

ACE APLU/BAA Communications Roadmap Zoom transcript

October 8, 2020, 11:00 am CDT

Jennifer Alexander:

We'll do brief introductions. We'll share a little context and background with all of you about this initiative. We will hear from our colleagues at the agency Forbes/Tate Partners who will go over the status update on the current strategy, so where this is at in the process and a little bit about the roadmap itself. And then we'll hope to spend the bulk of our time together with feedback and Q&A amongst all of us.

Jennifer Alexander:

Some of you have been involved in previous iterations of initiatives like this, in your roles; for some of you this may be new; or maybe you're in a new position now. But as professional communicators at our own institutions, and as an ACE organization, our input is really important in helping shape this plan, which exists to serve our land-grant institutions. So we will have a role in helping design a plan that we think will work for all of us and our institutions. And it's really great that we're able to have a chance to have some early feedback to share how we might plug into this and then suggestions for implementing it as it goes forward.

Jennifer Alexander:

So, again, my name is Jennifer Alexander, current president of ACE. I will briefly introduce my colleagues. Many of you know Elizabeth Gregory North from Mississippi State University. She is currently ACE's representative to the Communication and Marketing Committee within APLU's Board on Agriculture Assembly.

And we'll go over what those acronyms mean in a little bit, so you have some context of where that committee fits. We also have a number of APLU colleagues joining us this morning. In particular, I wanted to welcome a few members of the Communication and Marketing Committee, Mark Rieger the chair, Steve Loring is the outgoing chair, and Karla Trautman is the incoming chair. So, they'll be providing some context on this initiative. I also saw we've got Doug Steele on the call from APLU, who's also involved in this initiative. Welcome and thank you for being here with us today.

And we also have Ryan McConaghy, who's our colleague from Forbes/Tate Partners. His public affairs and advocacy agency is the group that's been hired to help develop this roadmap, so he'll be going over the details of that with us.

Jennifer Alexander:

So for a little context and background, I will ask Mark, as CMC chair, to situate us a little bit in the context of APLU and about this initiative. Mark.

Mark Rieger:

Hey, thanks, Jennifer, appreciate it. It's good to be with the communicators here today and to talk a little bit about this project that is getting to a point where we're ready to start, the rubber is going to meet the road. We're ready to get to an implementation phase on this. It's been an interesting six/seven months, coincident with the COVID world that we all exist in here, but we've been making a lot of progress, actually, on developing a roadmap for the future. About how we communicate better on

behalf of the land-grant system nationwide—and I know that that’s on your minds every day. That’s what you do and you do it well. I know I couldn’t do it without my guy in the office over my shoulder here, that’s for sure.

Mark Rieger:

But, anyway, just briefly since I don’t know who’s on the call and how much you know—I hope I’m not telling you things that you already know—is we started in ... I think it was in February or March. In fact, one of the last live meetings that I was at actually involved some of you. We were in D.C., and it was the AHS/CARET meeting and we had a little sidebar, and we had about seven or eight communicators. And I think, Jennifer, you were there, I believe, and, Elizabeth, I think you were there. Faith Peppers was there. There was a bunch of people. And we started to talk about this idea of how do we involve the college communicators better in this communications and marketing project? And we just did a nice intake. Also met with the Council on Government Affairs, which is part ... You can see them probably somewhere. I don’t have my glasses on, but they’re probably on that org chart somewhere.

Mark Rieger:

Anyway, we started to kind of open up the conversation to a lot of the different groups, not just within the BAA, but really more broadly through CFERR, the other boards that are so closely related to what we do. In fact, some of our colleges have human sciences, and forestry, and things like that associated with it.

Mark Rieger:

But anyway, so we started down that road in early March, then we all hit COVID. We did a request for proposals, got a lot of good proposals. Forbes/Tate was chosen as the partner; you’re going to hear from them in just a second here. And their charge was to develop a plan for a plan. Not to write a strategic plan—this is an important difference here—but to sort of give us some messaging frames, identify audiences, give us what a potential timeline would look like, give us examples of how we would be communicating on social media, all of those sorts of things. And that’s in the document that, no doubt, many of you have seen. If you haven’t seen it, I’ll send it to you. Happy to share it.

Mark Rieger:

So it’s been an iterative process, meeting with them almost every two weeks with my colleagues Steve, and Karla, and Rick Rhodes. We kind of formed a little bit of an executive group, so that we wouldn’t have the whole Communication and Marketing Committee every two weeks. And we did surveys, did focus groups, one-on-one phone calls, interviews. I think the tires have been kicked all around the Board on Ag Assembly and maybe even CFERR, as far as getting input, getting feedback from people. And thank you, if you were one of the many people that provided input on this.

Mark Rieger:

So, anyway, we have a roadmap, and it’s near-final. I would say it’s the penultimate version, and we’re on track. We had always envisioned that as coming to fruition in November and then going on to an implementation phase.

Mark Rieger:

So, anyway, with that as a background I'll just point to Steve Loring and Karla Trautman, and my colleagues on CMC, to see if they have anything to add. And, if not, we will turn it to Ryan, I guess, and we'll let him walk you through the roadmap. Steve, Karla, anything?

Steve Loring:

Yeah, I think you've covered it very well. I'm good; let Ryan go.

Karla Trautman:

Likewise. Thank you Mark.

Mark Rieger:

All right. Well, Jennifer, if you want to go back to you or go right to Ryan, whatever you want to do. Thank you for the opportunity.

Jennifer Alexander:

Thank you, Mark. Good morning and welcome, Ryan.

Ryan McConaghy:

Thank you. Thank you so much, it's great to be here. I appreciate the opportunity as well, and it's been fantastic to work with Mark, and Steve, Rick, Karla, so many people on the CMC and that CMC executive committee. And excited to be here and give an update on where we've been, where we are, and where we're going, and get that feedback.

Ryan McConaghy:

I think one of the key things that we have tried to do in this process is really cast a wide net. You heard Mark allude to it, and I'll go through it quickly. But we see, very much, our mandate and the goal of this project is to support CMC and the broader system in developing a framework for the communication plan that's going to ultimately enhance your efforts to secure more funding and promote your achievements. So, we've tried to be as inclusive as possible, and I'll tell you about some of the specifics we've done, and I look forward to the questions today. But I'll say this upfront and then I'll reiterate at the end: we have an open and dedicated inbox at Forbes Tate to take any input, questions, suggestions on this process. It's fully monitored by our team. And that's aplu_baa@forbes-tate.com. So we really want to hear from everybody. And, as Mark said, it's been a very iterative process.

Ryan McConaghy:

And I'll also underscore what he said, that this is a roadmap or a framework. We use those terms very consciously, because we're building a structure; we're not building a plan. The plan will ultimately be yours to build going forward; we're just here to give our thoughts on how to structure it.

Ryan McConaghy:

So our mandate has been to conduct a strategic assessment of the strengths, the challenges, the opportunities in the system, get feedback on the objectives, what the communications plan should be, and provide best practices for BAA to use in creating that final plan in the next year. So how did we go about that? And I think we can go to this process slide.

Ryan McConaghy:

Actually, sorry, the previous slide. Sorry. So, we're working in three phases. The first one: assessment and strategic alignment. That's really where we just get a sense of what's worked in the past, what hasn't, and make sure that our goals are all aligned, so that the plan ultimately accomplishes what you want it to accomplish. Phase two, which is the phase that we're wrapping up now, is plan development. That's where we take the learnings and the findings from that phase and draft the roadmap that some of you have seen. And then, finally, integration and execution. And that's where we'll do capacity building, work with communicators to answer any questions, we'll ask specific implementation details, and then step back as you finalize the actual plan and fill in the details.

Ryan McConaghy:

So I'll do a quick summary on phase one, and if we could go to the next slide? So assessment and strategic alignment. Again, the big goal here was to achieve consensus on what the plan is meant to achieve and then figure out the top-line strategy. So, for that, we wanted to look and establish a baseline through a combination of looking at what's been done, what assets are on hand, and then what people feel like has worked and not. So we did that through a few different things.

Ryan McConaghy:

On the next slide, you'll see we conducted a broad survey to the entire BAA membership. We sent it out to everybody, 643 members. Had a very high open rate, so we saw that there's an appetite for people to have a voice in this process: 38.8% is far above the 10% to 12% that you can expect someplace else. Good completion rate. What we found from that survey is that there was a clear priority on leaning heavily on advocacy and achieving the goal of securing more funding and supporting the outreach that Cornerstone and the Council on Government Affairs are doing to ultimately fuel the work that is your mission.

Ryan McConaghy:

To do that, there was a strong preference on clear and unified messaging. One of the things we picked up on, in the past, is that there were a lot of good messages out there, but they weren't necessarily coordinated. So, we wanted a clear, simple message that can be reiterated by the advocacy team, the communications team nationally, and the communications teams locally. And a need to build capacity and strengthen internal understanding, which is really just to make sure that everybody is aware of what's happening with the communications plan and how they can help out.

Ryan McConaghy:

If we go to the next slide, we also conducted a series of one-on-one interviews with a variety of stakeholder groups in the Extension system, the Experiment Stations, CGA, people who have worked in the plan in the past. And what we heard from them echoed what we saw in the broad survey, which was really get the message down to the One Ask, which I know is several budget lines and encompasses a wide variety of things, but really hone in on the One Ask that had been previously determined as the way to go, in terms of advocacy. Define the tactics and targets more clearly. And then one of the key things for the message frames was always be talking about the linkage between the federal dollars and BAA outcomes, since the goal is to get more federal dollars make a return-on-investment argument. We heard that continually through the process, and that's reflected in our recommendations.

Ryan McConaghy:

So, if we go to the next slide, we also looked at what BAA has done, what assets you had on hand. The Ag is America website is an existing platform; it's a good platform. That's a strength we saw, is that you're not going to be building from scratch. So, we went through and looked at the website traffic, the associated social media traffic, to see what had worked, what hadn't, what the following was.

Ryan McConaghy:

And our findings on the next slide. You can see that, essentially, we found a very strong but dormant platform that is ripe for a reboot, not a rebuild. So, going forward, we see the best ways to use those platforms as posting messages consistently; you need a regular cadence to stay at the top of the algorithm and in the timeline of people you're dealing with. Develop posts that have calls to action and opportunities for engagement, for people to interact with, that gets them more invested. And then you do need to, we feel like, commit some resources in the very noisy environment to promoting, occasionally, posts when you have a major accomplishment, a major report coming out, to make sure that you are, again, generating higher impressions. So those were our recommendations that you'll see reflected in the roadmap for the social side.

Ryan McConaghy:

And then, if we go to the next slide, overall, based on that strengths, challenges, and opportunities analysis, we felt the framework needs to both have an internal and an external communications component. And we really found—and I think that was one of the more surprising things when we got into this process—I think we came in thinking we would spend a lot of time thinking about message frames, tactical execution, online earned media. And we have spent a lot of time thinking about those things, but we didn't anticipate the degree to which we would hear consistently that the need for better internal communication and roles and responsibilities came up. And we really see that as a prerequisite for a communications plan being successful. So we did lean into that work significantly. Again, refining the communications priorities, getting clear consistent asks, and then defining audiences in a way that will make sure that you're not ... That to the degree you're investing energy and resources you are speaking to the people that are ultimately going to make the decisions.

Ryan McConaghy:

We based this off of, as I mentioned, a strengths, challenges, and opportunities assessment. Strengths: we found BAA has a fantastic story to tell, institutions all over the country, every state, every region. And research enjoys strong public support. And you have just a wealth of expertise and skilled communicators, people who know what they're talking about and have a great story to tell. The challenges: a little bit of a lack of nimbleness and lack of coordination previously. Also, just hard competition for federal dollars. And opportunities: as I mentioned, rebooting existing platforms. So, we tried to refine those things and then we took that as the main things we want to emphasize in phase two: writing the plan.

Ryan McConaghy:

Then you go to the next slide for the phase two summary. We wanted to focus specifically on then putting this all together into something that is tangible and actionable, that walks through. So, we took those findings, and then, as Mark said, it was a very iterative process. We did several drafts and within those drafts we conducted follow-up outreach to our interview targets. We've had individual meetings with ECOP, ESCOP, others, a few group calls, and one-on-one calls with CGA members. Really just honing that down to get to the point where we can make recommendations that are specific to the elements

that we put together. Whenever we're actually putting together a communications plan for our clients, this document very much reflects the thinking that we go through when we're building a communications plan, and we wanted to give you that structure as well.

Ryan McConaghy:

So, what's in the roadmap? This is the meat of what we're discussing here. Any good communications framework has to start with an objective. And what we arrived at through our rounds of feedback is, as I mentioned, help BAA successfully secure additional federal resources. With the secondary objective of influencing key stakeholders and promoting accomplishments through communications.

Ryan McConaghy:

The way that we see the communications framework potentially achieving that is by positioning the land-grant system as a unique, high-value resource that fulfills an education mission, but also delivers on investment and federal dollars. Just constantly using that umbrella of return on investment, whether it's in agricultural work, life sciences, precision healthcare, broadband deployment. One of the strengths and challenges is that the diversity of the work is so great that you need a unifying theme, and that return on investment allows all of those achievements to be proof points under that one message.

Ryan McConaghy:

In terms of identifying audiences, obviously, appropriators, decision makers, those including people on the Appropriations Committee, the authorizing committees. But not just in Congress: NIFA, the Secretary of Agriculture, OMB. We really focused on the breadth of the federal budget process and that calendar, starting with preparation of administration requests, through budget release markups, appropriations consideration on the floor, and then final decisions at the end of the year.

Ryan McConaghy:

Messages: we wanted to really take into account that we heard that the messages needed to represent the full breadth of all the BAA activities. But, in each instance, whether it's talking about, again, youth and community development with groups like 4-H or local schools, commitments to community health, a safe and secure food supply, dealing with urgent threats like climate change and conservation. Again, those frames can be plugged into a message calendar, but they all serve that greater strategy of the return-on-investment message.

Ryan McConaghy:

Tactically the draft of the plan provides a full menu that includes online earned media, major events, and initiatives, some virtual and online recommendations that address our COVID environment—which we will unfortunately likely be in for the next several months—and includes best practices on how to execute those events.

Ryan McConaghy:

And then, again, organization: we went through the larger infrastructure. And, really, when we came up to the organization, we tried to think about clearly defining roles and responsibilities, with the feeling that, when everyone has a job, everyone has something that they know that they're going to get and something they're going to be asked for, they're invested in the program.

And, so, our recommendations look at CMC as, for a term, the quarterback of the communications plan: monitoring coordination, sending out updates to all the constituent members on how the communications plan is performing and what they're being asked to provide within the context of that plan. Policy leads, the policy board of directors, the CGA, Cornerstone, individual communicators who should be involved both at the front end in setting the priorities that the messages advocate for, as well as adjusting the efforts in real time to make sure that issues are being spoken to in a way that's going to resonate with the decision makers, groups like CGA and Cornerstone are communicating with. As well as what individual communicators are seeing in their local press, to be able to seize opportunities and overcome that nimbleness challenge that we identified earlier.

Ryan McConaghy:

There's a role for the APLU overall communications office in making sure that the APLU main message is coordinated with the BAA message and also promoting tentpole events. And then making sure that local actors, like CARET, volunteers in the various states, are both generating content and feeding their accomplishments up into the main communications plan for promotion. And then also carrying that One Ask message and those message frames as the local face of their efforts.

Ryan McConaghy:

So that is a broad overview. We include a message calendar that tracks, as I said, the congressional budget year as an example. It's a framework, so we're not dictating that that's what you would do. It's an example of how we recommend you build the plan when you do it.

Ryan McConaghy:

And, so, we are now, if we want to go to the next slide, moving into phase three: plan adoption. This is the integration and execution. So, we are continuing to collect feedback; we are continuing to make this an iterative process. And then once we have final ratification of the roadmap, the last leg of our mandate is to go ahead and produce some materials; help fill in some of the gaps or some of the details on exactly who will be points of contact, how communications will work; answer any questions on the nitty gritty and granular tactical implementation. And then step away, and be on call, and be at the ready. So that's where we are now and that's where we're heading in the next couple weeks.

Ryan McConaghy:

And then, on the next slide, I said I would reiterate it throughout the end of phase two, where we are now, and the beginning of phase three. Please know you can reach out to me directly; you can reach out to our entire team at this address: aplu_baa@forbes-tate.com. And we want to make sure that we keep that open feedback loop clear and active through the entire process. So, I appreciate your attention.

I know that's a lot to take in. It's been a really robust process, and we're looking forward to bringing it to completion, and happy to answer any questions.

Jennifer Alexander:

Thank you, Ryan. So, for now, we'll move into the discussion portion. I'll stop sharing my screen here in just a moment. You're welcome to unmute and ask a question, and also use the chat. Elizabeth Gregory North will be compiling notes based on this feedback that you share and wrapping that into her feedback about this plan. In addition to that APLU email address, you're also welcome to email Elizabeth

directly at elizabeth.north@msstate.edu. And, if you could have comments to her by next Friday, October 16, we'd appreciate it. Thank you.

Jennifer Alexander:

So with that I'm going to stop sharing and I will facilitate our Q&A portion. So what questions do you have about how ACE or about how you, in your role, connect with this plan?

Frankie Gould:

So this is Frankie. I was wondering what ... And I read through everything but ... And there's a suggested timeline and topics for monthly focus and posts. So are we going to, as a group, try to populate Ag is America or are we going to do that through APLU?

Ryan McConaghy:

So I can ... I think ultimately that's a decision that you all will make. I think our recommendation would be to utilize Ag is America because it is an existing platform that you can dedicate solely to this message plan; and it's a clean, clear online property that you can really just hone and focus. So, I think that's where we would start. I also think it's notable that the Ag is America Twitter account has 12,000 followers, which is an impressive number. That's very difficult to achieve. And, so, I would definitely not want to start over from scratch, and I think it's more consistent to have the Ag is America handle link back to the Ag is America website. There may be other considerations, but, from a communications perspective, that'd be the FTP recommendation.

Jennifer Alexander:

Thank you. And Ryan, as a follow-up to that one, another part of Frankie's question that I maybe heard is does the roadmap, so far, suggest who actually might be hitting that post button? Are we thinking that there's a shared model amongst many communicators that would be doing those day-to-day things or is there also a central communication contact, within APLU or BAA, or somewhere, that's serving as a hub that all of us might be in contact with and report to or hear from?

Ryan McConaghy:

Our vision for it would be the latter. That the main national property would fall under the coordination and quarterbacking function of a dedicated point of contact at CMC. And then, I think, the individual institution communicators are a tremendous resource, and I think they could amplify that then through their local accounts or their individual institution accounts. So, if you have an Ag is America, you're promoting a new report on economic returns on investment or water resource management, or whatever the topic is, you could have that at the top level, and then the local communicators would then amplify that tweet with a tweet highlighting, potentially, something that an individual faculty member or student has done at that institution. But at the top-line level, I think, that's a quarterbacking function. And, Mark, I don't know if you have anything else to add to that or say to that?

Mark Rieger:

Yeah. And Doug has done a lot of the work behind the scenes on that specific part of it. So, as we get to implementation, we realize that we are going to have to have people that are in the coordination and quarterbacking role for sure. We can't do this without you, the communicators that are in colleges, but we don't want it to be a burden to you, either. So, there needs to be some kind of centralized support,

probably within APLU, that is going to then help coordinate, and create that steady drumbeat, and get us all on the same page. Doug, do you want to add anything?

Doug Steele:

Well, I'll start by saying good afternoon or good morning, or good lunch hour, wherever you're at across the country today. And I think it's an interesting question. As I've worked with Forbes/Tate and looked at the recommendations, two or three things really came out. It's going to be no surprise to you university communicators: one, we have a big voice that's not amplified very well, because we don't always speak together with the common messaging. Secondly, in many of the things we've done in the past, we have not been inclusive in getting the university ag communicators involved earlier to help with that messaging format.

Doug Steele:

And, in answer to Jennifer's question earlier about how do we now push this out in social media: I think it is kind of a shared platform because we've got a great message. And the work of Forbes/Tate has shown us that, if we do advocacy right, on the national level, it should improve the profile and image of all of our land-grant universities. And, in the past, much of our messaging was done separately at the national level versus your individual institutions. We want to bring that closer together.

Doug Steele:

And I will tell you, not to get too far out in front of myself or our chairperson Dr. Rieger, we did send a letter to the Policy Board and we told them we think there's a couple structural changes that are maybe preventing some of our future success. And one, the Communication and Marketing Committee right now is not a standing committee, it's a quasi-committee, and we felt like it ought to be a standing committee within the Policy Board and the Board on Ag Assembly.

Doug Steele:

And second, not to shock you guys and not to recreate something you already have, we felt like we had to have discussion with you in maybe creating a new section within the BAA, which is the section for university ag communicators. Because as Forbes/Tate did our work what they said is, "Man, you've got 350 CARET volunteers that you're not incorporating into this messaging? And you've got this great resource and partner with the university ag communicators that were not really tied into messaging. And you've got this whole section of government advisors, government relation people, that you're not incorporating into this." All of it is stuff we knew.

Doug Steele:

What I've shared with Steve and Mark is Forbes/Tate work has taken things that we knew anecdotally and put some of the science behind it. "No, this is what's happening. We can test your hypothesis. You knew this is happening, and we're showing you it's happening."

And, so, I'm excited. And there's a lot of details, and that's why I think what Ryan said earlier is what you've really got to remember: we didn't ask them to develop the plan, we asked them to develop the process and the considerations to make this plan more than what we have now. And we have asked the three sections [ECOP, ESCOP, and AHS] to help us hire somebody internally to help with the development, the delivery, and implementation of a plan. And we want you guys to have a strong voice in that.

Doug Steele:

And, as Ryan said, what has happened in social media this last six months is not anything we've done. It's just been a very static profile for us right now. If we really put some time and energy, and we got really intensive ... And I think our first proving ground may be when we release the infrastructure request for our ag experiment stations. I'd like to blow that up with a great example of how you use op-eds, how you use editorials, how you maybe on your university do a virtual research tour for congressional staffers, and how we put a social media behind a big push on getting deferred infrastructure. And this is just one example, I think, that the framework from Forbes/Tate's going to help us do moving forward.

Doug Steele:

But I think, Mark, I could speak for all of us, we're committed to a partnership in this, developing stronger relationships, and acknowledging in the past we probably have not put these resources and worked together as closely as we should have.

Jennifer Alexander:

Thank you very much, Doug and Mark, for those updates. We have a question in the chat from our colleague Tucker Wilson. Tucker, would you like to ask your question and elaborate on that at all?

Tucker Wilson:

Yes. Good morning, everyone. Thank you for the overview of the report. I had a chance to go through, look at it, and the plan is very thorough. But my questions would be related to implementation. Me being versed on the plan is one thing, because I'm exposed to it and have the details, but can you offer up any tips for bringing the stakeholders on my campus in on this?

Ryan McConaghy:

Sure. No, that's obviously going to be a key part of it. And I think what I would initially react to is, one, I think that when the actual communications plan is put together and people can see where, potentially ... And by stakeholders, I guess, I'm assuming you mean the researchers, people doing the work, administrators?

Tucker Wilson:

Yes. Pretty much everybody involved. Even communications across campus.

Ryan McConaghy:

[crosstalk 00:33:21] Yep. Yes. So I think one key asset of it, on the internal communications side, is being able to demonstrate upfront that you're going to be receiving regular updates about the communications plan, about message of the week, message of the month, so that it's not a you-hear-about-this-once-a-quarter-and-forget-about-it thing, and don't know what ever came of it.

Ryan McConaghy:

I think the other one is that this is where the ask comes in. This is where the call for contributions comes in. And asking a researcher, like, "What is the thing you want highlighted on the national stage for this communications plan?" And getting them bought in that way so they can see themselves in it, I think, is

the best way to get people. So the combination of predictability and investment I think are the best ways to get people involved, and then keep them involved.

Tucker Wilson:

Great. Thank you.

Jennifer Alexander:

Thanks. And, Michelle, would you like to talk about your question from chat?

Michelle Olgers:

Sure. Hi, everybody. Mine was more of a comment, an observation. It simply says that I've often felt that I've had a personal disconnect from the Ag is America platform, from APLU, et cetera. And I've often wondered is that my fault? Like, am I doing something wrong? Am I not traveling in the right circles? Am I not going to the right places for information? And I'm learning from this meeting that, no, it's probably not a personal problem, and it is something that's getting addressed. And I'm really glad, because I want to know that I'm not always in this all alone. And I give an example here, like all of the land-grants, I'm sure, are faced right now with the potential of having to answer questions about how we acquired the land that was granted to us to build our universities, and it's been in the news a lot, and I don't want to feel like I'm at my university alone having to answer a media question about that. There's got to be a greater messaging at a higher level.

Michelle Olgers:

And I'm just sharing with you that I'm relieved to hear that this is getting resolved and there'll be more guidance, and direction, and communication. That's all.

Jennifer Alexander:

Thank you, Michelle.

Mark Rieger:

And if I could just say thanks for your comments. We had the kglobal group a couple of years ago, and we ended that project. And this was about the time that I was getting involved with the community. And really, I think, looking back at those days, it wasn't so much that they weren't doing what we asked of them, it was that the committee wasn't being forthright and didn't have what we have now, which is a roadmap to structure the kind of communication. So, they were running the Ag is America thing, and it just wasn't resonating with people the way that it should be.

Mark Rieger:

But now, I think, dropping back, ceasing that project, going through the strategic process, gathering input, we now have a much better plan to go forward so that we can actually leverage that Ag is America, and then ACE, and everybody else. And this, I think, will get bigger than the BAA. It will go into other areas as well. You mentioned going across campus, we're really wanting to go across different boards. All of our colleges are actually a little bit more complex than what the BAA primarily deals with. So, yeah, I think that what you saw before showed a little bit of shortcomings, and now, I'm hoping, with this strategic roadmap, that we're going to get past that and we're going to get to a much better, much more coordinated effort.

Melea Licht:

This is Melea Licht from Iowa State University. We've done a little bit of advocacy work with the young alumni program that we have. And we've found that, with this group, they're very social-media savvy. and they get to the point where they say, "Just give us the tweets, show us the blanks we're supposed to fill out with our personal information, and tell us when we need to send it." Is that the kind of coordinated approach and specific tactics that this program will get to, or are you looking for something at a higher level, and then we need to find out how to implement them in each of our organizations and universities?

Ryan McConaghy:

No, I think that's a great example and I think that's ... If you have a message of the month and then you have updates on, "Okay, this is what we're going to be doing this month," and then on a weekly basis. You know you get from CMC sort of, "Okay, here are the sample tweets, and they're not prescribed in stone. They may work for your institution, or they may not. You may have a specific spin to put on it, but you'll have a basis that you can iterate and tailor." That's how we would see it.

Melea Licht:

Perfect. Thank you.

David Keto:

Hi, I'm David Keto, the communications and technology manager from the University of Wyoming Extension. And I guess I have some questions and comments about the audience piece of this, because that's always my starting point with all the folks I work with. Who's the audience? And I see that the primary audience is, as I understand, basically Congress and the funders of our efforts here. And so I guess ... And some of this is just me thinking out loud. I can understand us gathering on the same page and trying to push content up, that someone within all this alphabet soup of acronyms can organize and put out on Ag is America for us. And I think if what you're asking us to do is send our news articles, and those kinds of things, to higher levels so they can be better organized and communicated, we can easily add you guys to our list-servs, that's not a problem.

David Keto:

But I think the audience part is where I start because that's critically important. If you're asking us to use some of this content and share it back downwards, I'll just say, for our part, I don't see that happening. Partly because our audience, at least on ... If this is mostly a social media plan, our audience on social media is not primarily ... Our main target audience isn't funders; it's not the congressional delegation. It might be some local stakeholders like County Commissioners, but it's the more general audience we have, and trying to actually convey and get them to use our resources. And so here and there, if it fits, we might try and down-program some of that. But I guess I'm curious: there seems to be an audience misalignment there.

David Keto:

And the other comment I'll offer is, I'm curious, again, if this is predominantly social media, if Congress people are then the real audience and primary audience for this effort, because, at least in Wyoming—and I realize I'm out in the sticks and we have three Congress people total. And we have a little more access to them than a lot of others do and, I guess, we're lucky that way. But every time our administrators, at the Extension, college, and experiment station levels, go to talk to these people, it's

always about print material, and print out our impacts, and print this out. And they always hand them a physical copy of stuff. And maybe this is just different in Wyoming, but I would argue that perhaps the primary real audience, if it's social media focused, is congressional staffers. And that's fine, but I think there's probably some critical differences in programming and messaging to reach congressional staff members than there is in reaching Congress people themselves.

David Keto:

And so I would just say maybe the plan needs to reflect that, because the more detailed we can be in the audience, and understand who we're trying to reach, the better the message can be crafted and will resonate.

Ryan McConaghy:

So I think there's sort of ... I would put what this is in the context of the greater advocacy effort, which is first of all I'll start tactically. It is heavily social, because that is where a lot of communication is happening now, that is also the lightest lift, in terms of having a ... Cadence is important, and consistent visibility, and constant broadcasting, because you've got to talk a lot to get people to listen a little. And you can't really be cranking out a daily press release or blast email, that just gets people tuned out. So you have to use those online tools because that's the most efficient way to have consistent communication, but it's not to the exclusion of trying to generate a local letter to the editor every month or every two months, or trying to get a story on a development. It is meant to be a comprehensive framework that does include some of those earned media and more sort of ... Or owned media and legacy elements.

Ryan McConaghy:

I also think ... Again, this is the public affairs part that reinforces the direct advocacy piece. So it's about having top-line messaging that reinforces when you have the CARET fly-in, and they have those leave-behinds and those physical leave-behinds, that they're still going to hit staff and members with. So it's not in lieu of; it's in addition to that type of thing.

Ryan McConaghy:

And I saw from LaRachelle, I'm sorry, the question on opportunities for insight reports on web traffic. We think that's critical. We think metrics ... We took a look at the web performance on Ag is America and the social accounts, and what seemed to perform the best. I think we saw that Strawberry Week was very big when Ag is America was actively tweeting. So some of the things that we saw perform the best were around a specific event, highlighting a specific achievement, but we would absolutely recommend that you need to monitor those metrics so that you are shaping your content and constantly learning what people are ignoring or what people are engaging with, so you can always be learning and doing better. The metrics are key.

LaRachelle Smith:

Ryan, thank you for addressing that. I know in the strategic planning process we put a lot of energy and effort on the front end of alignment, and understanding our audience, but I think sometimes our shortcoming might be where we actually see what the results are in a quantitative way and being able to make decisions based on the results that we gather from that. So I appreciate you and how you valued that in the process.

Ryan McConaghy:

Oh, yeah, it's critical, definitely.

Melea Licht:

I was really excited to hear about the idea of engaging our CARET reps in this project. I feel like we do a nice job of sharing the pictures of our reps standing in a row visiting congressional delegates, but what we're missing is that opportunity to share a message. And so I would welcome the opportunity to coordinate on that messaging at the same time. And I think that's really exciting to think about how powerful that would be. Those social media posts, here in Iowa, are very popular. As many of your CARET reps probably are, our CARET reps are very connected, and people love to like and share when they see them. And, so, the idea to have a message that goes with the photo, that really emphasizes what it is they're there to talk about and knowing that then contributes to a larger national effort, I think is a very exciting idea.

Jennifer Alexander:

Mary, would you like to expand on your question in chat?

Mary Wirth:

Yeah, it was addressed ... It was just noting that one of the challenges has been, in the past—and we deal with at the college level, too—is the different mission areas and different messaging around those mission areas, and the structure is different from college to college. And there's been initiatives at various levels, particularly nationally, and so I'm just curious ... I've been involved in the BAA a long time... About 20 years or so... Or the committee from way back when. And getting the messaging consistent within the organization has to happen first, before we can effectively communicate. So, I was just wondering, I know that Cornerstone has struggled a lot of years about trying to get the ask more concise, is there more agreement in those areas across the mission areas on messaging, and goals, and how we position?

Ryan McConaghy:

Well, I think, in terms of the roadmap plan, that starts with the objective, and that's why we really wanted to hone-in on making sure. Because one of the questions we had coming into this probably was, is the goal the communications plan and sort of, what I'll call promotional, which is highlighting work, highlighting achievement, just getting more attention, more eyeballs, or is it directly tied to the policy priorities? And that's the answer we got back. So, I think that, as far as the roadmap plan goes, that's what it's meant to support.

Ryan McConaghy:

In terms of the internal process of honing those priorities, I think that that's not necessarily for us to look behind, but I do think that what we are recommending is that CMC and CGA be in lockstep from the beginning of that ... Whether it's in the fourth quarter of 2020, for 2021, or when those priorities are being developed, both energies need to be in the room, because, just my experience is that if you're only doing policy or you're only communicating, you're doing it wrong. Like they need to inform each other from start to finish, which is maybe not the most definitive answer, but in terms of how to execute I think that's pretty critical.

Mary Wirth:

And I think the other side of that is also getting the university-level government relations folks more involved, because they dictate what we're capable of doing. And I think that's gotten better—at least from my perspective here, I think our folks are more engaged, but obviously they deal at university- and not college-level. But that's critical, too. And I think that, in the past, sending ... We're not allowed to do legislative communications, let alone action alerts, without their permission, so it gets a little ... Getting them onboard and engaged would be helpful too.

Jennifer Alexander:

So, there's a theme of comments in the chat around just noting that there are differences across all of our institutions in how connected, or engaged, each of us are with the CARET reps and the different venues that they're involved in. And, also, an important note, that for things at that level, it's important to coordinate with our university's federal government liaison folks.

Jennifer Alexander:

A suggestion from Michelle about how this ultimate plan can get rolled out among gatherings or groups, where associations are already meeting. She's named some of those.

Mark Rieger:

Let me take a shot at that one. I think, if I understand the question, there's three primary organizations that fund this project and that's the Administrative Heads Section, the Experiment Station Section, and the Cooperative Extension Section. And so we have visited ... I think, Steve, didn't you do ESCOP the other day, and I did the AHS, and maybe Karla did ECOP ... I'm not really sure. So, we've been out communicating to the individual sections about this plan, and getting their feedback, and trying to get their buy-in to that. So, we've been working kind of hard and this is just... Really working with you here today in ACE is another one of several things that we've done to try to make sure we're engaging the different components under this really complex organization that we have called BAA. So, yeah, I think we're getting the word out, I think we're getting some pretty good feedback across that.

Mark Rieger:

And, again, let me reemphasize that there's another group that has actually given us really good input. And the story that doesn't get told quite as much, when we're talking about legislative priorities, are about students. And I think those are really refreshing stories to hear and to tweet out there, and that's the Academic Program Section, as you know, of BAA. And we want to try to get them more involved. And so it's not really totally about the One Ask, and all the stuff that we know we have to do. We know that's got to be a front-burner thing, but there are some great stories to tell that will actually engender a lot of enthusiasm for other things that we do, if we talk about our students and the success that our students are having in school, once they graduate, the impact they have on society. So, there's another group that we really need to pull into this.

Jennifer Alexander:

Michelle, is there anything else you want to say on that?

Michelle Olgers:

I do have a thought, and I just want to suggest that oftentimes pushing the message from the top down to the communicators isn't always as successful as going straight to the communicators, and having it bubble up. So just something to think about when tactically figuring out how to implement this plan.

Ryan McConaghy:

No, I think that ... Certainly, I think, we would recommend that this is an open two-way consistent channel of communication, it's not all top-down. Including having, like I said, a point of contact at CMC, a fully monitored inbox at CMC for non-urgent suggestions or things like that. I think that's a great and well-taken point.

Jennifer Alexander:

And Faith has offered a suggestion for all of us in chat about some ways to interact or begin interacting with your CARET delegates, if you aren't already.

Jennifer Alexander:

So we have about five minutes remaining in our time. That's likely time for probably one more question, if there is one? I can ask a brief one. I received an email this morning from an ACE colleague who was unable to join but she had reviewed the plan and noted that she saw some overlap in what's currently called the Amplifier and the Messenger roles. So, I wondered if you could speak to that a little bit, Ryan?

Ryan McConaghy:

Sure. And that also, I think, speaks to some of the comments earlier about engaging ... There's a group of people that are both audience and communicator here, and that's sort of your local Farm Bureau offices, your local ag affiliates, your local alumni network who are still engaged. The communications plan should speak to them but with the goal of enlisting them to then carry that message back to electeds, so that the electeds and appointeds are not just hearing directly from the institution, but they're getting a sense of broad-based support. So that overlap is somewhat intentional, in that they're both, hopefully, receiving and then carrying forward the message.

Jennifer Alexander:

Thank you. Mark and Doug, is there any closing thoughts or comments that you'd like to offer while you've got us all here?

Mark Rieger:

No. Just to say, again, not only do we not want to do this without you, we can't do it without you, and so we need you to be onboard. And it sounds like the structure's coming around, based on what Doug was saying. Maybe a whole new section. And some of the comments that Faith has made, consistently, is that communicators need to be part of some of these meetings that we have. When we get back to live meetings, we've got so many of them, and we're not inviting our communicators there and they should be there. And, so, we're committed to try to make that happen and really making this, like Ryan always says, the steady drumbeat. I think part of the reason why it wasn't working as well as it could have before, it was this big-blast, call-to-action kind of stuff that was sort of periodic. But if we get into more of a steady drumbeat of this, and we involve you more on a consistent basis, I think we're going to have a lot more success.

Mark Rieger:

So, we don't just want you involved; we need you to be involved. So we appreciate the opportunity to be here with you.

Jennifer Alexander:

Thank you, Mark.

Doug Steele:

Jennifer, just want to thank you guys for your time. Obviously, this has been an area that we do need to strengthen, and I think your input on the front end's going to be very important. And, in the past, we've really utilized Faith, and Elizabeth, and Frankie, and others, but I think coming to you as a group of ag communicators really brings a bigger voice and influence in what we're doing. So, I appreciate your interest, and I promise you this will not be the last time we have this conversation. We want you to be fully engaged moving forward. And I'm excited about where we can go with the work of Forbes/Tate.

Doug Steele:

I've had the question, "What happens if the three sections don't vote to continue the assessment?" And, to be honest with you, we don't have a plan B. We think we're all-in with what we proposed and trying to bring a position, in turn with APLU, and to bring the right people to part of that conversation. So, if they say no, Steve and Mark and I will be scrambling to think about what the next steps are, but we think this is the best opportunity to come together in a very cohesive way and make a difference for all of our institutions. And I hope the other three sections also see it that way.

Jennifer Alexander:

Thank you. And I do see there's one other important question in chat, from Melea, related to ... So, she asked, "Can we share this with our director of Federal Relations at the university level?" So, is there any guidance on who else is seeing this roadmap, or who we might be able to share it with, at this point?

Mark Rieger:

Please do. I mean, we're not hiding anything and the more people that are involved, I think it's fine. So, yeah, push it out as far as you can.

Jennifer Alexander:

Thank you. Thank you again, everyone, so much for joining us today. We will have the recording available, and that link, and the slides from today shared with ACE just as soon as Zoom processes that and we can get the email out. I hope you all have a wonderful rest of your day and thank you again.