TEXAS PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS OF AN ACADEMIC MAJOR IN AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS AND JOURNALISM

A Thesis

by

JESSICA ANNE DUBOIS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

August 2007

Major Subject: Agricultural Education

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee, Tracy Rutherford
Committee Members, Robert Knight
Douglas Starr
Gary Wingenbach
Head of Department, Christine Townsend

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ABSTRACT

Texas Public Relations Association Members' Perceptions of an Academic Major in Agricultural Communications and Journalism.

(August 2007)

Jessica Anne DuBois, B.S., Texas A&M University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Tracy A. Rutherford

The purpose of this study was to determine Texas Public Relations Association (TPRA) members' perception of the word *agriculture* and how that perception influences perceptions of the skills and qualifications of graduates from agricultural communications and journalism (AGCJ) programs. A researcher-developed electronic questionnaire was used for data collection. Of accessible population of 148 TPRA members, 83 responded to the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 56.08%.

This descriptive study found that TPRA members did not have a negative perception of agriculture or the AGCJ major, but there was a lack of awareness of the AGCJ major and respondents had low self-perceived agricultural knowledge. Writing, interpersonal skills, public relations, editing, and media relations were considered to be the five most important skills in the public relations profession; however, AGCJ graduates were perceived to be only somewhat competent in these skills. Respondents ranked AGCJ as seventh of eight majors according to how well prepared graduates were perceived to be for entry-level public relations positions. Results indicated a positive

correlation between awareness of the AGCJ major and perception of the major; therefore, the lack of awareness influenced the less positive perception of the major.

DEDICATION

Mom and Dad, this is for you. Thank you for always being my strongest supporters and my biggest fans. Thank you for being my safety net and giving me the freedom and ability to chase my dreams. Thank you for your love, support, encouragement, discipline, and of course, for your financial assistance.

I love you both with all my heart. I could not have fulfilled this dream without you. I’m proud to be your daughter, and I hope I make you proud.

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To the other AGCJ graduate students, thank you for lending your ears and providing support. We were all in this together!

Most of all, I acknowledge my parents. Mom and Dad, there really are no words to tell you how much I appreciate the love and support you have provided throughout my

life. Thank you for always stressing the importance of education and for continuously sacrificing for me so I could have every opportunity to succeed. Thank you for being such wonderful, loving parents and for being amazing role models. I love you, and knowing that this accomplishment makes you proud, makes it all worthwhile.

Clay, you were there by my side throughout graduate school. You heard me vent more than anyone, and you were always there encouraging me to stay focused. Thank you for believing in me and for loving me. I love you.

Katie, you are my best friend in the world. Thank you for your love, friendship and support.

Shrek and Otis…I could not have done this without you guys. I love you both!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Colleges of agriculture in the United States are facing branding issues that are suspected of being associated with negative perceptions of the word *agriculture* (E. Murano, personal communication, September 12, 2006). These perceptions are thought by college administrators to play a role in recent student enrollment fluctuations, so much so that the dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University, Dr. Elsa Murano, hired a marketing firm to research various populations' perceptions of the word *agriculture* and the overall perception of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Informal research findings have led to the proposal of a college name change and branding initiative at Texas A&M University (E. Murano, personal communication, September 12, 2006).

Concerns of negative public perceptions of agriculture reach beyond Texas A&M University. A study in New Zealand assessed student perceptions of an agricultural engineering (AE) degree and how AE students believe they are perceived by the public (Opara, 2003). This study found an overall poor image and public perception of the AE discipline; recommendations to reshape this image were made including everything from technology-focused advertising to a discipline name change. Students attributed 62% of the problem to the image of agriculture and 38% to the image of engineering (Opara, 2003).

This thesis follows the style of *Journal of Agricultural Education*

Perceptions of agriculture and how those perceptions affect various components of the agricultural industry have been assessed in many studies (Frick, Birkenholz, & Machtmes, 1995; Holz–Clause & Jost, 1995; Humphrey, Stewart, & Linhardt, 1994; Lancaster & Riesenberg, 1992; Opara, 2003; Wingenbach & Rutherford, 2006; Wingenbach, Rutherford, & Dunsford, 2003).

This study will assess perceptions held by Texas Public Relations Association (TPRA) members of the agricultural communications and journalism (AGCJ) major. Research indicates that there is a need to assess TPRA members' perceptions and no research has been found that specifically examines this population's perception of this major.

For the purposes of this study, AGCJ encompasses agricultural communications, agricultural journalism, and agricultural communications and journalism. These majors are offered at more than 20 universities nationwide and provide training in agriculture, journalism, and communications.

A 1997 study at the University of Florida showed only 33% of their AGCJ graduates actually begin working in the agricultural field (Sprecker & Rudd, 1997). Alumni and instructors recognize the need for students to be as competitive for non-agricultural communications positions as are graduates from colleges of journalism and communications. Alumni and instructors say that communications abilities, not agricultural knowledge, will get students a job (Sprecker & Rudd).

As potential employers review applicants' résumés, relevant education produces more positive perceptions of competence, potential, and predicted salary than any other factor (Knouse, 1994). Because education influences how competent employers perceive applicants to be (Knouse), it is important for AGCJ faculty and students to know how competent they are perceived to be based on the name of their academic degree.

Individuals' perceptions of agriculture are influenced largely by their knowledge of and experience in the industry (Wingenbach, et al.). In 1995, Frick et al. assessed the knowledge and perception of rural and urban adults in Midwestern states regarding agriculture, food, and natural resources. Frick et al. wrote that most Americans, whether young or old, have limited knowledge about agriculture and food production; however, their perception of the industry was somewhat positive.

Holz–Clause and Jost (1995) assessed youth perceptions of agriculture. This study found that overall agriculture was viewed as having a limited future, with the traditional image of agriculture dominating. The youths seemed unaware of nontraditional and technical career opportunities (Holz–Clause & Jost).

Research provides evidence that and both adults and youths from rural and urban communities have little knowledge of agriculture and relate the industry only to traditional farming (Frick et al. 1995; Holz–Clause & Jost, 1995). Based on the research, it can be assumed that TPRA members are similar to other adults.
People typically form a perception based on their knowledge of and experience in the given topic or field (Wingenbach, et al.). In terms of employment, job interviewers tend to favor individuals whom they perceive to be similar to themselves (Beruvides &

James, 1997; Garcia, 2004). Therefore, if TPRA members have little knowledge of agriculture, they are not likely to perceive an AGCJ student to be similar to themselves and therefore would not favor that student for employment.

Statement of the Problem

Texas Public Relations Association (TPRA) members' perception of the word *agriculture* affects how they perceive the agricultural communications and journalism major. This study will be guided by the following objectives:

1. Determine what skills TPRA members consider most important for the PR profession.
2. Determine how competent AGCJ graduates are perceived to be in specified skills based on the name of the major.
3. Determine if TPRA members have a negative perception of the word *agriculture*.
4. Determine which major TPRA members think best prepares graduates for entry-level PR positions.
5. Determine if TPRA members' perception of the word *agriculture* is related to their knowledge of and exposure to agriculture.
6. Determine if TPRA members' perception of the AGCJ major is related to their awareness of the major.

The purpose and objectives of this study are based on the on the public's poor image, misconceptions, and lack of agricultural knowledge found in previous research,

and on the fact that no research has been found that evaluates TPRA members' perceptions of the AGCJ major.

An electronic questionnaire based on *Dillman's Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method* (2000) was used to gather quantitative data to identify the perceptions that Texas Public Relations Association (TPRA) members had of the AGCJ major.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research assessed Texas Public Relations Association (TPRA) members' perception of the word *agriculture* and how that perception influenced their perception of the agricultural communications and journalism (AGCJ) major name. Research in agricultural communications had focused primarily on curricular requirements and development and the perceptions of the agricultural industry. No research was found that identified how perceptions of the word *agriculture* influenced the perceptions of the AGCJ major.

This literature review examined agricultural communications and agricultural education research to gain an understanding of curricular requirements within the discipline, skills sought by public relations (PR) practitioners, perceptions of agriculture, and the role of perceptions in hiring practices.

Agricultural Communications Research

The opinions of instructors, practitioners, and alumni concerning curricular requirements in AGCJ programs were assessed to determine the skills required for graduates to be successful agricultural communicators (Sprecker & Rudd, 1997). The researchers found that communication skills were more important to the job of an agricultural communicator than is agricultural knowledge, and that students needed to be versatile with the ability to do many communication tasks thoroughly. Instructors, practitioners, and alumni agreed that writing skills were the most valuable communications skills (Sprecker & Rudd, 1997).

Alumni and instructors recognized the need for AGCJ graduates to be as competitive for positions in communications as graduates from colleges of journalism and communication are because at the University of Florida only 33% of AGCJ graduates are employed in the agricultural field (Sprecker & Rudd, 1997). Alumni said that communication ability, not agricultural knowledge, would get graduates a job (Sprecker & Rudd, 1997).

Telg and Irani (2005) found that if AGCJ is to be seen as a viable player in journalism and PR, instructors must equip students with the skills that are required to be successful professional communicators. The researchers found that AGCJ students need to be critical thinkers because of the demand for them to learn to make connections, draw inferences, report inquisitively, and argue persuasively.

At many universities with AGCJ programs, schools and departments of journalism and communications work collaboratively with AGCJ programs to deliver foundational concepts in both agriculture and communications (Tucker, Whaley, & Cano, 2003); however, no research was found to show if professionals outside the agricultural industry recognized that AGCJ graduates received the same or similar training that graduates of communications or journalism programs received.

Most communication-focused programs develop their curriculum based on faculty and departmental recommendations. AGCJ programs are unique in that they receive recommendations on curricula and desired competencies of graduates (Tucker et al., 2003). These recommendations come from alumni committees, advisory boards, and industry professionals involved in organizations such as Agricultural Communicators of

Tomorrow, the Livestock Publications Council, and the American Agricultural Editors' Association. Recommendations from these individuals and groups are welcomed because the discipline lacks accreditation procedures.

With extensive feedback from agricultural industry representatives, the AGCJ curricula focuses largely on practical communication skills that are perceived as necessary for entry-level employment in the field (Baily–Evans, 1994 as cited in Tucker et al., 2003).

These studies identified the skills AGCJ students needed to be successful practitioners and pinpointed areas in which the discipline as a whole needs to better prepare its students. The research showed the integral role that professional agricultural communicators play in the curricula development and requirements for AGCJ students. However, the research referred to the need for AGCJ students to be competitive with communication and journalism students and to be viable players in the journalism and PR fields. Although this need to be competitive was recognized, no research was found that assessed how competitive AGCJ graduates are perceived to be for non-agricultural communications positions based on the name of the major.

Perceptions of Agriculture

Although the agricultural industry produces and markets food needed for human survival (Frick et al., 1995), knowledge of the industry remains limited among American adults, often creating inaccurate and/or stereotypical perceptions of the industry.

Wingenbach et al. (2003) studied college students' awareness of and attitudes toward biotechnology issues reported in the mass media. In this study, the researchers

recognized how communicators' stories were influenced by their perceptions, which are formed through knowledge and experience or through global attitudes reported in the mass media. The results of Wingenbach et al. found that future agricultural communicators' awareness of biotechnology practices impacted their attitudes toward biotechnology and higher awareness tended to create more positive attitudes among the respondents.

The results of Wingenbach et al. (2003) provided evidence that a relationship existed between peoples' knowledge of and experience with a specific topic and their perception of that topic. Those with high knowledge and experience tended to have a more positive perception.

Frick et al. (1995) assessed the knowledge and perception of rural and urban adults in a Midwestern state regarding agriculture, food, and natural resources. The study found both respondent groups to be somewhat knowledgeable about agriculture, but their results provided evidence of the need to further educate the public regarding the industry that is an integral part of sustaining human life.

Frick et al. (1995) found that respondents' agricultural knowledge tended to be a function of education level; the higher level of education tended to produce higher knowledge of agriculture. Respondents from smaller cities and towns were found to be more knowledgeable about agriculture than their counterparts from larger population centers.

In terms of perception, Frick et al. (1995) concluded that, although the respondent groups in this study had limited knowledge of agriculture, their perception of the industry was somewhat positive.

The population used in Frick et al. (1995) comprised Midwestern adults from urban and rural communities, which probably represented adults from various professions. Because TPRA members are adults from both rural and urban communities, they may be similar to Frick's population and have little knowledge of agriculture. Therefore, it was necessary to assess TPRA member's knowledge and perception of the AGCJ degree because Wingenbach et al. (2003) found evidence suggesting that a relationship existed between knowledge and perception.

Holz–Clause and Jost (1995) conducted a focus group study to determine youth's perceptions of agriculture. The researchers found stereotypical views of agriculture; youth equated agriculture with farming but made no connection to the technical or research-intensive aspects of agriculture. The youth seemed unaware of nontraditional and technical career opportunities in agriculture, and despite being rural or urban, youth tended to think of farmers as wearing overalls and chewing straw. Overall, agriculture was viewed as having a limited future, with the traditional image of agriculture dominating (Holz–Clause & Jost, 1995).

Similar findings resulted from Lancaster and Riesenberg's (1992) study that assessed the perceptions that University of Idaho students held about agriculture and careers in agriculture. The majority of the students thought only of production agriculture and did not indicate that they knew the true dimensions of the agricultural

industry and associated careers. Overall, respondents had either a negative opinion of pursuing a career in agriculture, or they suggested that those careers were suited for other people (Lancaster & Riesenberg, 1992).

Factors that influenced the opinions found in Lancaster and Riesenberg's 1992 study were popularly held views of farming and ranching, both positive and negative. The influencing factors were lifestyle expected, friends/relatives, lived/worked on a farm, knowledge of opportunities, growing up in a rural community, and financial rewards. Gender played a significant role in this study. Males were more positive about pursuing a career in agriculture, and females indicated careers in agriculture were more for others (Lancaster & Riesenberg, 1992).

Power of Perception

Research outside the agricultural field examined the role that perceptions played in hiring practices. Garcia (2004) studied antecedents of an interviewer's fit perceptions of an applicant and the role of actual and perceived similarity. For the purpose of this literature review, the role of actual similarity was not relevant.

Garcia (2004) presented and tested a model linking actual applicant-interviewer demographic, human capital, and cultural similarity to an interviewer's recommendation to hire. Results of Garcia's study partially supported the model, showing that an interviewer's perception of similarity with an applicant is positively related to an interviewer's fit evaluations, which is positively related to hiring recommendations. Overall, a perceived similarity was positively related to an interviewer's liking of an applicant (Garcia, 2004).

Garcia's (2004) findings indicated that interviewers tended to favor an applicant whom they perceived to be similar to themselves, an idea that was important to this study because an interviewer could make similar assumptions based on the name of the major an applicant studied. Interviewers who graduated with a journalism or communication major, could perceive an AGCJ student to be similar to their own background; however, some could perceive the fields to be entirely different; therefore, losing the favor of the interviewer.

Garcia's (2004) claim that interviewers tended to favor those whom they perceived to be similar to themselves was supported in a study that assessed the perceptions of engineering management (EM) students versus Master of Business Administration (MBA) students. Students from each major at four universities were surveyed to assess their perceptions of each program's difficulty level, career opportunities, and the leadership and communication skills taught in each program (Beruvides & James, 1997).

Results of the EM versus MBA study showed that students consistently claimed that their own major was more difficult than the other. EM students perceived themselves to be qualified for the same jobs as MBA students although MBA students disagreed, and both majors perceived their leadership and communications skills to be superior to their counterparts (Beruvides & James, 1997).

Beruvides and James' (1997) findings supported the idea that perceptions were influenced by experience, and that individuals tended to favor what they were familiar with.

In another study, Knouse (1994) examined how an applicant's education, experience, and impression of management influenced a reviewer's impression of that applicant's résumé. Knouse's results showed that relevant education produced more positive perceptions of competence, potential, and predicted salary.

Thoms, McMasters, Roberts, and Dombkowski (1999) found similar results in a study that assessed résumé characteristics as predictors of an invitation to interview. Among the characteristics tested, Thoms et al. analyzed the role of relevant coursework and found that applicants who listed relevant coursework were more often invited for an initial interview than those who did not list relevant coursework.

Because an applicant's education can influence an interviewer's perception of the candidate, AGCJ faculty and students should know how their education is being perceived.

Public Relations

According to Telg and Irani's 2005 study, students majoring in communication and journalism programs, including AGCJ, are increasingly pursuing careers beyond traditional print journalism, particularly in public relations. In 2004, 188,000 public relations specialists were employed in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics.

As a profession, public relations is defined as an industry to help organizations build relationships with the publics found within several categories of stakeholders, ultimately enhancing the interests and image of the organization. Public relations professionals help to build relationships by facilitating communication between an

organization and its publics, essentially it is communication management (Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier, 2002).

Based on job descriptions on the Public Relations Society of America's Web site, the most commonly recruited college majors for public relations positions are communications, journalism, journalism and mass communications, and public relations. Advertising, English, and marketing are occasionally included in listings of preferred education.

Summary

After reviewing the literature, it was evident that a negative perception of the word *agriculture* existed. Much of the literature linked this negative perception to the populace's lack of knowledge and experience in the industry.

The literature indicated that in terms of employment, interviewers tended to favor applicants whom they perceived to be similar to themselves. Considering the lack of agricultural knowledge and negative perceptions of the industry found in the research, it was probable that TPRA members would not perceive AGCJ applicants to be similar to themselves, and would not favor them for employment.

The literature findings about the perceptions of agriculture, how perceptions are formed, and how perceptions influence hiring practices, all supported the need to assess TPRA members' perception of the word *agriculture* and whether or not that perception affects how the AGCJ major is perceived. Although the literature supported the need for this study, no research was found that assessed this topic.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive methodology was used to complete this study, which was designed to determine Texas Public Relations Association (TPRA) members' perception of the word *agriculture* and how that perception influences perceptions of the skills and qualifications of graduates from agricultural communications and journalism (AGCJ) program. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University (#2006–0527).

This chapter includes a description of the population, TPRA, and the procedures and instrument used to collect data. This study was guided by the following objectives:

1. Determine what skills TPRA members consider most important for the PR profession.
2. Determine how competent AGCJ graduates are perceived to be in specified skills based on the name of the major.
3. Determine if TPRA members have a negative perception of the word *agriculture*.
4. Determine which major TPRA members think best prepares graduates for entry-level PR positions.
5. Determine if TPRA members' perception of the word *agriculture* is related to their knowledge of and exposure to agriculture.
6. Determine if TPRA members' perception of the AGCJ major is related to their awareness of the major.

Population

TPRA members were the population for this study. TPRA members represented all areas of the PR profession and all geographic areas of Texas. The association is a professional PR organization that offers its members professional development and networking opportunities through conventions, conferences, workshops, and informal meetings. TPRA was an appropriate population because its members are primarily non-agricultural professionals, meaning their opinions of AGCJ major would be based mostly on perceptions, which is the overall purpose of this study.

A convenient, non-probability sample of the TPRA members was used. The 2006 TPRA membership directory provided an accessible population of 198. These members were considered accessible because they were listed in the directory with valid e-mail addresses and were not specified as university faculty, students, or retired. Of the 198 accessible members, 23 had unusable e-mail addresses listed in the TPRA 2006 directory; 27 members opted out of the study after repeated survey reminders, reducing the accessible population to 148, of which 83 respondents provided usable data. The response rate was 56.08%.

Instrument

A researcher-developed electronic questionnaire was used to collect the data in this study. The electronic method was implemented because it achieves quick responses at a minimal cost (Dillman, 2000), and because “virtually all members of professional associations have Web access and the ability to use it for responding to questionnaires” (Dillman, 2007).

Research indicated that Web-based surveying methodology has the same reliability and criterion related validity as traditional paper–based survey methods, and that Web–based surveying is a valid and reliable method of conducting social science research (Ladner, Wingenbach, & Raven, 2002).

Statistical tests were conducted by computer, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS®) 13.0.

Dillman's Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method (2000) was followed for instrument design and implementation.

The survey was divided into six sections. Section one contained three questions that were designed to be interesting but simple-to-answer, and they showed a direct connection to the purpose of the study (Dillman, 2000). The section measured respondents' years of professional PR experience, their awareness of the AGCJ major, and how qualified they perceived AGCJ graduates to be for PR positions.

Section two asked respondents to rank eight majors in the order of how well they think the major prepared graduates for entry-level PR positions. The majors listed were advertising, agricultural communications and journalism, communication, English, journalism, journalism and mass communication, marketing, and public relations. The majors listed in section two were the acceptable majors listed in PR job descriptions in the job bank on the Public Relations Society of America Web site.

Section three contained a modified Borich model that measured needs assessment (Borich, 1980). The model listed 18 communication skills, and respondents were asked to indicate how important they perceived these skills to be in the PR field

and how competent they perceived AGCJ students to be in these skills. The skills list was derived from topic areas used in a previous Delphi study that identified competencies that should be achieved by high school students who completed courses in agricultural communications (Akers, Vaughn, & Lockaby, 2001), and from competencies listed in a similar national Delphi study that assessed master's level agricultural communications curriculum (Simon, Haygood, Akers, Doerfert, Davis, & Bullock, 2005). Other competencies were added from course topics in the AGCJ program at Texas A&M University, and from course topics in the communication, journalism, and public relations programs at the University of Texas. The skills were advertising, broadcast, computer skills, editing, graphic design, interpersonal skills, interviewing, marketing, media relations, photography, publication production, PR, public speaking, sales, television, video editing, Web design, and writing. A reliability test, which verifies that consistent measurements result from the scales, was conducted on the importance and competency scales using Cronbach's Alpha with a significance level of 0.05 set apriori. The importance portion of the scale had a reliability of 0.83 and the competence portion had a reliability of 0.92. Based on these coefficients, both scores had strong reliability since a value of 0.7–0.8 is an acceptable value for Cronbach's Alpha (Field, 2005).

The modified Borich model was analyzed to determine mean weighted discrepancy scores (MWDS). The discrepancy scores were calculated for each skill area by taking the importance rating minus the competency rating. A weighted discrepancy score was then calculated on each respondent for each of the skill areas by multiplying

the discrepancy score by the mean importance rating. A MWDS for each of the skill areas was then calculated by taking the sum of the weighted discrepancy scores and dividing by the number of observations. Using MWDS, the 18 skill were then ranked (Layfield & Dobbins, 2002).

Section four contained a series of questions to determine respondents' exposure to the AGCJ degree. Chi-square analysis was calculated to see how respondents' exposure to the AGCJ influenced other variables. This section also measured respondents' attitude toward the word *agriculture,* and how long it had been since they last heard about something related to agriculture. The respondents ranked sources according to which sources they use most in forming their perceptions of agriculture.

Section five contained ten agricultural knowledge statements and ten agricultural perception statements. The statements were taken from a list used in a 1995 study by Frick et al. (1995). A Likert-type scale was used for this section, and respondents answered by choosing strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree. The ten knowledge statements yielded a reliability of 0.40 using the split-half reliability test. The researcher suspected that the reliability was low because of the small number of statements used and the limited number of respondents. For the perception statements, five were removed from the final useable data in efforts to increase reliability. The highest achievable reliability using Cronbach's Alpha at a 0.05 significance level was 0.57. The reliability was suspected to be low because of the few number of statements use. For this section, the researcher recommends more statements be used in the future to increase reliability; however, the results of the perception and knowledge scales are

considered reliable because a good reliability is one that is as good as or better than the reliability of competing measures, and these portions of the instrument were developed for this study (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006).

Section six contained demographic questions. These questions were placed at the end of the questionnaire because the nature of these questions can be viewed as objectionable by the respondent and should not come at the beginning of the questionnaire (Dillman, 2000). Six of the eight demographic questions were taken from a study that assessed national agricultural and Texas journalists' attitudes toward and information sources for biotechnology issues (Wingenbach & Rutherford, 2006). The researcher developed the final demographic question to determine if the respondent majored in AGCJ.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to determine the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. The response rate for the pilot study was 48% (n = 25).

The pilot population was the International Association of Business Communicators–Brazos Valley Chapter (IABC), a professional organization that provides products, services, activities, and networking opportunities to help people and organizations achieve excellence in public relations, public affairs, employee communication, marketing communication, and other forms of communication.

Fifty–two members of IABC Brazos Valley were contacted. Some were eliminated from the pilot study because they were members of TPRA, the population for the final study or because they were students or because they had a relationship with the researcher.

The pilot study procedures mirrored the procedures that were followed in the final study, with one exception. The IABC president forwarded the researcher's messages to the pilot population, rather than releasing members' personal e-mail addresses.

The pre-notice describing the study was sent on October 10, 2006, and two days later, the notice and questionnaire hyperlink was sent to the pilot population. On October 17, and on October 19, reminder e-mails were sent; data collection ceased on October 20.

The modified-Borich scale yielded reliability of 0.86 for the importance scale and 0.90 for the competency scale, both based on Cronbach's Alpha with a significance level of 0.05.

Based on comments and recommendations from the pilot study, some questions were redesigned for clarity and one section was removed. The pilot instrument contained a section with 20 statements that respondents were asked to indicate how strongly they believed the statements were related to agriculture. This section yielded no significant data and was removed from the study and replaced with agricultural knowledge and perception questions based on Frick et al. (1995).

Data Collection

A pre-notice e-mail describing the study was sent to the designated 198 TPRA members on November 7, 2006. Two days later, the questionnaire was distributed via a second personalized e-mail with a link to the online questionnaire (Dillman, 2000). Respondents were assigned a unique password and instructed to read an Informed Consent form before using their password to enter the questionnaire site.

Following the pre-notice, 23 e-mails were undeliverable, and one respondent opted out of the study. Four respondents opted out of the study after the first notice.

Reminder e-mails containing the link to the questionnaire were sent on November 9, 13, 16, 20, and 27. The second reminder gave participants the option to request a paper copy of the survey and the option to be removed from the study. Sixteen respondents opted out of the study after the second reminder, five opted out after the third reminder, and two opted out after the fourth reminder. The population was reduced

by the undeliverable e–mail addresses and the respondents who opted out (N = 148), yielding a response rate of 56.08% (n = 83).

The reminders followed a Monday/Thursday schedule, with one exception. A reminder was not sent on Thursday, November 23, because it was the Thanksgiving holiday.

When respondents entered the questionnaire portal, specific instructions and information were provided so the respondents knew precisely what action to take (Dillman, 2000).

Data Analysis

Descriptive and frequency statistics were conducted on each section and on the whole instrument to determine measures of central tendency, measures of variability, and to determine if the data are normally distributed.

Pearson Correlation and Spearman rank-order correlation tests were used to identify if relationships existed in the following areas: respondents' initial reaction to the word *agriculture* and how qualified for PR positions they perceive AGCJ students to be based on the degree name; relationships between respondents' agricultural knowledge and their awareness of the AGCJ degree, and between how prepared respondents' perceive AGCJ graduates to be for PR positions and how competent they perceive AGCJ students to be in important communication skills.

To control for measurement error in this study, the most recent membership directory of TPRA was used, and Dillman (2000) was used in the construction of the questions and in the distribution of the questionnaire.

Protocols and procedures recommended by Lindner, Murphy, and Briers (2001) were used to control for nonresponse error as a threat to external validity of the study. In this study, those who responded after the original notice were deemed early respondents (n = 35) and those who responded after the first reminder were late respondents (n = 48).

Lindner et al. (2001) recommended that a minimum of 30 late respondents be obtained to ensure that the group is large enough to be meaningful practically and statistically. Comparisons were made between early and late respondents on primary variables of interest. A One-way ANOVA test was used to determine if statistical significant differences existed between early and late respondents on variable on interest. No significant statistical differences existed between the groups for the agricultural knowledge variables (p = 0.74) nor did a significant statistical difference exist between the groups for the agricultural perception variables (p = 0.28); therefore the findings of this study can be generalized to all TPRA members (Lindner et al., 2001).

Limitations

The researcher recognizes that a limitation exists within the study, which is the bias of the researcher, who has an agricultural background and an undergraduate degree in agricultural communications and journalism. This research, if conducted by someone with no agricultural background or education, could yield different results.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Data were analyzed from 83 Texas Public Relations Association (TPRA) members. As shown in Table 1, of the respondents, 42 (50.6%) were female and 46 (55.4%) were 50 years old or older. Seventy-nine (95.2%) respondents had either a bachelor's or master's degree, and none of them majored in AGCJ. Sixty-five (78.3%) of the respondents never lived on a farm/ranch, and 55 (66.3%) never worked on a farm/ranch. Thirty-eight (45.8%) of the respondents perceived their agricultural knowledge to be average.

Table 1
Demographics for TPRA Members

Category	Subcategory	*f*[a]	%
Gender	Female	42	50.6
	Male	41	49.4
Self-Perceived Agricultural Knowledge	Low	22	26.5
	Somewhat low	13	15.7
	Average	38	45.8
	Somewhat high	10	12
Ever lived on a farm/ranch	Yes	18	21.7
	No	65	78.3
Ever worked on a farm/ranch	Yes	26	31.3
	No	55	66.3
Majored in AGCJ	Yes	0	0
	No	81	97.6
Age	29 or younger	9	10.8
	30–39	11	13.3
	40–49	16	19.3
	50–59	30	36.1
	60 or more	16	19.3
Level of Education	High School	1	1.2
	Associate's Degree	1	1.2
	Bachelor's Degree	47	56.6
	Master's Degree	32	38.6
	Doctoral Degree	1	1.2

Note. n = 83. Frequencies may not total 83 because of missing data.

Table 2 summarizes the respondents' years of professional experience, their awareness of the AGCJ major and their perception of AGCJ graduates' qualifications for public relations. TPRA members averaged almost 21 years (*SD* = 11.07) of professional public relations experience. Their average awareness of the AGCJ major was 2.3 (*SD* = 2.65) and on average they perceived AGCJ graduates' qualification level for PR to be a 5.68 (*SD* = 2.21).

Table 2
Years of Experience, Awareness of the AGCJ Major and Perception

Category	*M*	*SD*
Years in public relations	20.99	11.07
Awareness of the AGCJ major	2.30	2.65
Perceived level of qualification of AGCJ graduates	5.68	2.21

Note. [a] Mean for awareness of the AGCJ major scale: 1 = Low…10 = High.
Note. [b]Mean for perceived level of qualification of AGCJ graduate scale: 1 = Low…10 = High.

Objectives 1 and 2

The first and second objectives determined the skills that TPRA members considered most important for the PR profession and how competent AGCJ graduates are perceived to be in the specified skill based on the name of the major. Descriptive statistics were applied to the 18 skill areas to determine TPRA members' mean perceived importance of the skills and mean perceived competency level of AGCJ graduates. Based on Cronbach's Alpha at the 0.05 significance level, the importance scale yielded a reliability of 0.83 and the competency scale yielded a reliability of 0.92.

Respondents reported seven skills as being important, six skills as somewhat important, and five skills as somewhat unimportant. Respondents rated writing,

interpersonal skills, public relations, editing, and media relations as important skills, and video editing and sales as the least important as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Importance of Communication Skills

	Importance	
Areas	*M*	*SD*
Writing	3.96	0.19
Interpersonal Skills	3.89	0.44
Public Relations	3.82	0.47
Editing	3.79	0.46
Media Relations	3.78	0.47
Computer Skills	3.65	0.6
Interviewing	3.52	0.63
Public Speaking	3.43	0.72
Marketing	3.12	0.67
Publication Production	3.00	0.76
Advertising	2.88	0.81
Broadcast	2.88	0.87
Television	2.72	0.85
Graphic Design	2.48	0.78
Photography	2.46	0.69
Web Design	2.46	0.76
Sales	2.33	0.85
Video Editing	2.22	0.87

Note. Scale for means: 1 = Unimportant, 2 = Somewhat unimportant, 3 = Somewhat Important, 4 = Important.

Respondents perceived AGCJ graduates to be somewhat competent in ten of the skill areas and somewhat incompetent eight skill areas. Writing, computer skills, interpersonal skills, and editing are the skill areas that respondents perceived AGCJ graduates to have the highest competency. Video editing and sales are the skills that respondents perceived AGCJ graduates to be the lowest competency. Means and standard deviations for each competency in each skill area are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Perceived Competency of AGCJ Graduates in Communication Skills

	Competence	
Areas	*M*	*SD*
Writing	3.30	0.72
Computer Skills	3.29	0.66
Interpersonal Skills	3.26	0.76
Editing	3.14	0.78
Public Relations	3.11	0.81
Media Relations	3.09	0.76
Interviewing	3.06	0.81
Public Speaking	2.96	0.86
Publication Production	2.77	0.82
Marketing	2.57	0.76
Broadcast	2.50	0.76
Television	2.50	0.76
Photography	2.46	0.81
Advertising	2.44	0.81
Web Design	2.28	0.82
Graphic Design	2.25	0.82
Sales	2.19	0.89
Video Editing	2.16	0.84

Note. Scale: 1 = Incompetent, 2 = Somewhat Incompetent, 3 = Somewhat Competent, 4 = Competent.

A mean weighted discrepancy score (MWDS), which is outlined in Table 5, was calculated to identify gaps between importance and competency levels. The larger the MWDS, the greater the gap was between perceived importance and perceived competency of AGCJ graduates. Media relations (*MWDS* = 0.0321), writing (*MWDS* = 0.0320), and public relations (*MWDS* = 0.0319) had the highest MWDSs indicating the largest gap between importance and competency. Photography (*MWDS* = -0.0005) was the only skill that resulted in a negative MWDS, indicating AGCJ graduates' perceived competency level was higher than the importance level for skill.

Table 5
Rank Order of Mean Weighted Discrepancy Scores for Skill

Rank	Skill Area	MWDS	***SD***
1	Media Relations	0.0321	0.04
2	Writing	0.0320	0.04
3	Public Relations	0.0319	0.04
4	Editing	0.0299	0.04
5	Interpersonal Skills	0.0298	0.04
6	Public Speaking	0.0194	0.04
7	Interviewing	0.0189	0.03
8	Marketing	0.0185	0.03
9	Computer Skills	0.0159	0.03
10	Advertising	0.0151	0.03
11	Broadcast	0.0140	0.03
12	Publication Production	0.0109	0.03
13	Television	0.0073	0.03
14	Graphic Design	0.0069	0.03
15	Web Design	0.0057	0.03
16	Sales	0.0050	0.03
17	Video Editing	0.0012	0.02
18	Photography	-0.0005	0.02

Note. MWDS was calculated by subtracting the skill competency score (Table 4) from the skill importance score (Table 3).

Objective 3

The third objective determined respondents' perception of the word *agriculture* and the industry as a whole. Respondents were asked to identify their initial reaction to the word *agriculture* (1 = very negative, 2 = somewhat negative, 3 = neutral, 4= somewhat positive and 5 = very positive). The average response was neutral (M = 3.29) (SD = 0.71).

Five statements were given and respondents indicated how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statements to further clarify respondents' perception of agriculture. The statements were both positive and negative: A strong agricultural industry is more important than military power; Animals should not be used for food; Biotechnology has increased the yield of crops in developing countries; Farmers earn too much money; The

government should exert more control over farming. The group of statements yielded a reliability of 0.57 based on Cronbach's Alpha with a significance level of 0.05.

Respondents' answers were assigned points from 1–4 for each statement, with four indicating the most positive perception. Negatively worded questions were reversed coded, so the point system remained consistent. Each respondent's total was calculated for the five statements, the total mean for each statement is shown in Table 6 . With five statements, a total score of 20 indicated a very positive perception of agriculture. Respondents' average perception was somewhat positive (M = 15.7).

Table 6
Perception of Agriculture

Knowledge statement	*M*	*SD*
A strong agricultural industry is more important than military power.	2.62	0.72
Animals should not be used for food.	3.47	0.70
Biotechnology has increased the yield of crops in developing countries.	3.09	0.62
Farmers earn too much money.	3.49	0.62
The government should exert more control over farming.	3.28	0.64
Overall summed perception.	15.7	2.33

Note. The overall summed knowledge was calculated by summing each respondent's mean knowledge and calculating a mean for the entire sample.

Table 7 shows respondents' ranking of sources they used in forming their perception of agriculture (1 = first…6 = last). Respondents most often based their perceptions of agriculture on how it is portrayed in the media. Family and friends' beliefs were the second and third most used sources for forming perceptions, and the least used source was academic studies.

Table 7
Sources Used in Forming Perceptions About Agriculture

Sources	Weighted Rank Scores[a]							
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	Total Score	Overall Rank
Media	156	80	68	48	8	4	364	1
Family's Beliefs	168	80	44	57	10	4	363	2
Friends' Beliefs	12	75	112	39	32	9	279	3
Public Relations Industry	54	100	48	27	22	22	273	4
Practical Experience	54	40	52	27	52	18	243	5
Academic Studies	30	45	52	36	40	29	212	6

Note. [a]Overall rank was determined by weighting rank scores in reverse order; 1st place rank scores received six points each, while 6th place rank scores received one point each. Individual weighted scores for each source were summed to derive the overall rank.

Respondents were asked to rate their self-perceived agricultural knowledge using a ten-point scale (1 = low…10 = high). Respondents averaged somewhat low self-perceived knowledge (M = 2.43) (SD = 2.01).

Ten statements were provided and respondents indicated how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statements to further clarify respondents' agricultural knowledge. The statements were, there are more farmers in the United States than there were 10 years ago; less than 3 % of the United States gross national product is from agriculture; processing increases the cost of food products; one in every five jobs in the United States is related to agriculture; homogenization uses heat to kill bacteria in milk; plant products are the main source of human foods; thousands of people in the world die of starvation each year; the average U.S. farm is larger than 500 acres; hamburger is made from the meat of pigs; and animal wastes are used to increase soil fertility.

Respondents' received a point for each statement they correctly agreed or disagreed with. Respondents' overall knowledge was above average with a mean score of 7.2 (*SD* = 1.3) as shown in Table 8.

Table 8
Knowledge of Agriculture

Knowledge statement	*M*	*SD*
There are more farmers in the U.S. than there were 10 years ago.	0.96	0.19
Less than 3 percent of the U.S. gross national product is from agriculture.	0.30	0.46
Processing increases the cost of food products.	0.89	0.32
One of every five jobs in the U.S. is related to agriculture.	0.66	0.48
Homogenization uses heat to kill bacteria in milk.	0.26	0.44
Plant products are the main source of human foods.	0.73	0.45
Thousands of people in the world die of starvation each year.	1.00	0.00
The average U.S. farm is larger than 500 acres.	0.70	0.46
Hamburger is made from the meat of pigs.	0.98	0.16
Animal wastes are used to increase soil fertility.	0.81	0.40
Overall summed knowledge	7.2	1.3

Note. The overall summed knowledge was calculated by summing each respondent's mean knowledge and calculating a mean for the entire sample.

Objective 4

The fourth objective determined which major TPRA members think best prepares graduates for entry-level PR positions. Respondents ranked eight academic majors (1 = first…8 = last) according to how well they perceived the major to prepare graduates for entry-level PR positions. As shown in Table 9, public relations was ranked first followed by journalism and mass communication, and journalism. AGCJ and advertising were ranked seventh and eighth respectively.

Table 9
Majors Ranked According to How Well They Prepare Students for Careers in Public Relations

Major	Weighted Rank Scores									
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	Total Score	Overall Rank
Public Relations	368	42	84	25	8	3	4	3	537	1
Journalism and Mass Communication	80	175	120	45	28	0	10	6	464	2
Journalism	112	133	78	85	12	21	12	4	457	3
Communication	16	84	42	65	88	33	22	5	355	4
Marketing	8	42	60	80	48	69	12	8	327	5
English	48	42	18	30	32	42	30	24	266	6
Agricultural Communication and Journalism	16	14	42	40	72	30	20	26	260	7
Advertising	16	14	18	20	24	48	70	15	225	8

Note. [a]Overall rank was determined by weighting rank scores in reverse order; 1st place rank scores received eight points each, while 8th place rank scores received one point each. Individual weighted scores for each major were summed to derive the overall rank.

Objective 5

The fifth objective determined if TPRA members' perception of the word *agriculture* is related to their knowledge of and exposure to agriculture.

Bivariate correlational analysis, which is a measure of linear association between two variables, was conducted to determine if TPRA members' perception of the word *agriculture* was related to their knowledge of and exposure to agriculture. As shown in Table 10, the values for correlation coefficients range between a perfect negative relationship (-1.00) and a perfect positive relationship (+1.00); a value of 0 indicates no linear relationship. The correlational coefficient as a descriptive measure was interpreted by Hinkle, Wiersma, and Jurs (1994).

Table 10
Size and Interpretation of Pearson's Correlation

Size of Correlation	Interpretation
0.90 to 1.00 (-0.90 to -1.00)	Very high positive (negative) correlation
0.70 to 0.90 (-0.70 to -0.90)	High positive (negative) correlation
0.50 to 0.70 (-0.50 to -0.70)	Moderate positive (negative) correlation
0.30 to 0.50 (-0.30 to -0.50)	Low positive (negative) correlation
0.00 to 0.30 (0.00 to -0.30)	Very low positive (negative) correlation

Based on Hinkle et al., positive correlations existed between five pairs of variables. The correlation between these variables was significant at the 0.05 level, and yielded a very low positive correlation according to Table 10. As shown in Table 11, the five pairs of variables were significant: summed knowledge and summed perception (r = 0.25); lived on a farm/ranch and self-perceived agricultural knowledge (r = 0. 33); lived on a farm/ranch and summed knowledge (r = 0.24); worked on a farm/ranch and lived on a farm/ranch (r = 0.23); and self-perceived agricultural knowledge and worked on farm/ranch (r = 0.3).

Table 11
Pearson Correlation for Perception of Agriculture

Variables	Pearson Correlation					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Summed Perception	1.00	.01	.25*	.00	.12	.12
2. Initial reaction to word agriculture		1.00	.00	.15	.26	.14
3. Summed Knowledge			1.00	.24*	.19	.19
4. Lived on farm/ranch				1.00	.23*	.33*
5. Worked on farm/ranch					1.00	.30*
6. Self-perceived Ag knowledge						1.00

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**The scale indicates a mixed-model ratio and nominal point-biserial correlation.

Objective 6

The sixth objective determined relationships between respondents' perception of AGCJ and variables that indicated their awareness of the major. A Spearman's rho correlation was computed between each of the variables to determine which pair of variables yielded a positive relationship. Spearman's rho test was conducted on this scale because it contained nominal and ordinal variables. The correlation coefficient was evaluated using a two-tailed test with a 0.05 significance level. The results are shown in Table 12. A strong positive correlation ($r_s = 0.82$) was found between respondents who had hired and recruited AGCJ graduates. There was also a significant positive relationship between respondents who had worked with an AGCJ graduate and their perception of AGCJ graduates' qualification level ($r_s = 0.26$).

Table 12
Spearman's Rho Correlation between Perception and Awareness Variables

	R_s				
Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived qualification	1.00	-.16	.26*	.11	.08
2. Makes Hiring Decisions		1.00	-.08	-.06	-.03
3. Worked with an AGCJ graduate			1.00	.13	.15
4. Recruited an AGCJ graduate				1.00	.82*
5. Hired an AGCJ graduate					1.00

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**The scale indicated a mixed-model of ordinal and nominal variables.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study, the objectives of this study, a description of the population, a summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations are presented in this chapter.

Purpose of the Study

This study assessed how Texas Public Relations Association (TPRA) members' perception of the word *agriculture* affects how they perceive the agricultural communications and journalism degree.

Objectives

This study was guided by the following objectives:

1. Determine what skills TPRA members consider most important for the PR profession.
2. Determine how competent AGCJ graduates are perceived to be in specified skills based on the name of the major.
3. Determine if TPRA members have a negative perception of the word *agriculture*.
4. Determine which major TPRA members think best prepares graduates for entry-level PR positions.
5. Determine if TPRA members' perception of the word agriculture is related to their knowledge of and exposure to *agriculture*.

6. Determine if TPRA members' perception of the AGCJ major is related to their awareness of the major.

Description of Population

For this study, data were analyzed from 83 TPRA members, of which 42 (50.6%) were female and 46 (55.4%) were 50 years old or older. Seventy-nine (95.2%) respondents had either a bachelor's or master's degree, and none of them majored in AGCJ. Sixty-five (78.3%) of the respondents never lived on a farm/ranch, and 55 (66.3%) never worked on a farm/ranch. Thirty-eight (45.8%) of the respondents perceived their agricultural knowledge to be average, but overall, respondents' self-perceived agricultural knowledge was somewhat low (M = 2.43).

The respondents averaged 21 years of professional PR experience. On a scale of 1–10 (1 = low and 10 = high), respondents' awareness of the AGCJ major was 2.3, and using that same scale, they perceived AGCJ graduates' level of qualification for entry-level PR positions to be 5.68, just above average.

Summary of Findings

Objective 1

The first objective determined the skills that TPRA members perceived to be the most important in the PR profession. Of the 18 listed skills, TPRA members rated writing as the most important skill, which is consistent with Sprecker and Rudd's (1997) findings that showed writing as the most valuable communication skill. On the four-point scale (1 = Unimportant, 2= Somewhat Unimportant, 3 = Somewhat Important, 4 =

Important) seven skills were rated important. Those skills were writing, interpersonal skills, public relations, editing, media relations, computer skills, and interviewing skills.

Video editing and sales were the two lowest rated skills in terms of importance. It is probable that these skills were ranked the least important because they are the least practiced in the PR profession.

The AGCJ program at Texas A&M University emphasizes writing and editing, and based on these findings, this program and other AGCJ programs should continue prioritizing these skills. They should incorporate the other top-ranked skills into their coursework if they are not already emphasized. Interpersonal skills could be further enhanced in writing courses through increased interviewing assignments.

Since 2002, an advanced public relations course has been incorporated into the Texas A&M University AGCJ program. This research determined that public relations are an important skill and topic area as is media relations. Texas A&M and other AGCJ should increase their emphasis on media relations education within their traditional public relations courses, or develop a course that educates students specifically on media relations skills and tactics.

Objective 2

The second objective determined how competent AGCJ graduates are perceived to be in given skill areas. Of the skills, TPRA members perceived AGCJ graduates to have the highest competency in writing, which is significant because TPRA members rated writing as the most important skill in the PR profession. After writing, AGCJ graduates are perceived to be most competent in computer skills, interpersonal skills,

editing, and media relations, which are skills that are most required in entry-level PR positions according to job descriptions on the PRSA Web site.

The top five skills in which TPRA members perceived AGCJ graduates to be the most competent are the skills that TPRA members considered the most important. It is important to note, however, that respondents used a four-point scale (1 = Incompetent, 2 = Somewhat Incompetent, 3 = Somewhat Competent, 4 = Competent) and they did not rate AGCJ graduates as incompetent or competent in any of the skills. All mean scores were either in the numerical range for somewhat incompetent and somewhat competent. Overall, TPRA members rated AGCJ graduates as being somewhat competent in ten skill areas and somewhat incompetent in eight.

These findings indicated that respondents perceived certain skills to be important but perceived AGCJ graduates to be only somewhat competent in those important skills. This finding could be problematic for AGCJ graduates as they begin seeking employment because potential employers do not perceive AGCJ graduates to be fully competent in the skill areas that they consider most important.

This perception of AGCJ graduates being somewhat competent instead of competent could be linked to respondents' awareness of the AGCJ major, which was 2.3 on a ten-point scale (1 = low…10 = high). According to Wingenbach et al. (2003), perceptions are associated with knowledge and experience; therefore little knowledge and experience can potentially yield a less positive perception. Because respondents' awareness level was low, it can be concluded that they have little knowledge of and experience with the AGCJ major, thus explaining their perception of AGCJ graduates

being only somewhat competent and somewhat incompetent in the 18 skill areas. As explained by Objective 3, respondents considered students who majored in public relations, journalism and mass communication, and journalism to be the most highly qualified individuals for entry-level public relations experience. Based on biographical information provided in the TPRA 2006 directory, 65% of the population majored in one of the majors considered most qualified (i.e. public relations, journalism and mass communication, and journalism), whereas, none majored in AGCJ. That fact that the majority majored in one of these areas, indicates that they had an increased awareness, knowledge and experience with these programs, which could explain why they perceived these graduates from these majors to be more qualified for entry-level public relations. This finding supports Garcia's (2004) findings that indicated that interviewers tended to favor an applicant whom they perceived to be similar to themselves.

Findings from Objectives 1 and 2 were combined to determine if gaps existed between the importance of a skill and the perceived competency level of AGCJ graduates. Mean weighted discrepancy scores (MWDS) were calculated to determine these gaps, which are indicative of a need or a perceived need for more training. Seventeen skill areas yielded a positive MWDS, indicating a perceived need for additional training in these skills. Media relations, writing, public relations, editing, and interpersonal skills had the highest MWDS. This finding was consistent with the other findings in this study that showed these skills to have importance but showed that respondents perceived AGCJ graduates to be only somewhat competent in these skills.

This finding is especially important because it indicates a perceived need in academic training. AGCJ faculty should be aware that AGCJ graduates are not perceived to be fully-competent for entry-level PR positions, and therefore, faculty should improve the training and marketing of AGCJ students. This conclusion supports the 2005 study by Telg and Irani that suggested that instructors must equip students with the skills that are required to be successful professional communicators if they are to be seen as viable players in journalism and PR.

It is noteworthy that the gaps between importance and competency were based on perceptions. To fully understand if gaps exist, this section of the study should be simulated using a population of professional agricultural communicators. Such a population would provide data from people who participated in AGCJ programs and worked in the field indicating gaps that exist based on actual knowledge instead of perceptions.

Objective 3

The third objective determined respondents' perception of the word *agriculture* and the industry as a whole. Respondents were asked to identify their initial reaction to the word *agriculture* (1 = very negative, 2 = somewhat negative, 3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat positive, and 5 = very positive). The average response was neutral (M = 3.29).

Respondents were presented five statements and asked to respond to further clarify their perception of agriculture. Based on their level of agreement with each of the statements, it was determined that respondents' average perception of agriculture was

somewhat positive (*M = 15.7).* This finding was consistent with Frick et al. (1995) that found Midwestern adults' perception of agriculture to be somewhat positive.

Because earlier research showed a relationship between perception and knowledge (Wingenbach et al., 2003), respondents' somewhat positive perception of agriculture could be explained by their above average agricultural knowledge. Respondents were asked ten knowledge questions and their knowledge averaged 7.2 (*SD* = 1.3) on a ten-point scale. Although the majority of respondents did not grow up on a farm or ranch, nor did they ever work on a farm or ranch, their knowledge was above average. Respondents' above average agricultural knowledge was consistent with Frick et al. (1995), which found Midwestern adults to be somewhat knowledgeable about agriculture. However, Frick et al. and this study suggest that increased agricultural knowledge could further raise the perception of agriculture.

Despite the respondents' above average agricultural knowledge that was based on actual knowledge questions, respondents rated their self-perceived agricultural knowledge as 2.43 (*SD* = 1.01), or somewhat low.

For AGCJ faculty and graduates, respondents' self-perceived low agricultural knowledge could be an obstacle. Because respondents did not perceive themselves to be knowledgeable about agriculture, they may not have realized how agriculture is intimately related to various industries; and therefore would not realize the benefit in hiring someone versed in agricultural communications.

These findings are important because, based on initial reaction, respondents were neutral about the word *agriculture*; however, when specific questions were asked,

respondents yielded a more positive perception. For AGCJ graduates, that initial reaction is most important because as graduates apply for PR positions, first impressions are lasting (Garcia, 2004).

TPRA members need more knowledge on agriculture and the AGCJ major to increase their perception of the major. More knowledge would probably increase their perception of the relevancy of AGCJ coursework, which Thoms et al. (1999) found to be highly related to job applicants' receiving an interview invitation.

The researcher recommends that AGCJ faculty and graduates apply PR tactics within the professional PR community to boost respondents' initial reaction to the word *agriculture* from neutral to a positive, which, according to Wingenbach et al. (2003), could be accomplished by increasing knowledge of agriculture and the AGCJ major.

Objective 4

The fourth objective determined the majors that respondents thought best prepared graduates for entry-level PR positions. Respondents ranked the majors in the following order from most prepared to least prepared: public relations, journalism and mass communications, journalism, communication, marketing, English, agricultural communications and journalism, and advertising.

As determined by objective three, respondents' initial reaction to the word *agriculture* was neutral, and when asked how qualified they perceive AGCJ graduates to be for entry-level PR positions, the mean qualification was above average (M = 5.68). Considering these facts, the researcher questioned why the AGCJ major was ranked seventh of eight in terms of how well it prepares graduates for entry-level PR positions.

The primary difference between AGCJ and the majors ranked second and third is the word *agriculture*; therefore, the researcher suspects that the word *agriculture* negatively influenced the ranking. Based on these findings, the researcher concluded that respondents' perception of the AGCJ major is less positive than their perception of the non-agricultural majors, excluding advertising.

Objective 5

The fifth objective determined if respondents' perception of the word *agriculture* was related to their knowledge of and exposure to agriculture. Bivariate correlational analyses were conducted to determine relationships between six variables. Based on Hinkle et al. (1994), three pair of variables showed a very low positive correlation. The variables that were significantly correlated at the .05 level were respondents' summed agricultural knowledge and their summed perception of agriculture; whether or not respondents ever lived on a farm/ranch and their summed agricultural knowledge; and whether or not they ever worked on a farm/ranch and whether or not they lived on a farm/ranch.

The positive relationship between knowledge and perception (r = .25) was consistent with the Wingenbach et al. (2003) study that found perceptions to be associated with knowledge and experience. The relationships between knowledge and having lived on a farm/ranch (r = .24), and the relationship between having worked on a farm/ranch and having lived on a farm/ranch (r = .23), are logical and predictable relationships that the researcher expected to find based on Frick et al. (1995). These

results support the findings (Frick et al., 1995) that people from rural communities tended to be more knowledgeable about agriculture.

Although having lived and worked on a farm or ranch increased respondents' perception of agriculture, the study showed that respondents' most often formed their perception of agriculture on how it is presented in the media; therefore, further research into how the media presents agriculture could better explain TPRA members' perception of agriculture.

This finding supports the need for increased knowledge of agriculture and the AGCJ major. It is likely that respondents used the media to form their perception because they lack experience in agriculture.

Objective 6

The sixth objective determined if TPRA members' perception of the AGCJ degree was related to their awareness of the degree. Based on Spearman Rho analysis, respondent's perception of how qualified an AGCJ graduate is for an entry-level PR position is positively correlated (r = .26) to having worked with an AGCJ graduate. Respondents who have worked with AGCJ graduates perceived AGCJ graduates to be more qualified.

Although this relationship is encouraging to the AGCJ community, only eight of the respondents have ever worked with an AGCJ graduate. Respondent's overall awareness of the AGCJ major averaged 2.3 (SD = 2.65) on a ten-point scale.

The research indicated that increased awareness yielded a more positive perception of AGCJ graduates' qualification level; therefore, it is recommended that

AGCJ departments invest more time and resources into marketing their students and increasing awareness of the AGCJ major.

Discussions

Based on this study, the most important skills in the PR profession are writing, interpersonal skills, public relations, editing, media relations, computer skills, and interviewing skills. AGCJ graduates were perceived to be somewhat competent in those skills, and overall respondents perceived AGCJ graduates' level of qualification for entry-level PR positions to be slightly above average.

For AGCJ graduates to be more competitive for entry-level PR positions, their perceived level of competency needs to increase from somewhat competent to competent. To increase this perception, it is recommended that AGCJ faculty examine their coursework and adjust accordingly, and AGCJ programs should increase their marketing and PR tactics to better educate TPRA members on the skills taught in AGCJ programs.

Although respondents reported that their initial reaction to the word *agriculture* was neutral, they ranked the AGCJ major seventh of eight in a list of communication-focused majors in terms of how well the major was perceived to prepare students for entry-level PR positions. Because perceptions are related to knowledge and experience, the researcher concluded that this ranking was a result of respondents' lack of knowledge and awareness. Respondent's average awareness of the AGCJ major was a 2.3 on a ten-point scale; indicating a significant need for improvement if AGCJ graduates are to be more competitive for entry-level PR positions.

In addition to respondents' initial neutral reaction to the word *agriculture*, their self-perceived agricultural knowledge was somewhat low. However, when TPRA members were asked to respond to perception and knowledge statements, their perception was somewhat positive and their knowledge was above average.

Despite respondents' tested perception and knowledge, the researcher was concerned by respondents' initial reaction to the word *agriculture* and their self-perceived low agricultural knowledge. Because TPRA members did not perceive themselves as being knowledgeable about agriculture, the researcher was concerned that TPRA members may not have realized how agricultural knowledge could be an asset in a variety of industries.

The study did not find an overall negative perception of the AGCJ major, but several of the findings indicated a need for increased awareness of the major and increased knowledge of the skills taught in AGCJ programs. AGCJ programs should be concerned that the respondents ranked AGCJ seventh of eight majors in terms of how well it prepares graduates for entry-level PR positions. This ranking could potentially increase if respondents had more knowledge of the AGCJ major. Because of this need for more knowledge, it is recommended that AGCJ students include relevant coursework education.

Recommendation for Further Research

Further research is recommended to determine the most effective PR tactics to increase TPRA members' knowledge of the AGCJ major, to ultimately create a more positive perception.

To better understand the TPRA members' perception of the AGCJ major, further research should be conducted to examine how competent students from the other majors are perceived to be in the specified communication skill areas compared to AGCJ graduates.

This study found gaps between the importance level of skills and the competency level of AGCJ graduates based on perceptions. Further research should examine the importance of skills and competency of AGCJ using a population of agricultural communicators who participated an AGCJ program and worked in the industry. Such a study would yield data based on actual knowledge, allowing AGCJ programs to better gauge is gaps exist.

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APPENDIX A

A1

Agricultural Knowledge of Respondents with Agricultural Experience vs. Respondents with No Agricultural Experience

	Knowledge	
Respondent group	*M*	*SD*
With Agricultural Experience	7.6	1.21
Without Agricultural Experience	6.8	1.85

Note. Scale: Respondents received one point for each correct answer. The highest possible score was 10.

A2

Agricultural Knowledge of Respondents with Agricultural Experience

	True/False	# correct	# wrong
Statement			
There are more farmers in the U.S than there were 10 years ago.	False	26	0
Less than 3% of the U.S. gross national product is from agriculture.	True	7	18
Processing increases the cost of food products.	True	22	4
One of every five jobs in the U.S. is related to agriculture.	True	19	6
Homogenization uses heat to kill bacteria in milk.	False	9	17
Plant products are the main source of human foods.	True	22	3
Thousands of people in the world die of starvation each year.	True	26	0
The average U.S. farm is larger than 500 acres.	False	20	5
Hamburger is made from pig meat.	False	26	0
Animal wastes are used to increase soil fertility.	True	20	5

Note. 26 respondents had agricultural experience. The total number of correct and incorrect responses for each statement may not total 26 because of non-response.

A3

Agricultural Knowledge of Respondents without Agricultural Experience

	True/False	# correct	# wrong
Statement			
There are more farmers in the U.S than there were 10 years ago.	False	50	3
Less than 3% of the U.S. gross national product is from agriculture.	True	17	36
Processing increases the cost of food products.	True	49	4
One of every five jobs in the U.S. is related to agriculture.	True	33	19
Homogenization uses heat to kill bacteria in milk.	False	10	40
Plant products are the main source of human foods.	True	36	16
Thousands of people in the world die of starvation each year.	True	53	0
The average U.S. farm is larger than 500 acres.	False	33	19
Hamburger is made from pig meat.	False	51	2
Animal wastes are used to increase soil fertility.	True	43	9

Note. 53 respondents had no agricultural experience. The total number of correct and incorrect responses for each statement may not total 53 because of non-response.

A4

Perception of Agriculture: Respondents with Agricultural Experience vs. Respondents with No Agricultural Experience

	Perception	
Respondent group	*M*	*SD*
With Agricultural Experience	16.08	2.50
Without Agricultural Experience	14.93	3.69

Note. Scale: Each respondent's perception was calculated by summing their responses to five perception questions. A score of 20 indicated a very positive perception.

A5

Perception of Agriculture: Respondents with Agricultural Experience

Statement	*M*	*SD*
A strong agricultural industry is more important than military power.	2.77	0.65
Animals should not be used for food.	3.63	1.09
Biotechnology has increased the yield of crops in developing countries.	3.12	0.85
Farmers earn too much money.	3.62	0.57
The government should exert more control over farming.	3.35	0.56

Note. Respondents could earn up to 4 points on each statement, indicating a very positive perception.

A6

Perception of Agriculture: Respondents without Agricultural Experience

Statement	*M*	*SD*
A strong agricultural industry is more important than military power.	2.55	0.88
Animals should not be used for food.	3.40	1.08
Biotechnology has increased the yield of crops in developing countries.	3.10	0.94
Farmers earn too much money.	3.40	0.99
The government should exert more control over farming.	3.23	0.90

Note. Respondents could earn up to 4 points on each statement, indicating a very positive perception. The overall summed perception was calculated by summing respondents' responses to the five perception questions. An overall score of 20 indicated a very positive perception.

APPENDIX B

Perceptions of an Academic Major in Agricultural Communications and Journalism

Information and Consent Form

Thank you for participating in this study. The study's purpose is to assess Texas Public Relations Association members' perceptions of an academic major in agricultural communications and journalism (AGCJ). This study will involve 200 Internet users, who are over 18 years of age. The survey takes **10 minutes** to complete. Do not add your name or other identifying data to the survey.

Please note the following characteristics of this study:

- your participation is voluntary;
- your identity will remain anonymous;
- the IP address of your computer will not be recorded;
- you can elect to withdraw at any time without penalty;
- there are no positive or negative benefits from responding to this survey;
- there is no compensation;
- the survey will be used for research;
- the results will be printed and kept for 12 months in a locked file and then destroyed; and
- the data obtained from the survey may be published.

If you have questions, you can contact Jessica DuBois at (979) 458-3388 or jdubois@aged.tamu.edu.

This research study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board - Human Subjects in Research, Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding subjects' rights, you can contact the Institutional Review Board through Ms. Melissa McIlhaney, IRB Program Coordinator, Office of Research Compliance, at (979) 458-4067, or mcilhaney@tamu.edu.

If you want a copy of this Information and Consent Form, you can print this page using your Internet browser.

If you agree with the above information, please access and complete the survey by entering your assigned password in this textbox (guest): Sign In

I do not agree to the information above and want to Return Home

If you have questions about this site or research project, please contact Ag-Communicators

Perceptions of an Academic Major in Agricultural Communications and Journalism

Thank you for your interest in this survey. All data collection has ceased.
If you would like a similar survey posted to this portal, please contact us.

The purpose of this study is to assess Texas Public Relations Association members' perceptions of an academic major in agricultural communications and journalism (AGCJ). I am interested in collecting your perceptions only; no prior knowledge or experience with the AGCJ major is required to complete this survey.

NOTE: Use the "tab" key to move between boxes; using the "enter" key produces an error.

How many years have you worked in public relations?

On a scale of 1-10 (**1=Low...10=High**), how aware were you of the AGCJ major, before you received this survey?

On a scale of 1-10 (**1=Low...10=High**), how qualified is someone with an AGCJ major for public relations positions in non-agricultural entities?

Based on your perceptions of the listed majors, please rank (**1=First...8=Last**) each major in the order of how well each prepares students for entry-level public relations positions.

Advertising
Agricultural Communications and Journalism
Communication
English
Journalism
Journalism and Mass Communication
Marketing
Public Relations

Please indicate the **importance** of each skill area in the public relations profession. Also, rate the **perceived competence** of AGCJ graduates in these skills, as compared to the major that you ranked #1 in the above section. All items in this section refer to the scales:

1 = Unimportant
2 = Somewhat Unimportant

1 = Incompetent
2 = Somewhat Incompetent

3 = Somewhat Important 4 = Important **Importance of Skill**					3 = Somewhat Competent 4 = Competent **Competence of AGCJ**			
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**Areas**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
○	○	○	○	Advertising	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Broadcast	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Computer skills	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Editing	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Graphic design	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Interpersonal skills	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Interviewing	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Marketing	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Media relations	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Photography	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Publication production	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Public relations	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Public speaking	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Sales	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Television	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Video editing	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Web design	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	Writing	○	○	○	○

Instructions: Please respond to each of the following statements by clicking the appropriate column.

Statements	**Yes**	**No**	**Not sure**
I make hiring decisions for my company/institution's public relations staff.	○	○	
I have worked with someone who majored in AGCJ.	○	○	
My company has recruited people with an AGCJ major.	○	○	○
My company has hired people with an AGCJ major.	○	○	○

Instructions: Please answer the following questions by clicking an appropriate response.

When I see the word agriculture, my initial response is…

- ○ Very negative
- ○ Negative
- ○ Neutral
- ○ Positive
- ○ Very Positive

How long has it been since you last read or heard something about agriculture?

- ○ Less than a week
- ○ Less than six months
- ○ Less than one year
- ○ More than one year
- ○ Never

Using all the following sources, rank each one (**1=First...6=Last**) according to what you use to

form your perceptions about agriculture.

Agricultural knowledge gained from academic studies
Practical experiences in production agriculture
Publicly accepted attitudes portrayed through media
Family's beliefs about agriculture
Friends' beliefs about agriculture
Knowledge gained from public relations industry

Instructions: How much do you *agree* or *disagree* with each of the following statements about the agricultural industry? Please click the column that best describes your level of agreement/disagreement for each statement, using the following scale:

SD = Strongly Disagree, **D** = Disagree, **A** = Agree, **SA** = Strongly Agree

Statements	**SD**	**D**	**A**	**SA**
There are more farmers in the U.S. than there were 10 years ago.	○	○	○	○
Less than 3 percent of the U.S. gross national product is from agriculture.	○	○	○	○
Processing increases the cost of food products.	○	○	○	○
One of every five jobs in the U.S. is related to agriculture.	○	○	○	○
Homogenization uses heat to kill bacteria in milk.	○	○	○	○
Plant products are the main source of human foods.	○	○	○	○
Thousands of people in the world die of starvation each year.	○	○	○	○
The average U.S. farm is larger than 500 acres.	○	○	○	○
Hamburger is made from the meat of pigs.	○	○	○	○
Animal wastes are used to increase soil fertility.	○	○	○	○
Many farmers do not use tillage practices that conserve the soil.	○	○	○	○
A strong agricultural industry is more important than military power.	○	○	○	○
Agricultural practices are harmful to the environment.	○	○	○	○
Farmers should use chemicals in crop production.	○	○	○	○
Animals do not have the same rights as people.	○	○	○	○
Animals should not be used for food.	○	○	○	○
Biotechnology has increased the yield of crops in developing countries.	○	○	○	○
Farmers earn too much money.	○	○	○	○
The government should exert more control over farming.	○	○	○	○
Farm grains are becoming an important energy source in the U.S.	○	○	○	○

Demographics: Please answer the following questions by clicking an appropriate response.

What is your gender?

○ Male

Have you ever lived on a farm/ranch?

○ Yes

◯ Female

How would you rate your level of agricultural knowledge?

◯ Low
◯ Somewhat low
◯ Average
◯ Somewhat high
◯ High

What is your age group?

◯ 29 or younger
◯ 30-39
◯ 40-49
◯ 50-59
◯ 60 or more

◯ No

Have you ever worked on a farm/ranch?

◯ Yes
◯ No

I majored in agricultural communications and journalism.

◯ Yes
◯ No

What is your highest level of education?

◯ High School
◯ Associate's degree
◯ Bachelor's degree
◯ Master's degree
◯ Doctoral degree

Thank you for your interest in this survey. All data collection has ceased. If you would like a similar survey posted to this portal, please contact us.

VITA

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