Taking Experimental Learning to the Next Level with Student-Run Agencies

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness of three different experiential learning approaches in public relations education (i.e., a student-run public relations firm approach vs. two variations of the traditional public relations capstone campaigns course) by measuring perceived student learning outcomes. Students participating in the study were enrolled in one of two variations of a traditional public relations capstone campaigns courses or in one student-run public relations firm course at a large southern university. The results suggest that working in a student-run public relations firm promotes students' perceived learning outcomes more effectively than participating in the more traditional capstone experience. Findings also suggest that among the two variations of the traditional capstone courses, the course with a stronger emphasis on direct client contact and engagement was more effective in achieving learning outcomes than was the course with less direct client interaction.

KEYWORDS: Competencies, perceived effectiveness, public relations campaign, public relations capstone, learning outcomes, experiential learning, student-run agency

There is growing pedagogical debate over what should be taught in public relations courses. One frequently debated topic is how educators might bridge the sizable gap between what professionals' desire from public relations graduates and what new graduates are actually able to do (Commission on Public Relations Education [CPRE], 2018). To address this concern, and to better prepare students for work in the industry, public relations educators have sought to incorporate more active and experiential learning styles into their classrooms (Swanson, 2011; Werder & Strand, 2011). For example, public relations capstone courses often adopt a service-learning approach that allows students to work in teams, conduct research, develop strategic public relations plans, and also create a collection of tactical materials for clients to implement. Public relations educators hope that by integrating experiential learning into their curricula, and in so doing allowing for more realistic hands-on experience, public relations courses can provide students with an opportunity to synthesize and apply the skills amassed and the theories learned during their coursework (Benigni et al., 2004; Bush, 2009; Harrison & Bak, 2017). Several studies support the efficacy of such experiential learning in producing desirable learning outcomes (Reising et al., 2006). However, even public relations capstone courses that adopt a service-learning approach are still limited in providing rich experiential opportunities when it comes to actual implementation of public relations campaigns and their corollary strategies, tactics, and evaluations. In recent years, and for the reasons stipulated above, more than 100 public relations programs have started offering students an educational experience rooted in the public relations agency model (PRSSA, 2019).

Student-run public relations agencies mimic professional public relations agencies "by providing students with a professional environment in which to work on real projects for real clients" (Bush & Miller, 2011, p. 485). This agency model is typically offered as either a replacement

for, or supplement to, the traditional public relations capstone course and has shown strong potential in boosting student learning outcomes. Other benefits to students include improved leadership and managerial skills, better client communication skills, increased professional confidence, the learning of central business practices and processes, an increased prominence of the program within the community, as well as stronger and more sophisticated pre-professional preparation (Bush, 2009; Bush & Miller, 2011; Busch & Struthers, 2016; Kim, 2015). Although public relations educators and scholars generally recognize the value of student agencies, relatively little systematic research on perceived student learning outcomes exists when it comes to evaluating whether student-run agencies are effective in achieving common public relations learning objectives and outcomes (Swanson, 2011). To the best of our knowledge, no quantitative study exists that evaluates students' perceived learning outcomes of student agencies as compared to the more traditional capstone experience. If research only examines students who have worked in student-run agencies, thereby omitting the educational experiences of students enrolled in a more traditional capstone course, then there are no grounds for comparison to provide compelling empirical evidence concerning the efficacy of student agencies as a pedagogical model. As Bush and Miller (2011) explain, "[t]he importance of understanding student-run agencies lies in the need to determine if and how communications curricula are falling short of preparing students for the profession and to examine how agencies might fill potential voids" (p. 485).

This study seeks to fill the void in the literature on public relations education by evaluating a student-run public relations firm as an experiential learning model and assessing its effectiveness in producing desired student learning outcomes. In doing so, this study examines the perceived learning outcomes reported by students enrolled in a student-run public relations firm course by comparing them to the perceived

learning outcomes reported by students enrolled in two variations of the more traditional public relations capstone course. Given the study's exploratory nature, our aim is not to argue that the below findings about the perceived effectiveness of different experiential learning approaches in public relations education are applicable to all student-run public relations agencies and all capstone courses at every university. Instead, the current study seeks to provide an empirical baseline that will help open up the scholarly discussion about the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches to the culminating experience in public relations education and to further allow for future research to not only test but also build upon the study's central findings.

Literature Review

Public Relations Program Learning Outcomes

According to Turk (2006), a central goal of public relations education is to facilitate and encourage the "linking of public relations education and practice" (p. 5). That is, to train students in ways that enable them to meet, and hopefully surpass, rigorous academic standards while at the same time providing them with the requisite conceptual tools and practical skills necessary to succeed in the public relations industry. After all, the public relations students of today are the public relations professionals of tomorrow. Not only does such a focus help codify the conceptual and practical elements of public relations education and practice, it also helps to prescribe and describe the types of knowledge, values, and skills burgeoning public relations practitioners should ideally adopt, embrace, and proficiently implement. Moreover, Turk's (2006) call for linking education and industry stresses the importance of facilitating productive conversations that span the educational/professional divide, an approach that further allows for industry members to provide feedback concerning graduates' relative preparedness for professional-level public relations work.

The good news is that there is a great deal of overlap between educators' and professionals' beliefs and opinions concerning the types of skills and abilities students are expected to possess following their successful completion of a university-level public relations program. While the list has expanded slightly over the years to include technological and other societal changes affecting the industry, educators and practitioners alike nonetheless agree that students entering the public relations industry should have written and verbal communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving abilities, and planning skills (Auger & Cho, 2018; Brunner et al, 2018; Lane & Johnston, 2017; Larsen & Len-Rios, 2006; Turk, 2006). A recent list with some of the technological and societal changes mentioned above is provided by Manley and Valin (2017) who, following an extensive content analysis of documents representing associations from around the world as well as feedback from association leaders, found that entry-level practitioners should have foundational skills and abilities in writing, oral and visual communication; critical listening, critical thinking and problem-solving skills; global and diversity awareness; technological and visual literacy; strategic planning skills; and flexibility with change.

Additionally, educators and practitioners also agree that public relations programs should include an internship, a practicum, or some other relevant hands-on experience in the field (Todd, 2009). The central goal of such an approach is for students to apply their knowledge and gain valuable experience in a low-stakes environment before they take on more substantial public relations tasks when they enter the profession following graduation. For an increasing number of university public relations programs, this involves providing students with the opportunity to work in student-run public relations agencies that service real clients. A positive side-effect of working with actual clients, as opposed to working through hypothetical scenarios in the classroom, is that students report feeling

increasingly confident in their ability to do public relations work (e.g., Aldoory & Wrigley, 1999; Haley et al., 2016; Sallot, 1996).

While the goals of both educators and academics align, there is discrepancy, however, between what students are capable of doing and what employers would like for them to be able to do (CPRE, 2018; Neff et al., 1999). That is, "evidence suggests that new graduates do not always meet employer's [sic] expectations" (Neff et al., 1999, p. 34). Indeed, "while practitioners and educators agree about what entry-level employees should know and do, graduates do not seem to meet these standards regularly" (Neff et al., 1999, p. 35). According to a 2018 Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) omnibus survey, practitioners and educators believe that entry-level practitioners lack the skills and abilities required for writing, research and analytics, media relations, ability to communicate, critical thinking, and problem solving that are required in order to succeed in professional settings. This, of course, is by no means a new or novel finding. As Todd (2009) suggests, although educators and practitioners agree that writing competence is a central skill for anyone wishing to make it in the public relations industry, "PR agency professionals reported that entry-level practitioners' writing skills were 'bad' or 'poor'" (p. 74). More concerning, perhaps, is Todd's claim that "PRSSA professional advisors are not convinced that faculty are teaching the skills students need in industry" (p. 71). For public relations educators, and for employers looking to hire public relations graduates, these insights certainly are troubling.

In terms of what students need to know and what they should be able to do in order to not only secure but also succeed in entry-level public relations positions, Neff et al. (1999) provided a lengthy albeit useful list of educational outcomes that nicely subsume most of the observations outlined above. Even in light of more recent scholarship, the outcomes they identified have stood the proverbial test of time. For entry-level

positions, budding public relations practitioners are expected, in addition to being broadly educated on a variety of topics and having a solid understanding of ethics, current and historical events, as well as social and political issues and controversies, to 1) possess writing skills, 2) display critical thinking and problem-solving skills, 3) have management skills, and 4) show an ability to communicate publicly.

Neff et al. (1999) also detailed four categories of skills that more advanced practitioners should have. In addition to the above, more seasoned or sophisticated public relations practitioners are expected to have 1) solid research skills, 2) display an ability to engage with and handle journalists and media institutions in a professional and competent manner, 3) understand the organizational and the societal role of public relations, and 4) have a solid working knowledge of issues management. Both sets of skills can be improved by combining public relations education with practical application through internships, practicums, student-run agency work, and service-learning initiatives such as the traditional capstone model.

Experiential Learning in Public Relations Education

Experiential learning theory (ELT), which outlines the process by which learning takes place through experience, states that "knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb et al., 2000, p. 41). According to ELT, there is a four-stage learning cycle that includes concrete experience (the learner actively engages in a new experience), reflective observation (the learner reflects back on the experience), abstract conceptualization (reflection creates a new idea or revises an existing abstract one), and active experimentation (the learner tests the new idea by applying it to the world around them, which ultimately leads to a new experience) (Kolb et al., 2000). Concrete experience and abstract conceptualization are the two ways in which a learner can grasp experiences, whereas reflective observation and active

experimentation are the two ways in which a learner can transform experiences (Kolb et al., 2000). While the beginning point of the stages is flexible and is typically chosen based on a combination of the learner's preferred learning style and the present situation, the order of the stages is not flexible. Effective learning occurs when the learner cycles through all four phases (Fraustino et al., 2015; Healey & Jenkins, 2000).

One of the reasons this approach is of interest to educators is because it can be applied to a variety of learning environments and contexts. Due to the practical nature of public relations, implementing experiential learning in the classroom is an ideal fit. It helps to break down theoretical concepts and further connect them with practical experiences (Fraustino et al., 2015). According to Toth (1999), a supervised and structured learning environment is important in the public relations capstone course; however, student autonomy and responsibility are essential pieces of experiential learning. Trying to balance these two things can be difficult but implementing a real-world capstone experience and/or leveraging a student-run firm creates an opportunity to do just that.

"While experiential learning is the concept of connecting an experience to learning, it often takes shape in the form of service-learning" (Kim, 2015, p. 58). Service-learning is a specific type of experiential learning that allows students to participate in an organized service activity while simultaneously meeting a community need. Students then reflect back on the service-learning activity in order to connect more with the course content, the overall discipline, and their own personal civic responsibility (Pelco et al., 2014). Service-learning has been advocated by many educators and has shown to have significant positive effects on students' academic learning as well as their personal and social development (Bennett et al., 2003; Pelco et al., 2014; Simons & Cleary, 2006). Service-learning has also been shown to increase understanding and the ability to apply theoretical concepts (Simons & Cleary, 2006).

Researchers looking at service-learning in the public relations classroom have found that it encourages students' ability to think creatively, solve real-world problems, and identify new information needed to reach useful conclusions (Wilson, 2012), as well as boost critical thinking and increase social responsibility (Benigni et al., 2004; Werder & Strand, 2011). Additionally, other service-learning studies have determined that public relations educators should consider it as an option for their classes because it helps students enhance skills that are important for the profession (Bennett et al., 2003; Pelco et al., 2014; Simons & Cleary, 2006). In other words, an experiential learning approach rooted in service-learning is a strong pedagogical tool for use in public relations education (Harrison & Bak, 2017).

While both the traditional campaigns capstone course and the student-run agency model allow for students to move through all four stages in the ELT, we nonetheless propose that there are significant differences in perceived learning outcomes between students who work with clients in a student-run agency setting and students who work with clients in a more traditional capstone course format. To support this argument, we first review the profiles of each pedagogical approach (public relations campaign courses vs. student-run public relations agencies).

Public Relations Campaign Course

The public relations campaigns class is relatively well-established as the capstone experience in many public relations programs. While the course can be implemented in various ways, there are several components that most campaigns courses include (Benigni et al., 2007). Students enrolled in the traditional capstone PR campaigns course often work in teams and are tasked with conducting both secondary and primary research, developing a strategic communication plan, and producing tactical elements. The client may choose to implement the plan once the

course reaches its conclusion (Werder & Strand, 2011). Depending on the instructor, multiple groups may compete for the approval of a single client or student groups may work with their own individual clients instead. In the former case, there is no guarantee that any group's work, even if it is of high quality, ends up being chosen by the client. Regardless of the structure of the course, the focus of this traditional capstone course is mostly on providing students with an opportunity to utilize previously learned skills from other courses in the curriculum, including research methods, strategic planning, informative and persuasive writing, ethical decision making, public speaking, and audience segmentation (Worley, 2001). The professor typically takes on the role of facilitator but still reviews key concepts from previous classes and provides periodic deadlines in order to prevent procrastination (Benigni & Cameron, 1999; Benigni et al., 2004; 2007).

This approach to teaching the capstone course has been shown to enhance student learning outcomes, such as increased practical skills, interpersonal skills, personal responsibility, and citizenship (Farmer et al., 2016; Werder & Strand, 2011). However, there are also some noted shortcomings to this pedagogical approach. For example, time constraints do not typically allow for campaign implementation (Benigni et al., 2004). Therefore, although students may interact with a real client to some degree, their communication and involvement with clients is oftentimes limited or sheltered. There is also a lack of accountability because timesheets and payments from clients are not required (Benigni & Cameron, 1999). Additionally, one of the consistently most difficult parts of a PR campaigns course is getting students to understand, develop, and maintain the team-client relationship, partially because the concept of client retention is missing (Benigni et al., 2004; Worley, 2001). Finally, students' willingness to participate plays a large role in the effectiveness of real-world, client-based projects (Fitch, 2011; Harrison & Bak, 2017).

Public Relations Campaign Capstone Course Profile

The public relations capstone course offered at the university where the study was conducted is a three-credit course with an enrollment cap of 33 students per section. Three sections of the capstone were offered during the semester of the study in conjunction with a student-run public relations agency. While all sections of the capstone course had the same learning outcomes and provided students with the opportunity to work with a real client by taking a service-learning approach, professors/ instructors nonetheless had freedom to organize the course according to their preferences. For this study, students from three capstone courses taught by two different professors were surveyed, resulting in some important distinctions. We discuss those below.

Public Relations Campaigns Capstone Course - Variation A

At the beginning of the semester, students were assigned to client teams consisting of five to six students. Following their formation, teams were prompted to choose their own clients from a prearranged list. There were several agency team positions – account executive, research director, client relations director/assistant research director, creative director, and programming director/assignment creative director. Students were given the option of selecting their top three team positions and the professor made the final decision. The student groups worked directly with clients and were all required to schedule regular meetings with those clients. All student groups conducted secondary and primary research and subsequently created a strategic communication plan for their chosen clients. A campaign presentation was made directly to the client during the final week of the semester.

Public Relations Campaigns Capstone Course - Variation B

Similar to Capstone A, students enrolled in Capstone B were assigned to client teams at the beginning of the semester and each student was given the option of indicating their top three agency team

positions before the professor assigned the final positions. All student groups conducted secondary and primary research and created a strategic communication plan for their respective clients and presented directly to those clients during the final week of the semester. Unlike Capstone A, student groups were assigned clients rather than choosing them from a list. Additionally, the professor was partially responsible for client interactions and functioned as a go-between, thereby limiting students' ability to directly interact with their clients beyond an initial meeting and the final campaign presentation. However, students were encouraged to check with clients and contact them when needed, while Course A required students to have various client interactions throughout the semester.

Because the level of direct client interaction with students significantly differed in this study, capstone courses were divided into two categories: Capstone A with greater client contact and interaction, and Capstone B with a lesser degree of client contact and interaction. Given that direct client contact can provide an experiential opportunity for students to understand, develop, and maintain the team-client relationship (Benigni et al., 2004; Worley, 2001), it is plausible that students' perceived learning outcomes differ between the two formats.

Student-run PR Agency

Student-run agencies are a newer approach to fulfilling the capstone experience with additional potential benefits to students. While all different and unique in their own ways, student-run agencies nonetheless have several characteristics in common: They operate continuously, are primarily funded through client fees and university funds, have written policy manuals, include a competitive application and selection process, and use a titled structure for the student employees. In student-run agencies, the students are the primary "decision makers" and typically manage the "planning, finances, client negotiation, client complaints, and new client development" (Maben & Whitson, 2013, p.

19). Additionally, it is becoming more common for these student-run agencies to have a dedicated office space. The idea, in short, is for student-run agencies to "mimic professional public relations and advertising agencies by providing students with a professional environment in which to work on real projects for real clients" (Bush & Miller, 2011, p. 485).

This agency model is typically offered as either a replacement for or supplement to the traditional public relations campaigns course and has shown some real promise in boosting student learning outcomes by providing a number of educational benefits (Bush, 2009; Swanson, 2011). Most notable among these benefits, perhaps, is that the learning-by-doing approach gives students an opportunity to actually implement the campaigns they plan—not only does the agency model produce an educational experience that more closely mirrors the professional agency setting that a number of students seek out following graduation, it also produces an experiential depth and richness that the more traditional campaigns course simply is not configured to deliver. Rather than simply pitching a campaign plan that clients may or may not choose to adopt following the conclusion of the capstone course, agency students are tasked with not only researching and formulating campaign plans, they also have to work with clients in real-time as those plans are tweaked, fine-tuned, and implemented. This means that students work closely with clients over time as opposed to simply reaching out during the research phase to ask questions or seek clarification.

The agency model also places an increased focus on client relations and managing client expectations (Benigni et al., 2004; Haygood et al., 2019; Bush et al., 2017; Swanson, 2011). As a result, the agency structure offers a more disciplined business setting and increases team communication skills more than other service-learning courses, including the PR campaigns course. Finally, the benefits of the student-run agency experience also include a rise in professional confidence and

readiness (Ranta et al., 2019), the opportunity to learn about leadership and management (Haygood et al., 2019), a chance to practice client relationship maintenance in a low-stakes environment (Bush et al., 2017), and the opportunity to improve administrative skills (Bush, 2009; Kim, 2015; Swanson, 2011). Beyond student learning outcomes, student-run agencies also hold the promise of increasing the prominence and reputation of the academic programs they belong to within their respective communities (Kim, 2015).

However, in spite of the abovementioned benefits, the agency model also presents some unique challenges, including a greater faculty time commitment compared to teaching other courses; struggles with student motivation because other classes can sometimes take precedence; and lack of dedicated space, technology, and money to run the agency (Swanson, 2011). It is difficult to predict student dependability, which can lead to an imbalanced workload among students, with some students doing or taking on more work than others, which is a common issue in other team-based projects and courses as well (Gibson & Rowden, 1994). Client expectations can also be unreasonable as they do not fully understand what outcomes are possible, or even reasonable, and they may also expect students to know more than they do (Bush, 2009; Gruenwald & Shadinger, 2013; Swanson, 2011). Agency students may not find the agency setting effective at improving their soft skills (Swanson, 2019). This means that it may take a considerable amount of time and effort for faculty to manage the agency so that the agency can bring all of the potential educational benefits to life.

Public Relations Agency Profile

The student-run public relations agency course at the university where the study was conducted is elective and is offered as a replacement for or as an addition to the university's public relations capstone campaigns course. While students receive course credit for working at

the agency, there is a competitive application process that students must navigate. The study was conducted during the agency's first year and since the agency was still working on getting established, the difference between capstone students and agency students was smaller at that time than what is likely the case today. This particular agency has what Busch and Struthers (2016) consider "high levels of accountability" (p.56), meaning that students meet weekly as a "class" and also work regularly outside of class time with other members of their account teams. Additionally, the agency has a formal title structure, a set of concrete business protocols students are expected to follow and uphold, the ability to charge clients for completed work, and also a dedicated office space for students to work and even meet with clients whenever such meetings are deemed desirable or necessary.

Student employees work directly with clients at every step from beginning to end. Therefore, the format very much mimics the real agency account format, except that there are workshops and active guidance from the faculty adviser throughout the process as plans and deliverables are tweaked, reworked, fine-tuned, and implemented.

All of the agency students in the survey sample described below elected to use the student agency course as a replacement for the traditional public relations capstone campaigns course. Because the university where the study was conducted requires that students complete at least two research methods courses, two public relations writing courses, and a public relations cases/management course before enrolling in the capstone, all students were well-equipped to function as employees even without first completing the traditional capstone course when undergoing training for the agency. The faculty adviser for the student agency also taught the Capstone A variation during the semester that data collection took place.

Perceived Student Learning Outcomes

When focusing on the students' learning perspectives, student agencies can provide significant educational benefits as one of the most active experiential learning models in the public relations academic program. Previous studies on student-run agencies have surveyed agency advisors about agency characteristics (Maben & Whitson, 2013) and interviewed advisors on the pedagogical benefits and risks of student-run agencies (Bush, 2009; Maben & Whitson, 2014). Additionally, there have been several case studies that profile a specific firm and oftentimes provide anecdotal evidence of effectiveness (Gibson & Rowden, 1994; Gruenwald & Shadinger, 2013; Kim, 2015; Swanson, 2011; Ranta et al., 2019), as well as a qualitative study that interviewed current industry professionals about the perceived benefits of their student agency experience (Bush et al., 2017).

However, prior to this study, little was known about whether student-run agencies can produce better perceived educational outcomes for students than the traditional public relations campaigns class. While a few of the aforementioned qualitative studies speculate about this topic, a quantitative comparison study that provides a basis for determining its effectiveness based on perceived student learning outcomes does not exist. The current study fills this gap in the literature and also extends previous research by examining how students perceive the pedagogical model of a student-run public relations agency differently from a traditional capstone course as it relates to achieving learning outcomes.

Prior studies have proposed assessing perceived learning outcomes by using both relative and absolute learning assessments (e.g., Aldoory & Wrigley, 1999; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994). Relative assessments ask a more comparative assessment of learning benefits, compared to other learning opportunities (i.e., they were asked to evaluate whether the course they were in was effective at achieving a list of learning outcomes,

relative to other public relations courses). Absolute assessment of learning can be defined as directly assessing whether specific projects or learning opportunities are helpful as a means for achieving desired learning outcomes (i.e., measuring students' developed competency in the course). In addition to adapting the distinctions made by previous studies (Aldoory & Wrigley, 1999; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994), this study also attempts to evaluate students' perceived learning outcomes across both relative assessments and absolute assessments. In other words, this study examines the effectiveness of different experiential learning approaches by measuring perceived student learning outcomes.

Students' perceptions of their development is one of the critical indicators of educational benefits used in prior studies (e.g., Astin et al., 2000; Blomstrom & Tam, 2008; Celio et al., 2011; Farmer et al., 2016; Toncar et al., 2006; Werder & Strand, 2011; Witmer et al., 2009). Although the specific concept used was slightly different across studies (e.g., students' perceived proficiency, perceived ability, self-awarded strengths and gained confidence, evaluation of acquired strengths, understanding roles, change in perspectives, heightened awareness), the common thread is their use of students' perceived competency to evaluate the benefits of an educational model, such as a service-learning approach. That means, while self-report measures are liable to suffer from conceptual inexactitude, they are nonetheless valuable and have seen extensive use in both psychology and education research. As Howard (1994) explains, "[w]hen employed within a sensible design, self-reports often represent a valuable and valid measurement strategy" (p. 403). Although one might speculate that students are ill-equipped to seriously evaluate their own aptitudes when asked to assess their ability to competently use and apply developing skill sets, there is ample evidence suggesting that self-perceptions of ability are reasonable predictors of actual ability (e.g., Silverthorn, et al., 2005; Van der Beek et al., 2017; Wood & Bandura,

1989). Research also suggests that successful performance of a given task is likely to increase one's self-perception of ability to carry out the same or similar tasks in the future (Schmitt et al., 1986). As such, there is reason to believe that students' self-perceptions of ability are not entirely detached from reality and that their assessments, while nonetheless likely to deviate from actual ability, still serve as a reasonable and valuable measure in its own right.

When discussing self-report measures, we should also be careful not to assume that students are unwitting victims of the Dunning-Kruger effect. That is, that they are incapable of reasonable and rational self-analysis:

> "Developing a self-concept requires the metacognitive ability of evaluating one's performance, which requires the same expertise that is necessary to perform well. The Dunning–Kruger effect thus predicts that low performers are less able to accurately judge their own performance and may overestimate themselves, whereas high performers are better at judging their performance… This view predicts that the relation between achievement and self-concept becomes stronger with increasing ability" (Van der Beek et al., 2017, p. 480-481)

Therefore, to assess the effectiveness of student-run agencies in public relations programs versus public relations capstone courses by measuring perceived student learning outcomes, the following hypotheses were proposed.

H1a-b: Student agency students will report a higher relative assessment of the pedagogical approach compared to students in public relations capstone courses A and B.

H2a-d: Student agency students will perceive the agency as more effective in achieving entry-level competencies than students in public relations capstone course A across the following categories: (a) writing

skills, (b) critical thinking/problem-solving skills, (c) management skills, (d) ability to communicate publicly and initiative.

H3a-d: Student agency students will perceive the agency as more effective in achieving entry-level competencies than public relations capstone course B across the following categories: (a) writing skills, (b) critical thinking/problem-solving skills, (c) management skills, (d) ability to communicate publicly and initiative.

H4a-d: Student agency students will perceive the agency as more effective in achieving entry-level competencies than public relations capstone course A across the following categories: (a) research skills, (b) ability to handle the media professionally, (c) knowledge of the role of public relations, (d) knowledge of issue management.

H5a-d: Student agency students will perceive the agency as more effective in achieving entry-level competencies than public relations capstone course B across the following categories: (a) research skills, (b) ability to handle the media professionally, (c) knowledge of the role of public relations, (d) knowledge of issue management.

As discussed earlier, given that direct client contact can provide an experiential opportunity for students to understand, develop, and maintain the team-client relationship (Benigni et al., 2004; Worley, 2001), it is plausible that students' perceived effectiveness differs between the two formats. Therefore, we proposed the following research question below: RQ: How do students perceive the educational effectiveness of Capstone A versus Capstone B?

Methodology

To examine the proposed hypotheses and research question, this study used an online survey methodology. The participants in this study were recruited from public relations capstone courses as well as a student-run public relations agency course at a large, southern public university.

Sample

All students enrolled in the two capstone course variations and the student public relations agency course were asked to participate in the survey. A total of 100 students participated in the online survey and the response rate was approximately 98%. Out of 100 participants, 17 (17%) were from the student-run PR agency and 83 students (83%) were from three sections of public relations campaign courses. Among the capstone courses a total of 33 (40%) students were enrolled in Capstone A, the course with greater client interaction, and 50 (60%) were enrolled in two sections of Capstone B, the course with less client interaction. Of the sampled students, 85% (n=85) self-identified as female.

Procedure

Students were invited to take an online survey. After reading an informed consent form, students were then asked to answer a series of questions focusing on relative assessment and absolute assessment across entry- and advanced level competencies.

Survey Instrument

By adapting the categories proposed by Cohen and Kinsey (1994) and Aldoory and Wrigley (1999), the survey items in this study included relative assessment items and absolute assessment items. The absolute items asked students to assess how much they perceived a specific course to be helpful to them in achieving entry- and advanced-level competencies, while the relative assessment items asked how students perceived their learning outcomes in the course compared to other public relations courses.

Relative Assessment. Relative assessment was examined using five items on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree); "the client projects of this class were more useful for placing classroom material in context," "the client projects of this class were a more effective learning exercise," "I was more motivated to work on the client project

of this class," "the client projects in this class were more helpful in understanding the relationship between the course and the real world," and "learning about public relations took place more in the client projects of this class." The relative assessment items were adapted from prior studies (Aldoory & Wrigley, 1999; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994) and the wording was slightly modified to fit the context of the study. For example, instead of asking "relative to other assignments," participants were asked to answer the above items "relative to other public relations courses."

Absolute Assessment. To measure perceived educational benefits of different pedagogical approaches, an instrument was developed by adapting items from prior studies and modified to fit the purpose of the study (CPRE, 2018; Neff et al., 1999; Simons & Cleary, 2006; Turk, 2006; Werder & Strand, 2011). Most notably, the survey instrument was designed to align with the suggestions by the 2018 Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) report. Detailed discussion on the public relations program learning outcomes can be found in the earlier section. The absolute assessment items included two categories: entry-level and advanced-level competencies. Entry-level competencies include: 1) writing skills, 2) critical thinking and problem-solving skills, 3) management skills, and 4) an ability to communicate publicly. Advanced level competencies include: 1) research skills, 2) an ability to engage with and handle journalists and media institutions in a professional and competent manner, 3) a knowledge of the organizational and societal role of public relations, and 4) a knowledge of issues management. A more detailed breakdown of the specific measurements included in each category and reliability scores can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Measurement items and reliability scores

Variables	Measures	*M (SD)*	*α*
Relative Assessment: *Relative to other public relations courses*		6.24 (1.04)	.93
	The client projects of this class were more useful for placing classroom material in context.	6.43 (.98)	
	The client projects of this class were more effective learning exercise.	6.42 (1.05)	
	I was more motivated to work on the client project of this class	6.08 (1.21)	
	The client projects of this class were more helpful in understanding relationship between course and real world.	6.20 (1.30)	
	Learning about public relations took place more with the client projects of this class.	6.09 (1.38)	
Entry Level Competency Assessment: *Taking this class, I improved my ability to…*			.87
Writing Skills		5.68 (1.17)	
	Write clear messages targeted toward publics using current technology	6.17 (.93)	
	Produce various types of traditional writing materials, e.g., news release, media pitch, feature stories etc.	5.72 (1.35)	
	Utilize important PR software (e.g., Cision, Meltwater, etc.)	5.24 (1.84)	
	Understand how to pitch to the media	5.40 (1.69)	
	Produce various types of social media posts, e.g., Facebook, Blog, Twitter	5.89 (1.28)	
Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills		6.28 (.86)	.93
	Listen	6.21 (1.06)	
	Take the role of the leader	6.24 (1.07)	
	Thinking logically and analytically	6.32 (.89)	
	Solve frustrating situations	6.31 (.91)	
	Compromise when solution could not be found	6.29 (.89)	
Management Skills		6.15 (1.02)	.92
	Work cooperatively	6.39 (.83)	
	Understand client relations	6.26 (1.13)	
	Develop and maintain healthy relations	6.20 (1.15)	
	Overcome difficult or hostile clients	5.82 (1.47)	

Manage my own time better	6.07 (1.25)	
Ability to Communicate Publicly and Initiative	6.24 (.94)	.90
Present ideas to client	6.26 (1.09)	
Speak in public	6.20 (.92)	
Create presentational materials	6.27 (1.08)	
Advanced Level Competency Assessment: *Taking this class, I improved my ability to…*		
Research Skills	6.00 (1.22)	.91
Understand audiences and their role in meaningful communication	6.05 (1.32)	
Conduct and interpret a quantitative research	5.94 (1.39)	
Conduct and interpret a qualitative research	5.77 (1.58)	
Connect the research process to success of campaigns	6.23 (1.21)	
Ability to handle the media professionally	5.58 (1.42)	.93
Create a media list for clients	5.59 (1.51)	
Find client stories	5.71 (1.47)	
Pitch client stories to appropriate media outlets	5.53 (1.62)	
Interact with media personnel	5.47 (1.63)	
Knowledge of the Role of Public Relations	6.00 (1.24)	.96
Understand organizational culture of clients	5.94 (1.38)	
Explain the role of public rleations to a management team of clients	6.08 (1.32)	
Manage various communication technologies	6.07 (1.22)	
Manage clients' communication channel strategically	5.91 (1.36)	
Knowledge of issues management	6.10 (1.01)	.91
Follow current issues related with clients	6.13 (1.08)	
Recognize opportunities available for clients	6.24 (1.02)	
Recognize current/potential problems of clients	6.18 (1.07)	
Recognize potential legal or ethical problems clients may face	5.85 (1.34)	

Results

Relative Assessment

H1 proposed that students' relative assessment of the student-run agency would be higher than the traditional public relations campaign capstone courses. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to examine whether significant mean differences exist, and the findings suggest statistically significant differences among the three groups (F (1, 99) = 6.86, $p < .005$, $\eta p^2 = .12$). Students in the student-run agency course reported the highest level of relative assessment ($M = 6.95$, $SD = 0.11$), followed by Capstone A with greater client interaction ($M=6.33$, $SD =.75$), followed by Capstone B ($M=5.94$, $SD=1.24$). A Tukey post hoc test revealed that significant mean differences exist between the student run agency and Capstone B. While student agency students reported higher scores than students in Capstone A, the difference was not statistically significant. Therefore, H1 (a) was not supported, while H1(b) was supported.

Perceived Entry Level Competency

H2a-d and H3a-d propose that students' assessment of the agency course at achieving entry level competency was significantly higher than those of the capstone course A and B courses across four categories; (a) writing skills, (b) critical thinking/problem-solving skills, (c) management skills, and (d) ability to communicate publicly.

Students' assessment of the agency at improving their writing skills was higher than students' assessment of both capstone courses (Agency; $M=6.56$, $SD=.60$, Capstone A; $M=5.62$, $SD=.87$; Capstone B; $M=5.42$, $SD=1.36$). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test showed that the mean differences were statistically significant (F (2, 99) =6.76, $p <.005$, $\eta p^2 = .12$). A Tukey post hoc test suggested that students enrolled in the student agency showed significantly greater confidence as to the course's effectiveness at improving their writing skills compared to students

enrolled in the traditional capstone courses. Therefore, H2a and H3a were supported.

Students' assessments of the agency at improving their critical thinking and problem-solving skills were higher than the two traditional capstone courses (Agency; M=6.88, SD=.23, Capstone A; M=6.3, SD=.58; Capstone B; M=5.99, SD=1.16). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test showed that the mean differences were statistically significant (F $(2, 99)$ = 6.49, p <.005, ηp^2 =.12). A Tukey post hoc test suggested that students enrolled in the student agency showed significantly greater confidence regarding the agency course's effectiveness at improving their critical thinking and problem-solving skills compared to Capstone B. Therefore, H3b was supported. Due to the lack of a significant difference between the agency model and Capstone A, H2b was not supported.

Students enrolled in the agency reported greater confidence that the course helped them to have better management skills, compared to the traditional capstone courses (Agency; M=6.90, SD=.21, Capstone A; M=6.36, SD=.45; Capstone B; M=5.75, SD=1.25). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test showed that the mean differences were statistically significant (F $(2, 99)$ = 11.07, p <.001, ηp^2 =.19). A Tukey post hoc test suggested that students enrolled in the student agency showed significantly greater confidence in the course's effectiveness at improving their management skills compared to the Capstone B course. Therefore, H3c was supported. The mean difference between the agency model and the Capstone A course was not statically significant, and therefore H2c was not supported.

Students enrolled in the agency reported that greater confidence in the course has helped them to improve their public communication ability, compared to the traditional capstone courses (Agency; M=6.88, SD=.23, Capstone A; M=6.30, SD=.58; Capstone B; M=5.98, SD=1.16). A one-

way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test showed that the mean differences were statistically significant (F (2, 99) = 6.49, p <.005, ηp^2 =.19). A Tukey post hoc test suggested that students enrolled in the student agency showed significantly greater confidence in the pedagogical approach's effectiveness at improving their public communication abilities compared to the Capstone B course. Therefore, H3d was supported. The mean difference between the agency model and the Capstone A course was not statistically significant, and therefore H2d was not supported (see Figure 1 and Table 2).
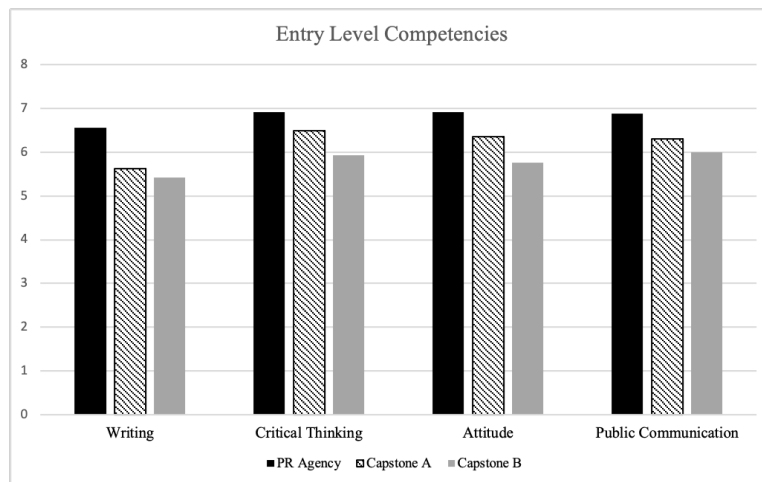
Figure 1. Entry Level Competencies

Table 2. Entry Level Competencies

Entry Level Competency	Agency		Capstone A		Capstone B	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Writing	6.56	.60	5.62	.87	5.42	1.36
Critical Thinking	6.91	.20	6.48	.46	5.93	1.02
Management	6.91	.21	6.36	.45	5.75	1.25
Public Communication	6.88	.23	6.30	.58	5.99	1.16

Perceived Advanced Level Competency

H4 and H5 posit that students' perceived effectiveness of a course at achieving advanced competencies would be greater among students enrolled in the student PR agency course compared to those in the traditional capstone courses across four categories: (a) research skills, (b) ability to handle the media professionally, (c) knowledge of the role of public relations, and (d) knowledge of issue management.

Agency students rated their research skills more highly than students of the two traditional capstone courses (Agency: M=6.35, SD=.94; Capstone A: M=6.42, SD=.43; Capstone B: M=5.60, SD=1.51). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test showed that the mean differences were statistically significant (F (2, 99) = 5.93, p <.005, ηp^2 =.11). A Tukey post hoc test suggested that students enrolled in the student agency showed significantly greater confidence in the agency course's effectiveness at improving their research skills, compared to the Capstone B course. Therefore, H5a was supported. Due to the lack of a significant difference between the agency model versus the Capstone A course, H4a was not supported.

Agency students rated their ability to handle the media professionally significantly higher than students of the two traditional capstone courses (Agency; M=6.56, SD=.77, Capstone A; M=5.34, SD=1.19; Capstone B; M=5.39, SD=1.59). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test showed that the mean differences were statistically significant (F (2, 99) = 5.35, p <.01, ηp^2 =.10). A Tukey post hoc test suggested that students enrolled in the student agency showed significantly greater confidence in the agency course's effectiveness at improving their media-relations skills compared to the Capstone A and Capstone B courses. Therefore, H4b and H5b were supported.

Agency students rated their understanding of the role of public relations more highly than students of the two traditional capstone courses

(Agency; *M*=6.85, *SD*=.25, Capstone A; *M*=6.14, *SD*=.59; Capstone B; *M*=5.62, *SD*=1.56). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test showed that the mean differences were statistically significant (F (2, 99) = 7.54, p <.005, ηp^2 =.14). A Tukey post hoc test suggested that students enrolled in the student agency showed significantly greater confidence in the agency course's effectiveness at improving their understanding of the role of public relations compared to the Capstone B course. Therefore, H5c was supported while H4c was not.

Agency students rated their understanding of issue management more highly than students of the two traditional capstone courses (Agency; *M*=6.91, *SD*=.18, Capstone A; *M*=6.14, *SD*=.54; Capstone B; *M*=5.8, *SD*=1.23). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test showed that the mean differences were statistically significant (F (2, 99) = 5.35, p <.01, ηp^2 =.10). A Tukey post hoc test suggested that students enrolled in the student agency showed significantly greater confidence in the agency course's effectiveness at improving their issue management skills, compared to the Capstone A and B courses. Therefore, H4d and H5d were supported (see Figure 2 and Table 3).
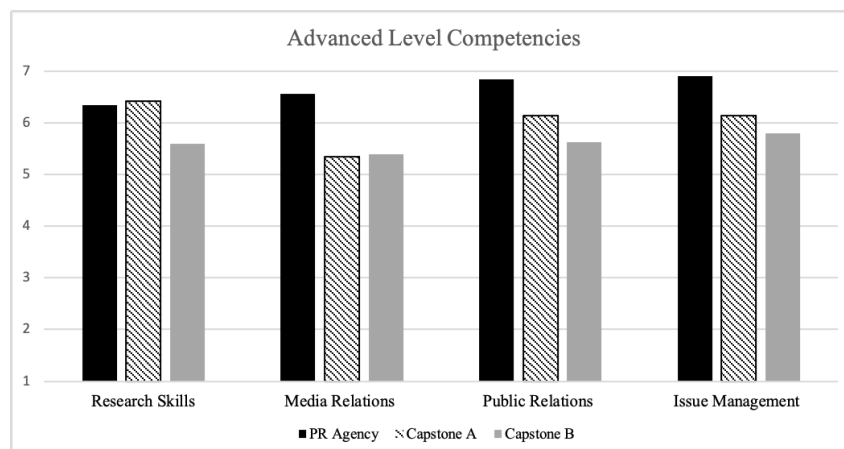
Figure 2. Advanced Level Competencies

Table 3. Advanced Level Competencies

Advanced Level Competency	Agency		Capstone A		Capstone B	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Research	6.35	.94	6.42	.43	5.60	1.51
Professional Media Relations	6.56	.78	5.34	1.20	5.40	1.59
Public Relations Roles	6.85	.25	6.14	.60	5.62	.156
Issue Management	6.91	.18	6.14	.54	5.80	1.24

Capstone A versus Capstone B

The research question asked whether and how perceived educational benefits differ between capstone courses A and B. Multiple t-tests were conducted to determine the mean differences between the two traditional courses across relative and absolute assessments (i.e., entry level competencies; writing skills, critical thinking/problem-solving skills, management skills and ability to communicate publicly, advanced level competences; research skills, ability to handle the media professionally, knowledge of the role of public relations, and knowledge of issue management). As to relative assessment, students from Capstone A reported higher scores than Capstone B (*M*=6.33 vs. *M*=5.94), but the mean difference was not statistically significant. Regarding entry level competency, students' assessment of Capstone A at achieving the entry level competency was significantly higher than Capstone B across two categories: critical thinking/problem-solving skills (*M*=6.48 vs. 5.92; $t(81)=2.91$, $p<.01$) and management skills (*M*=6.36 vs. 5.75; $t(81)=2.70$, $p<.01$). As to advanced level competencies, students assessed the Capstone A course significantly higher than the Capstone B course across two categories – research skills (*M*=5.62 vs. 5.42; $t(81)=3.10$, $p<.005$) and understanding public relations roles (*M*=6.48 vs. 5.92; $t(81)=2.86$, $p<.05$).

Discussion

This study examined the effectiveness of different experiential learning approaches in public relations courses by measuring perceived

student learning outcomes. We surveyed all students enrolled in three public relations campaign capstone courses as well as students enrolled in the student-run public relations agency course at a large southern university over the course of a single semester.

The results show that the public relations agency model was perceived by students as much more effective in achieving learning outcomes relative to other public relations courses. Agency students perceived the pedagogical format as more effective in placing the course materials in context, that the client projects proved to be a more effective learning exercise, that they were more motivated to work on the client projects, that the client projects were more helpful in understanding the relationship between the course and the real world, and that learning about public relations took place more with the client projects in the student-run public relations agency than in the traditional capstone setting. Although students working for the agency reported a greater relative assessment of the pedagogical model, this finding does not necessarily mean that students in the traditional capstone courses felt that their courses were not effective at achieving learning outcomes. The average scores of relative assessments among students in the traditional courses were 6.33 out of 7 (Capstone A), and 5.99 out of 7 (Capstone B). Although students' relative assessment of capstone courses was high, agency students' relative assessment was even higher (6.95 out of 7). That means the agency model, which attempts to provide experiential depth and richness that the more traditional campaign courses cannot, provided students with even greater perceived educational benefits relative to capstone courses, which were already rated high.

When it comes to achieving entry-level competencies, the findings suggested that the student agency showed superior results across all of the tested categories (e.g., writing skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, management skills, and public communication abilities) compared

to the public relations campaigns course B. Compared to Capstone A, the agency was perceived as more effective at improving writing skills, but students' perceived competencies in other areas were relatively similar between the agency and the Capstone A course as evidenced by H2's test results. This finding implies that limiting students' direct interactions with their clients, as was the case in Capstone B (the professor was responsible for client interactions and functioned as a go-between), significantly restricts the course's perceived educational effectiveness. While the student agency showed superior results regarding writing skills compared to the Capstone A course, Capstone A students still showed great confidence in the course format when it came to improving their entry-level skill sets across critical thinking and problem-solving skills, management skills, and public communication abilities. This indicates the importance of more direct experiential learning opportunities through client interactions; when the public relations campaign was structured to ensure greater client interaction (i.e., Capstone A) throughout the semester (including client initial interview, consistent communications while completing secondary and primary research, and developing a strategic campaign plan), the capstone course was perceived as much more effective to the point that the course was generally perceived as effective as the public relations agency model at achieving various entry-level skill sets, except for writing skills. At the student agency, students were not only developing a strategic plan for their client but were also implementing proposed communication plans, which required various styles of writing that were tweaked, fine-tuned, and implemented. Actual implementation of communication tactics could have improved the writing skills of agency students more effectively than any traditional capstone courses. This is important in that writing competence is one of the central skills for anyone wishing to make it in the public relations industry.

In evaluating the effectiveness of achieving advanced-level

competencies, the differences among the three pedagogical approaches were more apparent. The findings suggest that across numerous areas of advanced competencies, a public relations agency promotes student learning outcomes more effectively than both capstone courses. Agency students reported greater competency across all tested areas compared to the Capstone B course. Specifically, they reported that the agency improved their research skills, media relations skills, advanced knowledge on the role of public relations, and issue management abilities. Compared to the Capstone A course, agency students reported greater competency in media relations and issue management. These results are fairly consistent with previous studies. The agency structure presents a more disciplined business setting and increases team communication skills more than other service-learning courses, including PR campaigns courses. Therefore, agency students got a chance to learn about client relations and managing client expectations, among other things (Benigni et al., 2004; Swanson, 2011). The benefits of the student-run agency experience also included a rise in professional confidence and readiness, the chance to understand leadership and management, practice with client relationship maintenance, and the opportunity to improve administrative skills (Bush, 2009; Bush et al., 2017; Haygood et al., 2019; Kim, 2015; Ranta et al., 2019; Swanson, 2011).

Overall, agency students reported the highest perceived effectiveness and superior development of skill sets across numerous areas, followed by students in the Capstone A course. The Capstone A course, with more emphasis on direct client communication and engagement, was found to be more effective at achieving learning outcomes than Capstone B across critical thinking and problem-solving skills (entry-level), relationship management skills (entry-level), research skills (advanced-level), and knowledge of the role of public relations (advanced-level). The findings demonstrated that actively employing a

hands-on experiential and pedagogical approach can be significantly more effective, even within traditional public relations campaign courses.

Implications

Although public relations educators generally support the value of student agencies, little research on perceived student learning outcomes exists – especially on whether student agencies are effective at achieving public relations learning outcomes (Swanson, 2011). There are no quantitative studies that evaluate student learning outcomes of student agencies compared to traditional capstone courses. This study attempted to explore a topic that had not been clearly studied with the intention of providing basic foundational knowledge for future pedagogical studies focusing on student agencies. This study provides useful insights for academics and educators. A student-run agency that adopts an experiential learning approach can be highly effective at achieving learning outcomes where traditional courses may fall short, including the enhancement of writing skills, media relations skills, issue management skills, and more.

According to a 2018 CPRE omnibus survey, practitioners and educators believed that entry-level practitioners lack skills and ability in the areas of research, writing, analytics, media relations, communication, critical thinking, and problem solving, which are required in order to succeed in a professional setting. As the study findings showed, a course with more emphasis on the experiential learning approach can achieve more effective learning outcomes, most notably the student-run agency approach. The findings of this study demonstrated the usefulness of the experiential learning theory (ELT) framework in exploring perceived student learning outcomes of different courses. The process of learning through experience appears to be critical in preparing students for the profession because the knowledge earned from "the combination of grasping and transforming experience" can fill knowledge/skill discrepancies (Kolb et al., 2000, p. 41).

Limitations and Directions for Future Study

Despite the useful insights provided by the study, we acknowledge its limitations. First, this study is exploratory and therefore focuses more on providing useful foundational knowledge for future research to build upon. Because the study was carried out at a single university, future research should expand the population to test the generalizability of the study findings. Also, each school may have different formats for the student agency and public relations campaign course. In other words, with more than 100 public relations programs offering students an educational experience rooted in the public relations agency model and even more offering a public relations campaign course, it is important to note that these experiences are structured differently and we should be careful about making broad generalizations from one exploratory study. Therefore, the current study's findings should be interpreted with caution. In the case of this study, a student-run agency featured the most active experiential learning model followed by Capstone A and Capstone B. The latter course provided a limited form of service-learning in that students worked to meet a real client's public relations needs with very limited direct interaction. Other university courses may have different formats such that the findings here should be adapted with caution.

Second, despite the significant perceived educational benefits of a student-run agency, the format can also propose significant challenges, as discussed earlier (e.g., greater faculty time commitment, lack of dedicated space, technology, and money to run the agency, difficulty in predicting dependability, and unreasonable client expectations). It may take a considerable amount of time and effort for faculty to manage the agency model such that the agency can generate all of the potential educational benefits. Therefore, educators who consider student agencies should look not only at the significant educational benefits but also the realistic challenges it can entail. Future research may also explore the difficulties

and needs associated with the experiential learning model rather than just its perceived educational benefits.

Third, the student employees participating in this study went through an application process to be selected to serve as employees, which means that student employees might be high performing students to begin with. Additionally, applying for something is a determined action that also might be associated with high performing students. It is for these reasons that it is important to measure not only absolute learning outcomes but also relative learning outcomes. Future studies may even consider a longitudinal study to more accurately evaluate whether students who worked in a student run public relations agency are better equipped to competently carry out professional public relations tasks than students who enrolled in a traditional capstone course.

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