



COMMISSION ON  
PUBLIC RELATIONS  
EDUCATION

*Fast Forward: Updates on  
Public Relations Education*

# SPOTLIGHT SERIES

*Ethics Education:  
Recommendations for Public  
Relations Curriculum*

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# Ethics Committee Spotlight Report for Commission of Public Relations Education

Date: June 6, 2022

Committee members in attendance: Denise Bortree (chair), Shannon Bowen, Karla Gower, Marlene Neill, Deb Silverman

*Note: Committee member Nance Larsen had a last-minute conflict and could not attend. Former report co-author Krishnamurthy Sriramesh has stepped off the committee.*

## Report Summary

Members of the Ethics Committee of the Commissions on Public Relations Education (CPRE) met on June 6, 2022 to reflect on the [2018-2019 Ethics Education Report](#). We discussed ethics education priorities for today and how that has (or has not) changed since the report published. We also developed recommendations for programs that are developing and/or updating curriculum on public relations ethics. Below are our reflections.

## Changes in Public Relations Ethics Education Priorities

In reviewing the 2018-2019 Ethics Education Report from CPRE, we still strongly support the recommended course proposals and course content. Topics such as ethical decision-making and codes of ethics continue to be critical to students' understanding of public relations ethics. These topics are explored effectively in the student learning outcomes of the course plan. At the same time, some topics originally listed in the course content such as ethics of DEI, global communication, CSR, and crisis communication have emerged as a higher priority today than four years ago. We noted that these topics were not thoroughly addressed in student learning outcomes, and we would recommend that future versions of the report place a higher priority on these topics. In addition, we believe topics including critical thinking, ethical listening and courage to speak up when faced with an ethical challenge need to be raised in priority in the report. To that end, we have further developed these recommendations in the following section.

## Updated Recommendations for Public Relations Ethics Curriculum

The committee discussed the current state of public relations ethics education and recommended that the following topics be given greater priority in curriculum moving forward. The list below includes rationales and resources for each topic.

- **Critical Thinking/Ethical Decision Making**

Critical thinking skills and ethical decision-making are fundamental to ethical behavior in the workplace. We believe more needs to be done in the classroom to prepare public relations professionals to think critically about the actions they are taking and the content they are amplifying. This can begin in the classroom.

- **Courage and Confidence in Addressing Ethical Issues**

In thinking about what students are learning and not learning in the classroom, we agreed that students should develop courage to speak up on the job. If they witness unethical behavior, what do they do? Courage come from having used the ethical decision-making models and creating an action

plan to implement the decision. When student think through their action plan, they gain confidence and courage in their own abilities.

- **Navigating Misinformation in Crisis/Disaster Communication**

Misinformation is pervasive in crisis and disaster communication. This may be intentional or unintentional and may be due in part to the lack of accurate information. Students need to understand how to make ethical decisions about information in a high-pressure situation and decide how and what to communicate to the public. We see examples of this not only in traditional crisis and disaster communication but also in war and conflict communication and the recent pandemic health communication.

- **Ethical Listening**

Ethical listening was recommended as a student learning outcome of some of the course content in the CPRE Ethics Education Report; however, we believe this topic deserves to be elevated to a course topic in a public relations ethics course. To provide appropriate strategic counsel, public relations practitioners need to learn listening skills. This topic could appear in conjunction with relationship building skills, as listening is key to ethical relationship building. It could also be presented in conjunction with ethical leadership skills.

- **DEI/Social Responsibility**

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) has become a high priority for corporations and other organizations. In many cases, corporate social responsibility efforts have focused on DEI both internally and externally. Public relations students should understand how to make ethical decisions about DEI and about social responsibility of organizations. In recent years, companies have been compelled to make corporate social advocacy statements about DEI. This is emerging as a leading topic for organizations.

- **Global Ethics**

Much of the curriculum in public relations ethics focused on Western culture and thinking. As globalization continues to expand, students need to be able to navigate ethical problems in a variety of cultures. For that reason, we are recommending a greater focus on global ethics in the curriculum.