

# TEACHING PUBLIC RELATIONS

## Using New Technologies in Public Relations Curricula

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This study presents findings from an electronic mail (e-mail) survey of heads of public relations majors, sequences, or emphases at U.S. colleges and universities to determine what computer technologies these programs teach and use and what computer resources they have (Curtin & Witherspoon, 1999). A second phase of the study will comprise a survey of employers of new graduates to assess their needs and expectations of new hires and will compare those with the preparation students are receiving in their public relations programs.

Many studies have examined the coorientation, or lack thereof, between the body of knowledge educators teach their students and the skills professionals believe students should master (AEJMC, 1995; Davenport, 1990; Gunaratne & Lee, 1996; Grunig, 1989; Heath, 1990; Johnson, 1992; Wakefield & Cottone, 1987; Yovovich, 1996). In 1988 the Public Relations Body of Knowledge Task Force listed 32 publications, dating back to the 1970s, that examined the status of public relations education relative to the needs of the workplace.

Recent concerns have centered on the use of new technology by public relations practitioners (Cameron, Curtin, Hollander, Nowak, & Shamp, 1996; Curtin & Cameron, 1995; Haas, 1995; Information, 1995; PR Journal, 1995; Ross & Middleburg, 1997) and whether schools of journalism and mass communication are adequately preparing students to function in cyberspace (Guiniven, 1998; Gustafson & Thomsen, 1996; Singer et al., 1996; Smethers, 1998). Anecdotal evidence suggests public relations practitioners are depending on entry-level hires to provide leadership in the area of new technology. In a survey of top public relations executives of Fortune 500 companies, good writing skills, oral communication, and an understanding of an organization's goals and objectives rated ahead of being able to use desktop publishing or Internet skills, but one respondent also noted: "With young people, it's a given that they know the Internet and desktop publishing. They're tools of their generation, just like typing was for ours. It's their commonness that makes them less important" (Guiniven, 1998, p. 54).

Based on these concerns, exploratory research questions were designed to establish the baseline of computer technology available in public relations curricula nationwide.

1. What computer hardware and software are public

relations students exposed to as part of their public relations education?

2. Who makes the decisions on what kinds of hardware and software will be used within the public relations program? Are the decisions based on the presumed future professional needs of the student? Or are they based on larger, institutional concerns?
3. Does the relative size of the program and number and makeup of the faculty make a difference in the computer technology available?

### METHOD

**Survey Instrument.** This study reports results from a larger, 41-question survey instrument comprising seven categorical questions about the public relations program, sixteen 5-point frequency-scaled questions concerning new technology skills and competencies in the curricula, eight categorical questions about available computer technology, and eight demographic questions. A final open-ended question invited respondent input. (Please contact the authors for a copy of the instrument, if desired).

The measures were pretested with 11 public relations educators. Many respondents also provided copious additional written information of a frank nature, contributing to increased reliability and validity. This phenomenon is consonant with the work of Kiesler and Sproull (1986), who found that responses to electronic surveys provoked less courtesy bias and more "honest" answers.

**Sample.** All 264 colleges and universities in the 1997-98 Directory for the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication listed as having a public relations emphasis, sequence, or major or a Public Relations Student Society of America or International Association of Business Communicators chapter were targeted. Seven schools were subsequently dropped because they no longer offered a public relations program, leaving 257 schools. The names and e-mail addresses of the head of the public relations sequence or the primary public relations educator at each school was obtained from their Web sites and the AEJMC, ICA, and PRSA membership directories. Names and/or viable e-mail addresses could not be determined for individuals at 41 schools following

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a rigorous search, leaving 216 schools total.

Notification of the survey was e-mailed to each school. In some instances the premailing resulted in a request for the survey to be e-mailed to a more appropriate respondent; other individuals requested that the survey be faxed or mailed to them because of technical difficulties with their e-mail systems. The survey was sent out approximately three days after the original notification with a brief introduction and directions on how to reply via e-mail or by printing out the survey and mailing it back. A follow-up message and second copy of the survey were sent to non-respondents approximately two weeks after receipt of the first survey. Response times varied from several hours to several weeks, with most respondents replying within one to three days of receipt.

## RESULTS

**Respondents.** A total of 135 individuals replied, for a response rate of 62.5%. The schools they represent ranged from small, private liberal arts colleges to flagship universities of large state systems. A total of 59 respondents (43.7%) took advantage of the e-mail reply function to readily elaborate on their numeric responses. The results presented here, then, include not just the statistical analyses of the data but exemplary quotes received as well.

Four respondents (3%) reported no use of computers in their public relations classes. These respondents were employed in a variety of settings. Their only shared characteristics were having fairly large numbers of undergraduates compared to the number of faculty and having a small to nonexistent graduate program.

Of the remaining 131 respondents, 43.5% were female and 56.5% male. They ranged in age from 27 to 68 years of age, with 48 as the median. Almost 80% had been with their current organizations 15 years or fewer, and not quite 75% had been involved in public relations education for the same length of time. From these statistics and from comments volunteered on the surveys, it was evident that many respondents had started teaching in a related area and had taken on public relations courses after the start of their professorial careers or were heads of departments in charge of the public relations classes who did not themselves teach public relations classes.

Respondents were asked to indicate all applicable job titles: 8.4% were instructors, 26% were assistant professors, 35.1% associate professors, and 24.4% professors. Sequence coordinator was indicated in 24 (18.3%) cases, and department head in 39 cases (29.8%). Correlation data indicate that the number and position of women in supervisory positions in public relations education is similar to that of women in the profession (Wright, Grunig, Springston, & Toth, 1991). Being female significantly correlated with being an instructor ( $R = -.25$ ;  $p = .003$ ), with having fewer years experience in public relations education ( $R = .24$ ;  $p = .007$ ), and with being younger ( $R = -.21$ ;  $p = .045$ ). Women were significantly more likely than males to be instructors ( $t = 2.99$ ;  $d.f. = 129$ ;  $p = .000$ ), to have other job titles such as intern coordinator ( $t = 1.53$ ;  $d.f. = 129$ ;  $p = .002$ ), and not to be assistant professors ( $t = 1.12$ ;  $d.f. = 129$ ;  $p = .023$ ) or department heads ( $t = 1.14$ ;  $d.f. = 129$ ;  $p = .021$ ). Older respondents were significantly more likely to be

male ( $t = 2.03$ ;  $d.f. = 91$ ;  $p = .001$ ) and to be associate or full professors and department heads.

**Public Relations Programs.** Most respondents worked at schools with a public relations sequence (39.3%) or emphasis (17.8%). Stand-alone public relations departments accounted for only 3.7% of respondents' work venues. Public relations and advertising departments accounted for 6.7%; and public relations and journalism departments were somewhat more common at 9.6%. Twenty-three percent fell into other categories.

A total of 42.2% of respondents reported having one or fewer full-time public relations educators in their programs. As one respondent explained, "Our full-time faculty . . . are primarily assigned to other emphases, but are qualified to and do teach courses in the pr sequence." Another 30.4% reported having two full-time pr educators; together these two categories accounted for over two-thirds of respondents (median = 2). Another 11.9% reported three full-time pr educators, with totals up to eight accounting for the remaining 15.6%. The distribution for part-time educators was similar, with a skew toward slightly higher numbers of part-time faculty. Over three-fourths (77.5%) of respondents reported having three or fewer part-time pr educators in their programs, while among the remainder, programs had up to eight part-time pr educators.

Just over one-third (35.3%) of respondents reporting having 50 or fewer undergraduates enrolled in their public relations programs; another 27.8% reported having 51 to 100 undergraduates. The remaining 36.8% reported having 101 undergraduates or more, with 5 respondents indicating their programs enrolled more than 200 undergraduate public relations students. Over two-thirds (80%) reported having fewer than 10 masters students (including those with no graduate program). Another 10% had 11 to 20 masters students; the remaining 10% were evenly split between those with 21 to 30 masters students and those with more than 30.

**Computer Hardware, Software, and Decision Makers.** The most common computer system for classroom use was the Power Mac (55%). Next most common was an IBM or IBM clone (51.9%). Respondents marked all systems that applied; thus another 45% noted that they had regular Macintosh systems in their labs as well. Two respondents marked other systems, such as a Vax mainframe; no respondents marked that they did not know what systems were in use.

While no IBM users volunteered that they were switching to Macintoshes, four respondents noted they were planning to switch from Macintoshes to IBMs. Some of the comments volunteered on the issue by those reporting having Macintoshes include the following: "Mac is not 'real' business world—I tell them [students] to become fluent with PCs"; "We are in the process of creating better computer labs. These will be PC based and use Windows 95 and NT"; "More and more of my students use IBM or IBM compatible with Windows, so since we have a Mac lab they can't use the . . . software outside of the lab." Another noted the trouble of trying to keep up: "We are struggling to keep up with technology. We have made significant strides in the past two years, but the truth is that you can't possibly be cutting edge. By the time you purchase the stuff it

is out of date."

When asked who decided which computer systems would be installed (see Table 1), most respondents said it was the decision of the head of the department (34.9%). A total of 16.7% said a technology committee decided, and 15.9% said the Dean was responsible for the decision. A centralized office was marked by 15.1% of respondents; no other category was noted by more than 10% of respondents. A significant correlation existed between having PowerMacs and the distance of the decision maker from the department; in other words, the higher up the administrative scale the decision maker, the more likely it was that the public relations sequence would have PowerMacs for student use ( $R = .177$ ;  $p = .048$ ). One respondent pointed out that it was the donor of the hardware who decided just what that hardware would be—the decision was not an internal one.

**Table 1. Primary Decision Makers for Computer and Operating System Purchases**

Primary Decision Maker	Computer Systems (%)	Operating Systems (%)
Central university or college purchasing office	15.1	22.0
Dean	15.9	15.0
Business manager	1.6	0.0
Head of department or sequence	34.9	27.6
Individual professors	9.5	9.4
Technology committee	16.7	17.3
Other	6.3	8.7

While respondents were aware of what hardware was in their labs and would volunteer a specific preference, they were less sure of themselves when indicating what operating systems were in use. While only 6.9% said they did not know, it was obvious that many more should have marked this category, with some respondents indicating they had Macs running DOS or specifying operating systems such as Microsoft Word, Netscape Navigator, and even the American Heritage Dictionary. One respondent frankly stated:

I am not the most computer-literate guy you'll ever meet, although I know enough to survive. I am pretty much obliged to rely on others in the School of Journalism to handle most of the computer-related stuff such as equipment and programs and the proper utilization of them.

Of those marking a specific operating system category, Mac OS was the most commonly mentioned (63.4%), followed by Windows (all versions; 52.7%). A total of 9.9% indicated DOS, and 6.9% marked OS/2. Because respondents marked all that applied, the percentages total more than 100%. Women were significantly less likely to report using DOS ( $t = 2.81$ ;  $d.f. = 129$ ;  $p = .000$ ) and to know what operating system was in use in general ( $t = 1.43$ ;  $d.f. = 128$ ;  $p = .004$ ).

When asked who decided which operating system to use the answers were somewhat different than those given for hardware, with the decision appearing to be somewhat further removed from the department level. The highest proportion of

respondents (27.6%) said it was the head of the department's decision, and another 22% said it was the responsibility of a university-wide body. A total of 17.3% said it was a technology committee decision, and 15% said it was the Dean's responsibility. Given that the hardware chosen often dictates the choice of operating system, the lack of correlation between operating system decision makers and hardware purchase decision makers may be indicative of the confusion on the part of respondents noted above on just what constitutes an operating system and on which platforms they run.

A total of 37.7% of respondents did not list specific software programs that students should know. A few volunteered their reasoning: "skills are transferable," "there is always new software," and "variety is too diverse." One suggested some general skills and noted that "I do not believe in requiring specific brand name software, per se." Of the 61.9% that did recommend specific software, desktop publishing programs were mentioned most frequently (QuarkXpress and PageMaker), followed by word processing (Word, WordPerfect). Many respondents mentioned presentation software, such as PowerPoint, and Photoshop. Statistical analysis software was mentioned infrequently (SPSS, 6 mentions; SAS, 1 mention), and time tracking software (Time Slips) and project management software (PR Pro) were mentioned only once each. Also receiving few mentions were Web browsers, databases, spreadsheets, and drawing programs (see details in Table 2).

**Table 2. Frequently Mentioned Software Packages Students Should Master (N = 131)**

Software	No. of Mentions	(%)
QuarkXpress	35	(26.7)
PageMaker	25	(19.1)
Microsoft Word	17	(13.0)
WordPerfect	10	(7.6)
Photoshop	14	(10.7)
PowerPoint	8	(6.1)
Excel	7	(5.3)
SPSS	6	(4.6)

## DISCUSSION

From the survey results, it is apparent that AEJMC public relations programs occupy marginalized positions within many colleges and universities, which may restrict the power they have to instigate technological change. The low number of stand-alone departments, the high number of public relations programs classified in "other" sequences, the large number led by instructors, and the low number of full-time faculty and relatively higher number of part-time faculty suggest that these programs do not occupy a position of relative power. As such, they may be dependent on the whims of their superiors for necessary resources and lack the ability to set technological standards. What is clear is that many leaders of public relations education have firmly embraced technology as a part of the public relations curriculum.

Furthermore, although respondents indicated a high degree of commitment to graphic and visual skills, respondents indicated a shift toward IBM computers from Macintoshes,

which have traditionally been associated with better suitability for graphics work. The results suggest the dominance of Windows in "the real world" is having an effect in the academy as well. Particularly noteworthy was the comment that IBMs were "real world." The second phase of this study is designed to test just such an assumption.

Also noteworthy is the fact that the further away from the public relations program administrator and higher up the administration chain hardware decisions are made, the more likely the decision is to adopt PowerMacs, quite possibly because they represent the lowest common denominator that could be used by a variety of departments and support a variety of applications. Public relations programs lacking decision making power over hardware and software, then, may reflect a less than optimum learning experience for their students because of hardware constraints. An increasing concern only touched on in this study and requiring further work is the trend toward proprietary agreements between institutions and hardware and software companies that enforce one standard for the entire campus. In these instances, many programs will have to adjust as best they can or do without.

The results do not suggest, however, that bigger, in terms of program size, is necessarily better. In line with Gustafson and Thomsen's (1996) suggestions for ways in which new technologies can be integrated into the curriculum without straining existing resources, many respondents from smaller schools and state universities not known for their wealth reported innovative and heavy use of technology skills in the classroom. Resources, then, were not a limiting factor in what could be accomplished in the classroom and the curriculum.

Larger issues, however, remain regarding the appropriate role of technology within the public relations curriculum; how technology is and can be used to enhance pr students' intellectual, creative, and theoretical abilities; and whether professionals are willing to hire or even grant internships to students who do not provide technological skills as part of their package. All of these issues warrant future in-depth research to further augment findings of the report on public relations education jointly sponsored by the National Communication Association and the Public Relations Society of America (Stacks, 1998). The second phase of this study will address the technological skill expectations of professionals who are hiring new public relations graduates.

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