

Special Issue: The Unprecedented Upheaval of Public Relations Education

**Pivot Now! Lessons Learned From Moving
Public Relations Campaigns
Classes Online During the Pandemic
in Spring 2020**

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined how public relations professors adapted their PR campaigns courses to facilitate online learning in Spring 2020. Emphasis was placed on exploring the distinct or consistent challenges related to modifying coursework, managing student groups, and maintaining client relationships. The study also examined positive outcomes of moving online. Faculty teaching PR campaigns ($N = 63$) participated in a closed- and open-ended question survey exploring their experiences teaching the course. Results suggest that faculty felt compelled to change class components and experienced challenges related to individual student engagement (particularly in groups) and modifying specific components of students' campaigns projects, but had fewer problems managing client relationships. Student access to technology and resources was the biggest barrier to success in campaigns courses. While faculty are embracing lessons learned through the quick shift online, the ability to successfully deliver PR campaigns courses online hinges on bridging digital divides.

Keywords: survey, COVID-19, online teaching, public relations campaigns

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The best organizations are those that can adapt to the changing needs of their stakeholders. The same holds true when considering public relations education. However, few were prepared for the global challenges the emergent COVID-19 pandemic would create in early 2020.

In late January, 2020, the World Health Organization (W.H.O.) declared a global health emergency as thousands of COVID-19 cases began to spread through Asia (Taylor, 2021). By mid-February cases began to rise across Europe, particularly in Italy; by Feb. 29, the first death in the United States was reported. However, the United States was widely criticized for its response to the growing pandemic (Lewis, 2021). In addition to downplaying the severity of the virus, the Trump Administration leaned on the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to develop tests it was ill-equipped to produce and distribute. Even as testing availability expanded, the U.S. dealt with poor tracing and isolation procedures, quarantine and mask-wearing policies, and a decentralized response that placed the power for handling the crisis into the hands of state and local officials. By March 15, the CDC recommended that there be no gatherings of more than 50 people in the U.S. (Taylor, 2021), but by then state governors and local officials had already started exploring regional guidelines for slowing the virus' spread. On March 19, California was the first state to issue stay-at-home orders, followed by dozens of additional states in the coming weeks (Wu et al., 2020).

As the crisis unfolded, educational institutions implemented contingency plans while waiting for guidance from federal and state officials. More than 1,300 colleges and universities across the U.S. shut down, canceling classes and moving instruction online (Smalley, 2021), often with less than two weeks' notice. This created significant interruptions for students related to campus housing and dining, access to technology, resources for travel, and financial aid. In the midst of this

upheaval, educators had to adapt in-progress courses for remote delivery. The move to online learning raised concerns about the quality of these courses, the uncertainty of the evolving situation, and the ability for students and faculty to manage the stress associated with the pandemic. For example, Gen Z adults (ages 18-23) were reported as experiencing significantly more stress than other age groups (American Psychological Association, 2020).

While faculty and students generally experienced the same challenges related to the quickly evolving pandemic, anecdotal evidence suggested that faculty teaching public relations campaigns (or similar capstone) courses seemed to experience different challenges than their academic counterparts. For example, specialized challenges appeared to emerge in these classes as students generally engage in collaborative, client-based or service-learning work. Both faculty and students had to be nimble while making decisions about continuing client relationships, identifying whether it was safe to conduct research, confirming whether students had access to the technology and programs needed to complete class assignments, and more. Based on this anecdotal evidence, the purpose of this study was to explore how professors adapted their courses, to identify unique or consistent challenges to that adaptation, and to identify potentially positive curricula changes that emerged from the experience.

Literature Review

Public relations campaigns courses provide distinct experiential learning opportunities designed to prepare students for internships and jobs. These classes are commonly taught in PR programs and often emphasize team-based and service- or client-driven learning opportunities. Because of the approaches normally used to teach campaigns courses, they are often taught as face-to-face classes. As such, the shift to online learning in spring 2020 meant faculty quickly converted their classes

into remote delivery, but in a shorter time period than typically needed to develop quality online courses. The history and values of PR campaigns courses are evaluated before pedagogical approaches to groupwork and online learning are explored for context.

Public Relations Campaigns Course

The PR campaigns course has a long-standing history as part of excellent PR education. Even prior to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) *Managing Public Relations* seminal publication, which defined PR as a management function, scholars discussed the importance of the campaigns course. For example, Rings (1983) discussed a theory-based, team-centered course at Boston University that promoted PR as a management function rather than a mere technical function. More recently, Auger and Cho (2016) found that 56% of nearly 250 PR programs included the course, and 22% provided a similar practicum course.

The function of PR campaigns courses is often to prepare students for industry. Scholars have noted "because it is considered the capstone course of PR education, the campaigns class has a multi-faceted obligation to its students" (Benigni et al., 2004, p. 259). Benefits of the campaigns course, which traditionally uses a team-based approach to building a communication campaign for real clients, includes experiential learning outcomes such as managing group dynamics; professional decorum and presentation; establishing goals, objectives and strategies based on research; and determining appropriate tactics and evaluative criteria. Students find value in this learning format, particularly by placing classroom material in context and providing depth of understanding to the concepts of audiences and tactics (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000). However, challenges related to group-based dynamics suggest that students do not always find the experience of working with clients helpful to "learning about compromise, tolerance, or problem solving" (p. 56).

Outside of PR-specific courses, scholars have examined

the concept of the campaigns course from the integrated marketing communication (Moody, 2012), health communication (Neuberger, 2017), and strategic communication perspectives (Anderson, 2018); notably, most of these retain the key characteristics of PR campaigns courses. This includes the use of real clients for whom students identify, research, and analyze a real issue or situation. To do this, they conduct secondary and primary research; create, outline, or execute a plan; then evaluate or indicate evaluative measures for that plan. While some programs use case studies rather than clients, using clients provides students with real-world experience not found through case analysis; arguably, "... students are not properly prepared unless they are thrust into a situation filled with problems and opportunities" (Benigni et al., 2004, p. 262). For example, results from a health communication campaigns class showed that students successfully translated classroom learning to practical application: "Many students could not even identify or define a health campaign at the start of the term. Yet, they end the semester with valuable knowledge and experience" (Neuberger, 2017, p. 147).

Further, client perspectives show the benefits of campaigns classes. Rogers and Andrews (2016) found that nonprofit partners often lacked PR background, arguing that the need to educate community partners about PR expectations directly addresses the definition of best PR practices creating opportunities for mutual benefit (Public Relations Society of America, 2020). This creates a multi-faceted approach to strengthening student experiences while highlighting the need to privilege client perspectives. Further, Kinnick (1999) highlighted that a key benefit to client organizations came in the form of saved expenditure and staff time. Still others have indicated the value of the campaign plan itself to the organization (Benigni et al., 2004) and the value of opportunities to reflect on and analyze their own programs (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000). Moreover, while clients are infrequently part of the grading process, studies show

that clients are generally satisfied with their partnerships, many returning as a client for subsequent semesters or offering internships and other opportunities to students (Benigni et al., 2004).

Fostering Experiential Groupwork

The benefits of teaching PR campaigns courses include creating an environment to practice professional, team-based strategies. In the mid-90s, Blumenfeld et al. (1996) described the power and shortcomings of peer learning, arguing that “results can be positive when close attention is paid to norms, tasks, the mix of participants and their skills, and methods to ensure accountability” (p. 40). Group norms require collaboration and the ability to discuss and compromise on issues; but cooperation is not guaranteed, and evidence suggests that “students often do not behave prosocially” (p. 38). This includes issues related to contributing to the workload and decision making and issues related to interpersonal relationship behaviors. To deter such group dynamics, Blumenfeld et al. (1996) recommend developing meaningful tasks, teaching the art of giving and seeking help, and creating opportunities for accountability. Here, collaboration is a key component of groupwork in the classroom, offering opportunities to build communal knowledge by sharing resources, skills, and insights. However, technological supports must be in place to facilitate this type of learning.

Although the large body of literature exploring the values of collaboration is not explored in depth here, it is worth noting how collaborative learning shapes and informs PR campaigns courses. Kayes et al. (2005) recognized the growing prevalence of teamwork in education and professional work environments and argued that negative team-based experiences can be overcome “when a team intentionally focuses on learning” (p. 331). This involves clearly identifying group characteristics related to purpose, membership, roles, context, process, and action taking (p. 330). Laal and Ghodsi (2012) also illustrated the social, psychological,

and academic benefits of collaborative learning. In PR, scholars have examined the influence of groupwork and collaboration in the context of student-run agencies, highlighting the benefits of experiential learning and gaining professional skills (Bush, 2009; Bush et al., 2016; Bush & Miller, 2011). Here, the ability to work in teams is a key skill required in industry, and students in agency-style groups believed they gained numerous professional skills, including soft skills related to people, organizations, and communication (Bush et al., 2016).

The Art of Distance Learning

Understanding the challenges faculty faced during the switch to online learning in Spring 2020 means appreciating the need for and significant effort that normally goes into preparing online courses. Faculty must consider student engagement and course design strategies when adjusting courses for online delivery. And, as Moore (2014) discussed:

An understanding of effective instruction in online PR courses is necessary as the rising amount of non-resident “distance” students, the economic downturn, and university focus on decreasing costs, increasing revenues, and improving student access have led to an increase in online undergraduate courses offered online. (p. 283)

To begin, existing research highlights the need to consider different opportunities for student engagement. Student engagement occurs at cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels (Jones, 2008) and is defined as “the student’s psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote” (Newmann et al., 1992, as cited in Bolliger & Halupa, 2018, p. 3). Further, research suggests that students perceive online learning positively when there are high levels of engagement and low levels of transactional distance (Bolliger & Halupa, 2018). And while synchronous teaching strategies can lower perceptions of transactional distances, specific learner-to-learner, learner-

to-instructor, and learner-to-content strategies can be used to increase engagement (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Such strategies can include the use of icebreakers and collaborative work (learner-to-learner); regular communication and clear assignment instructions (learner-to-instructor); and structured discussion and “real-world projects” (Martin & Bollinger, 2018).

Despite these positive findings, research suggests that the time needed to design and teach online courses is often a barrier to converting face-to-face courses online (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). Faculty must re-develop courses to bridge instructional design and course organization needs. They must set curriculum, create diverse content delivery and activities, build scaffolded learning opportunities and timelines for group work, and establish netiquette rules (Anderson, 2001). Moreover, scholars recognize that online teaching requires adopting new practices that may be difficult for some faculty members to embrace (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). Significant responsibility is placed on faculty to learn about new modalities, balance pedagogy and technology, adjust teaching styles, increase communication with students, and recognize benefits and challenges of online learning (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010).

Distance Learning in Public Relations. Prior to the pandemic there was already a need to respond to the “changing PR teaching environment” (Moore, 2014, p. 283); the pandemic seemingly forced this change on educators across disciplines. Understanding the benefits and challenges of online learning as studied in PR, and recognizing best practices in the context of online learning in general, provides insight into the situation faculty faced in Spring 2020. Moreover, it is worth considering the distinct challenges of converting experiential, group-based courses (such as PR campaigns) to online formats.

Moore (2014) provided one of the first studies examining the success of online courses in PR programs. Specifically, she found that

student-student communication significantly impacted student success in courses more than student-instructor communication and interaction. As campaigns classes rely on groupwork, this suggests an important aspect of online learning that must be considered when developing such courses. Similarly, Smallwood and Brunner (2017) found that teams working collaboratively on scaffolded, realistic projects experienced better engagement and group success. Increased “interactions and engagement with course material, other students, instructors, and technology” (Smallwood & Brunner, 2017, p. 453) led to more positive student perceptions and outcomes. However, although students are often considered digital natives, that did not ensure comfort with using technology for classwork and class-based communication (Smallwood & Brunner, 2017). Such findings suggest opportunities to successfully convert campaigns classes online, but also highlight the need to consider barriers to student success.

The onset of the pandemic stressed the boundaries of typical student and faculty experiences. While many instructors experienced this shift to online teaching in a two-week period, many students were adapting to online learning for the first time. However, PR education seems to naturally employ best engagement practices as students are often required to collaborate in groups, follow specific strategies to complete work (such as using the planning process to develop campaign plans), and produce projects that emphasize practical outcomes. In the context of the pandemic—and without the usual time needed to meet best online teaching practices—converting campaigns courses arguably provided a distinct challenge for PR faculty.

Research Questions

PR campaigns courses often emphasize experiential learning opportunities designed to build and support client-focused relationships while students work in teams, mimicking professional experiences. And as

quality online courses generally require significant preparation, combined with the challenges of converting group-based experiential learning to an online format, this study aimed to explore the distinct challenges that faculty teaching campaigns-style courses may have faced during the switch to online learning. Based on the reviewed literature, this led to the following research questions:

RQ1: What consistent challenges did *professors* teaching PR campaigns courses face converting their classes to an online format?

RQ2: What consistent *student group* challenges were identified by PR professors because of the switch to online learning?

RQ3: How were relationships with PR campaigns *clients* impacted by the unexpected changes brought on by the pandemic?

RQ4: What positive course-related changes emerged from the experience of switching PR campaigns courses online?

Method

To answer the research questions and explore faculty experiences teaching PR campaigns courses at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a 45-question survey was distributed using Qualtrics¹. The survey was available from June 16-July 1, 2020 to ensure that faculty would have their spring 2020 semester experiences top-of-mind.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling, which primarily occurred via social media channels for PR

1 The richness of data yielded from this survey led the researchers to parse results related to emotional labor. A limited amount of data appearing in this manuscript was replicated in the second, related but different, study. The second manuscript emphasizes a mixed-method approach using exploratory sequential design (Creswell, 2015) and the authors embraced theoretical triangulation to interpret data through multiple perspectives (Tracy, 2013). For transparency, replicated data is identified in the results section.

groups of major conferences including the AEJMC, ICA, and NCA PR divisions. Participants were encouraged to share the survey with colleagues who also taught campaigns-style courses in spring. Of 74 survey responses, $N = 63$ usable responses were retained for analysis. Two participants did not meet the screening requirement of having taught a campaigns PR course in Spring 2020, while $n = 9$ responses were removed because the survey was aborted at launch. Of the retained responses, $n = 14$ were partially completed with completion rates ranging from 24% ($n = 1$) to 69% ($n = 3$); 10 participants (15.87%) completed between 49-69% of the survey.

Survey Design

The researchers launched this study because of their experiences teaching campaigns courses. As such, this exploratory survey was designed based on a mix of personal experience and knowledge about best practices in PR pedagogy. To understand faculty experiences, closed- and open-ended questions were designed to understand previous and current experiences teaching campaigns classes, adjustments made because of the pandemic, and outcomes of those adjustments. Participants were also asked about the number and types of classes taught and basic demographic information.

First, faculty were asked about *adjustments made to their courses* due to the pandemic. This included questions related to previous experience teaching online or hybrid courses, time available to convert classes online, strategies used to determine best formats for the class, and which platforms and tools were used to deliver the course online.

Next, respondents were asked to reflect on the nature and quality of their *client relationships* and how those may have changed because of the pandemic. This included understanding whether relationships changed and how, and what client-based factors may have influenced changes to the partnerships.

Because the switch to online learning was quite sudden, questions explored what *course component adjustments* faculty may have made to facilitate learning. This included exploring whether changes were made (a) to their classes in general, and (b) to the client-based projects, specifically.

As campaigns courses often emphasize groupwork, the need for flexibility, and a guide-on-the-side approach to teaching, faculty may have faced specific challenges related to converting their classes online. As such, questions explored *challenges faced in the course, content-related issues, and group-related issues*. Course-related challenges focused on understanding whether faculty experienced issues such as delivering course material, engaging with students, and communicating with clients. Content-related issues focused on specific challenges related to the campaigns projects such as conducting research, creating tactics, and delivering presentations. Finally, the switch to online courses may have influenced group dynamics, so items were designed to explore issues such as group-based communication, collaboration, conflict resolution, and social loafing.

Despite the emphasis on challenges, faculty may have had positive outcomes and identified strategies they would continue using in the future. As such, items were designed to explore positive changes related to course delivery styles, use of technology, and opportunities to connect with clients.

Participant Demographics and Experiences

Participants ranged from 31 to 73 years old ($M = 47.85$, $SD = 10.96$), and were primarily female ($n = 35$, 55.6%) and white ($n = 42$, 66.7%). Most participants were assistant or associate professors ($n = 31$, 49.2%), and taught at public universities ($n = 34$, 54%) with 30,000 students or less ($n = 37$, 75.5%). Additionally, participants primarily identified themselves as teaching at institutions with a balanced emphasis on research and teaching ($n = 27$, 42.9%). Table 1 provides a full picture of participant demographics.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Variable	Category	<i>n</i>	Percent
Gender	Female	35	55.6%
	Male	12	19.0%
	Prefer not to Identify	3	4.8%
Race	Asian or Pacific Islander	3	4.8%
	Black or African American	0	0.0%
	Hispanic or Latino	2	3.2%
	White	42	66.7%
	Prefer not to Identify	3	4.6%
	Academic Rank	Lecturer or Instructor	9
	Assistant Professor	21	33.3%
	Associate Professor	10	15.9%
	Full Professor	7	11.1%
	Other	2	3.2%
	Prefer not to Identify	1	1.6%
Institution Type	Private	16	25.4%
	Public	34	54.0%
Number of Students Enrolled	0-5,000	9	14.3%
	5,001-10,000	6	9.5%
	10,001-15,000	8	12.7%
	15,001-20,000	3	4.8%
	20,001-25,000	6	9.5%
	25,001-30,000	5	7.9%
	30,001+	12	19.0%
Institution Emphasis	Research	8	12.7%
	Teaching	15	23.8%
	Balanced	27	42.9%

Faculty were also asked how many courses they taught, particularly during Spring 2020. Respondents taught between 1-4 sections of campaigns ($M = 1.17$, $SD = 0.53$) and between 1-7 total courses ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.21$) during the semester. Most participants ($n = 11$, 87.3%) taught one campaigns section in spring, and generally taught 3 ($n = 25$, 39.7%) or fewer classes overall. Additionally, per semester, participants taught between 1-5 courses ($M = 2.75$, $SD = .92$) on average, with most teaching 3 courses ($n = 28$, 44.5%). Almost all participants had previously taught campaigns prior to the pandemic ($n = 56$, 88.9%), but had varying prior experience teaching classes in different formats. More than half of participants had previously taught fully online classes ($n = 34$, 54%) and hybrid classes ($n = 32$, 50.8%); fewer participants had previously taught flipped classes ($n = 25$, 39.7%).

Results

This survey was designed to understand the specific challenges instructors faced while teaching campaigns courses during a pandemic. As this study is exploratory, we begin by outlining general findings, then answer the guiding research questions.

Course Adjustments

Because faculty were required to make changes on short notice, there was interest in understanding how much lead time instructors had to make the shift online. Table 2 shows how much advance notice faculty had to prepare for online delivery, how much time they had to prepare, and how much time students had to prepare. Although the number of days advance notice they received from their universities varied, most participants ($n = 39$, 61.9%) and their students ($n = 41$, 65.1%) had 7 or more days to prepare for online delivery. This may be attributed to the timing of university closings, which often coincided with spring breaks. As course adjustments had to be made quickly, it seemed valuable to understand how faculty sought advice about online course formats.

Participants somewhat agreed that they sought advice from colleagues ($M = 5.21, SD = 1.72$) and their department ($M = 4.78, SD = 1.76$) and were less likely to work with on-campus faculty development groups ($M = 3.54, SD = 2.18$) or get feedback from students ($M = 3.29, SD = 2.18$). Ultimately, faculty used a blend of asynchronous and synchronous delivery ($n = 45, 71.4\%$) for their campaigns courses.

Table 2*Time to Convert*

	Advance notice university gave to provide online delivery	Time faculty had to prepare for online delivery	Time students had to prepare for online delivery
0-2 days	n = 4, 6.3%	n = 5, 7.9%	n = 2, 3.2%
3-4 days	n = 15, 23.8%	n = 9, 14.3%	n = 13, 20.6%
5-6 days	n = 9, 14.3%	n = 10, 15.9%	n = 7, 11.1%
7-8 days	n = 17, 27%	n = 17, 27%	n = 19, 30.2%
9+ days	n = 18, 28.6%	n = 22, 34.9%	n = 22, 34.9%

Correlation analysis was used to explore the relationship between course-preparation experiences. Notably, a weak but significant relationship showed that faculty who had no choice about which format to use were less likely to survey students ($p < .001, r = -.446$) or seek advice from colleagues ($p = .007, r = -.336$) about course formats. This suggests that when faculty had a choice regarding how to deliver their courses, they were more likely to seek feedback and advice; when they did not have course delivery options, they simply moved forward as best as they could considering the circumstances.

Open-ended results showed that instructors relied on multiple platforms and tools to deliver course content. Most participants used a combination of their university learning management system (e.g., Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle, Sakai), third-party video-conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom, Google Classroom, GotoMeeting, WebEx),

and additional tools (e.g., GroupMe, Google Drive, Kaltura, Keynote, Panopto, Slack, social media groups, VoiceThread) to deliver course content, manage group work, and communicate with clients.

RQ1: Specific Challenges Faced by Professors

As the pandemic created the need to adapt quickly, it was important to understand what challenges professors faced when converting their courses online. The survey explored two areas of potential challenges faced by professors: 1. The need to change specific class components, and 2. Challenges faced delivering courses.

Changing Class Components. Course components were split into two areas of interest including final project components and specific course content that may have been adjusted to accommodate student learning. Table 3 highlights which course components and project components were changed, and which were most challenging to adjust. Results suggest that in addition to changing student presentations ($n = 42, 66.7\%$), instructors primarily changed assignments ($n = 34, 54\%$), project components ($n = 30, 47.6\%$) and lectures ($n = 25, 39.7\%$). These were also considered the most challenging course components to adjust. Additionally, there was interest in understanding which project components were modified. Results suggest that practice and client presentations (each $n = 34, 54\%$) and tactics ($n = 29, 46\%$) were the most frequently changed project components. These were also considered the project components that were most challenging to adjust. Notably, the timing of the pandemic—approximately midway through the semester—meant that many students had collected data for their clients or were able to collect at least some data remotely. Additionally, as planning and evaluation can be based on secondary research, this may account for there being fewer issues with these phases.

Table 3*Adjusted Course Components*

		Components Removed or Changed	Components Most Challenging to Adjust or Adapt
Course Components	Assignments	$n = 34, 54\%$	$n = 22, 34.9\%$
	Lectures	$n = 25, 39.7\%$	$n = 26, 41.3\%$
	Exams/Quizzes	$n = 17, 27\%$	$n = 9, 14.3\%$
	Project Components	$n = 30, 47.6\%$	$n = 32, 50.8\%$
	Student Presentations	$n = 42, 66.7\%$	$n = 37, 58.7\%$
	Other	$n = 8, 12.7\%$	$n = 6, 9.5\%$
Project Components	Data Collection	$n = 15, 23.8\%$	$n = 16, 25.4\%$
	Planning Phase	$n = 5, 7.9\%$	$n = 7, 11.1\%$
	Producing Tactics	$n = 29, 46\%$	$n = 25, 39.7\%$
	Evaluation Strategy	$n = 15, 23.8\%$	$n = 14, 22.2\%$
	Practice Presentations	$n = 34, 54\%00$	$n = 24, 38.1\%$
	Client Presentations	$n = 34, 54\%00$	$n = 25, 39.7\%$
	Other	$n = 4, 6.3\%$	$n = 4, 6.3\%$

*Project Component data is replicated in the second study described in the method.

Course Challenges. Items were developed to understand specific challenges instructors faced in their courses. Results suggest that instructors had fewer challenges when it came to finding time to meet student groups ($M = 2.94, SD = 2.08$) and had the most difficulty engaging individual students ($M = 5.05, SD = 1.99$). In general, however, faculty neither agreed nor disagreed that they experienced challenges. Even so, the relatively large standard deviations on these items are noteworthy,

as they suggest that instructors had widely varying experiences in their classes. To that end, reliability analysis ($\alpha = .852$) led to the development of an 8-item course challenges scale ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.39$). Table 4 highlights challenges faced in the course.

Table 4*Challenges in the Course*

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Delivering course material.	54	3.85	1.89
Conveying project expectations.	55	3.98	1.99
Engaging individual students.	55	5.05	1.99
Engaging specific student groups.	54	4.35	2.09
Finding time to meet student groups.	54	2.94	2.08
Communicating with client.	53	3.30	1.74
Student professionalism.	54	3.91	1.96
Student communication with clients.	53	3.92	1.82

*This table is replicated in the second study described in the method.

Next, items were designed to explore specific content-related issues instructors faced, particularly regarding final client projects. Results suggest mixed perceptions existed regarding the client projects, as most respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the presented scenarios. Aligning with additional results, instructors had the most issues preparing for presentations ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.60$). But again, relatively high standard deviations suggest varying experiences across the sample. To build on these findings, reliability analysis ($\alpha = .825$) led to the development of a 7-item content issues scale ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.34$). Table 5 shows content-related issues instructors faced in their courses.

Table 5*Content-Related Issues*

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Conducting research.	53	3.40	2.15
Establishing goals and objectives.	53	3.04	1.91
Creating tactics.	53	4.21	2.13
Developing evaluative criteria.	53	3.87	1.96
Designing planbooks.	53	4.04	1.83
Designing presentations.	53	4.47	1.69
Preparing for presentations.	53	4.87	1.59

Correlation analysis suggests a relationship between course challenges and content issues. Specifically, instructors who faced course challenges were significantly more likely to experience content issues ($p < .001$, $r = .748$).

Additionally, exploratory one-way ANOVA was used to explore whether the amount of preparation time faculty had impacted course challenges ($p = .292$) or content issues ($p = .321$), but there was not a significant relationship between these variables.

Of course, challenges extended beyond the basic execution of the course and client projects. Although open-ended responses generally confirmed the quantitative results, they also highlighted multifaceted challenges participants faced converting their courses online. For example, multiple participants reported a sense of dejection among students whose work was no longer usable. Many reported that students and clients alike were “disappointed that they were not able to get F2F feedback from the clients,” while others acknowledged that students experienced significant outside stressors impacting their ability to complete course components as originally intended. For example, significant technical issues related to not having WiFi, hardware, or software needed to complete specific tasks were

routinely reported, leading to course and content changes. Ultimately, student engagement emerged as the most prominent issue for faculty who lamented missed opportunities to read body language, walk between and talk with groups, and create connections with clients. Mental health and stress-related issues were routinely acknowledged as impacting student engagement. The primary solution was to cancel team presentations, modify assignment expectations, and modify scheduling expectations.

Despite these challenges, some faculty ($n = 6$) reported having few issues converting their classes online. One participant suggested “their skills from all of the PR training made this pretty easy... it was frustrating, but we got through it.” Another suggested the switch to online was easy, but the challenges were primarily student-centered (such as health and technology needs). The few faculty who reported no challenges emphasized that classes continued to meet online, data collection had already been completed, lectures were recorded, and students were notified of the online conversion in advance. One participant even reported that they “took their client presentation events online” and tapped into a national audience, attracting 115-170+ practitioners.

RQ2: Specific Student Group Challenges

As PR campaigns courses often require significant groupwork, items were designed to explore the degree to which instructors experienced group-based issues. Results suggest that instructors somewhat agreed that group-based issues existed, particularly in regard to collaboration ($M = 4.87, SD = 1.93$), group-based communication ($M = 4.87, SD = 1.79$), problem-solving ($M = 4.89, SD = 1.72$), and social loafing ($M = 5.02, SD = 1.79$). To strengthen analysis of results, reliability analysis ($\alpha = .943$) led to the development of a 9-item group dynamics scale ($M = 4.43, SD = 1.55$). Table 6 highlights group-based issues faced by instructors.

Table 6*Group-Based Issues*

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Group-based communication.	52	4.87	1.79
General problem-solving.	53	4.89	1.72
In-group collaboration.	53	4.87	1.93
Compromising on campaign direction.	52	4.25	2.03
Developing a cohesive strategy.	53	4.38	1.83
Conflict resolution.	53	4.19	1.97
Understanding project direction and goals.	53	3.66	1.92
Agreeing on project direction and goals.	53	3.72	1.88
Rise in “social loafing.”	52	5.02	1.79

Correlation analysis suggests a relationship between course challenges, content issues, and group dynamics. Instructors who faced student group issues were significantly more likely to experience course challenges ($p < .001$, $r = .762$) and somewhat more likely to experience content issues ($p < .001$, $r = .658$).

Qualitative results suggest that group-related issues often stemmed from a lack of engagement and outside influences related to the pandemic. As group work shifted online, the dynamic of faculty supporting groups individually changed as “the instructor at the table was not able to happen in the same way.” Accountability among group members was a noted issue, as was the ability to “keep students on track.” Students also faced issues regarding lack of resources and technology at home or new, unpredictable scheduling conflicts that prevented them from routinely meeting with their teams and faculty members. Participants also noted that the shift online meant “underperforming teams” and individual students could “hide,” or that it was harder to “check in with teams and make sure they were working together well and finishing project elements.” Overall, engagement was the key indicator of group successes or challenges.

RQ3: Adjusting Client Relationships

As many PR campaigns classes focus on experiential learning, part of the challenge of moving online involved managing and adjusting client-related work. Participants in the study served between 0 and 10 clients ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.73$) in Spring 2020. Most classes served 1 client ($n = 27$, 42.9%), or 3 clients ($n = 9$, 14.3%). Generally, participants ($n = 58$) found that client relationships remained relatively stable (see Table 7). However, participants only somewhat agreed that client(s) maintained the same level of engagement with their classes ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.99$) and neither agreed nor disagreed that client(s) had to adjust their involvement with the class because of the pandemic ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 2.11$).

Table 7*Client Relationships*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I was able to continue my client relationships.	5.61	1.57
I communicated with my client(s) about the switch to online.	5.98	1.62
My client(s) was interested in continuing their relationship with my class	5.81	1.53
My client(s) maintained the same level of engagement with the class.	4.79	1.99
My client(s) had to back out of their partnership with my class.	1.83	1.50
My client(s) had to adjust their involvement with my class because their business was impacted by the pandemic.	4.08	2.11

Overall, participants kept lines of communication open with their clients. Participants generally agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to continue their client relationships ($n = 40$, 63.5%), and $n = 44$ participants (71.5%) agreed or strongly agreed they communicated with their clients about the move online. Although clients were interested in

continuing their class relationships ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.53$), there was less consistency in the degree of engagement maintained with those classes. For example, 34% ($n = 22$) of participants said they strongly disagreed to neither agreed nor disagreed that clients maintained the same level of engagement. Even so, clients did not completely back out of their partnerships. Only $n = 3$ (4.8%) participants agreed or strongly agreed that clients had to back out of their classes; rather, clients seemingly adjusted their involvement because of the pandemic. Overall, $n = 31$ (49.2%) participants at least somewhat agreed that their clients adjusted their involvement. This suggests that while changes were made to the client relationships, the clients still wanted to continue their partnerships.

To further explore the impact of client relationship experiences, reliability analysis ($\alpha = .817$) led to the development of a 5-item client relationships scale ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 1.24$). Initial reliability analysis suggested the need to reverse-code items exploring whether clients had to back out of their partnerships and whether clients had to adjust their class involvement because they were impacted by the pandemic. The latter item was removed to strengthen Cronbach's α from .774 to $\alpha = .817$. Building on RQ1, a weak but significant relationship existed between general course challenges and client relationships. Specifically, the more clients remained involved in the project, the less instructors faced course challenges ($p = .024$, $r = -.307$) and content issues ($p = .002$, $r = -.317$). Although these relationships are relatively weak, they still suggest that degrees of client involvement may have informed issues faced by participants.

Open-ended results support this finding. In addition to considering the tools used to communicate with clients, participants also reflected on what they communicated and the nature of communication. Qualitative results suggested that the primary point of concern involved updating clients on project-based changes. For example, circumstances required

one participant “to shift to a social media campaign since social distancing would not allow for face-to-face tactics.” Another participant found their campaign no longer plausible because target audiences could not be reached in person, so the partners “mutually ended” the client-agency relationship. Generally, however, most participants reported that they simply informed clients of minor changes, such as the need to move presentations online.

Overall, most client relationships continued, but few appeared to continue without adjustments. As expected, clients faced their own challenges as they modified their business practices and needs; they had to close their businesses, were laid off or furloughed, or in general “were struggling with the reality of COVID-19 and running their organizations.” In some cases, clients did not have video-conferencing tools or other software, became geographically dispersed from colleagues, or were balancing personal issues such as childcare. Some clients were impacted by shifting workloads and making their own rapid changes. This sometimes resulted in lags in responsiveness, but also led clients to “sometimes [give] us the autonomy to make decisions without review or collaboration.” The most noted change in client engagement, however, were changes to the final presentation. Multiple participants reported either canceling presentations altogether, providing recorded presentations, or switching presentations online. In many cases, this removed an opportunity for client evaluation and feedback, but ultimately did not significantly impact the overall client relationship.

RQ4: Positive Curricular Changes

Although there may be a tendency to focus on the negatives of the pandemic, this study sought to explore potentially positive outcomes. Specifically, by being forced to move classes online, many instructors may have discovered strategies or tools that could be adopted in future iterations of campaigns classes.

Overall, participants neither agreed nor disagreed with moving presentations online ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.95$) or the idea of changing the overall course format. However, participants somewhat agreed that they would consider having more online course meetings ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.54$), would deliver various course content online (see Table 8), and would teach students how to conduct group work remotely ($M = 5.6$, $SD = 1.13$). Additionally, they agreed that they would connect with teams online ($M = 5.86$, $SD = 1.32$). This suggests that while there are still barriers to putting campaigns courses online, the pandemic revealed opportunities to better facilitate course delivery online. Table 8 highlights these changes.

Table 8*Positive Outcomes for Future Use*

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Have more online course meetings.	50	5.26	1.54
Teach students how to conduct group work remotely.	50	5.60	1.13
Deliver lecture-based material online.	50	5.44	1.36
Deliver project expectation instructions online.	50	5.38	1.32
Flip my class.	49	4.35	1.69
Teach my class as a hybrid.	49	4.82	2.02
Connect with teams online.	49	5.86	1.32
Connect with client online.	49	5.65	1.35
Conduct client research fully online.	49	4.27	1.71
Move general student presentations online.	50	4.40	1.92
Move client presentations online.	50	4.30	1.95

To further explore the impact of positive changes, reliability analysis ($\alpha = .792$) led to the development of an 11-item positive outcomes scale ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 0.90$). The relationship between client relationships and positive outcomes was explored, but regression analysis suggests that quality of client relationships did not influence beliefs about positive outcomes related to the switch to online learning, $F(1, 47) = 3.185$, p

= .081, $R^2 = .044$. This builds on previous results suggesting that while the quality of client relationships may have influenced specific course-related issues, the overall positive benefits of moving online were more strongly related to the course itself, its participants, and accessibility to technologies. This is supported in the open-ended findings.

First, participants reported additional benefits to teaching online such as increased access to course materials that students could “access anytime, anywhere.” Some student groups adapted well to online learning, getting better about time- and group-management and participating in more one-on-one meetings with faculty. One participant started a private Facebook group that provided opportunities to ask questions and host Facebook live sessions. In general, participants experiencing positive outcomes felt going online provided “real-world skill when it comes to online calls” and remote working. Additionally, the lack of commute time provided more time to complete tasks such as course preparation and grading.

Because of these outcomes, at least some participants identified strategies they might change based on their experience teaching campaigns online. Faculty felt there were more opportunities to organize and articulate campaign components, offer flipped-class solutions to give students more time to work in class, and give students autonomy to work on their own time. By having content online, participants see opportunities to provide more resources and clearer descriptions of course expectations that students can review on their own time. Multiple participants also planned to embrace opportunities to spend more time guiding students rather than delivering content—a popular solution appears to be through the implementation of hybrid or flipped models. One participant suggested, “I enjoyed the flipped model with lectures online and using class time – either in person or via video conferencing – to be a guide on the side.” Finally, numerous participants plan to embrace

opportunities to reduce in-class time. By seeing that students worked well independently, multiple participants felt moving components online provides an opportunity to practice remote work strategies and move past “antiquated needs to ALWAYS meet in person.” Solutions included giving “groups more opportunities to work independently outside of class with clear expectations for checking in.”

Despite these optimistic approaches to the benefits of and potential strategies for teaching online, multiple participants simply saw no positive outcomes from the switch online. When prompted to reflect on benefits experienced when moving online, $n = 8$ participants indicated there were no “notable benefits” and that they simply “prefer not to teach the Campaigns class online.” Faculty in this position recognized strategies they can use to create engagement and teach campaigns online, but still felt this was not something they wanted to embrace unless forced to. Ultimately, this suggests that while tools and resources may be available to make positive course changes, there are still outside factors that influence the degree to which faculty want to adopt these changes moving forward.

Discussion

This exploratory study aimed to examine how PR professors adapted to teaching campaigns courses online at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020. Campaigns courses are routinely taught in public relations programs (Auger & Cho, 2016), and often include opportunities for students to produce full or proposed campaigns for real clients (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000). Results of this study demonstrated that the emphasis on group work and experiential learning coupled with the rapid switch to online course delivery created distinct challenges for teaching the PR campaigns course compared to those teaching other types of courses. Faculty teaching PR campaigns experienced consistent challenges related to the switch to online learning, but these challenges were not directly related to student groups or client

relationship issues as much as they reflected the inability to ensure that students had the technological resources needed to successfully complete their courses. Arguably, student- and client-related issues stemmed from a lack of or inconsistent access to resources among all parties involved. And while the sudden switch to online learning revealed potential opportunities to evolve the structure of future campaigns classes, the perceived potential success of those efforts rests on the ability for faculty to guarantee equal access to tools and resources needed to complete large-scale client projects.

Access to Resources and the Technological Gap

Overall, analysis of results indicates that the degrees of success experienced converting campaigns courses online were a direct result of whether students had access to resources and technology. For example, when evaluating the final campaign components, client presentations and campaign tactics were most frequently changed or eliminated altogether. A deeper analysis of the data suggests that changes were not made because of an inability to deliver content online but because circumstances required such adaptations. For example, students who had not collected data prior to the shift online were often left with limited options for reaching target audiences. This made it more difficult to produce campaign tactics and materials based on primary data.

Further, qualitative results suggest the most reported challenge to course delivery involved reaching students who had inconsistent internet access or lacked the hardware and software necessary to produce campaign components. Digital access has been widely reported as a significant predictor of student success at all educational levels, particularly during the pandemic (Sparks, 2020). Such divides appear to have impacted campaigns instructors; Although instructors had less difficulty meeting with groups, they had significant difficulty engaging individuals. Arguably, individual students without consistent internet

access or using mobile devices such as phones and tablets were simply unable to participate fully, thus increasing a sense of disengagement. This even extended to clients, as those who lacked resources were most likely to reduce their involvement in student projects. And the more that faculty experienced diminishing engagement from students and clients, the more they faced course challenges and content issues.

The notion that these issues are resource-driven can, in part, be attributed to the findings that faculty seemed undeterred by issues related to short turnover time, the ability to convert course content, and the ability to modify project expectations. Moreover, faculty expressed few problems with delivering materials, conveying course expectations, meeting with students, and maintaining client relationships. So, despite the prevailing notion that converting courses online requires significant time and effort (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010), and even though most faculty had between 3-8 days to convert their courses, they seemed to be nimble in their approaches. Often seeking advice from colleagues, they clearly used readily available and known tools, and relied on multiple, diverse platforms to deliver content.

Ultimately, the time faculty had to prepare their courses did not influence challenges they faced. However, it seems glib to suggest that no amount of technological know-how and confidence as an instructor can overcome the issues that emerge when students do not have consistent access to the tools being employed to meet best practices for online teaching. This suggests that emergent issues had little to do with instructor ability and more to do with resource and technology access issues.

Moving Forward

In response to the pandemic, Brownlee (2020) identified three opportunities to “[ensure] your institution is best positioned to support its students in the COVID-era of higher education” (para. 2). This included bridging the gaps on digital divide, experiential learning, and campus

community. Arguably, PR campaigns courses are uniquely positioned to bridge these specific gaps, and findings suggest that campaigns instructors see this opportunity. Despite the outlined challenges, technology and pedagogical evolution appear to be at the heart of perceived opportunities to learn from and adapt to pandemic-driven teaching experiences. Many instructors felt that being forced online highlighted opportunities to streamline campaigns courses by reducing the number of in-person meetings and delivering lecture-based content in a flipped modality. As the industry was already shifting toward virtual workspaces prior to the pandemic, faculty acknowledged the shift online provided an opportunity to give students real-world virtual teamwork experiences.

Additionally, results suggest opportunities to strengthen learner-to-learner, learner-to-instructor, and learner-to-content opportunities. As faculty appeared to have an easier time communicating with groups, but had more difficulty engaging individual students, the use of groups may provide an opportunity for faculty to reach individual students. Learner-to-learner engagement can be enhanced through guided icebreaker or team-building activities (Martin & Bolliger, 2018), which could lead to increased trust and engagement among group members. This could create an additional line of communication with individual students who may be more difficult to reach. Next, PR faculty can increase learner-to-instructor and learner-to-content opportunities by maintaining a consistent mix of synchronous and asynchronous communication with students about course and assignment expectations. Combining synchronous weekly meetings with regular announcements can foster a collaborative environment while simultaneously providing students the autonomy to work asynchronously. This approach also mimics the PR agency experience, wherein practitioners often work in teams but use meetings to track progress on projects and identify which tasks will be completed independently.

Moreover, the shift to online learning provides opportunities to

strengthen student-client relationships. As a means of engagement, faculty may seek on-campus clients that resonate with students, helping build a sense of personal interest in the campaign projects. Additionally, moving the traditional client discovery meeting online can ensure that the usual interactions between students and clients are maintained. By meeting virtually, it also may be possible for clients to meet more frequently with classes, such as during key points of the project. If that type of increased interaction is unmanageable for the client, it could be supplemented by inviting other professionals to attend important student presentations as an opportunity to gain outside feedback on the work being produced.

Finally, for faculty, by connecting with teams and clients online, there appear to be opportunities to emphasize giving students the autonomy to work independently as faculty act as guides-on-the-side and reclaim time needed for course preparation and grading. For some instructors, the pandemic led to a paradigm shift that questions the need for in-person engagement when so much of what happens in practice is virtual. Still, not everyone was as optimistic about the future of online campaigns courses. While some acknowledged they could teach this way but simply preferred not to, others felt strongly that campaigns courses require more consistent engagement between students and instructors. Essentially, the outside influencing factors—such as access to resources and lack of technology—seemed like hurdles too big to overcome.

In short, faculty who had more positive experiences seemingly had the least number of issues with student resource and technology access. And, while there is truth to the arguments that in practice PR professionals should be able to conduct business remotely and in quickly morphing situations, one must consider that students taking these classes are not yet professionals, nor do higher education institutions readily provide the tools necessary to complete their work remotely, as might be the case in professional settings.

This suggests that, as we consider how campaigns classes will evolve, we must also consider how to create equitable circumstances through which our students can learn. The sudden shift online means that higher education institutions have had to reimagine their technology infrastructures, and faculty and students alike have had to contend with digital divides and changing perceptions about the quality of online learning opportunities (Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020). Without the technology-based tools necessary to complete projects of the scale generally expected in campaigns courses, it may remain difficult to encourage buy-in from the students and faculty participating in these courses as they continue to face stressors that limit the potential of these courses.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A primary limitation of this study is the sample size and its representativeness. A mix of convenience and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants, yielding a non-representative and potentially homogenous group of participants. Although there was balanced representation regarding gender, academic rank, and institutional factors, participants lacked racial diversity. Future studies should consider a more robust sampling strategy that includes the experiences of faculty at more diverse institutions.

Further, future studies should consider whether students' socioeconomic factors and shared mental health experiences influence the experiences faculty have converting their campaigns courses online. Early evidence suggests that parent education may be a stronger indicator of potential student success, as those with higher levels of education were more likely to remain employed, have access to home computers and internet, and have access to schools with stronger levels of student support (Sparks, 2020). More troubling, however, is the emergent mental health impacts on both students and faculty. Ongoing research suggests

that the pandemic arrived during “a mental health crisis that had been unraveling on college campuses for years” (Lumpkin, 2021, para. 4). And while students experienced decreased well-being related to stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Anderson, 2020), so too did faculty. Within the first year of the pandemic, reports continued to emerge regarding faculty burnout (McMurtrie, 2020) and chronic stress (Flaherty, 2020). In a widely shared research brief by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2021), more than a third of respondents indicated they had considered changing careers or retiring. Undoubtedly, the effects of these experiences are likely to continue playing a role in the perceived success of delivering classes—particularly intensive capstone courses such as PR campaigns—in online or multi-modality formats.

Other limitations of the study include its exploratory nature and timing, although both can be considered starting points for future research examining faculty experiences teaching mixed-modality campaigns courses. Although survey items were evaluated in the context of best practices, the changing nature of the pandemic meant that many factors were not captured quantitatively. Additionally, this study was specifically designed to capture faculty experiences at the start of the pandemic. As many universities have switched to hybrid and HyFlex teaching models, and as the pandemic continues to extend beyond initial expectations, there exist opportunities to understand whether faculty experiences have evolved.

Finally, future studies may examine specific technology access issues, the degree to which faculty become more comfortable teaching online, and whether students become more accustomed to working remotely. They may also explore whether opportunities to strengthen classes were implemented and the results of those changes. For example, the pandemic circumstances may have led to opportunities to close the technology gaps experienced during the initial stages of the pandemic.

In short, like the practitioners they are grooming, PR faculty are nimble and will continue to pivot to meet student needs and produce quality campaigns experiences.

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