an integral part or remain an independent group. ACMA decided to merge with ACT on an experimental basis for one year. It later did so on a continuing basis.

Inaugural ACT president Frank Holdmeyer summarized the formation as follows: "On the whole, the first national conference of Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow was a huge success and the future promises a rewarding program of ACTivities."

So ACE found itself serving as a new parent, helping aspiring young agricultural journalists and communicators prepare for their careers.

Active support from ACE took immediate form. The next four ACE conferences (1971 through 1974) served as the venue for ACT conferences (National ACT meeting sites, 1995). At the conferences, students were able to carry out their business matters, communications contests, workshops and professional development sessions. In addition, they had opportunity to take part in the programming of the parent conferences. Students also benefited from meeting and establishing relationships with professionals. Many of the ACT advisers were (as today) members of ACE. Often the teachers of agricultural journalism and communications were affiliated with the same administrative units as other ACE members.

Throughout this 43-year relationship, ACE has helped increase the unity among agricultural communications students, nationally and beyond. It has helped support programs of student recognition and professional development, such as annual critique and recognition programs. ACE provided financial support for those programs. Individual members served as judges of contest materials. They also provided workshops for agriculture student publications and served as speakers in career sessions of ACT conferences. Beyond the first five annual ACT conferences, ACE hosted others across the years.

On home campuses, individual ACE members have supported agricultural communications students in many ways. They have, for example, provided part-time jobs in communications services units, helped teach classes, served as mentors, been guest speakers at ACT meetings, provided workshops, hosted field trips and helped students locate internships and jobs.

Through the affiliation with ACT, ACE has served faculty members as well as students. It provided the first continuing forums for faculty members who advised the student organization. Those relationships among faculty members began informally, but have developed substantially. Two current special interest groups, Academic Programs and Research, within ACE testify to the role it has played. Through these interest groups, ACE is serving faculty members in their professional development, their effectiveness as teachers and their contribution to research in agricultural communications. Through services to agricultural communications faculty members, ACE also has contributed to the formation and development of new academic programs throughout the nation.

### **Review of Findings**

This analysis, as reflected largely through the literature of ACE during the past century, helps answer the three identified research questions.

*What were the significant historical contexts through the Association for Communication Excellence (ACE) surrounding the development of the teaching programs in agricultural communications?*

The information found in the ACE documentation strongly suggests the organization played a major role in providing a basis for the development of the academic discipline of agricultural communications.

During the early years, programs battled to find their way in the academic setting. However, technological advancements along with the need to deliver scientific information to the general public led to demands for skilled professionals in writing and editing. This led to development of many programs that still exist today in the discipline.

As technology changed, professional development was critical for professionals. ACE has been the bedrock for providing professional development training for agricultural communicators from land-grant institutions. ACE along with support from other entities, formed the National Project in Agricultural Communications (NPAC), which became a critical effort in the overall continued growth of the professional development and training foci of ACE.

Certainly, the evolution of publications such as the *Journal of Applied Communications* (JAC) has provided outlets for scholarly growth of the discipline, including focused research on teaching and professional development.

As demand for skilled agricultural communicators has evolved, so to have programs at institutions around the country. Today, not only are programs robust and growing in terms of curriculum, student numbers, faculty numbers, etc., but also graduate programs are emerging. Certainly, the discipline wouldn't have made the strides it has without the support and commitment of ACE members throughout the years, especially related to a commitment to quality teaching and professional development opportunities.

*What were the significant historical contexts through ACE surrounding the development of research in agricultural communications?*

From the beginning of ACE the organization and members have helped identify, establish and pursue research missions and agendas that serve today's academic programs in agricultural communications. Research activities of ACE track back a century when the pioneer ACE members were asking "how to" questions about editing. They were looking for answers to help them improve their work and using their annual conferences and first newsletter, ACE, to share experiences and insights.

During the late 1940s ACE members connected with the emerging body of communications research. The National Project in Agricultural Communications (NPAC), which ACE was instrumental in forming, became a source of inspiration and growth for research. During that project of the 1950s and early 1960s ACE members improved their understanding of how research can serve their mission. It also heightened their interest and skills in conducting and using research.

In turn, greater use of research by ACE members helped strengthen the new academic programs in agricultural communications that were established after the 1960s. The evolution of *ACE Quarterly* and *Journal of Applied Communications* as more academic in approach served academic needs of faculty members and graduate students as well as others in ACE. Analysis reveals a uniquely strong and continuing interest in conducting research that serves both the professional needs of practicing communicators and other needs for enhancing the body of knowledge about communications aspects of the many and broadening dimensions of agriculture. Through ACE, practitioners in this field have partnered with teachers, researchers and students in developing a growing, useful research

agenda.

Also, historical analysis reveals how, during the past decade, ACE played a key role in establishing a national framework and agenda for agricultural communications research. This leadership provides another example of how ACE continues to serve the research evolution in agricultural communications.

*What were the significant historical contexts through ACE surrounding the development of service efforts in agricultural communications?*

This analysis focused on one of the special services and outreach efforts of ACE during the past century, as related to academic programming in agricultural communications.

More than 40 years ago, ACE laid the foundation for Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT), the first national professional organization of students in agricultural journalism and communications. ACE did so by accepting a petition from students to serve as parent organization of ACT. Faculty advisors who helped students conceive and plan the organization were active members of ACE, as have been most faculty advisors during the past four decades.

Analysis reveals how this service effort by ACE, begun in 1970, has continued to date. Through that service, the ACE organization and ACE members across the nation have enhanced the development of thousands of young men and women for their professional careers. Analysis has revealed how efforts within ACE to support students through their ACT organization have taken many forms across the years.

ACE also has provided valuable support for faculty members, serving (through joint ACT meetings with ACE) as the first national forum for those who teach and conduct research in this field. That service to faculty members and graduate students has continued, taking more structured form through ACE Special Interest Groups in Academic Programs and Research.

### **Conclusions, Recommendations and Future Implications**

Clearly, the ACE organization and individuals within it have served as the bedrock for development of agricultural communications as an academic discipline as well as a field of professional practice. ACE has done so across all dimensions of the land grant mission – teaching, research and service.

- Sometimes progress has been quiet and out of view. At other times it has been sparked by substantial, highly-visible projects and initiatives such as the million-dollar National Project in Agricultural Communications of the 1950s and establishment more recently of a national and international research framework and initiative.
- Sometimes progress has been unexpected, such as the experience of parenting the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow student organization. At other times, steps toward progress have been carefully planned.
- Sometimes progress has emerged through organizational programming and oversight. At other times, progress came through the varied and creative services of individual ACE members on campuses throughout the nation.

In combination, these achievements have greatly strengthened development of agricultural communications in the academic community. They also reveal the value of close ties between (a)

courses, degree programs, research agendas and other academic programming and (b) the day-to-day activities, skills, creativity and insights of those who practice as professionals within the discipline.

Looking forward, missions of the agricultural communications discipline will be well served by a collaborative approach to strengthening these close ties within the academic community. ACE remains the most logical, promising and effective organizational platform for doing so. LaRae Donnellan identified a major aspect of that uniqueness in a *Signals* column during 1997. She suggested that what makes ACE unique is that it, more than any other professional group, “exposes us to a breadth of tools and processes and activities and specializations we face within the context of our jobs. If we are effective at what we do, we must be integrators and interpreters and collaborators. We must be creative. We must be relevant” (Donnellan, 1997).

Following are recommended steps for doing so during the years ahead:

1. On campuses, encourage administrative and operational structures and arrangements that strongly connect agricultural communications students, teachers and researchers with communications practitioners who serve Extension Services, Experiment Station/Research services and other related programs. Continue efforts to position all as full partners in the teaching, research and service mission of colleges and universities.
2. Enhance collaborative efforts among agricultural communications faculty members and practitioners to provide informal and credit-based opportunities to help current professionals (agricultural journalists and communicators, Extension specialists and educators, agricultural scientists and others) grow in their understanding and skills in using personal and mediated communications.
3. Foster more decision-guiding research, decision data and evaluation efforts that connect communication theory with sound and effective practice.
4. Continue to strengthen the *Journal of Applied Communications* in the special role of highlighting effective practice and advancing the development of new knowledge about communications related to agriculture.
5. Through internships, employment, mentoring and other means, encourage communications units and individual ACE members to nurture the development of students preparing to become professionals in this field.
6. Create forums that involve a broader range of stakeholders in discussing needs and opportunities for agricultural communications as a professional and academic field. For example, forums might involve academic administrators, communications scholars and those who teach and conduct research in agriculture subject areas, as well as agricultural communications practitioners, faculty members and students.
7. Take steps to analyze and assess more clearly the hybrid vigor and academic contributions of organizations such as ACE that, across decades, consistently and in unique ways advance partnerships of theory and practice within the academic community.
8. Develop ways to engage more fully, in teaching and research, communicators associated with the U. S. Department of Agriculture and other public agencies involved in agriculture-related matters.
9. Continue efforts to keep curricula focused on helping students master journalistic skills as a basic foundation for our degree programs.

10. Maintain high academic standards in communications and journalism, no matter if students are taking core courses within our programmatic curriculum or outside our program (journalism or communications program).
11. To that end, we must build strong relationships, when possible, with our colleagues in journalism/communication schools.
12. Create opportunities for students and professionals to interact and become involved in international opportunities, fostering an understanding of cross-cultural communications.

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