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

Categories: Completed Research
General Submission

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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 (F1, 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