

*PRD GIFT Winner AEJMC 2020*

**Synthesizing Primary and Secondary Research  
to Drive Strategy: A Final Project for a Strategic  
Communication Research Course**

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**Rationale**

The ability to sort through data to find insight and opportunity, and determine what is meaningful and meaningless, is critical for PR graduates entering the profession (Lum, 2017). Additionally, conducting research and developing strategy informed by data is the bedrock of the PR process (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018). Students' success in PR is dependent on their ability to not only conduct primary and secondary research but also synthesize what this data means relevant to the organizational context, challenges, opportunities, and goals.

A research white paper, the final project for a strategic communication research course, allows the opportunity for students to leverage what they have learned throughout the semester, synthesizing data from a broad perspective to drive strategy. Students are provided with a hypothetical scenario about a real organization, as well as a fictional data set. They must confidently convey their conclusions and recommendations

in an easy-to-read, visually appealing report functional for busy executive decision-makers. This project helps students understand how research comes full circle, illustrating its role in PR planning and execution.

### **Student Learning Goals**

1. Demonstrate understanding of how research data benefits and informs PR strategy and tactics.
2. Demonstrate ability to interpret data as it relates to organizational context, challenges, opportunities, and goals.
3. Successfully utilize research from credible secondary sources to further synthesize primary data and support/justify recommendations.
4. Confidently communicate research conclusions and strategic recommendations using the written word and visuals, such as charts, graphs, and images.

### **Connection to Public Relations Practice**

This assignment connects to the PR process known as ROPES (Page & Parnell, 2018) because it emphasizes research as a necessary starting point for producing effective, strategic PR initiatives. It provides the experience today's PR graduates need to confidently recommend sound strategy informed by data.

### **Assessment of Student Learning**

- Assignment example: <http://bit.ly/ResearchWhitePaper> (All student authors have provided permission to have their work used publicly.)
- Since implementing this assignment as the final project (in addition to other course changes), students' self-report of "confidence handling research and data" moved from the bottom four rankings of student learning outcomes to the top four.
- "I liked that I could see how everything connects and how it would be presented to a client. There were no gaps, and I wasn't left asking

how it would actually work in the ‘real world.’ I appreciated the challenge of having primary and secondary research to synthesize into recommendations. It was difficult at first, but I realized it made our presentation so much more credible and interesting. Before this class, I could not confidently connect data back to suggestions I was making. This project was challenging because I was forced to do just that.” – senior female

- “I never thought I would say this about a research class, but this final project has been one of my favorites... I feel like the white paper really does a great job of incorporating everything we’ve learned this semester. We had to come up with a creative way to communicate our insights so that anyone could understand them, whether they’re an expert in this topic or not.” – senior male

#### References

- Commission on Public Relations Education (2018). *Fast forward: Foundations + future state. Educators + practitioners: The Commission on Public Relations Education 2017 report on undergraduate education*. <http://www.commissionpred.org/commission-reports/fast-forward-foundations-future-state-educators-practitioners/>
- Lum, E. (2017). *Bridging the talent disconnect: Charting the pathways to future growth*. The ANA Educational Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.aef.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/talent-2017study-v2.pdf>.
- Page, J. T., & Parnell, L. J. (2018). *Introduction to strategic public relations: Digital, global, and socially responsible communication*. Sage.

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## **Appendix: Final Research White Paper Assignment**

**Client:** National Park Foundation\*

\*This is a real organization but a hypothetical scenario

### **Background and Situation**

The National Park Foundation (NPF) has made significant strides developing modern communications that have increased awareness about the organization. However, its most recent campaign, “Find Your Park,” is underperforming. Although it boosted awareness, it did not significantly increase national park visits. Additionally, the communications team believes there is a lack of understanding of what NPF actually does.

Your team was hired to conduct a nationwide survey, analyze and communicate the results, and recommend three creative strategies for NPF’s next targeted campaign. NPF wants this campaign to increase understanding of what NPF does, ultimately cultivating long-term support for and appreciation of NPF’s efforts.

Your results analysis should reveal insights about the following:

1. Understanding and perceptions of the National Park Foundation
2. Perceptions of national parks as a travel destination
3. Media use behaviors related to the outdoors/travel

Assume you already distributed the survey and a statistician ran the data (see results in section titled “Survey Results”). You will interpret the data and communicate results in a visual and meaningful way to the client, meaning that you should clearly make the connection between insights, how the insights are relevant to the client’s situation, and how the insights inform your creative strategies.

### **Deliverables: White Paper**

“A white paper is a persuasive, authoritative, in-depth report on a specific topic that presents a problem and provides a solution” (HubSpot, 2018, para. 5). Click [here](#) for more information on white papers.

There are a lot of free resources to make your white paper visually appealing. I recommend using Canva to design your white paper or Adobe InDesign if you are comfortable.

Your white paper should be no more than 8 pages in length and consist of the following sections:

- **Cover Page:** Title your white paper and include author information.
- **Executive Summary:** An executive summary is a brief snapshot of the entire white paper. In two to three paragraphs, explain the purpose of the white paper; in three to four paragraphs, identify the most important findings and provide a brief overview of your creative strategies.
- **Survey Results:** Use charts, graphs, icons, or other visuals. (as well as words to support the visuals) to visually communicate the survey results. This means that the client can skim the report and easily understand key information. Additional commentary should support the “hard data” to explain what it means/how it is relevant to the client’s situation.
- **Supporting Insights:** Use secondary research from at least three different sources to provide additional information you think would be valuable for the client, given the survey results. This section should include three to five key insights.
- **Creative Strategies:** In this section, you will recommend three creative strategies that are informed by your survey data and secondary insights. These are strategies (not tactics), which means they should be broad ideas that align with what the client wants to accomplish.

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### Evaluation

- 10 pts. Executive Summary** | Provides a snapshot of the entire white paper and includes the following information: purpose of the report, three to four of the most important findings, and a discussion of how the client can move forward. Persuasive argumentation is evident.
- 25 pts. Survey Results** | Visuals clearly and appropriately illustrate all survey results; attention to question type and standard deviation is demonstrated; results are communicated in a way that reflects what the client wanted to learn from the research and why the data is relevant/meaningful.
- 25 pts. Secondary Insights** | Insights come from established, credible sources; relevant and meaningful in light of client's situation and goals; necessary details are included (e.g., survey population); sources are cited appropriately.
- 25 pts. Creative Strategies** | Three clear strategies are provided that align with the client's situation and challenge. Strategies are appropriate given primary and secondary data.
- 10 pts. Design and Formatting** | Visually appealing, creative, reflects the brand's look and feel. Entire white paper flows well from start to finish; is no more than 8 pages in length (excluding cover page); different sections are easily recognizable; cover page is professional yet creative.
- 5 pts. Writing Technicalities and Tone** | No spelling/grammatical errors; professional and confident tone.

National Park Foundation Survey Results (note: fictitious data)

SURVEY DATA ( $N = 1,500$ )

Question	Results
I understand that the National Park Foundation serves all national parks by protecting them for generations to come. (yes/no)	AGE 21-30: Yes = 72%; No = 28% 31-40: Yes = 37%; No = 63% 41-50: Yes = 44%; No = 56% 51+: Yes = 87%; No = 13%
Which of the following efforts do you most associate with NPF? (check all that apply) __ Protecting the wilderness __ Connecting children to the outdoors __ Supporting local communities __ Inspiring the next generation of park stewards and enthusiasts	(41%) Protecting the wilderness (17%) Connecting children to the outdoors (5%) Supporting local communities (8%) Inspiring the next generation of park stewards and enthusiasts
The National Park Foundation:* • is an apolitical organization (i.e., not affiliated with any particular political group) • is essential for protecting public lands • helps me understand how I can contribute to protecting public lands • is successful in advocating for all national parks • is a good resource for planning trips to national parks (*Likert scale 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is an apolitical organization (<math>M = 2.3</math>; <math>SD = 0.5</math>)</li> <li>• is essential for protecting public lands (<math>M = 6.2</math>; <math>SD = 0.7</math>)</li> <li>• helps me understand how I can contribute to protecting public lands (<math>M = 4.5</math>; <math>SD = 1.4</math>)</li> <li>• is successful in advocating for all national parks (<math>M = 3</math>; <math>SD = 1.8</math>)</li> <li>• is a good resource for planning trips to national parks (<math>M = 1.5</math>; <math>SD = 0.5</math>)</li> </ul>
To me, visiting national parks as a travel destination with family and friends is**: Easy - - - - - Complicated Appealing - - - - - Not appealing Time consuming - - - - - Not time consuming Affordable - - - - - Expensive (**Semantic differential scale 1-7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy-Complicated (<math>M = 6.1</math>; <math>SD = 0.3</math>)</li> <li>• Appealing-Not appealing (<math>M = 2</math>; <math>SD = 0.6</math>)</li> <li>• Time consuming-Not (<math>M = 1.4</math>; <math>SD = 1.8</math>)</li> <li>• Affordable-Expensive (<math>M = 1</math>; <math>SD = 0.5</math>)</li> </ul>
I would like to learn about the following regarding travel planning to national parks (check all that apply): __ Places to stay in/near national parks __ Community events/festivals in/near national parks __ Live entertainment in/near national parks __ Immersive outdoor experiences in/near national parks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Places to stay in/near national parks (80%)</li> <li>• Community events/festivals in/near national parks (22%)</li> <li>• Live entertainment in/near national parks (15%)</li> <li>• Immersive outdoor experiences in/near national parks (95%)</li> </ul>

Question	Results
<p>Which of the following forms of communication/media do you prefer to learn about outdoor travel destinations? (check all that apply)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook</li> <li>• Instagram</li> <li>• Promotional emails</li> <li>• Recommendations from friends and/or family</li> <li>• Other (please specify)_____</li> </ul>	<p>DATA BY AGE GROUP</p> <p>21-30:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook (40%)</li> <li>• Instagram (89%)</li> <li>• Promotional emails (50%)</li> <li>• Recommendations from friends and/or family (70%)</li> <li>• Other (please specify)_____ Google search; travel bloggers; Insta stories</li> </ul> <p>31-40:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook (51%)</li> <li>• Instagram (78%)</li> <li>• Promotional emails (62%)</li> <li>• Recommendations from friends and/or family (80%)</li> <li>• Other (please specify)_____ Netflix documentaries/features; Google search; mom bloggers on Instagram</li> </ul> <p>41-50:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook (67%)</li> <li>• Instagram (54%)</li> <li>• Promotional emails (75%)</li> <li>• Recommendations from friends and/or family (91%)</li> <li>• Other (please specify)_____ Tripadvisor; Google search; magazines (<i>Family Circle, Parents</i>)</li> </ul> <p>51+:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook (85%)</li> <li>• Instagram (15%)</li> <li>• Promotional emails (27%)</li> <li>• Recommendations from friends and/or family (78%)</li> <li>• Other (please specify)_____ Tripadvisor, Yelp, Google search _____</li> </ul>