A National Picture of Master's Agricultural Communications Programs in the United States

Introduction

When agriculture and communication work together, they create an especially powerful connection between producers, scientists, and the public. Agricultural communications help people with little or no background in agriculture to better understand where their food comes from, how farming works, and why agricultural decisions matter (Telg et al., 2022). Empowering publics with agricultural information is increasingly important as fewer people have direct ties to farming and rural life, which has led to less general knowledge and connection to agriculture. Consumers also face an overwhelming number of products, labels, and messages that can be confusing or misleading (Telg et al., 2022). Because of this, a growing need exists for skilled agricultural communicators who can develop clear, accurate, and effective communication across various platforms for a wide range of audiences (Doerfert & Miller, 2006; Kurtzo et al., 2016; Leal et al., 2019; McLeod-Morin et al., 2024; Miller et al., 2015; Morgan, 2010; Rampold et al., 2024).

While research has explored agricultural communications programs and competencies at the undergraduate level, much less is known about master's degree programs and what they offer (Cannon et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2015; Morgan, 2010; Settle et al., 2025). This gap matters because graduate education plays a key role in developing advanced skills and future leaders in the discipline. Settle et al. (2025) specifically called for more research to identify how many masters' agricultural communications programs exist and what courses they provide. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to create a national picture of agricultural communications master's degree programs by compiling program and course information that can serve as a benchmark for future research, support faculty in program development, and help prospective students better understand their options.

Objectives

The study sought to identify the following:

1) What post-secondary institutions offer master's programs in agricultural communications in the United States?
2) What graduate-level courses are currently offered in the agricultural communications discipline?
3) How many post-secondary universities offer specific agricultural communications master's degrees or as a concentration under a different master's degree name?

Methods

Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP Evaluation Model was used to evaluate master's level agricultural communications programs. The four parts of the model include: context (identifying the universities), input (identifying coursework), process (determining required credit hours and delivery method), and product (comparing the knowledge and skills acquired in coursework to competencies identified by Settle et al. (2025). The product part of the CIPP model is used to determine outcomes of programs, which is done to determine what is working for a program, and what could be done better (Stufflebeam, 2003). For this study, the product was used to identify categories of courses to which graduate students are exposed in their master's program.

Initial data collection of universities followed similar methods described by Miller et al. (2015) for their undergraduate program research, and initial course information collection followed similar methods from Cannon et al. (2016) and Andrew (2017). Further data collection used a decision-tree approach identifying universities from National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (NACT) membership database from 2001 to 2013, the Association of Public Land-Grant universities (APLU) membership roster, and an online search to find any additional programs not listed by NACT or APLU**.** Universities were researched one at a time to determine if they offered a master's degree or concentration in agricultural communications. Universities were considered to have an agricultural communications program if the degree name or degree description on the website included agricultural communications. From there, each program was reviewed to determine coursework and competencies.

Results and Discussion

Of the identified universities (*n*=212) in the initial search, this study identified 20 universities offering master's degrees in agricultural communications based upon information found on each university's website. Further refinement of the programs identified 17 universities offering master's agricultural communications programs in the United States. The study found that only Oklahoma State University and Texas Tech University offered stand-alone master's degrees for agricultural communications and not concentrations like other universities. The study reviewed the courses (*n*=303) and found that the top three categories were communication and public relations (11.02%), leadership (8.06%), and data (7.26%). The three lowest categories included photography (1.32%), publishing (1.32%), and graphic design (0.99%). Large categories were re-evaluated to determine if they needed to be broken into subcategories. Three categories, communication and public relations, leadership, and data, were assigned subcategories based on their respective courses. In communication and public relations (*n*=40), there were eight sub-categories identified. The leadership (*n*=30) category was broken into six sub-categories, and the top two subcategories included theory (40.00%) and decision (20.00%). Finally, the data (*n*=27) category was broken into five subcategories, with statistics (37.04%) as the largest category.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study aimed to create a national picture of master's agricultural communication programs in the United States. Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that only a small number of universities offer an agricultural communications master's degree. Of the 212 universities that were evaluated by the methods present by Miller et al. (2015) for undergraduate research to determine if universities offered agricultural communications master's degrees, only 8% (*n* = 17) offered such a degree. This study concluded that agricultural communications master's degree programs teach courses more heavily based on theory than in practice. The data also concluded that there were a variety of degree names that include agricultural communications and suggests that agricultural communications master's degrees could be moving closer to becoming their own field (Aherns & Gibson, 2013; Irani & Doerfert, 2013; Parrella et al., 2023).

In line with the conceptual framework, this study can be used for faculty within existing programs to compare their programs and offered courses to others across the country. This study can be used for faculty to expand or revise their existing programs, or for faculty to create new programs. There has not been research done around master's curricula before, so many

opportunities exist for further research beyond this study. This study should be replicated in later years to identify new programs or programs that may have been cut.

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