

The Agricultural Communications Discipline in the 21st Century: Moving from Surviving to Thriving

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The Agricultural Communications Discipline in the 21st Century: Moving from Surviving to Thriving

Abstract

One hundred fifty years after the establishment of the land grant colleges (Morrill Act of 1862, Irani & Doerfert (2013) shared an optimistic view of the future of agricultural communications in the new century. Now they are back with a new commentary, focusing, in a time of immense transformational change in the academy, on the critical importance of faculty development in a new age and a new reality. The authors indicate that rapid technological innovation, especially AI, coupled with disciplinary maturation and growth amid the changing higher ed landscape make it imperative for faculty members, their academic institutions, and the profession to prioritize development programs for each stage in a typical tenure or non-tenure track faculty career. They argue that these challenges have brought additional complexity to the process, with respect to what it takes to succeed at reaching the traditional milestones of tenure and promotion. They provide specific recommendations and offer insight on potential pitfalls and challenges which might occur at specific points in the faculty development process, including a look at those often faced by mid- and late-career stage faculty. They conclude with a call to action for the profession, calling for faculty development more strategically focused on the tenure and promotion process as an instrument of change vital to not only the success of individual faculty, but to the continued growth and sustainability of the profession itself.

Keywords

Faculty Development, Promotion & Tenure, Academic Institutions

Introduction

“We’re not made to merely survive – we’re made to thrive” (Robbins, 2025).

Thirteen years ago, Tracy Irani (University of Florida) and David Doerfert (Texas Tech University) wrote an opinion commentary for the *Journal of Applied Communications* (Irani & Doerfert, 2013) on the next “150 years of ag communications.” It was a fittingly optimistic piece, focusing on the promise of globe-spanning technology, the importance of lifelong learning, and the inevitability of change.

Back then, we doubt anyone could have predicted where we are today, with our nation’s intense politicization and serious demographic divides between rural/urban, male/female, and college educated/not (Pew Research Center, 2023). If we have truly become more than one tribe, many cultures, then the need for excellent communicators and educators has never been greater. Agricultural communicators and educators have long existed to “tell the story of agriculture”; the first ag communications writers and editors came on the scene in the early 1900s (Boone et al., 2000). Their numbers continue to grow, especially as public concerns about agricultural impacts are increasing (Tucker et al., 2022). Research, although limited, indicates that there are currently 47 undergraduate ag communications programs nationwide (R. Telg, personal communication, December 17, 2025). The profession has also diversified to include natural resources and environmental communications, as well as more “issues analysis” balanced reporting of controversial industry issues (Ruth et al., 2023). Trained ag communicators and educators have a role to play in disseminating accurate, favorable information about the industry that is both a building block and a vulnerable resource to society (Funk et al., 2022).

As our programs continue to mature and grow, there is also an ongoing revolution in online information seeking and provision—users have a wide variety of choices, from formal education, to self-directed, engagingly packaged information mediated by AI agents (Beninger et al., 2025). What does it mean for professional communicators (and the academics who will teach them) when audiences rely on AI to summarize their world (Singh et al., 2024)?

In this moment, the nexus of AI, technological innovation, and rapid changes in higher education is creating added complexity for our agricultural communications faculty with respect to what it takes to succeed in a typical tenure or non-tenure track faculty career. The subjectivity of the process, which, for public academic institutions, is often driven by ongoing changes to state and local priorities, can be hard to navigate. Trends in what flagship universities and R1’s require can go viral, pushing research expectations, although not the same level of resources, to the majority of schools with programs around the country no matter their ranking. Numbers are always a mystery, but more is always better.

Beyond these broader systemic changes, we see challenges at a more micro level, including generational turnover of faculty; evidenced by the recent retirements of these two authors. We also continue to see the “raiding” of faculty from one institution to another as well as internal challenges such as lack of support from department chairs, lack of collegiality and collaboration with colleagues (both with ag communications and across diverse departments), an

“overloaded plate” of professional and personal responsibilities, and uncertainty about whether fulfilling those responsibilities will ensure reappointment, tenure, and promotion (Brown, 2006).

As we see these macro and micro changes in academia play out, it occurred to us that now might be a good time to expand on our commentary piece, but with a more intentional focus on what early and later-career faculty need to do *now* to achieve success in our profession. This time around, we want to advance our thesis and sincere belief that, as a profession, we need to be even more deliberate and strategic with respect to the mentoring and professional development of all of our ag communications faculty, if we want to continue to grow our academic programs at the college level.

In addressing this issue directly, we want to start with what our faculty can do themselves to increase their likelihood of a successful career trajectory. Thriving means prospering, growing, and flourishing, not surviving your way to retirement. It is also not doing just enough to get by and make it to the weekend and ultimately settling for personal peace and a paycheck—that’s surviving. As a new or mid-career faculty member, it is easy to get caught up in the chaos of the world and the related impacts on your personal and work life, where you could end up feeling burned out and exhausted. We all have those moments of feeling overwhelmed. But with a plan and the right strategies, it is possible to thrive in today’s academic environment rather than just survive. What you need is a future-focused growth mindset. This includes taking total ownership of your career path and related decisions—do not expect someone else to get you there.

Advice for Early-career Faculty

Let’s assume you will not be an internationally-known scholar by the second day of your job. While we hope that this is your career aspiration, you must realize that it will take time and dedication to reach that goal. Your institution also knows it will take time, and they want you to be successful in your position. While your start-up package provides resources for the initial steps of your career journey, the path you take is commonly your own choosing.

In nearly every job, there is a period of time where a new employee is expected to demonstrate that they can successfully fulfil the minimum expectations of a position. Outside of the faculty ranks, this is called a probationary period and commonly varies from 30 days to six months. With a faculty position, teaching responsibilities (a course) require several months to complete and a grant-funded research project is often years in duration. As such, beginning faculty are given a finite number of years to demonstrate their ability to achieve these goals. This means the first stage of your faculty career development plan should have a multi-year focus that uses your institution’s expectations as the foundation for creating the plan.

For most of you, your institution has already defined the minimum expectations for you and for each potential advancement level for your position. Whether this is defined in institutional policy statements or a promotion/tenure handbook, you need to understand the expectations for promotion and tenure (P&T) and use these as both a starting point and for each stage of your career development plan.

Create a Two-part Development Plan

Depending on the structure of your position and the expected allocation of time between teaching, advising, research, outreach/engagement, and administration aspects of the position, *Part One* of your plan should reflect these position expectations. For example, if your institution's promotion to associate professor level criteria for teaching are: (a) has demonstrated quality performance as an undergraduate and/or graduate instructor; (b) has made positive contributions to Departmental, College, and University instructional program goals; and (c) has successfully directed graduate student programs, then you have three goals for teaching to provide solid evidence for the P&T review process. Criteria likely exist for each component of your faculty appointment.

If your institution also indicates how each of these criteria are to be assessed, you will have what you need to define the tasks and related timelines for your development plan. If not, you will need to determine what will meet the criteria on your own. This is not a great mystery but will require initiative on your part. For example, realize that assessment of your teaching appointment is based on more than your course evaluations (though these are a major consideration). Peer evaluations, student advising, advising student organizations, designing courses and curricula, textbooks, articles and posters, and other contributions to creative pedagogy, innovative instructional materials, leading studies abroad, leadership in teaching-related activities inside and external to the institution, and number of graduate students advised and graduated may be considered contributions to teaching. What will or will not count as evidence of your teaching performance will vary by institution. It will be up to you to find out which are appropriate and then determine if, when, and where you can integrate each into your plan. Follow this line of thinking for each of your position components.

Don't Skip Part Two

There is no guarantee that your graduate program will have prepared you for every aspect of your faculty position; in part, because expectations will vary by institution. When you have completed *Part One* of your development plan with goals, tasks, and timelines for each major component of your position description, it is time for reflection and creating goals that will become foundational to you and your success.

Begin with identifying gaps in your skills and knowledge to complete each task. You may need to begin with understanding the grant submission process at your institution or what learning management system is used to support instruction. The list of things to learn may be long but the good news is you're not the first to go through this at your institution. In fact, many universities have systems and resources in place to help new faculty be successful. Utilize every resource you can!

In *Part Two* of your development plan, consider creating goals in areas such as work/life balance (cognitive, physical, social, emotional well-being), pursuing leadership positions in your institution or the profession, establishing your professional identity/brand, and areas that might stretch you personally or professionally. It is easy to ignore these and focus on the essentials of

Part One but establishing these goals can help shape your personal and professional decisions and actions.

From here, build your network and find related support and resources. Some are already in place for you—department chair, your doctoral program chair, peers from your graduate program. If you are not provided one, find a mentor/peer coach to guide you. The best person for you may be outside your employing institution. Also, create for yourself a network of others who can support you in your journey. If you can find an accountability partner in that network, take advantage of that relationship.

As you progress through your development plan, track your progress. Make this part of your annual evaluation and share with your department chair during your assessment meeting—even if it is not expected as part of the meeting. It is likely you will be provided with feedback from your chair while also creating a positive impression with him or her. As such, stay flexible with your plan so you can integrate feedback received as well as adjust to changes such as the need to integrate new technology.

Advice for Mid- and Late-career Faculty

You will find a change in the amount of attention and support you receive once you have been promoted to associate rank. While universities dedicate resources to the early career faculty member, the types and number of resources dedicated to growth for mid- and late-career is often minimal. There is a bit of “trap” here of the mistaken idea that advancing to the rank of full professor requires that you keep doing what you have been doing—that repetition and persistence will get you promoted again. The expectation is more, not the same.

As you did when you began your development plan, begin with understanding what is going on and what is expected. When you examine the university policy and/or promotion guidelines, you will likely find that a phrase like “demonstrate quality performance” has been replaced with words/phrases such as “demonstrated excellence,” “superior academic achievement,” “national reputation,” and “demonstrated continued growth.” Depending on your institution, you may also see an expectation that you are mentoring junior faculty as well as graduate students.

The recent moves by state university systems to introduce enhanced post tenure review (PTR) processes may be shifting the playing field for some senior faculty. You might find yourself at one of these institutions, where faculty now receive a comprehensive, ranked performance evaluation every five years. If your ranking falls below a stated range, you can be put on a program improvement plan or terminated (Quach & Yu, 2025, 3).

As a tenured senior faculty member, you may be expected to perform service at a fairly high level to the institution or the profession. Post tenure review, essentially a tenure review every five years, changes that traditional dynamic and the resulting incentives fundamentally. For those at PTR schools, it may not make sense for you to take on leadership in the profession, faculty mentoring, etc. These “volunteer services” are thus no longer available as resources to the more junior faculty.

Check Your Well-Being As You Make a New/Revised Plan

You spent the first 4-6 years of your academic career in what many consider a “sink or swim” proposition. Despite this stressful scenario, you developed and completed a development plan that yielded success – promotion! Yet after this “Olympic” moment, you’re expected to not only continue all the tasks and routines you have been focused on the past few years but to now do more. For many, this is a challenging moment—perhaps more personally than professionally. Feelings of fatigue, disengagement, and malaise or feeling “stuck” are not uncommon. Studies reveal evidence of misdirection, uncertainty, ambivalence, and even decline in the years after tenure (Baldwin, Lunceford, and Vanderlinden 2005; Jaschik and Lederman 2015).

Overcoming this loss of purpose and committing to a new or renewed career goal or focus can be a struggle. While it is true at all stages that you are primarily responsible for advancing your career, you may find yourself feeling alone or lost amongst your peers. Being aware of this is important; adjusting to continue thriving as a faculty member is critical. It is essential for mid-career faculty to continue to be productive members of an organization and to possess a personal sense of fulfillment (Catanzano, et al., 2022). Faculty at all stages of their career path can find inspiration, provide much-needed mentorship, and serve as campus champions for professional development efforts. Remember, faculty development is not just about the promotion to professor but also about continuous growth throughout the career, engaging in professional activities, and adapting to the evolving academic landscape.

Cruz and Herzog (2018) offered major strategies for maintaining your vitality throughout the remainder of your faculty career. *Sustained relationships*, among your peers and with students, are often sources of affirmation, support, and creativity. *Self-efficacy*, while often perceived as a characteristic or trait of having a positive impact on your environment, can be used to guide your selection of projects or activities and subsequently uplifting you in return. *Mind-set* is important in fostering vitality—a matter of having a positive attitude, even if it takes an intentional effort to achieve and maintain in the face of challenges. Finally, the engagement with *Scholarly Life* can be invigorating. Thinking/thought, academic freedom, flexibility, and the value of scholarship whether within the institution or within the profession can lead to optimism of a positive future orientation.

The Profession Should Step Up!

The responsibility of a profession to its members and the public includes ensuring high-quality practice through continuous faculty development. “Ohana means family, and family means nobody is left behind or forgotten” is a famous quote from the Disney movie *Lilo & Stitch* (2002, 2025), spoken by the character Lilo. Agricultural communications can only grow in the number of academic programs as well as in the size of its programs if all members of the family are nurtured, supported, and protected. We are not blessed with a supply pipeline that minimizes the impact when a faculty member leaves the profession for whatever reason, so we must ensure the supply remains while growth is occurring.

The profession must do more than provide annual awards that add a line to an individual’s dossier. To grow the profession and maximize career satisfaction and empower all

faculty regardless of position type, career development is essential at all career stages, and the profession should take the lead. This can include leadership development and training to prepare for leadership roles within the institution or in professional organizations. Faculty development can assist with strengthening research portfolios, a crucial step for advancement to professor, which often requires a significant track record of external funding. Mentorship can also involve enhancing teaching portfolios, developing new teaching techniques, and improving skills like providing effective feedback to students. The creation of faculty learning communities (FLCs), to build a sense of community and reduce isolation may provide growth as well as accountability moments. These types of efforts and activities should be the future focus of the profession and we should advocate for their “counting” in tenure and promotion dossiers throughout the system. In these times of metric-driven evaluation, we should try as a profession to develop and then champion performance metrics at our institutions that better reflect the “typical ag communications faculty member.” More successful individual outcomes will also ensure the sustainability of the profession.

To extend this call for increased action and respond to the current increase in alternative faculty positions (non-tenure track positions such as professors-of-practice and instructor positions), the profession should open its thinking on how to better support these individuals not on the tenure track. Assuming the development needs of these individuals is the same as tenure-track faculty is a faulty assumption. These faculty often teach the most difficult classes while benefitting the least from existing professional development opportunities—a sobering reminder that as faculty have scrambled to move online and create the highest quality learning experiences for their students, non-tenure-track faculty do so over a chasm of resource inequities.

Faculty Development IS an Instrument of Change

All faculty need professional development, and the profession needs a broader vision for its members including supporting non-tenure-track faculty. Although the traditional goal of faculty development (FD) has been to enhance individual growth and development, this goal may no longer suffice to address the compelling challenges faculty members are facing, such as increasing workloads, emotional well-being, and institutional support for education. Addressing these challenges will require change at the organizational level (Steinert et al., 2024). There have been efforts with initial success, but when the individual that launched/led the effort is no longer present, there has not been a commitment from the profession to sustain it.

Can we really grow the profession with this lack of commitment to each other and our future? As Linus once noted to Charlie Brown, “Life is like a ten-speed bicycle . . . most of us have gears that we never use!” (May 29, 1981). A time of renewal, whether spurred by personal desire or a pandemic, is about finding new ways forward. That might take creating a few new gears, but it might also mean we start using the ones already there (Dedman, 2019).

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