

Ag Comm Camp: Empowering Future Communicators Through a Co-Curricular Experience

Kadyn Collins

Graduate Student

Department of Agricultural Education and Communications

Texas Tech University

kadycoll@ttu.edu

Hannah Hudgens

Undergraduate Student

Department of Agricultural Education and Communications

Texas Tech University

hanhudge@ttu.edu

Courtney Meyers, Ph.D.

Professor

Department of Agricultural Education and Communications

Texas Tech University

courtney.meyers@ttu.edu

Lindsay Kennedy, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Practice

Department of Agricultural Education and Communications

Texas Tech University

lindsay.kennedy@ttu.edu

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

In the agricultural communications curriculum, writing and photography courses are recognized as crucial competencies graduates must possess (Morgan, 2010). Writing skills are fundamental for success in a variety of career fields relevant to the agricultural communications discipline. Additionally, photography in agricultural contexts can be used to clarify scientific concepts, production practices, and technologies that are often a concern to public audiences (Kennedy et al., 2017). Co-curricular activities are those designed to complement the lessons learned in a formal classroom setting but are ungraded and do not count toward graduation requirements (Rutter & Mintz, 2016). These activities vary and can include student involvement in professional organizations, academic-related competitions, and attendance at career-focused events. Within agricultural communications, participation in a professional development conference was found to support students' personal and career development (Prather et al., 2018). "For many students, it's the co-curriculum that offers the most interesting, compelling, and institutionally defining educational experiences" (Rutter & Mintz, 2016, para. 8).

With the goal of building a sense of community while students gain career-ready skills, Ag Comm Camp was developed at Texas Tech University as a co-curricular opportunity. In Ag Comm Camp, students can strengthen their writing and photography skills beyond the classroom setting while being part of a community of supportive peers.

How it Works

Ag Comm Camp is supported by a gift from a private foundation. The Camp occurs off-campus at a private ranch owned and operated by the same foundation. During the camp, participants develop hands-on skills in photography and writing through immersion in a dynamic, sensory-rich environment for four days. To participate in Ag Comm Camp, students must complete a brief application and be in good academic standing with the university. The facility and budget support up to 12 students each year. Priority is given to upperclassmen majoring in agricultural communications.

Before Camp, students meet to discuss expectations and guidance for their time at the ranch. This involves making introductions, experimenting with camera equipment, and sharing initial plans for content. While they are at the ranch, students can embrace their creativity and explore innovative ideas free from grade-related pressures. The ranch setting provides abundant external stimuli, inspiring students to craft original descriptive writing based on everything they see, hear, smell, and feel. With diverse photography subjects—including wildlife, stunning landscapes, an equestrian center, and ranch workers—students can explore their unique styles and capture the essence of ranch life, complementing their written work. The second cohort also shot video for a short film highlighting their Ag Comm Camp experience. This project showcases the students' multimedia skills and contributions to the program. A student from the first cohort will compile the footage to create a promotional short film featuring their work.

Unlike a traditional classroom, Ag Comm Camp provides all students with the same high-quality photography gear, minimizing technical issues and ensuring consistent, high-quality images. This removes barriers to creativity and allows students to focus on developing their skills. Additionally, the secluded ranch setting encourages students to disconnect from daily life, freeing them from outside demands and enabling them to engage fully in the creative process.

Results to Date

Ag Comm Camp has been held for two years with 12 students participating in the first cohort and 10 students in the second. Each year, participants were asked to reflect on the experience at three points: before, during, and after. Overall, they identified several areas of personal and professional growth. Students recognized the experience gave them a chance to enhance their communication skills: “I plan to use lots of content from this Ag Comm Camp in my portfolio website.” One student wrote, “I truly think that in the years ahead, I will be taking my time and focusing on the quality of everything I do.” Another student reflected, “This trip has helped me become a better storyteller and be able to show those around me my thoughts and feelings in a fun and creative way.” Students also noted the benefits of being surrounded by their peers in this environment. One wrote, “This experience was transformational for me. I want to remember the comradery and how important this was for the experience as I’m someone who tends to isolate myself.”

The first cohort produced a coffee table book featuring images and creative writing. The foundation covered the expense for each member of the cohort to have a copy of the coffee table book. The second cohort is finalizing production on several creative projects including a coffee table book, a print of student photography work, and a short film highlighting student involvement in the program.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Based on participant feedback, Ag Comm Camp has been a success, with students producing high-quality images and writing pieces. However, after the first cohort, the agricultural communications faculty members who lead the program noted the need for more on-campus follow-up meetings. Due to the lack of a class structure, students did not feel urgency in completing tasks after they had left the ranch. For the second cohort, additional time was allocated to review and refine the content students provided. The second cohort also included adjustments to ensure a better representation of students’ work in the final book. These students had more guided writing prompts to encourage a cohesive approach to their written content.

In the future, we will continue to enrich and expand Ag Comm Camp. Inviting professional communicators as additional mentors and incorporating more structured activities before and after the program will enhance the experience and make the students’ time at the facility even more impactful. The two-day format at the ranch provides students with ample time to immerse themselves in the environment and develop their writing. Based on this success, future camps will follow this approach to maximize creative growth and learning opportunities.

Costs/Resources Needed

Ag Comm Camp is made possible by a generous gift from a private foundation. In the first year, most of the funding was used to purchase high-quality gear (12 Canon R5 Mirrorless camera kits, five Canon RF 70-200mm f/2.8 lenses, 12 Peak Design Camera Straps, and 3 Pelican Storage Cases) and pay for book printing. Participants are given Mindshift Backlight 18L Camera Backpacks, field journals, and reflection journals to use and keep. The gift also provides accommodation at the ranch. University vans were used to transport students to the ranch, which is located about four hours from campus. Two vans are required to transport students, staff, luggage, and equipment efficiently.

References

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