

I'M A PEOPLE PERSON!

A look at public relations majors' perceptions of why they chose public relations as their major

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how and why students pick public relations as their major and what expectations they have of their first job. Division and department chairs of colleges and universities with public relations majors listed in the AEJMC directory were asked to take part in this survey. One hundred forty-three institutions were contacted to invite students to take part in the study; 180 completed surveys were returned from 21 institutions. Most respondents stated that they had picked public relations as a major because they liked to plan events and because they liked people. Respondents who had interned did so at nonprofit organizations and were not paid for their internship. Participants seemed to have realistic expectations for starting salaries, and they stated that they wanted to obtain employment at agencies, corporations and nonprofits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although public relations educators do have research to describe curriculum requirements and the makeup of the faculty and student bodies, little is known about why students pick public relations as their major. Sorto (1990) found that students overwhelmingly picked public relations because they liked working with people. Other reasons students gave were social opportunities, industry growth, and liking to write. Bowen (2003) found that most students new to the major thought public relations would be media relations and event planning. Few seemed to understand that strategy, management, research and relationship building were a part of the package. Bowen also found that students picked public relations because they thought it would be an easy major and a career with few challenges.

In 2003, Atkinson Gorcyca, Hunt, Lubbers and Bourland-Davis conducted a survey to determine what public relations skills graduates use in their careers. Participants stated that their campaigns class best prepared them for their work experience because they were often asked take part in management and administrative activities (Atkinson Gorcyca, et al). Surprisingly, they also found that the respondents thought of their internships as a way to learn what they did not want to do in their careers. Their research also found that few graduates were working at agencies or firms, and most were working for a business or corporation. Finally, the authors stated that the current tracking of public relations graduates is inadequate.

Sha and Toth (2005) noted that little research has been done to examine what public relations students think their first job experience will be like. Farmer and Waugh (1999) found that most students expected a salary between \$18,000 and \$25,000 for an entry-level job. They also noted that males expected a higher salary than females. Sha and Toth found that male students were less likely to think that women in public relations were paid less than men for similar work. Farmer and Waugh found that, although no statistically significant differences were found in male and female students' desire to do managing and counseling functions, there was a statistically significant difference when looking at a technical role. Female students were more likely to say that they wanted to do technical functions, such as event planning and media relations, than their male counterparts.

This research attempts to establish how and why students pick public relations as their major and what expectations they have of their first job. The following research questions are posed:

- R1: What are the educational expectations of public relations majors?
- R2: What are the career expectations of public relations majors?

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METHOD

Using the AEJMC directory, a list was made of universities and colleges with public relations majors. The list totaled 143 institutions. An e-mail was sent to the public relations sequence head or department chair asking that person to forward an information letter and survey to all public relations majors so that they could participate in the study. Participants were asked to mark their responses to the survey in a word document and to return it via e-mail to the researchers. This step was done to avoid any e-mail identifiers on the surveys. Respondents were asked to respond within two weeks.

RESULTS

A total of 180 completed surveys were returned. The respondents represent 21 institutions. Three sequence heads/department chairs refused to be a part of the study. Another stated that he could not take part unless his institution's IRB approved the survey first. Of these respondents, approximately 86% were female (N=155) and 12% male (N=22). Three respondents chose not to answer the question. The majority (86%) of respondents identified themselves as Caucasian (N=155) and approximately 61% of the respondents were seniors (N=109). (See Table 1 for descriptive information about participants and Table 2 for descriptive information about their programs.)

R1: What are the educational expectations of public relations majors?

When asked why they chose public relations as their major, 34% (N=58) of the respondents stated it was because they like to plan events. Nearly a quarter of the respondents (N=41) said it was because they liked people. Only 12% (N=21) said it was because they enjoyed writing, and 11% (N=19) said it was because they wanted a degree that was like a business degree without having to do math. Only one respondent said he/she was majoring in PR because his/her friends were majoring in it. However, when crosstabs were run by year in school, it seemed that students were somewhat less inclined to say that they majored in PR for event planning as they progressed within the major (see Table 3).

Students were also asked about their current coursework. Ninety percent (N=162) had taken an introductory PR class, 73% (N=132) a PR writing class, 37% (N=66) research, 28% (N=51) cases, and 43% (N=78) campaigns. Approximately 41% (N=73) had taken marketing and 20% (N=36) reported they had taken management. Respondents also reported taking journalism classes such as reporting (22%), feature writing (27%), or photojournalism (13%). A breakdown by year in school is available in Table 4.

When asked about classes that they wished they could have taken had they been available, most responded international public relations (28%, N=45) and crisis management (29%, N=47). Only 22% (N=35) said that they would have liked to have taken classes in IMC or PR law. Again crosstabs by year in school were run and it was found that seniors were more likely to be interested in specialty courses than were underclass persons (see Table 5).

Twenty-three percent (N=30) of the respondents believed their writing course would be the one most important to their careers, and 22% (N=28) thought campaigns would

Table 1. PARTICIPANTS

RACE	CAUCASIAN	AFRICAN AMERICAN	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERICAN	HISPANIC	PACIFIC ISLANDER	OTHER
	n=155 86%	n=15 8%	n=3 2%	n=1 1%	n=1 1%	n=1 1%	n=1 1%
CLASS	SENIOR		JUNIOR	SOPHOMORE		FRESHMAN	
	n=109 61%		n=42 24%	n=23 23%		n=3 2%	
PR	PR IS FIRST MAJOR		BELONG TO PR CLUB		DONE VOLUNTEER PR WORK		
	n=78 44% yes		n=87 49.9% yes		n=89 51% yes		

Table 2. PR PROGRAMS

REQUIRE MINIMUM GPA	MINIMUM GPA	AVERAGE CLASS SIZE	NUMBER OF FACULTY
n=103 48% YES n=57 32% don't know	n=84 47% 2.0 - 2.9	n=111 62% 10-25 students	n=67 38% 1-5 faculty

Table 3. WHY DID YOU MAJOR IN PR?

	SENIOR n = 105	JUNIOR n = 38	SOPHOMORE n = 22	FRESHMAN n = 3
EVENTS	30% (n=32)	39% (n=15)	45% (n=10)	33% (n=1)
PEOPLE	22% (n=23)	33% (n=13)	14% (n= 3)	33% (n=1)
WRITING	14% (n=15)	8% (n= 3)	5% (n= 1)	0% (n=0)
NO MATH	10% (n=11)	11% (n= 4)	17% (n=4)	0% (n=0)

Table 4. COURSEWORK TAKEN

	SENIOR n = 109	JUNIOR n = 42	SOPHOMORE n = 23	FRESHMAN n = 3
INTRO	97% (n=106)	83% (n=35)	83% (n=19)	67% (n=2)
WRITING	85% (n= 93)	60% (n=25)	61% (n=14)	0% (n=0)
CASES	39% (n= 42)	21% (n= 9)	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)
CAMPAIGNS	66% (n= 72)	14% (n= 6)	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)
RESEARCH	49% (n=53)	19% (n= 8)	22% (n= 5)	0% (n= 0)
MARKETING	54% (n= 59)	29% (n=12)	9% (n= 2)	0% (n= 0)
MANAGEMENT	27% (n= 29)	12% (n= 5)	9% (n= 2)	0% (n= 0)
REPORTING	31% (N= 34)	14% (N= 6)	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)
FEATURES	37% (n= 40)	17% (n= 7)	4% (n= 1)	0% (n= 0)
PHOTOJOUR.	18% (n= 20)	7% (n= 3)	0% (n= 0)	0% (n= 0)

be their most important class. Respondents in their senior year of school were more likely to state that campaigns was the most important class (see Table 6). IMC, theory, ethics, reporting and feature writing were the least likely to be identified as an important class.

R2: *What are the career expectations of public relations majors?*

Approximately 40% (N=70) of the respondents had interned and most internships were unpaid (55%; N=40). Of those who had interned, 44% (N=31) had interned at nonprofit organizations. Most respondents found their internships from the Internet (27% N=20) and by networking (21% N=15).

The majority of respondents wanted to obtain their first position in agencies/firms, (29% N=47), corporate (26% N=43) or nonprofit sector (22% N=36). One-quarter (N=46) of them believed their starting salaries would be in the \$25,000 to \$29,000 range and about one-quarter (N=45) thought their starting salaries would be in the \$30,000 to \$34,000 range. Most respondents reported that they would search for job opportunities via networking (90%, N=158) and by asking faculty for help (66%, N=115). Half of the respondents (N=88) said that they would look through newspapers and only 26% (N=46) said that they would look at Internet postings. Nearly 91% (N=159) believed that they would stay in their first job between one and five years. Of these respondents, 52% (N=91) thought their tenure would be one to two years and 39% (N=68) thought it would be three to five years.

Approximately 57% (N=100) of respondents thought their job responsibilities would be technical ones. However, another 25% (N=44) thought that their responsibilities would cover both technical and managerial tasks. Only 12% (N=22) stated that they did not know what to expect at their first job. When asked specifically what types of work they thought they would do at their first job, 84% (N=152) thought that they would be required to write, 79% (N=142) thought that they would be planning events, and 71% (N=128) thought that they would be working with the media and doing publicity.

In order to gain more information, cross-tabulation calculations between the sex of the respondent and a number of variables were run. Table 7 presents this information. No further calculation was computed on this data since the difference in N size was too drastic and the number of male respondents (22) was too low to achieve any type of statistical reliability.

DISCUSSION

A majority of students stated that they went into public relations because they like events, although this percentage seems to decrease as the student progresses within the major. A small number of respondents stated that they became majors because they like to write. Although this finding mirrors those of Sorto (1990) and Bowen (2003), it is one that should give educators pause. If students are not aware of the importance of writing when they first enter the major, we may be losing some of our best candidates to other majors. However, based on the results of this study, it seems upperclass persons are more likely to recognize writing's importance.

Perhaps educators need to take advantage of this finding and do more to highlight the importance of writing in materials distributed to incoming and potential students in order to change this misperception and to attract those students who do enjoy writing. Additionally, beginning public relations students might gain more insight into the field through projects and exposure to practitioners as suggested by Heck (1994), Adams (1995), Gordon (2002), and Gonders (2005). Educators could also take this situation as

Table 5. COURSES RESPONDENTS WOULD HAVE LIKED

	SENIOR n = 99	JUNIOR n = 39	SOPHOMORE n = 19	FRESHMAN n = 2
INTERNATIONAL	24% (n=24)	36% (n=14)	37% (n=7)	0% (n=0)
CRISIS	31% (n=31)	28% (n=11)	26% (n=5)	0% (n=0)
IMC	24% (n=24)	18% (n= 7)	16% (n= 3)	0% (n=0)
LAW	21% (n=21)	26% (n=10)	21% (n=4)	0% (n=0)

Table 6. MOST IMPORTANT COURSE

	SENIOR n = 78	JUNIOR n = 33	SOPHOMORE n = 16	FRESHMAN n = 2
WRITING	24% (n=19)	21% (n=7)	25% (n=4)	0% (n=0)
CAMPAIGNS	31% (n=24)	6% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)

Table 7. GENDER DIFFERENCES

	MALE	FEMALE
FIRST JOB		
Starting salary	25-39 K	20-34 K
	73% (n=16)	70% (n=106)
will include working with media	82% (n=19)	70% (n=109)
will including planning events	86% (n=19)	79% (n=122)
will include strategic planning	45% (n=10)	29% (n=110)
will include leading a project team	32% (n= 7)	15% (n=132)
JOB SEARCH		
will use newspapers to find first job	32% (n= 7)	52% (n= 81)
will look on bulletin boards for jobs	14% (n= 3)	37% (n= 58)
will use networking to find first job	77% (n=17)	90% (n=140)
will use the Internet to find first job	9% (n= 2)	28% (n= 44)

an opportunity to teach students how to plan an event and learn other necessary skills, such as writing, strategic planning and design, by implementing a "Faculty for the Day" event as Heck suggests.

"Faculty for the Day" was a special event that brought practitioners into the classrooms for one day at Central Missouri State University (Heck, 1994). Public relations students at the university organized and developed the entire event as part of a class project. Heck reports that the idea was successful on many fronts. Students were able to participate in active learning, faculty built stronger relationships with practitioners, and the department gained more visibility within the university and local community because of the event.

The majority of these respondents had not interned at the time they completed the survey. However, many of those who had interned did so at nonprofit organizations. This finding may mean that students are getting to do a variety of tasks on their internships, since many nonprofit organizations are understaffed. It was also interesting to see that more than half of the respondents indicated that they had gained experience in public relations via volunteer opportunities. This seems to suggest that students understand the importance of gaining real-world experience and that they are active in finding it. The majority of these internships were unpaid, which is a problem that has been identified by the Commission of Public Relations Education. The Commission report clearly states that interns should be paid for their work. This is obviously a concern that needs to be addressed by educators and practitioners at venues like PRSA.

These respondents seemed to have realistic expectations of their first job, which are similar to the findings of Farmer and Waugh (1999). Half of the respondents thought their pay would be between \$25,000 and \$34,000 per year and nearly all thought that they would stay in that position between one and five years. Again respondents seemed to understand that an entry-level job would most likely entail technical work, such as writing press releases and working with the media. This finding seems to suggest that students are getting good information in their classroom, volunteer and internship experiences.

LIMITATIONS

Although this data is interesting, it is only a small representation of public relations students. Unfortunately, students from only 21 schools took part in this survey. Since we collapsed all of the data, we don't know if all of the schools were equally represented or if one participating program dominated the data. In order to obtain a clearer picture of the perceptions of public relations majors, more studies of this type are necessary to determine if these results are truly typical of PR programs in general.

While the respondents of this survey clearly reflect the current demographics of public relations majors, it also seems to suggest that there is an opportunity for public relations educators to recruit students from minority populations. The large response rate of Caucasians and females made it difficult to use more sophisticated statistics in the analysis.

The results of the cross-tabulation analysis yielded some interesting results, particularly in the area of what students expect to be doing on their first job. Unfortunately, the results couldn't be tested for significance, but they do present some questions about differences in expectations between male and female PR majors similar to what Farmer and Waugh found in 1999. Future research should explore these.

CONCLUSION

Public relations continues to be a popular major at colleges and universities across the United States. It is especially popular among Caucasian women. However, it would also be interesting to learn more about why the major is not as attractive to a more diverse population. Research like this needs to continue so that educators can learn more about what attracts or deters students from studying public relations. With this information, educators can develop strategies that will help diversify the student body and perhaps give public relations more legitimacy. In the age of integrated communications, it is imperative for public relations educators to understand their student body and to guarantee that public relations doesn't lose its sovereign identity.

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