

**Converging Curriculum: Using Experiential Learning to Power Student-Driven Event Planning**

Chandra Andrew  
Assistant Professor  
Tarleton State University  
Box T-0040  
Stephenville, TX 76401  
254-968-1641  
[candrew@tarleton.edu](mailto:candrew@tarleton.edu)

A. Brant Poe  
Assistant Professor  
Tarleton State University  
Box T-0040  
Stephenville, TX 76401  
254-968-0580  
[bpoe@tarleton.edu](mailto:bpoe@tarleton.edu)

T. Wayne Atchley  
Associate Professor  
Tarleton State University  
Box T-0040  
Stephenville, TX 76401  
254-968-9601  
[watchley@tarleton.edu](mailto:watchley@tarleton.edu)

J. Chris Haynes  
Department Head  
Assistant Professor  
Tarleton State University  
Box T-0040  
Stephenville, TX 76401  
254-968-0595  
[chaynes@tarleton.edu](mailto:chaynes@tarleton.edu)

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### **Introduction**

The information age is transforming agriculture as well as the messaging and communication channels used by agricultural communicators (Doerfert & Miller, 2006). Students graduating with agricultural communication degrees are expected to have diverse skillsets, with expertise in multiple areas such as writing, editing, marketing, graphic design, media relations, social media, event planning, photography, video production, mobile applications, online applications, and much more (Loizzo, Barron, Gee, & Ertmer, 2016). Morgan (2010) found that that industry demands a holistic approach to communications and that "...students do not have the luxury of narrowing their focus to one area of communications and becoming proficient, but rather need to incorporate all of the elements of communication successfully for clients" (p. 30).

Research indicates a need for regular evaluation of agricultural communication programs and their prescribed courses to keep up with industry demands (Doerfert & Miller, 2006; Terry, 1996; Sprecker & Rudd, 1998; Morgan, 2010; & Large, 2014). The research indicates that programs focused on journalism and mass communication are experimenting with convergence in courses (Lowrey, Daniels, & Becker, 2005). Convergence occurs when traditional communication skills are combined with technologically driven communication methods. Convergence is relevant to agricultural communications as agricultural audiences receive and interact through a variety of communication platforms (Loizzo, et al., 2016). Studies have suggested that agricultural communication degree programs should incorporate teaching methodologies that implement new technologies; properly equipping students for careers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Koldzy, Grant, DeMars, & Wilkinson, 2014; Tucker, 2014). Due to rapid changes in technology and communication roles, agricultural communication programs must "...respond with convergence courses and mobile technology implementation so that students are in touch with the demands of continually evolving 21<sup>st</sup> century communication careers" (Loizzo et al., 2016, p.116-117).

Baker and Robinson (2016) stated as a recommendation for practice that curriculum should incorporate experiential approaches to learning. As such, Kolb's experiential learning model was embedded in the application of practical research. By definition, Kolb's model uses experiences, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation through hands-on experiences (Baker & Robinson, 2016; Kolb, 1984). Learners' experiences are processed through reflection and observation, allowing for a course of action to be determined (Purdy, 2018). Four learner types are identified in the reflective and observant process: Divergers, Assimilators, Convergengers, and Accommodators (Kolb, 1984). The use of concrete experiences and reflective observations describe the divergent (imaginative) learner, whereas, assimilators use reflection, abstract conceptualization, and inductive reasoning, preferring an exact instructional method rather than through random means. Convergengers are real-world learners who rely on concrete experiences and abstract conceptualization, preferring interactive means of instruction for relevancy. Finally, accommodators rely upon concrete experiences and abstract conceptuality and prefer to be active learning participants (Kolb, 1984).

### **How it Works**

Graduates of agricultural communication programs must possess a variety of communication skills that can cross over to many aspects of the industry. The skills must also be transferable over a variety of communication platforms. In an attempt to converge curriculum and increase skill development through real-world experiential learning, two courses—Campaigns and Events and Mobile Agricultural Broadcasting—were introduced in the Spring 2019 semester.

The first course was tasked with developing, planning, promoting, and implementing two events—the “Farm to Fork,” a trail and fun run held at the university’s farm., and a second course that used a steer prospect show known as the “Pursuit of Purple.” This advanced videography course was designed to instruct students through an application of concepts needed for remote broadcasting using industry-standard technology required to livestream a video production.

This research meets the AAAE National Research Agenda Priority 4: Meaningful, Engaged Learning in All Environments (Roberts et al., 2016).

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

The courses were designed to converge traditional agricultural communication coursework with 21<sup>st</sup> century requirements of technology implementation. Both courses implemented experiential learning to conduct real-world tasks that would require students to further develop a wide array of communication skills across multiple information platforms to a global audience. The results of the courses were extremely positive. Students reported an increased understanding of event planning, incorporation of technology, and reliance upon traditional agricultural communication skills. The use of experiential learning further increased students’ knowledge as the hands-on activities solidified concepts covered in class.

### **Future Plans and Advice to Others**

The events and courses are now offered as official courses in the spring semesters. After the initial offering, faculty introduced another course with the purpose of providing a more realistic approach to event planning and campaign development with the goal of encouraging further knowledge and skill development. Future plans include the incorporation of a heifer show in conjunction with the steer show. Recommendations to others would be to allow more time than allowed in a semester to effectively develop, prepare, and execute an event plan that includes everything from marketing, sponsorship solicitation, awards, and all other aspects; as well as negotiating rental fees for the facilities and securing quality judges for the shows.

### **Costs and Resources**

The largest expenses for the race include the timing company and T-shirts for participants, minor expenses included marking paint for the trail, printing, food, and awards. Expenses for the prospect steer show included facility rental, insurance, judges’ fees and travel expenses, awards, office supplies, and walkie talkies. University had ample video and still cameras for use. A university grant provided an initial \$1,500 for the event. Proceeds from each year are used to fund the following year’s cattle show, work toward establishment of a scholarship fund for students in their final semester, as well as support student and faculty development.

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