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:

Denise Bortree     Marlene Neill  
Penn State University    Baylor University  

Shannon A. Bowen     Deborah Silverman  
University of South Carolina    Buffalo State University  

Karla Gower     Krishnamurthy Sriramesh  
University of Alabama    University of Colorado  

Nance Larsen  
Strive Group

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.

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

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

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

Sample ethics activities  
Sample ethics activities are available in this Google folder.

Ethics Activities:  
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1dS196GCVXCrzehAvODd6cgl3wkXmA7mb?usp=sharing

Possible textbooks for public relations course:  


Possible management text with ethics focus:  

Possible employee communication text with ethics focus:  

Research Resources:  


