

Public Relations Educators Assess and Report Current Teaching Practices

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DESPITE THE RECENT ATTENTION GIVEN TO MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION, many public relations practitioners continue to lack the confidence and skills to conduct research (Hon, 1997; Walker, 1997; Watson, 2001). Yet, research underlies all measurement and evaluation efforts. No longer is it sufficient for public relations educators to teach research competency to undergraduate students. Educators should also teach students how to use research to help them use the latest measurement and evaluation scales and matrices. Yet, is this the case? To what degree are public relations educators teaching students about measurement and evaluation developments? What contemporary research skills are being emphasized? This study addresses these questions by surveying public relations educators to determine research, measurement and evaluation content and challenges.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In response to pressure for greater accountability, efforts are underway to demonstrate the value, or importance, public relations provides to organizations and clients. This is often easier said than done in practice. The public relations process is complex and setting meaningful goals and objectives can be difficult (Hon, 1998). Some practitioners think it is nearly impossible to measure the value of public relations (Walker, 1997). Moreover, no universal measurement or tool exists. Instead, practitioners must customize measurement and evaluation efforts to meet their organizational and programming scenarios.

Practitioners must also decide which level of measurement to use (Lindenmann, 1999). The easiest and most common way to measure public relations success is to quantify public relations outputs, those things that are visible to the eye. Yet, a more meaningful way to demonstrate public relations value is to measure public relations outcomes, or impact. A focus on outcomes or impact requires that practitioners measure changes in opinions, attitudes or behaviors. While more meaningful, these efforts take longer and require more sophisticated research techniques (Lindenmann).

Attention has been given in recent public relations scholarship to examining how public relations provides value. Organizational-public relationship instruments have been developed by Bruning and Ledingham (2000), Hon and Grunig (1999) and Huang (2001). Kim (2001) documented the impact that public relations has on the bottom line. Len-Rios (2001) developed a scale to diagnose the health and strength of online organization-public relationships. Jeffries-Fox (2004) proposed an objective, quantitative way for public relations practitioners to select Web sites that really matter to their organizations and then monitor and analyze them.

The recent development of so many measurement and evaluation instruments underscores the importance of research to contemporary public relations practice. Research competency has been identified as an important learning outcome for undergraduate students by public relations practitioners and academics (Neff, Walker, Smith, & Creedon, 1999; O'Neil, 2004; Stack, Botan, & Turk, 1999). In one such recent study (O'Neil), public relations practitioners identified research measurement and evaluation skills they think undergraduate students should master. More than eighty percent of practitioners said students should learn how to measure economic returns, reputations and media coverage. Interestingly, despite the attention given to relationships by scholars, only about half of practitioners said students should learn how to measure relationships. When asked to identify the one research technique or skill that they wished they knew how to do, practitioners most frequently mentioned analyzing statistics, conducting focus groups, writing survey questionnaires and analyzing qualitative data.

Surprisingly, very few studies have examined how public relations research is taught. One exception, a study by DeSanto (1996), revealed a somewhat unfavorable assessment. DeSanto found that only 47 out of 179 programs surveyed offered separate public relations research courses. She also discovered that most educators eschewed practical applications in their teaching methods, instead choosing to focus on research design and data analysis.

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Nearly 10 years have passed since DeSanto's (1996) assessment of public relations research pedagogy. In light of the recent importance and popularity of evaluation, this study provides an updated benchmark of how educators are teaching students to research, measure and evaluate.

METHOD

A Web survey was conducted with public relations educators listed in the 2003/2004 Public Relations Division of AEJMC and the 2003/2004 Educators Academy of PRSA. An invitation to participate was disseminated to 518 individuals by email and postcard in 2004.

Respondents indicated the approximate number of hours they spend in a semester or quarter teaching undergraduate public relations students how to measure and evaluate various outputs and outcomes (see Table 1). Most spend 1 to 3 hours on the majority of practices. About a quarter of respondents indicated they spend 11 or more hours teaching students to measure relationships and the impact of public relations on attitudes and behaviors. Nineteen percent said they spend no time examining the impact of public relations on other department functions, and 12% said they spend no time teaching students how to measure public relations outputs.

Respondents next indicated the approximate number of hours they spend in a semester or quarter teaching various research techniques and skills. As indicated in Table 2, less emphasis is placed on teaching students about online research techniques. About half of educators said they spend no time teaching students how to monitor online chat rooms and message boards or search online databases to monitor competition, and one third of respondents report spending no time teaching students how to search online databases to detect trends or media coverage. About half of respondents also reported spending no time teaching students how to conduct a panel or readership survey.

Eighty-five percent of respondents think a stand-alone public relations research course should be offered. When asked why, most respondents explained that research is essential to current public relations practice. Two respondents said research is as important as good writing. Some respondents talked about how students need more in-depth treatment of a "subject that is too substantial to be glossed in subsequent courses." Other respondents talked about the importance of training future practitioners.

Fifteen percent of respondents do not think a separate public relations research course is necessary. Many respondents said a research course that is taught in communications, journalism or business is sufficient if the particularities related to public relations measurement and evaluation are covered in other courses. Some respondents mentioned a lack of faculty and funding as reasons why a stand-alone course is not being taught.

Forty-two percent of respondents said their department offers a public relations research methods course. When asked why, the majority of respondents stressed the importance of research to students' future success. One person explained: "Because you can not practice strategic PR or strategic advertising without knowing how and why to research and how to use it in planning campaigns. Otherwise you are an old green eyeshade type pondering your bellybutton to come up with a catchy idea."

TABLE 2

Hours Spent on Measurement and Evaluation Techniques

(Percent of Respondents per Technique)

TECHNIQUE	TOTAL HOURS SPENT					Total
	None	1-3	4-6	7-10	11+	
Impact of PR on attitudes and behaviors	1	30	30	15	24	100
Impact of PR on the "bottom line"	8	40	28	17	7	100
Impact of PR on departmental functions (marketing or sales) ¹⁹	42	23	13	3		100
PR outputs, such as number of press clippings	12	51	21	12	4	100
Relationships	6	33	26	14	21	100
Reputations	10	37	23	19	11	100

Forty-eight emails bounced back due to undeliverable addresses. At this point, I made every attempt to update these undeliverable addresses by correcting typos and by visiting Web sites to locate educators' new email addresses. The invitation was resent to 29 of the 48 email addresses.

A total of 117 questionnaires was completed and returned (25% response rate). On average, respondents have taught public relations and worked full-time in public relations 12 years. Forty-eight percent of respondents' units are accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications; 52% are not accredited. Seventy-six percent of respondents have a Ph.D., 22% have a master's degree; and 2% have a different type of degree. Thirty-three percent of respondents hold the rank of assistant professor; 32% are associate professors; 28% are professors; and 5% are instructors, adjuncts, or graduate students. Forty-six percent of respondents have taught a public relations research methods course.

RESULTS

When asked, "How important is it for educators to teach measurement and evaluation practices to undergraduate public relations students," 86% of respondents responded very important and 13% responded somewhat important. One respondent indicated very unimportant. No respondent selected somewhat unimportant or don't know.

Fifty-eight percent of respondents said their departments do not offer a public relations research methods course. When asked why, many respondents mentioned a lack of funding, faculty and space within the curriculum. Many respondents also explained that a generic research methods course was required in lieu of a public relations research methods course. A few respondents said they offered a combined advertising/public relations research methods course.

Respondents next identified other public relations courses where they focus on research, measurement and evaluation. Participants responded as follows: Introductory Public Relations Principles (76%), Public Relations Writing (50%), Public Relations Cases (57%) and Public Relations Campaigns (74%).

When asked to indicate how well public relations educators are doing teaching research, measurement and evaluation methods to undergraduate public relations students, 1% said excellent, 34% indicated good, 47% said fair, 16% responded poor and 2% said very poor.

In response to the question, "How can public relations educators do a better job teaching undergraduate students about research, measurement and evaluation," many respondents said research content should be incorporated into many classes. Many educators said research concepts should be introduced in the introductory public relations course, expanded in a research methods course and practiced and applied yet again in a campaigns course. One participant explained: "You've got to stay after them and build in a research requirement into every class you teach. It's like teaching ethics – it can't be addressed adequately in a single stand-alone course." Other suggestions included using real projects and clients, incorporating current events and trends and making research enjoyable for students.

Many respondents also said public relations educators should increase their competence with practical, applied research. Suggestions offered to help educators improve their research knowledge and skills included: attend professional development seminars, read books, engage in online discussions, improve quantitative skills and share syllabi.

When asked about challenges related to teaching research, measurement and evaluation, a lack of time and money were the two answers offered most often. One respondent explained: "In organizations, research is often passed over because it costs time and money. The same thing happens in higher education. With low budgets and few faculty members, the priority is offering 'traditional' courses, such as writing and cases. PR-specific research methods course is pushed to the bottom of the list."

Alleviating students' fear of numbers and overcoming "student resistance" by "making material interesting enough to keep their interest" were also mentioned by many educators. Other respondents mentioned the need to convince students of the value of research to the public relations process. Finally, the need for better teaching materials was voiced. Examples included educational subscriptions to Bacon's, Burrelle's, relevant textbooks with real examples and case studies.

Some respondents again discussed a perceived research incompetence of public relations educators. Some respondents said too many public relations professors are too academic.

TABLE 2
Hours Spent on Research Techniques
(Percent of Respondents per Technique)

TECHNIQUE	TOTAL HOURS SPENT					Total
	None	1-3	4-6	7-10	11+	
Analyze media coverage	21	59	14	4	2	100
Analyze statistical data	29	34	18	9	10	100
Analyze qualitative data	19	46	19	12	4	100
Conduct a focus group	15	52	20	8	5	100
Conduct an interview	17	51	20	8	4	100
Conduct online research	24	46	18	12	0	100
Conduct a panel study	56	33	8	3	0	100
Conduct a poll	24	44	19	8	5	100
Conduct a readership survey	48	35	10	7	0	100
Devise and write a questionnaire	44	22	9	12	100	
Monitor online chat rooms/ message boards	49	44	4	2	1	100
Search online databases to detect trends	36	44	12	4	4	100
Search online databases to monitor competition	48	37	11	2	3	100
Search online databases for media coverage	38	46	11	3	2	100

One respondent characterized public relations professors as "too mired in theory, not enough dialogue with practitioners or too isolated, not willing to 'go the extra mile' for information." Conversely, other respondents talked about how some educators "have lots of practical PR knowledge/skills, but have difficulty translating/applying the methods to practical situations." Some participants said more public relations faculty need more meaningful practical public relations experience.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Because so many measurement and evaluation techniques continue to be discussed in the public relations field, it is encouraging that so many educators report spending time on so many of these practices. Educators reported spending the most time teaching students how to measure and evaluate relationships and the impact of public relations on attitudes and behaviors. Because these techniques are indicators of impact – what research suggests are the most meaningful – it is

good that 35% of respondents spend at least seven hours or more on both.

A comparison between curricula and desired research learning outcomes of contemporary practitioners (O'Neil, 2004) yields insight. Practitioners said their top concern is learning about statistics. Hence, it is problematic that roughly one-third of educators said that they spend no time teaching students how to analyze statistical data. Most practitioners also said that students should learn how to measure (a) the economic return that public relations provides, (b) the impact of media coverage and (c) the impact of public relations on reputations. Educators did report spending a fair amount of time examining the impact of public relations on the bottom line and reputations. Yet, because only about half of practitioners said they want to learn how to measure relationships, it is interesting to note that around 20 percent of educators report spending 11 or more hours on teaching students how to measure relationships. It may be that, because practitioners do not know how to measure relationships, they do not think they are important. Alternatively, because relationships are not directly linked to the bottom line or because they take longer to measure, they may not seem as necessary for undergraduate students to master.

Despite the opportunities afforded by technology, educators don't appear to place much value on online research techniques, such as monitoring online chat rooms/message boards or using online databases. Because most current cyberspace measurement tools are relatively new, it may be that educators have yet to incorporate them into their teaching curriculum.

Although 85% of respondents said they believe a stand-alone public relations research course is necessary, only 42% of respondents said their units offer one. Nine years ago,

DeSanto (1996) found that only one third of programs offered a separate research methods course. Despite the increasing importance of measurement and evaluation, the numbers have not changed much. A lack of funding, faculty and space in the curriculum were most commonly cited as barriers. Because research, measurement and evaluation have become so important in public relations practice, it is good that so many respondents appear to be teaching about these topics in many public relations courses, particularly Public Relations Principles and Public Relations Campaigns.

Although it is discouraging that public relations educators did not receive high marks, educators can take advantage of some of the recommendations offered in this study.

Respondents indicated many useful ways for educators to stay connected and to help one another: sharing syllabi, creating a list serve to discuss challenges and possibilities and hosting a "how to" panel at upcoming academic conferences. Educators might consider attending more professional industry conferences or taking a quantitative research methods course at their own university to improve their expertise. Educators might also approach the Institute for Public Relations to ask if they could facilitate a workshop or series of articles on how to better teach measurement and evaluation practices.

Bridging the gap between seasoned professionals and academic researchers in the public relations university setting is not an easy feat. However, the suggestions offered by respondents in this study may help to minimize the differences. Hopefully, our future – the academic, the student, and the applied portions of the profession – will be stronger as we refine what it is that we do to facilitate learning and teaching about research, measurement and evaluation.

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