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Keywords

Curriculum, focus group, undergraduate, alumni

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Introduction

Agricultural communication course work in higher education took root more than 100 years ago, and since that time it has expanded well beyond basic print media (Doerfert & Miller, 2006). Today, graduates can pursue career options ranging from advertising to advocacy and public relations to photography, which equips agricultural communication graduates with skills valued by many sectors of agriculture (University of Georgia, 2007). The inherent value of this degree may be due to the nexus of disciplines found in this academic major, as students garner a foundation of knowledge and skills in courses such as basic science, agricultural science, and communications (Mencher, 2002; Tucker, Whaley, & Cano, 2003).

This research was presented at the Agricultural Communication section of the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists (SAAS) meeting in February 2010.

Over time, enrollment in agricultural communication programs has grown and the discipline has gained in popularity (Weckman, Witham, & Telg, 2000), while during the same period the communication needs and preferences of agricultural industry professionals and agricultural communication stakeholders have changed at a rapid pace (DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009; Doerfert & Miller, 2006). During the past three decades, several studies have reviewed agricultural communication curriculum by inquiring of industry, faculty, graduates, and students to help determine the coursework, competencies, and objectives to be included in an undergraduate program (Bailey-Evans, 1994; Irlbeck & Akers, 2009; Kroupa & Evans, 1973; Morgan, 2009; Sitton, Cartmell, & Sargent, 2005; Sprecker & Rudd, 1997; Terry, Lockaby, & Bailey-Evans, 1995; Terry et al., 1994). These studies are valuable to the discipline, but the dynamic nature of the agricultural communication profession and the technologies that continue to emerge in this field necessitate the frequent evaluation of curriculum (O'Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008; Pavlik, 2001). Indeed, agricultural communication programs should strive to provide students with curriculum that equips them for the work-place. To achieve this, curriculum must be examined periodically by seeking input from students, instructors, graduates, and professionals to determine the current needs of the profession (Doerfert & Miller, 2006).

Similarly, industry suggests the profession should review curriculum every 2 to 5 years to “reassess and readdress the agricultural communications curriculum” (Terry et al., 1994, p. 24). To accomplish this, a model was sought for curriculum revision. Finch and Crunkilton (1999) developed a systems program model which encourages feedback from graduates to improve the academic program (see Figure 1).

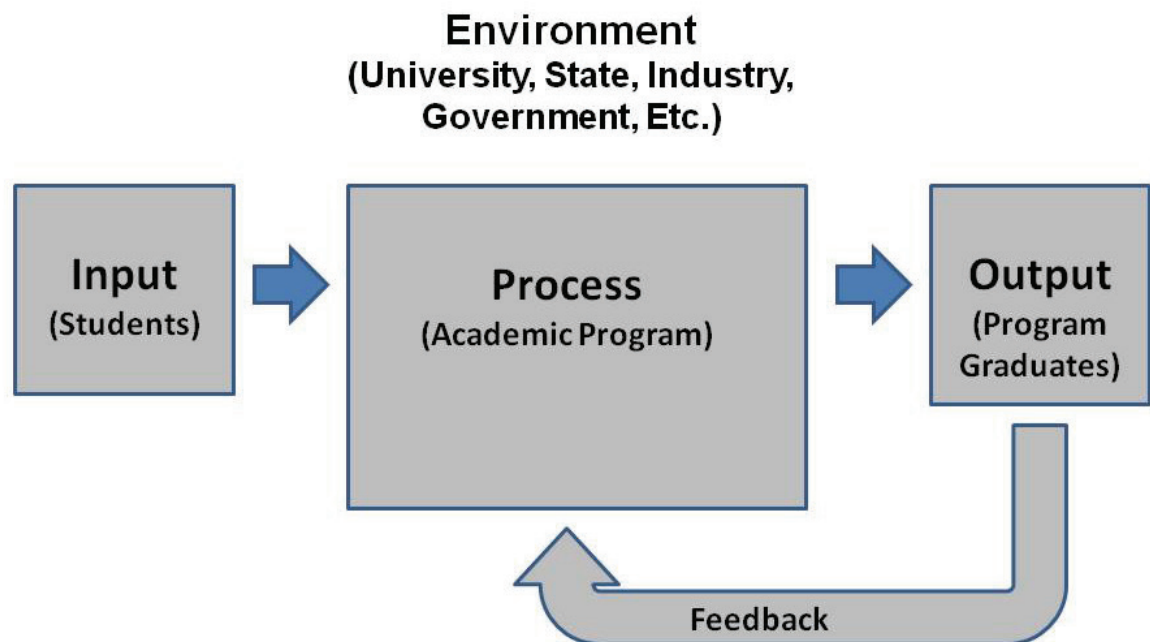


Figure 1. Program System Model. From Finch and Crunkilton, 1999, Curriculum development in vocational education and technical education: Planning, content, and implementation (p. 27), Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

The *National Research Agenda for Agricultural Education and Communication: 2007–2010* (Osborne, 2007) also encourages evaluating curriculum. Agricultural Communications Research Priority Area 4 provides the charge to determine “What are the skills, competencies, and resources

necessary to prepare professional agricultural communicators for success in various aspects of agricultural knowledge management” (Osborne, p. 11).

Earlier studies have evaluated curriculum from many perspectives. A panel of leaders from seven agricultural communication professional organizations who gathered in a 1994 study by Terry et al. determined agricultural communication coursework should consist of courses from 28 disciplines consisting of 89 specific concepts. The concepts receiving 100% agreement were grammar, government policies, history of American agriculture, communicating agriculture to the public-domestic, communicating agriculture to the public-international, agricultural policy, geography, word processing, creative strategies, campaign planning, graphic design, news writing, reporting, editing, ethics, design and layout, problem solving, speech writing, oral communication, scripting writing, and an internship that allows the student to apply learned concepts.

In 1997, Sprecker and Rudd surveyed faculty, practitioners, and alumni of agricultural communication and found these three groups felt the most valuable skill for graduates was writing. Their study revealed four key competencies needed by graduates: agricultural knowledge, communication skills, application of these skills, and networking. Participants felt a broad overview of agriculture, especially as it applies to their respective states, including policy, law, economics, and trade was important. Second, communication skills were more important than possessing agricultural knowledge, which was emphasized by statements such as “first and foremost” agricultural communication students are communicators, rather than agriculturalists (p. 9) and graduates’ communication skills will allow them to land a job, not their agricultural knowledge. Next, graduates need to be able to apply a wide variety of communication skills proficiently. Finally, participants indicated the ability to network is a key ingredient in agricultural communication.

When Sprecker and Rudd (1997) analyzed statements among the groups studied, instructors and practitioners viewed internships favorably, yet many internship cooperators found students lacked appropriate writing skills. Similarly, alumni felt coursework that required students to take on a project “from inception to completion” (p. 9) was valuable and offered students the environment in which they could apply learned communication skills. Other courses recommended for inclusion were government policy, agricultural issues, economics, politics, and international trade. Supporting this theme of coursework beyond communication-focused classes, current journalism educators have proclaimed the need for journalism curriculum to be interdisciplinary and that students should develop a critical depth of knowledge in a single discipline beyond necessary journalism courses (Commission on Public Relations Education, 1999; Dates, Glasser, Stephens, & Adam, 2006; Mencher, 2002).

Sitton, Cartmell, and Sargent (2005) investigated curriculum requirements for public relations and found practitioners placed more importance on communication and public relations skills than on agricultural proficiencies. Skills most frequently used by public relations professionals were computer applications, human relationship, time management, writing, and editing. When asked about agricultural proficiencies, understanding of government and legislative policy was most valued, followed by interpreting data to make good business decisions, defining conservation, and identifying government regulatory agencies. The most valued general communication proficiencies were using appropriate style, describing the principles of journalism, apply writing and reporting skills, interviewing, and editing. Within public relations, the popular proficiencies were effective writing, identifying problems and solutions, business knowledge, designing a marketing plan, and publicizing events.

A synthesis of research (Ettredge & Bellah, 2008) illustrated the importance of a strong foundation in journalism and public relations skills, which were deemed more important than agricultural skills. Having a way to apply learned skills, either through capstone courses, extra-curricular activities, or internships, was also a theme among these studies. However, no specific competencies were presented.

Carpenter (2009) evaluated journalism position advertisements ($n = 664$) and discovered that new media and skills focused on developing web content were frequently listed. Specifically, employers desired applicants to possess the ability to write code (HTML/CSS), post content to Web, and edit images. General communication skills listed in these advertisements were writing and editing, and the ability to work under a deadline.

A 2009 study by Morgan surveyed 37 practitioners to determine the skills needed by new agricultural communication graduates. The skills most frequently desired of graduates were meeting deadlines, possessing high journalistic ethics, dependability, work ethic, oral communication skills, enthusiasm about agriculture, reliable, ability to multi-task, proper use of grammar, and business etiquette, of which most would be expected of any graduate from a college of agriculture. The communication skills most desired were verbal communications, understanding the “media mix,” identifying barriers to communication, editing, and effective interviewing and reporting skills. In addition, grammar usage, writing, spelling, networking, and punctuation were also highly valued.

Although various researchers have conducted studies to analyze agricultural education curriculum from a variety different perspectives, many of the studies were conducted prior to the widespread use of the Internet and none were found that utilized a focus group to determine curriculum needs. This study sought to determine the competencies needed for graduates as perceived by a focus group of alumni.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the competencies needed by agricultural communication graduates as perceived by agricultural communication program alumni at the University of Georgia. The specific objectives were to determine the following:

- The competencies needed by agricultural communication program graduates.
- Suggestions for improvements of the current agricultural communication program.
- If an internship should be a required part of the curriculum.
- What experiences should be included in an internship.

This information would allow for the evaluation of existing curriculum or the development of new curriculum to meet the needs of current industry trends. Although regional in nature, this study provides a framework for determining knowledge and skills needed by current graduates which may be valuable to other institutions seeking to evaluate current curriculum.

Methods

The focus group method was used to collect this qualitative data. A focus group is a “carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment” (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 2), usually consisting of 5 to 10 participants, but “can range from as few as four to as many as twelve” (p. 8). Focus groups and interviews

have been used successfully to gather curriculum information in previous studies (Frasier, Slatt, Kowlowitz, Kollisch, & Mintzer, 1997; Scanlon, Bruening, & Cordero, 1996; Sprecker & Rudd, 1997).

Because responses from agricultural communication program alumni were desired, purposive sampling was used (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1996). A list of 136 program graduates from 1982-2007 was obtained and these graduates were contacted using telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. Of the 136, 47 responded to the inquiry, and 12 were actively involved in the communication field and subsequently invited to participate in the study. Due to schedule conflicts, only six graduates agreed to participate. This was beneficial because Krueger and Casey (2009) suggest when a researcher is investigating a complex topic, that recruiting fewer people with a deep experience base or recruiting people who have a high level of passion for the topic being discussed, is more beneficial than having more participants. On the scheduled day of the study four alumni were available to contribute. Because of the small number of participants, the application of the results of this study are limited in nature and should not be generalized to a larger population; nonetheless, these findings are valuable and may provide a benchmark from which to begin discussions regarding curriculum, especially as it pertains to the university from which these alumni were graduated.

Participants were located in three states, up to 1,200 miles away from the researcher. Due to this distance, the cost of bringing all the participants to one location, and the participants' busy schedules, the researcher chose to conduct the focus group using a conference call. Conducting a focus group using the telephone is recommended when participants are geographically dispersed, do not have the time to travel to a central meeting location, or when logistical costs to do so are prohibitive (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Limitations of conducting a focus group this way include the inability to observe body language and other forms of non-verbal communication, which may decrease the richness of the data (Krueger, n.d.).

Using telephone focus group guidelines provided by Krueger (n.d.), participants were notified via e-mail of the date, time, and procedures for the conference call. In addition, participants were provided with a list of questions which they were asked to consider in advance so they might be fully prepared to engage in discussion (Edwards & Briers, 2001). The questions asked were the following:

- What competencies do you think an agricultural communication graduate should have?
- Is there additional information that you think would be beneficial as we begin to design courses for the agricultural communication program?
- Should an internship be part of the agricultural communication program and, if so, what experiences should it include?

The focus group discussion was audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy of the data. The transcript was analyzed by using inductive data analysis, which allows ideas and themes to emerge from the data. Participant statements were coded and categorized based on emergent themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability of the analysis was established by having two researchers analyze the transcript. Themes identified by each researcher were compared and consistencies between the two researchers were presented in this report (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). To maintain confidentiality, quotes from the transcripts were coded and attributed to the participants by their focus group participant number (e.g., "FGP1").

Results

Participants represented a broad range of ages and experiences. Consisting of three females and one male from 23 to 47 years of age, these graduates held the following positions: vice president of a global public relations agency with offices in 76 countries; news editor for the regional office of a national agricultural organization; vice president and creative director for a “Top 100” national advertising agency; and congressional legislative assistant for agricultural, natural resource, energy, nutrition, and trade policy.

The conference call was approximately one hour in length and, due to the discussion, only one question was formally asked during the interview. However, because the participants were presented all of the questions in advance, most of the question topics were addressed.

In response to the first question, “What competencies do you think an agricultural communication graduate should have?” the consensus of the participants was writing. The participants were emphatic that the ability to write well was the foundation of a communication graduate, regardless of the specialized area of communication a graduate pursues. One participant stated, “These students need to be able to write regardless of whether they’re going to be writing for a magazine or whether they’re going to do PR or, you know, whatever they do, they need to be able to write” (FGP4). Another participant emphasized the point that the technological medium does not compensate for good writing skills:

... [program graduates] need to know, regardless and you have all testified to the fact from FGP1, and probably in both marketing and advertising, how crucial it is that you be able to write. And FGP4, you said that too, in your job, and you know these kids though, it needs to be drilled into them that even though they’re using the latest, cutting edge technology, they have to know how to write. (FGP2)

When looking at the styles of writing for which graduates should be prepared, participants felt newspaper writing was declining, and stated that magazine and public relations style writing are more important skills:

...if you look at what’s happening in the publishing industry, the communications industry, you know, newspapers are dying and their writers are all looking for jobs and they’ve got a bunch of inverted pyramid stuff to show and not a lot of more magazine-style, narrative types of training. (FGP1)

FGP2 further explained this need for magazine style writing:

...I think the value of the magazine writing goes back to the piece, as I mentioned earlier, about being able to tell a story. I mean newspaper writing essentials are necessary to what we’re doing...But the magazine-type writing, the feature-style writing is more about looking at the world around you and finding a story and then asking the right questions ...Finding the right questions to find the story angle. That ability applies no matter what you’re doing. If you’re putting together a website for a client and you wanna (sic) look at all the different ways you can tell that client’s story on a website, you need that skill. (FGP2)

Another perspective was revealed as well that reinforced the need for strong communication skills. The statement was made that “everyone is a consumer” (FGP1) meaning that not only are people consumers of goods, but of information too. Beyond reporting or magazine style writing, the ability to deliver business writing is important as well. “Whether it’s letters, memos, [etc.] ...I have to utilize a lot of my writing skills” (FGP4).

The second skill that participants thought was most important was what they termed basic communication skills. This includes understanding one’s audience, identifying the desired outcome from communication, developing a plan to achieve that desired outcome, editing, broad skill base, getting words down on paper, ability to organize thoughts, proper grammar, using proper style, and strategic writing. One participant stated this is the “price of entering” (FGP1) the communication industry. This statement led FGP1 to emphasize that, although agricultural communication is an agriculture degree, it is the communication part of the degree that is most important, and will enable the graduate to land the job: “by having these competencies in communications, they can parlay that. If they leave a job working on an ag account, they can go work on something else,” “her communications skill is what’s gonna (sic) get her that next job,” and “I think the crux of it is that it’s as much a communications degree as it is an ag degree.” (FGP1).

This base set of skills was defined by one participant as “getting words down on paper, being able to organize your thoughts, knowing what grammar and style are, and how to execute those” (FGP2). Regarding the term “strategic writing,” one participant defined it this way:

... [the graduate] can look at what the desired outcome is for an audience and really put together a plan for achieving that outcome, and I think that kind of skill set is not just useful in PR and advertising, I think it’s true on the editorial side as well; you need to know who your audience is and figure out the best editorial mix and plan for reaching them... (FGP2)

As stated earlier, agricultural knowledge is an important part of the degree, providing contextual knowledge for the students, and allowing them to differentiate themselves from other applicants. Indeed, the agriculture component of the degree has tremendous value, as emphasized by the following participant:

What the ag side of the degree brings is serious icing on the cake, I don’t want to diminish it, but it is icing on the cake. For instance, it brings a competency in the field of agriculture and acknowledges the field of agriculture, especially for an advertising or a PR firm, [which] is a major bonus for a [new] hire. When I’m pitching an ag account, somebody with an ag knowledge – I don’t have to teach a city boy from New York how to write to a farmer about tractors (laughter). But, I mean, a lot of agencies attempt that and it’s difficult and quite honestly, the agency that I work for right now has got a bunch of city boys from Pittsburgh writing to farmers about tractors. They miss the mark sometimes. So, I think that the degree is icing on the cake, but you don’t get the job unless you’ve got those communication skills in that specialty. (FGP1)

Similarly, another participant supported this proposition by saying “I’m looking to hire [some interns who have] that ag background and who can come in and start applying that immediately in the program ... [The agriculture knowledge is] an advantage...” (FGP2). These comments illus-

trated the importance and value of having an agricultural context in which students can apply their communication skills to their careers.

FGP3 related an experience in which the agriculture dimension influenced a hiring decision. An applicant was hired specifically because she had an agriculture background, alluding to how her agricultural background set her apart from other candidates. Similarly, FGP4 shared how her agricultural knowledge provided her with a foundation to effectively assist with agricultural legislation being crafted by a congressional representative.

Another theme which emerged was finding the story. Participants stated it was important for graduates to be able to recognize, pursue, and hone in on a story. They should have excellent listening skills, ask the right questions, and then tell the story, as was stated by one participant, "...I want people to recognize a story and tell it well" (FGP3). Another participant stated the lack of this skill seemed to be rather prevalent among graduates, "...but the piece that I see missing the most often is that ability to hone in on a story..." (FGP2)

Public speaking surfaced as a theme too. FGP3 stated that public speaking was second only to writing, referring to the communication skills they used. Another emphasized the importance of this skill, stating "I have to be able to perform under pressure and speak about [agriculture] in front of lots of people, and I think that public speaking is another definite tool that I've had to use as an ag comm grad" (FGP4).

General employment skills were mentioned by most of the participants as important qualities, specifically a strong work ethic and understanding that many routine tasks are associated with entry-level positions. One participant declared:

...what I always hope to have in our [new hired employees] is a willingness to engage in everything, from the most mundane task to higher level assignments, and I [want to] see them do all that with, you know, the same amount of enthusiasm and skill... oddly enough, what I find a lot when people come to us, [is that many new] folks start out kind of expecting the world when they walk in the door. (FGP2)

Having a strong familiarity with "new media," such as Web 2.0 and social media, is expected of graduates too. This familiarity goes beyond knowing how to post text and photos on Facebook and blogs, but extends to having a strong understanding of how these tools are used for marketing, public relations, and information gathering. Also stated was the phenomenon that the industry is making a "huge transition" (FGP1) from traditional media to new media. However, one participant was less concerned about graduates' ability to use new media, and more concerned that they understand how media is changing:

I don't see a problem with [graduates] understanding Web 2.0; I think what they need to understand and keep an eye on is how the role of traditional media will evolve or how it will change in response to that. (FGP2)

In addition to competencies, participants added that internships were a critical component of an undergraduate program. They felt that an internship experience was where students would hone the skills that have been developed in their coursework, as one participant related, "you can get the job skills through an ag communication internship...and to this day I still have things that I learned

on that internship that I apply in the work that I do” (FGP3). Overall, they indicated these types of hands-on writing experiences were a valuable asset for the graduate. In lieu of an internship, a suggestion made was to find industry mentors for students, people who would be willing to coach students as they moved through the university. One participant stated:

...if you paired students with people who are out there working in the field so they would touch base with their coach, maybe once a quarter, to see if [they had] any questions, or to talk about things they're working on...(FGP3)

Discussion

The Program System Model (Finch and Crunkilton, 1999) encourages the use of feedback from program graduates to inform the current program so improvements can be made. This study sought to capture alumni feedback necessary for an evaluation of the current program curriculum.

Participants thought the ability to write well was the most important competency for graduates to possess, whether it is journalistic writing or business writing. This opinion aligns with previous studies that found writing and editing to be the most important courses (Irlbeck & Akers, 2009; Morgan, 2009; Sprecker & Rudd, 1997; Terry et al., 1994). Moreover, Dates et al. (2006) stated that the “spine” of a journalism program should consist of “writing courses.” However, the style of writing was not defined in earlier studies, whereas in the current study magazine or feature style writing was thought to be most important, along with strategic writing. Based on these findings it appears that University of Georgia students should focus more on these styles of writing, and less on traditional news writing.

Basic communication skills were stressed by participants, as they were in previous studies as well (Irlbeck & Akers, 2009; Morgan, 2009; Sprecker & Rudd, 1997; Terry et al., 1994), yet this study added additional definition to these skills: understanding one's audience, identifying the desired outcome from communication, developing a plan to achieve that desired outcome, editing, getting words down on paper, ability to organize thoughts, proper grammar, using proper writing style, and strategic writing. This proposal of strategic writing was underscored by the idea that people are consumers of information and, therefore, the presentation of information (i.e., writing) should be appealing to consumers. Specifically, in regard to strategic writing, the competencies needed in University of Georgia graduates are audience analysis, determining the desired outcome for the audience, developing a plan to achieve that outcome, and using the best rhetorical mix to meet the desired goals. In addition, as writers and communicators, graduates must know how to communicate with people outside the field of agriculture. This ability is especially important as we find ourselves in an increasingly agriculturally illiterate society within which graduates must present information (Fritz, Birkenholz, Gardner, & Machtmes, 1995).

Sprecker and Rudd (1997) stated that being a communicator was the priority of an agricultural communication degree, rather than being an agriculturalist. This sentiment was reinforced by the current study that emphatically found agricultural knowledge is a valuable part of the degree, but seen more as “icing on the cake” (FGP1) rather than a foundational skill needed for this career. However, recent authors have stressed the importance of students developing an area of knowledge so that upon being graduated they can write knowledgeably about a subject and provide critical analysis (Carpenter, 2009; Dates et al., 2006).

Finding the story was a theme that emerged which has not been mentioned in previous studies; however, Terry et al. (1994) did identify the skill of “reporting,” furthermore Morgan (2009) found

many reporting skills that seem closely aligned to finding the story, such as “Communication skills beyond ‘listening’ - being able to understand what the person is saying. Repeat back what you understand to make sure you are hearing what truly has been (at least attempted to be) communicated” (p. 8). Perhaps reporting was the skill described by participants in the current study, but the semantics used by participants made the researcher look beyond graduates possessing the skill of cursory reporting. Terms and phrases used included “recognize,” “pursue,” “hone in on,” and “tell it well,” (FGP2), with which the other participants showed agreement, and leads this researcher to believe the competency being described may be similar to that found in a seasoned reporter who has a passion to pursue a story and to tell it with such vibrancy that readers will be engaged. Developing such skills in students could be a haughty challenge for any university to attain.

Similarly, public speaking was a theme found in earlier research (Morgan, 2009; Terry et al., 1994) as it was in the current study. Indeed, Morgan’s 2009 study ranked verbal communication highest among all communication skills identified by practitioners. Although the present University of Georgia degree program requires a public speaking course for students, it may be valuable to provide additional coursework in this area or perhaps additional opportunities for oral presentations in current agricultural communication courses.

General employment skills were desired by participants, a finding that was not revealed in early studies (Sprecker & Rudd, 1997; Terry et al., 1994), but is similar to findings of recent studies (Brooks et al., 2008; Irlbeck & Akers, 2009; Morgan, 2009). Notably, Morgan’s (2009) inquiries of practitioners indicated that employment skills were more important than many communication skills. Perhaps this generation of students has a work ethic that is interpreted to be less than what previous generations have exhibited? This finding may prompt the University of Georgia program to emphasize the necessity of a strong work ethic to students and encourage them to engage in experiences that will help develop this attribute. Indeed, courses that require application of communication knowledge and skills, such as capstone courses and internships, may help to instill some of these desired general employment traits.

A familiarity with new media was a fresh finding, primarily because these technologies are relatively new to the industry and did not exist when many of the previous studies were conducted. However, one recent study did find that familiarity with these technologies was valuable to current graduates and that they should have an “understanding [of] the media mix and how to use them effectively and efficiently” (Morgan, 2009, p. 8). Conversely, Irlbeck and Akers (2009) stated that “emerging technologies” were less important than “basic communication skills—writing, news editing, photography, and Web design...” (p. 70). The development of new media is a reminder that communication course work must continue to evolve as technology progresses, so that graduates will be properly equipped to perform effectively in the current marketplace. Other authors have referred to these multimedia and Web-based skills as *media convergence* (Geimann, 2001; Lawson-Borders, 2010).

Finally, internships were found to be important for applying and honing skills learned in the classroom. Similar findings were revealed by Sprecker and Rudd (1997), Terry et al. (1994), and Dates et al. (2006). Perhaps internships would be an appropriate environment for students to develop some of the competencies discussed earlier, such as work ethic and a thorough understanding of new media.

Although this study is regional in breadth, it may be a useful model for other agricultural communication programs desiring to evaluate their curriculum. Consequently, this report garnered per-

spectives from participants located in a variety of communication businesses from different areas of the country; therefore, additional research is needed to determine if these findings are applicable beyond the participants' alma mater.

One consistent thread among many studies, including this one, is that writing is critical to the success of graduates, yet many employers have been underwhelmed by the writing skills of program graduates. Investigating the best practices for teaching journalistic and public relations style writing would be beneficial to the discipline; still, this may be a skill that is most effectively learned in the workplace. Likewise, identifying the best practices for teaching students reporting, including "honing in on a story," may be advantageous to agricultural communication.

Additionally, studies have confirmed that a baseline of agricultural knowledge is important for graduates to possess; therefore, it would be beneficial to determine if there is a consensus among practitioners of the specific agricultural areas students should study. Regarding course development, research is needed to determine what specific "new media" or "emerging technology" competencies are necessary for graduates. Finally, a study should be conducted to determine what competencies that faculty believe graduates should attain and if faculty perspectives influence program curriculum.

About the Author

ACE member Chris Morgan is an assistant professor at the University of Georgia where he teaches courses in communication and leadership.

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