

A Field Worth Cultivating

AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS

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Never before has the college student majoring in agriculture been faced with a more solid curriculum of stiff science than is true today.

Today's boy and girl are expected to master learning in soil science, in hydrology, genetics and nutrition on a higher level than the professor himself attained 50 years ago. More and more agricultural processes are being computerized, and highly refined measurements of temperature, soil moisture, protein analysis, marketing margins and chemical analyses of herbicidal applications test the skill of those youths whom we classify as mathematically minded, or scientifically minded.

But what of the boy and girl who have different temperaments? Those who can paint pictures with words? Those whose interest in agriculture is just as real, but whose talents and inclinations rest in the broad lap of philosophy, imagination, perhaps more interest in the human applications and results of sweeping change than in the calibrated reading of a field sprayer?

There is a place for these, too, in agricultural colleges, a field which has never attracted the numbers needed to fill existing vacancies. We refer, of course, to agricultural communications, a term which includes agricultural journalism plus a few other communicative skills closely allied to it.

This is the field for the literary minded as opposed to the scientific minded. This is the field which fills the vital role of communicating new knowledge to those who can best utilize that knowledge. This is a field which has had a "Men Wanted" sign over its gatepost for every year of the past half century.

Actually, it is surprising that this need has been so sparsely answered. The need is certainly there, and the interest and facilities for training. It has remained, however, as a sort of back eddy, outside the main stream. It is time to get it into the middle of that rushing course, awaken interest in this discipline and feed this need.

The field of activity for the agricultural communicator — journalist — is wide, intensely interesting and richly rewarding. It includes the editor's office in every land-grant university or college of agriculture, as well as scores of opportunities in the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

It trains for the "house organs," the magazines and news letters issued by the big agro-chemical companies, seed companies, farm machinery manufacturers, the breed associations for all breeds and kinds of livestock, the national and state farm organizations, the artificial insemination organizations, the farm co-operatives, the commodity associations, the public relations firms catering to agriculture, and the national associations made up of land-grant agricultural personnel themselves.

Additionally, the agricultural communications skills can be used by others trained for other agricultural tasks — the vocational agriculture teacher, the county agent, the college administrators themselves. Actually, we'd recommend some courses in this field for all students in agriculture, so they can communicate their learning to others.

(In our own little house organ a decade ago we made reference to the frequent comment, "He's a great scientist, but he can't communicate with others." Our comment was that a "great scientist" who couldn't communicate with others was like a cowboy who is afraid of horses, set afoot and immobile and useless at the start).

Actually, the very intricacy of this highly scientific agriculture of today makes the communicator's skills more needed than ever before. The county agent in his newspaper

column is trying to translate into the layman's terms more involved skills and processes than was true a few decades ago. The editor of a national farm magazine, talking to the research scientist in an agricultural college, deals with a hundred terms not in the vocabulary of the magazine reader — but he must explain them to that reader.

So the need is there. How to fill it?

There are two general routes, training within an agricultural journalism department and fairly similar training gained by the dual major in agriculture and journalism. We have observed both, and observed that both do the job well. The agricultural journalism curriculum delves more deeply within the single field of training, while the dual major offers a somewhat wider vista. As a newsman of the old school, we personally believe that the trained journalist is one adept at applying his skills to all situations — that a good reporter can handle adequately every assignment from the governor's ball to a hog calling contest.

We yield from that view, however, to the extent of admitting that a good reporter is a better reporter if he has some depth of knowledge within certain broad fields — agriculture, health, government, military science or electronics.

We see no incompatibility in a student learning — as we train them at the University of Arizona — his journalistic skills in a department of journalism and at the same time learning about the new agricultural science in a college of agriculture. The proof of this particular pudding is that all our own agricultural journalism graduates not only got good jobs upon graduation, not only that they each had choices between two or more job offers, but that now — a few years later — they are writing us about their transfers to higher levels and imploring us, "... if you have someone getting out of school this spring, someone trained about the way I was, we have an opening ..."

Belatedly we are trying to catch up with that demand, enlarge our agricultural communications enrollment from a few boys and girls to several. We have just produced a little brochure on the subject, and readers of this magazine are invited to write and ask for copies. We candidly admit we had a blind spot and are hurrying to overcome that lack of attention given to the needs of our own field. News letters from our professional organizations suggest that this blind spot was not localized, and that the need has been general. Not only that, but a variety of "foreign programs" emphasize that translating agricultural knowledge into usefulness through the communications skills is more vitally needed when teams of agricultural scientists go into foreign countries than even here at home — which marks expansion of the market for agricultural communicators. The need for these skills will be with us, without a doubt, for all the foreseeable future.

The Committee on the E. B. Knight Journal Award will be making its decision soon on the best article published in the NACTA Journal in 1968. A cash prize of \$50.00 and a plaque is given to the person receiving this annual award. Plan now to compete in 1969 by submitting your article or articles for publication.