

**The Student AG-ency Experience: Cultivating Strategic Communicators in Agriculture  
through a Capstone Campaigns Course**

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### **Introduction and Need for Innovation**

The agricultural communications field has evolved throughout history as technology has advanced (Ahrens & Gibson, 2013). Historically journalistic in nature, agricultural communications programs now encompass advertising, marketing, public relations, and digital communications to advocate on behalf of farmers and ranchers, engage consumer audiences, and develop brand messaging for agricultural organizations (Irani & Doerfert, 2013; Leal et al., 2019). Future employers seek out candidates with experience in strategic communication to achieve their business goals (Wyss & Cletzer, 2023), and there is a growing demand for students equipped to work in agencies to play an integral role in strategic campaign planning. In fact, agencies represent a \$369 billion industry, with continued expected growth (The Business Research Company, 2025). This business growth is based on agencies, which are a business assisting clients develop and manage advertising campaigns and other marketing efforts (Wlosik, 2024). Within agencies, roles involved in the campaign development process include account management, strategy, creative, and production (Windels & Stuhlfaut, 2018). Professionals entering a career in this field need to be creative, team players, and strategic thinkers, with strong communication skills (Blakeman & Haley, 2005; Lowery & Xie, 2008).

To bridge the gap between agricultural communications and agencies, we modeled a campaign course after the agency structure. This approach integrates practical skills and experiential learning to prepare students for evolving industry environments (Finch et al., 2012). By simulating agency operations in a classroom setting, students engage in hands-on projects fostering creativity, teamwork, and problem-solving (Lynch, 2019; Spiller et al., 2011). This experiential learning framework not only cultivates career development skills but also encourages students to transition their skills from a classroom setting to professional environments more effectively (Ewing & Ewing, 2017). Ultimately, an agency-based course structure can bridge the gap between communication theory and practice, ensuring agricultural communication graduates are well-equipped to meet the demands of the strategic communication and marketing professions (Kemp et al., 2018; Vickers et al., 2023).

### **How It Works**

We created an agency structure in our senior-level agricultural communications course, where students collaborated in teams to develop comprehensive strategic communication campaigns for a client. The course structure takes an industry-driven approach mimicking how industry agencies operate. Students are divided into teams of four or five based on their strengths and given specific agency-based roles: Client Relations & Project Director, Creative Director, PR & Copywriting Director, and Research & Strategy Director (Windels & Stuhlfaut, 2018). Students learn leadership skills by becoming subject matter experts in their assigned role and collaborating as a team. The course guides students through the campaign planning process used by agencies, starting with research and strategy. Students meet with clients to establish goals, identify key problems, and develop expectations before conducting primary and secondary research to understand target audiences and the industry landscape. After strategy development, student agency teams create deliverables, pitch their work to the client, and recommend evaluation metrics. Mimicking agencies, internal reviews with the account management team (i.e., instructor and teaching assistant) provides students with internal feedback prior to major assignment submissions.

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

To understand student perspectives, reflections were analyzed qualitatively (Erlandson et al., 1993), revealing key themes about the agency model's impact on career readiness, skill development, and teamwork. Students expressed the agency model ***mirrors real-world industry expectations and prepares them for professional roles***. They noted it provided experience with industry-standard work, "This type of 'assignment' will be common when entering the workforce." Additionally, it helped them manage long-term projects, "Seeing how all these components fit together to make one overall document has been eye-opening." Many also viewed the project as a valuable portfolio piece, "This is going to be a crucial tangible document as I enter the workforce." The agency model ***reinforced strategic thinking*** by requiring thorough preparation, "You can't just jump into making a deliverable – there needs to be strategic development." Additionally, they learned to focus on audience motivation, "We often forget about tailoring everything to our target audience." Students also gained insights into budgeting and feasibility, "Allocating the budget after all the creative ideas showed what it takes to make them come to life." Engagement with research ***broadened their understanding*** of audience insights. Students gained an appreciation for research, "I have never shown any research interest, but this project was very informative." Others said, "Researching into the psychographics of people is imperative to campaign success." Finally, students emphasized how the agency model ***enhanced teamwork and collaboration***. They learned to trust their team, "I have a hard time letting others have control, but I learned to rely on my team." Many refined communication and leadership skills, "We have learned to make executive decisions and trust our instincts." Time management was also key, "Breaking up big projects into smaller sections made large assignments less daunting."

### **Future Plans/Advice**

The concept of an agency might be abstract to students; therefore, we recommend instructors connect students with an agency to gain a picture of real-world experience of the collaborative nature in agency life. Further, it is important to encourage students to explore agency campaigns to familiarize them with communications planning. For those interested in implementing an agency-style course, we recommend implementing flexibility and feedback; instructors should incorporate soft deadlines and internal reviews with the account management team in the form of round-table discussions, similar to agency work. Future research should explore graduates who obtain agency jobs and the skills they leverage in their careers. Currently, the agricultural communications discipline focuses on developing production skills for undergraduates, but these findings may emphasize more content on research and strategy.

### **Costs/Resources Needed**

Administering a course under this agency-based structure does not require any additional funding. Students already have the supplies and software they need to collaborate and develop campaigns (i.e., laptops). We recommend ensuring students have access to Microsoft Teams or similar online collaboration software to facilitate group work. Creative software such as Adobe Suite assists in developing creative deliverables. Finally, one unique factor about this class is access to a client with a budget (\$30,000) for real-world applications of student-produced work.

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