

## Cultivating Conversation: Exploring Mentorship Perspectives and Experiences of Agricultural Communications Alumnae

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# Cultivating Conversation: Exploring Mentorship Perspectives and Experiences of Agricultural Communications Alumnae

## Abstract

The growth of the agricultural communications field, combined with the predicted increase in young professionals pursuing careers within agriculture, creates a need to explore how to support these professionals. This study sought to explore and describe mentorship perspectives and experiences of alumnae from [UNIVERSITY]'s agricultural communications program. It was framed by social capital theory and data collection consisted of two phases.

First, a prescreening Qualtrics form was distributed via Facebook. Respondents ( $n = 85$ ) provided demographic data and answered questions related to their involvement, experiences, and the extent to which they received mentorship. A non-probabilistic, purposive sampling approach was then used to select participants eligible to participate in a follow-up interview ( $n = 71$ ). Ten females from this pool were interviewed to examine their pursuit of mentorship, the nature of their mentoring relationships and experiences, outcomes they received from being mentored, and how they see mentorship being discussed and facilitated.

Findings imply agricultural communications alumnae are being mentored primarily through informal and natural relationships. The structure of their company or organization either positively or negatively affected their ability to receive mentorship. Agricultural communications alumnae are more likely to seek mentors they perceive as similar in terms of life stages, interests, and experiences. To spark further discussion, agricultural communications alumnae recognized a need to continue showcasing the range of mentorship-related opportunities available.

## Keywords

mentorship, agricultural communications, female

## Authors

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## Introduction

Agricultural communications, as both a discipline and profession, is emerging. Throughout more than 100 years, at least 40 academic programs have formed nationwide to equip future generations of professionals (Corder & Irlbeck, 2018). Miller et al. (2015) expected this field to continue gaining traction, with trend lines indicating a potential increase of at least 11 new agricultural communications programs throughout a 23-year period. This growth is attributed to numerous factors, including an increased demand for professionals with a specialized skill set and an increased interest among high school students pursuing post-secondary education (Doerfert & Cepica, 1991; Miller et al., 2015; Weckman et al., 2000).

Furthermore, existing academic programs nationwide have expanded due to “the increasing job opportunities for well-prepared graduates who are indeed trained in agriculture and journalism/communications” (Cartmell & Evans, 2013, p. 52-53). According to a report titled *Employment Opportunities for College Graduates in Food, Agriculture, Renewable Natural Resources, and the Environment*, approximately 59,400 job opportunities will be available to graduates annually between 2020 and 2025 (USDA NIFA & Purdue University, 2020). Anticipated openings within education, communication, and governmental sectors are expected to account for 14% of this growth (USDA NIFA & Purdue University, 2020). Researchers also found agricultural communications programs historically attracted a greater portion of female students (USDA NIFA & Purdue University, 2020).

Therefore, the expected creation, development, and growth of higher education programs (Miller et al., 2015), in combination with the anticipated increase in jobs available within agricultural fields (USDA NIFA & Purdue University, 2020), will likely result in an influx of individuals, particularly females, pursuing degrees and careers in agricultural communications in the future (Irani & Doerfert, 2013; Miller et al., 2015; Ruth et al., 2020; USDA NIFA & Purdue University, 2020). As the number of female students and agricultural communications professionals increases, so does the need to ensure they have access to adequate levels of support (Cline et al., 2019; Cline et al., 2020; Moore, 1982). Since the structure, design, and overall nature of both new and existing agricultural communications academic programs will likely differ based on location, departmental housing, and additional factors (Irani & Doerfert, 2013; Miller et al., 2015), it is critical to ensure a broad range of resources are available to nurture and strengthen these programs and the professionals they will produce (Miller et al., 2015).

One way to foster continued growth, both individually and collectively, is through receiving mentorship or providing mentorship-related opportunities (Hezlett & Gipson, 2007). Across a variety of professions, mentorship has shown to be particularly advantageous for women (Cline et al., 2020; Cline et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is also beneficial for those identifying as members of specific cultures, ethnicities, or races (Blue, 2022; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Cline et al., 2020; Cline et al., 2019; Foster & Seevers, 2003; Hill et al., 1989; Norman & Tang, 2016; Read et al., 2020).

Previous research indicates receiving mentorship can contribute to leadership and professional development, promote academic and career success, assist individuals with handling stress, and foster connections within the workplace (Blue, 2022; Bishop, 2021; Copeland &

Calhoun, 2014; Gaspar-Hillenbrand, 2022; Gipson, 2021; Shen et al., 2022; Tolar, 2012). These outcomes could be particularly helpful for females who are beginning their careers as young professionals, which is to be expected if the number of jobs available in the agriculture industry, including those focused in communications, continues to increase (USDA NIFA & Purdue University, 2020).

The recent creation and implementation of several mentorship programs and resources within the realm of agricultural communications further indicates both an interest and need for current and future professionals in this field to access, receive, and utilize mentorship-related opportunities. For example, the Agricultural Communicators Network (2023) offers a formalized mentorship program to its members and, in years past, the Association for Communications Excellence (2022) recruited participants for its ACE Mentorship Program. These programs, among others, suggest mentorship is considered valuable for female professionals and imply future research should examine the impacts of receiving mentorship.

### Literature Review

One of the first known references to mentorship is found in Homer's *Odyssey* (1919). Within Homer's (1919) poem, Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, asks his friend Mentor to advise and teach his son, Telemachus (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). As a result, the term 'mentor' began to be used in reference to someone who guides, educates, and supports another person (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

Throughout time, however, the definition of mentorship has evolved and changed. Collins (1983) described a mentor as someone "higher up on the organizational ladder, an authority in his or her field, influential, interested in your growth and development, and willing to commit time and emotion to the relationship" (p.7). Baker (1994) viewed a mentor as "a trusted adviser who promotes an advisee through a variety of career enhancing activities" and a mentee as "the protégé of an individual further advanced in a profession" (p. 9).

Furthermore, Hezlett and Gipson (2007) considered mentorship an "intense, dyadic relationship" between a senior, more experienced person (i.e., a mentor) and an often younger protégé or mentee" (p. 385). After evaluating mentoring experiences of past National FFA Officers during their year of service and participants' responses about what it means to be a mentor, Shellhouse et al. (2021) developed the following definition: "Effective mentoring requires one person, often older, who is a 'life stage' of experience ahead of one protégé, to intentionally invest in the protégé's life to develop them in a specific context" (p. 37).

Given the nature of the relationship formed between individuals, mentorship is also closely tied to one's leadership and development (Lamm et al., 2017; Shellhouse et al., 2021) and known to foster personal and professional growth (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019; Shellhouse et al., 2021). Identified roles of mentors include providing both psychosocial (i.e., emotional and role modeling) and career-related support (Kram, 1983). Individuals typically benefit from having multiple mentors, and mentoring relationships are typically most effective when those involved possess similar interests, goals, and shared

connections (Zerzan et al., 2009). Although mentorship can be beneficial for those in all stages of their careers, it is particularly advantageous for early career professionals (Hagerman et al., 2022; Smith & Beckley, 1985).

Despite positive outcomes associated with mentorship, access to it and the nature of mentoring experiences is often affected by one's race, gender, career field, and professional environment (Mahendran et al., 2022). Men can serve as mentors for women (Baker, 1994; Baxter & Hoover, 1992; Collins, 1983; Jeruchim & Shapiro, 1992), but more recent studies indicate women may be more likely to seek female mentors they view as a role model or perceive as similar in terms of personality, career aspirations, and expectations (Johnston & Smith, 2019; Mahendran et al., 2022). Although mentorship may be occurring in many professions, there is a need to further examine and develop additional mentorship avenues specifically with females in mind (Cline et al., 2019; Cline et al., 2020; Moore, 1982). This study aimed to explore networks of support or resources females within the agricultural communications profession may or may not have received through mentorship programs, resources, or relationships.

### Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework is social capital theory. Simplified as "who you know" (Thompson et al., 2016, p. 965), social capital theory aims to describe the value derived from relationships (Coleman, 1998). Coleman (1998) described how social capital can be depicted in three main forms: 1) obligations and expectations (i.e., trustworthiness among group members); 2) information channels (i.e., acquisition of information through relationships); and 3) social norms (i.e., collective beliefs and standards guiding or constraining individuals' behaviors). Furthermore, Claridge (2018) identified three forms of social capital, which include: 1) bonding social capital (i.e., between individuals of similar backgrounds or interests); 2) bridging social capital (i.e., the exchange of information or resources between groups); and 3) linking social capital (i.e., interactions across perceived social networks).

The primary rationale for using this theory is Hezlett and Gipson's (2007) exploration of clear connections between social capital and mentorship. These include how social relationships tend to yield favorable outcomes, provide opportunities for information and knowledge exchange, promote trust, and instill cooperation among and between individuals in social settings (Hezlett & Gipson, 2007). Previous literature also showcases how possessing social capital, particularly in the form of mentorship, can be beneficial to young women.

For example, Shier et al. (2018) sought to explore social capital development and usage among high school-aged females ( $n = 15$ ) in Toronto, Canada. When interviewed, the study's participants described how lacking social capital early in life encouraged them to seek and participate in a formal mentorship program (Shier et al., 2018). Doing so ultimately enabled these participants to increase their social mobility and therefore seize additional opportunities and connections (Shier et al., 2018).

This study sought to determine how possessing (or not possessing) social capital in the form of mentorship affected participants during their time at Oklahoma State University and

within their professional environments post-graduation. For example, the amount of social capital participants possess or develop could result from support they received through access to mentorship. It could also be influenced by factors like years of professional experience, the dynamic and culture of their academic environment or workplace, the length of their involvement in the field of agricultural communications, and the sector of agriculture they are currently working in (or have in the past).

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe mentoring experiences and perspectives of female professionals who graduated from the Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership and studied agricultural communications at Oklahoma State University. The study was framed by the following research objectives:

1. Describe how mentorship is being experienced by female professionals and alumnae of Oklahoma State University's agricultural communications program.
2. Describe how mentorship is being perceived by female professionals and alumnae of Oklahoma State University's agricultural communications program.
3. Explore implications of mentorship for female professionals and alumnae of Oklahoma State University's agricultural communications program.

### **Methods**

The target population for this study was female agricultural communications professionals who graduated from agricultural communications programs within the United States. This study also sought to examine those who are currently pursuing or previously held a position related to agricultural communications. Therefore, the selected sample was females who graduated from Oklahoma State University's Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership.

### **Research Design**

This study was primarily qualitative in nature but used a prescreening questionnaire to recruit participants and collect demographic data. A 17-question Qualtrics form was distributed within the Oklahoma State Ag Comm (AGCM) Alumni Facebook group throughout a four-week period, and weekly reminders were posted in the Facebook group throughout this period. Participants were asked to complete the form and provide their name, gender, age, current location, the year they graduated from Oklahoma State University, the type(s) of degrees they earned from Oklahoma State University, and their current position title.

Most participants who filled out the Qualtrics form were females between the ages of 21 to 30 who earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Oklahoma State University. Two Likert-type scale questions then asked participants to indicate the extent to which (i.e., To a Great Extent, Somewhat, Very little, or Not at All) they consider their current position related to agricultural communications and the extent to which they believe Oklahoma State University's agricultural communications program prepared them for their current career (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Personal Characteristics of Oklahoma State University's Agricultural Communications Program Alumni (n = 85)*

| Characteristics                                  | <i>f</i> | %     |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------|-------|
| Gender                                           |          |       |
| Female                                           | 80       | 94.12 |
| Male                                             | 5        | 5.88  |
| Age                                              |          |       |
| 21 to 30                                         | 52       | 61.18 |
| 31 to 40                                         | 17       | 20.00 |
| 41 to 50                                         | 13       | 15.29 |
| 51 to 60                                         | 3        | 3.53  |
| Degree(s)* Earned from Oklahoma State University |          |       |
| Bachelor of Science                              | 70       | 76.92 |
| Master of Science                                | 19       | 20.88 |
| Doctor of Philosophy                             | 2        | 2.20  |

*\*Participants could select multiple responses.*

Two additional Likert-type scale questions asked participants to indicate the frequency of which (i.e., Frequently, Sometimes, Rarely, or Never) they received mentorship during their time at Oklahoma State University and throughout their professional career. When evaluating their professional careers, the most frequently chosen answer was 'Sometimes' (45.88%,  $n = 39$ ). The least chosen answer was 'Never' (7.41%,  $n = 4$ ). During their time at Oklahoma State University, however, most participants (60%,  $n = 51$ ) indicated they 'Frequently' received mentorship. A few (7.06%,  $n = 6$ ) indicated 'Rarely' receiving mentorship, and none (0%,  $n = 0$ ) indicated they 'Never' received mentorship (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Mentorship Experiences of Oklahoma State University's Agricultural Communications Program Alumni (n = 85)*

| Responses                                                                             | <i>f</i> | %     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|-------|
| <i>Throughout your professional career, when did you receive mentorship?</i>          |          |       |
| Frequently                                                                            | 30       | 35.29 |
| Sometimes                                                                             | 39       | 45.88 |
| Rarely                                                                                | 12       | 14.12 |
| Never                                                                                 | 4        | 7.41  |
| <i>When did you receive mentorship during your time at Oklahoma State University?</i> | 51       | 60.00 |
| Frequently                                                                            | 28       | 32.94 |
| Sometimes                                                                             | 6        | 7.06  |
| Rarely                                                                                | 0        | 0.00  |
| Never                                                                                 |          |       |

Based on their responses to the prescreening questionnaire, participants were placed in an interview pool if they met the following criteria: 1) self-identified as female; 2) earned at least one degree from Oklahoma State University including aspects of the agricultural communications curriculum; and 3) were currently pursuing or previously pursued a career related to agricultural communications. Participants also had to indicate they were interested in participating in a follow up interview and provide their availability within a given time frame.

Of the 85 total respondents to the prescreening Qualtrics form, 71 participants met the above criteria and were willing to be interviewed. A non-probabilistic, purposive sampling approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) was then used to select 10 participants for semi-structured interviews. A mixture of participants with differing professional backgrounds and mentoring experiences, as indicated by their responses to the prescreening Qualtrics form (see Table 2), were selected (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Description of Oklahoma State University Agricultural Communications Alumnae Selected for an Interview (n = 10)*

| Pseudonym | Description                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Allison   | Female who directs communications-related efforts for a nonprofit; completed a Bachelor of Science and Master of Science.                                |
| Barbara   | Female who directs organizational communications efforts; completed a Bachelor of Science.                                                               |
| Brooklyn  | Female who manages state legislative affairs; completed a Bachelor of Science and Master of Science.                                                     |
| Cheryl    | Female focused within public relations; completed a Bachelor of Science.                                                                                 |
| Eleanor   | Female pursuing freelance work in communications and background includes multiple careers in agricultural law settings; completed a Bachelor of Science. |
| Grace     | Female currently working as a high school educator with a background in marketing; completed a Bachelor of Science.                                      |
| Lucy      | Female who specializes in marketing and communications; completed a Bachelor of Science.                                                                 |
| Olivia    | Female working in the editorial realm for a publishing company; completed a Bachelor of Science.                                                         |
| Piper     | Female working as an editor for an agricultural publication; completed a Bachelor of Science.                                                            |
| Riley     | Female whose most recent career focused on coordinating social media content for an institution; completed a Bachelor of Science.                        |

All interviews were conducted via Zoom, and two question sets were developed prior to interviewing each participant. These questions aligned with the study's problem statement,

purpose, and three research objectives. Within the interviews, participants were asked about their professional background and experiences at Oklahoma State University, their pursuit of mentorship, qualities or characteristics they seek in a mentor, the depth and nature of their mentoring relationships, outcomes they received from being mentored, and how they see mentorship being discussed or facilitated within the profession of agricultural communications and the agriculture industry. Interviews continued until no new information was being presented, and data saturation was deemed to be reached after 10 participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **Pilot Test**

Prior to collecting any data, a pilot test was performed for both the prescreening questionnaire and interview question sets. After receiving a list of names and contact information for members of a similar population sample, we contacted these females ( $n = 5$ ) via email. After agreeing to participate, everyone filled out the Qualtrics form and was asked a series of interview questions. Per recommendations from participants, a few additional demographic questions were added to the Qualtrics form, and several interview questions were rephrased to make them more straightforward to answer.

### **Data Collection**

Once the predetermined deadline for receiving responses to the prescreening questionnaire passed, we exported all Qualtrics form responses to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. We then contacted 15 individuals who indicated an interest and availability to interview directly via an email address or phone number provided. Once confirmation was received from 10 of these individuals, we used a Zoom account provided by Oklahoma State University to schedule interviews based on availability. We also distributed a copy of a written consent form and made sure to receive a signed copy from each participant before the interviews began. Most interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, but some were closer to an hour in length.

To ensure internal consistency and accuracy, audio from all interviews was recorded using Zoom, then saved on a password-protected computer. We manually transcribed all interviews and reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy, then once again saved the transcripts on a password-protected computer. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym, and all identifiable information was removed within the transcripts.

### **Data Analysis**

Prior to creating an interview pool, selecting interviewees, and conducting interviews, all incomplete Qualtrics form responses, in addition to duplicates and responses received after the deadline, were deleted. The remaining data were analyzed using functions included in the Qualtrics software and manually within an Excel spreadsheet exported from Qualtrics. For example, a function in Qualtrics was used to calculate the frequencies of the multiple choice question responses, including both a numeral count and percentage. We downloaded and saved these to a password-protected computer.

The short answer questions, which included participant responses about their genders, ages, willingness to participate in an interview, and dates of availability, were sorted and color-coded. Responses related to participants' current position title and the company or organization they worked for were considered when selecting individuals to interview but were not analyzed in depth. Likewise, the questions asking about the extent to which individuals considered their current position related to agricultural communications and if they believed Oklahoma State University's agricultural communications program prepared them for their career were designed to serve as an evaluation tool for the program because they were not related to mentorship.

For the qualitative responses, we employed Glaser's (1965) Constant Comparative Method when analyzing the 10 interviews. After manually transcribing all interviews, we uploaded them to the MAXDQA 2022 software to code responses and identify themes. A total of 248 coded responses were developed, which were divided into eight main categories. Within each category, the number of subcategories varied from one to 18. After finalizing all codes, a coding audit was completed, meaning the analysis process and data were reviewed for accuracy. We also compared the identified codes to tenants of social capital theory and combined codes to develop themes within responses, which are included in the findings of this paper.

### **Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research**

Within the qualitative realm, Lincoln and Guba (1985) found trustworthy research addresses four main criteria. These include: 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability, and 4) confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). We accounted for all four of these criteria throughout the study's design, implementation, and analysis processes. To establish credibility, the committee chair and committee members as well as the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board approved the Qualtrics form and semi-structured interview protocol. Summative member checks were also completed, meaning interview transcripts were distributed, reviewed, and approved by all participants to ensure accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure transferability, we provided rich, thorough, and complete descriptions of the methodological processes used for both the quantitative and qualitative components of this study. We also included a table outlining descriptions of all interviewed participants (see Table 3).

The primary means of accounting for dependability is performing audit checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, it was performed by the committee chair and an outside researcher with relevant knowledge and experience in agricultural communications. All components were deemed sound by the chair and researcher. Confirmability indicates the soundness of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and it was achieved through using a researcher outside the study to review findings and utilizing the MAXQDA 2022 software during thematic analysis.

### **Reflexivity Statement**

Lauren Quinlan is a female who grew up in agriculture. She attended Oklahoma State University and completed a master's degree in agricultural communications. This research was part of her thesis work. Dwayne Cartmell is a male who grew up in agriculture. He is a faculty member at Oklahoma State University in the agricultural communications program, which is a predominantly female program. Audrey King is a female who grew up in agriculture. She is a

faculty member at Oklahoma State University in the agricultural communications program. Lauren Cline is a female. She is a faculty member at Oklahoma State University in the agricultural leadership program.

## Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe mentoring experiences and perspectives of female professionals who graduated from the Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership and studied agricultural communications at Oklahoma State University. The study was framed by the following research objectives:

1. Describe how mentorship is being experienced by female professionals and alumnae of Oklahoma State University's agricultural communications program.
2. Describe how mentorship is being perceived by female professionals and alumnae of Oklahoma State University's agricultural communications program.
3. Explore implications of mentorship for female professionals and alumnae of Oklahoma State University's agricultural communications program.

To fulfill these objectives, a set of questions within the prescreening questionnaire asked participants to indicate how often they have or have not received mentorship, both within their professional careers and during their time at Oklahoma State University. As outlined in Table 2, nearly half of participants (45.88%,  $n = 39$ ) said they 'Sometimes' received mentorship throughout their professional careers. During their time at Oklahoma State University, however, most participants (60%,  $n = 51$ ) indicated they 'Frequently' received mentorship, and none (0%,  $n = 0$ ) indicated 'Never' receiving mentorship.

Responses to these two questions were used to determine the set of questions to ask each of the 10 participants selected for an interview (see Table 3). During the interviews, participants were asked to describe the nature and focus of their mentoring experiences and relationships, which includes how they connected with their chosen mentors and what they look for in potential mentors. For those who indicated 'Rarely' receiving mentorship at any point, they were asked to consider and describe why this might be the case.

During the data collection and analysis processes, participant responses were coded and grouped into themes based on each objective. These will now be explored in greater depth. The following themes emerged after analyzing the qualitative data from this questioning.

### Objective 1: Mentorship Experiences

The first objective sought to describe how mentorship is being experienced by female professionals and alumnae of Oklahoma State University's agricultural communications program. The three themes that emerged for this objective were "Development of informal and natural relationships," "Combination of male and female mentors," and "Mentorship is unattainable or out of reach."

### ***Theme 1A: Development of informal and natural relationships***

Overall, most participants said their positive mentoring experiences emerged from natural relationship that progressed throughout time. According to Brooklyn, “I would say mine have been very informal, in terms of my boss and then the others being people I have met out in the world. Our professional circles just bumped up against each other, and I would say the focus was more of ‘What do you need?’” Brooklyn also said most of her mentoring relationships were dependent upon the life stage and circumstances she found herself in.

Cheryl emphasized how spending a significant amount of time getting to know people led her to acquire many of the mentors she has today. She reported, “Although I have only had two jobs, the people in each of those jobs who come to mind as mentors and the things I learned from them have come from observing and interacting with them on daily basis.” Cheryl also said others can experience, and perhaps are already experiencing, these types of interactions and may not realize it. “Whether or not we seek out mentors, we have them almost accidentally,” she said. “I think we always have people who encourage or advise us.”

From her perspective, Lucy did not do anything to initiate her relationships; rather, they emerged from spending significant time with professors in Oklahoma State University’s agricultural communications program. She also described how she sees many college students and young professionals experiencing mentorship without realizing it, stating, “They are learning from this person and know they can call on him or her at any time. I do not necessarily know if it is being discussed as much as it is more of a natural action taking place with so many people.”

In her experiences, Barbara said she did not think to label relationships as mentorship until after they evolved. In many cases, she still does not. “It was not like we ever had a conversation of, ‘Hey, I see you as my mentor,’ or ‘I want you as my mentor,’” she stated. “Those bonds just kind of happened to form this way.”

### ***Theme 1B: Combination of male and female mentors***

Within the interviews, all participants were asked to identify whether most of their mentors are male, female, or a combination of the two, then were asked to consider why this may be the case. Most participants said they typically acquired mentors within their professional environments, and, in many cases, this included males and females. However, some participants described how, although they may interact with both males and females, they typically lean toward a certain gender based on their intended goals for the mentor-mentee relationship.

Allison described how, in her line of work, she typically seeks mentors who fit certain circumstances and situations. From her perspective, she does not consciously look for mentors of a certain gender. “It is more so just who fits what I am going through at the time,” Allison said. “I think it just depends on where you are at, what you need, and what is going on.” Riley, on the other hand, said she typically feels more comfortable engaging with females. In describing her mentoring relationships, she stated, “The two I am thinking of are female, and I think it is because you seek out people who have been in the same situations as you are not too long ago.”

Olivia also commented on the influence of company structure and how it affects the types of mentors she encounters in the workplace. Olivia stated:

My mentors are typically females, but I think it is usually who is above me in the pecking order. I have always had female bosses, and my college advisor was a female, but I also had one male boss, and he was fine. I think this is just the way things have gone for me.

### ***Theme 1C: Mentorship is unattainable or out of reach***

Although mentorship did occur for some, a few participants indicated finding a mentor seemed unattainable because of their workplace environment. When considering mentorship within the agriculture industry, Riley said she often sees competition between individuals instead of collaboration. She said one of the reasons she believes young people do not seek out and experience mentorship is because they do not consider it to be attainable. “You can reach out to someone, but they may be like, ‘Well, you can pay for my knowledge,’” she stated. “I think it is out there, but out of reach for so many people and a lot harder to access.” From her point of view, Riley believes opportunities exist to make mentorship more affordable and accessible for others to experience in the future.

Piper also touched on how her company’s structure prevented or reduced her from experiencing mentorship. Although she was mentored well during a summer internship, she described how, early in her career, she faced an interesting dynamic with a colleague during a season of transition. “They made it more competitive between us, and I think in a department like ours we needed to be comfortable giving each other critiques,” she said. “It did not happen between us because we worried we would upset the order of things. We existed like this for years.” In hindsight, Piper said this more competitive environment prevented collaboration and mentorship-focused opportunities.

## **Objective 2: Mentorship Perspectives**

The second objective sought to describe how mentorship is being perceived by female professionals and alumnae of Oklahoma State University’s agricultural communications program. The four themes that emerged for this objective were “Taking initiative and being receptive,” “Respected and established,” “Mentors are humans, too,” and “Willingness to have honest conversations.”

### ***Theme 2A: Taking initiative and being receptive***

During the interviews, participants were asked questions designed to provide insight on their perceptions of mentors and mentorship. These included how they choose to identify and select potential mentors. Participants were also asked to provide descriptions of qualities or characteristics their mentors possess, as well as types of mentors they typically gravitate toward.

In reflecting on how they connected with their current mentors, many participants touched on the influence of one’s willingness to seek out others’ guidance and be receptive to it. For example, Grace believed her outgoing personality contributes to her ability to form

connections with others. “By not being afraid to ask questions, being persistent in a kind way, and consistently wanting to be better, I have made mentors in every facet and field I have been in,” she said.

As Brooklyn shared a story about a former colleague who asked her to be a mentor, she described feeling impressed by this individual’s ability to clearly articulate what she was looking for. Although this individual later left the company and pursued other career opportunities, Brooklyn said she continues to keep in touch with her. “I learned from other people seeking out my mentorship how to ask for it myself,” she added.

### ***Theme 2B: Respected and established***

When asked about personal qualities and characteristics one looks for in a potential or existing mentor, a common response was mentors who are well-versed in a profession and possess a noteworthy level of experience. In describing her ideal mentor, Cheryl elaborated on the importance of being level-headed, reasonable, and sound in judgment. “I want to feel like they have quality thoughts behind the type of advisement they would be giving me,” she said. Along the same lines, Barbara seeks mentors who have been in her field longer, stating, “Maybe they do not have the exact job title or career I am pursuing, but they have the skill set and leadership capacity I am seeking out.”

Eleanor touched on the importance of finding and connecting with the “office mom” or “organizational mom,” which she describes as someone who can be considered a confidant and possesses a network of connections within a company. Establishing this relationship, she said, creates an increased level of trust and fosters understanding as she navigates through the workplace. Brooklyn also seeks out mentors with similar professional backgrounds and résumés, saying, “For me it has always been somebody more advanced in their career. I think they have the scars and a level of understanding.”

### ***Theme 2C: Mentors are humans, too***

Beyond being established and respected, most participants said they wanted their mentors to show a human side because this made them feel more relatable and personable. During her interview, Lucy stated:

For me, I feel like it is someone who can tell you, “Hey, when I was your age, I messed up, too.” They are not going to be picture-perfect. They are messy and real. I appreciate someone who can let me in on their real life and what is really going on instead of just showing their highlight reel.

Lucy also said one of the most influential pieces of advice she received was to hold her mentor accountable. From her perspective, this meant creating space for both the mentee and mentor to reflect and share both the highs and lows associated with life.

During her interview, Lucy also said one of the most influential pieces of advice she received was to hold her mentor accountable. From her perspective, this meant creating space for

both her and her mentor to share the highs and lows of life. Lucy shared, “It was cool to see how this person I looked up to was struggling, too, and they were a real person. Rather than me being the one to talk and get all the advice, we could bounce ideas off one another,” she said.

In highlighting the admirable qualities of a female mentor, Grace reported, “From business to personal, she was just human.” Barbara, on the other hand, emphasized how her mentor takes an interest in her at a personal level, noting, “She is always checking in and seeing how my life is going so work can benefit.”

### ***Theme 2D: Willingness to have honest conversations***

Feeling like they were interacting with a relatable human encouraged participants to have honest conversations with their mentors, both in the workplace and in life. “You can talk about anything and everything,” Allison stated. “Whether you want to hear it or not, you know they are going to have your best interests at heart. I also think you need the ability to have hard conversations in a positive and productive way.”

In her line of work, Grace described how her mentor’s ability to be frank, yet sincere, is a quality she grew to admire. “She was the one person who allowed you to be human and told you how it was,” she stated. “I think what really drew me to her was I knew if she genuinely said something was done well, she meant it and would help me get somewhere if it wasn’t.”

According to Riley, knowing her mentor cared was beneficial when she progressed within her career and made the decision to eventually change jobs. “Most of the time it is not advice or things I want to hear, but things I need to hear,” she said. “Having [mentors] be completely honest has been helpful for me.”

### **Objective 3: Mentorship Implications**

The final objective sought to explore implications of mentorship for female professionals and alumnae of Oklahoma State University’s agricultural communications program. During the interviews, participants were asked to describe outcomes resulting from being mentored. They were also asked about how often they believe mentorship is currently being discussed or facilitated within the profession of agricultural communications, and an additional question asked participants to consider how mentorship affected them and others in agriculture. The three themes that emerged for this objective were “Assistance with making decisions and navigating uncertainty,” “Learning how to be a mentor for others,” and “Showcase available opportunities.”

### ***Theme 3A: Assistance with making decisions and navigating uncertainty***

One of the primary outcomes participants received from being mentored is guidance when determining next steps to take in their career or in life. Olivia commended her mentors for helping her take important steps, which led to additional growth opportunities and increased her self-confidence. “I think helping someone else make choices will help them, especially those who are in college, get a step up in their career,” she said.

After she graduated, Barbara moved to a new state and started a new job amid the coronavirus pandemic. Receiving mentorship helped her gain familiarity with her company's expectations in the workplace. "In transitioning and figuring it all out, it was nice to have a team, a supervisor, and a mentor who were able to help me navigate those waters," she reported.

### ***Theme 3B: Learning how to be a mentor for others***

Although participants relied on others as mentors, some also highlighted how being mentored has opened opportunities to serve as a mentor, too. Several described how they often find themselves switching between the two roles, especially as they have aged and gained insight they wish to pass to those new to the profession. "Right now, for the stage of life I am in, I want to focus on mentoring younger students," Lucy said. On a similar note, Allison reported, "I learn a lot from others, and there are lots of opportunities to learn from each other."

Riley said she is mostly self-taught and learned to manage her agricultural photography business without a mentor. However, she recognizes how others can benefit from receiving guidance from those with more experience. "I take it upon myself to make sure I mentor and try to help younger people," she said. "I always think about what I would have wanted at this age or stage of my life because I did not really have anybody helping me."

Allison touched on the uniqueness of the organization she works for and how it enables her to mentor the volunteers who serve within it as well as receive mentorship from those she works with on a day-to-day basis. "I learn a lot from them, and there are lots of opportunities to learn from each other," she said. Some of the ways Allison believes she learned how to mentor well is facilitating student internships, training and uplifting volunteers, and building connections with those working for the nonprofit in areas throughout the country.

### ***Theme 3C: Showcase available opportunities***

Participants were also asked how mentorship affected those within the profession of agricultural communications and the agriculture industry as well as how it is currently being discussed and facilitated in these areas. Most responses emphasized the importance of continuing to spotlight ways for individuals to connect with mentors. During her interview, Cheryl described how she continually identifies intersections between mentorship and internships, reporting, "I think because you are exposing yourself to being in a learning environment, oftentimes the people who help you or provide you with an internship become advisers or mentors."

Olivia expressed how mentorship is often a topic of discussion in her professional organizations. "They talk about it a lot," she reported. "At conferences and other events, they always stress the importance of finding mentors when you are young." Eleanor also believes professional organizations provide avenues for continued growth and mentorship if people are encouraging membership in them. Overall, Lucy believes as the profession evolves and progresses, the need to seek out mentorship in all its forms increases, stating:

I feel like agricultural communications is ever-changing. You must keep up with the times, so there is always someone you have to catch up to or who is more advanced in

their career that you can learn from. I think mentorships, specifically in this profession, are so valuable because you are always learning.

## **Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations**

Existing literature (Cline et al., 2019; Cline et al., 2020; Foster & Seevers, 2003; Hill et al., 1989; Norman & Tang, 2016) indicated the implications of mentorship for females should be further researched and mentorship opportunities were, or perhaps still are, underdeveloped for females. Findings from this study, however, suggest otherwise. Most female professionals interviewed seek mentorship with intention, are aware of beneficial outcomes associated with mentorship, and recognize a need to ensure mentorship continues to be discussed and facilitated, both within their profession and the agriculture industry.

As detailed in the Findings section, several themes emerged during data analysis. This section will discuss applications of this study and how they connect to previous literature, in accordance with the study's three research objectives. Findings will be evaluated in terms of how they align with social capital theory, and recommendations will be outlined for both future practice and research.

### **Conclusions Related to Objective 1: Mentorship Experiences**

In both their professional environments and during their time at Oklahoma State University, participants were either 'Sometimes' or 'Frequently' mentored. Several key themes also emerged within participant interviews that describe how they experienced mentorship, both in their professional lives and during their time at Oklahoma State University. These include the development of informal and natural relationships (Zerzan et al., 2009), possessing a combination of mentors, and mentorship being considered unattainable or out of reach.

All participants in this study mentioned acquiring one or multiple mentors at some point in their life, yet the nature, focus, quality, and duration of their relationships varied. When asked how they connected with their mentors, most participants said their relationships developed as time passed by (Zerzan et al., 2009). Although some were the result of professional relationships, participants said they typically began as personal connections with individuals who possessed shared interests or similar life experiences (Zerzan et al., 2009). In some cases, the development of mentoring relationships can be affected by factors such as a company or organization's structure (Mahendran et al., 2022; Zerzan et al., 2009). Participants also sought both male and female mentors, with some citing their outgoing personality as the main reason why their relationships were typically more informal in nature.

### **Conclusions Related to Objective 2: Mentorship Perspectives**

During the interviews, participants were also asked about their pursuit of mentorship and qualities they look for in a mentor. One of the most important qualities participants seek is someone with a wealth of knowledge and is established in their career. This coincides with Shellhouse et al.'s (2021) definition of how a mentor is often a 'life stage' ahead of a mentee.

Most participants also looked for mentors who were relatable and took a human-focused approach to mentoring. In this regard, they enjoy hearing about others' successes and receiving applicable advice, but they also want to hear about how mentors made mistakes and overcame challenges in their own lives. Overall, participants indicated wanting a mentor who is honest, authentic, and has their best interests in mind when offering advice, guidance, or support.

### **Conclusions Related to Objective 3: Mentorship Implications**

Toward the end of the interviews, participants were asked what they gained or how they benefited from receiving mentorship. Several themes emerged, including assistance with making life decisions and navigating uncertainty, learning how to be a mentor for others, and the perceived need to showcase available opportunities. These could include internships, professional organizations, or groups on social media platforms.

Hagerman et al. (2022) found mentorship can help alleviate stress and frustration when a professional transitions to a new environment or role. According to Zerzan et al. (2009), mentorship is also known to contribute to personal and professional growth. Several participants aligned with these perspectives when describing how their mentors helped instill a sense of confidence in them when starting a new job and learning to navigate a new workplace dynamic.

Depending on their circumstances, participants also said they find themselves switching between being the mentor and mentee (Shellhouse et al., 2021), particularly as their stage of life shifts and they gain more experience in a certain area. For example, some participants are intentionally choosing to focus their attention on mentoring others instead of seeking out additional mentors. Several also said they see mentorship occurring in agricultural communications through internships, relationships with professors and employers, and involvement in clubs, extracurricular activities, and professional organizations. However, they also see a need to continually showcase available mentorship opportunities.

### **Discussion**

Previous research (USDA NIFA & Purdue University, 2020) indicated the field of agricultural communications is known to historically attract a greater percentage of females, which is why this study examined female perspectives and experiences. Likewise, the number of young professionals, particularly females, pursuing degrees and careers in agricultural communications is expected to increase in the future (Irani & Doerfert, 2013; Ruth et al., 2020; USDA NIFA, & Purdue University, 2020) along with the number of agricultural communications programs (Miller et al., 2015). If these trends continue as expected due to an increased demand for professionals with a specialized skill set and a growing interest among high school students (Cartmell & Evans, 2013; Doerfert & Cepica, 1991; Miller et al., 2015; Weckman et al., 2000), it is also worth considering how males who choose to pursue this career path will be affected. Although this study aligns with previous research indicating it is important to recognize areas in which mentoring opportunities may be lacking for females and create additional ones with this audience in mind (Cline et al., 2019; Cline et al., 2020; Moore, 1982), it is also valuable to ensure the same types of support and resources are available to males, both within the classroom and as they begin their professional careers (Hagerman et al., 2022; Smith & Beckley, 1985).

Furthermore, one of this study's participants described the concept of paying to receive mentorship from others with more knowledge or experience in a certain topic area (Hezlett & Gipson, 2007; Shellhouse et al., 2021). From her perspective, this is becoming more common within the profession of agricultural communications and, in some cases, can decrease the accessibility of mentorship for those who cannot afford these types of opportunities. On a different note, another participant referenced how social media features like Facebook groups can create more informal and discussion-based avenues for idea and resource sharing, which can be particularly advantageous for young or beginning professionals.

Since mentorship is known to contribute to personal and professional growth (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019; Shellhouse et al., 2021), it is valuable to recognize and consider both participants' observations. Future research and industrywide discussions should explore how these phenomena align with Kram's (1983) mentoring theory and how they affect individuals' approach to mentorship, including if they are likely to continue connecting with individuals they perceive as similar in terms of life stage and career goals (Johnston & Smith, 2019; Mahendran et al., 2022). Furthermore, research and discussions should determine if these types of interactions are truly considered mentorship, particularly in cases when the long-term relationship development piece (Zerzan et al., 2009) is missing.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Findings from this study both support and align with tenants of social capital theory. Social capital theory aims to evaluate the intrinsic and extrinsic value derived from relationships with others (Coleman, 1988). In this study, participants described how their mentors both served as a role model and provided career-focused guidance (Kram, 1983). One described how her work output directly benefitted from a mentor frequently checking in, and another described how knowing certain people within her workplace enabled her to navigate different dynamics more comfortably. In both experiences, receiving mentorship helped instill a sense of confidence, promoted trust and information exchange, and yielded favorable outcomes – all of which are connections between social capital theory and mentorship (Hezlett & Gipson, 2007).

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The predominately informal nature of mentoring relationships and experiences shared by participants within this study suggests resources and programs related to professional development and mentorship should be created with this in mind. Most of this study's participants indicated the significance of taking the initiative needed to acquire and develop mentoring relationships, and several described how college students and young professionals are often being mentored without realizing it or knowing to label it as mentorship. This indicates a need to create additional opportunities for peer-to-peer and colleague-to-colleague mentoring, both during an individual's time at a college or university and as he or she begins a career in the industry (Hagerman et al., 2022). Doing so will not only help future communicators realize the value of connecting with a mentor, but also what to look for when selecting one — both of which can help ease their transition from student to young professional. Therefore, current academic leaders, professionals and others in the agriculture industry should develop classroom curriculum

such as online modules, guest speaker panels, or large group discussions covering mentorship topics. Additionally, professional organizations geared toward agricultural communicators should consider implementing an in-person or virtual mentoring program to help bridge the gap between future and current professionals in this career field.

In considering how to foster additional avenues for professional development, prospective employers hiring agricultural communications graduates, as well as faculty and staff members within academic programs, should consider how their culture, structure, and dynamics can positively and negatively influence their employees' access to mentorship (Zerzan et al., 2009). This includes increasing the ability for individuals to collaborate with others in the workplace, particularly when making important life decisions or seeking guidance, redirection, or feedback. Furthermore, although creating formalized mentoring programs and encouraging individuals to join professional organizations can be impactful, they are not the only viable options. Some may not have the means or interests to become involved in these, and mentorship can often occur more naturally through daily interactions within the workplace or ongoing conversations on social media. Therefore, employers should consider hosting more networking opportunities and other in-person or virtual events curated toward early career professionals (Hagerman et al., 2022), which would enable them to form connections with others established in their careers, outside of their department, or, in some cases, working in a different location.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future researchers should treat this study as the springboard for additional studies regarding mentorship in the agricultural communications profession. This study recruited participants via Facebook and used Zoom to conduct interviews. Although this did not create any significant challenges, it did limit the amount of field observations made, and participants might have felt more comfortable sharing in a face-to-face interview or group setting. Distributing a Qualtrics form using an email newsletter or organizational listserv could also increase the amount of participant engagement and response rate, therefore providing more data to analyze.

In terms of further evaluating Oklahoma State University's agricultural communications program and others throughout the nation, future research could expand upon specific questions included in this study's prescreening Qualtrics form. For example, studies could explore the extent to which individuals believe their degree program did or did not prepare them for a career in agricultural communications and the extent to which they consider their current career related to agricultural communications. Furthermore, additional studies should explore how current and future professionals define agricultural communications as a discipline and profession. This information could be used to create a more current, comprehensive definition and affect recruitment and promotional materials developed by current and future academic programs in this discipline.

Since this study aimed to evaluate alumni from only one higher education program, future research examining similar programs and agricultural communications-focused professional organizations would provide more comprehensive results. A nationwide study of all agricultural communications programs would also be beneficial and insightful. In addition to exploring female perspectives and experiences, male participants should be also included in

these studies. Within all future research, a larger sample size should be considered, and other types of data collection should be used. Investing in tomorrow can start today, so strides should continually be made to research and create environments where current and future agricultural communications professionals feel valued, supported, and encouraged.

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