

# New Directions in Agricultural Communications Curricula

Eugene A. Kroupa and James Evans

THE TITLE OF this address—"New Directions in Agricultural Communications Curricula"—might better be paraphrased as sifting and winnowing the grain from the chaff. This study was an outgrowth of discussions between the authors about current and future problems in giving students proper guidance and preparation for agricultural communications careers. The job of defining such problems is somewhat like that of the bank president who was faced with the task of hiring a new secretary.

Since the new secretary would be confronted daily with problems that would require quick and decisive action, the bank president decided to pose such a problem to the three prospective secretaries.

He presented the problem to the first applicant in this manner. "You are on a luxury liner somewhere in the Mediterranean enjoying the romance of ocean travel. The serenity of your cruise is interrupted by an unexpected hurricane that sinks the liner. You are fortunate enough to swim to a small island, but as you climb up the beach you are confronted with 50 men who have been shipwrecked there for five years without any female companionship. What would you do?"

The aspiring secretary threw her hands up in horror and said, "I would jump off the nearest cliff and kill myself!" The bank president wasn't too impressed with this doomsday reaction and called in the second applicant. He presented the same situation and again asked, "What would you do?" She thought it over care-

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This article is adapted from a talk given by Dr. Kroupa at the 1973 AAACE meeting, Guelph, Ontario.

fully and then responded, "I would look over the 50 men, pick out the strongest, make love to him, and let him defend me from the other 49."

The president was impressed with this shrewd line of reasoning, but felt it was his duty to interview the third girl. She took in the situation quickly and responded quizzically, "Sir, I understand your question, but what is the problem?"

## The Problem

The problem we wanted to grapple with was twofold. First, we wanted to find some reliable method of determining which courses students should take as they prepare for various kinds of communication jobs. And second, we wanted to be able to specifically recommend courses by subject area or catalog description. Additionally, we wanted observations or general comments from industry people on what was good, bad, or indifferent about their preparation for particular communication jobs. In short, we wanted feedback from agricultural communicators on what they thought our curricula should look like.

The easiest and cheapest way of getting feedback from ag communicators was by mail questionnaire. Many AAACE members received and returned this questionnaire. The questionnaire was mailed May 9, to 2,750 members of the Agricultural Relations Council, American Agricultural Editors Association, American Association of Agricultural College Editors, Communications Officers of State Departments of Agriculture, Cooperative Editorial Association, National Association of Farm Broadcasters, Newspaper Farm Editors of America, and National Agricultural Advertising and Marketing Association. Completed questionnaires were received from 1,100 people or 40 percent of the mailing.<sup>1</sup> The findings we are reporting here were from the first 900 questionnaires we received.

The questionnaires we used were very easy to complete, yet provided us with quantitative measurements of communicators' opinions of a large number of courses. Respondents were asked to

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<sup>1</sup>The 40 percent return was obtained from a one-time mailing. There were no follow-up mailings.

identify themselves by their job title—extension editor, advertising account executive, etc. This allowed us to relate the kind of agricultural communications job with course ratings. By combining the course ratings of people doing similar jobs, we could determine the relative importance of particular courses in any curriculum. The respondents rated the courses on a five-point scale—a (5) indicated very important and a (1) rating, very unimportant.

Sixty-eight academic courses were assigned to three broad categories—communication courses, supporting course areas in agriculture, and supporting course areas outside agriculture. We tried to be very precise with the communication course titles, and as a result we listed 31 different titles. For example we listed separate courses in writing for radio and writing for television. One person indicated in his comments that it was hard to believe our departments offer 31 different journalism courses. They don't, but we wanted to leave little room for misinterpretation or exclusion.

The supporting courses in and out of the agriculture field were more broadly titled, such as agronomy or sociology. We did not try to give all the possible combinations and permutations within those subject areas.

We also asked the respondents to rate (on the five-point scale) the importance of four general areas of communication training to give us some idea of the basic approach to take. In other words, we were asking whether we should concentrate on the nuts and bolts skills approach or take a more liberal education approach. Some people might challenge our selection of titles to describe these general training areas, but we settled on these four.

*Human relations* training basically deals with one's ability to manage and get along with people. Based on some heated responses we got, we would say that the words understanding and empathy certainly belong in this definition.

*Communication systems* training relates to understanding the formation and movement of knowledge and ideas within agriculture: channels, rate of flow, and other aspects of various systems. The concept might be broadened to include the study of communication between agricultural and non-agricultural segments of our population.

Training in *subject matter area*, or knowing something about a particular agricultural field such as animal science or agronomy, gets down to the nitty gritty of whether agricultural communicators really need this kind of training in college.

And the final area of training we wanted to evaluate was that of developing *communication skills*. This involves getting, organizing and presenting information.

Fourteen different communicator positions or job title categories were used to classify the various kinds of respondents. We had the following numbers of respondents in each category: 118 extension/ag college writers and publications editors; 46 farm newspaper editors; 62 magazine editors and publishers; 54 magazine field associate, and subject editors/writers; 15 extension/ag college visuals, exhibit, art and photography specialists; 19 extension/ag college radio/TV specialists; 45 farm radio/TV directors; 143 public relations people; 89 advertising account executives, copywriters, media directors, etc.; 187 advertising, sales and marketing directors and managers; 33 department chairmen, professors, USDA branch chiefs; 61 presidents, vice-presidents, owners; 7 research directors; and 19 classified as other and retired.

The statistical analysis consisted of using an analysis of variance program to get the variance within the groups, then using this information in calculating Tukey's honestly significant difference. In essence we just figured how much of a difference was needed from the midpoint of the scale to determine if a course was considered essential by a particular group of communicators. Keep in mind that we are considering what they thought to be the most essential types of courses for curricula preparing people for jobs similar to theirs.

## Findings

The results of this analysis pose some interesting questions for those who define curricula for our career field in narrow, rigid terms—especially those who consider agricultural courses as prerequisites to being well prepared for any agricultural communications job.

Let's look first at the courses which extension press editors and



publications editors considered vital (Table 1). They tended to consider news writing and editing, feature writing, photography, publications editing, publication layout and design, and printing methods as cornerstones for the curricula foundation. Publications editors will point out that their job is distinctively different from that of extension editors operating in the press service. Well, preliminary analysis offers indirect evidence to support that idea. Farm newspaper editors chose only the press-oriented writing/editing courses and rated the publications editing/layout courses as less important. We will definitely separate these in our final analysis.

Extension visuals and exhibits specialists did not consider the writing and editing courses particularly vital, but they did cite more total courses as being very important. It is also apparent that their duties extend beyond the narrow scope of producing visuals or exhibits. The courses they selected as critically important include publication layout, illustration and design, photography, film production, principles of advertising, and exhibit techniques. In addition, advertising layout, promotional campaign planning, advertising media, printing methods, and audio/visual techniques rated highly. It seems obvious that these people are heavily involved with promotional events such as field days and state fairs which require a broader knowledge than simply knowing how to produce exhibits and visuals.

Extension radio and TV specialists cited the largest number of vital courses among all the occupational groups. Their dual functions of producing on-the-air shows or recordings, and writing scripts for use by commercial station announcers are reflected in their list of essential courses: news writing and editing, photography, audio/visual techniques, film production, radio broadcasting, television announcing, broadcast management, radio and television programming and production, and writing for radio and TV. Increased use of broadcast facilities in home economics and agricultural programming for urban audiences may be reflected in the importance attached to a course in mass media and minorities. Use of federally regulated airwaves to accomplish such information

missions resulted in a high rating for a course in law of mass communications.

In the supporting course areas outside of agriculture, the extension/ag college press, broadcast and visuals groups cited only psychology, art and speech as essential courses.

We purposely reported this group of occupations together because it comprises many of the members of your organization. We also call special attention to responses about the importance of agriculture courses because the responses may surprise you. None of the courses—agronomy, animal science, horticulture, or what have you—from the supporting course areas in agriculture received a significant enough rating to be considered a vital part of any curriculum preparing people to follow in your footsteps. The same pattern appeared in ratings of the general areas of communication training. Your press, publications, and radio/TV specialists did not attach significant importance to being up on agricultural subject matter.

Your counterparts in the farm newspaper field also did not, as a group, attach critical importance to agricultural courses. However, farm magazine editors and publishers said they feel that courses in animal science and agricultural economics are critical. Public relations people also expressed high regard for knowledge of agricultural economics.

The magazine editors, publishers and staff writers added courses in business magazines and house publications, scientific and technical writing, and editorial practice to the writing/editing courses on their list of needed journalism courses.

Let's turn now to the areas of public relations and advertising. The 143 public relations people answering our survey selected feature writing, news writing and editing, and publications editing as important communication courses. Psychology, economics and marketing were the only non-agricultural supporting courses receiving enough votes to be considered critically important.

We divided advertising professionals into two groups—those working for advertising agencies as account executives, copywriters, media directors, etc., and those employed by firms as advertising and sales directors. Sales managers, marketing direc-

tors, and product promotion managers were included in this second group. Agency and business people agreed on the importance of courses in principles of advertising, promotional campaign planning and advertising media. The agency people also included advertising copywriting, layout, and communication research methods courses to that list. Both groups supported courses in psychology and marketing, while the advertising and sales managers also voted for requiring agricultural economics. Agency people didn't see a great need for including any agriculture courses.

Responses from the remaining groups were similar in many respects to those we have already discussed. It is interesting to note that department chairmen, deans, professors and others in similar positions tabbed news writing and editing as the only essential course from among the 68 different courses. Research directors focused on research methods, statistics and math while respondents in the "other" category were most nearly like extension editors and magazine editors.

We have seen how different kinds of agricultural communicators view the importance of specific communication, agriculture and general academic courses. How do these specific course ratings square with group evaluations of the four general areas of training? These areas, again, were human relations, agricultural communication systems, agricultural subject matter, and communication skills. Communication skills and human relations received practically unanimous support. Training in agricultural communication systems and subject matter were rated not nearly as important. We said earlier that there was a definite divergence of opinion among the communicators as to the importance of depth training in agricultural subject matter.

## Discussion

Analysis of these findings must take into account the particular approach that we used. Two observations about the design of our study are especially pertinent.

1. The statistical tool that we used to cluster responses from a large number of persons was rigorous. That is, we used it to identify only those courses which respondents considered critically

important. The list of recommended courses would be much longer if we had chosen a less restrictive cut-off point.

2. Basically, this study measured only one aspect of agricultural orientation—coursework. Results suggest that most professionals did not consider such coursework critically important. However, coursework is only one way to gain agricultural expertise. Some respondents may have felt that a farm background or on-the-job training is the best way to get agricultural know-how. In other words, they could place a high value on agricultural knowledge, yet place a relatively low value on college coursework as a means of achieving it.

It is possible, too, that part of the emphasis which many agricultural communicators placed upon training in human relations is agricultural in the sense of understanding rural life, people and culture. You may have heard about the company president who described his experience with an agricultural journalist lacking in farm savvy:

He wrote a feature about a hog farmer and his “bores and gilts.” Luckily, I had him tape-record the interview. When I questioned a statement about “having 170,000 gilts on my farm,” the young ag journalist played back the tape for me. What the farmer really said was, “I have 170 sows and gilts on my farm.” After I let this budding young communicator go to a higher paying job in Washington, I found out that he thought it was a racket. He had heard that there were more jobs available for ag journalists than for straight journalists.

The point is that this study does not let us generalize about the priority that respondents place upon agricultural expertise; it measured only one source of that expertise. Nor does the study explain *why* coursework failed to rate high. One possible reason is that respondents whose college degrees were nonagricultural felt no great professional discomfort from a lack of agriculture courses. Some communicators, such as broadcasters, can rely on the agricultural expertise of those they interview. And part of the response may arise from a feeling that coursework lags behind changes in agricultural technology, that on-job experience is the only way to keep up with a rapidly-changing agriculture. Still

another possible line of reasoning is that a person cannot really anticipate during college the segment of agriculture in which he or she will work after graduation. Further study into the why's of this response would be useful.

Given these two special features of the study, we feel that diversity is the major theme of our findings—diversity both in the interests and the activities of professional agricultural communicators. Such findings will not surprise those who point to dynamic change and growth within our profession. New media, new communication techniques, and new audiences inevitably broaden and shift the professional requirements. At the same time, the modest emphasis that many professionals placed upon agricultural coursework may be surprising to those accustomed to agricultural journalism/communications curricula geared mainly to editorial work on print media directed to farmers.

We believe that results of the study argue for flexibility in our curricula. We who work directly with such curricula may focus upon definite groupings of required coursework, such as communication skills, human relations, and agricultural orientation. Yet within those groupings we should permit maximum flexibility to accommodate a widening range of career directions.

For example, among the communication courses, only those in newswriting, feature writing, editing and photography were considered critically important for most types of agricultural communications work. These courses might serve as a core requirement for programs (other than advertising, perhaps). Beyond that, the student might use recommendations based on studies such as this to tailor-make a mix of communication courses suited to his or her career goals.

Similarly, students who intend to work with agricultural periodicals directed to farmers may need more emphasis upon agriculture coursework than other students in the same curriculum. One agricultural editor from a state university said: "In all requests for young staff members that I have received over the years, the farm magazines want a person who knows cattle, crops, farm machinery, or some other field of specialization first—and writing ability

second. Those who manage the other media tend to want a writer, speaker or photographer.”

In any case, responses from the professionals underlined the value of getting students on the job for hands-on experience. As one information director stated it, “practice more and preach less.”

As a next step, we suggest the formation of one or more curriculum planning workshops for those who direct agricultural journalism/communications curricula throughout the nation. Such a workshop might have two goals: (1) Assess current programs in light of suggestions from the professionals. Our curricula may be out of balance now, in terms of types of required coursework. A national survey of agricultural journalism/communications curricula probably would reveal that agricultural subject matter forms the largest single block of required coursework for all students. (2) Frame guidelines for possible curricula improvement.

We can take these steps on our individual campuses, but the workshop offers the added advantage of shared ideas and coordinated action.

You may not agree with our analysis, especially in view of our attempt to quantify something that many persons may feel is beyond quantification. So we would like to leave you with this story about the value of measurement.

It seems that during World War I two college boys from the city were assigned to the mounted cavalry. They had used two horses during the first day of training, and the old sergeant had told them that it was best to work with the same horse each day. That way the rider and horse knew what to expect from the other in the heat of battle.

Well, the boys knew that their horses had been tied at the end of the line, but they couldn't remember which horse belonged to which rider. Being smarter than most and having a background in research methods and such, they decided that measurement would solve their problem. They grabbed a ruler and went down to measure the horses. Sure enough upon measurement, they found that the black horse was one inch taller than the white horse.