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Student-Run Agencies Best Practices: Replicating the Professional Agency Experience to Prepare Budding Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

Preparing students to become practitioners includes immersion in public relations theory and practical training. While much of this is accomplished in traditional college classrooms, student-run agencies (SRAs) add an additional learning environment that includes experience in professionalism and familiarity with practices, skills and protocols necessary for future success. While often similarly structured as professional agencies, SRAs provide an integrated learning environment that encompasses professionalism. This research is built on two theoretical streams, social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) and professionalism theory (Cruess, 2006). Describing best practices in policies, tactics and techniques, this study provides insights into the what, the why and the how of fostering professionalism in undergraduates via the SRA's unique and immersive experience to prepare students for post-graduate careers.

Keywords: student-run agencies/firms, professionalism, hard/soft skills, best practices, integrative learning

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Defining an occupation as a profession carries with it many challenges. The profession of public relations is not an exception. As Sriramesh and Hornaman (2006) pointed out, the debate of "is PR a profession?" ran on for over two decades.

While at the time, the researchers pointed out that public relations was not yet a profession, based on a consensus of available research, Sriramesh and Hornaman (2006) did offer that attainment of a professional status for public relations must include items like a code of ethics and professional values and norms, service to the public interest, cultivation of specialized research and technical skills, possession of a body of esoteric knowledge, specialized and standardized education, the offer of a unique service and establishment of robust professional organizations and having autonomy in organizations to make communication-related decisions.

The student-run agency (SRA) in its most basic form provides several aspects of this assertion including providing specialized education that can also serve the public interest, reinforced training in professional values and norms, unique development of technical and research skills, cultivating and providing autonomy for making communication-related decisions on behalf of an organization, and reinforcing good ethical practice and solid professional values and norms in the 'real work for real clients' model.

To that end, the student-run agency is an excellent springboard that bears closer study in terms of best practices and as an outlet for fostering professionalism. Not all of the research areas addressed in this study translate directly to the aforementioned criteria for professionalism, but many do.

In recent studies (Bush et al., 2017; Haygood et al., 2019; Ranta et al., 2019), communication professionals have recommended academic programs provide pedagogical elements that mirror real-world practice whenever possible. The student-run agency (SRA) is an integrative

learning experience which mimics the professional agency and provides exceptional instruction in applying soft and hard skills.

The Role of Student-Run Agencies in Emulating Professional Organizations

The goal of an SRA, in large part, is to create an environment students may find themselves in upon graduation in terms of deadlines, client management, client service, professional standards of work and promotion of competencies. There are various types of structures and specialties in contemporary SRAs (Bush et al., 2018). Some may be composed of a handful of students and a graduate assistant, others may be a stand-alone student club or an offshoot of a student organization like the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), and still others may be highly structured, repeatable classes worth between 1-3 credit hours engaging dozens of students per academic year.

Regardless of its structure, however, ultimately a student-run agency should strive to generate professionalism among its students by emulating professional, client-service behavior that reinforces their identity, reputation, and problem-solving acumen.

This study explored current SRA operations based on responses from more than 60 advisers in the United States, and illustrates best practices by the agencies and how they mirror professional agency operations. The questions focused on multiple areas including practice discipline integration, the scope of work (public relations, advertising, strategic communication, and integrated communication), client diversity, business development practices, personnel management and recruitment, agency identity and promotion, client selection, revenue generation, and facilities and technology usage and adoptions.

Advisers provided insights on their particular agency's perceived best practices, core competencies, client type, organizational structure, infrastructure, student leadership, funding and professional affiliation(s).

Implications for this study include pedagogical planning, integrative learning opportunities, establishment of generalized best practices and discussion of improved standards of performance to successfully prepare graduates for the communication professions.

Literature Review

Whether headed toward a career at an agency or within another type of similar organization, communication-related jobs require a level of understanding of required practices, skills development, establishment protocols and the confidence to complete tasks or provide counsel. Thus, this research is built on a dual theory approach: self-efficacy and professionalism.

Student-run agencies enable students to become more confident in their skills. Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory focuses on an individual's ability to believe they can produce positive results by completing tasks or activities based on learned skills sets. Learning occurs by observing; then the behavior(s) are reinforced and repeated (Schunk, 2012). These skills can include both hard and/or soft skills. In the case of communicators, sample hard skills involve knowledge or expertise such as writing, video production, event planning, etc.

Soft skills are also fostered in the SRA environment and include development of personal attributes such as collaboration, time management and interpersonal communication (Robles, 2012). In a recent study by Ranta et al. (2019) student-run agency participants said they had strong confidence to execute tasks associated with 23 separate communication-related variables and attributed much of that confidence to experience gained during time spent in their SRA. Students strongly agreed or agreed across 20 variables that their time in an SRA contributed to that confidence. Variables where students felt confidence and credited the SRA for creating it, included collaborative leadership, public relations principles, endurance and persistence in the face of adversity,

persuasive communication, social media aptitude, brand communication planning, interpersonal communication, and advertising principles. Swanson (2019) recognized more measurable hard skill tasks such as client communication, social media management and campaign planning/development as areas where students perceived they had gained self-efficacy.

Equally important, Cruess (2006) argued that professionalism is a separate and equal learning experience within the context of other types of instruction. Though Cruess' research is focused on healthcare professionals and practitioners, the same can be argued for professionals and practitioners in communication disciplines. Rather than leaving the learning of professionalism to happenstance, Cruess posited that it should be specifically incorporated into curriculum. His position built on Freidson's (2001) work where he emphasized the occupational value and importance of professionalism as a distinctive aspect of work. More specifically, Cruess and Cruess (2012) argued professionalism must be taught both through a definition and a series of traits for theoretical knowledge and through role modeling and experiential learning. In those terms, SRAs are a gateway to providing a path toward learning professionalism in preparation for a real-world, post graduate job engagement.

Addressing professionalism within the PR, advertising, and integrated communication professions, Brunner et al. (2018) found a preponderance of professional position postings showed new graduates needed a mix of hard and soft skills including writing, time management, and collaboration. Krishna et al. (2019) also found a mix of hard and soft skills when surveying practitioners themselves. Swanson (2019) found that SRA graduates did identify time management and team collaboration among the top five skills they acquired.

To prepare communication students for positions in a highly-

competitive job environment, an increasingly popular college/university experience addressing this need involves student-run agencies. According to Swanson (2017), there are more than 150 SRAs at colleges and universities in the U.S. Whether managed as an advertising, public relations, or integrated/strategic communication agency, SRAs prepare students for careers while still within an educational setting. Student-run agencies provide a link between academic course work and the professional world by providing opportunities to integrate skills learned in the classroom with real world experience working for real clients. (Huber & Hutchings, 2004; Swanson, 2011; Kim, 2015; Bush et al., 2018).

While traditional campaigns courses are often the capstones for communication-related programs, some argue they may provide a more hypothetical experience and less "real-world" simulation than student-run agencies (Haley et al., 2016). Many campaigns classes minimize client interaction and risk. Instead, as Bush (2009) asserted, SRAs often provide a better opportunity for experiential learning and professional abilities development through the incorporation of business practices, agency operations and other career-related skills seen as valuable by students, advisers and hiring managers. The agency structure adds a level of depth to the learning through day-to-day engagement, collaboration and problem-solving (Haygood et al., 2019).

In addition to confidence, the real-world aspect of student-run agencies is significant for multiple reasons. Academics and practitioners agree a key component of the educational experience should be co-curricular and include experiences such as SRAs. According to the most recent Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) report on undergraduate education, practitioners indicated experience in student-run media, student-run public relations firms, and public relations organizations are among the most "highly-desired traits" when hiring graduates because of the professional development opportunities these

experiences provide (CPRE, 2018).

Professional and Student-Run Agency Parallels

In a 2014 study of chief communication and marketing officers, Weber Shandwick documented the growing trend of the integration of communication and marketing, in part to align with "an increasingly complex media environment" (p. 3). Likewise, the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (2019) reported that 90% of business leaders surveyed said that PR and marketing will become somewhat or a lot more integrated in the next five years. Nearly a decade ago, Bush and Miller (2011) found that 43% of advisors described their agencies as specifically PR or advertising agencies. At the same time, the lines between sources of media continue to blur. In the previously cited 2019 USC Annenberg study, 62% of business leaders agreed that there will be no distinction between paid, earned, shared, and owned (PESO) media in five years. Thus, supporting integration of advertising and public relations efforts is critical for most academic programs.

Like professional agencies, space is important. In 2011, Bush and Miller found that 38% of student-run agencies had dedicated office space, which led to higher learning outcomes. These spaces include student leadership offices, client and student conference rooms, and creative and production workspaces. Being in a professional environment also includes the need for business acumen. Ragas et al., (2015) found that senior communication executives want to hire those that understand the business of agencies and the businesses of the clients.

Student Experience in the Agency

In two studies (Bush et al., 2017 and Haygood et al., 2019), SRA graduates and hiring decision makers outlined the importance of working with a diversity of people, as well as understanding return on investment to prepare graduates for the field. Also, recent literature has outlined the need to prepare students for leadership roles in the field, particularly

in light of dynamic changes in the industry (Pavlik, 2013; Bronstein & Fitzpatrick, 2015). In addition, paying students for their time shows the importance of and difference in the work from traditional academic environments and motivates them to fully engage in the work, much like professional communicators. Payment is also ethical if the agency charges clients. The Public Relations Society of America's (2011) Professional Standards Advisory advocates for paid internships when students create billable work.

And while writing led the list of most desired hard skills among many researchers, listening and creativity were among the top soft skills many new practitioners should have. As pointed out in Ranta et al., (2019), and in a recent 2020 AEJMC professional panel (Davis et al., 2020), SRAs are instructive areas for a variety of hard and soft skills from writing, web design, video production, and social media execution to soft skills like collaborative leadership, time management, collegiality, relationship-building, persistence in the face of adversity and providing ethical communication counsel.

In addition, the skills and experiences gained from participating in a student-run agency can also make a difference in graduates competing for entry-level positions (Haygood et al., 2019). In interviews with advertising agency hiring decision-makers, among the most valued perceived benefits of SRAs were real client interaction, communicating, and collaborating with a diversity of people, understanding agency operations/culture, being held accountable for project completion, and experiencing the rigors of agency life. "Several respondents asserted that the experience could even rival actual internships because of the direct client interaction gained at student agencies and the real accountability of the work generated," (p. 31).

These results are consistent with previous research about the benefits of student-run agencies. Bush and Miller (2011) found that

agency advisers believed students gain experiences in applied skills and professionalism. More specifically, Maben and Whitson (2014) found that advisers felt students matured, became more confident, more responsible, and were better teammates while also becoming better at problem-solving and leadership through experience in an SRA.

From a recent graduate perspective, those with SRA experience now working in the professional communication fields most highly valued the real-world client interactions, agency operations experience, communicating with a diversity of people, and gaining professional skills provided via the SRA (Bush et al., 2017). Similarly, Haley et al., (2016) found students appreciated the "real-life" aspect of SRAs to increase their personal job marketability while building soft skills such as collaboration, interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and leadership.

In order for students to learn hard and soft skills, professionalism and self-efficacy, hiring decision makers recommend that SRAs mimic professional agencies as much as possible in both their structures and processes (Haygood et al., 2019). In 2009, Bush posited that students participating in highly structured SRAs (specific job titles, competitive applications processes, formal assessment practices, dedicated office space, etc.) were more likely to achieve greater learning outcomes. These levels of learning included applying PR theories to real-world clients, learning business processes and protocols, and developing a professional identity. Likewise, Bush and Miller (2011) found that SRAs with dedicated office space reported significantly higher levels of learning in these areas than SRAs without dedicated spaces. Therefore, it is imperative to review the nuances of a professional agency environment and how SRAs mimic this integrative learning immersion.

Methodology

When analyzing the professional agency organizational environment through native experience and studies of agency descriptions

(Wynne, 2013; Juneja 2015), several categories of operations are specific to a professional communications agency (public relations, advertising, integrated communication, etc.) and in some cases, are unique to that career pursuit.

For the purpose of this research those elements are: establishing a purpose and people required to complete the agency mission; investing in and "hiring" those with professional qualifications; establishing a process for employee recruitment and retention; establishing a policy for client recruitment and service; ensuring systems in place for revenue generation; and stewardship of resources (Swanson, 2017; Bush et al., 2018).

Keeping those professional agency functions, traits and responsibilities in mind, this study of SRA operations investigated areas where integrated learning opportunities at the BA/BS level replicated those variables in preparing students for professional work in the agency environment.

This study includes responses from 64 SRA faculty adviser respondents, out of a total of 164 distinct points of contact who were asked about the organization and orientation of their particular student-run agency. Advisers were contacted via e-mail and invited to use a link to a Qualtrics survey. Advisers were queried over a three-week period with multiple, scheduled e-mails sent asking recipients to respond and reminding them to do so. The list of recipients was assembled from various sources including registration in the 2016 Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) international conference directory, personal contacts from the study authors, other scholars studying student-run agencies, research databases of other SRA advisers and Internet searches of student-run agency and university web sites.

The survey included 47 questions centered around the following areas:

- Details about the agency (including name/branding, affiliated university, and characterization of the agency as a club or a class)
- Type of agency (PR, integrated communication, strategic communication, advertising, other)
- Agency core competencies
- Client types served by the agency (for profit, not-for-profit, university properties, NGOs, etc.)
- Annual number of student participants
- Recruitment/selection of students
- Organizational structure of the agency
- Fee structures (if any) for the agency (clients are charged, not charged for work performed, etc.)
- Employment characterization of the agency workers (student workers paid or unpaid, graduate assistants, teaching assistants, etc.)
- Funding sources for the agency (grants, profits, endowments, etc.)
- Agency resources (dedicated space, dedicated equipment, levels of technology, etc.)
- Sources of clients to the agency (recruited, referred, etc.)
- Other observations SRA advisers may have had about their particular firm.

Where appropriate, free response answers were permitted in an attempt to obtain elaboration of specific variables.

Results

To illustrate how an SRA can successfully mimic a professional firm, there are some clear distinctions included in the tabulations. The following categories were provided to better organize the responses: Adviser Descriptions of their Specific SRA—people and purpose; SRAs and Professional Qualifications; Recruiting Students; "Employee" Compensation/Retention; Client Recruitment; SRA Revenue Generation; SRA Funding and Grants; and Stewardship of/Access to Resources.

Survey results were tabulated and expressed in percentages of the total number of respondents.

Important notation: many of the questions discussed in this study involved multiple selection questions. Therefore, while there was only a maximum total of 64 respondents in the survey, some questions delivered three-figure response results. These results are reported as percentages of the total number of responses, not respondents. In addition, because of the relatively small sample size, and because this was a descriptive study, a more robust statistical analysis was not conducted.

Resources, in terms of hard costs or their representations are very important components if an agency is to be deemed successful. In this research, the line of questioning revolves around space, technology and operating revenue.

Another important definition of a professional firm is the quantity and type of services it provides. This survey explored the different types of core competencies the SRAs offered based on similar capabilities seen in the professional realm of agency work.

In addition to a clear path of core competencies, many professional agencies define themselves by the types of clients they serve or specialize in. There are any variety of types of clients an SRA could specialize in or work towards. An active line of questioning in this survey addressed types of clients served by each SRA.

Another area where professional firms define themselves is the scope, breadth and depth of the employees who work for them. The SRA has similar challenges. There are several questions in the survey addressing selection of individuals to work in the SRA and the questions of compensation for who works within the organization.

Adviser Descriptions of their Specific SRA—People and Purpose

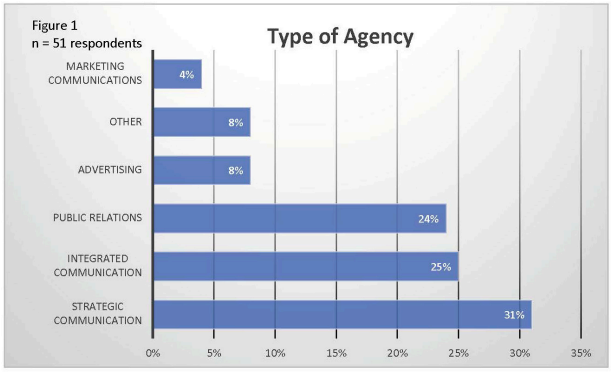
In terms of people who staffed and managed the SRA,

advisers offered several insights in response to a variety of questions. Characterizing the size of SRAs, a total of 49 respondents said their SRA sizes in terms of students ranged from 21% having 60 + students participating to 14% having 0-9 students participating annually. Other breakouts of attendance were spread out between 19% having 10-19 students participating annually, 19% of respondents having 20-29 students participating annually and nine percent having 50-59 or 40-49 student participants annually.

When asked how to describe their agencies by primary capabilities (core competencies) a total of 51 advisers responded. Thirty-one percent of respondents said their firm was a strategic communications agency, 25% said their firm was an integrated communication agency and 24% said their firm was primarily a public relations agency. Other choices recorded included an advertising agency, a marketing communications agency and "other." Figure 1 shows a detailed breakout of all choices.

Figure 1

Type of Agency



Among the other respondents, one adviser indicated they were called public relations but were really an integrated communication agency, one respondent said their agency was a creative services agency, another claimed to be a digital and social media agency, and one outlier

said their SRA was a gift-product provider.

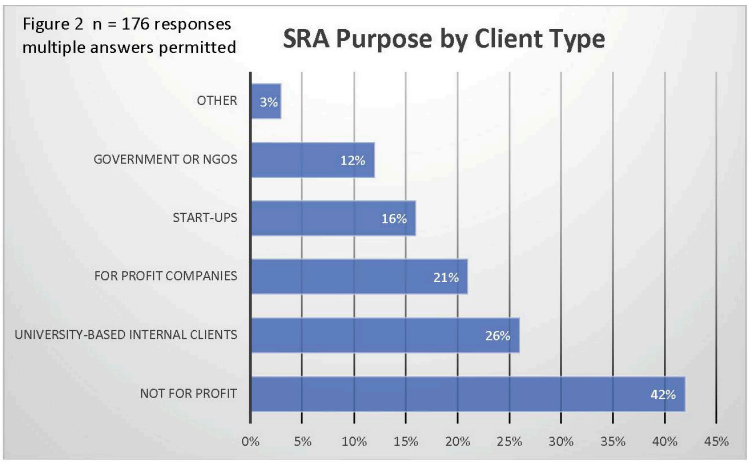
When describing core competencies via a free-response question, SRA advisers reflected a converged media population with wide varieties of professional categories including public relations research, strategy, objectives and tactics. Creation and distribution of press materials and branded materials were also mentioned. Some advisers said their firms engaged in event planning and execution. Analytics were also prominent responses with firms claiming social media content analysis and execution competencies; digital media content design and analytics competencies and digital media strategies and analytics. Other SRA advisers claimed competencies in advertising functions to include research, design and tactics, including branding. Some firms said they exclusively specialized in all things required for not-for-profits. Still more claimed graphic design, web design, experiential marketing design, and video production as their strengths. Most notable about the volume and quality of responses was the assertion that agencies vary in their competencies but many were self-described as integrated or strategic or converged in their competency claims and approaches. See Appendix 1 for more details.

Specific free-response comments regarding the questions of mission/core values yielded a wide selection of answers: One respondent summed up their SRA mission: "…to provide clients with comprehensive PR strategies and solutions, to offer (university name) Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) members the opportunity to apply their knowledge and gain experience beyond the classroom, and to build credibility while forming lasting student-client relationships." Another respondent said, "Provide strategic communication services to external and internal clients. Serve the community without undermining the established, for-profit firms." Another said their SRA was "Full service with significant expertise in social media (content and analysis) and engagement with millennials." See Appendix 2 for more details.

Similarly when defining the purpose of the SRA by client type, from an unknown number of respondents, within 176 responses (multiple client categories permitted), 42% of the answers indicated their SRA served not-for-profit organizations, 26% said their SRA served university-based internal clients, 21% indicated their firms served for profit companies, 16% of responses indicated their firm served start-ups, 12% said their SRA served government or NGOs; and three percent of respondents said other. Figure 2 has more detail.

Figure 2

SRA Purpose by Client Type



Of those selecting other, one respondent said they were a service bureau for an outside agency, another stressed they only served "501(c)(3) compliant organizations" and one more said they were "supporting commercial agencies with research and work."

SRAs and Professional Qualifications

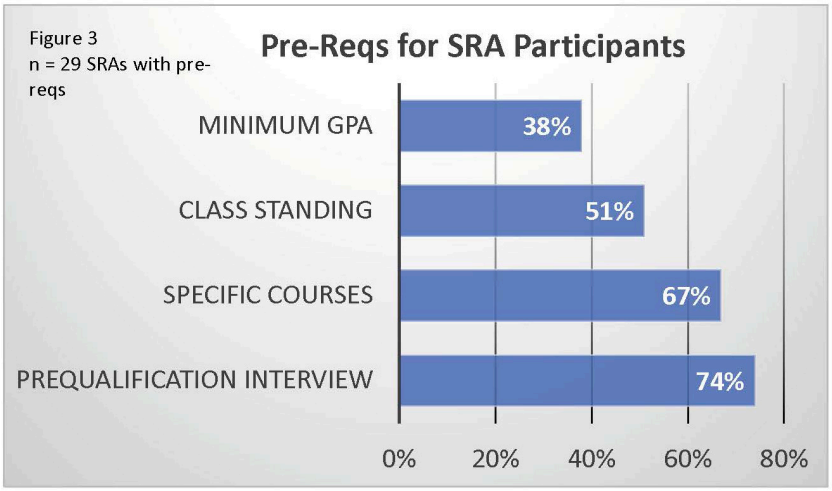
Much like professional agencies, SRAs also have identified a need to ensure qualified people are "hired" for work in their agencies. Addressing the need for pre-qualifications/pre-requisites for taking the SRA course, among 48 respondents, 60% indicated their SRA had pre-

requisites for student participation and 40% indicated they did not.

Among the categories of those SRAs requiring pre-requisites, (29 respondents), 38% included a minimum GPA, 51% cited specific class standing as a participation requirement and 67% required specific courses prior to SRA participation. In addition, 74% of advisers indicated they performed a pre-qualification interview prior to permitting students to enroll in the class. Twenty-six percent did not. See Figure 3 for more details.

Figure 3

Type of Pre-Reqs for SRA Student Participants



Further addressing preparation of students to participate in an SRA, of 48 respondents, 54% indicated their agency was taught as a class, and 46% indicated their agency was not. Within the universe of those using a class model for their SRA experience, 19 respondents indicated that it was an elective class and only 4 SRA advisers said their class was required for their program of study.

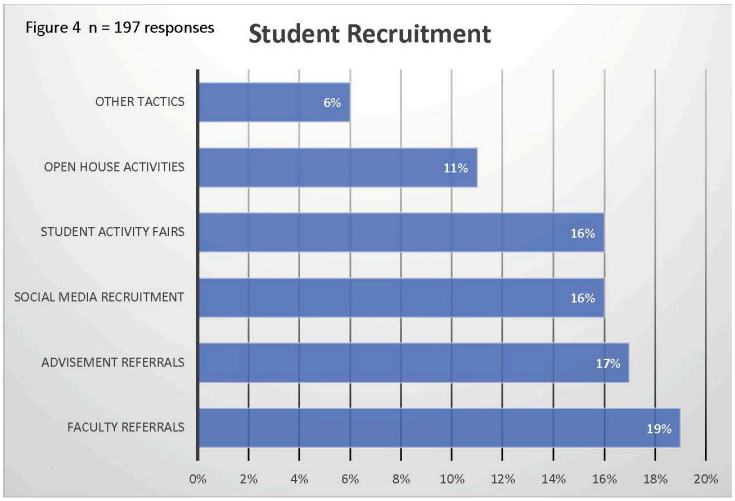
Recruiting Students

As it pertained to recruiting students to work for the SRA, advisers

indicate a large selection of tactics with many agencies employing a robust approach. In this question, multiple answers were accepted. Of 197 responses, 19% of student recruitment efforts involved the use of faculty referrals, 17% used advisement referrals to 16% involved student activity fairs, 16% involved social media, 11% included open house activities and six percent used other tactics including: classroom visits, student presentations to classes, utilization of entrepreneurship programs, PRSSA chapter meetings, student orientations and electronic bulletin boards. See Figure 4 for more details.

Figure 4

Student Recruitment



Another important tool for recruiting students to work at the SRA, is a digital location to display the student experience and showcase student work. Students use this outlet in marketing themselves for jobs as they matriculate. Among the 46 respondents to the question of website presence to showcase student work, 59% of advisers said that they use an agency web site or some other digital identity to show the student experience and/or highlight student work. Forty-one percent did not create/use a web site for displaying the student experience/student work.

"Employee" Compensation/Retention

As with a professional agency environment, in addition to recruiting employees/participants, there is also a need for SRAs to retain students. Among a field of 47 SRA adviser respondents, 43% indicated they did pay some of their student workers for work done at the firm, 57% did not. In a separate but related question, among 24 respondents who indicated they did pay students for working at the firm, two percent said they offered incentive pay, 50% offered leadership pay, 12% said they offered merit pay for exceptional performance, and 58% indicated they had other paid position structures including graphic design work, business manager work, compensation for PRSSA participation, and summer internships, which they considered compensation for student work.

Client Recruitment

Another key function of agency work in both the professional and student-run agency environment includes recruiting clients for the firm. Respondents indicated a broad selection of strategies to gain clients. Of the 169 responses, (respondents could select multiple strategies), 24% involved receiving referrals from their home university, 20% involved recruitment of clients by faculty, 20% involved referrals from past firm clients, 12% involved referrals from commercial agencies or firms, eight percent involved supporting business incubators or start-ups and six percent involved receiving referrals from professional organizations like the American Advertising Federation, The Public Relations Society of America, or the International Association of Business Communicators or other referral sources. Four percent involved pursuing competitive bids or RFP responses, or other strategies including student recruitment of clients, direct sales from student teams, and alumni assistance. See Figure 5 for more details.

One key component of a professional agency's business development strategy is displaying/discussing past client work. This is

no different with SRAs. Potential clients who are thinking about hiring an agency usually want to see what caliber of work has been previously accomplished. This vetting of agencies via their work usually involves some sort of digital display of work like a web site, a blog page or other forms of digital media. When asked about displaying client work for recruiting clients, of 47 SRA adviser respondents, 66% indicated they had a web site for displaying client work, 34% said they did not.

Figure 5

Client Recruitment Sources

SRA Revenue Generation

Another important part of an agency business model is revenue generation. Not as critical for a state or privately funded institution when contrasted with a professional agency, charging fees for client work can nonetheless be instructive in terms of teaching budgeting, billing requirements and valuing levels of service. Of 47 SRA adviser respondents, 28% said they had no paying clients, 13% of respondents said one percent to 25% of their clients paid for student work. Eleven percent of advisers said 26% - 49% of their clients paid for their students' work. Thirteen percent said 50% -74% of their student work went to paying

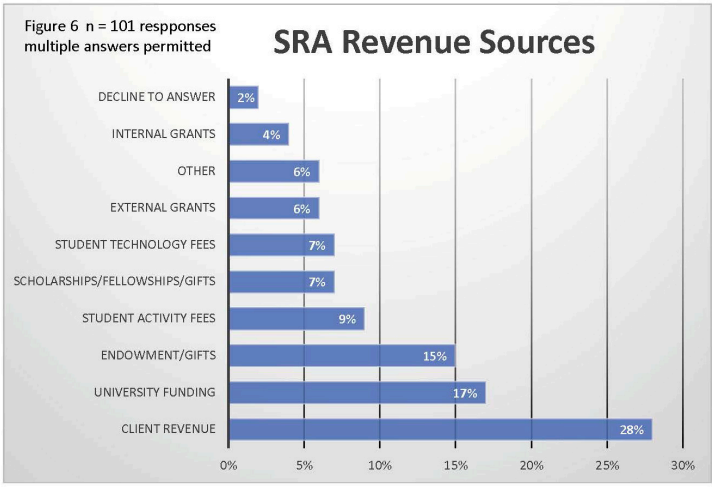
clients and 36% of advisers said 75% -100% of their SRA clients were paying clients.

SRA Funding and Grants

In terms of funding the student-run agency, there were many sources of revenue reported. Among the 101 responses addressing funding sources, (respondents could select more than one funding source), 15% of the responses indicated endowments or gifts as a fund source. Twenty-eight percent of responses identified client revenue as a funding source. Nine percent indicated student activity fees as a funding source. Seven percent of responses indicated student technology fees as a funding source. Seven percent of responses indicated development monies to include scholarships or fellowships as well as gifts as a funding source. Seventeen percent indicated university funding as a revenue source. Six percent indicated external grants as a funding source. Four percent indicated internal grants as a funding source. Two percent preferred not to say, and six percent indicated other sources including donations, course fees, student fees, and alumni donations. See Figure 6 for more information.

Figure 6

SRA Revenue Source



Stewardship and Access to Resources

In addition to purpose, people, expertise, clients, revenue and operational funds, professional and student-run agencies need resources. This research showed that of 47 survey respondents, 72% indicated they had dedicated space to house the firm, 28% indicated they did not. In a separate question, of 38 SRA adviser respondents, 95% indicated they had facilities primarily located on their campus and five percent indicated they were off campus.

Similarly, defining specific space usage by the different SRAs within a collection of 131 responses (respondents were allowed to select more than one space use strategy) 17% of adviser responses indicated they had a dedicated student conference room, 17% indicated a client conference room, 15% indicated creative workspaces for video/audio display, 14% included dedicated faculty offices, 12% indicated dedicated student leadership offices, 12% indicated student work display areas and 10% indicated dedicated classrooms for teaching. Three percent of responses indicated other facilities including a social media listening center, breakout rooms for student work, and multi-function rooms. See Appendix 3 for more details.

In terms of technology for client work, the survey asked about both dedicated technology that resided with the SRA and shared technology. As it pertains to technology spaces, among 47 SRA adviser responses, 53% indicated dedicated technology spaces for client work and 47% indicated they did not have those dedicated spaces.

In a total of 113 responses, (respondents were allowed to select multiple technology types) SRA advisers indicated a wide selection of dedicated technology advantages. Seventeen percent had graphic design facilities, 12% of responses indicated either dedicated survey software or social media software, 10% had dedicated video production facilities. Eight percent had dedicated high quality/high resolution printing,

dedicated portable lighting kits or dedicated server space for hosting client web sites. Six percent had dedicated audio production facilities, and four percent or less had dedicated focus group facilities, photo or still photography studios, video recording studios, 3D/animation software, media relations software. or event hosting materials. See Appendix 4 for more details.

In terms of shared technologies, out of 212 responses (SRA advisers were allowed to list multiple technologies), 12% had shared video recording studios or shared video production facilities, 11% had shared audio production facilities, 10% had shared focus group recording facilities. Nine percent had shared portable video and light kits, shared survey software, shared photo or still photography studios. Eight percent had shared graphic design facilities. Six percent had access to high quality/ high resolution printing. Three percent or less of SRAs had shared server space for hosting client materials, shared media relations software, shared social media monitoring software or a shared MAC lab. See Appendix 5 for more details.

Implications/Recommendations

The SRA is a growing phenomenon among universities in the United States. Imitating the model of a professional agency for students to experience is a strong contribution to the application of theory, increased confidence and student retention. By providing a 'real work for real clients' environment, students gain confidence, real world application of learned knowledge and in many cases, valuable network experience that translates directly to increased chances of employability. SRA advisers are offering a diverse selection of opportunities to imitate the professional environment while maintaining some level of control, qualification and results within their organizations.

Specific results of this survey do not point to a "one size fits all" pedagogy or methodology that advisers can implement, but rather a

collection of outcomes and expectations that can be implemented to ensure students have a constructive and productive experience. However, based on this research, areas where SRAs mirror current and future trends in PR communications include:

1. Establishing a purpose for the SRA and defining it by core competencies and client type—much like a professional agency.
2. Establishing a level/structure of the SRA organization and the number of students required to complete the organization's mission—much like a professional agency. Solutions include dedicated classes, clubs and other organizational structures.
3. Determination of how to "hire" and invest in those with professional qualifications—much like a professional agency and determining how knowledge/investment will be delivered including paid or unpaid leadership staff, interviewing student participants, establishing academic prerequisites, etc.
4. Establishing a process for employee retention with various benefit structures—mimicking the professional agency process, and including for some, monetary compensation and for others extra, career-enhancing responsibilities, paid dues, conference travel etc.
5. Establishing a policy for client recruitment—much like a professional agency and service including utilizing a wide variety of tactics to find clients.
6. Ensuring systems are established and in place for revenue generation/operating expenses—similar to a professional agency business model.
7. Establishing a system for obtaining resources necessary for agency operations including dedicated workspaces, dedicated or shared technologies and stewardship of those resources for use in client service and student training—reflecting concerns by professional agencies to remain relevant and current.

Specific points to consider from the results of this survey include:

1. *Integration*: A majority of SRAs identify as integrated agencies. Among respondents, 32% said their agencies were specifically focused on either PR or advertising, while 56% identified themselves as integrated communications agencies or strategic communications agencies. In comparison, in Bush and Miller's study (2011), 43% of advisors described their agencies as specifically PR or advertising agencies in 2011. This growth in integration aligns with research from the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (2019).
2. *Agency capabilities*: Along with integration comes the need to expand agency services to include a variety of communications strategies and tactics, as well as capabilities that focus on increased technology and data analytics. This study shows among the various SRAs, clients can engage with some or all elements of the full strategic process – from research and concepting to execution and measurement. Agencies reported doing work that includes research and strategic planning, analytics and trend analysis, creative concepting, writing, design, social media, event planning, media relations, etc.
3. *Diversity of clients and people:* This study shows that SRAs are currently exposing students to a mix of revenue positive and pro bono agency clients, government clients, NGO's, on-campus clients and start-ups. Only 28% of SRAs in this study reported having no paying clients, while 49% said more than half of their clients are paying clients. Having a mix of both for-profit and nonprofit clients gives students the opportunity to work with a broad representation of industry professionals while teaching them the importance of the ever-present return on investment. As previous studies have indicated (Bush et al., 2017; Haygood et al., 2019), SRAs need to continue doing more to introduce students to industry billing and budgeting practices.
4. *Competitive application process and pre-requisites:* The majority

of SRAs in this study interview students prior to selection. While some SRAs are taught as elective courses, many student agencies require students have basic knowledge of theory and concepts before participating in the agency. This gives them the opportunity to apply what they learn in the classroom to their SRA work, while also practicing how to professionally present themselves in a competitive interview process.

5. *Client recruitment*. While the majority of student agencies obtain clients through active recruitment by faculty or referrals from professional agencies and previous clients, at least some student agencies are participating in competitive RFP processes. Eight agencies said they participate in RFP processes, and several agencies said students participate in active new business development. Maintaining a pipeline of viable clients and participating in new business pitches is a foundation of success for professional agencies. SRAs may want to do more to expose students to these practices.

6. *Paid leadership opportunities.* While the majority of students are not paid for their time in the student agency, about 43% of students are paid for some of their work, particularly when it comes to leadership roles such as business manager, agency director, and finance officer. This also aligns with the literature on preparing future practitioners for leadership roles (Pavlik, 2013; Bronstein and Fitzpatrick, 2015). It also incorporates professionalism (Cruess and Cruess, 2012) and is ethically important for agencies that bill clients (PRSA, 2011).

7. *Dedicated office space and technology.* Just like professional agencies, the majority of agencies (72%) have some kind of dedicated (solo or shared) office space for agency functions. In addition, over half of student agencies have dedicated technology spaces for student work. In comparison, this is a vast improvement over the 38% reporting having a dedicated office space in 2011 (Bush & Miller,

2011). Student agencies are using many of the technologies found in professional agencies, including audio and visual production facilities, software for research and social media monitoring, graphic design facilities and software, and focus group facilities.

8. *Agency Branding.* When it comes to agency branding, 59% of agencies indicated they had a website to display their work, while 41% did not. Promoting SRA work is critical for two reasons. First, students benefit from the exposure when interviewing for internships and jobs. Secondly, it promotes the existence of SRAs to potential clients and communications professionals. This is particularly important given that a recent study showed a low level of awareness of SRAs among hiring decision makers (Haygood et al., 2019). SRAs would do well to develop professional websites, keep them updated, and explore other opportunities for continuous agency branding through blogs, podcasts and social media pages.

9. *Size does matter, for a lot of things.* Larger agencies in terms of participating students translated into more client revenue being used to offset expenses, more dedicated or shared spaces of various types and more flexibility in recruiting of students and clients using an open house approach.

Conclusions and Future Research

This study is a broad survey of SRA operations and reveals that there are many faculty advisers working to establish professional-level SRA experiences resulting in superior training and qualification of students via this integrative learning opportunity.

Further research in these areas would include "drilling down" into specific practices within SRAs that could shed insight on best strategies for client recruitment, student recruitment, student retention, client retention, resource acquisition, etc.

Another interesting area of study would be to explore the

experience, qualifications and agency aspirations of the SRA advisers themselves. What visions do these individuals have for the growth of their agencies and what qualifications do they have to lead the agencies?
And, as this is a unique study that focuses on the material and pragmatic aspects of establishing and running an SRA, this might be an interesting study that could be used as a baseline to track changes and improvements to the SRA model as more universities experiment with this integrative learning model.

Finally, as alluded to in the earlier Haygood et al., (2019) study there may be other strategies SRAs can employ to make professional agencies more aware of the student-run agency and its exceptional training of new graduates—filling the need for trained professionals in the fields of public relations, advertising, integrated communication and strategic communication.

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Appendix 1—SRA Core Competencies, Free Response

- Creation and distribution of press materials and branded materials
- Event planning and execution
- Social media content analysis and execution
- Digital media content design
- Digital media strategies and analytics
- Advertising research, design and tactics, including branding
- Not-for-profits
- Graphic design
- Web design
- Experiential marketing design
- Video production

Appendix 2—SRA Core Mission and Values, Free Response

- "…to provide clients with comprehensive PR strategies and solutions, to offer (university name) Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) members the opportunity to apply their knowledge and gain experience beyond the classroom, and to build credibility while forming lasting student-client relationships."
- "Provide strategic communication services to external and internal clients. Serve the community without undermining the established, for-profit firms."
- "Full service with significant expertise in social media (content and analysis) and engagement with millennials."
- "General advertising services for community groups, not for profits and university-related clients. An emphasis on NFPs in the community."

Appendix 3—Access to Dedicated Resource Spaces

(N = 131 with multiple responses possible)

- Seventeen percent indicated a client conference room
- Seventeen percent of adviser responses indicated dedicated student conference room
- Fifteen percent indicated creative workspaces for video/audio display
- Fourteen percent included dedicated faculty offices
- Twelve percent indicated dedicated student leadership offices
- Twelve percent indicated student work display areas
- Ten percent indicated dedicated classrooms for teaching
- Three percent of responses indicated other facilities including a social media listening center, breakout rooms, for student work, and multi-function rooms

Appendix 4—Access to Dedicated Technology

(N = 113 with multiple responses possible)

- Seventeen percent had graphic design facilities
- Twelve percent had survey software
- Twelve percent had social media software
- Ten percent had dedicated video production facilities
- Eight percent had portable lighting kits
- Eight percent had dedicated high quality/high resolution printing
- Eight percent had server space for hosting client web sites
- Six percent had dedicated audio production facilities
- Four percent had dedicated media relations software
- Four percent had focus group facilities
- Four percent had photo or still photography studios
- Four percent had video recording studios
- Four percent had 3D/animation software
- Two percent had other dedicated technologies described as event hosting materials.

Appendix 5—Access to Shared Technology

(N = 212 with multiple responses possible)

- Twelve percent had shared video production facilities
- Twelve percent had shared video recording studios
- Eleven percent had shared audio production facilities
- Ten percent had shared focus group recording facilities
- Nine percent had shared portable video and light kits
- Nine percent had shared survey software
- Nine percent had shared photo or still photography studios
- Eight percent had shared graphic design facilities
- Six percent had access to high quality/high resolution printing;
- Three percent had social media monitoring software
- Three percent had shared server space for hosting client materials
- One percent said they had a shared MAC lab
- Two (<one percent) SRAs reported shared media relations software