



How Dynamic Capabilities Inform Public Relations Pedagogy

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Abstract

The public relations industry encompasses areas such as crisis communication, social media, and strategic communication as a management function. As noted in previous research of the public relations education landscape, one significant need is for public relations students to have better business acumen. This study builds on a recent study that suggested there were eight themes that connected dynamic capabilities and crisis public relations management. This two-staged qualitative and quantitative study of public relations professionals, students, and educators examines the relationship between public relations education and these eight themes. A key finding is that public relations educators need to provide students with relevant business skills and knowledge as a core requirement, especially given the sizable gap between professional and faculty perspectives of students' levels of preparedness to enter volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) business environments.

The world is in constant flux. In 2020, for example, we saw a global shift to remote or online work because of the COVID-19 pandemic that impacted organizations' management of employees, productivity, and the processes used to engage with employees and stakeholders. While it is not always possible to predict changes or crises, especially those on the magnitude of those that were a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, a core part of being successful as a public relations professional depends on one's ability to understand and keep up with industry changes (Forrest, 2019). Similarly, public relations education should also adapt to the industry's changes, new communication technologies, and best practices by training pub-

lic relations students in the areas of business literacy and business acumen (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018; Devereux & Peirson-Smith, 2009; Krishna et al., 2020; Swanson, 2019).

Dynamic capabilities (DC) is a strategic management construct that has gained much attention in the past few decades for its ability to provide explanatory and predictive insights for organizations through three integrated activities. These activities, sensing, seizing, and transforming, help organizations navigate change in a world where change is the only constant (Teece et al., 1997; Helfat et al., 2007). These three processes are, in many ways, similar to the management process of public relations as found

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in systems such as RPIE, which is research, planning, implementation, evaluation (PRSA, n.d.). There is, however, limited research that connects the dynamic capabilities framework with public relations education. Although Kim (2021) examined the connection between DC and public relations crisis communication practices, this study seeks to explore whether students are being equipped with dynamic capabilities competencies by their public relations programs. Furthermore, this study looks at whether or not faculty and industry professionals view the current preparation of entry-level public relations as being adequate in the areas of dynamic capabilities.

Literature Review

A Lack of Preparation of Public Relations Students with Business Acumen: In a study of the public relations education landscape and the essential skills and tools required to make students successful, Krishna et al. (2020) found that while “writing, listening, and creativity” (p. 33) are the three most important skills an aspiring public relations professional should have, there is also a critical need for business acumen. These findings support the conclusion by the Commission on Public Relations Education (2018) that there is a lack of new technological, business, and global landscape training for public relations students. These findings also reinforce Attansey et al.’s (2008) declaration that public relations educational programs should reflect the times and require “teaching methods that are not immutable to change ... problem-based learning has an important place in our contemporary approaches to teaching public relations” (p. 37).

Educators need to provide real-life and industry-specific training in the classroom so that entry-level professionals have the competencies demanded in an ever-changing world. A study by Neff et al. (1999) of the desired characteristics for entry-level and advanced level professionals in public relations concluded that there were significant gaps between desired outcomes of education and those found in the opinions of both practitioners and educators. This may suggest that the effective education and equipping of the next generation of public relations professionals is challenging. The reason for this difficulty is highlighted by the Commission on Public Relations Education’s (2018) report, which argued that public relations is a complex and changing industry, and there is “no one-size-fits-all list of knowledge, abilities, and skills that is applicable for every job in every public

relations setting” (p. 25). This aligns with Sparks and Patrice’s (1998) recommendation to integrate “current technology into traditional teaching methods in order to accommodate the needs of the current market as well as future practitioners” (p. 44). The importance of understanding business literacy is also supported by Swanson (2019), who suggests that public relations is a bellwether within society, a leader of trends, and so when things within the industry change, they change for public relations professionals first: “There are huge changes going on in our society. Public relations as a profession stimulates those changes and is mirroring them” (p. 76). Similarly, Devereuz and Peirson-Smith (2009) argue that public relations professionals must “adapt to these new environments and make the necessary changes on behalf of organizations and expertly communicate with stakeholders” (p. 219). Therefore, the importance of equipping students to listen, understand the business landscape, engage in strategic communication within the digital landscape, and conduct research effectively has come to the forefront as an essential competency in order for them to enter the industry successfully.

Dynamic Capabilities Theory: Dynamic capabilities theory, defined as an “organization’s ability to achieve new and innovative forms of competitive advantage given path dependencies and market positions” (Teece et al., 1997, p. 516), was first presented by Teece et al. in 1997, and this seminal article has now been cited more than 39,000 times by scholars in a range of disciplines, including strategic management, crisis communication, and business development. Teece et al.’s (1997) initial study aimed to address the disconnect in research between competitive advantages that organizations held and internal and external capabilities that were firm-specific. The conclusions were that an organization has dynamic capabilities if it can “integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments” (p. 516). Firms with dynamic capabilities can stay relevant within their business market and remain competitive as they continue to adapt to future challenges.

Because of such broad relevance, a number of areas have been examined, including the theory and framework of dynamic capabilities within business strategy and management (e.g., Augier & Teece, 2009), operational abilities (e.g., Cepeda & Vera, 2007), human resources (e.g., Festing & Eidems, 2011), supply chain management (e.g., Cheng et al., 2014; Clifford & Fugate, 2010), project management

(e.g., Davies & Brandy, 2016), entrepreneurship (e.g., Townsend & Busenitz, 2015), and technology and innovation management (e.g., Cai & Tylecote, 2008). As a result of the broadening research and application scope of dynamic capabilities, the definition needed to adapt. A proposed updated definition for dynamic capabilities is as follows: “the capacity of an organization to purposefully create, extend, and modify its resource base,” with the understanding of the resource base to be the “tangible, intangible, and human assets (or resources) as well as capabilities which the organization owns, controls, or has access to on a preferential basis” (Helfat et al., 2007, p. 4).

Schilke et al. (2018) conducted an extensive literature review to reveal that most research in dynamic capabilities had become empirical, in contrast to the earlier days where the research was highly conceptual. Kump et al. (2019) confirmed this development in dynamic capabilities theory in their study of 325 peer-reviewed articles about dynamic capabilities between 1997 (the year Teece et al. introduced the construct) and 2018. They concluded that dynamic capabilities are “latent capabilities that manifest in observable routines and their outcomes” (p. 1156). Additionally, the Kump et al. (2019) study considered previously suggested sub-scales (e.g., Cepeda & Vera, 2007; Corrêa et al., 2019; Wohlgemuth & Wenzel, 2016) and combined them into a 14-factor scale that focused on the items of sensing, seizing, and transforming. “Sensing” had five factors: 1) knowing the best practices in the market; 2) being up-to-date on the current market situation; 3) systematically searching for current market situation information; 4) knowing how to access new information; and 5) keeping an eye on competitor activities (Kump et al., 2019, p. 1158). “Seizing” comprised four factors: 1) quickly relating the knowledge attained; 2) recognizing what new information can be utilized within an organization; 3) utilizing the new technological knowledge into practice; and (4) initiating product innovation, and using current information to develop new products and services (Kump et al., 2019, p. 1158). Finally, “transformation” had four factors: 1) defining clear responsibilities that allow for successful implementation of plans for changes; 2) consistently pursuing decisions on planned changes within the organization; 3) seeing projects that implement changes through to completion consistently, despite unforeseen interruptions and; (4) putting change projects into practice alongside daily business activities (Kump et al., 2019,

p. 1158).

Dynamic Capabilities and Public Relations Education: Despite the thousands of articles related to dynamic capabilities, the framework has limited studies within the realm of public relations. Kim (2021) completed one such relevant study, using the 14-item scale by Kump et al. (2019) to conduct a qualitative study of 22 public relations practitioners that may help provide a theoretical bridge between dynamic capabilities and public relations crisis communication practices. According to Kim (2021), eight themes bridge dynamic capabilities practices and public relations practices: (1) listening, (2) responding, (3) responsibility, (4) planning, (5) reaction, (6) human dignity in communication, (7) action-orientation, and (8) agility. Although there have been no studies to bridge dynamic capabilities with public relations education, Teece (2011) championed the usage of dynamic capabilities within business school curriculums to train students. Teece suggested that the dynamic capabilities framework allows students and educators to “grapple effectively with today’s – let alone tomorrow’s – problems ... primarily from a more fundamental failure to integrate discipline-based research, and properly link theory and practice” (p. 499).

Student-run Firms, PRSSA, & Dynamic Capabilities: Finally, research suggests that out-of-classroom educational opportunities such as a student-run firm (Maben & Whitson, 2013; Swanson, 2011) and participation with a Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapter (Sparks & Conwell, 1998; Rogers, 2014) can develop and provide significant business experience and understanding to students. Students’ ability to gain valuable experience is also a key component of student-run firms. It is these lived experiences with clients and running of campaigns that “educate, or mis-educate, and provide hands-on learning preparing students for their next experiences” (Maben & Whitson, 2013, p. 5). There is, however, yet to be a study that connects the business skills learned through these co-curricular experiences and the framework of dynamic capabilities, a construct that has gained traction and credibility within the strategic business realm.

In conclusion, there is a lack of research on the integration of dynamic capabilities education, which has been pushed for business programs (Teece, 2011), and its potential for public relations. This study, thus, seeks to build on the research conducted with public relations professionals (Kim, 2021) and explore the

perceived effectiveness of PR educational pedagogy in preparing students according to the eight themes. The following question and hypothesis guided the study:

RQ1: What is the perception among educators and students in public relations courses related to the eight themes of dynamic capabilities and public relations as found by Kim (2021)?

H1: Students who participate in public relations clubs and/or agencies will express a self-perception of higher levels of effectiveness regarding the eight themes related to dynamic capabilities and public relations (Kim, 2021).

Method

This study utilized a two-staged, mixed-method research approach to explore the connection between public relations education and dynamic capabilities. The first stage of research with professionals helped identify the need and perceived gaps within the public relations educational experience, especially in regard to dynamic capabilities-related skills. This first stage informed the need to ask students and faculty of their perceptions of their dynamic capabilities.

Stage One: Initial Qualitative Study Method

Instrument Design: Basing the questions on the Kump et al. (2019) scale, a qualitative survey question asked a purposive sample of public relations and strategic communication professionals in high-ranking positions at agencies, corporate organizations, and non-profit organizations. Respondents were also invited utilizing appeals on social media, including the Accredited Public Relations Professionals (APR) group on LinkedIn. Those who chose to participate were then directed to a SurveyMonkey.com questionnaire, where they provided demographic information and answered a qualitative question related to the study. This data collection method allows for deep reflection and the ability to have complete thoughts when completing the survey (James, 2017; James & Bushner, 2006; Hawkins, 2018) and allows professionals to provide answers thoughtfully at their own pace, without pressure from the interviewer (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; James, 2017).

In order to prepare the professionals, a description of dynamic capabilities and the three stages (sensing, seizing, and transformation) was provided to help norm the responses. The question that was asked of the professionals was as follows:

Studies show that there is a gap between the

practice of public relations crisis communication and the education delivered to students. What are the strengths and weaknesses of entry-level communication professionals being prepared to navigate crisis communications using dynamic capabilities? Is there anything that educators can do to better prepare future professionals in this area?

Participant Demographics: A total of 22 professionals responded to this qualitative survey instrument with a qualified response. A majority of the respondents (86.36%, n=19) identified as female and were in the 35-44 age range (45.45%, n=10). Other ages represented were in the 25-34 age range (36.36%, n=8) and the 45-54 age range (18.18%, n=4). The industries represented included professional services, social media management, higher education, entertainment, agencies, food public relations, insurance, healthcare, retail, and aerospace. The represented job titles were also diverse, including those of director, president, vice president, social media manager, director of corporate communications, communication specialists, digital content strategist, and senior account executive. The professionals had a range of experience, with the majority having 11 to 15 years (36.36%, n=8), followed by eight to ten years of experience (22.72%, n=5); the three to seven-year range (18.18%, n=4); more than 16 years of experience (13.63%, n=3); and one to two years of experience (9.09%, n=2). Almost a quarter of the respondents (23.81%, n=5) had the professional credential of being an Accredited Public Relations (APR) professional. Finally, of the 21 who responded to this question, 85.71% (n=18) stated that they were currently “tasked with developing strategies for communicating on behalf of organizations.” Finally, all 22 respondents responded to a question on whether they manage others in their communication/public relations department, with 16 (72.72%) answering positively.

Stage Two: Secondary Quantitative Study Method

Instrument Design: After concluding the first stage of this study, a quantitative survey was developed to reach out to a purposive sample of students and faculty studying and teaching public relations at the university level. This second stage of research was launched by using SurveyMonkey.com as the collection method. The survey was shared on social media platforms, asking that only public relations students and faculty participate and asking that the survey be

shared with others who would fit that profile. A survey incentive of four \$25 Amazon.com gift cards was used to attract participation. A total of 49 responses were collected. When respondents began the survey, they were first presented with the following description to frame dynamic capabilities, as well as the goal of the study:

Dynamic capability is defined by Kump et al. (2019) as “organizational capabilities that allow firms to ‘build and renew resources and assets [...], reconfiguring them as needed to innovate and respond to (or bring about) changes in the market and in the business environment” (p. 1149). This study aims to better understand how dynamic capabilities may be taught/learned within public relations programs at universities.

For students consenting to participate, demographic questions included questions about rank as a student or faculty, gender, state of residence, university type (public or private, two-year or four-year institution), major (or minor as it relates to public relations), and whether they participate in a public relations student-run agency and/or PRSSA. Faculty were asked additional questions about how long they have been teaching and their highest degree earned. The next section of the survey asked questions related to dynamic capabilities, the eight themes identified by Kim (2021) as related to and important for the public relations process. Respondents were asked to share their perception regarding their program’s effectiveness in preparing students for each of the eight themes, using a 5-point Likert Scale. The scale ranged from highly ineffective to highly effective. Finally, respondents were asked to answer an open-ended question regarding the education of public relations and dynamic capabilities and the best method for educating students.

Participant Demographics: Among the 49 respondents, 83.7% (n=41) identified as public relations students, with the remainder identifying as public relations faculty (n=8). Of the 41 students, 68.3% (n=28) stated that they were in a public relations club (for example, PRSSA), a public relations student agency, or both. Females made up 71.4% (n=35) of all respondents, and 28.6% (n=14) identified as male. Additionally, 62.5% (n=30) stated they were at a private university compared to the 37.5% (n=18) at a public institution; 22.45% (n=11) stated that they went to a 2-year institution, while 77.55% (n=38) went to a 4-year school.

Study Results and Analysis

Stage One Results and Analysis

Four key themes emerged related to PR education from the 22 qualitative survey responses from the strategic communication and public relations professionals: (1) the need for scenario-based simulation exercises, (2) the need for basic emotional intelligence and common sense, (3) the need for strategic problem-solving abilities and business acumen, and finally, (4) the need for real-world experience, while education serves as a foundation.

The Need for Scenario-based Simulation Exercises: One repeated response by professionals was that students need to be prepared to understand that many factors must be considered in the real world, and several suggested the usage of simulations or playing out of situational analysis exercises. An aerospace industry professional tasked with developing strategies for an organization explained:

One thing that is very difficult to emulate in the classroom is the emotional toll of a crisis situation and communication response. When students are working on a class project, their livelihoods and safety net are not on the line like they might be during a crisis situation later on.

The suggestion, therefore, was to “have students working on a project, then completely change the nature or content of the project one or two weeks before it’s due.” This kind of crisis situational response management was supported by a managing partner with 8-10 years of experience in the marketing and entertainment who argued for “random implementation of a crisis situation” with an element of surprise to help make it feel more “real.” A president and chief storyteller with 11-15 years of experience in public relations stated that students should have to work through more “real-world scenarios ... Less theory/terminology, and more planning.”

Similarly, from the suggestion to work on crisis plans as a way to have experiential learning, the professionals expressed the need for fewer “passive lessons” and increased “engaging lessons.” An associate professor teaching public relations summed up this thought by stating that students should be put in an actual “situation where it’s real and has important consequences based on their actions.” The need, then, for scenario-based simulation experiences was clearly defined. The next theme that was observed, the need to examine real-world examples and cases, was also a

recommendation in the same vein.

Emotional Intelligence and Common Sense: The importance of thinking and having common sense is something that many professionals highlighted as an essential factor for training. A vice president of communications at a nonprofit with more than 16 years of experience said, “It boils down to common sense and the ability to THINK rather than regurgitate information from classes.” A quality assurance manager in higher education with 8-10 years of experience echoed this sentiment, providing specific elements sought in a hire: “high level of EQ, maturity and common sense with nuanced communication skills (both writing and speaking).” The need for maturity and the ability to think and have emotional intelligence was highlighted by this professional. The importance of emotional intelligence was repeated by a director of corporate communications in the healthcare industry with more than 16 years of experience and is an accredited public relations (APR) professional: “Emotional intelligence and self-awareness are critical to entry-level professionals.” A social media manager tasked with developing strategies for communication said emotional intelligence is essential: “We’re in a time when authenticity and real connection are valued at a premium. So following a crisis communication plan without questioning, personalizing, or throwing it out if it doesn’t fit your organization can leave people with the sense that the organization is being inauthentic or unfeeling.” With all of this, it is clear that professionals valued the ability to think independently, have common sense, and have emotional intelligence as well.

Strategic Problem-Solving Abilities & Business Acumen: One area highlighted as important by a number of professionals was the importance of business acumen in having strategic problem-solving abilities. One participant said that students would be better prepared if educators were “realistic about the nature of company dynamics while also equipping students with a more diverse set of responses that can be applied to any industry.” This sentiment was similar to that of an accredited public relations professional in the telecommunications industry with 11-15 years of experience. This individual said that it is important for new professionals to know how to navigate “different personalities, approval levels, industries.”

Real-World Experience is Required: The final theme that was observed was the importance of real-world experience. One participant mentioned that although

education “provides a good foundation for entry-level communication professionals to begin their career, true learning and understanding is hands-on experience in the workplace.” This sentiment is echoed by other professionals, who believe that educational experiences alone would never be sufficient, no matter what the quality, as “ultimately, every situation and crisis environment is different.” A vice president at a marketing and public relations agency argued that only “time on the job and learning from others who have experience dealing with situations on all levels” would bridge this gap. Another participant, an accredited public relations professional in the telecommunications industry with 11-15 years of experience, said: “I don’t think it comes with education in school; I think it comes with work experience, navigating different personalities, approval levels, industries, etc. Everyone is always learning in this area.”

Stage Two Study Results and Analysis

First, descriptive statistics were used to understand the perceptions related to effectiveness of the eight scale items and PR programs. The scale item with the highest strongest result was Human Dignity in Communication ($n = 46, M = 4.63, SD = .80$). This was followed by Responsibility ($n = 46, M = 4.43, SD = .91$) and Planning ($n = 46, M = 4.17, SD = .90$). Responding was next ($n = 46, M = 4.11, SD = .82$) which was closely followed by Listening ($n = 46, M = 4.07, SD = .93$), Action-orientation, ($n = 46, M = 4.04, SD = .82$), and Reaction ($n = 46, M = 4.00, SD = 1.01$). The lowest result was with Agility ($n = 46, M = 3.90, SD = 1.00$). There was, therefore, a difference of 0.73 points between the strongest result (Human Dignity in Communication) and the weakest result (Agility).

Next, to examine the study’s hypothesis, an independent-samples t-test was conducted on each of the eight Likert-scale themes. This was to test whether there was a significant difference between students who had participated in either the school’s chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) and/or a student-run firm compared with students who had not participated in these co-curricular activities. Of the 38 student respondents, 27 participated in a student-run agency and/or PRSSA, and 11 did not. The eight t-test results are as follows:

Students who had participated in either the school’s chapter of PRSSA and/or a student-run firm will have a stronger perception of the effectiveness of public relations courses teaching the concept of

Human Dignity in Communication compared with students who are not involved in these co-curricular activities. The T-test was not significant, $t(14.63) = 1.01, p = .32$, even though those who participated in PRSSA and/or a student-run public relations agency had a higher mean ($M=4.77, SD=0.51$) compared with those who did not participate in these activities ($M=4.54, SD=0.69$).

Students who had participated in either the school's chapter of PRSSA and/or a student-run firm will have a stronger perception of the effectiveness of public relations courses teaching the concept of Listening compared with students who are not involved in these co-curricular activities. The T-test was not significant, $t(23.05) = .14, p = .89$, even though those who participated in PRSSA and/or a student-run public relations agency had a higher mean ($M=4.22, SD=0.93$) compared to those who did not participate in these activities ($M=4.18, SD=0.75$).

Students who had participated in either the school's chapter of PRSSA and/or a student-run firm will have a stronger perception of the effectiveness of public relations courses teaching the concept of Responding compared with students who are not involved in these co-curricular activities. The T-test was not significant, $t(34.99) = -.53, p = .60$, even though those who participated in PRSSA and/or a student-run public relations agency had a lower mean ($M=4.15, SD=0.99$) compared with those who did not participate in these activities ($M=4.27, SD=0.47$).

Students who had participated in either the school's chapter of PRSSA and/or a student-run firm will have a stronger perception of the effectiveness of public relations courses teaching the concept of Responsibility compared with students who are not involved in these co-curricular activities. The T-test was not significant, $t(25.20) = .37, p = .97$, even though those who participated in PRSSA and/or a student-run public relations agency had a higher mean ($M=4.56, SD=0.93$) compared with those who did not participate in these activities ($M=4.55, SD=0.69$).

Students who had participated in either the school's chapter of PRSSA and/or a student-run firm will have a stronger perception of the effectiveness of public relations courses teaching the concept of Planning compared with students who are not involved in these co-curricular activities. The T-test was not significant, $t(32.97) = -.95, p = .35$, even though those who participated in PRSSA and/or a student-run public relations agency had a lower mean ($M=4.22,$

$SD=0.97$) compared with those who did not participate in these activities ($M=4.45, SD=0.52$).

Students who had participated in either the school's chapter of PRSSA and/or a student-run firm will have a stronger perception of the effectiveness of public relations courses teaching the concept of reaction compared with students who are not involved in these co-curricular activities. The T-test was significant, $t(22.94) = -2.64, p = .01$, but supported the null hypothesis as those who participated in PRSSA and/or a student-run public relations agency had a lower mean ($M=3.81, SD=1.00$) compared with those who did not participate in these activities ($M=4.64, SD=0.81$).

Students who had participated in either the school's chapter of PRSSA and/or a student-run firm will have a stronger perception of the effectiveness of public relations courses teaching the concept of Action-orientation compared with students who are not involved in these co-curricular activities. The T-test was not significant, $t(18.46) = -.22, p = .83$, even though those who participated in PRSSA and/or a student-run public relations agency had a lower mean ($M=4.22, SD=0.64$) compared with those who did not participate in these activities ($M=4.27, SD=0.64$).

Students who had participated in either the school's chapter of PRSSA and/or a student-run firm will have a stronger perception of the effectiveness of public relations courses teaching the concept of agility compared with students who are not involved in these co-curricular activities. The T-test was not significant $t(29.82) = -.69, p = .41$, even though those who participated in PRSSA and/or a student-run public relations agency had a lower mean ($M=3.96, SD=0.98$) compared with those who did not participate in these activities ($M=4.18, SD=0.60$).

The results showed that all but one of the themes were not significant, thus supporting the null hypothesis. The only theme that was significant was that of Reaction, defined in the study as "the ability to help an organization quickly react and mobilize resources to manage issues and prevent even larger crises from occurring." The group of students who did not participate in PRSSA or a public relations agency scored significantly higher ($M=4.64, SD=0.81$) versus those who were in a student group ($M=3.81, SD=1.00$).

Discussion

This study provides new insight into public relations education that has not been explored in previous

studies, as it introduces the theoretical construct of dynamic capabilities into the world of public relations education. As Attansey et al. (2008) strongly suggest, public relations educators should not have teaching methods that are “immutable to change” (p. 37). As the world grapples with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the latest challenge faced in a VUCA world, the need for new skills and abilities to adapt is even more important. Public relations practitioners are crafting communication messages and are also involved in strategy, organizational design, and relationships with those in all their publics. Therefore, more than ever, public relations educators should provide students with business skills and knowledge as a core requirement (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018; Devereux & Peirson-Smith, 2009; Krishna et al., 2020; Swanson, 2019) and prepare students to engage in a world that is continually changing.

An interesting finding from this study revealed a gap between professional and faculty perspectives of students being prepared to enter VUCA environments and the perceived preparation of students. This gap may be seen, in some respect, as a continuation of the distance that Neff et al. (1999) found in their study two decades ago. While the professionals emphasized areas such as needing more real-world practice, better business acumen, and emotional intelligence to navigate complex communication environments, students reported feeling very equipped. The majority of students felt that their programs were either highly effective or effective in preparing them in all areas except for agility. This is particularly interesting, as agility requires the ability to pivot and transform in situations quickly. Since professionals and educators seemed to emphasize the need for students to be more equipped at thinking in high-change situations, and students feel the least prepared in this area, PR programs could integrate more course assignments, pedagogical practices, or co-curricular opportunities that require the reliance on the ability to be successful in the situation.

Additionally, professionals and educators emphasized a need for greater emotional intelligence and self-awareness among young professionals in VUCA environments. This is an important component in preparing students to manage their own experiences and professional influence throughout VUCA environments. When examining student responses, it was interesting to note that the two highest factors for which they felt they were equipped were operating

within human dignity and responsibility, representing two sides of the ethical commitments for PR professionals. Students then felt ready to be loyal to their organization and effectively communicate while balancing the public’s ethical obligation to protect their dignity through truthful, authentic, and honest communication. In the past several years, the PR curriculum has had a needed and important focus on ethics in PR. This study indicates it may be essential to pair these conversations with an understanding of oneself within the discipline. This way, programs will be able to equip students to serve the client or organization and the public and have a strong sense of professional identity and personal awareness throughout.

Student-run Firms, PRSSA, & Dynamic Capabilities:

One key way students can learn skills and grow in their confidence is through co-curricular activities such as participating in their local PRSSA chapter or engaging in real-life campaigns with clients through their student-run agency (Maben & Whitson, 2013; Swanson, 2011). It would have made sense, then, in light of the applied experience in student groups, for respondents in this study to feel more prepared in the eight key themes. However, it was surprising to find there was no difference between students who were active in student groups compared with those who were not. Perhaps even more surprising was the one area that did show a difference. Students who were not part of student groups felt more prepared for reactivity.

With professionals often asserting that some things cannot be learned in class (and thus students need real-world experience), many curriculums integrate as many applied learning opportunities as possible. Student groups represent an incredible opportunity for this kind of learning (Swanson, 2011). Within the context of student-run groups, faculty members help mitigate the impact of students needing to “react,” as the faculty person leads during VUCA situations. Alternatively, it could be that, as students experience actual VUCA environments in student groups, they also recognize their gap in applied versus theoretical experience of managing situations like this. If that is the case, they may have scored themselves lower based on applied experience, while students who had no hands-on experience through a student group felt more prepared simply because they had not yet dealt with a situation that placed them in a VUCA environment.

Pedagogical Implications: The ability to bring lessons

to life with real-life experience is the key finding of this study. Educators interested in guiding students to gain dynamic capabilities should consider integrating opportunities for students to engage in sense-making activities, providing hands-on experience in making decisions with real consequences, and encouraging activities that require students to problem-solve. While the classroom provides many opportunities for students to learn and engage in these areas, a more prudent and longer-term plan that has already proven effective builds on the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) learned to engage students in real-life experiences. Whether this is building a student-run (or even faculty-led) agency or working on projects for an actual client, the tenets of dynamic capabilities can be instilled within students if they are allowed to take on real-life problems.

Professionals also recommended options that would mimic VUCA environments, such as running more simulations as a core part of PR pedagogy. Additionally, a recommendation by one professional centered on “changing the assignment” midway through the process to show students that things can shift and to help them learn to react and adapt effectively. The challenges for educators come with managing increased student stress and engagement in the classroom, investing substantial time into pedagogical applications such as simulations (which often require additional investment to design, run, and evaluate effectively), and integrating these practices across an entire curriculum.

Limitations and Future Research

Perhaps the most important limitation of this study was the smaller size of the response. Trying to get students to complete an online study in the midst of school, primarily when school was remote due to COVID-19, was a challenge. It was equally challenging to get professionals and educators to participate in the study for the same reason. While this study was able to get a base understanding, a larger sample size would allow for more statistical analysis to be run with higher levels of confidence and reliability. With a larger sample size, other interesting areas to study would be differences between private and public schools, small and large programs, and between male and female perspectives. It would also be good to have a larger sample size of educators to participate and compare the educators’ assumed effectiveness versus the perception of effectiveness by the student. It

should also be noted that this study is based on a results by Kim (2021), which had a limited scope with just 22 participants.

A future study in this area also may benefit from a qualitative interview, in addition to the quantitative study, to provide another layer of understanding, especially in regard to the perceptions of the students and their dynamic capabilities. Additionally, it may be interesting to examine individual ratings of DC and cross compare the eight themes as found by Kim (2021) against the DC scale that Kump et al. (2019) found for organizations. Future studies may also benefit from having a training session on dynamic capabilities, with a before and after study. Future studies could explore the recommendations that this study provided for curricular design and pedagogical practices for public relations programs and compare it against PR syllabi to see if the academy is aligned with the business world demands, especially in a VUCA environment. Finally, given the importance of online educational pathways that COVID-19 has uncovered, special attention should be given to how these learning outcomes and abilities related to DC could be provided in digital-only learning environments.

Conclusion

It is more important than ever for public relations education and practice to be closely connected, especially in this VUCA world that includes dynamics such as COVID-19 and the resulting global pandemic. Teece’s (2011) strong suggestion that dynamic capabilities be a foundational framework for business schools should also be extended to those studying public relations. As public relations has pivoted to embrace ways to help organizations navigate the VUCA world, educators recognize the need to do the same in our curriculums. Leveraging the theory of dynamic capabilities, emphasizing the eight themes applicable to public relations professionals, unlocks a myriad of potentials for curricular and co-curricular learning. This study suggests that to maintain relevance and prepare students for the new world that entry-level PR professionals will enter, integrating a commitment to dynamic capabilities throughout a curriculum will benefit students’ long-term learning. More than simply a one-time assignment or a set model, dynamic capabilities are, in many ways, one of the “soft skills” that will be the differentiating competency to position students to thrive in VUCA environments as young professionals.

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