

Accreditation, Curriculum, and Ethics: Exploring the Public Relations Education Landscape

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The Commission on Public Relations Education issued a report in 2018 recommending that public relations ethics be a required course, in addition to the incorporation of ethics into all public relations courses. To understand the implications of this recommendation, this study explores the nature of public relations ethics education in 15 PR programs accredited by Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications and certified by Public Relations Society of America via the Certification in Education for Public Relations program. Through an analysis of 2020 academic catalogs, findings suggest that although programs have general ethics courses (e.g., media ethics or law and ethics), few programs offer—and fewer require—public relations ethics courses. The research concludes that in conjunction with previous research on ethics in the classroom, programs implement an experiential learning approach to ethics instruction.

Keywords: ethics, curriculum, accreditation

More and more, public relations professionals are finding that ethics in PR go beyond communication. Stakeholders and publics want companies to not only post on social media, but also to allocate resources, diversify leadership, and donate to social justice causes (Meyers, 2020; Mull, 2020). As PR professionals navigate these issues for their organizations, the need for ethics training is evident. A Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) report found that employers rate knowledge regarding ethical issues as one of the top three skills they seek in hiring employees (CPRE, 2018). The report recommended that a course focusing specifically on public relations ethics be required for undergraduate PR students (Bortree et al., 2018). In 2019, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) prescribed a PR Ethics course for all programs seeking certification in its Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) program. This coalescence of factors means that public relations programs need to revisit the ethical training they provide and explore a new path forward. This need was laid out in the CPRE report where it was recommended that all PR courses incorporate ethics into the curriculum and lessons center on “moral philosophy, case studies, and simulations” (Bortree et al., 2018, p. 68).

Ethics training is not new to journalism and mass communication programs, where public relations programs are often housed. The Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) positions ethics training as one of its professional values and competencies that programs must teach students, writing that students must “demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity” (ACEJMC, n.d.-b, para. 18). However, training in most programs tends to be broad and built on the ethics of journalism. As public relations operates differently than journalism, more specific ethics training for public relations is needed.

The purpose of this study is to explore how public relations programs both accredited by ACEJMC and certified by PRSA through the CEPR program address ethics in their curricula. Given the renewed emphasis on ethics education (CPRE, 2018), this research seeks to understand the state of ethics teaching in this specific subset of programs. As ACEJMC and CEPR represent some of the highest expectations and standards for teaching in journalism, mass communication, and public relations, schools that subject themselves to both reviews should reasonably be expected to have higher standards for ethical education.

Literature Review

Public Relations Ethics: Industry Perspectives

Most definitions and conceptualizations of ethics involve “systematic analysis, distinguishing right from wrong, and determining what should be valued” (Bowen, 2007, para. 2). In public relations, that manifests into a practice of valuing “honesty, openness, fair-mindedness, respect, integrity, and forthright communication” (Bowen, 2007, para. 2). Historically, PR was viewed as void of ethics and as a profession that put too much energy into spinning and sensationalizing stories and not focusing on truth and relationship building (Bowen, 2007).

As the profession further embraces its role in the corporate suite, many PR professionals are serving as ethical compasses for their organization’s leadership (Bowen, 2007). The PRSA Code of Ethics guides members and the profession as a whole on the ethical responsibilities of public relations professionals. The core professional values of advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness help PR professionals serve the public good and achieve “excellence with powerful standards of performance, professionalism, and ethical conduct” (PRSA, n.d., para. 3).

Globally, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) adopted the Code of Athens in 1965, which was amended in 1968 and

again in 2009 (IPRA, 2009). The code's ethical recommendations to public relations professionals around the world encourage PR practitioners to work in three ethical realms: endeavoring, undertaking, and refraining. These codes center the need to establish and circulate the free flow of information, uphold human dignity, center the truth, avoid manipulation, and balance the concerns of publics and organizations (IPRA, 2009). Similarly, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA) offers a code of ethics that includes a declaration of principles and resources for ethics education and enforcement. GA argues in favor of working in the public interest; obeying laws and respecting diversity of local customs; freedom of speech; freedom of assembly; freedom of media; honesty, truth, and fact-based communication; integrity; transparency and disclosure; and privacy (GA, 2018).

Public Relations Ethics: Classroom Perspectives

Before public relations professionals enter the industry, their understanding of ethics often comes from their experiences within higher education. At the 2019 PRSA International Conference in San Diego, Elizabeth Toth moderated a conversation with public relations educators at the Educators Academy about how programs can begin to implement the CPRE's recommendations for ethics education. This presentation explored research around ethics, common ethical issues, core ethical competencies, implementation models, trends in ethics syllabi, creating a PR-specific ethics course, and increasing ethical lessons across the curriculum (Toth et al., 2019).

Accreditation

Administrators and professors often struggle with finding the right balance between skills-based courses, theory and conceptual classes, course requirements, electives, minors, and supplementary classes outside of the major or department (Blom et al., 2012). If a unit opts to seek accreditation for its program, that decision often brings

more considerations and requirements with how schools present the course catalog and descriptions to its students. Although the process of accrediting a program can limit and direct how a school builds its programs (e.g., the amount of credits a student can take within the major, see Blom et al., 2012), as of June 2020, 118 programs have earned accreditation by ACEJMC (ACEJMC, n.d.-a). Seamon (2010) argued that the limits imposed by accreditation make a broader curriculum more difficult, and highlighted a study noting that international public relations courses were stymied by accreditation limits (Hatzios & Lariscy, 2008). However, it should be noted that ACEJMC requirements have changed significantly since Seamon's work to be more open to curricular change, thus, an examination of how ethics training has been implemented in light of those changes is appropriate. Becoming an accredited program provides administrators and professors the opportunity to reflect on the program's successes and failures, compare itself to other programs, and assess whether its students are prepared for industry work (Blom et al., 2012). In addition to the internal evaluation, a school or department's accreditation status may influence students' decisions when they weigh options that include rankings, athletics, and extracurricular activities (Blom et al., 2012; Pellegrini, 2017). These internal and external opportunities provide an incentive for schools and departments with public relations programs to pursue the accreditation with ACEJMC or certification through PRSA.

ACEJMC

Although ACEJMC does not define exactly how units design their programs, the organization outlines nine core standards for accreditation:

1. Mission, governance, and administration;
2. Curriculum and instruction;
3. Diversity and inclusiveness;
4. Full-time and part-time faculty;
5. Scholarship, which includes research, creative, and professional service;
6. Student services;
7. Resources, facilities, and equipment;
8. Professional and public service;
9. Assessment of learning outcomes (ACEJMC,

n.d.-b). With each standard there is a basic principle and an outline of key indicators and evidence. These standards provide the rubric for how the programs are evaluated during the accreditation process. The process of accreditation happens every six years and programs complete a self-study before an accreditation team conducts a site visit. After the self-study and site visit, the national accrediting committee reviews the materials and votes, and then the national accrediting council takes final action (ACEJMC, n.d.-c).

PRSA Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR)

In 1989, the Public Relations Society of America established a certification for public relations programs through its educational affairs committee (PRSSA, 2020). Similar to the ACEJMC process, the CEPR requires programs to submit a self-assessment, followed by a site visit with two PRSA members. CEPR identifies eight standards, which include an analysis of the curriculum; faculty; resources, equipment, and facilities; students; assessment; professional affiliations; relationship with the unit and university; and perspectives on diversity and global public relations (PRSSA, 2020).

Value of Accreditation

Research suggests that most journalism and mass communication programs see accreditation as a path to reputation enhancement (Blom et al., 2012). There is no evidence to suggest that accredited schools are “better” than unaccredited schools, especially when it comes to social justice issues (e.g., human rights) (Blom et al., 2012; Reilly, 2018; Seamon, 2010). However, ethics is a key component attributed to professional and public service (ACEJMC) and curriculum and diversity and global perspectives (CEPR).

Pedagogy and Curricula

The previous standards review and research into accreditation suggests that incorporating ethics more robustly will be initiated

by the professor or the school. In 1999, in one of the earliest PR pedagogy articles, Coombs and Rybacki synthesized survey results and conversations that emerged from a pedagogy task force team at the National Communication Association (NCA) summer conference on public relations education. Coombs and Rybacki (1999) concluded the public relations pedagogy was “steeped in active learning” (p. 55). At the time, PR professors placed an emphasis on bridging theory and practice through dynamic assignments, lessons, and outside-of-the-classroom opportunities (Coombs & Rybacki, 1999). Since this trailblazing article on public relations pedagogy, scholars have explored pedagogy through the lens of writing (e.g., Hardin & Pompper, 2004; Waymer, 2014), social media (e.g., Kim & Freberg, 2016), and international perspectives (e.g., Thompson, 2018).

Public Relations Curricula

Public relations scholars who study PR curriculum note that there has been a transition toward a more skills-based, professional focus (Auger & Cho, 2016). For some, the shift to a more professionally minded profession can erode what some believe is the purpose of higher education, which is to pursue knowledge for the sake of pursuing knowledge (Auger & Cho, 2016; Brint et al., 2005). Attempting to focus on skills-based lessons can result in the exclusion of topics such as race, globalization, and interdisciplinary perspectives (Auger & Cho, 2016).

A powerful indicator of curricula decisions and priorities can result from the organization in which a public relations program is housed. Public relations programs are sometimes housed in journalism and mass communication schools but are found equally in speech, liberal arts, and business departments and schools (Kruckeberg, 1998). In their study of 234 public relations programs, Auger and Cho (2016) found that more than half (57%) of PR programs were affiliated with the liberal arts and humanities and almost one-third (38%) were housed in communication

and journalism schools.

For course offerings, Auger and Cho (2016) found that the liberal arts (53%) and journalism schools (57%) were more likely to offer ethics courses than the public relations programs housed in business schools (31%). The most common type of classes across the curricula were principles/introductory classes, mass communication theory, law, writing, campaigns, and research (Auger & Cho, 2016). Only 51% of programs offered a media ethics class in their curricula, while only 3% offered a specific public relations ethics course (Auger & Cho, 2016).

Public Relations Skills

As previously discussed, public relations curricula programs are often labeled as a practical field, meaning students can expect to encounter applicable hard and soft skills that they can transfer to their internships and professional careers. As McCleneghan (2006) suggests, “No other profession requires greater knowledge of ‘how to’ communicate than public relations” (p. 42). Almost every year some think-piece pitches a list of the most important skills PR students need to know once they graduate. For example, in 2013, *The Guardian* listed those skills as communication, research, writing, international mindset, and creativity (Turner, 2013). Seven years later in 2020, the media monitoring and social listening platform Meltwater identified the top 10 skills as: social media, copywriting, management, multimedia and new media skills, analytics, visual branding, writing, virtual team management, and influencer collaboration (Garrett, 2020).

Public relations scholars have explored the topics of how relevant skills translate from the classroom into the professional world. For example, in 2014, Todd surveyed PRSA members on 24 quantitative categories divided into two subgroups, job skills and professional characteristics, to determine how prepared entry-level workers were for the workforce. The goal of this survey was to determine how Millennial

(born between 1982-2002), entry-level workers rate themselves compared to their supervisors, and the survey's 165 participants were asked to rank themselves or their entry-level employees on the following skills: writing, technology, research, social media, computer, job task preparation, and overall quality of work and performance (Todd, 2014). In addition to these practical skills, Todd (2014) identified professional characteristics (i.e., soft skills) that were key performance indicators in the public relations profession (e.g., awareness of ethics, creativity, cooperation, and time management). The "pressure to teach students the most relevant knowledge and skills to be industry-ready" is one that educators are familiar with, and assessments like these can illuminate how recent graduates are performing (Todd, 2014, p. 790).

The Commission on Public Relations Education (2018) found that writing is a core skill for future public relations professionals and should be included in every public relations class. In addition to writing, the report suggests that research remains a foundational skill with particular attention paid to data, analytics, and big data (CPRE, 2018). Finally, technology is seen as a "triple threat challenge" (i.e., educators must teach it, study it, and do it) (CPRE, 2018, p. 14). Along with these tangible skills, the report also stressed the need for the incorporation of ethics (CPRE, 2018).

Ethics as a Skill

Research suggests that educators, professionals, mentors, and advisers agree that ethics is a key skill for graduates (Eschenfelder, 2011). In public relations programs, ethics is often covered in principles, writing, campaigns, and case studies in the classroom and in textbooks (Hutchinson, 2002). These more traditional, static forms of learning ethics, however, might contribute to entry-level public relations professionals overestimating their ability to practice and understand ethical principles and their decision-making skills (Eschenfelder, 2011). Conway and

Groshek (2009) suggest that students might gain more from interactive experiences through student media and internships, and Curtin et al. (2011) found that mentors (e.g., PRSA industry advisers and PRSSA faculty advisers) can influence younger workers as they consider ethical dilemmas (also see Todd, 2009). Furthermore, ethics competency is a skill that employers seek from new hires and one that educators feel compelled to teach (DiStaso et al., 2009). Unfortunately, employers rated their employees low on ethics skills (Todd, 2014). These studies suggest that the key to students gaining these skills outside of the classroom in meaningful ways is through dynamic coursework, such as service and project-based learning (e.g., McCollough, 2018), student-run agencies (e.g., Haley et al., 2016), and internships. According to experiential learning theory, this type of learning environment is vital for students as they understand and process experiences into knowledge.

Experiential Learning Theory

According to Dewey (1938) and other scholars of experiential learning theory (ELT), the theory is best understood as a “theory of experience” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 193). This work draws on learning as the “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” and learning is the result of “grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). ELT focuses on the process rather than the outcome, and scholars of experiential learning theory identify six pillars that facilitate experience as a key component to human learning and development. These pillars can be summarized as: learning as a holistic process that creates knowledge; learning as relearning; and learning as a process that involves transactions between a person and their environment, which are primarily driven by finding solutions for conflict, difference, and disagreements (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Using ELT as a foundation in understanding knowledge acquisition, students can grasp experiences through concrete experience (apprehension) and abstract

conceptualization (comprehension) and can transform through reflective observation (intension) and active experimentation (extension) (Baker et al., 2002; Fraustino et al., 2015; Kolb, 1984). These tactics work together and provide students with the experience of process: they can engage, internalize, observe and analyze, and then experiment with conclusions (Fraustino et al., 2015).

ELT and the Strategic Communication Classroom

Scholarship suggests that public relations professors and instructors are looking to incorporate ELT-driven lessons, assignments, and projects into the public relations classroom. For example, Fraustino et al. (2015) studied the relationship between Twitter chats and digital case studies (i.e., using the now defunct app Storify) and whether students apply public relations concepts to those practices. Other scholars have explored how students engage in teleworking in a cross-institutional setting (Madden et al., 2016), service learning and empathy (Everhart et al., 2016), public relations writing (Meganck & Smith, 2019), and learning about journalism storytelling through Instagram Stories (Byrd & Denney, 2018).

Research Questions

To understand the present state of ethics education at ACEJMC-accredited and CEPR-certified schools, the present study examines the following research questions:

RQ1: How do programs following both the ACEJMC and CEPR guidelines address ethics writ large in their curricula?

RQ2: How are ethics addressed in public-relations-specific courses in ACEJMC and CEPR accredited programs?

Method

To answer the research questions, we compiled a list of ACEJMC accredited programs ($n = 112$), PRSA CEPR programs ($n = 40$), and determined which programs were listed in both ($n = 15$). After we

identified the 15 schools with ACEJMC accreditation and PRSA CEPR certification, we analyzed the 2020 programs of study and course catalogs to determine what kind of public relations program each school offered (e.g., major, concentration, or emphasis area), number of credit hours required inside and outside of the unit, if there were ethics-specific courses available and/or required, if there was a PR-ethics-specific course available and/or required, and which courses specifically mentioned ethics in their course descriptions. To achieve internal validity, the research team first coded three universities collectively and then each of the three researchers individually coded the four remaining schools.

The method of content analysis was chosen for multiple reasons. First, it provided an evidence-based analysis of the offerings and requirements of the programs. While previous studies regarding public relations education used a survey approach (DiStaso et al., 2009; Neill, 2017; Silverman et al., 2014), curriculum studies from other disciplines in mass communication found course descriptions to be a fruitful avenue for analysis (Spillman et al., 2017; Tanner et al., 2012). Second, as course names and descriptions are used as indicators of course content and catalogs as indicators of program requirements, their use here is congruent. Finally, content analysis proved to be an expeditious way to collect data, as some previous studies saw low response rates and used content analysis to supplement their data (e.g., Tanner et al., 2012).

Findings

To address RQ1, we examined the listings of required courses for the public relations programs at each school. Of the 15 schools, 10 offered public relations as a major, two as an emphasis area, two as a concentration, and one as a specialization. Most schools required students to complete 34-48 credit hours (with three schools requiring 48, and six schools requiring 36-39 credit hours) in public relations and related classes. Programs required as few as three and as many as 27 credit hours

be taken outside of the major (e.g., business or statistics classes). Six schools required zero credit hours outside of the program.

Most schools taught elective ethics overall in the form of mass communication ethics, ethics and law, and/or media ethics courses (87%). Thirteen of the 15 schools offered one of these courses—tending to approach ethics similar to the University of Florida (n.d.-a), which described them as a cross-disciplinary introduction to study and practice. Fewer schools required students to take a general mass communication ethics class (67%). Thus, it is possible for a third of these public relations students to graduate without any department ethics training. Furthermore, 13% of students appeared to have no or limited access to ethics training within their major.

To answer RQ2, we analyzed the course descriptions for each of the programs. Only five universities offered an elective in PR-specific ethics (33%) and fewer schools required a public-relations-specific ethics course (20%). Drake University (n.d.-a) had an elective course called *Cases in Ethical PR Practice* that prepared students through “instruction and practice to execute professional-level thinking, analysis, writing and presentation skills needed for successful public relations campaign management” (Drake University, n.d.-b, para. 1). The University of Florida (n.d.-b) offered an *Ethics and Professional Responsibility in Public Relations* course, which focused on “ethical responsibilities of the public relations professional” (para. 1). This course provided knowledge and skills for study to “reach and justify ethical decisions,” which elicits “a sense of personal and professional responsibility” (para. 1).

The findings suggest that most students receive their ethics training through interdisciplinary study, focusing on the intersection of law, ethics, and mass communication professions (e.g., journalism, advertising, media studies). Public relations ethics, on the other hand, are more likely to be a learning objective or talking point in courses such as principles

of/introduction to public relations, campaigns, and some case studies courses. Five programs addressed ethics in the course description for their Principles of Public Relations classes. These classes indicated topics will cover “ethics and social responsibility” (Syracuse University, n.d., para. 1) or “persuasion, media relations, crisis communication, reputation management, and ethics” (Indiana University, n.d., para. 2), many of which explored different ethical approaches and introduced students to codes of ethics (e.g., PRSA). This positioning indicates that schools recognize the need to introduce ethics early.

Some schools engaged with ethics instruction and scholarship through journalism, multimedia, or advertising classes. The University of Memphis (n.d.), for example, offered an elective class for public relations students in multimedia storytelling in which students could expect to learn and understand “legal and ethical issues in photography” (para. 1). The University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh (n.d.) offered a course in Special Topics in Writing/Editing, which addressed several topics, including media ethics.

These findings indicate that although ethics is an important part of a public relations student’s curricula, there is an opportunity to expand this offering of public-relations-specific ethics courses.

Discussion

After analyzing the programs at 15 ACEJMC and PRSA CEPR schools, this study’s findings suggest there is room for growth regarding public relations ethics education. Through our analysis of selected public relations programs, we have concluded that public relations programs need to revisit their PR ethics requirements. Given ACEJMC accredited and PRSA certified schools have chosen to hold themselves to higher standards, they must be leaders in adopting the CPRE and PRSA recommendations for PR ethics training. Based on their accreditation and certification and the standards of both, the 15 programs in our study should

be leading the way on teaching ethics and providing students with the dynamic opportunities to engage the subject matter. The fact that 80% of students might graduate without a PR ethics course and a third of students can graduate without an ethics course at all, sets students up for difficulty in the industry upon graduation. As employers expect ethical knowledge in their hires, universities need to respond by providing ethics training to students.

Experiential Learning Theory in the Ethics Classroom

The CPRE (2018) report outlines a new course proposal summary for faculty and administrators wishing to build a new PR ethics class based on the recommendations from the undergraduate education report. The report outlines key outcomes and assessment metrics, which include written assignments, class discussions, quizzes, exams, presentations, and projects (Bortree et al., 2019). The provided catalog descriptions focus on students engaging in “discussions and case studies” and being able to “apply learning from the course to an original case study paper” (Bortree et al., 2019, p. 3). In addition, courses should “bridge cultural applications and offer practical insights on how communicators . . . might develop communication strategies that uphold ethical principles” (Bortree et al., 2019, p. 3).

The active language used in these course and catalog descriptions and the proposed assignments suggest that an experiential learning approach would be best suited for the instruction of PR ethics. Research suggests that lectures on ethics are not as valuable as case studies (Canary, 2007; Todd, 2009), and many students are receiving their ethical training through internships and mentors (Conway & Groshek, 2009; Curtin et al., 2011; Todd, 2014). Although internships and real-world opportunities are wonderful learning tools for students, there is little guarantee that ethics will be practiced in a consistent manner, which makes these environments a challenge.

For many internships and mentor-driven relationships, the outcome might outweigh the process. Given that experiential learning is process-driven and, as Kolb and Kolb (2005) describe, “a theory of experience” (p. 193), students must be exposed to ethics through a number of different processes and experiences. Our findings indicate that most conversations around ethics are happening in siloed spaces, such as in relationships with the law or as a dedicated week during an introduction to a public relations class. For students to grasp and transform experiences around ethical dilemmas and cases, approaching the subject matter in a way that lets them work together and experience the process is key for entry-level public relations professionals developing the critical thinking needed for this important skill (Eschenfelder, 2011). A standalone ethics course would be a major step toward resolving these issues and would answer the call for greater ethics education from previous research (DiStaso et al., 2009; Neill, 2017; Silverman et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Based on the previous research presented in this study and our own findings, we recommend that public relations programs implement and require a case-study-based public relations ethics course for their advanced-level students. This class should be completed at a level greater than foundational public relations courses and should draw on real work to provide students with the opportunity to grasp and transform the experience of an ethical situation. In this course, students can process the dilemma, engage, internalize, observe and analyze, and experiment with different conclusions (see Fraustino et al., 2015).

In addition to a case study class, professors and administrators should consider including the word ethics in course descriptions for experiential learning courses, client work, and capstone classes (e.g., internships, student-run agencies, research, and campaigns). Addressing ethics in all facets of a student’s education and creating a specific public-

relations-centered ethics course would help students graduate with a more robust understanding of what it means to be an ethical public relations professional.

The present study is limited in its scope by only examining ACEJMC and CEPR programs. Although the population of universities utilized in this study makes sense for examining those at the highest standards, further investigation across both review bodies would present a clearer picture of the state of public relations education. Future studies should examine these schools as well as public relations programs without certification or accreditation.

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