

## Ethics Education Report

In 2017 The Commission on Public Relations Education issued its report *Fast Forward: Foundations and Future State*, a product of three years of research with practitioners and educators in the public relations field. The report made 10 major recommendations based on the finding of the study. The first recommendation was to add an ethics course to the required public relations curriculum, bringing the minimum number of courses to six. This course should be a stand-alone course in public relations ethics, as differentiated from courses in media ethics or media law.

As a follow up to the recommendation, the Commission charged a committee of academics and practitioners to develop additional guidelines for a public relations ethics course.

Below are the names and affiliations of the committee members:

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The following report shares the work of the committee and offers recommendations for academics preparing ethics materials for the public relations classroom.

### What this report covers

In this report you will find materials to propose a new public relations ethics course as well as priorities for ethics content in courses, links to sample syllabi and other ethics resources that can be included in a public relations course.

Faculty are welcomed to use any material in this report to propose or develop a course in public relations ethics. Material may also be used to incorporate ethics topics across the curriculum and into other public relations courses, such as public relations writing, campaigns, introduction, or campaigns. A stand-alone public relations ethics course is recommended in addition to integrating ethics across the curriculum.

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## New Course Proposal

Below is content that faculty and administrators may use to complete a new course proposal for a public relations ethics course, including a course description, reason for course addition, student learning outcomes, recommended assessments, and course content. In some sections, options are provided. Please feel free to adapt this material to fit the requirements of your college or university.

**Name of Course:** Public Relations Ethics

**Credit Hours:** 3

**Catalog Description:**

**Option 1:** This course provides an overview and analysis of ethics issues confronted by public relations professionals and organizational leaders; discussions and case studies of ethical reasoning; philosophical, theoretical, and practical concerns affecting everyday matters of moral choice and moral judgment; current trends on these topics in public relations; the moral responsibilities and impact of public relations on public policy and on society

**Option 2:** Today's public relations professionals face a range of ethical dilemmas on the job. The purpose of this course is to explore the most common issues and to provide students with tools to work through moral dilemmas. The course will cover a wide range of topics including transparency, digital ethics, social responsibility, and media framing. Students will discuss case studies, complete online modules, and apply learning from the course to an original case study paper. This course provides a framework for approaching strategic communication work from an ethical perspective, allowing students to better understand the larger implications of communication on individual groups and society. The course will cover theories and best practices that bridge cultural applications and offer practical insights on how communicators in corporations, government agencies, or advocacy groups might develop communication strategies that uphold ethical principles.

**Prerequisite:** Principles of public relations, [Other courses]

**Frequency of Offering:** Offered every (semester, quarter, year)

**Reasons for Addition or Revision:** This new course is being added to the college's public relations curriculum based on a recommendation from the Commission on Public Relations Educations' 2017 report on undergraduate education in public relations, *Fast Forward: Foundations and Future State. Educators and Practitioners*, which calls for a required course in ethics as part of the public relations curriculum.

## Student Learning Outcomes

Below is a list of the recommended student learning outcomes, along with the related course content and methods of assessment.

Outcomes	Course Content References (see below)	Assessment
1. Identify ethical issues in communication situations	I, II	Written assignments, class discussions, quizzes, exams
2. Demonstrate an understanding of the major ethical approaches that affect moral decision making by organizations, as well as the role of public relations professionals in shaping those decisions	II, IV, V	Written assignments, discussion board posts, exams, final project
3. Analyze the conflicting duties and loyalties in ethical issues that public relations practitioners and organizational leaders confront	III, VI	Written assignments, in-class presentations, exams
4. Develop additional skills in listening, managing, and resolving potential ethical issues in public relations	V, IX	Written assignments, in-class presentations, exams
5. Construct written and oral arguments explaining particular ethical choices	III, VI	In-class presentations, written assignments
6. Create a personal ethical standard for communication	III, IV	Personal code of ethics
7. Develop critical thinking and analytical problem-solving skills to address ethical issues using ethical decision models	II, VI	Class discussions, discussion board posts, written assignments
8. Develop an action plan to address an ethical issue including identifying appropriate communication strategies to raise	VIII	Written assignments, exams, final project
9. Understand the role of organization culture including motivations of others in ethical decision making	VII	Final project
10. Understanding broader impact of organizational ethical decision making	X, XI, XII, XIII	Quizzes, Final project

## Course Content

Following are recommended topics to be covered in a public relations ethics course. These topics are referenced in the Student Learning Outcomes chart.

Content Topics	
I.	Introduction to Ethical Decision Making
II.	Ethical Decision Models & Theories
III.	Professional Code of Ethics
IV.	Loyalties in Public Relations
V.	Ethics & Persuasion
VI.	Impact of Organizational Culture on Ethical Decision Making
VII.	Building Credibility/ Allies & Coalitions
VIII.	Last Resort Approaches – Rocking the Boat & Whistleblowing/ Personal Crisis Plan
IX.	Ethics in the Digital Age
X.	Diversity and Inclusion in Public Relations
XI.	Corporate Social Responsibilities
XII.	Ethics in Crisis Communication
XIII.	Ethics in a Global Context

# Incorporating Ethics Skills Across the Curriculum

As faculty consider incorporating ethics across the public relations curriculum, they may find the following list of skills, knowledge, and abilities useful. These topics could be addressed in a public relations ethics course or in other core courses, such as introduction to public relations, writing, strategy, or campaigns courses. This list was gathered through a Delphi study of public relations practitioners conducted by Ethics Committee member Marlene Neill. The list identifies essential skills/knowledge/abilities needed in the public relations practitioner role. Additionally, a list of skills that practitioners consider to be lacking in current graduates is provided. Consider ways to incorporate these into your course.

## Essential Skills/Knowledge/Abilities

Personal Behavior/Integrity/Accountability/Trustworthiness  
Personal Code of Conduct/Ethics/Value System/Understanding of Basic Moral Principles  
Accessibility to Information  
Critical Thinking/ Problem Solving  
Honesty/Transparency/Truthfulness/Candor/Disclosure  
Awareness/Knowledge Code of Ethics/Identify Ethical Issue/Discernment  
Courage/Speak Truth to Power  
Diplomacy/ Ability to Ask Questions  
Judgment  
Influence  
Business Acumen/Analytics/Budgeting/Copyright laws  
Education/Philosophy Courses/Religious Studies/Classic Codes  
Issues Management  
Ethical Decision Models  
Collaboration  
Counseling Abilities/Articulate & Provide Recommendations/Oral Communication  
Respect for Others  
Understand Policies & Procedures/Consequences  
Strategic Planning  
Leadership/Team Building  
Need Mentors/Network to Discuss Issues  
Confidentiality  
Act in Public Interest  
Emotional Intelligence  
Understand Others' Motivations

## Skills/Knowledge/Abilities that are lacking in current graduates

Business Acumen/Data Analysis/Copyright law  
Respect for Others  
Courage/Speaking Up/Confidence  
Moral Compass/Values-Based Decision Making  
Formal education/Case & Scenario Based training/Continuing Education  
Judgment/Critical Thinking/Problem Solving  
Accepting Information on Face Value/Accuracy  
Personal Behavior/Accountability/Integrity  
Understand Policies/Procedures/Organization's Values  
Transparency/Disclosure/Candor  
Ethical Awareness/Moral Understanding  
Counseling Abilities  
Understanding History/Worldview  
Risk Evaluation/Crisis Communication

## Ethics Education Resources

Instructors may choose to include some of the following online resources, textbooks, and other resources in their public relations courses.

### Online resources

The following list of resources can be accessed online at no cost.

- Arthur W. Page Center teaching modules: <https://bellisario.psu.edu/page-center/teaching-modules>
- PRSA Board of Ethics & Professional Standards (code of ethics, ESAs, decision models, case studies): <https://www.prsa.org/ethics/>
- AEJMC Media Ethics Division: <http://www.teachingethicsresources.org/>
- University of Texas, Media Ethics Initiative, Advertising/Public Relations Case Studies: <https://mediaethicsinitiative.org/advertising-public-relations-ethics-case-studies/>
- Giving Voice to Values curriculum: <https://www.givingvoicetovaluesthebook.com/resources-for-educators/>
- Ethics Unwrapped: <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/>
- U.N, ethics and integrity module: <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/tertiary/integrity-ethics.html>

### Sample syllabi

Sample syllabi are available in these Google folders.

Public Relations Ethics syllabi:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cN9JgRYV5A3w1LCRC0cxRiJLJQdNHauW?usp=sharing>

Media Ethics syllabi:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1rCcjn28nRAJ7Ddjsx\\_WuQLp5LBSzrHV1?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1rCcjn28nRAJ7Ddjsx_WuQLp5LBSzrHV1?usp=sharing)

### Sample ethics activities

Sample ethics activities are available in this Google folder.

Ethics Activities:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1dS196GCVXCrzEhAvODd6clg3wkXmA7mb?usp=sharing>

### Possible textbooks for public relations course:

Martin, D. and Wright, D.K. (2005). *Public Relations Ethics: How to Practice PR Without Losing Your Soul*. New York, NY: Business Expert Press, 2016.

Neill, M.S. & Barnes, A. (2018). *Public Relations Ethics: Senior PR Pros Tell Us How to Speak Up and Keep Your Job*, New York: Business Expert Press.

### Possible management text with ethics focus:

Bowen, S. A., Rawlins, B. L., & Martin, T. M. (2019). An overview of the public relations function (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Business Expert Press.

### Possible employee communication text with ethics focus:

Men, R. L., & Bowen, S. A. (2017). *Excellence in internal communication management*. New York: Business Expert Press.

### Research Resources:

Barnes, J. W. (2016). *Social Media Ethics Made Easy: How to Comply with FTC Guidelines*. New York: Business Expert Press.

Black, J. & Roberts, C. (2011). *Doing Ethics in Media: Theories and Practical Applications*. New York: Routledge.

Boeyink, D.E. & Borden, S.L. (2010). *Making Hard Choices in Journalism Ethics: Cases and Practice*. New York: Routledge.

Bowen, S. A. (2018). Ethics of strategic communication. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of strategic communication* (pp. 1-11). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. DOI: 10.1002/9781119010722.iesc0074

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- Bowen, S. A. (2005). A practical model for ethical decision making in issues management and public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17(3), 191-216.
- Bowen, S. A. (2013). Using classic social media cases to distill ethical guidelines for digital engagement. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality*, 28(2), 119-133.
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- DiStaso, M.W. & Bortree, D.S. (2014). *Ethical Practice of Social Media in Public Relations*. New York: Routledge.
- Ess, C. (2014). *Digital Media Ethics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
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- Fitzpatrick, K. & Bronstein, C., eds. (2006). *Ethics in Public Relations: Responsible Advocacy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Frost, C. (2016). *Journalism Ethics and Regulation*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Routledge.
- Good, H., ed. (2008). *Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Gordon, A. D., Kittross, J.M., Merrill, J.C., Babcock, W., & Dorsher, M. (2011). *Controversies in Media Ethics*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge.
- Gower, K.K. (2018). *Legal and Ethical Considerations for Public Relations*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Horner, D.S. (2015). *Understanding Media Ethics*. London: Sage Publications.
- Jacquette, D. (2016). *Journalistic Ethics: Moral Responsibility in the Media*. New York: Routledge.

- Lester, P.M. (2018). *Visual Ethics: A Guide for Photographers, Journalists, and Filmmakers*. New York: Routledge.
- Lipschultz, J.H. (2018). *Social Media Communication: Concepts, Practices, Data, Law and Ethics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge.
- Luttrell, R. & Ward, J. (2018). *A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Martin, D., & Wright, D.K. (2016). *Public Relations Ethics: How To Practice PR Without Losing Your Soul*. New York: Business Expert Press.
- McBride, K.B. & Rosensteil, T.B., eds. (2014). *The New Ethics of Journalism: Principles for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Meyers, C. (2010). *Journalism Ethics: A Philosophical Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, R.L., Murray, M.D., Farrell, J.M. & Youm, K.H. (2018). *Media Law and Ethics*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Routledge.
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- Patterson, P., Wilkins, L., and Painter, C. (2019). *Media Ethics: Issues and Cases*. 9<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Peck, L.A. & Reel, G.S. (2017). *Media Ethics at Work: True Stories from Young Professionals*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Perebinosoff, P. (2017). *Real-World Media Ethics: Inside the Broadcast and Entertainment Industries*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge.
- Plaisance, P.L. (2014). *Media Ethics: Key Principles for Responsible Practice*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Smith, R.F. (2008). *Ethics in Journalism*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Ward, S.J.A. (2019). *Ethical Journalism in a Populist Age: The Democratically Engaged Journalist*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing.
- Zion, L. & Craig, D. (2015). *Ethics for Digital Journalists: Emerging Best Practices*. New York: Routledge.