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Abstract

Our recent national survey of agricultural communicators was designed to reveal more about these professionals and obtain their academic course recommendations and other suggestions for college students preparing for similar careers.

water, and energy; constraints being imposed upon food producing and preservation systems by regulatory agencies and society in general; adversities of weather on a global scale; demands of hungry nations with money for the food that we have as the major world source of food and feed grains; an unprecedented current record in food exports to nations abroad, related not only to need but a newly found affluency and income and desire to build up reserves—all this coupled with the most efficient food producing and handling systems ever devised by man and the envy of all the world, and all renewable resources at that—is a story that we must tell. We all share in that responsibility.

Characteristics and Course Recommendations of Agricultural Communicators: An Update

Eugene Kroupa and James Evans

Our recent national survey of agricultural communicators was designed to reveal more about these professionals and obtain their academic course recommendations and other suggestions for college students preparing for similar careers.¹ Our preliminary report, prepared for an AAACE convention before all responses had been returned, was necessarily incomplete. Therefore, the intent here, is twofold: (1) to report the impact of additional returns on preliminary findings about course recommendations and (2) to summarize selected characteristics of the Extension and agricultural college communicators who took part in this study.

¹Eugene A. Kroupa and James Evans, "New Directions in Agricultural Communications Curricula," *ACE Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 3, July/September 1973, pp. 28-38.

Method

Results are based on 1,105 usable questionnaires returned from a May 1973 mailing to 2,750 members of the American Association of Agricultural College Editors, Agricultural Relations Council, American Agricultural Editors Association, Communications Officers of State Departments of Agriculture, Cooperative Editorial Association, Newspaper Farm Editors of America, National Association of Farm Broadcasters and the National Agri-Marketing Association. Responses provided a 40 percent return rate for the one-time mailing. Our preliminary report had been based on the first 900 questionnaires returned.

Details of methods used in the study appear in the preliminary report. However, it might be helpful to outline our approach briefly. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 68 academic courses in three broad categories—communication courses, supporting course areas in agriculture and supporting course areas outside of agriculture. Being very precise with the communication course titles, we listed 31 separate courses. The supporting course areas were more broadly titled, such as agronomy or sociology.

Respondents also rated the importance of four general areas of communication education to help guide broad approaches to curriculum planning in our discipline. The four areas were labeled human relations, communication systems, subject matter area and communication skills. **Human relations** education deals with one's ability to understand, manage and get along with people. **Communication systems** education related to understanding the formation and movement of knowledge and ideas within agriculture. Education in **subject matter** area deals with the understanding of one's agricultural field. **Communication skills training** involves the ability to get, organize and present information.

To relate the kind of agricultural communicator job with course ratings, we asked respondents to identify themselves by their job titles. Fifteen different communicator categories were used to classify the various kinds of jobs listed. By combining the course ratings of people doing similar jobs, we were able to determine the importance of particular courses for particular jobs.

The statistical analysis consisted of using an analysis of variance program to get the variance within groups, then using this information to calculate Tukey's honestly significant difference. The Tukey test is rigorous, but allowed us to identify only those courses which respondents considered critically important.

Findings

Course recommendations

Table 1 shows the journalism/communication courses considered critically important to prepare students for the different agricultural communications jobs. You will note three major changes in this table, compared with the one published with the preliminary report.

1. We added a "publication editor" job category by separating the original "Extension/ag college writers/publication editors" category into two parts. Respondents in the "publications editor" category included editors of Extension and other agricultural college publications, plus a few editors of corporate publications.

Our intent was to identify possible differences in reactions of the two groups. Some did appear. The ag college writers placed greater emphasis on newswriting and feature writing courses than did publication editors. The latter considered scientific and technical writing courses necessary, along with coursework in editorial practice. Responses of the two groups were quite similar in other respects.

2. Table 1 reveals universal endorsement of coursework in public relations. Actually, the pattern of response was apparent in the preliminary analysis of data and should have appeared in the earlier table. Later returns strengthened the response and reinforced the importance that all types of agricultural communicators attributed to an understanding of public relations methods.

3. Several additional journalism/communication courses emerged as critically important in the analysis of data from all 1,105 respondents. Editors and publishers of farm magazines added two courses: publications editing and editorial practice. Extension/ag college radio-television specialists added feature writing and campaign planning courses as "musts." Commercial farm radio-television broadcasters added to the preliminary list courses in newswriting and advertising principles.

Public relations directors added courses in photography and publication layout-illustration-design, reflecting duties often associated with their position. Advertising agency executives added courses in economics of the mass media and audio-visual techniques, while company advertising people added coursework in advertising copywriting. Feature writing and advertising principles were added respectively by department chairmen, professors and USDA branch chiefs; and presidents, vp's and owners.

Courses in psychology, economics and marketing were deemed critical by several groups not apparent in the preliminary analysis. Those groups included public relations directors, company advertising and sales managers, advertising agency executives and research directors.

Among the agricultural courses, farm magazine editors/publishers and the field-and-subject editors added two courses—agronomy and veterinary science—to their earlier choices of animal science and agricultural economics. Other categories of agricultural communicators added no agricultural courses as critically important.

Although only a few communicator groups rated specific supporting agricultural courses as critically important, 11 of the 15 groups rated the *subject matter* education area significantly important. The only groups not considering subject matter education important were Extension/ag college writers; Extension/ag college radio/TV Specialists; department chairmen, professors and branch chiefs; and publications editors.

This overwhelming general support for knowledge of agricultural subject matter is tempered by the fact that individual communicator groups have varying needs for specific kinds of agricultural information. As a result, many of the specific supporting agricultural course areas may not have received strong ratings from any group, because individual members, of that group may have had varying degrees of need for that specific kind of information.

As in the preliminary analysis, all groups have practically unanimous support for education in communication skills, human relations and communication systems.

We suspected that ratings of courses would vary significantly with the undergraduate degree of respondents. For example, we thought that the holder of an agricultural degree might rate agricultural courses as more important than would a nonagricultural graduate, and vice versa. But the research did not support this view. Of all respondents in this study, 91% indicated that they had graduated from college. We classified them as majoring in agriculture, agricultural journalism, journalism, business or other fields. A separate analysis of the ratings of individual courses, cross-tabulated by major showed no significant variation in the ratings of individual courses attributable to college major. Apparently the professional requirements of a particular communication job are more important than the major area of study in college in determining what skills and knowledge are needed.

Characteristics of communicators

Table 2 shows four characteristics of the Extension/agricultural college communicators who took part in this study: education, college major, years in communications work and years in current position. As a basis for comparison, it also offers a summary of characteristics of respondents in all 15 communicator groups. Bear in mind that while the press, visuals and

radio-television groups consist totally of Extension/agricultural college personnel, the publications editor group includes a small number of corporate employees.

TABLE 2

Characteristics of Extension/Agricultural College Communicators Compared With All Communicator Groups¹

	Press	Visuals	Radio/TV	Publ. Ed.	All Groups
Education	(4=104)	(N=16)	(N=21)	(N=40)	(N=1070)
High School	0.0%	12.6%	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%
2 Yr. College	0.0	6.2	0.0	0.0	0.6
Some College	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.8
B.S. Degree	40.4	37.5	33.3	42.5	64.2
M.S. Degree	53.8	37.5	61.9	57.5	25.0
Ph.D. etc.	5.8	6.2	4.8	0.0	2.8
College Major	(N=101)	(N=16)	(N=21)	(N=40)	(N=1012)
Agriculture	9.9%	25.0%	23.8%	15.0%	23.4%
Journalism	48.5	31.3	47.6	55.0	34.7
Ag. Journalism	25.8	0.0	14.3	20.0	21.6
Business	0.0	12.4	4.8	0.0	7.6
Other	15.8	31.3	9.5	10.0	12.7
Years in Communications Work	(N=104)	(N=17)	(N=21)	(N=41)	(N=1105)
0-5 years	10.6%	5.9%	9.5%	4.9%	11.2%
6-10	16.4	17.6	33.3	14.6	17.1
11-15	13.4	5.9	23.8	17.1	17.9
16-20	16.4	41.2	19.1	21.9	15.7
21 or more	43.2	29.4	14.3	41.5	38.1
Years in Current Position	(N=104)	(N=17)	(N=21)	(N=41)	(N=1105)
0-5 years	48.1%	41.1%	47.6%	34.1%	55.1%
6-10	24.0	23.5	28.6	22.0	22.2
11-15	10.6	11.8	14.3	19.5	10.9
16-20	11.5	11.8	9.5	14.6	5.9
21 or more	5.8	11.8	0.0	9.8	5.9

¹ N's for individual communicator groups and the all groups column differ for characteristics due to no responses and persons not being college graduates. Columns total 100 percent for each characteristic.

Generally, Extension/agricultural college respondents were college educated. A large proportion held graduate degrees, while only about 28% of all respondents completed graduate programs.

More than 80 percent of the press, radio-television, and publications people majored in agriculture, journalism, or a combination of the two fields. Agricultural college communicators differed little from other agricultural communicators in that respect.

Most of the communicators said they have been in communication work for more than 10 years. Agricultural college radio-television specialists appear to have had somewhat less experience than persons in other groups. The press and publications groups had a relatively large share of persons with more than 20 years of experience.

Table 2 shows not only extensive communication experience, but also considerable mobility among agricultural communicators. About one-half of the respondents said they have been in their current positions five years or less. Agricultural college communicators may be a little less mobile than other types of agricultural communicators, according to the table. Among the four kinds of agricultural college communicators, publication editors showed the most stability of position. Our study did not indicate whether these changes in position have been due to upward position mobility in the same office or changes in place of work.

What they do

Respondents gave some idea of what they do by ranking nine functions according to the amount of time they devote to each. Table 3 summarizes the results from all four groups of Extension/agricultural college communicators.

As expected, press and publications specialists tended to assign top priority to writing and editing, visuals specialists to working with visuals and radio-television specialists to broadcasting. Perhaps more surprising is the high rank assigned by all four groups to administration of operations, a function on which they reported spending more time than on communication activities such as planning. Education and training stood slightly below average in the four scales. Bottom priority tended to go to sales, personal contact other than selling and research.

Discussion

The added data helped identify some journalism/communication courses considered critically important by professionals, which were not apparent as such in the preliminary analysis. In so doing, the data strengthened our earlier observations about the diversity of journalism/communication coursework appropriate for various kinds of work in our discipline. Of 31 courses listed, only two were identified as critically important in more than

TABLE 3

How Extension/Agricultural College Communicators Spend Their Time:
A Ranking of Amount of Time Devoted to Various Functions

FUNCTION	RANK, BY TYPE OF POSITION			
	Press (N=104)	Visuals (N=17)	Radio/TV (N=21)	Publ. Ed. (N=41)
Administration of operations	2	2	3	2
Planning campaign and communication strategies	2	4	4	3
Education and training	5	5	5	5
Writing and editing for print media and publications	1	7	6	1
Broadcasting and writing for broadcast media	7	9	1	8
Working with visuals, e.g. photography, graphics, film	4	1	2	4
Research	8	3	8	7
Sales	9	6	9	9
Personal contact other than selling, e.g. lobbying and meetings	6	7	7	6

10 of the 15 job categories. Such findings endorse the need for carefully-tailored programs of advising students and planning curricula. Moreover, the findings offer useful direction for those efforts.

Our study provides less specific help in terms of agricultural coursework. Most respondents felt that a grasp of agricultural subject matter is significantly important, but only those who worked on farm publications seemed able to pinpoint specific agricultural courses of critical importance. Such a pattern suggests that the most appropriate curriculum today may be one that requires a substantial level of agricultural coursework, but few specifically-required courses. The student, then, can pursue personal subject matter interests in agriculture—a policy which may come as close as

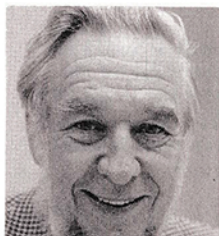
any to anticipating future agricultural activities of the graduate.

Even so, these recommendations differ from those of the 1950's. In a 1957 national study, Clyde Duncan solicited course recommendations from 200 professional agricultural communicators. More than 50 percent recommended that an aspiring agricultural journalist should take these nine agriculture courses: general agricultural marketing, field crops, rural sociology, introduction to agriculture, animal nutrition, general agricultural chemistry, forage crop production, marketing of grain and livestock products and soils.²

The composite picture of 183 agricultural college communicators who took part in this study reinforces some common assumptions: college-related communicators have more education than most agricultural communicators and often come from journalism-related degree programs. We find mixed evidence about levels of experience and mobility of agricultural college communicators compared with their colleagues in industry. Considerable variation appeared, even among agricultural college communicators.

²Clyde H. Duncan, "An Evaluation of the Agricultural Journalism Curriculum in Land Grant Colleges." Master's thesis, University of Missouri, 1957, pp. 47-49.

Meet ACE Authors



Again, HAROLD B. SWANSON is our leadoff man with the second article he promised us on improving our communications. This time he collaborated with Warren Gore. Their thoughts on creativity can help all of us. Since we started this series, Harold has reached another plateau. He has retired, and the University of Minnesota has gone through the search for a successor to the position of department head and program director, extension communications. Knowing Harold, we suspect this will simply be one more occasion for a change of hats. What is retirement, anyway?

WARREN GORE, co-author with Harold B. Swanson of the lead article **Creative Communication is for You**, is assistant professor, Rhetoric, and extension communications specialist at the University of Minnesota. He has been active in extension speech training for several years. He received his B.A. in journalism from the University of Missouri and his M.A. in English from the University of Iowa. He has taught at the University of Cincinnati, University of Omaha, Illinois Institute of Technology, and Iowa State.

