



The 2019 CPRE  
West Coast  
Industry/Educator  
Summit Report:  
*Key Issues and  
Recommendations*



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## **Introduction**

In 1973, leaders in public relations education and the profession came together to address a shared problem: too few public relations degree programs to meet market needs, and too few public relations professionals in C-suites. The resulting collaboration between the public relations division of American Education in Journalism (now American Education in Journalism and Mass Communication) and PRSA produced the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE). Today, the Commission is widely recognized as one of the most powerful voices worldwide on public relations education, linking colleges and universities with industry leaders and public relations-related associations to benefit students, educators, and the profession.

The Commission's 65-member Board includes representatives of 20 major national and international public relations and public relations-related associations, such as PRSA, The Arthur Page Society, the PR Council, the Plank Center, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Strategic Communication, the Institute for Public Relations, and the International Communications Consultancy Organization. Serving as at-large members are individuals who are educators and practitioners, representing large and small universities, international and boutique agencies, and major corporations.

Since its founding, the Commission has produced ground-breaking research and six major reports, from 1981 through 2017, that have made a significant impact on the growth and quality of undergraduate and graduate public relations programs internationally. Its recommendations have been adopted by educators, educational administrators, students, practitioners, and industry leaders.

Among its major recommendations, the 2017 *Fast Forward* report called for the Commission to actively promote and strengthen understanding and alliances between educators and practicing professionals.

Since 2018, CPRE has sponsored three Summit meetings between the two groups to address common issues and develop ways to work together, for the benefit of our students and our profession – now and in the future. The first two Summits, each with 20 to 30 participants, took place in Washington, D.C., and Columbus, Ohio. This report highlights issues and key findings from the third, and largest, event, held at San Diego State University, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., on October 18, 2019: the West Coast Industry/Educator Summit.

## **About the Summit**

The West Coast Summit drew a diverse group of approximately 60 participants, including educators, practicing professionals, and several who were – or have been – both. Because the Summit took place the day before the PRSA Educators Academy Super Saturday and two days before the beginning of the 2019 PRSA International Conference, the timing was convenient for many state and San Diego region residents, as well as Academy and conference attendees from around the country and the world. The program focused on issues concerning educators and practitioners that had been raised at the two previous summits, along with emerging issues identified by West Coast educators and industry leaders. For example, several in the area told us about increasing demand from employers for public relations students to possess business skills, and a growing number of students who want to become entrepreneurs.

The Summit opened with a panel of West Coast-based educators and industry leaders who discussed their own experiences and insights before engaging in a dialogue with the audience. Panelists included Kim Hunter, chair and CEO, The LAGRANT Foundation; Julie Wright, (w)righton communications; Bey-Ling Sha, dean, College of Communications, California State Fullerton; and Carolyn Kim, associate professor, Biola University. David Oates, principal, Public Relations Security Services, was the moderator.



*Hunter*



*Wright*



*Sha*



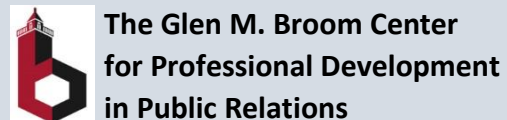
*Kim*



*Oates*

## **Sponsors**

*The Commission is grateful to these sponsors who made the 2019 West Coast Summit possible:*



**...and Joseph Cohen, President,  
PRSA Foundation**

## **Panel Discussion Highlights**

Panelists focused on topics including qualities employers look for in job applicants, issues relating to diversity and inclusion, internships, and common misunderstandings between academe and the workplace. Panelists Hunter and Wright noted that a modern public relations professional must learn to be a strategist, a leader, and an analyst who knows that measurement is more than counting numbers. Hunter, Sha, and Kim stressed the importance of universities and places of employment focusing on diversity and inclusion in all of its aspects; Sha cited continuing pay gaps in the workplace based on diversity, and on the need for practitioners and educators to work together to identify and change such practices.

All agreed that, in general, most employers don't know what constitutes a public relations degree today. Employers and educators could benefit from discussions on the relationship between curriculum design and industry needs, the pros and cons of online education, and how educators get the resources they need. As Sha pointed out, state institutions are especially challenged in today's economy, as continuing budget cuts create fewer resources for students and faculty. While schools need to become more creative as they cope with limited resources, the panelists also called for more investment by the public relations industry in public relations education. All noted the value of internships for employers and students, and the importance of work experience in general for students as they prepare for the job market.

Wright and Hunter said that many professionals would welcome opportunities to contribute more to public relations education. They also offered a few additional pointers for graduating jobseekers:

- Know how to brand yourself – resumé and writing skills are critical.
- Visual presentation skills matter too.
- Never use template cover letters!

Following the panel discussion, the group took a lunch break before beginning the roundtable discussion portion of the program.

The group moved into eight roundtables, each with a designated leader, for discussions on key issues in public relations education from employer and educator perspectives. All the panelists, and the moderator, took part in the roundtable discussions. The event concluded with reports to the group from the roundtable leaders.

## **Key Findings: Roundtables**

A senior professional or educator presided over each roundtable, which included a mix of professionals/practitioners and educators. Roundtable discussion leaders were Denise Bortree, associate professor, Penn State University; La Monica Everett-Haynes, interim associate vice president of strategic communications and public affairs and chief communications officer, San Diego State University; William Gay, APR, Fellow PRSA, president, Reliance Public Relations; Nance Larsen, APR, Fellow PRSA, vice president, integrated marketing communications, The STRIVE Group; Tina McCorkindale, APR, president and CEO, Institute for Public Relations; Julie O'Neil, APR, Fellow PRSA, professor and associate dean for graduate studies and administration, Texas Christian University; Deanna Pelfrey, APR, Fellow PRSA, senior lecturer, University of Florida; Kathleen Rennie, APR, Fellow PRSA, associate professor, New Jersey City University; and Deborah Silverman, APR, Fellow PRSA, chair and associate professor of communication, Buffalo State University.

Each group's charge was two-fold:

- Discuss topic areas covered in two previous CPRE-sponsored roundtables: diversity, ethics, writing, and online education.
- Discuss issues/topics raised by the opening panel as well as other issues that may be of particular interest and concern to roundtable members.

At the conclusion of the roundtable sessions, each group's leader reported its comments and observations on key topics to all in attendance. The following is a summation of key findings on major topics addressed by the groups.

### **1. Diversity and Gender Issues**

Participants said racial and ethnic diversity remains a significant issue in public relations programs at colleges and universities. A challenge for many institutions, including those with many diverse students, is the lack of diverse faculty. Geographic and financial challenges often hamper hiring more diverse faculty. Some suggested that faculty identify "stars" among their students, provide mentoring for them, and build leadership paths. They noted that this is easier at larger colleges and universities with strong graduate programs. On the curriculum front, diversity needs to be defined broadly and woven into all classes.

In the area of gender issues, public relations programs continue to attract more women than men. As one roundtable noted, 70 percent-female classrooms are not uncommon. Among other observations:

- Male students don't see public relations as "macho" enough. Some suggested that collaborations with programs in public affairs, criminal justice, political science, and sports communication could help change that image.
- Both male and female students often don't understand the salary potential of the profession.

- Men get more promotions than women in the workplace.
- While more women are in the classroom, prejudice against women still exists at the highest levels in the profession, with men still a significant majority of top industry leaders.

## **2. Ethics**

The Commission's 2017 *Fast Forward* report made strong recommendations regarding an emphasis on ethics in all public relations courses, as well as a separate ethics course. The PRSA Educational Affairs Committee highly recommends that all college and university public relations courses that seek Certification in Education for Public Relations require a public relations ethics course. Roundtable participants agreed on the need to emphasize ethics, with comments as follows:

- In general, student plagiarism is on the rise; many students don't even understand what plagiarism is.
- Ethics should be a core part of the curriculum, infused into every public relations course.
- Students need to understand that unethical practices and behavior carry consequences – including lawsuits.

## **3. Online Education**

Online and hybrid education courses are becoming a greater part of the curriculum at many colleges and universities. Participants shared these observations and concerns:

- Many schools are pushing online education; deans often are advocates.
- Faculty worry about a lack of interpersonal communication in these courses.
- Some courses work well with online instruction, such as introductory and social media courses.
- Capstone and campaigns courses are not as successful online.
- Online students need to be self-directed learners to succeed.
- Online courses are more work for educators.
- Some educators and employers question the quality of online education.
- Perceptions of online courses by employers are colored by the reputation of the school.
- Hybrid may be the best option – California State Fullerton is working with a university in Norway on hybrids.



#### **4. Skills Students Need – and How to Deliver Them**

Roundtable members agreed on some broad and specific areas where students needed strong preparation on the undergraduate level. Both educators and practitioners offered ideas on how colleges and universities could meet these needs, as defined here:

##### ***A. Develop mastery in critical thinking, analytics, verbal, and visual communication***

- Include assignments on these topics across several different classes.
- Create minors in these areas; allow students to select up to three minors.
- Require certification.

##### ***B. Project a polished, mature presence***

- Require internships (see separate section below).
- Introduce/encourage certification.
- Develop strong mentorship programs. Create specific topics for mentorships to meet individual student needs, train mentors.
- Emphasize verbal and visual communication/presentation skills (from employers, “This is critical.”).
- Provide special training and consulting in professional behavior. Many students have never had exposure to this and don’t know what professional behavior is.
- Educators and professionals can work together in training students to develop and deliver their “elevator speeches.”

##### ***C. Learn how to write***

- Integrate writing across the curriculum.
- Increase the number of specific writing classes.
- Professionals can prepare YouTube videos for students on how to write a pitch, resumé, cover letter.

#### **5. Internships**

Educators and practitioners all considered internships a key experience for public relations students, and they generally agreed that students should be compensated for their internships. Other comments and observations included:

- Additional support may be needed – and should be provided – to students in under-served populations who are seeking internships.



- Many students are working full-time as well as attending a college/university full-time. Develop alternatives to insure they can have internship experiences, perhaps including virtual internships or one-credit options, such as practicums.
- Consider offering programs like the American Advertising Federation's, which selects students for summer-long work, with living quarters and compensation provided.
- What do students expect – and employers want – from internships? Career centers and employers should work together closely to define, monitor, and evaluate internships.

## **6. Student Training and Preparation Challenges**

Roundtable participants cited challenges and changes that will face today's students – and steps that can be taken to help ensure their future success.

- Educators should work more closely with public relations agencies and organizations to ensure students will receive training to meet new and changing demands. Students who plan to work in such areas as health care, public policy, and the like may need special training for difficult situations and decisions.
- Education curricula should place more emphasis on analysis, review, and practicing with concepts and issues connected to the real lives of students.
- Consider offering funding so students with financial constraints can take advantage of PRSSA.
- Agencies can help students better understand the business aspect of their future careers. For example, some said they show students breakdowns of their expenses.
- Students need to be prepared for a multidisciplinary world, meaning they should understand public affairs and marketing. However, as one roundtable group warned, "There is a danger in combining communications and marketing/branding in the same academic program."

## **7. Entering the Marketplace**

Roundtable participants addressed the topics of career centers and resumés in a wide-ranging discussion of how students and their instructors can best prepare them for interviews and employment.

### ***A. Utilizing the campus career center***

- Most centers are not well-informed about public relations and the needs of employers, and some are counter-productive in advising students in such areas as resumés.
- Pair employers with career centers to prepare students for interviews, help with resumés and cover letters, and determine the best internships to match employer/student needs and interests.

### ***B. Creating a resumé that works***

- Tailor the resumé to the audience – have different versions for different positions.
- List languages spoken prominently.
- Include information providing objective measures of excellence beyond grades – for example, engagement with PRSSA and other extracurricular activities/volunteer groups, certification in public relations, membership in honorary societies.
- Employers want to know what applicants have accomplished – provide more than statistics.
- Employers pay attention to design. Some like infographics, others don't— have versions of each.
- Include digital media skills, including websites, analytics, social media, content creation.

## **8. Advice Exchange: Taking Actions, Building Bridges**

Educators suggested actions employers could take for the benefit of students, and vice versa. They also shared ideas for building bridges between education and the profession.

### ***A. Exchanging advice***

- For faculty: use more visuals and videos in the classroom; engage students in creating, modifying, updating the curriculum.
- For employers: help colleges and universities with developing their curriculum and key performance indicators for courses/students.
- For employers: work with educators to create a part-time farm system to help students develop the skill sets they need.
- For employers: provide interns and new employees with opportunities for advocacy in their work – today's students are often cause-focused.

### ***B. Building bridges***

- Work together to provide opportunities for public relations educators to present their research in non-PR conference spaces.
- Do a joint forum or summit on mistakes, lessons learned, case studies for an audience of educators and practitioners.
- Together, develop a repository of case studies, best practices, and crisis communications situations that is accessible to students, educators, and professionals.
- Create joint innovation centers/incubators that can give students valuable experience and help them learn how to use creative, unconventional approaches to problems.

## **9. Perceptions – and Misperceptions – of Public Relations**

Educators cited the changes in the names of many programs and majors from “public relations” to options such as “strategic communication.” Practitioners commented that most agencies have deleted “public relations” from their company names. These practices have created visibility problems, while at the same time, misperceptions about what public relations represents also may be deterring students.

### **A. *Common public misperceptions***

- Public relations is “spin.”
- Public relations is unethical – participants reported that some faculty members in other programs encourage students not to take public relations courses.

### **B. *Changing the conversation, boosting visibility with potential students***

- Open the public relations principles course to other majors. Some schools have done this and increased enrollment in the major.
- Work together (employers and educators) to expand public knowledge and appreciation for skilled public relations work.
- Strengthen the connection of individual university programs with a national network. For example, PRSA could set up a framework for university partnerships on internships or collaborations. These could be chapter, organization, or region-specific.

## **10. Final Words**

Finally, roundtable participants concluded that educators and employers had cited some key factors about today’s public relations students that both parties should recognize and embrace, and some messages they can jointly deliver:

- Most students will not work for big agencies in big cities.
- Students need to know how to do hard work.
- Students are very unlikely to own their agency when the graduate. Therefore, provide information and ideas regarding how to do freelance/contract work successfully.

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*This report is authored by Judith T. Phair, APR, Fellow PRSA, and co-chair, Commission on Public Relations Education, 2019-2020. She thanks Summit roundtable leaders, sponsors, the staff, faculty and students of San Diego State University and its Broom Center, and the CPRE Board for their valuable assistance and support.*