

**Co-Creating Communication with Immigrant Farmworkers: A Community-Engaged
Public Engagement Pedagogy**

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Introduction

The agricultural and life sciences communication discipline constantly evolves and shifts to meet the needs of student workforce preparedness (Cannon et al., 2016). In contemporary contexts, life science communications involves the dissemination of credible, science-based information, advocacy related to agriculture and natural resources, and engagement with public opinion (Irani & Doerfert, 2013). Undergraduate students in agricultural communications complete coursework designed to prepare them for careers in agriculture and natural resources. However, many courses emphasize theory over hands-on application (Keleman et al., 2009). Given that communication skills are developed through practice, hands-on learning experiences provide meaningful opportunities for students to engage in real-world agricultural communications work, and therefore better prepare them for their future communications careers. Agriculture and life science communications courses often involve clients in courses to provide students with real-world experience (Lawson et al., 2021; Telg et al., 2018). However, client-based course experiences are often not longitudinal, nor involve community-defined needs. In the fall of 2024 and 2025, a Life Sciences Public Engagement undergraduate course at Virginia Tech (VT) deeply embedded a partnership with the Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) and immigrant farmworkers that produced multiple points of relationship building and enabled students to produce course outcomes through a community-centered approach. This intervention not only provided students with tangible client-based experience, but also created a reciprocal loop of knowledge moving *back* to the community in accessible, usable forms.

Program Phases

Phase 1: Partnership Infrastructure. University faculty and LAJC initially made contact through a mutually known faculty member. The course instructor invited the LAJC to serve as a client and gatekeeper to local migrant farmworker populations. The LAJC met with students during the semester to provide context for their organization, and the communication needs of migrant farmworkers in Virginia. The LAJC invited the class to attend a community event held for local immigrant farmworkers.

Phase 2: Annual Community-Driven Needs Assessment. Each course year centers on a community-identified communication priority identified by the LAJC and their intimate knowledge of the immigrant farmworker population. In 2024, students focused on digital literacy needs of farmworkers, and 2025 focused on health communication issues. Students prepared needs assessment questions with instructor guidance and the LAJC's feedback, approval, and translation. Students then conducted needs assessments with immigrant farmworkers that included facilitated small-group discussions and an additional Empowerment Matrix.

Phase 3: Student Analysis and Strategic Planning. Students analyzed the needs assessment data to identify priority communication challenges, preferred channels, messengers, and formats, and lastly cultural and structural constraints. Students used this information to develop a comprehensive strategic communication plan, grounded in formative research, audience analysis, and ethical engagement, and explicitly designed for immigrant farmworkers in Virginia.

Phase 4: Community Feedback and Accountability. Students presented their findings and plans for communication intervention for these issues at The Virginia Farmworker Advocacy Network Conference. This conference included LAJC staff, farmworkers, additional advocacy groups, legal professionals, and allied organizations. The presentation offered the chance for

students to receive feedback used to challenge assumptions, refine messaging, and reinforce accountability to community priorities.

Phase 5: Iterative Knowledge Return. Students from the 2024 course advocated for themselves to go beyond course expectations and produce the video content proposed in their final assignments. Students worked together to develop two Instagram Reel-style videos to improve digital literacy on 1) avoiding text-based scams and 2) setting up digital bank accounts. Students conducted independent research, planned, and produced videos. The videos were sent to the LAJC for final feedback, and eventually presented at the fall 2025 needs assessment event, and provided back to LAJC in their final form for dissemination to migrant farmworker populations, closing the loop on their project.

Results to Date

This model reinforced student learning outcomes from the course, and increased competency in community-engaged research and strategic communication grounded in equity. Through this partnership experience, students were able to work across language, cultural, and power differences. Students reflected after the needs assessment and post-course completion with positive sentiments about the experience; one student stated, “it was an honor to work directly with my target audience. This experience allowed me to truly understand the importance of what we are doing. I got to see firsthand who our project will impact, which made the work feel more personal and purposeful, because of this, I believe my future work will be more meaningful and more accurate.” Another reflected, “my biggest takeaway from this event was realizing how important collaboration with your target audience is. It gave me a deeper understanding of who and what I am working toward. I am excited to continue developing our project and to see the positive change we can help create.” Due to the intentional and reciprocal client-based experience embedded within the course, students ultimately developed stronger professional readiness for Extension, advocacy, and communication roles. In addition to student outcomes, the LAJC received tailored outreach materials and actionable communication insights, and farmworkers were able to see their input translated into real outcomes that will aid their community. This model is easily transferable to health, environmental, and other agricultural communication contexts, as well as other marginalized or underserved populations.

Future Plans and Advice to Others

We plan to continue annual needs assessments with rotating communication themes in conjunction with the LAJC, and fall 2025 students plan to attend and present at the upcoming conference. For programs looking to replicate this model, we recommend investing early in partnerships to establish trust and reciprocity. Instructors met regularly with the LAJC to ensure their needs were met and their time was worth their effort partnering with the course. We also recommend building in multiple points for feedback and revision and to maintain the partner organization as the foremost authority on the population at hand. We recommend prioritizing a way to return results to participants and partners, and to seek community validation over academic polish.

Resources Needed

The primary resource for this partnership model is faculty time for coordination. Student labor should be course-embedded. Although we utilized language experts within our University and from LAJC, we recognize the need for translation or interpretation services for materials and focus group activities. Lastly, travel funds and support is necessary for attending the community event where the needs assessment took place, and to the conference where students presented results and plans.

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