



## Preface and Acknowledgments

The Commission on Public Relations Education acknowledges the support and contributions of many individuals and organizations in the preparation of this 2012 report that provides standards for U.S.-based master's degree education in public relations.

The report's standards were informed by research that was performed by Commission members and their colleagues at Syracuse University and at the University of Maryland. The research was funded by the PRSA Foundation. In addition, the PRSA Foundation and The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations provided financial support for the publication and dissemination of this report.

Members of the Commission, who collectively represent a wide range of scholarly/professional associations that are stakeholders in public relations education, worked untold hours diligently analyzing and interpreting the findings of the research, deliberating final recommendations and writing this report.

Judy VanSlyke Turk, Virginia Commonwealth University, performed the formidable task of editing the document. The Commission's executive committee that managed the process included Maria Russell, Syracuse

Relations, and Dean Kruckeberg, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

### **Introduction and Context for This Commission Report**

Since 1975, the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE), which is comprised of public relations educators and practitioners who represent organizations in public relations and related fields, has studied U.S.-based undergraduate public relations education. CPRE's reports and recommendations have been widely adopted by programs that prepare undergraduate students with

a strong foundation for entry into the public relations profession, both in the United States as well as elsewhere throughout the world. The Commission's recommendations throughout the years also have influenced criteria for Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) Chapters, standards for PRSA Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) and the recommendations

graduate public relations education throughout the world.

Now the Commission must address the burgeoning growth of master's degree programs in public relations. This growth in graduate education can be measured not only in the rapidly increasing numbers of students and programs, but also in the types of programs and the range of providers: 1) that are available on campus and online; 2) that are academically and professionally focused; and 3) that are offered by traditional academic institutions and by commercial enterprises, the latter of which were not examined in the Commission's research.

Today, some master's degree programs are almost wholly theoretical, while others are almost totally applied, to the extent that the latter may be devoid of theory and research courses. In addition, some graduate programs in public relations may be considered little more than a "fifth year" of undergraduate education.

The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) is attempting to evaluate public relations as part of its review of professional graduate programs in schools of journalism and mass communication. But the specific curricular requirements for public relations graduate education remain poorly defined, and many master's degree programs in public relations are not eligible for ACEJMC accreditation because their academic homes are not in journalism or mass communication programs. That situation has prompted PRSA to "certify" both undergraduate and graduate programs. PRSA and its Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) program have taken leadership roles in establishing these certification standards, and, today, in-

creasing numbers of both undergraduate and graduate programs are seeking CEPR certification. But this certification process would benefit from better-defined standards at the master's level.

While graduate education had not been ignored in previous Commission reports, it has received a rather cursory review. In fact, no comprehensive standards have been attempted in at least two decades that the Commission could find. The only prior examples appear to be a 1982 International Public Relations Association (IPRA) Gold Paper, "A Model for Public Relations Education for Professional Practice" (International Public Relations Association, 1982) and a 1985 report, "Advancing Public Relations Education: Recommended Curriculum for Graduate Public Relations Education" (National Commission on Graduate Study in Public Relations, 1985).

Given the growth of master's-level public relations education in recent years, rigorous standards in this area are badly needed. This report will serve the profession, the academic institutions that confer graduate degrees in public relations, the students who are enrolled in master's degree programs in public relations and the organizations that employ these graduates as practitioners or professors.

### Goals of the Report

1. To provide academic standards for master's-level public relations programs, both those designed to prepare graduates for the professional practice of public relations as well as those intended to prepare graduates for doctoral study.
2. To recommend guidelines for accrediting and certifying bodies for master's-level public relations education programs.

## Preface and Acknowledgments

3. To elevate expectations for master's-level public relations education above those normally set for undergraduate programs of study.
4. To recommend standards for educators who teach in public relations graduate programs.
5. To engage the public relations industry in support of graduate public relations education.

## Definition of Terms

### *Titles*

Public relations master's degree programs have many different titles. Among them are public relations, strategic public relations, strategic management and communication management. In the Commission's research for this report, we had used the terms "public relations" and "communication management" synonymously; however, in this report we will use the term "public relations" to collectively describe these programs.

### *Professional Graduate Program*

A professional graduate program is a post-baccalaureate academic program that prepares students to think strategically and critically and to master the skills and to be able to fulfill the responsibilities of professional public relations practice, as well as to understand and respect the ethical decision-making requirements for a public relations management position.

### *Academic Graduate Program*

An academic graduate program is a post-baccalaureate academic program that prepares students for university teaching and research careers that are grounded in

### **Driving Forces Behind Growth of Public Relations Graduate Programs in the United States**

Graduate public relations education represents a relatively new discipline in U.S. colleges and universities. Although there were occasional graduate courses offered in several universities as early as 1920, and a few graduate degree programs in public relations were developed in the late 1940s, the rapid growth and development of graduate education in public relations began in the 1960s and 1970s, and has accelerated over the past decade.

In addition to formal public relations education programs at colleges and universities, there has been an explosion of professional development offerings, not only from the traditional deliverers — professional societies such as PRSA, International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), Institute for Public Relations, the Arthur W. Page Society — but also from an ever-growing list of commercial enterprises and trade publications. These offerings, which do not offer academic credit toward a graduate degree, come in a variety of models ranging from traditional face-to-face seminars and conferences to teleconferences and webinars.

While many practitioners see the need for advanced and/or continuing education, a large number cannot take advantage of traditional master's degree programs because these are usually offered during the work-day. Even the time-tested model of evening and weekend classes — long the solution for working professionals — is difficult for those practitioners trying to balance work and family obligations. The world is now 24/7

bosses, clients and the media. Globalization is exacerbating this situation because these practitioners are responsible for communicating across time zones, geographic boundaries and cultures.

Since 2000, the number of master's degree public relations education programs in the United States has grown from 26 to 75 (when the Commission's research was completed in 2011). Market demand is the primary driver of this growth, but there are many "supply" drivers as well. As journalism and mass media go through the throes of radical change, enrollments in these curricula have dropped dramatically. To replace those students, many schools are looking to the areas that are experiencing growth: public relations, advertising and digital journalism. Universities also are seeking new and nontraditional students, e.g., international students, particularly from Asia, and "older" students, often working professionals, to offset declining enrollments and budget cuts. The rise of "for-profit" universities is another response to this growing demand for graduate education. A variation on the "for-profit" university is the appearance of commercial enterprises that partner with traditional universities to manage branding, marketing and recruitment of students.

Technology and improvements in learning software have aided the growth of graduate programs. Of the 75 master's degree programs in the United States that were identified in research for this study, eight were delivered totally online. Another four were delivered in a "blended" or "hybrid" model of short, on-campus residencies followed by independent study and distance learning. Some universities have had a long tradition of "distance education," particularly those

them, this growth is a natural extension of their outreach.

#### Value of a Master's Degree Program in Public Relations

Today's business environment has become increasingly complex and poses myriad challenges for public relations practitioners who must have a detailed understanding of the forces that affect organizations; that influence commercial, institutional and political trends; and that shape society. Today's practitioners, especially those in management positions, must possess the ability to conduct research and to think strategically in every situation.

#### *A Public Relations Professional Master's Degree Program*

A professional master's degree in public relations should provide students and their present and future employers with a competitive edge in a competitive environment. Such a master's degree program teaches the nuances of public relations and management techniques as well as leadership, business and communication skills. Specifically, public relations educators and practitioners expect a professional master's degree in public relations to provide:

- An appreciation for the importance of globalization, entrepreneurship and technology in today's business environment.
- An understanding of the interactions of the key functional aspects of an organization.
- An understanding of the role of communication in society and the ethical challenges of global public relations.

## Preface and Acknowledgments

- An understanding of, and the skills necessary to participate in, effective teamwork.
- Improved critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Social science research and evaluation knowledge and skills.
- Cutting-edge communication management abilities.
- Thorough knowledge of public relations theories and principles.
- Advanced critical thinking skills.
- Social science research skills to test new theories.
- Skills to work in applied public relations research.
- Skills to teach undergraduate public relations.
- Preparation to enter and succeed in public relations doctoral programs.

### *A Public Relations Academic Master's Degree Program*

An academic master's degree program in public relations should build on the same outcomes of a professional master's program, but students in a public relations academic master's degree program should have additional understanding of theory and social science research methods so that they will be prepared to enter doctoral programs.

Specifically, an academic master's degree in public relations should provide, in addition to the outcomes of a professional master's degree program:

### The Global Way Forward

The Commission acknowledges that most of the research that has led to this report was conducted in the United States, with a majority of participants located in the United States. However, in formulating recommendations for master's degree education in public relations, the Commission has given much consideration to global issues and context. This is reflected by the inclusion of a robust list of course content areas designed to enhance global understanding.

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