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EFFECTIVE WRITING: AG ALUMNI SAY IT'S ESSENTIAL!

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Introduction

Often, instructors in the College of Agriculture experience difficulties as they attempt to convince students that writing effectively is important. Too frequently students believe that once outside the college classroom, they will not need to write. They therefore take little heed of skills taught in required writing courses, resent writing assignments given in agriculture classes, and fail to enroll in technical writing courses available to them. Sensing students' disregard of writing skills, instructors increase attempts to convince them that the ability to write effectively is essential to success in many agricultural careers. But we lack specific information to support this generalization, and we therefore frequently fail to motivate students to improve writing skills.

In August of 1971 the English Counseling Service of the University of Illinois College of Agriculture surveyed graduates' use of writing skills in agricultural careers. A five page questionnaire was mailed to 660 graduates of the College of Agriculture randomly selected from a list of all graduates from 1923 to 1968. The specific purpose of the study was to ascertain kinds of writing tasks College of Agriculture graduates regularly engage in, the number of hours they devote to writing during an average work week, the value of writing experiences offered in U. of I. courses, and other information useful in motivating students to improve writing skills. Also, the information was sought for use in developing communications curricula for agricultural students.

Forty-four percent of the questionnaires mailed were completed and returned. Questionnaires not completed can be accounted for, in part, by the fact that addresses were in some cases incorrect, several of the recent graduates were overseas on military assignments, and older graduates were retired and therefore decided the questionnaire was not applicable for them. Graduates no longer working in agriculturally related careers also considered the questionnaire not applicable. Still others were deceased.

Findings

The 292 graduates responding to the questionnaire ranged in age from 25 to 72, an average age of 44. Thirty-nine percent of those responding were in professional or technical positions, 38 percent in managerial or official positions, and 17 percent in farming. The remaining 6 percent included craftsmen, housewives, and non-farm laborers. Forty percent were employed by private agencies, 34 percent by governmental agencies, and 21 percent self-employed. Most of those self-employed were farmers.

Respondents were asked, "Do you think the ability to write well is important to persons entering your profession?" Ninety-five percent of those responding to the questionnaire answered "yes." The 5 percent (N=15) who answered "no" included 9 self-employed farmers, 4 persons in managerial positions, 1 craftsman, and 1 non-farm laborer.

Respondents were also asked to indicate the amount of time they spend writing each week. Twenty-four percent indicated that they spend an average of 1 to 2 hours each week writing, and an additional 23 percent spend 3 to 5 hours each week. Another 20 percent spend 6 to 10 hours writing in an average week, 11 percent spend 11 to 15 hours, and 13 percent spend over 16 hours per week. Only 9 percent indicated they do no writing at all. A breakdown of these groups by occupation and employer indicates that 54 percent of those persons who spend 16 hours or more of each week writing are in managerial positions whereas the overwhelming majority (21 out of 26 or 81 percent) of those who do no writing in an average week are in nonmanagerial positions.

Respondents indicated that their writing tasks are varied. Business letters, documented reports, plans of work, and inter-office memoranda require the most time of the greatest portion of the respondents. Other writing tasks include monthly reports, advertisements, technical reports, budget reports, speeches, newsreleases and other journalistic writing, legal documents and miscellaneous reports. Thirty-three percent of the respondents

spend from 15 minutes to 1 hour a week writing business letters. Plans of work also occupy 29 percent of the respondents from 15 minutes to an hour each week, whereas 17 percent spend over an hour each week writing plans of work. Speeches and office memos each involve 29 percent of the respondents between fifteen minutes and one hour per week, and an additional 16 percent spend over one hour per week writing speeches and memos. Thirty-one percent of the respondents spend up to one hour in an average week writing progress reports. The mean number of hours spent by respondents in writing was 7.1 hours.

Over half of the respondents indicated that writing courses they took while at the U. of I. were useful to them. Thirty-five percent also learned useful writing skills in agriculture courses which required lab reports, research papers, and other writing assignments.

Respondents holding managerial positions were asked the following question: "In general, how would you rate the skills in written communication of those persons who apply for positions in your company?" A rating scale of "Very good," "Good," "Don't know," and "Very poor" was provided. Twenty-eight percent of the managers rated applicants' skills as "Poor" or "Very poor" and 37 percent rated them as "Good" or "Very good." The remaining 35 percent could not rate applicants' writing skills.

Many respondents added unsolicited comments to the questionnaire. One 1928 graduate wrote,

I think speech and writing are more important in any line of work than most undergraduates realize. You can make more hay by being able to stand on your feet and talk when called upon, than by being the most able person in your profession if inarticulate.

His remark sums up the attitude of most of the respondents who added personal notes. Several commented that writing skills are closely related to success in agricultural careers. A 1948 graduate noted, "Busy executives demand concise, well-organized technical reports, and justifiably so." Others expressed regret that they had not enrolled in technical writing, report writing, or research reporting courses while students. One noted that "Any skill that will improve an individual's capacity to write simply and briefly would be of great benefit." As a footnote to his comments on the value of speech and writing courses which he took at the U.

of I., a 1961 graduate wrote "These courses would have been more useful had I known their importance and studied." Another graduate stressed that students should realize that a few years after graduation they may be working in an area only remotely connected with what they studied in college. But because writing is important in any career, he recommends thorough preparation for all students.

Conclusion

Overall, the survey shows that effective writing is essential for most graduates of the College of Agriculture: the sheer number of hours that most graduates spend writing is convincing evidence of its significance. It also suggests that in particular graduates who plan to enter managerial positions and "go to the top" will find effective writing an essential.

Findings in the survey have important implications for agriculture faculty and administrators, too. Today a variety of pressures on university administrators and classroom teachers may adversely affect the writing skills of our graduates. Many colleges and universities are reducing the number of writing courses required of students regardless of their writing skills. Budgetary cutbacks which necessitate larger class enrollments limit the time an instructor can devote to evaluation of student writing. Students, particularly those who do not write well, argue that writing assignments are "irrelevant" to agricultural coursework. But the findings from this questionnaire suggest that we do our students no favor if we yield to these various pressures and reduce composition requirements for all students, whether qualified or not, or omit writing assignments from agriculture courses. Our students will be writing once they leave the university. We therefore will be most helpful to them if we provide meaningful writing experiences, familiarizing them with the variety of writing tasks they will face in agricultural careers and helping them perfect writing skills.

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