

Southern Agricultural Communications Undergraduate Programs: A Survey

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Abstract

Student enrollment in agricultural communications undergraduate programs continues to increase throughout the southern region. This research reports on a survey of the nine agricultural communications programs in the 13-state southern region. The survey reviewed programmatic areas being taught, the number of students enrolled at each of the institutions, the faculty allocated to the effort, and faculty opinions about the future directions of their programs, especially in terms of enrollment and support for the program. Findings include that all programs depend on a small number of faculty to teach courses; and many of those faculty seem frustrated with a low level of support, recognition and respect. Two-thirds of respondents believed that a national accreditation program would be beneficial to their programs.

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The first agricultural communications programs were developed primarily to help disseminate information discovered and created at the experiment stations of land-grant universities (Duley, Jensen & O'Brien, 1984). Iowa State College was the first to offer a Bachelor of Science degree in Agricultural Journalism in 1920. By 1928, there was a total of seven colleges offering courses in agricultural journalism. During the 1960s, agricultural journalism programs had another era of significant growth (Duley et al., 1984). By 1975, most programs defined themselves as "agricultural communications" rather than "agricultural journalism" (Evans, 1975). As of 1991, there were more than 30 agricultural communications programs at colleges and universities across the United States (Doerfert & Cepica, 1991).

Several studies have been conducted within the past decade pertaining to undergraduate agricultural communications programs at U.S. universities. Reisner (1990) found that 26 institutions nationwide taught agricultural communications classes and that the curriculum at these institutions varied widely. Sprecker and Rudd (1998) found that practitioners emphasized a need for students to build firm communication skills in an array of areas, particularly the ability to write. Bailey-Evans (1994) suggested a model curriculum be developed that new or developing agricultural communications programs could use as a guide to meet the needs of the industry and future professionals. She recommended that this model be based on disciplines and competencies identified in her research, which surveyed leaders in agricultural communications (Bailey-Evans, 1994). Terry, Vaughn, Vernon, Lockaby, Bailey-Evans, and Rehrman (1994) recommended that future research identify a core curriculum as the basis of agricultural communications degree programs.

Reisner's (1990) study examined undergraduate program structure and curricular requirements in agricultural communications programs and found that the programs' most predominant characteristic was variety. Specifically, Reisner (1990) stated that agricultural communications curricula were lacking because "agricultural communication students are not required to take courses specifically designed to teach cross-cultural global perspectives, agricultural systems analysis, values and ethics in agriculture, public policy, or leadership" (p. 15). Terry et al. (1994) noted that it would be impossible to complete each instructional objective contained in the research in a

typical four-year bachelor's degree program. Therefore, they argue that agricultural communications curricula should be flexible with opportunities for students to specialize in specific areas of agriculture and communications in their upper division course work

Because of this variability in programs, agricultural communications faculty may be facing some of the same academic issues shared by colleagues in other nascent fields, such as women's studies, popular culture, film studies or, closer to home, natural resources conservation management. What is the current status of this emerging field, especially since it is almost exclusively housed in long-established colleges of agriculture? How is it faring in terms of support (funding, space, personnel)? Finally, what directions are these programs taking?

The purposes of this study were to examine current undergraduate agricultural communications programs in the southern United States and to identify their baseline characteristics. Specific objectives were:

1. to compile a list of colleges/universities with agricultural communications programs,
2. to identify their current major programmatic areas as perceived by agricultural communications faculty, and
3. to identify future trends for agricultural communications undergraduate programs as perceived by agricultural communications faculty.

Methods

This research surveyed all undergraduate agricultural communications programs in the 13-state southern region, which included Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. A 43-question survey was sent via electronic mail to the primary advisers for chapters of Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) as well as to land-grant agricultural communications professionals who teach agricultural communications courses or had expressed interest to the National ACT faculty adviser in starting an agricultural communications program at their universities. A total of 14 surveys (Texas had two programs) was distributed. Nine programs provided information about

their programs; five other states responded that they had no current program. The surveys were returned to the researchers via E-mail, and responses were tabulated.

Findings

All of the nine respondents indicated that their programs were affiliated with colleges of agriculture. Even though several had names somewhat different from that, all colleges mentioned had "agriculture" in the title. Similarly, all the degree programs were called either "agricultural communications" or "agricultural journalism."

Where Programs Are Housed

Regarding the department that houses their program, the predominant response (4) was that it is part of another academic department; two each were either aligned with an affiliated program or unit or were in a stand-alone program; and one was part of an agricultural communications service unit. Seven affiliated in some manner with an academic unit were part of an agricultural education or Extension education department. One program was simply part of the college of agriculture. (This last one appears to be a topical major offered by the college, in that no agricultural communications courses are taught.)

Enrollment/Graduation Trends

The number of students majoring in agricultural communications varied widely at the nine institutions, from 9 students to 115 students. The mean number was 32 students per department.

Eight of the nine respondents indicated that their enrollment had increased during the past five years, with one indicating that enrollment remained steady. (A newly established department had no graduates to report.) Further, six respondents indicated that their enrollment would grow in the next five years; three indicated that they anticipated that enrollment would remain steady. No respondent believed their program's enrollment was likely to decrease.

Respondents were asked how many students graduated from their agricultural communications programs in the previous year (1998-1999). The range from nine respondents was fairly substantial with from "none graduated from a newly

established program” to “40 students.” The mean was 11.5, with most programs falling within the 8 to 12 range.

Respondents also were asked to provide the number of agricultural communications graduates from last year, who were now employed within the field. Of the total of 92 students graduated from the eight established agricultural communications programs, 41 are employed in agricultural communications work; 19 had accepted jobs in some other aspect of agriculture. Slightly less, 16, had applied to or been accepted into graduate school. And 14 of the 92 found employment outside both agriculture and communications. (Although respondents said they graduated 92 students, they could account for only 90.)

Programs' Foci

Respondents were asked to characterize their program's preparation of students in these three areas: program focuses primarily on teaching professional skills; program primarily teaches broad-based critical thinking skills; and the program provides an equal combination of both professional and critical thinking skills. The nine respondents fell nearly equally into the professional skills category (5) and into the both "professional skills" and "critical thinking skills" category (4).

When asked how many agricultural courses are taught within each program, responses from the nine respondents ranged from none to ten, with the mean just under five. In response to the companion question "How many different instructors teach these courses?" a narrower range of responses (from one to four) was indicated, with the predominant response as two. The mean was just under two.

The Faculty

The survey asked how many full-time equivalent faculty (FTE) members teach in the agricultural communications program (Table 1). Responses ranged from 0.5 faculty members to 2.6. Faculty-to-student ratios (for programs with faculty members assigned to teaching) ranged widely from 1:10 to 1:77, for eight respondents with faculty teaching courses.

Thirteen faculty members were listed as teaching agricultural communications. Of those, two are full professors, with

Table 1 *Undergraduate Agricultural Communications Programs and the Number of Full-time Equivalent Faculty Members Assigned in 1999.*

University	Faculty (FTEs)
Auburn	0
Clemson University	*
Louisiana State University	*
Mississippi State University	*
North Carolina State University	1
Oklahoma State University	.75
Texas A & M	1
Texas Tech	1.5
University of Arkansas	1
University of Florida	2.6
University of Georgia	.5
University of Kentucky	.5
University of Tennessee	*
Virginia Polytechnical Institute	*

*denotes no active undergraduate agricultural communications program.

doctorates in education; four are associate professors with Ph.D. degrees, four are assistant professors with Ph.D. degrees; and three are called "instructors" with master's degrees.

Quality of Preparation

Respondents were asked how well their programs prepare graduates in three areas: applied professional skills, critical thinking skills, and graduate or professional school. All nine programs provided data and the "applied professional skills" area received the highest ranking, with six schools indicating they prepared students "very well" and two more indicating they prepared students "well." Six respondents reported their

programs prepared students "well" in critical thinking skills, and one program prepares students "very well" in this area. Finally, seven schools also said they prepared students either "very well" or "well" for graduate or professional school. Since nearly one out of five agricultural communications graduates lands in advanced programs, the faculty are aware of their responsibilities in this area.

Program Support

When asked to describe the support (collectively defined as funding, space, personnel) their program receives relative to other academic programs in their college, seven respondents indicated that their program was in the bottom 50 percent; five of those seven responded that their programs were in the bottom 25 percent. One respondent said his program was in the top 50 percent. A respondent from the newly established program did not respond to this question.

To improve their programs, respondents would like to see increased support *across the board*; each of seven listed support areas in the survey were checked off, and additional choices were identified in the blank "other" area. Overwhelmingly, respondents indicated that agricultural communications programs need more faculty and increased program enrichment funds. Respondents also said they needed respect, technology support and more funding for travel and professional development. The need for more scholarship dollars also was noted, which might help with another need: more students.

Although support for agricultural communications programs was rated low relative to other programs in their colleges, the faculty were largely unsure of their relative salaries. Most (five respondents) do not know where they stand in relation to how much animal scientists or agricultural economists are paid at their institutions; or perhaps, given their low program status, they prefer not to know about the relative size of their paychecks. (The respondent from the newly established program, which had no one assigned to teach agricultural communications, did not respond to this question.)

Would Accreditation Be Helpful?

Two-thirds of the nine respondents agreed that a national agricultural communications accreditation process would

benefit their programs. They believe that accreditation would do the following: "provide leverage with the administration" in garnering much-needed support; "bolster the image" of agricultural communications in relation to journalism and communications programs on campus; "improve the identity" of ag communications within the college; and "provide respect and esteem" to the field through the establishment of standards.

Challenges to Programs

Issues cited in open-ended questions at the end of the survey—What are the biggest challenges facing your program? What are the challenges facing ag communications programs nationally? and where do you see your program five years from now?—were interesting. All nine respondents provided comments such as "lack of understanding about what ag communications is," "the image problem," and "poor attitudes of journalism faculty and students toward ag communications" which could be addressed by national accreditation. Challenges that programs face individually—administration turf battles, understaffing, student recruitment, wearing too many hats as faculty members—might also be ameliorated by national standards in such areas as appropriate funding levels for curriculum and professional development and faculty:student ratios, for example.

Because a majority of agricultural communications programs in the southern states see themselves as increasing in size over the next five years, faculty find themselves challenged by all of the issues related to that growth. From simple concerns—such as identifying good textbooks and making contacts for internships and job placement—to complex issues—such as increased funding for technology and maintaining critical thinking skills—agricultural communications faculty face perhaps their most challenging decade since the inception of the field.

Conclusions and Discussion

This study found that the undergraduate agricultural communications programs throughout the southern United States are growing and are expected to continue to grow for at least the next five years. This seemingly rapid growth may be responsible for the wide-ranging number of faculty to student ratios, from 1:10 to 1:77. The rapid growth also may be responsible for the small number of faculty members involved

in teaching in the various surveyed programs. (The mean number of faculty who taught at the programs was just under two per program, with many having only one faculty member involved in teaching.) Without a doubt, all programs depend on a small number of faculty members to coordinate, administer and teach the agricultural communications programs surveyed.

It might be asked how robust an agricultural communications program really can be if only one or two faculty members coordinate, administer and teach a program. It was apparent that many of the faculty members involved in teaching also had other responsibilities, too. The question we might ask from these responses is how well can faculty members teach courses when the demands for teaching are high, but the FTE's allocated for teaching are so low, especially in programs with a large number of students?

The survey indicated a strong level of faculty frustration associated with the perceived low status of their programs as well as actual low levels of support (funding, space, personnel), recognition, and respect. All but one of the program respondents indicated that their program was in the bottom half in terms of support, relative to other programs in their institution. And fully one half of those responding to the question said that their program was in the bottom quarter in terms of support, relative to other programs at their institution. That only one program of all of those surveyed considers itself to be in the top half of programs at its institution, relative to other programs, is very telling. The need for accreditation (discussed below), the need for support of all kinds, and the "lack of understanding about what agricultural communications is as a field" (cited as a national challenge), are all related to the perceived low standing of agricultural communications programs in colleges of agriculture.

The low level of perceived support may be due in some measure to the rapid growth many of the programs are experiencing. If so, then, it may be that institutional support will catch up to their growth over time. The fact that two-thirds of respondents believed that a national accreditation program would help their program may be a response to their perceived low status of programs, coupled with high demands on the faculty.

A national accreditation process could be somewhat prob-

lematic, however, given at least one of the findings of this research. The orientation of programs differed somewhat with one half of the programs focusing predominantly on professional skills and the other half focusing on both professional and critical skills. Any accreditation process, then, would need to be flexible enough to accommodate both orientations, yet at the same time, be specific enough to be meaningful.

Because this survey studied only the southern states, a national survey is necessary to ascertain whether a consensus of agricultural communications faculty supports accreditation. Should such a survey indicate national support for an accreditation process, then additional research focusing solely on standards needs to be conducted.

Key Words

Southern region agricultural communications undergraduate programs; teaching; accreditation.

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