

# Then and Now: An Eight-Year Look at the U.S. Land-Grant University Agricultural Communications Profession, 1987-1995

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The purpose of this study was to examine selected trends and conditions pertaining to agricultural communications units in the U.S. land-grant institutions and to compare data obtained from a similar study conducted in the summer of 1987<sup>1</sup>. In both studies, the population surveyed was chairpersons or heads of agricultural communications departments in U.S. land-grant universities. Responses were received from all 50 states. Surveys were mailed to unit heads in September and October of 1995. Findings include: (1) an overall funding decline in terms of real dollars, (2) a reduction in total number of staff positions, and (3) a drop in number of tenure-track positions. Salary ranges are provided for publication editors, news/feature writers, video producer/directors and graphic illustrator/designers. In addition, perceptions of unit heads are reported on whether they would encourage their children to pursue a career in agricultural communications, or in fact, do it over themselves if given the opportunity.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert E. Thomas, *Academic Tenure and Positional Structural Security as Factors in Recruiting, Retaining and Motivating Agricultural Communicators in U.S. Land-Grant Institutions*, University of Idaho, December 1987.

## Introduction

Little, if any, literature exists on agricultural communications as a profession. Yet it is a profession to which several hundred individuals now dedicate their efforts and talents (membership alone in Agricultural Communicators in Education in 1996 is reported at 665). In recent years, studies have appeared in the literature examining communication techniques, delivery methods, readership surveys and the like. By contrast, this study provides the reader some sense of the state-of-the-profession from data reported by managers of land-grant agricultural communications units (N=50). Most of the data are summarized into descriptive profiles. What emerges is a portrait of trends or a general health report of the profession. The reader should keep in mind that not all respondents were either able or willing to answer all survey questions. So, in some instances, responses will not total 50. To clarify when this occurs, the N is provided when displaying or discussing data.

## A Growth Profession?

Of the 50 states reporting in 1995, 45 states provided data for their agricultural communications operating budgets. Operating budgets for these 45 states reporting in 1995 totaled \$53,800,000 compared to \$41,970,000 for these same 45 states in the summer of 1987. The five states not reporting in 1995 included Arizona, Hawaii, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming. Operating budgets for these five states reported in 1987 totaled \$874,000.

For the purpose of this study, these five states were omitted in determining a national total for agricultural communications operating budgets. For the 45 states included, the reported increase was 22%, or an average of 2-3% per year, not factoring in inflation. However, during this period the Consumer Price Index rose 30.5%, indicating a decline in actual or real dollar funding. Growth in budgets was scattered. In this regard, 31 of 43 unit heads (72%) indicated their budget had either decreased or remained about the same in the last three years.

The \$53,800,000 in agricultural communications budgets (N=45) equaled 2.43% of total reported colleges of agriculture budgets for 1995. Agricultural communications units continue to be funded primarily by Extension dollars. About 70% of

total agricultural communications funding in 1995 came from Extension dollars, a figure similar to that reported in 1987. Other funding came from research, teaching, grants or sale of publications. Units with annual operating budgets of at least \$2.5 million included Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska and North Carolina.

When asked what was their biggest single challenge, 33% (N=49) of the unit heads indicated it was obtaining adequate funding for their operations. This compared to 27% who indicated their biggest single challenge was internal personnel management, 24% who indicated it was dealing with competing work demands and 13% who reported it was relating to administration.

Unit heads, as indicated in Table 1, reported a drop in both the number of professionals on their staffs and a decrease in the number of tenure track positions over this eight-year period.

**TABLE 1:**  
*U.S. Land-Grant University Agricultural Communicators,  
Reported Population Including Those on Tenure-Track  
Positions, 1987 and 1995.*

	1987	1995
Total Population	757	690
Tenure-Track	145	86
Percentage Tenure-Track	19%	12%

In the eight-year period there was a loss of 67 positions or 9% for the profession. The number of agricultural communicators reported on tenure-track positions declined by 59% during this same period.

Unit heads did not generally support the idea of having more tenure-track positions on their staffs.

Thirty-five unit heads responded to the question: If you had your choice, which of the following would you have in your department?

- more tenure-track positions
- the same number of tenure-track positions
- fewer tenure-track positions

(Perhaps a reason for the low response rate on this question is that only 20 states reported having agricultural communicators on tenure-track positions in 1995.) Ten (28.5%) of the above 35 respondents indicated a preference for more tenure-track positions. Another ten indicated a preference for fewer tenure-track positions and 15 (43%) preferred the same number of tenure-track positions. Thus, 71% of the respondents did not indicate a preference for more tenure track positions in their units. Of the ten unit heads indicating a preference for fewer tenure-track positions, eight were among the states having at least one tenure-track faculty in their department.

The 1987 findings as part of this study indicated no statistically significant difference in the unit heads' perceptions of their ability to recruit, retain and motivate agricultural communicators when tenure is allowed to vary as a condition of employment..

As indicated in Table 2, despite reductions in staff size, only 11% of unit heads in 1995 report it extremely or quite difficult to recruit quality agricultural communicators. Data from 1987 and 1995 in this regard show little change.

**TABLE 2:**  
*Reported Difficulty in Recruiting Quality Professional Agricultural Communicators, 1987 and 1995*

Response	1987 N=50	1995 N=47
Extremely Difficult	8%	4%
Quite difficult	14%	7%
Somewhat Difficult	18%	37%
Slightly Difficult	24%	24%
Not Difficult	36%	28%

Despite reductions in staff size and limited funding, unit heads reported little difficulty in motivating agricultural communicators. Thirty-two of 48 unit heads (67%) reported either "not difficult" or "slightly difficult" to motivate professional staff. Twelve (25%) reported it "somewhat difficult" and one each reported "quite difficult" and "extremely difficult." These data are consistent with 1987 data and perhaps suggest an intrinsic nature of motivation for agricultural communicators.

## Salary Ranges

Unit heads were asked to provide salary ranges for publication editors, news/feature writers, video producers/directors and graphic illustrator/designers. Data as reported in Table 3 are intended to give the reader ranges and do not account for length of service or other factors affecting an individual's salary.

**TABLE 3:**  
*Salary Ranges of Agricultural Communicators in  
Frequency By Position Title, 1995.*

Salaries \$	Publication Editors		News/Feature Writers		Video Producers		Graphic Designers	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
20,001-25,000	0	-	0	-	1	(3.3)	1	(2.7)
25,001-30,000	9	(25)	8	(22)	9	(30)	9	(25)
30,001-35,000	10	(27)	11	(30)	9	(30)	13	(36)
35,001-40,000	9	(25)	10	(27)	6	(20)	9	(25)
above 40,000	8	(22)	8	(22)	5	(17)	4	(11)
States Reporting	36		37		30		36	

Note: total percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding off.

As indicated in Table 3, about one in five unit heads reported a salary range in excess of \$40,000 per year for publication editors or news/feature writers and a lesser percentage for video producers and graphic illustrators. The mode for all position categories was \$30,001-35,000. Twenty-one or 48% of the 44 unit heads indicated starting salary was the highest concern of qualified candidates for positions in their units. The second highest concern of qualified candidates was nature of assignment (9 or 20%). The least concern of qualified candidates was job advancement (2 or 4.5%).

## Mergers

Ten states reported experiencing a merger between communications and computer operations during the previous five years. When asked to judge the success or failure of these mergers, eight of the 10 reported them to be either "highly successful" (5) or "successful" (3). The remaining two responded with "only moderately successful."

## Would You Do It Over Again?

Unit heads were asked their perceptions by responding to a series of statements on a four-point Likert scale with 1 being strongly agree and 4 being strongly disagree. Mean scores and standard deviations appear in Table 4.

**TABLE 4:**  
*Descriptive Statistics of Unit Head Perceptions Regarding the Agricultural Communications Profession, 1995*

	X	S
1. Staffing levels in my department are adequate to meet workload expectations.	3.15	0.79
2. Salaries of agricultural communicators are generally about what they should be for their talents and job responsibilities.	2.62	0.89
3. Agricultural communicators live under a glass ceiling in which promotion to administration posts is limited.	2.02	0.95
4. Administrators insist on a disproportionate amount of time and money be spent on public relations as opposed to educational communications activities.	2.70	0.83
5. Generally speaking, agricultural communicators receive the amount of respect they deserve from faculty in your college's academic units.	2.65	0.97
6. The mission of agricultural communicators has changed with the advent of emerging technologies.	1.87	0.98
7. Emerging technologies have led college administrators to think smaller agricultural communications staffing is possible.	2.52	0.84
8. The future for agricultural communications is bright.	2.38	0.86
9. If I had it to do over, I would go into agricultural communications as a career.	2.27	0.87
10. I would encourage my children to pursue a career in agricultural communications.	2.80	0.95

Unit heads' responses to Statement 1 indicate concern regarding adequate staff to meet workload expectations. This is apparent not only in the mean score but in the relatively low standard deviation reflecting general uniformity of opinion. As previously indicated in Table 1, units have experienced an overall decline in the number of professional staff positions during the past eight years. Responses to Statement 1 seem to reflect concern over this decline in number of staff.

In Statement 6, unit heads indicate the mission of agricultural communications has changed due to emerging technologies. (This writer would challenge that judgment, saying the mission has not changed but rather the tools for accomplishing the mission have changed with the advent of new technologies.) Unit leaders seem to agree in Statement 7 that their bosses think emerging technologies make smaller staffing possible.

Statement 4 regarding the glass ceiling relates to the reported average length of service for agricultural communicators in 1995 of 10.34 years, up slightly from 9.69 years in 1987 (by contrast, average length of service for unit heads is 4.73 years.) These data suggest that agricultural communicators tend to remain place bound in their careers and that advancement is limited.

Statements 8, 9 and 10 were designed to examine unit head attitudes toward their careers and self-satisfaction. The highest response of the three in terms of overall disagreement was on Statement 10 regarding whether unit heads would encourage their children to pursue a career in agricultural communications (mean=2.80, when 1=strongly agree and 4=strongly disagree). Only three (6%) of 49 respondents indicated a 1. Thirteen (27%) indicated a 4. Data in Table 5 have been collapsed (1's and 2's) and (3's and 4's) to form cells in a two-way Chi Square test for statistical significance of the following null hypothesis:

There is no significance between unit heads' length of service and their encouraging their children to enter their profession.

**TABLE 5:**

*Observed and Expected Frequencies (in parentheses) —  
Unit Heads By Length of Service Encouraging Their  
Children to Enter Their Profession.*

	Encourage	Not Encourage	Row Total
Unit Heads 5 years and less	11 (12)	17 (16)	28
Unit Heads 6 years and more	10 (9)	11 (12)	21
Column Total	21	28	N=49

Chi Square=.36

Data displayed in Table 4 show that the computed Chi Square of .36 is less than the table value of 3.84 (df=1, level of significance=.01). Based on the Chi Square value, the hypothesis was not rejected.

(While not of statistical significance, an anecdotal note: there were ten unit heads in their first year of service. Their respective mean scores for Questions 8, 9, and 10 were 2.5, 2.4, and 2.9, compared to more experienced unit heads whose scores were 2.38, 2.27 and 2.80).

### Concluding Remarks

I have seen changes in my 22 years as an agricultural communicator, both as a unit head and faculty member at three land-grant universities. The nature of these changes, including dramatic shifts in client group demographics, suggests a strong need for skilled communicators working on behalf of the land-grant colleges of agriculture. So it is with some concern that I see a decline in the funding of real dollars and staffing of agricultural communicators.

In earlier times, it was not unusual for the dean or vice president of the college of agriculture to ascend to his university's presidency. That no longer is the case. Land-grant university top administrators now come from other disciplines, often poorly versed in the land-grant philosophy. A formidable internal communications challenge exists here alone as the various colleges compete for resources on their

campuses.

Today, only about 5% of college of agriculture graduates return to farming operations. It is important as these agricultural colleges evolve that they communicate to the public their accomplishments and continued relevancy.

The increased emphasis on research in land-grant universities coupled with emerging communications technologies also points to a need for communications professionals in performing an educational and information delivery role to those we serve.

It would seem then that 2.43% of colleges of agriculture reported budgets for communications is a modest investment at best during a period when the task at hand is substantial.