Visiting reporters often get it wrong, but Cajuns probably more than anyone else are responsible for creating the Cajun stereotype of a jolly, swamp-dwelling dance-a-coholic.

That was the consensus of panelists and USL mass communication graduate students at a forum Wednesday, most of whom agreed that Cajun isn't easily defined.

The panel included James Houtrides, Emmy award winning producer of the CBS Sunday Morning News with Charles Kuralt; USL French professor Barry Ancelet; Acadian Profile publisher and author Trent Angers; and public relations executive Larry Sides.

"Does the news media misrepresent?" Houtrides asked. "Yes. That's to say journalists don't always get it right. But when CBS came down here last August (to do a story on Cajuns) we tried to be honest with respect to the things we saw. I think we did a good job."

"But I think part of the problem here is that Cajuns don't know who they are. I'm Greek, and it's hard to define what it is to be Greek. I don't know that I'm that different than a Cajun or anybody else," Houtrides said.

He suggested that Cajuns are struggling to maintain their identity while being American, not an easy task.

"It's a worthy struggle of our nation, and to that extent, Cajuns have been successful," he said.

Ancelet agreed.

"We really don't know who we are," Ancelet said. "And that stems from not having a profound knowledge of our history. If we knew more about ourselves, we would tend to characterize ourselves less before visitors."

The visitors Ancelet referred to are broadcasters and writers, and he said Cajuns assume what they believe is the Cajun stereotype when a TV camera is shoved in their face or they see a pad and pencil.

Most media understand the exaggerations, but misrepresentations happen, he said.

TV of Boston, for example, came to Acadiana for Mardi Gras in 1975, to a festival where the object is "to be anybody but yourself," Ancelet aid. A Bostonian asked a child what kind of food she ate, to which she replied, "Squirrel heads," said Ancelet.

The piece ran.

"I could picture some guy in Laramie (Wyo.) sitting in front of his TV, saying, 'Holy God, these people eat weird things!'" Ancelet said.

None of the panelists were as frustrated over misrepresentations as Angers, who recently published a book, "The Truth About Cajuns."

"The vast majority of Cajuns are not like those depicted by the American news media," Angers said. "There is a need for counter balancing the reporting."

When pressed on what should be done, Angers said the current stories simply need a paragraph or two on Cajuns who are accountants, lawyers or doctors, or the fact that "pound for pound, there are more geniuses here than anywhere else."

"This is not the mark of a an ignorant people," Angers said. He said the power of persuasion should be used on visiting media to have them include the types of items he was talking about. Audience members and other panelists countered, however, that it would make for boring reading.

Bob Hamm, a Cajun humorist, said business successes of Acadians are being told. He said he's given countless stories about Acadian Ambulance and Petroleum Helicopters to small, targeted-audience-oriented magazines around the world.

"More of the story is being told than what's being told here," Hamm said. "But it is told to targeted markets, to people who are interested in those items."