A curriculum for university agricultural communication programs: A synthesis of research

Research paper

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Abstract

The primary focus of this synthesis of research was to identify previous studies regarding agricultural communication curriculum. Research deficiencies were also determined to aid in future investigations. Articles utilized in this study were obtained through a library database search from seven sources and were published between 1972 and 2007. Studies pertaining to agricultural communication degree program features, student characteristics, and curriculum elements were evaluated. Research identifying current student, alumni, and agricultural communication professional perceptions were also synthesized. The majority of previous research utilized researcher developed questionnaires or surveys and was descriptive in design. In addition, many studies were more than 10 years old, or were regionally confined; therefore, an updated national evaluation of agricultural communication programs and program trends is necessary. The documented demand for a master’s degree program in agricultural communication also implies a variety of research prospects.

Keywords

Agricultural communication, curriculum, degree programs, synthesis of research
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More than a century ago, students at Iowa State University were the first to have the opportunity to complete coursework in agricultural journalism (as cited in Evans, 1972). At that time, the main focus was to relay breaking news from agricultural experiment stations to the entire agricultural industry (as cited in Weckman, Witham, & Telg, 2000). Approximately 80 years later, more than 25 colleges and universities were offering degree programs in what is now primarily known as agricultural communication (Doerfert & Cepica, 1991; Reisner, 1990a), and it continues to develop today.

Over time, communication technology has changed, which subsequently directed myriad changes in agricultural communication across the nation. “Agricultural communicators are not agriculturalists primarily, but communicators who have a specialty” (Sprecker & Rudd, 1998, p. 40); therefore, careful consideration should be taken when creating specific curricula. Determining the optimal knowledge and skill preparation for agricultural communication professionals was cited as a key research question for the 2007-2010 National Research Agenda for Agricultural Education and Communication (Osborne, n. d.). Although multiple research studies have been conducted on agricultural communication programs and perceptions regarding curriculum, numerous perspectives about university agricultural communication curriculum have surfaced. To aid in future research of curriculum, this paper attempted to organize all pertinent articles related to agricultural communication curriculum.

Objectives

The key objective of this study was to synthesize previous research concerning university agricultural communication curriculum. An additional objective was established to identify any deficiencies associated with agricultural communication curriculum research.
Methodology

Eight sources were utilized to collect data for this investigation: *Journal of Applied Communications, Journal of Agricultural Education, Agricultural Communicators in Education Quarterly, American Association of Agricultural College Editors Quarterly, North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture Journal, Agricultural Communication Documentation Center Database, ERIC Documentation Reproduction Service, and EBSCO Databases*. To determine relevance to agricultural communication curriculum, article titles and abstracts were evaluated. Although the researchers encountered some difficulty in obtaining pertinent articles, a total of 16 peer-reviewed articles and theses, ranging from 1972 to 2007, were gathered for content analysis. Upon assessment, article findings were categorized as program evaluations, curriculum perceptions, and agricultural communication master’s program research. Research pertaining to agricultural communication program evaluations was further divided into program features and student characteristics.

Findings

Program Evaluations

Evaluations of university agricultural communication program features and their students were common foci of previous research relating to agricultural communication curriculum. Evans and Bolick (1982) revealed that 21 colleges and universities nationwide had undergraduate agricultural communication programs with only one housing a graduate program. Reisner (1990a) found 26 colleges and universities offered degrees integrating agriculture and communications, seven of which also offered advanced degrees; however, Doerfert and Cepica (1991) determined that 30 undergraduate programs were available. In 1982, 51% of the agricultural communication programs were less than 20 years old (Evans & Bolick, 1982).
Reisner (1990a) and Weckman, Witham, and Telg (2000) indicated that a large number of agricultural communication programs were associated with agricultural education or extension education academic departments. For students, the most frequent degree choice was a general agricultural communication degree (Reisner, 1990a). The majority of institutions relied on communication departments to supply the required communication courses for agricultural communication students (Reisner, 1990a), since many institutions do not offer agricultural communication courses (Evans & Bolick, 1982; Reisner, 1990b). Among those institutions that provided agricultural communication specific coursework, 30% of these courses were not offered before 1984 (Reisner, 1990b). Studies have found the majority of agricultural communication courses emphasize the development of communication skills (Evans & Bolick, 1982; Reisner, 1990b). Most programs had agricultural course requirements equivalent to those recommended by agricultural communication professionals since students were required to complete a specific number of credit hours in communication and additional components, such as internships and special problems were utilized (Reisner, 1990a, 1990b).

As for agricultural communication students, enrollment numbers vary among institutions (Evans & Bolick, 1982; Reisner, 1990a; Weckman et al., 2000). Evans and Bolick (1982) found typical agricultural communication programs to have 10 to 19 students, while Weckman et al. (2000) found programs to have an average of 32 students. When reviewing agricultural communication programs in the United States, Reisner (1990a), and Doerfert and Cepica (1991) indicated that more than 65% of the schools had a student enrollment less than 30. In 2000, eight institutions offering agricultural communication programs showed an enrollment growth over the previous five years, and six foresaw future increases within the next five years (Weckman et al., 2000). Most recently, Cartmell, Majors, Ashlock, and Sitton (2007) indicated a 625% increase in
the number of agricultural communication students at Oklahoma State University from 1991 to 2003.

**Curriculum Perceptions**

Another major theme among previous research was related to the perceptions of agricultural communication program alumni and current agricultural communication students regarding degree program satisfaction. At the University of Florida, over 50% of agricultural communication graduates indicated they were satisfied with the career training they received from their educational coursework (Irani & Scherler, 2002). More specifically, Cooper and Bowen (1989) found that Ohio State University graduates were very pleased with their agriculture, communication, and journalism requirements. A study of Texas Tech University agricultural communication students revealed agriculture and communication were also important areas for current students; however, agriculture courses received a significantly higher rating than mass communication coursework (Tucker & Paulson, 1988). Studies have found that graduates perceive internships as an extremely effective method of enhancing agricultural communication skills (Cooper & Bowen, 1989; Irani & Scherler, 2002). In addition, some of the most rewarding experiences noted by agricultural communication graduates and students include their involvement with university publications and student organizations, such as Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (Cooper & Bowen, 1989; Tucker & Paulson, 1988).

In addition to degree program satisfaction, several studies ($n = 5$) were conducted to gather perceptions from agricultural communication professionals and alumni about agricultural communication curriculum recommendations (Evans, 1972; Kroupa & Evans, 1973, 1976; Sitton, Cartmell, & Sargent, 2005; Sprecker & Rudd, 1998). First and foremost, research
indicated that communication skills should be the basis of an agricultural communication curriculum (Kroupa & Evans, 1976; Sitton et al., 2005; Sprecker & Rudd, 1998). Many agricultural communication professionals believe that “general communications or public relations-specific proficiencies” are more significant than “technical agriculture proficiencies” (Sitton et al., 2005, p. 35; Sprecker & Rudd, 1998). However, Kroupa and Evans (1976) found that a majority of professionals surveyed considered agricultural coursework to be a major component of agricultural communication curricula. From flexible course offerings to an array of necessary writing styles, variety was a common factor in curriculum recommendations among research studies (Bailey-Evans, 1994; Kroupa & Evans, 1973, 1976; Sprecker & Rudd, 1998).

By obtaining a solid education in communication and writing, students can branch out into many different areas of agricultural communication (Sprecker & Rudd, 1998). In addition, Kroupa and Evans (1976) concluded that agricultural communication curriculum should include extensive agricultural courses; however, only a limited number should be mandatory to allow students to specialize in their area of choice.

Agricultural Communication Master’s Program

Although numerous studies ($n = 8$) identified perceptions regarding agricultural communication programs, especially undergraduate programs (Cooper & Bowen, 1989; Evans, 1972; Kroupa & Evans, 1973, 1976; Sitton et al., 2005; Sprecker & Rudd, 1998), a minimal number of studies ($n = 2$) have investigated the demand for an agricultural communication master’s degree program and its desirable components. Wilson, Paulson, and Henderson (1991) found 62% of Agricultural Communicators in Education members perceived a need for an agricultural communication master’s degree option. Of those surveyed, 77% held that enhancing
communication skills should be the key objective of a master’s degree program, instead of research or management skills (Wilson et al., 1991). Agricultural communication professionals indicated that 23 different focus areas containing 90 curricular topics were crucial elements for an agricultural communication master’s degree program (Simon, Haygood, Akers, Doerfert, & Davis, 2005). While communication may be an important aspect of this master’s program, 88% of ACE members expressed that a variety of agricultural courses should also be required (Wilson et al., 1991).

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

An overwhelming majority of the existing research regarding agricultural communication curriculum employed researcher developed questionnaires or surveys to collect descriptive data. Although two different descriptive-correlational studies were found, it appears that no experimental research relating to agricultural communication curriculum has been conducted. The scholarly body of knowledge would be benefited by empirical data that determines the best agricultural communication curriculum, or the benefits that the current programs possess.

While previous research has indicated that agricultural communication is a growing field, and there is a greater need for additional programs every year, very few studies exist verifying these trends. Each year, the Association for Communication Excellence’s academic programs special interest group completes an update of general program information for 11 different universities offering agricultural communication programs; however, previous research has shown that more programs exist (Academic Programs Special Interest Group, 2006). Since 10 of the 16 articles identified in this synthesis were more than 10 years old, current studies are necessary to evaluate potential changes for the education of future agricultural communicators. Therefore, a thorough, updated census survey of university agricultural communication
programs, their students, and its features would prove helpful to both current and future students. In addition, the genre could propel forward more vigorously through notations regarding changes that have occurred in agricultural communication curriculum over the past 35 years.

As with most descriptive research, individual perceptions are essential. By unearthing the current needs of the agricultural industry, agricultural communication curricular programs can continue to produce graduates with the essential skills needed to be successful; however, as stated before, the majority of available research is dated, and may not serve as an accurate foundation for grounding current course offerings. By conducting new studies, researchers can investigate the ideal agricultural communication curriculum as reported by professionals and graduates, as well as compile perceptions of students and faculty regarding current agricultural communication coursework.

With a documented demand for the creation of a master’s degree program in agricultural communication, research opportunities abound involving these students. From the value of the program to perceptions about the curriculum, these studies would enable universities to look at benefits of the program and also where curricular improvements could be made. In addition, universities currently not offering agricultural communication master’s programs could evaluate the results as a means to consider implementing a program of their own.

Although there were many studies analyzed for this synthesis, the majority of articles were not readily available through the library database search. Therefore, it is possible that these scholarly works are reaching only a narrow audience. By publishing future studies in a wider array of scholarly publications, researchers would likely encourage further investigations in agricultural communication.
Research Deficiencies

After reviewing the information gathered by the synthesis of research regarding university agricultural communication curriculum, numerous deficiencies were identified. Further research should be conducted to answer the following questions:

1. What empirical value do university agricultural communication curricula provide?
2. What is the current state of all university agricultural communication programs in the United States? How many programs are available? How many students are enrolled? What are the common curricular features?
3. Have any growth trends been expressed in university agricultural communication programs during the past ten years?
4. How has agricultural communication curriculum changed over the past 35 years?
5. Currently, what are the perceptions of agricultural communication professionals regarding necessary agricultural communication curriculum?
6. What are the components of an “ideal” agricultural communication curriculum?
7. How satisfied are current agricultural communication students with their agricultural communication curriculum?
8. What are the perceptions of agricultural communication faculty about the current state of agricultural communication curriculum?
9. What value do the current agricultural communication masters’ programs have to the agricultural industry?
10. What perceptions do agricultural communication master’s students have about the effectiveness of the current masters’ programs?
11. What are the components of a high quality agricultural communication master’s program?
References


