

**An Evaluation of the 2025 National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow
Professional Development Conference**

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Introduction

Participation in professional development opportunities supports learners in acquiring and applying new knowledge and skills, ultimately improving personal and professional performance (Mizell, 2010). In higher education, particularly within discipline-specific student organizations, conferences offer immersive environments for experiential learning, mentorship, and community building (Mizell, 2010). The National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (NACT) is a collegiate organization developing agricultural communication students through professional development opportunities and national communications contests (National ACT, n.d.). One of its hallmark events is the National ACT Professional Development Conference (PDC), hosted annually by nominated and elected chapters (National ACT, n.d.). The conference provides attendees with industry tours, hands-on workshops, and networking opportunities with agricultural communications professionals. This study aimed to evaluate the perceived impact and effectiveness of the 2025 National ACT PDC.

Theoretical Framework

This research was guided by Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1971) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Human Capital Theory suggests individuals invest in education and training to increase their future productivity and economic value (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1971). Within the context of this professional development, this theory helps explain why students seek opportunities to grow professionally through conferences. The Theory of Planned Behavior supports this evaluation by examining how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence intention and behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Applied to this study, TPB helps interpret participants' motivations for attending and their intentions to apply knowledge gained during the conference.

Methodology

A total of 86 students and 14 advisers attended the 2025 National ACT Professional Development Conference. To evaluate the conference's impact, an instructor and the PDC planning committee chair developed a questionnaire. Three faculty members from the Agricultural Education, Communications and Leadership department established the content validity of the survey instrument. Attendees accessed the Qualtrics Survey through a QR Code distributed at the concluding event. The questionnaire included demographic questions, inquiries about breakout sessions and participant's perceptions of the conference's overall impact. This non-experimental survey (Creswell, 2012) remained open for two weeks, during which 61 attendees responded, four of which were incomplete and removed, yielding a 57% response rate.

Results

There were 57 complete responses to the post-conference evaluation, representing a range of student classifications from freshmen to seniors. Satisfaction levels were high, with 89% of participants indicating they were satisfied to extremely satisfied with the conference. Furthermore, 90% reported they were likely to apply what they learned in their academic, professional, or personal lives.

Networking and professional growth emerged as the top goals for attending the PDC, with 36.8% and 33.3% of participants, respectively, identifying these as their primary reason for attendance. Skill development and building industry connections followed closely. Self-reported confidence measures indicated attendees felt more capable of creating meaningful content, more aware of current trends and challenges in agricultural communications, and more comfortable reaching out to professionals for mentorship after the conference.

Qualitative responses highlighted the panel session as highly enjoyable and impactful. Participants appreciated the panelists' authenticity and the opportunity to learn from their real-world experiences. Sessions on event planning, storytelling, photography, and career strategy were also frequently mentioned as especially beneficial. When asked about implementation, attendees planned to use skills related to networking, personal branding, photography, storytelling, and freelance work. Suggestions for future conferences included portfolio development, podcasting, agricultural policy, social media strategy, and expanded multimedia training. Additionally, participants recommended clearer session descriptions and more informal networking opportunities.

Conclusions

The evaluation revealed the 2025 National ACT PDC effectively met objectives of enhancing professional development and industry readiness among agricultural communication students. Participants expressed a high level of satisfaction and a strong intent to apply knowledge and skills gained during the event.

The conference successfully supported the mission of National ACT by stimulating interest in agricultural communications, facilitating idea exchange, and fostering connections between students and professionals (National ACT, n.d.). These findings reinforce the importance of student engagement in ACT programming and its role in career readiness.

The findings align with Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964; Shultz, 1971), demonstrating how educational investments such as conference participation contribute to future productivity and career preparation. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) further explains participants' post-conference intentions, as their increased confidence and motivation suggest a high likelihood of behavior change.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, it is important for student involvement in the National ACT organization to continue implementation of the Professional Development Conference. Future conferences should prioritize applied, hands-on breakout sessions and incorporate more opportunities for peer interaction and mentorship. Sessions offering life and career advice from industry professionals were especially impactful and should remain central. Continued research on the annual conference should be conducted with each new chapter hosting to ensure the best learning experiences for students.

References

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