

Public Relations Graduates' Perceptions of Their Degrees and Careers: A Five-University Study

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ABSTRACT

The numbers of public relations majors and available positions in the field continue to rise. However, many public relations alumni continue to have challenges finding these positions in the field and some choose to leave the profession after working in the field. Findings from this public relations' alumni survey explored the reasons why students major in public relations, the challenges to secure employment in the field upon graduation, and why they leave or stay in the profession. There were significant differences between gender in a variety of areas. Overall, just over one-third of respondents said they definitely or probably expected to spend their professional careers in public relations, but about three-fourths of those surveyed expressed satisfaction toward their degrees and the public relations profession. Educators and practitioners should work together more closely to train students who can successfully enter and remain in the public relations profession.

Keywords: perceptions of public relations degrees, curriculum, perceptions of public relations, perception of degrees, public relations alumni

Special Editorial Note: The authors dedicate this paper to the memory of our amazing colleague, Judy VanSlyke Turk. Thank you, Judy, for your insight, talent, and collaboration. We will miss you.

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Dedication

We dedicate this paper to the memory of our amazing colleague, Judy VanSlyke Turk. Thank you, Judy, for your insight, talent, and collaboration.

We will miss you.

Ken, Gemma, John, and Brad

Public relations has grown in virtually all facets in recent years, including opportunities in the profession and related fields, college degree programs, and numbers of classes. Many studies have been conducted on perceptions of the field by practitioners, educators, and students. However, few studies have specifically targeted alumni in public relations and focused on degree and career satisfaction and suggestions for curriculum improvements that could lead to enhancements for the profession. Many graduates of public relations programs never work in the public relations profession or leave the field. The major focus of this study is on public relations alumni perceptions of their education and professional experience, and this study includes responses from alumni in and out of the field to fill in some gaps in the research. This expansive survey research is based on a longitudinal study completed over the course of three years that initially started with focus groups and interviews.

Literature Review

Social Exchange and Identity Theories' Application to PR Students and Alumni

Social exchange researchers have explored the connection between people's motivation to obtain a reward in exchange for something of value (Homans, 1961), whether it be tangible or intangible. Additional studies have concluded that motivation of expected returns will impact an individual's voluntary actions (Blau, 1964). Levine et al. (2010) stated that for the most part people are satisfied with their relationships when the rewards exceed the cost, and they continue in those relationships where

investments lead to projected growth. In turn, what results is commitment forming between the exchange partners of employers and employees (Lawler et al., 2000).

Social exchange research expanded to real-world interactions including students and universities (Yucel-Aybat et al., 2018), as well as employer and employee exchanges (de Jong et al., 2009; Eisenberger et al., 1986). One study found that college students were motivated to choose a specific major based on factors they value most including personal value, interests, pay, interest, and ability to do the coursework, career activities, and job availability/location (Wright, 2018). Another study found that employees' motivation stems from the opportunity to develop exchange relationships with organizations through organizational support and leader member exchange (Wayne et al., 1997). Eisenberger and colleagues (1986) argued that those perceptions correlate with employees' commitment to the organizations for which they work.

Additionally, social identity researchers (Fiske & Ruscher, 1993) noted that social identity theory explicates that individuals categorize other individuals into in-groups and out-groups based on such criteria as ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, occupation, or the like and such organized groups provide individuals with meaning (Amiot et al., 2007) and a sense of belonging (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Students and employees who study public relations belong to a group of individuals with a similar social identity, but as other studies (Cialdini et al., 1976; Crisp et al., 2007) established, self-categorization can decrease or increase motivation and emotion depending on the social group's successes or failures.

Perceptions and Attitudes of Public Relations Students

Various studies have considered perceptions of public relations students, including their roles as leaders in the field and future professionals (Duffy et al., 2012; Gallicano et al., 2012; Quesenberry, 2016). In 2005, Sha and Toth stated at the time that "very little research"

had analyzed students' views on future careers (p. 94). They found that 62.6% of students in public relations thought they would be working in public relations 10 years after graduating. Many respondents also expressed a major interest in work-life balance, including flexible working hours. These authors emphasized the necessity to "demystify" the public relations workplace that is "even critical, to the survival of our field" (p. 99).

Other authors have studied student attitudes toward careers that indicated 60% expected to be promoted within a year of starting to work, and over half said they would counsel top management in their ideal jobs (Farmer & Waugh, 1999). Additional studies have reviewed student perceptions toward the profession in general before they entered the field (DeRosa & Wilcox, 1989; Morton, 1989). In a more recent related study (Fullerton & McKinnon, 2012), a nationwide survey of college students who are members of Public Relations Student Society of America chapters found a mix of attitudes and perceptions of the public relations industry. A large majority of students believed their college degrees had prepared them well for a career in public relations. Yet, many were still concerned about finding a job after graduation. A third-person effect was detected in that students believed that the negative media portrayals of the PR industry had more effect on others than it did on them.

Job Satisfaction in the Public Relations Field

Researchers have addressed job satisfaction of those working in public relations, regardless of educational background and time in the profession. Various scholars have analyzed overall career satisfaction, especially related to communication and commitment to careers (Duffy et al., 2012; Eisenberger et al., 1997; Pincus, 1986; Pincus et al., 1990; Wolniak & Pascarella, 2005).

Kang (2010) studied conflicts in public relations careers with a focus on ethics and found that ethical problems link directly to job

dissatisfaction. Other studies have considered millennials working in public relations. Gallicano et al. (2012) found that these young workers were generally satisfied with their positions. Blum and Tremarco (2008) discovered a link between job satisfaction and employees' perceptions of whether organizations were following their corporate values. These researchers emphasized the importance of employees feeling connected to the employer through shared values.

Multiple studies have examined job satisfaction differences between males and females working in public relations (Park, 2003; Serini et al., 1997, Wright et al., 1991). In the latest research above, Park (2003) conducted a survey of 40 questions focusing on self-perceptions. Regarding opportunity equity for different genders, the study found no occupational consensus between government and corporate practitioners. However, government practitioners emphasized gender equity more than corporate practitioners. In addition, women in corporate organizations were less satisfied with their salaries and opportunities for advancement than men, but there was no difference in this immediate aspect in government organizations.

Rupprecht (2011) examined work satisfaction of practitioners and developed focus areas of personal growth, recognition, community, trust, and respect. This was a qualitative and phenomenological study looking at composite textual and structural descriptions of phenomena. Rupprecht found that the leader of an organization sets the tone and had great impact on the happiness of employees. Participants also were happier if they felt they made a difference and they were respected and valued for their contributions. Participants also enjoyed feeling part of a team and had a sense of community in a workplace where people could connect to one another. They also thrived in an autonomous workplace where there was a spark to creativity, passion, and excitement as well as experiencing personal growth in the variety and types of work they were engaged in.

Satisfaction with the College Degree

Various studies have considered degree satisfaction of alumni. Pike (1993) found that satisfaction with college was positively correlated to later perceived learning. Pike (1994) later found that college satisfaction also was related to work experiences and career satisfaction. Still another related study concluded that alumni who were satisfied overall with their college experience expressed satisfaction with classroom experiences and social situations (Sanusi, 2007). Another group of researchers found a relationship between graduates' perceptions of employment preparation and their degree satisfaction. This satisfaction may also positively impact later donations (Martin et al., 2000). Others expressed broadly that alumni surveys and input can provide very useful information for educators related to college experiences and preparation for work (Cabrera et al., 2005).

Satisfaction with the Public Relations Degree

Very few scholars have investigated specifically the satisfaction of alumni with public relations degrees. Rybacki and Lattimore (1999) expressed that program assessment for public relations programs should definitely include alumni surveys and other related sources. Almost half of those included in this study said they used alumni surveys as part of their assessment programs. Richardson (1993) surveyed alumni from the University of Tennessee, which included some communication majors. Generally, they were satisfied with their educational experiences related to developing cultural understanding, verbal skills, and social skills. Todd (2012) studied the perspectives of millennial communication graduates based on their job skills and professionalism. Most of these respondents perceived themselves as above average or even outstanding. The annual survey of graduates from communication programs conducted by Becker et al. (2012) focused on job satisfaction, salary, and post-graduation employment. About two-thirds were glad they had chosen to major in

journalism or communication, and about one-fourth regretted the choice of major. Approximately 60% felt adequately trained for the job market (including having updated professors and courses with appropriate skills taught), but just under 28% expressed regret on their career choice. This study provided some specific details on public relations graduates: almost three-fourths were employed full time and the median salary was \$33,000.

Public Relations, Advertising, and Other Communication-related Education

One study conducted by DiStaso et al. (2009) highlighted that both the numbers of public relations jobs and the amounts of money spent on public relations functions were increasing. The stature of the field also was growing within organizations. The public relations profession itself was becoming a more strategic function and involved more counseling and involvement in decision-making processes. In addition, training and leadership roles of the field were showing an increase, including focus areas of research and ethics implementation. The authors questioned whether degree programs were keeping up with these trends.

Opinions as to how well colleges and universities prepare new graduates for the public relations field are often determined by educators' understanding of the field in its current state. Studies indicate the vast majority of practitioners typically have earned a bachelor's degree: 94.5% (Rentner & Bissland, 1990) and 99% (DiStaso et al., 2009). Statista (2014) found that almost 52,000 degrees were awarded in journalism and mass communication programs in 2012-2013, with approximately one-quarter of the majors in public relations, advertising, or closely related areas or combinations. However, Todd's (2014) research showed that supervisors rate millennial students as having below average writing skills, with 38% of supervisors suggesting that students should be required to gain more writing practice prior to graduation. Again, this finding demonstrates the importance of educators understanding the knowledge, skills, and abilities

necessary to prepare majors for potential success as they transition into the profession.

A general trend in communication education is toward specialized subfields within advertising and public relations education (Quesenberry, 2016). In fact, business leaders, educators, and students agree that specific knowledge is more important than being a generalist (Schelfhault & Crittenden, 2005). Neill and Schauster (2015) surveyed professionals in both advertising and public relations to discover what core skills are needed in practice and any gaps in education. They found the most common skills needed in the field are storytelling, business, strategic planning, presentations, math, and client relations. A common specialization for both fields is social listening and community management. Business skills for public relations and advertising students included statistics, financial documents, and budgeting as well as an understanding of business vocabulary and challenges. Regarding specialization, students need real-time technical training, strategic thinking, and problem-solving abilities through both theory and critical thinking courses. Technical skills in digital media were reinforced as a need in an earlier study by Kim (2012) that covered journalism, advertising, and public relations and characterized these broadly as digital media communications. This would now logically and obviously include the various uses of social media so prevalent in public relations practice.

From an advertising and business perspective, gender issues have also been a topic connected to education. McMillan (2016) found that women are most likely to be found in communication and least likely in business. This finding was confirmed in earlier research. Four different majors were investigated: advertising and public relations, marketing, English, and consumer sciences. Men were at their highest level at 62.5% in marketing and women were highest in consumer science at 81%. Women comprised 63.5% of undergraduate students in journalism and

mass communication programs, which normally include public relations majors (Windels et al., 2010; Windels et al., 2013).

Many studies have been conducted focusing on educators' and practitioners' perspectives, but again few have been targeted toward graduates. Much research has been conducted on employers' expectations of public relations graduates entering the workforce (Brody, 1988; Brody, 1990; Wakefield & Cottone, 1987) and specifically on whether alumni were educated well enough in specific areas, including writing (Cole et al, 2009; Hardin & Pompper, 2004). Other studies have provided an overview of educator and practitioner educational priorities and perspectives, often highlighting differences in desired focus areas (Sohodol, 2010; Sriramesh & Hornaman, 2006; Stacks et al., 1999). Todd (2009) added in another study that public relations professionals generally value hands-on learning more highly than educators.

The Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE, 2006; 2017) reported that practitioners and educators often agree on many areas that should be included in public relations degree programs. These two reports included recommendations for specific study in oral communication, writing, critical thinking, individual initiative, and overall positive attitude development. They added that business skills, behavioral science, global understanding, public relations ethics, technology use, and diversity also should be taught. Ragas et al. (2015) found in a study of Arthur W. Page senior communicators that understanding of various business areas was highly valued by employers and contributed to higher salaries for these public relations practitioners.

Need for Research on Perceptions of Public Relations Graduates

Few scholars have targeted their research efforts toward public relations graduates' perspectives on what should be included in degree programs. Gale and Bunton (2005) found that public relations and advertising alumni who completed ethics courses were more likely to

consider ethical issues when they entered the workforce. In this study, 56% of those surveyed were working in communication, which was actually an increase from a previous study that showed 46.5% working in the field (Becker & Engleman, 1988).

Based on the literature reviews considering perceptions and attitudes of public relations students, job satisfaction in the public relations field, satisfaction with the college degree, and public relations education, the following research questions were developed. Gender differences were considered for all the research questions.

Research Questions:

RQ 1: What values of social exchange and social identity motivated alumni to complete a degree in public relations?

RQ 2: Where have public relations graduates worked since graduating and do they plan to continue their careers in the same field? If so, what successful social exchanges to include gender motivate them to stay in the practice?

RQ 3: For those who no longer work in public relations, why did they leave the practice, and would alumni recommend public relations degrees and careers to others who wish to identify personally and socially as a practitioner?

Method

Five faculty members, all representing different universities, started with focus groups of interviews with alumni from their individual programs. The results of that research were incorporated into one survey concentrating on the perceptions of public relations graduates concerning their degrees and the field. Graduates from each location were targeted directly by faculty at each location through individual email lists and alumni associations when possible. In addition, social media channels (including LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter) were used to encourage broad participation in the study from targeted alumni. This was an online survey

available to all alumni from any of the institutions through one link. The research started with interviews and focus groups in 2015 and extended to actual surveys after that -- with final analysis of data in 2020. Multiple follow-up messages were sent by researchers to enhance feedback. The survey was completed through Qualtrics, and Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from all five universities.

Forced-choice questions with rankings were included as well as qualitative open-ended questions. Multiple questions were the result of previous related research from focus groups and interviews conducted by the same researchers. Participants were given the opportunity in many instances to add qualitative extended comments to closed-ended questions.

Findings

Overall, 659 respondents completed the survey from all of the universities included. Of those indicating gender ($n = 647$), almost two-thirds were female ($n = 412$, 63.7%) and just over one-third were male ($n = 235$, 36.3%).

Based on the 644 who indicated their age, younger alumni tended to respond in this study. Ages 21-40 were listed by 463 (71.8%), while ages 41 and over were listed by 182 (28.3%).

For the 655 indicating their university, responses were as follows: Mountain West private university ($n = 346$, 52.8%), Southern public university #1 ($n = 174$, 21.9%), Mid-Atlantic private university ($n = 57$, 8.7%), Mid-Atlantic public university ($n = 41$, 6.3%), and Southern public university #2 ($n = 37$, 5.6%).

Just over a third had earned advanced degrees ($n = 237$, 36.0%). The top two graduate areas were identical in number of responses: master's in a communication-related field ($n = 54$, 22.8%) and MBA ($n = 54$, 22.8%). These were followed by JD ($n = 26$, 11.0%) and MPA ($n = 25$, 10.5%). (Percentages here are based on the 237 who indicated they completed a graduate degree).

Specific explanations are included for each research question below and based on applicable survey questions. Because of numerous responses on open-ended questions and multiple responses by many alumni, theme or sub-theme totals will not equal the total number of overall responses for each question. In addition, qualitative summary figures are estimated as close as possible and could be skewed slightly based on uncommon abbreviations, misspelled words, or similar response irregularities from respondents. Each open-ended segment of all questions was reviewed thoroughly by analyzing all responses and placing them in similar categories. In addition, percentages are based on responses for each question as well as broader themes.

RQ 1: What values of social exchange and social identity motivated alumni to complete a degree in public relations?

The first question in the survey was an open-ended inquiry of why respondents first chose to study public relations. A thematic analysis of the 632 responses indicated that many of the alumni were attracted because of the skill sets in the profession, including writing ($n = 153$, 24.2%), strategizing and planning 8.9% ($n = 56$), applying creativity, ($n = 40$, 6.3%), oral communication 5.5% ($n = 35$) and design ($n = 19$, 3.0%). Additionally, other respondents commented specifically on the diversity of jobs in the field ($n = 7$, 1.1%).

Many graduates ($n = 86$, 13.6%) indicated choosing the field because they liked working with people, were good with people, were attracted to persuading others, or the field seemed to fit their personality. Many respondents indicated they changed their college major to public relations from other areas they perceived to be a less appropriate fit, such as business in general ($n = 73$, 11.6%), journalism/news reporting (67, $n = 10.6\%$) marketing ($n = 41$, 6.5%), broadcasting ($n = 28$, 4.4%), English ($n = 16$, 2.5%), advertising, ($n = 14$, 2.2%), and law ($n = 14$, 2.2%).

Public relations graduates were asked on a scale of 1 (not at all) to

5 (definitely) what factors motivated them toward completing the public relations degree. Respondents indicated dominant motivating factors were, in order of ranking: writing skills gained, enjoyed the classes, the broad application of the major to other fields, problem solving opportunities, and the diversity of public relations career choices. (See Table 1.)

Table 1*Factors for Completing the Public Relations Degree Across Gender*

Factors	All (<i>n</i> = 650)		Females (<i>n</i> = 412)		Males (<i>n</i> = 235)		Independent Samples t-test		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Writing skills gained	4.30	0.84	4.32	.835	4.26	.852	.933	641	.351
Enjoyed classes*	4.22	0.86	4.29	.838	4.08	.874	3.083	639	.002
Broad application to many other fields	4.01	1.09	4.04	1.070	3.97	1.102	.759	639	.448
Problem solving opportunities	3.95	0.99	3.96	.992	3.91	.994	.563	638	.574
Diversity of public relations career choices*	3.92	1.10	4.07	1.035	3.66	1.166	4.562	639	.000
Speaking skills gained	3.85	1.06	3.89	1.057	3.74	1.057	1.803	639	.072
Emphasis on relationships*	3.83	1.15	3.92	1.163	3.69	1.126	2.418	639	.016
Relationship of field to business	3.77	1.12	3.71	1.147	3.86	1.058	-1.554	6329	.121
Planning skills gained*	3.65	1.12	3.82	1.051	3.33	1.180	5.394	637	.000
Positive role of public relations in society*	3.45	1.14	3.57	1.143	3.23	1.119	3.589	635	.000
Research skills gained	3.22	1.14	3.26	1.152	3.13	1.086	1.423	635	.155
Layout and design knowledge*	2.87	1.24	3.02	1.230	2.59	1.197	4.274	635	.000
Travel opportunities in career*	2.87	1.29	3.00	1.296	2.62	1.234	3.601	633	.000
Group projects	2.67	1.25	2.69	1.261	2.62	1.223	.704	640	.482
High salary opportunities	2.49	1.09	2.50	1.093	2.47	1.087	.312	641	.755
Friends in major	2.36	1.33	2.40	1.381	2.29	1.262	1.063	639	.288
Other	3.68	1.88	3.53	1.741	3.88	1.650	-.753	54	.460

Females were more likely to rate numerous factors on degree completion higher than males overall. According to an independent sample t-test analysis, females rated the following factors higher: diversity of career, emphasis on relationships, enjoyed classes, layout and design knowledge, planning skills gained, positive role of public relations in society, and travel opportunities. Males only rated one factor higher, relationship of field to business, but it was not significantly higher. (See Table 1.)

RQ 2: Where have public relations graduates worked since graduating and do they plan to continue their careers in the same field? If so, what successful social exchanges to include gender motivate them to stay in the practice?

When asked to list the top five public relations jobs they hoped to gain after graduation, 74.5% identified corporate public relations and 73.7% identified agency/firm in their top five choices. Rounding out the top five choices were nonprofit/association (50.2%), special events (48.4%), and entertainment (39.4%). Working in government ($n = 252$, 38.2%) and university public relations ($n = 248$, 37.6%) were close behind. Several respondents did not intend to find a job in public relations: 93 selected this as their first option (14.1%), while 144 chose this option in their top five (21.8%). A t-test analysis found that males were more likely to prefer a starting job in corporations, $t(447) = 3.43$, $p < .01$, while females were more likely to prefer positions in fashion, $t(132) = 1.98$, $p = .05$, nonprofit, $t(325) = 4.31$, $p < .001$, and special events organizations, $t(176) = 4.71$, $p < .001$.

The first job after graduation was very often something not in public relations; 44.9% ($n = 296$) of respondents found jobs in other fields. For those whose first job was in public relations ($n = 357$), they were most likely in agencies/firms ($n = 95$, 32.1%), corporations ($n = 63$, 21.3%), or nonprofits/associations ($n = 50$, 16.9%). Another 8.4% of alumni went

straight to graduate school ($n = 25$), and 12.5% ($n = 37$) identified an “other” position in public relations. Respondents selected job categories and the responses were cross tabulated by gender to identify differences. Because the data were categorical, a Chi-Square analysis was conducted and found that there were differences between where males and females found positions, $\chi^2(13, N = 646) = 37.39, p < .001$. Specifically, males were more likely to find positions in corporations while females were more likely to find positions in government and nonprofit organizations.

Ultimately, 438 of the 659 respondents found employment in the field of public relations (66.5%). When the 93 respondents are subtracted who did not intend to look for a job in public relations, the percentage of those seeking jobs in public relations rises to 77.3%. The majority ($n = 331$) found a public relations position within a year (50.2% of all respondents, and 58.4% of those seeking public relations jobs). Another 56 (8.5% and 9.9% respectively) found a position by their second year, 38 (5.8%, 6.7%) between two and five years, and the remaining 13 (2.0%, 2.3%) after five years. At the same time, a majority of the respondents ($n = 358, 63.9%$) have held jobs other than public relations since graduation.

A minority of respondents in this study, 37.5% ($n = 243$), said they definitely or probably expect to spend their professional career in public relations. Of the 648 respondents to this question, 17.6% were unsure ($n = 114$), and 44.9% said they would probably not or definitely not spend their careers in public relations ($n = 291$). Females were significantly more likely to respond favorably about spending their careers in public relations, $t(640) = 5.95, p < .001$. More than 43% of females responded that they would definitely/probably continue their careers in public relations ($n = 177$), with 20% unsure ($n = 82$) and almost 37% responding definitely not or probably not ($n = 150$). Meanwhile, only 27% of males responded that they would definitely/probably continue their careers in public relations ($n = 64$), 13% were unsure ($n = 30$), and 60% indicated definitely not/

probably not ($n = 139$).

The alumni remaining in the public relations field ($n = 270$) primarily stayed because it was an enjoyable career, gave them a flexible career path, and they found opportunities for advancement. Making a lot of money and traveling were not as high on the list for motivating factors to stay in the field. Females, however, were significantly more likely to indicate traveling as a motivating factor, $t(253) = 2.35, p < .05$. (See Table 2.) Under the “other” category, respondents listed additional reasons such as the possibility of making a difference, using creativity in the job, and connecting with people.

Table 2

Motivations for Studying Public Relations

Motivations	1=Not at All	2	3	4	5=Definitely	Total Responses	Mean	SD
Enjoyable career	3	4	22	74	167	270	4.47	0.80
Flexible career paths	4	19	47	85	113	268	4.06	1.01
Opportunities for advancement	7	26	64	76	90	263	3.82	1.09
Financial opportunities	28	37	73	69	50	257	3.30	1.24
Travel opportunities*	55	44	61	47	51	258	2.98	1.42
Other	5	0	1	3	15	24	3.96	1.99

* Factor rated higher by females (t-test, $p < .05$)

RQ 3: For those who no longer work in public relations, why did they leave the practice, and would alumni recommend public relations degrees and careers to others who wish to identify personally and socially as a practitioner?

The most prevalent reason indicated for leaving the public relations profession ($n = 259$) was that respondents found career choices that were more preferable or paid better, or they could not find a public relations position. Other less important factors were limitations on geography,

impact of significant others' career choices, boredom with the field, feminization of public relations, and being relieved of a position in public relations. (See Table 3).

Table 3*Determinants for Leaving Public Relations Profession Across Gender*

Determinants	All Responses			Females			Males			Independent Samples t-test		
	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Like other career choices more**	281	3.92	1.37	149	3.77	1.440	129	4.10	1.243	-2.065	276	.040
More money in other field**	259	3.63	1.59	132	3.11	1.695	124	4.21	1.238	-5.916	254	.000
Could not find a public relations position*	246	3.26	1.67	140	3.46	1.642	103	2.98	1.680	2.214	241	.028
Geographic limitations led to few public relations opportunities*	211	2.58	1.57	117	2.81	1.608	91	2.26	1.467	2.534	206	.012
Significant other's career limited my public relations opportunities*	207	2.13	1.64	122	2.72	1.750	83	1.29	.982	6.764	203	.000
Bored in former public relations position**	214	2.01	1.44	114	1.82	1.287	98	2.22	1.557	-2.092	210	.038
Feminization of the field**	192	1.68	1.27	98	1.29	.799	92	2.04	1.489	-4.406	188	.000
Released from former public relations position	176	1.45	1.13	91	1.40	1.031	83	1.52	1.243	-.709	172	.479
Other	80	4.44	2.25	57	4.40	1.307	23	4.52	.994	-.390	78	.698

* Factor rated higher by males (t-test, $p < .05$)

Within the “other” category of why they left the field, there were 102 responses. The most popular was to be at home more with the family or to start a family ($n = 39$, 38.2%). Pursuing a graduate degree ($n = 10$, 9.8%) was listed as another reason some left the field. Others indicated they became disillusioned with public relations practice because what they found in the “real world” did not coincide with what they learned in college.

There were several significant differences between males and females on why they chose to leave the practice. A t-test analysis showed that males were more likely to leave because of other career choices, better paying jobs, being bored with their public relations position and the feminization of the field. Females were more likely to leave the field because they could not find a position, geographic limitations and significant other’s career limited their opportunities. (See Table 3.)

When asked if they would recommend a degree in public relations to college students, a vast majority ($n = 489$, 75.3%) of the 649 respondents for this question said they would. A relatively small number ($n = 74$, 11.4%) indicated they would probably not recommend or definitely not recommend the public relations degree.

While a minority of respondents expect to continue careers in public relations, a sizable majority of the 650 respondents on a separate question recommend it as a career path. A total of 70.3% ($n = 457$) would definitely recommend or probably recommend a public relations career to others entering college, while 13.7% ($n = 89$) would probably not or would definitely not recommend the career. Females were significantly more likely to recommend a public relations degree, $t(442) = 3.22$, $p < .001$, and a career in public relations, $t(456) = 4.03$, $p < .001$, according to a t-test analysis.

In a summary open-ended question, numerous alumni ($n = 171$) responded as to why they would or would not recommend public relations

as a degree or career. Many alumni ($n = 61$, 35.7%) indicated in this open forum that they enjoyed their degrees and felt very prepared for work and related later activities. Many mentioned again the broadness of the degrees in public relations and the application to many other fields. Within these responses, some indicated the value of writing, speaking, strategic thinking, and other specific skills. This sentiment was especially true among respondents who were no longer working in public relations, as evidenced by these specific quotes:

- “While I am not still working in Public Relations, I still hold my degree and what I learned to be extremely valuable. It has allowed me to better understand the customer experience and to have valuable skills, especially writing skills, and I have been able to utilize that knowledge throughout my career.”
- “Many of us majored in PR not because we wanted to be PR professionals (I never did), but because it was a good broadly applicable field of study that could serve as a springboard to a wide variety of grad programs or other careers.”
- “As a wife and mother who worked as a newspaper editor for 10 years right out of college, then stayed home to run the family business, I found that Public Relations gave me a broad experience base that I have used for volunteer work and to support my husband’s business. I have served on boards and committees in the community and have organized community-wide events which I am not paid for. My degree has been used constantly and consistently through the years. I understand the connection between people and tasks and how to manage the media. I am so glad that I majored in PR! I have developed and managed relationships and friendships with ethics and integrity. I believe that if I chose to work outside my home, I would have little problem getting a job. I have so many skills and understanding of how business and the community work.”

Additional respondents ($n = 23$, 13.5%) indicated that business, marketing, or other related areas should be emphasized more in public relations curricula. Of those replying, many said they had ended up working in positions that were blended or included more specific business areas with public relations. This quote is representative of this sentiment: “I believe there is too much distinction between PR and other Comms/Ad/Branding/Marketing disciplines. Same goal . . . slightly different tools. I work, live and breathe in the space shared by ALL the MarCom fields . . . but don’t consider myself working in PR.”

Another segment of respondents ($n = 19$, 11.1%) stated that they were frustrated with their degrees, felt unprepared for work, or did not feel their educational backgrounds painted an accurate career picture. Many of these replies indicated that some of their perceived inadequacies were not understood until they entered the field. They expressed it would have been much better to know these challenges while still in school. Some of these respondents who expressed various frustrations still liked their degree programs overall.

Throughout the study in various questions, alumni indicated they would have liked more training and emphasis on social media. In fact, many of their titles listed (which is beyond the scope of this article) indicated social media or similar terms in their titles. However, many did express that social media was not in existence when they were in school. Additionally, dozens of alumni stated they learned the realities of public relations through internships, which often either cemented their major decisions or motivated them to pursue other areas. Others expressed that they either needed more internships while in school to understand the field or they needed more help from faculty and others locating appropriate internships.

Discussion

Three major themes emerged over the five-year period of the study

and will be discussed more in-depth: why practitioners stay in the field, why they leave, and what directions this study suggests for public relations curricula. The three areas are obviously intertwined.

Why They Stay

The broadness of the public relations curriculum encourages some to stay in the field and others to leave. The study indicates that public relations may be perceived as a new general liberal arts program in many colleges. Educators and practitioners should determine if this broadness is positive or negative. Many alumni seem to be using the degree to hone writing, speaking, strategic planning, research, technology and other skills and knowledge that they then apply in other career fields. Many college students are simply striving to graduate and then decide what specific careers to pursue. Educators should consider that many of their students likely do not plan to pursue public relations careers at all, but they plan to use the knowledge, skills, and abilities gained in the degree to work in other fields. Practitioners should consider if it matters that that many of their current and future colleagues probably plan to work in other professions eventually, many of which are very related to public relations (but not specifically in the field).

Since many respondents seemed to enjoy the specific work in public relations positions overall, and others indicated job flexibility as a major advantage, employers should emphasize these elements when possible in recruiting and hiring for public relations positions. Within reason, practitioners should emphasize the enjoyment and impact of the work. In addition, employers providing flexible hours and more telecommuting might attract and keep quality practitioners who have other career options. However, the reality of often long hours and hard work should be explained as well to provide an accurate picture of the profession to reduce misperceptions as graduates enter the field.

Another major factor for those staying in the public relations

field or planning to stay was that many alumni felt they could advance in the field. This perception should be emphasized more by employers to indicate that new employees will not be stuck in entry-level positions if they produce quality work. If there is hope for quick and important advancement, perhaps younger practitioners would stay in the field. Increased pay and potential broader supervisory roles incorporating public relations also could be emphasized.

Why They Leave

At first consideration, it would seem negative that many in this study did not plan to stay in public relations. Just 37.5% said they either definitely or probably would stay in the field. However, over 75% of respondents said they would definitely or probably recommend the public relations degree, and over 70% of alumni in this study said they would definitely or probably recommend working in the field. Apparently, most do not feel negatively toward the degree or the field; they apply the knowledge, skills, and abilities gained in public relations education and practice often to much broader career aspirations.

Naturally, challenges arise for practitioners and educators when many public relations graduates who have majored in public relations (and value the degree and career overall) leave for other opportunities they perceive will provide more advancement opportunities or enjoyment. Lawler and Yoon (1996; 1998) researched social exchange theory and concluded that frequent positive experiences have a long-term impact on creating feelings of relational cohesion and commitment. These social exchange experiences and feelings of cohesiveness, in turn, may influence a graduate's decision to remain with their current employer rather than pursue more profitable employment opportunities elsewhere. To decrease the number of alumni who leave the field, employers, educators, and entities creating public relations practitioner networks must find ways to strengthen favorable perceptions by public relations alumni of their social

identity within the public relations sphere. Additionally, they must offer social exchange opportunities that will increase graduates' understanding of their role's relevance, the valuable contributions they make, and their sense of belonging within the public relations industry. Since just over one-third of the survey's respondents expressed a desire to stay in the field, public relations leaders and employers need to determine whether or not the actual human capital drain of losing talented practitioners is significant enough to be worth addressing.

Also, the disconnect between the large numbers of majors and the number of available positions in public relations should be considered by educators and practitioners. Public relations continues to be an academic growth area – because of all the tuition revenue it generates – but there should be enough jobs in public relations or closely related fields for graduates. Torossian (2011) cited public relations as the fastest growing communications segment. Another related challenge is that some of the jobs in public relations are being filled by those who did not study public relations. Educators need to work more closely with practitioners to better prepare exemplary public relations majors to be the prime candidates for these positions. Employers could also enhance professional development and growth to develop future leaders and address attrition.

Many alumni also indicated that public relations offers graduates the opportunity to enter the field, then “stop out” (especially to raise a family), and then possibly return to public relations employment. Some of these respondents indicated they planned to eventually return to the working world, possibly in public relations or a related field. This stop-and-start option could be viewed by educators and employers as a positive opportunity for certain types of employees, although the frequent turnover in positions potentially makes management much more complicated.

Differences Between Male and Female Alumni Responses

Overall, females were more enthusiastic about studying public

relations and staying in the field. This result may not be too surprising considering the higher percentage of females studying and practicing public relations. Females rated several reasons at a higher rate for studying public relations than their male counterparts and were significantly more likely to stay in public relations as a career and were more likely to recommend studying public relations and public relations as a career choice.

The reasons for choosing to leave the practice suggest that males choose to leave for better pay, other career choices, and because they were no longer interested in the field. These reasons are consistent with other research on gender differences, particularly the trend to seek more money and more competitive jobs (Andsager & Hust, 2005). Females were more likely to respond that they left because they could not find the right position, geographic limitations, or because of the career of their significant other. The findings suggest that males often make the decision to leave based on their choices for careers and females are more influenced by other factors that are more outside their control. This finding could use more research to dig deeper into these preliminary results.

Curricular Updates

More than ever, public relations educators must understand what is necessary to prepare their graduates for gainful employment in public relations and related fields. Based on this study's findings, educators should think more broadly about career fields for which they can prepare students. Many public relations graduates will never work in or will leave the field, either by choice or accident; however, overall they value their education and feel prepared for numerous other careers because of their public relations degree.

Because many alumni eventually work in business-related fields (either as part of their public relations duties or in other positions), it is evident that business courses should be part of the public relations

curriculum, either as requirements or electives. Marketing and management are two of the most obvious and often mentioned specific areas needed, but an understanding of finance, economics, and accounting has become necessary as public relations functions (especially at the highest levels) integrate with organizational business roles.

This study also suggests strongly that more curricular attention should be paid to emerging technologies, including social media, which from a communication management perspective should be led in organizations by public relations professionals with expertise in communication channel selection and analysis. Public relations educators must determine whether social media elements should be embedded throughout current classes, if these tools should be taught in separate classes, or if a blended approach should be implemented. In any case, overall technological and social media expertise for graduates must be made a high priority lest another field take the leadership role in managing organizations' social media programs.

Alumni stressed that writing still should be emphasized in public relations education. A love or enjoyment of writing encouraged many to enter the field, and they say the ability to write well in various formats often determines career success.

Alumni overwhelmingly emphasized that students should complete internships. Typically, those who interned were glad they did and said they should have done more, and those who did not intern wished they would have. Not only do internships provide work experience, portfolio materials, and potential job references, but these experiences also offer students a realistic view of the public relations workplace. Many respondents alluded to not knowing what the professional environment was like in certain types of organizations (such as firms/agencies or corporations) before entering the profession. Completing more internships in diverse areas of public relations practice would provide a more realistic

view of where graduates feel they would best fit. In many cases, the work in the field is similar but the different venues impact career satisfaction greatly. For example, there is very often a different “vibe” or workplace culture at a health care institution versus a resort. The related overall stress levels are also often disparate in different industries.

Limitations

Although there were many respondents in this study, these only indicate perceptions of alumni from these five institutions. These programs all have well-developed sequences of required public relations classes and related student organizations. Characteristics may vary with a wider selection of colleges and different types of programs.

Even though some in the research team distributed the survey link via their university alumni association, there was still no viable method to reach all alumni from the five institutions. Any respondents were typically on an email list or connected to one of the professors (or other alumni) through social media. Additionally, the sample was skewed towards one university since almost half of the sample were from alumni of one of the universities.

Future Research

Another interesting follow-up study would be to determine if most professionals with public relations degrees who are not working in the field never intended to do so but have chosen another career field because they perceive there are few opportunities in public relations. Did they feel they could not have successful careers working specifically in public relations? Additional studies also could compare perceptions of alumni based on various detailed demographic factors, including gender, race/ethnicity, and different types of colleges. Researchers also might further explore work-life balance issues overall and how these benefits are addressed in workplace employee recruiting packages to specifically influence public relations practitioners’ job satisfaction and longevity.

Perceptions of other professional groups concerning public relations should continue to be ascertained. In addition, additional study could be explored concerning those working in public relations, especially at the highest levels, who have no educational background and little direct professional experience in the field.

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