

Teaching Public Relations

Management Students Can Learn to Manage Others

by Todd Hunt, Rutgers University

In recent years, much of the literature and research concerned with teaching public relations has focused on innovative methods for making experiences more "realistic" to students—realistic in the sense that the students see the consequences of the decisions and suggestions they make. An analysis of more than 100 syllabi from public relations courses gathered from leading programs showed that instructors were enlisting practitioner support in order to make assignments and projects parallel with tasks and situations encountered in the "real world."¹

Simultaneously, the emphasis in the public relations curricula at leading institutions is increasingly focused on teaching the *management* skills that will enable graduates to move from from entry-level technical positions to those that require supervision of the activities of others.² In her review of syllabi for public relations management courses, Toth found that instructors strive to find projects that will expose students to the realities of applying management theory to problems and opportunities posed by real clients.³

Arnoff and Baskin have suggested, however, that because practical public relations activities designed for use in college classroom use the counseling firm as a model, students do not learn how to operate within the structure of large organization where "faceless" communication is carried on through memos and reports.⁴ Thus "they will be unqualified for the jobs that wait them...not because they lack the communications skills necessary to do the job, but because they lack an understanding of how to apply their skills in organizational settings."⁵

What has been largely missing in designs for public relations management courses is the opportunity for advanced students to gain experience by preparing programs that others will execute—and then taking the responsibility for supervising the execution of those programs. This article describes an innovative mechanism for enabling management students to learn by directing the activities of students enrolled in the campaigns course.

EXPERIENCE—THE BEST TEACHER

The emphasis in the Department of Communication at Rutgers has long been on experience-based learning. Curriculum design has facilitated situations where students enrolled in one course are involved with the activities of students in other courses—sometimes merely as consumers or evaluators of the information produced, but other times as supervisors or managers responsible for coordinating the work of other students. Organizational communication

students, for example, move on to an "Administrative Communication" course where they are responsible for the management of a simulated corporation called SIMCORP that takes on a project suggested by the department chairman or dean of the school. The students must treat the entire School of Communication, Information and Library Studies as a "community" and must analyze the information needs and behaviors of their audiences.⁶

Beginning in the Spring of 1990, the concept of experienced-based learning was expanded in the Public Relations Management course at Rutgers to require the students in the course to research a situation, prepare the broad outlines of a program, and then—most importantly—to supervise the execution of that program by another class.

The management students are senior majors completing their studies in the Department of Communication. The classes they supervise—in a course called *Message Design for Public Relations and Organizational Communication*—consists of juniors and seniors, some of them non-majors, who are learning the mechanics of preparing an information campaign. The management course is taught by a tenured faculty member, and the campaigns course is taught by an adjunct instructor who is a public relations professional. Both courses require students to work with outside clients.

CASE STUDY: BLOOD DONOR PROGRAM

During the 1990 summer session, the clients for the two-course project were the American Red Cross and New Jersey Blood Services, which are concerned about lagging blood donations in the state. Only about 2 percent of Rutgers students and faculty contribute in the blood drives held on campus. The client hoped that a program to publicize the need would help increase the donations.

Following is the sequence of events, showing the role played by the students at each step in the process.

¹—*Conducting Research and Analysis*: The instructor and the students in the management class applied public relations theory to an analysis of the situation. Whereas the client had requested publicity in support of a blood drive, the class decided that modifying behavior should be the long-range goal. The problem was then restated by the class: "Plan and execute a long-range program that will change the culture of Rutgers University and socialize incoming first-year students to the idea that blood donation is the norm on campus." Focus groups were held to determine student attitudes about blood donation. A meeting was held with the clients to

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