

Communicating Strategically with Generation Me: Aligning Students' Career Needs With Communication about Academic Programs and Available Careers¹



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Abstract

Many academic programs in agriculture struggle with recruiting qualified students. Why are students choosing to enter other fields of study instead of agriculture? The purpose of this study was to determine students' perceptions and awareness about academic agricultural programs. A set of three focus groups were conducted, which consisted of 1) students inside a specific academic program, 2) students outside of the program but within the college of agriculture, and 3) students outside of the college of agriculture but enrolled in an introductory agriculture class for non-majors. Questions were asked regarding students' career and major choices, and perceptions about a specific program of study. The results showed that students were initially unaware of careers available in this area and had a negative impression of careers in the agricultural field. However, after hearing about available careers, their perceptions were positive, and they expressed the need for more marketing and branding of the industry so that students would be aware of careers available in this field. A major implication of this study is the need to address students' lack of awareness with respect to the diverse range of careers and employer organizations within agriculture. Future research is recommended to determine how to develop effective strategic communication plans for academic programs in agriculture.

Keywords: student recruitment, college of agriculture, career choices, college students

Introduction

Colleges and universities can no longer rely on simply knowing how to communicate. It is essential that institutions also know how to communicate effectively. To thrive in today's marketplace, an

institution must communicate strategically with its publics, including but not limited to donors, students, alumni, prospective students, and parents (Smith, 2002). While improving communication at all levels are important when working to build a strong reputation (Fill, 2002), for recruitment programs to entice the highest caliber of students, it is imperative to assess the current state of their communication from a student's perspective as to what is effective and meaningful.

The triad mission of the land grant institution and the value of an agriculturally related education have historically been supported by stakeholder groups without much attention to public relations or marketing (Kelsey and Mariger, 2003). The land grant institution offers a unique experience and is often the only place where a student can obtain a degree with an agricultural focus; however, there is an increased need for developing a diverse population of students and support within these institutions (Kellogg Commission, 2001). As times change and the population of the United States is further removed from production agriculture, these institutions have a greater need for a strategic approach to communication in order to recruit the next generation of leaders. Today, in addition to agriculture, a land grant education may include a myriad of areas of interest ranging from communication to science, technology, and pre-professional options like medicine (University of Florida, 2008).

While all colleges and universities are concerned with the recruitment of students in quantity and quality (Montmarquette et al., 2002), agricultural programs of study struggled with a significant decline in enrollment in the 1980s and 1990s (Donnermeyer and Kreps, 1994). Numerous studies were conducted to determine the exact cause of this decline, primarily by researching students' choice (DesJardins and

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Hendel, 1999; Chapman, 1981). However, no one cause was established. In more recent years, enrollments in colleges of agriculture have actually increased, but the increase has been in the areas of business, social sciences, and pre-professional track programs, while other program areas have seen a decline in enrollment (personal communication, E. Turner, 2009).

Over the last decade, the competition to get admitted to a college or university has increased astronomically, as a direct result of more students wanting to pursue a college education. In 1990, 55% of high school sophomores said they intended to graduate from a four-year college, compared to 80% in 2002 (Twenge, 2006). Demands for perfect grades and above average SAT/ACT scores are a minimum requirement to get in to many top colleges and universities. Harvard notoriously rejects 50% of applicants with perfect SAT scores, Ivy League schools only accept an average of 10% of applicants, and these high standards are trickling down to land grant institutions and state schools. For example, the majority of the University of Wisconsin's 2004 freshmen were in the top 10% of their class (Twenge, 2006).

The number of students entering pre-professional track programs as freshmen is growing, but only a small number of these students will eventually be accepted to professional programs like medical, law, or veterinary schools. National acceptance rates into these programs range from 4-10% (Twenge, 2006). There is certainly an opportunity for academic programs that have declining enrollment to recruit students internally who have decided that the pre-professional track will not work for them or that this decision has been made for them because they do not meet the extreme standards for acceptance (personal communication, E. Turner, 2009).

Students facing growing competitive entrance standards and increased pressure to, at a minimum, acquire a bachelor's degree, are a part of a new generation that has never known a time without the Internet nor a world where duty was more important than self (Twenge, 2006). This generation has many names: millennials, i-generation, generation Y, or generation ME (Twenge, 2006). Typically, this generation starts with those born after 1992 (Provitiera-McGlynn, 2005) though some suggest it starts as early as those born after 1982 (Twenge, 2006). Marketing studies have found that the generation a person was born in is more likely to influence decision making than income, sex, or education (Twenge, 2006), thus it is imperative that researchers determine how this generation communicates and interacts (Provitiera-McGlynn, 2005) in order to effectively recruit students.

Literature Review

Marketing in Higher Education

Marketing and public relations on college campuses have progressed considerably since a study in 1966 reported that the most important function of the college informational program was press relations (Steinberg, 1966). Today, the central purpose of marketing and public relations activities in general are broader in their definition. These activities now include mitigating damages, responding to the needs of key stakeholders, responding to organizational crises, and restoring and maintaining favorable reputation (Seeger et al., 2001). Additionally, it is important to build relationships with stakeholders (Fill, 2002), including prospective students, in the place where they are the most comfortable interacting (Provitiera-McGlynn, 2005).

Studies have determined that prospective students have a desire to find out if a program is a good match for their interests before they make a decision on a college or a major (DesJardins and Hendel, 1999). Thus, an academic program should communicate its strengths accurately in order to engage the correct type of student for their goals (Stewart, 1991). In order to communicate these strengths, a program must know where it fits within industry requirements for graduates. The understanding of a program's position within the market should be the first step in any recruitment planning process (Hossler, 1999).

Academic Programs in Agriculture

The scope of academic programs in agriculture at land grant institutions continues to evolve. However, at the core of the wide span of programs are a myriad of plant and animal related majors (National Science Foundation, 2009). National employment opportunities for U.S. college graduates with expertise in food, agricultural, and natural resources remain high, with an estimated 52,000 annual job openings for new graduates during 2005-2010. Yet, there are not enough qualified college graduates in these areas, with only an estimated 32,300 food, agricultural, and natural resources college graduates expected annually during this same time frame (USDA CSREES, 2005-2010). While many agricultural program areas without pre-professional track options are suffering from a decline in enrollment (personal communication, E. Turner, 2009).

One specific academic program area that is struggling with enrollment nationally is that of ornamental horticulture (FAEIS Reports, 2008). In this study, ornamental horticulture has been defined as a discipline of horticulture concerned with growing and using flowering and ornamental plants for gardens, landscapes, and floral display. Horticultural science nationally has dropped in enrollment from 3,484 in 2003 to 2,559 in 2007 and specifically ornamental horticulture dropped from 495 in 2003 to 301 in 2007 (FAEIS Reports, 2008). In the past, a

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plethora of students from traditional agricultural backgrounds with an interest in all facets of the industry from production and managerial positions to sales and marketing were attracted to a major in ornamental horticulture (Fretz, 1991). However, with the shift from production agriculture that has been seen across the U.S., this major has likewise been affected and has seen a decline in enrollment (Rom, 2004). During this period of national decline, some ornamental horticulture programs have seen a slight increase in enrollment. From fall of 2002 to the fall of 2008, the University of Florida had an increase in students from 56 to 80 (UF College of Agriculture, 2008). However, this increase in a few programs has not been able to stop the trickle-down effect to employment in the industry. The ornamental horticulture industry is struggling to find and retain qualified students to fill positions in the field (Rom, 2004). This is a \$20.1 billion industry in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2008) and is of major importance to the state of Florida's economy with total sales of nursery, landscape service firms, and horticulture retailers totaling \$15.2 billion in 2005 (Florida Gardening, 2009). The ornamental horticulture industry has more than 500 positions available nationally each year and as little as 400 students graduating in this area annually, some of whom go into other industries (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

Purpose and Objectives

In order to determine the position of academic programs of agriculture in the market place, as suggested by Hossler (1999), it is important to explore the perceptions and level of awareness of current and potential students. An assessment of where students stand in terms of attitudes and awareness will be valuable in improving recruitment communication and guidelines (Wildman and Torres, 2001). Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine students' perceptions and awareness about academic agricultural programs. For the purpose of this study, one academic program, ornamental horticulture, was chosen as an example of an agriculture program area that is struggling to find enough qualified students. Though the ornamental horticulture industry struggles with issues specific to their industry, they are not unlike other academic agricultural programs in their decline of student enrollment (Wildman and Torres, 2001) and communication challenges (Kelsey and Mariger, 2003). In this study, ornamental horticulture has been defined as a discipline of horticulture concerned with growing and using flowering and ornamental plants for gardens, landscapes, and floral display. The following research objectives were developed to guide this study:

- Objective 1: Determine students' key influences when choosing a major or career;
- Objective 2: Investigate students' awareness

and perceptions of a career in agriculture;

- Objective 3: Identify students' barriers and constraints in choosing a specific academic program of agriculture as a career.

Methodology

This study used a set of three focus groups comprised of representative members of the target audience of current college students. A market research firm was hired and used Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) telephone random digit dialing (RDD) sampling to qualify potential participants. Probability samples were generated using a predetermined sampling frame based on demographic variables for groups one and two. The third group was a purposive sample recruited by researchers through the University of Florida's Environmental Horticulture Student Organization. The first two focus groups were conducted on November 17, 2008, and the last focus group was conducted on November 18, 2008. Focus group research has long been prominent in marketing studies in part because market researchers seek to tap emotional and unconscious motivations not amenable to the structured questions of conventional survey research (Morgan, 1998). A protocol was developed to guide all three focus groups using the procedures set forth in Krueger's (1998) book, *Developing Questions for Focus Groups*. The protocol was used to guide the discussion and to keep the focus groups consistent between groups. The protocol was reviewed by a panel of experts for face and content validity. Additionally, the protocol was sent to the Institutional Review Board and received approval that participants rights were not violated in this study. Moreover, a written informed consent was signed by each participant prior to the start of each focus group session. All focus groups were video and audio recorded for transcription. Transcripts from the focus groups were imported into Weft QDA software to be analyzed in accordance with Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method. Researchers worked to remain unbiased throughout the process, which was aided by the fact that none of the researchers had direct affiliations or ties to the industry of interest. While this research was funded by the American Floral Endowment, no one from their organization was involved during the research process and all information was analyzed without their involvement.

Demographics

The total number of participants in all three focus groups was 28; a breakdown of the demographics of all three groups can be seen in Table 1. The first group consisted of students who were enrolled in an introductory plant class for non-majors, all outside of a college of agriculture. The purpose of separating this group from the others was to determine if the perceptions and knowledge of students outside of a

college of agriculture were different from those inside. Additionally, it was of interest to the researchers to determine what information about careers in agriculture was learned by students in an introductory plant class for non-majors. It proved of additional interest that this group had more upperclassmen than group two (Table 1). The second group consisted of students who were majors within a college of agriculture, but not in one related to the academic agricultural program of interest, ornamental horticulture. The purpose of selecting this group was to see how students within a college of agriculture perceived a career in the academic program of interest, and to compare their views to the other two groups. Moreover, this group consisted of predominantly sophomores. The third group consisted of students who were enrolled in the academic program of interest to determine the reasons why they chose this path, and to compare them with the other groups. The third group was all upperclassmen.

Table 1. Breakdown of Participants by Focus Group

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
No. of Participants	10	10	8
Males	3	3	3
Females	7	7	5
Major in College of Agriculture	0	10	10
Enrolled in an Introductory Plant Class for Non-Majors	9	0	0
Ornamental Horticulture Major/Minor	0	0	8
Sophomores	1	8	0
Juniors	5	1	5
Seniors	4	1	3

Results

Objective 1: Determine students' key influences when choosing a major or career. In an effort to address this research question, participants in all focus groups were asked questions about how they approached decisions about their majors and careers. Some major themes about students' processes when seeking career information appeared. Key influences of students in this area were a passion for the industry, desire to be happy, money, stability, security, and ability to make a mark.

Passion for the industry or subject

The majority of participants sought information about a career because of a passion that they felt for that industry or subject. One participant explained, "I chose my career because I have a passion for it, and I saw this as my opportunity to make a difference in the lives of young people." After this initial passion, students moved to the adults within their social systems for advice or guidance. In some cases, students looked at the adults around them to inspire passion for a certain career. One participant

explained this by saying, "I look at people that I admire or that have jobs that I think would be a lot of fun for me to do and I see they have passion for it and I feel like I have similar passions or interests."

Although the majority of the participants chose their major because of a passion, there were a few exceptions to this. Some participants were not sure what they wanted to do and, thus chose a major by convenience. One participant summed this up by saying, "I think I kind of picked my major by default, because I had a lot of credit coming in that fulfilled it and I could pretty much graduate really soon or like take all the electives I wanted to."

Desire to be Happy vs. Money

Many of the participants expressed a desire to be happy in their intended career choice. This attitude was repeated in all three groups, although it was expressed more often in the two focus groups that included participants from the college of agriculture.

In general, students had the perception that they would be happy in their future careers. One participant expressed this in the following statement, "What more could you ask for? Wake up every day and get paid to do something you want to do that you would take off to do if you were doing a different job."

However, participants recognized they might have to weigh their happiness against the salary they would make for a job. The

general consensus of the two groups with students in the college of agriculture was that happiness should come before money. One participant expressed this by saying, "I definitely think you have to weigh your happiness versus the salary. Cause like even if the salary's like really big, eventually you might hate it enough that it's not worth the money. Like you have to do something that makes you happy." However, in the focus group without any students from the college of agriculture money was perceived as being of major importance, and often more important than happiness. This group recognized they were planning to work in career fields with high stress and pressure to excel and compete, but were willing to it because of the salary. One participant went as far as to say, "...if the job will pay you enough I don't care how boring it is, I'll do it."

Stability, Security, and Making a Mark

Participants in all groups had similar responses to what characteristics of a career were important to them. All groups were concerned with the stability of the job and were extremely aware of the current down

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economy. One participant summed up what he/she was looking for in a career as “Job security. Something that will be there. That you know for sure it will be there.” Another participant explained this desire by saying, “...having a job that you can have especially with the way the economy is, knowing that you can graduate and have, yeah, job security is huge.” Another major concern for students that was often lumped with other career concerns was their desire to leave a mark or make a difference with their career. One participant expressed this desire by saying, “I chose my career because I have a passion for it, and it was what I saw as my opportunity to make a difference in the lives of young people.” Another typical participant response was, “Yeah, I think that's something, everyone wants to leave their mark, everyone wants to have that 'legacy' whatever it may be for them.”

Objective 2: Investigate students' awareness and perceptions of a specific career in agriculture. In order to assess this objective, questions were asked of the two focus groups that were not already in a plant related major about their awareness of careers in ornamental horticultural. Some noticeable differences existed between the group that included students who had taken an introductory class for plant majors and those who hadn't. Key findings in this area included a limited knowledge of careers in the field of ornamental horticulture, initial negative perceptions of these careers, but a shift to the positive once exposed to available careers.

Limited Knowledge of Careers in the Field and Negative Perceptions

Participants who did not take the introductory plant class had limited knowledge about ornamental horticulture prior to being given a description. The majority of participants only knew that ornamental horticulture had something to do with flowers. One participant said, “Doesn't that like have something to do with flowers?” Some participants thought the only careers available would be working in a flower shop. More than that, participants were unaware of careers in this field at all. A typical response was “I had no idea about any of these opportunities.” In fact, many participants were not only unaware about careers in ornamental horticulture and agriculture but actually expressed a negative impression about careers in agriculture by themselves and their peers. One participant said, “A lot of people have a negative connotation of agriculture.” In contrast, participants who had taken the introductory plant class were knowledgeable about the types of careers available prior to being presented with the list of opportunities.

Once Exposed to Available Careers, Attitudes were Positive

Most, but not all, participants who took the

introductory plant class for non-majors said they would have considered getting a minor or major in a plant related field if they had they taken the introductory course earlier in their college career. One participant expressed this by saying, “I'm taking the class and I'm loving it, and I actually wished I had taken it early before my senior year, because I might have at least gotten a minor in horticulture.” Another participant expressed this with even more enthusiasm by saying, “I wish I had known that that minor existed because I probably would have done it. It might have even been my major if I had taken it early enough.” After being presented a definition of ornamental horticulture and a list of career choices, most participants, but not all, had positive reactions to the possibility of employment in this field. One participant expressed this by saying, “I think it sounds cool because it takes some creativity in like how you want to engineer [flowers] and use them, and then also it uses the sciences because you have to understand how the plants grow and things like that so it's kind of a well-rounded deal.” However, some participants were concerned for the security of a job in ornamental horticulture, because of the struggling economy, even after being told there were jobs available in this area.

Objective 3: Identify students' barriers and constraints in choosing a specific academic program of agriculture as a career. Participants perceived barriers to entering the field of ornamental horticulture were mixed, but included: Lack of knowledge of careers available, bad job market, not enough money, and not masculine enough. Participants in all focus groups were asked what barriers, if any, they would see for entering the ornamental horticulture industry. Additionally, participants believed these barriers could be overcome if the industry was more visible in their daily lives.

Lack of Knowledge about Available Opportunities

The majority of the participants felt that the largest barrier for them entering the field of ornamental horticulture was that they knew nothing about what it was or what it had to offer. A typical participant response was, “I have no idea what this job would generally entail.” Other participants thought they had never seen a career available in this area. One participant expressed this by saying, “I don't think I've ever seen an [ornamental horticulture] career.” Some participants expressed a need to be educated more on what career options were available in this area. One participant summed this up by saying, “educate us on what there is.”

Bad Job Market and Not Enough Money

Participants were ask what barriers they saw for entering the field of ornamental horticulture after

hearing a description and viewing a list of careers available in the field. One common theme among all groups was the idea that the job market was not good for this career and they wouldn't receive enough money. It is important to note that salary and job market for this career were not information provided to participants. Participants expressed their concern about money and the job market in ornamental horticulture in a multitude of ways. One participant articulated a concern for money in this career area by saying, "I don't see this field as being able to pay me enough money." Another participant said, "I mean I sort of have this preconceived notion that the job market isn't that good for ornamental horticulture." Other participants expressed an interest in the industry, but found money to be a major barrier. One participant expressed this by saying, "I'd consider it as a hobby, but it doesn't pay enough for a career."

Not Masculine Enough

The majority of participants, both male and female, from all three focus groups thought men would be unwilling to work in the field of ornamental horticulture. One participant expressed this perception by explaining, "I think guys would be deterred from it just because its flowers." Other participants confirmed this perception by expressing their views in similar comments. Another participant said, "Very few men can actually say I sell flowers." All groups expressed this perception emphatically. Another participant went as far as to call the field "girly," as expressed in the following quote, "Flowers are kind of girly, in a really girly, girly sense."

Need for Visibility of Companies in the Industry

Participants expressed that ornamental horticulture companies should market themselves directly to recruit students through a well-developed brand. Participants felt that with other industries they know exactly what type of company and specific names of companies they might work for when they have completed a degree. They are aware of the names of the top engineering firms, or top accounting firms, but they don't know of any companies that would employ people in the ornamental horticulture industry. The students suggested partnerships to promote the companies at the same time as promoting their career options. One participant expressed this view by saying, "yeah, I mean I think the industry in general is just not that well known. I mean how many flower companies can you name? And how many engineering firms, how many financial firms, how many restaurants? There's just not that much visibility compared to other markets, and I think that the industry as a whole needs to promote that in general."

This was an area that all focus groups expressed a need for the ornamental horticulture industry to improve. Another participant said, "Well I think that just the general point is that they need to brand themselves in the industry." The concept of the

industry needing to market or brand itself continued to arise. Another participant said, "By not marketing themselves and putting it out there, like there are jobs for you to get, it kind of makes it sound to people like us that there really isn't much of a job industry, since you never hear about them asking for people to work for them."

Conclusions and Discussion

Overall, this study indicates an increased need for aligning students' career needs with communication about academic programs and available careers, as seen by students' desire to major or minor in a specific academic agricultural program once they were made aware of programs of study in this area and available careers. Additionally, this research provides support for the importance of marketing and branding the agricultural industry, as specifically requested by students. Although this study was limited to the one institution under study, key findings suggest that increased communication at all levels is necessary to recruit qualified students, which aligns with the corporate literature on building relationships and trustworthiness with stakeholder and customer groups (Fill, 2002).

Students' lack of awareness and knowledge about careers in an agricultural field parallels previous conclusions (Kellogg Commission, 2001); however, this study found that not only were students not aware of career opportunities in this area, they actually had an initial negative perception about being in a college of agriculture. Additionally, participants were under the impression that careers were not available in this academic program area and those that were available were low paying positions. Another key finding of interest was that students already in the college of agriculture were more likely to choose happiness in their future career over a large paycheck.

It is not surprising that students were not willing to enter into a major or program of study prior to learning about it, as previous studies have determined that prospective students have a desire to find out if a program is a good match for their interests before they make a decision on a college or a major (DesJardins and Hendel, 1999). It is noteworthy that once learning about this specific program of study, participants found it a favorable career option. This indicates that the barriers to recruitment are not related to problems with studying an agriculturally related field, but rather with their lack of knowledge about careers in these areas.

Many of the participants' concerns were about the image of jobs in the area of ornamental horticulture and/or agriculture. Some of these were specific to ornamental horticulture, like working with flowers not being a masculine occupation. However, some of these concerns were about agriculture overall, with participants indicating that it seemed antiquated or unable to pay them enough money. Thus, this

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indicates an opportunity for an academic program in agriculture to communicate its strengths accurately in an effort to engage a student that is interested in their program and can identify mutual goals as suggested by Stewart (1991).

Recommendations

Although this study is limited in that it represents a case study of one land grant institution, these findings may be transferrable and have implications for all academic programs of agriculture. In addition to the traditional influence of family, speakers in the classroom, teachers, and classroom experiences the results of this study indicate an increased need for marketing of not only academic programs, but agricultural businesses as well. Students were unlikely to choose a career if they did not recognize a company or organization in that field that they would work for once they completed their degree. Thus, it is recommended that institutions of higher education work with the agricultural industry to market and brand themselves so that students will be aware of careers available in the industry.

As evidenced by the results of these focus groups, what is important in a career to this generation of students is the idea of “leaving a mark” or a legacy through their work. This generation of current and incoming college students has been influenced by movements toward globalism and social outreach in the 1990s and 2000s. They are more likely to be civic-minded, open to volunteerism, and serve communities nationally and abroad (Jonas-Dwyer and Pospisil, 2004). This may explain their desire to seek careers that offer the opportunity to leave a legacy; therefore, communicating that aspect of agricultural careers would likely aid in recruiting students to lesser known majors in colleges of agriculture.

Interestingly, the results of this study indicate that students within the college of agriculture are more concerned with personal happiness than making money. Academic programs in agriculture, which may not pay competitive salaries with engineering firms or big business, should try recruiting students within the college of agriculture who have decided that the pre-professional track, or other program of study, will not work for them for any number of reasons.

Finally, the results of this study indicate an increased need to improve communication through a strategic communication process, which is regularly recommended in corporate communication (Smith, 2002). The students in this group recognized and saw other businesses as prominent in their daily lives, causing them to think about these as potential careers for their future. Future research is recommended to determine how to move forward with an appropriate strategic communication plan for academic programs of agriculture.

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