

*Special Issue: The Unprecedented Upheaval of Public  
Relations Education*

**PRSSA During COVID-19: Examining the  
Challenges and Best Practices of Student  
Organization Management in an Online World**

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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2020, much of the U.S. implemented a nationwide shutdown in response to the global pandemic COVID-19 that had a ripple effect on universities to close campuses. In the hard shift to online learning, many student organizations were left with little input about how to make their own transition to the digital realm. Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, the following study surveyed current and recent PRSSA executive board members ( $n = 208$ ) to gain insights about online chapter programming practices in the spring and fall terms of 2020, key concerns about online chapter management, and what online program training and resources are needed. Research-based best practices for online chapter management offer practical guidance for PRSSA chapters and support organizations to improve chapter leaders' confidence and proficiency in producing online programming during COVID-19 and beyond.

*Keywords:* online organization, student organizations, Zoom, online learning, self-determination theory, COVID-19, PRSSA, Public Relations Student Society of America

**Editorial Record:** Original draft submitted October 2, 2020. Revisions submitted April 12, 2021 & July 7, 2021. Accepted July 20, 2021. Published December 2021.

In the spring of 2020, much of the United States (U.S.) implemented a nationwide shutdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Such drastic nationwide actions had not been taken since the Spanish Flu outbreak more than 100 years ago. As U.S. states issued stay-at-home orders, that had a ripple effect on universities to close campuses and send students home, often with little notice to students, faculty, and staff. While classes remained in session through online modalities, the robust campus life experience waned. In the hard shift to online learning, many student organizations were left with little input about how to make their own transition to the digital realm.

This study examined how one such student organization, the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), fared with online programming during COVID-19 in the spring and fall terms of 2020. A nationwide questionnaire was distributed to PRSSA executive board (e-board) members to determine what programming strategies and communication tools were used by chapters, which individuals and organizations provided guidance with online programming planning, key concerns of e-board members, and what types of training they desired to effectively manage their chapters in the online environment. This research is the third paper in a trio of PRSSA and pedagogical-related papers that uses Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a basis for study to serve as a practical guide for PRSSA chapters and support organizations in developing innovative chapter management solutions and collaborative partnerships that will build a thriving community during COVID-19 and beyond.

### **Literature Review**

#### **PRSSA in a Pre-COVID-19 World**

To study the effects of the pandemic on student organizations, the pre-pandemic structure of student organizations has to be established. Todd's (2009) study of PRSSA, in particular, uncovered that professional

advisers felt the organization would best serve students by acting as a bridge toward the professional world. That connection included having current PR practitioners assess student capstone projects, focusing on essential writing and web design skills. A look at the difference between universities with and without a PRSSA chapter illuminated the benefits of the organization even further. Previous research noted that faculty advisers considered PRSSA a “critical component” to the undergraduate experience and felt the organization had a responsibility to facilitate leadership development, provide aid in finding internships, and emulate real work practice before entering the field (Weed et al., 2020; Rogers, 2014). Apart from the applicability of the organization’s activities, students also joined and stayed in student organizations through self-determined motivations that stemmed from their needs being met (Filak & Pritchard, 2007). That implies students join PRSSA not only for the professional connections, but to build upon their personal goals as well.

### **Organization Issues in an Online World During COVID-19**

In spring of 2020 universities were tested by the COVID-19 pandemic, driving PRSSA chapters to navigate a disrupted world in an attempt to #FlattenTheCurve (Merritt, 2020). Graduations were canceled. Classes were rushed into an online modality. Businesses also learned to navigate a 100% virtual work environment forcing students to “make the most of a summer without a traditional internship” (Charron, 2020, para. 1). Likewise, university extracurricular activities were also in unfamiliar territory. In April 2020, the PRSSA National Leadership Assembly was relegated to a virtual town hall with officer elections moved online (PRSA, 2020), Star Chapter requirements were reduced and amended to remove the high school outreach component, and for the first time in PRSSA history, the international conference took place online (PRSSA, 2020). PRSSA members and faculty advisers were attempting to navigate change and preparing for a “new normal” during a tumultuous time on campuses

across the nation. This subsequently presented new challenges and opportunities to organizations run by volunteer students and faculty.

### ***Higher Education Issues***

Very little was known pre-COVID-19 regarding how students, required to move to an online learning environment from an in-class learning environment, might react during a widespread emergency. Post COVID-19 the literature is starting to emerge concerning general online teaching and learning perspectives during COVID-19 suggesting lessons learned in updating online pedagogy to meet the needs of students (Coman et al., 2020; Hofer et al., 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Rippé et al., 2021). Luckily, much attention has been paid in recent years toward student and faculty use of technology in the public relations classroom, in building community (Curtin & Witherspoon, 2000; Fraustino et al., 2015; Janoske et al., 2019; Kinsky et al., 2016; Kruger-Ross & Waters, 2013; McKeever, 2019; Moore, 2014; Tatone et al., 2017; Weed et al., 2018;) and to online teaching and learning in general (Martin, Stamper et al., 2020; Martin, Sun et al., 2020; Nilson & Goodson, 2018) to supplement as the body of knowledge continues to grow post-COVID-19; however, the literature does more to point out the flaws in the online learning system than the solutions (Albrahim, 2020; Morreale et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2020). The teaching of faculty on how to transition online seems to be one of those missteps as sometimes faculty are left to figure out how to teach online completely on their own (Callo & Yazon, 2020; Lowenthal et al., 2019; Paul & Jefferson, 2019).

### ***Organizational Issues***

COVID-19 presented numerous communication challenges to organizations as the traditional in-person workplace moved to remote work. In times of crises, subordinates turn to leaders for information, which heightens demands for effective communication of critical decisions (van der Meer et al., 2017; van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015)

much like PRSSA advisers and members might look to PRSSA National for solutions. Organizational issues pre-COVID-19 are only exacerbated during COVID-19. Thus, engaging now in thoughtful deconstruction of pre-COVID-19 practices can create deliberate and practical organizational improvement, even whilst forced through severe ecological conditions which present as “crisis” or misfortune. There may be hope that these online tools can contribute to organizational engagement in times of uncertainty. When looking at natural disasters that result in a shift to online learning, one study showed that a university became more resilient in its online education after a crisis event (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017). However, proper tools including bandwidth, internet equity, and access to digital devices are key components in guaranteeing that students do not miss educational opportunities during such a crisis (Dhawan, 2020). Ensuring proper equity toward online learning can be important for not only the students involved but the health of the overall learning organization. According to Coombs and Holladay (1996), effectively communicating to an organization’s public is crucial to the reputational and financial health of any organization, regardless of industry. In this instance, ensuring that effective communication is maintained between all educational participants is crucial in sustaining an online learning environment.

### **Self-Determination Theory and Organization Management**

When broken down to its basic ideology, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) looks at the psychological pull of an individual toward personal growth and the effect external forces have on the motivation toward that growth (Deci, 1975; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Motivation is important to examine as it is the catalyst to get work done (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT considers motivation based on a person’s motivation at any given time, as opposed to adopting motivation as a unitary concept in people (Deci, 1975). As PRSSA is a student-run organization, organizational leaders do not have the common motivating factor of

financial-based compensation for their work and must find their intrinsic motivations for participation. Filak and Pritchard (2007) established the application of SDT in the context of PRSSA in a study of chapter advisers and members, and found that when the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness were met through support from the faculty adviser, student members will more positively rate their chapter and adviser, and experience greater self-motivation to participate in the organization.

White (1959) and deCharms (1968) proposed that motivating behavior is based on competence and autonomy. That the link between the basic needs of people and their motivations is based on intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Pritchard et al., 1977). Findings from Jang (2008) show the role that externally-provided rationales can play in helping students generate the motivation they need to engage in, and learn from, uninteresting but personally important material. That is critical to teaching and professional development in order to promote student motivation by promoting the value of the task, discover the experience's hidden value, and communicate why it is personally useful to the participant. "Simply put, motivation is tantamount to a student's ability to engage with the course information" (Ewing et al., 2019, p. 105). SDT research has been applied in pedagogy research to examine how needs are satisfied in face-to-face teaching and learning in relation to student motivation (Ahn et al., 2021; Davidson & Beck, 2019; Goldman et al., 2017; Lietaert et al., 2015; Pritchard et al., 1977; Roorda et al., 2011).

### ***Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness***

Ryan and Deci (2000) proposed three psychological needs that are required for individual psychological health and well-being: a) competence (seek to control the outcome of a task and experience task mastery), b) autonomy (the desire to be causal agents of one's own life and act in harmony with one's integrated self), and c) relatedness (the will to interact with, be connected to, and experience caring) (Deci, 1975). If

competence is defined as self-efficacy, then the basic need for competence is the need of feeling knowledgeable about the environment in which one exists (White, 1959). In a structured organization, the need for competence is fostered by offering constructive feedback and showing organized progress through activities or projects (Martin et al., 2018). Autonomy can be viewed as the psychological need to experience the ownership of one's actions (Chirkov, 2009). Therefore, true autonomy exists only when there is no control over individual actions in a given environment. Although true autonomy is not often possible in academic or work settings, autonomy support was shown more conducive to continued learning and personal success (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005), as well as self-determined motivation (Filak & Pritchard, 2007). Meaning, the more control that is put upon an individual in an environment, the less the need for autonomy is being met. When translated to an educational environment, autonomy can be supported through a self-paced environment with limited reward contingencies for participating (Martin et al., 2018). Relatedness directly corresponds with the need to feel like a part of one's environment which relates to the innate human need for survival with others (van den Broeck et al., 2016). However, that need of relatedness does not require others to be physically present to be fulfilled and support motivation (Martin et al., 2018). Encouragement to participate or acknowledgement of involvement, even after the fact, can fulfill the need of relatedness.

The lack of fulfillment of those three basic psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—will result in a decrease in the overall well-being of the individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and reduce the likelihood of further participation in the organization (Filak & Pritchard, 2007; Fisher et al., 2020). Alternatively, when an organization aids in fulfillment of these basic needs, participants tend to see an increase in well-being that is then reflected in increased motivations to succeed and continue personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan & Deci (2000) found

that conditions which enhanced perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness positively affected self-determined motivation and sense of competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci et al., 1994). That is of significance for individuals who seek to motivate others in a way that gives way to vested interest, commitment, effort, and high-quality performance, much like pre-professional organizations would do (Deci et al., 2017). SDT argues that needs are innate but can be developed in a social context, much in the way student organizations integrate peer mentoring in a social context (Fisher et al., 2020).

Some people develop stronger needs than others, creating individual differences (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, individual differences within the theory focus on concepts resulting from the degree to which needs have been satisfied or not satisfied (Pritchard et al., 1977). When participants experience growth, so does the organization. When the needs of the participants are fulfilled, the organization can then consider its own needs. Finally, of chief concern to SDT is the well-being of the individuals within the systems in which they participate. If the context in which participants are engaged in/with are responsive to those needs and provide the appropriate organizational structure in which participants can ascend without excessive control. Motivation and enhanced performance are what SDT would predict as participant engagement that can be sustained as a result (Kohn, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

While the body of knowledge in public relations pedagogy addresses unique challenges and innovations in online learning, that research does not address the complexity of a student organization such as PRSSA. PRSSA is more than a supplement to classroom learning. It is an experiential learning lab that provides student leaders with valuable organizational management skills at the university, regional, and international levels. This study adds to the existing literature by exploring issues of online organization management, through the lens of SDT, by



exploring the following questions:

**RQ1:** What were the common chapter management practices of PRSSA chapters during COVID-19?

**RQ2a:** How do the common concerns of PRSSA e-board members regarding online programming affect perceptions of competency in chapter management?

**RQ2b:** What resources or tools are desired by PRSSA e-board members to facilitate perceptions of autonomy in chapter management?

**RQ2c:** What resources or tools are desired by PRSSA e-board members to foster relatedness with other organizations?

### **Method**

This study used an online questionnaire distributed to PRSSA executive board members who served in the spring semester of the 2019-2020 and Fall semester of the 2020-2021 academic years. Surveys have been previously used to study the perceptions of PRSSA members in realms of public relations curricula (Sparks & Conwell, 1998; Todd, 2009) and self-efficacy in public relations practice (Ranta et al., 2020). The timeline of this study began in the last half of August and ended in late September of 2020. Questions were asked in a way to capture data from respondents' actual and anticipated policies regarding online classes and management of PRSSA chapters. The questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics software and distributed via a) emails to PRSSA faculty advisers and chapter presidents, b) private Facebook groups where faculty advisers were likely to be members, and c) social media posts that were directed to faculty advisers and PRSSA e-board members. Questionnaire protocols were approved by the respective institutional review boards of the authors.

### **Study Population**

The authors initially made a request with the PRSSA national office for a contact list of current PRSSA board members, but the request was denied due to proprietary rights. Next, the authors reviewed the

PRSSA national chapter directory, which is publicly available through the PRSSA national website. Individual chapters are responsible for maintaining their directory listing, though it was unknown whether the contact information was current and accurate as no information was included with the chapter listing that indicated when it was last updated. While the PRSSA National Chapter Handbook (PRSSA, 2019) recommends a minimum of six executive board positions — president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, public relations director, and historian — the individual listing for PRSSA chapters from the national chapter directory often did not include contact information for all students who held those roles. In addition, it is unknown whether all PRSSA chapter e-boards included all positions recommended by the PRSSA national chapter handbook or if individual chapters had more e-board positions than were recommended.

Due to the above limitations, the authors developed an internal contact database of faculty advisers and chapter presidents, which were commonly included in the national directory listings for individual chapters. When faculty adviser and/or chapter president information was not available in the PRSSA chapter directory, the authors searched PRSSA chapter websites, chapter social media channels, and direct phone calls were made to university schools/departments that hosted PRSSA chapters. In total, 381 faculty advisers and 302 chapter presidents were identified at 370 U.S. university PRSSA chapters. Participants were recruited for the questionnaire through four distinct recruitment tactics implemented in August and September of 2020. First, the researchers sent two rounds of email invitations to PRSSA faculty advisers to share with their Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 e-board members. Second, the researchers sent an email invitation to PRSSA chapter presidents to share with their e-boards. Third, questionnaire invitations were posted on private Facebook groups such as PRSA Educators Academy, Student-Run Agency Advisers, and

Faculty Advisers for PRSSA Chapters. In addition, researchers used directed tweets to promote the survey using the hashtag #PRSSA and tags for the accounts of PRSSA National, PRSA Educators Academy, and the AEJMC Public Relations Division. Finally, an email invitation was sent by the PRSSA national office to chapter presidents, and study promotion tweets were shared by the @PRSSANational account.

A qualifying question at the beginning of the questionnaire asked participants if they were an e-board member of their local PRSSA chapter in Spring 2020 or Fall 2020. In total, 208 respondents indicated they were a PRSSA e-board member. Those board members represented at least 69 PRSSA chapters located in all U.S. districts of PRSSA, for a response rate of 18.6% within chapters. As the authors were unable to access information that could determine the actual size of e-boards for all 370 U.S. university PRSSA chapters, an accurate response rate for the total population of e-board members could not be calculated.

### **Questionnaire Design**

The questionnaire included 40 items that measured five categories of information: a) general chapter information, b) completed and anticipated chapter programming practices for Spring and Fall 2020, c) areas of concern for PRSSA online programming, and d) resources used or desired for effective management of PRSSA online programming. Questions were developed with input from PRSSA faculty advisers who shared chapter management challenges that developed after many university campuses went to an online-only format during the Spring 2020 semester. No identifying information was collected, though respondents could opt-in for a \$50 Amazon gift card drawing through a separate link using their university email addresses.

### ***Online PRSSA Programming During COVID-19***

Multiple-choice questions covered topics related to PRSSA chapter programming for Spring and Fall 2020 terms including: a) the quantity

of Spring 2020 programming compared to Fall 2019, b) types of PRSSA online programming completed in Spring 2020 and planned to produce for Fall 2020. In addition, a unique question was added for the Spring 2020 e-board members to reflect on their PRSSA chapter's effectiveness of online programming by providing a letter grade assessment.

#### ***Areas of Concern for Online PRSSA Programming***

Participants identified up to 10 chapter management areas in which the respondent would want more resources and/or training. Three Likert scale questions asked the respondent's level of confidence in meeting common chapter goals. Eight open-ended questions gained further insights about the respondent's perception of how online programming would impact various aspects of PRSSA chapter management. Open-ended questions were surveyed for recurring key terms that were ranked by frequency of use.

#### ***Desired Resources for PRSSA Online Programming***

Five Likert-scale questions assessed respondents' level of agreement with statements related to how specific individuals or organizations—faculty adviser, university offices, school or department offices, PRSSA national leadership, and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) sponsor chapter—understood what their PRSSA chapter needed to successfully implement online programs. Three open-ended questions asked what support services the respondent's PRSSA chapter needed from a) their university, b) their faculty and professional advisers, and c) PRSSA national leadership. Open-ended questions were surveyed for recurring related key terms that were ranked by frequency of use. For example, the key term “Zoom burnout” also included “Zoom fatigue,” which was classified under the umbrella term of “Zoom burnout.”

### **Results**

#### **Respondent Demographics**

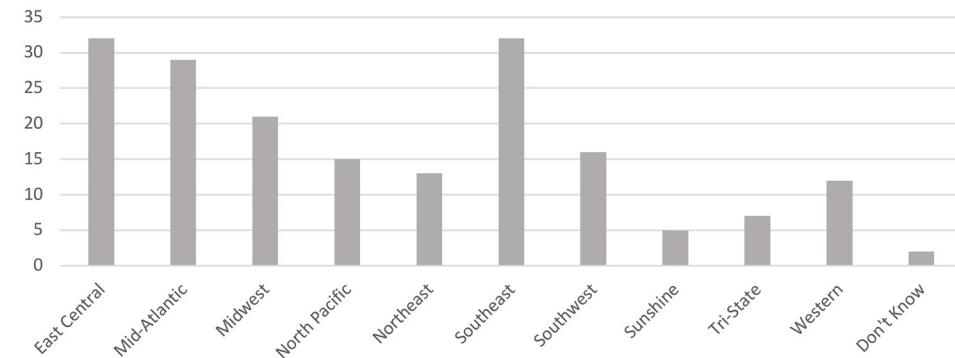
The vast majority of the study population identified as female at

80.3% ( $n = 171$ ), 8.0% ( $n = 17$ ) identified as male, and the remaining 11.7% ( $n = 25$ ) declined to answer. Of the respondents, 128 identified as e-board members in Spring 2020 and 156 in Fall 2020. Respondents represented Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 e-board positions which were noted as required in the PRSSA Chapter Handbook (PRSSA, 2020) including presidents at 33.8% ( $n = 96$ ), vice presidents at 13.0% ( $n = 37$ ), secretaries at 3.9% ( $n = 11$ ), treasurers at 5.3% ( $n = 22$ ), PR directors at 8.5% ( $n = 24$ ), and one historian. The remaining respondents represented other board positions that were unique to individual chapters but included leadership roles related to membership, events, and communication. Twenty-three respondents declined to provide their e-board position for Spring 2020, and 42 respondents declined for Fall 2020. Respondents included recent graduates and e-board members whose roles might have changed from Spring to Fall of 2020.

At the chapter level, 184 respondents identified the size of their PRSSA chapter, with 22.8% ( $n = 42$ ) representing micro-chapters of one to nine members, 48.4% ( $n = 89$ ) for small chapters of 10 to 49 members, 15.8% ( $n = 29$ ) for mid-size chapters of 50-99 members and the remaining 13.0% ( $n = 24$ ) represented large chapters of more than 100 members. Respondents represented all ten (PRSA U.S. districts (PRSA, n.d.) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Respondents by PRSA District*



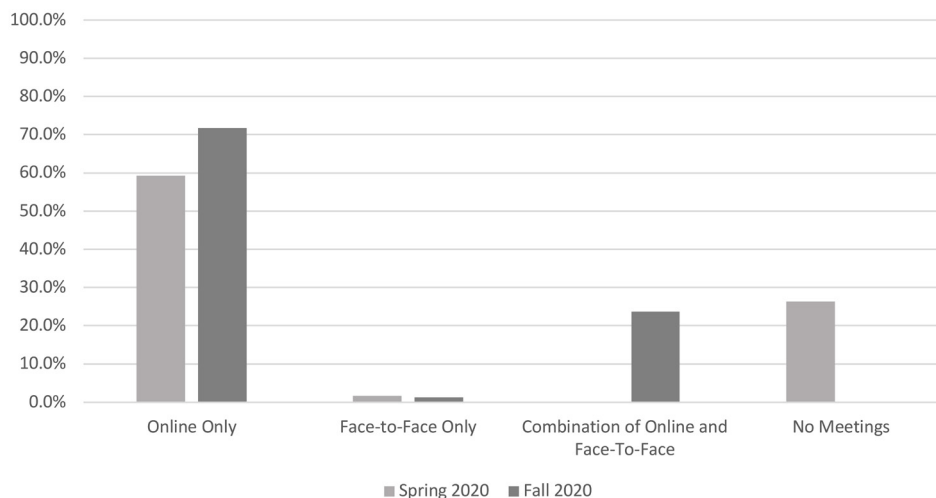
## PRSSA Online Programming Trends During COVID-19

### *Adoption of Online Modality*

Among PRSSA e-board members for Spring 2020 ( $n = 128$ ), 92.2% ( $n = 11$ ) indicated that their university moved to an online-only format, 7.8% ( $n = 10$ ) remained with a face-to-face campus. Among PRSSA e-board members in Fall 2020 ( $n = 156$ ), 39.8% ( $n = 62$ ) indicated that their university classes were, or were scheduled to be, online-only for some of the fall term, while 30.2% ( $n = 47$ ) would be face-to-face for all the fall term, and 23.7% ( $n = 37$ ) would be online-only for all of the fall term. In a twist, 3.8% ( $n = 6$ ) began the fall term as face-to-face but had to shift to online-only due to COVID-19 surges in their geographic region after the term began. Fifty respondents (32.0%) declined to answer the question, which might be related to the uncertainty of campus openings at the time the survey was administered (see Figure 2).

### **Figure 2**

*Modality of PRSSA Chapter Management between Spring and Fall 2020 Terms*



The modality of university classes did not mirror an alignment with PRSSA chapter modality. While survey responses indicated a reduction of online-only campuses from Spring to Fall 2020, the quantity of respondents who indicated their PRSSA chapter would be online-only increased from 59.3% in spring to 70.0% in fall. Respondents who indicated their chapter would host only face-to-face meetings remained consistently small at less than 2.0% of responses. There was a dramatic increase in a combination of online and face-to-face programming from less than 1.0% in Spring 2020 to 23.7% in Fall 2020.

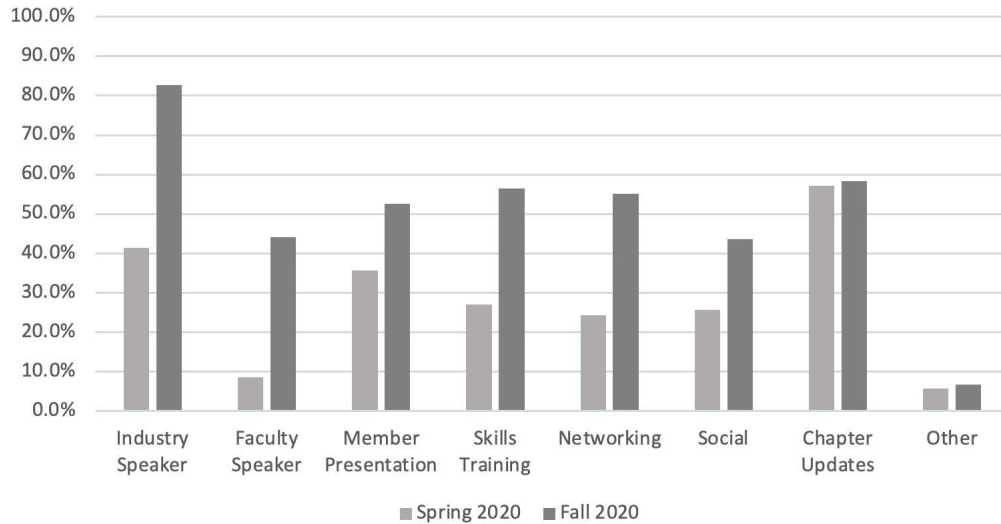
### ***Chapter Programming***

**Content.** When comparing the frequency of meetings for chapters that moved online in Spring 2020 to the previous fall semester, 91.4% ( $n = 57$ ) of respondents indicated the chapter had less programming, with 40.0% ( $n = 28$ ) reporting significantly less programs in Spring 2020 over fall 2019. For respondents whose chapters produced online programs in Spring 2020, chapter updates were most frequent ( $n = 40$ ), followed by industry guest speakers ( $n = 29$ ), and member presentations ( $n = 25$ ). In Fall 2020, respondents indicated their chapter was likely to produce a variety of programming including industry guest speakers ( $n = 129$ ), chapter updates ( $n = 91$ ), skills training ( $n = 88$ ), networking events ( $n = 86$ ), member-led presentations ( $n = 82$ ), faculty guest speakers ( $n = 69$ ), and social events ( $n = 68$ ). Thirteen respondents (8.3%) indicated other types of programming including collaborative events with other PRSSA chapters ( $n = 4$ ), podcasts ( $n = 2$ ), fundraising events ( $n = 2$ ), and client projects ( $n = 2$ ). Ten respondents (6.4%) did not know what types of online programming their chapter was planning (see Figure 3).

**Communication applications.** By far, the most common online application used for PRSSA online programming in both Spring and Fall 2020 was Zoom. In Fall 2020, responses indicated an increased use of other communication applications including GroupMe, Slack, Instagram video, and Twitter chats (see Figure 4).

**Figure 3**

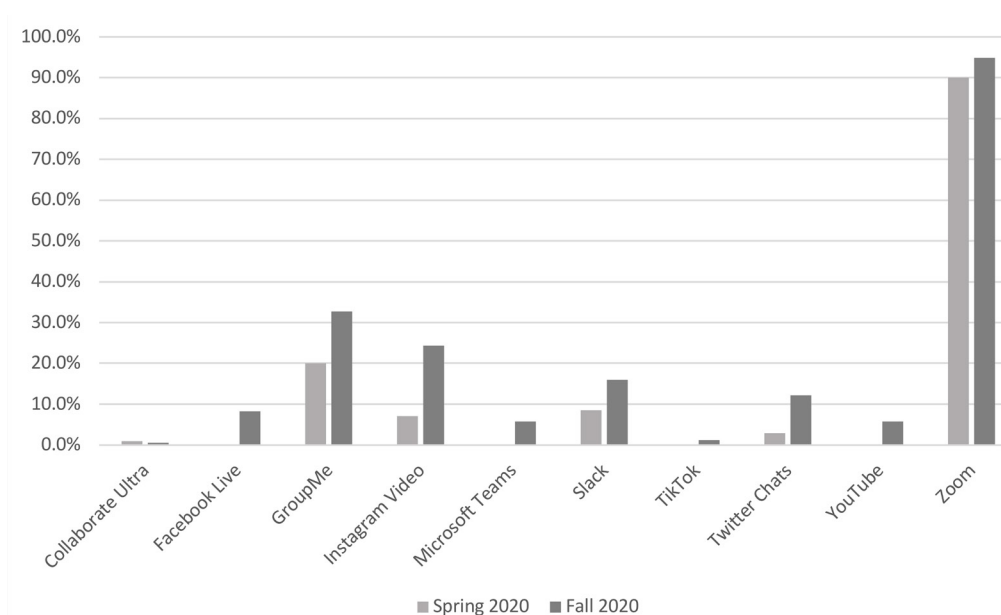
*Comparison of PRSSA Online Programming Between Spring 2020 and Fall 2020*



**Perceived Competency in PRSSA Online Chapter Management**

**Figure 4**

*Online Communication Applications Used by PRSSA Chapters Between Spring and Fall 2020*





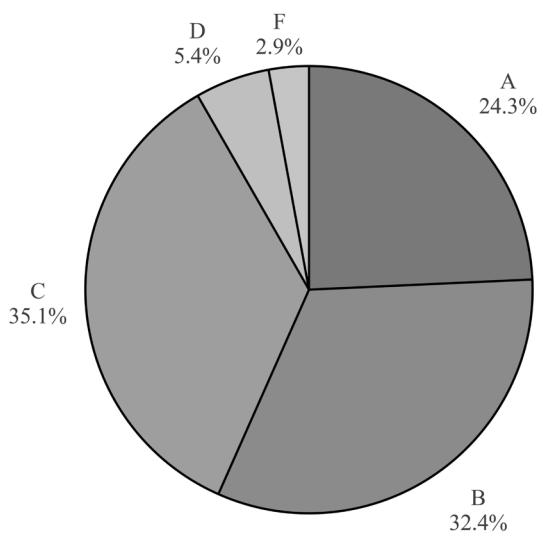
Respondents whose chapters continued to meet after their university went to an online-only format in Spring 2020 ( $n = 72$ ) were asked what letter grade they would give their chapter's online programming. The greatest percentage of respondents gave their chapter a "C" ( $n = 26$ ), followed by a "B" ( $n = 24$ ). "A" ( $n = 18$ ), "D," ( $n = 4$ ) and "F," and 7.1% ( $n = 1$ ) (see Figure 5).

#### ***Production of Online Programming***

Moving to Fall 2020, respondents answered a Likert scale item

#### **Figure 5**

*What grade would you give your PRSSA chapter for its online programs in Spring 2020?*



that indicated their level of confidence (from 1 = very unconfident to 5 = very confident) in producing PRSSA online programming. Respondents expressed confidence ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = .963$ ) in producing online programming, which was further supported by the reports that their PRSSA chapters were planning a wider variety of programs for the Fall 2020 than in the previous spring. Yet, responses to additional questions about Fall 2020 PRSSA chapter management revealed common concerns.

### ***Membership***

PRSSA e-board members in Fall 2020 expressed multiple concerns about online chapter management. Respondents ( $n = 148$ ) were asked to rate their level of confidence (from 1 = very unconfident to 5 = very confident) in their chapter's ability to renew existing dues-paid members and recruit new dues-paid members. Respondents expressed the least confidence in recruiting new PRSSA members in Fall 2020 ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.227$ ) but slightly increased confidence in renewing existing members ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.128$ ). A one-way ANOVA found no significant difference between the size of the respondent's PRSSA chapter and level of confidence in recruiting new or renewing existing members.

A small positive correlation was found between chapter size and the respondent's confidence level in producing online programs,  $r(147) = .199$ ,  $p < .05$ , as well as the ability to renew existing dues-paid members,  $r(147) = .175$ ,  $p < .05$ . A large positive correlation was found between the respondent's confidence in their chapter's ability to produce online programs and recruiting new members,  $r(147) = .565$ ,  $p < .001$ , and renewing existing members,  $r(147) = .599$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Table 1).

### ***Perception of how Online Programming Helps or Hurts PRSSA Chapters***

A series of open-ended questions asked respondents who were Fall 2020 PRSSA e-board members whether they felt online programming would only help, only hurt, or a combination of help and hurt, their chapter in: a) new member recruitment, b) member retention, c) chapter engagement, and d) scheduling of guest speakers.

**Membership.** Regarding recruiting new members, of the total respondents ( $n = 150$ ) most ( $n = 84$ ) felt that online programming would only hurt recruitment of new members. In terms of retaining existing

**Table 1**

*Correlations between Chapter Size, Confidence in Producing Online Programming, and Ability to Recruit/Renew Members*

		How many dues-paid members currently belong to your PRSSA Chapter?	How confident are you in your PRSSA chapters' ability to produce online programming?	How confident are you in your PRSSA chapters' ability to renew existing members in Fall 2020?	How confident are you in your PRSSA chapters' ability to recruit new members in Fall 2020?
How many dues-paid members currently belong to your PRSSA Chapter?	Pearson Correlation	1	.199**	.175*	.158
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.016	.033	.055
	N	148	148	148	148
How confident are you in your PRSSA chapters' ability to produce online programming?	Pearson Correlation	.199**	1	.599**	.565**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.016		.000	.000
	N	148	148	148	148
How confident are you in your PRSSA chapters' ability to renew existing members in Fall 2020?	Pearson Correlation	.175*	.599**	1	.710**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.033	.000		.000
	N	148	148	148	148
How confident are you in your PRSSA chapters' ability to recruit new members in Fall 2020?	Pearson Correlation	.158	.565**	.710**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.055	.000	.000	
	N	148	148	148	148

\*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level

\* Correlation is significant at the .05 level

PRSSA members, respondents ( $n = 116$ ) were nearly split between those who felt that online programming would help membership retention ( $n$

= 52) and those who felt online programming would only hurt retention ( $n = 48$ ). Convenience of attending online programming was the most identified benefit to help retention ( $n = 12$ ) and “Zoom burnout” was the most identified limitation to hurt retention ( $n = 9$ ).

**Dues Value.** Of respondents ( $n = 134$ ) who answered an open-ended question that addressed whether they believed online programming would affect the perception of dues value, more than two-thirds indicated a negative impact of the perceived value of the dues cost among PRSSA members, even though 12.7% ( $n = 17$ ) of respondents noted their chapter members would receive a dues discount either for PRSSA national dues and/or local chapter dues. Common issues respondents noted that would negatively impact the perception of dues values were the lack of in-person programming ( $n = 31$ ) and unique financial hardships students experienced due to COVID-19 ( $n = 5$ ).

**Meeting Attendance.** Respondents ( $n = 151$ ) answered an open-ended question about whether they felt online programming would help or hurt meeting attendance. Of the total respondents ( $n = 151$ ) to the open-ended question, the greatest number ( $n = 62$ ) felt online programming would only help meeting attendance, but others ( $n = 45$ ) only felt online programming would hurt. As with dues value, respondents most commonly noted convenience as a benefit for online meeting attendance ( $n = 34$ ) along with the ability to record meetings for asynchronous viewing ( $n = 18$ ). “Zoom burnout” was also repeated as a limitation that could hurt meeting attendance ( $n = 18$ ).

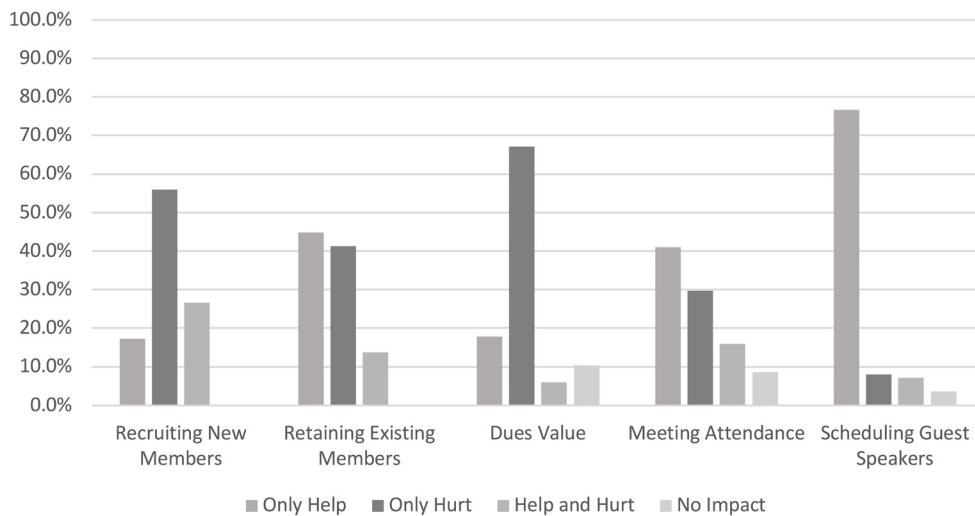
**Scheduling Guest Speakers.** Of the respondents ( $n = 145$ ) who answered an open-ended question about whether online programming would help or hurt scheduling guest speakers, more than three-quarters of respondents ( $n = 111$ ) felt it would help, with lack of travel requirements for speakers being the greatest benefit ( $n = 66$ ). Only a handful of respondents ( $n = 9$ ) indicated that online programming would hurt their

chapter's ability to schedule guest speakers (see Figure 6).

***What Online Programming Resources Do PRSSA Chapters Need to Achieve Autonomy?***

**Figure 6**

*Perceptions of Whether Online Programming Helps or Hurts PRSSA Chapter Management*



Respondents were asked to identify specific online programming training or resources they wanted. Respondents ( $n = 149$ ) most commonly identified membership recruitment and retention resources ( $n = 110$ ), followed by collaboration with other PRSSA chapters ( $n = 81$ ), and fundraising ( $n = 70$ ) (see Figure 7).

A one-way ANOVA found a significant difference between chapter size and the need for training or resources related to scheduling guest speakers [ $F(6,148) = 2.442, p = .029$ ]. Among the various chapter sizes, 36.8% ( $n = 50$ ) of respondents from chapters with less than 100 members ( $n = 138$ ) indicated they desired that training, while only 10.5% ( $n = 2$ ) of respondents from chapters with 100 or more members ( $n = 19$ ) requested the same. It is important to note that respondents of chapters with 10-19

members ( $n = 30$ ) expressed the greatest need for that training at 53.3% ( $n = 16$ ). No significant difference was found between the board position respondents held and the type of online training or resources which were desired.

There was a moderate negative correlation between chapter size and the need for assistance in scheduling guest speakers,  $r(154) = -.183, p < .001$ . Further analysis was conducted to determine if receiving assistance from specific individuals or organizations correlated with a desire for specific types of training or resources. Positive correlations were found between the chapter receiving online programming assistance from the faculty adviser,  $r(148) = .197, p < .05$ , professional adviser,  $r(148) = .224, p < .001$ , and desire for more information about membership recruitment/retention. Assistance from PRSSA chapters at different universities was positively correlated with the desire for more information about membership recruitment/retention,  $r(148) = .186, p < .05$ , communication with chapter members,  $r(148) = .166, p < .05$ , and service projects,  $r(148) = .181, p < .05$ . Assistance from university offices was positively correlated with the desire for more information about collaborating with PRSSA chapters at different universities,  $r(148) = .169, p < .05$ .

Open-ended questions continued the explorations of what online training or resources respondents wanted. Three questions asked what support services respondents needed to successfully produce online chapter programming from a) their university, b) PRSSA national leadership, and c) their faculty and/or professional advisers. From the university, respondents ( $n = 132$ ) most needed a) the promotion of their chapter and its events ( $n = 22$ ), b) technical support such as accessing online meeting tools or “stronger wifi access” ( $n = 25$ ), and c) general support such as communication student organization offices, how to collaborate with other organizations, and encouragement from faculty ( $n = 39$ ). From PRSSA national leadership, respondents ( $n = 122$ ) most

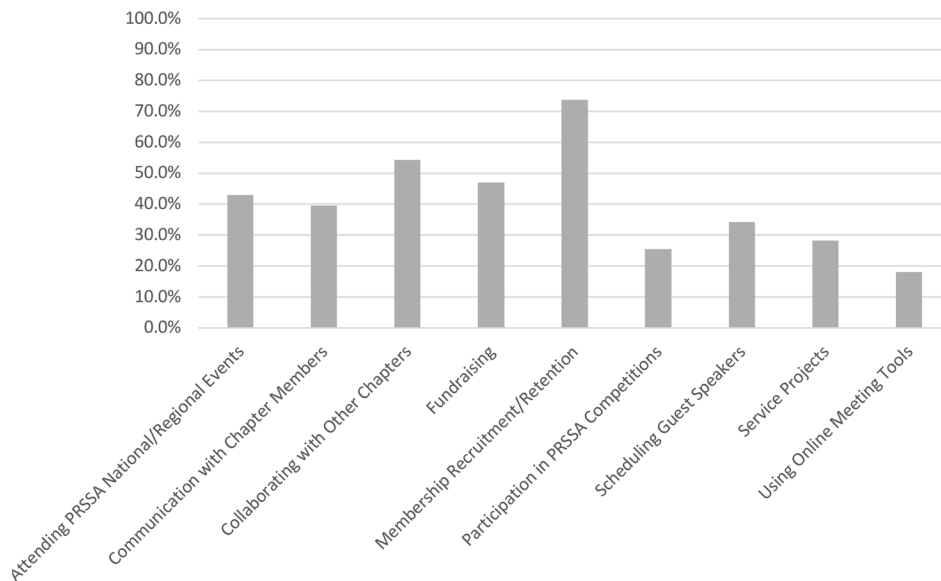
needed a) meeting planning support such as a content library and national speakers directory ( $n = 13$ ), b) training for online chapter management such as webinars and best practices from other chapters ( $n = 36$ ), c) communication such as individual chapter check-ins, a calendar of upcoming national events, and general chapter information ( $n = 39$ ). From faculty and/or professional advisers, respondents ( $n = 122$ ) most commonly indicated that they were satisfied with their adviser’s support ( $n = 35$ ), but others identified specific items such as general support like encouragement and advocating for the chapter ( $n = 31$ ), assistance with scheduling guest speakers ( $n = 28$ ), and tips for building member engagement in an online environment ( $n = 7$ ).

**Relatedness with Chapter Support Resources**

When examining which organizations or individuals that

**Figure 7**

*Online Training or Resources that PRSSA E-board Members Want*



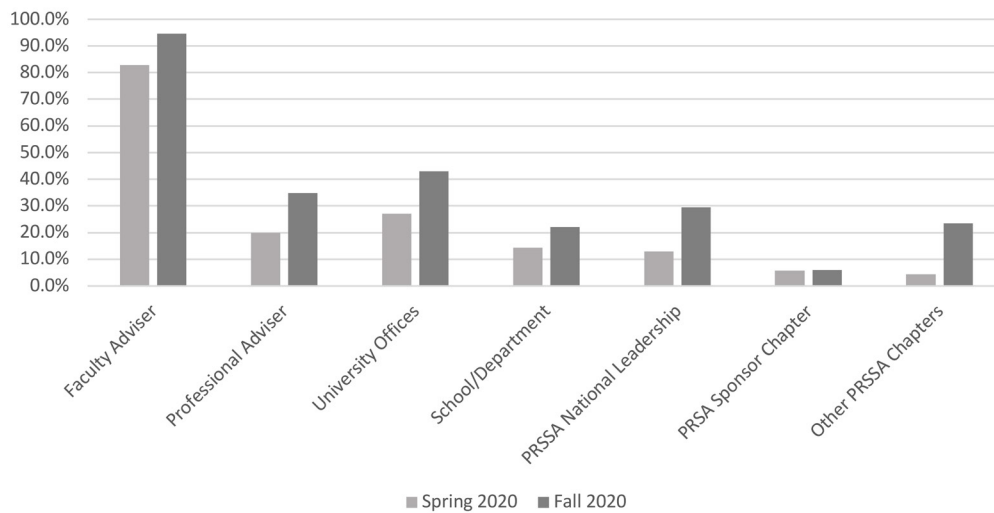
respondents identified as a chapter resource for online programming in

Spring ( $n = 137$ ) and Fall 2020 ( $n = 141$ ), faculty advisers were the most identified resource. While many chapters lacked guidance from other university resources such as university offices (student affairs, student government, or student organization offices) or school/department offices in Spring 2020, there were small improvements in those resources providing guidance to PRSSA chapters in Fall 2020. Organizational resources such as professional advisors, PRSSA national leadership, and PRSA sponsor chapters were identified by slightly more respondents for Fall 2020, but those remained unidentified by at least two-thirds of respondents. One organizational resource that gained a considerable increase in recognition was other PRSSA chapters, which grew from a resource identified by only 4.3% of respondents for Spring 2020, to 23.5% of respondents for Fall 2020 (see Figure 8).

Respondents were asked a series of Likert scale questions to indicate their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with statements related to how specific individuals or organizations

**Figure 8**

*Comparison of Individuals/Organizations that Provided Online Program Guidance Between Spring 2020 and Fall 2020*





understood their chapter's needs in developing online programming. Respondents most strongly agreed that their faculty adviser understood the chapter's needs ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 1.125$ ), followed by PRSSA national leadership ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 1.267$ ), school or department offices ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 1.262$ ), PRSA sponsor chapters ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.308$ ), and university offices ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.328$ ). The large standard deviations indicated a mixed experience among respondents, which was further explored. A one-way MANOVA found no significant difference between the respondent's chapter size and the level of agreement that specific individuals or organizations understood their chapter's online programming needs. An additional one-way MANOVA found no significant difference between respondents' Fall 2020 e-board position and the level of agreement that specific individuals or organizations understood their chapter's online programming needs. There was a moderate correlation between respondents receiving assistance from their faculty adviser and their level of agreement that the adviser understood their chapter needs,  $r(148) = .395$ ,  $p < .001$ , but weaker correlations were found for university offices,  $r(148) = .257$ ,  $p < .001$ , PRSSA national leadership,  $r(148) = .203$ ,  $p < .05$ , and the PRSA sponsor chapter,  $r(148) = .178$ ,  $p < .05$ . There was no correlation for the school/department. There were also moderate positive correlations between respondent's level of agreement that their faculty adviser understood what their chapter needed to successfully implement online programming and other organizations understanding the same needs (see Table 2).

A small positive correlation was found between chapter size and receiving online programming assistance from the school/department,  $r(147) = .302$ ,  $p < .001$ , but no other correlations existed between chapter size and receiving assistance from other individuals or organizations.

### **Discussion**

#### **Moving from Reactive to Proactive Online Programming Practices**

The results of this study found that most PRSSA chapters were ill-

**Table 2**

*Correlations between Perceptions the Faculty Adviser and Other Resource Organizations Understood What the PRSSA Chapter Needs to Successfully Implement Online Programming*

		My university office understands what our chapter needs to successfully implement online programming	My school or department office understands what our chapter needs to successfully implement online programming	PRSSA national leadership understands what our chapter needs to successfully implement online programming	Our PRSA sponsor chapter understands what our chapter needs to successfully implement online programming
My faculty advisor understands what our chapter needs to successfully implement online programming	Pearson Correlation	.523**	.591**	.550**	.529**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	156	156	156	156

\*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level

equipped to handle the quick transition to an online-only modality. More than one-third of respondents noted their chapter did not meet after the university moved to an online-only modality. Of those chapters that did make a transition to online programming, more than 90% shared that they produced less programming in Spring 2020 in comparison to the previous Fall, and that programming was most often in the form of chapter news and updates rather than content related to the three pillars of PRSSA—enhancing education, building networks, and launching careers.

While the integration of online programming was initiated by most PRSSA chapters as a response to universities transitioning to online-only campuses during the COVID-19 pandemic, these practices hold long-term value to create more inclusive programming and identify new strategies that enhance member recruitment. The traditional tactics of in-person

PRSSA chapter programming and membership recruitment tactics limit outreach opportunities to students who fit a non-traditional mold such as online learners, continuing education students, commuters, and graduate students.

Through the application of Self-Determination Theory, which was previously applied to PRSSA management by Filak & Pritchard (2007), the authors identified how competence, autonomy, and relatedness are urgent needs that need to be addressed to support PRSSA e-board members through the uncharted territory of online program management. The following recommendations address the current needs of PRSSA chapters and provide a blueprint to elevate chapter practices that address the evolving nature of higher education and the public relations industry.

### **Enhance Competency**

Respondents' self-assessment of their chapter's online programming for Spring 2020 revealed that more than two-thirds of respondents gave their chapter either a "C" (34.3%) or "B" (28.6%). Membership recruitment and retention were, by far, the most pressing concern of PRSSA e-board members. There was a concern regarding the recruitment of new members especially when student outreach opportunities, such as student fairs, were limited. Though slightly greater confidence was expressed in retaining existing members, qualitative responses indicated concerns about the lack of personal connection with members and fighting "Zoom fatigue." As a respondent shared,

I think that in general, online programs will hurt recruiting and retaining of chapter members for students to really learn with a human touch face-to-face. Coming from my own experience, being at the chapter's events helped me network and talk with guest professionals to learn more of the secrets of the trade. I think with having online programs, the motivation from members won't be as enthusiastic about, says a Microsoft Teams meeting with an

industry professional to attend.

In addition, respondents were also concerned about the dues cost, even when considering a limited-time 25% discount on national dues and some chapters reducing or eliminating their local dues. Another respondent stated,

I think it's great that Nationals dropped the price, however, \$41 is still a lot of money for a college student. That could pay for two weeks of groceries. So, with programs being all online and most other clubs waiving fees, I think it will be much more difficult to convince members that they will get their money's worth.

Concern was expressed that prospective members would not see the return on investment of their dues cost because many programs that were selling points of the organization—face-to-face networking, agency tours, attending national and/or regional events—were not an option for Fall 2020.

A negative perception of online programming was evident among respondents, especially in regard to new member recruitment and engagement. More than 56% of respondents felt that online programming would hurt new member recruitment, even though nearly 90% of respondents expressed confidence in their chapter's ability to produce online programming. Martin, Sun, & Westine (2020) suggest that perception might be linked to existing attitudes related to participation in online courses or feelings of anxiety related to uncertainty working within a new communication modality (Hilliard et al., 2020). A respondent shared,

Online programs, in my experience so far, split a group into attentive vs uninterested members. The members who didn't pay as much attention or didn't get as involved as others are dropping away and the members who were working hard are continuing to grow. I'd say that this online format is really showing who is

serious about PRSSA and their profession.

PRSSA e-board members noted concern about limited opportunities to promote their chapters in an online environment. As opportunities for face-to-face connections—student organization fairs, “tabling,” in-class presentations, or casual conversations—were noted by respondents as being reduced, or eliminated, it is crucial that PRSSA chapters receive assistance from faculty and administration to advocate for the organization with prospective students. As the results of this study found that there was a negative correlation between chapter size and whether the chapter received assistance from its school or department, it is essential that smaller chapters receive outreach assistance to promote PRSSA, especially among underclassmen. These results were reflected in a respondent’s comment,

In order to successfully produce online programs for my PRSSA chapter, we will need support services such as technology services, faculty help, and help from our school to reach out to as many students as possible.

Based on the feedback provided by PRSSA e-board members in this study, the authors make two recommendations to build competence in online chapter management. First, enhanced training is needed to address unique issues identified by respondents including a) member recruitment, b) fundraising, and c) service projects. Training initiatives can be made available as live webinars to solicit real-time questions from chapter leaders, but also should be recorded for on-demand viewing as needed. Primarily, training sessions should be produced by PRSSA national leadership as they are in the best position to understand the unique challenges and needs of chapters. Initiatives should be produced with the assistance and guidance of PRSA to ensure comprehensive and best practices are disseminated to PRSSA chapter leaders.

Second, PRSSA national leadership should engage in strategic

partnerships with organizations that offer specialized training in online communication to make those resources available to chapter leaders. Organizational programs such as the HubSpot Education Partner Program (HubSpot, n.d.), Hootsuite Student Program (Hootsuite, n.d.), and Facebook Educators Portal (Facebook, n.d.) already produce student-oriented training modules and/support services related to online communication. Those resources could be linked on the PRSSA national website and promoted through chapter communication. Access to the resources provided by those organizations will provide resources for chapters to effectively plan, implement, and evaluate diverse online communication tactics that follow best practice standards.

### **Empower Autonomy**

Self-Determination Theory defines autonomy as the psychological need to experience the ownership of one's actions (Chirkov, 2009). By providing access to additional tools and resources, PRSSA e-board members can take ownership of developing their own skills related to online program management, identifying relevant subject-matter experts in the field of public relations, and integrating pre-packaged content that best serves the members' educational and professional development needs.

PRSSA e-board members recognized the benefits of online programming in regard to meeting attendance. Respondents noted that online programming could help meeting attendance by offering a level of convenience for members who could participate live from home or watch meetings on their own schedule when the meetings are recorded, as a respondent shared,

I hope that they increase the meeting attendance. Prior to going to an online format, I spoke to various members to find out what I can do to increase meeting attendance. A large majority of our dues paying members are commuter students who would not travel to school for the sole purpose of the meeting. I think the online

programs will help with attendance along with the new format I plan to implement at meetings.

One concern was “Zoom fatigue” members might experience, especially when classes are taught solely in the online modality. This points to a greater need for training resources that will teach PRSSA board members about the best practices of online event planning that facilitate strong audience engagement.

Respondents were most enthusiastic about the opportunity to schedule guest speakers. Many noted the convenience for guests since they did not need to travel to campus and expressed optimism for improving their chapter’s ability to schedule speakers in comparison to in-person meetings. Respondents were especially excited at the prospect of scheduling guest speakers from across the U.S. instead of focusing on recruiting guests who were within physical proximity to their university campus.

We have had no problem scheduling speakers and have even had an easier time as we have been able to bring more speakers in from all over the industry as well as the country. The flexibility has increased speakers’ willingness to agree to speak as well as the ease of simply hopping onto a Zoom call rather than necessarily having to travel to the school.

A small number of respondents did express concern with scheduling guest speakers because they would be too busy.

PRSSA national leadership should coordinate with PRSA to develop a nationwide PRSSA speakers directory that is available on a password-protected page of the PRSSA national website. Through collaboration with the PRSA national office, members may indicate their interest in new membership or renewal documentation as to whether they would like to be included in a PRSSA speakers directory. The directory can be a valuable resource for smaller PRSSA chapters, or chapters in

rural locations, that might have difficulty with identifying appropriate guest speakers. If a PRSA member indicates interest in being added to a PRSSA speaker directory, a follow-up questionnaire can be distributed to collect additional information such as: a) what company the speaker works for, b) how long they have worked in the PR industry, c) what industry do they specialize in (i.e. healthcare, nonprofit, food/beverage), d) areas of expertise (i.e. crisis communication, media relations, diversity & inclusion), e) how the speaker would like to meet with chapters (i.e. online or in-person), and f) demographic questions to ensure a diverse representation of speakers. The speaker directory can be updated through an opt-in selection in the PRSA new member or membership renewal process.

In addition to assistance with scheduling guest speakers, PRSSA chapters, especially small chapters, need access to other programming content for member meetings. Pre-packaged content developed specifically for PRSSA members, such as interviews with industry professionals and skills training learning modules should be available on-demand in a digital library that is available on the PRSSA website. That will not only provide content for chapters that are struggling during COVID-19 but serve chapters well into the future to increase the perceived value of dues and, in turn, increase membership.

### **Foster Relatedness**

Faculty advisers were consistent sources of guidance to PRSSA e-board members, as identified by nearly 83% of respondents for Spring 2020. In contrast, other organizations were far less consistent in providing support services to guide chapter leadership in developing online programs. University offices were identified by 27% of respondents and PRSSA national leadership trailed far further at less than 13%. A respondent shared,

I've been in PRSSA for seven semesters now. I was also the



National Committee Liaison. I felt in all of the roles I've been in a lack of support from PRSSA National. Other than the national conference, we don't get opportunities to interact with National other than when we are constantly reaching out ourselves. I think the biggest way national can support us is getting in touch with us first and setting up monthly (if not weekly) check-ins.

This lack of organizational communication, from the university and PRSSA, likely limited access to valuable information and resources that would have allowed PRSSA chapter leaders to effectively and efficiently transition to an online format. PRSSA chapter e-board members also indicated a need for general support from their universities and PRSSA national leadership including: a) more information related to managing their chapter in an online format and b) regular check-ins by university faculty/staff and PRSSA national leadership to address any emerging needs and to provide much-needed encouragement.

PRSSA e-board members noted concern about limited opportunities to promote their chapters to the campus community in an online environment. During COVID-19, respondents commonly noted traditional means of new member outreach — student organization fairs, “tabling,” in-class presentations, or casual conversations — as being reduced, or eliminated. As the results of this study found that there was a negative correlation between chapter size and whether the chapter received online programming assistance from its school or department, it is essential that smaller chapters receive online outreach assistance, especially among nontraditional or commuter students who might not be able to attend in-person events. That type of assistance holds potential to not only benefit increased membership in PRSSA, but to recruit prospective majors to the school or department.

Since more than 95% of respondents indicated their PRSSA

chapter would continue with online programming in Fall 2020, it is critical that chapters receive consistent and comprehensive training resources to guide their program planning. Small improvements have been made by university offices and the PRSSA organization to enhance communication and training related to online programming for Fall 2020, but research results point to a continued need for stronger efforts from both organizations. At the time of this survey in the early part of the Fall 2020 term, only 43% of respondents stated they were receiving guidance from university offices, and PRSSA national leadership lagged further behind by only providing guidance to less than 30% of respondents. At the same time, the number of respondents who received guidance from other PRSSA chapters grew dramatically from 4.3% in Spring to 23.5% in Fall 2020, suggesting that chapter leaders were turning to each other as peer support for information and solutions when communication lacked from university and organization resources.

More than 50% of respondents indicated a desire to collaborate with PRSSA chapters at other universities, and nearly 25% had already reached out to other chapters during the Fall 2020 semester. Those respondents indicate a growing desire for inter-chapter networking and/or cross-chapter collaborations. Such initiatives build a productive network to share the load of programming and create a greater sense of community. Examples of those collaborations include PRSSA Reimagined, a partnership of six PRSSA chapters across the U.S. Each chapter committed to producing one event during Fall 2020 that was open to all PRSSA members. The Georgia PRSSA E-board Meetup, hosted by Kennesaw State University, invited chapter leaders to network and collaborate on finding solutions to common chapter issues related to online programming. Other PRSSA chapters, such as Ohio University, West Virginia University, and SUNY Oswego, opened guest speaker events to all PRSSA members. To further facilitate inter-chapter collaborations,

PRSSA national leadership needs to ensure that the PRSSA chapter directory, available on the PRSSA national website, is up to date with current leaders and chapter contact information. As part of this study, the authors attempted to access PRSSA chapter e-board leaders through the chapter directory and discovered more than 30% of chapter listings were either outdated or incomplete. By educating chapter leaders and faculty advisers on how to update their chapter's directory listing, they can ensure their chapter information is current, correct, and complete. PRSSA chapters could indicate in their chapter directory listing whether they would like to collaborate with other PRSSA chapters.

#### **Limitations and Directions for Future Study**

This study provides a detailed snapshot of current PRSSA chapter management issues during COVID-19, but the situation remains in a state of flux and the long-term effects are yet to be known. While the authors were able to examine actual practices of online programs for the Spring 2020 term, only anticipated programming practices were collected for Fall 2020. In addition, there was a large percentage of female participants in this study. No demographic information could be found about the ratio of male, female, or nonbinary PRSSA executive board members to determine if the study sample was representative of the total population, though gender representation does appear to be reflective of the public relations industry (Dubrowski et al., 2019). To provide a broader picture of study results, future research will pursue a longitudinal perspective by conducting follow-up surveys of PRSSA e-board members as COVID-19 continues to impact universities to determine if current findings remain stable over time.

#### **Conclusion**

While the vision of a more collaborative PRSSA is aspirational, it is by no means impractical. The new strategies and tactics related to online programming that result from this study hold promise to strengthen

the technological business aptitude of students, allow for increased networking and mentorship access to professionals from across the globe, and improve chapter recruitment and retention outcomes through diverse communication modalities and strategies.

During times of uncertainty, organizational management practices are put to the test. The cracks and flaws that have gone unnoticed in times of smooth sailing can no longer be ignored when navigating stormy seas. The research findings provide evidence that PRSSA national leadership, the PRSA organization, and university departments can seize the opportunities to address organizational challenges highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic response to pursue new training and support initiatives for PRSSA chapters. By embracing innovations, PRSSA chapters will emerge from the storm stronger and more resilient.

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