

THINK AGAIN - REINVENTING PERCEPTIONS OF AGRICULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The College of Agricultural Sciences at The Pennsylvania State University has a rich tradition of excellence in agricultural education and research; in 1861 we conferred the first baccalaureate degrees in agriculture by a United States university. As a land-grant university, Penn State was charged with teaching agricultural sciences and engineering to the “industrial classes,” particularly to rural farming communities. Through time, enrollment in the College has remained strong, but declined in recent years. With less than two percent of the population directly engaged in food production, fewer people understand their connection to agriculture, even though they eat daily, and students found it hard to identify with professional opportunities in agriculture. In response, we engaged in a college-wide initiative to help prospective students understand the relevance of our programs and the wealth of career opportunities in the agricultural sciences. The starting point was a college-wide commitment to this strategic effort. A Communications and Marketing Group was established develop a plan that would serve as a guide to enhance college communication and marketing efforts and to engage marketing experts from across the University level at all levels. Our “Think Again” campaign emerged from this year-long process. The campaign targets 15-18 year-old students and their families. Our message conveyed the diversity and excitement of our “hands-on” educational programs and the career opportunities for students with degrees in these programs. We engaged our faculty, staff, county extension educators, current students, alumni, and industry partners in delivering this message. The net result has been outstanding - an increase in college enrollments approaching 25% over the first three years of the campaign. This campaign is a work in progress, and we continue to emphasize new angles, update our materials and strategies, and develop new and exciting curriculum to keep students engaged and prepare them for the challenges of the global food system. We set a goal that in the next ten years 50% of our students will study abroad, participate in an internship or service-learning project, or conduct research. In this way, we are bringing the curriculum alive by showing our students how what they learn in the classroom can make a difference in the lives of others. We have also made international partnerships a cornerstone of our new curriculum offerings, believing that our best research, teaching, and outreach will be done through the exchanges of knowledge gained by working, learning and growing together.

1.0 INTRODUCTION: THE LAND-GRANT HISTORY

"Upon the subject of education, not presuming to dictate any plan or system respecting it, I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in."

And so were the musings of former U.S. President Abraham Lincoln who signed the Morrill Land Grant Act in 1862 establishing the land-grant university system in the United States. With the stroke of a pen, President Lincoln began an educational experiment which continues to this day.

The road we started down roughly 140 years ago was a timely and effective economic development strategy for its day. The donation of lands for these institutions democratized education and transformed educational opportunities for individuals into prosperity for communities, states and the nation. Imagine a nation without any public colleges, but only private schools to teach only men to be preachers, teachers, doctors and lawyers! The Morrill Act was designed to provide practical education for the working classes focusing on agriculture and the mechanic arts. Subsequent legislation rounded out the approach by incorporating research and extension missions into the land-grant vision. Legislation in 1890 and 1994 integrated other institutions--historically black colleges and minority serving institutions--into the land grant family.

Today's land grant universities are some of the top comprehensive research universities in the world. Penn State currently has an annual enrollment of 93,000 across 20 campuses. Penn State is ranked ninth among public universities in the U.S. for the amount of federal research and development dollars (\$405 million in 2008) in areas as diverse as renewable energy, materials science, cyber security, plant disease, health and medicine and the natural environment. Our college continues its tradition of excellence dating back to 1855, when we awarded the nation's first baccalaureate degree in agriculture.

2.0 CHANGING TIMES

One could make the case that the success of our country is built on the success of the land-grant university concept. An assessment of the agricultural sector in the U.S. over the past century tells the story of amazing accomplishment.

According to USDA Economic Research Service, in 1900, 41% of the United States population was engaged in farming. By 2000, however, only 1.9% of the U.S. population was engaged in farming in some capacity, and less than 1% of the population claimed farming as their principal occupation. Despite this decline in percentage of population working directly in farming, the agricultural sector in the United States has grown in terms of dollars, from \$7 billion in 1930 to \$73 billion in 2001.

During this time, the amount of land being farmed in the U.S. has remained relatively constant. In simplified terms, today, as a percentage of population, far fewer people work in production agriculture, growing far more food, worth far more money, feeding far more people, on the same amount of land. The changing face of agriculture has provided relatively inexpensive, healthy, and safe food for a growing nation, and world.

This is an incredible success story that did not happen by chance, but in part is the dividends paid on our investments in our land-grant system! With its focus on teaching, research, and the application of new knowledge through the extension service, the land-grant system helped an increasingly complex agricultural system meet the demands of a growing nation. With the world population expected to grow to 9 billion by 2040, and with agriculture expected to not only feed, but fuel, a growing population in an environmental sustainable manner, the future of agriculture is bright, albeit challenging.

However, it could be said that agriculture's success is also its demise. With fewer people involved in production agriculture and with a relatively abundant, diverse, and easily accessible food supply came a lack of awareness of the importance and complexity of our agricultural system.

Colleges of Agricultural Sciences were not spared from this trend. Between 1994 and 2005, we saw the enrollment in our college decline by 33% and a shift in the demographics of our students. Today, only 15% of our students come from traditional agriculture backgrounds and nearly 60% are female. Our funding portfolio changed as well. Between 1977 and 1992, our college's research and extension federal funding increased at an average annual rate of 15% and 11% respectively. However, since 1992 these funds have increased by an average annual rate of less than 0.5%. A similar story is true concerning funding from the state government. Between 1980 and 2000, state government funding for research and extension more than doubled. However, since the turn of the new millennium, this funding has risen by an average annual rate of less than 0.5%, less than the rate of inflation. As a result, we are looking at new approaches for funding and broadening our portfolio by building partnerships with local governments, the private sector, clients, and donors.

Meeting the challenges of declining enrollments and public appropriations required us to rethink the way we did business – to create a new vision and a new way of showcasing ourselves to the world – and to reposition the college in the eyes of our potential students and funders as well as the public at large.

3.0 CHANGING WAYS

Our college set out to repositioning itself with prospective students as an active college with a meaningful and engaging academic lifestyle, leading to exciting and diverse career opportunities, as well as to demonstrate relevancy and impact with government and industry stakeholders.

Consensus for change was built within the college through the development of a new strategic plan in 2005. This plan was based on making efficient, creative and strategic decisions, on focusing resources – both financial and human – on the priorities of the college, and on managing expectations – appreciating that we could not be all things to all people. The centerpiece of the vision of the strategic plan was to organize our approach to all college teaching, research and extension around three interrelated systems – food and fiber systems, ecosystems, and socioeconomic systems.

From this foundation, one of the central goals articulated in the plan as a critical way for our college to attain this new vision was to increase enrollment and enhance student success. The college urgently needed to redefine agriculture for younger

generations. Agriculture was increasingly seen by students as an out-dated and narrow topic of study, and misconceptions of agriculture abounded. However, agriculture involves more than farming for production, and includes agribusiness, nutrition, engineering, sustainability, national security, and a whole host of other local, regional, national and global issues that are immediately relevant to today's youth. We took to heart the very real challenge of the need to promote to our target audiences that our college is applying sound educational principles towards addressing these vast, diverse, and also very timely issues both in our home state and across the world.

To further help us achieve our goal of increasing enrollment, curricula have been revitalized, more relevant programs have been introduced, and efforts have been made to increase student and general public literacy on agriculture. This has all been done in conjunction with stepping up efforts to recruit and retain a high-quality and diverse pool of both undergraduate and graduate students. Specifically, the college focused on reviewing current college marketing materials and developing standards, processes, and procedures to enhance, streamline, and increase the consistency of college marketing and branding efforts as well as developing aggressive recruitment and retention strategy. As a result, enrollment continues to increase, retention rates are improving, and student, employer and alumni satisfaction with the college is on the rise.

4.0 CHANGING PROCESSES

Recognising we needed to change and executing meaningful change were two different things. In an effort to implement the charge of the college strategic plan, a Communications and Marketing Study Group was formed to “update and improve college marketing materials, specifically recruitment publications and Web site, to enhance the image of the college to target audiences.”

The study group, working with University Marketing, created a final report with recommendations, while concurrently providing direct oversight over the production of recruitment products in their initial planning stages including professional, high impact photography, development of imaging and positioning messages, production of a new viewbook, new major brochures, and the development of a new college Website and videos.

Significant challenges identified in the Communications and Marketing Study Group Report were:

- (i) Need for consistency and quality control in college marketing materials, as across the college there was no consistency in the look and feel of communication materials and quality varied greatly. We had more than 300 different Websites in our college that were not connected or consistent.
- (ii) Need for college level branding, as there was currently no authority to mandate the use of college campaign materials. Some college materials did not even have the college logo on them.
- (iii) Need for some level of centralised marketing budget and financial incentives for units to utilize professional services and products.
- (iv) Need for an overall marketing and communication strategy and plan.

The inclusion of communication and marketing goals in our college strategic plan, and the focused efforts in this area, resulted in creative freedom that was lacking in the past. The results were award winning products being developed at the college level. The “Think Again” campaign rolled out in an effort to reposition the college beyond production agriculture and farming, particularly with future students, but addressed broader audiences as well...to get folks to “think outside the barn” with regard to the relevance and diversity of agricultural sciences.

5.0 CHANGING STRUCTURE

With positive results, both in products and recruitment numbers, the next step was to keep the momentum going. The college made a decision to restructure the college communications unit, moving agriculture communications from the technology unit into the college relations office. The college relations office - responsible for industry, legislative, and alumni relations - had the responsibility to build mutually beneficial relationships with college stakeholders. The merger of the college communications unit into the college relations office resulted in the integration of those charged to build strategic stakeholder relationships with those charged to deliver strategic information to stakeholders. It worked.

Not only did our recruitment pieces improve, but pieces targeted at our funders, legislators, alumni, and other stakeholders improved. New print pieces, such as our AGRImpact pieces, which demonstrate college impacts and are designed to strategically position the college around emerging or critical issues, were created. Mission focused (teaching, research and extension) one-pagers, that target legislative and other funding sources, were developed to demonstrate the impact and value of college funding. Regardless of the target audience, all of our communication and marketing products now focus on the relevancy, breadth, and impact of the agricultural sciences, to continue to strategically position our college.

The newly structured college communication unit shifted focus and responsibilities through this process from a service unit to a strategic unit, providing a comprehensive vision and strategy for college communication and marketing efforts, based on the college strategic plan. To provide guidance, a Communication and Marketing Advisory Committee (a recommendation from the study group report) was created to serve in a high level advisory role for communication and marketing efforts in the college. The advisory committee also serves as a sponsor and is the connection to the resources needed to accomplish college communication goals, a critical component for success.

A leadership/creative team was established to process all college communications requests and to approach each request as a team – this enabled us to combine and focus our efforts in order to generate the greatest impact possible. This team consisted of a web director, a marketing specialist, a communications specialist, a designer, a news coordinator and a photographer. This team sparked creativity within the college in order to improve the image of the college both locally and globally. New promotional strategies were developed that were comprehensive and professionally designed, including flyers, postcards, fact sheets, folders and brochures. Every publication that our college puts out now has the same brand, with similar looks, while still promoting our college in diverse ways to reach potential prospective students.

Furthermore, other committees were established including the undergraduate recruitment committee, trade show committees and a social networking committee to ensure high level strategies for all major audiences and events.

6.0 CHANGES IN TECHNOLOGY

Unique to our new college communications structure was the full inclusion of a Web communications team into the communication unit as equal partners, not just as a technology or delivery mode. No area of communication has changed more rapidly than that of digital technology in social interaction and media. A new vocabulary--Twitter, FaceBook, Google, Delicious, StumbleUpon, Linked-In, MySpace, YouTube, Blogs--defines not just how we get information, but how we manage and respond to it. To be a 21st century institution, our college decided to learn the vocabulary of our students and embrace the technology as the most effective and up-to-date way to interact with our students, future students, and other stakeholders. Having the Web team, including technology experts, as part of the communications leadership team resulted in technology becoming part of the strategy rather than a delivery mode. The team developed strategies such as the Dean's Desk – a Web page dedicated to presenting the new dean to the world through strategic blog entries, Twitter messages, and Flickr photo galleries.

Our Web vision is to create a unified college Web presence that provides useful and rich content to our audiences while ensuring high quality-control standards. We have uniquely implemented a content management system, Plone, to allow our academic units to focus on content rather than technology. We have developed a college-level template built with a user-centered design that provides the users with continuous upgrades, search engine optimisation, social networking technologies, Web statistics, and easy content management while providing the college with high quality and consistent branding.

7.0 NEW INVESTMENTS

Crucial to the success of the strategic plan was both the collaboration and long-term commitment from all departments in the college and from administration units across the university system. In achieving their goal, the Communications and Marketing Study Group had to work closely with the University Marketing and Advertising Team, Undergraduate Education for information on college recruitment practices, and University Publications on college-level publications and image development. Collaboration with Cooperative Extension reaped major benefits, as extension offices made it a strategic priority to share about our college's undergraduate educational opportunities. Some departmental units within our college even started to assign part-time duties to faculty, staff and graduate students to focus on and assist in "recruiting and retention" events.

The focus of new investments was placed on prioritising for maximum impact with limited resources. This was implemented by placing priority on communication pieces addressing the five priority areas defined in the college strategic plan including - 1) energy, 2) entrepreneurship, 3) food, diet and health, 4) pest prediction and response, and 5) water quality and quantity. By focusing communication resources around the defined priority areas of the college there was buy-in and awareness regarding the prioritization process for allocating communication resources.

Furthermore, a reframing process of the current extension system enabled extension offices to be more effective in promoting Penn State programs. This process was

conducted with emphasis on: 1) increasing the transfer of new knowledge into innovative solutions that address societal challenges, 2) consolidating and improving the quality and consistency of statewide programs, 3) improving flexibility and agility of service provision, and 4) developing self-empowered teams through the creation of 21 working groups statewide. This process provided a strategic structure to prioritise extension publications and communication resources as well.

8.0 CONCLUSION: WHAT LIES AHEAD

The college is now seen as a leader in communication strategies within the University and beyond. Our award winning publications, our innovative and effective Website, our strategically targeted impact pieces, and our overall quality and creativity have uniquely positioned us for the future. Involving all stakeholders was central to this process of restructuring, and without such universal involvement, the implementation of the strategic plan would not have been a success. The college has multiple stakeholders including not only the internal academic units and administration, but also a variety of external partners such as industry, government, alumni, donors and cooperative extension.

Agriculture is facing challenges like never before--the world's most complex problems are global in nature (food security, climate change and natural resource depletion, health) and are interrelated with decisions about agriculture at their core. Our mutual goal is to build ag literacy and train the next generation of young people with the tools to address these types of issues. Much like the land grant system envisioned teaching the tools of the trade of mechanised farming within the U.S. borders, perhaps we need to think about the global land-grant that works across continents and oceans to teach the tools of a new way of doing business.