



# Teaching Public Relations

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## Bringing Professionals Into The Classroom To Give Students Practical, Portfolio-Building Assignments

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*Editor's Note: Suzanne Heck's June 1994 TPR article "Bringing Professionals into the Classroom: Faculty for a Day" provides additional insights for utilizing professionals in public relations courses.)*

Teachers of public relations have long used practitioners in the classroom to give students an opportunity for exposure to those working in the field. Many organizations encourage their public relations professionals to speak on university campuses, meet with PRSSA chapters, and act as mentors. Some companies have designed entire educational outreach programs in which company executives—including public relations representatives—visit campus classrooms for more than just the perfunctory lecture to the Principles of Public Relations course. [1]

Taking proper advantage of this *utilitarian/pragmatic* side of public relations education is crucial to achieving the educational balance sought by most educators. Practitioners and professional situations and assignments can be employed as an integral part of our courses—not only as an important part of the creative challenge we face as teachers, but as a way to make learning more practical, more meaningful, even more *fun* as we prepare students for the work force.[2]

At face value, my undergraduate public relations courses seem to hold no surprises: use of textbooks, "Kinko reprint packs," audio/visual aids and lectures balanced with guest speakers, case studies and campaign assignments—often encompassing "mini-internships" with local organizations. But I try to take it a step or two further, balancing this "traditional" classroom methodology with opportunities for students to interact with professionals through in-class appearances, gain exposure to "real-life" deadlines and pressure, and build a portfolio of work while still in school. Additionally, we receive important feedback from students and practitioners about our curriculum and the quality of work being turned out.

I've utilized guest speakers to give my students a number of opportunities to write for publication, have their PSAs used as part of an actual organizational communications campaign, produce newsletter copy for a non-profit, and such. For example, in my undergraduate writing classes, I generally use the following techniques for possible assignment publication and portfolio-building experience:

- Creation of news releases and feature stories generated by guest-speaker appearances;
- Public service announcements for broadcast (as well as print—more commonly referred to as "public service advertisements"), produced for non-profits;

- Articles aimed at the student newspaper (*The Beacon*), featuring guest speakers, panels, workshops and other on-campus events.

Over the years, we've been fortunate to have public relations professionals-along with journalists-give time and expertise to our program at their own expense. They've spoken across the spectrum, from intro classes to writing, case studies and campaigns classes, as well as to the graduate classes. Whether it be nationally known figures such as John Budd, James Tolley and Fraser Seitel, or local practitioners from non-profits, healthcare, agencies and corporations-even journalists-all become the subjects of releases, features and other potentially publishable writing exercises.

A recent example: When Miami Herald Business Editor David Satterfield spoke to my Advanced Writing class last spring, students were asked to structure news releases about Satterfield's appearance (especially his media relations philosophy) to selected media targets, ranging from the school newspaper to local business weeklies to national public relations periodicals. Students were delighted to see their work picked up by the likes of pr reporter and the Broward chapter of PRSA's newsletter, Gulfstream Currents, while others traced usage of their efforts to a number of other publications.[3] Giving students opportunities for exposure to professionals from organizations such as local divisions of the American Red Cross, United Way, consumer organizations-even hospitals and trade associations-can help prepare them for situations they're likely to encounter on their first jobs.

In the past few years, classroom appearances from communications professionals have resulted in student production of hundreds of features, news releases, PSAs, newsletter items and information kits for non-profits, trade associations and such,. Letters from practitioners expressing satisfaction with student work are given to students for their portfolios, placed in their official files and even circulated to university administration. These assignments obviously bring students recognition, give them exposure to deadline realities, and provide them an unparalleled opportunity to develop their professional network.

Other opportunities for undergraduates to work with local practitioners come from assignments in the case studies and campaigns classes. Generally, practitioners share information about their organizations and about projects they're involved with, and they sometimes offer opportunities for case and campaign assignments. (This does not include traditional internships, taken for credit and available in our sequence only to those majors maintaining a 3.0 grade-point average, plus completion of all core courses.)

Depending upon the course, students are assigned-individually or in teams-to organizations offering worthwhile projects, campaigns and events. *Feedback* from practitioners is encouraged, and becomes an integral part of student grades. Work students accomplish is included in their course files, and they have the satisfaction of knowing they've carved another notch in their resume belts.[4]

You can even give writing assignments in the large-section intro class by utilizing the team approach to projects and making use of professionals in the classroom, as in the courses noted above. Even those students just beginning the public relations sequence can take advantage of publishing opportunities.

Once the semester is well underway and students in my intro class have been exposed to public relations and communications theory, historical precedents and a general introduction to the techniques of the profession, I begin to bring in practitioners. They come on a solo basis as well as part of what I call "Mini-Career Day"-a panel of professionals from non-profits, agency, corporate, sports, healthcare and the entertainment/hospitality industry (a South Florida mainstay) describing their jobs to students and answering questions. As in the writing classes, students in the intro course are encouraged to "cover" these events, turning in news releases and pieces targeted to the student newspaper. On occasion, *The Beacon* has used such material, giving students an early career opportunity to see their work published.

Using these techniques not only allows us to get an early start on the writing process for some future public relations majors, but it gives us (and the sequence, department or school) a "heads-up" on what level of writing skills our latest group of recruits possesses...very early in the game. And, at the heart of all this have been those professionals taking their time to bring experience into the classroom, augmenting the traditional textbook-based exercises, and giving students opportunities to create meaningful projects while still in school.

## NOTES

[1] For example, Phillips Petroleum Company developed an award-winning program of regular contact and speaking engagements that spread to over 100 colleges and universities across the country; Dow Chemical, under the leadership of Richard K. Long, now vice president of communications for Weyerhaeuser Co., had a similar program; both are cited in Center, Allen H. and Jackson, Patrick, *Public Relations Practices* (4th ed.), Prentice Hall, esp. p. 356; also see Jolliffe, Lee, "Industry's Team Approach to Classroom Projects," *Journalism Educator*, Summer 1991 (46/2), pp. 15-24.

[2] Countless articles in scholarly journals, as well as the consumer press, have been written about the need for "creativity in the classroom," the value of practical experience for students while still in school, etc. Recent papers on these subjects include Maria Russell, "Developing Challenging and Creative Assignments," *Learning to Teach*, op. cit., pp. 99-110; Suzanne Heck, Central Missouri State University, "Baseball and Research? Using Baseball Television Clips and Metaphors to Dramatize the Need for Students to Appreciate the Value of Public Relations Research," paper presented at the Speech Communications Association convention, Miami Beach, FL, November 19, 1993; Todd Hunt, Linda Costigan Lederman, Gary L. Kreps and Brent D. Ruben, Rutgers, "Instructional Simulation Helps Public Relations Students to Understand Roles in Organizational Communication," presented to the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Memphis, TN, August, 1985; William Adams, Florida International University, "Using Case Studies in the Introductory Public Relations Course," paper presented at the Speech Communications Association convention, Miami Beach, FL, November 19, 1993; Jason Berger, Duquesne University (now at Central Missouri), "Brainstorming: We Can Teach 'Creativity'," *Teaching Public Relations*, No. 28, Sept., 1992 (publication of AEJMC).

[3] "Short and Personal is the Way to Reach the Media When You Want to," *pr reporter*, March 21, 1994; Izquierdo, Aileen, "Miami Herald business editor speaks to FIU public relations class," *Gulfstream Currents*, June-July, 1994.

[4] Samples of projects and organizations available from the writer and/or SJMC library; examples of organizations include St. Francis Hospital; Miami Project to Cure Paralysis; Public Communication, Inc.; American Airlines, other.

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