



Teaching Public Relations

Published by the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Edited by Professor Todd Hunt, Rutgers University

No. 30, February 1993

Topics Course Provides Unique Learning Experience

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Students undertaking the study of public relations are both fascinated and overwhelmed by the diverse types of companies and organizations that use public relations in their day-to-day operations. They learn in the Introduction to Public Relations course, for example, that "practitioners work in diverse fields and seek to reach hundreds of different publics . . . virtually all commercial and noncommercial organizations that deal with the public, from computer manufacturers to hospitals to art museums, need public relations guidance and service."⁽¹⁾

While this fact clearly shows students that their career options are by no means limited, it also brings with it the challenge of demonstrating the nuances of public relations practice as they relate to specific types of organizations -- and doing so effectively in the framework of a basic public relations curriculum.

To help address this concern, Utica College of Syracuse University last year launched, on an experimental basis, its first-ever Topics in Public Relations course. It was the primary intent of this course to give upper-level (juniors and seniors) students keen insights into the responsibilities and challenges facing public relations practitioners in various organizational settings, and to better define the specialized areas of practice that exist within these settings.

Designing The Course Framework

In structuring the course, it was decided to try something a little different from the three-hour, full semester approach. The semester was broken down into three, one-credit mini-sessions, with each session focusing on public relations in a certain industry. This proved attractive to students, because they could register for one, two or all three mini-sessions and earn from one to three credit hours, based on their interest and scheduling constraints. For the most part, students enrolled in all three, but several did opt to take only one or two of the sessions.

The three areas of study selected for this first Topics course were "Corporate PR," "Sports PR & Promotion" and "Health Care PR." The Corporate PR session was a logical choice, since much of the basic instruction provided in public relations courses puts the student on the "outside looking in," akin to an agency practitioner. Offering the corporate session enabled students to get a perspective of the role of a practitioner who deals with both external and internal publics and represents a single cause or corporate philosophy.

Both the Sports and Health Care sessions were selected based on a variety of factors, such as a review of trends in the public relations field which have prompted growth in these areas. For example, a recent Public Relations Journal article quoted one health care executive as saying, "Health care is a driving

force in our economy. Health care is a big issue. The challenge has fallen to us in public relations to move the dialogue (on health care issues) forward."²⁾ In addition, an examination of recent Utica College job placements showed an increase in the number of public relations graduates accepting positions in the health care area, with 10-15% of all 1991 and 1992 Utica College graduates working in health/medical public relations jobs.

Establishing A Workable Format

The Topics course was offered once a week, for three hours, in the evening from 6:30 to 9:20 p.m. This made it easier for students to schedule, particularly if they only registered for one or two of the sessions, since they could avoid conflicts with required courses offered only at specific times during the day. Offering the course in the evening made it possible for continuing education students and practicing professionals to register as well.

The three-hour format presented many benefits, but it created special problems, too. For instance, how would the time be used fully yet creatively? And, how would information be shared in such a way to promote lively discussion and spark interest? The approach taken was twofold, consisting of (a) **lecture and discussion** during the first half, and (b) a **guest speaker** during the second half of the class period.

Lectures and discussion were initially based on a comprehensive reading list provided to students the first day of class. Readings were assigned from public relations textbooks, professional journals and news magazines, housed in the campus library. Examples of readings for the Corporate PR session included chapters from various texts on Corporate PR, Internal Communications and Community Relations, as well as contemporary articles from recent issues of *Public Relations Journal* pertinent to the session. A good first reading was the article written by the chair of the PRSA Corporate Section in the "Forecast 1992" issue, which summarized the challenges for corporate public relations practitioners in the year ahead. Students were asked to read particular articles prior to the class period, at which time main points were reviewed and discussion ensued on some of the more provocative issues. Frequently, related items from the news were distributed during discussion periods to stimulate dialogue.

In the Sports PR Session, an article entitled "Why do we pay 29 cents for a stamp: Postal Service spends millions to sponsor Olympics," prompted some interesting discussion on the public relations benefits and potential pitfalls of sports sponsorships. (A more complete reading list is included at the end of this article.)

Role playing also was used in each session to give students practical experience tackling conflict situations and ethical concerns. In the Health Care session, a scenario was created asking for public relations counsel on a hospital's crisis involving allegations of drug abuse by a noted surgeon. After the class had a week to review the case, a student was selected to play the role of a public relations director, with the instructor portraying the hospital's top administrator, asking for specific advice on how to best handle the situation. The exercise generated extensive comment and feedback on ethical issues such as confidentiality, honest media and employee relations during a crisis and social responsibility. In the corporate section, students were put into situations where they had to confront firsthand some tough ethical choices in dealing with constituents and the media, such as denying allegations of wrongdoing (at management's insistence) known to be true to protect the company "at all costs," versus serving public interest through responsible truthful action. This activity led to much discussion of another "choice"-- that of developing a reputation as a public relations "yes man or woman" who simply does what he or she is told, or as a true counselor who helps management understand the negative, long-term implications of an action based on unethical, deceptive behavior.

Securing Guest Speakers

Following the discussion period, the final half of the class featured a public relations professional who talked about his or her particular job in a given work environment. Cultivation of speakers began by first identifying some of the more common public relations specializations in each of the three mini-course areas. For example, employee communications and community relations professionals were targeted for the corporate section, while (college) sports information and sports marketing/public relations specialists were among the speakers in the Sports PR session.

The next step involved making a list of potential speakers, looking primarily to those professionals with a more direct connection to the college who would be receptive to participating at little or no charge. These included primarily Utica College alumni with public relations degrees, and members of the PRSA Central New York Chapter, the sponsoring professional chapter of the Utica College PRSSA. As a result of this approach, a group of top-notch professionals including several senior-level managers was assembled and no fees were incurred. In the future, it is likely some budget monies will be requested to cover items such as travel expenses to draw interesting speakers from outside the central New York area

Special care was taken to connect the lecture and discussion topics that evening with the speaker's comments. After concluding a discussion of community relations and issues management during a Corporate PR class, a community relations manager from the New York Power Authority outlined her job, detailed a current crisis involving environmental factions, and addressed how public relations was being used as a tool to manage the conflict. All in all, this created a central focus for that class period, and the practical knowledge shared by the speaker worked to enhance the students' understanding of fundamental concepts reviewed earlier. Students responded very positively to the speakers, asking many questions both during and after the presentation. A few students also developed potential internship opportunities as a result of this professional contact.

Making the Grade

Certainly, a key consideration in setting up this new course was deciding upon the projects to be assigned and the grading procedure. Because a large share of total class time was devoted to discussion, each student received an individual participation grade based on both attendance and consistent in-class involvement.

The main class assignment was a group project which asked students to develop a program plan for a designated "client." The corporate session project focused on a local brewery's concerns with being more environmentally-conscious in its operations and the community, while Sports PR students developed plans for a local hockey club facing increased negative criticism of its name, the Utica Devils.

Following a preliminary briefing by the instructor, students conducted fact-finding interview with a company public relations representative (this person also was the first scheduled guest speaker in each mini session). At this time, students were provided with a packet of information containing media clips, brochures and other pertinent background material.

The student teams were then asked to move ahead and develop a public relations program plan to include the following:

- Situation analysis, including a summary of any additional secondary/primary research conducted on the subject and leading to a specific definition of the public relations problem(s) and implications,
- Program goal and objectives
- Other suggested research methods necessary for fully understanding public opinion,
- Targeted publics,

- Initial thoughts on strategies and tactics,
- Recommendations on timing, budget considerations and evaluation techniques.

After three to four weeks, student teams met with the client on the fifth and final class of the mini session to make formal presentations. Ultimately, this project allowed public relations students to utilize a variety of necessary skills in the areas of research, planning, problem-solving, teamwork and presentation development. Each client for whom projects were undertaken said these plans were discussed with management of their respective organizations, and several of the recommendations were fine-tuned and implemented.

Making It Work!

The Topics course can truly be one of the most interesting and rewarding teaching experiences possible, and attention to a few necessary points can help to best ensure success.

1) Encourage Discussion

This is the perennial teaching problem -- getting students to speak up and participate. Make an extra effort to get students talking in this course. Provide timely, thought provoking readings, and assign readings in advance to allow students adequate time to organize their thoughts and insights. Tie in a discussion of relevant current events whenever possible.

2) Prepare Speakers -- and Keep it Simple!

Ask each speaker to prepare a brief (5-10 minutes) introduction on his or her professional background, company history and background, etc. After this introduction, *be prepared* by having a list of questions ready which are specifically designed to stimulate in-depth discussion of the practitioner's responsibilities and to reinforce the key instructional points.

This "interview" approach can be very effective, as it reduces preparation time for these busy professionals, provides for a more personal and engaging look at the person's job and promotes more involvement by the students who are encouraged to ask questions at any time. The instructor plays a key role here, especially in keeping the dialogue on track and in focus.

It is important for the instructor to provide in advance and in writing to the guest speaker an outline of expectations, including some basic speaking points. Also, consider having a back-up plan -- maybe someone working on campus who could speak on short notice, or an alternate in-class assignment or role-playing exercise should the scheduled speaker need to postpone or cancel. In securing speakers, consider that the students like hearing from both public relations veterans as well as younger practitioners who can talk about some of the challenges these soon-to-be graduates will face from a more recent perspective. Setting up these presentations can be a time-consuming job, but the end result for students is a better understanding of what life would be like working for a particular type of organization and in a particular capacity, which helps them to formulate goals and gain a greater sense of direction in their career.

3) "Go With The Flow!"

If a particular reading or subject leads to an involved, intense dialogue, don't simply abandon it because there is something else in the lesson plan. Stick with it to allow all those interested to contribute their opinions. And, always make sure any discussion ends with a summary to bring together the main public relations points that are part of the teaching plan.

Flexibility is especially important in planning the guest speaker portion of the class. On one occasion, a spokesperson for a major hospital was set to visit the class. A few days before her visit, accusations had been made that a patient at her hospital died as a result of receiving the wrong medication. As a result, negative headlines filled the local press and eventually made their way to major New York City media. With this in mind, it became important to contact the speaker and ask if this timely issue could be addressed during the class period. She agreed, and her visit was one of the most talked about and well received of the semester.

Results and Recommendations

First, it should be noted that while Utica College plans to offer this course periodically as an elective, (U.C. currently offers six required courses for majors), other programs could consider using this Topics approach as an alternative to a Public Relations Campaigns or Practicum course. Topics might be a suitable addition to public relations programs in need of a fifth course to meet accreditation requirements.

Because this was a first-time experimental offering, there also were some "learning experiences" from an instructional standpoint. A post-assessment of the course and its design pinpointed some specific areas in need of refinement:

1) Scheduling of Speakers

Thought is being given to featuring the speaker at the beginning of the three-hour period, or at least a bit earlier in the period. This would provide more adequate time immediately following the presentation to discuss the speaker's comments and get instant feedback from students on what they learned.

2) Expansion of Reading List

Much of the reading list included excerpts from public relations textbooks and journals. With an increasing volume of literature now available, there is a need to add more substance to the reading list through the addition of items such as public relations research abstracts and news articles relevant to the specific courses being taught.

3) Course Workload, Requirements and Grading

It is difficult to sometimes know if a course workload is too light or heavy, especially for a one credit course. Further discussions are planned with other instructors who have been offering one-credit courses for some time to assess their various course requirements. An additional writing assignment- possibly a progress report in memorandum form on the group project -- might also be required of each individual in the future.

In the area of grading, it is always challenging to give "participation" grades because such decisions run the risk of being subjective. However, there is a need for such a participation grade because the course is heavily focused on class discussion. Some ideas being considered here include designating a specific portion of the written plan to a particular individual in each group, assessing individual as well as group performance in the client presentation, and requiring peer reviews from members of each group.

Ultimately, the real proof of success came from student evaluations of the Topics in Public Relations course. The great majority of students felt this course made a valuable contribution to their public relations education and knowledge of the field. Many of the students remarked that they enjoyed and felt comfortable expressing their opinions and ideas freely and openly in this "real-life course" which involved "real-life business problems." In response to a question asking for a rating of the overall quality of the course, one student said, "Great! It helped me decide what I want to do."

Endnotes

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2. Focus on Health Care: Public relations can facilitate debate on US health care. *Public Relations Journal* 48 (March 1992): 4.

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Last updated March 1997..