

BRINGING THE FRAGMENTS TOGETHER TO FORM A WHOLE

An examination of the current state of public relations

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Becker, Vlad, Huh and Daniels' (2002) Annual Enrollment Report found that, although undergraduate enrollment in Journalism and Mass Communication programs was up 2.2% from the academic year 2000-2001, the growth rate was lower than that of the previous year. Although undergraduate enrollments have been growing since the early 1990s, the authors found that freshmen enrollment had actually declined (Becker, et. al, 2002). They suggested this finding might suggest a leveling off or decline until the U.S. economy recovers noting a similar pattern the last time the U.S. economy was weak (Becker, et. al, 2002). The researchers also noted that graduate enrollments had declined again with the number of master's students dropping 2.6% and that of doctoral students dropping 16.2% (Becker, et. al, 2002).

However it seems that public relations academics and professionals are not yet noticing such a trend. Sweeney (2003) states that with the economy turning for the worse more people are choosing to pursue degrees, especially in public relations. "Public relations in the last five years has become a very noticed profession. Increasingly students come in saying they want to major in PR," stated Professor Laurie J. Wilson (quoted in Sweeney, 2003, p. 10). In fact Wilson adds, "It really is a flood....I haven't talked to any educator who isn't looking at increased enrollment. In state universities particularly sometimes it can be hard to maintain high standards" (quoted in Sweeney, 2003, p. 10).

As the above anecdotal information indicates, there seems to be increasing PR enrollment, but no clear picture of the demand or current description of PR programs exists. Therefore, this research will attempt to establish what the current state of public relations education is. The following research questions are posed:

R1: *What constitutes a "typical" PR program?*

R2: *Who are public relations students?*

R3: *Who are public relations faculty?*

R4: *What are the requirements and electives for undergraduate public relations curricula?*

R5: *What are the requirements and electives for graduate public relations curricula?*

METHOD

Using a list of members of the Public Relations Division of AEJMC, 474 surveys were mailed. Attached to the survey was a letter from the two researchers. Postage-paid return envelopes were included. Respondents were asked to respond within four weeks. One hundred seven surveys were returned giving a response rate of 22.5%. Out of the 107 surveys, only 92 reported having either a PR major or a PR emphasis at their institution. This gave us a usable response rate of 19.4%.

RESULTS

R1: *What constitutes a "typical" PR program?*

Responses to demographic questions indicate that our respondents represent a diversity of institutions. One mark of difference is the size of the student body. The majority (63.2%) of our respondents represent schools with over 10,000 students, while 19% represent schools with between 5,000 and 10,000 students. Only 17% represented schools with enrollments of 5,000 or fewer. When asked about the form of institutional funding, 66.7% indicated they are state assisted while 28.6 are privately funded. Interestingly, 4.8% are hybrid institutions.

We also wanted to see what types of institutions were represented in our sample. The vast majority (83%) have university status, while 16% are colleges. Only one response came from a community college. Perhaps most important, we wanted to know if the institution offered a PR major or emphasis. Nearly 88% of the respondents indicated that their institution offered such a major or emphasis. This computation revealed that 92 respondents represented PR programs. Of those programs, 73.3% have a PRSSA chapter and the remaining 26.7% have some other type of PR club for their students. Of the 92 PR programs represented in our data, 45.1% are ACEJMC accredited and 23% have PRSA certification.

Most of the participating programs (35.2%) are housed in either Colleges of Liberal Arts or Arts & Sciences. Only 24.2% are in Colleges of Communication and 13.2% are in Colleges of Journalism or Mass Communication. Only one program reported being housed in a Business School and three in Humanities.

When asked about engaging in a self-study, 86.2% report engaging in a periodic self-study. Most (54.2%) engage in self-study every 1-3 years while 44.4% engage in a self-study every 4-6 years. Only one program reported engaging in a self-study less frequently.

When asked about the growth of their programs, 81.1% report that their programs have grown over the past five years. Only 3.3% reported that their programs had declined in enrollment and 15.6% reported that their programs had remained the same.

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Perhaps the most surprising piece of information about the participating programs is that only 27.1% of them report having an advisory council. This result is surprising in light of the number who report being ACEJMC accredited. It's possible that some of the programs have journalism or departmental advisory councils and not specific PR advisory councils.

R2: Who are public relations students?

In an attempt to get a picture of PR majors, a number of questions on the survey addressed issues of sex and ethnicity. The participants in our study indicated that the vast majority of PR students are Caucasian females. Table 1 reveals the mean number of PR students by sex.

	Female undergrad	Male undergrad	Female graduate	Male graduate
Mean	119	46	26	8.4

Table 2 shows the mean ethnic breakdown of undergraduate PR majors.

	African American	Asian	Caucasian	Hispanic Latino	Native American	Other	Not available
	26	6	131	13	1	3	3

R3: Who are public relations faculty?

In addition to getting a picture of PR students, we wanted to get a picture of PR faculty. Participants in the survey report an average of 3.1 tenure-track faculty. Interestingly, the number of PR faculty ranged from one to 44 tenure-track faculty. The high end of the range is a bit questionable. We think that it is likely that the respondent reported the total number of faculty in the department rather than just PR faculty. Other results indicated that the respondents have a mean of 1.2 faculty with the APR designation and 3.7 with actual PR experience. The survey also indicates that the typical PR instructor is a tenure-track Caucasian with at least one graduate degree. Unlike the gender makeup of PR students, faculty seem to be equally divided between the sexes. Table 3 gives the percentage of minority faculty at responding institutions.

Number Faculty	African American	Asian	Hispanic Latino	Native American	Other
0	51.6	73.9	72.7	78.9	66.7
1	38.7	26.1	27.3	21.1	22.2
2	6.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	11.1
3	3.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

R4: What are the requirements and electives for undergraduate public relations curricula?

In order to get a clear idea of what PR students are studying, we asked whether certain courses were re-

quired or were electives in the curriculum. Table 4 lists PR courses and what percentage of participating institutions either require these courses or offer them as electives. Readers should note that respondents were not given the option of reporting classes not offered at their institution.

CLASSES	Required	Elective
Introduction to PR	90.4	2.1
PR Writing	84.0	2.1
PR Case Studies	51.1	9.6
PR Campaigns	67.0	10.6
International PR	2.1	14.9
PR Management	17.0	5.3
Integrating Marketing	4.3	13.8
Crisis Management	3.2	8.5
PR Theory	13.8	3.2
Publication Design	31.9	20.2
PR Research	40.4	3.2
Other	45.7	35.2

We also asked what minors were available to PR majors. Table 5 presents the percentage of respondents whose institutions offer the following minors.

MINORS	Percentage
Communication	43.6
Journalism	27.7
Radio/Television/Film	23.4
Organizational Communication	21.3
Advertising	19.1
Marketing	59.6
Management	51.1
Other	34.0

Another important part of undergraduate PR education is the internship experience. Our survey results reveal that 46.8 % of the respondents require an internship for an undergraduate degree in PR. When asked if a student had to complete a certain number of hours before interning, 66.7% of respondents said yes while 33.3 % said no. We also asked if departments required the completion of certain courses before a student could intern.

GRAD	Required	Elective
Introduction to PR	12.8	3.2
PR Writing	10.6	5.3
PR Case Studies	9.6	5.3
PR Campaigns	12.8	10.6
International PR	2.1	14.9
PR Management	20.2	9.6
Integrating Marketing	5.3	11.7
Crisis Management	1.1	8.5
PR Theory	16.0	4.3
Publication Design	4.3	2.1
PR Research	13.8	5.3
PR Law	4.3	4.3
PR Ethics	7.4	8.5
Other	17.0	14.9

Nearly 74% responded yes while 26.2% reported no. We did not ask which specific courses were required.

R5: *What are the requirements and electives for graduate public relations curricula?*

Our final research question addressed graduate programs. Table 6 reports the courses both required and offered as electives for a graduate degree in public relations. Once again, we did not offer the option for respondent to say a course wasn't available.

DISCUSSION

From this research we have learned descriptive information about public relations programs. For example, the majority of the responding institutions offering a PR major are large- to medium-sized, state-funded universities. The majority of the programs are housed in Colleges of Liberal Arts, Arts and Sciences or Communication. In addition, about 82% reported increases in enrollment, which backs the claims made by Wilson (quoted in Sweeny, 2003) suggesting that most public relations educators would say they have seen a continuous increase in enrollment.

Roughly 86% of respondents reported undertaking periodic self-study, suggesting that program officials have been paying attention to the recommendations made by the 1999 Commission. These officials have also listened to the Commission's call for external review since approximately 45% report having ACEJMC accreditation and close to 25% are PRSA certified. However an area ripe for improvement is the establishment of public relations advisory boards. Only 27% of these respondents report having public relations advisory boards, which begs the questions of who is helping to shape public relations education and why are public relation-specific boards so infrequent.

Not surprisingly, the researchers found that the majority public relations student is a Caucasian female. Obviously there is room for diversification on many levels in the public relations student body as well as in those of journalism and mass communication (Becker, et al., 2002). Public relations educators and administrators should spend time investigating this trend in order to help generate a varied workforce. The lack of diversity could hamper public relations as a field since new perspectives might be difficult to find. Officials should determine what has caused and continues this trend to allow public relations to be an area known for inclusivity, rather than sameness.

On average responding institutions had three full-time public relations faculty who had earned at least one graduate degree. On average, one of these faculty had gained APR status and all had some practical experience under their belts. These findings back those of Fitch-Hauser and Neff (1997), who found that the majority of public relations programs employed faculty with both graduate degrees and practitioner experience. Again, these current results are in compliance with the 1999 Commission's recommendations for the ideal public relations faculty. Although these findings indicate the gender of faculty to be about equal, there was still a need to

diversify the ethnicity of public relations faculty. Such a diversification might lead to a diversification of the student body since students of color would have role models.

The most commonly required courses for undergraduates were Introduction to Public Relations, Public Relations Writing, Public Relations Cases, and Public Relations Campaigns. These findings mean most students would be exposed to the six most highly valued topics identified by the 1999 Commission. These topics are (1) planning, writing, producing and delivering print communication to audiences; (2) setting goals/objectives/strategic planning; (3) ethical and legal credibility; (4) audience segmentation; (5) publicity and media relations; and (6) problem/opportunity analysis (The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 1999, p. 16). Most programs are following the ideal undergraduate public relations major put forth by the 1999 Commission. In addition, these findings should mean students are gaining the important employment skills identified by Stacks, Botan & Van Slyke Turk, 1999.

However, since the least required courses are International Public Relations, Integrated Marketing Communication, and Crisis Communication, public relations students may not be getting exposed to some of the critical knowledge areas identified by the 1999 Commission. This finding should lead to discussion to determine if current curricula need to be changed or if the critical knowledge areas need further refinement by the next Commission.

In addition, the 1999 Commission strongly emphasized the need for a minor or double-major in the liberal arts, social sciences or business (p. 4). Since the most common minors identified by this study were marketing, management and communication, it seems program leaders have heeded this call. This should also mean most students are gaining the understanding of business that Pincus & Rayfield (1992) and Prepon (1993) have previously called for.

Nearly one-half of the respondents stated that internships were mandatory for their public relations students. Two-thirds of these respondents also required that students complete a certain number of hours before interning and three-quarters of these respondents also requiring certain class work be completed before interning. These findings might suggest that public relations program leaders took Fitch-Hauser and Neff's (1997) concerns seriously.

When examining graduate education, the results show that the most common courses offered are Public Relations Management, Public Relations Theory, and Research Methods. Again it seems program officials have listened to the recommendations of the 1999 Commission. The least commonly offered courses are International Public Relations, Crisis Management, Public Relations Law, and Publication Design. However, these topics might be covered in the curricula of other classes like Public Relations Management and Public Relations Theory.

LIMITATIONS

Like many research projects this study has some limitations. Although the response rate is fair, it falls below the 50% mark set by Babbie (1999) as acceptable. The response rate might have been improved by sending a second mailing or e-mails reminding respondents to complete and return their surveys. The length and depth of the survey may have also caused a lower response rate.

The researchers have concerns about the accuracy of the self-reports of the number of public relations faculty. This is mainly due to the response of 44 faculty given by one respondent. In future projects, researchers should be certain to carefully explain that only the number of faculty teaching public relations should be reported.

A final limitation was the inability for some respondents to track and provide data on ethnicity of public relations students and faculty. This information would provide a richer context for understanding who is studying and who is teaching public relations.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this study has done its part in answering many questions about the current status of public relations education, it has also opened the door for other avenues of future research projects.

Further inquiry should be made to determine if public relations programs are still growing or if they are leveling off like other programs as suggested by Becker, et al. (2002). Another project could examine how many programs are engaging in enrollment management and assess the successes and failures of such efforts.

Another area for further study is an examination of why there are so few public relations-specific advisory boards, and how this situation has hindered and/or helped the development of public relations.

An important agenda would focus on what can be done to encourage men and minorities to study public relations as well as finding what attracts so many Caucasian women to study public relations. Similarly there could be an investigation into how the academy could attract more minorities into teaching public relations.

Finally, future research projects should also be dedicated to understanding the issue of placement as well as tracking the careers of public relations program graduates.

CONCLUSION

Although the current understanding of public relations education may still be fragmented, research such as this survey is beginning to bring the pieces together to form a whole. This study should serve as a benchmark for future comparison. In order for educators to be responsive to the needs of their students and their students' future employers, educators and administrators must know and understand what the critical knowledge areas of public relations are. Educators must also know where the gaps lie. Introspective research is vital to the continued growth and improvement of public relations education. It is only with this type of information that public relations will make strides into the realms of management and the dominant coalition.

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