Research Poster

New directions: Exploring establishing new agricultural communications academic programs internationally

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Introduction

As a growing field, agricultural communications academic programs in the United States have changed with the times and, on average, increased in numbers since studies in 2000, suggesting an increase in popularity and student and industry demand (Miller, Large, Rucker & Buck, 2015). This demand is timely, as the profession has never been more important. The agricultural industry has never been under greater pressure and the role of the agricultural communicator is fundamental to sharing information about key societal issues (Cannon, Specht & Buck, 2016). Agriculture in Canada is also under immense scrutiny, with a communication gap between industry workers and the general population (Hamel & Saindon, 2017). Despite experiencing the same problems, Canada currently has no agricultural communications programs available at any university or college. Presently, the University of Guelph offers two agricultural communications courses for students, but no specific major or minor program. By better understanding the methods, experiences, and perspectives of actors within the agricultural communications academic landscape who have established or remodeled ag comm programs in the United States and other countries, we can be better informed in creating such programs in Canadian institutions.

Conceptual Framework

There are many components that go into designing and developing curricula. For this study, we followed the curriculum development model posed by Peter Wolf (2007) that details the process through three distinct stages: Curriculum Visioning, Curriculum Development, and Alignment, Coordination, and Development. We specifically focused on the Curriculum Visioning stage for our study. This stage involves curriculum assessment, program objectives and program focus, which are achieved through determining attributes of the "ideal graduate," foundational content for the program, desired educational experiences, and creating a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis with help from program stakeholders (Wolf, 2007). Our study has begun the process of talking with stakeholders and experts, identifying foundational content and educational experiences, and preliminarily articulating "ideal graduate" attributes (Wolf, 2007).

Methods

This study used qualitative interview techniques. The objectives of this phenomenological study were to determine 1) what procedures led to success in program development, 2) what challenges faced ag comm program development, 3) what key skills and components should be included in programs and 4) what roles key players in ag comm (faculty, students, industry professionals) should play in program development (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Three interviews were conducted via Zoom, with current faculty members within agricultural communications academic programs in the United States. All participants are in ag comm faculty positions in the U.S. and have either had previous experience in ag comm program development internationally or are currently working within program development. They were chosen for those reasons. Participants were asked about their experiences with successes and challenges with U.S. and international ag comm program development, and how these may be replicated or avoided. Further, they were also asked what key elements, skills and concepts should be included in ag comm programs and how regional differences may impact design of a program. Finally, participants provided information about relationships between faculty, industry and students when designing ag comm

programs and what role each should have in the process. A qualitative open coding process was performed on responses to compare participant responses and identify clusters of meaning between responses and to accumulate direction for future program development (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). For credibility and transferability, transcripts were analyzed, and field notes were taken during interviews for triangulation.

Results

All participants emphasized that written communication skills are of utmost importance and should be the core of any agricultural communications program. While communications skills were rated a top priority (social media, visual media, public speaking, graphic design, web development), participants also agreed that students should have a background knowledge in agriculture, recommending they take ag science classes outside of the department. Participants agreed that ag comm industries in both Canada and the United States show a strong desire for ag comm graduates. They identified that industry professionals are key stakeholders along with students and institution faculty, and all should have input in program development. Moreover, a change agent or advocate should be acquired to advocate for the program in its early stages. Aside from academic components, all participants emphasized the need for extracurricular components, specifically, an Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) chapter, internship opportunities, and clubs. Having a good relationship with other colleges, such as the college of journalism, was recommended, so students would have opportunities to take those classes outside of the department while it grew. When asked of challenges, participants noted that establishing a program where it does not already exist is difficult, but it should be expanded from any existing elements. Further, since the program would be small, participants agreed that this would prove difficult when convincing administration to take the risk in establishing it.

Conclusions

Unsurprisingly, the most emphasized point from all interviews is the importance of having a strong written communications component in programs, followed closely by other general communications skills. These lent themselves handily in respect to the conceptual framework, specifically when identifying foundational content and the attributes of the “ideal graduate.” Oral speaking skills, social media, visual media, graphic design, and web development were all specifically mentioned as high priorities. Further, the participants endorsed having extracurriculars available to students outside of academic courses as ways to further not only student abilities but also international visibility for the academic program. When developing the program, we must consistently take feedback from industry stakeholders, faculty, and students directed to design the program with these groups in mind. Having these stakeholders as allies and advocates is essential to the initial start-up and long-term success of the program and to address challenges mentioned by participants.

Implications/Recommendations

These results highlight some important challenges and opportunities for agricultural communications program development in Canada. While a small program size and no existing Canadian model for success pose difficulties, having involved and passionate stakeholders and advocates, using existing programs in the United States as examples, and the overarching need for agricultural communicators within the industry can combat these barriers. Future analysis of successful programs across the nations should be conducted to collect information on the academic structure and other components that contribute to student success. Moreover, surveys and interviews should be carried out amongst stakeholder groups to ascertain industry, student,

and faculty needs and perspectives within ag comm to tailor the programs to those it will benefit. This will also build connections for future advocates of the program and lend itself to success.

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