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Who Is an ACE Member? Results From a 2005 ACE Member Survey

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Abstract

This study describes the demographics of the population of current, active, U.S.-based agricultural communications practitioner respondents in the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE) in an effort to gain a better understanding of membership demographics. In fall 2004, the researchers mailed questionnaires to 510 ACE members. Returned questionnaires were accepted through January 2005 and processed in the following months. The overall response rate was 35.1% (n = 179). Analysis of demographic results showed that the majority of U.S. respondents were female (58.8%, n = 104) and Caucasian (95%, n = 168). More than 80% of the respondents worked for an agricultural institution of higher education. When asked to select the ACE special interest group (SIG) to which their job function was most closely related, most respondents selected the writing/media relations/marketing and publishing/graphic design/photography SIGs. When compared with data from other communications studies, the demographic profile of ACE members demonstrated by these survey results suggests that employment trends within ACE are similar to those seen in other communications fields in the United States. Understanding the demographics of a professional association like ACE might make it easier for members to participate in and help lead the organization.

So What?

The Association for Communication Excellence in Agricultural, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE) is a progressive professional organization with a dynamic, changing membership. Understanding these dynamics is useful for all ACE members and essential for those who wish to help lead the organization. This study describes the demographic characteristics of current U.S.-based ACE members to help answer the question, "Who is an ACE member?" Findings provide insight into how the organization's membership is changing in response to shifting dynamics in academic institutions, agencies, and industries in which members work.

Research

Agricultural communications is rooted in the land-grant system. The profession developed in the 1800s to meet scientists' needs to respond to the public's questions "as agriculture outgrew the ability to pass information by word-of-mouth" (Buck & Paulson, 1995, p. 3)—although, according to Kearl, rather than translating science to the public, the first agricultural communicators were more "scribes and secretaries" (1983, p. 3). These scientists and communicators were on the forefront of the Cooperative Extension Service, which developed from the Morrill Act of 1862 and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 (Boone, Meisenbach, & Tucker, 2000; Buck & Paulson, 1995; NASULGC, 1999; Tucker, 1996). Agricultural communicators have long been considered "communicators who have a specialty" (Sprecker & Rudd, 1998, p. 40). It has been a professional field in the United States for nearly 100 years with "professionals who combine 1) knowledge of agriculture, 2) skills in communications, and 3) interest in working with people" (Buck & Paulson, 1995, p. 2-3).

Today's agricultural communications industry is a hybrid of media industries. Practitioners work in news and reporting, editing, broadcasting (radio and television), electronic and Web-based media, marketing, public relations, and more (ACE, 2004; Bowen & Cooper, 1989; Buck & Paulson, 1995; Scherler, 2001; Sprecker & Rudd, 1998; Terry & Bailey-Evans, 1995). Similarly, agricultural communications has several professional groups in which industry members participate. Many of these groups are tailored to specific interests, such as broadcasting or marketing, and provide members with the chance to network, present, and publish research; influence the policy or goals of an organization; and socialize (Buck & Paulson, 1995; Donnellan & Snowdon, 2000). In their study of six agricultural communication professional organizations, Buck and Paulson (1995) state:

> Professional organizations are valuable to the growth and welfare of any profession and thus serve as catalysts for the professional growth and development of members. In addition, the membership and participation of individuals in organizations contribute directly to growth and collective expertise within the profession itself. (p. 2)

The Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE) is the oldest and largest of these professional agricultural communication organizations, with more than 600 members throughout the United States and around the world (Carnahan, 2000; Hilt, 1988). The researchers contacted the membership coordinators of several other agricultural communications professional organizations in August 2006 to determine the size of their organizations in comparison to ACE. The Agricultural Relations Council had 76 professional members; the Livestock Publications Council had 200 members, including company

memberships; the National Association of Farm Broadcasters had 500 members, 135 of whom were broadcasters; and the American Agricultural Editors' Association had 385 members.

ACE began in 1913 when agricultural editors from six land-grant colleges met at the University of Illinois (Carnahan, 2000; Hilt, 1988). The organization was originally known as the American Association of Agricultural College Editors (AAACE); in 1978, the name was changed to Agricultural Communicators in Education (ACE). Members met annually to review and discuss the work of their peers (Carnahan, 2000; Hilt, 1988). The current moniker (The Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences) was adopted in 2003, but the original acronym was retained because of its popularity and recognition. In his retrospective speech, Kearl described the "functioning professional society like ACE [as] probably the best single legacy our predecessors have given us" (1983, p. 5).

An online review of *Journal of Applied Communications* (JAC) abstracts from 1990-2005 and the Agricultural Communications Documentation Center Database for previous ACE member studies revealed two. The first, by Buck and Paulson in 1995, included ACE members in its study of the membership characteristics of six agricultural professional groups. The second study, conducted in 2000 by Donnellan and Snowdon, surveyed ACE members about why they joined ACE, how ACE meets members' needs, and what would make ACE more relevant. Members were also surveyed about a possible name change for the organization. Demographic data from Buck and Paulson's study (1995) showed that the majority of their agricultural communications respondents were Caucasian. In terms of gender, Buck and Paulson (1995) stated that over half of their respondents were male, whereas Donnellan and Snowdon (2000) stated that more than half of their respondents were female. The studies showed similarities in the most common age ranges listed by agricultural communications practitioners: 35-44 and 45-54 years old (Buck & Paulson, 1995) and 46-55 and 36-45 years old, respectively (Donnellan & Snowdon, 2000).

The two studies also included organizational demographics describing agricultural communications practitioners. Donnellan and Snowdon (2000) stated that the majority of their respondents worked for universities. Results from Buck and Paulson (1995) revealed that the majority of agricultural communicators they surveyed held at least one college degree, while one-third held at least one graduate degree. When asked how long they had worked as communicators, responses were distributed fairly evenly across 5-12 years, 13-20 years, and greater than 20 years in Buck and Paulson's

1995 study, and between 11-20 years and 21-26+ years in Donnellan and Snowdon's 2000 study.

Researchers evaluated the salary data of media workers across communications fields similar to those listed by agricultural communications professionals as their daily professions (ACE, 2004; Bowen & Cooper, 1989; Buck & Paulson, 1995; Scherler, 2001; Sprecker & Rudd, 1998; Terry & Bailey-Evans, 1995). The assessment revealed that public relations practitioners had an average salary of $46,000 to $65,000, technical writers and news reporters had average salaries of $47,000 to $55,000 and $44,000 to $55,000, respectively, and photographers had an average salary of $29,000 to $43,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004a, 2004b).

Purpose

Today's ACE member works in both the public and private sector, within companies, firms, universities, government agencies, and research organizations (ACE, 2004; Carnahan, 2000; Hilt, 1988). A thorough examination of current ACE membership to determine specific information about its members had not been recently conducted. Therefore, this study describes the characteristics of the population of current, active, U.S.-based agricultural communications practitioner respondents in ACE in an effort to gain a better understanding of membership demographics.

Methods

This study used a census population of current, active ACE members located within the United States in 2004 ($N = 510$). The results reported in this article were based on a thesis that examined U.S.-based ACE members' perceptions of job satisfaction and gender roles in the workplace (McGovney, 2005). The population was developed with help from the ACE coordinator at the University of Florida, who provided the researchers with members' names and contact information. A survey was then conducted via mail using Dillman's (2000) Tailored Design Method. The questionnaire used both quantitative and qualitative measurements. A Scantron form was used for data collection purposes based on the researchers' desire to enhance the convenience of the survey method for participants and thus ensure an adequate response rate.

The questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of experts and pilot-tested in September 2004 with current, active Florida ACE members ($n = 24$). Responses from the pilot test were used to refine the survey instrument (McGovney, Irani, & Telg, 2005). The initial contact wave was sent via e-mail to the ACE listserv on October 1, 2004 by ACE President Judy Winn on behalf of the researchers. On October 8, the questionnaires were sent to the ACE

census population with a request to return them by the end of the month. Reminder waves were sent in the form of a postcard on October 19 and an e-mail on November 2. Returned questionnaires were accepted through January 2005, and then processed.

Results

Data collection resulted in an overall response rate of 35.1% ($n = 179$) of current, active, U.S.-based ACE members. The majority of respondents were female (58.8%, $n = 104$), with two missing responses. These missing responses could be due to response error because of the use of the Scantron form for data collection. Almost 95% ($n = 168$) of respondents listed Caucasian as their ethnicity. Four respondents selected African American, three selected Hispanic/Latin American, two selected "other," and two did not answer. Respondents were asked to indicate their age by choosing from five age ranges (see Table 1). The majority of respondents were between 40-49 years old (29.0%, $n = 51$) and 50-59 years old (29.5%, $n = 52$). Three respondents did not answer.

Table 1. *Age of Respondents*

Age range	*n*	Percent (%)
20-29 years	21	11.9
30-39 years	26	14.8
40-49 years	51	29.0
50-59 years	52	29.5
60+ years	26	14.8
Total	176	100.0

When asked their marital status, 79.7% ($n = 141$) of respondents indicated that they were married or had a live-in partner. Eighteen (10.2%) of the study participants were single, 15 were divorced (8.5%), 2 were widowed (1.1%), and 1 was separated (0.6%). Most of the respondents (60.6%, $n = 106$) answered "no" when asked if they had children under 18 years of age living in their homes. Of those who answered "yes" ($n = 69$), the majority had one child ($n = 29$) or two children ($n = 31$). Four participants did not respond when

asked their marital status. Almost half of the respondents reported a master's degree as their highest level of education (41.6%, $n = 72$) (see Table 2). This was followed closely by those who held bachelor's degrees (34.7%, $n = 60$).

Table 2. *Respondents' Highest Level of Education*

Degree	*n*	Percent (%)
High school diploma	2	1.2
Bachelor's degree	60	34.7
Master's degree	72	41.6
Doctoral degree	39	22.5
Total	173	100.0

More than 8 in 10 (85.8%, n = 151) of the respondents worked for an agricultural institution of higher education (see Table 3). "Government agency" was the next most popular response for work organization at 9.1% (n = 16). Respondents were asked how many agricultural communications practitioners work in their offices, excluding themselves. Almost half of the respondents (42.86%, n = 75) stated that there were more than 11 other agricultural communications practitioners in their departments (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Respondents' Organization and Agricultural Communications Coworkers*

Work organization	*n*	Percent (%)
Agricultural institution of higher education	151	85.9
Government agency	16	9.1
Other	5	2.8
For-profit company	2	1.1
Trade or professional organization	2	1.1
Total	176	100.0

Work organization	*n*	Percent (%)
Number of agricultural communicators in office (other than respondent)	*n*	Percent (%)
0 practitioners	19	10.86
1 practitioner	13	7.43
2-5 practitioners	38	21.71
6-10 practitioners	30	17.14
11+ practitioners	75	42.86
Total	175	100.0

Participants were asked to report their current salary levels within given ranges. Of the 175 who responded to this question, 41.72% ($n = 73$) stated that their salaries were $41,000 to $60,000 and 29.14% ($n = 51$) stated their salaries were $20,000 to $40,000 (see Table 4).

Table 4. *Respondents' Salary in Agricultural Communications*

Current salary	*n*	Percent (%)
$20,000 to $40,000	51	29.14
$41,000 to $60,000	73	41.72
$61,000 to $80,000	28	16.00
$81,000 to $100,000	9	5.14
$101,000+	14	8.00
Total	175	100.00

Respondents were then asked to indicate how long they had worked in agricultural communications by selecting from five ranges. Responses were distributed fairly evenly across these ranges: 20.2% ($n = 35$) had worked in agricultural communications for 2-5 years, 22.5% ($n = 39$) had worked in the field for 6-10 years, 23.1% ($n = 40$) had worked in the field for 11-20 years, and 30.1% ($n = 52$) had worked in the field for 21-30 years.

Participants were also asked to select the ACE special interest group (SIG) to which their current job function most closely related. Responses were distributed somewhat evenly (see Table 5). The nature of the Scantron form used for data collection necessitated a priori grouping of SIGs for this question. SIGs were grouped together by closest job function relation. The writing/media relations/marketing SIGs were selected by most of the participants (30.6%, $n = 53$), followed closely by the publishing/graphic design/photography SIGs (26.0%, $n = 45$). Six participants did not respond to this question.

Table 5. *ACE Special Interest Group (SIG) With Closest Relation to Respondents' Jobs*

SIG	*n*	Percent (%)
Writing/media relations/marketing	53	30.6
Publishing/graphic design/photography	45	26.0
Electronic media/distance education and instructional design/information technology	33	19.1
Communications management	20	11.6
Academic programs/research	22	12.7
Total	173	100.0

The majority of respondents in this study did not hold management positions in their organizations (63.1%, $n = 111$); three did not respond. Of the 65 respondents (36.9%) who were managers, the majority had been in their positions for one to five years ($n = 27$) and supervised two to five people ($n = 28$).

Discussion

Analysis of the demographic data collected in this study indicated that ACE members are predominantly middle-aged Caucasian females with more conventional backgrounds who work for land-grant universities. Previous studies by Buck and Paulson (1995) and Donnellan and Snowdon (2000) showed similar characteristics among agricultural communications practitioners. It is important to note the similarities in age ranges found by all three studies. Perhaps ACE members choose to join the group at middle to later age.

Gender findings revealed a greater number of female than male respondents; this corresponds to Donnellan and Snowdon's (2000) findings. In contrast, Buck and Paulson (1995) found a greater number of male respondents in their study. This could suggest a "feminization" of the field over time, similar to employment trends within other media industries (Creedon, 1989; Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001; Marlane, 1999; Toth & Cline, 1989) in which an increasing number of women entered the field (Scherler, 2001).

ACE members represent some of the more traditional media interests (writing, public relations, photography) and receive salaries similar to their counterparts in related communications fields (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004a, 2004b). In addition, a greater number of ACE members seem to hold higher-level degrees than in the past (Buck & Paulson, 1995).

The small number of respondents who were managers suggests that there may be few management-level positions in agricultural communications—especially when the length of time that respondents stated they had worked in agricultural communications is taken into account, both in this study and in previous studies (Buck & Paulson, 1995; Donnellan & Snowdon, 2000). This finding could suggest a static organizational structure within agricultural communications/land-grant universities. Additional work is needed to confirm this finding.

The results of this survey help to paint a picture of who U.S.-based ACE members are, what they do, and what their interests are. Understanding the demographics of a professional association such as ACE makes it easier for members to participate in and help lead the organization. The findings and their comparison with data from other communications studies suggest that employment trends within ACE are similar to those seen in other communications fields.

Recommendations

Working to include a more diverse member population in ACE in terms of job description, age, and ethnicity is a key recommendation of this study. When the members of ACE voted to change the organization's name in 2003, some of the reasons cited for the change were to broaden the focus from the land-grant and agricultural communications base and to be more inclusive (Donnellan & Snowdon, 2000). This study indicates that ACE's membership characteristics have not changed much; the organization is in a similar place to where it was 6 (Donnellan & Snowdon, 2000) and even 11 years ago (Buck & Paulson, 1995).

Recommendations to ACE members, SIG leaders, and the ACE board of directors include developing membership recruitment efforts beyond the traditional base. The Membership Committee should reach out to communicators at government agencies and for-profit companies to let them know that ACE exists and that it can provide them a valuable service, both professionally and socially. Additionally, the Membership Committee and the newly formed diversity SIG should work together to attract a more ethnically diverse membership to ACE. One way to accomplish this is to reach out to agricultural communicators working at 1890 and Native American land-grant institutions and demonstrate to them how membership would be beneficial to both them and the organization (McGovney-Ingram & Donnellan, 2006). To attract members in a younger age range, ACE should continue offering lower dues to recent graduates and strengthen the current mentor programs that are in place to give students and young professionals a place to reach out to when needed.

About the Authors

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Keywords

membership, demographics, Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE)

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