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## Characteristics, Educational Preparation, and Membership In Professional Organizations of Agricultural Communicators

### Abstract

As the Profession of agricultural communication continues to develop and refine its mission in society, we must relate this mission to our academic programs.

# Characteristics, Educational Preparation, and Membership In Professional Organizations of Agricultural Communicators

Cheryl A. Buck  
Curtis E. Paulson

As the profession of agricultural communication continues to develop and refine its mission in society, we must relate this mission to our academic programs. Therefore, we must continually examine the profession where our graduates will find professional positions. By doing so, we continually refine our programs for academic content, gain new knowledge to realistically advise our students, and therefore produce graduates who will meet the expectations of our profession. This article looks at selected characteristics of practicing agricultural communication professionals from six professional organizations and gives insights into concepts we must consider as we plan our academic programs and advise our students.

## Introduction

Every profession has knowledge and carries out activities that separate it from other professions (Doheny, Cook, and Stopper, 1992). 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.

A symbiotic relationship exists among a professional organization, its membership, and a profession. The membership should define the purpose and functions of the organization. In return, "the organiza-

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tion provides a "clearly defined purpose for which the group can be accomplished" (DeYoung, 1981, p. 151). Professional organizations are established to arrange policies and activities of practice within a professional area and to ensure that activities regarding meeting qualifications of the profession are maintained (Doheny et al., 1992).

The extent to which a professional organization is considered successful in achieving its purpose is often a reflection of the general welfare of both its members and the profession at large. One factor necessary for a professional organization to achieve its goals is an adequate number of active members (Merton cited in Blais and Frock, 1987; DeYoung, 1981). Ultimately, the caliber of a professional organization can be measured, in part, by the member characteristics, educational preparation, and practices of the collective membership. Therefore, the quality of membership becomes a concern as a professional identity is created for each profession.

For instance, the position of agricultural communicator is not new to the list of agriculturally related occupations. However, there are no set guidelines regarding the agricultural communicator's purpose in disseminating information about agriculture (Weckman, Quinn, and Witham, 1992). The responsibilities of an agricultural communicator are complex, and they vary according to the type of employment, the educational preparation of the individual, and the range of his or her experiences and special interests. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a profile that gives special attention to these characteristics of current agricultural communicators, before their perceptions and opinions can be used effectively for professional development.

## **Review of Related Literature**

Professional organizations exist to provide members with opportunities to: network with others in the profession; influence the goals of the profession; speak and publish; and increase awareness of information in professional journals. Organizations also provide social and moral support for the members and for their work (Anderson, D'Amicantonio, and DuBois, 1992; DeYoung, 1981; Kearl, 1983; Merton, cited in Blais and Frock, 1987; Scott, 1980).

Agricultural communication professional organizations are similar. Kearl (1983) reported that agricultural communicators use professional organizations as "our channel for reviewing our work, improving our skills, and selecting and developing the capacities of our successors" (p. 4).

Agricultural communication has been a professional field in the United States for approximately 100 years (Kearl, 1983). Hopke

(1987) stated that "the agricultural communications field includes professionals who combine (1) knowledge of agriculture, (2) skills in communications, and (3) interest in working with people" (p. 77).

Research shows that agricultural communication began in earnest in the early 1800s, as agriculture outgrew the ability to pass information by word-of-mouth. Kearl (1983) suggested that agricultural communication developed when scientists needed help responding to questions and information requests. Lionberger and Gwin (1982) said the United States agricultural college and extension system developed to fulfill a need for scientific information that could improve farming efforts. College courses in agricultural communication began in the early 1900s and have existed under various names ever since. Reisner (1990) found that, as of 1988, undergraduate degrees in agricultural journalism and agricultural communication were available at 26 universities in the United States, and several offered master's degrees in some combination of agriculture and communications. One school offered a doctoral program in mass communication. However, Evans and Bolick (1982) discovered that most programs of education in agricultural journalism and communication were less than 20 years old in 1982.

Early agricultural editors worked to change the stereotype image of agriculture through public relations (Kearl, 1983). Today, as the general public's direct contact with agriculture on farms diminishes, there is much public dialogue about issues related to agriculture such as food prices, healthfulness of food, land use, water use, animal rights, and pollution. Agriculture still needs a strong public relations program (Evans, 1984).

The literature suggests that the agricultural communicator's responsibility is to determine what information about agriculture is needed by each of many different audiences and then develop ways to present that information (Agunga, 1989; Singh, 1976; Teller, 1980). This requires involvement in all stages of the communication process, and the types of skills needed varies greatly.

Previous studies of agricultural communicators (Boone, 1991; Bowen and Cooper, 1988; Evans and Bolick, 1982; Hillgren, 1989; Kroupa and Evans, 1973, 1976; Mitchell, 1956; Reisner, 1990, 1991; Weckman, Quinn, and Witham, 1992; Wilson, Paulson, and Henderson, 1991) have revealed many opinions and practices regarding proper education and training for agricultural communicators.

For example, Mitchell (1956) said there was no consensus among employers of agricultural journalists and communicators about the best educational background for this career. Both Mitchell and Clyde Duncan (cited in Evans and Bolick, 1982) found that professionals

recommended more coursework in agriculture than in journalism and other areas.

Kroupa and Evans (1973) found, in a study of several agricultural communication organizations, that the only communication courses recommended as critically important were: news writing, feature writing, editing, and photography. They also said some respondents seemed to feel that coursework lags behind changes in agricultural technology, meaning on-the-job experience is better for keeping up in the industry. In 1976, Kroupa and Evans recommended that agricultural coursework be required, but the student should choose the specific course subject matter.

Reisner's (1990) review of several agricultural communication curriculum surveys revealed beliefs opposite the findings of Mitchell (1956) and Duncan (cited in Evans and Bolick, 1982). Reisner (1990) reported that professionals agreed that courses in communication skills, communication systems, or human relations were more important than agricultural communications systems and agricultural subject matter courses. However, Reisner (1990) did find, like Mitchell (1956), that employers of agricultural communicators consider experience in both mass communication media and agriculture helpful.

Boone (1991) discovered that both academicians and leading agricultural communicators recommend graduate programs in agricultural communication. However, she noted that technical skills and knowledge of agriculture subject matter were rated as far less important than communication skills for graduate study. Wilson, Paulson, and Henderson (1991) reported that members of the Agricultural Communicators in Education believed both communication and agricultural subject matter should be included in graduate studies for agricultural communicators.

Overall, the variations in the preparation of agricultural communicators can be seen most readily in the wide range of types of career training for agricultural communicators and in their levels of education (Weckman, Quinn, and Witham, 1992). Usually, agricultural communication students have degrees that require some combination of agricultural courses and journalism or communication courses (Evans and Bolick, 1982; Hopke, 1987).

## **Purpose and Research Objectives**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine selected characteristics and the educational preparation of agricultural communicators who are members of six agricultural communication professional organizations. The study also sought to identify the

membership of these agricultural communicators in professional organizations outside of agricultural communication.

The objectives were to:

1. Describe agricultural communication organization members on the following demographic characteristics: number of years worked in the field of agricultural communication; membership(s) in the six agricultural communication organizations associated with this study; officer position(s) held in agricultural communication organizations; salary range; residence; age; gender; and ethnicity.
2. Describe the type and level of educational preparation of agricultural communicators according to the following items: academic degree(s) attained; academic major(s) in college; and emphasis of educational preparation anchored in (i) agricultural subject matter, (ii) communication skills subject matter; or (iii) alternative educational experiences.
3. Identify the membership of agricultural communicators in professional organizations outside of agricultural communication.
4. Determine the job titles and job responsibilities of agricultural communicators.

## Methodology

The target population was the current members of the following six agricultural communication professional organizations: American Agricultural Editors' Association; Agricultural Communicators in Education; Agricultural Relations Council; Cooperative Communicators Association; National Association of Agricultural Journalists; and National Association of Farm Broadcasters. The most recent directory of each of the six organizations was used to update a master list of all names and addresses originally compiled by the planners of the 1992 United States Agricultural Communicators Congress. The names of all persons with mailing addresses outside the United States were deleted from the list, along with the names of members of all organizations other than the six in this study. A random sample of 313 was chosen from the 1,706 names on the final population list. The sample names were selected using a computer random function command. Random selection of study participants ensured no sampling bias. The sample size was determined from the "Table for Determining Sample Size from a Given Population" provided by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). The researchers accepted the possibility of a 5 percent margin of error for this study.

The survey instrument was a questionnaire developed by the researchers. A panel of experts from The Ohio State University examined the questionnaire for content and face validity. Several

A pilot test was conducted to determine the reliability of the questionnaire using a test-retest reliability coefficient as a form of internal consistency (Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh, 1990). A random sample of agricultural communicators was selected from the population list after the selection of the study sample. The average reliability coefficient was 93.4 percent agreement. The highest coefficient was 100 percent agreement for eleven of the questions. The lowest coefficient was 56 percent agreement for one question.

The survey questionnaire contained questions about selected characteristics, educational preparation, and membership in professional organizations of agricultural communicators. The questions were designed to provide responses for each objective of the study. The demographic data were used to build a brief profile of today's professional agricultural communicator. Socio-demographic information about the respondents' background and personal characteristics was considered important as a basis for the profile. Other questions expanded the profile with information about the educational and professional preparation of the current agricultural communicators. Information also was requested about the communicators' current jobs, including job titles, responsibilities, and activities. In addition, respondents were asked to list their membership(s) in professional organizations.

Procedures recommended by Dillman (1978) for mail surveys were used for conducting the data collection. Questionnaires were mailed to the sample population on May 17, 1993. A cover letter, a questionnaire, and a pre-addressed, stamped envelope were included in the packet. Each questionnaire contained an identification code number for nonresponse follow-up. On May 28, 1993, a follow-up reminder and a second copy of all materials were sent to nonrespondents. On June 11, 1993, a postcard reminder was mailed to remaining nonrespondents. The total response rate was 264 questionnaires returned (84 percent). The number of usable responses was 243 (78 percent).

The data obtained through these responses were coded and analyzed using Microsoft Excel v. 3.00 and SPSS v. 4.0 computer software. Results of the data analysis were reported in frequencies and percentages. Responses to open-ended questions on the questionnaire were synthesized into lists of membership patterns and educational preparation patterns held by the agricultural communicators. Because of testing for nonresponse error, this study can be generalized to apply to all the members of the six agricultural communication professional organizations named in this study.



## Findings

### Demographic Profile

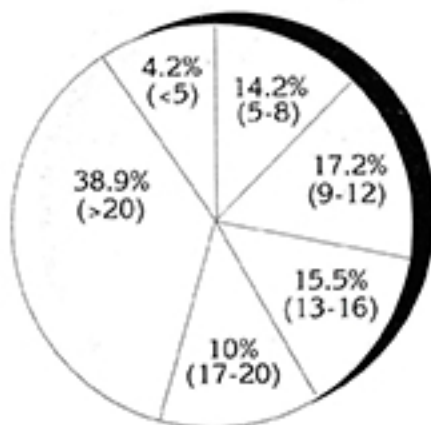
Of all the respondents, 94.2 percent were Caucasian. More than one-half of the respondents, 63.4 percent, were males. The most common age groups were people aged 35 to 44 years old and 45 to 54 years old. Most of the respondents, 40.9 percent, grew up in a rural, farm situation. However, almost 75 percent of them currently live in a small city or a more populated area, all with populations of 10,000 or more people.

More than one-third of the respondents had been a communicator for more than 20 years; and another 10 percent had been a communicator for 17 to 20 years. Overall, only 4.2 percent had been a communicator for less than five years. However, only one-fourth of the respondents had been an agricultural communicator for more than 20 years. Also, 20.8 percent had been an agricultural communicator for less than five years. (Figures 1 and 2.)

### Educational Preparation

In terms of educational background, 93 percent of the respondents had at least one college degree. The types of degrees represented included the Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Master of Arts, Master of Science, Ph.D.,

**FIGURE 1:**  
*Years as a Communicator*



Numbers in parentheses denote number of years.

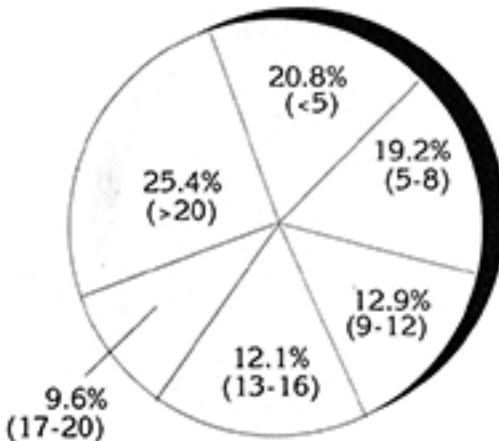
Ed.D., and MBA degrees. A variety of majors represented each of these degrees, although English, journalism, and agricultural journalism were the most commonly cited majors for the BA, BS, MA, and MS. Almost one-third of the respondents had earned at least one graduate degree; 5 percent of those included a Ph.D. or an Ed.D.

### Job Description

More than one-fifth, 20.9 percent, of the 234 people who answered the question about salary earned \$20,000 to 29,999 per year. The \$30,000 to 39,999 range and the \$60,000 or more range were the next most cited, at 20.1 percent each. Those who earned \$40,000 to \$49,999 comprised 18.4 percent of the respondents, and \$50,000 to \$59,999, 14.1 percent. Only 6.4 percent of the respondents made less than \$20,000 per year. Job titles varied also. There were 171 different titles listed; 31 of the titles were listed by more than one person. The two most common titles named were Editor (13 people) and Farm Director (10 people) (Figure 3).

Reporting was cited most frequently as a primary job responsibility, with 19.2 percent of the responses. Public relations was the second most common job responsibility (16.9 percent of the responses), and editing was the third most common (16.2 percent).

**FIGURE 2:**  
*Years as an Agricultural Communicator*



Numbers in parentheses denote number of years.

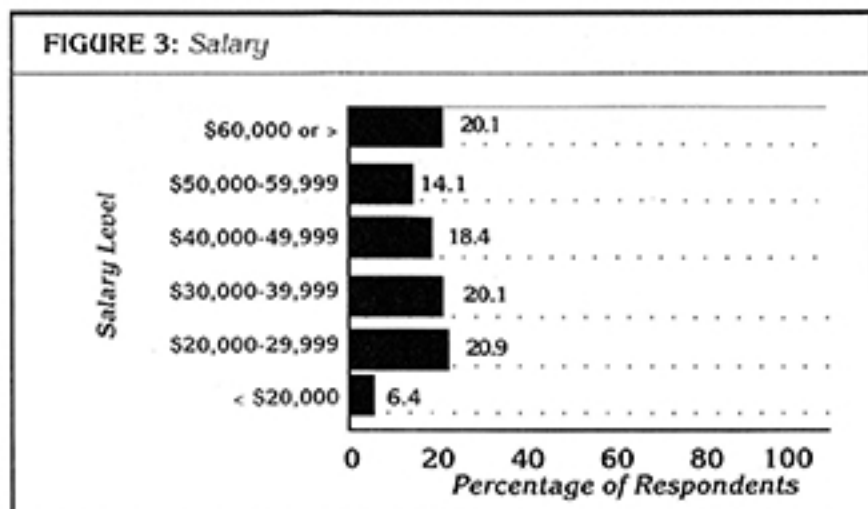
### Professional Organization Memberships

The organization ranked by the most people as the most valuable to their work was Agricultural Communicators in Education, followed by the American Agricultural Editors' Association. The third organization cited as most valuable by the respondents was actually a variety of organizations besides the six named in this study. The National Association of Farm Broadcasters was cited fourth most often, the Cooperative Communicators Association fifth, the National Association of Agricultural Journalists sixth, and the Agricultural Relations Council seventh.

More than one-half of the respondents, 55.2 percent, said both agricultural subject matter knowledge and communication skills knowledge were equally important in their work. An additional 42.7 percent of the respondents said communication skills knowledge was most important in their work. Only 2.1 percent said agricultural subject matter knowledge was most important.

Most of the respondents were not familiar with the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) student organization. Almost one-half of those who did have ACT on their campus had joined the chapter; and 68.2 percent of those members then had held local offices. Only 6.7 percent of those who were ACT members were national officers.

Membership in the six agricultural communication organizations in the study was varied; no significant pattern emerged representing the respondents. Overall, more of the respondents, 39 percent, belonged to Agricultural Communicators in Education than to each of the other five organizations. Also, the number of years of membership in



each organization varied, with a range from one year to 50 years. Sixteen percent of all the respondents said they were members of one, two or three additional agricultural communication organizations. Most of the businesses of the agricultural communicators in this study pay the dues for their employees to be a member of agricultural communication professional organizations, although 33.6 percent said their employers did not pay any dues for such membership. More than one-half of the respondents, 55.6 percent, also belong to at least one outside professional organization.

## Summary

The typical agricultural communicator in this study was a Caucasian male, approximately 45 years old, who grew up on a farm, but now lives in an area with a population of 10,000 or more people. He or she has been a communicator and an agricultural communicator for 20 years and has earned a bachelor's degree in English, journalism, or agricultural journalism. The respondent's average salary is \$30,000; the primary job responsibility is reporting; and both agricultural subject matter and communication skills knowledge are used at work. The average agricultural communicator is most likely to belong to the Agricultural Communicators in Education with the membership dues paid by his or her employer. The average respondent was not familiar with the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow student organization during college, and even now is not a member of any agricultural communication professional organizations beyond the six named in this study. However, the typical agricultural communicator is a member of at least one outside professional organization.

In an effort to illustrate the diverse backgrounds, responsibilities, and interests of the agricultural communicators who responded to this study, several appendices were developed to summarize some of their characteristics. The appendices included lists of the respondents' majors in college — by degree level, job titles, and offices held in agricultural communication organizations. The names of the other agricultural communication organizations (besides the six in this study) and additional professional organizations to which the respondents belonged were also listed. Another summary indicated why certain organizations were considered most valuable. Additional comments from the respondents — about the agricultural communication industry in general — were also included in the appendices.

## Conclusions

This study attempted to develop a more comprehensive profile of agricultural communicators than has existed to date. The results of

this study show that current agricultural communicators in agricultural communication professional organizations have a variety of backgrounds and a variety of educational experiences. Most agricultural communicators have some type of college degree, and many have advanced degrees. The respondents indicated more degrees with majors in journalism, English, and agricultural communication than any other majors. However, the range of majors for all the degrees included a mixture of topics and levels of degrees that reflect continuing uncertainty about exactly what type of education is best for an agricultural communicator.

The types of personal backgrounds of agricultural communicators, as well as their job descriptions, also indicate a continuing lack of consensus about the qualities that yield the best agricultural communicator. This study shows that there is no uniform description of an agricultural communicator. In general, agricultural communicators have become more diversified. This is true, at least, for the members of agricultural communication professional organizations.

Some of the respondents even said they did not consider themselves to be agricultural communicators, despite their membership(s) in such organizations. However, the organizations in this study remain "agricultural" communication-related in nature, and each is specialized to appeal to certain practitioners. This factor, plus the large number of different organizations listed by the respondents, leads to two questions. Does specialization "lock out" some potential members of each organization, agricultural communication-related or not? Secondly, are current members receiving all they need to help them perform their jobs well?

Direct application to a respondent's job was cited often as the reason why a particular organization was the most valuable and why. Other reasons given for rating certain organizations as most valuable included: professional networking, contacts; workshops and meetings for information exchange, speakers; and targeted focus to profession. On the other hand, some respondents said no organization was most valuable to them because of the organizations' lack of impact, or because the respondents needed a variety to get all the support they needed to do their jobs well. No attempt was made in this study to establish a pattern of employer support for organizational activities and their effect on a communicator's work.

Although previous studies have been conducted, they have concentrated only on specific types of agricultural communicators such as current students, recent agricultural communication graduates, and some members of individual agricultural communication organizations. This research studied a more diverse group of those in the agricultural communication field. With this summary of the basic

nature and characteristics of agricultural communicators, other researchers can study the relationship between membership in professional organizations and effectiveness within a profession.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study provided baseline data to help determine issues in agricultural communication for future consideration. Several items have been identified as needing further study:

1. Separate the six organizations of this study and do the same study on a more intensive level in each organization. This would provide a more thorough description of the members of each individual organization, which then could be compared to the characteristics of agricultural communication organization members as a whole.
2. Develop additional studies to examine the reasons why agricultural communicators join other agricultural communication organizations and other professional organizations. A quantitative study could correlate results about which types of agricultural communicators (in terms of background, educational training, job description) join which types of organizations.
3. Develop a qualitative study to examine agricultural communicators' opinions about different professional organizations.
4. Conduct a study of nonmembers of agricultural communication organizations to compare with the results of this study. Are the backgrounds, educational training, and job descriptions similar or different between the two groups? Why are some people not members of such organizations?
5. Examine the existence and locations of chapters of the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) and the promotion of ACT activities on the various campuses. Look for any correlations between ACT membership and agricultural communication professional organization membership after college.
6. Examine employer support of agricultural communication professional organizations by examining the dues payments that are paid by employers for such organizations.

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**Illustrations by Eric McGaw**

Eric McGaw works as Public Awareness Officer for the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT). The photos presented within this issue demonstrate farmers throughout the semi-arid tropics (the eco-regional mandate for ICRISAT) (see page 24).