

Curriculum Rebuilding in Public Relations: Understanding what Early Career, Mid-Career, and Senior PR/Communications Professionals Expect from PR Graduates

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This manuscript reports on a survey of public relations practitioners about the professional attributes and job skills necessary for those who intend to enter the public relations field. Analyses compared differences and similarities between senior, mid-career, and early-career practitioners. Results indicate that writing, listening, and creativity are the three most significant skills aspiring public relations individuals should have, followed by the ability to think creatively, deal with an online reputation crisis, communicate effectively in today's environment of disinformation, and build a crisis response plan. Results found statistically significant differences across senior management, middle management, and early-career respondents on items measuring some skills and attributes (i.e., possessing business acumen, creativity, research/measurement skills, new technologies, digital storytelling, and an understanding of how to best interact with public relations and outside firms).

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Public relations education, now celebrating nearly 100 years in the United States, has come a long way since the first public relations course was taught at the University of Illinois in 1920, and the first degree program was offered by Boston University in 1947 (Wright, 2011). Over 1,200 universities and colleges today offer majors and/or undergraduate degrees in public relations, communication, public affairs, and other related disciplines (My College Options Research Center, 2017), and many others include public relations concentrations and minors in their curricula, reflecting the demand among students for formal training in the practice of public relations. With jobs in public relations projected to grow by 9% each year until 2026 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), this demand for high quality public relations education will also increase. Therefore, it is imperative for public relations educators to design courses and curricula to reflect the needs of the profession and prepare students to enter the workforce with the key tools and skills they need to be successful in their careers. As Brunner et al. (2018) noted, “Staying current with what students will need to be successful is often a high priority for programs large and small” (p. 22), as it should be.

An important question for public relations educators is what these key skills and tools are and what learning outcomes educators should focus on when designing courses and curricula. To answer this question, programs employ a variety of tactics, including engaging with alumni, forming advisory boards, and encouraging faculty involvement in industry groups (Brunner et al., 2018). However, gaps between the needs of the profession and the skillsets of the recent-graduate workforce continue to exist (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018), indicating perhaps the need for more rigorous, social scientific inquiry into the needs of the profession as perceived by the professionals. The present study is an effort to address this need through surveys conducted among public relations practitioners in the U.S. and around the world.

This study builds on the work of scholars such as DiStaso et al. (2009); Brunner et al. (2018); Ragas et al. (2015); and Auger and Cho (2016), as well as industry bodies like the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), to identify the skills important for the future of public relations practice. However, the results reported in this study represent a key point of difference from other survey-based investigations into the subject (e.g., DiStaso et al., 2009). This study not only presents a description of key skills and pieces of knowledge that professionals consider important for the future generation of communicators to possess but also includes an analysis of the differences and similarities between senior-level, mid-level, and early-career practitioners in what they consider to be priority skills. As we move closer to celebrating a century of formal public relations education in the United States, it is important to look forward to the next 100 years. Understanding what practitioners at different stages in their careers perceive to be important for the future of the practice may help provide further insight into how educators may need to design curricula and courses. Practitioners in different stages of their public relations career may have different experiences and lenses from which they think about what the future of the profession may look like, and unpacking differences or lack thereof in these professionals' views may help underscore the importance of certain attributes over others. In the section that follows, we situate this study in current literature and explicate the overarching research question that guided our inquiry.

Literature Review

It has been 47 years since Scott M. Cutlip and J. Carroll Bateman addressed the 1973 business meeting of the Public Relations Division of what was then the Association for Education in Journalism (AEJ) about the “unsatisfactory and disparate state of public relations education in the U.S.” (Commission for Public Relations Education, 1975, p. 57). Cutlip, who some consider to be the father of public relations education (Wright,

1991), was a professor at the University of Wisconsin at the time, and Bateman, a noted insurance industry executive, was extremely active in the PRSA and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA). The Cutlip-Bateman AEJ report was the catalyst for the formation of the nation's first task force that had both educators and practitioners take a serious look at the state of public relations education. Over the next half century, a number of groups—frequently called “commissions”—would meet and author various reports designed to set standards and ideally help bring improvements to public relations education. Although the focus of these commissions centered on undergraduate education in the United States, several specifically looked at graduate education, and a few had international intentions.

Always co-chaired by an educator and a practitioner, these commissions and task forces received considerable support from professional associations, not only in the United States but also in other English-speaking countries. In addition to the original report published in *Public Relations Review* in 1975, other major reports include *A Port of Entry: Public Relations Education for the 21st Century* (1999), *The Professional Bond* (2006), and most recently *Fast Forward. Foundations and Future State. Educators and Practitioners* (2018). When the present study was conducted, the commission was co-chaired by Elizabeth L. Toth of the University of Maryland and Judith T. Phair of PhairAdvantage Communications. Members represent PRSA and 14 other professional societies, four of which are located outside of the U.S. The current commission also includes 20 at-large members.

Over the years, these commissions have made recommendations that have impacted curriculum development at a number of U.S.-based colleges and universities. Many of these curriculum recommendations and changes are the result of research these commissions conducted with subjects who either taught or practiced public relations. Given the strong

role the PRSA has played throughout the history of this commission activity, most of the practitioners serving as subjects in this research have been PRSA members, although, of course, other groups have been included in such research. Commission research conducted 20 years ago reported 35,000 students were majoring in public relations at nearly 700 U.S. colleges and universities (Stacks et al., 1999). Reporting on one of the most recent omnibus surveys conducted by the CPRE, DiStaso (2019) discussed the key knowledge areas, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that educators and practitioners surveyed in the study stated were expected from PR professionals and/or delivered by new PR graduates. The same report also explored important topics both professors and practitioners believed to be essential for curriculum. Practitioners in the CPRE report sample ranked writing, communication, and social media management to be the top three desired skills, and creative thinking, problem solving, and critical thinking as the top three abilities expected from PR professionals. The present study seeks to build upon this work and is therefore guided by the following research question:

RQ1: What skills and attributes do current public relations practitioners consider important for the future generations of communicators to possess?

Professional Attributes

Public relations academics have attempted to identify and rank the importance of professional attributes for nearly half a century (Ingram, 1975). Katz and Kahn (1978) developed a theory of organizations that called for similar studies in other occupational groups. As Johansson and Larsson (2015) have explained, the various roles in which public relations and communications professionals serve have been studied thoroughly. The earliest work examining occupational attributes in public relations practice involved research conducted by Broom and Smith (1979) that led to a number of studies (Broom & Dozier, 1986; Dozier & Broom, 1995).

Although initial reports about this research focused on four practitioner roles, upon reflection and clarification, their future studies suggested these two major roles: communication technician and communication manager (Broom & Dozier, 1986). Later work by Wright (1995) identified a three-role typology, adding communication executive to this mix, while a study by Moss and Green (2001) suggested five major roles.

As Argenti (2016) and Marshall (1980) have explained, occupational expectations of public relations executives began changing in the 1970s, and a “new breed” of the public relations executive started to surface. Burson (2004, 2017), who *PRWeek* named “the century’s most influential PR figure” (“The 20 most influential communicators,” 2018, para 2), explained the expectation changes, noting that public relations used to only be involved in helping organizations answer questions about how to say something. Decisions about what to do, how to do it, and what to say were made by others. Over time, the most successful organizations have begun to seek assistance from public relations experts in making decisions about these questions. As a result, the public relations function has changed during the past few decades from something that mainly focused on media relations into an executive-level function that has become part of the decision-making dominant coalition of many organizations. These changes, and the need for them, have been discussed by Grunig (1992), Berger (2005), Gregory (2008), Bowen (2009) and others.

A field that once was not much more than publicity and public information now encompasses research, measurement, problem solving, crisis communication, organizational authenticity and more. Understanding more about what current public relations people predict will be important for future generations of practitioners to know will help public relations educators make more informed and effective decisions about curriculum and course content. Furthermore, understanding whether

professionals at different stages in their career hold different perceptions of key future skills would help public relations educators understand the future of the industry from multiple perspectives and contribute to the design of more effective public relations courses and curricula. Therefore, the following research question is proposed:

RQ2: How do professionals at different stages in their career view the importance of various attributes and skills differently?

Method

This manuscript is part of a broader collaboration between Boston University and *PRWeek* to understand the state of the public relations profession. Surveys were conducted among public relations practitioners using Qualtrics' online survey interface. The survey consisted of 72 closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions, excluding demographic questions. Of those, 32 items asked the participants to respond to the question, "How important is it for the next generation of communicators to have skills/expertise in each of the following areas?" followed by skills such as "writing" and "ability to lead teams." Participants' responses to these 32 items formed the focus of this manuscript. All closed-ended items were measured on 5-point Likert scales ranging from "very unimportant" to "very important." The survey instrument was developed by the authors of this study in consultation with *PRWeek*.

The link to the survey was sent along with an invitation to participate to all subscribers of *PRWeek*, as well as members of other PR-related organizations, both U.S.-based and global (i.e., PRSA, PR Council, the International Public Relations Association, and board members of the Institute for Public Relations). Reminders to complete the survey were sent to *PRWeek* subscribers at three time points following the first email. Survey links were also posted on social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), as well as in the form of a pop-up advertisement on *PRWeek's*

website. A total of 1500 surveys were started; however, given the length of the survey (~20 minutes), the survey had a high drop-out rate, yielding a total of 799 responses ($N = 799$). Of these, 296 (37.04%) participants reported being male, 479 said they were female (59.94%), while the remaining 24 participants either did not answer the question or said they preferred not to answer. The gender distribution of the sample closely mirrors the U.S. public relations industry, as women have been reported to comprise 65.7% of the industry (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018), making our sample representative of the field. The age distribution of the sample is reported in Table 1.

In terms of geographic location, 107 of our respondents reported being based outside of the United States, while the rest were located in the United States. The relatively low number of participants from outside the U.S. hindered our ability to perform comparative analyses between U.S.-based and international practitioners. The sample was, therefore, considered as a whole rather than analyzed by location.

Table 1

Age Distribution of Sample

Age	Frequency
Under 30	81
30-39	163
40-49	179
50-59	224
60-69	119
70 or older	20
Total	786

Table 2*Distribution of Respondents' Current Positions*

	Chairman/CEO/Founder/President	107
	CCO (in-house)	37
	MD/GM (agency)	23
Senior Management	EVP (agency)	18
	EVP (in-house)	3
	SVP (agency)	30
	SVP (in-house)	18
	VP (agency)	17
	VP (in-house)	51
	Associate/Assistant VP (agency)	2
Middle Management	Senior Director PR/Comms	39
	Director PR/Comms	120
	Senior Manager PR/Comms	43
	Manager, PR/Comms	76
	Specialist, PR/Comms	61
	Senior Account Supervisor	4
	Account Supervisor	8
Early-Career	Senior Account Executive	8
Professionals	Account Executive	17
	Account Coordinator	11
	Others	105
	Total	798

Answering RQ2 necessitated classifying the respondents into three categories based on their current reported position. Based on discussions between the authors and *PRWeek* and the research team's collective knowledge of industry practices (the third author of this study is the former CEO of Ketchum), participants were classified into senior management, middle management, and early-career practitioners. Toward the end of the survey, all participants were asked to report their current positions in their organizations and to choose one of 21 positions noted in Table 2. Importantly, 13.39% of our sample ($n = 107$) reported being either the chairperson, CEO, president, or founder of their own company/firm. Thirty-seven (4.63%) participants were chief communication officers (CCO), and 23 (2.88%) reported being either managing directors or general managers of an agency. The distribution of the positions held by the respondents is reported in Table 2.

Individuals classified as senior management included those who reported being CEO/chairperson/president/founder, CCO, MD/GM, executive vice president, or senior vice president ($n = 236$). Vice presidents were classified as middle management, as were associate/assistant vice presidents, senior director PR/Comms, director PR/Comms, senior manager PR/Comms, manager PR/Comms, and specialist PR/Comms ($n = 409$). Account executives, account coordinators, senior account executives, account supervisors, and senior account supervisors were all categorized as early-career practitioners ($n = 48$). Of the sample, 105 respondents stated their current position as being "other," precluding their classification into one of the three categories as we were unable to classify them accurately.

All data analyses were conducted using Stata IC/14. ANOVAs were conducted to understand whether there were differences in participants' responses based on level. Post-hoc analyses were conducted using Bonferroni's test for pairwise comparisons.

Results

To answer RQ1, the means of all 32 items were calculated and analyzed for interpretation. Table 3 contains a summary of the means for the 32 items related to the importance of skills in the future. As this table indicates, overall respondents ranked writing ($M = 4.79$), listening ($M = 4.70$), and creative thinking ($M = 4.61$) as the most important skills for aspiring public relations practitioners. This ranking closely follows that of the CPRE's (DiStaso, 2019) report. The top three skills noted earlier were followed by the ability to deal with an online reputation crisis ($M = 4.61$), the ability to communicate effectively in today's environment of disinformation ($M = 4.61$), creativity ($M = 4.54$), and the ability to build a crisis response plan ($M = 4.49$). The importance of new technologies for the future of the practice was scored lower than expected by our respondents. For example, the specific application of virtual reality was scored an average of 3.19, while that of artificial intelligence was 3.36.

Table 3

Summary of ANOVA

Item*	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Creativity	4.54	.59	.42	n.s.
Possessing business acumen	4.40	.67	8.97	<.0001
Multilingual abilities	3.43	.82	1.45	n.s.
Having a global mindset	4.04	.80	3.97	<.05
Listening skills	4.70	.54	.03	n.s.
Research/measurement skills	4.33	.67	4.76	<.01
Writing skills	4.79	.49	.80	n.s.
Experiential	3.85	.79	0.48	n.s.
Ability to lead teams	4.12	.72	0.77	n.s.
Ability to develop talent	4.15	.74	2.64	n.s.
Application of new technologies (e.g., AI, AR, VR, Blockchain)	3.82	.87	2.74	n.s.
Specific application of AI (Artificial Intelligence)	3.36	.92	4.71	<.01
Specific application of AR (Augmented Reality)	3.22	.92	3.71	<.05
Specific application of VR (Virtual Reality)	3.19	.92	3.42	<.05
Specific application of Blockchain	3.01	.90	4.76	<.01

Item*	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
How to best use PR firms in a convergent, integrated, high velocity age	3.97	.85	6.67	<.01
How to best use other outside consultants in a convergent, integrated, high velocity age	3.89	.81	6.41	<.01
Ability build a modern crisis response plan	4.49	.68	0.01	n.s.
Ability to deal with online reputation crises	4.61	.60	1.49	n.s.
Branded content	4.18	.72	1.40	n.s.
Paid content	3.76	.88	1.16	n.s.
Paid media	3.69	.91	1.52	n.s.
Earned media	4.38	.70	0.21	n.s.
Shared media	4.15	.74	0.39	n.s.
Owned media	4.15	.82	.01	n.s.
Work with big data	3.91	.86	.24	n.s.
Media buying	3.32	.97	2.95	n.s.
Digital storytelling	4.41	.70	3.43	<.05
Social listening	4.4	.67	2.38	n.s.
Creative thinking	4.61	.57	.24	n.s.
Understanding the complexity of today's global communications networks	4.31	.73	2.26	n.s.
Ability to communicate effectively in today's environment of disinformation	4.61	.59	1.20	n.s.

***Anchor Item:** How important is it for the next generation of communicators to have skills/expertise in each of the following areas?

M = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation, *F* = *F* statistics, *p* = *p* value

To answer RQ2, responses from participants at different stages in their careers (senior management, middle management and early career) were compared using one-way ANOVA tests to understand the impact of professional level on reported importance of skills for the future. In the paragraphs that follow, we present analyses of all 32 items across the three professional levels (i.e., senior management, middle management, and early-career practitioners).

Of the 32 items, differences were found only for 10 across the three professional levels. Table 4 provides the means across professional levels of the skills found to be significantly different across levels. For

example, the ANOVA for the importance of creativity was not statistically significant [$F(2, 705) = .42, p = .658$], indicating general agreement about the importance of creativity as a skill for future practice ($M = 4.54$; $SD = .59$). Similarly, the importance of multilingual abilities was not significantly different across the three levels [$F(2, 704) = 1.45, p = .235$]. Practitioners at senior, middle, and early levels were consistent in their consideration of the importance of multilingual abilities, the importance of which was found to be moderate rather than crucial ($M = 3.43, SD = .82$). Also, the importance of the PESO (paid, earned, shared, owned) framework was consistent across the three professional levels, with paid media registering the lowest means across the four [$F(2, 695) = 1.52, p = .218$; $M = 3.69, SD = .91$]. Unsurprisingly, participants across professional levels agreed about the importance of earned media, with little variance in means across the three groups [$F(2, 697) = .21, p = .814$; $M = 4.38, SD = .70$]. Writing skills [$F(2, 704) = .80, p = .448$; $M = 4.79, SD = .49$], the ability to build a modern crisis plan [$F(2, 703) = .01, p = .995$; $M = 4.48, SD = .68$], the ability to deal with online reputation crises [$F(2, 701) = 1.49, p = .226$; $M = 4.61, SD = .60$], and the ability to communicate effectively in today's environment of disinformation [$F(2, 697) = 1.20, p = .300$; $M = 4.71, SD = .59$] were all similarly scored highly and consistently by the participants as key skills for the future of the public relations industry.

Table 4

Summary of Means across Professional Levels (significant values only)

Item*	Early Career	Middle Managers	Senior Managers
Possessing business acumen	4.43	4.30	4.51
Having a global mindset	4.3	3.98	4.07
Research/measurement skills	4.69	4.34	4.26
Specific application of AI (Artificial Intelligence)	3.32	3.26	3.47

Item*	Early Career	Middle Managers	Senior Managers
Specific application of AR (Augmented Reality)	3.19	3.12	3.31
Specific application of VR (Virtual Reality)	3.11	3.10	3.28
Specific application of Blockchain	2.87	2.91	3.11
How to best use PR firms in a convergent, integrated, high velocity age	4.09	3.86	4.09
How to best use other outside consultants in a convergent, integrated, high velocity age	3.98	3.79	4.01
Digital storytelling	4.51	4.45	4.32

***Anchor Item:** How important is it for the next generation of communicators to have skills/expertise in each of the following areas?

Ten items were found to have statistically significant differences across the three groups (see Table 4). To further investigate the differences across the three groups, Bonferroni's pairwise comparisons were used as a post-hoc test. First, the importance of possessing business acumen was found to be different across the three groups [$F(2, 708) = 8.97, p < .001; M_{total} = 4.41, SD_{total} = .67$]. Bonferroni's pairwise comparisons revealed a significant difference between top/senior management ($M_{senior} = 4.51$) and middle management ($M_{middle} = 4.30$). Senior managers considered possessing business acumen to be more important than middle managers did. No significant differences were found between early-career practitioners ($M_{early} = 4.43$) and the other two groups.

Having a global mindset was also found to be different across groups [$F(2, 708) = 3.97, p < .05; M_{total} = 4.04, SD_{total} = .80$]. Specifically, early-career practitioners considered having a global mindset most important across the three groups ($M_{early} = 4.30$) and significantly more important than middle management ($M_{middle} = 3.98$). Senior managers'

perceptions of the importance of having a global mindset were not significantly different from either group ($M_{\text{senior}} = 4.07$).

Another skill that revealed significant differences was research/measurement skills [$F(2, 705) = 4.76, p < .01; M_{\text{total}} = 4.33, SD_{\text{total}} = .68$]. Although all three groups considered research/measurement as an important future skill, early-career practitioners reported the highest importance across the three groups ($M_{\text{early}} = 4.69$) and were significantly different from perceptions of senior managers ($M_{\text{early}} = 4.26$) but not middle managers ($M_{\text{middle}} = 4.34$).

In terms of new technology, while participants across groups did not disagree about the importance of the application of new technologies [$F(2, 702) = 2.74, p = .065; M_{\text{total}} = 3.81, SD_{\text{total}} = .87$], differences were found across the groups about the importance of the application of specific technologies. The importance of the specific application of artificial intelligence, for example, was found to be different across the three levels [$F(2, 699) = 4.71, p < .01; M_{\text{total}} = 3.37, SD_{\text{total}} = .93$], as were augmented reality [$F(2, 696) = 3.71, p < .05; M_{\text{total}} = 3.21, SD_{\text{total}} = .93$], virtual reality [$F(2, 698) = 3.42, p < .05; M_{\text{total}} = 3.19, SD_{\text{total}} = .92$], and Blockchain [$F(2, 687) = 4.76, p < .01; M_{\text{total}} = 3.01, SD_{\text{total}} = .90$]. For all four types of new technologies, senior managers considered their application to be significantly more important than did middle managers, but no differences were found between early-career practitioners and the other two groups. The means for the application of Blockchain were particularly interesting, as early-career ($M_{\text{early}} = 2.87$) and middle managers ($M_{\text{middle}} = 2.91$) considered it relatively unimportant for the future compared to senior managers ($M_{\text{senior}} = 3.11$).

Finally, senior managers and early-career practitioners considered it important for future practitioners to know how best to use PR firms and outside consultants in a dynamic, fast-paced environment more so than middle management did. Specifically, on the item, “[the importance

of knowing] how to best use PR firms in a convergent, integrated, high velocity age,” [$F(2, 693) = 6.67, p < .01; M_{\text{total}} = 3.96, SD_{\text{total}} = .85$], senior managers’ report ($M_{\text{senior}} = 4.09$) of its future importance was much higher than middle management’s ($M_{\text{middle}} = 3.86$).

Discussion

The purpose of this manuscript was two-fold; first, we sought to understand the key skills and attributes that public relations practitioners consider important for future generations of communicators to master. Second, we wanted to understand the differences in perceptions of respondents at different positions and professional levels. Unlike similar studies that have focused mainly on mid-level and early-career practitioners, this research also included a larger than usual sample of senior-level practitioners, enabling richer analyses of such perceptual differences. Writing, creativity, and listening were found to be scored the most highly in terms of important skills for future practitioners to excel in, followed by creative thinking and managing crises both offline and online. Results found statistically significant differences across senior management, middle management, and early-career practitioners on items measuring these skills and attributes: possessing business acumen, creativity, research/measurement skills, new technologies, digital storytelling (see Table 4), and how to best interact with public relations firms. In the paragraphs that follow, we unpack the implications of this study.

Public Relations Hard Skills are Still Relevant

The results of this study echo the findings of several years’ worth of research into public relations education that writing is an essential skill for aspiring public relations practitioners (e.g., Barber et al., 2012; CPRE, 2015; DiStaso et al., 2009). The present study found that not only did writing as a skill score the highest level of agreement from participants about its importance, this agreement was consistently high across the

three professional levels. As the CPRE (2018) has noted, “Educators and practitioners agree that writing is essential” particularly as platforms continue to emerge and evolve (p. 13). This finding also builds upon DiStaso et al.’s (2009) work that writing was an essential skill for entry-level applicants by examining whether such a requirement was considered important by those at the top of their profession as well as those just starting out. As demonstrated through the analyses of variance, writing was considered important regardless of professional level. The same was true for creativity, social listening, and expertise in earned, shared, and owned media (see Table 3). The ability to develop plans for both online and offline crises (see Table 3) was also considered an important skill across all three levels.

Interestingly, the importance of research and measurement skills was the highest among early-career practitioners. Although the averages across all three professional levels were high (well above 4 on a 5 point scale), early-career practitioners considered research and measurement to be significantly more important than did the senior executives in our sample. Research, as CPRE (2018) has also noted, remains a “bedrock of professional public relations” (p. 14). One potential explanation for the higher scores on research and measurement from early-career professionals may be the emphasis on these skills in their own undergraduate or graduate curricula, as has been recommended by the CPRE, quite correctly so.

Furthermore, senior-level managers consistently considered new technologies such as AI, AR, and VR to be significantly more important than did middle managers. This finding is in line with Meng and Berger’s (2018) study, which found that Millennials reported lower levels of value for new technology than their managers thought they did. Based on this finding, senior-level executives, who have a broader insight into the profession and business at large, believe that these new technologies

will play an increasingly important role in the public relations profession. On the other hand, senior managers' relatively stronger emphasis on new technologies may simply reflect their own discomfort and/or inadequacies with such technologies. Regardless, although technology did not score very highly in this particular study, the need for universities and colleges to respond to this change in the technological landscape remains an important challenge, especially given the rapid speed at which technological changes take place. Technology, then, remains a "triple threat challenge" (CPRE, 2018, p. 14).

Our findings also echoed calls from industry leaders about the importance of public relations practitioners being literate in the language of business (e.g., Barber et al., 2012; Ragas et al., 2015). Across all three professional levels, the importance of possessing business acumen was rated highly; however, of the three sets of professionals, senior executives scored possessing business acumen highest, significantly more than mid-level managers. It is possible that senior executives' experience and broader worldview of the business world contributed to this difference. This particular finding holds meaningful implications for building public relations curricula, particularly for programs whose students may not have access to classes in business schools. Business literacy then needs to be built into basic curricula by public relations faculty so future generations are well-versed in the language of business, as recommended by senior managers. Perhaps one way for programs to incorporate this recommendation is to add business-related modules to both required and elective courses in the curriculum, such that students gain business literacy within the context of core PR concepts. Another option for PR programs is to collaborate with their counterparts in business schools and design blended, co-taught courses that may benefit both sets of students. This finding, and indeed, the recommendation for business literacy courses to be part of the core is slightly at odds with the CPRE (2018) report,

which recommended business literacy as an additional area of study rather than as a part of the core curriculum. However, both the CPRE's (2018) recommendations and the results of this study continue to echo the importance of incorporating business courses into public relations curricula.

Soft Skills

Several soft skills were rated highly as being important for future practitioners, similar to Barber et al.'s (2012) and DiStaso et al.'s (2009) findings. Specifically, the ability to lead teams and to develop talent were both scored highly across all three professional levels, echoing the findings of several public relations scholars (e.g., Berger & Meng, 2010; Ewing et al., 2019). However, despite its importance, effective leadership tends not to be a topic included in public relations curricula as an area of skill development (Auger & Cho, 2016).

Understanding the complexity of today's global communication networks, too, was found to be important for future public relations practitioners to master. Additionally, respondents seemed to feel the pressure of the current media environment, and noted that the ability to communicate effectively in today's environment of disinformation was a crucial skill that future practitioners will need to master.

Limitations

As with any research endeavor, this study does suffer from some limitations. First, the results of these analyses are generalizable only to PR practitioners who are *PRWeek* subscribers or affiliated with the four industry groups whose members were invited to participate in the study. Second, although our focus is on public relations education in the United States, we did have some participation from respondents across the world. Future research may seek to investigate differences between practitioners' perceptions of key skills across different countries and conduct comparative analyses. Third, although we have interpreted the findings for

public relations education, our question asked about which areas future generations need to have expertise/skills in rather than what they need to be educated in; however, we believe our interpretation of the responses to be a logical extension. Fourth, the classification of participants into groups for analyses across levels depended on self-reported titles. Other variables, such as organization type and size, size of teams, etc., were not taken into account while performing the classification. Further studies should consider these factors in the classification of participants.

Finally, certain KSA areas highlighted by the recent CPRE report (DiStaso, 2019) were not included in this particular article as they have been reported elsewhere. For example, although DiStaso (2019) emphasized ethics as one of the most desired knowledge areas for PR practitioners, ethics was not addressed as a skill for future practitioners. This is because the importance of ethics was investigated in a different part of the survey where we asked respondents to report on key areas that were crucial for their current practice. Given that ethics education has been recommended by the CPRE for several years (DiStaso, 2019), it was not studied as a skill for future practice. Instead, we sought to understand how important ethics were to our respondents' current practice, reporting on which would be outside the scope of the current article. Despite these limitations, we believe the findings of this study have significant implications for public relations education.

Conclusion

This study brings forth a number of implications for public relations curricula and course development. Some of the skills deemed to be most important for public relations practitioners have been taught for years in university-based public relations degree programs. The most pronounced of these is writing, which enjoys a long history of being a required PR course perhaps due to public relations programs historically being housed in colleges of journalism. Required courses teaching media

relations, creativity, and creative thinking also enjoy a long association in PR education.

More recently, many university-based public relations degree programs have developed required or elective courses in subjects such as PR or communication research and measurement, crisis communication, new technologies, and global/international communication. However, this article highlights the importance of several additional areas of focus for PR programs to consider, including coursework on listening, digital storytelling, communicating effectively in today's environment of disinformation, leadership, how to work effectively with PR firms and other outside consultants, and most importantly, business acumen.

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