

*Top PRSA-EA GIFT*

**Shifting the Paradigm - Improving Student Awareness of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts Through Public Relations Campaigns**

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ABSTRACT

As PR professors it is our responsibility to make diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) top of mind when teaching our students to develop comprehensive campaigns. It is our role to educate the next wave of practitioners to take the “diversity first” approach when working with clients or organizations. Through learning how to apply the researcher-developed Diversity & Inclusion Wheel for Public Relations Practitioners, this paper illustrates how students can operationalize this tool to build strategic campaigns that encompass DEI principles.

**KEYWORDS:** Public relations, campaigns, diversity, equity, inclusion, cultural competency

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**Rationale:** Through this activity, we seek to shift the paradigm of student awareness of diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in and through public relations campaign courses. Through learning how to apply the researcher-developed Diversity & Inclusion Wheel for Public Relations Practitioners, students can then operationalize this tool to build strategic campaigns that encompass diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles. Facilitation of cultural competence through relevant curriculum, such as public relations campaigns, empowers students (Pelletier, 2019) and breaks barriers of cognitive and cultural dissonance (Smith, 2019), which in this case applies to creating a “diversity first” approach of examination into, and development of, comprehensive communications campaigns with students.

**Targeted Learning Outcomes:** 1) students become more comfortable with many of the aspects surrounding DEI, 2) students can demonstrate a deliberate and effective way for addressing various audiences through empathy and consideration of diverse populations using a customized tool built for PR practitioners, 3) students reflect on the importance of application of DEI efforts to campaigns and the field.

**Teaching Practice & Assignment:** During the first week of class, to help students begin to think critically about DEI issues, we first define diversity, equity and inclusion to set the stage for the semester and open the discussion surrounding the role diversity plays within the field of PR. We propose the following: diversity is the “difference or variety of difference or variety of a particular identity”; equity addresses the “resources and the need to provide additional or alternative resources so that all groups can reach comparable, favorable outcomes;” and inclusion involves the “practices, policies, and processes that shape an organization’s culture” (Beavers, 2018, p. 3). Rather than making DEI add-on elements of

strategic communication campaigns and messages, practitioners should make conscientious decisions to put DEI considerations at the forefront of their planning. This model can be introduced in introductory level courses, then students can carry the model forward throughout their program of study.

Next, we introduce the Diversity & Inclusion Wheel for PR Practitioners (Appendix A). This wheel is based on previous research by Dr. Lee Gardenswartz and Dr. Anita Rowe (1994, 1998). In doing so we teach our students how to develop more inclusive campaigns from the beginning – the “diversity first” approach. Explaining the wheel: the center of the wheel has six core spokes that brands should consider when beginning to develop a campaign - national origin, age, physical qualities/abilities, gender, race and ethnicity. The outer layer of the wheel, beginning at the top and moving clockwise around the wheel includes seventeen additional attributes such as marital status, religious beliefs, mental health/well-being, language, communication styles, thinking styles, education or language. The idea is not to incorporate every spoke or external layer represented in the D&I Wheel, rather to consider deeply whether the same people are continually represented and create a campaign that includes two or three inner spokes and an array of external layers presented here.

### Step 1

To begin, students are given a recent PR case study or campaign to read chosen by the instructor. Allow the learners to read the case completely. Instruct them to highlight and make notes that illustrate direct connections to DEI principles. Additionally, students should go online to assess the digital assets available for the campaign. In this step students begin to connect specific areas of DEI to actual campaigns.

### Step 2

Hand out a sheet of paper that has an image of a circle in the center of the page with a smaller circle in the center of that or have students take out a piece of paper and draw a circle in the center (Appendix B). Prompt the students to use the D&I Wheel as a guide (Appendix A). In the smaller circle, ask the students to identify at least two aspects from the center of the wheel. In the larger circle ask students to identify at least four aspects from the external portion that they believe were implemented in this case study. In this step, students investigate and identify multiple aspects of diversity, equity and inclusion. Here students begin to understand the importance of multidimensional diversity.

### Step 3

Ask students to look up the diversity and inclusion policy of the company featured in the case study. They should analyze the principles of DEI and compare them to the case study they just evaluated. Do the company's mission and values align with the campaigns they are executing? By doing this, students think critically about the messages being sent publicly versus the actions taken internally by organizations. Sometimes the two are at odds with one another.

### Step 4

Open the floor to discuss the student findings from the exercise. The learners should provide examples from their discovery to fuel the conversation. Have students explore why certain decisions were made and why (or why not) certain representations are present. This assignment provides a foundation for instructors to use and refer back to often when conducting research, developing content, identifying strategies or planning campaigns. An add-on assignment is to have students write their own DEI statements that they can post to their website portfolios using concepts

learned.

**Assessment & Student Reactions:** Having taught this approach over the past two years, students consistently respond positively. Some comment that this is the first time they have been introduced to the D&I Wheel. Students become more comfortable with aspects of DEI (LO1), a student commented, “This was all new to me. I’ve never thought about diversity from a communication perspective. Other classes don’t use this concept and I wish they would.” While another remarked on the importance of application of DEI efforts to campaigns and the field (LO3), “I don’t know why this isn’t a standard part of learning how to put together an integrated campaign.” Others noted that before learning how to incorporate a diversity first approach from the research process throughout, they simply would include photos of diverse people. As a result of this practice, students can demonstrate a deliberate and effective way for addressing various audiences through empathy and consideration of diverse populations using a customized tool built for PR practitioners (LO2), whereas one student commented, “I used to think diversity was just making sure that different color people were in the pics I used for my assignments. Now I know that to really understand diversity we must take what we understand about culture, communication, gender and so much more and apply it to building content.” Additional assessment results available in Appendix C.

### References

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- Gardenswartz, L., & Rowe, A. (1994). *Diverse teams at work: Capitalizing on the power of diversity*. Chicago: Irwin.

Gardenswartz, L., & Rowe, A. (1998). *Managing diversity: A complete desk reference and planning guide*. McGraw Hill Professional.

Pelletier, K. (2019, April 29). DEI and Empowering Students. *Educause*. <https://er.educause.edu/blogs/2019/4/dei-and-empowering-students>

Smith, K. C. (2019). *Developing a culturally relevant curriculum and breaking the barriers of cognitive and cultural dissonance* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Wayne State University.

### Appendix A

## Diversity & Inclusion Wheel For PR Practitioners



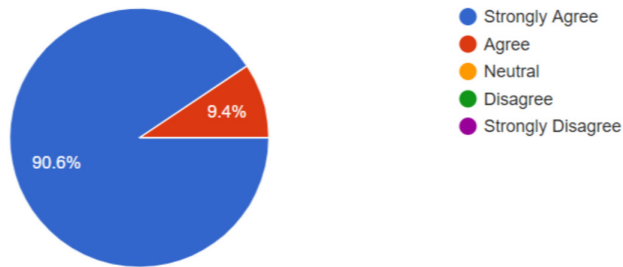
## Appendix B



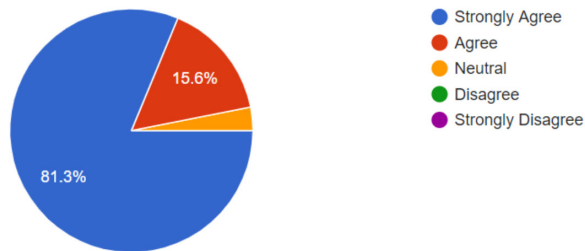
### Appendix C

**Note: The instructors collected the following pre- and post- test attitudes over two semesters in campaigns courses, below are the results with regard to Student Attitudes and Perceptions of DEI in the PR Classroom.**

1. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are important to consider while building effective public relations campaigns.

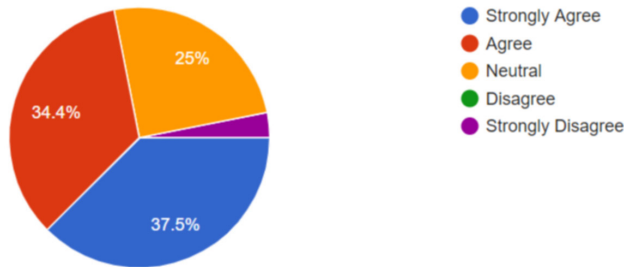


2. Diversity, equity, and inclusion education should be included in all classes related to public relations.

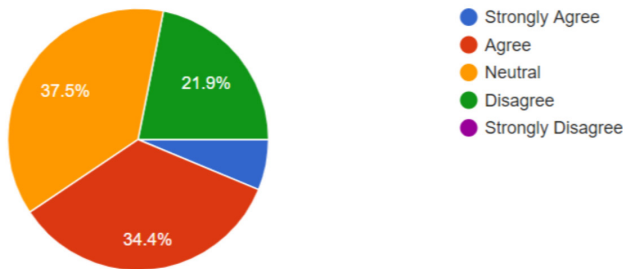




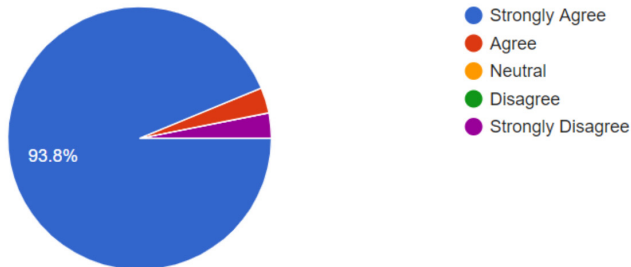
3. I feel prepared to learn and effectively apply new material from textbooks, journal articles, blogs, etc. without classroom review on matters related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in public relations.



4. I have sufficient background knowledge on diversity, equity, and inclusion related to public relations in order to apply these matters to campaigns successfully.



5. I am open to learning more about how diversity, equity, and inclusion are related to public relations.



6. I wish there were more offered in my public relations curriculum that addressed diversity, equity, and inclusion issues.

