

2016 Agricultural Communications Vision Consortium

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Introduction

Since the early 1990s, communicators have rapidly evolved their methods in order to keep up with the newest technology trends of the time. In turn, the education of the next generation of communicators, as well as the faculty members who train them, have had to constantly change as well. Specifically for agricultural communications (ag comm), it is important to keep industry and academia working together to ensure students receive an education that is on track with the expectations and current trends of the industry; industry suggests ag comm curriculum be evaluated every two to five years to ensure this (Doerfert & Miller, 2006; Terry Vaughn, Vernon, Lockaby, Bailey-Evans, & Reherman, 1994). Although many universities conduct research with their stakeholder groups to develop new and improve the quality of existing curriculum, ag comm faculty were collectively voicing a need for a wide-scale, national needs assessment to determine core ag comm competencies involving higher education and industry.

During the 2014 Ag Media Summit, a group of ag comm faculty members agreed to organize a meeting involving both faculty and industry members to begin the process of this needs assessment. Using the model left by an Agricultural Communications Summit in 2004, plans began to assemble agricultural communicators from both industry and academia to discuss curriculum, research, and the future of ag comm. The faculty agreed that meeting in conjunction with the Southern Association of Agriculture Scientists (SAAS) in San Antonio would be conducive to most travel and work schedules.

How it works/program phases/methodology/steps

During the early planning of the 2016 Agriculture Communications Vision Consortium, two faculty members from separate universities volunteered to serve as chairs. They applied for and received a USDA Higher Education Challenge Grant to fund the event. Three objectives were established for the consortium: 1) Discuss the essential knowledge base for the industry, 2) Identify emerging trends that can be addressed through curriculum, and 3) Explore the possibility of a national research agenda. An external facilitator was hired to help create the agenda and lead the discussion. The meeting planners selected four panelists to kick off the discussion. They also identified leading industry professionals that work for national organizations and invited them to participate in the consortium. Invitations to all ag comm faculty nationwide were sent via email.

Participants registered through Eventbrite.com, an online event registration tool. External sponsorships for food and beverages were secured. Nearly 70 faculty, industry professionals, and doctoral students attended. The consortium kicked off with a panel discussion that included very esteemed and respected leaders in the ag comm industry: Lyle Orwig, Charleston|Orwig; Janet Adkison, RFD TV; Cindy Cunningham, National Pork Board; and Mace Thornton, American Farm Bureau Federation. The panel discussion was followed by breakout groups to identify ag comm stakeholders. Day two began with a speed dating style question and answer session where each attendee answered a series of six questions that contributed to the overall objectives of the consortium. Next, everyone was divided into six groups to further discuss the overarching questions, and present summary findings to the entire group. The attendees were then broken into two groups: one group discussed goals for ag comm curriculum, and the

other group discussed research goals. Both groups were given the opportunity to present their findings. All attendees were able to weigh in on the findings.

Discussion on curriculum and research took more time than expected, so the discussion did not address the emerging trends objective.

Results to Date/Implications

The vision statements—the essential knowledge base and research agenda—are being distributed to a panel of faculty members to review and refine. Preliminarily, the group found that writing skills are the biggest element of the essential knowledge base, and should be emphasized and included in every ag comm academic program. The groups stated that developing theory should be an area of focus in ag comm research. A final report is being compiled to distribute to all who attended. Researchers are currently collecting data on the post event evaluation.

Future plans/Advice to others

Once the panel of ag comm faculty members reviews the vision statements, the event organizers will collect comments about the statements through a panel of faculty members that will be distributed via email. Based on feedback, statements may be revised, and will be reviewed again by the panel of faculty members. An article presenting the vision statements will be written and submitted to the Journal of Applied Communications.

This process can be replicated in any discipline looking to bridge the gap between industry and academia. The event can be easily modified to fit the needs of any group. Advice to other disciplines looking to host such an event would be to identify and invite industry representatives at least six months in advance, look for external donors for sponsorships, and partner with a pre-existing conference to take advantage of discounted meeting room rates. Partnering with SAAS also helped reduce many faculty members' travel costs as many were attending SAAS anyway and did not require additional travel funds. The meeting organizers recommend allowing additional time for the next meeting, which, based on participant feedback, will occur in five years. The two day format was not enough time.

Costs/Resources Needed

The facilitator was a necessary expense as it allowed the meeting organizers to participate in the discussion. It was also prudent to have someone that did not necessarily consider herself an ag communicator to keep the meeting on track and ensure the objectives were met (\$1,500 + travel). Each panelist received a \$500 honorarium to help offset travel (\$2,000 total). A snack break on Monday and a coffee break on Tuesday were the only food expenses. Food was not a required budget item; however, it was nice to re-energize the participants (\$1,200). The conference room was complementary from SAAS. Audio-visual equipment (\$400), printing (\$50), and facilitator's supplies (\$100) were other small expenses. Total expenses for the consortium were \$5,250.

References

- Doerfert, D. L., & Miller, R. P. (2006). What are agricultural industry professionals trying to tell us? Implications for university-level agricultural communications curricula. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 90(3), 17-31.
- Terry, R., Vaughn, P., Vernon, J.S., Lockaby, J., Bailey-Evans, F., & Reheman, M. (1994). *Enhancing the agricultural communications curriculum: A vision for the future*. Texas Tech University. Lubbock, TX.