

## Using Basecamp in an Agricultural Communications Block Course Structure

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### **Introduction/Need for idea or research**

Agricultural communications industry professionals desire more developed “indirect” competencies in agricultural communications graduates, including a more holistic approach to communications, tactical and strategic skills, and project management ability (Irlbeck & Akers, 2009; Morgan, 2010). In order to help students learn these soft skills in the classroom, an innovative approach to instruction in agricultural communications curriculum is needed (Doerfert & Miller, 2006). The Texas Tech University agricultural communications (ACOM) undergraduate program began using a “block” classroom structure for its four senior-level courses during the spring 2017 semester. The new structure, modeled after the agricultural education block system, included ACOM courses in publication development, campaigns, advanced web design, and media convergence. The purpose of this new structure was to provide students with a structured learning environment that mimicked a cooperative communications environment. To assist with the ACOM Block’s goal of boosting students’ understanding of strategic organizational communications, the students and instructors used an online program called Basecamp.

### **How It Works**

Basecamp is a web-based project management system designed to help streamline internal and external communications. Specifically, it “helps organize projects, internal communications, and client work in one place so you have a central source of truth” (Basecamp, 2017, para. 1). The program uses six core communication tools: a schedule, message boards, docs and files, to-dos, automatic check-ins, and the “campfire,” a casual chatroom for project contributors. With these tools, Basecamp attempts to replace several common communication tools within organizations such as emails, conference calls, and face-to-face meetings. Each tool encourages collaboration, open communication, and accountability on project progress. An additional tool, pings, enable quick, one-on-one messaging within Basecamp.

The ACOM Block used Basecamp to assist with the unique organizational and communication challenges created by the combined four-course structure. All 22 students enrolled in the Block and each of the four Block course instructors created user accounts and were added to the “ACOM Block Headquarters” within Basecamp. The Basecamp schedule feature was used to chronologically list all deadlines for assignments, quizzes, and projects for the four Block courses. The docs and files feature was used to house all course syllabi, resources, and shared documents from each course in one centralized location. Students and instructors were able to add materials to these folders. The casual, open communication of the campfire feature was used to make announcements or pose questions.

To determine perceptions of using Basecamp, a five-question Qualtrics survey using open-ended and Likert-style questions was sent to all 22 Block students at the end of the semester. Fifteen students responded to the survey.

### **Results to Date/Implications**

Overall, students reported a positive experience when using Basecamp in the ACOM Block. Of the 15 respondents, 60% said Basecamp kept them more organized, 86.7% said they used Basecamp to communicate with fellow students, 80% used the program to communicate with instructors, 93% said it was a helpful place to find course documents and materials, and 73% said Basecamp was more helpful than Blackboard.

Of all of Basecamp's tools and features, students favored the ability to easily access all course resources in one location, especially the Docs & Files option. Others noted the ability to communicate with fellow classmates in a closed social media-style environment was helpful for asking questions about assignments and projects. A few students reported there was a learning curve with Basecamp at the beginning, but did understand its benefit to group communication. As a drawback, students expressed their displeasure with the overlapping functions of Basecamp and Blackboard, specifically stating they wished they could submit assignments via Basecamp. Three students stated the Block should only use one of the two programs.

Some students noted annoyance with the multitude of notifications they received from Basecamp. Within Basecamp's six core tools, students said the comprehensive schedule was the most useful. One student noted, "It was nice to see everything that is going on in all of the courses in one place."

### **Future Plans/Advice to Others**

Basecamp provided a central, organized hub for communication, file access, and scheduling during the ACOM Block and facilitated the students' experience with strategic communication. The capabilities inherent in Basecamp fostered student collaboration on group projects.

The ACOM Block will continue to use Basecamp as a means for organizing course content and teaching the soft skill of project collaboration. Efforts should be made to better streamline the use of Basecamp and Blackboard and clarify why each is being used in the course. For example, Basecamp provides more tools for collaboration and teamwork while Blackboard allows for confidential assignment submission and grade tracking. Students should be given clear expectations for when Basecamp, Blackboard, and email are used within the ACOM Block. Based on student feedback, course instructors should strive for consistency between schedule dates and deadlines between Basecamp and Blackboard to avoid student confusion. Because students are more accustomed to using email for regular communication, Basecamp's message forwarding function should be used to avoid missing important announcements. Additionally, if instructors are going to encourage the use of Basecamp in the course, they need to be just as engaged in the program as the students, including responding to pings, message board questions, and campfire discussions.

### **Costs/Resources Needed**

Basecamp is free when used for verified educational purposes. Getting free educational access to the program only requires an email be sent to Basecamp from a university account. Once an instructor has set up an account, they can invite students to join the project. Basecamp can be accessed via web browser and the free Basecamp smartphone app, which provides push notifications to project contributors.

## References

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