Opinions of Practitioners Concerning Curricular Requirements of Agricultural Communication Students at the University of Florida

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Abstract

This study identifies opinions of agricultural communication practitioners in Florida concerning knowledge and skills that should be taught to agricultural communication students at the University of Florida. We interviewed 14 practitioners who were on the Board of Directors of the Agriculture Institute of Florida. Practitioners recognized the need for broad-based instruction about agriculture. They said communication skills, however, are more important than subject-area knowledge. Students must be versatile in many communication areas and learn interpersonal networking skills. Desktop publishing and internships are essential, as is training in issues management. Curriculum planners should consider these views when making agricultural communication curriculum decisions.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

As our world and its social and ecological systems change, so must our instruction, curricula, and educational systems. Schuh (1986) maintained that the basic challenge for today's land-grant university is to bridge the gap between society's problems and frontiers of knowledge. Because the food, agriculture, and natural resources field is dynamic, curricula need to be reviewed often to meet the

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demands of evolving technical information, technology, changing demographics, dwindling resources, and the occupational requirements of the discipline (McAlpin, 1994; Wrye & Terry, 1993). Curriculum designers must balance the vision of faculty at a particular institution, the goals of students, and the needs of employers (Coffey, 1987).

Competencies needed to become an agricultural communicator have changed with technology and job requirements, indicating an urgent need to examine the curricula in an effort to make it applicable to students and their future employers. It is vitally important to ensure that curriculum content reflects the needs of the work world (Finch & Crunkilton, 1989). To establish realistic priorities for instructional development, the curriculum planning process should involve all who are affected by the program (Bjoraker, 1987; Diamond, 1989; Sledge et al., 1987; Wilkinson, 1987). Thus, teachers, students, administrators, employers, and employees should participate in planning and evaluation. Erven (1987) said that employers can be particularly helpful by sharing their perceptions of the competitive society in which graduates will function. They can provide information on educational experiences necessary for a satisfying life in the cultural setting and society of the next century. The agricultural industry represents the consumer or benefactor of curricular reform and can measure the quality of the academic program (Bjoraker, 1987; Wilkinson, 1987).

If academic curricula are to meet the needs of industry, agricultural communication programs must continually survey professionals to determine the skills required for a career in agricultural communication (Evans, 1969; Flatt, 1991; Paulson & Metzger, 1990). An examination of competencies needed by graduates as recommended by professional agricultural communicators will help planners design curricula that enable graduates to be more competitive in the marketplace. As Wharton (1987) suggested, communication between education and the agricultural industry plays a vital role in the well-being of society at large:

> If our efforts to revitalize our curricula are to succeed . . . college professors and administrators need to listen with naive and unbiased ears to the expressed needs of our clientele, and then join with that clientele to create a curriculum responsive to those needs (p. 1).

Recognition of agricultural communication as an area of study at the university level began when colleges of agriculture developed an

extension function early in the twentieth century (Duley, Jensen, & O'Brien, 1984). By 1991, more than 30 agricultural communication programs existed at colleges and universities in the United States (Doerfert & Cepica, 1991). Yet Buck and Barrick's (1995) study of professional agricultural communicators showed no uniform description of an agricultural communicator and uncertainty on the type of education best suited for an agricultural communicator. The present study is an attempt to shed some light on the question of education as it pertains to agricultural communication in Florida.

Agricultural communication can be defined broadly as a profession that applies communication techniques and theory to decisions of companies that represent food, agriculture, or natural resources. An agricultural communicator, likewise, can be defined broadly as a person whose job requires communicating to both rural and urban audiences through a variety of media on matters of importance to food, agriculture, and natural resources. While students of the agricultural communication curriculum at the University of Florida are qualified to pursue employment in any facet of the agricultural communication industry upon graduation (e.g., telecommunication, journalism, and advertising), the program has tended to focus its efforts primarily on the public relations arm of the profession. Therefore, this paper considers the definitions of "agricultural communication/communicator" to apply only to public relations professions. Specifically, the limitations of the study are as follow:

1. The study was limited to the agricultural communication content of the agricultural communication program at the University of Florida.
2. The qualitative nature of the work meant that gains in validity would come at the expense of generalizability.
3. Because the subjects were primarily public relations practitioners, the findings lean toward public relations concerns.

Purpose of the Study

Given the widespread influence of Florida's agriculture across the United States and abroad, it becomes especially significant to know which aspects of education and training are important for a career in agricultural communication in Florida. In addition, no study has been carried out on the undergraduate agricultural communication curriculum at the University of Florida (a curriculum established in 1990) to assess how well it prepares graduates for the workforce. This study was designed, as a result, to identify the competencies

that Florida's agricultural industries desire of agricultural communication graduates. More precisely, the purpose of this study was to determine which knowledge and skills agricultural communication practitioners in Florida believe are vital for graduates of the University of Florida's agricultural communication program.

Procedures

The research project, a descriptive study, attempted to identify qualitatively the knowledge and skills that agricultural communication graduates in Florida need. A qualitative approach was necessary to gain a deeper, more thorough understanding of the situation than could be gained through quantitative methods (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1990). Participants were 20 practitioners of agricultural communication in Florida who served on the Board of Directors of the Agriculture Institute of Florida (AIF). The board is composed of communication/public relations/marketing professionals who represent the state's major agricultural and commodity organizations, agribusinesses, and agriculture-related industries and institutions. Nominations to the board are received and approved by the board each year at an annual meeting. To qualify for nomination, an individual must represent an organization, business, or institution engaged in or working in support of Florida agriculture. Board members are themselves, or are representatives of, the major employers in Florida of agricultural communication graduates.

As recommended by Merriam (1988) and Moon, Dillon, and Sprenkle (1990), participant selection was guided by what each could contribute to the researchers' understanding of the topic. Fourteen AIF board members were chosen because, altogether, their occupations represented the broad spectrum of Florida agriculture. All participants responded to the study. At the time of interview, eight participants worked for commodity groups, two worked for the Florida Department of Agriculture, one worked for a farm bureau, one for a university, one for a farm credit association, and one for a supermarket chain. Urban and rural/semi-rural backgrounds were equally represented. All but one person had at least a bachelor's degree. Eight people had degrees in some facet of communication (public relations, advertising, journalism, telecommunication), and one had a degree in agricultural communication. Five had advanced degrees. Areas of study represented by these five were mass communication, English, business administration, and microbiology.

We used an interview schedule to facilitate data collection. According to Finch and Crunkilton (1989), personal interviews are the

best way to contact practitioners, since a high rate of response can be obtained. Questions were arranged to take each respondent through the same sequence, answering the same questions and using the same words (Patton, 1980). Questions on the instrument pertained to agricultural communication professional competencies. For example, "What do you wish you had known before taking a career in agricultural communication?" and "What educational training and profession-related experience would you look for in a potential employee who is an agricultural communication graduate?" To establish content and face validity, a panel of eight faculty in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida having professional experience in some phase of agricultural communication reviewed the instrument. Pilot tests were conducted with two practitioners not included in the sample. Prior to interviews, a contact letter, the interview schedule, and a description of courses required of University of Florida agricultural communication majors were sent to all participants. This allowed participants time to think thoroughly about their responses and to consider specific ways to modify the curriculum. Interviews with 8 of the 14 practitioners occurred in their offices in cities within a reasonable driving distance of Gainesville, Florida. The other six who lived over four hours away were interviewed by telephone. The interviews, which took place during the first two weeks of February 1996, lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Lincoln and Guba (1985) said that qualitative data collection may end when regularities in responses emerge and only small amounts of new information result compared to the effort expended. Indeed, as the 14 interviews neared completion, little was said that had not been discussed already. Hence, the decision not to interview all 20 members proved justified.

Reliability generally refers to the replicability of one's findings, but Lincoln and Guba (1985) said that in qualitative studies, one should think in terms of dependability or consistency of results. That is, do the results make sense given the data collected? To achieve dependable and consistent results, we specified the basis for selecting participants, described the theory behind the study, and kept detailed notes throughout the procedure (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Lincoln and Guba used the terms "credibility" and "truth value" to describe internal validity in qualitative research (p. 166). To help ensure that findings were congruent with reality, we consulted with departmental faculty and practitioners not included in the study. We also made clear the assumptions underlying the study (Merriam, 1988). Assumptions were as follow:

1. The participants were dependable, credible, and knowledgeable on matters of importance to agricultural communication (as defined herein) in Florida.
2. The participants' perspectives of reality were of interest, rather than truth per se.
3. The opinions of the 14 members selected for interviews represented the views of board members of the Agriculture Institute who were not interviewed.

Tape-recorded interviews were transcribed into WordPerfect. As suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1992), we constructed a matrix with interview questions across the top and participant names down the side. Within each matrix, we jotted notes and key words from each response to each question. When the matrix was complete, similar words and words expressing similar themes were circled and connected with lines. Upon examination, overarching themes that represented the substance of the interviews became clear. Then we studied the transcripts again, this time for words that captured the essence of emergent themes.

Findings

Five main themes arose from an analysis of the data:

1. Communication skills are more important than agricultural knowledge. Oral and written skills need to be excellent. Students need to be versatile, able to do a variety of communication functions in both print and electronic media. Still, desktop publishing takes precedence over Internet capabilities.
2. A broad overview of Florida food, agriculture, and natural resources is essential. Practitioners wanted students to have a good deal of training in international trade/economics issues and theory. They thought that requiring technical agriculture courses that cover only certain aspects of agriculture was inappropriate. Instead, they wanted to see courses that provide an overview of agriculture because Florida has a vast array of commodities.
3. Courses should teach students to conduct communication campaigns and to manage issues, especially in crisis situations, because agricultural communicators spend much time responding to issues that develop beyond their control.
4. Interpersonal networking is an integral component of agri-

cultural communication and should be incorporated into the learning environment.

5. Internships are a critical component of an agricultural communication student's training.

Areas of training that were mentioned but not frequently enough to be considered "overarching themes" were photography, statistics, foreign language, media relations, research skills, and speech writing.

Respondents also were asked about trends that would influence the future needs of agricultural communication students. Increasing globalization and international trade were said to be "major" trends, as was the continued need to be able to manage environmental and policy issues. Improvement of writing skills and computer-facilitated research were seen to be of continuing importance as well.

Discussion

Only one of the practitioners interviewed was educated specifically in agricultural communication. This person was well-positioned to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses in the University of Florida's agricultural communication curricula. Yet the perspectives of the other 13 were also valuable because they could identify knowledge and skills that would have better prepared them for the field. If the practitioners in the Agriculture Institute of Florida were to design a degree in agricultural communication to meet the needs of graduates, the degree would contain several key components.

First, students would receive training in many aspects of communication, most importantly writing. Practitioners agreed that writing skills are undoubtedly the most valuable of all communication skills, just as Reisner (1990a) found that writing was the most essential core course for agricultural communication majors. A variety of writing styles—speech writing, feature writing, news writing—needs to be taught. Presently, students receive training only in introductory writing, nothing advanced or specialized. Students would also receive well-rounded training in a wide range of communication endeavors. "You have to be a reporter, editor, and PR person all in one," one practitioner said. "The emphasis should be placed on communication, public relations, and marketing skills."

Use of visual media (television and photography) would be covered in enough detail so that students would be prepared to do a thorough job with confidence. One practitioner expressed disappointment with the students' education in this area when she said, "I

really expected to see the college being at the forefront of assisting students in learning to work in what is an increasingly visual communications age. . . . I was assuming there would be a greater emphasis on it."

While new media technology involving online computer skills is experiencing great growth in society, most respondents agreed that desktop publishing skills are much more important to their daily work. Only 2 of 14 practitioners spoke of the need for training in Internet skills. Apparently, that need was not great enough at the time of interview to cause them to value it above other communication tools. In the words of one practitioner:

> The technology is still available to a relative few. . . . It is a small population now. It will grow, but you can't focus on that to the exclusion of those strategies that will reach a far greater number of people. A business is driven by the bottom line. What is the most cost effective means for me to reach an audience? The Internet is not it right now. It has too few people.

The second major area of emphasis would be laws, economics, and politics surrounding the broad scope of Florida agriculture and natural resources. Practitioners considered knowledge in this area essential to their work. Similar to the Florida situation, Reisner (1990b) found that agricultural economics was the most recommended course by professionals and that agricultural communication students nationwide were not required to take courses specifically designed to teach cross-cultural global perspectives in economics or in public policy. Practitioners said that students need to understand the economic decisions farmers make, but they don't need to focus specifically on any one commodity. They emphasized that a broad understanding of the "nuts and bolts" of Florida agriculture and natural resources would serve students well. It is interesting that all respondents who grew up in a semi-rural or urban environment said that their lack of agricultural knowledge was not a hindrance to their ability to perform as an agricultural communicator. In fact, many said that the absence of agriculture from their youth was valuable in that it allowed them to approach their work from the perspective of a consumer.

Third, training on how to manage issues and influence public opinion would be extensive—much more than the Florida curricu-

lum offers. The practitioners interviewed agreed that much of what agricultural communicators do revolves around public relations (some acknowledged that agricultural communicators may be likely to find jobs in corporate business or government also). Similarly, Kroupa and Evans (1976) found that practitioners strongly supported coursework in public relations. Practitioners wanted students to know how to handle crises, negative publicity, and especially antagonistic environmental activists. "I would really underscore issues management as one of the key areas that needs to be really taught," one practitioner said, adding that a "dedicated course load that looks at case studies from previous campaigns that worked or didn't work and spending time in the trenches at a major farm organization" is valuable.

Another person elaborated on this idea, as follows:

> (Students) need to study the environmental movement and the activists within it. They need to learn how they think, how they are funded, and how to deal with them, because they represent the single largest threat to the continuation of American agriculture. Right behind them is our federal and state governments. Students need to know how to deal with this. . . . Activists seek to control agriculture through regulation, so the two work together.

Fourth, many practitioners said that teaching interpersonal networking skills would be helpful because it is not feasible to expect agricultural communicators to know everything about every issue they face. Instead, they should know whom to go to for information they need. "Why do I need to learn everything about BST when I could contact Monsanto or the university and get everything I need to know in laymen's language?" a practitioner asked.

Fifth, practitioners said that, at the minimum, students would participate in at least one internship (the Florida curriculum requires one already). During this internship, they would develop demonstrable skills. Employers "don't really want to know what you can do. They want to know what you have done. They will be able to judge what you can do by what you have done," one practitioner said. When choosing an internship site, students should consider what will make them marketable and give a competitive advantage.

Summary and Recommendatons

Practitioners agreed that agricultural communicators are not agriculturalists primarily, but communicators who have a specialty. They emphasized that students need to build firm communication skills so that they will have expertise in an array of areas—key among them the ability to write well. They believed that a greater emphasis on in-depth communication courses would help prepare students in the University of Florida's agricultural communication program more completely for their careers. If the required courses that provide an overview of public relations, advertising, telecommunication, and journalism could be condensed and combined, students could take courses in campaigns and specific writing styles that they presently do not have time to take. The result would be communicators who are more deeply grounded and prepared for the challenges of the career field.

To better prepare agricultural communication students at the University of Florida for the agricultural component of their future jobs, curriculum planners should consider eliminating the requirement of semester-long introductory courses in specific commodities (e.g., horticulture, animal science, and agronomy). Practitioners indicated that students would benefit more if a series of courses were offered that together covered the breadth of Florida agriculture and natural resources. A "big picture" approach would address environmental issues facing the state, agricultural law, and economics surrounding commodities of significance to Florida—just to give students a speaking acquaintance with the commodities and the where-with-all to pursue further information. Training in interpersonal networking would help students start making connections with those in the field from whom they may need to seek information in the future.

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