

**An Industry Perspective of Competencies Needed for Agricultural Communications
Workforce Development**

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Introduction/Need for Research

Graduates prepared to meet the challenges and opportunities of the industry are critical for industry success (Robert et al., 2016). Regular in-depth curriculum review is recommended every two to five years because curriculum evaluations, along with industry relations, are proven to develop strong academic programs, preparing graduates to take on the demands of the industry (Morgan, 2010; Cannon et al., 2016; Easterly et al., 2017; Stripling & Ricketts, 2016, Robert et al., 2016). This research examines previous literature to identify agricultural graduate competency needs, highlighting opportunities for academic program development. This research focus aligns with priority three of the 2016-2020 American Association of Agricultural Education (AAAE) National Research Agenda: Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century (Roberts et al., 2016) and is funded by the USDA Higher Education Challenge Grant #2020-70003.

Conceptual Framework/Methodology

The focus of this study was to review literature from the past ten years addressing agricultural communication competencies needed for agricultural workforce development. This research involved a qualitative content analysis of previous literature published. Articles were examined and special attention was given to the three literary outlets: Journal of Agricultural Education (JAE), Journal of Applied Communications (JAC), and the Association of Public Land-grant University (APLU) series on Employability Skills in Agriculture and Natural Resources (Crawford & Fink, 2020). Each literature piece was reviewed and coded for recurring themes. The researcher defined categories of competency and industry perspectives (Cozby & Bates, 2020). Once the researcher exhausted available literature, key themes were identified and constructed into a literature review. Recommendations for further research were made based on those findings.

Findings

The first theme identified included retaining technical skills. Literature showed technical skills such as writing, editing, public relations, advertising, and photography remain highly important competencies within agricultural communications, with writing rising to the top within multiple evaluations (Morgan, 2010; Easterly et al., 2017, Crawford et al., 2011). Along with technical skills remaining important, industry professionals emphasized the need for technical skills to be taught with real world application (Kurtzo et al., 2017; Steede et al., 2016; Easterly et al., 2017).

Real-world application received enough focus within literature to become the second theme identified with industry relations being recommended as a key component of instruction (Kurtzo et al., 2017; Steede et al., 2016; Easterly et al., 2017). Real-world application emphasized soft skills (Crawford & Fink, 2020). Cannon, Specht, and Buck (2016), evaluated 17 agricultural communications programs, and identified soft skills as “society ready” skills. According to the 2016-2020 AAAE National Research Agenda these skills can be identified as “21st Century Skills” (Robert et al., 2016).

Twenty-first Century Skill Development was the final and most extensive theme identified within literature. Listening, conversation, team, and critical thinking skills were all emphasized as important skill needs within literature (Steede et al., 2016; Easterly et al., 2017). A 2011 report conducted in conjunction with APLU and Michigan State University looked at the agricultural industry's desired skills for graduates, and within that report, soft skills were divided and ranked in order of importance into the seven following clusters: experience, team skills, communication skills, leadership skills, decision making/ problem solving skills, self-management skills, and professional skills (Crawford et al., 2011).

A follow up report, the 2020 APLU Series on Employability Skills in Agriculture and Natural Resources, also looked at soft skills; however, APLU built upon their previous research by providing soft skills development curriculum recommendations (Crawford & Fink, 2020). Compared to the seven clusters of the 2011 report, only four employability skills were identified as areas of concern within the 2020 report and were recommended for academic program focus:

- Ability to persist in a new job,
- Dealing with ambiguity in job tasks and workplace expectations,
- Dealing with the pace and content of change in the workplace, and
- How to manage conflict in the workplace (Crawford & Fink, 2020).

Technical skills specific to the agricultural communications discipline remain an important curriculum focus; however, literature leans toward a focus on 21st Century skills. Both technical skills and 21st Century skills should be taught with a real-world approach. Considering APLU's effort to provide an industry-wide profile of graduate needs, the four concern areas listed within the 2020 APLU report exist as the strongest curriculum recommendation focus at this time (Crawford & Fink, 2020).

Conclusions

In conclusion, previous research identified competency needs of the industry and evaluated curriculum; however, industry changes and advancements require continual re-evaluation of the discipline. The 2020 APLU report provided the most up-to-date competency desires of the industry, and the report was unique from previous studies by placing focus on best implementation methods within the classroom and identifying gaps on the university level before graduates reach the workforce (Crawford & Fink, 2020). Findings reiterated the need for students to have the opportunity to gain real-world application and employ skills such as listening, critical thinking, change, and conflict (Steede et al., 2016; Easterly et al., 2017; Crawford & Fink, 2020).

Implications

These findings provide a foundation for additional competency research and implementation. The 2020 APLU report serves as a jumping point for evaluating how the four areas of concern are addressed within current academic programs. Research focused on the four concern areas of APLU would provide a targeted approach for reviewing agricultural communications curriculum, ensuring the curriculum aligned with industry needs and demands. With the rapid changes taking place, timeliness of industry reviewed curriculum evaluation and improvement is essential for meeting the demands of an evolving workforce (Robert et al., 2016).

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