

Mastering communications

Agricultural communications program introduces an advanced degree

An interest. A need. A market.

Based on these three things, a new Master of Science program in agricultural communications made its debut in the fall of 2003 at Oklahoma State University.

This has opened up opportunities for Oklahoma State to market a new degree to students across the Midwest.

"It's the second program in the country of its kind," said Dwayne Cartmell, agricultural communications assistant professor. "The only other university with a degree in agricultural com-

munications at the graduate level is the University of Florida, giving us a chance to provide a rare opportunity for students in this region."

A market for an agricultural communications master's program has developed throughout the years as the enrollment of agricultural communications undergraduate students has risen.

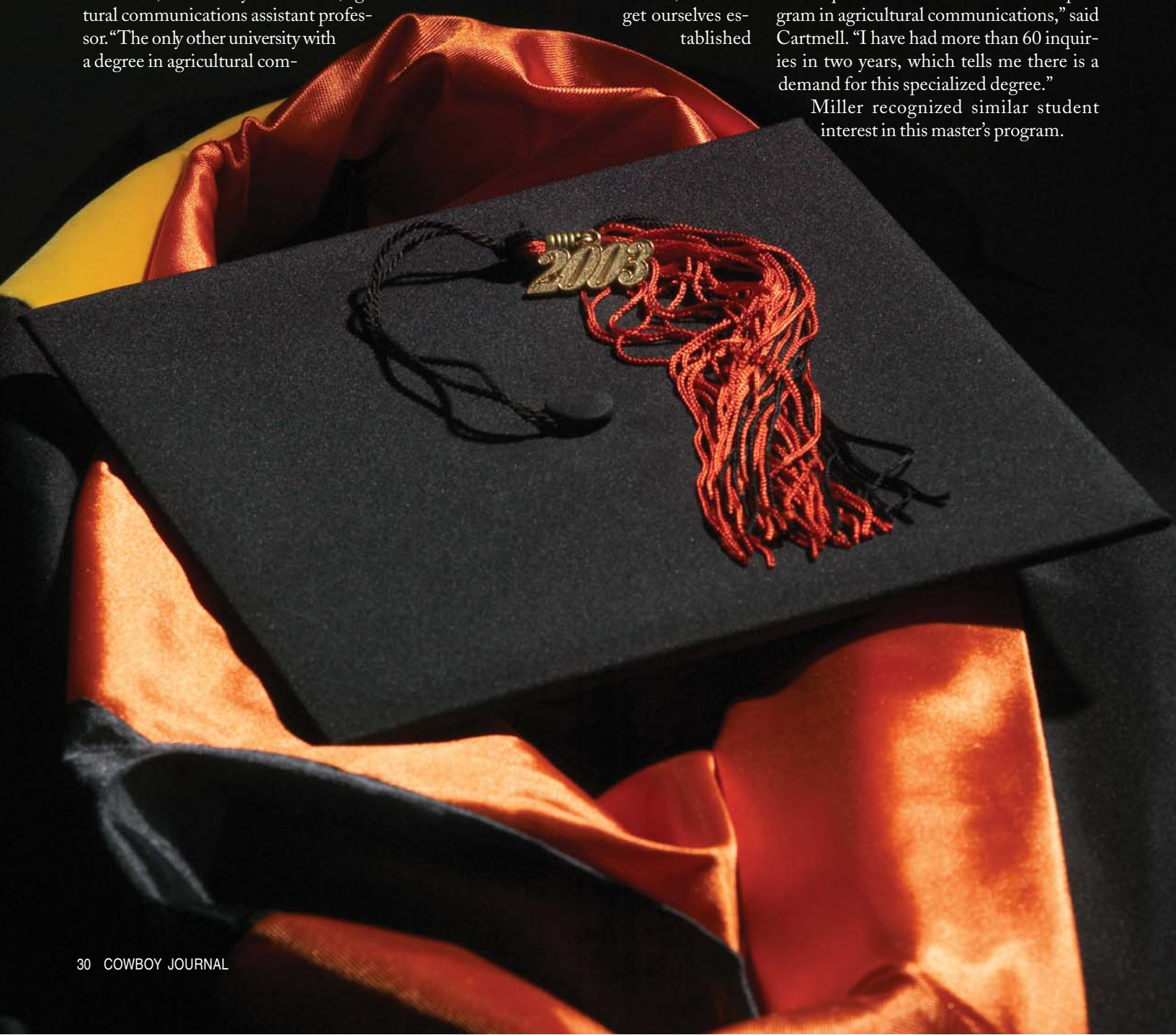
"I think this is an area where, if we can get ourselves es-

established and develop a solid reputation, we can take advantage of this unique market," said Ed Miller, College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources associate dean.

As interest grew in a master's program in agricultural communications, steps were taken by faculty and administration to carry out the desires of the students.

"I kept track of the number of students who inquired about a Master of Science program in agricultural communications," said Cartmell. "I have had more than 60 inquiries in two years, which tells me there is a demand for this specialized degree."

Miller recognized similar student interest in this master's program.



"This is something students have been wanting," Miller said, "but they can't define or create it. Somebody has to create it for them."

Sarah Sargent was one of those students. She enrolled in the master's program in agricultural education and last fall switched to the agricultural communications master's degree.

"I plan on staying in the university atmosphere," said Sargent, who graduated from The Ohio State University with a bachelor's in agricultural communications. "I really have a heart for students, but I'm not sure it's in teaching."

The specialized coursework and flexibility offered by these master's programs allowed Sargent to work on agricultural communications requirements as an agricultural education student before the final approval of the new program, as did Gina Ciuffetelli, who graduated with an agricultural communications bachelor's degree from Oklahoma State.

"I thought it would give me more options," said Ciuffetelli about her goal of obtaining a master's. "I would like to do anything communications related, including advertising, marketing or public relations."

As a result of Sargent's and Ciuffetelli's goals, they will be the first to graduate from Oklahoma State with a Master of Science in agricultural communications.

Cathy Herren, an agricultural communications graduate student with a bachelor's degree from Oklahoma State in agribusiness, experienced different interests in the master's program.

While Sargent wanted to further her agricultural communications knowledge with a master's degree, Herren desired to add an additional knowledge base to her undergraduate education.

"Having the opportunity to learn how you can communicate more clearly with others is really important," Herren said. "It will be beneficial to me to have those combined experiences with my undergraduate major and my master's program when I go to look for a job."

The opportunity for an agricultural communications master's degree may have greater benefits to those who have gotten an undergraduate degree in another area,



Sarah Sargent (left) and Gina Ciuffetelli take a moment to smile for a quick graduate photo. (Photos by Erin Harris)

said Miller. People in disciplines other than communications often seek students who have specialized communication skills and training in addition to degree expertise.

"A student with a bachelor's in one field, such as horticulture, and a master's in agricultural communications will have gained special talents in written or oral communication," said Miller. "That's a great combination of skills."

From agricultural communications professionals in the field to agricultural communications professors in universities, many have said there is a need for highly educated people in the agricultural industry.

"We have experienced first-hand there is a real shortage of agricultural communications professors and professionals beyond the bachelor's degree," Miller said about the college's search for agricultural communications professionals in the industry.

Students also recognize the importance of advanced degrees in the agricultural industry, and they recognize it can be helpful, but is not necessary to succeed.

"You definitely don't need a master's degree to succeed in agricultural communications," said Sargent. "But a master's degree does give you a chance to move on to a doctoral degree if you want to work in academia, and it does give you a chance to really do some research that will make a difference for the profession."

Having the additional discipline a master's program requires gives an edge when applying for a specialized job in the agricultural industry, said Sam Knipp, director of corporate communications at Oklahoma Farm Bureau.

"This would be where I would think a master's degree program would be an asset," said Knipp, describing the benefits of having a master's degree when applying for a specialized job. "A master's is one of the things I think could make the difference between you and someone else who may have equal qualifications."

To be admitted in the program, students must complete the Graduate Record Examination. They also must submit an application to the graduate college at Oklahoma State, a statement of purpose and three letters of recommendation to the department.

Students in the agricultural communications master's program must complete 30 credit hours focusing on agricultural communications core requirements, research and statistics, and their personal specialization.

Full-time students can complete the degree in one year, compared to approximately three years for part-time students.

For Oklahoma residents, the cost of a master's degree in agricultural communications is approximately \$4,400 including fees. For out-of-state students, the cost is higher, at approximately \$12,600 including fees. Some assistantships are available to reduce tuition costs.

The Department of Agricultural Education, Communications and 4-H Youth Development at Oklahoma State has designed a master's program to quench the need in the industry, open the market for the Midwestern states and fulfill student interests.

With these ideas in place, Oklahoma State is on its way to developing a memorable, reputable and beneficial program, said Miller.

"There's a need. There's a market. There's an interest," said Miller. "Those are the things that go together to make a program successful." ♦ *By Erin Reece Harris, Yale, Okla.*

For more information about the Master of Science in agricultural communications, call the Department of Agricultural Education, Communications and 4-H Youth Development at Oklahoma State University at (405) 744-5129 or visit the departmental Web site at <http://agweb.okstate.edu/agedcm4h/>.