

Undergraduate Transformations: Reported Observations from Advisers at U.S. Student-run Public Relations Firms

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Advisers from almost half of the student-run public relations firms in the United States provide insight into transformations that occur for undergraduates working at the firms. Literature on service learning, internships, campaigns courses, problem-based learning and experiential learning are used to build a theoretical background. Fifty-five advisers provided observations about student learning and career development. Common themes are discussed and considerations for future study are included. Adviser insights were mostly positive about student transformations, value of student experiences at firms and how the experiences assist or hinder post-graduation. Student growth was noted by increases in maturation, confidence, responsibility, problem-solving, leadership skills and teamwork. The value of the campus agency experience was reported as added experience and a complement to coursework.

INTRODUCTION

Student-run firms are part of public relations education, but not much is known about their impact on students and student learning. Examining firms and effects on students provides a basis for agency improvement. Based on a 2009 evaluation, about 120 student-run public relations firms exist at U.S. colleges (Maben, 2010). At these firms, students work for real-world, and sometimes paying, clients to solve communication needs. Public relations educators and practitioners tout the importance of internships and practical experience from the 1985 Commission

on Undergraduate Public Relations Education to Blanchard and Christ's New Professionalism of 1993 to Public Relations Society of America's 1999 Port of Entry study (Dickson, 2000) and a 2006 Commission on Public Relations Education. Writers recommended the ideal public relations major and public relations focus/sequence would include "supervised work experience in public relations (internship)" (Commission, 2006).

The Public Relations Student Society of America encourages student-run firms, with a national affiliate program and resources for

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student leaders like a handbook and sample documents (PRSSA, n.d.). To become nationally affiliated, the student-run firms must provide documentation of meeting three core requirements: 1) a solid connection to PRSA or PRSSA, 2) a high level of professionalism, and an 3) effective structure. Thirty-five firms are listed as nationally affiliated, which is a three-year appointment. PRSSA offers awards for student-run firms and conference opportunities.

While the organizations, commissions and reforms call for hands-on learning, a 2006 study suggested that students ($n=209$ seniors and juniors at nine U.S. universities) felt more prepared in understandings and leadership than tactical skills in public relations (Gower & Reber), signaling that more hands-on learning is needed. Hands-on learning in communication programs is not new, with student newspapers and radio stations paving the way much earlier, but journalism enrollments are in decline (Becker, Vlad, & Simpson, 2013).

In the current higher education climate, the majority of students entering communication programs are selecting programs besides journalism, namely public relations and advertising and 2012 enrollments increased by 13.2 percent at the undergraduate level for the public relations programs reflected in the study (Becker et al., 2013). Authors of annual enrollment survey even suggest that journalism and mass communication educators investigate why students seem to be drawn to public relations.

The purpose of this study is to look at student learning and career implications from the adviser perspective at the undergraduate student-run public relations firms in American higher education. The student-run firms are essentially public relations agencies, run by students on a campus, that provide services for clients. For the purpose of this research a student-run firm was an agency or firm providing undergraduate students the opportunity to work as if they were employed at a professional public relations agency.

LITERATURE ON STUDENT-RUN FIRMS AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The commonplace belief that working for a campus media outlet is a good learning experience is perpetuated by anecdotal stories. Professors and advisers tell students that the experiences gained while at the campus newspaper or student-run public relations firm will help hone skills and later pay off in future internships and/or employment. This kind of learning lab has received some attention in journals (Bush, 2009; Bush & Miller, 2011; Gibson & Rowden, 1994; Imagewest, 2005; Mogavero, 1982; Swanson, 2007, 2011) and trade publications (Colson, 2008; Lewis, 2008; Trainor, 2009). But, few studies specific to student-run public relations agencies make it necessary to pull from research aligned with pedagogy like internships and comparisons to campaigns courses, problem-based learning and experiential learning, to create a starting point.

Campaigns Courses and Internships

Most PR programs include a campaigns course or senior capstone course where students create a public relations campaign. A campaigns course is a normally a semester-long project students complete as a group for course credit. The campaigns course could be looked at like an abbreviated version of a student-run agency. To facilitate the campaigns course in the time frame of a semester, the instructor might fulfill some roles that students would fulfill in a more traditional agency structure. While the courses and firms may differ in structure, client type, and longevity, the campaigns courses have been subject to more study and, therefore, can provide some background.

Client retention is one difference between the student-run agency and the campaigns course (Benigni, Cheng & Cameron, 2004). Agencies will need to retain clients for more than a semester in order to succeed. A limited amount of client retention occurs in the campaigns course; almost a third of campaigns professors use the same real client for more than one semester (Benigni

et al., 2004). A campaigns course typically ends with a presentation and agency work ends with implementation and review. In the course, the client would be responsible for implementing the campaign, not students. About 70 percent of clients in one study used campaign plans “significantly” (Benigni et al., 2004). Using the campaigns developed by the student practitioners helps clients, but does not show students the messy nature of implementation and the realities of practicing public relations, like they would see at an agency. Ninety-two percent of campaigns students had actual clients (Benigni & Cameron, 1999), but only half of the courses use an agency-type environment. The authors suggested an agency structure be more widely adopted. In a larger study five years later, 96 percent of the campaigns course instructors invited actual clients to participate in the campaigns class and all but 10 percent had adopted an agency structure (Benigni et al., 2004).

For a campaigns course, clients may only interact with the class for an initial meeting or for a final presentation (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000). The campaigns course may not meet as frequently as the agency students would. Meeting weekly or less frequently were the norm for campaigns classes (Benigni et al., 2004). The campaigns course is managed by an instructor who provides a grade and the agency more closely resembles a workplace. Benigni and Cameron (1999) assert that a campaigns course “can never be sufficient to fully prepare students for real-world experiences” (p. 50).

Internships are another way students gain real-world experience. When surveyed, the hosts for public relations interns ($N=109$) said the skills most necessary to perform internship duties were writing, oral skills and organizational skills (Brown & Fall, 2005). Authors suggested faculty members should encourage students to pursue on-the-job training and internships that could provide the desired experiential learning the hosts wanted—a higher degree of professionalism. The more public relations majors

enrolled in a required one-hour credit internship course are able to use what they have learned in coursework, the more it influences their career choices (Fall, 2006). Students completing longer internships agreed more with statements about career insights than students completing shorter ones (Basow & Bryne, 1993). Daugherty (2011) said that public relations interns suggested more hands-on learning in internship experiences, whereas some site supervisors for the interns thought a general introduction to the field was sufficient skill development.

Problem-based Learning, Experiential Learning, Service Learning and the “Other Curriculum”

When students work at the student-run public relations firm, it could be likened to an extensive problem-based learning scenario. Hativa (2000) defines problem-based learning (PBL) as an instructional method based on “working in groups to achieve understanding or resolution of complex real-world problems” (p. 124). The student-run public relations firm is a model of a real-world public relations firm and students work to solve their clients’ communication problems. PBL focuses on the process more than the products of learning and creates a situation that is open-ended with no one correct solution (Hanney, 2005). Sixty students in three public relations courses at a Midwestern university acted as public relations agencies for clients and were asked to view themselves as *professional problem-solvers* (Attansey, Okigbo & Schmidt, 2007). Researchers said students felt like they learned a lot and found “real-world applications appropriate for their needs” (p. 35). One key to a “powerful learning environment” is that the problems presented to students become more complex (Vermunt, 2003, p. 121). Clarity, structure, size, abstraction, number of facets, and distance between current knowledge and that needed to solve the problem, are areas where a problem’s difficulty can increase. In an agency setting, an adviser or student leader could pitch easier

problems, clients or campaigns to the more novice students at the firm, and as they learn more, give them the larger “problems.”

In 1947, Lee said practical experience, along with motivation, were important to producing public relations leaders of the time. Experiential learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (as quoted in Kolb, 1984, p. 38). These experiences create layers that are integrated into previous layers. Gibbons and Hopkins (1980) created a scale of experientiality to show how not all experiential learning has the same level of experience. When the planning and execution of the experience is part of the learner’s responsibility, the experience becomes more experiential. For example, a student at the firm deciding a course of action for the client, pitching the idea to the client and implementing the plan, would have more experiential learning than studying a case about a company’s public relations strategies. Duhe and Zukowski (1997) asked a mixed group of academics and television news directors to select an ideal curriculum; both academics and news directors selected a curriculum with the highest number of hours of hands-on laboratory learning.

Jacoby (1999) defines service learning as a form of experiential learning; students learn and develop from designed activities that address human or community needs. The learning is inside the classroom and out, or curricular and co-curricular. An example would be student-run agencies that solicit nonprofit clients for pro-bono work. Some service learning occurs through campaigns courses, where students help prepare a public relations campaign for a real-world or simulated client. Some campaigns courses use a service-learning focus, selecting clients with a public service type message. Silverman (2007) suggests that her students found the execution, not just the conceptual planning, of their campaign to be a valuable experience. Public relations educators interviewed used service learning to give students an application to real-world

settings (Witmer, Silverman & Gaschen, 2009). Co-curricular experiences, like working for the student-run firm or serving on student government, “can yield rich learning and developmental outcomes as well” (Jacoby, 1999, p. 20). George Kuh (1995) called the experiences outside of the classroom the “other curriculum” (p. 124) and found out-of-class experiences helped students clarify their vocational goals.

Campus Firms

Student-run firms at California Polytechnic State University (Swanson, 2007, 2011), Western Kentucky University (Imagewest, 2005) and the University of Delaware (Mogavero, 1982) shared descriptions of their structure, clients and funding in journals. In 1980, the University of Delaware’s student-run firm provided agency functions for the State of Delaware, corporate Wilmington and the University of Delaware. About 15 students worked for Del-com; most had finished core coursework and one internship experience. The agency was run through a course over two semesters (Mogavero, 1982). Central Coast PRspectives at California Polytechnic State University, established in 2002 with a client base of community nonprofits, operated through a course called “advanced public relations practice” (Swanson, 2007). Imagewest came along two years later at Western Kentucky University (Imagewest, 2005). During the internships, students receive course credit and a stipend. Their client list included a hospital, attorney, church, nonprofits, credit union, and campus departments and organizations and services ranged from graphic design to research to event planning to news release writing. In 2009, a Public Relations Student Society of America listing showed 124 of its members reporting a student-run public relations firm (Public Relations Student Society of America, 2009).

In-depth interviews with advisers from 10 student-run firms gave Bush (2009) data to outline pedagogical benefits of student-run public relations firms: experiential learning/process

learning, professional identity development and career choices/opportunities. She created a schema for the “types” of agencies where Type 1 most resembled a real-world firm and had a low risk of dissolving and Type 3 firms had a high risk of dissolving and no regular meetings. Type 2 was in between. She showed Type 1 agencies as the model that can fill voids in coursework and reported that agency work fills in where campaigns courses or service learning cannot.

A 2010 study (Maben) used a larger sample size ($n=55$) and sought information from advisers to illustrate key qualities among the student-run firms. The respondents represented 35 public institutions and 22 programs accredited by AEJMC. Firms ranged in age from just beginning to 37 years in operation; the average age of the firms was 9 years. The firms were mostly funded through client fees and university funds. Half used an open access selection process for the student workers and 17 used a competitive process like applications or interviews. The majority did not pay students and firms “employed” between four and 125 students ($n=50$, $SD=19.06$). All but one firm used titles for students. Five clients was the average number per firm and client types were mixed. Twenty-two firms’ primary clients were community nonprofits. The majority of the advisers were full-time employees with equal representation from assistant and associate professors.

Bush and Miller (2011) developed a list of 83 U.S. schools with agencies, using directories from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and obtained responses from 51 advisers in their survey administration. Key findings included that advisers reported the agency experience was beneficial to student learning, that agencies receive little funding (especially compared to other student learning laboratories like the campus newspaper) and advisers receive limited support like course release.

The research questions posed in this study are designed to look observed effects on undergraduate students at student-run public relations firms:

- RQ1.** What observations do the advisers of student-run public relations agencies report on student learning?
- RQ2.** What observations do the advisers of student-run public relations agencies report on career development?

METHODS

Remarks to open-ended questions were collected via questionnaire from advisers from public relations programs in U.S. institutions of higher education with student-run public relations agencies.

Creating the List of Advisers

PRSSA keeps a list of its members self-reporting a student-run firm. A Google search and cross-referencing with the AEJMC list of accredited journalism programs helped fill in the list. If a colleague had a recollection of a student-run firm at a particular institution, the university’s Web site was checked. The adjusted listing of universities with firms created the sample from which the study began. The Fashion Institute was excluded because its structure was unlike the other universities. If multiple faculty members served as the advisers, each one was included in the sample for the adviser part of this study. The study’s population was the 120 U.S. firms; the sample was the survey respondents ($n=55$). For the complete list of U.S. firms compiled, see Maben (2013). A panel of experts reviewed the survey instrument’s validity and IRB approval was acquired. After the first survey invitation was sent, four subsequent e-mail reminders followed, over a two-month time frame. Forty-six responded. Phone call reminders solicited another 16 responses. Two incomplete surveys were kept in the dataset because there was value in analyzing the responses made. One university has two firms, so both advisers’ responses were included in the study. Fifty-five usable surveys of

the 119 possible means 46 percent of firms are represented.

Data Analysis

Descriptive data collected from the open-ended questions were reviewed for re-occurring comments to produce themes. Themes were checked by reviewing the adviser responses a second time. A grounded theory approach was used. It is important to mention that although authors strived for objectivity, one researcher had her own very positive learning experiences working for a campus newspaper. Both researchers are proponents for experiential learning.

RESULTS

Of the 55 adviser responses, all but one could be identified and connected to institutional data. More public institutions ($n=35$) were represented in the study. Thirty-two of the respondents represented universities with communications programs not accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC). Two firms came from the same university, an accredited public institution. Open-ended questions from the advisers presented themes about observed transformations in students working at the firms, value to students and their post-graduation job attainment.

Research Question 1

Advisers were asked, what observed transformations do you see in students working at the student-run firm from their first day working at the firm to their leaving the firm? The observations fell into two overarching themes: student growth and realizations about the profession. One respondent captured the transformations like this: "They gain confidence because they see how much experience they have gained. They gain confidence in their ability to think independently and to take on new challenges and manage ambiguities and unknowns."

Student growth was conveyed with comments about increased student confidence and

maturity. One respondent said this confidence enabled students to sell with conviction to their clients; another said students have a greater sense of personal responsibility when they leave the agency. Increased confidence as public relations practitioners was mentioned. Diplomacy, time management, desire to produce quality work, accountability to peers and self were also cited as transformations. "Their attitude changes from doing something for a grade as an abstract situation to very specific real world urgency," according to a respondent, who said personal and professional maturity increases. As student confidence grows, an adviser reports, the students tackle more creative and complex projects.

Leadership was an area repeated in the adviser comments. "They (students) are also seen as leaders by their peers and take on the responsibility as leaders." Another phrased the student transformation as moving from just a "passive member to really taking responsibility and advancing a project beyond expectations."

A deeper understanding of public relations was repeatedly cited. Descriptions touched on public relations tasks and a couple of respondents talked about the "big picture" perspective. One respondent cited students gain more realistic expectations of public relations agency work. Understanding of agency work was cited by other respondents as well. One reported that students call it "eye-opening." Some respondents cited specific agency tasks like timekeeping and billing. Another respondent phrased it so, "Many develop a new awareness of the challenges. Students grow incredibly during this experience."

Client interactions and student learning from these experiences were strong themes in the responses. One respondent said the most significant observed transformation was student views of clients. Students realize the "client is king." Another wrote, "The fact that our clients are paying money makes most of them have a level of stress to deliver over and above product." Through their experiences, students showed a greater desire to solicit clients, according to a

respondent. Students have a more focused understanding of satisfying clients' needs, anticipating client issues and managing clients. Students learn how to "deal with something that does not follow a textbook—i.e. clients who change their minds."

Improved writing, understanding of media relations, awareness of environment scanning and research, and working with deadlines were specific skills mentioned. Problem-solving and teambuilding showed up in adviser responses. Increased participation in PRSSA was cited by one respondent. While not a major theme in the bulk of responses, the adviser said students became enthusiastic and involved in the organization after firm experience.

"Realization" and "realistic" were frequently used words in the responses. One respondent said students realize the challenges of serving clients at a high level. Another said students become more aware of industry opportunities and are more career focused. A pithy response was that the observed transformation was "from student to professional." Another said, "The whole experience sets them apart from students who have no practical experience."

The survey question about what value, if any, did student workers gain from their experiences gathered similar insights as the question about observed transformations. Experience, specific skills, contacts, and resume and portfolio building were consistent themes. Complementing coursework and applying what they have learned in the classroom were more prominent in responses to this question. Leadership and client interactions from the previous question were echoed in responses to this question as well.

Career implications were more frequently cited by advisers for this question. One adviser cited the value of the agency experience: "Agency graduates are highly sought after among firms we work with that need entry-level staff." Another said students are "infinitely more marketable upon graduation." Their portfolios are "impressive, which secures high level internships and entry-level jobs." Another said students working

at the firm "always have the best portfolios." The same adviser also said students have the most industry contacts, are confident in their job searches and tend to be the first ones with jobs. Discussion material for interviews was a value cited by some advisers. Directors learned how to plan and manage meetings, provide constructive feedback, evaluate work performance, and manage associates, according to a respondent. "Better prepared for their careers" was how one adviser phrased the value. Learning public relations was not the field for them was another cited value for the students.

The number one value is "working with others," said one adviser. Many advisers touched on interpersonal and team skills. One adviser provided this list of values: "Portfolio development, hands-on experience, self-management, team building, client service, client management, budgeting, campaign planning, timelines, and various skills including: press release writing Web publishing graphics social media creation and management layout and design."

Imperfection was a lesser theme in the questions about values and observed transformation. Advisers said students learn about messy projects, clients who do not give project teams enough feedback and how things do not always run smoothly. Business acumen was another lightly mentioned concept, specific to the public relations industry.

Research Question 2

Advisers were asked to describe in their observations how the student experience at the student-run public relations firm assists or hinders post-graduation job attainment? The bulk of respondents said firm experiences helped students with job attainment. Adviser responses included both securing internships and post-graduation positions in public relations. Advisers used words like "tremendously," "always," "no question," "of course" and a "major plus" to describe how firm experiences helped students attain jobs.

Themes emerged about the quality of jobs and internships, and how quickly the students were able to secure them. One respondent said students who worked for the firm were selected for the local industry's top pick of internships. "The practical experience has allowed them to gain a job much quicker." The agency experience helps students secure more senior positions, said one adviser. "Firms often count their experience as, well, experience. Our students often get jobs that call for experience when they do not have anything other than this practicum and internships." Another said often students obtain above entry-level positions upon graduation.

Some advisers mentioned the products of the agency work that help student attain positions. One mentioned improved contacts and a real-life client's testimonial. The students are better prepared to address interview questions about hands-on applications of coursework. "Employers are often impressed." Another said agency students learn the "language" of agencies and are more prepared for the demands, which helps them in the interview process. The agency experience communicates to prospective employers that students are serious about their field of interest. An adviser noted that "I am more inclined to write a strong recommendation for those whom I know work hard in our student firm, regardless of how well they do in my classes."

One adviser reported the "majority of students participating in the firm have obtained jobs post-graduation, which they credit to involvement in the firm." The same adviser said nearly every student who had been ACTIVE (sic) has landed at least one internship as a result of working with the firm. Another adviser recounted a student who reported student-run firm experience as the most important reason she was offered her job. Another told of two students who attained a job and internship, respectively, because of their agency work with nonprofits. The experiences "open doors" and make students more marketable. One adviser relayed a belief from a local PR firm executive about the experience giving new

graduates at least one to two years of professional experience ahead of their peers who only do internships. Agency reputation was a lesser theme represented in responses. Advisers commented on how local public relations communities embrace the students from the firms. One school's alumni actively recruit agency graduates. "Employers sing the praises of our firm and what it has prepared the students to do before they leave school," touted one adviser.

Very few mentions of hindrance were made. When one adviser could not say definitively that the agency experience helped, he/she qualified that "at this point, all I can say is that it definitely does not hinder our students." One adviser reported most of the students decided they did not want to work at a public relations firm. Experience in a student-run agency is not enough by itself, according to one adviser who said, "Students need to have other internships. There is a huge difference between leading a team and working and learning on a team." The adviser continued that connections made at the student-run agency often help students find internships.

Some advisers qualified responses based on student motivation and initiative. One said, "Those who worked hardest, did the most, always had jobs upon graduation. However, that was only a small number. Most students just sit back and wait to be told what to do." Another echoed this sentiment by saying "good students" who work for the firm understand how to leverage that experience and those with "poor work habits are still jobless after the experience."

Responses to open-ended questions were emphatic with advisers using capital letters, superlatives and exclamation points. A few advisers responded that their firms were too new to be able to make this observation. Not all respondents touted the helpfulness of the firms. "Not much" and "has not" were a couple of the luke-warm responses. Others reported that there was no effect or said they did not know.

DISCUSSION

Adviser insights about student transformations while working at the firm, value of student experiences at firms, and how the experiences assist or hinder post-graduation were mostly positive reflections. Bias may exist for advisers highly connected with their student-run firm. They may be in the habit of defending and promoting their firms so they continue to operate in periods of competitive budgets. Responses also relied on adviser recollection. Some may be more able to remember the extremes, highly successful and very unsuccessful students. A few advisers said they could not say definitively how the firm helped students in their acquisition of a position. Some seemed reluctant to make assertions about their graduates without data to back them up.

Results tend to coincide with Bush and Miller (2011) study, where advisers reported on a 1-5 Likert agreement scale showing where they thought agencies provided the most amount of training for students. Working within a team structure ($n=45$; $M=4.51$, $SD=.90$) was the top ranked and creativity/imagination ranked second, which was not directly expressed as much in adviser responses in the current study. But, gaining career knowledge and acquiring interpersonal skills were the third and fourth contenders, with critical thinking and problem solving in fifth. Bush and Miller's open ended responses aligned with this study, with adviser perceptions of the main benefits of the agency as experience working with clients and portfolio and resume building.

The adviser comments about student experiences closely mimicked outcomes seniors reported about out-of-class experiences in a Kuh (1993) study. Confidence, practical competences, knowledge acquisition, application of knowledge, and vocational competence were a few that were represented in adviser comments in this study. Student-run firm characteristics and data collected from graduates in the future could be aligned with other experiential learning outcomes in order to build theory.

Generalizations must be tempered because half of the U.S. firms identified are not represented in this study. Bush's (2009) study looked at 10 firms and her 2011 study captured 51 firms. This study expanded the picture to 55 firms (with likely some overlap), but more research is needed for a clearer understanding. Advisers who did not respond to the survey may represent firms where other observations would be made. Timing could have been a factor because the questionnaire was emailed toward the end of a fall semester. Advisers for the newly formed firms could not provide much insight on career concerns, but will be able to as firms age and students graduate. The qualitative data was secured from a few questions on a survey that also collected data for quantitative analyses. Semi-structured follow-up interviews with the advisers could have strengthened and clarified the study. Understanding adviser philosophies on their roles might have also helped better categorize their responses. While survey questions were asked in a neutral manner, adding a research question and survey items about the negatives of firm experience might round out the seemingly positive reports.

Future Directions for Research

Adviser comments pointed to many possible avenues for further inquiry. One adviser commented that students who join the firm are typically the students who have either been extremely involved already, overachievers or have realized their portfolios are weak and want to supplement academic work through the firm. Student demographics of firms could be matched to the communication department's demographics. Are certain students seeking firm positions? Student motivation was not considered in this study and could offer insights between those who seek experiential learning and those who do not. Students who pursue positions at firms are self-selecting. The students' view and how they rate their agency experience would provide additional insight.

King (2008) proposed the academy will need to teach students the "culture" of journalism.

Studies could look into what students learn about the “culture” of public relations while working for the student-run firm. Is this culture transmitted more or less through these experiential learning situations than classroom activities? Advisers in this study reported that students learned how public relations agencies worked. They learned the culture and industry language. Part of this environment includes interactions with advisers and other student workers, at various stages in their studies. What happens during the socialization and informal learning at the firms? What are students learning from each other on-the-job? What mis-education, per John Dewey, or bad habits, if any, occurs? How does the student-run firm look through the framework of collaborative and cooperative learning models? Is there a tipping point for student learning at firm? How much more do they learn with three semesters of experience compared to just one or two? One could devise a way to conduct a cost-benefit analysis that might give advisers a way to quantify benefits of firm experience.

Comparing student outcomes from internship experience and student-run agency experience is another area to explore. One professor, not included in this study, said his university abandoned its agency for internships in a strategic move. He said there were more internships in the city than public relations majors, so the professors felt it was best for students to work “out in the professional world to gain their experience.” Adviser remarks were mostly positive about the student experiences. Other perspectives could be compared to control for potential bias. Future study could see what employers say about the graduates hired from the firms. Client feedback could also be mined for themes. An international survey could illuminate how other countries are using or not using student-run public relations firms.

Creating some kind of metric for client or campaign complexity might provide clues to student learning. One adviser talked about how students persuaded her to let them take on extremely

challenging clients. In problem-based learning, problems should get more complex as students progress through curriculum (Vermunt, 2003). Firm reputation would be another metric for evaluation. A few advisers commented on how their firm reputation helped graduates obtain post-graduate positions in the area. A couple of advisers mentioned how students working at the firms then became more involved in PRSSA. One could investigate correlations between agency work and subsequent professional association participation.

It is important to study the mechanisms used to help students. As one adviser said, it is “nice to see research being done on such an important aspect of PRSSA.” The more known about the student-run firms and their impact on students, the more the positives can be emulated in other learning situations.

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