

Public Relations Graduates A Survey Across Three Institutions

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ABSTRACT

A total of 183 graduates from three institutions responded to a survey designed to determine what specific public relations functions they use in their present careers. Additionally, respondents indicated which curricular elements best prepared them for their careers. Results indicate that the most frequently used public relations functions center around the issues of strategic planning and implementation. Students from all three institutions rated the public relations campaigns course as the most beneficial in preparing them for future careers. While the vast majority of students had participated in internships while in school, they report only moderate relevance of the internships to their future work and to the field of public relations.

INTRODUCTION

According to Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000), the number of public relations specialists increased from 162,000 in 1990 to 197,000 in 2000. *U.S. News & World Report* (1997) projected a 55 percent increase in the number by 2006. Johnson and Ross (2000) report that public relations and combined advertising and public relations programs have increased rapidly. Although the increase in numbers is well documented, accurate accounts of professional experiences are difficult to obtain. Because of the variety of titles and job descriptions that prevail, labor reports may not reflect the full extent of public relations practice.

Condino (1987) reports an observed preference for staying in public relations and leaving media and publication work in favor of issues management and policy-making careers. Some practitioners are starting their own firms in search of job security. Based on Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) statistics, it is estimated that the majority of practitioners work in business and commercial corporations. About a third are employed in public relations firms, advertising agencies, or as individual practitioners. The remaining are employed in associations, foundations, educational institutions, health care, government, charitable, religious and other nonprofit organizations (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000).

If *Fortune* magazine (1995) was correct in its placement of public relations among the 20 most rapidly growing industries during the 1990s, where exactly are today's graduates finding employment and what skills are utilized in accomplishing the tactics of public relations?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Public Relations Education and Employment

David Drobis, chair and CEO of Ketchum Public Relations Worldwide, states: "Public relations is no longer a tactic. It's a business strategy. And in five years,

it will be an even more useful business strategy" (Greenberg, *PR Tactics*). Goldman (*PR Strategist*, 1998) predicted the number of communication jobs will increase as we adjust to the technology of the 21st century. PRSA categorizes the functions of a public relations position as involving one or more of the following: programming, cultivating relationships, writing and editing, information, production, special events, speaking, and research and evaluation (www.prsa.org/career/careeroverview.html).

A national study, "Perceptions of Public Relations Education," was conducted in 1998. Educators and practitioners rated the skills of writing news releases, being a self-starter and critical thinking and problem solving as the three most highly desired skill areas. Content areas to be taught in public relations curriculum were: planning, writing, producing and delivering print communication to audiences, setting goals/objectives/strategic planning, ethical and legal credibility, audience segmentation, publicity and media relations, and problem/opportunity analysis.

While the study of the perceptions of public relations education provides an important comparison of the perceptions of educators and professionals, the process left out one group – the student. The current research project was designed to determine if there are differences between institutions. The current project allowed recently graduated students to be part of the process.

USE OF ALUMNI SURVEYS

Alumni surveys have a long history of being used as a strategy employed by education organizations to determine the strengths and weaknesses of curriculum. However, it has only been in recent years that alumni surveys have been used to gather information beyond the evaluation of a specific curriculum. For example, Aviles (2001) discusses how the Career Development Center (CDC) at one institution combined questions related to the use of CDC services with specific questions prepared for alumni by their departments. One of the largest alumni surveys is the annual graduating student survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (Nagle & Bohovich 2000; Nagle, Bohovich & Gold, 2001;). These surveys have one distinct limitation – the use of recent graduates. Many of these surveys sample individuals at the time of graduation or within the first few months of graduation. This leads some to question the utility of alumni evaluations of academic programs.

There are examples of superior alumni surveys that do not limit themselves to those who just graduated. One of the most relevant to the current project is the research of Rice, Stewart and Hujber (2000). As a method of assessing instructional effectiveness, their institution turned to surveys of graduates of the Department of Communication one year and 10 years after graduation. Alumni surveys have been used to eval-

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uate and improve the curriculum of programs in nursing (Mawn & Reece, 2000), psychology (Ogletree, 1999; Ogletree, 1998), social work (Simon & Vidal, 1997), and management (Ainsworth & Morley, 1995). Alumni surveys have even been used to evaluate and reform uni-

gram. Specifically, this project was designed to answer these two research questions:

RQ1 – *What specific public relations functions do recent graduates use in their careers?*

RQ2 – *What curricular elements (classes and internships) best prepared them for their careers?*

TABLE 1
Means for Public Relations Tasks

PUBLIC RELATIONS TASK	TOTAL	MWSC	KSU	GSU
01 Develop strategy and tactics	1.75	1.43	1.85	2.07
02 Set goals and objectives	*1.77	1.29	1.95	2.10
03 Correspondence	1.79	1.73	1.80	1.83
04 Determine needs, priorities	*1.86	1.39	2.03	2.17
05 Program and planning, collaboration	2.09	1.71	2.21	2.41
06 Define publics	2.14	1.95	2.13	2.55
07 Administer personnel, budgets	2.26	1.95	2.35	2.55
08 Manage conflict	2.35	1.84	2.54	2.69
09 Meeting guests and visitors	2.36	2.39	2.27	2.59
10 Website and other online messages	2.42	2.46	2.43	2.31
11 Appear before groups, public speaking	*2.42	2.00	2.55	2.79
12 Create communications, multimedia	2.44	2.34	2.42	2.69
13 Search Internet	2.45	2.32	2.46	2.66
14 Desktop publishing	2.46	2.63	2.41	2.28
15 Serve as liaison	2.55	2.25	2.66	2.79
16 Arrange news conferences, etc.	2.63	2.70	2.59	2.62
17 Develop strategies for critical issues	2.73	2.55	2.77	2.90
18 Brochures	2.79	2.77	2.71	2.66
19 Change in policy, etc.	2.83	2.66	2.90	2.93
20 Consult on crisis communication	2.86	2.80	2.93	2.76
21 Newsletters	2.87	2.71	3.01	2.69
22 Instruct others on communication, oral and written	2.91	2.68	2.98	3.10
23 Speeches	2.96	2.46	3.21	3.10
24 Product and technical collateral materials	2.97	2.89	2.99	2.66
25 Gather information/public opinion	3.07	2.79	3.20	3.17
26 Coach others for public appearances	3.13	2.64	3.41	3.14
27 Prepare AV presentation	3.14	2.84	3.27	3.31
28 Advise top management	3.16	3.09	3.16	3.31
29 Contact media	3.18	3.18	3.23	3.00
30 Respond to media requests	3.18	3.04	3.24	3.24
31 Conduct research	3.18	2.89	3.36	3.10
32 Annual reports	3.20	2.73	3.37	2.52
33 Compose print news releases	3.22	3.11	3.42	2.76
34 Institutional advertisements	3.25	3.14	3.36	3.07
35 Arrange fund-raising events	3.26	3.36	3.34	2.79
36 Design research program	3.36	3.23	3.60	2.83
37 Compose feature stories	3.41	3.39	3.51	3.10
38 Prepare spokespersons	3.41	3.05	3.68	3.17
39 Film and slide-show scripts	3.47	3.04	3.72	3.45
40 Trade publication articles	3.54	3.45	3.71	2.97
41 Audio/video recording and editing	3.59	3.23	3.85	3.45
42 Compose broadcast news releases	3.60	3.57	3.73	3.24
43 Manage a speakers bureau	3.70	3.64	3.85	3.34
44 Hire a research firm	3.92	3.88	4.03	3.66
* ANOVA analysis indicated three tasks with statistically significant values of F:				
02 Setting goals and objectives		F = 9.724		p > .011
04 Determine needs and priorities		F = 4.186		p > .017
11 Appear before groups, public speaking		F = 10.118		p > .037

METHODS

The goal of the research project was to determine the types of work done by recent graduates of public relations programs and to solicit opinions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their academic preparation. To decrease problems inherent in surveying graduates from a single program, graduates from the following three institutions were surveyed: Georgia Southern University (GSU), Kansas State University (KSU) and Missouri Western State College (MWSC). Efforts were made to select programs housed in both journalism and mass communication (KSU) and communication studies departments (MWSC and GSU). The three programs also differ in the number of specific public relations courses offered (from a low of 1 to a high of 5), size of faculty teaching public relations (also from a low of 1 to a high of 5) and the region of the country.

The results presented in this paper represent only a portion of the data collected in the survey.

Subject Selection/Sampling

Each school prepared a personalized invitation to their former students to complete the survey. Graduates from 1996 to 2000 (inclusive) were asked to participate. Departmental records, alumni lists and personal information were used to create the most complete contact list for each school.

E-mail solicitation and first-class mail was used to encourage students to complete the survey. First-class mail requests included a cover letter and offered the option of completing the survey online or in print form. A print copy of the survey and a prepaid postage return envelope were included with the mailings. E-mail solicitations provided the URL for the web-based survey and also offered the option of having a print copy mailed.

Multiple methods of contact have led to impressive response rates. MWSC had an overall response rate of 65%, and KSU's overall response rate was 54.7%. However, the methods of solicitation garnered different response rates. KSU's response rate for e-mail contact using snowball sampling was 84.3% and for first-class mail was only 25.6%. MWSC collected the majority of its responses online; thus, response rates for mailings were not calculated. GSU is still collecting information at the time this was written, so no response rate can be calculated.

Survey Development

The survey objectives were: (1) to discover what types of jobs PR students hold after graduation; (2) what curricular elements best prepared them for their careers (including internships); (3) what curricular elements would have helped them in their career; and (4) what specific PR functions they use in their careers.

The portion of the survey focused on PR functions was developed based on the listing of work assignments in Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000, pp. 36-37). Some items were revised due to the increased dependence on computer-aided communication. Respondents were asked to identify up to three courses in their undergraduate curriculum that best prepared them for their career. A third portion of the survey asked respondents if they had participated in at least one internship while in

iversity general education requirements (Klenow, Cummings & Peterson, 1998). The current project is an initial attempt to use the alumni survey method to evaluate public relations education. Additionally, the use of three different programs may allow the results to be more representative than a study of any particular pro-

school, and, if so, how relevant that internship was to their current work.

Statistical Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS-PC, version 9.0. Descriptive statistics were used to determine frequencies and means for each of the task functions. ANOVA analysis was used to test for the significance of the differences in the means for the three institutions.

RESULTS

RQ1 – What specific public relations functions do recent graduates use in their careers?

Forty-four public relations tasks were listed in the survey. Respondents were asked to indicate for each task on a scale of 1-5 (1-frequently to 5-rarely) how often they used each task. Table 1 lists the overall mean for each task and provides the mean for the three schools involved in the research. The issues of planning and strategy are among the most frequent tasks for all the graduates. Four of the five most frequently used tasks on Table 1 (1-Develop strategy and tactics, 2-Set goals and objectives, 4-Determine needs and priorities, and 5-Program planning and collaboration) represent four of the total of six management tasks included in the list of 44 tasks.

ANOVA analysis was conducted for each of the task functions. Three were significant: giving speeches, setting goals and objectives, needs and priorities. Statistical significance highlights important differences in the means for the three schools. The low number of tasks with significant differences (n=3, 6.8%) is an indication that graduates of the three programs are reporting similar use of the tasks, despite the differences in the programs. Two of the three tasks with statistically significant differences are in the top five in terms of frequency of use, and they both represent management activities.

RQ2 – What curricular elements (classes and internships) best prepared them for their careers?

To answer this question the respondents were asked which college courses best prepared them for their present career. Since each of the three schools employs a different curriculum for undergraduate education, the choices may be clearer if presented as a ranking of the classes most frequently identified. The top choices, by school, are presented in Table 2.

The differences between programs in terms of their classes with "public relations" in the title are clearly evident in the results on Table 2. Additionally, two courses offering similar content may have different titles. For example, GSU's third class, desktop publishing, offers content split and combined with other topics in the second and third most important courses at KSU (editing and design and public relations techniques).

The survey also asked if the respondent had participated in an internship during the college career. They were asked to indicate if the internship was relevant, on a 1-5 scale with 1 as highly relevant, to their future work in their careers and also to public relations itself. The responses are presented in Table 3.

DISCUSSION

The similarities of the PR functions between graduates of three separate, and divergent, programs indicates there are common tasks across a wide spectrum of careers. Table 1 results clearly indicate that the most commonly identified tasks are management activities. All six of the management tasks identified in the task list are found among the top seven choices based on fre-

quency of use. Public relations graduates are being asked to perform management and administrative activities.

While respondents from all three schools indicated frequent use of these activities, MWSC graduates were sufficiently different from the KSU or GSU graduates, which led to statistical significance on ANOVAs for two of the management functions: setting goals and objectives and determining needs and priorities. A nonquantitative review of the survey responses offers one answer. MWSC graduates typically work at smaller organizations/businesses. They may be responsible for more of the planning development functions earlier, since there are so few people involved.

The results of the task functions associated with the present jobs explains the hierarchy of courses the respondents indicated best prepared them for their present career (Table 2). The respondents from all three schools clearly selected the public relations campaigns course as the top choice. In this course, undergraduate students obtain first-hand experience with establishing goals and objectives and developing strategies. Also, choices by the graduates reflect the particular emphasis of the different schools. Kansas State University houses public relations education within the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. The choices of writing, editing and design, and news and features writing demonstrates the strong journalistic tradition of the program. Georgia Southern's public

TABLE 2
Courses that best prepared students for their career

Missouri Western
Public Relations Campaigns
Organizational Communication
Public Speaking
Nonverbal Communication
Interpersonal Communication
Marketing and Promotions
Kansas State
Public Relations Campaigns
Editing and Design
Public Relations Techniques
News and Feature Writing
Public Relations Writing
Public Relations Case Studies
Mass Communication Research
Georgia Southern
Public Relations Campaigns
Public Relations Writing
Desktop Publishing
Research
Marketing/Event Planning
Organizational Communication

TABLE 3
Internships and relevancy

	All respondents	MWSC	KSU	GSU
Percent participated in internships	86%	55%	99%	100%
Relevance to future work	2.37	1.82	2.65	2.59
Relevance to public relations work	2.25	1.64	2.65	2.21

relations program is housed in the Communications Department, as is the program at Missouri Western State College. Students from these two programs indicated more traditional communication courses (organizational communication, small groups, interpersonal).

The conclusions of the 1998 survey of Public Relations Education are supported by the responses of graduates in terms of task functions. The three most highly desired skill areas of writing news releases, being a self-starter, and critical thinking and problem solving are clearly utilized by these practitioners. The seven most frequently used functions depend upon an individual's organizational abilities and problem-solving abilities for successful completion. Similar results occur when comparing the content areas valued in public relations curriculums. The ability to engage in strategic planning and execution clearly is the desired result of a public relations education.

Internships are a highly desired element of today's public relations curriculum. While students may evaluate the internship as not highly relevant to their present career (see Table 3), many students indicate that the internship demonstrated what career choices they did not want to make. Future research may focus on this

"career screening" function of internships. Additionally, future research may determine if the number of internships, the length of internships, and/or if requiring internships are correlated with perceived importance of internships.

Respondents were asked to indicate their present job position. The only commonality across the career choices is the lack of students who work at large advertising and public relations firms. Most of the graduates are working in public relations for a specific business or corporation. The most common designations for the careers included communications specialist, development director, marketing and promotions specialist, and account executive.

A sample of the job titles includes director of development for a not-for-profit agency, community relations assistant, sales manager, employment and training representative, marketing and promotion specialist, events coordinator for an association, director of sports information/publications, director/coach at the high school

level, tourism and public relations manager, publicity writer and public relations coordinator. The variety of jobs titles listed by the respondents questions the validity as to the estimates of professionals working with the area of public relations. If one goes beyond the traditional designation of public relations in the job title, the number of professionals in public relations may be at significantly higher level than previously assumed.

This research project highlighted one problem area for all three institutions: the tracking of graduates is woefully inadequate. We cannot depend upon the alumni office to keep in contact with graduates. Individual departments need to develop strategies for alumni contact. The increased use of electronic communications is simplifying the process, yet specific plans need to be designed and implemented in order to accomplish the purpose. It is through graduates of a program that evaluation of the elements of the curriculum can be determined.

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