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LaRae M. Donnellan

Gail Snowdon

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Abstract

Any professional organization, such as Agricultural Communicators in Education (ACE), needs to stay relevant to the needs of its members. This article reports the results of a 1998 membership survey that examined such questions as why people belong to ACE, how well ACE is meeting member needs, what would make ACE more relevant, and whether ACE should change its name. Fifty-four percent of active members responded to an on-line survey. The top reasons given for belonging to ACE included professional development and networking with peers. However, only 47 percent of respondents felt ACE was doing "well" or "very well" in meeting members' professional development needs. The longer a person belonged to ACE, the higher he or she rated ACE overall. The challenge for ACE leadership is to provide appropriate professional development opportunities to match the high ranking given to networking, job announcements, publishing, leadership opportunities, and award recognition. ACE also needs to address the changing culture within communications offices that has resulted in changing expectations and participation.

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Any professional organization, such as Agricultural Communicators in Education (ACE), needs to stay relevant to the needs of its members. This article reports the results of a 1998 membership survey that examined such questions as why people belong to ACE, how well ACE is meeting member needs, what would make ACE more relevant, and whether ACE should change its name. Fifty-four percent of active members responded to an on-line survey. The top reasons given for belonging to ACE included professional development and networking with peers. However, only 47 percent of respondents felt ACE was doing "well" or "very well" in meeting members' professional development needs. The longer a person belonged to ACE, the higher he or she rated ACE overall. The challenge for ACE leadership is to provide appropriate professional development opportunities to match the high ranking given to networking, job announcements, publishing, leadership opportunities, and award recognition. ACE also needs to address the changing culture within communications offices that has resulted in changing expectations and participation.

LaRae Donnellan is professor and head of Extension Communications at The University of Tennessee. She has been an ACE member for more than 25 years and was ACE president at the time of this survey when she drafted the content. Gail Snowdon is the director of development research for the University of Illinois Foundation. She was an ACE member at the time of this study and coordinated the creation and delivery of the survey. She presented the preliminary results at the ACE annual meeting in Asilomar, California, in 1998.

In 1987-88, the ACE Long-Range Planning Committee surveyed ACE members and concluded that "there is no doubt that the majority of ACE members believe in and are clear about the mission of ACE as an organization of professional communicators" (Scherer and Juanillo, 1989). However, they identified professional development—specifically the Critique and Awards Program (C&A), Special Interest Groups (SIGs), and overall participation in the organization—as areas needing attention.

Over the intervening decade, ACE members have faced numerous changes and challenges brought about by the increased use of technology, the increased demand by administrators for marketing support, and the reshaping of communications offices and their missions.

In 1998, the ACE Board decided to survey members again to determine member satisfaction and receive direction for the future. Among the questions the Board was concerned about were the following:

1. Why do you belong to ACE?
2. How well is ACE meeting your needs?
3. What activities would make ACE more relevant to you?
4. Do you think our name accurately describes our purpose?
5. Have you served in, or would you like to serve in, a leadership position within ACE?
6. How much financial support does your employer provide for your participation in ACE?
7. What are the major constraints to your participation in ACE?

Methods

Rather than using traditional paper surveys delivered by mail, we reviewed alternative methods and decided to use a Web-based survey because:

- 99 percent of active ACE members have E-mail;
- ACE members at the University of Illinois were interested in conducting an electronic survey; and

- ACE members generally are comfortable with Web-based technology.

We surveyed the "active members"—those who work for land-grant or other public agricultural and/or "life sciences" universities and organizations. This excludes the retirees, students, and associate members (people who work for agribusinesses or other for-profit organizations with an interest in agricultural communications). Active members are the majority of the ACE membership and are most likely to be active in the profession of agricultural communications.

Two information technologists at the University of Illinois designed and programmed the survey for the Web and addressed technical problems related to the survey. A decision data specialist pilot-tested the survey, analyzed the results, and reported the findings to the ACE Board.

We conducted two pilot tests and made minor changes in wording. Extensive changes were required to remove programming problems and lockouts. Pilot-testers had problems with eight-character alpha and numeric passwords and the case-sensitivity of the user names. Passwords were shortened to four alpha characters and names were made case-insensitive.

The ACE president sent an E-mail message to every active member in June 1998, inviting each to participate in the survey. To ensure confidentiality and prevent possible "ballot-box stuffing," each message contained a user name and password that allowed the respondent to enter the survey site only once. User names were used solely for follow-up purposes and were not connected to any responses.

Two follow-up E-mail messages were sent to nonrespondents. Data were recorded in a database file and available without additional coding for analysis. Results were compiled in early July and shared later that month at the annual ACE meeting in Asilomar, California.

Sixty-three respondents added written comments, which we coded by content. This resulted in 93 different statements. The largest number (41) addressed the issues of professional development, including the Critique and Awards Program and whether ACE was structured to address the needs of members and potential members. Another 18 comments focused on the value of ACE, including networking. Twenty-one responses

addressed the survey tool itself; nine responses addressed the proposed dues hike; and five addressed "other" topics (e.g., how to get in touch with Special Interest Groups (SIGs), the quality of ACE's Web site, proposed name change).

Respondent Profile

Of the 538 active members, only seven (or 1 percent) did not have E-mail; we offered to send them paper copies, although none accepted our offer. Eight surveys were undeliverable. Of the 523 active members who received the surveys, 281 (or 54 percent) responded.

The largest group (37 percent) of respondents was between the ages of 46 and 55. The next largest group (33 percent) was 36-45 years old, followed by 19 percent under 35 and 10 percent between 56-65 years old. Fifty-one percent were female. Most (92 percent) worked for universities, with 5 percent working for government agencies, and 1 percent working for each of the following: research organizations, private industry, and their own businesses.

Many ACE members refer to themselves as "information technologists" rather than "communicators." Therefore, we asked respondents how many years they had been employed either as a professional communicator or information technologist. Table 1 contains the results. The largest group has been in the field for 11-15 years, followed by those with 21-25 years of experience.

Table 1 *Years as a Professional Communicator or Information Technologist (N=278).*

| No. of years | Response (percent) |
|---------------------|---------------------------|
| <1 | 2 |
| 1-5 | 12 |
| 6-10 | 16 |
| 11-15 | 23 |
| 16-20 | 15 |
| 21-25 | 19 |
| 26+ | 14 |

Table 2 *Years as an ACE Member (N=275).*

| No. years | Survey (%) | Population (%) |
|-----------|------------|----------------|
| <1 | 14 | 15 |
| 1-5 | 38 | 40 |
| 6-10 | 22 | 21 |
| 11-15 | 9 | 10 |
| 16-20 | 11 | 6 |
| 21+ | 7 | 8 |

From data provided to us by ACE Headquarters, we knew how long active members had been a member of ACE. Table 2 compares the results of our survey versus the data from headquarters. As you can see, with the exception of those who had been ACE members 16-20 years, the respondents represented the membership accurately and allowed us to generalize the results to the entire membership.

Why People Join ACE

Active ACE members were asked to check all the reasons why they joined ACE and how well ACE met those needs (Table 3). Eighty-seven percent of the respondents said they joined ACE for professional development. Eighty-four percent listed networking with peers. The Critique and Awards contest was the third most popular reason, at 47 percent.

We asked how well ACE was addressing the reasons why people joined ACE. Although 87 percent said they joined ACE for professional development, only 47 percent of the respondents felt that ACE was doing a good job of meeting their professional development needs.

Of the 63 written responses, 11 specifically mentioned "professional development." One respondent felt ACE's national meetings offered "a great deal of professional development and networking opportunities." Three respondents wanted more help for their roles as teachers and researchers; one expressed interest in professional development specifically for information technologists. Three mentioned concerns with the Critique and Awards (C&A) Program. Two suggested ACE

Table 3 Reasons for Membership (N=281) and Perceptions of How Well ACE Meets Needs (N=280).

| Need | Reason for joining ACE (%) | How well ACE meets these needs (% responding "well" or "very well") |
|--|----------------------------|---|
| Professional development | 87 | 47 |
| Networking with peers | 84 | 72 |
| Critique & Awards Program | 47 | 57 |
| Leadership opportunities | 29 | 58 |
| Outlet for publishing/ presentations | 27 | 60 |
| <i>Journal of Applied Communications</i> | 26 | 47 |
| Notice of job opportunities | 24 | 80 |
| <i>Signals</i> newsletter | 21 | 59 |
| Boss expectations | 15 | 50 |
| Other* | 13 | 67 |

* "Other" reasons include to find out what's going on (e.g., "energizing advice, new ideas and success stories from a diverse group of communicators"); travel and annual conference; someone urged me to ("peer pressure from co-workers"); and best fit ("organization most tailored to my work").

rely more on electronic interaction, chat rooms, listservs, or tutorials in *Signals* (ACE's newsletter) for professional development. Two responses focused on professional development as a means of "equipping the agricultural communicator" who just happens to have "specific skills sets":

While I'd like to see more skill-based learning opportunities through ACE, I hope we will organize those events around the outcome/end product (e.g., impact reporting), as opposed to the craft/artistic discipline (e.g., video production).

Eighty-four percent of survey respondents indicated that they joined ACE to network with peers; 72 percent felt ACE was doing "well" or "very well" in meeting this need. Of those who wrote additional responses, eight mentioned the importance of networking and the high quality of ACE leadership

and members.

Forty-seven percent of the respondents said they joined ACE because of the C&A Program; 57 percent felt ACE was doing "well" or "very well" with the program. However, of the 10 respondents who wrote comments about C&A, seven were concerned about the program or felt that ACE overemphasized awards:

I'm ... EXTREMELY frustrated over C&A right now. We judge whether our educational programs and materials are "pretty," not whether they are truly effective with target audiences.

[When I first joined ACE,] I was disillusioned by what I saw as an overemphasis on awards—especially awards that result from self-nominations—and a serious underemphasis on professional development. ... I hope there will always be room in the new-and-improved ACE for people who join for professional development / peer-interaction reasons and opt not to participate in the C&A Program.

The Value of ACE

The longer a respondent had been an ACE member, the more favorably he or she rated ACE and its efforts. These longer-standing members more likely would:

- Have been a communicator or technologist longer;
- Be older;
- Have served in an ACE leadership role;
- Belong to ACE for:
 - Networking with peers;
 - Leadership opportunities;
 - *Signals* newsletter;
 - Outlet for presenting papers/publishing;
- Rate ACE higher on:

- Professional development;
- Leadership opportunities;
- *Signals* newsletter;
- Outlet for presenting papers/publishing; and
- Have their dues paid by employer.

These results were statistically significant at $p < .01$.

Those who added written comments mentioned that ACE had value for them and their colleagues. Five respondents specifically mentioned the value of networking, or interacting with their ACE peers. Seven respondents made strong positive statements about the organization, such as this one from a 35-year member of ACE:

ACE is terrific! Even when professional sessions may not suit you, there is always the excellent interaction with some of the best professionals in the business. ACE has given me lifelong friends and job opportunities (consulting, etc). *JAC* keeps me sharp intellectually; *Signals* keeps me up-to-date professionally; C&A give me good feedback on my writing, information campaigns, training, etc. ACE is the best, and has been for me for 35 years.

One respondent expressed the opinion that ACE has a bad reputation with some people that might affect membership:

...I hope the organization will continue to reach out to potential members whose perceptions of ACE may be outdated or skewed. (Years ago, a respected colleague told me that ACE was an organization for "has-been's and never-were's.") ... I believe ACE is changing for the better, and I'm pleased to be a part of the organization.

Professional Culture

Several respondents commented on the changing culture

within communications offices that has resulted in a change in attitude towards ACE. One respondent said:

I think ACE is doing a good job meeting my needs. (I'm a tenure-track faculty member.) However, there seems to be less and less interest in ACE on the part of our communications staff members. ... I think it is imperative for ACE to find a way to reach out to these professional staff ... to offer [them] some real value for their membership fees. As an example, although I find the journal useful and informative, most of the staff members I'm referring to see little value in it.

Part of this cultural change within ACE and communications offices has resulted from the shift away from an academic orientation to a production orientation. One respondent described the change in this way:

...I think the culture of ACE membership has changed in the last 15 years. The trend in most states is to convert faculty positions to staff positions, which eliminates the need to do research and either publish or perish. Consequently, less of our membership is interested in doing research, writing research findings, or even reading research findings! Content for the Journal is more difficult to come by and there is less readership for it. There are also fewer potential "papers" for presentations. There simply has been a major culture change that is impacting on many things, but primarily less academic/research and more professional skill orientation.

Making ACE More Relevant

Respondents were asked to indicate their top five choices for what would make ACE more relevant to their needs. Table 4 lists the top suggestions, which focus primarily on building professional skills. A significant number of respondents also

Table 4 *Activities That Would Make ACE More Relevant (N=280).*

| Suggestion for making ACE more relevant | Percent responding* |
|--|----------------------------|
| Regional meetings with a professional skill theme | 78 |
| More specialty skill workshops open to groups beyond ACE | 77 |
| More SIG interaction | 68 |
| More collaboration with other organizations | 61 |
| More promotion of communications and technology | 52 |

*Sum of respondents who selected item as one of their top five choices.

wanted ACE to promote the value of communications and technology to administrators.

Several respondents added written comments on how ACE might be more relevant to them. Five suggested that ACE partner with other organizations to provide skills training, such as the National Extension Technology Conference (NETC), Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), and Extension Video Producers (EVP).

For some respondents, "skills" training was not confined to "technology skills." One respondent wrote:

Technology is part of our lives now, but I wonder if we aren't ignoring some of our own training and 'getting-recharged' needs by focusing so much on it and not as much on skills development and revisioning—things that make us feel like creative, contributing communicators, and not only technologists.

Those who chose to add written comments suggested other ways to make ACE more relevant to them: Move beyond the existing focus on land-grant universities to the international world of agricultural communications; search for members to supplement the aging Baby Boomers, perhaps by establishing

a student component; expand the focus beyond Cooperative Extension; and eliminate the agricultural orientation of ACE, which is a problem for people who work primarily with youth, families, or the environment:

Unfortunately, there is no alternative group to join; perhaps that is why ACE survives? Many land-grant communicators ... are looking for something better [than CASE]. ACE could be that organization, IF it can shed its agricultural, backwoods, hick image.

Three respondents wrote that they wanted ACE to identify major issues confronting communicators and technologists and to share information about them with members. "In this age of information overload," one respondent said, "our ACE activities should try to address the most relevant questions, problems, issues, while at the same time be a revitalizing breath of fresh air."

Leadership Opportunities

Fifty-one percent of the respondents indicated that they had served in an ACE leadership role at some point in the past. That would include serving as an officer, board member, SIG chair or vice chair, state representative, committee or task force member, journal editor or reviewer, or another such role. When compared with other respondents, those who have served in leadership roles were more likely to:

- Belong to ACE for networking with peers and other reasons;
- Have been an ACE member and professional communicator/technologist longer;
- Rate ACE lower on professional development, networking, and leadership opportunities;
- Be willing to serve in an ACE leadership role in the future; and
 - Have their expenses paid for;
 - Attendance at regional, national, and board meetings;

- Postage for ACE; and
- ACE teleconferences.

Those who added written comments differed in their opinions of the benefits of leadership training and mentoring. One respondent complained of the bureaucracy that has formed to provide new member services and to train SIG leaders. Four respondents felt that the increased efforts to recruit and support new members and to train ACE leaders were signs of strength. Adding a mentoring program for new members also was suggested as a valuable service ACE might offer.

Financial and Support Issues

Respondents were asked how much financial support their employers provided for their participation in ACE (see Table 5). Most respondents received full or partial funding to attend national meetings (87 percent) or regional meetings (77 percent). Most (63 percent) received full or partial support to enter the C&A Program. On the other hand, 69 percent of the respondents indicated that they received no support for dues.

When asked which costs or demands were most likely to keep them from participating in ACE, respondents emphasized competing work demands as the greatest hindrance, followed by family demands and expenses relating to participating in ACE (Table 6).

At the time of the survey, the ACE Board was contemplating increasing member dues from \$75 per year to \$100. The board was interested in whether such an increase might prohibit people from joining.

Nine respondents chose to write comments about the possible dues increase; all but one opposed it. That one person responded, "Compared to other organizations, I feel that ACE provides many fine benefits for the dues paid."

However, only 13 percent of the respondents, when asked about dues, indicated that membership fees would prohibit them from participating in ACE.

When the ACE membership was asked to vote in late 1998 on whether to increase dues to cover increased costs, the membership voted more than 2 to 1 to do so.

Table 5 *Financial Support for Participation in ACE (Percent No Response or Not Applicable*)*.

| ACE activity | Level of support (%) | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|---------|------|
| | Full | Partial | None |
| Attendance at national meetings | 52 | 35 | 11 |
| Critique & Awards entry fees | 46 | 17 | 28 |
| Attendance at regional meetings | 45 | 32 | 15 |
| Expenses for ACE teleconferences | 40 | 6 | 25 |
| Expenses for ACE postage | 34 | 7 | 32 |
| Expenses for board meetings | 23 | 8 | 33 |
| Annual dues | 23 | 5 | 69 |

* Attendance at national meetings, 3%; Critique and Awards, 9%; Attendance at regional meetings, 8%; ACE teleconferences, 29%; ACE postage, 27%; Board meetings, 37%; Annual dues, 4%.

Table 6 *Constraints to Participating in ACE (N=275)*.

| Likely reasons participation would be limited | Those responding "Absolutely" or "Nearly always" (%) |
|---|--|
| Too many other work demands | 50 |
| Too many family demands | 28 |
| Cost of attending regional or national meetings | 26 |
| Other | 20 |
| Cost of membership | 13 |
| Cost of entering Critique & Awards Program | 10 |
| Lack of support from boss to participate | 8 |

ACE's Name

For years, the ACE Board had received comments about the name of the organization, both supporting it and recommending a change to reflect the new membership. The organization was formed in 1913 as the American Association of Agricultural College Editors (AAACE). To open the organization to more people, the membership voted in 1978 to change the name to Agricultural Communicators in Education—thus keeping part of the acronym, "ACE."

With the increase in the number of technologists within the organization, and the addition of more people with responsibilities outside traditional agriculture, the ACE board wanted to know how members felt about another possible name change.

About two-thirds of the respondents felt that the name "Agricultural Communicators in Education" accurately described the organization's purpose. Respondents who thought "ACE" accurately describes the membership and purpose were not significantly different from those who wanted a name change. When asked for possible suggestions for a name change, respondents said:

- Keep "communication" in the name.
- Remove "agriculture" from the name.
- Add "technology" to the name.

One possible name offered by a few respondents was "National Association of Land-Grant Communicators." The one person who added a written comment about the name said:

I am not unhappy with ACE's name. I just don't think it fits us well. At my institution, administration is taking the lead role away from agriculture. In fact, the name "Extension" is to be used less. What are we: Outreach Communicators????? Things are changing across the nation. We may need to let things settle before we mess with our name again.

Conclusions and Implications

Respondents gave a variety of reasons for joining ACE and in general expressed support for the organization and its leadership. Opportunities to network with peers, learn of job opportunities, share scholarship with others, develop leadership skills, and receive feedback on professional efforts through the Critique and Awards program were areas where ACE provided valuable member services.

However, ACE should consider focusing special attention on professional development, since ACE members clearly look to ACE to have their professional development needs met. Those needs include technical and creative skill-building as well as integrative, evaluative, and marketing skills.

One suggestion was to offer skill-building workshops, either at the national level or at regional sites, for ACE members alone or for other participants as well. Another suggestion was for ACE to partner with other groups, such as NETC, CASE, EVP, NAMA (National Agricultural Marketing Association), or ARC (Agricultural Relations Council) to offer joint meetings or workshops to meet member needs.

The changing culture within communications units is having a major impact on the membership of and expectations for ACE. Fewer active members have academic appointments than in the past (Thomas, 1996; Donnellan, unpublished). Active ACE members use new technologies in their jobs (e.g., E-mail, the Web) and may even consider themselves to be information technologists rather than communicators. Demands for production and marketing have increased (Thomas, 1996), along with demands for greater accountability (Richardson, 1999). And members are being recruited from more than just traditional land-grant universities.

Another challenge facing ACE is the increasing demands on members' time, both from work and family. ACE needs to find a way to serve its members without demanding too much of their time. That, however, may be difficult for a volunteer organization that survives because of the efforts of its members.

Some respondents were concerned that ACE might possibly raise its dues, although only 13 percent indicated that dues would "absolutely" or "nearly always" constrain them from participating in ACE.

In some professions, paying dues to belong to professional organizations is an expected part of the price of being a professional. As part of the faculty culture, faculty members join professional organizations to share scholarship and network with peers. In recent years the number of faculty positions within agricultural communications offices has dropped, being replaced by positions with such titles as academic-professional or specialist (Thomas, 1996; Donnellan, unpublished). Academic-professional positions in general do not carry the same expectations for scholarship and professional involvement that faculty positions do. What impact that may have on membership and involvement in ACE is worth further study.

Buck and Paulson (1995), who studied members of six national agricultural communications organizations, reported that "the average agricultural communicator is most likely to belong to Agricultural Communicators in Education with the membership dues paid by his or her employer." What is not clear, however, is whether ACE members had their dues paid by their employers or whether the other agricultural communicators in the study had their dues paid by their employers.

Fifty-two percent of the respondents indicated they wanted ACE to promote the disciplines of communications and technology to their administrators. ACE may want to consider whether to work with employers and encourage them to purchase "organizational memberships," similar to the way universities buy group memberships to CASE, thus supporting professional growth and ACE at the same time.

About two-thirds of the respondents felt that the name "Agricultural Communicators in Education" accurately described the organization's purpose. However, a third felt the name needed to be changed to better reflect its membership and the fact that many members did not work for "agriculture" in the strictest sense. ACE members will need to decide whether to change the organization's name or to find a home within an organization identified with "agriculture," "communicators," and "education."

ACE's mission statement identifies professional-skill development as ACE's major function:

ACE develops professional skills of education, government, and research communicators and information technologists to extend knowledge about agriculture, natural resources, and human sciences to people worldwide.

The survey shows that ACE must improve in this area if it is to meet member expectations and stay relevant as the premier professional organization for communicators and information technologists at land-grant universities and associated businesses and agencies. However, as with any volunteer organization, ACE will change only if the membership puts forth the energy to make it happen.

The ACE board should periodically survey the membership

to determine whether the organization is remaining relevant and meeting the needs of its members.

Finding ways to engage members to help create the desired professional development opportunities, and finding ways to promote the profession of agricultural communications with the members' employers so that ACE members will be encouraged and supported in their efforts to remain professionally active, will be two of ACE's major challenges in the years ahead.

Key Words

ACE, membership survey, professional development

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