

A Shortage of Excellence? An Exploratory Study of U.S. Doctoral-level Education in Public Relations

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory content analysis of doctoral-level education in public relations at U.S. universities describes the state of doctoral training in the discipline, applies existing best practice criteria, and generates recommendations for improving the structures and processes that undergird the preparation of new scholars and faculty members. Bringing together existing doctoral and master's-level best practices from the discipline alongside doctoral best practices from the broader fields of communication and mass communication, this paper explicates the work of strengthening public relations doctoral programs and improving the size and quality of the graduate student-to-faculty pipeline. Key recommendations include additional codification of public relations and strategic communication tracks and classes within broader doctoral programs, as well as a more explicit commitment to diversity and inclusion (D&I) as a measurable value and objective for doctoral programs.

Keywords: d&i, inclusion, diversity, doctoral education, public relations

While the public relations field has seen significant growth in the volume and quality of pedagogical scholarship over the past several decades, there has been a shortage in the number of scholars produced for available tenure-track faculty positions (Botan & Hazleton, 2006; Commission on Public Relations Education [CPRE], 2012; Turk, 2006; Wright & Flynn, 2017). U.S. doctoral-level education in the public relations discipline has yet to be studied systematically. Foundational studies have examined undergraduate education (e.g., CPRE, 2018; Turk, 2006) and master's-level programs (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2000; Briones & Toth, 2013; CPRE, 2012; Toth & Briones, 2013; Weissman et al., 2019) and touched on doctoral education (Auger & Cho, 2016), but, even as scholars have spoken to the "shortage of excellence" in public relations teaching and research (Wright, 2011, p. 245; Wright & Flynn, 2017, p. 55), little has been done to formalize expectations for doctoral programs and graduate students to help address this gap. The Commission on Public Relations Education's (CPRE) 1999 report provided broad guidelines for curriculum and learning objectives in U.S.-based public relations doctoral programs, but no research has evaluated (1) whether these guidelines have been followed by existing programs and (2) what updates, adjustments, and improvements could be made to better address the needs of today's graduate students and tomorrow's faculty members.

As a young discipline (in academic time), U.S. public relations graduate students do not have wide accessibility to highly developed, focused, and established degrees and programs at the doctoral level. Yet, they still have more opportunities than other countries. As of 2017, Canada had no doctoral programs allowing students to focus on public relations (Wright & Flynn, 2017). Therefore, this research addresses this lacuna to better understand the programs that currently train tomorrow's scholars and educators. The results and discussion propose an updated framework for doctoral programs to ensure they provide students with

access to the best-possible preparation for the research, teaching, service, and professional work. Additionally, given the significant challenges faced by faculty of color across disciplines (e.g., Arnold et al., 2016; Guillaume & Apodaca, 2020; Haynes et al., 2020), and the underrepresentation of faculty of color in communication and mass communication (e.g., Hon et al., 1999; Murthy, 2020; Stephens, 2003), as well as within the discipline and profession of public relations (e.g., Landis, 2019; Place & Vanc, 2016; Tindall, 2009a, 2009b; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017; Waymer & Brown, 2018; Wills, 2020), this project looks to add student and faculty diversity and inclusion (D&I) as measurable outcomes of successful doctoral programs.

The purpose of this project is to, first, provide an exploratory examination of existing U.S. public relations education at the doctoral level and compare the findings with existing and emergent best practices. Next, as doctoral best practices in the discipline have not been studied (CPRE, 1999), the researchers investigate and connect existing best practices in master's-level programs in public relations with research from related doctoral programs in communication and mass communication to recommend updated guidelines. The results provide crucial insights about who is teaching public relations doctoral students, how students are being taught, and how these processes may be improved.

Literature Review

The first public relations degree at any level offered in the U.S. was Boston University's Master of Science in 1947 (Wright, 2011; Wright & Flynn, 2017). While the discipline has seen significant efforts in the interim to generate best practices, there is little uniformity in the structure of public relations graduate education in the U.S., either at the master's or doctoral level (e.g., Briones et al., 2017; CPRE, 1999; Toth & Briones, 2013). Previous research on master's-level education has focused on the variety of existing programs and attempted to understand how they

address the changing needs of students and the PR industry. Multiple factors have contributed to this variety, including the multiple models for students prioritizing doctoral education or professional development, evolving specialization within the public relations profession (Turk, 2006), and an attempt to bridge the ongoing disconnect between existing curricula and employer-demanded skills (Toth & Briones, 2013). Yet, this variety at the master's level has not translated into a similar depth of programs at the doctoral level.

Best Practices in U.S. PR Graduate Education

A U.S. doctoral degree in public relations should serve as a gateway for graduates to generate research specific to the discipline (for scholarly or organizational purposes), teach and mentor students at multiple levels, and serve the academy and the profession (CPRE, 1999). Beginning in the 1970s, a series of commissions led the discipline's direction on education and pedagogy at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Wright and Turk (2007) outlined the historical path from the 1970s to 2006, beginning with the first formal commission in 1973-1975. At the graduate level, it recognized the shortage of doctoral programs in existence at the time and focused its attention on strengthening the research components of master's programs. By 1985, a reconstituted commission recognized the growing need for improved graduate education, as well as a more defined structure for undergraduate skills and expectations (Wright & Turk, 2007, p. 577). For the doctoral programs, the commission strongly advocated for an increased focus on research and methodology development. Unlike the master's-level PR programs, a public relations doctoral program should focus on helping students develop theoretical and methodological skills applicable to either an academic or applied research setting (CPRE, 1999).

In contrast to scholarship in journalism, which prioritizes professional development research (Macdonald, 2006), CPRE cemented

the importance of social science research as the center of academic public relations' scholarly inquiry and doctoral training (1999). Delineated expectations for graduate education in public relations were initially developed in 1985 by the Commission on Graduate Public Relations Education (Aldoory & Toth, 2000), and later updated in the CPRE report, *Standards for a Master's Degree in Public Relations: Educating for Complexity* (CPRE, 2012). According to the report, all master's degree-seeking students should be exposed to a core curriculum with five content areas: (1) strategic public relations management, (2) basic business principles and processes, (3) communication/public relations theory and research methods, (4) global influences on the practice of public relations, and (5) ethics (see CPRE, 2012, pp. 11-15). It describes a "fork in the road" (p. 16), where curricula should diverge for professional- and academic-focused students. The recommended academic track includes additional courses in research, as well as a thesis, in contrast to a professional track, which would include a topical or industry specialization (e.g., health communication, crisis/risk communication, sports public relations, etc.) and an internship or practicum experience.

Table 1: Public Relations Master's-Level Competencies, Topics, and Foci

Professional & Academic M.A. (CPRE, 2012, pp. 5-6)	Academic M.A. (CPRE, 2012, p. 6)
Globalization	Public relations theories
Entrepreneurship	Advanced critical thinking
Technology	Advanced social science research
Ethics	Applied public relations research skills
Organizational function and business knowledge	Public relations classroom pedagogy
Role of communication in society	Preparation to enter doctoral programs
Leadership skills	
Teamwork skills	
Critical thinking and problem solving	
Social science research	
Communication management	

The most complete set of guidelines for U.S. doctoral programs in public relations was completed by the CPRE as part of its 1999 report: *A Port of Entry*. It offered four recommended outcomes for doctoral graduates: (1) to be prepared for faculty and high-level managerial roles, (2) to be well versed in public relations theory and concepts, as well as related fields in communication and mass communication, (3) to be able to generate original research that contributes to the discipline of public relations, and (4) to contribute to new paradigms and directions for the communication and mass communication fields. In order to achieve these ends, the report makes a number of curricular recommendations (see Table 2).

Table 2: Recommendation for the U.S. Public Relations Doctoral Curriculum

(CPRE, 1999, p. 18)	
1.	“The core curriculum of most Ph.D. programs in communication or mass communication stresses research and theory building through courses in communication theory, philosophy of science, research methods and statistical and qualitative research tools.”
2.	“A public relations Ph.D. candidate should also take the bulk of his or her coursework in these core areas of research skills. It is essential that the instructors of these core courses understand public relations, encourage new research on public relations problems and encourage the building of public relations theories. This has seldom been the case in current Ph.D. programs.”
3.	“In addition, the Ph.D. programs should offer several specialized seminars in public relations on topics such as public relations management and its appropriate place in the organizational structure; behavior of publics; public relations roles, law, history and operations; and global perspectives on public relations”
4.	“Public relations Ph.D. students should be encouraged to take research seminars in related to social, behavioral and business sciences that are particularly relevant to public relations in order to learn the theories and methods of those related disciplines. These courses, for example, could include the sociology of organization, organizational communication, operations research and management science, political behavior, sociology of collective behavior, public opinion, language usage and communication and social psychology.”

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| 5. “Finally, the public relations Ph.D. candidate should conduct dissertation research in which he or she studies theory applicable to the solution of important public relations problems and in specific topic areas in public relations such as investor relations, crisis management, issues management, social responsibility, marketing public relations, and integrated communications. |
| 6. “However, a doctoral program also has the obligation to prepare students to teach by involving students in the classroom and developing their teaching skills because many, if not most, graduates will accept positions as public relations faculty. |

These recommendations point to establishing a foothold for public relations within existing U.S. communication and mass communication doctoral programs, and creating additional space to perform public relations research, lead public relations seminars, and allow students to pursue their individual interests. For a discipline early on in its development at the doctoral level, these recommendations broadened the ability for students enrolled in existing programs to focus more directly on public relations as the center of their study. Many of these recommendations should be familiar to more recent doctoral graduates. This study seeks, in part, to evaluate this progress. Yet, as undergraduate public relations programs have expanded rapidly, these recommendations and limited disciplinary doctoral program offerings may not be enough to keep pace with the demand for new public relations faculty (Botan & Hazleton, 2006; Wright & Flynn, 2017).

Pipeline Challenges for U.S. Doctoral Programs in Public Relations

The applied nature of the discipline has meant that public relations faculty are often expected to have terminal degrees and “experience in the public relations field” (CPRE, 2018, p. 106), for example, Toth (2010) and Smudde (2020) argue for the value of both professional and academic experiences for doctoral students and researchers. Due to practical enrollment needs, public relations faculty are often recruited and/or rewarded for their professional knowledge and ability to teach rather

than their ability to conduct research (Botan & Taylor, 2004). For doctoral programs, this poses a significant potential problem for inequity between the discipline of public relations and other disciplines in communication and mass communication with more established and developed Ph.D. pipelines. The challenge is compounded by the lack of existing faculty in communication and mass communication doctoral programs who focus on or specialize in public relations, which contributes to the gap of Ph.D. graduates with a public relations research focus (CPRE, 1999). While these challenges are present today, they are not new—as explained by the CPRE more than two decades ago:

It is essential that the instructors of these core courses understand public relations, encourage new research on public relations problems, and encourage the building of public relations theories. This has seldom been the case in current doctoral programs. (CPRE, 1999, p. 18)

Around this same time, Johnson and Ross (2000) found fewer than 10 public relations graduates at the doctoral level in 1995 and 1999¹. As undergraduate enrollments for public relations majors have increased, doctoral programs have not kept pace (Botan & Hazleton, 2006). According to Wright (2011) and Wright and Flynn (2017), one of challenges in finding well-qualified faculty is the insistence by U.S. universities on having doctoral graduates or those with terminal degrees as faculty members, in the midst of exceptional growth of undergraduate student enrollment in public relations courses, particularly at smaller institutions. In 2012, the CPRE report focused on master's programs recommended that these programs could “help address the shortage

¹ The data appears to be based on degree name (i.e., Ph.D. in Public Relations), thus potentially undercounting those who have received Ph.D.s in Communication or Mass Communication with an emphasis in public relations, as the vast majority of current faculty have.

of public relations faculty” by “mentoring talented students in their master’s degree programs to earn doctoral degrees and acquire significant professional experience (p. 30). Yet, many R1 universities², particularly the elite universities that produce a disproportionate number of doctoral graduates, do not dedicate resources to doctoral programs in public relations that would help rectify this imbalance. Despite the availability of tenure-track positions in public relations and the general sentiment that at least some public relations faculty should hold terminal degrees in the field (CPRE, 2012; 2018; Turk, 2006), doctoral education in public relations has lagged behind the demand. According to the most recent CPRE report (2018),

while not every university teaching position can be tenured, it is important that there are tenured faculty in public relations programs to help provide leadership and influence in faculty governance. Tenured educators help secure resources and funding as well as providing sustainability by ensuring that programs remain relevant in teaching students worthwhile skills and abilities. Additionally, tenured faculty are instrumental in leading and directing research that ultimately enhances the public relations industry by testing and verifying that teaching methods and industry practices are achieving their desired output. (p. 102)

The shortage of terminal degree-earners continues to drive the over-reliance on professional-track faculty (e.g., adjuncts and part-time instructors), despite the governance and accreditation challenges it creates for colleges (Turk, 2006). Even as professionals in the field have increasingly embraced graduate education (DiStaso et al., 2009) and

² Under the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, doctoral granting institutions (those that award more than 20 doctorates each year) are classified as R1 (Very High Research Activity), R2 (High Research Activity) or R3 (Doctoral/Professional Universities) (Kosar & Scott, 2018).

master's degree programs have multiplied (Shen & Toth, 2013), doctoral-level education has not followed the same trajectory.

Professionally, success as tenure-track faculty is also dependent on doctoral students building relationships that support research productivity and successful job searches. Relationships and relationship-building can be understood from a social network perspective, as networks of relationships play a significant impact on doctoral students' abilities to gain employment (weak ties), as well as build research and mentoring partnerships (strong ties) (Saffer, 2015). Effective doctoral programs generate ties among students and faculty—building social capital for graduates and giving students and early career scholars the chance to fill “structural holes of a learning network” (p. 7)—yet the spoils of inequity disproportionately go to those already set up to succeed from elite doctoral programs (Holley & Gardner, 2012). This may be reflected at an individual level, affecting traditionally marginalized students more than privileged students, as well as at the level of the discipline, as public relations faculty often represent a small group of scholars at larger institutions. Other faculty in communication and mass communication programs may also perceive public relations as “dirty work” or less academically worthy than other disciplines (Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2020, p. 1), leading public relations scholarship to be potentially marginalized within departments that lack an established core group of PR faculty. In a survey, Neuendorft et al. (2007) asked communication scholars to rank successful doctoral programs in the field and found that only 20% of faculty and 22% of program chairs thought that more doctoral programs should emphasize the promotional communication category, including public relations and advertising. Additionally, 27% of faculty thought that there was already too much of an emphasis on these areas. Given these disciplinary challenges, the next section examines best practices in doctoral education from across academia.

Best Practices in U.S. Doctoral Education

Significant research across higher education has provided broad recommendations and guardrails for doctoral education. A leading model to understand the process is grounded in *socialization*—explaining doctoral training as professional identity development through relationship building with those in the research area (e.g., Sweitzer, 2009). This combines a network mindset with the idea that students who are more willing to develop their professional identity will be more successful at setting relevant goals and completing the necessary work during their time in graduate school. As few, if any, doctoral students begin with a complete understanding of the path toward faculty careers, graduate programs have a responsibility to provide professionalization training, networking opportunities, and practical career guidance to students (Wulff et al., 2004).

Gardner's (2009) multi-disciplinary study defines success in doctoral programs as a combination of academic achievement, retention, degree completion, and professional skill development for academic positions (research, teaching, etc.). Across diverse disciplines, faculty members in what Gardner defines as *successful departments* (based on the completion rate of their graduate students relative to national averages for their field) identified two key markers of students' success: empowerment through self-direction and a desire and ability to disseminate research through conferences and publications. By contrast, departments with low completion rates had a less collegial and more competitive environment among current students and focused on maintaining status more than those with high completion rates. Retention and success rates for doctoral students have been described as tied to the degree to which students are professionalized—exposed to the rules in play for their specific field of study (Gopaul, 2015). Gardner (2009) recommends successful doctoral programs should (1) be using mentoring to facilitate habits and skills

such as self-motivation as well as (2) helping students to publish through coursework: “aligning course assignments and research opportunities so that students engage in the publication process is also necessary” (p. 401).

Places to look for guidance in benchmarks and best practices include doctoral education scholarship in the broader fields of communication and mass communication. In mass communication, Christ and Broyles’s (2008) benchmark study arose from the 2006 Task Force on the Status and Future of Doctoral Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, which surveyed chairs or directors for 39 of 40 AEJMC-affiliated doctoral programs in existence at the time. Participants explained that preparing doctoral students for professional success in academia required, among other factors, research preparation (e.g., coursework, exposure to quantitative and qualitative methods, research assistantships/mentorship), and conference travel funding to present their own research and gain exposure to others’ research. That said, respondents also noted that doctoral students should be prepared for the teaching and service expectations of the tenure-track faculty position. Pardun et al. (2015) investigated the mentoring relationship between advisor and doctoral student by conducting a survey of 241 full professors of journalism and mass communication. The researchers found that senior faculty perceived graduate students as “colleagues in training” more than research assistants (p. 363), and that successful mentor-mentee relationships grew from shared experiences with both participants. By contrast, Neuendorf et al. (2007) found that explicit specialization in specific areas of research was a strength for doctoral programs in communication, which provides support for programs seeking to further define a niche in public relations—and convince colleagues outside of the discipline of the potential value in developing additional tracks within existing programs.

D&I in U.S. Doctoral Education

Public relations faces the challenge of limited diversity in the

industry by multiple measures (Bardhan & Gower, 2020; Tindall, 2009a; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017; Wills, 2020) and in higher education (Brown et al., 2011, 2016, 2019; Tindall, 2009b; Waymer, 2012). Public relations has been criticized for a lack of cultural diversity in education and the industry for three decades (Brown et al., 2019; Kern-Foxworth et al., 1994; Len-Rios, 1998; Muturi & Zhu, 2019; Pompper, 2005). As the percentage of Americans identifying as non-white continues to increase (42% in 2020) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), the PR industry continues to lag behind with an estimated 19% PR professionals identifying as non-white (Elasser, 2018; Muturi & Zhu, 2019).

However, the public relations industry has made some progress in its attention and awareness toward D&I. For example, the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) recently founded the Center for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (IPR, 2020); the Diversity Action Alliance (DAA) has created a coalition of diverse communication leaders; and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Educators Academy and chapters across the U.S. have made efforts to support diversity among practitioners and DEI principles in organizations' communication and actions (Blow & Gils Monzón, 2020). While efforts to increase the number of underrepresented groups in the PR profession has been slow, some scholars have indicated that the root problem begins in the classroom, which ultimately affects the industry pipeline (Brown et al., 2011, 2016, 2019). In this environment, some have called on universities and public relations faculty to take a leading role in diversifying the profession (Landis, 2019). Past research has indicated that cultural diversity can be addressed by (1) actively recruiting faculty of color to better reflect the student body, (2) creating more networking and mentoring opportunities, and (3) incorporating D&I within the curricula (Brown et al., 2019; Landis, 2019; CPRE, 2018). Having a diversity of identities among faculty provides role models for more students—as noted in Brown et al.'s (2011)

research with Black undergraduates. According to the CPRE report:

In order to see D&I within the public relations industry flourish, change must begin at the academic level through a more diverse student and educator base, and through changes in how D&I is taught at the educational level. This school-to-industry pipeline will result in a more diverse workforce. (CPRE, 2018, p. 139)

Unfortunately, doctoral education in PR tends to maintain the current status quo or exacerbate this existing inequity (Gopaul, 2011, 2015). Across academia, faculty of color are consistently underrepresented and face more difficult paths to tenure and promotion (Arnold et al., 2016; Haynes et al., 2020). Public relations doctoral education is often embedded within schools and departments of communication and mass communication, which also face significant D&I issues (e.g., Corrigan & Vats, 2020; Hon et al., 1999; Murthy, 2020; Stephens, 2003). Despite these challenges, the benefits of diverse faculty in the discipline are clear: When faculty and curricula embrace and embody D&I, public relations undergraduate students benefit in improved understanding, increased skills in communicating with diverse publics, and exposure to a wider variety of client work and career opportunities (Bardhan & Gower, 2020; Place & Vanc, 2016).

While race and ethnicity are often at the center of discussions of D&I, any conception of these terms should represent multiple salient facets or categories (e.g., Hon & Brunner, 2000; Mundy, 2015; Pompper, 2007; Sha, 2013). Gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, (dis)ability, international student status, and many other factors must inform any evaluation of and recommendations for doctoral programs (Smith, 2015). As such programs look to play a productive role diversifying faculty, they should keep in mind the challenges of first-generation college students who go on to earn doctoral degrees, including financial challenges, familial pressures, and imposter syndrome, as well as

the specific structural discrimination and othering faced by students from underrepresented and historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups (Holley & Gardner, 2012; Waymer, 2012). Additionally, doctoral programs should examine their role and responsibility in preparing future PR faculty leaders who will oftentimes act as the bridge between the industry and the academy to prepare students to have a multicultural perspective. As J. Grunig and L. Grunig (2011) explained, excellence in public relations means having diversity in roles and perspectives that can benefit the organization. Doctoral education clearly has a role to play in driving diversity among faculty and, ultimately, among students and practitioners.

Based on these challenges in public relations education, doctoral education, and D&I, the following research questions explore the current state of U.S. doctoral programs in public relations:

RQ1: Where can students study public relations at the doctoral level in the U.S.?

RQ2: What does the PR curricula look like in U.S.-based doctoral programs in communication and mass communication?

RQ3: How do these curricula align with best practices for U.S. doctoral education?

RQ4: How are D&I reflected in the curricula and policies of doctoral programs in PR?

Method

This study used an exploratory content analysis of U.S.-based doctoral programs in communication and mass communication to address the research questions at hand. The research team gathered data on public relations doctoral programs that were available through the public websites of the departments, schools, and colleges. Based on prior studies by Aldoory and Toth (2000) and Johnson and Ross (2000), the researchers used qualifying criteria for the programs involved in the study. Beginning with initial lists of doctoral-level programs from the National

Communication Association (NCA) and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), 32 programs met two of the following four criteria: (1) a degree in public relations or strategic communication or a track/focus area in public relations or strategic communication (or similar), (2) at least two courses in public relations or strategic communication (i.e. not just a single PR Theory course), (3) at least one current, tenure-track faculty member who has published in public relations journals over the past five years, and (4) at least one current student researching public relations³. Data for all 32 programs is provided. The initial list was culled to 25 programs that met three of the four criteria or had four or more public relations researchers as tenure-track faculty members. The second list will be referred to as well-established public relations programs. The universities in the sample represented primarily public, R1 institutions with significant research productivity, as well as several large private institutions. They range in size from just under 10,000 students to more than 50,000.

To better understand these programs, categories for further data collection were determined by best practices for doctoral education (CPRE, 1999) and master's-level education in public relations (CPRE, 2012). To the degree that it was publicly available (via departmental websites and accessible graduate handbooks), the researchers also collected data regarding the degree name, degree specializations (relevant to public relations scholarship), the number of current students researching public relations, the number of listed public relations courses, and the number of public relations tenure-track faculty, as well as several curricular data points: pedagogy courses, research methods, and professional development. Among the challenges faced in collecting these

³ For this step, public relations journals included International Journal of Strategic Communication, Journal of Communication Management, Journal of Public Interest Communications, Journal of Public Relations Research, Journal of Public Relations Education, PR Inquiry, Public Relations Journal, and Public Relations Review.

data were the many variations in definitions to represent similar concepts among students, faculty, and program guidelines. For example, in order to adequately capture the breadth of scholarship constituting public relations, students and faculty were considered public relations researchers if they listed their research interest as *public relations*, *strategic communication* (not exclusively advertising/marketing), *crisis communication*, or *risk communication* or if they actively (within the past five years) published in a public relations journal (i.e. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Review*). Students and faculty were not included in the sample if their publications were exclusively in advertising, health communication, journalism, marketing, mass communication, media studies, political communication, science communication, social media, or other related communication subfields. Public relations courses reflected a similar definition, including strategic communication, crisis communication, and risk communication, but excluding health communication, communication theory, mass communication theory, etc. Incorporation of D&I language in the graduate handbooks served as an initial way to investigate this category and better understand where public relations theories could be taught.

In order to develop updated criteria for doctoral education in public relations, the researchers utilized a thematic analysis approach to examine and synthesize existing frameworks (e.g., McKinnon, 2014; Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). This included a close reading of the existing frameworks and best practices (as documented in Table 5), which contributed to the verification of existing criteria (CPRE, 1999) and the synthesis of new, literature-driven criteria. These criteria attain resonance (Tracy, 2013) through connecting aforementioned best practices in doctoral education, research and professionalization in academia, public relations pedagogy, and D&I—topics central to the success of doctoral students.

Results

RQ1: Where can students study public relations at the doctoral level?

The results of this investigation found 32 U.S.-based doctoral programs where studying public relations with expert faculty oversight was available, and 25 programs where studying public relations was clearly codified and supported (see Table 3). Programs ranged in their commitment to the discipline and established best practices, but findings supported the notion that there are a variety of options—geographic, interest-specific, and entry point/accessibility—that may allow for growth and expansion of the doctoral faculty pipeline through existing channels. The eight universities with the possibility for the study of public relations did not fit a different profile demographically or geographically, but had fewer faculty members researching public relations and fewer courses focusing on public relations topics. Of the well-established programs, most (17 of 25) only accepted students with master’s degrees into the doctoral program. Of the remaining seven, two universities strongly recommended a master’s degree, leaving five programs that would admit students regularly with only a bachelor’s degree.

Table 3: Analysis of U.S. Public Relations Doctoral Programs

	University	Doctoral Degree Name	PR Track/ Concentration	Number of PR Students ^	Number of PR Faculty ^
1.	Alabama*	Communication & Information Science	Applied Communication	3	8
2.	Central Florida*	Strategic Communication	Risk & Crisis Communication	N/A	5
3.	Colorado- Boulder*	Media Research & Practice	Strategic Communication	4	5
4.	Connecticut	Communication	Marketing Communication	N/A	1
5.	Duquesne*	Rhetoric	IMC; Corporate Communication	N/A	3
6.	Florida*	Mass Communication	Strategic Communication	13	7
7.	George Mason*	Communication	Strategic Communication	N/A	1

8.	Georgia State	Public Communication	Media & Society	N/A	1
9.	Georgia*	Mass Communication	N/A	5	7
10.	Howard	Communication, Culture, & Media Studies	Media Studies	N/A	1
11.	Kentucky*	Communication	Strategic & Organizational Communication	N/A	4
12.	Maryland*	Communication	Public Relations & Strategic Communication	15	6
13.	Miami*	Communication	N/A	13	5
14.	Michigan State	Information & Media	Advertising & Public Relations	2	2
15.	Minnesota*	Mass Communication	Public Relations	N/A	3
16.	Missouri*	Strategic Communication	Strategic Communication	6	3
17.	North Carolina*	Media & Communication	Political, Social, & Strategic Communication	N/A	4
18.	North Carolina State*	Communication, Rhetoric, & Digital Media	Public Relations	N/A	5
19.	North Dakota State	Communication	Organizational Communication	N/A	2
20.	Oklahoma*	Mass Communication	Strategic Communication	N/A	3
21.	Oregon*	Media Studies	N/A	4	7
22.	Penn State*	Mass Communication	Strategic Communications	7	5
23.	Purdue*	Communication	Public Relations	N/A	3
24.	South Carolina*	Mass Communication	N/A	4	7
25.	Syracuse*	Mass Communications	N/A	N/A	6
26.	Temple	Media & Communication	Global Media, Social Change, & Activism	2	1
27.	Tennessee*	Communication & Information	Public Relations	N/A	5
28.	Texas	Advertising	N/A	N/A	1

29.	Texas A&M*	Communication	Organizational Communication	N/A	3
30.	Texas Tech*	Media & Communications	Public Relations	5	2
31.	Virginia Commonwealth*	Media, Art, & Text	N/A	0	5
32.	Wayne State*	Communication	Risk, Crisis, & Conflict	1	3

Note: The table reflects available data from each university website during the 2019-2020 academic year. Universities are listed in alphabetical order (not in ranking order).

*These universities represent “well-established” PR programs that meet at least three of the four criteria.

^ Ph.D. students and tenure-track faculty were considered public relations researchers if they listed their research interest as *public relations*, *strategic communication* (not exclusively advertising/marketing), *crisis communication*, or *risk communication* or if they actively (within the past five years) published in a public relations journal (*International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *Journal of Public Interest Communications*, *Journal of Public Relations Education*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *PR Inquiry*, *Public Relations Journal*, *Public Relations Review*)

The 25 established public relations doctoral programs included a variety of degree names, the most common being *mass communication* (eight programs) and *communication* (six programs), as well as several instances of *strategic communication* and *media & communication*. This represents, in part, the historic split between programs paired with (for example) interpersonal communication and rhetoric in contrast to those connected to schools of journalism and mass communication (Wright, 2011). Within these, a variety of degree specializations or tracks represented the preferred coursework for public relations students. These included *applied communication*, *corporate communication*, *public relations*, and *strategic communication*, among others. Data on current doctoral students was not publicly available for many programs, but among those where it was, established programs averaged 4.7 currently enrolled doctoral students researching public relations. These programs

had up to 13 students and between one and eight faculty members researching public relations and related topics. Even among the established programs, many had very few enrolled students listing specializations or a research focus in public relations, which may point to a problematic lack of recruitment or faculty focus in relevant areas.

Table 4: Curriculum Requirements in U.S. Public Relations Doctoral Programs

	University	Required Proseminar	Required Methods	Required Teaching	Number of PR courses [^]	PR Course in Global, International, or Culture
1.	Alabama*	Yes	Yes	No	4	No
2.	Central Florida*	Yes	Yes	Yes	5	No
3.	Colorado-Boulder*	Yes	Yes	Yes	1	No
4.	Connecticut	Yes	Yes	No	3	No
5.	Duquesne*	No	Yes	Yes	4	No
6.	Florida*	Yes	Yes	Yes	5	Yes
7.	George Mason*	No	Yes	No	4	No
8.	Georgia State	Yes	Yes	Yes	2	Yes
9.	Georgia*	No	Yes	No	4	No
10.	Howard	Yes	Yes	No	1	Yes
11.	Kentucky*	Yes	Yes	Yes	4	No
12.	Maryland*	Yes	Yes	Yes	5	Yes
13.	Miami*	N/A	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A
14.	Michigan State	Yes	Yes	No	0	No
15.	Minnesota*	Yes	Yes	Yes	1	No
16.	Missouri*	Yes	Yes	No	1	No
17.	North Carolina*	Yes	Yes	No	2	No
18.	North Carolina State*	Yes	Yes	Yes	0	N/A
19.	North Dakota State	No	Yes	Yes	1	No
20.	Oklahoma*	Yes	Yes	Yes	5	Yes
21.	Oregon*	Yes	Yes	Yes	4	No
22.	Penn State*	Yes	Yes	Yes	5	No

23.	Purdue*	Yes	Yes	No	5	No
24.	South Carolina*	No	Yes	Yes	5	No
25.	Syracuse*	Yes	Yes	No	2	No
26.	Temple	Yes	Yes	Yes	1	No
27.	Tennessee*	Yes	Yes	Yes	5	No
28.	Texas	No	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A
29.	Texas A&M*	Yes	Yes	Yes	1	No
30.	Texas Tech*	Yes	Yes	Yes	5	Yes
31.	Virginia Commonwealth*	N/A	Yes	N/A	0	No
32.	Wayne State*	Yes	Yes	Yes	4	No

*These universities represent “well-established” PR programs that meet at least two of the four criteria.

^ Public relations courses reflected courses with titles such as *public relations*, *strategic communication*, *crisis communication*, and *risk communication*, but excluded those focused solely on advertising, communication theory, health communication, marketing, mass communication, theory, etc.

RQ2: What do PR curricula look like in U.S.-based doctoral programs in communication and mass communication?

RQ3: How do these curricula align with best practices for U.S. doctoral education?

From a curricular perspective, the doctoral programs reviewed in this sample shared many similarities and reflected many existing best practices. For example, all programs for which assistantship information was available provided opportunities for gaining teaching experience. Additionally, each program required students to take at least one research methods course. At a baseline level, this ensured that doctoral students have the tools to develop humanistic or social science research skills, but it does not mean they have a deep exposure to public relations scholarship. Proseminars or similar professionalization courses were part of the curriculum for 19 of the 25 well-established programs and six of the eight other universities. Fourteen of 25 established programs and five of

the eight other programs required a course in pedagogy (in several cases, combined with the professionalization course). Taken together, programs are prioritizing the research training aspect of doctoral work, but several may be potentially underemphasizing pedagogy and professionalization.

Public relations courses varied widely from program to program with *public relations theory* and *crisis communication* being the most popular. Well-established programs included 18 that offered more than one course specifically focused on public relations or related content, averaging just under 3.5 courses per university, with several not clearly having a relevant subject matter course listed. Even with these offerings, it was not clear that many doctoral students would have regular access to a sequence of regular public relations courses, even at several established programs. This was even more apparent at the other eight programs, which had up to three courses listed—most having just one.

RQ 4: How is D&I reflected in the curricula and policies of doctoral programs in PR?

D&I were evaluated in two ways: curricula and policies (see Table 4). First, curricula were examined by searching for a course in public relations with a focus on global PR, international PR, or culture in PR. For the 32 programs listed, 30 had accessible lists of courses offered. Of those 30, six had a course that reflected one of these three areas. Policies addressing D&I were examined by searching graduate handbooks for relevant content. Among programs where graduate handbooks were publicly available (19 of 32), only one included a formal diversity statement while two others referenced D&I as part of the program's vision or values. For the other 16 programs, D&I terms only appeared as part of faculty research or grievance procedures. Despite the limitations of the data, it was evident that, on the whole, doctoral programs still did not demonstrate visible, tangible commitments to D&I through policies or courses—two straightforward avenues for such action.

Discussion & Implications

Scholars have pointed to challenges in the pipeline of doctoral programs generating graduates with expertise in public relations research (e.g., Botan & Taylor, 2004; Botan & Hazleton, 2006; Wright, 2011; Wright & Flynn, 2017), but these data support a more optimistic view. Students interested in pursuing a doctorate in public relations have more options than many faculty members might realize. That said, existing doctoral programs in communication and mass communication demonstrate openness to public relations and strategic communication scholarship, but not always with the depth necessary to provide a thorough understanding of existing research and theory in the discipline as part of scholars' development. There is still, seemingly, a chicken-and-egg problem: Doctoral programs need more public relations faculty to teach additional public relations courses and move into administrative roles, but those new faculty cannot be trained without existing faculty in these programs. The crucial next step may not be establishing new doctoral programs, but rather ensuring that existing programs with the potential for growth in the public relations area (1) codify and formalize public relations and strategic communication tracks and courses, and (2) expand their use of existing best practices. Additionally, the findings point to possibilities for expanding access and inclusivity to improve D&I along multiple criteria. As the structures of doctoral education tend to magnify (rather than reduce) such inequity, doctoral programs must be proactive in addressing them (Gopaul, 2011).

What might these best practices look like? Beginning with the framework of the CPRE (1999; 2012) and supplementing with additional best practices from extant literature on doctoral pedagogy, the authors identified seven core competencies for public relations doctoral programs (Table 5). This includes three recommendations based on CPRE master's-level recommendations (2012) and doctoral-level recommendations

(1999): attaining (1) a deep knowledge of public relations research and theories, (2) advanced methodological training, and (3) pedagogical training. The findings and review of relevant literature led to four additional, emergent recommendations: (1) professionalization training to be a successful faculty member, (2) mentoring and networking support, (3) a clear, codified area or track for public relations doctoral studies, and (4) active, explicit support and metrics for D&I.

Table 5: U.S. Public Relations Doctoral Program Competencies

Public Relations Ph.D. Program Competencies	Sources
1. Deep knowledge of public relations research and theories*	CPRE, 2012; CPRE, 1999
2. Advanced social science methodology training (quantitative or qualitative)*	Christ & Boyles, 2008; CPRE, 2012; CPRE, 1999
3. Public relations classroom pedagogy*	CPRE, 2012; CPRE, 1999
4. New #1: Professionalization/preparation for faculty positions	Christ & Boyles, 2008; CPRE, 1999
5. New #2: Prioritizing mentoring and networking among public relations scholars	Gardner, 2009; Pardun et al., 2018; Saffer, 2015; Waymer, 2012
6. New #3: Established “area” or “track” for PR/strategic communication	Neuendorf et al., 2007
7. New #4: Active support and metrics for diversity and inclusion	Brown et al., 2011; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Murthy, 2020; Murturi & Zhu, 2019; Tindall, 2009b; Waymer, 2012

*Adapted from CPRE, 2012 recommendations for PR master’s degree programs.

Programs that develop successful doctoral graduates focus on research expertise as well as pedagogical preparation, but they must also address the professional development needs of today’s graduate students—who may not always have the opportunity to learn about how to succeed as tenure-track faculty members on the job (Gardner, 2009; Gopaul, 2015; Holley & Gardner, 2012). Doctoral students need exposure to networks of researchers in order to secure tenure-track positions and

build new partnerships for research (Saffer, 2015). Additionally, for public relations doctoral programs to thrive and grow, they should further establish themselves as clear, demarcated spaces as part of broader doctoral programs (Neuendorf et al., 2007). While the results indicated that many mass communication and communication doctoral programs have the potential to train public relations doctoral students, many fewer programs had public relations or strategic communication as an explicit area or track, and few had an assortment of public relations courses listed. Such codification works to prevent the loss of valuable programs when faculty retire or leave institutions, as well as to ensure opportunities at the doctoral level are clearly advertised to potential students. Programs must help students build their scholarly identities, nurture relationships within existing programs (among students and between students and faculty), and facilitate external networks with other graduate students and researchers in the field (Sweitzer, 2009; Wulff et al., 2004).

Finally, as D&I have been clearly outlined as significant challenges in communication and mass communication, more doctoral programs (including those in public relations) must begin the process of developing and integrating policies and curricula that support D&I in recruitment, graduate student policies, pedagogical training, exposure to theory and research, and—maybe most importantly—in visible support for doctoral students. To say that programs must begin this process is certainly not a slight to the exceptional scholarship and efforts of many faculty to bring D&I to the center of public relations research and pedagogy (e.g., Bardhan & Gower, 2020; Mundy, 2015; Place & Vanc, 2016; Pompper, 2007; Tindall, 2009b; Vardeman-Winter & Tindall, 2010; Waymer, 2012), but it reflects the lack of institutionalization of these values in the structures and processes that frame the doctoral experience. While rules or policies—written and unwritten—may shape the doctoral student experience, it is the faculty, graduate directors, and administrators who have the power

and obligation to reshape these rules with an eye toward improving D&I (Gopaul, 2015). As the 2017 CPRE report notes, D&I efforts will be successful in the public relations profession when there is change at the educational level in terms of diversifying faculty, students, and changing the way we teach.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As an exploratory study using publicly-available program data, this research has several limitations, a number of which point toward future directions for scholarship. This research does not address a range of important questions for U.S.-based doctoral education in the PR discipline: What challenges do today's public relations doctoral students and doctoral faculty face? What do these groups see as areas of opportunity or improvement? What do both groups see as obstacles and opportunities for increasing D&I in the public relations faculty pipeline? Additional qualitative research could further explore these questions to deepen insights about best practices and better grapple with perceived barriers. While labyrinthian institutional requirements and processes for course changes and updates may explain some of this variety, it is clear that (1) no two programs are alike or include the same offerings, and (2) many graduate courses may exist that are never or rarely taught. The researchers attempted to investigate several other categories and factors, but the data was not publicly available for many programs. These included assistantship funding, program graduation data and placements, dissertation topics, and the knowledge or visibility of currently enrolled students and their research interests. Additional granular data must be collected to investigate how and whether the programs that provide the infrastructure for developing public relations doctoral students are fulfilling that potential, as well as to identify additional obstacles for student success. In particular, publicly available data related to D&I from a policy perspective was scarce. As it stands now, PR educators are

not equipping students with D&I knowledge and skills (CPRE, 2018). Therefore, more research is needed to examine how doctoral programs can contribute to diversifying the PR curricula, recruit and fully support diverse faculty and students, and improve the overall school-to-work pipeline. Future research should consider generating additional data through surveys and interviews to more fully address these questions.

Conclusion

The discipline of public relations can only grow and thrive if an established pipeline consistently generates a diverse group of scholars that values the theories, questions, and approaches that answer a shared set of questions. This is not to say that public relations scholars should aim to replicate themselves or to only seek others like them (Toth, 2010), but that there is value in codifying the discipline and clarifying best practices to guard against contraction, confusion, or dilution. Building more robust public relations faculty units within specific doctoral programs helps to provide more opportunities for growth and development, as well as to strengthen ties and fill structural holes within the doctoral learning network (Saffer, 2015). Established programs develop and refine the curricula, courses, and specializations needed to prepare future faculty in public relations. More U.S. doctoral programs can and should move toward formalizing public relations tracks, as well as defining and measuring goals and strategies to increase D&I among faculty and doctoral students. In doing so, those managing the training and professional socialization of doctoral students must also assume the responsibility of limiting the transference of engrained inequities (Gopaul, 2011). The public relations industry's lack of diversity is an area of growing concern and professional focus, but little improvement (Bardhan & Gower, 2020). This represents an industry-wide problem and numerous studies are pointing to education as the catalyst and leader for change (Brown et al., 2019; CPRE, 2018; Pompper, 2005). Improving D&I for

students in public relations doctoral programs is an important part of this larger project.

Public relations is rich with a growing number undergraduate students. The discipline's research is increasing in stature and eminently practical beyond the academy. As this exploratory study indicates, U.S. PR doctoral education is well positioned to continue its growth alongside the demand for practitioners, undergraduate majors, and faculty. Scholars must take advantage of this opportunity to further establish and formalize these successful practices—as well as to prioritize changing those that have been less successful to improve D&I for future scholars and scholarship.

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Public Relations Doctoral Program Webpages

1.	Alabama*	https://cis.ua.edu/cis-doctoral-program/
2.	Central Florida*	https://www.ucf.edu/degree/strategic-communication-phd/
3.	Colorado-Boulder*	https://www.colorado.edu/cmci/aprd/phd
4.	Connecticut	https://comm.uconn.edu/grad/phd/#
5.	Duquesne*	https://www.duq.edu/academics/schools/liberal-arts/academics/departments-and-centers/communication-and-rhetorical-studies/graduate-programs/phd-in-rhetoric
6.	Florida*	https://www.jou.ufl.edu/graduate/phd/
7.	George Mason*	https://communication.gmu.edu/programs/la-phd-com
8.	Georgia State	https://communication.gsu.edu/public-communication/
9.	Georgia*	https://grady.uga.edu/academics/ph-d-degree-program/
10.	Howard	https://communications.howard.edu/index.php/ccms/
11.	Kentucky*	http://ci.uky.edu/grad/phd-communication
12.	Maryland*	http://www.comm.umd.edu/graduate/overview
13.	Miami*	https://com.miami.edu/phd-communication/
14.	Michigan State	https://comartsci.msu.edu/academics/academic-departments/advertising-public-relations-journalism-media-information/graduate
15.	Minnesota*	https://hsjmc.umn.edu/graduate/degree-programs/phd-mass-communication
16.	Missouri*	https://communication.missouri.edu/graduate-program

17.	North Carolina*	http://hussman.unc.edu/phd
18.	North Carolina State*	https://crdm.chass.ncsu.edu/
19.	North Dakota State	https://www.ndsu.edu/communication/programs/doctoral_program/
20.	Oklahoma*	https://www.ou.edu/gaylord/graduate/ph-d
21.	Oregon*	https://journalism.uoregon.edu/academics/graduate-programs/media-studies-phd
22.	Penn State*	https://www.bellisario.psu.edu/graduate/ph.d.-in-mass-communications
23.	Purdue*	https://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/communication/graduate/areasofstudy/publicrelations.html
24.	South Carolina*	https://www.sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/cic/academic_programs/phd/mass_communication_phd/
25.	Syracuse*	https://newhouse.syr.edu/academics/mass-communications/
26.	Temple	https://klein.temple.edu/academics/media-and-communication-doctoral-program
27.	Tennessee*	https://cci.utk.edu/phdprogram
28.	Texas	https://advertising.utexas.edu/graduate/advertising-phd-program
29.	Texas A&M*	https://liberalarts.tamu.edu/communication/graduate/about-the-doctoral-program/
30.	Texas Tech*	http://www.depts.ttu.edu/comc/graduate/phd/
31.	Virginia Commonwealth*	https://robertson.vcu.edu/graduate/strategic-public-relations/
32.	Wayne State*	http://comm.wayne.edu/phd/index.php

*These universities represent “well-established” PR programs that meet three of the four criteria.

Appendix

Program Qualifying Criteria:

32 programs met at least 2/4 (potential), 25 met at least 3/4 (well established)

1. A degree or a track/focus area in public relations or strategic communication (or similar)
2. A curriculum (at least two) courses in public relations or strategic

communication

3. At least one current, tenure track faculty member who has published in public relations journals* in the past five years (or self-identifies as a PR researcher^ in their university bio)

4. At least one current Ph.D. student researching public relations or strategic communication, defined by publishing in public relations journals* or by self-identifying as a PR/stratcomm researcher^ in their university bio

* “Public relations journals” were defined as the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *Journal of Public Interest Communications*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Journal of Public Relations Education*, *PR Inquiry*, *Public Relations Journal*, and *Public Relations Review*.

^ Self-identified research topics included *public relations*, *strategic communication* (not exclusively advertising/marketing), *crisis communication*, or *risk communication*.