Running head: PR EDUCATION DIVIDE

Differential Visions of An Ideal Graduate Public Relations Curriculum between Educators
and Practitioners: Professional Identity as A Driver

Categories: **Completed Research**
General Submission

Hongmei Shen, Ph.D. (**Corresponding Author**)
Assistant Professor
School of Journalism & Media Studies
San Diego State University
Email: hshen@mail.sdsu.edu

Elizabeth Toth, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Communication
University of Maryland
Email: eltoth@umd.edu

Differential Visions of An Ideal Graduate Public Relations Curriculum between Educators and Practitioners: Professional Identity as A Driver

Abstract

Given the growth of master's level education in public relations in recent years, industry leaders and educators have begun to set curriculum standards for the master's education (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2012). Practitioners' and educators' expectations and visions of the graduate education, however, are largely influenced by their own identification with the public relations profession, a process by which people assert their membership to a particular group (Sha, 2009). Meanwhile prior literature has consistently suggested a big divide or disconnect between educators and practitioners regarding their expectations and visions of an ideal public relations education (Russell, 2006; Wright & Turk, 2006). Cutting across these streams of research, we investigated the impact of professional identification on educators' and practitioners' perceptions of an ideal master's curriculum in public relations.

A nationally representative sample of the PRSA membership and willing educators from three academic associations participated in the study (N = 463). Exploratory factor analysis, analysis of variance, and regression analyses were performed. First, we found that both practitioner and educators identified highly with our profession, but practitioners (M = 6.37, SD = .70) scored significantly higher than educators ((M = 6.04, SD = .97) on professional identification ($F_{1, 387} = 13.64$, $p < .01$).

We then used regression analysis to compare the differential influence of practitioners' and educators' professional identification on their perceptions of an ideal master's level education in public relations. In terms of expected **knowledge** to be delivered through the ideal curriculum, professional identification was a significant influencer of the **strategic management knowledge component** for **both** practitioners and educators (Practitioner: beta = .25, Educator: beta = .29, $p < .01$). That is, the more practitioners and educators identified with the public relations profession, the stronger support they reported for including a strategic management component in the ideal master's curriculum. Second, significant contrasts surfaced between practitioners and educators regarding all the other three components of the **knowledge** factor (business principles and processes, theory, and global influence). Professional identification only had a significant and positive impact on these knowledge components for practitioners (Business: beta = .23, $p < .05$; Theory: beta = .33, $p < .01$; Global: beta = .33, $p < .01$), not the educators. In other words, the more practitioners felt belonging to the public relations profession, the more likely they would endorse these three knowledge components of an ideal master's curriculum.

Intriguingly, professional identification only significantly predicted the anticipated **skills component** of the ideal master's curriculum for educators (beta = .24, $p < .01$), not practitioners. That means, the more the educators identified with the public relations profession, the more they would embrace the skill sets to be delivered to master's students.

These findings provided us a first look into a potential driver of educators' and practitioners' envisioned master's level curriculum and shed light into the nuanced differences between them.

References

Commission on Public Relations Education. (2012). Standards for a master's degree in public
relations: Educating for complexity. Retrieved November 4, 2012,
http://www.commpred.org/_uploads/report5-full.pdf

Sha, B.-L. (2009). Exploring the connection between organizational identity and public
relations behaviors: How symmetry trumps conservation in engendering organizational
identification. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 21*(3), 295-317.

Wright, D. K., & Turk, J. V. (2007). Public relations knowledge and professionalism:
Challenges to educators and practitioners. In E. L. Toth (Ed.), *The future of excellence
in public relations and communication management* (pp. 571-588). Mahwah, NJ:
Lawrence Erlbaum.

Russell, M. P. (1999).An education model to prepare for excellence in public relations: A case
study of the Syracuse University limited residency/distance learning master's program
in communications management. In E. L. Toth (Ed.), *The future of excellence in public
relations and communication management* (pp. 589-599). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence
Erlbaum.