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Hootsuite University: Equipping Academics and Future PR Professionals for Social Media Success

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Abstract

Public relations educators are challenged with developing practical approaches to teaching social media. This study explores the use of Hootsuite University, a social media education and certification program that has reached more than 20,000 students. The impact of the training is examined through three angles. First, the study explores the value to students who participate in Hootsuite University within a classroom setting. Researchers at five universities used a pre-/post-test survey with students in their social-media-related courses in the spring, summer and fall semesters of 2014 and conducted in-depth interviews with former students who had completed Hootsuite Certification. Second, through in-depth interviews with employers who hire for digital positions, the study highlights the impact of Hootsuite University training on professionals who hire recent graduates. Finally, the study examines the partnership between professors and the Hootsuite organization. Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with Hootsuite staff and analyzed the results of Hootsuite's annual professor survey conducted in fall 2014.

Keywords: Social media education; social media certification; Hootsuite University

Professional organizations grapple with maintaining strong social media engagement, adjusting to changing social platforms, and continually training and preparing employees for social media crisis and engagement (Brown, 2014). In today's social environment, organizations experience real-time consequences for their employees' actions. These consequences carry strong implications for the public relations efforts of these organizations. For example, Krispy Kreme received intense backlash over its "Krispy Kreme Klub" promoted via Facebook with the acronym "KKK" (Healy, 2015). On the other hand, The Salvation Army leveraged a social media viral conversation to engage communities around the issue of domestic violence (Tan, 2015). The question is no longer whether brands will need to engage in the ever-changing landscape of social media, but how to best prepare employees to monitor and manage those conversations well. The connection between social media and public relations is clear. In a study by Altimeter Group's Brian Solis et al. (2013), 66% of their respondents said that their corporate communication/public relations department contained staff dedicated to social media. According to the 2014 Generally Accepted Practices Study (known as GAP VIII), Swerling et al. noted an increase in public relations practitioners using social media techniques above traditional media relations. The top four media techniques used by the 347 senior communicators who responded to the 2014 GAP survey were (in order): "content created to be spread by social media," Twitter, online video production, and Facebook (Swerling et al., para. 6).

Researchers have explored how public relations practitioners have increased their use of social media (Wright & Hinson, 2014), and educators are challenged with developing practical pedagogical approaches to teaching social media in the shifting digital world (Fratti, 2013). The rapidly changing digital environment has paved the way for many academic and popular texts on the topic of successfully leveraging social media (e.g., DiStaso & Bortree, 2014; Kerpen, 2011; Shih, 2011). Yet, an important but understudied component in how brands can prepare for social media success is how university programs can equip students to enter the professional world with robust social media acumen.

To address this gap, the current study explores social media education certification programs as a tool for enhancing professional social media education in the college classroom. Specifically, we examine Hootsuite University, a social media and Hootsuite dashboard education program that has reached more than 20,000 students (K. Jung, personal communication, March 27, 2015). Our purpose is to identify the impact of Hootsuite University training on U.S. communication majors. Data related to the perceived value of the program was gathered through surveys and interviews of professionals, current and former students, and professors. Future implications and directions for social media pedagogy in public relations classes are also discussed.

Literature Review

Public Relations & Social Media

The goal of public relations is to build mutually beneficial relationships (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.). With the advent of social media, public relations practitioners have learned to use social media to effectively build relationships in the digital world. Breakenridge (2012), for example, argues that social media are tools that public relations professionals should be engaging with to enhance relationships. This is often accomplished by identifying key influencers in the social sphere and developing conversations that will then reach a larger social community (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011). The growing focus on public relations and social media led to Smith (2010) proposing the social model of interaction, which looks at user initiation as a key facet in the relationship-building dimension of social media. In other words, public relations in the social media world rests on an understanding that conversations, activities and dialogue are driven by publics and not organizations (Macnamara, 2010). This audience-focused approach requires public relations professionals to be skilled with social media tools in order to be effective in the digital landscape.

Social Media in Universities

Due to the growing demand to utilize social media and the need to equip students to effectively engage in the digital world, the use of social media within higher education is a rapidly growing area of research. To date, various aspects of social media use in the classroom have been studied, including research focused on Facebook (e.g., McCorkindale, DiStaso, & Fussell Sisco, 2013; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009), Twitter (e.g., Anderson & Swenson, 2013; Forgie, Duff & Ross, 2013; Hosterman, 2011; Junco, Heibergert & Loken, 2010; Kassens-Noor, 2012; Rankin, 2009), and social media in the curriculum in general (e.g., Davis III, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & González Canché, 2012; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2010; Santovec, 2006; Seaman &

Tinti-Kane, 2013). However, no published academic research has focused specifically on social media software certification programs, such as Hootsuite University, in the university classroom.

Student Perceptions of Social Media

With the penetration of social media into seemingly all facets of life, scholarly interest has sought to explore how college students use social media in a variety of ways (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Joy & Katherine, 2008; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). Along these lines is growing scholarly examination into the perceptions of students who use social media in higher education (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty, 2010; So & Brush, 2008). Yet, scholarly research has not examined student perceptions regarding the professional application of social media and its role in communication careers. Meanwhile, popular publications have highlighted the growing need for students to be trained in the professional uses of social media (e.g., Brodock, 2012). Despite evidence of the growing need for students to understand professional social media standards, formal research is lacking as to how students, professors and professionals perceive social media education and its role in preparing students for success in communication careers.

Certification Programs for Public Relations Students

Just as Merriam-Webster explains, certifying someone says they have, "met the official requirements that are needed to do [a] particular type of work" ("Certified," 2015). For many years, higher education institutions have used certifications as a component of information technology learning outcomes (Randall & Zirkle, 2005; Rob & Roy, 2013). The popularity of these certification programs may be due to the percep-

tion that such certifications will assist in employment for students (McGill & Dixon, 2007). Indeed, Rob and Roy (2013) found that current students and alumni believe that certifications will help build a better career trajectory. Some of the certifications offered regarding information technologies, in addition to Hootsuite University's Certificate (Hootsuite, 2015), include Code Academy (CodeAcademy, 2015), Google Analytics (Google, 2015); Hubspot (Hubspot, 2015); and Cision (Cision, 2015). Building on this research, the present study investigates the use of the Hootsuite University certification program in college communication classes to uncover perceptions of its value in educating students in the professional use of social media.

Hootsuite launched "Hootsuite University" in 2011 to help people understand how to use social media better for business and how to use Hootsuite's dashboard to maintain social media feeds. According to Hootsuite (2015), that program has trained more than 50,000 people. In 2012, Hootsuite established its Higher Education Program to help educators and their students. Since Jan. 1, 2013, this program has been used by 20,600 students and been implemented into 790 classes (K. Jang, personal communication, March 27, 2015). Through the program, Hootsuite provides professors free access to tools to effectively teach social media while also empowering students with training that helps close the digital skills gap within the current workforce. This tool allows faculty a resource to incorporate into their courses, which is particularly beneficial in a public relations industry that is so rapidly changing. The fast-paced developments can be one of the tension points faculty face when tasked with effectively teaching social media in a university setting.

Social Media Professions for PR students

As previously mentioned, the rapidly growing world of social media garners attention from the professional and academic worlds. Within the PR industry, there is an increased focus on the ability of organizations to properly prepare, monitor and evaluate social media efforts (Breakenridge, 2012; Kerns, 2014; Treadaway & Smith, 2010). However, organizations are not simply looking to mechanize social interaction—they recognize that the value of social media is two-way communication with real-time audiences (Kerns, 2014). Instead, organizations desire to customize digital conversations into compelling dialogues that engage unique audiences and industry partners (Brito, 2014; Scott, 2011; Swann, 2014). These desires directly relate to the perception hiring managers have of students entering the digital profession (Aders, 2014; Mitchell, 2015).

Recognizing the industry need for qualified professionals, the growing body of research in the academy on how to prepare students with digital expertise, and the lack of research currently available on the impact of Hootsuite University and other certification programs for public relations students, this study will explore the following research questions:

RQ1: Will students feel more confident with social media after completing Hootsuite training?

RQ2: How does Hootsuite certification impact students' job readiness?

RQ3: Will students' recognition of the importance of social media education increase after completing Hootsuite training?

RQ4: What aspects of Hootsuite training are the most valuable to students?

RQ5: How do communication students think social media will impact their careers?

RQ6: What type of social media education do students still feel they need after Hootsuite training?

RQ 7: What are the perceptions of Hootsuite Certification among industry professionals who make hiring decisions?

RQ 8: What thoughts do professors who have used Hootsuite University have about the program?

Method

To address the research questions, interviews and online surveys were employed.

Interviews

First, a mix of email, phone, and face-to-face interviews were conducted as was appropriate to the time or distance restraints or the stated preference of the interviewee. In the event of phone or face-to-face interviews, text-transcripts were taken during the interview. Purposive sampling was employed to identify students who had completed the Hootsuite University program and employers familiar with Hootsuite University.

In regard to student interviews, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with persons who had completed new-media-related communication classes taught by one of the researchers between 2012 and 2014. Each interviewee was 18 years or older, resided in the United States, and had completed the Hootsuite University program as part of the course curriculum. All participants were given the opportunity to opt into having their name used in the study. Those who opted out were given pseudonyms.

In total, 28 interviews were conducted with students/graduates from five universities, which will be referred to as University A, B, C, D and E: six from University A, three from University B, eight from

University C, seven from University D, and four from University E.

Researchers recruited potential student interviewees directly. While 28 is a small sample when compared to the 20,600 students who have completed the program (K. Jang, personal communication, March 27, 2015), these interviews represent a variety of students from different backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, prior social media knowledge and experience, academic standings, degree majors, as well as various geographic locations across the United States.

In addition, interviews were conducted with employers who hire for digital positions, including current or former employers of students who had completed Hootsuite Certification. Employer interviewees were recruited via the researchers' prior knowledge of an employer who had hired a Hootsuite Certified student or who had expressed interest in Hootsuite University. The employers interviewed included the CEO of a small public relations firm, the managing editor of a university magazine, the president of a full-service marketing firm, the director of student affairs marketing at a university, the broadcasting director for a Junior A Tier II hockey team, and a university web communication manager. In total, six employer interviews were conducted. While there were many students to pull from, there were far fewer employers available to interview. There are a few reasons for this: only some students who have completed Hootsuite have positions that directly utilize social media; sometimes the person who hired the student is no longer with the organization; some employers were nonresponsive perhaps due to busy schedules; and some students chose not to provide employer contact information.

Semi-structured interviews were used enabling the interviewer to be flexible and ask follow-up questions to further explore interviewee responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The interview protocol with students began with a broad question about how the Hootsuite University training impacted the interviewee's life and/or work. The interviewer also asked what parts of the training program seemed most and least helpful. Lastly, the interviewer asked what suggestions the interviewee had for students taking the Hootsuite training in the future.

Using the semi-structured interview approach, interviews with employers of students who had completed Hootsuite University training adhered to the following protocol. The employer interviewees were asked how Hootsuite University training in the college classroom impacted a student who interned or worked for the employer. The interviewee was also asked what portions of the student's Hootsuite University training seemed most helpful to the student's employment. The interviewer then asked if, and in what way, a student candidate's certification status with Hootsuite impacts the employer's impression of the candidate.

Semi-structured interviews were also used to gather data on employers who hire for digital positions, but who have not yet hired a Hootsuite Certified student. These interviews enabled the researchers to examine the wider understanding of Hootsuite Certification among the industry. These employers were asked about their familiarity with Hootsuite University, their perceptions of the program, and how an applicant's certification might impact hiring decisions.

Applying the Glaser and Strauss (1967) constant comparison method, researchers qualitatively coded interview transcripts to allow for the emergence of themes. Due to lack of scholarly research into perceptions of the Hootsuite Univer-

sity program, a qualitative, grounded theory approach is appropriate for in-depth exploration of perceptions of its utility in social media education.

To analyze the interviews, two researchers independently read all student transcripts and two researchers read all employer transcripts to establish familiarity with the content and to allow themes to emerge. Second, through repeated analysis and refinement, and in consideration of the research questions, each coder individually established initial themes and evidence in the form of quotes, through an open-coding procedure (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Third, the researchers compared the completed individual analyses to identify categories and discuss category dimensions. The researchers discussed any inconsistent initial coding to reach a consensus on data coding procedures and ensure validity and reliability of category coding. From this discussion, a coding scheme was created and the researchers revisited the data to ensure consistent coding of the transcripts. Lastly, the researchers reconvened to confirm findings.

Surveys

In addition, surveys with a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions were conducted with students who had completed Hootsuite University, as well as professors who had used Hootsuite University with their students. A pre-certification survey was administered in the beginning weeks of the semester to students enrolled in a new media course that was going to participate in the Hootsuite University program. Once students had completed the Hootsuite University training, a second, post-certification survey was administered. In total, 164 students responded to the pre-certification survey between Feb. 7 and Nov. 5, 2014, and 129 students responded to the post-

certification survey between March 24 and Dec. 3, 2014.

To attain professors' perceptions of Hootsuite University, the researchers also examined results from a survey performed by the Higher Education program within Hootsuite. The survey was launched online in September 2014 and targeted professors who had or were currently using Hootsuite University in their classes. The Hootsuite personnel shared the results with the researchers of this project. In total, 45 professors from varying universities responded to the survey. Text responses from both student and professor surveys were analyzed using the same constant comparison approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as applied to the interviews described above. As a result of the analyses, the research team arrived at the following results. Descriptive statistics were performed using Qualtrics to offer additional insight into the research questions.

Results

This research gathered feedback from students, professionals and professors regarding the use of Hootsuite University training in undergraduate communication classes. The responses and emergent themes are shared below in reference to the research questions posed.

Research Question 1: Social Media Confidence

Regarding the first research question, a comparison was made between the pre-certification survey and the post-certification survey for the question: "What is your comfort level on social media?" On the pre-certification test given to current students in a course using Hootsuite University, students self-reported an average comfort level of 3.94 (on a scale of 1 to 5). Of the 157 students who responded to that question, 38 were very

comfortable, 81 were comfortable, 30 were neutral, 7 were uncomfortable and 1 was very uncomfortable prior to completing their certification. The post-certification survey showed an increased average comfort level of 4.06 (*n* = 124). Of the 124 participants who responded to this question on the post-test survey, 42 said they were very comfortable, 62 said they were comfortable, 12 were neutral, 1 was uncomfortable, and 7 were very uncomfortable.

From the in-depth interviews with students who earned Hootsuite Certification in previous semesters, a theme emerged that these students had a better understanding of the professional application of social media tools, concepts, and strategies. Sub-themes included better understanding of personal social media use and a feeling of empowerment.

Professional social media understanding. Alex Ptanchick, a graduate of University E and currently working with USA Today's social media team, described her experience with Hootsuite University: "one day you're learning about the importance of keywords and tagging and the next you are finding out how important it is to have a professional, engaging bio" (personal communication, February 9, 2015). Ptanchick said, "There's really nothing quite like Hootsuite University in the sense that someone is actually telling you what to do, how to do it and why it's important that it's done."

Adelyn Biendenbach, the social media coordinator for the Florida Panthers hockey team and another graduate of University E, discussed how she uses Hootsuite in her job:

> I use it for social listening to see every tweet from and about our players and prospects. The season at a pro-sports team really is year-round with

long hours and crazy busy days, I was able to so quickly jump into and adapt to this atmosphere because of the extensive training I already had in the Hootsuite software. (personal communication, February 2, 2015)

"Rebecca" from University D interns at a non-profit and a small business. She said her experience with Hootsuite University gave her the tools to demonstrate "what I can do for them, how I can prove results, and how I will stay organized, ahead, and proactive. For the most part, I use [Hootsuite] to schedule messages, report metrics, and search for key words" (personal communication, May 4, 2015).

Personal social media understanding. Besides professional understanding of social media, students felt that Hootsuite University served as a tool for growth and development of personal social media literacy, skills, and understanding. Some of the students had not heard of Hootsuite before taking their social media class. Nicole Gabriel from University B (personal communication, September 14, 2014) shared:

> I had never heard of … "social media management" before hearing about Hootsuite. When I heard one of our assignments for the course was to become Hootsuite Certified I actually panicked. When I dove into Hootsuite and found out I could look at my Facebook wall and Twitter feed I got pretty excited.

"Clark," a student from University D, felt that the program allowed students to explore all of the possibilities of social media and how they could use it not just for their professional career, but personal as well (personal communication, June 1, 2014). There were specific lessons within Hootsuite University that struck a chord with students. University D student

"Thomas" pointed out that, "On the personal end, the sections of the program regarding etiquette and ways to use social media have left more of an impression for me" (personal communication, June 14, 2014).

Empowerment. Knowing the strategic applications and tools allowed students to feel emboldened and ahead of the game. Students felt that Hootsuite enabled them to have a positive impact on their organization's social media presence or strategy.

Leadership. In one vein, students felt the knowledge they gained enabled them to stand out to their employers. They said the certification helped them feel confident in their ability to engender change within the organization. Emily Maher, a graduate of University E and a reporter for Hearst Television, mentioned that "[Within] the first 6-8 months I was there, they started using Hootsuite at work. Everyone else had a learning curve, so I was already ahead of the game" (personal communication, Feb. 5, 2015). Gisselle Kohoyda, social media coordinator for SwimSwam and University B student, talked about how she became a leader in social media and felt empowered to help her employer:

> Most people are afraid to pass off such a large portion of their company to a 23-year-old kid with an Instagram account, but after I elaborate my formal training and my experience, they are almost relieved to be passing off a piece of their business, especially to someone who actually knows what they are doing and has a very concise plan on scheduling that will benefit them (personal communication, January 27, 2015).

University B student Nicole Gabriel (personal communication, September 14, 2014) talked about how she became a social media leader within her nonprofit organization. Gabriel said, "Before I came into the picture, all . . . staff members were posting on our Facebook and Twitter page. This made for a confusing wall and newsfeed that didn't mesh well together." Because of her training, she was able to shift social media management to Hootsuite.

Confidence. Similarly, students gained confidence in their abilities. This confidence had an impact in the students' outputs. For example, Laura Decorte from University C said, "It also made me more confident when working with social media platforms for my job. I understood better what helps companies increase their visibility online, and how to use hashtags and keywords to really improve engagement" (personal communication, June 18, 2014).

Robin Karber, a graduate of University A and now director of marketing for a credit union, said, "While in school, it did help me feel more comfortable and hirable, as if I was better rounding off my skill set" (personal communication, January 26, 2015).

University C student Amber Amaya said, "Practical training exercises helped me become more confident when using Hootsuite. Learning how to utilize geocodes and geo-searches helped me tailor my client's Twitter posts to best interact with the local audience" (personal communication, June 9, 2014).

Cassandra Acosta, also a student from University C, discussed how she was able to use Hootsuite for her work with a nonprofit organization and how she has recommended the program to other nonprofits. Acosta said:

> I feel confident explaining what Hootsuite is and how organizations can best use the program. My Hoot-

suite certification also has helped me in my current job . . . because I am able to show the non-profit's director how Hootsuite would be beneficial to use in order to save time and to reach a more specific local audience (personal communication, May 19, 2014).

Rachel Snyder, also from University C, said, "After the training, I was more confident in my ability to schedule posts, and I even scheduled tweets for the month-long January term we have" (personal communication, Jan. 15, 2015).

Research Question 2: Hootsuite Certification and Job Readiness

In addition to the question of confidence levels after Hootsuite training, this research looked at certified individuals' job preparedness. Eighty-two percent of the students who responded to the post-certification survey indicated they thought the social media education they received through Hootsuite University would aid them in their job search.

Through the open coding of the in-depth interviews of Hootsuite-certified former students, several themes were found related to job readiness. In addition to improved confidence, other themes involved developing a social media skillset, understanding the professional application of social media, and the ability to find internships and jobs. For example, "Clark" said, "In the case of jobs, it does look good to have knowledge in Hootsuite. A lot [of] employers and businesses especially in marketing and public relations require applicants to have prior knowledge of all social media" (personal communication, June 1, 2104). Another student commented, "Because of our Hootsuite training in class, I have been able to explore a whole new career field as I prepare to graduate and enter the

workforce" (C. Acosta, personal communication, May 19, 2014).

Laura Decorte (personal communication, June 18, 2014) said, "I am currently employed with a marketing company, and I think [Hootsuite University] provided my resume and experience with an edge because I already understood this social media aggregate and understood how to make it work." George Lozano, graduate of University A, also talked about the value of Hootsuite Certification being on his resume: "It's on there .... I can say, I know social media. I can keep up with trends. It prepared me to know what's important, what they're looking for" (personal communication, January 26, 2015). Nicole Gabriel (personal communication, September 14, 2014) said, "it looks great to employers (especially if you're looking in the field I'm in) to be Hootsuite certified." Maggie Cunningham of University B, a copywriter and social media coordinator for CafePress, agreed: "Even just having the Hootsuite Certification owl emblem embedded onto my resume and LinkedIn accounts set me apart" (personal communication, January 26, 2015). Cunningham added, "It was a talking point in interviews, and a metaphorical gold star that really helped me stand out and show employers I was ahead of the game." Caitlin Tye, a graduate of University A, said Hootsuite University training "makes a communication degree more marketable whether you're selling a product or working with an organization" (personal communication, March 4, 2015).

"Lori," a graduate of University E, said "When I was hired, Hootsuite was very instrumental. . . it's the same tool we used at work to monitor our clients' account" (personal communication, February 23, 2015). In the job interview, "Lori" said she "was able to confidently say I was Hootsuite certified." She said, "They

were pleased to know that I already had experience. It definitely earned me some brownie points."

Research Question 3: Student Recognition of the Importance of Social Media Education

In a pre/post-certification survey, students were asked how important social media education was to them. The recognition of social media education's importance did not increase after Hootsuite University training. Ninety percent of the participants responded that social media education was important to them in the pre-test, and 83 percent said it was important to them in the post-test.

In addition, on the post-certification survey, students were asked how likely they were to recommend Hootsuite University to a friend, which also speaks to their valuation of social media education. On a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely likely), the average response was 6.62 with a mode of 8.

From the interviews, students expressed there were many opportunities available to them to apply what they had learned from the Hootsuite University program. Joshua Dominguez, a student from University C, said the training he received from Hootsuite University helped him with his job search "particularly because it has a certificate associated with the education process that can be produced for employers. The certificate helps me show employers that I am willing to go out and learn the necessary tools and skills needed" (personal communication, April 28, 2014).

There are even opportunities for creating a new role within an organization or brand if it does not have a social media presence yet. By having the strategic understanding and applied practice of Hootsuite, students felt this was a wonderful opportunity to capitalize on. Kohoyda said, "Even further, going to a business that doesn't have specific SM platforms and mission statements directed towards social media provides a skill that will give you the edge over your competition, the edge that says 'You need me to work for you, I am an invaluable resource'" (personal communication, January 27, 2015).

Research Question 4: Hootsuite Training Aspects Most Valuable to Students

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very little and 10 being very much, current university students who had just completed their Hootsuite Certification were asked to rate certain aspects of Hootsuite University. The elements are listed here with their average scores: Hootsuite Certification ($M = 7.29$), social media courseware ($M = 6.63$), Hootsuite dashboard courseware ($M = 6.43$), certified professionals directory ($M = 5.91$), and lecture series webinars ($M = 5.44$).

When asked on the post-certification survey what particular lessons were most helpful, students responded with a variety of opinions. Answers were open-coded to reveal themes. One of the most common topics was the Hootsuite dashboard itself. One student responded, "At first the ones that showed me how to maneuver around Hootsuite." Students also appreciated the opportunity to learn about the differences and strengths of specific platforms, including Google+ and LinkedIn. One student said, "The lesson that I found helpful to me was the lesson that dealt with all different kinds of social media. It really showed me things about some social media tools that I had no idea of how to do." Another student replied, "I like the videos that were specific to different social networks so it was easier to see what different content to post on each." Another pop-

ular response was the topic of professionalism and "the do's and don'ts of social media etiquette." Many students also mentioned the topic of monitoring or listening. One student said the most helpful videos were those "on the importance of why we monitor and how to monitor to listen to users."

Other areas mentioned repeatedly included "learning how to create posts and scheduling them to several platforms" and "tracking for keywords." Geolocation was another repeated topic. One student explained, "The lessons on location services inside of Hootsuite . . . I think that finding what people are talking about in my area will be very useful in my future."

Research Question 5: How Students Think Social Media Will Impact Careers

In the post-certification survey, students were asked an open-ended question about how they thought social media could impact their careers. All responses were open-coded to search for emergent themes. The overarching categories that emerged were related to how social media impact *getting* a job and *doing* a job.

Landing a job. Certain students saw social media knowledge as a key element on their resume. One participant said, "I believe social is the only way our job market is heading. Knowledge in this will increase your potential for job searches and strength in your job." Besides the importance of social media knowledge, some students recognized that even the location for job searches has changed. One student said, "I think social media can benefit the job search because nowadays many companies/organizations are posting job information online." In addition to knowing about social media and searching for jobs via social media, students recognized the ability to connect with others on social media.

Networking. One student said, "Social media can give you opportunities to meet new and important people." Another student commented, "In terms of getting a job, social media can impact the way I connect with people."

Skillset. Students pointed to social media skills as beneficial to their future careers. One explained that the current economy "creates the need for people with the skill set and knowledge in social media." Another respondent said, "If I am well rounded, it may give me an upper hand in the hiring spectrum. The more skills you have the better!" One student said, "I definitely think that having sufficiency in all platforms would be a great idea for all people entering into the job market. It will become vital in people graduating." Similarly, one student pointed to the benefit of that skillset: "Can give me an advantage against other people applying for the same job."

Appearance. For some, they noted the importance of not just social media skills, but the appearance of one's social media profiles: "I think it's a huge deciding factor on whether or not you will get a job. Most employers look on your social media accounts before hiring." Another student agreed: " I think that all employers look at every social media outlet that you have. So in that way, what I post can influence if I get a job or not." Closely connected to appearance was the reference to personal branding.

Self-Branding. One student said, "It can help create 'My brand.'" Another student replied, "If done right, social media can help share your personal brand and show future employers that you can help publicize their brand." One participant said, "I think that social media has the power to impact your image and brand on a broader level. You can show your per-

sonality and also your professionalism on one profile or even post." Another respondent said, "Social media can help us brand ourselves, and being educated in it can help us to be more marketable for future jobs."

In addition to the positive possibilities in personal branding, other students pointed to the caution needed. One said, "You have to be careful what you post and how you brand yourself." Another student agreed: "Employers will search you on various platforms. It's important to have a good online persona." Another participant explained, you "never know when an employer may choose to look up [your] profile on Facebook. I believe that if you present yourself well not only in person, but also in social media you are more likely to get a job."

On the job. Many of the students noted how social media will not only help them get a job, but it will be part of those careers. One student indicated the widespread need of social media knowledge: "Social media is becoming so important for companies. Every company or brand needs a social media presence and social media teams for these companies are growing." Another respondent discussed the uses for social media within business in general: "Social media can impact the way we gain customer perceived value, data information, and build a relationship with our customers." Similarly, another student said, "Social media allows for customers to feel heard, valued, and listened to when used correctly with business." One student expressed the usefulness of social media within the non-profit realm: "I hope to go into the non-profit sector, so social media (as a free and prominent resource) will be a huge part of reaching out to our audiences. We have to meet them where they already are."

Reputation. While many students mentioned the importance of watching what they post as they get ready to search for a job, one student suggested the need for continual vigilance: "If not wise when posting, it could end your career."

Networking. In addition to using social media to network to find a job, students mentioned networking within their jobs. One student said, "I use LinkedIn to help network with co-workers and potential clients." Another said, I can use social media to "connect with prospective clients/connect with consumers/get information to the public/promote." One respondent said, "It can impact [my career] by expanding contacts and networking, while promoting the non profit organization I hope to work for."

Expected in field. Some students pointed to the expectation of social media use in public relations. One student said:

> Being in the public relations field, social media will have a huge impact in my career. Social media is a great tool for directly communicating with the public to further understand their wants as well as their opinions on given subjects.

Another student said, "It is my career, honestly."

Research Question 6: Type of Training Still Needed

The survey also asked respondents what type of social media training they thought they still needed after earning their certification. Respondents were encouraged to select all choices that applied to them. The majority selected measuring social media analytics (64%) and education on social media for business (54%). Other choices were education on specific social networks (29%) and social media etiquette and responsibility (14%). They

were asked a similar question on the pre-certification survey to see what areas of social media education they thought they needed. Eighty percent of the respondents wanted education on social media for business; 61% on measuring social media analytics; 57% on specific social networks; and 47% on social media etiquette and responsibility. Most of the percentages were dramatically lower on the post-test survey, which suggests some of their educational needs were satisfied through the Hootsuite University training.

Research Question 7: Perceptions of Hootsuite Certification Among Industry Professionals

Through open coding of employer interviews, several themes emerged. First, having Hootsuite certification apparently gains students more credibility in the eyes of decision makers who are looking for social media interns/employees. Assistant Director of Brand Messaging and Content Strategy at University C, Brett McCracken, said, "A student's certification status definitely makes me feel more confident in their skills" (personal communication, February 16, 2015). According to Kim May, president of Nobox Creative, if she saw Hootsuite Certification on a resume, "I would at least want to interview this person. I wouldn't make the hiring decision based on it, but it would help" (personal communication, March 4, 2015).

Second, according to the professionals interviewed, Hootsuite University training provides verification that students have basic social media acumen. McCracken (personal communication, February 16, 2015) said, "It is a big plus to know that an applicant to a social media job has taken the time to develop their skills and familiarity with things like Hootsuite." When asked about seeing Hootsuite Certification on a resume, Web Communication Manager Trey Roach said, "If it were for a social media job, I would almost expect it. If it were for a web/marketing job, it would be a huge plus" (personal communication, March 6, 2015). Denis J. Puska, director of broadcasting/media relations for a local hockey team, said, "Having an intern come in with prior experience makes a huge difference and puts us ahead of the game right away, and it takes the stress off our staff" (personal communication, March 16, 2015).

Third, the Hootsuite Certification reportedly grabs employers' attention. May said it "would at least take my interest" (personal communication, March 4, 2015). Sandy Sponaugle, CEO of Platinum PR, said Hootsuite experience serves as a "conversation starter" in a job interview, and she discovered after hiring a Hootsuite Certified student that it "proved to be a value because it didn't require any training on my part. I could ask them to complete the task and then walk away from it" (personal communication, Jan. 22, 2015). Sponaugle said the certification also "immediately elevated them in an interview . . . because it is something that I don't have."

A fourth theme that emerged from the employer interviews was how Hootsuite Certification sent the message of being willing to learn. Employers suggested that those who have Hootsuite Certification illustrate they not only have social media proficiency but that they are driven to learn more. Finally, a theme emerged that employers do not know much of what the training entails, but they are impressed by the certification. For example, Puska said, "I don't know much about Hootsuite, but the fact that she is certified is huge" (personal communication, March 16, 2015).

Research Question 8: Perceptions from Professors

Forty-five professors who have used Hootsuite University in their classes responded to a survey launched by Hootsuite in September 2014. Thirty-seven of them were currently using Hootsuite University in class, and the other eight had used Hootsuite University the previous semester. These professors were asked how likely they were to recommend the program to other professors. On a scale of 1 to 10, the average response was 9.18, with 26 of the professors indicating a 10 (extremely likely). The survey then asked the respondents to select the best response for why they chose the score they selected. Choices included: learning opportunity for students (selected by 16 respondents), the opportunity for students to earn Hootsuite Certification (13), recognized in the industry (7), and high quality educational materials (7). The survey also asked whether providing the opportunity for Hootsuite Certification was an important factor in the faculty member's choice to participate in Hootsuite University. Forty-one respondents said it was an important or very important factor, while three said it was neither important or unimportant, and one said it was an unimportant factor.

Discussion & Conclusion

Several lessons can be taken away from this study of social media education. Overall, students felt that having a social media education program as part of class was important. While understanding the technical tools and tactics was essential, students also recognized the management-level opportunities that come with having this type of knowledge.

One particular result from the student surveys was surprising. Some students were more confident prior to certification than afterward. This response suggested Hootsuite University was a humbling experience for them as digital natives. In essence, students were facing somewhat of a "social media paradox" – students are considered to be digital natives, but they were perhaps uncomfortable in the realization of how much they did not know.

While some students felt overwhelmed and uncomfortable, others felt the training they received from Hootsuite University not only empowered them, but gave them the confidence needed to become a leader within their organization. Students not only felt they knew what the social media tools were, but also how to apply them strategically, which empowered them with confidence in knowing they were ahead of the game. Specifically, students felt the activities and lessons provided in the program allowed them to develop their social media skills and opened the door to understanding how this is applied in the professional field, as well as using these tools to help them find jobs and internships.

Empowerment and leadership benefits from social media education can also be applied for professors as well. Providing a tool and experience for students that is not only useful, but respected by professionals in the field, can help professors gain more acceptance in their respective departments, programs, and universities. Indeed, more programs across the nation have integrated social media into their curricula. Based on a 2013 survey by Seaman and Tinti-Kane, 41% of professors now use social media as a teaching tool compared to 34% the year before. With Hootsuite University being implemented in more universities and programs, this number will likely continue to rise.

Knowledge in social media is indeed power in today's business environment, allowing students to apply what they have

learned in the program to help make changes in the culture, business practices, and communication structure on social media for their respective internships and jobs. In a time where job competition is high, a rise in confidence in knowing new applications, strategies, and tools can be the difference for students between unemployment and becoming a rising star. Based on the post-certification surveys, students pointed to valuable training received through Hootsuite University, including the explanation of various platforms, professionalism, and monitoring/listening.

Limitations. Because of the anonymous survey method used and thus, an inability to have matched pairs, the pre-certification and post-certification data could not be tested for statistical significance. In addition, a larger sample size would be preferable to help generalizability, although the recruitment of students from five universities spread across the country should help. Finally, as with all interview and survey research, there is a chance of response bias. An attempt was made to mitigate that by offering anonymity on the surveys and using objectively worded questions in the interviews.

Future studies. Future studies could examine social media education over the long term, exploring what students judge as most helpful down the road. Other certification programs could also be studied (e.g., Google Analytics) and how they are implemented in the classroom.

In summary, professors must continue exploring the benefits and challenges within social media education for not only their students, but also among practitioners. Understanding the gaps in understanding and application of social media tools is going to continue to be a challenge for professors in social media classes; however, embracing sustainable education programs like Hootsuite University can provide public relations professors a current and beneficial tool to incorporate into their classes. Professors need to serve as a guide in social media education to help students know not only the personal use of social media, but the benefits of using these tools to accomplish their own future goals in the public relations field.

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"The Best of Both Worlds": Student Perspectives on Student-Run Advertising and Public Relations Agencies

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Abstract

Student-led advertising and/or public relations agencies have increasingly become an educational component of university ad/PR programs. Previous research has established the value that advisers see in the agencies, and this study reports student perceptions of agency involvement. The survey ($N = 210$) found that participants rated the opportunity to work with real clients, the importance of their universities having agencies, and the increase in their own job marketability as the most positive aspects of the agency experience. Participants said that the most highly rated skills that agency participation built were the ability to work with clients, working in a team structure, and interpersonal skills.

Keywords: Student-led agencies, public relations, advertising, skills

Student-run public relations agencies have existed for nearly 40 years. Self-identifying as the nation's oldest student-run public relations agency, PRLab at Boston University was founded in 1978. By 1989, eight student-run advertising agencies had been established in such places as the University of Oregon and the University of Illinois (Avery & Marra, 1992). By 2010, a study of student-run public relations agencies identified 119 such firms (Maben, 2010).

In the past decade, the student-led agency has increasingly become a component of university public relations and advertising programs. Bush and Miller (2011) found that nearly 60% of participating agencies had existed for fewer than 6 years and almost 15% of agencies had existed less than a year. Further, Busch (2013) reported that 55% were established after 2007.

Likewise, research about student agencies is also a relatively unexplored frontier. The available research examines the pedagogical value of the agency from the adviser or educator perspective. Many of the studies are qualitative. This study adds the student perspective of the learning experience to the existing literature.

In this survey, students and alumni report that the student agency provides an experiential learning opportunity that gives students the chance to apply the knowledge gleaned from the classroom to client work, performed in a professional environment with faculty adviser guidance. Participants reported their perceptions of how agency experience helped them develop skills required for employment in strategic communication fields.

Survey results indicate that campus-based advertising and public relations agencies can offer a powerful learning environment in higher education. The experience enables the development of

skills that are important to employers: teamwork, written and oral communication, and interpersonal skills, as well as reliability and problem-solving ability (Battle, Morimito & Reber, 2007; Commission Report, 2006; Paskin, 2013; Todd, 2009). This paper begins with a review of literature that has examined education in strategic communication, the value of experiential learning, and the growth and performance of student agencies. It continues by describing the survey methodology employed, sharing results, and discussing implications of the findings.

Literature Review

Strategic communication educators periodically receive input from industry professionals regarding skills requirements for entry-level practitioners. The Commission on Public Relations Education issued a report in 2006 (an update of an earlier report issued in 1999) titled *The Professional Bond: Public Relations Education for the 21st Century*. In both the 1999 and 2006 reports, the commission identified gaps between what public relations majors were able to do upon graduation and what PR professionals required of entry-level employees. Among the most desired attributes were writing, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Professionals deemed graduates lacking in all of these areas. The commission called on faculty to balance the teaching of writing skills with instruction in "higher order knowledge" like strategic thinking and management skills. Gaining practical experience was highly recommended and was named a key factor in students obtaining entry-level positions (Commission Report, 2006).

Several recent studies indicate that this gap continues to exist. Todd (2009) reported that PRSSA professional advisers thought skills taught in classes and skills needed in industry were mismatched. Todd said professional advisers placed higher value on "a curriculum that emphasizes practical experience in new media, internships, preparing students for their first job, and 'hands-on experience'" (Todd, 2009).

There is a wide divide between how recent graduates employed in entry-level public relations positions view their job skills and how their supervisors rate them, according to Todd (2014). Practitioners who had been working in the field for 2 years or less believed their performance to be average to above average on skills and professional characteristics. Supervisors rated them significantly poorer on all but two skills, social media and computers. The greatest disparity in technical skills was in the evaluation of writing ability, followed by oral and research skills. Of the 16 professional characteristics measured, the largest divide occurred in critical thinking, dependability, attention to detail, following instructions, time management and accepting responsibility.

Industry supervisors placed "real life industry experience in the classroom" as their top suggestion to improve professional performance (Todd, 2014). Entry-level personnel ranked that suggestion second after business etiquette courses. Obtaining multiple internships ranked as second for industry supervisors and third for entry-level personnel. Supervisors also suggested increasing opportunities for writing with constructive criticism and requiring students to gain more writing practice.

The professional expectations of integrated marketing communications practitioners mirror those required of dedicated public relations professionals. Students entering IMC fields should have strong communication skills, strategic and conceptual thinking, interpersonal skills and professionalism (Battle et al., 2007;

Beachboard & Weidman, 2013).

Professional application of new media tools has become essential to the practice of advertising and public relations. But, when asked to compare the importance of new media skills to traditional skills, professionals said a foundation of basic skills like writing, communication and strategic thinking should take precedence. Teaching traditional skills within the context of new media applications was considered to be ideal (Paskin, 2013).

Experiential Learning in the Curriculum

Kolb (2014) focuses on experiential learning and suggests that most disciplines would be well served to go beyond imparting factual information to helping students place the information in a conceptual framework so they can use it in varied settings. Experiential learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). In this approach, learning is a process of relearning that requires learners to adapt as they interact with their environments. Experiential learning connects learning, thinking, and doing in a continuous loop.

Experiential learning activities have long been available for journalism majors through working on a school newspaper or yearbook. This applied learning experience increases the likelihood that students entering the journalism field truly understand the discipline and secure a job immediately upon graduation, according to Feldman (1995).

Within the public relations and advertising curriculum, experiential learning is typically facilitated through the capstone campaigns course, internships, and service learning. Students rated a campaigns course as highly effective in helping them develop the professional skills of writing and editing, strategic planning, teamwork, research, client relations and managerial skills. They also ranked service-learning high for its ability to deliver an opportunity to apply course knowledge to the real world and to build confidence and leadership (Werder & Strand, 2011). Yet, the campaigns course generally provides minimal client contact. According to Benigni, Cheng and Cameron (2004) more than half of professors report having client contact only one to three times per semester. The class also tends to have short-term technical tasks that must be repeated rather than focusing on "evolved management function" (p. 270).

Muturi, An, and Mwangi (2013) write that students report a high level of motivation from service learning projects, viewing them as an opportunity to "learn about the real world outside the classroom" (p. 401). A key motivating factor could be the "desire to move away from hypothetical classroom situations and into a real-world setting as the site for education" (p. 400), suggesting they would have a positive attitude toward any project that would meet these needs.

Professionals ranked having an internship/practicum or work-study program among the top five out of 88 areas of public relations content (DiStaso, Stacks & Botan, 2009). But internships may be more task- than process-oriented, thus not facilitating higher-level knowledge (Neff, 2002). The student agency delivers a form of experiential learning that facilitates a "cycle of learning" where the learner "touches all the bases—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting" (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p. 298).

Growth in the Number and Size of Student Firms

An analysis of undergraduate student-run public relations firms on U.S. college campuses in 2010 identified 119 agencies

(Maben, 2010). Advisers representing 55 of these agencies responded to the online survey, reporting an average agency age of 9.36 years, with 22 having been in operation for 4 years or fewer. Thirteen had existed over 15 years, and the oldest was 37 years. Bush and Miller (2011) found that nearly 60% of advisers worked with agencies that had existed fewer than 6 years. Almost 15% of respondents advised firms that were less than a year old.

Busch (2013) analyzed the online presence of advertising and public relations agencies and found that only 19% of the analyzed agencies were established before 2000. More than half began after 2007. Busch found that agencies get larger over time. Seventy-five percent of small agencies (fewer than 25 members) were founded after 2007. All of the large agencies (more than 50 members) were founded before 2007. Taken together, these studies indicate that student-run agencies are a relatively recent trend.

Structure of Student-Run Agencies

Bush and Miller (2011) found that advisers of 51% of student-run firms described them as focused on integrated communications, followed by about a third primarily focused on public relations, and 9% focused on advertising. Agencies were evenly split between schools offering credit for participation and those that did not. Just over half operated out of journalism/mass communication programs, and 40% were student organizations, most commonly affiliated with a professional organization such as PRSSA. Just over a third had a dedicated workspace. The service most frequently provided for clients was social media (89.6%), followed by event planning (87.5%), and campus posters (85.4%). Full campaigns were implemented by 83% of firms.

Of business processes, the most common practices were weekly meetings (89.6%) and client contracts and staff orientation (at 77.1% each). Less than half used planning briefs or time sheets, and only 32.6% tracked billable hours. A majority of student agencies have implemented standard industry business practices such as job descriptions, approval and reporting hierarchies, an application and interview process, and client billing (Bush & Miller, 2011). These findings were supported by Maben (2010). Bush and Miller (2011) found that nearly 90% of agencies provide leadership opportunities for students. Fewer than half have creative teams or media directors. Nearly 60% invoice clients for their services (Bush & Miller, 2011). Maben (2010) indicated that nearly half of agencies charge clients for services.

Prior to 2009, publications about student agencies focused on case studies of individual firms (Swanson, 2011). Bush (2009) evaluated pedagogical benefits and suggested agency structures (or types) that were best prepared to deliver these benefits. Another focus of the study explored features that appeared to enhance agency sustainability. To provide a consistent platform for teaching and learning, student agencies need stability. More than 20% of the sample agencies in the Bush and Miller (2011) study had gone out of existence and revived, a few more than once. Bush (2009) suggested that agencies with the greatest likelihood of longevity had well-established structures with teams and job titles, and used business procedures including job applications and performance assessments. Additionally, clients were charged for services and the firm had a dedicated office space. Academic course credit and set meeting times provided accountability for student performance. Some students were paid. Faculty advisers

were compensated, generally through a course release or overtime pay. Services provided to clients required both task and process-oriented skills.

Agencies that are operated through journalism/mass communication programs reported having more of the variables that contribute to sustainability than those run as student organizations (Bush, 2009). Those connected to JMC programs were significantly more likely to have an office that included technology and to charge clients for their services. Advisers of these programs report spending more time in their advising roles.

Among the significant challenges to stability and consistency were funding and university support. Bush and Miller (2011) found that nearly two-thirds of agencies received no university funding. Only 2% received funding at levels consistent with other student media. Seventy-five percent of agencies in Maben (2010) reported receiving no university funding.

Bush and Miller (2011) found that almost 40% of advisers described their advising as more time-consuming than teaching other courses, and about 20% reported spending the same amount of time. Eighty percent did not receive a course release or overload pay, and their advising did not count as service for tenure and promotion. Those who received compensation generally spent more time than advisers who took on the role as faculty service (Bush, 2009).

Agencies identified by Bush (2009) as having the greatest risk of dissolving had little student accountability, were volunteer-based with no application process, operated with few business protocols, and had no dedicated office space. These less stable student agencies functioned entirely as a student organization or club, and the quality of student leadership varied from year to year. Few of the

55 agencies Maben (2010) studied were this type of agency.

The importance of a dedicated office space to sustainability is unclear. Firms in existence the longest were less likely to have dedicated office space, according to Maben (2010). Only 38% of agencies in the Bush and Miller (2011) study were housed in a dedicated space.

At one university, an agency model provides an example of an approach that may circumvent the sustainability and university support issues. The university established a PR firm and integrated it with a required senior-level capstone course. In this way, faculty involvement is included in a regular course load (Swanson, 2011).

Advisers' Perceptions of the Educational Value of Student-Run Firms

Previous research indicates that advisers of student-run agencies believe in the educational value of the agency model. Two-thirds said they believe student agencies are "extremely beneficial to student learning" (Bush & Miller, 2011, p. 488). They are viewed to be "highly beneficial to public relations pedagogy in the two areas that are most difficult to teach: Process-oriented experiential learning and professional skills," according to Bush (2009, p. 35). The advisers articulated another benefit: the facilitation of career choice and opportunities.

Among the professional skills learned, the top benefit cited was the experience of working directly with clients (Bush & Miller, 2011). Learning to manage client relationships, anticipate issues, and deal with clients who change direction were commonly defined benefits (Maben, 2010). A majority of advisers said the agency experience benefited students by giving them the chance to apply their classroom learning to immediate client

challenges, and to practice business processes within the context of a professional environment. (Bush & Miller, 2011). Advisers report that applied learning occurs with research, writing, strategic planning, event planning, media pitching and other client services (Maben, 2010).

Students participating in agencies were observed to grow in gaining confidence, taking on responsibility, solving problems, providing leadership that inspires others to follow, working effectively in teams, and managing deadlines (Bush, 2009; Maben, 2010). Maben said it provided a place where students "gain confidence in their ability to think independently and to take on new challenges" (p. 87). Students learned the skills of negotiating with others and of giving and accepting constructive feedback. Advisers said that the experience helped students believe they could succeed in professional agencies.

One important aspect of learning was leadership. Bush (2009) reported that "most questions for advisers are management questions — team membership, client relationships and how to deal with employees" (Bush, 2009, p. 32). The student agency structure typically gives students experience with more disciplined business practices than are offered in other experiential courses like the campaigns course, Bush found. Students have an opportunity to learn to apply a process approach and critical thinking within the professional environment. (Bush, 2009).

Agency experience on a résumé can open doors to internships and employment. Bush and Miller (2011) found that half of advisers report that students often receive job or internship opportunities based upon having the agency experience. Another 42% report that students sometimes are afforded these opportunities. Maben (2010) reported that seeing a student-run agency listed on applicants' résu-

més automatically earned interviews. Students with agency experience were able to more quickly obtain top internships and secure jobs, sometimes above entry-level (Bush, 2009). Maben (2010) said that "the whole experience sets them apart from students who have no practical experience" (p. 89).

Adviser time commitment was positively correlated with advisers' perceptions of students' skill development (in areas such as writing press releases and graphic design) and of the agency's overall benefit to student learning (Bush & Miller, 2011; Bush, 2009). Having dedicated office space enhanced learning outcomes in skills application, understanding business processes, and developing professional skills (Bush & Miller, 2011).

Adviser responses were overwhelmingly positive regarding the agency experience, with a few reporting that their firms were too young to predict outcomes or that they believed the effects to be neutral (Maben, 2010). Challenges cited include keeping students motivated and managing client expectations. Advisers reported that "client expectations were often either too high or too low" (Bush, 2009, p. 33).

Research Questions

The literature provides a solid view of the value advisers see in student-run ad/PR agencies, so this study will focus on the perspective of student participants. Three research questions guide the paper.

RQ 1. What were students' experience in agency participation?

RQ 2. How did agency experience affect student skills?

RQ 3. How did agency participation affect opinions about university structure for agencies?

Method

An online survey targeted people (current university students and graduates within the previous 2 years) who have worked in a student ad/PR agency. The survey had 28 items. Participants reported gender, major and year of graduation. Participants rated their level of agreement with nine items about their agency experience:

I feel better prepared for the professional expectations of the workplace.

The experience allowed me to learn at a deeper level the concepts covered in previous coursework.

I feel more confident in my abilities.

It is/was important for my learning to work directly for real clients.

The experience has enhanced my "marketability" as a job candidate.

Being in a responsible, dedicated job role is/was one of the most valuable things about the experience.

It is important for my college or university to have a student agency for ad/PR.

I have gained a greater sensitivity for people who are different from me (a difference such as racial or ethnic background, sexual orientation, disability).

Participants also rated the effect of agency work on their development of 10 types of skills:

Working within a team structure
Interpersonal skills
Problem-solving
Leadership
Writing
Working with clients
Understanding new media
Strategic planning
Production skills like graphic or web design
Business practices like budgeting, timekeeping, billing

Participants reported their level of agreement with the need for a student agency to have a dedicated space (instead of a classroom) and a faculty adviser who is readily available to students when they need guidance. They reported whether they received academic credit, a stipend and/or pay for participating in the student agency. They also reported how many hours per week on average they worked in the student agency.

A Qualtrics survey link was emailed to faculty advisers of student advertising and/or public relations agencies at 61 U.S. colleges and universities. The list included student agencies at both public and private colleges and universities, geographically dispersed across the U.S. To compile the list, the authors drew from PRSSA's roster of affiliated student agencies and the list of schools accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. From the combined list, the authors searched for current adviser contacts. Three online searches were conducted to obtain faculty adviser names, first on student agency websites, secondly on the host university website, and finally a general search engine query using the agency name and the term "faculty adviser."

The 61 faculty advisers were asked to distribute the survey link to the students who worked at the student agency either currently or in the previous 2 years.

Results

Out of 227 responses, 210 people provided informed consent and are considered participants. Not all participants answered every question. Participants were primarily female ($n = 164$, 80%), and two-thirds of participants were advertising or public relations majors in college (see Table 1).

Nearly three-quarters of participants

Table 1
College major of participants

Major	Frequency (%) n=209
Public relations	91 (43.5%)
Advertising	47 (22.5%)
Strategic communication	23 (11.0%)
Other	11 (5.2%)
Advertising and PR	9 (4.3%)
Marketing	8 (3.8%)
Graphic design	7 (3.3%)
Media management	6 (2.9%)
Mass communication	6 (2.9%)
Integrated mkt. comm.	1 (0.5%)

were currently working at a student-run agency ($n = 153$, 74.3%), and the rest had worked at an agency in the past. Participants reported whether they received academic credit, pay, neither, or both for their agency service. Academic credit was the most popular response ($n = 114$, 55.1%), followed by neither academic credit nor pay (31.4%, $n = 65$), both academic credit and pay for their agency participation (9.2%, $n = 19$), and pay for their agency participation (4.3%, $n = 9$). Slightly more than half of participants spent 6 hours or fewer per week in their agency roles (see Table 2).

Table 2
Weekly hours worked at student-run agencies

Hours per week	Frequency (%) N = 210
1- 6 hours	108 (51.9%)
7-14 hours	70 (33.7%)
15 or more hours	30 (14.4%)

Research Question 1

Nine questions measured various aspects of students' agency experiences.

Mean responses above 4.25 on all items except one indicated high levels of agreement with the statements (see Table 3).

Table 3
Participant experiences at student-run agencies

Item	Mean (SD) n = 209
It is important for my college or university to have a student agency for advertising/public relations.	4.67 (.67)
It is/was important for my learning to work directly with real clients.	4.59 (.67)
The experience has enhanced my marketability as a job candidate.	4.46 (.80)
I feel better prepared for the professional expectations of the workplace.	4.38 (.79)
The experience allowed me to learn at a deeper level the concepts covered in previous coursework.	4.38 (.83)
Being in a responsible, dedicated job role is/was one of the most valuable things about the experience.	4.30 (.79)
I feel more confident in my abilities.	4.27 (.79)
A student agency should be selective; students should have to apply before being admitted.	4.25 (1.05)
I have gained a greater sensitivity for people who are different from me.	3.83 (1.07)
Experience item average	*4.35 (α = .80)*

Agreement was particularly high among participants that it was important for colleges or universities to have a student-run agency and that it was important for their learning to work directly with real clients. The only item to receive moderate agreement was the statement that participants gained greater sensitivity for people who were different from them. There were no statistically significant differences by gender on any item.

Participants who were currently working for a student-run agency had a higher estimation of how the experience would enhance their marketability as a job candidate (*M* = 4.56, *SD* = .67) than participants who had worked for agencies in the past (*M* = 4.21, *SD* = 1.03). This difference was statistically significant, *t*(204) = -2.82, *p* < .01.

The number of hours worked per week affected participants' judgment of two experience variables. The item "The experience allowed me to learn at a deeper level the concepts covered in previous coursework" showed a significant difference, *F*(2, 205) = 4.24, *p* = .02. Participants who worked 15 or more hours per week rated their conceptual learning higher (*M* = 4.77, *SD* = .50) than participants who worked 1-6 hours per week (*M* = 4.28, *SD* = .83) and students who worked 7-14 hours per week (*M* = 4.39, *SD* = .89). These are statistically different means according to Games-Howell post-hoc tests. Students who worked 1-6 hours per week did not differ significantly from students who worked 7-14 hours per week.

The item "I feel more confident in my abilities" also showed a significant difference, *F*(2, 205) = 4.29, *p* = .02. A Games-Howell post-hoc test showed that participants who worked 15 hours or more per week rated their confidence higher (*M* = 4.60, *SD* = .62) than participants who

worked 1-6 hours per week (*M* = 4.15, *SD* = .75). Participants who reported working 7-14 hours per week were not significantly different from either of the other groups.

Research Question 2

Students evaluated the effect that agency work had on 10 types of skills (see Table 4). Working with clients was the skill that had the highest mean rating (*M* = 4.45, *SD* = .76), and production skills was the item that was lowest (*M*=3.34, *SD* = 1.04). Skill development did not vary by gender or whether participants were currently engaged in agency work or had been in the past.

Table 4
Agreement with agency's effect on personal skill enhancement

My experience in the student agency has enhanced my skills in the following areas:	*Mean (SD) n=203*
Working within a team structure	4.37 (.72)
Interpersonal skills	4.29 (.72)
Problem-solving	4.20 (.83)
Leadership	4.24 (.85)
Writing	3.66 (.94)
Working with clients	4.45 (.76)
Understanding new media	3.87 (.96)
Strategic planning	4.25 (.79)
Production skills	3.34 (1.08)
Business practices	3.90 (1.05)
Skill rating average	*4.06 (α=.88)*

Participants who had graduated were more likely to say that agency participation had helped their production skills (*M* = 3.52, *SD* = .92) than current students did (*M* = 3.18, *SD* = 1.19), *t*(198) = 2.23, *p* = .03.

The number of hours worked per week at the agency affected six of the skills variables. Students who reported working 15 or more hours per week rated the effect on their ability to work within a team structure higher (*M* = 4.63, *SD* = .49) than students who worked 1-6 hours per week (*M* = 4.25, *SD* = .71), a significant difference according to a Tukey post-hoc test on the omnibus *F*(2, 199) = 3.79, *p* = .02. The students who worked 7-14 hours per week (*M* = 4.44, *SD* = .77) did not differ significantly from the other groups.

A one-way ANOVA examining problem-solving skills by hours worked per week was significant, *F*(2, 197) = 4.02, *p* = .02. Post-hoc tests using Tukey HSD showed that students who reported working 15 or more hours per week rated the effect on their problem-solving skills higher (*M* = 4.59, *SD* = .50) than students who worked 1-6 hours per week (*M* = 4.10, *SD* = .82). The students who worked 7-14 hours per week (*M* = 4.20, *SD* = .91) did not differ significantly from the other groups.

A one-way ANOVA examining leadership skills by hours worked per week was significant, *F*(2, 197) = 5.54, *p* < .01. Post-hoc tests using Tukey HSD showed that students who reported working 15 or more hours per week rated the effect on their leadership skills higher (*M* = 4.62, *SD* = .56) than students who worked 1-6 hours per week (*M* = 4.07, *SD* = .84). The students who worked 7-14 hours per week (*M* = 4.33, *SD* = .91) did not differ significantly from the other groups.

A one-way ANOVA examining skills working with clients by hours worked per week was significant, *F*(2, 197) = 7.64, *p* = .001. Games-Howell post-hoc tests showed that students who reported working 15 or more hours per week rated the effect on their client skills higher (*M* = 4.83, *SD* = .38) than students who worked 1-6 hours per week (*M* = 4.27, *SD* = .79). Students who reported working 7-14 hours per week rated the effect on their client skills higher (*M* = 4.56, *SD* = .77) than students who worked 1-6 hours per week but did not differ significantly from students working 15 or more hours per week.

A one-way ANOVA examining new media skills by hours worked per week was significant, *F*(2, 196) = 6.39, *p* < .01. Tukey HSD post-hoc tests showed that students who reported working 15 or more hours per week rated the effect on their new media skills higher (*M* = 4.41, *SD* = .68) than students who worked 1-6 hours per week (*M* = 3.83, *SD* = .91) and students who reported working 7-14 hours per week (*M* = 3.69, *SD* = 1.04). There was no significant difference between students working 1-6 hours per week and students working 7-14 hours per week.

A one-way ANOVA examining production skills by hours worked per week was significant, *F*(2, 197) = 4.82, *p* < .01. Games-Howell post-hoc tests showed that students who reported working 15 or more hours per week rated the effect on their production skills higher (*M* = 3.90, *SD* = .86) than students who worked 1-6 hours per week (*M* = 3.21, *SD* = 1.07) and students who reported working 7-14 hours per week (*M* = 3.29, *SD* = 1.13). There was no significant difference between students working 1-6 hours per week and students working 7-14 hours per week.

Research Question 3

Participants indicated moderate sup-

port for the need for exclusive resources. The mean response indicated that it is moderately important for the student agency to have a dedicated space instead of a classroom (M = 3.51, SD = .65). The mean response for need for a faculty adviser who is readily available to students was 3.74 (SD = .50). There were no significant differences by gender or current or past affiliation with an agency, and the need for an adviser also had no significant differences by hours worked. Agency alumni thought it was more important (M = 3.62, SD = .55) than current students did (M = 3.42, SD = .72) for the agency to have a dedicated space, $t(202)$ = 2.08. p = .04.

The more hours participants spent working at the agency, the higher their average rating of the importance of a dedicated space, $F(2, 201)$ = 11.79, p < .001. Students who worked 1-6 hours a week rated this 3.31 (SD = .71) and were significantly different from students who worked 7-14 hours a week (M=3.66, SD = .56), and 15 or more hours a week (M = 3.86, SD = .35), according to Games-Howell post-hoc tests. Students working 7-14 hours per week and students working 15 or more hours per week were not significantly different.

Participant Comments

Participants responded to an open-ended question: "Why did you choose to participate in your college or university's student agency?"

A total of 214 responses revealed a range of reasons, most commonly stated as "experience." The word "experience" appeared in 68% (n = 146) of the responses in a variety of contexts, ranging from "real-world," "real life," and "professional" experience to "the experience of being in charge and making decisions rather than [being] a powerless intern."

One participant's response reveals this common theme:

The experience would be more hands-on than learning about strategy from books, in lectures, case studies and projects … working with real clients to solve their marketing problems and see proposed strategies come to fruition was extremely motivating and more gratifying than an 'A' on a test.

Some of the students defined their motivation for joining a campus agency in terms of what they believed the experience would *not* be. "It would not be another class, you get to work with real clients," wrote one. "I wanted the guarantee of receiving real world work experience versus the possibility of making copies or getting someone coffee," wrote another.

The quote above reflects a related theme: a desire for a "real" professional experience. Students used the word "real" in 19% (n = 42) of the open-ended responses, with "real world" the most frequent way the term was used, appearing 23 times. Students wrote that they wanted to work with "real clients" and to gain "real-life," "real job," "real agency," and "real work" experience. Another student wrote: "The real-life experience can not be duplicated anywhere else. At the same time, it's a controlled environment. It's the best of both worlds."

Discussion

Previous research shows that faculty advisers believe in the pedagogical benefits of student-run ad/PR agencies (Bush, 2009; Bush & Miller, 2011; Maben 2010). Advisers who have championed this teaching tool, often giving their time to it without compensation (Bush & Miller, 2011), should be encouraged to know that this survey indicates students and alumni highly value the student agency experience. They join advisers in observing that agencies are able to facilitate process-

oriented learning and develop professional skills (Bush, 2009; Bush & Miller, 2011; Maben 2010). On most measures of skills and professional characteristics, participants rated the agencies' effects on their skills above 4 on a 5-point scale.

For decades, the public relations profession has charged academia with delivering instruction in "higher order knowledge" like strategic thinking and management skills (Commission Report, 2006; Neff, Walker, Smith, & Creedon, 1999). These skills are also considered to be important in the broader IMC field (Battle, et al., 2007; Beachboard & Weidman, 2013). Quite recently, supervisors in the public relations field found that their entry-level hires underperform in critical thinking, dependability, attention to detail, following instructions, time management and accepting responsibility (Todd, 2014). Student and alumni participants in this study gave the student agency experience high marks for developing their capacity for strategic thinking, problem solving, and leadership. Advisers report that the student firm facilitates "learning things you can't learn in a classroom" (Bush, 2009; Maben, 2010).

The capacity to collaborate successfully is a professional characteristic developed by the student firm experience (Bush, 2009; Maben, 2010). Students placed the ability to work with others at the top of the list of skills enhanced by agency participation. The three most highly rated skills were proficiency in working with clients, ability to work within a team structure, and growth in interpersonal skills.

Professionals recommend that students gain practical and hands-on experience. They further recommend that curriculum be designed to deliver some of these opportunities (Commission Report, 2006). One key area where the student firm delivers practical experience is in working directly with real clients. In this study, participants said this was the most important experience gained and the area in which they grew more than any other. Advisers also cited the client interface as the top benefit (Bush & Miller, 2011). Traditionally the campaigns course has encapsulated hands-on learning, but the campaigns course generally provides minimal client contact (Benigni, et al., 2004).

Advisers rate the application of classroom learning as the tertiary benefit (at 85%) after client contact and portfolio building (Bush & Miller, 2011). This survey showed that students who invested more time in working at the firm (15 or more hours per week) rated the experience more highly for allowing them to learn at a deeper level the concepts covered in previous coursework than did students who spent 6 or fewer hours. This finding suggests that students should be encouraged to invest 15 or more hours per week to learn and benefit the most from the experience.

Professionals point to practical experience as a key factor in students obtaining entry-level positions (Commission Report, 2006; Todd, 2009). Participants reported that they are well prepared to meet the requirements of the profession and that their marketability as job candidates had increased. Advisers also believe that the agency experience on a résumé enhances job opportunities (Bush, 2009; Bush & Miller, 2011; Maben, 2010).

Results suggest that although student firms provide above-average experiential learning in writing, production, new media and businesses practices, these are the lowest-rated areas for skill development. Agency advisers would do well to explore ways to enhance the learning in these areas.

Participants agreed strongly that colleges and universities should have a student-run agency for advertising and public

relations. They rated as moderately important the university-provided resources of a dedicated office space and an adviser who is readily available. According to Bush and Miller (2011), fewer than 40% of agencies have a dedicated space. This survey didn't ask whether participants worked in agencies with dedicated space, but the presence of a facility could have affected participants' judgments of this factor. Perhaps the role of the adviser is only moderately valued because students may be unaware of the foundational support required to obtain clients, facilitate the staffing and training process, ensure that equipment and supplies are available and other behind-the-scenes work. Additionally, some agencies have both a staff director and a faculty adviser. In these cases, the staff director's day-to-day role may meet the "readily available" need.

Limitations

The number of questions included in this survey was limited. The one previous attempt on record (Maben, 2010) to gather the views of students who had worked at student firms resulted in only five responses. In an effort to greatly increase the number of respondents, this study launched a survey that could be completed quickly. The questions provide a first look at student experiences. The area can certainly use further research. The study also used current faculty advisers to contact current and former agency participants. The authors could not confirm that all advisers sent the survey out, nor did the survey ask participants to identify the school they attended. Future research would do well to collect data from a group that could be confirmed to be representative.

The survey was designed to produce results that allowed comparison of participants' experiences with previous research examining advisers' views, therefore some questions about need for university support, faculty advisers, and office space may not be salient for many student respondents.

Conclusion

Participation in a student-run advertising and public relations firm, if designed well, can allow students to learn at a deeper level the concepts covered in their coursework. The experience can enable students to feel better prepared for the professional expectations of the workplace. They are likely to graduate with more confidence in their abilities, including problem-solving, interpersonal, and teamwork skills and the ability to work directly with clients. This study suggests that students who participate in a student-run agency strongly believe in the value of the experience and believe every campus should offer it. In general, the more time students spend working in a campus agency, the higher they rate their learning.

Undergraduate advertising and public relations programs that do not offer a student agency can learn much from this study, combined with related literature, as they consider creating such an experiential learning opportunity for their students. Programs that already have student firms will find data that may guide efforts to refine and improve the educational impact of the student-run advertising and public relations agency.

Future research might seek the perspectives of employers who have hired students with campus agency experience. Employers may be able to shed light on whether the experience helped a student land the job, and whether they believe it provided a good foundation for recent graduates' current responsibilities and prospects within the organization.

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Considering Certification?: An Analysis of Universities' Communication Certificates and Feedback from Public Relations Professionals

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Abstract

Working professionals may need post-baccalaureate education, but finding time and resources to do so may be difficult. An analysis of 75 university master's programs in public relations found 22 related programs offering communication certificates. A web audit of these programs, plus a survey and in-depth interviews, indicated professionals are interested in earning certificates, particularly in social and digital media strategy and measurement. Professionals want to attend certificate programs that combine online and face-to-face instruction.

Keywords: certification, public relations, communication certificates

U.S. News & World Report (2014) named public relations as one of the top 100 careers of 2014. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicted that from 2010 to 2012, job growth for public relations specialists would increase by 12% (2012a) and that growth for public relations management positions would increase by 21% (2012b). This growing number of public relations practitioners must keep up with technology and industry trends and demands occurring in public relations.

There is no shortage of options for ongoing training and learning in public relations, as noted by the Commission on Public Relations Education 2012 report. Professional associations, commercial enterprises and trade publications offer a plethora of webinars, face-to-face seminars, and publications to educate and train public relations practitioners. Some public relations practitioners take advantage of these training and learning opportunities, while others invest the time and money to pursue a graduate degree in public relations or a tangential field such as business. However, in addition to the offerings provided by professional entities and the in-depth master's degree, there is yet another way for public relations professionals to learn and grow: earn a certificate from a university. To date, scant research exists on communication certificates offered by universities. This study seeks to address this gap, by (1) analyzing through a website audit the types and structures of communication certificates offered by U.S. colleges and universities that also offer master's degrees in public relations, and (2) examining public relations professionals' preferences for certificates through an online survey and in-depth interviews.

Literature Review

Public Relations Graduate Education

Graduate education is growing particularly fast in public relations, fueled by the explosion of social and digital media and the accompanying job opportunities. Another driver of the growth of graduate programs in public relations is the need for universities to offset declining enrollments in journalism programs and budget cuts from state budgets (Commission on

PR Education, 2012). Since 2000, the number of master's degree programs in public relations has increased from 26 to 75 (Commission on PR Education, 2012; Shen & Toth, 2013).

In its website audit of 75 graduate programs in public relations, the Commission on PR Education (2012) noted a lack of uniformity among master's degree programs in public relations in terms of program titles, admission standards, required credit hours, and curriculum. Follow-up research by public relations scholars Briones and Toth (2013) found a lack of conformity among the programs in terms of adhering to recommended content areas provided by the Commission on PR Education 2012 report. Briones and Toth attributed the lack of uniformity among programs in part to the widely different graduate models in existence at universities. While the majority of programs offer a professional graduate degree in public relations, some offer an academic degree designed to prepare students for a Ph.D., while others provide a more interdisciplinary graduate degree.

The Commission on PR Education (2012) also reviewed the delivery methods of public relations graduate programs. Roughly 82% of programs offer traditional courses, which rely on face-to-face meetings and instruction. Approximately 10% of public relations programs use online delivery, and about 8% use a hybrid/blended delivery that includes online and in-person instruction. Despite the small number of programs offering online programs, the Commission on PR Education predicts that the number of online and hybrid graduate programs in public relations will increase. According to journalism educator and researcher Casteneda (2011), some journalism programs are partnering with outside vendors to develop certificates and online degrees using a shared-revenue agreement.

Professional perceptions of education delivery methods is mixed. For example, research indicates that public relations educators and practitioners view traditional programs more positively compared to online programs (Commission on PR Education, 2012; Toth, Shen, & Briones, 2012). However outside of public relations, evaluation of online programs tends to be more positive. One evaluation of an online master's program revealed that students listed improving themselves, advancing in their career, personal reasons and securing new job opportunities as the top reasons for their need of an online program (Tokmak, Baturay & Fadde, 2013). Online courses can better accommodate working professionals who may be balancing family commitments (Wyland, Lester, Mone, & Winkel, 2013), and they enable people to take courses from universities located around the world (Gold & Jose, 2012).

Graduate programs can integrate in-person meetings with online sessions to create a hybrid program that combines benefits of both methods while still remaining flexible for students. In an 18-month Internet-Based Master's in Educational Technology (iMet) program, students learn collaborative problem solving through teamwork assignments in a classroom and online platform (Cowan, 2012). Students of the iMet program "meet 25% face-to-face and 75% online" (p. 13). At the University of Nevada at Reno, a hybrid master's degree program allowed the journalism school to create variety in its curriculum that accommodated students' preferences without needing additional staff or resources (Coulson & Linn, 1995).

Certificate Programs

For students who desire to earn new skills, but require a more cost-effective

and/or more accessible program than what is afforded through a master's program, a certificate program is a viable option. Universities are increasingly offering students the ability to complete courses to earn a post-baccalaureate certificate. Bosworth (2010) of Complete College America defines a certificate as a technical diploma comprised of "credentials issued by educational institutions that indicate completion of a discrete program of study or series of courses" (p. i). Certificate programs provide credentialing for new skill sets in a shorter amount of time than a typical master's degree. In the 2010-2011 academic year, public and private universities in the United States conferred more than 1.20 million certificates (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). The knowledge and skills gained from a certificate program allow students to easily transfer what they learn to the workplace (National Center for Education Statistic, 2012). By teaching students more practical knowledge, the coursework included in a certificate program is typically more applicable for career advancement.

The demand for certificates is steadily increasing. Since 2000, conferred certificates have increased 64% (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). The increase in certificates demonstrates both a desire from students and a need for universities to provide these types of learning and training programs. Certificate programs range significantly in structure in terms of the amount of time and coursework needed for completion. However, compared to certificates completed in shorter periods of time, certificate programs lasting more than one year are linked with higher salaries (Bosworth, 2010). Public institutions award more one-year certificates compared to private universities, which account for only 5% of all certificate programs (Bosworth).

Certificate course delivery ranges from traditional and online methods to hybrid approaches that combine the two. In a study conducted about an online library media certificate, researchers found that a strictly online education provided working adults access to specialized knowledge needed to prepare them to maintain and grow within their current positions (Meyer, Bruwelheide & Poulin, 2009). In a study conducted by professors from Northern Illinois University, they recommended that certificate programs of all types should target more interdisciplinary approaches to courses (McFadden, Chen, Munroe, Natfzger, & Selinger, 2011). By providing overlap, students can learn how to address core subject areas more dynamically. Universities that can provide course crossover are better positioned to equip their students to think critically about their subject area.

In 2013, the Public Relations Society of America began offering the Certificate in Public Relations Principles for university students majoring in public relations in their final year of school (PR accreditation, 2013). This certificate program is currently offered at 13 participating colleges and universities. The Universal Accreditation Board administers the certification exam (PR accreditation).

In summary, in response to the growth in the public relations field and professionals' need for ongoing training and learning, master's degree programs in public relations also continue to increase in number. Certificate programs in multiple disciplines are also increasing. Other than the 2013 PRSA certificate program, less is known, however, about the ways universities are offering certificate programs related to communication professions, how those programs meet the specialized training and learning needs of public relations professionals, and wheth-

er public relations professionals see value in pursuing a certificate. This mixed-methods study therefore seeks to answer:

RQ1: What types of communication-related certificates do universities offer?

RQ2: Do public relations professionals value post-baccalaureate certificates, and if yes, what certificate features are most attractive?

Method

In the first phase of the project, researchers conducted a website audit of communication-related certificates offered at universities in the United States. The sampling frame included the 75 universities identified by the Commission on Public Relations Education (2012) as offering a master's degree in public relations. Researchers first visited the websites at those 75 universities to determine if the university offered a certificate program in a communication-related field. Only post-baccalaureate certificates—not undergraduate ones—were systematically analyzed. Twenty-two of the 75 universities offer post-baccalaureate certificate programs, with four university programs offering two types of certificates, for a total of 26 certificate programs to be analyzed. Researchers then systematically analyzed the offerings for certificate title, program costs, delivery method, and the ratio of courses and credits earned.

The second phase of the research included an online survey and in-depth interviews with public relations professionals. The survey instrument was created in Qualtrics and included questions about communication professionals' ongoing training and learning needs and their interest in and preference for certificates, including content and delivery method. Researchers secured approval from their university's Institutional Review Board prior to data collection.

The researchers used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit practitioners for their online survey. Researchers emailed 30 presidents of local chapters of professional communication associations such as the Public Relations Society of America, Social Media Club, and the International Business Communicators Association to ask them to forward the survey invitation to their respective members. The researchers also recruited participants via social media and personal contacts. One hundred and twelve participants completed the survey in February 2014. Participants live and work across the United States.

As part of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed by the researchers. In this third phase of research, more than 20 participants were contacted after volunteering, and the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 13 communication professionals. Each participant responded to nine open-ended questions that were related to their career and educational goals and professional development needs. Their responses were transcribed and analyzed by the researchers through an iterative reading process used to discover common themes and to produce descriptive summaries of participants' ideas and suggestions. In this qualitative part of the overall study, participants created meaning with the researchers.

Results

Audit of Existing Certificate Programs

Table 1 displays the information about the communication certificates offered by the 22 programs. Eighteen of those programs offer a single certificate program, with four offering two certificate programs; the following descriptive findings, then, are based on these 26 separate

certificate programs. Seven programs use the term "marketing" in their titles, as in "Strategic Marketing" or "Integrated Marketing." Five programs include the word "digital" in their titles, with three of those titles using "Digital Marketing." The other two programs using this term were called "Digital Storytelling" and "Digital Media Skills." Five programs include the term "public relations" in their titles, while four programs use the term "strategic" in their title, as in "Strategic Communication" or "Strategic Marketing." Nine programs positioned themselves through terms related to new/social media or technology. The single or double appearances of these following terms indicate more focused programs on this list: "nonprofit," "global," "storytelling," "ethics," and "diversity."

As indicated by Table 1, the majority of the graduate programs included in this website audit offer a certificate completion in one year or less. That is, out of 22 schools examined, 12 offer certificate completion within 1 year, with the leading minimum being a 3-months' completion at the University of the Pacific, followed by a 9-months' completion at Seton Hall University and Lasell College. Out of the remaining 10 schools, eight offer certificate completion between a 1-year minimum and 2-year maximum. Factors playing into completion within this timeframe depend on a student's course load and availability of requisite courses. For example, Northwestern's certificate in Strategic Marketing requires a completion of five courses, which may be taken in just 2 semesters or across 2 years. Similarly, the certificate programs at West Virginia University require 1-year minimums and 8-year maximums to complete, on a kind of "as you go" basis. Two other schools, the universities of Denver and Oregon, require a 2-year minimum for program completion and certificate attainment.

The ratio of number of courses to credit hours varied but most programs followed credit-hour protocols borrowed from graduate programs (i.e., one course equals three credit hours). Six programs offered 5 courses/15 credits for their certification, and six programs offered 6 courses/18 credits for certification. Six other programs were based on three courses, with varied credit hours. The outliers in this study were a 2-course program at Seton Hall for 12 credits and a 7-course program at the University of Oregon for 28 credits. These differences account for some of the variety of costs of these programs. Two universities, California State University-Fullerton and Georgetown University, offer Continuing Education Units (CEU) rather than credit hours. Twelve CEUs can be earned at California State University-Fullerton for completion of 6 courses and 10.8 CEUs at Georgetown for 6 courses.

While the majority of these graduate certificate programs cost between $10,000 and $15,000, five of the 22 programs cost less than $5,500. Of these five, the most affordable program is the University of the Pacific's certificate in Social Media Business, offered at $495 and in a completion time of 3 months. Second to this program is that of California State University-Fullerton, offering a Digital Marketing certificate between $2,700 and $3,600 depending on in-state or out-of-state tuition, and obtained in a 10-month period of time. Six programs cost between $7,000 and $9,900, beginning with Rowan University at $7,019 for a certificate in Public Relations, and ending with Lasell College for a 9-month-long certificate obtainment priced at $9,825. Programs at 10 schools cost between $10,000 and $15,000, depending on students' in-state or out-of-state classification and other factors. Mov-

Table 1

Communication-related Certificates Offered by Universities and Colleges with a Master's Degree in Public Relations**

College or University	Certificate Program Title	Delivery Model	# Courses /Cr Hours
American Univ.	Digital Media	Online	5/15
Auburn Univ.	Communication	Classroom	6/18
Ball State Univ.	Emerging Media Journalism	Online	6/18
*California State University-Fullerton	Digital Marketing	Online	6/12.0 CEUs
Emerson College	Marketing and Branding	Online	5/15
Fairleigh Dickinson Univ.	Public Relations Administration	Classroom & Online	6/18
*Georgetown Univ.	Digital Marketing	Classroom	6/10.8 CEUs
George Washington	Public Relations	Classroom	6/18
Iona College	Non-Profit Public Relations	Online	3/9
Lasell College	Integrated Marketing Comm; Public Relations	Classroom & Online	5/15
Marquette Univ.	Digital Storytelling	Classroom	5/15
Northwestern Univ.	Strategic Marketing	Classroom	5/15
Quinnipiac Univ.	Social Media	Online	3/9
Rowan Univ.	Public Relations	Classroom & Online	3/9
Seton Hall Univ.	Strategic Comm: Leadership & Change; Strategic Comm: Leadership, Diversity & Globalization	Online	2/12
Univ. of Denver	Public Relations and Marketing	Classroom & Online	6/24
Univ. of Florida	Global Strategic Comm.	Online	4/12
Univ. of NC at Chapel Hill	Technology and Communication; Business Journalism	Online	3/9
Univ. of Oregon	Communication Ethics	Classroom	7/28
Univ. of the Pacific	Social Media for Business	Online	3/12
Univ. of Southern Mississippi	Organizational Comm.	Classroom	3/12
West Virginia Univ.	Integrated Marketing Comm.; Digital Marketing Communications	Online	5/15

* *College or university offers Continuing Education Units, not credit hours.*
** *Data collected in May 2014*

ing on to those programs in the $20,000 bracket, the University of Oregon's non-resident certificate cost of $22,198 begins the category, and is closely followed by George Washington University's $23,674 Public Relations certificate program cost and Northwestern's $24,330 Strategic Marketing certificate program cost. Standing as the most expensive certificate programs are those offered by Farleigh Dickson University at $33,507 for a six-course completion in Public Relations Administration, and $56,208 to obtain a Communication certificate from Auburn University in just two semesters.

The delivery models of the 22 university certificate programs varied as well. Eleven programs were online only and seven programs were classroom only, with four programs using a blended model.

Survey

One hundred and twelve professionals responded to the survey, although only 85 people fully completed it. Seventy-four percent of respondents are female; 26% are male. Fifty-nine percent are 30 or younger, 24% are between the ages of 31 and 45, and 17% are older than age 45. Eighty-six percent of participants have an undergraduate degree, mostly in the areas of public relations, strategic communication, and journalism. Fourteen percent of respondents have a master's degree. In terms of current position, 25% of respondents indicated they are working in public relations, 18% in advertising, 14% in digital media, 4% in journalism, and 35% in "other," which includes fields such as event planning, sustainability, fundraising, marketing, corporate communication, and human resources. Five percent of respondents said they were not currently working. Thirty-six percent of respondents work for an agency, 31% for a corporation, 13% for a nonprofit organization,

9% for government, 4% are self-employed, and 8% said "other." The self-reported income levels included 6% less than $25,000, 16% between $25,000 and $35,000, 34% between $35,001 and $50,000, 24% between $50,001 and $75,000, 10% between $75,001 and $100,000, and 11% more than $100,000.

Survey participants were first asked to indicate their level of interest in taking leadership and training programs at a university on a variety of topics by indicating whether they were interested, uninterested, or unsure of interest. As indicated by Table 2, the topic that received the greatest interest included effective storytelling across multiple platforms (traditional and online) followed by social media and digital media strategy, and then measuring and evaluating communication effectiveness. The topic that received the least amount of interest was design fundamentals and multimedia, although roughly 50% of respondents still indicated interest in that topic alone.

When asked to indicate their level of interest in earning a post-baccalaureate certificate in a communication-related area, 28% said they were "definitely interested," 29% said "probably interested," 29% indicated they "might be interested," 10% said "probably not interested," and 3% said "definitely not interested." There were no statistically significant differences among people of different ages regarding their interest in certificates (x^2 = 25.54; df = 32; p = .78), between men or women (x^2 = 4.19; df = 4; p = .38), nor between people working at different types of organizations (x^2 = 19.15; df = 20; p = .51).

Participants were next asked what type of learning environment they would prefer for certificate coursework. Sixty percent said they would prefer one-day weekend, in-person seminars coupled with 5- to 10-week online assignments and

Table 2

Professionals' Interest in Leadership and Training Programs by Topic

Topics	Interested		Uninterested		Unsure of interest	
Topics	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*
Branded content	62	53	16	14	21	18
Crisis communication	65	56	24	21	10	9
Effective storytelling across multiple platforms, both traditional and online	84	72	8	7	8	7
Digital journalism	52	45	30	26	17	15
Entrepreneurship	56	48	23	20	21	18
Social media and digital media strategy	82	70	14	12	4	3
Measuring and evaluating communication effectiveness	81	70	12	10	7	6
Design fundamentals and multimedia	51	43	24	20	26	22

discussions; 22% said in-person weekend seminars only; and 18% said online learning delivery that consists solely of online assignments and discussions. Sixty-seven percent of respondents then said they typically prefer to learn and keep up with professional development with a community of people; 33% said they prefer to do so by themselves.

Fifteen percent of participants said they had already earned a professional certificate. Participants indicated they had earned certificates in new media, human resources, management, fundraising, teaching, training, graphic design, leadership and communication, including both APR (Accredited in Public Relations, offered through the Public Relations Society of America) and ABC (Accredited Business Communicator, offered through the International Association of Business Communicators).

The last survey question asked respondents for other suggestions related to their professional development and learning needs. In this open-ended survey question, some participants expressed the need for program flexibility and course options that accommodated professionals working full time. A few participants said programs need to have a strong focus on contemporary digital and social media tools and strategy. One participant lamented that "I'm pretty skeptical of any structured program's ability to keep up with the pace of real-world trends in communication." Another participant mentioned "connectivity to top-level executives for networking and job placement," and another said the program must be "engaging." Finally, one participant wrote that s/he "would love more info on how pay increases and how it can help with getting better job opportunities as well as figuring out your specific interests so that you can decide which program you want to go into."

In-Depth Interviews

The in-depth interviews with 13 professionals included 10 women and 3 men ranging in age from mid-20s to early 60s.

Nine of those interviewed are between the ages of 30 and 50, during a time of life when many professionals are seeking graduate-level educational opportunities ("Digest," 2012; Mullen, Goyette & Soares, 2003); 4 participants had earned master's degrees. These professionals work in varied environments. Four are employed by corporations, four work for nonprofits or universities, three work in sole-proprietor communication businesses, and two are employed by marketing or public relations agencies.

Participants were evenly split in response to whether they were actively thinking about pursuing a master's degree, with five saying "yes" and five saying "no" (but three of the "no" answers were from professionals who already had master's degrees). Three participants responded with "maybe," and even the "yes" answers were filled with caveats. Cost and/or time was mentioned by six participants as reasons why pursuing a master's degree would be difficult for them; two women and two men specifically mentioned family considerations as probable barriers. One of the male participants said "the lawn still has to be mowed," another said he "was the primary breadwinner of my family," and two female participants mentioned the ages of their children as factors for delaying consideration of or being hesitant to pursue graduate studies. Two participants specifically said shorter programs of 1 year or 18 months would be attractive to them.

These considerations of family and current career responsibilities also informed participant descriptions of a "dream" post-baccalaureate experience. Five professionals used the words "blended," "mixture," or "flexible" when describing a program that would be both in-person and online. This flexible program would help them manage learning while they worked and cared for family members. One participant who was interested in earning a master's degree said, "Right now, we are all hands on deck, and I don't leave here most nights before 7 p.m." Nine of 13 participants expressed their preferences for a mixture of online and in-person course work for other reasons, too. One participant said he would want to meet in person "to connect and network," while another wants to hear "what others are doing." Another said she wants "a think-tank format … (where discussion) is part of the learning." One female professional said, "I never did want to do the APR thing (through PRSA), since it's a lot of studying by yourself." Finally, one participant said that while he realized some of the instruction would probably be online because many people required flexibility, he realized "I do better in person, not online … there's a level of accountability in a group setting."

An ideal curriculum for post-baccalaureate programs would include new social media communication strategies and new digital tools for analytics, according to almost all participants. "I need help with strategy," said one participant, "to know what an orderly process is for doing the research or finding information, and then making a plan." Blogging and digital influence were listed as components of needed new media tactics and strategies. Another participant asked for interdisciplinary curriculum that included "the spectrum of PR, marketing, business, advertising, social media." Next on the list for many participants was curriculum that addressed business management or entrepreneurship. "If you want to move up, you must understand business," said one, who mentioned a university which offered a business boot camp for non-business graduate students. Two respondents talked about their dreams of entrepreneurship and mentioned that disciplinary area as important to them. Two

others mentioned diversity and cross-cultural communication as important to their professional needs.

Eight of 13 people said they would be interested in earning a professional certificate from a university, with one respondent saying "maybe." Two of the "no" answers came from professionals who had already earned master's degrees. This question prompted fewer caveats than those listed for master's programs, with participants seeming to make underlying assumptions that certificate programs were both well focused and completed more quickly than graduate degrees. One participant "loved" the idea of a certificate program "without the commitment of a master's degree." Another one of the eight professionals who expressed interest in a certificate program said he "saw value in [it], when people see initials after a name, and know that there's an expertise level associated with that." This participant said the master's/certificate conversation does not have to be an "either/or kind of thing," but "maybe they could be done at the same time, or one could lead to the other." Another said she would be interested in a certificate program as long as it was not "just studying to the test." Curriculum preferences expressed for graduate-level certificate programs included business and marketing strategies, leadership and management, employee engagement, overcoming challenges and handling crisis, ethics, social media, channel and segmentation planning, and digital metrics and methodologies.

Discussion

Just as Briones and Toth (2013) discovered a lack of coherence in master's education in public relations, this present research found certificate programs offered by the 22 universities in this study to lack uniformity; certainly, these certificate programs respond to different educational goals and marketing demands than traditional master's education. However, many certificate programs offered programs of similar credit-hour requirements, with 12 of the programs offering certificates that included five or six courses, for 15-18 credit hours total. There was a split in delivery method, with 11 programs online only, and 11 programs using classroom only delivery or a blended model of classroom and online instruction.

In general, these certificate programs could be said to be following models B and C of the 2006 Commission on Public Relations Education report for master's degrees in public relations, with B-type certificate programs providing public relations and business-related instruction to meet the advanced career goals of seasoned professionals and C-type certificate programs providing more focused instruction on a specific part of the communications field, such as ethics. Beyond curriculum, the largest differences among these certificate programs were the costs, which ranged from $495 to more than $50,000 for programs of widely ranging requirements.

The desires of practitioners in the in-depth interviews seem to support this certificate program variety, and this variety is supported by responses to an open-ended question in the survey as well. Flexibility was a key to participants' abilities to earn either a master's degree or certificate, especially in terms of the timing of classes and/or the delivery model. However, in the interviews many practitioners expressed their desire for building relationships with other students and for in-classroom discussion, where they believed real learning took place. Several practitioners expressed reservations about studying alone or earning a certificate that was a "study to the test" type of experience.

Certainly, programs designing certificate programs must balance all of these concerns and desires carefully, with perhaps the most challenging decision to be that of whether to offer a broad program that serves the demands of seasoned professionals or a specific program designed to "catch up" professionals on new trends in the industry.

Findings from the survey and interviews indicate that public relations professionals are generally interested in earning a certificate. Nearly 60% of survey respondents indicated that they were either "definitely interested" or "probably interested" in earning a certificate, and another 29% said they "might be interested." More people in the interviews said they would be interested in a university certificate program than in a master's degree program. Perceived advantages of certificate programs included the shorter time commitment and more specific curriculum content.

Despite the fact that public relations educators and some professionals generally don't view online programs as positively as traditional programs (Commission on PR Education, 2012), respondents in this research indicated a preference for a hybrid delivery, one that combines online and face-to-face learning. In the survey, only 1 in 5 respondents preferred to earn a certificate program that consisted of face-to-face instruction only. The interviews also indicated that participants would value master's degree programs that contained both online and in-person components, with flexible meeting times. Although the majority of professionals prefer a hybrid delivery, only 18% of certificate programs analyzed used a hybrid approach, while half provided online-only course experiences.

Although public relations practitioners can certainly learn a great deal by reading blogs and trade publications, the majority of respondents in this research indicated that they prefer to learn with a community of people. One of the strengths of master's and certificate programs is that they bring together a community of people to learn.

Participants want a graduate curriculum that includes the newest digital tools and strategies for communication careers, with business management and marketing expertise rated highly, too. Participants indicate a preference for multiple topics for a certificate, with the greater number of people saying they would like a class on storytelling, digital and social media strategy, and measuring communication effectiveness.

One overall finding of this mixed-methods research is that universities and colleges have an opportunity to respond to professional demand for certificates and other ongoing training. Only 29 percent of universities that offer a graduate degree in public relations also provide a communication-centric certificate. Although certificates will never completely replace the relevance or need for an in-depth master's program in public relations, a certificate may be the best educational choice for professionals who want to learn a specialized skill or process without the time commitment and cost of a master's degree. Certificates may also become more desirable if more people strive to earn "badges" as an informal way to showcase expertise to prospective employers (Goligoski, 2012).

The findings of this research are limited by the use of a convenience and snowball sample. Moreover, the types of people who were motivated to complete the survey likely have a higher interest in graduate education and certificates compared to other professionals. Participation in the in-depth interviews was self-

selected.

Future research could analyze the differences in university certificate and for-profit certification programs, and the differences among programs offered by universities, broad professional organizations, and specific trade groups. Depth interviews could be conducted with certificate program coordinators to explore the challenges and opportunities in coordinating these programs. Finally, additional research could delve into professional attitudes and likely behavior of potential students toward universities which offered "laddered" approaches to graduate work, allowing students to begin with a certificate program that would give credit toward a future master's degree program. As this research demonstrates, certificate programs offer opportunities for both communication professionals and universities interested in being part of their ongoing learning.

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Who Wants to Be a Manager?: Applying the Attraction-Selection-Attrition Framework to Public Relations Education

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An underexplored area in the literature on public relations education concerns the preconceptions that attract undergraduate students to study public relations. A few qualitative and descriptive studies have found that beginning public relations students hold a number of media-influenced misperceptions about the profession (Bowen, 2003, 2009; Brunner & Fitch-Hauser, 2009). While this research has raised important questions about why students choose to study public relations and the potential consequences of not attracting "the right" students, it has not developed or applied a theoretical framework to understand the individual-level factors that contribute to student attraction. This study seeks to identify individual personality traits that play a role in attracting undergraduate students to study public relations by adopting the attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) framework from the personnel psychology literature (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). This framework has been applied primarily to job seekers after graduation. However, it also has been applied to the sorting process that occurs as students seek an academic major prior to entering the job market (Boone, van Olffen, & Roijakkers, 2004).

Literature Review

Public Relations Management and Education

Because the public relations function needs a seat at the management table to implement effective public relations programs (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995), scholars have stressed the need for education in public relations management in the academy (e.g., Kinnick & Cameron, 1994). Nevertheless, research suggests that many beginning public relations students are not aware of the management emphasis of the curriculum. Instead, these students are attracted to public relations because of perceptions formed through exposure to stereotypical depictions in the news and entertainment media (Bowen, 2003, 2009). While there is concern that some students may rely on these faulty assumptions to evaluate public relations as a potential major and future career path, examples of public relations becoming an integral part of organizational management are on the rise. Therefore, it is likely that a motivated student seeking information about the discipline could form preconceptions of public relations as a management function in the process of investigating the major.

Attraction-Selection-Attrition Framework

One way to understand the role that preconceptions play in attracting students to study public relations is to examine the issue through the lens of the attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) framework (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). According to the ASA framework, job seekers are attracted to particular organizations because they see a fit between their individual personalities and an organization's culture. Conversely, organizations typically hire, or select, applicants with personalities that resonate with their goals and culture. Finally, the framework suggests that employees who are not "a fit" for the organization choose to leave through attrition. Experimental research has supported the relationship between

personality type and organizational attraction (e.g., Cable & Judge, 1996).

Boone, van Olffen, and Roijakkers (2004) used the ASA framework to investigate whether a similar process applies to the selection of majors by university undergraduates. They reasoned that students experience a similar process as they select a major. Namely, some students may be attracted to a field of study that will lead to a career path that suits their personality. However, other students will make an initial decision about a major only to find that the resulting career path is not a good fit, causing them to change majors. Their research found support for the attraction phase of the ASA cycle by examining the relationship between student personality type and the relevance of information used to decide on a major.

Need for Achievement and Need for Power

The individual personality traits selected for the current study were need for achievement and need for power. These personality traits come from research about the influence of individual needs on motivation and behavior (McClelland, 1985). These personality traits have been used consistently in organizational behavior research on leadership and managerial effectiveness (e.g., Stahl, 1983). Research has found that these traits are not mutually exclusive (Taormina, 2009) and are present in similar levels for both male and female managers (Chusmir, 1985).

Individuals with a high need for achievement have a strong desire to meet standards of excellence set by themselves or others (McClelland, 1961). Their focus is on doing something well. These individuals tend to engage in challenging activities that involve skill, effort, planning, and goal setting. Additionally, they seek out activities that require personal respon-

sibility and feedback about their performance. Therefore, students with a high need for achievement may be attracted to study public relations if they have management-related preconceptions of the function, such as goal-setting, strategic planning, and evaluation.

Individuals who exhibit a high need for power are motivated to exert emotional and behavioral influence over others and receive recognition for their actions (Winter, 1973). Their focus is on making an impact. From an organizational perspective, a high need for power motivates and enables managers to influence subordinates to achieve organizational goals (McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982). Students with a high need for power may be drawn to study public relations if they have preconceptions that they can have an impact on the organization through the public relations function, such as counseling senior management or participating in organizational decision making.

The current study focuses only on the attraction phase of the ASA cycle by evaluating the relationships among students' individual personality traits, their preconceptions about public relations as a management function, and their perceptions of public relations career fit. The following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Undergraduate students' need for achievement will be positively related to their preconceptions of public relations as a management function.

H2: Undergraduate students' need for power will be positively related to their preconceptions of public relations as a management function.

H3: Undergraduate students' preconceptions of public relations as a management function will have a positive influence on their evaluation of the potential fit of public relations as a career.

Method

Population

The population of interest for this study was undergraduate students enrolled in two sections of the introductory public relations course at a university where the curriculum follows the Commission on Public Relations Education's (CPRE, 2006) guidelines. A total of 307 students were enrolled in both classes. An online survey was administered early in the second month of the fall 2012 semester. By this point, both sections of the course had discussed the definition and evolution of public relations, ethics and professionalism, and the differences between departments and firms.

Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was developed for this study consisting of four principal sections: personality traits, management preconceptions, perceptions of career fit, and demographics. Reliability for each scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The personality traits need for achievement and need for power were measured using eight items from Steers and Braunstein's (1976) Manifest Needs Questionnaire. Both needs were measured by separate four-item scales (need for achievement, $\alpha = .66$; need for power, $\alpha = .83$). Subjects were asked to agree or disagree with statements about how they typically behave in a work setting using a seven-point, Likert-type scale anchored by "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree." In the current study, need for power ($\alpha = .82$) had an acceptable alpha while the alpha for need for achievement ($\alpha = .64$) was low but similar to the alpha reported for the original scale. As a result, caution should be used in interpreting analysis involving this particular scale due to substandard internal consistency.

Management preconceptions were measured using Lauzen's (1992) four-item manager role aspirations scale ($\alpha = .87$). This scale was developed to measure the "managerial activities they would ideally like to do" (p. 73). Respondents were asked to report how often they would like to perform four managerial tasks in their ideal public relations job using a seven-point, Likert-type scale anchored by "never" and "always." Cronbach's alpha for management preconceptions in the current study ($\alpha = .86$) was acceptable.

Perceived career fit was assessed by modifying three items developed by Cable and Judge (1996) ($\alpha = .68$). The modified items were: (1) "To what degree do you feel your personality is a 'match' or fit for a career in public relations?"; (2) "Do you think the values and 'personality' of the public relations industry reflect your own values and personality?"; and (3) "My personality matches those of current public relations practitioners." Participants were asked to respond to the first question using a seven-point, Likert-type scale anchored by "not at all" and "completely." They were asked to respond to the second and third questions using a seven-point, Likert-type scale anchored by "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree." Cronbach's alpha for career fit in the current study ($\alpha = .84$) was acceptable.

Results

Sample Description

Of the 307 students invited to participate in the study, 262 completed the online survey for a response rate of 85%. More than three-quarters of the participants (76%) were female and less than one-fourth (24%) were male. The majority of respondents were sophomores (39%) or juniors (39%). However, the sample also

included seniors (18%) and freshmen (4%). In terms of majors, 40% of the respondents identified themselves as public relations majors. Nearly the same number (38%) identified themselves as majors from a different discipline (e.g., English, marketing, sports management, finance, political science). Students majoring in advertising (15%), telecommunications (5%), and journalism (3%) were also represented in the sample. A majority of survey respondents were in the 19 to 20 age group (66%), while nearly a quarter were in the 21 to 22 age group (23%). Additionally, 8% of respondents were in the 17 to 18 age group and 3% were in the 23 to 35 age group. Caucasians comprised 60% of the sample, followed by African Americans (21%), Hispanics (12%), Asian Americans (3%), and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (1%).

Students' mean scores for both need for achievement (M = 5.3; SD = 0.75) and need for power (M = 5.1; SD = 0.93) were above the midpoint of the seven-point measurement scale. Similar mean scores also were obtained for students' management preconceptions (M = 5.2; SD = 1.1) and perceived career fit (M = 5.2; SD = 1.1).

Personality Traits and Management Preconceptions

Pearson correlations were calculated to test H1 and H2. Management preconceptions had significant positive relationships with both need for achievement (r = .44, p < .001) and need for power (r = .34, p < .001). Need for achievement and need for power were positively correlated (r = .62, p < .001). In addition, stepwise regression was used to test H1 and H2 while controlling for students' declared major and gender. The results of the stepwise regression are presented in Table 1. The analysis found that need for achievement (β = .35, p < .001) and being a declared public relations major (β = .13, p = .02) were positively related to management preconceptions. Results indicated that the complete regression model accounted for 20.3% of the variance in management preconceptions and was a good fit for the data (R^2 = .22, F (4, 257) = 17.08, p < .001). Additionally, the full model explained significantly more variance than the model that only included the control variables (R^2_{change} = .18, F (2, 257) = 29.31, p < .001). Multicolliniarity was not an issue as the variance inflation factor (VIF) was less than 10 (VIF < 1.65).

Table 1. *Results of Stepwise Regression for Management Preconceptions*

	Model 1			Model 2		
	β	t	p	β	t	p
Major (PR=1, Other=0)	.20	3.10	.002	.13	2.33	.02
Gender (F=1, M=0)	-.03	-.43	.67	-.04	-.75	.45
Need for Achievement				.35	4.90	< .001
Need for Power				.11	1.60	.11
Adjusted R^2	.03			.20		
R^2	.04			.22		
F	4.85			17.61		
df	2,259			4,257		
p	.009			< .001		

Therefore, based on the results, H1 was supported, but H2 was not.

Personality Traits, Management Preconceptions, and Career Fit

A correlation analysis was used to test H3. It found that career fit had significant positive relationships with need for achievement ($r = .35$, $p < .001$), need for power ($r = .38$, $p < .001$), and management preconceptions ($r = .42$, $p < .001$). As a result, stepwise regression was used to analyze the relationship between management preconceptions and perceptions of career fit while controlling for the effects of the two personality traits, declared major, and gender. The results of the stepwise regression are presented in Table 2. The analysis found that management preconceptions ($\beta = .28$, $t = 4.68$, $p < .001$), declared public relations major ($\beta = .22$, t $= 3.89$, $p < .001$), and need for power ($\beta = .21$, $t = 3.13$, $p = .002$) had significant positive relationships with perceived career fit. The complete model was a good fit for the data, explaining 27.7% of the variance in perceived career fit ($R^2 = .28$, $F (5, 256) = 17.90$, $p < .001$). In addition, the full model explained more of the variance in perceived career fit than the model containing only the control variables ($R^2_{change} = .06$, $F (1, 256) = 21.90$, $p < .001$). Multicolliniarity was not an issue as the variance inflation factor (VIF) was less than 10 (VIF < 1.80). Therefore, based on these results, H3 was supported.

Discussion

This study found that students' need for achievement and being a declared public relations major were positively related to preconceptions of public relations as a management function. These results indicate that the higher a student's need for achievement the more he or she thinks about public relations in terms of management. The results also suggest that students who have already declared public relations as their major are more likely to think of public relations as a management function than students from other disciplines who choose to study it. This finding provides some empirical support for the proposition that students with a high need for achievement are attracted to study public relations because of their preconceptions of public relations as a management function that involves skill, effort, planning, and goal setting.

Interestingly, the results also show

Table 2. *Results of Stepwise Regression for Perceived Career Fit*

	Model 1			Model 2		
	β	t	p	β	t	p
Major (PR=1, Other=0)	.25	4.44	<.001	.22	3.89	< .001
Gender (F=1, M=0)	.04	.62	.54	.05	.86	.39
Need for Achievement	.16	2.24	.03	.06	.86	.39
Need for Power	.24	3.47	.001	.21	3.13	.002
Management Preconceptions				.28	4.68	< .001
Adjusted R^2	.22			.28		
R^2	.23			.29		
F	19.24			17.90		
df	4,257			5,256		
p	< .001			< .001		

that need for power is not related to management preconceptions. This is likely because undergraduate students with a high need for power do not see an opportunity in the public relations manager role, as described by the four items adopted in this study, to influence subordinates and reach top-levels of management.

This study also demonstrates that management preconceptions have a significant positive relationship with perceived career fit. Specifically, the results indicate that the more a student considers public relations to be a management function, the greater the student's perceptions of career fit. In addition, the results demonstrate that students who possess a high need for power or who have already declared their major to be public relations are likely to have perceptions of high career fit. One explanation of why students high in need for power see public relations as a career fit independent of management preconceptions could be that these students hold a misperception about the actual power and influence of public relations in organizations. It is possible that they hold preconceptions of public relations as a powerful organizational function that will enable them to influence the behavior of others within the organization.

Conclusion

Students with a high need for achievement likely are attracted to the major because they have developed preconceptions of public relations as a management function. This view of public relations needs to be fostered with these students so they will develop a greater sense of career fit. In addition, educators need to explain how public relations gains power and influence in organizations so students with high need for power will have an accurate evaluation of career fit.

Because students with a high power motivation have the potential to become high-level executives, public relations programs need to hold on to these students by fostering their interest in the field. Moreover, this study provides a foundation for future research investigating the ASA model in public relations education.

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