University Agricultural Projects— Communications Problems and Prospects

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This paper discusses the problems of and prospects for international communication sections of large university agricultural projects.

A large project, in this context, is any single undertaking whose budget exceeds $500,000-$750,000 per year. A budget of this magnitude allows for a communication arm to be established as an integral part of the project. As budgets rise, a corresponding increase in responsibility, output, and personnel is seen in the communication arm.

Typically, the communication sections of large projects have fulfilled a variety of roles. These have included media production, information dissemination, publications, library maintenance, and training. While some specific tasks may be contracted out, such as printing, most tasks are carried out inhouse.

Communication sections see themselves as linking mechanisms, translating and tailoring project content for identified special audiences. As part of an international development effort, the communication section of a large university project is a key piece tying diverse elements together when necessary, and exposing their singular virtues when needed.

The Problems

With this general image of the types of projects and settings under discussion, let's move on to delineate what constitutes a problem. A problem exists when there is a dif-

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ference between what is—the present state—and what should be—the desired future. Most large, international agricultural projects exist because of this gap; that is, a current situation is not what people want it to be, and one solution to the perceived problem, it is hoped, will be the output of the particular project.

A communication section, as part of the hoped-for solution, encounters a variety of problems. The constraints to communication mentioned here are global ones and are related to the section's role as a dissemination agent, attempting to bring about change through communication.

A communication section must shoulder the problems borne by the university project as a whole. These can be called general systems problems. Those most likely to occur are:

- lack of adequate funding which hinders full use of development models, evaluation, and media choices;
- turnover in staff due to the nature of soft money projects, to generally low salaries, and to unrealistic expectations on the part of project management;
- ill-defined or conflicting target audiences which cause imprecision in the design of programs;
- credibility issues—related to either the content or the scientists—that reflect on the integrity of the communication section;
- lapses in intraproject communication when it is not perceived as a definite responsibility of some element of the project;
- limited interpretation of communication as journalism or print media; and
- inability to reconceptualize roles when project scope dictates, such as the move from agricultural research to international development, from journalism to communication, and from print media to multimedia.

These "general systems" difficulties are not the only ones which beset a communication section in a large university project. There are seven other distinct areas where malfunctions can hinder optimal performance (Havelock, et.al., 1964; King, 1981). These areas are:

Linkage—The connections and contacts between a communication section and the relevant members of the interested systems. As alluded to above, there are problems in defining all the relevant members of interested systems. Other issues in the linkage category are:

    a. communicating within a project between superiors and subordinates, and staff of equal status;

b. using specialists;
c. developing contacts with other communication units of similar or intra-university projects;
d. relating to the funding agents; and
e. establishing relationships with private-sector groups.

Structure—The systematic organization and coordination of the section elements. Situations encountered under structure are:
a. fostering a mutual understanding of the various purposes of the project;
b. organizing diverse elements in the devising of communication planning and implementation efforts;
c. coming to an agreement on defining clients and reaching clients;
d. establishing an equitable division of labor;
e. coping with unplanned dissemination and utilization activities; and
f. ensuring that formal evaluation of communication efforts occurs.

Openness—The giving and receiving of new information. For a communication section in a large university project, issues related to openness include:
a. revising and adopting materials;
b. responding to both inside and outside requests;
c. seeking out potential users;
d. attempting to get users involved; and
e. using evaluation and research results.

Capacity—The ability to summon and invest diverse resources. Problem areas related to capacity include:
a. having money;
b. finding and keeping qualified personnel;
c. developing adequate facilities, equipment, and supplies;
d. using power; and
e. developing sophistication.

Reward—The positive consequences for the section. The reward factor incorporates such issues as:
a. receiving recognition by colleagues;
b. gaining relief from stress of work;
c. seeking recognition from the public; and
d. receiving feedback from clients.

Proximity—The geographical and psychological nearness of the project to resources and users. Proximity includes such problem areas as:

a. developing close and ready access to resources;
b. developing close and ready access to clients; and
c. encouraging psychological proximity to clients.

Synergy—The bringing together of a variety of messages and message components and focusing them in combination, in sequence, and in repetition upon the potential user. Issues include:

a. incorporating a variety of messages;
b. using a variety of communication channels; and
c. repeating messages and channels.

The Prospects

If these, then, are the problems, what are the prospects? If the problems seem, at times, overwhelming, the prospects offer much encouragement. To prospect means to explore and search, to consider what is in store for one who becomes involved in an undertaking. For international communication sections in large university settings, there are two prospects—one dealing with communication opportunities and the other dealing with individual needs.

Foremost, there will be an increasing number of communication opportunities in the near future. As funding agencies recognize the need for a systems approach to international development, communication will be seen as an important and complementary component of international agriculture programs. Communication professionals will be needed to apply communication principles to projects that are, themselves, grappling with a variety of hypotheses. And as certain federal programs, such as Title XII projects ("which help strengthen the human skills and knowledge, and in institutional capabilities for the purpose of solving developing countries' food and nutrition problems") and CRSP's (Collaborative Research Support Programs in which agricultural problems are addressed through collaborative research between U.S. scientists and their counterparts in the non-industrialized ccountries) develop, opportunities for communication professionals to enter into international work will expand.

The network of funding agencies outside the U.S. government, such as UNESCO, FAO, the World Bank, and private foundations, will augment opportunities created by federal efforts.

Opportunities will also grow because of emerging characteristics of future oriented communication sections

(based on Lippitt, 1973). Briefly, these characteristics are:
- innovative structures to cope with needed flexibility;
- development of all the system's human resources;
- work accomplished through mutual confidence rather than obedience to authority;
- freedom of access to information and two-way communication;
- conflict, confrontation, and stress as ongoing processes in systems development; and
- development accomplished through face-to-face groups.

To take advantage of these opportunities, individuals interested in international communication need to develop holistic approaches that consider several things.

The professionalization of communication—this should be experience-based, and not necessarily degree-oriented. Communication people need to see themselves as professionals dealing with a process that is applicable to a wide variety of content areas. The professionalization of communication means implementing communication audits and systems approaches to the soft-money, overly bureaucratized university setting. It also means joining and supporting professional organizations, such as ACE and AECT.

The need to be proactive—This demands a decision-making, problem-solving orientation. Gone are the days of management by reaction. People need to be familiar with future-oriented communication strategies and current communication research and its implications for message design. The proactive element takes the form of developing independent linkages, applying traditional and innovative media to diverse settings, and utilizing a variety of evaluation processes such as pretesting and summative evaluation. Reconceptualizing events and examining multiple options must be expected.

The need for continuing education—This education should be multidisciplinary in nature. Major areas in which continuing education are needed include cross cultural communication; networking with emphasis on multinational and interdisciplinary linkages; and familiarization with diverse literature—including organizational development, team development, management, and diffusion and utilization activities. The result of this type of education will be a communication generalist who can adapt to a variety of situations and who can apply a human touch as an integral member of an interdisciplinary team.

Conclusion

The problem with communication is not communication itself, but the successful management of it. Most people involved in communication like their work, especially the practical side of it. Yet management, hand-in-hand with production, is the key to success.

And as the global village becomes both closer to reality and more difficult to achieve, the role of international communication will change and expand. The information society is not an idea or a trend, it is a reality. As the new technologies of communication develop, they will be applied to old problems, and then to new activities. Our role as communication specialists in the agricultural community will be to "keep people from drowning in information and to feed people who are starved for knowledge." (Naisbitt, J., 1982.)

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