

Enhancing Professionalism in Academic Agricultural Communications Programs: The Role of Accreditation

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Abstract

Enhancing professionalism in agricultural and applied communications has been an important topic of discussion among ACE members in recent years. Developing strategies to increase prestige and recognition of this specialized field are of particular interest to ACE members involved in administering academic programs in agricultural communications and agricultural journalism. One of the measures under consideration to bolster recognition is the development of accreditation standards and procedures that would allow for "certification" of academic programs. Among the often-cited advantages of accreditation are increased uniformity of curricula and the development of formal quality-control mechanisms. However, if accreditation standards and procedures are to be implemented successfully, more information is needed on the overall accreditation process, how it has been used in other disciplines, and what factors should be considered in applying it to agricultural communications.

This paper attempts to fill this void by providing an overview of the accreditation process and a review of the accreditation literature to identify important issues in developing and implementing such programs. In addition, results from an electronic mail survey of academic agricultural communications program faculty are provided to document their perceptions of the need and role of accreditation in this field. The authors argue that development of a structured accreditation process is not in the best interest of agricultural communications at this time. The paper concludes with a set of discussion items and recommendations for agricultural communications faculty to consider in weighing for themselves the merits of national accreditation standards.

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Abstract

Enhancing professionalism in agricultural and applied communications has been an important topic of discussion among ACE members in recent years. Developing strategies to increase prestige and recognition of this specialized field are of particular interest to ACE members involved in administering academic programs in agricultural communications and agricultural journalism. One of the measures under consideration to bolster recognition is the development of accreditation standards and procedures that would allow for “certification” of academic programs. Among the often-cited advantages of accreditation are increased uniformity of curricula and the development of formal quality-control mechanisms. However, if accreditation standards and procedures are to be implemented successfully, more information is needed on the overall accreditation process, how it has been used in other disciplines, and what

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Introduction

Since the early 1900s, when agricultural communications first emerged as an occupational area in higher education, its practitioners have struggled for recognition as professionals both within and outside the academy. While significant progress has been made, many agricultural communicators continue to believe that the field has not achieved the professional recognition it deserves. Discussions about enhancing the discipline's professional recognition have been especially prevalent among ACE members responsible for administering academic programs in agricultural communications. These agricultural communicators often must navigate between two worlds—the academic world in which quality of research and teaching are the major criteria governing promotion and tenure, and the practitioner world in which applied communications skills are valued most highly (Boone et al., 2000).

Striking a proper balance between academic and applied communications tasks is a challenge for both individual

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faculty members and the teaching programs and curricula they administer. Agricultural communications curriculum development is particularly complex because of the widely different world views held by various stakeholders. For instance, employers and students tend to place the highest value on applied skills needed in the work place, while academicians place a higher premium on graduate-level course work and research. Meanwhile, university administrators often tend to rely on agricultural communications as a general education training ground for such skills as public speaking or writing. At many universities, general education courses have relatively large enrollments and may require a majority of an agricultural communications faculty member's time.

One of the results of competing stakeholder influences on agricultural communications academic programs is that the programs vary widely in scope and description (Reisner, 1990; Doerfert & Cepica, 1991). Such diversity in programs had led to calls by some for curriculum reform and quality control of academic programs. In 1993, a national summit in Kansas City for faculty and professionals involved with agricultural communications and journalism addressed the problems of the field. A committee was charged to develop a mission-vision statement with the idea that it would provide more direction and consistency for individual academic programs (C.E. Paulson, personal communication, February 28, 1994). That document was approved in 1994 by those who attended the conference. It had 15 "value" statements that embraced such goals as increased diversity in the programs, development of critical thinking skills in students, an improved understanding of the differences between journalism and public relations, and the necessity for expanded research in agricultural communications. Unfortunately, this document has largely been forgotten.

More recent calls have been made for the possible development of an accreditation process for agricultural communications to help define and ensure quality of individual programs. Research conducted by Weckman et al. (2000) revealed that more than half of 22 agricultural communications programs favored the development of a national accreditation program.

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The argument for accreditation is that it could help enhance recognition and prestige of programs not only among industry professionals, but also among other faculty and administrators at home institutions, which could help justify additional resources and faculty. While accreditation does represent one possible avenue for enhancing professionalism of academic agricultural communications programs, very little attention has been focused on the feasibility or challenges of implementing such a process. This paper seeks to fill that void in the literature by providing an overview of the purpose of accreditation, followed by implications that should be considered in the unique case of agricultural communications. Findings from a national e-mail survey of agricultural communications faculty also are provided to help encourage further discussion on accreditation and related issues.

Accreditation

A large literature has been developed on the broad topic of accreditation, including its purposes and outcomes. While many volumes on the topic have been written by accreditation scholars, experts representing fields such as forestry and library science also have developed helpful references in hopes of adapting meaningful accreditation standards and procedures in their disciplines. In all these fields, academic accreditation is based on the notion that voluntary self-regulation is preferable to regulation from outside forces, such as government organizations (Wolff, 1993). Its major purposes are to assist institutions in evaluating themselves and to verify publicly the accuracy of these self-evaluations (Young, 1979; Thrash, 1991). An underlying principle of accreditation is the notion of public accountability.

As used in this paper, the term “accreditation” differs from certification and licensure in that it refers to the assessment of quality of academic programs, while the latter terms are used to recognize individuals’ accomplishments or credentials (Milbrath, 1980). In addition, this paper is concerned with specialized accreditation of academic programs and curricula, as opposed to the accreditation of entire colleges or universities (Lubinescu et al., 2001). Specialized accreditation is sometimes referred to as programmatic or professional accreditation (Young et al., 1983).

As shown in Table 1, accreditation of academic programs dates back to the early 1900s for a number of fields, such as dentistry

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and law, and to the late nineteenth century for medicine. A number of professional organizations implemented accreditation procedures in the 1930s in response to reduced educational funding brought on by the Depression (Selden, 1960). In 1980, the Council of Postsecondary Accreditation identified 48 specialized accrediting bodies active in evaluating programs ranging from chemistry and cosmetology to teacher education and theology. Updated information on both academic and nonacademic accrediting bodies is available in the *Certification and Accreditation Programs Directory* (Pare, 1996).

While accreditation standards and procedures vary by field, nearly all include a self-study process followed by an on-site visit from a team of experts (Williams & O'Connor, 1994). A written report of the self-study typically is submitted to the accreditation team director prior to the on-site visit.

Accreditation in Journalism and Mass Communications

The recognized body that oversees accreditation of university departments and programs in journalism and mass communications is the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC). Established in 1945 as the American Council on Education for Journalism, ACEJMC accredits both undergraduate and professional master's programs (Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, 1980). Twelve standards are used in evaluating programs: effective governance and administration; adequacy of budget; balanced curricula; evidence of effective student record-keeping and advising; quality of student instruction; quality of faculty; administration of a student internship program; adequacy of equipment and facilities; evidence of faculty scholarship, creative activity and professional activity; evidence that the unit provides public service to the journalism and mass communication profession and the public; regular contact with alumni; and commitment to diversity.

Three types of accreditation decisions are possible through ACEJMC: accreditation, provisional accreditation, and denial. Accreditation intervals are six years, and units that have been denied accreditation may reapply after two years. Provisional accreditation is granted when the accrediting council finds problems or deficiencies that it believes can be corrected in a year

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Table 1. Professions Sponsoring Accreditation of Postsecondary Academic Programs and Approximate Year¹ Accreditation Procedures Were Developed

Allied health (1933)	Medical laboratory technician (1964)
Architecture (1940)	Medical records (1928)
Art (1944)	Medical technology (1973)
Blind and visually handicapped (1967)	Medicine (pre-1900)
Business (1919)	Music (1924)
Chemistry (1936)	Nursing (pre-1930)
Chiropractic education (1947)	Nurse anesthesia (1931)
Clinical pastoral education (1967)	Occupational therapy (1917)
Construction education (1974)	Optometry (pre-1930)
Cosmetology (1969)	Osteopathic medicine (1901)
Dentistry and dental auxiliary programs (1906)	Pharmacy (1932)
Dietetics (1927)	Physical therapy (1933)
Engineering (1932)	Podiatry (1918)
Forestry (pre-1940)	Practical nursing (1945)
Funeral service education (1946)	Psychology (1952)

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Table 1. *Professions Sponsoring Accreditation of Postsecondary Academic Programs and Approximate Year¹ Accreditation Procedures Were Developed (continued)*

Health services administration (1948)	Public health (1974)
Home economics (1949)	Rehabilitation counseling education (1971)
Industrial technology (1968)	Respiratory therapy (1956)
Interior design (1971)	Social work (pre-1940)
Journalism (1945)	Speech pathology and audiology (1964)
Landscape architecture (pre-1930)	Teacher education (pre-1930)
Law (1900)	Theology (1936)
Librarianship (1924)	Veterinary medicine (1932)
Medical assistants (1966)	

¹ Years provided are approximate. Reliable data are not available for all fields because accreditation and related approval procedures were often phased in gradually or put into practice before formal accrediting bodies were established.

Sources: Selden, W.K. (1960); Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (1980); and Garten, E.D. (1994).

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or less. Currently, 108 professional programs are accredited by ACEJMC (ACEJMC, 2002).

There are a number of reasons that ACEJMC accrediting standards do not provide a perfect fit for agricultural communications programs. For instance, agricultural communications programs are typically much smaller than journalism and mass communication programs in terms of both student and faculty numbers and usually have fewer resources and smaller budgets. In addition, agricultural communications programs often are administered through combined academic departments, along with such programs as agricultural education (Reisner, 1990). Because of these arrangements, they often lack the autonomy of journalism and mass communications units that often have departmental or school status.

Despite these differences, it is informative to apply the 12 ACEJMC criteria to agricultural communications programs to see how these programs would fare in a recognized accreditation procedure. The following section of this paper considers each standard in more detail and briefly identifies some of the possible ramifications of applying these standards to agricultural communications academic programs.

Application of ACEJMC Standards to Agricultural Communications

Governance/Administration

The chief administrative officer, typically a dean or department chair or head, must provide intellectual, academic, and professional leadership. There must be faculty control over basic educational policy and the curriculum. One of the complicating factors for many agricultural communications programs is that administrators often have no background or training in agricultural communications. This is particularly true when the program is just one discipline in a two-, three-, and sometimes four-discipline academic unit. A second complicating factor may be the degree of faculty control over the curriculum and educational policy. In instances where a majority of course work is embedded in a journalism curriculum and only advising and coordination is coming from agricultural communications faculty, there may be little or no opportunity for input.

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Budget

The central issue with budget involves adequate funding to administer the program. This would include adequate monies, either soft or hard dollars, to assure sufficient instruction facilities, equipment, and support services such as travel and professional development opportunities.

Curriculum

The ACEJMC curriculum standard calls for teaching students to communicate in a diverse society and maintaining a balance between courses in journalism and mass communications and other disciplines, primarily in the liberal arts and sciences. Agricultural communications programs would typically have the same kind of guideline but require a minor or other coherent concentration of courses in some field of agriculture. This is the very thing that makes agricultural communications and agricultural journalism programs unique from mainstream journalism and mass communication programs.

Student Records/Advising

University regulations assure good record keeping. The more likely problem is advising—both quality and quantity. Some agricultural communications programs have the equivalent of one full-time faculty member or even less with dozens of students to advise. What adviser-student ratio is desired? Other concerns might center on whether faculty or staff are sources of the advising. Whatever the advising structure, high-quality student advising is essential for accreditation.

Instruction/Evaluation

A regular, formal assessment of teaching is required. Most universities have sound teaching evaluation procedures in place, including the use of faculty peer evaluations. Department chairs or heads are expected to provide teaching oversight. Citations for outstanding teaching and other evidence of instructional innovation, quality, and dedication are evidence of excellent teaching. ACEJMC recommends a student-teacher ratio of 15-1 and not exceeding 20-1. Agricultural communications instruction might fall short of this requirement with large-enrollment service courses open to all students.

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Faculty: Full-time/Part-time

ACEJMC requires that faculty be academically and professionally qualified for their responsibilities, and full-time faculty must have primary responsibility for teaching, research, and service. When it becomes difficult to find faculty with degrees or training in agricultural communications, journalism and mass communication, our field often turns to others such as those with backgrounds in agricultural education. Some programs use only part-time coordinators or instructors.

Student Internships

ACEJMC encourages at least one semester of carefully monitored and supervised internship experience with supervision and evaluation provided by media professionals. Internships should be related to journalism and mass communication. Most agricultural communications programs place a high premium on students gaining practical experience, and most have an internship requirement. Therefore, this requirement would not be difficult to meet if it were part of an agricultural communications accreditation process.

Equipment and Facilities

Journalism programs use computer labs for courses such as news writing, publication layout and design, and print and video editing. Portable equipment, such as digital and video cameras, is needed for fieldwork. Agricultural communications programs would require the same kinds of student resources. Administrative linkages with schools of journalism or applied communications units in colleges of agriculture can greatly affect a program's accessibility to equipment and services.

Scholarship, Research, Creative and Professional Activities

This ACEJMC standard is meant to stretch faculty in areas beyond the teaching function, such as in research and other creative activity. Faculty are expected to show activity in these areas even if one's program is strictly an undergraduate teaching program. Such efforts are intended to help keep faculty current in their field and to make contributions to the body of knowledge in their profession. This standard might be difficult to achieve in agricultural communications, particularly for understaffed programs with large teaching loads and those where agricultural

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communications instructors hold nontenure-track or nonfaculty positions. In such programs, there often is not a major research expectation.

Public Service

Expectations of this standard are that faculty would provide services, such as media workshops, lectures, refresher courses, and similar activities, to communications professionals and high school journalism programs. As with the scholarship standard, this standard may be difficult to meet in understaffed programs.

Graduates

This standard involves keeping in regular contact with alumni, periodically assessing the work experience of graduates who work in communications, and making improvements in the program based on that input. This standard probably would not be difficult for agricultural communications programs to meet. Many already incorporate exit interviews with graduating seniors or have an advisory committee consisting of career professionals or alumni. In addition, most publish newsletters and use Web sites to maintain communication with graduates, current students, and prospective students.

Diversity

Perhaps one of the more difficult standards for agricultural communications to meet centers on the racial and ethnic diversity of its students. In the past, programs have attracted primarily young white people with farm or rural backgrounds. With increased interest in public relations and marketing and less interest in purely journalistic writing, more nonrural students have entered our programs in recent years. With respect to gender, diversity has been reached as female students have outnumbered male students in agricultural communications programs nationally for some time. Another dimension is the attainment of diverse faculty. Some minorities are on agricultural communications faculties, but there has never been a study to determine minority composition of agricultural communications faculty.

These 12 ACEJMC standards have been a definitive set of criteria for a number of years for journalism programs around the country. Agricultural communications may find it necessary to eliminate

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some of these or add others if it should pursue an accreditation process. One thing that seems to be ignored in the ACEJMC standards and which seems rather important for agricultural communications programs is student membership and participation in extracurricular activities related to the profession. For example, should some value be placed on the level of activity and visibility of students in Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow or other student professional organizations?

Despite this omission, these 12 standards constitute an impressive set of objectives that should be on our profession's "to consider" list. Table 2 lists these standards and provides an estimate by the authors of how the Ohio State University Agricultural Communication Program might rank. It also provides a column for other faculty to use in evaluating their programs. Because the views and perceptions of academic agricultural communicators will ultimately dictate whether an accreditation process can or should be formed for the discipline, the following section provides findings from a national survey of agricultural communications faculty regarding accreditation and related issues.

Faculty Perceptions of Accreditation

The researchers developed a 10-item survey instrument to measure attitudes of agricultural communications faculty toward accreditation and other major issues facing their programs. The instrument, composed primarily of open-ended questions, was distributed via e-mail in June 2002 to 30 faculty listed in the 2001-02 National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) membership directory. The directory includes all universities in the United States and Puerto Rico with active ACT chapters.

These faculty represented some 22 programs in agricultural communications and agricultural journalism. A sample of five university department chairs also was selected to represent the largest agricultural communications programs and to provide an administrative perspective of accreditation and related issues. Twelve faculty members and four of the five chairs responded to the survey for an overall response rate of 45 percent. Respondents represented 11 different universities and academic agricultural communications programs, or about half of the country's agricultural communications academic programs.

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Table 2. Application of ACE/JMC Standards to Ohio State Agricultural Communication Program

Standard	Ohio State Score ¹	Other Program
Governance / Administration	3	—
Budget	3	—
Curriculum	3	—
Student Records / Advising	4	—
Instruction / Evaluation	4	—
Faculty (full-time / part-time)	4	—
Student Internships	5	—
Equipment / Facilities	3	—
Scholarship / Creative Activities	4	—
Public Service	3	—
Contact with Graduates / Alumni	1	—
Diversity	3	—

¹ Values are scored 1-5 with 5 being the highest indicator. The Ohio State University scores were reached by consensus of the four agricultural communication faculty.

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Serious Issues Facing Agricultural Communications Programs

Respondents were first asked to list the two most serious issues or challenges facing agricultural communications programs. Although responses ran the gamut from low starting salaries to administrators' lack of understanding of agricultural communications, one issue that frequently appeared was the lack of qualified faculty. Both faculty and department chair respondents expressed concern over the insufficient number of qualified faculty to lead agricultural communications academic programs. One respondent wrote, "Because there hasn't been a large number of AgComm/Ag Journalism doctoral students graduating, universities have resorted to stealing from other programs, thus cannibalizing from the discipline."

Nearly half of the respondents cited image, focus of the profession and identity/legitimacy of the discipline as serious issues. One respondent noted that although many agricultural communications programs are part of agricultural education departments, "I don't think the AgEd faculty or straight journalism faculty recognize agricultural communications/agricultural journalism as a separate discipline."

Other responses included lack of scholarship, the need for a "theory-driven" curriculum as opposed to a "practice-driven" curriculum, and the lack of graduate programs in agricultural communications.

Importance and Relevance of Agricultural Communications Programs

Answers were almost evenly split to the question, "Do you think university administrators and other faculty fully understand the importance and relevance of agricultural communications at your university?" with a slight majority answering "No." Two respondents took the middle ground answering both "Yes and No."

Establishment of Standards Across the Discipline

Respondents were asked if they felt an accreditation process that would establish standards across the discipline would bring more prestige and recognition to agricultural communications. Five, or about one third of the respondents, answered, "Yes," but an equal number indicated they were unsure.

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One respondent noted, "There is a possibility that academic standards would unify ag comm/ag journalism nationally, but the problem is that I'm not sure they need to be standardized. It seems that each state/program has different needs and may serve a different target audience." On the other hand, the same respondent indicated it would be beneficial to have resources such as curriculum kits or books to assist in advancing the profession.

Several respondents opposed to accreditation noted that the process would be only more "red tape" and bureaucracy. "The rewards would not outweigh the added effort and expense," explained one.

Feasibility of a National Uniform Agricultural Communications Curriculum

Responses were even more negative to the questions, "Do you feel it's possible to establish a nationwide standard, uniform agricultural communications curriculum and do you think it's desirable to do so?" About half of the respondents doubted that the establishment of a standard nationwide curriculum was possible, and a similar number stated that it would not be desirable.

One respondent said, "Programs, especially small programs with small faculties and limited facilities, have to work within their limits and emphasize their strengths in terms of faculty expertise. Standardization would be a burden on small programs." At the same time, nearly one third of the respondents highlighted the need for some "common base" that the academic programs could share. "A nationwide uniform, standard curriculum is not possible, but nationwide standard guidelines are," wrote one respondent. "If you get into specific course recommendations, you'll get bogged down. But guidelines about core content and competencies are possible and definitely desirable."

Enhanced Recognition and Prestige from Accreditation

An argument often touted as a benefit of a national accreditation process is that it brings greater recognition and prestige to academic programs. Study participants were asked if they felt accreditation of agricultural communications programs would increase their recognition among university administrators and communications professionals in private industry. Eight of the 16 respondents stated that an accreditation process would increase

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program recognition among university administrators, while three felt that such a process would increase recognition among professionals in private industry.

“Administrators might appreciate it, but accreditation won’t make much difference to professionals who already know which programs are strong and which programs produce the most capable graduates,” explained one respondent. Another wrote, “Outside of academia, no one cares. Inside academia, it is usually only a mechanism to help a program get resources.”

Department chair responses were evenly split with two respondents stating that accreditation would not bring greater recognition or prestige among either university administrators or industry professionals, while two felt that it would.

Costs of Accreditation

Because accreditation is a costly process than can total several thousand dollars to be accredited for a five- or six-year period (ACEJMC, 2002), respondents were asked if they felt such an expenditure would be money well spent by their institutions. Nine, or nearly two thirds of the respondents, reported they did not believe it would be money well spent or noted that current budget situations would make such an expenditure prohibitive. “Unfortunately, we are in a situation where we need all funds to keep our program operating on a daily basis,” said one respondent. Another noted, “In tight budget times, the high cost of accreditation would likely be closely scrutinized.”

Advantages of Accrediting Agricultural Communications Programs

Study respondents listed what they felt would be the major advantages of accrediting academic agricultural communications programs. Advantages cited most often were that accreditation could provide minimum quality standards for all programs and provide some justification and leverage with administration for additional resources and recognition. One respondent wrote, “Accreditation is a quick way for administrators to identify strong programs and it helps programs justify themselves during administrative reviews.” Another respondent shared that “...a recent accreditation program for the School of Journalism here was reinforcement for hiring a few more faculty members and

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consolidation of the school into one building. So, it can serve as another voice to support positive action for the program.”

Disadvantages of Accrediting Agricultural Communications Programs

Respondents were also asked to list what they felt would be the major disadvantages of accrediting academic agricultural communications programs. Cost of accreditation and time to implement were listed as major disadvantages by both faculty and department chair respondents. One respondent noted, “Accreditation is expensive in terms of time (especially) and money. It could put small and fledgling programs at a competitive disadvantage. It could remove programmatic flexibility. It could prevent programs from building on the unique strengths of their faculty.” A second respondent agreed, saying, “It does take time and money on a continuing basis. There could be a one-type-fits-all concept, but this should be discouraged. There is merit in differences.”

Composition of Accreditation Teams

Respondents were asked to list what groups should be represented on an accreditation team for agricultural communications programs. There was relatively strong agreement concerning what groups should be included. Among groups identified were faculty and administrators from other agricultural communications programs, alumni, current students, and communications industry professionals. One respondent suggested including representatives from any of the professional agricultural communications organizations, while two respondents felt it would be worthwhile to include journalism / communications faculty on the accreditation team.

General Comments

Finally, respondents were given the opportunity to provide open-ended comments on the accreditation issue. One respondent explained, “If we really want respect on campus, we need to be effective researchers and teachers. It really comes down to our scholarship. An accreditation means very, very little on campus, nothing to industry, and only a little to parents.”

Another respondent wrote, “So how do agricultural communications / agricultural journalism programs address the

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pressing issues of justifying and marketing ourselves without an accreditation process? The same way programs in many other academic disciplines do: build curricula based upon the unique strengths of existing faculty in the program; prepare graduates who are capable professionals armed with specific skills and knowledge; put effort into placing students in important and visible communications positions within and outside agriculture; encourage faculty, students, and alumni to be active and visible in agricultural and non-agricultural professional organizations consisting of practitioners as well as academicians; and foster a sense of pride for the academic discipline among current students and alumni through professional organizations devoted to agricultural communications/agricultural journalism.”

Discussion

The year 2005 marks the centennial anniversary of the first college course that taught writing for the agricultural press. John Clay, a well-known Chicago livestock commissioner and avid agricultural writer, provided an annual \$1,000 endowment to Iowa State College to support the effort. As we recognize this milestone, the question remains whether our second century will bring us the respect and recognition sought by earlier generations of agricultural communications professionals.

For some agricultural communicators, accreditation of academic programs represents one possible avenue to increase our recognition and prestige among key stakeholder groups, including industry leaders and university administrators. However, this paper argues that three significant questions need to be resolved before agricultural communications makes a commitment to establishing accreditation standards.

First, do agricultural communications faculty firmly agree that there is value in having a formal accreditation process for agricultural communications? There clearly is not a consensus in mainstream journalism that accreditation is essential, and the number of accredited programs has grown only slightly in the past 20 years. After years of being accredited, the School of Journalism and Communication at The Ohio State University, one of the larger programs in the nation, decided to let its accreditation lapse and to refocus energies toward public affairs journalism.

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Other accreditation critics argue that *graduates'* education and skills are more important indicators of program quality than whether a given program is or is not accredited (Hebert & Thorn, 1993). Whether agricultural communications evaluation criteria should focus on educational outcomes of students rather than institutional characteristics emphasized by ACEJMC is an important matter for consideration and discussion.

Second, what individuals should be included in accreditation teams for agricultural communications, and what is the ideal mix of practitioners and academicians? Lubinescu et al. (2001) point out that no established procedures exist for determining how evaluators should be selected for specialized accreditation. As mentioned earlier, the relatively small number of agricultural communications faculty nationally poses a challenge to developing an accreditation process in the field. However, over-reliance on industry representatives could bias the accreditation process in the direction of undergraduate programs at the expense of other important activities. To be sure, quality of the baccalaureate program is one of the foremost priorities of agricultural communications faculty and, indeed, a major reason to consider accreditation in the first place. However, other important functions, such as graduate education and research, should not be neglected in the process (Tucker, 1996). Agricultural communications faculty also must ensure that applied communication skills are not emphasized at the expense of liberal arts and general education.

Third, assuming that agricultural communications faculty agree on the value of establishing an accreditation system, are they able to invest the time and resources needed to launch a successful accreditation system? The cost of implementing such a process is high considering the fact that most agricultural communications faculty already say they suffer from limited resources and time. Significant time commitments would need to be made during self-studies of one's own program as well as in serving on review teams for other programs. It is not clear that agricultural communications has a critical mass of faculty to meet this ambitious goal. It also is important to note that accreditation would result in our 20-plus programs being divided into two major groups—those accredited and those deemed substandard.

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Can our programs, which for the most part lack critical mass in terms of faculty and monetary resources, endure such a division and maintain any measure of programmatic self-esteem?

Conclusions

In this section, the authors close with several observations. These value statements represent our personal views and are not intended to be the last word on the issue of accreditation. Indeed, we hope to encourage additional discussion and debate on this important issue.

Based on the review of literature and findings from the e-mail survey of agricultural communications faculty, we embrace many of the concepts and objectives associated with accreditation. For instance, the notion of accountability to stakeholders—students, employers, university administrators—is important and valuable if our goal is to enhance the image of academic agricultural communications programs.

At the same time, we feel that the development of a structured accreditation process is not in the best interest of agricultural communications at this time. Too many questions remain unanswered about what accrediting standards should be used, who should be empowered to make such decisions, and whether there is an adequate critical mass of academicians in the discipline to carry out such an initiative.¹ Rather, we opt for continuous evaluation and improvement of our programs and recognition of the relevance and importance of standards such as those of ACEJMC. Similarly, we think that critical self-studies can and should be undertaken by individual institutions to clarify their mission and values and to develop adaptive strategies to build on strengths and shore up weaknesses (Garten, 1994; Martin et al., 2001). These and other concepts and practices can be adopted by individual institutions without the profession implementing a formal, comprehensive accreditation system.

We also feel it is important to accommodate the diversity of specific programs to meet local and state educational and professional needs and the differing climates of our institutions and academic units. Different teaching strategies, curricular arrangements and program configurations provide choices for

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students and also allow individual programs to build unique academic identities both within and outside of their universities. We oppose adoption of any standards or procedures that threaten this diversity or lead to an academic sameness among programs.

Finally, we think it is time for a more serious and concerted effort to share experiences and ideas across our programs. At present, this effort is very much fragmented. For example, not all agricultural communications faculty belong to an organization such as the Agricultural Communicators in Education. Therefore, opportunities for all parties to be present at the same table do not exist. Summit meetings like that which occurred at Kansas City in 1993 are too few.

What solutions exist for continued improvement of academic agricultural communications programs is not all that clear, but it seems quite certain that accreditation, though a noble idea, may pose more risks than benefits for our programs, even as we approach the centennial mile marker of our specialized discipline.

Keywords

Accreditation, academic programs, professionalism

Note

¹See Young et al. (1983) and Pare (1996) for a discussion of cautions related to the proliferation of accrediting procedures in both academia and private industry. The authors also provide a helpful discussion of recommended alternatives to accreditation.

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