

Exploring Research Outreach and Engagement in Departments of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

The need to address grand challenges is at the forefront of most universities' research initiatives and drives many funding requests. Grand challenges present as complex problems, which must be approached from multiple expertise areas using multiple methodologies. As such, interdisciplinary research approaches and teams are encouraged to address them. Social scientists are often added to bench science teams to develop, administer, and evaluate extension or educational outreach components due to their expertise in these areas.

But how do these faculty members and departments advertise their expertise to other faculty within their college, university, and beyond?

PURPOSE

In the 21st century, effective communication to digital audiences is crucial for many disciplines of life. Through observation and personal experience, questions surfaced regarding how the Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership at The Ohio State University communicates the expertise of faculty's research to current and prospective students, current and prospective stakeholders, and the research community. The use of a research instrument will allow accurate and reliable investigation and comparison of similar multidisciplinary land-grant universities to create a toolbox of effective digital strategies.

Research Mission

The ACEL Department and Research Committee support this research to better understand the ways in which similar departments disseminate faculty research expertise. This research could identify best practices from across the country to inform the ways in which ACEL communicates faculty research and expertise.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptual Framework for the Sharing of Department Research Expertise

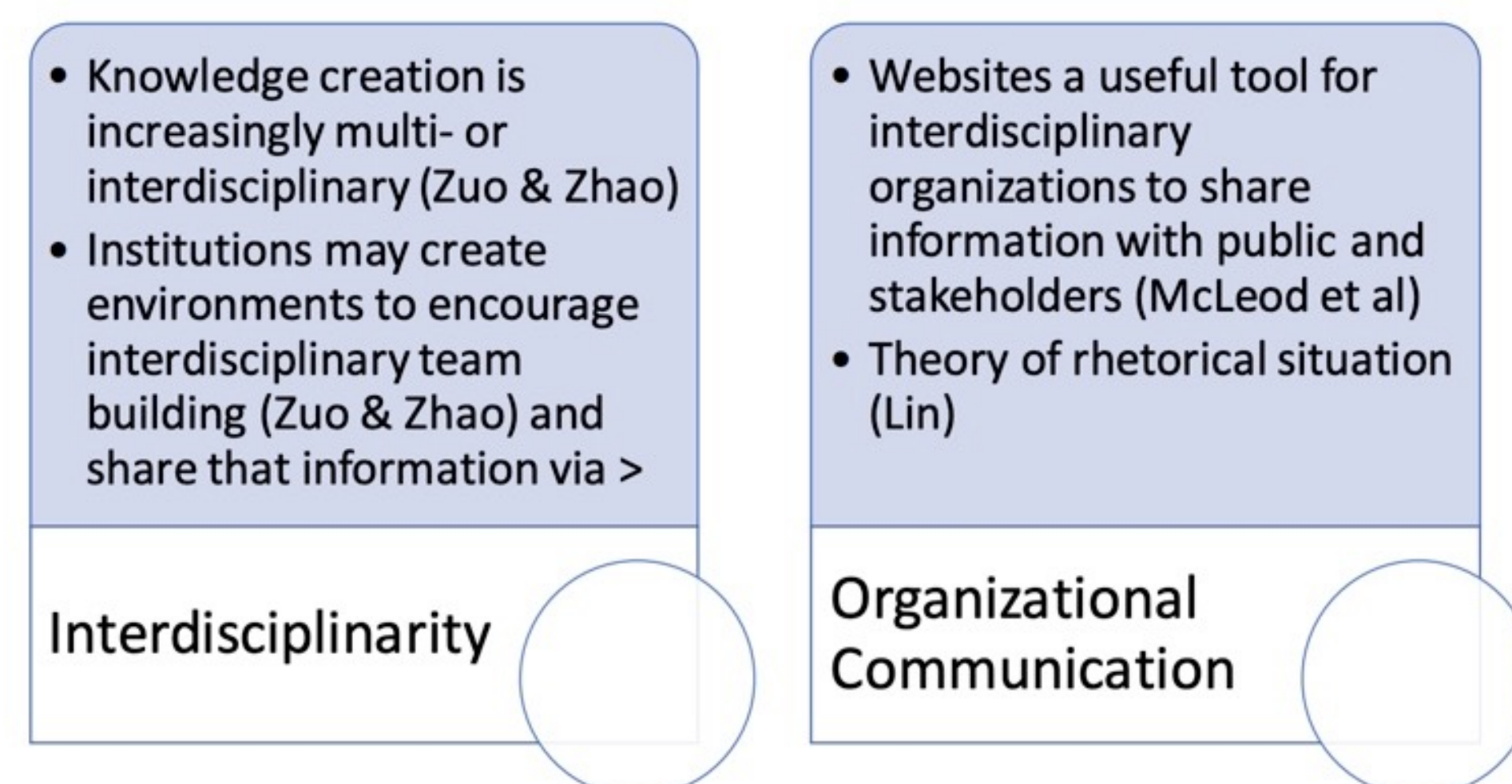


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework for the Sharing of Department Research Expertise visual.

The study is constructed on a conceptual framework of interdisciplinarity and organizational communication. Knowledge creation is increasingly multi- or interdisciplinary, and research institutions may create environments to encourage interdisciplinary team building and share that information via various organizational channels. Specifically, websites are a useful tool for interdisciplinary organizations to share information with the public and stakeholders.

METHODS

The researchers analyzed departmental websites related to the social science fields of agricultural communication, education, extension, and leadership to determine how faculty expertise was advertised.

The sample for this study was university websites of departments that had at least two of the following programs: agricultural communication, agricultural education, agricultural leadership, and extension education at land-grant, tier-one research institutions, which resulted in 21 departments. After identifying the sample, a website content analysis was conducted to understand how these universities showcase their faculty's research.

SAMPLE INSTRUMENT QUESTIONS

How many clicks does it take to get to faculty research descriptions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0 • 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 • 6+
Are individual researchers or research projects highlighted on the home page?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual Researchers • Research Projects • Both • Neither
Where are faculty research descriptions located? (Select all that apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home Page • Inner Page - Research Specific • Inner Page - Individual Faculty • Inner Page - Other • Not present
Check all that are included on research descriptions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photo of Faculty Member • Faculty Contact • Link to CV • Research Interests • Articles Published • Grants Funded • Research Awards • Journal Editor/Reviewer Listings • Other
Is information available consistent among faculty?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Not applicable
Are the research pages graphically consistent with the site? (Graphically consistent: do they have consistent design with the other web pages? Similar colors, text/photo arrangement?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Not applicable

Fig. 2. Sample questions pulled from the Qualtrics data collection instrument.

Data collection was completed using the web-based software form service, Qualtrics, by researchers Maryellen and Lindsey. Questions asked were framed around priority website navigation features regarding the effective dissemination of faculty research.

Researchers were comparatively tested on accurate data collection by completing an identical sample set that was computed for accuracy by running a reliability test. After reliability was established, data collection was divided and initiated.

DEPARTMENT WEBSITE NAVIGATION BARS

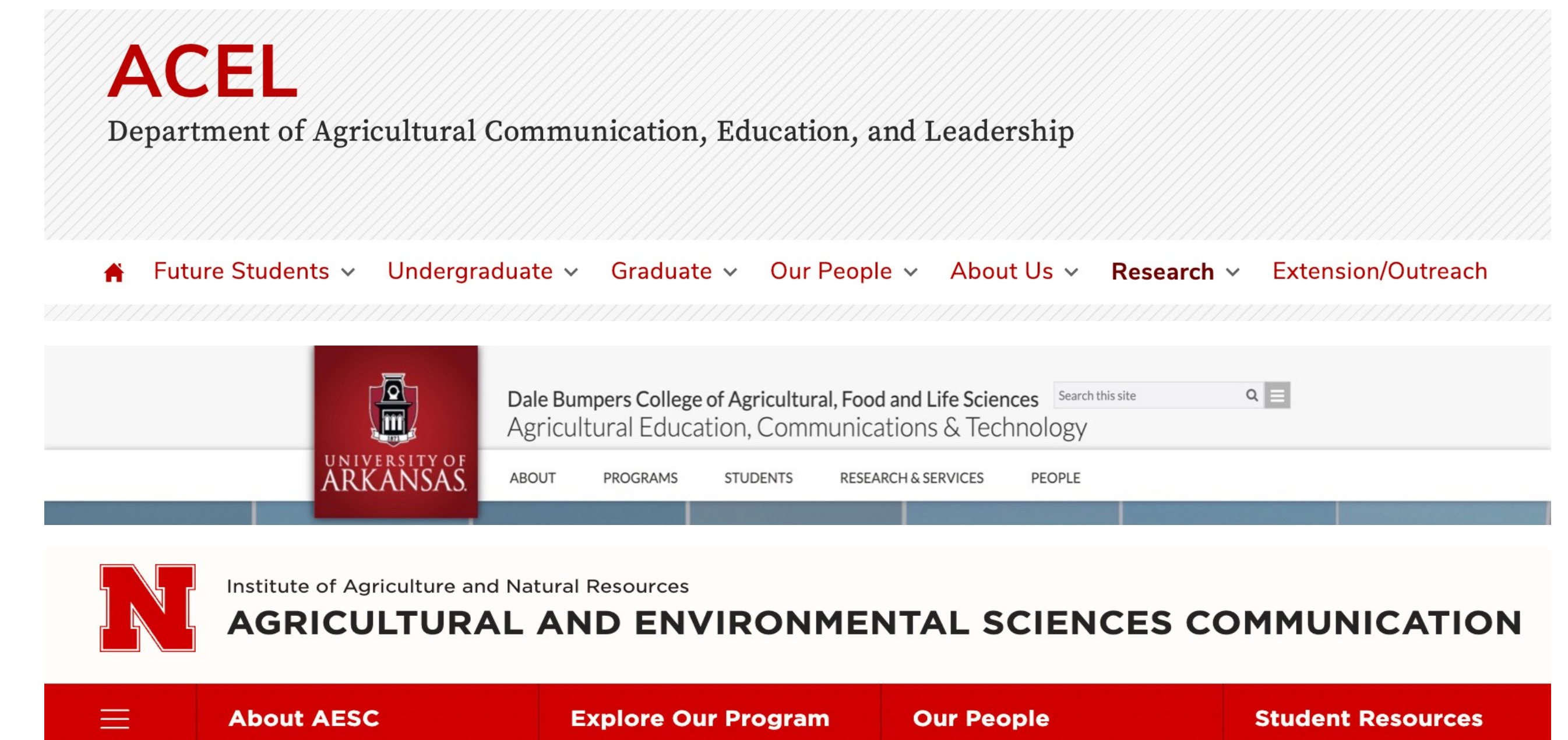


Fig. 3. Examples of departmental website navigation bars from The Ohio State University, University of Arkansas, and University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Preliminary results indicate most department websites require multiple clicks to reach faculty expertise. One feature some analyzed intuitions have implemented to communicate research in a central location on the website is through utilizing a research tab in the navigation bar. Audiences are directed to faculty research and current projects more efficiently upon use of this feature. While all department websites included faculty research descriptions on inner pages for each faculty member, some included this information on a research-specific page reached through the research tab.

The findings provide data for user experience that can compare accessibility and comprehension to disseminate research expertise more efficiently.

After completion of the data collection and analysis for the 21 sample institutions, faculty and researchers will use findings to evaluate current strategies and areas of improvement for organizational communication.

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