

a CLARIFICATION of the DIFFERENCES between “PRODUCT” and “CONSUMER” in public relations professional education

A Call for the Re-Assessment and Re-Ordering of Perception of Stakeholders

Dean Kruckeberg

kruckeberg@uni.edu
University of Northern Iowa

U.S. colleges and universities—in their highly competitive efforts to market their institutions’ education—increasingly view students as consumers, in which higher education is viewed as a product to be consumed. Many “public relations departments” in institutions of higher learning have become “marketing and public relations departments” in far more than name only, i.e., their efforts considerably—if not primarily—focus on “marketing” these institutions’ product, which is the overall educational experience that these colleges and universities provide to their students.

Note the number of these institutions that use some variation of a “Students First” marketing theme that suggests, if not promises, that the individual student will be the center of that particular institution’s academic universe and that this potential student’s consumer satisfaction will be the primary goal—indeed obsession—to which all of that institution’s resources will be dedicated. A “Google” search of the Internet for “Students First” (July 22, 2005) amazingly identifies about 290,000 websites. Admittedly imprecise, this index nevertheless provides myriad examples of institutions that declare that it is the students who are of primary—indeed of ultimate—importance in an academy that views these students as “consumers” of the overall educational experience that these colleges and universities provide, i.e., students are a market who must first be “sold” the product, i.e., an educational experience, and who hopefully will remain highly satisfied “repeat” customers so that they will continue their higher education at that institution until they earn their degrees.

An overstatement? Undoubtedly so! Nevertheless, the astute observer of U.S. institutions of higher education can only conclude from these colleges and universities’ efforts that recruitment strategies that focus on consumer satisfaction during the process of education are used far more than are those that stress the outcome of that educational experience, i.e., it is of more concern that students are promised consumer satisfaction during their educational experience than that they are assured of the value of the degrees that they are earning and of the outcomes of their education, i.e., that they will become liberally educated citizens who will be well-prepared to apply the knowledge and skills that those degrees represent in these graduates’ later civil and occupational lives.

Competition for a “market share” of the finite number of potential students is keen for the United States’ nearly 4,200 degree-granting institutions in their recruitment and retention of their nearly 16 million students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). University “viewbooks” typically show happy students being taught in high-tech—but nevertheless warmly pleasant—classrooms by obviously kind and caring—and usually smiling—professors in a collegiate environment that offers good food, ample social opportunities and a comfortable living environment—all to reassure potential students that their educational experience will be, not only intellectually enriching, but also will be personally fulfilling, and even entertaining, in each and every other way.

Few educators would deny students a collegiate ambiance that is pleasant as well as academically enriching—or even a warm smile on occasion; furthermore, the need to vigorously market their institutions in a competitive national environment is a harsh reality for U.S. colleges and universities. Problems occur only when consumer satisfaction influences or dictates the content and rigor of educational programs, in which the student may indeed be the “consumer,” but is by no means the primary stakeholder. For example, to assure continuing consumer satisfaction, enrolled students are entitled to complete “student assessments” of their professors, which for the most part are good-faith attempts by colleges and universities to gather ostensibly valid and reliable data to measure the conceptually elusive and amorphous “teaching effectiveness” of faculty.

Significant numbers of students, however, use these surveys to make nonrelevant (oftentimes callously cruel) personal observations and to provide unseen administrators with ample rationalizations about why they are not getting an A in a particular class (a superlative grade that ostensibly is always well-deserved, despite many of these students’ mediocre performance in K-12, less-than-stellar ACT/SAT scores and obviously half-hearted attempts to learn the subject matter that was presented in their classes and within the pages of their textbooks). Thus, such failure obviously must be the fault of

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TPR EDITOR

Ken Plowman

Brigham Young University
Dept. of Communications
F-547 HEAC • Provo, UT 84602

801/422.6493 (off.) • 422.0160 (fax)

plowman@byu.edu

their professors because these students' parents told them they were brilliant, albeit grossly misunderstood and underappreciated. If such catharsis is not sufficient, students can always ventilate their frustrations on "RateMyProfessors.com" (n.d.), which encourages a voluntary sample of students to use any criterion they wish to evaluate their professors; where they can recommend whether their peers should enroll in a particular professor's class; and—most importantly—where they can proffer an opinion regarding how easy it will be to get an A in that class. No counterpart "RateMyStudents.com" exists.

Viable Model for World Leader in Higher Education?

Okay, maybe it's not really that bad! We like (most of) our students, and we find great rewards in teaching, else we would be doing something else for a living—probably practicing public relations. Enlightened and fair administrators balance their interpretation of student assessments with other indicators of teaching effectiveness, and these student assessments do have much value in the academy. Furthermore, such assessments may not influence grade inflation as much as some might suggest.

Nevertheless, it is little wonder that many foreign-born professors at U.S. institutions, who had been educated in other countries before earning their Ph.D.s in the United States, do not understand American undergraduate students' lack of deference to—and respect for—their professors and greatly question the wisdom of a "consumer model" of higher education that is implicitly pervasive—if not explicit—at the undergraduate level in many U.S. colleges and universities, the level of instruction that, of course, represents the majority of student enrollment at most institutions. And these foreign-born and -educated expatriates join their U.S.-born and -educated probationary colleagues in realizing the power that undergraduate students have through student assessments and through other feedback mechanisms to greatly influence faculty tenure-and-promotion decisions.

Further, many in this generation of traditional students are used to being entertained in their daily lives, expect immediate gratification and assume an entitlement that includes very little acceptance of personal responsibility in the education of which they perceive themselves to be the "consumers." Indeed, one does not have to be an alarmist to question whether the United States will maintain its supremacy in higher education in the 21st Century because of this "consumer model" of higher education that seems endemic among college and university students, if not their institutions. Kerr et al. (1994) said global leadership in higher education has shifted throughout history from Greece in the classical age; to the Muslim world in the Middle Ages; then to Italy (1540-1610), France (1770-1830), Germany (1810-1920) and most recently to the United States—noting that the pattern since 1540 has been for leadership to last an average of 80 years. Given this historic pattern, should we fear that the global leadership of U.S. institutions of higher education is existing on borrowed time, particularly in light of the United States' increased scrutiny in awarding visas to international students in this post-9/11 era that requires heightened concern about national security?

At many levels, "students first" may be laudatory.

Of course, at many levels, a "students first" focus may be laudatory, or at worst it may be a merely innocuous fact-of-life in an economic environment in which students are indeed a finite population from which educational institutions must earn their "market share" in an increasingly competitive environment in which private for-profit institutions and distance education programs create even more competition for U.S. colleges and universities. Furthermore, students are "paying customers," to varying extents, although oftentimes these consumers would be better described as "clients" of a product that is heavily subsidized by other stakeholders, e.g., governments and these governments' taxpayers. One can see both the truth and the wisdom in this statement by one university president:

The student-centered university is one in which we look out for the best interest of our students... Once in a while, people think a students first university means a student gets to do whatever they want - that's certainly not the case. Student-centered, for us, is a value. It's one that we decide: if a particular action is to be taken, will it benefit the students or not? If it benefits the students, we take it; if it does not, we think twice. Students first is really a value that helps guide our decisions. ("What 'Students First' means to UNI President Robert Koob," n.d.)

This president of a medium-sized comprehensive university in the Midwest has identified a perspective that he rightly rejects, i.e., he does not advocate that "a student gets to do whatever they want"—a mindset that nevertheless seems to be an underlying permeation throughout much of higher education today, i.e., a pre-occupation with the consumer satisfaction of students, who: (1) undeniably may be the "market" of colleges and universities; (2) whose tuition dollars are essential, as are the other monies that are made available contingent upon student numbers; but (3) who arguably are not the primary stakeholders of the education that these institutions of higher education provide.

Indeed, as this essay will argue, such pre-occupation with "consumer satisfaction" is especially deleterious in professional education—and undoubtedly even more so in "emerging" professional areas such as public relations. Rather than looking at higher education—and particularly professional education—from a "consumer model" perspective in which students are the consumers, let's look at these institutions of higher education from a "stakeholder" perspective. Especially in professional education, one must conclude: "It's not about the students!"

Failure must be the fault of professors because parents told students they were brilliant, albeit grossly misunderstood and underappreciated.

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Who are the stakeholders?

Who are the stakeholders of American higher education, and particularly of these institutions' professional education? And who must be recognized as the primary stakeholder of professional education?

Goodstein et al. (1993) define stakeholders as:

...(T)hose individuals, groups, and organizations who will be impacted by or who are likely to be interested in the organization's strategic plan and the planning process. Included are all who believe, rightly or wrongly, that they have a stake in the organization's future and not merely those whom the planning team believes have a reasonable or legitimate right to such a stake. (pp. 162-163)

Ehling and Dozier (1992) say:

People involved or affected by an organization may be regarded as stakeholder (sic)—a collection of people (the size of which varies over time—who have a stake in the policies and operations of an organization. Such stakeholders may arise when they believe and feel (accurately or inaccurately, rightly or wrongly) that they will gain something from or lose something to the organization. (p. 274)

One must argue that the primary stakeholder of higher education is society, itself, i.e., society historically has depended on colleges and universities, not only to be repositories of the collected knowledge of civilization with a mission to add to that knowledge, but also to be institutions of higher learning that educate those who will become—even within a society having strong democratic traditions—an intellectual elite who can contribute substantively to the welfare of that society, often through their leadership as citizens.

Society is the primary stakeholder of the professions.

Institutions of higher education, however, have an equal role in educating students for their vocations, and particularly for the professions; indeed, the primary stakeholder of professional education is society, itself. Historically, an occupation has been considered to be a profession because of its essential role of service to society, i.e., society needs those who practice these professions, and these professions exist primarily to serve society—rather than does society exist from the perspective of that occupation's professional community to serve as that profession's market.

(Some scholars maintain that today's professional practice precludes even the traditional professions from this unique classification, i.e., while occupations may respond only to the marketplace, members of a profession should serve their clients regardless of recompense—a position that most Health Maintenance Organizations would probably reject) (Behrman, 1988).

That is, a medical school exists because society needs physicians, i.e., society is the primary stakeholder of a medical school, not the individual medical student. Furthermore, it can be argued that the second-most-important stakeholder of a profession is its professional community, which ultimately judges the worthiness of those aspirants who seek entry into that community. Society and the professional community do not—and should not—care if student A is given the opportunity to be educated to achieve the status, class and power of that profession or if that opportunity for medical school education is given to student B—only that the outcome of this process is the highest-quality physician who is most capable of serving society. The individual student is unimportant to society as well as to the professional community; at best, the individual student is only third in priority as a stakeholder—after society and after the professional community (the latter who may also want to assure that there is not a surfeit of members in their professional community, a surplus that would dilute members' own "market share").

Of course, other criteria also help define professions (although these are often difficult to evaluate comparatively among the "professional" occupations), e.g., the three traditional professions of medicine, law and the clergy exemplify the commonalities of: (1) an agreed-upon body of knowledge of some consequence gained from a highly prescribed and regulated education; (2) a system of certification/licensing (usually through the machinery of government, but which is ultimately controlled by the professional community), which assures that only competent practitioners may join and represent the community of those professionals who practice that profession; and (3) a code of ethics that defines that profession's role in and relationship with society. (Because of the United States' First Amendment right of freedom of religion, considerable variance can occur among the clergy in satisfying these criteria.)

The role of higher education in professional education.

Today, colleges and universities are being challenged in their roles as repositories and builders of knowledge, e.g., by corporations and governments. However, they have retained their historic role as educators, including as educators of the professions—a phenomenon that began in the late 1800s. Colonial American colleges had followed the British tradition of a three- to four-year baccalaureate curriculum (Shore, 1992). Their students were exposed to a "classical" education that provided a uniform curriculum that began with the instruction of the Latin and Greek languages (to impose rigor as well as to teach logic, grammar and rhetoric), followed by mathematics, natural philosophy, geology, biology and astronomy. This preliminary coursework led to studies in philosophy (Anderson, 1993). Most of these colleges' graduates became ministers, teachers, lawyers and statesmen (Douglas, 1992).

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However, by the early 1800s, students were demanding more courses in the physical sciences, and, when these classes were adopted, they were oftentimes relegated to separate schools (Simpson & Frost, 1993). Colleges and universities in the 19th century began offering majors and course electives to prepare students for specialized vocational occupations, and the emerging "research universities" began emulating German higher education that emphasized research and graduate instruction. Elective courses were added to permit students some discretion in their subject matter, and, by 1900, most students were allowed to choose a major (Simpson and Frost, 1993). Such "electives" signaled a cessation of the implicit relationship among courses and suggested the invalidity of prescribed course progression (Anderson, 1993). Jacoby (1994) describes how the Land-Grant Act broadened the scope of higher education:

After the Civil War the pressures intensified to reform curriculum and to open wider the college gates. The Morrill Act, or Land-Grant Act, passed in the midst of the Civil War, accelerated the collapse of the classical curriculum. Inasmuch as it provided federal support for colleges that included agricultural and mechanical arts, it spurred the shifting of resources from classical studies to sciences and modern languages. (p. 98)

Colleges and universities' curricular offerings during this era provided students with educational preparation for a wide range of production-oriented occupations that were needed in an increasingly industrialized nation, many of which occupations could be considered "professional" in nature, if not actual "professions." Thus, early "classical" education had yielded to the newly defined mission of land-grant schools and other "research universities" (Kerr et. al., 1994). A rising patriotism in the United States further suggested that a classical education ignored indigenous history and culture (Jacoby, 1994).

Wiebe (1967) noted:

Since the emergence of the modern graduate school in the seventies, the best universities had been serving as outposts of professional self-consciousness, frankly preparing young men for professions that as yet did not exist. By 1900 they held an unquestioned power to legitimize, for no new profession felt complete—or scientific—without its distinct academic curriculum; they provided centers for philosophizing and propagandizing; and they inculcated apprentices with the proper values and goals. Considering the potential of the universities for frustration, it was extremely important that higher education permissively, even indiscriminately, welcomed each of the new groups in turn. (p. 121).

Formal entry requirements into the professions usually included a specified and highly specialized college curriculum, which directly affected collegiate administration. Damrosch (1995) concluded: "The shape of the modern American university was forged during roughly twenty years, from the early 1870s through the mid-1890s" (p. 24).

Public Relations as an emerging professional education.

Can public relations portend to be a "profession," which primary stakeholder is society and which secondary stakeholder is the professional community? Public relations educators can point to indicators that support this contention:

(1) An agreed-upon body of knowledge of some consequence that is presented in a highly prescribed curriculum is evidenced today, not only by the ever-growing literature of public relations, on which codification globally such groups as the Institute for Public Relations' Commission on International Public Relations is working diligently ("New Commission on International Public Relations will Build Research-Based Knowledge in the Field," n.d.) Standardization of curricula exists, not only through the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, but also through the "Certified in Education for Public Relations" program of the Public Relations Society of America and through criteria that must be satisfied to establish chapters of the Public Relations Student Society of America and student chapters of the International Association of Business Communicators. Furthermore, considerable consistency can be found in the selection and adoption of textbooks by U.S. public relations educators, and the Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (1999, October) has added much standardization to public relations professional education in U.S. colleges and universities, as will its new report that will be published fall 2006. This trend may become international, e.g.:

Whereas previously most universities outside of the United States preferred the European model of teaching disciplines, not professions, many have now added courses and even majors in public relations and/or advertising. In nations where a tradition of teaching journalism already existed, such as India, the addition of public relations and advertising seemed to come easily. Giving support to these fledgling academic endeavors have been the resident professionals, who have also encouraged continuing education courses, seminars, and workshops. (Newsom and Carroll, 1995, p. 90)

(2) A system of certification/licensing (usually administered through the machinery of government, but essentially controlled by the professional community) is problematic in the United States, with its strong First Amendment freedoms that no public relations educator or practitioner would want to relinquish. Voluntary accreditation/certification, e.g., PRSA's APR and IABC's ABC accreditations, as well as membership in good stead of the professional associations, themselves, such as the Public Relations Society of America and the International Association of Business Communicators, remains the only professional arenas in which the public relations professional community can act collectively and with solidarity.

(3) A code of ethics that defines that profession's role in and relationship with society also remains problematic, with codes by professional associations that result in no legal sanctions for those practitioners

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who don't follow these codes' dictates. The most important criterion, however, to judge whether public relations is even an "emerging" profession of which society is the primary stakeholder of its education is public relations' essential role in society. Is public relations as critical to society as are medicine and law, for example? Such comparisons are meaningless, of course, being contingent upon whether the client has a medical, legal or public relations problem. Nevertheless, considerable argument exists that professional public relations practice is, indeed, essential in a complex free-and-democratic society that relies on the marketplace of ideas to make reasoned democratic decisions and that "professionalism" is thereby requisite in public relations practice. Ultimately, resolution to the question of public relations' status as a "profession" is unnecessary, because Delattre's (1984, June) point is valid:

Law enforcement, journalism, politics, public relations, and many other lines of work are service oriented even though they are not professions by the traditional definition. Yet, because police, journalists, and the like perform services for individuals whose interests are at stake, it makes sense to speak of professionalism in law enforcement or in journalism. Like other professions, these lines of work can be undertaken well or badly, competently or incompetently, wisely and disinterestedly or unwisely and with prejudice. (p. 12)

Airline passengers do not ponder whether the captain is a member of a "profession" when their pilot lands a jumbo jetliner at a congested airport, only wanting assurance that she has mastered the body of knowledge and skills to safely fly the airplane; clients of public relations practitioners should also have confidence in the practitioner's abilities to strategically, tactically and technical resolve a public relations problem, as should that practitioner's second-most-important stakeholder, her professional community.

CONCLUSION

Public relations as a professionalized/professionalizing occupation must come to grips with its historically egalitarian attitude toward public relations professional education that is exacerbated by:

(1) *The plethora of public relations education programs that historically have varied greatly in their quality, in their curricular content and in the students that they attract:* Data of 2003-2004 public relations education in journalism and mass communication programs show that, of the 190,934 students that were enrolled in journalism and mass communication bachelor's programs in fall 2003, 15.5 percent were in public relations and 3.6 percent were in combined programs of public relations and advertising, compared, e.g., with 9.9 percent in advertising and 7.9 percent in news editorial (print) journalism (Becker, Vlad, Hennink-Kaminiski and Coffey, 2004, Fall). These data do NOT include the large numbers of students in programs that are not journalism- and mass communication-focused.

Public relations educators and their practitioner counterparts must monitor the "public relations professional education" that is being offered, and the public relations professional community of educators and practitioners must judge the efficacy of these programs as well as the quality of their graduates on behalf of society.

(2) *The finite career opportunities that exist for graduates of these programs:* While the prognosis looks good for future career opportunities in public relations, the problem nevertheless remains whether many of today's public relations students will have the knowledge and skill sets needed to compete for these positions. The Occupational Outlook Handbook of the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics ("Public Relations Specialists," n.d.) warns that, although employment of public relations specialists is expected to increase faster than the average for all occupations through 2012, keen competition will likely continue for entry-level public relations jobs because the number of qualified applicants is expected to exceed the number of job openings. In one important respect, public relations, like journalism, is a "professionalized" nonprofession, i.e., while the First Amendment permits anyone to be a journalist, most people without a "professional" journalism education would not be competitive for positions that are offered in the professional marketplace of journalism positions. Likewise, although anyone can compete for a public relations position (or call himself a public relations practitioner, for that matter), those without appropriate and sufficient education in this professionalized occupation would not be competitive for the positions that are available in the marketplace.

The time has come for a national credential that public relations students can earn immediately upon graduation, one most closely modeled after the Certified Public Accountant (CPA) credential in accounting. Such credential in accounting does not preclude others from competing for a range of bookkeeping/accounting positions, but does extend a validation of competence. While public relations can never be regulated through licensing in this country, again primarily because of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, public relations competence can nevertheless be measured and validated at a national level. Such credential would obviate questions about an institution's curricular and instructional deficiencies, its grade inflation and its students' comparative knowledge and skills. And such a national examination that awarded certification would lend itself well to educational institutions' present-day attempts to measure "outcomes assessment."

(3) *The need to reconcile the ethical dilemma that exists when students are viewed as "consumers" rather than as a "product," i.e., when they are viewed as the primary stakeholder of public relations education while they are in the process of earning their degrees.* (A more valid indicator of success is a

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Public relations education programs have historically varied greatly in their quality and content.... public relations education thus must be monitored and programs assessed for the efficacy and quality of their graduates.

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continuing measurement of the progressive educational outcomes that these students can demonstrate during their college careers.) Rather, as is the case with the traditionally recognized professions, i.e., medicine, law and the clergy, society is the primary stakeholder of public relations practice and its education—because a complex modern society needs professional public relations practitioners.

The second-most important stakeholder remains the professional community that has a “watchdog” role for society in assuring that only those aspirants are admitted into its community who are worthy of such professional membership. Public relations education cannot be viewed as a “cash cow” to boost colleges and universities’ academic unit enrollments, a phenomenon that is exploitive, not only of the student “consumer” of such education, but ultimately is exploitive of the professional community and—most importantly—of society, itself.

After a record 15.3 million students in fall 2000 and another record 15.6 million in 2002, college enrollment is predicted to increase in this nation by an additional 13 percent between 2002 and 2012; estimates are that over 17.6 million students will attend degree-granting institutions of higher education in the year 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). More than a few of these students will consider public relations as a career. It behooves public relations educators to identify those with the potential to become successful practitioners, to view them as a “product” to be crafted, rather than as a “consumer” to be satisfied, and to remember that society is the most important stakeholder in our efforts.

To best serve the stakeholder interests of society, as well as those of the public relations professional community, public relations educators and their educational institutions cannot be pre-occupied with the consumer satisfaction of their students in any way that affects the integrity and rigor of public relations professional education. Of course, the hundreds of dedicated and tireless public relations educators in this nation’s institutions of higher education have always gone far beyond the call of duty to help students learn to be public relations professionals, as have many institutions of higher education. However, all of us, i.e., students, educational institutions and educators, must always remember that these students are our “product,” not our “consumers,” in the professional education that we provide; society and the public relations professional community are the more important stakeholders of public relations professional education.

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