

SPECIAL TOPICS MINI-COURSES

Bringing the profession's leading practitioners and scholars into the middle America classroom at (almost) no cost

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We began two years ago to develop an idea for solving a problem, and the solution that has been successful in our program can be replicated anywhere. We have found a no-cost way to expand our public relations curriculum by bringing leading professionals and academicians to a small town in middle America.

THE PROBLEM: Broad Content and Limited Faculty

Preparation for the public relations profession requires an incredibly broad spectrum of course content. It was impossible for existing faculty to cover this spectrum at Southeast Missouri State University, and it had become apparent that we could not attract appropriately credentialed new faculty to Cape Girardeau, a 35,000-population town on the banks of the Mississippi River three hours north of Memphis and two hours south of St. Louis. Even the pool of professionals from which we could recruit adjuncts was woefully shallow.

Curriculum Content – Dr. Clark Kerr, president emeritus and former chancellor, University of California-Berkeley, concluded more than 40 years ago that a profession gains its identity by making the university the “port of entry” (1995; 1963). PRSA’s Commission on Public Relations Education (1999) therefore titled its report “Port of Entry” for the 21st century and identified the curricular content areas necessary to prepare new graduates for entry level positions. The Commission identified 12 knowledge areas and 20 skills areas as necessary for entry into the profession.

Southeast’s prescribed curriculum in public relations covers four of the knowledge areas adequately (communication and public relations theories; relationships and relationship building; legal requirements and issues; and public relations history). We cover five other knowledge areas moderately (communication and persuasion concepts and strategies; societal trends; ethical issues; uses of research and forecasting; and multicultural and global issues). Three areas receive only slight attention (marketing and finance; organizational change and development; and management concepts and theories).

Our curriculum also covers four of the skills areas adequately (research methods and analysis; strategic planning; message production; and public speaking and presentation). We cover 15 other skills areas moderately (management of information; mastery of language in written and oral communication; problem solving and negotiation; management of communication; issues management; audience segmentation; informative and persuasive writing; community relations, consumer relations, employee relations and other practice areas; technological and visual literacy; managing people, programs and resources; sensitive interpersonal communication; ethical decision-making; participation in the professional public relations community; working with a current issue; and applying cross-cultural and cross-gender sensitivity). The 20th area, fluency in a foreign language, is achieved by only those students who minor in a foreign language or enter the program with multiple fluencies.

Due to guidelines for accreditation through PRSA and ACEJMC, these 32 areas of competency must be covered within five or six public relations courses and five or six core courses for which the competition for inclusion is heated. When our internship requirement moved from the public relations option into the department core, we had a “hole” for a new course. Consideration of the Commission’s recommendations revealed that we were covering nine areas adequately, but the 24 areas we were covering only moderately at best constituted a range of topics far too broad for a single new course. Moreover, even if we could figure out a way to cover the needed content areas, we had no hope of attracting the appropriate expertise to our faculty.

Faculty Credentials – Bill Adams (1995), who brought extensive professional experience into his classrooms at Florida International University, cautioned that, “Taking proper advantage of [the] utilitarian/pragmatic side of public relations education is crucial to achieving the educational balance sought by most educators.”

The Commission concluded that both academic and professional credentials are important qualifications for public relations faculty. My then-chair, Dr. R. Ferrell Ervin, and I constituted the whole of our public relations faculty. We were both doctorate-holding with three decades of cumulative professional experience, but we could cover only 10 or 11 sections per academic year. In the unlikely event we could get approval for a new faculty line, the odds are heavily against finding a new doctorate-holding colleague willing to come to a small town with a 4-4 tenure-track teaching load. Even if we could recruit a new doctorate-holding colleague, as required by our university for tenure-track status,

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<http://lamar.colostate.edu/~aejmcpr>

TPR
Teaching Public Relations

MONOGRAPH 66
Summer 2005

Submissions
should be sent to:

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it is unlikely that person would have significant professional experience. And even if we could recruit someone with significant professional experience, the university would approve no better than a term contract with a 5-5 teaching load. We are hard-pressed even to persuade professionals to travel two or three hours from St. Louis or Memphis to deliver guest lectures.

That left us with nobody to teach at least 24 content areas. Then along came Maria Russell, who brought two decades of professional experience to the program at Syracuse University.

THE IDEA: How It Started

At the 2002 AEJMC convention in Miami Beach, Russell told me about a one-credit course in public relations management that the Council of Public Relations Firms was field testing at Syracuse.

More than a decade ago, Joseph M. Zappala (1993) reported on the three one-hour special topics courses offered at Utica College of Syracuse University. The semester was divided into three, one-credit mini-sessions, with each session focusing on a different area of public relations. The initial offerings, Corporate PR, Sports PR & Promotion and Health Care PR, were limited to upper-division students (juniors and seniors). Each session convened for three hours one evening per week with lecture and discussion followed by a guest speaker. Student teams met with the client on the fifth and final class of the mini-session to make formal presentations.

Suzanne Heck (1994) reported on a similar effort to bring professionals into the classroom for Central Missouri State University's "Faculty for a Day" special event. Heck noted that the program had benefits beyond practical application of coursework in a real world setting. It actively involved the department's Professional Advisory Council, and it enhanced the image of the program by showcasing the students and facilities to outside publics.

So I proposed that our "new course" be a menu of one-credit special topics courses taught by outside professionals and academicians. Approval required nothing more than the chair's nod because, like most departments, we had a special topics course floating in the curriculum.

THE SOLUTION: How It Works

Funding – As is so often the case, funding was the first problem. All I could get was the \$700 compensation paid for one-credit of adjunct teaching. So I began with friends I could persuade to use their \$700 to travel to Cape Girardeau and lodge in my home. (I also thought it would be less embarrassing, should the idea bomb, if it did so with friends.) Although we could not recruit people to give up their "real" jobs to come to Cape for a week, much less for an entire semester, I thought I could persuade them to invest a long weekend.

We subsequently found that these guest instructor appointments have value to academicians. It's an impressive teaching credit for promotion and tenure records. In March 2004, when Richard Long presented "Crisis Management," based on his three decades with Dow and Weyerhaeuser, his home institution, Brigham Young University, provided funding for his travel and lodging.

When I briefly met Ofield Dukes at PRSA's 2002 World Congress in San Francisco, I wanted him to teach a mini-course in "Political Campaign Strategy Planning" in the 2004 election year. Dukes, the first African-American to win PRSA's Gold Anvil Award for lifetime achievement in the profession, has been an adviser to not only Motown and

Lever Brothers, but also Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, George McGovern, Jimmy Carter, Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, Bill Clinton, Al Gore and other politicians from his headquarters in Washington, D.C. Thanks to the influence of my friend, Betsy Plank, and the funding available for our Michael Davis Lecture, we were able to bring this world-class professional to campus for four days. Davis was a journalism student at Southeast who died in February 1994 as a result of injuries incurred in a fraternity hazing incident. In his honor, and in conjunction with Black History Month in February, we have funding to bring a prominent African-American communication professional to campus each year. Dukes taught a mini-course on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, delivered the Davis Lecture Sunday evening, and visited classrooms on Monday.

North Central Accreditation requires the university to have employment applications and validated transcripts for every instructor. I balked on asking Dukes for a transcript from 50-plus years ago, and his academic credentials had little to do with his value to the students. The dean of Southeast's College of Liberal Arts, Dr. Martin M. Jones, did some creative bookkeeping so that I can be the instructor of record for these special topics courses (which is a nice P&T credit for me anyway) and we can compensate the guest instructors with an honorarium instead of wages. This saves much paperwork hassle and eliminates tax withholding. Dean Jones has been so impressed with the special topics mini-courses, that he has also provided some expense money so I can be reimbursed for taking my guests to dinner and providing students with pizza when they have all-day sessions.

Agenda – The first guest instructor was Lu Hollander, my friend of more than a quarter-century. She has three decades of professional experience and taught full-time at the University of Central Oklahoma for several years. Among other credentials, Hollander has been editor of Oklahoma Living Magazine, publications and public relations director for the corporate offices of Express Personnel, and past president and later executive director of the Ninety-Nines, the international organization of women pilots. She is currently with the Chamber of Commerce in Brenham, Texas. The two-day format with which we began stretched the endurance levels of both students and instructor. Hollander's mini-course on "Organization Relations" was offered on a weekend in May 2002, focusing on dealing with franchise relations at Express on Saturday (in professional attire), followed by association relations with the Ninety-Nines on Sunday (in casual flying attire).

We provided another two-day section that met 9 a.m.-5 p.m. on a Saturday and Sunday in October 2002. Jeff Crilley, an on-air reporter with the Fox affiliate in Dallas, presented "Free TV Publicity." After this second trial run, it became clear that condensing the one-credit time (15-16 hours) was too intense for a two-day period. When William Thompson, Louisville University, presented "Public Relations Writing," we found that five or six days is too long, particularly with mandatory attendance. Three five-hour days seem to be the ideal, or perhaps four four-hour days, but that's not always possible when guest instructors are avoiding extended absence from their real jobs. We also need to avoid scheduling special topics courses that will conflict with students' semester-long courses. So the mini-courses typically convene for four hours on Friday afternoon, eight hours on Saturday, and three hours Sunday morning. Guest instructors can then travel to Cape Girardeau Friday morning and return home Sunday evening.

Attendance – Zappala noted that each student in the Syracuse program received a participation grade based on both attendance and consistent in-class involvement. Because an absent student gets little from a guest instructor, and because it's rude for a guest to be confronted with empty seats, attendance in Southeast's mini-courses is mandatory. We know that emergencies and other unexpected conflicts occur. So we rather liberally approve section shifts, requiring public relations majors to select three sections from a menu of about seven mini-courses per academic year. However, because the courses are so beneficial and enjoyable, many of the students elect far more than the three required sections.

Instructor Mentoring – Some of the professionals have never been in a classroom and can be shaken by the notion of writing syllabi and grading. So I provide sample syllabi and confer with each guest instructor so the class plan has flexibility. Zappala noted that it is difficult to know if the workload is too light or too heavy for a one-credit course. Moreover, Zappala added that the structure should be flexible enough to "go with the flow" if a particular subject leads to productive dialogue. Flexibility is also needed if the instructor realizes students need more foundation than anticipated. It's also important to vary the pace when the course is restricted to such a condensed time frame. Typically, special topics courses begin with an instructor presentation, followed by student group work on an assignment, team presentations, and concluding discussion of the presentations. Because much public relations work is done by teams of practitioners, and because oral presentation skills are vital to practitioners, this is an approach strongly endorsed by the Commission. Some guest instructors choose to assign e-mail assignments outside the scheduled time frame. Pre-class e-mail assignments can be used for the instructor to get acquainted with students or, as with Hollander, they can be used to brief students. She had students answer questions from information available on the Express and Ninety-Nines Webpages. A final project or exam can be administered in the course's 16th hour, or the class can adjourn after 15 hours with students submitting their final work a week or two later via e-mail.

Grade inflation seems to be a natural tendency with these mini-courses, but the university objects when 27 students in one class each get an "A." That happened in our first year of special topics offerings, but the problem was eliminated when I became the instructor of record. Now guest instructors discuss their scoring with me, and I post the grades online.

Small Groups – That 27-seat class was too large to effectively engage all students in discussion. Some of the more glamorous topics attract large numbers, and other topics scare students. We now put an 18-seat cap on each section. Students hustle to get seats in the sections they want. Occasionally we still have to admit a few students who procrastinate until their last semester, but we usually hit our target of 12-16 students per section.

Selecting Topics and Instructors – Graduates of our program provide a valuable pool of potential guest instructors. Greg Phillips, who was president of our PRSSA chapter in 1996, is now an executive with Fox Sports. He was media relations coordinator at Fox Sports Midwest (St. Louis), head of programming publicity at the network (Los Angeles), manager of Fox Sports North (Minneapolis), and now in marketing back at Midwest. His course in "Sports Promotion and Media Relations" is extremely popular. But

sometimes students are surprised when they are stuck with taking a topic they thought was unattractive. Students were especially intimidated about taking "Creative Aerobics" from Linda Conway Correll, an advertising professor at the University of Florida who has taught on the topic in India. Creative juices flowed, students got excited, and the section got the highest student evaluation scores of any of our special topics offerings to date.

Students were also surprised to enjoy the sections on "Fundraising and Development" and "Direct-Mail Marketing" that were provided by another graduate of our program. Doug McDermott is director of University Advancement Marketing Communications. His first offering was in direct response to a recommendation from our Professional Advisory Council to add a fundraising component to our curriculum. Kathleen Kelly (1991), then at Louisiana, now chair of the University of Florida's Department of Public Relations and newly seated member of the Accrediting Council (ACEJMC), identified fundraising as "the seventh element and function of the professional practice of public relations, along with media relations, community relations, financial and investor relations, internal relations, public affairs, and marketing, marketing support, and consumer relations." As Kelly advised, McDermott provided the three topics of (1) the history of philanthropy and fundraising, (2) donor publics, and (3) annual giving and major gifts programs.

Because he is on-campus, McDermott is a valuable backup when the inevitable happens. But I didn't expect the inevitable to strike twice in as many months. In fall 2004, the September and October guest instructors both got sick. This happened in the semester when our 17-year beloved chair died just nine days before the site visit team arrived to review our program for initial ACEJMC accreditation. One of the guest instructors had health problems related to her pregnancy. Mary Beth West, Knoxville, Tenn., was the youngest director elected to the PRSA National Board. We rescheduled her to present "Corporate Communications" later in the semester, but it became apparent that we need more local backups. I am currently working with another graduate of our program, Brad Cygan, a newly hired account executive who will present "First days at a PR Agency" in a summer special topics section.

Special topics mini-courses have also strengthened some key values of the Accrediting Council. Dr. Dean Kruckeberg, a professor at the University of Northern Iowa who has lectured on ethics in 28 countries, delivered "Global Public Relations Ethics" in February 2005. As with the popular mini-courses in sports promotion and creative aerobics, we plan to repeat Kruckeberg's class every year. The special topics program also expands our diversity of content, gender and ethnicity. So far guest instructors represent 13 states plus the District of Columbia, and they have lectured or worked in 43 other countries.

THE POSSIBILITIES: Growing the Program

Technology – Elizabeth M. Witherspoon, Elon College, and Dr. Patricia A. Curtin, North Carolina-Chapel Hill, found that graduates were expected to master eight different software packages as of the year 2000. Because expectations have probably grown, and because an expanded software portfolio cannot help but make graduates more marketable in the job contest, we are planning special topics mini-courses in Webpage construction and maintenance, as well as advanced operations in such programs as QuarkXPress, Photoshop, Illustrator and In Design.

Specializations – Another special topics course students were surprised to enjoy was “Public Affairs and Government Relations,” presented by Dr. Alan Freitag, who completed a career in military communications before joining the faculty at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. Government job opportunities opened new doors for some students who had apparently not previously considered this avenue.

Noting that graduates may land in public relations positions with scientific and technical organizations, bj Altschul (2004), American University, has suggested an interdisciplinary approach with practicing scientists. We are not quite to that point with our special topics programs, but we are planning some collaborations with other mass communication fields.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration – Florida advertising students in Correll’s classes annually collaborate with Southeast radio students advised by Dr. Bruce Mims. They have won numerous regional and national advertising awards for the spots created in Florida and produced in Missouri. Effective in summer 2005, Southeast’s special topics classes will be open to students in the other mass communication options of radio, video, advertising and journalism. Mims’ radio students will be able to take Correll’s special topics course as an elective next spring. Dulcie Murdock Straughan (1995), North Carolina-Chapel Hill, has noted the growing role of video in public relations, including videoconferencing, video news releases, internal video newsletters, broadcast public service announcements and satellite news conferences. Special topics courses on these subjects could significantly enhance the career preparation of video and public relations students working in concert. We’re also planning to team video and advertising students for more creative special topics, and we’d like to find a newspaper editor to teach a mini-course about the relationship between reporters and public relations practitioners. Some of these special topics might be most effectively team-taught if we can figure out how to deal with the FTE and honorariums. This is a particularly intriguing idea when we consider combining mass communication faculty with business faculty. After all, as Robert A. Carroll (2000), University of Southern Indiana, has noted, “an understanding of how public relations, advertising, and marketing interests should work together” in the integrated marketing communications process is becoming increasingly important.

Since the majority of our students are from the St. Louis area, we’re also looking into the possibilities of providing

summer sections at agencies and media outlets in that communications hub. These offerings could even combine part of the time on site in St. Louis and part of the time with online distance learning.

Distance Learning – The Commission pointed to the growing role of distance learning, a notion we embraced out of desperation. Dr. Barbara DeSanto, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, heads a consortium for the international study of public relations. She was one of our earliest guest instructors when she presented “International Public Relations” in August 2003. She was unable to make her scheduled repeat presentation in October 2004. She came up with a real problem facing an international corporation and grouped the students into teams representing Coca-Cola Brazil, Coca-Cola Russia, Coca-Cola China and Coca-Cola Turkey. We thought our graduate student from Germany could handle his country on his own. DeSanto e-mailed tutorials and assignments to the teams each week, and we scheduled conference telephone calls on Monday evenings. This approach provided timing flexibility and spread the experience over a period of two months. The last week before final examinations, DeSanto flew to Cape Girardeau for a concluding conference with the students. This solution was not just something for which we “settled.” The fact is that Coca-Cola executives in all of those countries would communicate via Internet and telephone, thus making this alternative more realistic than the original plan. We are now considering more creative uses of distance learning, which could greatly expand our pool of guest instructors.

CONCLUSION

We have thus expanded the content of our public relations curriculum, and our students have the benefits of studying under the profession’s leading practitioners and scholars, all in a small town in middle America. Although we began with no budget beyond the modest compensation for teaching a one-credit course, we have found other institutions supportive of sending their faculty as guest instructors, we have received about \$2,000 in annual funding from our approving dean, and we think other outside funding may be forthcoming. This program takes some effort for a coordinator to recruit instructors, help with syllabi and grading, shuffle students from section to section, and provide some nourishment, but it’s a program that can work at any institution regardless of size or location.

Professionals and academicians interested in teaching special topics mini-courses are urged to contact Dr. Susan Gonders (SGonders@yahoo.com), Southeast Missouri State University.

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