

## Student Publications' Place in the Agricultural Communication Curricula

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### Abstract

Many agricultural communication or journalism programs offer publication production opportunities as a way for students to use their writing, editing, design, and photography skills. This study evaluated the curriculum and make-up of student publications produced through these agricultural communication or journalism programs. The study also described the role advisers have in handling editorial, ethical, and legal issues. Data were collected through a questionnaire sent to members of the Academic Programs Special Interest Group in the Association for Communication Excellence. Fifteen programs identified offering a student-produced publication. The majority of these publications (n = 8) were offered as a course in an agricultural communication or journalism program, while five programs developed their publications as an extracurricular activity. Once the publication was produced, only three of the publications were reviewed and critiqued by industry professionals. While no advisers were concerned with obscenity issues, eight were concerned with a code of ethics, five were concerned with censorship, and four were concerned with libel issues. Recommendations are made for agricultural communication or journalism faculty.

### Keywords

Publications, student, Curricula, Communication, Agriculture, recommendations, journalism, faculty.

# Student Publications' Place in the Agricultural Communication Curricula

**Kelsey Hall, Emily Rhoades, and Robert Agunga**

## Abstract

*Many agricultural communication or journalism programs offer publication production opportunities as a way for students to use their writing, editing, design, and photography skills. This study evaluated the curriculum and make-up of student publications produced through these agricultural communication or journalism programs. The study also described the role advisers have in handling editorial, ethical, and legal issues. Data were collected through a questionnaire sent to members of the Academic Programs Special Interest Group in the Association for Communication Excellence. Fifteen programs identified offering a student-produced publication. The majority of these publications ( $n = 8$ ) were offered as a course in an agricultural communication or journalism program, while five programs developed their publications as an extracurricular activity. Once the publication was produced, only three of the publications were reviewed and critiqued by industry professionals. While no advisers were concerned with obscenity issues, eight were concerned with a code of ethics, five were concerned with censorship, and four were concerned with libel issues. Recommendations are made for agricultural communication or journalism faculty.*

## So What?

Student-produced publications in agricultural communication or journalism programs can pose various challenges to advisers when they handle production issues, help students build journalistic skills, and handle budget issues. New knowledge associated with the curriculum and make-up of student-produced publications within our discipline can help advisers evaluate their courses and their roles in producing the student publications.

## Introduction

Curriculum for agricultural communication programs has been explored since the 1980s (Evans & Bolick, 1982; Reisner, 1990a; Reisner, 1990b). In one such study, Reisner (1990b) conducted a mail survey of 30 universities to examine program structure and curriculum requirements. The findings revealed that each agricultural communication program determined the number and type of courses offered in skills such as writing, visual, audio, advertising, planning, internships, special problems, and information systems. Hence, administrators and agricultural communication faculty throughout the country have few guidelines for comparing programs with others (Reisner, 1990b).

Studies have focused on curriculum for agricultural communication or journalism programs; however, studies have not diversified to specific courses such as a student-produced publication experience. Publication production is one such course found in these programs that allows students to use all of the aforementioned skills such as writing, photography, design, and advertising, to create, design, publish, and distribute student-produced publications. However, publication courses pose various challenges to advisers when determining their role in producing publications, building stu-

dent journalistic skills, establishing work relationships with students, and handling budget issues (Button, 1982). Advisers hired to teach and run college publications might also handle challenging ethical and legal decisions (Lodge-Kopenhaver & Click, 1978).

No studies have investigated the specific student publications produced in agricultural communication or journalism programs or the problems advisers experience when students produce these publications. Not much research has even addressed the graphic design software used for publishing or the technologies used for placing student-produced publications online. Furthermore, limited research has been conducted on the ethics and responsibilities of advising any type of college publications (Bohman, 2005). The need for agricultural communication faculty to know the variety of publication types, curriculum covered, and how advisers of student-produced publications give student ownership and handle legal and ethical issues would help them in evaluating their own publication curriculum.

### **Literature Review**

While no other research studies have explored student-produced publications in agricultural communication or journalism programs, studies have explored the structure of college magazine curriculum, the role of faculty advisers, and ethical issues (Frangoulis, 1993; Wheeler, 1994). Frangoulis (1993) reported results from 180 schools in the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication magazine division and the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication. Of the 180 schools, 147 offered magazine journalism. Sixty-three journalism departments (43%) were responsible for publishing a student-produced magazine (Frangoulis). Another study identified 40 journalism schools out of 100 schools that published a magazine (Wheeler).

According to Wheeler (1994), the magazines in the study had a frequency of either one magazine per year or one per semester. In a similar study, Frangoulis (1993) found the frequency of publication per year was 1 time (27%), 2 times (24%), 3 times (21%), 12 times (10%), 4 times (8%), 52 times (6%), 6 times (2%), or 24 times (2%). Wheeler's study also explored the organization and compensation of the magazines. Although no statistics were provided, the magazines were produced through a course offered in the journalism school or as an extracurricular activity. Students producing the magazines were offered a variety of compensation methods such as course credit or salary.

Respondents described the graphic design software programs used more than 15 years ago to design student-produced magazines. The software program used by the majority of these journalism school publications was Aldus PageMaker (74%), followed by MacDraw/MacPrint (49%), Quark Xpress (44%), Adobe Illustrator (34%), and Ready-Set-Go (8%) (Frangoulis, 1993).

In Wheeler's study (1994), 40 advisers indicated advertising, subscription fees, student fees, and endowments as sources for funding. About half of those magazines were funded through a university subsidy, general college fund, or academic budget.

### **Adviser Roles**

Lodge-Kopenhaver and Click (1978) define adviser as someone primarily responsible for offering guidance and advice to students who operate college publications. Publication advisers also determine their role in helping to produce student publications and building students' journalistic ability when they establish a working relationship with student editorial staffs (Button, 1982). The working relationship also depends on the staff structure and positions. Although magazine staffs complete tasks such as planning, writing, and editing articles; designing and laying out spreads;

managing production of the entire magazine; selling advertisements; and making financial decisions, little consistency is common in the job titles and roles of magazine staff (Johnson & Prijatel, 1999).

Wheeler (1994) discovered a diverse editorial structure ranging from staff editors plus non-staff reporters to staff reporters who wrote and edited everything with few or no freelancers. Even though most publication staffs have a business department and advertising sales people making financial decisions, advisers are responsible for meeting the budget (Button, 1982). Advisers must also direct students in not only the writing of the publication but also in recognizing images, choosing typography, and designing (Johnson & Prijatel, 1999).

Many publication advisers play a role in not only establishing the curriculum in a course but also making ethical and legal decisions involving student-produced publications. Few journal articles have documented the role of advisers for journalism school publications, but many make suggestions for what should be done (Wheeler, 1994). However, books have suggested that advisers of student publications need a basic knowledge of ethics, libel, censorship, and obscenity (Johnson & Prijatel, 1999; Lodge-Kopenhaver & Click, 1978). In regards to ethics, it was recommended by Lodge-Kopenhaver and Click that advisers train student journalists in knowing how local and state laws affect how they report information. Advisers should explain how to handle comments on or off the record and when to use tape recorders legally and ethically.

Advisers may face the issue of censorship at a university. One responsibility of an adviser is to educate university personnel concerned with censorship (Lodge-Kopenhaver & Click, 1978). Knowledge about the First Amendment and constitutional rights of students to conduct investigations of matters that affect their communities would help in guiding editorial staffs in handling censorship questions from administrators concerned with printed material that negatively reflects on the university (Lodge-Kopenhaver & Click). Obscenities in student publications can also cause problems for advisers (Lodge-Kopenhaver & Click).

In a professional article published in the *Journal of Applied Communications*, Hays (1990) said ethical dilemmas challenge professional agricultural journalists; therefore, professors in agricultural communication need to interact more with students about the seriousness of the problem. Hays stated that “those of us who teach and advise these young men and women have an obligation to make them more conscious not only of the severity of ethics challenges they can expect to face, but also the types of challenges” (p. 10).

Advisers of student publications can guide students in writing policies that follow the standards of the professional press. Lodge-Kopenhaver and Click (1978) encouraged student publications to establish their own strong, clear editorial policy or to adopt the existing codes of ethics or editorial policies followed by the Society of Professional Journalists, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, or the Associated Press Managing Editors.

### **Experiential Learning**

Undergraduates may enhance their learning opportunities through agricultural publication curriculum. Studies have shown that one important key to agricultural communication curriculum is giving students the chance to practice their communication skills (Cooper & Bowen, 1989; Reisner, 1990b; Sitton, Cartmell, & Sargent, 2005). Internship and publication production courses are examples of how students get these experiences through agricultural communication curriculum. Several theorists have explained this educational practice of providing real world experiences in the classroom.

Experiential learning is one research theory applied to study agricultural education and agricultural communication or journalism programs (Roberts, 2006). Dewey (1938) and Joplin (1981) focus on learners gaining understanding through experience. Dewey proposed that learning from education occurs after observation of an experience, reflection of the experience from information or advice from more experienced individuals, and the development of concepts. Experiential learning places students in realistic situations where they can more easily comprehend and apply their coursework by imitating behavior, following procedures, and then receiving feedback (Cheek, Arrington, Carter, & Randell, 1994). Brandon (2002) found that students in experiential learning environments determine how to accomplish objectives, to refer to errors for learning opportunities, to learn new skills, to receive feedback, to test new techniques and methods, and to support actions that foster learning in classroom environments.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of the study was to explore the curriculum and make-up of student-produced publications associated with agricultural communication or journalism programs. The study also described the role advisers serve in regards to handling editorial, ethical, and legal issues for student-produced publications. New knowledge will result relating to how agricultural communication or journalism programs teach publication production and how advisers of student-produced publications help students handle legal and ethical circumstances that they could encounter as professional agricultural communicators. Publication advisers could use the information yielded by the research to evaluate their courses and their roles in producing the student publications. The following objectives guided this study:

1. To describe agricultural communication publication courses taught in agricultural communication or journalism curriculum across the United States.
2. To describe the business and production structure of student-produced agricultural publications.
3. To describe the ethical and legal issues advisers encounter with student-produced agricultural publications.

### **Method**

The research design for this study was a descriptive, quantitative survey to explore and describe the demographics, curriculum, and the role of advisers for student-produced agricultural publications. The target population for this study was agricultural communications professionals or faculty who were members of the Academic Programs Special Interest Group (SIG) in the Association for Communication Excellence (ACE). Researchers selected a population of active members of the Academic SIG because it provided the most complete list of academic programs available.

Data for this study were collected with a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of 62 items. Items related to publication demographics, funding, policies, publication staff organization, course structure, adviser's role, and legal content. Due to IRB requirements, schools remained anonymous in their completion of the study. A panel of experts reviewed the questionnaire to determine validity.

The researchers implemented online survey procedures as explained by Dillman's Tailored Design Method (TDM) to accomplish a high response rate (Dillman, 2007). Recipients received a

pre-notice letter via e-mail, a cover letter with a link to a Web form through e-mail, and three reminder e-mails. The researcher made telephone calls to non-respondents for the final wave. After data collection, researchers analyzed responses to assess the reliability of the survey, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of .688. Reliability was affected by a small population size and the use of a researcher-developed instrument that needs more testing. To conduct the study, the researchers sent the survey to 42 schools. Of those, four schools responded that they did not have a formal agricultural communication or journalism program or are not involved with the program. Of the remaining 23 respondents, 15 indicated having a student-produced publication integrated somehow into their agricultural communication or journalism curriculum. In some cases, not all 15 responded to each item due to their unique programs.

## Results

### **Objective 1: To describe agricultural communication publication courses taught in agricultural communication or journalism curriculum across the United States**

The oldest publication indicated a start date of 1894, while the youngest publication indicated a start of 2005. Only six of the publications indicated interruptions in their magazine's yearly publication, citing reasons such as "lack of student involvement" and "World War II." Of the 15 student-produced publications, eight were published two times a year, while two were published once a year, two were published three times a year, and one was continuously published online. The majority of respondents described their publications as a magazine ( $n = 8$ ), followed by a newsletter ( $n = 4$ ), an online newsletter ( $n = 1$ ), or a newspaper ( $n = 1$ ).

More than half of the publications ( $n = 8$ ) were developed through a course offered as part of an agricultural communication or journalism curriculum, while roughly one third ( $n = 5$ ) of the publications were created as an extracurricular activity outside of structured curriculum. While one of the publications was part of a course, many students not in the course freelanced for the publication. For the publications developed through a course, six were developed in one course, while only one was taught through a series of courses. Roughly half of the publications ( $n = 7$ ) had prerequisite courses in place before students could work on the publication.

Advisers for nine of the student-produced publications counted the publication as part of their teaching/course load, while three advisers ran the publication as part of their appointment and administrative duties, and one adviser ran the publication in addition to their course load and appointment. No matter how they came to teach the course, advisers of the publications were covering several topics in their curriculum. Topics covered included, design ( $n = 9$ ), writing, ( $n = 9$ ), editing ( $n = 9$ ), photography ( $n = 8$ ), the publication industry ( $n = 5$ ), and HTML/online publishing ( $n = 2$ ).

Respondents reported numerous audiences who made up the circulation of the student-produced publications, with 10 citing faculty and staff of the institution, 9 citing students, and 9 citing alumni. Other audiences receiving the student-produced publications included government officials ( $n = 5$ ), industry members ( $n = 5$ ), advertisers ( $n = 5$ ), high school students ( $n = 1$ ), research stakeholders ( $n = 1$ ), and foundation donors ( $n = 1$ ).

With such a wide range of audiences, story topics covered in these student-produced publications were just as varied. Student recognition articles were published by 12 of the publications, while 11 published profile stories. Alumni stories ( $n = 11$ ), research stories ( $n = 7$ ), and agricultural news and trend stories ( $n = 6$ ) were also covered heavily by these publications. Fewer student-produced publications wrote editorials ( $n = 4$ ) and extension news ( $n = 3$ ) (See Table 1).

Table 1  
*Types of Articles Covered by Agricultural Student-Produced Publications*

Article Type	n	%
Student Recognition	12	85.7
Profile	11	78.6
Alumni	11	78.6
Research	7	50.0
Agricultural News & Trends	6	42.9
Editorials	4	28.6
Extension News	3	21.4

### **Objective 2: To describe the business and production structure of student-produced agricultural publications**

To determine the production and business structure of the agricultural student-produced publications, questions asked respondents to report on staffing, development, advertising, and industry support. More than half of the publications ( $n = 8$ ) had less than 10 students serve as the publication staff, and three publications had staffs of 16 to 20 students. In most of these publications, the staff is involved in all aspects of production. For 11 of the publications, all students write stories to be printed, and 9 take photos for publication. Eleven of the publications have students edit each other's stories, while four publications have students critique each other's photographs.

Staff positions noted in the publications included: editor ( $n = 9$ ), managing editor ( $n = 8$ ), design editor ( $n = 6$ ), photo editor ( $n = 5$ ), ad sales director ( $n = 5$ ), copy editor ( $n = 4$ ), business manager ( $n = 2$ ), web editor/developer ( $n = 2$ ), art director ( $n = 1$ ), and circulation director ( $n = 1$ ) (see Table 2). Advisers assigned staff positions for six of the publications, while students assigned positions for four of the publications, the agricultural communication faculty appointed positions for two of the publications, and two publications appointed positions through an editorial board or the department chair.

Table 2  
*Staff Positions on Agricultural Student-Produced Publications*

Staff Positions	n	%
Staff Writers	11	84.6
Editor	9	69.2
Managing Editor	8	61.5
Design Editor	6	46.2
Photo Editor	5	38.5
Ad Sales Director	5	38.5
Photographers	5	38.5
Copy Editor	4	30.8
Business Manager	2	15.4
Web Editor/Developer	2	15.4
Ad Sales Staff	2	15.4
Art Director	1	7.7
Circulation Director	1	7.7
Section Editors	1	7.7
Editorial Editor	0	0.0

Respondents described how their publication is produced. Photoshop ( $n = 11$ ) and InDesign ( $n = 9$ ) were the two software programs used by the majority of the publications. Other software used included: Illustrator ( $n = 5$ ), Dreamweaver ( $n = 4$ ), Microsoft Publisher ( $n = 2$ ), Fireworks ( $n = 1$ ), QuarkXpress ( $n = 1$ ), and Freehand ( $n = 1$ ). Two publications indicated that students do not complete production and layout or it is done off campus. However, four publications are designed by student editors, three of the publications are designed by all students, and two of the publications are designed by a student graphic editor.

As indicated earlier, one publication is online; however, six publications indicated that their publication is placed online in some way. The majority of publications place the publication online as a PDF file ( $n = 4$ ) or as HTML pages ( $n = 2$ ). One publication indicated having a blog as part of its publishing, while one publication does podcasts.

Respondents were asked to indicate their budget for their publications. Budget was not defined but based on results that appear to mostly include printing costs. Four of the publications indicated a single-issue budget of \$1,000 to \$3,000. Budgets of \$3,001 to \$5,000 and \$5,001 to \$7,000 were reported by two publications each. Two publications indicated a budget of less than \$1,000, while two had a budget of \$9,000 or more. Six publications indicated that they received funding from advertising sales. Funding from a department, college, or university is used by nine publications, and two get funding from student fees. No publication indicated getting funding from subscriptions.

On a scale of not at all to often (1-5), respondents reported how involved the agricultural communication industry is with the students during production. A mean of 1.36 ( $SD = 1.21$ ) was calculated from the responses. After production, three publications are reviewed and critiqued by industry professionals. Students were also involved in the critique process during the end of production; five publications indicated that students review the press proof or blue-line proof before final printing.

### **Objective 3: To describe the ethical and legal issues advisers encounter with student-produced agricultural publications**

Questions asked the respondents to indicate which legal issues concern them as instructors/advisers of student-produced agricultural publications. While no respondents indicated they were concerned with obscenity, eight were concerned with a code of ethics, five were concerned with censorship, four were concerned with libel, and two were concerned with First Amendment issues. While only one publication reported a libel issue, many discuss this issue in their curriculum. Libel is a topic covered in six of the publications' curriculum, while censorship is covered in four of the publications. Other topics covered include obscenity ( $n = 3$ ) and the First Amendment ( $n = 2$ ). Three of the publications do not cover any legal topics with their student staffs.

When asked if they have an editorial policy, 10 of the publications indicated yes. While many have this policy, only five publications have an advertising policy, and only two have a business policy. The majority of publications ( $n = 9$ ) do not have a code of ethics for their publication, while nine have their own style manual.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study examined student-produced publications in agricultural communication or journalism programs by describing the programs' publication curriculum, by determining the business and production structure of these publications, and by explaining legal and ethical issues the advisers experience in publication production. The oldest publication still in press started in the 1894, while

the youngest launched in 2005. This shows that while these publications have been a part of agricultural curriculum from the beginning, some programs without such courses are seeing the value and adding them.

Eight of the programs printed their publications two times a year, followed by two programs with publications each printed once a year and three times a year, respectively. Funding, course schedule, and student enrollment could explain why publication frequency varied greatly among the agricultural communication or journalism programs. Only one publication continuously posted material online. This finding was surprising given the number of institutions that have computer access to web design software and the affordability of maintaining a website. With less than half of the publications publishing the publication online in any manner, it is recommended that course instructors consider adding this new form of publishing into their courses. Many popular and trade magazines have developed online presences over the last 10 years (Johnson & Prijatel, 1999), and to fully teach future agricultural communicators about the magazine industry, curriculum online publishing must be included.

Publication frequency was not the only difference discovered in this study. From type and size of publication, to budgets and where funding comes from, these publications are as unique as their universities. While the majority of the publications ( $n = 8$ ) were created through a course in agricultural communication or journalism curriculum, five publications were published as an extracurricular activity excluded from a structured curriculum. Student-produced publications created as an extracurricular activity offer one way to give students experience in writing, graphic design, and photography, although this might not be an ideal long-term solution at all institutions.

Many different audiences received the student-produced publications. Faculty and staff were included in the circulation lists of 10 publications. Students and alumni each received issues from nine of the publications studied. Student-produced publications also distributed to other audiences, including government officials, industry members, advertisers, high school students, research stakeholders, and foundation donors. University affiliated individuals are the target audiences for these publications; this could be because the article topics reflect diverse academic programs within the institutions. This finding could also be the result of the institutions trying to communicate information about their research, community service, recognition, and the agricultural industry to a target readership that is impacted by the information.

The difference in the publication and business structure of the agricultural student publications could be related to student enrollment in agricultural communication or journalism programs. The analysis of publication staffing showed that the majority of publications ( $n = 8$ ) had less than 10 students on staff, followed by 16–20 students on staff ( $n = 3$ ). The number of students enrolled as agricultural communication or journalism majors would impact the size of a publication staff. Agricultural communication or journalism programs with prerequisite courses in place before working on the publication would also affect the staffing size.

Selection of publication software varied greatly depending on the publication. A majority of publications produced issues using Photoshop ( $n = 11$ ) and InDesign ( $n = 9$ ). Publications also used other software such as Illustrator ( $n = 5$ ), Dreamweaver ( $n = 4$ ), Microsoft Publisher ( $n = 2$ ), and Fireworks ( $n = 1$ ). This finding could be due to the type of publication an agricultural communication or journalism program has selected to produce. InDesign, Photoshop, and Illustrator are software programs frequently used for publication design and layout by professionals in the industry, while Dreamweaver and Fireworks are web design software programs, which are more commonly used for

online publications. It is important to note that these courses are working to prepare students with real-world experiences by using such software.

The involvement of agricultural communication industry in the publication process is limited. A mean of 1.36 was calculated for how involved the agricultural communication industry is with students in the publication process. Additionally, industry professionals reviewed and critiqued only 21.4% of the student publications. This finding is surprising because professional feedback could help students improve their graphics, stories, editing, and proofreading. However, the lack of professional involvement could be because agricultural communicators were either not invited to participate on an advisory board or were too busy to critique a student agricultural publication. The theory of experiential learning calls for students to have the opportunity to reflect after having a concrete experience (Dewey, 1938). One way students can get a full experiential learning experience is to allow them to receive feedback and have time for reflection at several points in the production process. With 78.6% of respondents saying students edit one another's stories, it is apparent that many are using part of this model in their classrooms. However, it is recommended that advisers add another opportunity for reflection by involving industry or alumni in critiquing the publication or in the editing process.

Publication curriculum covered a variety of legal and ethical content. Six publications discussed libel, while censorship was covered by four publications. Obscenity and the First Amendment were covered by two and three publications, respectively. Past studies have indicated the need for instructors to teach ethics in agricultural communication curriculum (Hays, 1990). These publications offer a unique environment to discuss with students these issues. Advisers must take advantage of this opportunity.

Only half of the respondents were concerned with obscenity, and less than half were concerned with libel. With only one respondent indicating that it faced any of these issues in the past, it is not surprising these are not a major concern for advisers. However, it is important that advisers of these publications give these issues thought and have plans in place in case one should occur. Only 36% of publications have a code of ethics in place. Advisers need to work toward not only having editorial and advertising policies in place, but they must also be prepared for ethical and legal issues that may occur.

Future studies should continue to look at agricultural communication curriculum and how it is preparing future communicators for the ethical issues they may face. Another study should further address the issue of whether publication advising and production provide an experiential learning experience for undergraduates. Research should also continue to explore and share the current curriculum being taught at the various institutions. Many programs are growing, and many institutions have begun to start programs in agricultural communication and journalism. A current literature base is needed to help such programs develop a successful curriculum.

### Keywords

magazine, student-produced publication, agricultural communication curricula, ethics

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