

New Beginnings: Exploring Agricultural Communications Curriculum Development in Ontario



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Abstract

While agricultural communications programs are staples in American higher education, no comparable program exists in any Canadian institution. As North American nations, Canadian and American agriculture face similar challenges such as increasingly skeptical public opinion and decreasing agricultural literacy. This study focuses on the flagship agricultural institution in Canada as a potential base for a new agricultural communications program and highlights the opinions of two key stakeholders, agricultural students at the institution, and agricultural industry professionals in Ontario. Following a curriculum development framework by Wolf (2007), stakeholders detailed suggested program formatting, ideal core curriculum content, traits of the ideal graduate, and desired opportunities and experiences provided by such a program. Results found that stakeholders upheld the program teaching a variety of communication skills, social skills, and providing networking and co-op opportunities. Participants upheld the value of the program, noting that a major or a minor option are ideal to introduce the program to as many students as possible, even those outside of agriculture. This study serves as an important step for future Canadian or North American curriculum development initiatives and seeks to bolster the growing literature base for agricultural communications curriculum development outside of the United States..

Keywords: agricultural communications, curriculum development, Canada, international, agriculture

Agricultural communications programs have been a feature in numerous United States colleges of agriculture since the early 1900s (Tedrick, 2009). The notable growth of the discipline, with over 40 programs today, corresponds with agricultural industry needs. Trained agricultural communicators are more in-demand than ever as agricultural literacy decreases among the public and the industry grows increasingly complex (Cannon et al., 2016; Kurtzo et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2015). Despite the growth and longevity of the discipline, the United States remains the only country to have such dedicated academic focus on the field, even when looking at similar North American countries such as Canada (Miller et al., 2020; Thorn et al., 2022).

Modern Agricultural Communications Programs

Modern American agricultural communications programs are an evolving blend of mass-communications, journalism, and industry influences that reflect the changing nature of the industry they serve (Ahrens & Gibson, 2013). The first agricultural communications programs began as agricultural journalism, teaching students how to communicate research and information about agricultural practices to farmers and agriculturalists. However, increasing urbanization in recent decades led to shifting public opinion and a public progressively apathetic toward agriculture and food industries (Center for Food Integrity, 2014; Irani & Doerfert, 2013; Kurtzo et al., 2016). Thus, modern agricultural communications programs in U.S. colleges of agriculture increased their emphasis on communicating to consumers and demonstrate consistent growth in numbers and enrollment (Cannon et al., 2016; Corder & Irlbeck, 2018; Doerfert & Miller, 2006; Irani & Doerfert, 2013; Kurtzo et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2015; Tucker et al., 2018; Weckman et al., 2000).

These American programs are commonly classified as Bachelor of Science degrees, but take the form of academic majors, minors, and graduate programs (Cannon et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2015; Reisner, 1990). Since their inception, these programs consistently promote the core ideals of strong writing, internship experiences, and agricultural courses (Cannon et al., 2016; Corder & Irlbeck, 2018; Doerfert & Miller, 2006; Irlbeck & Ackers, 2009; Kurtzo et al., 2016; Morgan, 2014; Morgan & Rucker, 2013; Sprecker & Rudd, 1998; Terry & Bailey-Evans, 1995; Watson, 2009). Other specialized skills, such as graphic design, photography, web design, social media, and oral communications, are frequent components (Cannon et al., 2016). Beyond technical competencies, agricultural communications programs emphasize high-impact learning experiences for students to develop both practical and social skills that are sought after by industry (Leal et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2019).

International Agricultural Communications Curriculum Development

While the United States remains the nation most dedicated to agricultural communications, studies have been conducted in recent years aimed at disseminating the discipline internationally. Miller et al. (2020) and Thorn et al. (2022) have explored agricultural communications curriculum development in the United Kingdom and Australia, respectively. These countries lack higher education programs in agricultural communications, and these studies provide insight into stakeholder perceptions and attitudes toward the discipline, granting preliminary groundwork and cultural distinctions (Miller et al., 2020; Thorn et al., 2022).

As in the United States, agricultural communications stakeholders in other countries commonly favor graduates obtaining foundational communication skills, such as written and oral communication (Miller et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2020; Thorn et al., 2022). Having an underlying understanding of their nations' respective agricultural industries was also valued, with suggestions to have graduates serving as a link between agriculture and the public (Miller et al., 2020; Thorn et al., 2022). Most notably, these authors recommend an expansion of the agricultural communications discipline beyond American soil. Specialists in agricultural communications are taking note of the discipline's relevance and applying U.S. curricular elements internationally to assess how such programs would fit and elevate other countries' higher education institutions (Miller et al., 2020; Thorn et al., 2022).

Canadian Connections and Agricultural Communications Needs

Canadian and U.S. agricultural industries face many of the same communication challenges, with the general population's move away from agriculture potentially eroding decades of trust cultivated between producers and consumers (Center for Food Integrity, 2014; Doerfert & Miller, 2006; Hamel & Saindon, 2017; Irani & Doerfert,

2013; Kurtzo et al., 2016; Spooner et al., 2014). Perceptions of conventional agriculture in Canada are impacted by consumers' lack of understanding of the science behind food production and the broader industry functions, often leading to a negative outlook on agricultural practices (Braun et al., 2020).

Among the most distinct differences between Canadian and American agricultural challenges is the lack of educational and research opportunities for aspiring agricultural communicators in Canada. Currently, there are no disciplinary programs in Canadian four-year universities. With a rise in skepticism and concerns about agriculture from the Canadian public, issues of misinformation surrounding agriculture and a decrease in agricultural literacy are potent challenges noted by industry professionals and advocates (Dyment et al., 2022). However, these are also challenges agricultural communications have started to address through formal and informal communication methods (Agriculture and AgriFood Canada, 2018; Braun et al., 2020; Dyment et al., 2022). The introduction of a dedicated agricultural communications discipline in Canadian higher education can provide future communicators formal training to educate about North American agriculture. The University of Guelph Ontario Agricultural College is widely regarded as the flagship Canadian agricultural institution, making it a natural host for curriculum development exploration.

Even with close national ties and connections, Canada remains a largely unexplored venue for agricultural communications curriculum development. To date, few if any publications from agricultural communications scholars have acknowledged Canadian universities as potential hosts for new degree programs in the discipline. In a North American country facing many of the same agricultural challenges as the U.S., Canadian students lack opportunities to pursue this discipline without studying internationally. Moreover, this presents a distinct gap in agricultural communications curriculum development literature that has, historically, focused on the United States.

Purpose and Research Questions

To address the lack of literature on this subject, this study was designed to explore the wants and needs of the Ontarian agricultural industry and agricultural students at the University of Guelph OAC regarding a future Canadian agricultural communications program hosted by this institution. Furthermore, this study assessed commonalities and distinctions between Ontarian stakeholders' needs compared to established American agricultural communications programs. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What program components or skill development would students like to see implemented in a future Canadian agricultural communications program?
2. What program components or skill development would industry professionals like to see implemented in a future Canadian agricultural communications program?
3. How do these components or skills compare to existing American agricultural communications academic programs?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Curriculum development is a complex and varied process and presents opportunities for revitalization of institutional and stakeholder goals and strengths (Devine et al., 2007). This study examines curriculum development through the model posed by Wolf (2007) following the process-oriented curriculum theory provided by Glatthorn (2005). Glatthorn (2005) defines process-oriented curriculum theories as being “concerned primarily with describing how curricula are developed or recommending how they should be developed” (p. 78), making this a natural fit for this study.

Given the complexities of curriculum development, the model posed by Peter Wolf (2007) acts as the guide for this study. Wolf (2007) outlines the curriculum development model through three distinct phases and processes:

1. *Curriculum Visioning*, involving initial conversations with key stakeholders to address the current state of the program and stakeholder desires for the curriculum end-goal. This includes a curriculum assessment to identify strengths and weaknesses, program objectives, ideal graduate traits, and foundational or supplemental curriculum content

2. *Curriculum Development*, bringing the existing program under review, wherein faculty or instructors match elements determined in the Curriculum Visioning phase to content currently being taught using curriculum mapping.

3. *Alignment, Coordination, and Development*, connecting existing program components with the desired outcomes and characteristics identified by stakeholders. The work of faculty members and developers result in a short and long-term development plan to be presented to the department for adoption decisions given that agricultural communications programs do not yet exist at Canadian colleges of agriculture, Curriculum Visioning is the most relevant phase for this study. Initial stakeholder conversations were facilitated through study methodology.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory case-study design using focus groups to adequately address the research questions. This case study research design served to holistically understand the landscape of agricultural communications in Canada and the perspectives of the invested population in relation to agricultural communications in-depth (Yin, 2014). Both student and industry professional stakeholder groups participated in virtual focus groups, with student and industry participants separated. Student participants engaged in focus groups with other students via Zoom, while industry participants conversed with other industry professionals. Three student and two industry focus groups were held, each moderated by a member of the research team and observed by another researcher to take notes. Researchers received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to recruitment and data collection (IRB #2022E0013).

Population and Sampling Methods

The study's population included agricultural industry professionals in Ontario and agricultural undergraduate students at the University of Guelph OAC. Both purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed. Representing prominent agricultural sectors in Ontario was important, and purposive sampling allowed us to identify individuals who met the pre-determined criteria for the industry population. Once these targeted representatives from the beef, dairy, food, poultry, and swine industries were identified, snowball sampling was used to identify other potential participants on the recommendations of our initial contacts. Ten industry professionals were contacted through a recruitment email to participate in the study, eight responded, and six were able to participate. Qualitative research consistently accepts smaller sample sizes, prioritizing saturation and depth of data rather than large sample groups (Yin, 2016). Time restrictions were the main deterrent for participants, so multiple focus group sessions were provided to address participant scheduling needs.

Students were another imperative stakeholder group, with relevant student populations often recognized as valued perspectives and co-inquirers in program development (Marquis & Ahmad, 2016). For the University of Guelph OAC student population, snowball sampling was used. The president of the college's student federation was contacted to undertake recruitment efforts for the study and a recruitment statement was written for the weekly OAC newsletter. Total sample size for students was intended to be 20 participants ($n = 20$). Thirty-five students responded with interest to recruitment efforts, and 18 participated in the study. Total sample size for the study was 24 participants ($n = 24$). Again, sample sizes follow qualitative recommendations, often having smaller sample sizes and compensating with increased depth and detail in collected data (Yin, 2016).

Data Collection

Participants answered open-ended questions from an interview guide to accommodate case study design protocols (Yin, 2014). Focus groups lasted one hour via Zoom and were led by an unbiased researcher, with a second member of the research team attending anonymously to observe and take notes. Participants were read an IRB-approved consent statement before answering questions. Following focus groups, we distributed an online demographics survey via Qualtrics. Surveys differed slightly based on population, with student surveys inquiring more into academic specialty and industry focusing on current career positions.

This article represents a larger study and for the purposes of this paper, we focus on the questions posed below.

Data Analysis

We conducted and recorded all focus groups on Zoom and analyzed data through an inductive open coding process (Bhattacharya, 2017). We separated focus group

Table 1

Industry Focus Group Questions

- What skills would you look for in an agricultural communications graduate when hiring?
- What elements do you feel should be present in an agricultural communications program in Canada?
- What form should this program be offered (undergraduate degree, minor, course-based master's)?

data by population and transcribed and categorized data to discover themes. We assigned participants a number during transcription to further protect confidentiality. Codes were organized in a virtual document, separated by population group, then consolidated into themes; we then compared and analyzed themes between participant groups. The lead researcher conducted the initial coding and thematic analysis, which were reviewed and corroborated by other members of the research team to triangulate findings.

Demographic data from the survey were recorded and coded to provide scope for the study. Demographic survey responses consisted of multiple-choice questions and short-answer responses. Short answer questions were coded, and descriptive frequencies were run for the quantitative demographic data.

Reflexivity

Given the inability for qualitative researchers to extract themselves from the research process, it was deemed necessary to include positionality statements (Yin, 2016). The principal researcher, a graduate student at the University of Florida, was born and raised in rural Ontario and has family and numerous friends who are alumni of the University of Guelph OAC. Much of her research has been dedicated to the subject of curriculum development in agricultural communications in hopes of bringing the discipline to her home country. This researcher's understanding of the dynamics of rural Ontario and her connections to the University of Guelph OAC allows her to bring a unique perspective to the idea of curriculum development for a Canadian agricultural communications program. The remaining researchers are faculty members in the agricultural communications discipline with no connections to the University of Guelph or Canadian agriculture.

Trustworthiness and Triangulation

Trustworthiness refers to the confidence in a study's overall quality, including methods, data, and interpretation of findings (Pilot & Beck, 2014). This study increased trustworthiness by addressing topics of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Forero et al., 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) through triangulation between multiple data sources, observational notes, an audit trail, purposive sampling methods, and thorough reflexivity. Use of three data sources (student and industry participants, observational notes, and related literature) allowed for

Table 2

Student Focus Group Questions

- What would you expect to learn in a program like this?
- What would need to be present in a program like this, if anything, to interest you in studying it?
- Would you be interested in pursuing this more as an undergraduate degree, a minor, or master's program?

triangulation and confirmability, while observational notes bolstered dependability and credibility through detailed descriptions. An audit trail noted each step of the research process, increasing dependability. The use of multiple purposive sampling methods aided transferability through the development of a representative sample while reflexivity noted researcher connections and impacts on the project, aiding confirmability (Forero et al., 2018).

Limitations

Despite relatively diverse backgrounds of participants, this study hosted a small sample size in comparison to the breadth of the agricultural industry itself. Therefore, findings from this study cannot definitively be generalized to the broader population but can adequately reflect similar agricultural communications programs in U.S. colleges of agriculture thanks to thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research consistently accommodates smaller sample sizes, instead emphasizing the in-depth nature and quality of data collected over quantity (Bhattacharya, 2017; Yin, 2016).

Scheduling challenges posed another limitation. To compensate, we created an introductory script for the three moderators and the original moderator's recorded session was observed to increase similarity. To address limited literature on international agricultural communications curriculum development, triangulation was employed by using three data sources (student participants, industry participants, and researcher notes). The lack of recent agricultural communication curricular review and curriculum development literature also bolsters this article's ability to contribute to the scholarly base.

Results

All participants had some connection to Ontarian agriculture. Industry professionals held positions representing a variety of the main Ontarian agricultural sectors, while students specialized in numerous majors under the broader college of agriculture. The following tables illustrate the demographic information of all study participants.

RQ1: What program components or skill development would students like to see implemented in a future Canadian agricultural communications program?

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Table 3

Student Demographics

| | Year in School | Major | Gender | Agricultural Background |
|------------|----------------|--|--------|-------------------------------|
| Student 1 | Freshman | Agricultural Science | Female | Yes, Unspecified |
| Student 2 | Freshman | Agricultural Science | Female | Yes, Unspecified |
| Student 3 | Freshman | Environmental Science | Female | Yes, Poultry, Beef, Cash Crop |
| Student 4 | Freshman | Food & Agricultural Business | Female | Yes, Dairy |
| Student 5 | Freshman | Crop Science | Female | Yes, Cash Crop |
| Student 6 | Sophomore | Crop Science | Female | Yes, Cash Crop |
| Student 7 | Sophomore | Crop Science | Female | Yes, Cash Crop |
| Student 8 | Sophomore | Animal Science | Female | Yes, Dairy |
| Student 9 | Junior | Animal Science | Male | Yes, Unspecified |
| Student 10 | Junior | Food, Agriculture & Resource Economics | Female | Yes, Unspecified |
| Student 11 | Junior | Food, Agriculture & Resource Economics | Female | Yes, Unspecified |
| Student 12 | Junior | Food & Agricultural Business | Female | Yes, Unspecified |
| Student 13 | Junior | Honours Agriculture | Female | Yes, Unspecified |
| Student 14 | Junior | Honours Agriculture | Female | Unknown |
| Student 15 | Senior | Food & Agricultural Business | Male | Yes, Dairy |
| Student 16 | Senior | Crop Science | Male | Yes, Cash Crop |
| Student 17 | Senior | Food & Agricultural Business | Female | Yes, Dairy |
| Student 18 | Senior | Food & Agricultural Business | Male | No, Restaurant Background |

Research question one assessed the needs and desires of students at the University of Guelph OAC regarding a potential agricultural communications program at their institution. The noted themes were “grounding the program in agriculture,” “flexibility,” “wide range of communication skills,” “co-ops and practical experiences,” and “benefitting the greatest number of students.”

Table 4

Industry Demographics

| | Company | Role | Sector |
|----------------|------------------------------------|---|------------|
| Professional 1 | Dairy and Beef A.I. Company | General Manager | Dairy Beef |
| Professional 2 | Provincial Commodity Organization | Manager of Public Engagement & Digital Strategy | Beef |
| Professional 3 | Provincial Commodity Organization | Communications & Consumer Marketing Manager | Swine |
| Professional 4 | National Commodity Organization | Director of Brand and Communications | Poultry |
| Professional 5 | Agricultural Communications Agency | Founder & CEO | Food |
| Professional 6 | Agricultural Communications Agency | Founder & Digital Communications Strategist | Food Dairy |

Grounded in Agriculture

When asked about learning expectations in an agricultural communications program, many student participants emphasized the importance of having the program grounded in agriculture. This was the most predominant student response across multiple questions, indicating it as an imperative factor in ensuring student interest in the program. Student 16 said, “it would have to be specifically agriculture focused...I don’t think it would appeal to me as much if I was just writing about vaguely agricultural topics just for the sake of it.” Students offered specific methods to accomplish this, including pulling agriculture courses from other programs or beginning with an introduction to agriculture course before diving deeper into more specified topics. This draws upon another student theme of flexibility, with students noting that a flexible program structure allowing them to take other agricultural courses would attract their peers.

Range of Technical Communication Skills

Students identified having a range of technical communication skills that should be available in the program. Effective writing skills across various mediums, social media training, graphic design, public speaking, and advertising and marketing were all mentioned. Audience analysis and communicating with various audiences were other valued topics to help educate and bridge the gap between producers and consumers. Social media was identified as a prominent area in the industry and important to agricultural communications, particularly among younger generations. For public speaking, students were enthusiastic about an opportunity for a debate class in the program to strengthen public speaking skills and to train students to deal with conflict management and how to communicate

with individuals opposed to the agriculture.

Co-ops and Experiential Learning

Outside of technical skills, co-op and experiential learning opportunities were heavily supported. Students felt there should be a practical aspect to the program where they would be able to network and apply the skills they learn in a meaningful way. One student suggested that a student-run newsletter would be a good option to apply learning and allow students to “display what we’ve learned and show it to the general public at the school as well.”

Program Format

Understanding the program format that gained the most student support was important. The *undergraduate minor* option gained the most wide-spread support. Participants believed that this option would produce the greatest enrollment number and would allow for further specialization in other areas of agriculture while still obtaining knowledge in the field of agricultural communications. One student summarized this with her response.

I think it’s important to be more thoroughly implemented across the board for anyone looking to get into [agriculture]. I definitely think it’s important for everyone to have that general knowledge.

A *master’s degree* and *undergraduate major* were frequently mentioned, with students noting that a master’s degree gives them the opportunity to also specialize in other agricultural areas, while an undergraduate major gives them a concentrated education in the discipline that would be attractive to many students.

RQ2: What program components or skill development would industry professionals like to see implemented in a future Canadian agricultural communications program?

Research question two served a similar purpose as research question one, only exploring this from an Ontarian agricultural industry perspective. Identified themes from these responses included “*social skills*,” “*wide range of communication skills*,” “*co-ops and practical experiences*,” “*crisis communications*,” “*grounded in agriculture*,” and “*benefitting the greatest number of students*.”

Social Skills

Industry professionals mentioned a variety of *social skills* when considering attractive attributes for hiring. These skills included conflict management, critical thinking, initiative, leadership skills, strategic thinking, optimism or emotional intelligence and self-assessment. One professional noted that, “when I’m hiring, I always start with their attitude and personal attributes, then I can help to hone the skills.”

Technical Skills

Technical skills also received frequent mention, with industry participants recognizing that graduates should be poly-skilled and adaptable across the communications industry. Such skills include social media, written communications, public speaking, audience analysis, media

training, and market research. Crisis communication and understanding audiences were valued skills. Social media was the most frequent response among these participants, feeling this was an important proficiency to keep pace with the increasingly digital industry. One professional stated:

They need a strong grounding in digital and social media because, increasingly that’s where our world is going and whether it’s advertising or just managing social media accounts, they need to understand how to do that effectively.

Professionals also noted that the instinct to be defensive when discussing controversial agricultural topics needed to be curbed and that writing is a key element to be a successful communicator.

Co-ops and Practical Experiences

Similar to student responses, *co-ops and practical experiences* emerged as one of the most common themes for educational experiences among professionals. Participants considered these themes as opportunities to gain practical experience in the field, network, and to gain perspective, particularly outside of agriculture. Professional 2 noted:

A co-op or mandatory placement, for me, was incredibly helpful because you not only learn the theory, but you can also be placed with different organizations where you actually have to put those skills into practice. I think it would be hugely beneficial.

Focus on Agriculture

Finally, grounding the program in agriculture was a debated theme among professionals. While some participants valued this approach, others advised against a full-scale agricultural program, noting that it should be more general and less agriculture-specific to attract those outside the industry. However, other participants emphasized the importance of an agricultural version of general communications. Professional 1 specifically noted that while the program should broadly focus on communication skills, it should have its roots in agriculture for the benefit of the industry.

Program Format

Looking at the potential program formats, professionals overwhelmingly supported agricultural communications as a major. Participants noted that although starting as a major would be a lofty goal, they perceive value in having this as a major. A minor was another popular response among participants, emphasizing this form of the program to raise the number of enrolled students and to increase the popularity of the program. Professional 2 noted that “the largest number of people in the sector would benefit from the minor. Every undergraduate should have communications training and it should be open across colleges, not just the college of agriculture.” The master’s option was mentioned to provide further specialization for students looking for career benefits. The discussion focused mainly on the practical aspect of an agricultural communications education rather than a theoretical focus.

Professional 1 indicated being indifferent to the form of the program. Their greatest concern was making sure the

largest number of students were educated in this field. They emphasized the importance of agricultural communications as an educational program and industry sector, stating that “it should be available in the way that is best to produce the most amount of skilled people who are inspired to become part of the program and the industry. We just need more people trained in this area and agriculture.”

Overall, participants concurred that it was important to have an agricultural communications presence in the university. Most professional participants supported having as many students as possible enrolled in the program in some form to maximize its impact of the program for industry benefit.

Discussion

Across research questions, participants provided comments and themes that unknowingly paralleled the American agricultural communications academic model. This discussion serves to highlight any similarities or disparities and address RQ₃ (How do these components or skills compare to existing American agricultural communications academic programs?) across themes.

Support for the program being *grounded in agriculture* varied across participant groups, with students heavily supporting this approach and industry professionals open to more variety in topics. These polarized viewpoints are similarly prevalent within the discipline across America. Many American programs maintain a strong agricultural focus, emphasizing students having background knowledge in agriculture (Cannon et al., 2016; Corder & Irlbeck, 2018; Miller et al., 2015; Morgan & Rucker, 2013). When looking at stakeholder desires for new international agricultural communication programs, understanding the agricultural industry and topics was a high priority (Miller et al., 2020; Thorn et al., 2022). However, the discipline in the U.S. is diversifying, with many programs adopting food, natural resources, or science alongside agriculture topics. As issues such as climate change, sustainable food production, and science literacy become more relevant, society will continue to see more overlap between these topics and agriculture; many objectives of agricultural communications scholarship align with disciplines such as science communication (Parrella et al., 2023). American agricultural communications scholars are discussing how this overlap may influence their programs, and Ontarian students and industry professionals exemplify this discourse from a Canadian perspective, mirroring questions of how the discipline may diversify in the future.

Both groups felt that Ontarian agricultural communications graduates should learn a wide range of communication skills. This variety of technical communication skill coursework has been a constant feature of U.S. agricultural communications programs (Cannon et al., 2016; Leal et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2015). This is upheld by both Ontarian stakeholders, with industry professionals specifically noting the importance of poly-skilled individuals to handle a variety of tasks. All communication skills mentioned by participants are common topics taught in courses across U.S. agricultural communications programs and in colleges of agriculture,

with these technical skills frequently considered to be the core element of these programs (Cannon et al., 2016; Leal et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2015). Ontarian participants' desire for these skills in academic settings indicate similar industry needs and a comparable understanding of what agricultural communications programs offer students when likened to American counterparts.

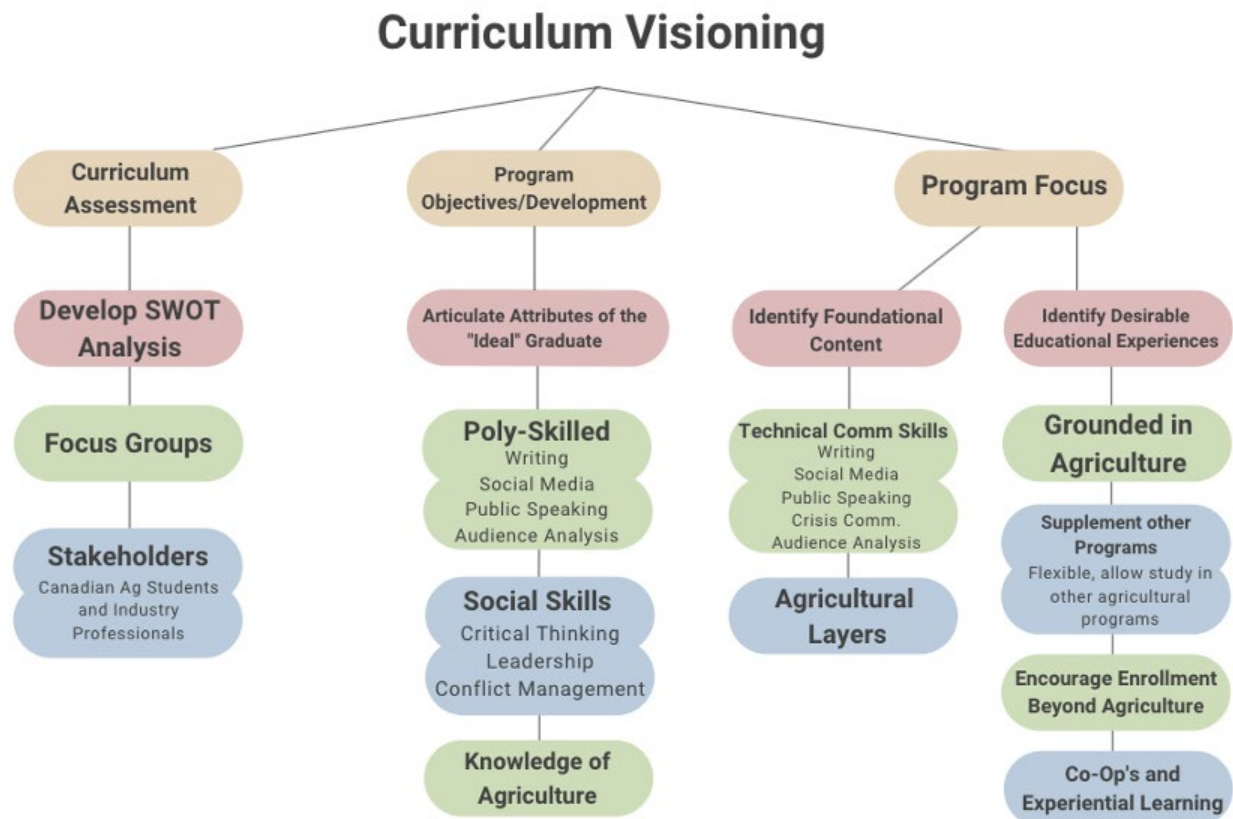
While technical skills were prominent responses for desired competencies, industry professionals particularly valued *social skills* when hiring. This stakeholder group sought graduates with skills like critical thinking, leadership, or emotional intelligence rather than solely technical competencies. Research on U.S. agricultural communications graduates and employers explored the needs for interpersonal skills that extend beyond traditional communication capabilities, finding that they are highly valued by professionals and students alike (Leal et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2019). These skills are often indirectly acquired, with students developing these skillsets through experiences rather than dedicated course teachings (Leal et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2019). However, educators can foster this development by placing students in learning situations that facilitate skill development like team projects, case studies, or hands-on experiences. Ontarian industry professionals were clear about social skill priorities, but Ontarian students failed to mention social skills at all. This counters prior research where students were shown to place slightly more value on these skillsets than professionals (Leal et al., 2019).

One theme that unified Ontarian professionals and students was *co-ops and practical experiences*. Co-ops, commonly referred to as internships, are essential components of most U.S. agricultural communications programs (Cannon et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2015). These and other high-impact learning opportunities are common across programs, providing students opportunities to network and gain practical experience beyond the classroom (Cannon et al., 2016; Corder & Irlbeck, 2018; Miller et al., 2015; Morgan & Rucker, 2013; Terry et al., 1994). Some tier-one research institutions in the U.S. now require their agricultural communications students to complete an internship or high-impact experience as a graduation requirement (Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership, n.d.). Ontarian stakeholders emphasized the importance of students obtaining these high-impact practical experiences and applying their learning beyond classroom settings.

Agricultural communications programs in the U.S. come in a variety of formats, from undergraduate minors and certificates to graduate degrees (Cannon et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2015). Ontarian stakeholders were divided on how best to offer this educational opportunity to students. However, the one agreement across participants was that the program should benefit the greatest number of students. Stakeholders emphasized that there would be student and industry interest in any offering level of agricultural communications but allowing the most students to be trained in some capacity was vital. This valuing of the discipline is reflected in the growing popularity of agricultural communications in the U.S. and abroad (Corder & Irlbeck, 2018; Miller et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2020; Thorn et al.,

Figure 1

Ontarian Stakeholders' Desired Characteristics in Wolf's (2007) Curriculum Visioning Stage



2022; Tucker et al., 2018). American institutions offer the discipline in a variety of ways that best fit their institutional needs. Ontarian stakeholders, particularly industry professionals, indicated that the program should be given room to grow to similarly enhance the institution as needed while still maximizing student exposure to the discipline.

The requirements of stakeholders in Ontario consistently align with key and persistent features found in U.S. agricultural communications programs. Desired Ontarian program characteristics are formatted into Wolf's (2007) Curriculum Visioning format in Figure 1.

Summary

With an increasingly complex agricultural industry and a decreasingly agricultural-literate society (Cannon et al., 2016; Kurtzo et al., 2016), American and Canadian agriculturalists face many of the same challenges. Ontarian stakeholders' needs reflect some of the most prominent and consistent aspects of American agricultural communications programs. With these connections, establishing agricultural communications in Canadian colleges of agriculture provides an encouraging opportunity to expand the discipline to benefit more North American nations. The American model of agricultural communications is a promising fit for a similar Canadian

program, addressing many of the needs and desires of important stakeholders. Future research should explore these same questions from the faculty perspective, addressing faculty at a potential home institution. Further study should also be conducted into international agricultural communications programs, specifically in North American countries, to address needs and provide opportunities in other regions of Canada.

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