# BEYOND THE CLASSROOM:
# Developing statewide competitive public relations campaigns

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This article focuses on an innovative approach to teaching public relations campaigns courses in which students compete against students at other universities across the state. An understanding of active learning and how competition may heighten a student's overall educational experience is explored. This is followed by two case studies of tobacco reduction competitions and how these competitions impacted students' motivation to succeed, quality of work, and overall pride in a job well done. In addition, educators learn how to create and assess such a course.

## INTRODUCTION

Within the public relations curricula, much attention has focused on the campaigns course and ways to develop relationships between students and "real world" clients. Some courses are designed so that each group works with a different client while others incorporate a competitive element in which there is one client and multiple groups competing against one another. Which method of teaching is best is certainly up for debate. What has not been explored in either course design is the role of competition and the impact it has on the quality of work. Literature on the effectiveness of competition as a pedagogical tool was debated in the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, the debate went silent and the literature has been scarce and practically non-existent in the public relations discipline. Furthermore, the impact of competition on creating quality campaigns has not been tested beyond classroom walls.

This article studies the role of competition as it moves beyond the classroom and into a public arena that enriches real-world experiences beyond what the traditional campaigns course allows. The specific research question addressed in this article asks to what extent the role of competition plays in the quality of work in campaigns courses. This article briefly reviews active learning and competition and illustrates how both are implemented in two statewide campaigns. The impact of competition is assessed by students, faculty, client, and agency members. This article hopes to reignite the debate on classroom competition and to help educators explore new ways in which to teach and assess campaign courses.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Active Learning* – College students have various avenues for gaining intellectual, developmental, and professional growth. The focus here is to highlight active learning, one of several theoretical frameworks associated with a learning-by-doing approach. Active learning, the umbrella term for hands-on experiences such as internships, service learning and individual and group projects, has become the focus of an invigorating pedagogical tool (Rentner, Wood, Bolan, & Smith, 2003). However, under the broad term of active learning there are many concepts and theories of learning that can be used to achieve active learning.

Active learning is best described as a learning style in which students apply what they are learning (Meyers & Jones, 1993). Many years prior to this, active learning was discussed, but it was only in the 1980s that university college classrooms began to really incorporate this style of learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). This theory works under the assumptions "that learning is by nature an active endeavor and that different people learn in different ways" (Meyers & Jones, 1993). This style allows for students to gain a clearer understanding of concepts and processes explained during a lecture. This teacher-student collaborative process places the student at the center of the learning process and removes the teacher from a strictly hierarchical position (Lewis & Williams, 1994). Active learning is a large pedagogical concept and may be better understood by investigating ways in which this process can be demonstrated.

*Competition in the Classroom* – Competition in the college classroom can be traced back to the 1950s, but little discussion seems to take place today. Some scholars discussed competition in class as it related to motivation (Clifford, 1972), while others study student competitiveness in relation to getting a task accomplished (Lowell, 1952). Dowell (1975) noted that while many studies have investigated competition in the classroom, no conclusive evidence has been provided, and there are great disagreements in the research. For example, Rudow and Hautaluoma (1975) noted that competition is an important social motivator that can produce both positive and negative consequences. They found that competition with others and oneself both resulted in a greater quantity of work than not competing at all; however, when considering the quality of work performance, more errors were produced when competing with others. Those not competing at all and those competing with themselves had the same number of errors. The researchers concluded that if the quality of work is important, then competition with oneself may produce the best results (Rudow & Hautaluoma, 1975). Ryan and Lakie (1965) focused on competitive and noncompetitive performance in relation to achievement motive and anxiety. In this experiment the authors discovered that individuals, whose motives to avoid failure were greater than their motive to succeed in a non-competitive situation, performed better.

While other studies exist, the overall body of literature on competition is dated. The most recent research, dating from around 1995-2003, focuses on cultural differences among college students and the role culture plays as it relates to competition (Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995; Tang, 1999; Ryckman, Van Den Borne, & Syroit, 2001). Although competition is addressed in these studies, the focus is on culture and not competition specifically.

Other related, yet still inconclusive or conflicting research includes the examination of competition as a positive pedagogical tool for college students when administered through web-based and computer media (Fu, Wu, & Ho, 2009) and competitive instruction and its (lack of) influence on class climate (Ghaith, 2003). There is also a fair amount of research examining competition in primary and secondary classrooms (e.g., Black, 2005; Madrid, Canas, & Ortega-Media, 2007) through various modes of instruction such as vicarious

learning (Chan & Lam, 2008), equal opportunity tactic computer games (Cheng, Wu, Liau, & Chan, 2009), and mathematics modeling competitions (Munakata, 2006) that have suggested positive outcomes from competitive activities in the classroom. Simultaneously, there are also discussions in the academic community about the need to limit competition in the classroom to foster more effective learning environments (Chakraborty & Stone, 2009), that competition can worsen self-evaluation after failure (Lam, Yim, Law, & Cheung, 2004), and that for gifted students, competition can serve a positive purpose with short-term goals but has long-term drawbacks in the form of diminishing creativity and reducing intrinsic motivation (Cropper, 1998). Apparently, studies still yield mixed findings of the effectiveness of competition on student learning and quality of work produced. Overall, what is apparent is that research focusing on the role competition can play in the college classroom in linking academic concepts to real-world contexts are limited in quantity and therefore warrant further examination.

***Value of Client-Based Projects*** – One of the best ways to learn and practice public relations is through an intensive experience in dealing with a real public relations problem. Students draw on everything they have learned before--in their public relations courses and elsewhere--to diagnose, propose, and implement, and evaluate solutions to that problem.

Studies on the value of client-based projects have been documented. For example, Wickliff (1997) studied the value of client-based projects through a survey of 73 former students in college-level technical communication courses and found that years after graduation, students found the experience had increased their social negotiation skills in the areas of problem definition, research, analysis, and reporting.

This experience also provides a valuable pedagogical method that engages and enlivens both students and faculty, especially when students know that others may use their work. It prepares students transition from college to work in public relations by helping them to better understand their community and its needs.

When students finish this type of course, they will likely have the satisfaction of knowing they successfully coped with an authentic public relations work experience as challenging as any they are apt to encounter for years to come. Moreover, students will have actually contributed to the problem-solving effort of some worthwhile organization. This effort often includes measurable changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

***Research Questions*** – The main research question addresses the role that competition plays in campaigns courses. More specifically, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: To what extent does competition impact student motivation to succeed personally and as members of a team?

RQ2: To what extent does competition influence the quality of work?

RQ3: To what extent is competition related to pride that students feel in a job well done?

## METHOD

***Competition Beyond the Classroom*** – The following case studies will bridge the themes of active learning and competition in campaign classes. Educators will learn how the courses were designed and what impact these have had on student learning outcomes. Woven into this process are the actual health campaigns themselves. Both campaigns focused on tobacco reduction.

***Campaign One: Tobacco Reduction*** – The development of the first health campaign competition began with a partnership among a university faculty member, a public relations agency, and the client of that agency. The client, the Ohio Tobacco Prevention Foundation (OTPF), expanded its high school tobacco prevention campaign to the college level. The goal, according to the president of a nationally-known public relations agency in Cincinnati, was to implement a cost-efficient, strategic plan to engage college students in dispelling tobacco misperceptions and lowering the campus smoking rate. Eight colleges and universities from around the state participated in developing, implementing, and evaluating a campaign aimed at increasing awareness of Debunkify (the client's theme) and correcting tobacco misperceptions held by their peers. The higher education institutions who participated conducted their campaigns either through a public relations course or their student chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). This institution developed its strategic plan through its PRSSA chapter.

Each institution developed its infrastructure that included at least a 10-member student team, a faculty member, and either a class or public relations firm within PRSSA. All strategic plans were due on the same day, but implementation could not take place until the client had signed off on the proposal. At that point, the client provided $5,000 to implement the program.

On this campus a newly-created, one-credit hour, 200-level course titled, "Specialized Public Relations Projects" was created for spring semester to implement the campaign. The campaign used social norms theory as the underpinnings of its "No More Ifs, Ands Or Butts" campaign to correct misperceptions about tobacco use and lower the smoking rate.

Strategies for the campaign included collaboration with Student Health Services, implementation of social norms messages, and the use of student and local media. Tactics ranged from informational pieces and promotional items to special events including participation in the student health fair and creation of "Kick Butts Day." Social media, especially the use of Facebook, were also part of the campaign mix.

The survey that was administered prior to developing the strategic plan was re-administered later that semester. The results showed a significant correction of misperceptions students held about smoking attitudes and behaviors and an overall reduction in the smoking rate at this campus.

All eight universities presented their campaign at the agency's office at the end of the semester. The judges consisted of representative from the OTPF and the public relations agency. Also present were the team members from the competing institutions. Following deliberations, the judges presented awards for research, most creative tactic, and overall winner. The overall winning team received $1,000 toward their PRSSA chapter or department.

Both the client and the agency deemed this competition as a success. They credited peer-based programming as a powerful means of developing messages and programs to reach the hard-to-reach college audience. They also viewed the campaigns as a cost-effective way to reach their target audience. By investing $5,000 in each of the eight collegiate campaigns, the client's messages reached thousands of college students (up to 20,000 on this campus alone), and on most campuses corrected misperceptions and lowered the overall smoking rate. The client viewed the overall $40,000 as an excellent investment (R. Miller, personal communication, July, 2008).

***Anti-Tobacco Campaign: Part Two*** – The next academic year, students were once again challenged with participating in the OTPF competition. The focus shifted from dispelling misperceptions to exploring the impact of cultural infiltrations on college students' intention to smoke or not to smoke. These influences included manipulation, modeling, passive exposure, tobacco glamorization, and profiling. Fourteen colleges and universities participated. At this university, students participated through the Specialized Public Relations Project course. The goals, as identified by the OTPF, were to increase awareness of Debunkify, to increase awareness of tobacco's cultural infiltration with key audience, and to generate Web traffic to Debunkify.com (your college/university). Because the OTPF client deemed the previous year's competition so successful, each participating institution was given $8,000, $3,000 of which was to be spent on media buys. Once again, the client and agency deemed these campaigns as highly successful.

## RESULTS

***Student Assessment*** – The role competition played in these campaigns is critical in determining successes and failures of this unique approach to a campaigns course. The instructor, client, and agency provided face-to-face and written assessments from campaign development through evaluation. Assessment tools used to measure the role of competition included regular classroom discussion, reflexive journaling, and end-of-semester student evaluations. The instructor and a graduate student independently reviewed these materials and categorized

them by themes they saw emerging. The researchers compared their results and agreed that three main themes emerged from the discussions and journal writings: motivation to succeed, quality of work, and pride in a job well done.

*Motivation to Succeed* – RQ1 explored the relationship of competition and student motivation to succeed. Almost all students wrote that they were highly motivated to succeed both personally and as a class. Several students discussed how their fear of failure or "looking stupid" in front of other universities motivated them to put more time and effort into this course than others. Students expressed frustration if they felt a team member was not as highly motivated as they were. Specifically, if one team member did not make a deadline that it affected the entire team's morale. Students said they learned skills about dealing with difficult people and motivating others to do their best.

Interestingly, students rarely talked or wrote about their grades. Instead, they described how client deadlines, especially the final presentation deadline, served as the primary motivators for doing well in their class. Students indicated that they were more interested in beating particular universities than they were about their grades. Some compared themselves to the David and Goliath battles with the smaller university taking on the bigger one. Others compared this experience to a sporting event in which the underdog was not expected to win, but did.

Students also described how they would check other university Web sites daily to monitor their campaigns. Some students said they were discouraged at times in seeing strategies and tactics that they felt were stronger than theirs. Most, however, said that daily monitoring of competitor Web sites only increased their motivation to succeed.

Almost all students described their drive to win as a stronger motivator than fear of failure. They also cited making their university look good among the competitors as a motivating factor. One student particularly impacted by the campaign said, "…it inspired me to change my sequence from print to public relations."

*Quality of Work* – RQ2 asked how competition influenced quality of work. While one student described the course as "rather labor intensive," students said that the quality of work produced was extremely important to them, especially because other universities would be seeing it. Some felt frustration with teammates who they thought were not performing at the same level as they were. Most students agreed that they were very meticulous with their writing, editing, and design work knowing that it had to be approved by the client and agency prior to implementation. Mistakes or lack of quality work meant a delay in the implementation process, so precision was essential. Again, students cited the competing schools Web sites as an incentive to produce quality work. For example, students could monitor the number of visits and "likes" of other universities' Facebook pages. When students felt that they were falling behind other schools, they updated their Facebook page more regularly and added more interactive activities such as giveaways to those who visited the site. The majority of students also said that high quality work was more important than in any other class because their work had a real-world impact in saving lives by reducing the number of students who smoke.

A few students commented on the connection of the quality of work to the grading system. One student said, "We did not have any exams, but what we did do was work on committees, and it was a great learning experience because we actually worked on what we wanted to do with our lives." Another student said, "I liked the grading system…graded on the amount of time we put in the campaign, peer evaluations, instructor evaluations and even input from the client and agency all influenced our overall grade."

*Pride in a Job Well Done* – RQ3 explored the relationship of competition and pride in a job well done. Overwhelming, students cited a sense of pride in their work. While they often complained about the time commitment outside of the classroom, they said they were willing to put in more time because they were proud of their campaign. Students working on the tobacco prevention campaign described a sense of pride on their "Kick Butts" day when students were lined up earlier than the start time to receive free T-shirts and when they gained over 2,000 signatures on a banner from non-smokers.

One student described the course as "the most unique class I've ever taken…"

In both campaigns, students were able to see the impact of their work. Survey results showed corrections of misperceptions and changes in attitudes and behaviors. One student wrote, "I felt not only a sense of accomplishment at the end of the semester but a sense of pride in knowing what we did had a true impact. It may sound dramatic to say we saved lives, but we did." Another student said, "I've never felt as proud of my work as I did in this class. It wasn't about the grade; it was about making a difference." One student summed up the experience saying the campaign experience "will look wonderful on anyone's resume and we all worked really hard on it. I loved the idea that this was a class…"

What also emerged was a sense of pride students felt about their university. They talked about wanting to make a positive impression among other universities. One student said, "It wasn't just about me anymore. I needed to make our public relations program look strong and [institution] look good. After all, we were representing [institution] and I took a lot of pride in that."

## DISCUSSION

*Suggestions for Implementation* – Laying the foundation for this type of course took about six months of advance planning. For this specific course, an alumnus of the program who worked at an advertising/public relations firm contacted the instructor based on knowledge of her research expertise in college student health campaigns. Because the focus was on developing and implementing a public relations campaign, the agency suggested using campus Public Relations Student Society of America chapters (PRSSA). At this university, the PRSSA chapter developed the plan during a fall semester, but as the semester progressed, students invested less time in this project to focus on graded courses. The agency and client adjusted for this by allowing either PRSSA chapters or classes to participate. For spring semester, a specialized skills course was created to implement the campaign. This course has now served as the foundation for three collegiate competitions. The agency was able to generate interest from colleges and universities through personal invitations followed by formal on-campus presentations to students and the instructor. Word-of-mouth about the success of the first year led to an increase from eight institutions participating in year one to 14 in year two.

Those who wish to pursue this type of collaboration should first look to their alumni base to identify graduates who work in agencies to identify if they have clients who work with social issues such as tobacco, alcohol, and organ donations. The agency should be able to help the client understand the cost-effectiveness of this partnership. For example, an investment of $5000 by the OTPF reached over 19,000 students on this campus alone. With eight universities participating in the first year, the investment of $40,000 by the OTPF produced campaign messages that reached over 160,000 college students.

*Faculty Assessment* – Moving the campaign course experience beyond university walls has great value to educators as well by allowing them to apply new assessment tools. For example, instructors and students received feedback at each stage of the public relations process by the client and agency. This helped to identify strengths and weaknesses and to allow for adjustments throughout the campaign. Comparative scores and written comments from the client and agency at the end of the competition also provided valuable feedback.

This course introduced a new level of assessment that allowed educators to compare various aspects of their course with others throughout the state. For example, viewing other university presentations and reading their proposals provided opportunities to discuss and refine presentation and writing skills. An overall ranking, scores within in each section of the written proposal, and written feedback provided comparisons within each step of the public relations process.

*Conclusion* – Students, educators, clients, and agencies may benefit from a competitive campaigns course. From a client and agency perspective, collaboration with a university can be a cost-effective approach to developing and implementing campaigns that reach large target audi-

ences. For students, the role of competition may be a motivator to succeed, produce quality work, and take pride in a job well done. For educators, state level campaigns will provide new assessment tools that include client and agency feedback and comparative data of campaigns courses at other universities.

While this study was limited two state-wide campaigns, the results indicate that the role of competition strengthens the overall experience in the campaigns course. Future research could explore differences that competition may play in a statewide campaigns course compared with a more traditional classroom course.

As more and more higher education institutions focus on collaborative efforts, co-curricular programs, and community engagement activities, this innovative approach opens doors for future collaborative efforts with non-profit clients, public relations agencies, and educators at other institutions.

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