

Navigating Change:

Recommendations for Advancing Undergraduate Public Relations Education

The 50th Anniversary Report



Editors

Elizabeth L. Toth

University of Maryland, College Park

Pamela G. Bourland-Davis

Georgia Southern University



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PUBLIC RELATIONS
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With gratitude, the Commission recognizes its partner organization, the Institute for Public Relations, for its generous in-kind support.

*As of October 11, 2013

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University of Maryland, College Park

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Georgia Southern University



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Navigating Change: Recommendations for Advancing Undergraduate Public Relations Education

The Public Relations industry has never been more appreciated nor more in demand by the constituents it serves. At the same time, it's never faced more challenges, including the overarching need for well-educated and well-trained talent. **The Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) is unique in its role as the critically important bridge between education and industry,** helping prepare that talent for impactful and exciting careers that are both demanding and rewarding.

It is in this role that the Commission issues its latest in a series of Signature Reports for a dual purpose: to examine the evolving needs of our industry, and to conduct formal and informal research as the foundation for recommendations for advancing Public Relations education.

This report includes **input and insights of key stakeholders:** educators, academic administrators, leaders of accrediting bodies, and the practitioners who employ and mentor students who will become the future of the Public Relations profession.

“Navigating Change” is issued as the Commission celebrates its 50th anniversary, consistent with the vision of early Public Relations education advocates J. Carroll Bateman, Dr. Scott Cutlip, and Betsy Ann Plank, who inspired the Commission's creation in 1973.

At the same time, the Commission is mindful of **the need to respond to the accelerated pace of Public Relations today.** Public Relations operates in a global, diverse, and multi-cultural society, united and divided by technology, using new and evolving communication tools, and taking on forces of misinformation and disinformation. Because of its unique ethical responsibility, Public Relations is the voice for all of society, in the boardroom, at the leadership table, and throughout the organizations it serves.

Today the Commission has become the committed and collaborative leading organization that brings together educators and practitioners in advancing

Public Relations education. Guided by the Commission's periodic reports, educators benefit from new knowledge, tools, and practices; academic administrators gain insights into the special needs of Public Relations faculty and students; accrediting bodies ensure the highest standards for their decisions; and the profession is rewarded with well-educated, well-trained, new talent and future leaders.

As in any major initiative, there are **many people whose contributions must be acknowledged.** We extend enormous gratitude to those educators and practitioners who worked for nearly a year in the research process, led by the indefatigable Dr. Elizabeth Toth and Dr. Pamela Bourland-Davis. In the following chapters you will see the excellent work of teams led by Dr. Charles Lubbers, Dr. Kenneth Plowman and Dr. Anna Klyueva, Dr. Emily S. Kinsky, Dr. Denise Bortree, Dr. Nneka Logan, and Dr. Karla K. Gower, with Dr. Hongmei Shen and Dr. Hua Jiang leading the quantitative survey research.

In addition, we thank the many practitioners, including those from The Page Society and the Commission's newly created Research Panels, who provided insights on the industry's priorities through formal and informal surveys and focus groups; as well as to the representatives of the Commission's 24 member organizations who serve in a variety of leadership and committee positions.

Finally, we express our sincere appreciation to Jim Weiss, whose generous donation through The Weiss Family Trust makes possible the publication of this Report, and its widespread distribution across many traditional, digital, and social platforms. As a graduate of a Public Relations program, it is Jim's entrepreneurial spirit that has created innovative and forward-thinking firms employing thousands at every level of responsibility, with opportunities for their professional advancement. Jim Weiss is among those thought leaders who are committed to helping shape the future of Public Relations through education.



“We encourage you to not just read this Report, but to accept future invitations to join the educators and practitioners who will work hard to move its recommendations into action.”

For The Commission:

Stacey Smith

2022 Co-Chair, Practitioners

Senior Counsel and Partner
Jackson, Jackson and Wagner
Rye, New Hampshire

Maria P. Russell

2023 Co-Chair, Educators

Professor Emerita, Public Relations
Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse
School of Public Communications
Syracuse, New York

Nance Larsen

2023 Co-Chair, Practitioners

Director, Strategic Communications
Gere Tactical, Inc.
Anchorage, Alaska

About The Commission: www.commissionpred.org

To get involved: commissiononpred@gmail.org

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Navigating The Future in Communication Education ... It's About Relevance

By Jim Weiss

Founder & Chairman, Real Chemistry and Founder, The Weiss Center at Syracuse University's
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications

Celebrating its 50th anniversary, the Commission on Public Relations Education has once again published a seminal report, **Navigating Change: Recommendations for Advancing Undergraduate Public Relations Education**. The report is meant to illuminate the shifts in society and business and the impact on public relations. The purpose is meant to ignite discussions and debates among practitioners and educators on where the profession needs to move.

I'm proud to be the premier sponsor of this signature study, featuring recommendations on how to adequately prepare students for the real world of the communications profession over the next five years.

The mark of any successful organization, institution, or profession is its ability to sustain itself over time by educating the next generation of professionals who will create the future. In the case of higher education, it's about ensuring students are prepared to operate successfully in an ever-changing, complex, and competitive global marketplace. Knowledge and education must evolve and adapt in real time to embrace innovative technology—including data, analytics, AI, and machine learning—tools, techniques, processes, and approaches that adapt to new and different circumstances.

The PR profession is besieged by a confluence of events impacting our legacy of advocacy, including an increasingly technology-led marketplace, an expanding social media-driven ecosystem, and the need for a diverse, equitable, inclusive culture. Practitioners must deeply understand the challenges of communicating and engaging in an omnichannel environment as attention spans continue to be fragmented and reliable sources shift in a world of increasing misinformation.

My professors, class work, internships, relationships, and experiences in college ignited my curiosity and accelerated what has turned out to be a life-long learning journey.

As founder of a leading global integrated communications consulting firm, I've hired thousands of people including interns and graduates beginning their careers. I've sent hundreds of staff to various colleges and universities over the years to share their experiences and expertise, lead in-class discussions and case studies with students, and work with faculty to re-imagine the curriculum.

Looking ahead: science, technology, and innovation will dominate the day, and curricula and courses must be rethought to reflect the realities of today's world. As such, there are several areas of ambidextrous skills development, meaning it's not all about the tools and tactics of technology, it's also about doubling-down on the foundational fundamentals of critical thinking and analysis so that our future practitioners can get the most out of data and technology:

- Public Relations is about understanding, comprehension, advocacy, facts, and respect. This must be at the core of every curriculum.
- Writing will always be a top priority. But if students can't think critically, they cannot write well.
- Analytics, insights, and AI all need to be incorporated in the student college experience, **specifically, how such information is incorporated into decision-making, policy developments and action.**
- Business acumen, including finance and economics, needs to be incorporated into PR education. The next generation of leaders needs to understand business basics to be relevant.
- Educators and practitioners need to forge closer relationships in order to share the latest knowledge, skills, and ethical practices with students.
- There needs to be more flexibility in the classroom to react and adapt to different learning styles, and more hands-on training and mentoring opportunities for students is critical to forming the right skill sets.
- We must equip students with the skills to address the challenge of working in a hybrid environment—both on campus and in the workplace.

It is critical that PR education programs are steeped in teaching these important skills that go beyond communications tactics to equip students as they leave campus for professional positions. It is our individual and collective responsibility to get this right.

I'm stepping up to do my part with this report and I intend to enlist many of you to join me as this initiative evolves and grows beyond just recommendations; we owe it to the future of public relations and the successful careers of the next generation of leaders.

– Jim



“There are four traits that mean the most to employers: competence, curiosity, confidence, and collaboration.”



Navigating Change: Recommendations for Advancing Undergraduate Public Relations Education

Elizabeth L. Toth
Pamela G. Bourland-Davis

Public relations education has come of age as an established major, track, or sequence in universities. CPRE has established a five-course minimum standard for excellent KSA preparation. In 2018, CPRE turned its focus to ethics, with a sixth-course recommendation that is starting to receive adoption. This CPRE report recommends several directives to educators to integrate into their vital teaching practices. And, it identifies six broader public relations industry expectations of future practitioners.

What we recognize over a year's worth of discussions and research are our elevated professional expectations for undergraduate education. Educators and practitioners want talented entry-level practitioners who are strategic thinkers and who understand the impact of data analytics. These entry-level practitioners also will have learned the standards for ethical practice, the importance of DEI, and the role of public relations in contributing to social change.

This report has even greater import given the multiple organizational recalibrations underway, initiated by the pandemic response: hence our title choice, Navigating Change. As with any organizational crisis, the result is that we come out of it changed. Yet despite what has happened in these existential changes in the work of organizations and public relations, this report reaffirms many of the key abilities expected by practitioners and taught by educators including the value placed on writing, communication and storytelling—within ethical parameters, but now with a turn toward a broader worldview informed by the seismic changes in technology, society, politics, the economy, and global conflicts.

Method

For the first time, CPRE presents a report based on the consensus choices of its 65-member Board's involvement. Preparations began in the Spring of 2022 with CPRE members participating in four brainstorming sessions to generate topics they felt should make up the 2023 report.

Consensus topics were crowdsourced in April of 2022 in two surveys of the CPRE members and members of the PR Council. Topics were refined in two focus groups with Page Society members conducted in September of 2022. Then, member teams developed questions for a quantitative survey to obtain benchmark perceptions of six topics, which were added to benchmarking questions used in the past. Survey participation by public relations practitioners and educators representing United States and international public relations associations yielded sufficient numbers to allow advanced data analysis and interpretation.

Key Findings

The Future of the Public Relations Workplace: Experiential Learning from Classroom to Boardroom.

Because of the seismic changes brought on by COVID-19, the future of the Public Relations Workplace chapter leads off the 2023 report. Educators and practitioners will need to work together to develop experiential learning opportunities for students to enhance their exposure to post COVID-19 professional behavior and workplace expectations. Workplace challenges addressed include work-life balance and hybrid working environments; mental health and accommodations; DEI commitment and assessment; artificial intelligence (AI); and GenZ expectations of employers. The chapter provides examples of networking and experiential opportunity best practices.

Essential KSAs and the Six-Course Standard: It's all about the Six-Course Standard.

This report provides an update on educator and practitioner perceptions of undergraduate public relations education KSAs and how the six-course standard is being met. Previous KSA and hiring characteristics studies have highlighted mean differences between educators and practitioners. Analyzing the 2023 data from the perspective of top ranked items reflects substantial similarities in practitioner and educator



views. The five-course standard introduced in 1999 has taken hold in public relations programs, but the five course topics are not always offered in dedicated public relations courses. CPRE's sixth course in public relations ethics recommendation still must be added to public relations curricula, as supported by persuasive top survey rankings of ethics as a necessity in public relations education.

Critical Strategic Thinking: Strategic is Critical.

Public relations practitioners have repeatedly ranked critical and strategic thinking as the most sought after skills for entry-level career success, confirmed in the CPRE 2023 survey. However, research has suggested that most critical thinking instruction is a side element in public relations undergraduate education, and that strategic thinking tends to be more visible. This chapter argues for and presents ways to make explicit critical strategic thinking instruction. Critical thinking is the analytic followed by strategic thinking to determine creative direction, both involved in the process of creating communication strategy. Introduced is the DASA model (Detecting, Analyzing, Strategizing, Acting), a critical strategic model as a way of thinking through public relations planning.

Data Insights and Strategy: Aligning Data Analysis and AI through Education for Practice. The need for early career public relations practitioners to understand the basics of analytic metrics and data analysis could not be clearer, especially now with the advent of AI. The practice of public relations depends on prioritizing data insights and communicating them effectively to management. While students do not need to become data scientists, they must have a solid grounding in quantitative and qualitative research. Teaching the data analysis process can be approached as an extension of critical thinking. Educators are encouraged to teach students to align measurable organizational outcomes with public relations objectives; prioritize data ethics; and encourage their students' curiosity.

“Educators and practitioners want talented entry-level practitioners who are strategic thinkers and who understand the impact of data analytics. These entry-level practitioners also will have learned the standards for ethical practice, the importance of DEI, and the role of public relations in contributing to social change.”

Ethics: An Essential Competency, but Neglected.

While public relations professionals and educators continue to rank ethics at the top of the list of most desired knowledge areas (of KSAs) for entry-level practitioners, survey results indicated that our newest professionals are not adequately prepared to address public relations' ethical challenges. Practitioners were especially critical of young professionals' lack of mastery of essential ethics skills in their first five years, especially their lack of ethics skills in critical thinking, strategic planning, and a personal code of ethics. A top priority for future educational efforts should be to develop ethical critical thinking skills. Also, new professionals reported experiencing hostile workplace environments/harassment more than anticipated.

DEI: An Ethical Social Responsibility in PR Education.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion center on appreciating human differences, treating all people fairly, and ensuring that all individuals and communities feel valued, actions that lend themselves well to public relations practice. This chapter's research confirmed that the public relations field continues to value DEI knowledge, skills, and abilities but is not finding these KSAs in entry-level practitioners as much as is desired. CPRE recommends five ways to improve DEI public relations education, where educators must: understand DEI as an ethical social responsibility; actualize the DEI mission; take a comprehensive approach to DEI in public relations; create PR/DEI course materials and expand awareness of and access to them; and, prepare for pushback by creating support networks.

PR as a Driver of Social Change: Being Courageous.

This final section considers how public relations has a role in civil society. This chapter considered public relations' role as a social and cultural practice that generates discourses that shape society. Based on strong survey agreement by both practitioners and educators that public relations drives social change, it argues that students need to be prepared for the social role of organizations in which they work. Recommendations include a variety of ways that public relations educators can develop the critical thinking of students about social change: engaged scholarship; value-based case studies; classroom activities; guest speakers; and, Page Center teaching modules.

Final Notes

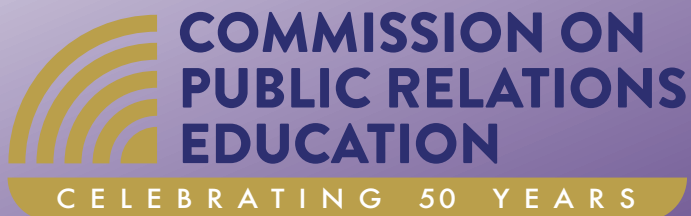
We have many colleagues to thank for giving of their time, talent, expertise, and commitment to this report. We are deeply appreciative of the topic team leaders who led the research efforts and discussions, and the final writing of the report: Denise Bortree, Karla Gower, Emily Kinsky, Nneka Logan, Chuck Lubbers, Ken Plowman & Anna Klyueva. We thank Hongmei Shen and Hua Jiang who developed the quantitative survey and provided the data analysis. We also thank our practitioner and educator colleagues, too many to name, who participated in the brainstorming sessions, crowdsourcing surveys, focus groups and team discussions, and those who responded to the survey itself.


“The Commission on Public Relations Education is unique in its role as the critically important bridge between education and industry, helping prepare future practitioners for exciting careers that are both demanding and rewarding.”

– Stacey Smith, Maria Russell, Nance Larson,
2022-2023 Co-Chairs

"I'm stepping up to do my part with this report. I intend to enlist many of you to join me as this initiative evolves and grows beyond just recommendations: we owe it to the future of public relations and the successful careers of the next generation of leaders."

– Jim Weiss



 **Navigating Change:**
Recommendations for
Advancing Undergraduate
Public Relations Education

**2023 CPRE
Principal Recommendations**

These principal recommendations are the overarching themes from the teams. Additional recommendations are outlined within each chapter.





Future of the Workplace

Educators and practitioners should work together to develop experiential learning opportunities for students that will enhance their exposure to professional behavior and workplace expectations, as well as help develop students' soft skills.



Essential KSAs and Six-Course Standard

CPRE must continue to promote the six-course standard. Public relations undergraduate programs must include: public relations courses in principles, research, writing, campaigns/cases, internship, and ethics.



Critical Thinking

- Successful public relations program sequencing of critical and strategic thinking involves:
 - Principles—introduction to critical strategic model (through learning objectives)
 - Writing, Method—practicing the model (learning through failing forward)
 - Capstone—applying the model to real-world problems (mastering critical strategic thinking).



Data Insights and Strategy

Educators should integrate Knowledge, Skills and Abilities related to data analytics and AI into academic programs.



Ethics

Public relations educators should continue to incorporate ethics into all courses across the curriculum.



DEI

Educators must understand DEI as an ethical social responsibility that should be embedded in the public relations curriculum.



PR as a Driver of Social Change

Educators must be courageous in addressing challenging issues including gender identity, sexuality, racism, ableism, and poverty.

Navigating Change: Recommendations for Advancing Undergraduate Public Relations Education

Section I: Report Premises

This section sets the stage for the *Navigating Change* report. Chapter 1 provides an overview for the report in terms of why we have the 2023 report, and how the study for the report was developed. Chapter 2 highlights critical areas of change occurring now and affecting the future of the contemporary workplace. All of these provide the foundation for subsequent sections.





Chapter 1

Introduction to the Report

Elizabeth L. Toth, CPRE Report Co-Chair, University of Maryland, College Park

Pamela G. Bourland-Davis, CPRE Report Co-Chair, Georgia Southern University

Since 1973, in an effort to bring the highest standards possible for public relations education, the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) has provided recommendations for public relations undergraduate and graduate education best practices. Each Commission report has reflected how educators and practitioners prioritized the issues of public relations education at the time. Between 1973 and 2023, the reports have lessened their emphasis on faculty credentials, resource needs, and more support from administration, all early necessities for fledgling programs. The reports have continued to chart curriculum requirements and recommended syllabus content for educator use. But over time, the reports have begun to advance perspectives for public relations education on ethics, diversity, globalization, and the professionalization of the field. While this 2023 report also provides curriculum and job application standards for excellent public relations undergraduate education, it centers on in-depth treatments of six topic areas, signaling public relations education's maturity, and elevating the expectations to produce critical thinkers and leaders for the public relations profession.

Fifty Years of CPRE Reports

Over its 50-year history, the Commission on Public Relations Education has issued five undergraduate education reports. The initial milestone 1975 *A Design for Public Relations Education* report, written by leading public relations educators, introduced the Commission's mission; made curriculum recommendations for undergraduate and graduate public relations education; and, identified specific courses with which to create a public relations undergraduate major. It addressed the vital relationship between practitioners and educators and the need for basic research to advance public relations practice.

The 1987 Commission-issued report *The Design for Undergraduate Public Relations Education* recommended the exact content for public relations undergraduate

courses. It was the first report to base its recommendations on survey research of public relations practitioners and educators. The report provided greater depth to what the objectives of a public relations program of study should be and discussed the assumptions and commitments of a public relations curriculum. It advocated for more resources and administrative and professional support.

With the 1999 *A Port of Entry* report, the Commission urged public relations practitioners to hire public relations program graduates. Based on an original comprehensive survey and focus groups sponsored by CPRE and the National Communication Association, the report updated recommended courses and content of courses for undergraduate and graduate public relations programs. *A Port of Entry* included, for the first time, what has become known as the five-course standard for undergraduate education, urging all public relations undergraduate majors to have at least five public relations titled courses.

The 2006 *Professional Bond* report called for the recognition of public relations education as the hallmark of the public relations profession. It presented up-to-date recommendations for professional public relations undergraduate and graduate studies. Based on five waves of original research, *The Professional Bond* was the first CPRE report to address the topics of ethics, diversity, communication technology, and distance learning.

The 2017 CPRE report, *Fast Forward: Foundations + Future State. Educators and Practitioners*, reflected the work of 60 educators and practitioners who served as subject matter experts. It introduced a sixth ethics course required for undergraduate public relations programs. The 2017 report added topics to help new public relations educators learn curriculum and pedagogical expectations inside and outside of the classroom. It reflected university trends toward learning outcomes, online education, and the impact of technology as well as included the topics of theory, research, diversity and global perspectives that were affecting universities and the field of public relations generally.

Why a 2023 Report

The Commission on Public Relations Education chose to produce its 2023 report based on several factors. Seismic changes had impacted the delivery of public relations education. Central among those factors was the March 2020 higher education turmoil caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Universities responded overnight by gearing up online classrooms to stop COVID-19's spread, but with consequential losses to public relations education's delivery to students. Employers similarly adjusted by creating remote workplaces with expectations for different skills from its first-time employees if they had openings at all; and the Great Resignation showed that employees' priorities had changed, especially in balancing work, childcare, home schooling, and reduced finances. Global issues not experienced before, such as the war in Ukraine, brought recognition of the role of communication and public affairs in new ways. Also, CPRE members cited the pervasiveness of social media and data analytics, and how AI is rapidly changing the public relations field—especially in creating disinformation and misinformation.

The 2023 Report Goals

Based on the CPRE brainstorming discussions, the following four goals were set for the report:

- To provide public relations education standards for successful preparation of students to enter and advance in their public relations careers.
- To be known as the authoritative voice on public relations education.
- To contribute to the social good.
- To provide a forum for ongoing discussions between practitioners and educators for successful public relations education.

Definition of Public Relations and Acknowledgement of United States Perspectives

CPRE members, in early discussions for this report, recognized that the field of public relations is multidimensional and ever-changing. Members described the integration and convergence of communication functions, the emphasis on marketing communication, the influence of technology, global communication growth and the variety of terms in use to reflect sub-specializations such as employee

communication, public affairs, and media relations.

This 2023 report adopts the 1987 *Design for Undergraduate Public Relations Education* boundary meanings of public relations practice, around dimensions of relationships with an organization's publics and attaining and maintaining those relationships through performance and communication. In summary: "the nature of public relations activity is thus rooted in an empirical world of organizational environment and interaction where intercommunication is the primary means of attaining, maintaining or enhancing social accord" (p. 15). CPRE directs its recommendations for public relations academic programs to convey this concept to students "to grasp the social, organizational, administrative, and ethical implications of this perspective" (p. 15).

CPRE supports and acknowledges the rich history, evolution, and today's variety of academic and professional public relations studies throughout the world that successfully prepare students for public relations careers. This report represents the research and expertise of United States practitioners and educators, enriched by the involvement of CPRE's international members and survey participation from those outside of the United States. We welcome readers from around the world to consider this report's recommendations but recognize its limitations based on a United States educational system.

How this Report Came to Be

Brainstorming Sessions

From four online brainstorming sessions conducted in the Spring of 2022, with more than 60 total participants, consensus topics were crowdsourced in April of 2022 in two polls of the CPRE members and members of the PR Council. Topics were further refined in two focus groups of Page Society members conducted in September of 2022. The Summer of 2022 was spent creating a report structure of six topic leaders and team members. These teams, totaling over 50 practitioners and educators, met throughout 2022 and 2023 to prioritize topics; conduct further research, including a comprehensive survey of educators and practitioners fielded in February of 2023; and draft their report sections by May of 2023.

The initial development of topics through the CPRE Research Committee brainstorming process focused on what practitioners and educators considered most relevant to public relations at the time. Initial questions asked participants to consider ideal, original research projects for the 2023 Commission Report, and career outcomes and/or opportunities for students as well. Other general suggestions for discussion included DEI, data science and social

media, convergence, soft skills, teaching online, and whether writing is still the key skill needed. The first two brainstorming sessions led to topics related to perceived industry trends that would influence public relations education, past report topics and possible research needs. Also considered were pandemic global issues and media changes, including AI. All of these discussions led to the following topics of consideration.

- Data analytics (data science)
- DEI alignment with contemporary issues
- Social media
- Convergence of disciplines
- Measurement
- Writing
- Soft skills
- Online education
- Nomenclature: Strategic communication versus public relations
- Internships and onboarding/training

Crowdsourcing

These topics were ranked, via crowd-sourcing, by CPRE and PR Council members. Key topics ranking higher were DEI; Technology – Social Media, Digital, Analytics, AI; Ethics; Public Relations as a Driver of Social Change; Internships, Mentoring and Onboard Training; and Online Education. PR Council members also considered important the Convergence of Communication Disciplines.

From those discussions, a list of topics was created for a vote by the members of the committee to create a list of priority issues. From this process and with some revision and consolidation of topics, the committee forwarded these final topic areas: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; State of the Curriculum (with a focus on critical thinking); Data Insight and Strategies; Future of the Workplace (to include possible consideration of internships, onboarding, etc.); Ethics; and Public Relations as a Driver of Social Change.

Members of the CPRE Research Committee then joined topic subcommittees, with the report co-chairs identifying team leaders. As needed, the subcommittee invited an *ad hoc* member or two; the Data Insight and Strategies group, for example, worked to increase practitioner representatives as part of its discussions. The teams were tasked with conducting background research on these topics, and determining how they would move forward in investigating these, highlighting initially, key research questions. A comprehensive study with questions from each team was planned, and teams could complete additional primary and secondary research as needed.

Page Conversations (Focus Groups)

In the interim, two focus group interviews were conducted with Page Society members, as Page Conversations, to further explore each of the six topics, and to provide additional background information for the teams. These were conducted in the fall of 2022, led by Elizabeth Toth, via Zoom, with conversations recorded. Completed prior to the development of the survey instrument, they provided rich insight into the six topics as summarized below.

DEI. The members of the Page Conversations recognized that students have a good grasp of Diversity, more so than many on the Zoom call acknowledged having at that age. They suggested areas where the students or recent graduates could use development such as in understanding the need for strategic thinking related to DEI, aligning DEI goals with management, and connecting DEI to the culture of the organization to the extent that they could identify pitfalls of management or communication decisions which would not align with DEI goals of the organization.

State of the Curriculum (Critical Thinking). The Page conversations centered around the need for informed points of view, not being a “yes” person to management, and completing analysis before strategies. They stressed that recent graduates must be able to navigate complex issues which don’t have right or wrong answers.

Data Insight & Strategies. The best compliment for practitioners, according to the Page Conversations, is “you’re not here because you’re a great communicator, but because you know how to think.” They stressed the importance of understanding digital and digital storytelling. The general response was that graduates should be familiar with a digital program that would allow them to adapt to whatever the organization used. They also stressed having the courage to dive deep through data to assess and understand underlying beliefs and motivations.

Future of the Workplace. The Conversations highlighted the need to intentionally interact at work, especially given hybrid and remote work options. The discussants underscored that graduates must be self-directing, but also able to acclimatize to the culture of the organization. They noted that while many students have learned about relationships online, they need to recognize and work within power structures in the “office.” To that end, they recommended manager involvement in the onboarding of new employees.

Ethics. The participants here stressed the need for new employees to understand legal elements, while also recognizing ethical elements; in other words, recent graduates should know key legal and ethical issues in communication. They highlighted graduates having a strong moral compass, recognizing that many of them grew up “out loud” (via social

media) which could have significant ethical and fiduciary challenges in the workplace.

Driver of Social Change. Page Conversation members noted that public relations practitioners and their organizations aren't particularly relevant if they aren't part of social change. They added that PR can be a catalyst and a driver of social change, but PR, itself, doesn't need to take all the credit. The members also recognized the importance of educating audiences, especially internally, such as in the case of COVID-19 and DEI. They identified some discerning fine lines for the graduates such as understanding that political discussion at work is not necessarily a right, that advocacy cannot be in the way of everyday communication, and that the organization's agenda has to come first.

Quantitative Survey

Survey and Sampling. With the topics and background in hand, teams moved to complete secondary research on their respective team topics to develop guiding research questions. Those questions then led to each group's specific set of actual questions included in the survey instrument. Also part of the survey were questions from past Commission surveys including demographics; knowledge, skills and abilities; hiring characteristics expectations; and program curriculum-related questions. These questions allowed for comparisons to past survey responses. Questions were compiled through Qualtrics, and tested with team leaders. Most questions were Likert-type questions based on a five-point scale. Syracuse University's Institutional Review Board approved the survey in January of 2023.

Sampling for the survey involved mixed methods ranging from random sampling in some groups to entire group invitations to participate, along with some "snowball sampling" invitations to other practitioners who might not be part of the groups. Specifically, 24 practitioner and educator organizations are represented in the membership of the Commission for Public Relations Education. Each of those representatives asked group members to complete the surveys. Some invited all participants via email, such as the PR Divisions of AEJMC and NCA, while PRSA requested participation of a random sample initially, and then expanded the request to others in addition to member newsletter links to the survey. Other group representatives invited participation via newsletter links only. CPRE's Research Panel also received the survey link. Within three weeks, the responses provided a sufficient number to allow data analysis beyond reporting percentages. Respondents received a filter question which directed them either to the public relations practitioner survey or to the public relations educator survey.

Demographics of educator participants. A total of 197 educators participated in the survey. Their mean age was 58.4, with 22.65 mean years of experience. Of these 75.7% had an earned doctorate, and another 22% had an earned master's degree based on those responding to the question. Educators included 59% cisgender women and 32.9% cisgender men; another 7.5% identified as transgender men or self-described, while another 2.9% preferred not to disclose (12.2% did not provide a response). The race/ethnicity of the educators, based on those responding to the question, included 75.1% White, 8.7% Black or African American, 4.8% Asian and Pacific Islander, 3.5% Multiracial, 1.2% Hispanic/Latinx, .6% Native American (with "other" as a response at 5.2%).

Educators reported that 61.8% teach in person, 4.6% teach remotely, and 33.5% teach both in person and remotely. More than two thirds (79.2%) reported being based in the U.S. The majority were in tenured or tenure-track positions, specifically with 14.5% listing tenure track; 27.7%, associate professor; and 29.5%, full professor. Professors of practice included 7.5% respondents; adjunct professors, 2.3%; administrators, 2.9%; and "other," 15.6%.

Demographics of practitioner respondents. For the 269 practitioner participants, the mean age was 48.2, and the mean years of experience was 22.65 years. Over 62% (62.6%) of practitioners identified as cisgender women, and 29.8%, cisgender men. Another 3.8% identified as transgender men or preferred not to disclose, with another 3.8% providing a self-description. In terms of race/ethnicity identification, 81.5% of practitioners identified as White; 6.8%, Black or African American; 4.5%, Asian and Pacific Islander; 2.3% Hispanic/Latinx; 1.9%, Multiracial; and 3%, other. Highest levels of education reported were 3% having a doctorate; 29.8%, a master's; 44.5%, a bachelor's; 1.1%, associate degree; and 1.6% having either a high school diploma or tech/vocational certificate.

Practitioners also indicated that 19.6% work on the job, in person; 21.5%, remotely; and 58.9%, a mix of both. They included 75.1% working in the U.S. They also represented a variety of practices including 29.8% agency, 21.1% corporation, 13.6% educational institution, 11.3% nonprofit, 8.7% independent practitioner, 7.5% government/military, 2.6% professional services, and 5.3% other.

Structure of the 2023 Report

The 2023 Report is structured in three sections, with different teams of educators and practitioners coordinating the data analysis and recommendations per chapter. Chapter Two of Section One reflects on the Future of the Public Relations Workplace. Section Two presents

recommendations on the State of the Undergraduate Public Relations Curriculum based on research on educator and practitioner perceived coursework and job application expectations. It evaluates the success of the CPRE recommended six-course standard. Section Two also provides in-depth discussions and recommendations on critical strategic thinking; strategy insights and data; ethics; and DEI - diversity, equity, and inclusion. Section Three discusses the value of Public Relations as a Driver of Social Change, and offers concluding remarks.

Data from the survey have been incorporated into relevant sections. **Most sections will include charts of the means of the responses, based on the Likert-type questions using a five-point scale.** In many cases the responses will be rank ordered based on the means, especially to provide clarity in terms of practitioner and educator views on the relevant aspects of preparing graduates for contemporary public relations practices. Where relevant data are available, the teams compared 2023 results to the CPRE *Fast Forward* (2018) study also referred to as the 2017 report (note that the study occurred in 2016, the report was prepared in 2017, and the report was published in 2018). As in past studies, each team developed a set of CPRE recommendations for educators, administrators and/or practitioners.

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Chapter 2

Future of the Public Relations Workplace

Charles Lubbers, Chair, University of South Dakota

Anthony W. D'Angelo, Syracuse University

Debbie Davis, Texas Tech University

Amiso George, Texas Christian University

Anne Gregory, University of Huddersfield, Great Britain

Judy Phair, Phair Advantage

Kim Sample, PR Council

CPRE Recommendations

- Educators and practitioners should work together to develop experiential learning opportunities for students that will enhance their exposure to professional behavior and workplace expectations, as well as helping develop the students' soft skills.
- Include specific course content (case studies, reports, presentations, etc.) on the ethical challenges of contemporary practice.
- Prepare students to understand their personal values and priorities and how they should fit into their job searches and career plans.
- Develop course content with a strong focus on students communicating on a personal level with key audiences, including effective networking for the short and long term.
- Employers must adapt their onboarding practices for new hires, including interns, to better represent a new workplace.

Introduction

The goals of this chapter include reviewing how economic changes in the last two years are likely to impact the public relations workplace. This chapter provides analysis of, and guidance for responding to, several trends identified by practitioners and educators, including work/life balance, remote work, "DEIB" initiatives, the rapid advance of AI and generational differences in employees. The recommendations presented here can help educators prepare students for

the new workplace and help practitioners create an effective workplace that accommodates the needs of future public relations practitioners.

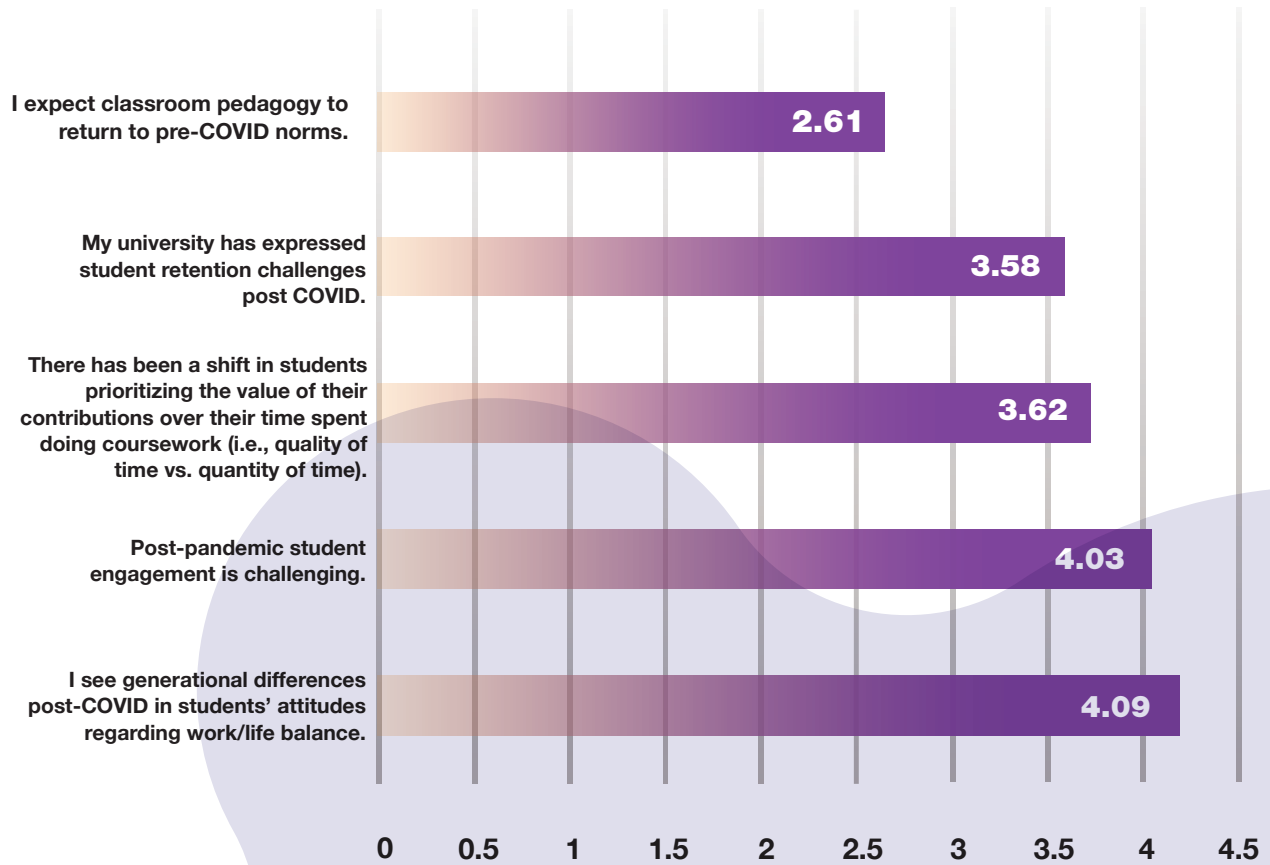
The first section of the chapter reviews the results of the CPRE-sponsored survey followed by an analysis of the challenges facing the future public relations workplace and suggestions/guidance in response. The chapter ends with explanations for its recommendations to public relations educators and practitioners.

Discussion of Survey Results

Future of the PR Workplace – Educators

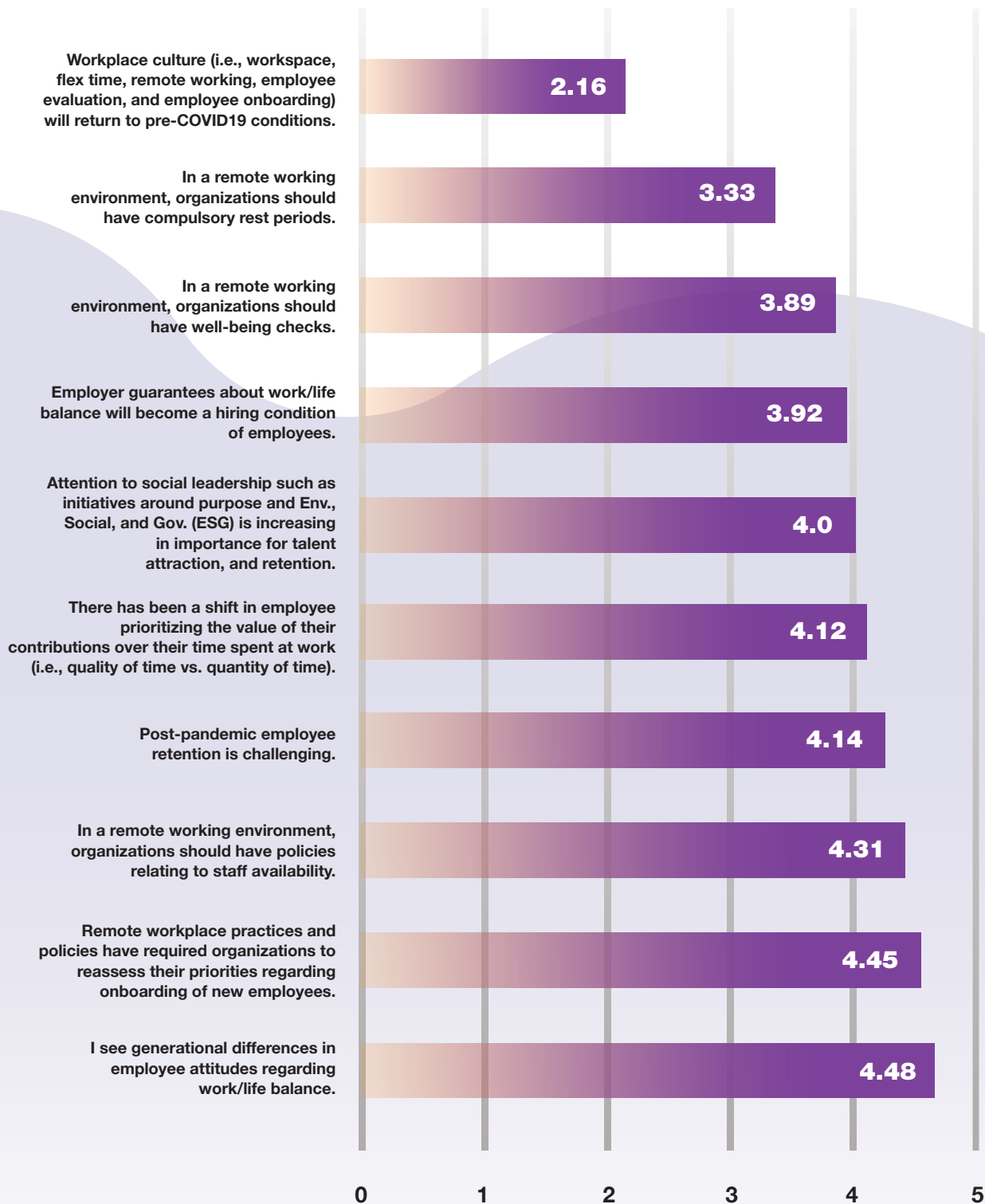
The five questions shown in Table 1.2.1 helped to determine the key changes educators noted in the last two years as they prepared students for the workplace, including the influence of COVID-19 on student engagement and retention. The questions were measured on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The only result below the central score of a 3 is the item on expecting the classroom pedagogy to return to the pre-COVID-19 norms. Educators were more certain that COVID-19 has made student retention and engagement more challenging. The other items showed moderate agreement that students were shifting to place greater importance on the quality of what they contribute versus the quantity of time they contribute. Finally, educators most strongly agreed that they see generational differences in students post COVID-19, a theme returned to later in this chapter.

Table 1.2.1 Average/Mean Scores for Educators Workplace Questions



"Educators and practitioners should work together to develop experiential learning opportunities for students that will enhance their exposure to professional behavior and workplace expectations, as well as helping develop the students' soft skills."

Table 1.2.2 Average/Mean Scores for Practitioner Workplace Questions



Future of the PR Workplace – Practitioners

Ten questions helped to determine what practitioners consider to be the main changes in the PR workplace in the past two years. Where practitioner question topics overlapped with those asked of educators, the results demonstrate agreement between the two. Just like the educators, the practitioners disagree with the idea that the workplace (classroom) will return to pre-COVID-19 conditions. Practitioners were slightly in agreement with the idea that in a remote working environment there should be compulsory rest periods. The remaining eight questions as shown in Table 1.2.2 all had mean scores around the “agree” level or slightly higher

The concerns expressed by both practitioners and educators will be addressed, as we take a closer look at topics related to organizational policies and procedures for these new employees who have different priorities in the areas of work/life balance, remote work, the value of DEIB initiatives, etc. Later, the chapter reviews challenges faced by employers related to the use of artificial intelligence in the public relations workplace. The final section addresses the expectations of Gen Z and younger millennials when entering the workplace. Throughout the chapter there are suggestions for responses to the challenges discussed as well as references to additional resources that may be consulted.

Challenges in the Future Public Relations Workplace

Work-Life Balance and Hybrid Environment (Physical vs. Virtual Attendance)

The topics of work-life balance and hybrid working are interrelated and both quickly evolving. Employers who once embraced remote work now require their employees to return to the office. Disney, Twitter, Goldman Sachs Group, Morgan Stanley, and JPMorgan Chase & Co. have made headlines for eliminating remote work. According to a January 2023 survey by Monster.com, while half of employers believe giving employees flexible schedules has worked well, a third who planned to adopt a virtual or hybrid model have changed their minds from 2022. Company leadership cites the need for in-person collaboration, camaraderie, and mentorship as reasons for returning to the office. However, employers value flexible work, which has reduced worker burnout, boosted work-life balance, and even improved professional performance in many cases. According to one human resources executive, these values align with a differing work philosophy. “Before 2020, people worked and fit life into that. Now, people live—and work needs to fit into their life,” said Paula Erickson, senior

vice president, and global CHRO for Beam Suntory, Japan’s Suntory Holdings subsidiary (Agovino, 2023, para 3).

In a post-COVID-19 environment, employers are giving increased attention to employee well-being as they plan return-to-worksite strategies, with 83 percent indicating that employee well-being will have a significant role (Business Group on Health, 2023). Initiatives include mental health (91 percent of employers), physical health (60 percent), and work/life balance (57 percent).

Overall, a shift has occurred from the office being considered “work” to work being simply what one does, wherever possible. A workplace amenity has become being with other people. Company leaders still value bringing colleagues together and are challenged with how to do so. Nearly 75 percent of employees say the top reason they go to the office is to interact with colleagues, according to a recent survey by Zeeland, Mich.-based, office furniture manufacturer MillerKnoll Inc., commonly known as Herman Miller (Agovino, 2023). As a result, organizations are revamping their spaces to create inviting, useful meeting areas while offering quiet spots for solo activities.

Hybrid work also benefits employers. Seventy percent of hybrid workers report feeling a strong sense of loyalty to their employer, compared with 64 percent of in-person workers and 59 percent of remote workers, according to a survey by Prudential Financial. Hybrid workers are also more likely to believe that they are compensated fairly for their work and that their employer’s benefits are tailored to their individual needs (Prudential Pulse Survey Series, 2022). In a 2022 survey, one-third of the respondents worked remotely five or more days per week. Only 13% did not complete any hybrid work (McKinsey American Opportunity Survey, Spring 2022).

Work-life balance improved during the pandemic while employers and employees recognized the shrinking of physical boundaries between home and the workplace. Workplace flexibility has had some positive impacts on work-life balance (Yan, Kim & Hong, 2023).

Mental Health and Accommodations

As the pandemic recedes, mental health, stress, and fatigue are key concerns among PR agency leaders. National surveys also confirm this trend, with a 2021 MindShare Partners survey revealing that 76% of full-time employees reported experiencing at least one symptom of a mental health condition in the past year, a 27% increase from 2019.

Although employees may have grappled with mental health issues in the past, the pandemic’s outsized impact and increased media coverage have given more people a new language to describe their feelings. Agencies are moving swiftly to enlist help, embrace empathy, and encourage

transparency. There is no simple solution to responding to employee mental health, but below are six strategies HR leaders are using to help cultivate a culture of care and empathy (PR Council, 2023).

1. Enlist help. Even if you feel your HR team is equipped to handle mental health issues, it is too important to get it wrong. Many HR executives have either brought in suicide prevention experts or conducted trainings through their healthcare provider to help managers better notice and understand certain mental health signs.

2. Start at the beginning. Ensure your onboarding process covers mental health topics. Double-check that your job descriptions are accurate and reflect the current responsibilities. Highlighting the mental health resources offered by your insurance provider and EAP (employee assistance program) is an important early conversation.

3. Over-communicate. Employees suffering from mental health issues in silence make their lives harder and impact their teammates, clients, and the organization. Regardless of the policies you have in place, find opportunities in internal communication, signage in the office, and other means to let employees know they can reach out if they're struggling. This is especially important in hybrid or fully remote situations where you may not see signs of issues as easily.

4. Give senior managers the right tools to help. A study by the Workforce Institute at UKG (2023) found managers had as great an influence on employee mental health as spouses or partners, and a bigger influence than therapists. Training managers to notice signs related to mental health concerns can help alleviate many larger issues.

5. Consider other remedies. One agency carves time out for mental health, so employees do not have to take sick days when they are not physically sick. Temporarily paring back client workloads can help a struggling employee.

6. Continually re-evaluate. One leader recommended that agencies regularly review all tasks to make sure the client is benefitting versus something is being done because of habit. Reviewing processes to see if anything can be reinvented to be better, stronger, or quicker could help alleviate some stress.

Research continues to evolve on addressing employee mental health. Agencies are trying to strike the right balance of being responsive and proactive while maintaining a degree of sensitivity and privacy to individual issues. Continuing to make mental health an organizational priority will create a healthier and more stable work environment for all.

Employees. For employees who are experiencing mental health issues, HR leaders (PR Council, 2023) offer the following guidance:

1. Enlist help. While it can sometimes be difficult to determine exactly how you are feeling and why, seek out

and confide in an HR leader at your workplace. The HR leader can share the resources available through your health plan and EAP (Employee Assistance Plan), as well as help you explore possible accommodations with your teams. One watch-out is to avoid leaning on your manager (or teammates) as a therapist.

2. Over-communicate. Employees suffering from mental health issues in silence make their lives harder and impact their teammates, clients, and the organization. Reach out to your HR leader to let them know how you are feeling, keeping them posted after initial conversations. In remote work situations, it can feel awkward to reach out, but it's always better to over-communicate.

3. Ask for what you need. If you know you need a lighter workload temporarily or permanently, have that conversation. You don't know what your employer is willing and able to do for you unless you inquire.

4. Seek community. Research about employee mental health issues suggests that connecting with other people is helpful. Your firm may have an employee resource group (ERG) for folks with mental health issues and you may find being a part of it to be helpful. Most importantly, don't feel pressured to be open and forthcoming with colleagues if you're not ready – you get to determine how much to share and when.

DEIB Commitment and Assessment

Research on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging in the public relations profession indicates the need for increased diversity, inclusive communication strategies, promoting the benefits of diversity, addressing challenges to implementing DEIB, and recognizing the role of leadership in promoting DEIB. A survey conducted by the HR Research Institute, *The Future of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging 2023*, found that while the goal of organizations surveyed included building a culture of trust, eliminating bias, recruiting and retaining the right talent, ensuring fairness and boosting engagement, more than half of the DEIB initiatives in those organizations was ineffective. The reasons for these include “insufficient prioritization at top leadership levels” (The HR Research Institute, 2023, p. 23).

The leadership of an organization plays a crucial role in promoting DEIB. Research has shown that when leaders prioritize DEIB, it can have a profound impact on the culture of the organization and lead to increased diversity and inclusion. Another impediment is the lack of metrics to identify insufficient DEIB. If organizations do not have built-in metrics, it is impossible for them to ascertain the impact of their program. Other challenges to effectively executing DEIB include a lack of time, resources, resistance to change, and a lack of understanding about how to effectively integrate DEIB into organizational culture, and

lack of adequate training (The HR Research Institute, 2023).

The statement, “An organization is only as good as its culture,” could not be truer in the public relations field. As public relations professionals, we strive to live the definition of our field—to communicate strategically to build mutually beneficial relationships between our clients and their publics. Often, these publics are not monolithic; therefore, one must ensure that Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging are incorporated in public relations practice. As a profession whose goal is to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences, public relations professionals strive to understand the diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences of their target audiences. Research of DEIB programs indicates that if organizations are to be taken seriously as advocates and practitioners of DEIB, public relations professionals can help organizations to build trust with diverse audiences by doing the following (HR Research Institute, 2023).

- **Prioritizing DEIB at the leadership level:** Studies have shown that organizations that are seen as diverse, equitable, and inclusive can improve their reputation and credibility with the public. This perception can lead to increased trust and loyalty among all stakeholders, because such companies can be seen, among others, as socially responsible.
- **Developing a diverse team:** A diverse team that reflects the diversity of the audience that will create relatable messages that, by extension, will enhance communication and build trust with the audience. This diverse team also provides opportunities for diverse points of view and lived experiences, which would ultimately lead to innovation, different approaches to problem solving and better decision making.
- **Promoting Fairness and Equity:** DEIB practices in organizations help promote fairness and equity in the PR profession. They guarantee that everyone is treated equally and has the same opportunities to succeed, regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other identities. Such an approach fosters a more inclusive and welcoming work environment.
- **Mandatory Compliance with Regulatory Requirements:** In some cases, organizations are required to show that they are committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion through adherence to regulations. Failure to do so may have legal and financial consequences. Public relations professionals can help organizations communicate the importance of complying with these regulations and can advocate for action that go beyond regulatory requirements. These efforts are done not just to fulfill government mandates, but to show its

stakeholders that it is committed to a workplace that takes DEIB seriously.

In summary, diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging are crucial in the public relations profession to understand diverse audiences, promote fairness and equity, encourage and improve creativity and innovation, show leadership, enhance reputation and credibility, improve decision-making, comply with regulatory requirements, and ensure effective communication that builds and promotes trust between the organization and their various stakeholders.

Artificial Intelligence in the Workplace

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming the world of work. Routine tasks are being successfully automated and business-decisions informed by analysis of large data sets at speed by increasingly sophisticated, self-learning algorithms. McKinsey’s State of AI in 2022 Report (McKinsey, 2022) noted that the number of companies adopting AI had doubled in the previous five years. There is universal agreement that the workplace will be revolutionized over the next five years.

The arrival of Chat GPT in November 2022 and the subsequent rush of generative AI tools has been a wake-up call for organizations and public relations. That call was timely: the profession has been behind the curve in both the adoption of AI-infused tools and in thinking about the implications for its future. Indeed, in its authoritative reports on the effects of AI on public relations (CIPR, 2020a, 2020b 2021, 2023), the UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations’ analysis is that the profession is sleep-walking into the AI future. Astonishingly, in a global survey by the Public Relations Communication Association and the International Communications Consultancy Organisation in February 2023, 25% of public relations leaders said they would never use AI tools (PRCA & ICCO Global Confidence Tracker, 2023).

The world of work will be very different for the public relations graduates of the future. Organizations are now adopting AI systems because they bring efficiencies in accuracy, speed and flexibility in organizational knowledge, systems, processes and activities; and, they facilitate scalable vertical and horizontal growth.

Public relations is also being changed by AI. Many routine, entry-level tasks such as basic audience and topic research; contact identification and tracking; written, audio and visual content development; channel optimization; on- and off-line media monitoring; evaluation; and workflow management are already amenable to automation and generative AI applications. Hence, AI augments human activity rather than displaces it. There will be, for some time, a need for humans to set up and join up these systems, establish the parameters for their work, monitor their

performance and determine how the outputs are used. Entry-level graduates will need the skills to undertake these kinds of tasks, and there will be a range of new jobs that can be envisioned in data and analytics, AI prompt design, creative parameter setting for image and video production, content authentication and mis- and dis-information identification and rebuttal.

Entry-level practitioners, clearly, will also need to make ethical and governance judgments about the AI tools systems they use and the outputs they generate (Herd, 2023). AI systems have built-in biases, their algorithms are not transparent, there are growing issues around privacy and surveillance, and decisions based on their output may direct courses of action resulting in good or harm, with unforeseen consequences.

The bigger challenge for public relations will be that because AI tools are becoming relatively easy to use by everyone, the need for specialist expertise will come under scrutiny. If everyone can write and create visual and audio content to professional standards, there is a risk that public relations, just as the media industry before it, could be left behind. Just as there has been a battle over the use and governance of social media in organizations, there will be a battle over the use and governance of AI communication tools.

At a more senior level, as graduates progress, there will be a need for them to address the issues outlined above in a more systematic way. Here the impacts and effects of AI on the public relations function and the wider organization will need to be understood and managed. Organizations will be challenged and held to account by stakeholders and society for their use of AI, and there will be a role for the public relations professional in the organizational governance of these technologies.

Such an overarching governance role will require practitioners to have a knowledge base and skill set that may not be taught in social sciences, so it is now incumbent on educators to begin to design curricula that embrace the necessary change (McGregor & Lucas, 2023). This will include, for example, the fundamentals of governance, strategy, finance, operations management, dynamic decision-making, HR and all the communicative disciplines (Deloitte, 2023).

At the time of writing, a new generation of AI is emerging – autonomous agents (Schlicht, 2023). Autonomous agents, when given an objective, are able to create tasks for themselves, complete those tasks, generate new tasks, reprioritize the task list, complete the next set of tasks, revise the task list having learned on the way, and go round this loop until the objective is reached. The potential here is that once the objective has been decided and the parameters set, for example in handling a crisis, the autonomous agent

can devise the best strategy and direct a whole raft of the necessary actions without human intervention; in fact, they can determine what, if any, human intervention is required and define it in detail.

It is almost impossible to envisage what organizations more generally and public relations more specifically will look like in five years' time given the rapid advance of AI. Presently, the public relations profession has no clear vision of its future role at either the tactical or strategic level, and this Commission calls for urgent action on this issue. Given that AI will shape and be a part of work into the future, the literature suggests employers will expect entry-level graduates who can demonstrate a level of proficiency in the following areas to make a contribution:

- An understanding of the AI and digital landscape and developments
- Business knowledge
- Data literacy
- Knowledge and an ability to use of digital communication platforms and tools
- Human/machine interface design and moderation
- Knowledge of and an ability to design and implement ethical decision-making policies and practices
- Augmented working
- Leadership skills
- Risk identification, and issues and crisis management
- Critical thinking and analytical skills
- Flexibility and adaptability
- A continuous learning mindset
- Creativity
- Emotional intelligence

Entry-level practitioners will need to understand their organization's ethical guidelines for the use of Generative AI including transparency requirements for legal copyright. The PR Council has advanced new guidelines on generative AI tools that can be found at <https://prcouncil.net/advocacy/guidelines-on-generative-ai/>, along with a helpful webinar on the use of generative AI in the workplace at <https://prcouncil.net/resources/agency-intel/> (the password is PRC).

Networking and Experiential Learning Opportunities

Top-level education in public relations plays many roles, from defining and meeting the critical needs of today's profession to foreseeing future developments and opportunities that will impact tomorrow's leaders. It provides students with the knowledge and understanding of vital communication skills, from research and writing to strategic planning and global perspectives, that they will need to succeed in their public relations careers. At the same time, the best public relations programs create an environment

where students can understand—and develop—the professional and personal connections that will help them become successful and trusted professionals.

Networking with classmates, faculty, guest speakers, alumni, and others is key to helping students succeed within and outside the classroom, now and in the future. The PRSA Certification in Education in Public Relations Program (CEPR) recognizes the value of helping students build and cultivate professional relationships, and is therefore used here as an example of networking and experiential learning opportunities. Numerous other professional organizations and programs provide experiential learning. CEPR's Standard Six, one of eight standards college and university public relations programs must meet to achieve certification, states: "The opportunity to network through PRSA/PRSSA and/or other professional organizations is essential to preparation for practicing the profession of public relations." A review of several colleges and universities that have been recently certified or recertified provides examples of effective programs and practices. Public relations program faculty at Monmouth University in New Jersey reported that post-pandemic students often seemed "more fragile, more challenged" when first returning to the classroom. However, the ability to network in person played an important part in helping them adapt more quickly. The students expressed enthusiasm for connecting with alumni and potential employers through the revival of such events as the annual career fair. All Monmouth public relations students must complete one internship, and the majority elect to complete more. Their PRSSA Chapter provides a valuable source of networking with alumni and the New Jersey PRSA Chapter.

At Eastern Kentucky University, a third of the public relations students take advantage of PRSSA membership. Many faculty members belong to the Lexington, Kentucky PRSA Chapter and accompany PRSSA students to its monthly meetings. They also help the student chapter raise funds for members to attend the PRSA annual conference. The program connects with businesses in the area to offer tours and arrange one-on-one sessions between students and in-house public relations staff members.

Courses can help students network, too. Eastern Kentucky's Comm-Now course, required for all juniors, brings area public relations professionals to campus for a day of special lectures and counseling sessions with students. Southeastern Missouri State University faculty maintain relationships with practicing professionals in the region through special topics small courses. In these one-credit courses, students interact with recent graduates and practicing professionals. Topics have included sports public relations, public relations in politics, and public relations agencies.

Georgia Southern University facilitates networking between PRSSA students and high school students. PRSSA students meet with high school students, and participate in on-campus career recruitment fairs. The annual Communication Arts INC – Internship, Networking and Career – Fair includes networking sessions and panel discussions. Members of the Public Relations Advisory Board, composed of alumni and other area communication leaders, hold practice interviews with students.

Rowan University's strong PRSSA Chapter is complemented by E Board, a pre-professional organization engaged in speed networking agency tours. Students also participate in the Philadelphia Chapter's Shadow-a-Pro Day. The New Orleans PRSA Chapter invites students at Loyola University to meet with area professionals and interview for internships during its annual Networking Day.

Student-run agencies offer avenues for students to connect with professionals. Biola University's Sixth Street Public Relations has worked with clients ranging from the Santa Ana Zoo to the Union Rescue Mission. The University's PRSSA chapter members also attend both Los Angeles and Orange County Chapter Events.

Morgan State University collaborated with a leading international public relations agency to set up student internships. The partnership also led to developing a three-class workshop with networking and mentoring components to help link "textbook and reality."

These examples represent the networking and experiential learning activities of a limited number of US-based public relations programs seeking CEPR certification. Many other professional organizations and networking/experiential learning opportunities exist.

Gen Z Expectations of Employers

While criteria for inclusion in the generation varies by source, most indicate that members of Gen Z were born from 1995 to 2010, or from 1997 to 2012. The World Economic Forum estimates that Gen Z represents about 30% of the global population and it predicts that by 2025, Gen Z will comprise 27% of the global workforce (Koop, 2021). Gen Z follows the Millennial cohort that brought new challenges into the workplace and differentiated themselves from their predecessors in Generation X and the Baby Boomers. Reared in an era of digital accessibility, Millennials transformed the workplace. Gen Z, however, does not represent a linear path following Millennials. Instead, in some areas, Gen Z members express attitudes and preferences that are more akin to their grandparents.

This section identifies major characteristics of these younger workers (Gen Z and younger Millennials) and how those characteristics might impact the future workplace.

Digital Connectivity. While there is universal recognition

of an extensive use of digital communication in this generation, some fail to fully understand the nature of these actions. The first smart phones were introduced while Gen Z were infants, and they have never known life without technology being readily available. Recent surveys have found that Gen Z members use an average of five “screens,” 96% own a smartphone, and approximately half spend at least 10 hours per day on an electronic device (CSP Global, 2023). While other generations have had to actively educate themselves for every technological change, Gen Z has lived through many major technological changes and see these changes as normal. Gen Z members expect to be working with modern technology and organizations that meet those expectations are most likely to have success in recruitment and retention.

Favor Personal Interaction. Perhaps because of their use of technology, members of Gen Z express a desire for personal interaction with others, including their supervisors and coworkers. They want to be coached, trained, etc. Surveys have found that many in the Gen Z cohort worry that social media displays too much of their information publicly and are concerned that time spent on social media may diminish their abilities to develop strong, interpersonal relationships (Galarza, 2023).

Expect Diversity. This generation in the United States is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation. Gen Z and younger Millennials appreciate the importance of diversity, equity and inclusive efforts in the workplace, expect to see these practices in use, and look for evidence of their effectiveness. They also define diversity broadly to include a wide variety of categories. Companies that present a broad, diverse cross-section of society in their workforce and branding, are likely to have an easier time recruiting members of Gen Z, since they want to work for an organization that mirrors their values.

Career Growth with Immediate Impact. Members of Gen Z believe they control their own career path and look for employers with training and options to allow them to customize their work experience. Organizations that offer greater individualization and flexibility in career paths and work environments will have an easier time recruiting and retaining Generation Z. Organizations that feature a more authoritarian management structure with limited individualization options are likely to find it more difficult to recruit and retain younger workers.

Motivations Go Beyond Salary. While salary is a primary motivator like in all age cohorts, Gen Z and younger Millennials view salary as slightly less important. Instead, they are likely to evaluate that salary by looking for career development options, interesting work in which they can make an immediate impact, evidence of job security, and organizational efforts promoting greater work-life

balance/personal well-being. A November 2022 Gallup poll found that “Compared with older generations, millennials are more likely to look for career development (by 17 percentage points) and more likely to seek remote work (by eight percentage points) and greater work-life balance and better well-being (by seven percentage points),” according to Pendell & Vander Helm (2022). Those motivations appear to be continuing and intensifying within Gen Z. It is also important to emphasize job security. Gen Z grew up experiencing the great recession and were some of the first to be furloughed when the COVID-19 pandemic led to layoffs. In fact, the World Economic Forum (Koop, 2021) found that Gen Z unemployment rates in the first year of the pandemic (2020) were twice that of the other age cohorts.

Suggestions for organizational/management changes to help Gen Z employees have been advanced by numerous authors. Below are two recent pieces with guidance for organizations.

Fernandez, Lee and Landis (2023) offer seven guidelines for helping to create an effective work environment for Gen Z employees.

1. Increase information-sharing to alleviate fears of uncertainty.
2. Show them paths to career progression to incentivize them.
3. Explain how their individual contributions matter.
4. Give them room for autonomy to keep them motivated.
5. Provide specific, constructive feedback to demonstrate that you are invested in their success.
6. Harness community and connection to engage and empower them.
7. Prioritize wellness and mental health to show you care.

Galarza (2023) offers three general areas that should be addressed to develop a workplace for Gen Z.

1. Build a healthy and inclusive culture.
2. Leverage tech to attract potential hires and engage your team.
3. Bring your values to life to engage your team.

CPRE Recommendations

- Educators and practitioners should work together to develop experiential learning opportunities for students that will enhance their exposure to professional behavior and workplace expectations, as well as helping develop students’ soft skills. Connecting practice to education helps underscore expectations, especially in a changing and challenging workplace. The connections

can furthermore provide reverse mentoring opportunities, especially important given the constant technology change and adaptations.

- Include specific course content (case studies, reports, presentations, etc.) on the ethical challenges of contemporary practice. With the advent of AI and other current concerns, ethics content must be adapted and contextualized.
- Prepare students to understand their personal values and priorities and how they should fit into their job searches and career plans. With different expectations of different generations, understanding their own values and priorities can help in defining careers and selecting organizations providing a good fit for employment.
- Develop course content with a strong focus on students communicating on a personal level with key audiences, including effective networking for the short and long term. Students must be able to communicate across generational divides, and across different potential terms of employment such as hybrid environments.
- Employers must adapt their onboarding practices for new hires, including interns, to better represent a new workplace. Understanding that new employees may not know how to negotiate workplace politics and protocol can help ensure they are able to successfully bridge their initial hiring to established practices. This is especially important given the possibilities of remote and hybrid work environments.

Chapter Summary

The goal of this chapter was to ascertain how changes in students and workers in the last two years are likely to impact the public relations workplace. In addition to presenting the results of the surveys of both public relations practitioners and educators, this chapter has provided analysis and guidance related to several trends identified by practitioners and educators. It is the hope of the chapter authors that the guidance presented here, when enacted through the recommendations provided, can help educators prepare students for the new workplace and help practitioners to create an effective workplace that meets the needs of future public relations practitioners.

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Navigating Change: Recommendations for Advancing Undergraduate Public Relations Education

Section II: Status of Public Relations Education and Workplace Issues Affecting Practice and PR Programs

Section II of this report addresses the status of the undergraduate public relations curriculum in meeting the expectations of educators and practitioners for students' successful entry into public relations positions, including perspectives on critical thinking. Section II considers, as well, key topic areas connected to the future of the workplace, with consideration given to what students are learning in the areas of Data Insight and Strategy, Ethics, and DEI - Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.



Chapter 3

State of the Curriculum: Key Curricular and Marketplace Expectations Plus the Six-Course Standard



Pamela G. Bourland-Davis, CPRE Report Co-Chair, Georgia Southern University

Elizabeth L. Toth, CPRE Report Co-Chair, University of Maryland, College Park

CPRE Recommendations

- CPRE must continue to promote the six-course standard.
- Practitioners should continue connecting with courses and programs (speakers, clients, campaign coaches or evaluators).
- Programs and administrators should value the inclusion of professors of practice.
- Internships should be promoted for students, programs and practitioners.
- Administrators should attach value (reassigned time, etc.) to internship coordinators.
- Practitioners should continue to value PR coursework and degrees—in ads and when hiring.
- Educators must incorporate ethics education, especially with a specific public relations orientation.
- Writing, communicating and storytelling should remain at the center of education in public relations.
- Educators must find ways to integrate research and analytics throughout the PR curriculum.
- Educators need to ensure their classes connect graduates to the relationships between problem solving, critical and creative thinking, and strategic planning.
- CPRE must promote public relations ethics as a sixth required course to meet its standard for professional public relations career preparation.

Central to recent CPRE reports have been the perceptions of educators and practitioners on the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that students achieve while in school. Also of concern has been the marketplace's hiring expectations, or the characteristics, traits or abilities that distinguish candidates and elevate their prospects for offers. These elements, repeated in this study, are assessed in this chapter. Past reports have furthermore examined the types of programs and courses offered. With the 2017 report (Commission, 2018), CPRE's six-course standard

recommendation was a resulting centerpiece, so the status of that recommendation is also assessed in this chapter.

KSAs & Hiring Characteristics

Context

According to the Federal Career Information site (2023), KSAs (Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities) are used in applicant reviews, with knowledge reflecting understanding of a core area, skills highlighting “proficiency, expertise, or competence” (para 4), and abilities underscoring the application of both knowledge and skills.

KSAs have been adopted and adapted by the Universal Accreditation Board, as reported by Sha (2011). Her analysis of survey data suggested that the assessments of professional competencies by respondents between 2000 and 2010 were stable. Based on the 2010 study, Sha identified three core KSA groupings representing “general business skills, media relations, and theoretical knowledge.”

Knowledge, Skills and Abilities indicators were incorporated into the 2006 and 2016 Commission surveys, with adaptation to reflect the changing nature of the field (DiStaso, 2019). Items such as app development, audio/video production, speech writing and website development were removed in the 2023 study based on their low ratings in the prior study and to help streamline survey length.

The Commission reports have worked to identify and align practitioner and educator expectations, and while they may not always correlate precisely, no study has identified anything noticeably absent from education that would be expected by practitioners.

One study (Meganck et al., 2020) of what are, effectively, KSAs and “hiring characteristics,” looked at attributes listed in job descriptions. Consistent with other studies, “The most frequently requested skills in the sampled postings

include written communication skills, organizational skills, administrative software skills, social/digital media skills, leadership abilities, ability to work in teams, and graphic design” (p. 5). The type of position – whether PR assistant or account executive – did affect the type of skills. The authors recommended that alignment could be improved with: “student and faculty internship programs, strong advisory boards, important classroom presentations, stronger alumni involvement, ongoing partnerships, and continuous professional organization support” (p. 5). The authors of this study also emphasized that with such a long list of attributes “educators can’t be expected or required to incorporate everything” (pp. 5-6). They highlighted the CEPR and CPRE recommended foundations as important, with additional courses or areas supplementing the six-course standard. Meganck, Smith and Guidry also highlighted the importance of soft skills needed, especially ones which might not be taught directly through lectures, such as organizational skills.

While the soft skills are not directly taught, they are often incorporated into classes. Deline (2022) described an activity used in class to get students to consider KSAs they’ve developed and/or refined due to the pandemic, and how that could be used to distinguish themselves in the job search, thus combining KSAs and soft skills.

Key 2023 Survey Findings

The 2023 Report survey continued to compare and contrast the perceptions of educators and practitioner expectations (desires) on what they saw as desired and delivered (or found) KSAs. However, this analysis of 2023 findings adds a ranking of items as well as statistical comparisons. While there are notable distinctions between practitioners and educators, the differences between desired and found or delivered both reflect drops in ratings regardless of the group, signifying that graduates may not be living up to their potential. (See Tables 2.3.1, 2.3.2, and 2.3.3). In other words, educators work to include so many elements as part of their programs, but are not particularly optimistic about what their students retain or carry over from class to class or from class to practice. Whereas, practitioners may be more broadly judging the new generation of incoming practitioners/employees.

The knowledge area received some of the lowest ratings overall (see 2.3.1), especially compared to skills and abilities, possibly signifying that the practitioners focus on the application of that knowledge—what the recent graduates can do. Areas such as business acumen and management, often listed as what practitioners want students to know and understand, did not receive higher ratings. There is one exception, and that is ethics, which

was highly rated, coming in at the top of the ranking for desired and delivered by educators, and at the top of the ranking for what practitioners desired, while third for what is found.

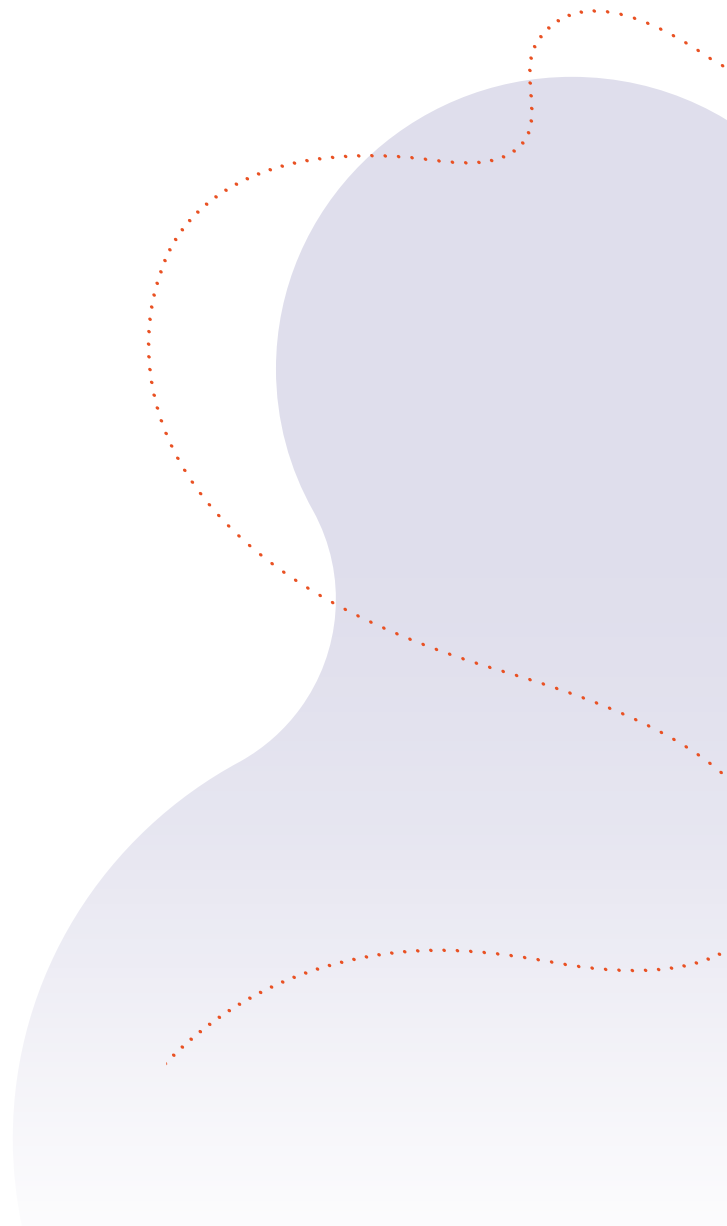


Table 2.3.1 Educator and Practitioner Ratings of Desired and Delivered/Found Knowledge Traits

Knowledge	Educator Desired	Educator Delivered	Practitioner Desired	Practitioner Found
Ethics	4.54	3.99	4.41	3.03
Cultural Perspectives	4.19	3.46	3.74	2.96
Business Acumen	4.15	3.05	3.25	1.94
DEI	4.15	3.57	3.83	3.13
Social Issues	4.01	3.8	3.69	3.22
Internal Communication	3.89	3.13	3.5	2.41
Crisis Management	3.79	3.57	2.69	1.67
Global Perspectives	3.73	3.21	2.96	2.2
PR Laws & Regulations	3.71	3.18	2.94	2
Management	3.69	3.2	2.28	1.65
PR Theory	3.29	3.58	3.22	2.76



"The 2023 Report survey continued to compare and contrast the perceptions of educators and practitioner expectations (desires) on what they saw as desired and delivered."

In the skills classification, while the mean ratings are different, both educators' and practitioners' views of top desired skills include nearly the same skills when put in rank order. (See Table 2.3.2.) Both also feel that what students graduate with is not at the same level as what is desired, with practitioners ranking skills found substantially lower than educators. Communication, Writing and Social Media Management were skills in the top five lists when rated items were ranked – for both desired and found skills. Other key items were Research and Analytics, Storytelling and Editing, although the latter only appeared in the “found” list for practitioners, with a score just below the midpoint.

Table 2.3.2 Educator and Practitioner Ratings of Desired and Delivered/Found Skills

Skills	Educator Desired	Educator Delivered	Practitioner Desired	Practitioner Found
Communication	4.89	4.41	4.6	3.49
Writing	4.83	4.18	4.67	3.08
Social Media Management	4.51	4.13	3.94	3.68
Research & Analytics	4.37	3.89	3.81	2.62
Editing	4.32	3.6	4.2	2.8
Storytelling	4.24	3.68	4.05	2.78
Media Relations	4.18	3.6	3.6	2.49
Public Speaking	3.93	3.71	3.32	2.6
Graphic Design	3.54	3.16	2.93	2.65

Abilities included only four items—problem solving, creative thinking, strategic thinking and analytic thinking. (See Table 2.3.3.) Practitioners and educators would place Problem Solving as the most desired ability, although all appear to be abilities both groups would consider important. When the mean scores were ranked, educators and practitioners were identical for abilities desired. Both groups rated the abilities found much lower than those desired, with practitioners, again, rating items much lower than educators. In the delivered category, strategic thinking emerges as the top-ranked item for educators, very likely because it is a critical component of the campaigns class which often serves as a capstone course for seniors, but only appeared in the “found” list for practitioners, with a score just below the midpoint.

Table 2.3.3 Educator and Practitioner Ratings of Desired and Delivered/Found Abilities

Abilities	Educator Desired	Educator Delivered	Practitioner Desired	Practitioner Found
Problem Solving	4.66	3.92	4.34	2.72
Creative Thinking	4.54	3.92	4.31	3.15
Analytic Thinking	4.51	3.9	4.25	2.57
Strategic Planning	4.38	4.12	3.39	2.1



"Central to recent CPRE reports have been the perceptions of educators and practitioners on the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that students achieve while in school. "

In addition to KSAs, the survey also included “hiring characteristics,” a term adopted from previous studies, but which is perhaps better identified as an extension of Abilities as these often reflect the abilities level, which combines the knowledge and skills such as their application in an internship. (See Tables 2.3.4 and 2.3.5.)

Table 2.3.4 Educator Ratings of Desired and Found Abilities or Hiring Characteristics

Abilities/Hiring Characteristics	Educator Desired	Educator Found
Writing Performance	4.77	3.51
Internship or Work Experience	4.66	4.15
Teamwork Ability	4.58	3.77
Strong References	4.27	3.94
Active on Social Media	4.21	4.5
Public Relations Coursework	4.19	4.15
Currency in Professional Trends & Issues	4.16	3.34
Public Relations Portfolio	4.12	3.64
Diversity/Multicultural Perspectives	3.95	3.29
Diversity of the Candidate	3.84	2.98
Business Coursework	3.83	2.92
Online Portfolio	3.82	3.52
Hybrid/Remote Work Capability	3.81	3.77
Leadership Experience	3.74	3.22
Degree in PR	3.62	3.73
Campus Involvement	3.54	3.4
Bi- or Multi-lingual	3.52	2.65
Active in Student Media	3.5	3.16
Participation in Student PR Agency	3.5	2.98
Active in PR Organizations	3.49	3.06
Caliber of University Attended	3.47	3.29
High GPA	3.33	3.47
Volunteer Work	3.28	3.2
Interest in Culture	3.19	3.13
Liberal Arts Coursework	3.17	3.47
Study Abroad Experience	2.77	2.7
Certificate in Principles of PR	2.45	2.09

Table 2.3.5 Practitioner Ratings of Desired and Found Abilities or Hiring Characteristics

Abilities/Hiring Characteristics	Practitioner Desired	Practitioner Found
Writing Performance	4.66	3.03
Teamwork Ability	4.53	3.54
Internship or Work Experience	4.35	3.67
Public Relations Coursework	4.07	3.6
Currency in Professional Trends & Issues	4.06	2.97
Strong References	3.94	3.46
Diverse/Multicultural Perspective	3.8	3.02
Public Relations Portfolio	3.68	2.92
Active on Social Media	3.67	4.35
Diversity of the Candidate	3.61	2.73
Hybrid/Remote Work Capability	3.59	3.57
Degree in PR	3.51	3.15
Business Coursework	3.45	2.38
Active in PR Organizations	3.33	2.47
Active in Student Media	3.29	2.68
Online Portfolio	3.21	2.88
Leadership Experience	3.13	2.67
Volunteer Work	3.13	2.97
Interest in Culture	3.07	3.04
Campus Involvement	3.05	3.09
Bi- or Multi-Lingual	3.03	2.11
Participation in Student PR Agency	2.95	2.29
Liberal Arts Coursework	2.94	3.11
High GPA	2.91	3.04
Caliber of University Attended	2.74	2.93
Certificate in Principles of PR	2.65	1.91
Study Abroad Experience	2.11	2.11

Scores for most items are statistically significant in terms of their differences based on educator versus practitioner responses. Nevertheless, the items, when ranked based on the mean scores, reflect substantial similarity, despite some reports suggesting practitioners and educators are not on the same page. Practitioners also recognize the value of public relations coursework, based on their responses. Specifically, public relations coursework is in the top-ranked items based on a ranking of the mean responses by practitioners for both desired and found characteristics. Practitioners and educators agree on the experience of graduates with social media, although the practitioners' responses do not place that characteristic in their top responses for desired characteristics. Of particular note is that internships or work experience ranked second or third in lists for both practitioners and educators.

In the area of what makes students more “hirable,” practitioners identified writing, teamwork, internships, PR courses and currency in PR (items which scored, on average, above a 4 on a five-point scale). Strong references as a characteristic was close, with an average of 3.94.

Educators, similarly rated these items among the highest for what they believed were important for the job application process, along with a PR portfolio, strong references and being active on social media (items which scored, on average, above a 4 on a five-point scale). Social media remained more highly ranked when asked what the educators believe are actually found, and the portfolio dropped below a 4. Practitioners and educators agree on the hiring value of graduates with social media, although the practitioners' responses do not place that characteristic in their top responses for desired characteristics, perhaps because Gen Z is already on social, so have already learned to use it technically. Of particular note is that internships or work experience ranked second or third in lists for both practitioners and educators. Ultimately, however, neither group seems overly satisfied with recent graduates meeting their expectations.

Comparison to 2017 Report

The 2023 findings were similar to the 2017 Report findings on top abilities or hiring characteristics, with both educators and practitioners responding to the question in terms of what might be desired and what might be found in graduates (Commission, 2018). The results were similar with the five most desired characteristics except for including teamwork ability for practitioners, and on-campus experience being more important in the last study. Writing capped off the desired lists in both studies. In both cases, social media was not in the top five for desired, but topped the rank ordering for what practitioners found.

Similarities were also found in the KSAs assessed in both studies. Practitioners, in the 2017 report, included knowledge areas of business acumen as desired, but did not include internal communication in the top five when responses were rank ordered. In the category of what practitioners found, ethics, DEI and social issues topped the 2017 and 2023 lists.

Similarly, the top three skills items of KSAs for practitioners were very similar, with skills found including social media management, communication and writing; whereas skills desired included writing, communication and social media management in 2017, and writing, communication and storytelling in 2023.

In the KSA areas of abilities, critical thinking was explored separately in this study, and was not included in the list of abilities. In 2017, practitioner response for desired and found, highlighted problem solving and creative thinking first, with the exception of the educator response placing strategic planning as the first ability that they found in new graduates.

In both studies, a noted difference in the scales appeared with both educators and practitioners indicating what students graduated with or what was found in new hires was not as highly rated as what was desired. And again, practitioner scores often fell below educator scores.

Assessment of the Six-Course Standard

Context

The Commission on Public Relations Education, throughout its history of educational research and recommendations, has considered student curricula coursework to be of central importance. Across the United States, while public relations undergraduate majors, sequences, or tracks are widely popular, no studies exist to assure that these programs consistently provide the same kinds of professional preparation. Undergraduate public relations education is typically housed in different schools and departments, such as in schools of journalism or communication, as illustrated in the variety of program names reported in the 2023 quantitative survey. These schools and departments will dictate up to 50 credit hours of coursework that might include 12 courses with no guarantee that these courses will focus on public relations studies. Public relations students may be required to take communication theory or media law courses not directly related to public relations practice. Because of the wide variety and inconsistency found in public relations majors, CPRE has continued to advocate that at least six courses or half of a public relations student's coursework should be

in public relations studies, skills, and practical preparation. In its 2023 quantitative survey, CPRE tested whether this six-course standard has become accepted after establishing this requirement in its 2017 report.

Status of the Six-Course CPRE Standard

The educators in this sample provided a snapshot of their public relations undergraduate program titles, accreditation/certification, and whether their programs required the six-course standard recommended in the CPRE 2017 *Fast Forward* report (Commission, 2018). See Table 2.3.6. Slightly more than a majority of the educators sampled (58.9%) reported that their program/major/track/sequences were titled “public relations.” Programs were called “strategic communication” by 14.2 % of educators; “communication” by 5.6% of educators; “advertising and public relations” by 10.2% of educators; and 11.2 % reported other titles. Only 35% (35.5%) of educators taught in ACEJMC programs. Some 25% (25.4%) taught in PRSA (CEPR) certified programs. Almost two-thirds (69.5) of the educators sampled reported that their program had a PRSSA chapter. This variety of program names and paucity of earned credentials illustrates the inconsistency likely to be found in undergraduate public relations studies.

In 1999, the CPRE set a standard for undergraduate programs to have at least five public relations-named courses: Principles, Research Methods, Writing, Campaigns or Case Studies; and Supervised Work Experience or Internships. In 2017, CPRE added a sixth course in ethics to its standards. The educators in this 2023 sample reported that almost all of their programs (96.4%) had an introduction to or Principles of Public Relations Course in their programs, while 89.3% reported that it was a required course, and 84.8% reported that it was a public relations specific course.

A high percentage (92.9%) of the educators reported having a research methods course in their programs. For 83.8%, research methods is a required course; however, only 43.7% reported that research methods is a specific public relations course.

A high percentage (92.9%) of educators reported that writing was taught in their programs. For 88.8%, writing was a required course; and for 76.1% of the educators reporting their writing course was public relations specific.

A high percentage (96.4%) of educators reported that the campaigns or case studies course was taught in their programs. For 86.8% of the educators reporting, campaigns or case studies was required. They reported that 82.7% of their campaigns or case studies courses were specific to public relations.

For the supervised work experience or internship course, most educators (93.4%) reported that it was taught in their programs. Only slightly more than half (54.3%) reported that internships were required; and slightly more than half (54.8%) reported that the internship was public relations specific. Requiring an internship is viewed by CPRE as critical to employment success. However, this requirement is still controversial because students are paying tuition credit to work possibly without compensation.

The ethics course was less likely to have a central role in public relations undergraduate education, although 79.7% of the educators reported that ethics was taught in their programs. Slightly more than half (54.8%) said that ethics was a required course; however, only 36% reported that ethics was a public relations specific course in their programs. While this study didn’t examine how public relations ethics might be woven into course plans for a major, sequence or track, anecdotal data has suggested that public relations ethics is found in a communication ethics course or a communication law and ethics course.

Table 2.3.6 Status of the Six-Course Standard in Education

CPRE Recommended Courses (Six-Course Standard)	Yes Taught	Yes Required	Yes PR Specific	Not Taught	Not Required	Not PR Specific
Introduction to or Principles of Public Relations	96.4% (N = 190)	89.3% (N = 176)	84.8% (N = 167)	3% (N = 6)	7.6% (N = 15)	11.2% (N = 22)
Research Methods	92.9% (N = 183)	83.8% (N = 165)	43.7% (N = 86)	6.6% (N = 13)	11.2% (N = 22)	50.3% (N = 99)
Writing	92.9% (N = 183)	88.8% (N = 175)	76.1% (N = 150)	6.1% (N = 12)	8.1% (N = 16)	19.8% (N = 39)
Campaigns or Case Studies	96.4% (N = 190)	86.8% (N = 171)	82.7% (N = 163)	2.5% (N = 5)	10.2% (N = 20)	12.7% (N = 25)
Supervised Work Experience or Internships	93.4% (N = 184)	54.3% (N = 107)	54.8% (N = 108)	6.6% (N = 13)	41.6% (N = 802)	40.6% (N = 80)
Ethics	79.9% (N = 157)	54.8% (N = 108)	36% (N = 71)	18.8% (N = 37)	40.1% (N = 79)	55.8% (N = 110)

These data are generally encouraging. CPRE’s five-course standard has taken hold across the United States, as found in this sample of educators, so that wherever students choose to study public relations, they will learn similarly the most important elements of the public relations body of knowledge, skills, and abilities. However, these data alone do not tell us whether the five-course standard is generally accepted across U.S. universities. We recommend that CPRE continue to promote the six-course standard.

There is work yet to do on informing programs that they should be teaching the professional ethical standards of the field. The ethics chapter of this report provides additional justification and explanation of why a stand-alone public relations ethics course is recommended. Therefore, this report recommends that CPRE make it a priority to promote requiring a public relations ethics course in all public relations undergraduate majors/tracks/sequences.

CPRE Recommendations

Based on educators’ and practitioners’ assessments of what is desired versus what is found in KSAs and hiring characteristics, or key abilities, and based on an examination

of programs and courses offered, the following recommendations highlight key areas such as internships and the value of public relations coursework, including ethics.

- CPRE must continue to promote the six-course standard. CPRE still has work to do to make its six-course standard realized across United States universities. We recommend that it increase its promotional efforts to achieve this standard with updated recommendations on course content through its Spotlight Reports.
- Practitioners should continue connecting with courses and programs (speakers, clients, campaign coaches or evaluators). Practitioner involvement helps connect educators and students with practice, and practitioners with educational institutions and the current generation of students. Continuing this involvement can help ensure that practitioner and educator values for the next generation are aligned.
- Programs and administrators should value the inclusion of professors of practice. Continuing to align the classroom-to-practice expectations can help strengthen the value assigned to KSAs, further aligning the views of educators and practitioners.
- Internships should be promoted for students, programs

and practitioners. Given the high ranking of internships and applied experience, internships should remain as part of the six-course standard. Students should be encouraged to complete them, and internships should be paid learning opportunities to attract talented students and ensure the next generation of talent.

- Administrators should attach value (reassigned time, etc.) to internship coordinators. While not part of this study, some programs parcel out internship supervision to staff or non-public relations staff or faculty. To achieve higher correlation between public relations programs and practitioner expectations, public relations faculty involvement is paramount. That involvement should not be at the expense of teaching and research expectations.
- Practitioners should continue to value PR coursework and degrees—in ads and when hiring. Given that practitioners placed value on public relations coursework, it is our hope that public relations coursework and degrees will be emphasized in the hiring process.
- Educators must incorporate ethics education, especially with a specific public relations orientation. High priority for ethics in the area of knowledge, emphasizes the need for a public relations focus as part of the academic curriculum.
- Writing, communicating and storytelling should remain at the center of education in public relations. Given that practitioners and educators placed value on these elements, they are reaffirmed as both part of the six-course standard, and as critical roles played in the practice of public relations.
- Educators must find ways to integrate research and analytics throughout the PR curriculum. Again, the data from qualitative and quantitative research reaffirms the need for research to be included as part of the six-course standard.
- Educators need to ensure their classes connect graduates to the relationships between problem solving, critical and creative thinking, and strategic planning. While educators work to encourage students in all of these areas, additional attention is helpful given these areas reflect the application of knowledge and skills. Again, having practitioners joining in classes and offering challenges which require problem solving can emphasize the connection between education and practice.
- CPRE must promote public relations ethics as a sixth

required course to meet its standard for professional public relations career preparation. As will be discussed in the Ethics chapter of this report, public relations practitioners rank ethical skills as critically important for the public relations workplace. Public relations ethics integrated into other courses tends to be neglected.

Summary

While these types of studies often highlight the differences between educators and practitioners, analyzing the data from the perspective of the top ranked items highlights substantial similarity in the views of the two groups, especially in terms of the abilities which make graduates viable candidates in job searches. The fact that practitioners value public relations coursework speaks to the ongoing work of the Commission for Public Relations Education, and countless educators and practitioners in establishing the foundations of public relations in education. We note here as well that the five-course standard introduced in the CPRE 1999 report has taken hold in public relations programs, as reflected in the 2023 survey; however the courses are not always offered as dedicated public relations courses. CPRE introduced the sixth course recommendation in the 2017 report, and must continue to promote it so that public relations educators and administrators of public relations programs across the board know of this recommendation that should be achieved.

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Chapter 4

Critical Strategic Thinking

Kenneth Plowman, Co-Chair, Brigham Young University

Anna Klyueva, Co-Chair, University of Houston-Clear Lake

Hongmei Shen, San Diego State University

Elina Erzikova, Central Michigan University

Christopher Wilson, Brigham Young University

CPRE Recommendations

- Public Relations sequences must include critical strategic thinking, ideally using the DASA model.
 - Principles—introduction to critical strategic model (through learning objectives)
 - Writing and Research—practicing the model by learning its application
 - Capstone—applying the model to real-world problems to master critical strategic thinking.
- Request PRSA, CEPR, ACEJMC, and CPRS change the term in pedagogy language from critical to *critical strategic thinking*.
- Integrate critical strategic thinking into learning objectives for syllabi.
- Hands-on activities must incorporate and be informed by theory.
- Use real-world case studies to understand critical strategy.

Introduction

The 2017 CPRE Report on Undergraduate Education (Commission, 2018) found that creative thinking, problem-solving, and critical thinking are the most desired abilities employers want to see in recent graduates. PR practitioners who hire entry-level positions indicated in the 2017 survey, the need for entry-level employees to be strategic/critical thinkers. At the same time, the report revealed a difference between educators' and practitioners' perceptions of students' strategic and critical thinking abilities, suggesting that practitioners disagreed that PR programs adequately teach students these skills

(Commission, 2018). Similarly, the USC Global Communication Report (2018) listed strategic planning and leadership as the two most critical skills for future career success in public relations. Likewise, Meganck et al. (2020) reported that 184 out of 1,000 public relations job ads listed strategic thinking as a qualification. Further, AAC&U's annual survey of employers to identify essential learning outcomes of undergraduate education ranked consistently high such outcomes as critical thinking and analytic reasoning (Finley & McConnell, 2022).

Academic and trade public relations literature often treats critical thinking and strategic thinking as two independent sets of skills desirable for public relations practitioners. However, research presented in this chapter demonstrates that critical and strategic thinking are codependent and should be taught and nurtured together through explicit and deliberate instruction. This chapter makes recommendations to improve student critical strategic thinking to meet the expectations of employers and to achieve success in public relations careers.

Critical Thinking in Public Relations

Effective public relations involves strategic thinking, which is heavily rooted in one's ability to think critically. Defined as the ability to analyze and evaluate thought processes, critical thinking is one of the most sought-after skills in public relations professionals (Schoenberger-Orgad & Spiller, 2014).

There are many definitions of critical thinking. For example, Sternberg (1986) described it as "the mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to

solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts" (p. 1). Haber (2020) defined critical thinking as structured thinking that (1) makes clear what we or others are thinking or communicating, (2) makes transparent the reasons behind what we believe or want others to believe, and (3) has the ability to determine if reasons for belief are justified.

Paul and Elder's (2006) classic definition of critical thinking discusses it as "the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it" (p. 4). As such, critical thinking is both a learned skill and a disposition toward engaging in the reasoning process through intentional analysis of the elements of thought, such as point of view, purpose, the question at issue, information, interpretation and inference, concepts, assumptions, implications and consequences. They suggested that the evaluation of these elements of thought must be conducted with a consideration of the universal intellectual standards such as clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness. Importantly, Paul and Elder (2006) argued that critical thinking is "self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-correcting thinking" and "requires rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use" (pp. 4-5).

Critical thinkers are individuals capable of thinking systematically and independently, engaging in analysis, reflection, and critique of social norms and social issues (Haber, 2020). Further, critical thinkers are individuals who habitually and deliberately "apply the intellectual standards to the elements of reasoning in order to develop intellectual traits" (Paul & Elder, 2006, p. 21). These traits are intellectual integrity, intellectual humility, confidence in reason, intellectual perseverance, fair mindedness, intellectual courage, intellectual empathy, and intellectual autonomy.

Paul and Elder (2006) describe a critical thinker as someone who:

- raises vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely;
- gathers and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively;
- comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;
- thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences; and
- communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.

Importantly, effective communication is an inherent function of a critical thinker (p. 4). According to Haber

(2020), rhetoric or persuasive communication is directly related to critical thinking. Understanding the nature of persuasive language provides a critical thinker with "the 'X-ray vision' needed to pierce the verbal fog and find the poor reasoning or false premises behind it" (p. 78). Critical thinking is fundamental to the public relations function as practitioners analyze information, assess risks and opportunities, identify biases, and consider diverse perspectives:

- Critical thinking skills enable public relations practitioners to identify patterns, evaluate the reliability of sources, and determine the significance of the information (Spicer, 1991).
- Critical thinking skills enable professionals to engage in ongoing environmental scanning, media monitoring, and social media listening, as well as consider different scenarios, evaluate the potential impact of each, and make informed decisions about how to proceed.
- Critical thinking skills enable public relations professionals to recognize their own biases, as well as organizational prejudiced positions, in order to address them appropriately in their communication strategies (Schoenberger-Orgad & Spiller, 2014).
- Critical thinking skills enable public relations professionals to see issues from multiple perspectives and to develop communication strategies that consider the needs and concerns of different stakeholder groups (Guth & Marsh, 2016).

Schoenberger-Orgad and Spiller (2014) argued that undergraduate public relations programs often focus more on teaching the practical skills "to become tacticians who are able to produce messages" in the interests of their organizations and disseminate them through various communication channels (p. 211). Often, teaching approaches imply critical thinking but without explicit and deliberate instruction or infused critical thinking pedagogical strategies into regular course content-delivery. Marin and Halpern (2011) argued that explicit critical thinking instruction is more beneficial than implicit instruction. Halpern (2003) proposed a four-part model for teaching critical thinking skills that consist of (a) explicit critical thinking skills instruction, (b) encouraging student disposition or attitude toward intentional thinking and learning, (c) directing learning activities in ways that increase the probability of transcontextual transfer, and (d) making metacognitive monitoring explicit and overt. According to Haber (2020), becoming a critical thinker involves not just knowing but also putting that knowledge to use regularly through strategic thinking.

Strategic Thinking in Public Relations

If critical thinking is the analysis of a problem according to Paul and Elder (2006), then as part of a template for problem-solving is to adopt a strategy and follow through on it. In 1987, Mintzberg wrote about strategy as a plan, ploy, pattern or perspective. Perspective seems to most apply to strategic thinking. He argued that strategy is not just “a chosen position, but . . . an ingrained way of perceiving the world” (p. 18). He points out that in this sense, “strategy . . . is to the organization what personality is to the individual” (p. 18) (Mintzberg, 1994).

Fiona Graetz in 2002 interpreted the term *strategic thinking* as closer to this pattern of actions of Mintzberg’s, and as a creative, dynamic, responsive, and often intuitive process (p. 456). In 1998, Liedtka delved into the attributes of strategic thinking saying it embodied a focus on intent as opposed to traditional strategic planning, and that it recognized newly emerging opportunities. In 1998 she also asserted that left-brain thinking reflects the planning side of strategy (need for logic, attention to detail etc.) while right-brain thinking reflects strategic thinking that is creative, inquisitive, intuitive and entrepreneurial.

So if critical thinking is the analytic, trending toward planning, then critical thinking would come first, followed by strategic thinking to determine creative direction, and both are involved in the process of creating communication strategy. The application of operable communication planning would follow in the progression as the implementation portion of the process. So, again, critical thinking, then strategic thinking, and then public relations or communication planning or the process enacts strategic communication (SC) that would carry out the plan and incorporate the doing of the process.

Bronn (2014, 2021) amalgamated a number of strategic thinking authors. She recognized Nuntamanop, who found seven characteristics of strategic thinking: conceptual thinking ability, visionary thinking, analytic thinking ability, synthesizing ability, objectivity, creativity, and learning ability. Then Bronn found that communication practitioners with strategic thinking competencies are proactive, issues-oriented, creative, informed and innovative, organizationally well-informed and innovative, future-oriented, and are systems thinkers (p. 30). She defined them below:

- **Organizationally aware**—has extensive knowledge of important issues within the organization.
- **Issues-oriented**—has extensive knowledge of issues and changes in the external environment.
- **Proactive**—is proactive and encourages the introduction of new structures, methods, and guidelines.

- **Creative and innovative**—comes with very creative and innovative ideas.
- **System thinkers**—rises above the immediate problem or situation and sees the broader problem areas/issues and far-reaching consequences of them.
- **Future-oriented**—determines future priorities and can forecast foreseeable changes to meet future needs.

Critical thinking could embody the organizationally-aware and issues-oriented elements above, while strategic thinking takes that information and makes sense of it for the organization, so it is proactive, creative, looks at the entire process as part of organizational and environment system, and then looks to the future to determine direction for the organization.

This review of literature led to three research questions for the 2023 quantitative study:

1. What do educators and practitioners believe about the importance of critical and strategic thinking to public relations?
2. What critical and strategic thinking competencies do PR educators believe that graduates should possess after mastering those skills/knowledge and abilities?
3. What learning activities do educators report to promote critical and strategic thinking among students?

Perceptions of the Importance of Critical and Strategic Thinking to Educators and Practitioners

The first research question embodied this subheading. In the CPRE survey, a total of 197 public relations educators and 269 practitioners were asked about their perceptions regarding the importance of critical and strategic thinking to public relations education and its curriculum. They were provided three statements (see Figure 2.4.1) and shared their agreements with the statements on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree.

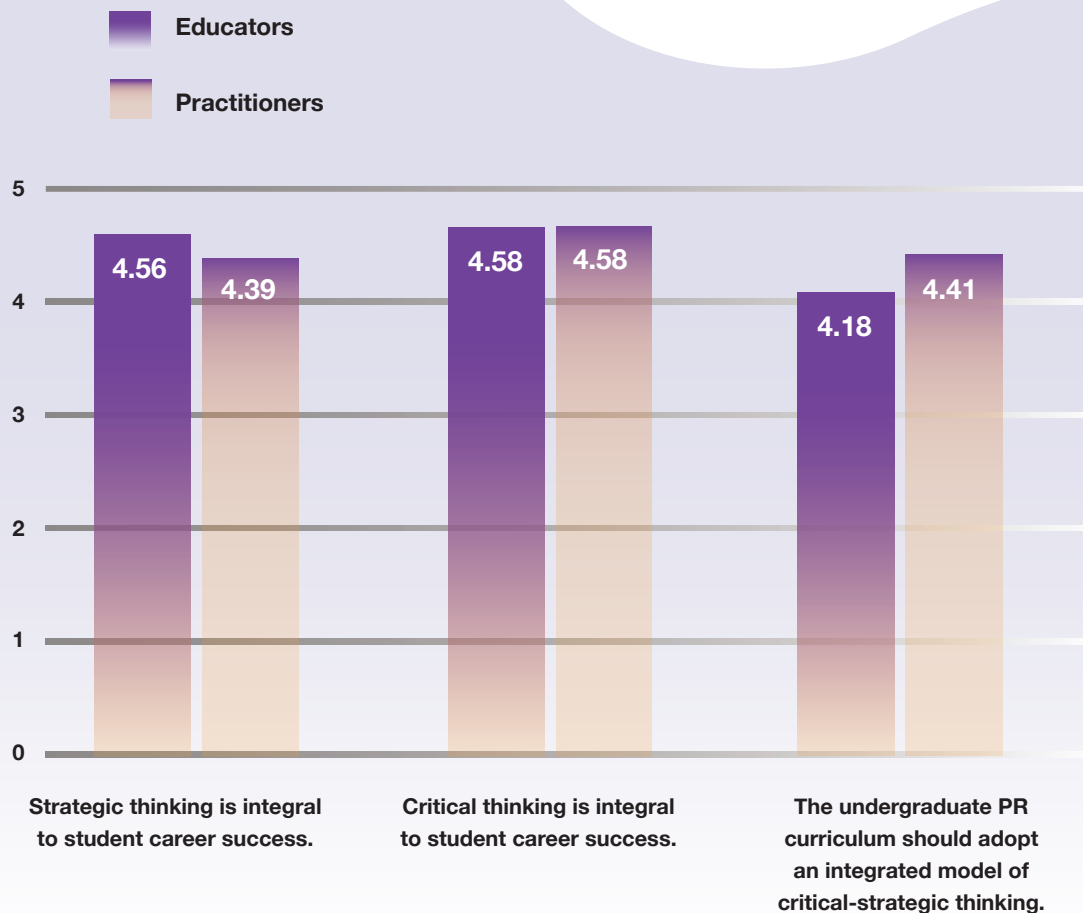
Practitioners and educators alike considered both strategic thinking and critical thinking being integral to student career success (see Table 2.4.1 for the means and standard deviations). Both groups also agreed that the undergraduate public relations curriculum should adopt an integrated model of critical-strategic thinking.

While both groups of participants rated the three statements highly, they differed significantly in their agreements to two of the statements regarding the importance of strategic thinking and critical thinking. Educators rated the importance of strategic thinking to student career

success significantly more highly than did the practitioners. In contrast, practitioners held a significantly stronger belief that an integrated model of critical-strategic thinking should be adopted in the undergraduate public relations curriculum. Notably, both educators and practitioners thought to the same extent that critical thinking was important to student career success.

To sum up the results, we conclude that both strategic thinking and critical thinking mattered to public relations educators and practitioners of slightly varying degrees, and that a dual integrated model of critical-strategic thinking should be reflected in the public relations undergraduate curriculum.

Table 2.4.1 Educators' and Practitioners' Perceptions of Critical and Strategic Thinking Importance to Student Career Success

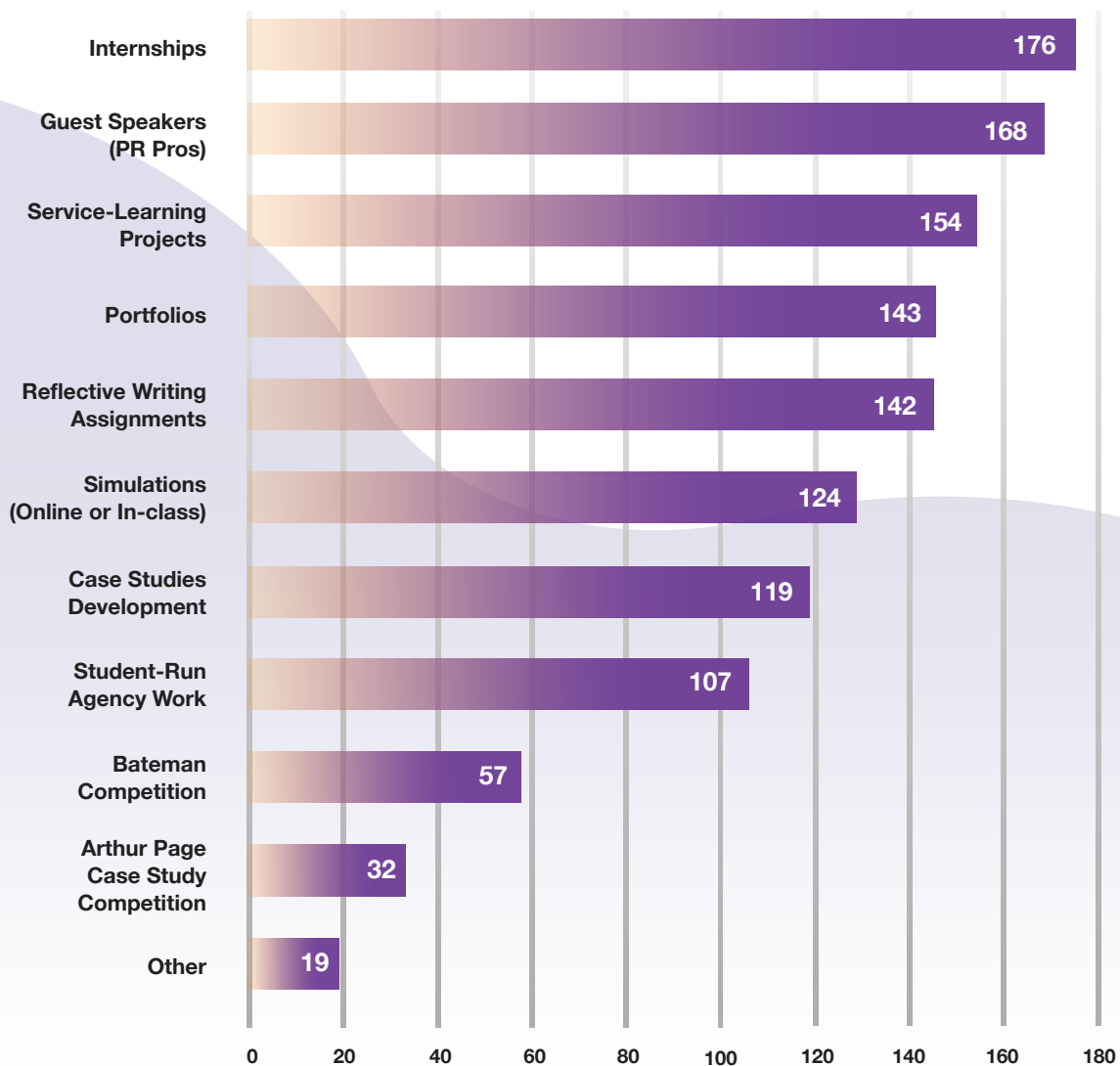


What Educators Do to Promote Critical and Strategic Thinking

The second research question involved the examination of learning activities that foster critical and strategic thinking among students, a new focus of study for the 2023 report on undergraduate public relations education. Educators (n=197) indicated that, on average, they use five to six different approaches attempting to diversify learning experiences of students while keeping them engaged and motivated (Figure 2.4.2 and Table 2.4.2).

The top three activities reported by educators were internships, guest speaking and service-learning projects. These activities appeared to be foundational and integral, reflecting shared beliefs in the effectiveness of active participatory learning and the need for an industry-educator connection.

Table 2.4.2 Learning Activities to Promote Critical and Strategic Thinking by Educators



The ranking also suggests a majority of the popular approaches are those that incorporate tangible results that help students stand out to potential employers. At the same time, such an activity as a reflective writing assignment helps students ponder and develop a deeper understanding of their experiences with clients and projects and subsequently, map out areas for professional growth and improvement. Activities that might require extra time and effort such as advising teams participating in the Bateman competition and/or Page Society case study competition are used less by surveyed educators.

Overall, PR educators tend to emphasize hands-on, career-focused learning activities that require students to think critically and strategically about the challenges and opportunities presented by projects and/or clients.

Critical and Strategic Thinking Competencies of Public Relations Graduates

The final research question concerned the knowledge and abilities related to critical and strategic thinking that PR graduates should possess. Six statements were provided (see Figure 2.4.3), and their agreements were shared with the statements on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. Three statements related to elements of critical thinking, and the other three statements represented aspects of strategic thinking.

Overall, educators and practitioners agreed that PR graduates should possess critical and strategic thinking knowledge and abilities (see Table 2.4.3 for the means and standard deviations), rating each of the six statements above a 4 on the 5-point agreement scale. However, both groups of respondents differed significantly in their agreements to five of the six statements, with educators rating each of the five statements significantly higher than practitioners. There was not a significant difference between educator and practitioner agreement with the statement that students should be able to ask “why” questions to make independent decisions. Notably, this statement had the second highest mean score (M=4.59) among educators and the highest mean score among practitioners (M=4.55).

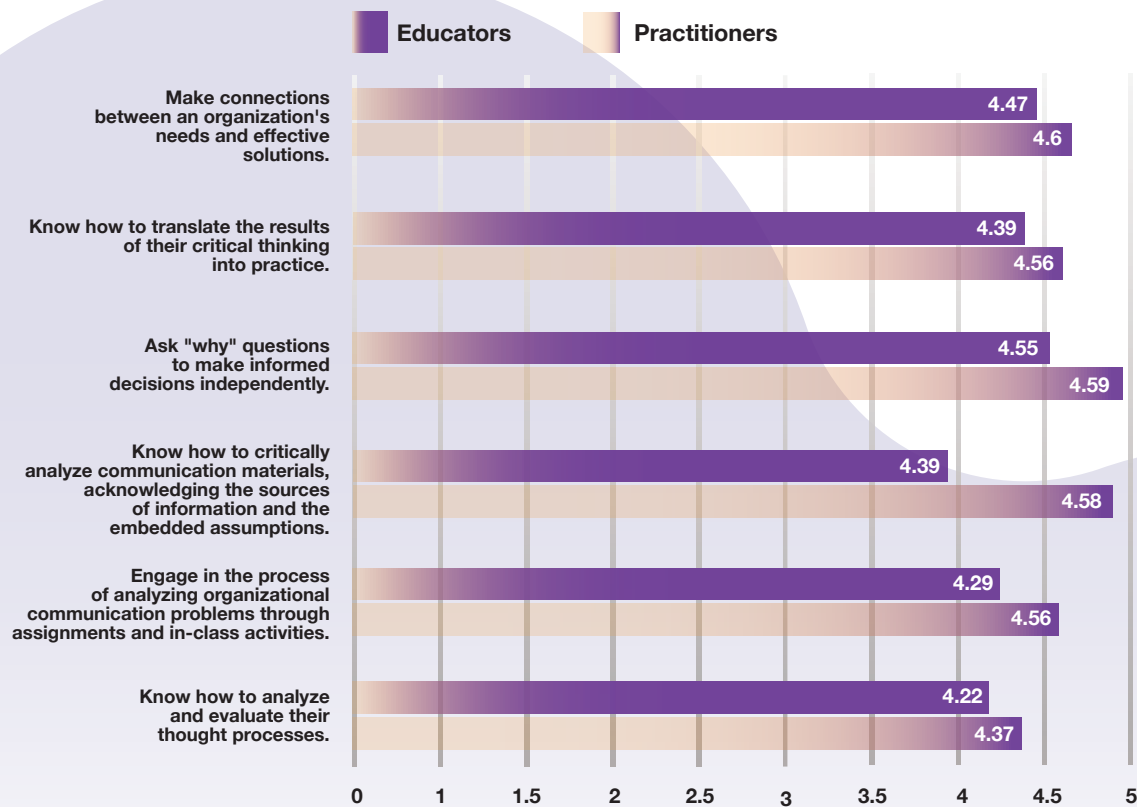
The results indicate that critical and strategic thinking knowledge and abilities are important educational outcomes to those who teach PR students and important hiring criteria for those who hire graduating PR students. While there is some variation among educators and practitioners, the general trend is that learning outcomes of public relations curricula should focus on developing graduates who can think critically and strategically.



"Synthesizing the results of the three research questions on critical and strategic thinking can perhaps be summed up in a four-step process."

- **Detecting**
- **Analyzing**
- **Strategizing**
- **Acting**

Table 2.4.3 Critical and Strategic Thinking Competencies of Public Relations Graduates According to Educators and Practitioners



Two Sides of the Same Coin: Introducing the Critical Strategic Thinking Model

Synthesizing the results of the three research questions on critical and strategic thinking can perhaps be summed up in a four-step process. These elements seem to combine everything leading up to the actual carrying out of a communication, strategic communication, or a public relations plan. We call it **DASA** – a critical strategic model as a way of thinking through the public relations planning process. See Figure 2.4.4 of mapping activities.

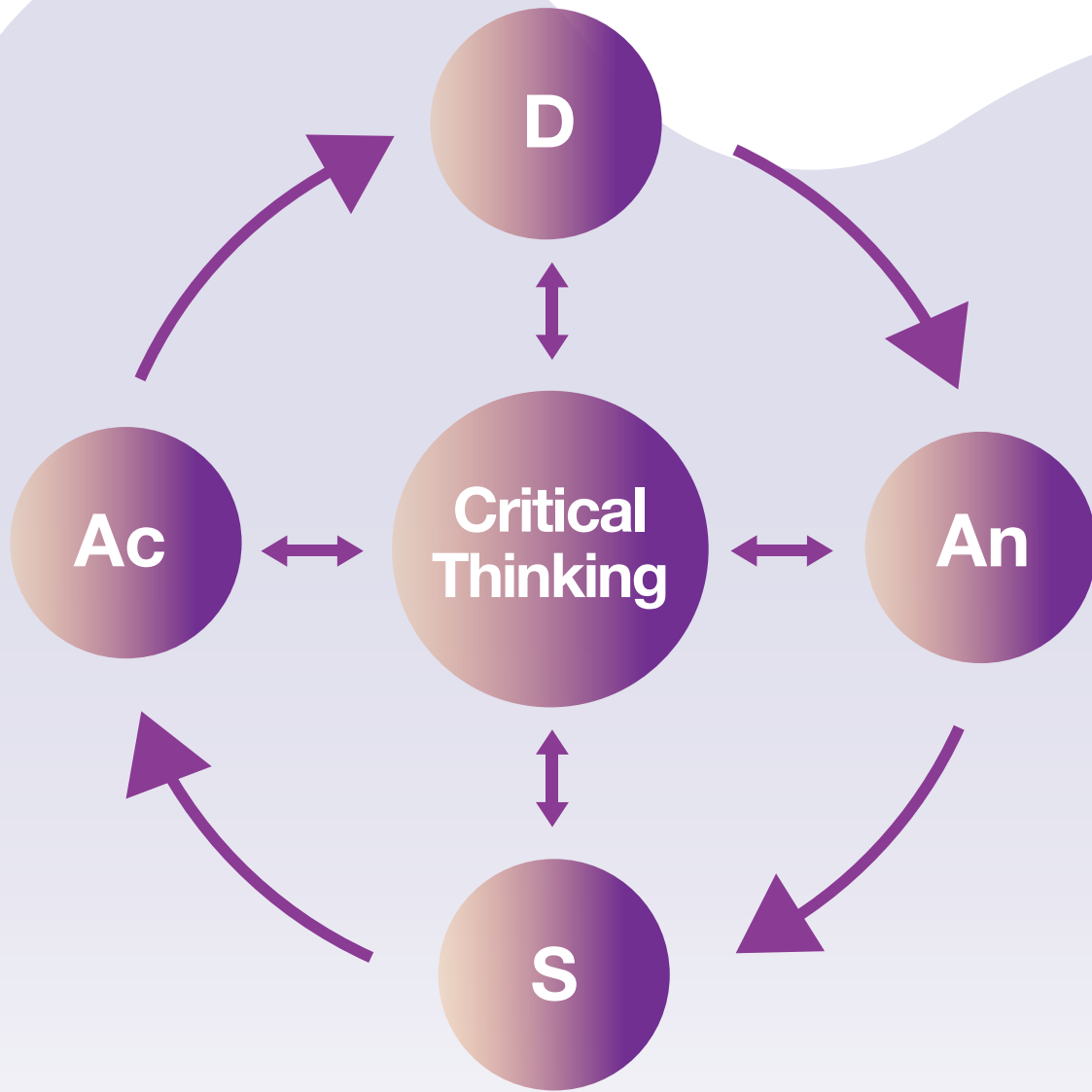
The first step is **Detecting**, to identify all of the relevant information that will affect the ultimate implementation of a plan. Second, **Analyzing**, is the thinking and reflecting on what is germane and important to the issues involved in the process. These two steps could be determined as the most important parts of our critical strategic thinking appellation of what is going on in this process. The next step in the strategic portion, is the **Strategizing** in a direction determined by the initial steps, and the selection of options in an innovative direction that will have a highly

likely success rate if implemented. Finally, to complete the strategic communication process but not part of this study, is **Acting**, or the individual performance of the plan, the implementation of the plan.

The critical strategic thinker creates sanity out of the chaos of the big data world and the enormous availability of information. That strategizer can sift through and create a direction for an organization so the tacticians can then create the plans that will successfully push the organization forward according to its own mission and vision. When teaching students, strategic thinking is often compared to a chess match. One must understand the rules of the game, but beyond that, one must understand, in a holistic way, the board, the chess pieces or the players in any public relations situation, to execute intelligent and strategic moves or a plan to make the change of attitudes or behavior to capture the opponent's king. Or, in two-way symmetric or dialogic manner, critical strategic thinking creates a mutually satisfactory or win/win solution to a communication problem.

Figure 2.4.4 DASA Model

The DASA Model



D: Detecting
An: Analyzing
S: Strategizing
Ac: Acting

Figure 2.4.5 Map of Learning Activities for DASA



Fostering critical and strategic disposition through DASA application helps equip public relations students to manage the complexity and change in the workplace and society today. According to Grigg (2012), pedagogies that target critical thinking focus on challenging students through activities requiring problem-solving, problem posing, and informed decision-making. Various instructional activities commonly utilized by public relations educators can be mapped against the DASA model to demonstrate its pedagogical application (see Figure 2.4.5).

- Hands-on activities about the challenges and opportunities presented by projects and clients must incorporate and be informed by theory. This would incorporate critical strategic thinking more directly.
- Use real-world case studies to understand critical strategy. This emphasizes the public relations industry-educator connection.

Conclusions

Our research examined opinions of public relations educators and practitioners on the importance of strategic and critical thinking, ranked current ways by educators to promote strategic and critical thinking among students, and explored what mastery of such critical-strategic thinking competencies should include. Our results identified an integrated model of critical-strategic thinking for undergraduate public relations curriculum and potential indicators of such thinking competencies among public relations graduates. Based on this review, the following recommendations emphasize the pedagogical means to strengthen students' critical strategic thinking skills.

CPRE Recommendations

- Public Relations sequences must include critical strategic thinking, ideally using the DASA model. The DASA model highlights the critical strategic thinking process, and connects to the six-course standard, such as in these courses:
 - Principles—introduction to critical strategic model (through learning objectives)
 - Writing and Research—practicing the model by learning its application
 - Capstone—applying the model to real-world problems to master critical strategic thinking.
- Request public relations-related organizations such as PRSA, CEPR, ACEJMC, and CPRS to change the term in pedagogy language from critical to critical strategic thinking.
- Integrate critical strategic thinking into learning objectives for syllabi. Critical and strategic thinking are codependent, made clearly visible through explicit instruction.

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Figure 2.4.1 Educator and Practitioner Views on Critical and Strategic Thinking as Integral to Career Success

	Educators			Practitioners		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Strategic thinking is integral to student career success.	197	4.56*	.88	269	4.39*	.75
Critical thinking is integral to student career success.	197	4.58	.87	269	4.58	.63
The undergraduate PR curriculum should adopt an integrated model of critical-strategic thinking.	197	4.18*	.97	269	4.41*	.71

* $p < .05$

Figure 2.4.2 Learning Activities for Critical and Strategic Thinking

	N	%
Internships	176	89.3
Guest speakers (PR pros)	168	85.2
Service-learning projects	154	78.2
Portfolios	143	72.6
Reflective writing assignments	142	72.1
Simulations (online or in-class)	124	62.9
Case studies development	119	60.4
Student-run agency work	107	54.3
Bateman competition	57	28.9
Page Society Case Study Competition in Corporate Communication	32	16.2
Other	19	9.6

Figure 2.4.3 Expectations of Graduates in the Areas of Critical Thinking

PR Graduates should:	Educators			Practitioners		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Know how to analyze and evaluate their thought processes.	195	4.37*	.83	268	4.22*	.66
Engage in the process of analyzing organizational communication problems through assignments and in-class activities.	195	4.56*	.78	268	4.29*	.64
Know how to critically analyze communication materials, acknowledging the sources of information and the embedded assumptions.	195	4.58*	.76	268	4.39*	.68
Ask “why” questions to make informed decisions independently.	195	4.59	.76	268	4.55	.65
Know how to translate the results of their critical thinking into practice.	195	4.56*	.76	268	4.39*	.64
Make connections between an organization’s needs and effective solutions.	195	4.60*	.77	268	4.47*	.66

* $p < .05$

Chapter 5

Data Insights and Strategy



Emily S. Kinsky, Chair, West Texas A&M University

Melissa Adams, Appalachian State University

Johna Burke, International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication

Sandra Duhé, Southern Methodist University

Aerial Ellis, North Carolina Central University and Advisory 83

Julie O’Neil, Texas Christian University

Kathleen Stansberry, Elon University

Martin Waxman, Martin Waxman Communications

CPRE Recommendations

- Integrate Knowledge, Skills and Abilities related to data analytics and AI into academic programs.
- Incorporate data and analytics across the PR curriculum.
- Build a solid foundation in quantitative and qualitative research for students.
- Teach basic “spreadsheets” and business data analysis.
- Encourage curiosity.
- Prioritize data ethics, particularly given the growing usage of artificial intelligence in public relations practice.
- Teach students to align data analysis with measurable organizational outcomes and public relations objectives rather than low-level outputs.
- Educators need administrative support to invest in ongoing training and learning to stay abreast of changes in PR practice fueled by developments in technology.

Introduction

Data insights and strategy are key elements of public relations, yet industry-wide standards and practices have not been developed. Following the goal of the 2023 CPRE research initiative to examine the most important issues of the day, the topic of “data insights and strategy” was

essential to include within this report. Focused on the current state of public relations practice and classroom training, this chapter shares highlights of practitioners’ and educators’ perceptions of data use within the PR industry and the preparedness of students to analyze, understand, and communicate data results and recommendations effectively.

Context

Research on measuring public relations effectiveness has expanded, as well as pedagogical research on training students to conduct data analytics properly and to better understand the connection to business objectives.

The team received inspiration from the CPRE 2017 (Commission, 2018) report results indicating the importance of research, data analytics, and measurement and evaluation; and from pedagogical research related to student readiness and how to best train students such as articles by Adams and Lee (2021), Ewing et al. (2018), Lee and Meng (2021), Luttrell et al. (2021), O’Neil et al. (2023), and Stansberry (2016). Industry-focused content important to this topic includes the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) Measurement and Evaluation Resources, including the Barcelona Principles 3.0; Katie Paine’s blog and annual Measurement Summit; Michael Brito’s newsletter *The Data*

Drop; the Arthur W. Page Society CommTech resources; and Mark Weiner's (2021) book *PR Technology, Data and Insights: Igniting a Positive Return on Your Communications Investment*.

Research has indicated that practitioners are relatively tool-agnostic when it comes to campaign data collection and management (e.g., Adams & Lee, 2021; O'Neil et al., 2023). However, the need for early career professionals to understand the basics of analytic metrics and data analysis is commonly cited as necessary education, as is the ability to draw actionable insights from such data and communicate them effectively (e.g., Adams & Lee, 2021; CPRE, 2018; Neill & Schauster, 2015; O'Neil et al., 2023; Wiencierz & Röttger, 2019; Xie et al., 2018). Considering that measurement and analytics tools are constantly evolving, one might assume that they will eventually present more robust reporting themselves. AI can create content for communication professionals (see Dietrich, 2023; Waxman, 2023), and management systems can implement it, but there is no valid and reliable available algorithmic method of interpretation in regard to overall campaign and organizational objectives. Thus, the need for a trained analyst is still required to prioritize data insights and to communicate them effectively to management. According to practitioners, the need for skilled analysis and communication of resulting recommendations is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future as is the need for basic spreadsheet data analysis (e.g., Adams & Lee, 2021; O'Neil et al., 2023).

Method

Leading up to the survey launched by CPRE in February 2023, two focus groups were held via Zoom with self-selected Arthur W. Page Society (Page Society) members in September 2022 led by CPRE research committee co-chair Elizabeth Toth. The facilitators asked the focus group participants about students' need to learn data analytics and "CommTech," a term frequently used within the Page Society. Key insights from those discussions will be shared in the findings section.

In the survey created by the CPRE research committee, one segment posed questions to practitioners and educators related to their own data literacy, their comfort level training others in data analysis, and their opinions about several data-related statements regarding the field and the current preparation level of recent graduates. In addition, survey participants were asked to rate the importance of entry-level public relations practitioners having the skills to visually and persuasively tell the story of the data, find the insights, and translate those insights into meaningful recommendations.

Educators were also asked whether their program offered a course focused on data gathering and analytics, and practitioners were asked to rate their agreement to a statement about the industry being data driven.

Key Findings

Focus Group Insights

Page Society focus groups participants expressed a good understanding of the opportunities and challenges data and analytics pose. One of the participants in the Sept. 26, 2023 Page Conversations responded that PR practitioners "have to understand how to interpret data," and if they can master data analysis, it will "accelerate their career." Another participant followed with a comment that practitioners need to be able to work with data to get to "the root cause" and "to figure out what is going on and why." One Page Society member said it is important to train "students so they're critically assessing and leveraging the insight correctly."

Members recommended exposure to dashboards and to at least one tool, and they recognize much is evolving in that area. A participant suggested teaching students about predictive analytics and the importance of "understanding what true beliefs are," as well as people's motivation, and understanding and delivering effective messaging.

Not surprisingly, some comments pointed toward the need to understand the bigger picture. For example, one participant emphasized that data analysis has "much to do with curiosity." Students will "have to understand the business they are in, and the comm comes after that." Educators were encouraged to teach "as much as can be shared and conveyed around data analysis and insight," in particular, *actionable* insights.

The team researching this topic for the report was concerned about trying to cover communication technology in addition to data analytics in this chapter, and a decision to narrow the attention to data analysis became very clear with this comment from a Page Conversation participant:

It's just my opinion, but "tech" has only so much to do with it. Critical thinking, facility with data and applying data to support strategy development and execution are more of what's needed. True, many graduates will be plunked in front of a "tool" to pull media lists and produce clip reports, but they should be prepared for what happens after that: Not just "managing the technology" (nobody gets into PR to "manage the tool"), but *interpreting and applying* the data that technology enables.

Survey Results

The next step in our research was the CPRE survey, which was drafted in the fall of 2022 and launched in early 2023.

Research Methods Course. Most educators (92.9%) who participated in the 2023 survey indicated they have a research methods course in their program, and 83.8% of the educator respondents said the research methods course in their major was a required course. In comparison, the 2017 survey results showed 90% of respondents had research methods as a required course in their program (Commission, 2018). In the latest survey, we also asked about the presence of a course in their program specifically focusing on data gathering and analytics, and 70.5% of educators responding said they have one.

Practitioners’ Perceptions of PR as a Data-Driven Industry.

A strong majority (81.9%) of practitioners agreed that “public relations is a data-driven industry.” On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 indicating strong agreement, practitioners’ average response was 4.02 (*SD* = .929).

Importance of AI Knowledge. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statement: “A working knowledge of AI and related machine learning applications is increasingly important in public relations practice.” Educator average response was 4.25 (with 5 indicating “strongly agree”), while practitioner average response was 4.07 (see Table 2.5.1). The results of a two-tailed t-test were statistically significant, $t(1,434) = -2.098, p = .036$, with a mean difference of $-.186$.

Table 2.5.1 PR Practitioners’ and Educators’ Perceptions of Data and Insight Importance, Student Competency, and Their Own Abilities to Teach and Train

Statements	Practitioners (n = 269) (M/SD)	Educators (n = 173) (M/SD)
The ability to draw insights from data is increasingly important in PR practice.	4.51 (.729)	4.60 (.636)
I consider myself data literate.*	4.12 (.779)	3.86 (.881)
A working knowledge of AI and related machine learning applications is increasingly important in PR practice.**	4.07 (.967)	4.25 (.795)
I am comfortable training others to analyze data.	3.49 (1.122)	3.56 (1.075)
Recent graduates are capable of analyzing data using spreadsheet programs.**	2.82 (1.013)	3.01 (.967)
Recent graduates are well prepared to draw insights from data for PR practice.**^	2.79 (.950)	3.10 (1.00)

*significant difference found between practitioners and educators ($p < .05$) with equal variances not assumed

** ** significant difference found between practitioners and educators ($p < .05$) with equal variances assumed ^one-sided

Educators' and Practitioners' Perceptions of Data's Importance. Another question asked both practitioners and educators about their level of agreement to the increasing importance of the ability to draw insights from data in public relations. Practitioners and educators agreed rather strongly, and there was no significant difference between the two groups (practitioners: $n = 263$, $M = 4.51$, $SD = .730$; educators: $n = 173$, $M = 4.60$, $SD = .636$).

Practitioners' and Educators' Perceptions of Own Data Literacy. Out of 265 participants from the public relations industry, 85.6% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I consider myself data literate" ($M = 4.12$, $SD = .779$). Of the 173 participants from academia, 72.2% agreed or strongly agreed that they were data literate ($M = 3.86$, $SD = .881$). There was a significant difference between the two groups ($t(336.453) = 3.183$, $p = .002$, two-tailed), with a mean difference of .262.

Perceptions of Ability to Train Others in Data Analytics. Although most practitioners and educators felt data literate, a smaller percentage felt comfortable teaching someone else how to use data. A similar percentage from the two groups indicated comfort: 58.5% of practitioners agreed they felt comfortable training others to analyze data ($n = 265$, $M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.122$), and 57.8% of educators agreed they felt comfortable training others to analyze data ($n = 173$, $M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.075$). There was no significant difference between practitioners' and educators' responses to this question.

Perceptions of Recent Graduates' Data Competency. Several statements on the survey asked for perceptions of student data analytics competency connected to their career readiness upon graduation.

Drawing Insights. One statement on the survey asked about student preparation to draw insights from data for PR. This statement prompted the lowest agreement from practitioners across the data-analytics-related questions ($n = 263$, $M = 2.79$, $SD = .950$) and was significantly different from the educators' average rating. Only 21.5% of practitioners agreed with the statement, and just 3.4% of those strongly agreed. The 173 educators responding to the question perceived higher numbers of students were graduating prepared to draw insights, but it was still fewer than half of them who agreed; specifically, 41.6% of educators said they agreed or strongly agreed to the statement about graduates being prepared to draw insights from data ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.00$). The difference between educators' and practitioners' responses was statistically significant. A t-test ($t(434) = -3.331$, $p < .001$) found a significant difference between the two groups, with a mean difference of -0.317.

In addition to a difference between practitioners and educators, respondents outside the U.S. indicated a significantly higher agreement ($n = 66$, $M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.015$) than those practitioner respondents inside the U.S. ($n = 199$, $M = 2.72$, $SD = .921$) regarding recent graduates' abilities to draw insights from data; though both groups rated it lower than other questions.

Spreadsheet Competency. Participants were asked to indicate agreement related to recent graduates' abilities to use spreadsheet programs (e.g., Excel) for data analysis. This question resulted in the lowest agreement mean from educators ($M = 3.01$); only 33.6% agreed or strongly agreed that "Recent bachelor's degree graduates are capable of analyzing data using spreadsheet programs." Practitioners also rated it lower than most of the other statements ($M = 2.82$). A t-test ($t = -1.932$, $df = 434$, $p = 0.027$, one-tailed) found a significant difference between the two groups, with a mean difference of -0.188 and a medium effect size of Cohen's $d = -0.326$ (95% CI: -0.519 to -0.133).

Importance of Skills. Survey participants were asked to rate the importance of entry-level practitioners having these data-related skills: (1) visually and persuasively telling the data's story, (2) finding insight in data, and (3) translating insight into meaningful recommendations (see Table 2.5.2). All three skills were rated as important. Both educators and practitioners deemed translating insight into actionable recommendations as the most important of the three, though the two groups' ratings of that skill were significantly different from one another. Finding insights was rated second highest among the three skills, and showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups of participants. Visual storytelling was the third-most important based on the scores by both practitioners and educators.

Table 2.5.2 PR Practitioners' and Educators' Perceptions of the Importance of Data and Insights Skills for New PR Practitioners

Skills Evaluated	Practitioners	Educators
	(n = 269) (M/SD)	(n = 173) (M/SD)
Translating insight into actionable recommendations*	4.57 (.736)	4.69 (.564)
Finding insight in data*	4.48 (.697)	4.63 (.621)
Visually and persuasively telling the data's story	4.42 (.745)	4.53 (.643)

*significant difference found between practitioners and educators ($p < .05$) with equal variances not assumed

** significant difference found between practitioners and educators ($p < .05$) with equal variances assumed

Comparison to 2017 Report

The 2023 study is the first time a CPRE report chapter has focused on data insights and strategies. However, there were certain data-relevant questions in the 2017 CPRE study, such as a question to both educators and practitioners on how much “research and analytics” knowledge, skills, and abilities were *desired* in the field and the frequency that the KSA was *found* in recent graduates by practitioners or that the educators thought the KSA is *delivered* by their academic programs. That question was repeated in the 2023 survey.

In the KSAs section of the 2023 survey, educators rated “Research & Analytics” as a *desired* skill at $M = 4.37$ ($SD = 0.78$) and thought their own programs *delivered* that skill a little lower than desired ($M = 3.89$; $SD = 1.04$). Practitioners rated the “Research & Analytics” KSA as desired at a mean of 3.81 ($SD = 1.06$), and said they found it in new hires at a mean of 2.62 ($SD = 1.07$). The perceptions of practitioners and educators regarding the desirability of this KSA were significantly different from each other $F(2, 461) = 16.696, p < .001$.

The perceptions of practitioners and educators regarding whether research and analytics skills are found/delivered in students as they graduate were also significantly different. A t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the two groups. The t-test was significant, $t(457) = -12.762, p < .001$. The mean difference was -1.273 .

Interestingly, in the 2017 CPRE report, practitioners rated the desire for PR graduates to have research and analytical skills as 4.07 and educators at 4.30 , compared to the 2023 mean score of 3.81 ($SD = 1.06$) by practitioners and 4.37 ($SD = .78$) by educators. Why practitioners indicated less importance on research and analytics in the more recent survey is puzzling, given that digital analytics is playing an increasingly important role in contemporary practice.

In addition to “research and analytics” items on the 2017 CPRE study, there were also questions about the desirability of “data analytics” and “measurement and evaluation” KSAs. Educators rated “data analytics” skills at an average of 4.15 in desirability on a scale of 1 to 5 and “measurement and evaluation skills” at a 4.57 average; practitioners rated “data analytics” KSAs at 3.93 and “measurement and evaluation” at a 4.41 .

Conclusions

In conclusion, practitioners and educators agree that research and analytics is a desired skill for communication professionals. Both practitioners and educators also agree on the importance of skills associated with research and analytics: finding insight in data, translating insight into recommendations, and visually and persuasively telling the data's story. While both practitioners and educators are

relatively confident in their own data literacy skills, they have less confidence in their ability to train or teach others.

The three lowest scores by practitioners (each under 3.00) relate to the questions about finding recent graduates with KSAs regarding research and analytics, the ability to find insight in data, and the ability to use spreadsheet programs. Thus, practitioners' ratings suggest room for improvement in those three areas in university PR curricula, and two of those three questions showed a significant gap in perception between practitioners and educators (KSA delivery and ability of recent graduates to find insight). Educators similarly scored recent graduates' abilities to draw insights and to use spreadsheet programs as their lowest two scores, suggesting they also recognize a deficiency in that area.

CPRE Recommendations

- **Integrate Knowledge, Skills and Abilities related to data analytics and AI into academic programs.**

Given the recent increase in awareness and use of generative AI tools and how data and analytics inform the results, PR educators should determine where and how to integrate KSAs based on data analytics as well as AI KSAs related to data analytics into their programs.

- **Incorporate data and analytics across the PR curriculum.** Educators must examine where in their curriculum to teach data and analytics. Many programs may not have the resources to create or staff another course. If so, educators can embed data analytics and insight content into courses such as Intro to Public Relations, PR Campaigns, or a content creation or social media course, in addition to Research Methods. Specifically social media strategy or management courses commonly taught in blended Ad/PR programs are particularly suited to the incorporation of basic spreadsheet analysis using platform-native analytics or GA4. Students might also be able to take relevant data analysis classes in other university units like business or computer science.

- **Build a solid foundation in quantitative and qualitative research for students.** While students do not need to be data scientists, they must have a solid grounding in quantitative and qualitative research. Educators should place less emphasis on the tools or software, and prioritize teaching students the rudimentary tasks of asking the right questions, understanding the sampling process, considering the context of data, analyzing descriptive and inferential statistical results and qualitative data,

finding insight in available data, and aligning that insight with actionable recommendations.

- **Teach basic “spreadsheets” and business data analysis** as part of the data analysis process both to interpret simple data and as a means of dashboard reporting. These skills should not be limited to upper-level courses. When approached as an extension of critical thinking (i.e., approaching basic data analysis from a critical or questioning perspective), there is opportunity to incorporate a variety of activities or assignments in early-career public relations and social media management courses.

- **Encourage curiosity among students when analyzing data.** Teach students the importance of asking good questions. Consider using case analysis or other types of course activities or workshops that mimic basic data analysis and the value (and fun) of asking good questions as part of problem-solving and campaign development and management.

- **Prioritize data ethics, particularly given the growing usage of artificial intelligence in public relations practice.** Educators must teach and mentor students to ethically approach issues related to data transparency, privacy of consumer data, and mis- and disinformation. Students must thoughtfully and rigorously consider how they will ethically access data or use data purchased or collected by their organizations.

- **Teach students to align data analysis with measurable organizational outcomes and public relations objectives rather than low-level outputs** (e.g., vanity metrics of likes, posts, and followers). Students should become familiar with the Barcelona Principles 3.0, which prioritize outcomes and impacts important to both society and organizations. When analyzing data, students should think about how their data correlate or predict outcomes, such as increased organizational reputation, sales, votes, donations, or employee engagement.

- **Educators need administrative support to invest in ongoing training and learning to stay abreast of changes in PR practice fueled by developments in technology and Artificial Intelligence.** Both practitioners and educators can also take advantage of free and low-cost training and certifications available via LinkedIn, as well as webinars and conferences.

In summary, educators need to incorporate more data analysis training and application opportunities across the Public Relations curriculum, including ethical sourcing and uses of data, and the basics of spreadsheet use for data analysis. O’Neil et al.’s (2023) article provides concrete teaching suggestions to improve student readiness in data and analytics. Special attention should be focused on training students to search for insights within the results and to communicate actionable recommendations based on those insights. Because of quickly evolving expectations, educators and practitioners need to monitor new data analysis trends daily, explore new tools, and invest time in updating their knowledge, skills, and abilities through further training.

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Chapter 6

Ethics: An Essential Competency, but Neglected

Ethics Chapter Team

Denise Bortree, Co-Chair, Penn State University

Marlene S. Neill, Co-Chair, Baylor University

Shannon Bowen, University of South Carolina

Stephanie Madden, Penn State University

Nance Larsen, Gere Tactical

Christie Kleinmann, Belmont University

Tom Martin, College of Charleston

Gary Sheffer, Boston University

Sandra A. Frazier, Boston University

CPRE Recommendations

- Ethics should be a required course in all public relations programs.
- Public relations educators should continue to incorporate ethics into all courses across the curriculum.
- Educators should review the core ethics competencies identified in our research and find ways to integrate these knowledge, skills and abilities into their courses.
- Public relations programs should review their curricula with an eye toward the most important ethics topics as identified in this report.
- Hostile work environment/harassment should be an area for honest conversations in the classroom in preparation for workplace experiences.

Introduction

As new and continuing ethical challenges emerge and linger in our industry around areas of artificial intelligence, data privacy and misinformation, survey results indicate our newest professionals are not adequately prepared.

In the 2023 CPRE survey, ethics was ranked third among

the most desired knowledge, skills and abilities for entry-level practitioners ($M=4.41$). However, practitioners also indicated that entry-level practitioners are not meeting their expectations in this area ($M=3.03$). Unfortunately, these findings are similar to the CPRE 2017 report, *Fast Forward* (Commission, 2018), indicating that progress has not been made. In the 2017 CPRE report, practitioners rated entry-level practitioners' ethics competencies with a mean score of 3.61, which is higher than this 2023 assessment.

According to survey results in the *North Communication Monitor* study, six out of 10 communication professionals reported they had faced one or more ethical issues in the prior year (Meng et al., 2020-2021). A similar study, the *European Communication Monitor*, found that two out every three survey respondents had faced an ethical issue the prior year and 40% of them reported that they had never completed training in communication ethics (Zerfass et al., 2020). Together these statistics suggest that students need to be prepared to address ethical challenges when they enter the workforce, and they cannot rely on workplace ethics training to help guide their decision-making.

This chapter offers insights into the essential ethical competencies that are needed in the public relations profession, how well new professionals exhibit these competencies, and to what degree public relations programs

are helping students build these competencies. Using a list of recommended ethics topics from the 2017 report, this chapter identifies those topics that are taught most often in the classroom, those that educators think are priorities, and those that practitioners would like to see prioritized. From the results of the 2023 study, we offer recommendations for better ethical preparation of public relations students.

Context

Classroom preparation is critical for students who will face ethical challenges in their careers, as is seen in the following discussion of the value of ethics in the classroom and ethics competencies.

Value of Ethics Education

Based on a study with alumni, Gale and Bunton (2005) found that advertising and public relations professionals who had taken an ethics course in college were more likely to value ethics, identify ethical issues, and discuss ethical issues with colleagues when compared to alumni who had not taken an ethics course. Similarly, Neill (2016) found that public relations professionals who had taken an ethics course were more likely to report they were prepared to offer ethics counsel (i.e., moral efficacy, $M=4.02$) when compared to those who had not taken an ethics course ($M=3.72$).

Public Relations Ethics in the Classroom

Neill (2017) found the common topics covered in ethics courses included the PRSA code of ethics (91%), corporate social responsibility (83.5%) and current events (83.2%). The two ethics topics that were least likely to be covered when ethics is integrated into other courses are how to raise ethical concerns (38.46%) and global perspectives on ethics (38.46%). In prior studies, Silverman et al. (2014) found that ethics was most often covered in PR Campaigns (81%), followed by the introductory course (80%) and least taught in PR Management courses (47%). Professors preferred to use case studies, simulations and small group discussions when teaching about ethics (Silverman et al., 2014).

Building Ethical Competencies

Through Delphi research with public relations leaders, Neill (2021) was able to identify ten essential ethics competencies. Because these competencies were based on qualitative research, we conducted survey research in 2023 with both public relations practitioners and educators to confirm the necessity of the 2021 ten-competency areas of knowledge, skills and abilities. Based on our research,

we identified essential ethics competencies that are necessary in our discipline (Neill, 2021; 2023). They are: 1) integrity/trustworthiness, 2) honesty/transparency/truthfulness, 3) a personal code of ethics or values system, 4) critical thinking and problem solving abilities, 5) understanding of ethical business practices, 6) awareness and knowledge of the code of ethics and ability to identify ethical issues, 7) judgment, 8) courage to speak truth to power, 9) ethical listening skills, and 10) counseling abilities (Neill, 2021).

Ethical Challenges in the Workplace

Neill's (2021) Delphi study also identified what public relations leaders considered to be the top 10 ethical issues they or their colleagues had faced in the past five years. The list included: 1) Transparency/Disclosure/Selective truth telling, 2) Lack of ethics training, 3) Deceptive practices/False narratives/Intentional lying, 4) No consequences for unethical behavior, 5) Verifying Facts/Information 6) Confidentiality, 7) Conflicts of Interest, 8) Violation of company/organization's core values, 9) Honesty/Pressure to lie, 10) Executive Behavior/Misconduct/Cutting Corners/Hostile Work Environment/Sexual Harassment (Neill, 2021). This same list was tested in the 2023 CPRE survey.

Method

In the 2023 CPRE survey, educators and practitioners were asked about public relations ethics content in the curriculum, ethics competencies needed for new professionals, and ethical challenges that new professionals likely face in the workplace. These were used to draw conclusions about what is being taught about ethics and what likely should be taught in the public relations classroom to prepare students as they transition to the workforce.

The ethics section of the questionnaire included the list of public relations essential competencies from Neill's study (2021). It asked educators to assess how important each was for young professionals, to what degree the competencies are taught in the public relations classroom, and to what degree graduating seniors have mastered these competencies. Practitioners were also asked to what degree the competencies are essential for new professionals. In addition, they were asked to assess the degree to which they believe new professionals have mastered the competencies.

To further explore public relations ethics content in the classroom, educators and practitioners were asked to rate the importance of a list of ethics topics in public relations curricula. The topics were pulled from the 2019 Ethics Education Report from CPRE (Bortree et al. 2019).

Educators were asked to indicate the degree to which the topics are taught in the public relations classroom.

To better understand the frequency at which professionals face ethical issues in the workplace, a question was added to the survey that listed potential ethical challenges. Professionals were asked to indicate any that they faced in the past five years. Educators were asked to predict which of the issues a new professional would likely face in the first five years on the job. These responses were used to examine how experiences differed between junior and senior practitioners and the degree to which educators understood the frequency of these experiences. Educators provided additional information about the ways public relations ethics is taught by answering questions about where ethics is taught in their curriculum.

Key Findings

Ethics in the Public Relations Classroom

According to educators in the 2023 CPRE study, approximately 80% of programs teach ethics in their public relations courses. Sixty-one percent of participants indicated that their program teaches ethics across the curriculum, 41% offer a course in ethics/law, 31% offer a public relations ethics course, and 26% offer a media ethics course. A small percentage of educators reported that ethics was taught in business ethics or philosophy courses.

Ethics-related Competencies for Young Professionals

Of the 12 ethical competencies (see Table 2.6.1), educators find five competencies to be the most important for young professionals in their first five years of work. Personal behavior/integrity/accountability/trustworthiness emerged as the most important followed by critical thinking/problem solving and honesty/transparency/truthfulness/candor. Rounding out the top five are personal code of conduct/ethics/values system and strategic planning. The top five competencies as rated by professionals are quite similar: 1) personal behavior/integrity/accountability/trustworthiness, 2) honesty/transparency/truthfulness/candor, 3) personal code of conduct/ethics/values system, 4) critical thinking/problem solving, and 5) ethical business practices. Both groups strongly value personal behavior/integrity/accountability/trustworthiness, honesty/transparency/truthfulness/candor, personal code of conduct/ethics/values system, and critical thinking/problem solving.

Educators and practitioners are also in sync with their least valued competencies. Educators found these to be the least critical: 1) ethical listening skills, 2) leadership/team building, 3) counseling abilities, and 4) courage/speaking

truth to power. For practitioners, the least critical were: 1) leadership/team building, 2) courage/speak truth to power, 3) counseling abilities, and 4) ethical listening skills. This is not to suggest that these are not important skills for the profession, only that they are not as critical for new professionals to master as other ethics-related skills.

Comparing the most and least valued competencies for new professionals as assessed by educators and practitioners offers some useful insights. First, both educators and practitioners ranked personal behavior/integrity/accountability/trustworthiness as the most valuable competency. Clearly, this is an area that both the academy and the profession see as critical to success for young professionals. Public relations ethics programs should develop curriculum and programming to help students develop these competencies. In addition, educators and practitioners both acknowledge the importance of honesty/transparency/truthfulness/candor, personal code of conduct/ethics/values system, and critical thinking/problem solving for young professionals. These are values and competencies that can be built through case studies discussions and close examination of ethical decision-making models.

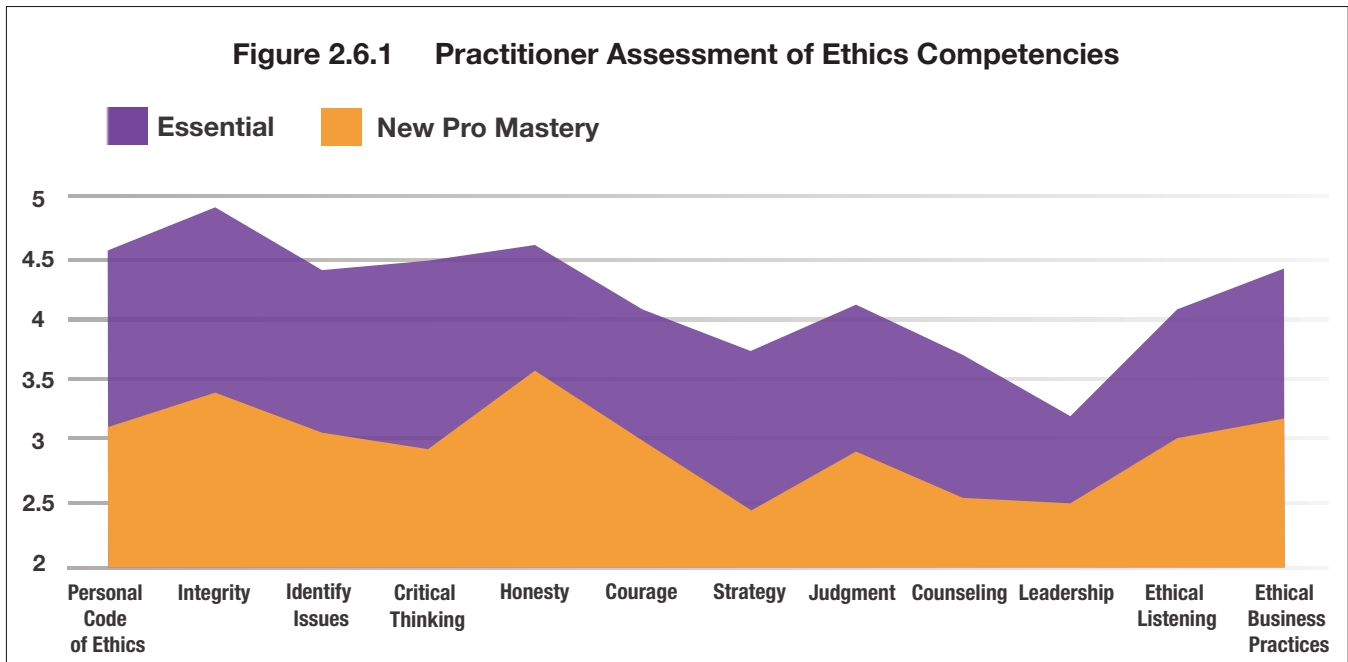
A few differences emerge in the rankings. One of the most highly ranked competencies by educators was also one of the lowest ranked by professionals – strategic planning. This disconnect may suggest that educators value this competency more than is needed for new professionals, or it may suggest that professionals are not taking into consideration the value of young professionals being prepared to take ethics into consideration in their strategic planning decisions. Educators who teach strategic planning may want to take a closer look at how their curriculum strengthens ethical decision-making to ensure its value to the field. Another key difference emerged around ethical business practices, with practitioners ranking this competency in their top five, but educators ranking it lower. Practitioners appear to be saying this is important for young professionals to master, and educators may want to prioritize content that covers this topic to better prepare students for future ethical challenges.

Table 2.6.1 Ethical Competencies as Ranked by Educators and Practitioners

Essential Competencies	Educator Desired	Student Mastery	Professional Desired	New Pro Mastery
Characteristics	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
Personal Behavior/Integrity/Accountability/Trustworthiness	4.71	3.86	4.81	3.39
Critical Thinking/Problem Solving	4.69	3.91	4.5	2.89
Honesty/Transparency/Truthfulness/Candor	4.69	4.03	4.67	3.56
Personal Code of Conduct/Ethics/Values System	4.49	3.57	4.59	3.12
Strategic Planning	4.49	3.98	3.7	2.44
Awareness/Knowledge of Code of Ethics/Identify Ethical Issues/Discernment	4.4	3.74	4.33	3.05
Judgment	4.39	3.55	4.18	2.87
Ethical Business Practices	4.38	3.45	4.34	3.16
Courage/Speak Truth to Power	4.3	3.52	4.07	3.02
Counseling Abilities/Ability to Articulate and Provide Recommendations/Oral Communication	4.25	3.56	3.76	2.56
Leadership/Team Building	4.23	3.65	3.18	2.54
Ethical Listening Skills	4.07	3.17	4.04	2.94

Using the same set of ethics competencies, practitioners assessed how well young professionals in their first five years have mastered these competencies. Unfortunately, the outcomes are not favorable, as across the board they ranked young professionals' mastery as significantly lower than desired (Figure 2.6.1). The greatest discrepancies were with critical thinking, strategic planning, and personal codes of ethics.

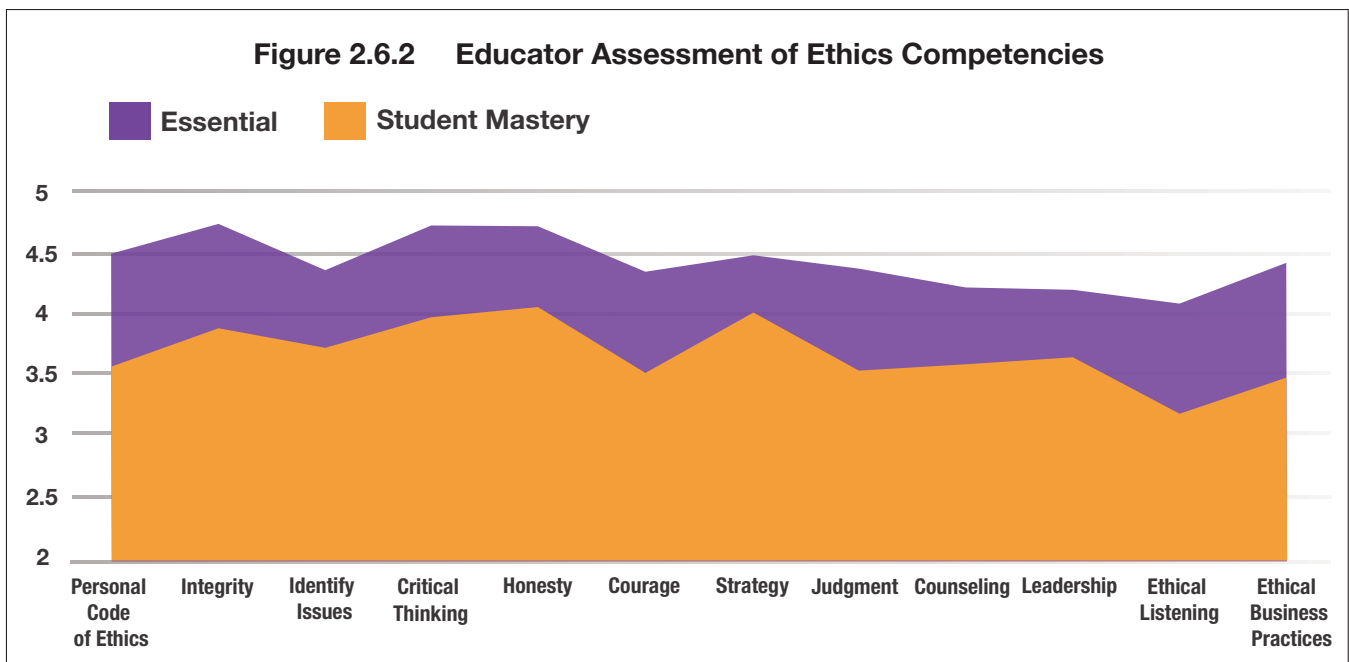
Figure 2.6.1 Practitioner Assessment of Ethics Competencies



Educators rated ethics with a mean of 4.54 as a desired competency for their graduates and rated their students' ethics competencies with a mean of 3.99, which indicates they see room for improvement. It is significant to note that their overall assessment is much more optimistic than that of practitioners (M=3.03) as well as their assessment of specific ethics competencies (See Figure 2.6.2).

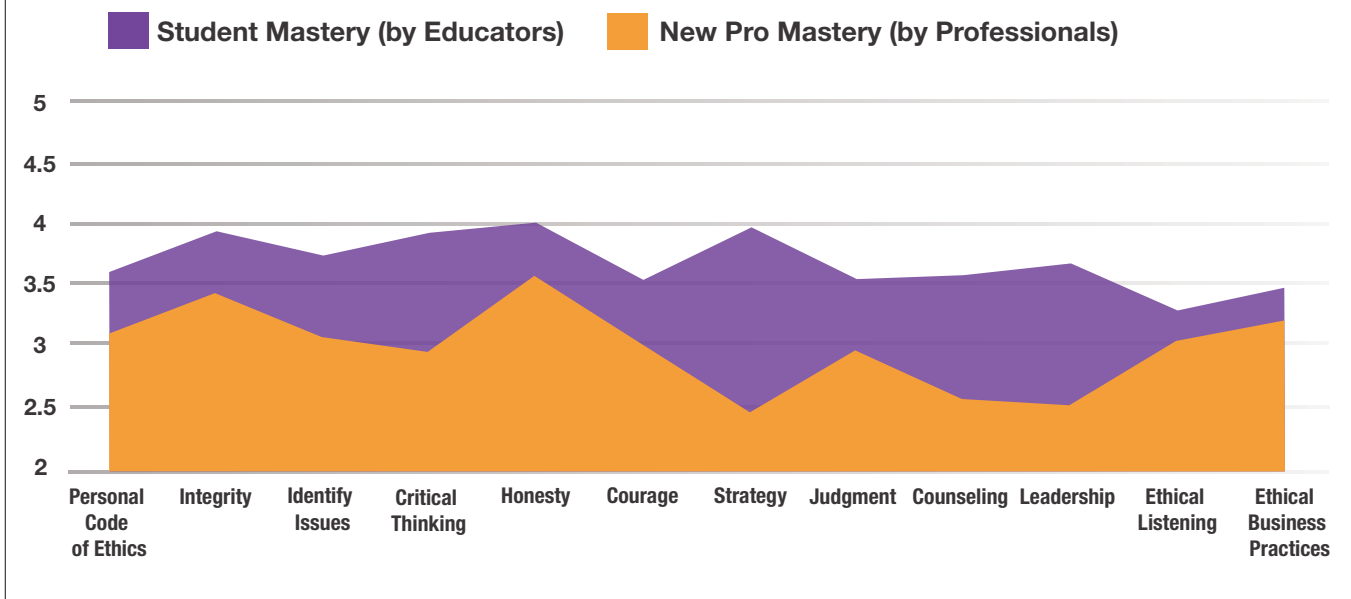
As with practitioners, educators ranked their students' mastery of critical competencies as significantly lower than the desired levels (Figure 2.6.2), most significantly for ethical listening, ethical business practices, and personal codes of ethics. Ethical business practices were ranked as a top competency by practitioners. The fact that educators see student mastery in this area as lacking suggests that more needs to be done to build this into the curriculum. Broadly, educators and practitioners realize the critical need for more education and development in the area of ethics.

Figure 2.6.2 Educator Assessment of Ethics Competencies



Educators and practitioners both observed the level of mastery of essential skills by young professionals, and the differences in their observation are interesting. Practitioners are much more critical of the critical thinking skills, strategic planning, counseling, and leadership of young professionals than are educators. These may be areas to consider for future curriculum development. However, it's important to note that of the four areas, only critical thinking skills was ranked highly by educators and practitioners, so this should be a top priority for future educational efforts (see Figure 2.6.3).

Figure 2.6.3 Mastery of Essential Skills as Observed by Practitioners and Educators



How Public Relations Ethics Is Taught in the Classroom

Nearly 80% of educators indicated that ethics is taught in their program, and almost 55% indicated that an ethics course is required in their program. Our findings are consistent with another recent study (Del Rosso, Haught & Malone, 2020), which found that among 15 ACEJMC-accredited programs, most programs (87%) offered ethics in the form of a mass communication ethics course, a joint ethics and law course or media ethics, and 67% of those programs required students to take an ethics course. This of course would mean that approximately one-third of public relations graduates in these programs may very well graduate without completing ethics training (Del Rosso et al., 2020).

As reported in Chapter 3, 61.4% of educators indicated that ethics was being integrated across the curriculum, 40.6% reported that they offer a stand-alone course in law and ethics, and 30% had a stand-alone course in public relations ethics. Previous research has found that when ethics is integrated across the curriculum certain critical topics tend to be neglected (Neill, 2017).

We asked both educators and practitioners to evaluate the importance of a list of ethics topics developed by a prior CPRE ethics committee (Bortree et al., 2019). Educators were also asked what is being taught in the class. Based on the survey results, the four most common PR ethics topics taught in the classroom are 1) corporate social responsibility, 2) professional codes of ethics, 3) misinformation/fake news, and 4) PRSA’s code of ethics. Some of the topics least likely to be covered by educators included loyalties in public relations, last resort approaches, developing a personal crisis plan, and ethical listening.

Not surprising, three of the four ethics topics taught most often in the public relations classroom align with the educators’ values (see Table 2.6.2). Educators indicated these topics were the four most important, ethics in the digital age, misinformation/fake news, corporate social responsibility, and professional codes of ethics. The topic that ranked the highest—ethics in a digital age—did not appear in the four most commonly taught topics. This is an area for further curriculum development.

Professionals offered a similar list of most important topics, 1) misinformation/fake news, 2) ethics in the digital age, 3) ethics in crisis communication, and 4) professional codes of ethics. Again, ethics in the digital age emerges as a top priority for public relations ethics education.

Table 2.6.2 Ethics-Related Topics Taught in PR Classroom vs. Content Desired by Educators and Practitioners

Ethics Content in Classroom	Topic Taught In PR Classroom	Educator Expectations	Practitioner Expectations
Characteristics	Mean	Mean	Mean
Corporate Social Responsibility	4.02	4.24	4.21
Professional Codes of Ethics	3.91	4.19	4.43
Misinformation/Fake News	3.79	4.26	4.58
PRSA's Code of Ethics	3.76	3.99	4.24
Ethics in Crisis Communication	3.73	4.01	4.54
Ethics in the Digital Age	3.72	4.29	4.56
Ethics & Persuasion	3.70	4.10	4.27
Ethical Decision Models & Theories	3.61	4.04	4.24
Diversity and Inclusion in Public Relations	3.59	4.07	4.42
Ethical Business Practices	3.51	4.01	4.41
Impact of Organizational Culture on Ethical Decision Making	3.28	3.82	4.31
Moral Philosophy/Ethical Theories and Frameworks	3.25	3.48	3.87
Ethics in a Global Context	3.08	3.70	4.01
Building Credibility/Allies & Coalitions	3.04	3.69	4.24
Loyalties in Public Relations	2.86	3.31	3.81
Ethical Listening	2.84	3.61	4.19
Developing a Personal Crisis Plan	2.49	3.10	3.84
Last Resort Approaches-Rocking the Boat & Whistleblowing	2.46	3.08	3.78

Ethical Issues Practitioners Face on the Job

Knowing the ethical challenges that new professionals face in their first five years on the job would help educators prepare students for issues they will face as they transition into the workplace. Our survey asked educators what they believed new professionals faced, and we asked professionals what they have faced in the past five years (Table 2.6.3). Pulling out those who were in their first six years on the job offers insights into how their experiences might differ from educators' expectations as well as differ from all professionals' experiences.

The most common ethical dilemmas professionals faced included: 1) transparency/disclosure/selective truth telling, 2) conflicts of interest, 3) verifying facts/information, 4) confidentiality, and 5) no consequences for unethical behavior. Educators had similar expectations: 1) transparency/disclosure/selective truth telling, 2) verifying facts/information, 3) conflicts of interest, 4) deceptive practices/false narratives/intentional lying, and 5) confidentiality.

New professionals reported a similar list with one exception. The fifth most common troubling experience for new professionals was hostile work environment/sexual harassment. This did not appear near the top of the list for either educator predictions or all professionals' experiences and deserves to be examined more closely. Preparing students to deal with harassment that they experience and/or witness is an important skill for those entering the workplace.

Table 2.6.3 Ethical Issues Faced in the Workplace

Ethics Content in Classroom	Educators Prediction	New Professionals Reported	All Professionals Reported
Ethical issues faced in the workplace	N= 141 (percentage)	N=23 (percentage)	N=269 (percentage)
Transparency/Disclosure/Selective Truth telling	72	61	69
Verifying Facts/Information	72	44	51
Conflicts of Interest	58	52	53
Deceptive Practices/False Narratives/Intentional Lying	57	26	32
Confidentiality	56	52	47
Honesty/Pressure to Lie	55	30	20
No Consequences for Unethical Behavior	53	35	45
Hostile Work Environment/Sexual Harassment	53	39	35

Conclusions

Educators in this study suggested that ethics is taught in most public relations programs (80%), and this is done primarily through addressing ethics across the curriculum. Given the challenges of today's media environment, 80% is not sufficient. All students in a public relations program should be trained to face ethical dilemmas in the workplace, as other research shows that many professionals do not receive ethics training on the job.

When asked about the most important ethics values and competencies for new professionals, both educators and professionals listed *personal behavior/integrity/accountability/trustworthiness* as their top choices. These are personal values that will help new professionals navigate dilemmas in the workplace, and public relations programs should consider incorporating classroom content and programming that can help students build these values.

Across the board, practitioners and educators indicated that student mastery of ethical competencies was below expectations. This is an area that needs to be addressed. One particularly alarming discrepancy was critical thinking skills, a competency rated highly by both academics and practitioners. Practitioners rated new professionals as significantly lacking in this area. Educators should consider embedding more training on critical thinking skills across the public relations curriculum.

Another important discrepancy was the importance of ethical business practices. Practitioners valued this more highly than did educators; however, educators noted in their responses that students are significantly below expectation in mastery of this area.

Educators and practitioners reviewed a list of ethics topics for the classroom and both indicated that ethics in the digital age is a critical topic for today's student. However, this topic did not appear in the list of the topics most often covered in the classroom. This is an area that should be revisited to adequately prepare students for future work. Ethics in crisis communication was also a topic that emerged for practitioners but not for educators and did not appear on the most common list of topics taught in the PR classroom. This too should be considered for future course development.

And finally, practitioners and educators weighed in on ethical dilemmas in the workplace. Educators predicted the experiences of professionals in their first five years on the job, and practitioners shared their experience over the past five years. The results suggest that for the most part experience and predictions match. However, new professionals experience hostile work environments/harassment more commonly (relative to other experiences) than was anticipated.

Educators may want to include material in their courses to help new professionals navigate this potential.

CPRE Recommendations

- Ethics should be a required course in all public relations programs.
- Public relations educators should continue to incorporate ethics into all courses across the curriculum.
- Educators should review the core ethics competencies identified in our research and find ways to integrate these knowledge, skills and abilities into their courses. In particular, these competencies and values emerged as critical or lacking:
 - **Personal behavior, integrity, accountability and trustworthiness.** Both academics and practitioners rank this as the highest competency for preparation for the workplace.
 - **Critical thinking skills** are highly valued by academics and practitioners, but practitioners see a significant lack of this competency in new professionals.
 - **Ethical business practices.** Practitioners see this as more important than do educators, but educators are aware of the significant gap between expected mastery and actual mastery among students.
- Public relations programs should review their curriculum with an eye toward the most important ethics topics as identified in this report. Two that may need to be prioritized are below.
 - **Ethics in the digital age.** Both academics and practitioners rank this highly, but it did not appear on the list of most common topics currently taught in public relations classrooms.
 - **Ethics in crisis communication.** This topic emerged as important for practitioners but did not make the list for educators. Given its importance for the profession, public relations educators may want to include it for curriculum development.
- **Hostile work environment/harassment** should be an area for honest conversations in the classroom in preparation for workplace experiences. Anticipated ethical dilemmas faced by professionals match reality with one exception. Since new professionals experience hostile work environment/harassment at a higher rate than expected (relative to other ethics issues), educators should consider this topic as well.

Resources for Teaching Ethical Competencies

Public relations educators should review the list of core ethics competencies and recommended course content highlighted in this report and look for ways to implement them in their ethics courses or integrate the content across other existing public relations courses. There are a number of free resources available to assist educators in this process. Below are some recommendations based on the key ethics competencies (Neill, in press). Pedagogical recommendations are followed by resources.

- **Personal behavior/Integrity/Accountability/Trustworthiness.** This may be best taught through classroom discussions and case studies. Also, the use of TurnItIn software can make students aware of the integrity issues. See also [Page Center Teaching Modules](#).
- **Critical thinking/Problem solving:** This may be best through the use of ethical decision-making models and case studies. See, for example, [Media Ethics Initiative](#) and [Giving Voice to Values Curriculum](#).
- **Honesty/Transparency/Truthfulness/Candor:** This may be best learned through discussion of current events and review of case studies. Examples here include [Influence Tactics](#) (Neill & Barnes, 2018) and [Page Center Teaching Modules](#).
- **Personal code of conduct/Ethics/Values system:** This may be taught by having students draft a personal code of ethics. Other resources include: [PRSA Code of Ethics](#) and [Global Alliance Code of Ethics](#).
- **Strategic Planning:** This may be taught by having students discuss ethical decision making in the context of strategic planning (Bowen, 2005). See [APR Study Guide](#).
- **Awareness/Knowledge of code of ethics/Identify ethical issues/Discernment:** This may be taught through case studies, classroom discussions, and guest speakers. Resources include [Page Center Teaching Modules](#), [Media Ethics Initiative](#), and [PRSA Board of Ethics and Professional Standards reports](#).
- **Judgment:** The ethical reasoning VALUE rubric can help assess student learning outcomes in this area. See [Ethical Reasoning VALUE rubric](#).
- **Ethical Business Practices:** Students can learn about ethical business practices through review of current case studies and also from understanding codes of ethics. Useful for discussion are [PRSA Codes of Ethics](#) and [PRSA Board of Ethics and Professional Standards reports](#).
- **Courage/Speak truth to power:** This may be best taught through guest speakers and through student-professional ethics narratives (Eschenfelder, 2011). Resources include [Giving Voice to Values Curriculum](#) and [Plank Center – Cracking the Code to Workplace Confidence](#).
- **Counseling abilities/Ability to articulate and provide recommendations/Oral communication:** These competencies may be best taught through role playing activities in the classroom. See [Influence Tactics](#) (Neill & Barnes, 2018), [Giving Voice to Values Curriculum](#) and [Ethics Case Scenarios](#).
- **Leadership/Team building:** Leadership skills may be best learned through service learning projects and team activities (including work on student organizations). Helpful resources include [Public Relations Leaders as Sensemakers](#) (Berger & Meng, 2014) and [PR Women with Influence: Breaking Through the Ethical and Leadership Challenges](#) (Meng & Neill, 2021).
- **Ethical listening skills:** This may be best learned through examples, current events, and group discussions. See [Toward a Framework for Listening](#) (Place, 2021).

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Chapter 7

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Public Relations: Moving Beyond the Status Quo



Nneka Logan, Chair, Virginia Tech

Katie R. Place, Quinnipiac University

Hilary Fussell Sisco, Quinnipiac University

Rosalynn Vasquez, Baylor University

Amiso George, Texas Christian University

Martha Terdik, Conestoga College, Canada

Rashpal Rai, Canadian Public Relations Association

CPRE Recommendations

Educators must:

- Understand DEI as an ethical social responsibility that should be embedded in the public relations curriculum.
- Actualize DEI mission.
- Take a comprehensive approach to DEI in public relations.
- Create Public Relations DEI course materials; expand awareness of, and access to, them.
- Prepare for pushback.

Introduction

This chapter describes how educators and practitioners view diversity, equity and inclusion in the public relations field. It presents seven key findings from the 2023 CPRE survey of public relations educators and practitioners, and it makes five key recommendations to strengthen DEI within public relations. The recommendations are based on survey responses and findings, and they are supported by public relations diversity research.

Emerging as a public relations concern approximately 30 years ago (Ertem-Eray & Ki, 2021; Waymer et al., 2023), diversity has since evolved to encompass the areas of equity and inclusion. DEI is among the most recent and widely-known iterations of diversity discourse, though the

terminology is constantly evolving. The business case rationale and the moral/ethical rationale are the two most common approaches to DEI in public relations (Bardhan & Gower, 2022). The dynamic nature of diversity discourse makes universal agreement on a single definition of diversity, or any of its aspects, difficult to achieve. Many organizations elect to define it for themselves (Wills, 2020). The public relations literature also offers many excellent resources that define DEI, including its individual components (e.g., Commission on Public Relations Education, n.d.; Edwards, 2011; Ertem-Eray & Ki, 2021; Luttrell & Wallace, 2021; Waymer et al., 2023; *The Language of Diversity*, 2021). Regardless of the definitional fluidity, what remains consistent is that DEI, and its various iterations, all center around the idea of appreciating human differences, treating all people fairly, and ensuring individuals in organizations and communities feel valued, actions that lend themselves well to effective public relations education and practice in a global, digital, multicultural world.

Much has changed since the last CPRE 2017 *Fast Forward* report (Commission, 2018), especially with attention to DEI in the public relations field increasing substantially. Survey findings show that DEI is taught across all six CPRE-recommended courses, including internships and supervised work experiences. *Public Relations Journal*, the *Journal of Public Relations Education* and the *Journal*

of *Public Relations Research* all have recently published special issues focused on DEI and related areas. The Public Relations Society of America includes its DEI strategic plan within its broader strategic plan, and it launched the Diverse Voices program, which hosts diversity webinars (PRNEWS, 2023). The Institute for Public Relations launched a Center for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion and published a report about the language practitioners use to define and describe DEI, in partnership with the Wakeman Agency. The Arthur W. Page Center launched an Introduction to Diversity in PR learning module (Brown, n.d.), while the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations held a DEI summit in 2022 in conjunction with its Milestones in Mentoring Gala to promote diversity among future public relations professionals. The PR Council as well as several high-profile public relations agencies have partnered with HBCU programs to help improve the pipeline of diverse practitioners. These mark only a few examples of how DEI in public relations has grown since the last CPRE report.

Beyond the public relations field, society has experienced significant changes: there has been a global pandemic, a racial reckoning, a rise in hate crimes, intense political polarization, economic uncertainty, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, increasing acute effects of climate change, a war between Russia and Ukraine, and declining trust in society's foundational institutions such as media and government, along with rapidly accelerating AI and disinformation. The world needs effective communicators now more than ever. The 2023 CPRE survey emerged from this context. Its findings provide instructive insights about the state of the field and how to advance DEI with specific recommendations.

Method

As part of the survey, the DEI subcommittee requested a number of questions be included, focusing on the content of DEI education and practice in public relations, the impact of contemporary movements and issues on public relations, possible pushback against DEI efforts, and understanding DEI as an ethical social responsibility.

Seven Key Findings

1. DEI is essential in Public Relations Education

Both educators and practitioners agreed that DEI had become more important to public relations in the last five years, and it had become more important to their respective areas. This finding is consistent with public relations research and industry reports that also recognize the

growing importance of DEI to the public relations field (e.g. Ertem-Eray & Ki, 2021; Mundy et al., 2018; Sha & Ford, 2007; *The Language of Diversity*, 2021; Waymer et al., 2023; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). There were some differences to note. Specifically, practitioners strongly agreed that DEI had become more important to public relations practice, with a mean of 4.59 on a 5-point Likert Scale. On the other hand, educators agreed that DEI had become a more important part of their department's curriculum in the past five years ($M= 3.86$).

2. Core DEI Concepts in Public Relations Curriculum

When asked to identify key DEI concepts, educators and practitioners identified gender, race, ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, and social justice as the top five DEI concepts. More specifically, educators identified those concepts as the top five they teach, and practitioners identified them as the top five they expect to be taught in public relations classrooms. Thus, survey results confirm participants agree about which DEI concepts are core DEI concepts in public relations (i.e., gender, race, ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, and social justice). However, there were slight differences in the rankings: educators ranked gender first and race second, while practitioners ranked race first and gender second. Regardless of these slight differences, this finding demonstrates strong alignment between what educators teach and what practitioners want entry-level practitioners to know. This affirms that public relations DEI education is meeting the expectations of employers in the industry (Meganck & Kim, 2022) in terms of the concepts they would like taught in the public relations curriculum.

3. Expanding DEI Concepts

Educators and practitioners identified diversity of thought and disability/accessibility as the top two DEI concepts they wished were taught more in the public relations curriculum. Diversity of thought ranked first and disability/accessibility ranked second for both groups. This finding is consistent with public relations research that argues having diversity among people in organizations increases diversity of thought (Hon & Brunner, 2000; Mundy, 2015; Sha & Ford, 2007) and problem solving (Hay, 2023), and it is consistent with research that suggests a need to expand DEI concepts beyond core or traditional understandings such as race, gender and ethnicity (Ertem-Eray & Ki, 2021; Wills, 2020).

4. Social Movements Influencing Curriculum and Practice

When asked if movements and issues such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, #Don'tSayGay, #StopAsianHate, #BlackLivesMatter and immigration influenced public relations education and practice, educators and practitioners affirmed that they had.

This finding is consistent with public relations research that has explored these and similar movements and issues (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Dong et al., 2023; Edrington, 2018; Vardeman & Sebesta, 2020). It is also important to note that practitioners agreed strongly that these movements and issues influenced their practice ($M=4.85$). On the other hand, educator agreement that these movements and issues influenced their teaching was more tempered ($M=3.79$).

5. DEI Pushback

Both educators and practitioners affirmed some degree of pushback to DEI from stakeholders. Forty percent of educators reported pushback as compared to 60% of practitioners. This finding is consistent with public relations literature (Bardhan & Gower, 2020; Hon & Brunner, 2000; Parrish & Gassam, 2020; Place & Vanc, 2016) and organizational studies research (Thomas, 2020) that addresses resistance to DEI.

6. Demand for DEI Skills

In both groups, educators and practitioners reported that they desired DEI KSAs more than they found them in students and entry-level practitioners, respectively. More specifically, educators strongly desired DEI KSAs ($M= 4.15$), but found them in graduates to a lesser degree ($M=3.8$). Practitioners also desired DEI KSAs at a greater level than they were found with means of 3.38 and 3.13, respectively. This finding echoes a concern from the 2017 CPRE report:

Practitioners value job candidates who enter the workforce and exhibit D&I specific knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), and who have a strong multicultural professional lens. However, practitioners do not see that perspective reflected among the entry-level candidates to the extent they would prefer (Mundy et al., 2018, p. 139).

These DEI-related KSA findings confirm that the public relations field continues to value DEI knowledge, skills and abilities, but is not finding these KSAs in students or entry-level practitioners as much as is desired.

7. DEI Implementation in Public Relations Courses

More than half of educators report teaching DEI in ethics courses (53%, $n=104$). This finding is consistent with public relations literature that emphasizes the moral imperative of DEI in the field (Bardhan & Gower, 2022; Bortree, 2022; Hon & Brunner, 2000; Place & Zhang, 2023; Pompper, 2021; Mundy et al., 2017). Some educators (19%, $n=38$) report that DEI is taught in internships or supervised work experiences. This finding is consistent with literature that explores the intersection of DEI and public relations education

(e.g., Meganck & Kim, 2022; Place & Vanc, 2016; Berger & Erzikova, 2022). While it is important that students break out of the bubble of university life, educators should not over rely on experiential learning as a way to teach DEI, and they should continue teaching DEI in all six CPRE-recommended courses, drawing connections to DEI's ethical foundations.

Comparison to the 2017 Report

There are several similarities and differences between the 2017 study (Commission, 2018) and the 2023 study. In terms of similarities, both studies found that the public relations field places great value on diversity discourse, that the importance of diversity to public relations has increased since the previous report, and that the public relations field's efforts are making strides toward improving diversity. Both reports also assert that much more needs to be done so that the field better reflects and represents the diversity within society and so that classroom and workplace environments are inclusive spaces where all are welcome, valued, and treated fairly. Both reports also hold that in order for diversity efforts to be successful at the industry level, they must be strengthened at the academic level. Both reports also emphasize the ethical, moral importance of diversity.

In terms of differences, the 2017 study focused primarily on the role of leadership in advancing D&I initiatives, discrimination in the workplace, how one's own identity impacted one's views of D&I, the importance of recruiting and retaining diverse students and practitioners to strengthen the school-to-industry pipeline, and teaching diversity and multicultural perspectives. While those remain important foci that have informed public relations research and practice, and with which we fully concur, the present study focuses mainly on the content of DEI education and practice in public relations, the impact of contemporary movements and issues on public relations, pushback against DEI efforts, and understanding DEI as an ethical social responsibility. It offers new, instructive insights about the state of DEI in public relations and provides recommendations to strengthen DEI in the current climate.

The 2023 study findings help to shape the direction and the emphasis that DEI curriculum could take in order to meet the expectations of practitioners and to build upon the foundation of diversity discourse that seems to be spread across the curriculum, but may be missing key facets of invisible diversity as well as the practical application of diverse issues. Another challenge will be ensuring that DEI initiatives maintain focus on people who are most vulnerable to discrimination without alienating those who do not

experience systemic or structural marginalization. The findings presented in this chapter can help inform educators as well as practitioners on the various areas of diversity and encourage them to consider how well DEI is addressed in their own teachings and public relations practices.

Conclusion

Today's public relations practitioners and educators exist in more diverse, equitable and inclusive environments than years past because of the diversity-related work the field has undertaken over the last several decades. Public relations professionals routinely interact with people from different races, ethnicities, gender identities, sexualities, religions, values, views and beliefs and who have numerous combinations thereof. Many communicate across time zones and through language and cultural barriers to get the job done. Yet, at the same time, the DEI landscape is not where it should be, because it does not reflect the rapidly growing diversity in the United States (Meganck & Kim, 2022). According to the most recent Diversity Action Alliance Benchmark Report (2023):

In 2020, 75% of employees in public relations and communication were White with 25% being racially diverse (N = 15,724). In 2021, diversity increased 8% across all organizations and position levels (N = 6,119). Seventy-three percent of employees were White in 2021 and 27% were racially/ethnically diverse (p. 6).

Broken down into finer detail by race/ethnicity, approximately 12% of public relations practitioners are Hispanic or Latino, 10% are Black or African American, and approximately 5% are Asian (Zippia, n.d.). Additionally, approximately 12% identify as LGBTQ. While women continue to make up the majority of the field at 64%, they continue to be paid less than men at .95 cents to the dollar (Zippia, n.d.).

Progress has been made, but not yet fully actualized. In order to fully realize the benefits of its investments in DEI, such as recruiting and retaining top talent, appropriately identifying and segmenting stakeholders and publics, and communicating with people in ways that resonate, effectively managing relationships, enhancing organizational identity and reputation, fostering a diversity of thought (Ertem-Eray & Ki, 2021; Hon & Brunner, 2000; Mundy, 2015; Sha & Ford, 2007), the public relations field must maintain its commitment to DEI. Shying away from DEI commitments would hamper the field's ability to meet the needs of students and practitioners by providing effective education and communication counsel. The set of recommendations outlined below in this report stem from the current survey, are informed by past CPRE reports and ongoing DEI research, and they respond to the present climate for DEI in public relations.

CPRE Recommendations

Educators must:

1. Understand DEI as an Ethical Social Responsibility that should be embedded in the curriculum. There is a natural connection between DEI and ethics that many educators are already tapping into. Ethics can strengthen organizational relationship-building and communication with publics, ensuring that their expectations are met and engagement is done to facilitate trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control-mutuality (Bowen et al., 2016; Place et al., 2021). Our survey findings show that 52% percent of educators report teaching DEI in ethics courses. Additionally, the Arthur W. Page Center's Introduction to Diversity training module is situated within its Public Relations Ethics Training. While we are not recommending DEI be subsumed under ethics, we are drawing attention to ways in which DEI and ethics are deeply and meaningfully connected in public relations. DEI and ethics share in common authentic commitments to respect, fairness, equity, and justice (Place et al., 2021). As such, DEI and ethics are aligned with socially responsible approaches to communication and business (Hon & Brunner, 2000; Pompper, 2021), which were recommended in the previous CPRE DEI chapter (Mundy et al., 2018), and with which we fully concur. While the business case for diversity has arguably been proven, DEI's contributions to creating fairer organizations and a more humane world may be its greatest value in the end. When educators and practitioners actualize DEI as an ethical social responsibility, they contribute to creating a more fully functional society (Heath, 2006).

2. Actualize DEI Mission. Survey responses from educators and practitioners clearly indicate that DEI is a priority for the public relations field. Recent focus group conversations with Page Center CCOs also identified DEI as a top concern. The importance of DEI is also acknowledged in academic and industry research, with the public relations commitment to DEI characterized as a mandate (Mundy et al., 2018). Many universities, public relations firms, corporations, nonprofits and other organizations have some form of DEI mission, vision or value statement, and some even have full-blown strategic plans. Thus, educators and practitioners need to carry out these aims because DEI is having a positive impact. DEI has changed traditional organizational norms: the hiring of women and racial minorities into leadership roles has increased, and the critique of sexist, racist, or heteronormative policies and practices is no longer an anomaly (e.g. Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Serini et al., 1997; Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018; Pompper 2007, 2011; Tindall & Waters, 2012; Wrigley, 2002).

Despite DEI successes, a common refrain is that more needs to be done. Diversity research and policy development, as well as auditing of diversity practices in public relations (e.g. Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017) are actions that strengthen DEI. Arguably, many educators and practitioners already know what to do to actualize their DEI missions (e.g. diversify university settings and public relations majors to strengthen the school-to-profession pipeline; recruit, retain and promote people from historically marginalized and underrepresented backgrounds; diversify syllabi and guest speakers; listen to and engage different stakeholder groups; and measure DEI programs when appropriate). We just need to do it. To create the kinds of classroom and workplace environments where everyone is welcome and opportunities are distributed fairly, educators and practitioners must actualize their DEI commitments.

3. Take a Comprehensive Approach to DEI in Public Relations. Taking a comprehensive approach to DEI means understanding DEI as fluid, ever-changing and responsive to the social climate. Approaching DEI this way acknowledges that race, gender, ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, and social justice are foundational diversity concepts of enduring importance, while also allowing room to incorporate concepts that are becoming of increasing interest to the field such as diversity of thought, ability/disability, mental health, and age for example. A comprehensive approach facilitates broad understandings of DEI that include primary and secondary characteristics (Sha & Ford, 2007; Commission on Public Relations Education, n.d.) while also responding to the complexities of identity that are highlighted by intersectionality (Logan & Ciszek, 2022; Vardeman & Sebesta, 2020; Vardeman-Winter & Tindall, 2010) – an area of scholarship that draws attention to the fact people have multiple identity attributes that interact and affect their lives in a multitude of ways. Taking a holistic approach to DEI in public relations is consistent with responses to the 2023 CPRE survey, which indicate that a wide variety of concepts are relevant to DEI in public relations. This recommendation is also consistent with recent research that advocates for an expansive approach to DEI that acknowledges historical inequities while being responsive to the ways in which society is changing (Logan, 2021; Mundy et al., 2018; Wills, 2020).

4. Create PR/DEI Course Materials; Expand Awareness of, and Access to, Them. This recommendation responds to the fourth finding that educators and practitioners indicated that movements and issues such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, #Don'tSayGay, #StopAsianHate, #BlackLivesMatter and immigration influenced their work. Thus, creating case studies, assignments and activities based on these and

similar occurrences would be beneficial in several ways. These movements and issues inherently involve matters of DEI. They address the top five DEI concepts identified by practitioners in the second finding discussed earlier, and they are inherently powered by public relations practices, which makes them well suited to serve as raw materials to create meaningful course content. Such course content would emerge from the nexus of DEI and public relations to connect theory with practice, while allowing students to explore contemporary situations they are likely familiar with, further facilitating the potential to spark rich class discussions. In fact, educators who responded to this year's CPRE survey identified class discussions as a primary way in which they assess students' DEI knowledge so materials that are likely to stimulate class discussion will be beneficial to educators. Holbert and Waymer (2022), for example, suggested that educators assign DEI-related case studies for students to read and discuss in class with facilitation by educators' open-ended questions. Research from Berger and Erzikova (2022) demonstrated the value of self-reflection assignments to stimulate DEI learning and practices in public relations classes and workplaces. Ideally, DEI course materials should be systematically integrated into all six CPRE-recommended courses. Some materials may also be suitable for training practitioners.

Additionally, creating greater awareness of, and access to, the many helpful resources already available to aid educator and practitioner DEI efforts is necessary. Although educators in this survey indicated that they were comfortable teaching DEI ($M=3.72$), other studies have found that educators and practitioners may feel uncomfortable or unprepared to address DEI topics (Bardhan & Gower, 2020; *The Language of Diversity*, 2021). Access to DEI/PR resources may help to reduce discomfort that stems from unfamiliarity with, or inexperience in engaging, DEI. Many resources are available to enhance DEI acumen.

The CPRE collects DEI teaching materials such as syllabi, assignments, readings and videos and makes this inventory available on its website. Scholars and practitioners should continue to contribute their work to the inventory, access its materials, share them, and widely communicate that this resource is available to the public relations community. Many of CPRE's member organizations also have a wealth of helpful resources. For example, the Institute for Public Relations' Center for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion has many peer-reviewed research articles, industry reports, blog posts and videos, including videos from the *Race in the PR Classroom* series and the *Diversity in the PR Classroom* series, both offered through a partnership between IPR and the Public Relations Society of America's Educators Academy. The Institute for Public Relations

Center for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion published a study defining and describing the language practitioners use to talk about DEI in their 2021 *The Language of Diversity* report. PRSA launched its *Voices4Everyone* website to further support DEI (<https://voices4everyone.prsa.org/>). PRSA also has a D&I toolkit and numerous other resources available on its website, PRSA.org. The Arthur W. Page Center also offers an informative DEI module: <https://www.pagecentertraining.psu.edu/>. These resources are excellent sources of support for both educators and practitioners. Increasing awareness of these materials and access to them will allow more people to learn from them, thereby strengthening the public relations DEI knowledge base, which strengthens the entire field.

5. Prepare for Pushback. A significant percentage of survey respondents indicated they experienced pushback from key stakeholders when engaging in DEI. Approximately 60 percent of practitioners said they experienced pushback as compared to 40 percent of educators. The survey indicated that pushback came from many places such as university and organizational leadership, employees, clients, faculty, students and administrators. Major corporations, such as Gartner, have also responded to denial, disengagement, and pushback to DEI efforts (Rai & Dutkiewicz, 2022), recommending that organizations engage in more frequent communication to generate buy-in and demonstrate empathy.

Internal resistance to DEI initiatives is often based on psychological threats (Shuman et al., 2023). Thus, organizational leaders and communicators should work to reduce threats against status, merit, and morals by ensuring that employees understand DEI is not a threat to any of those things, but rather an improvement upon the status quo, which has long stifled organizational effectiveness by restricting who could participate (and how) in organizations. The goal is to find ways to help all employees see themselves as part of DEI so that they do not distance themselves from DEI efforts.

Public relations research has identified various forms of pushback including fatigue, fear of people who are different from oneself, and misperceptions that DEI lowers standards or leads to reverse discrimination (e.g. Hon & Brunner, 2000; Place & Vanc, 2016; Wills, 2020). Economic uncertainty, and efforts to tighten corporate budgets, also threatens DEI jobs and programs with many being cut (Browley, 2023). According to a recent Bloomberg Report, DEI job openings declined 19% in 2022 (Butler, 2023), and brands are seemingly backing off of previous DEI commitments (Risi, 2023). Leadership support for DEI also seems to be waning (Colvin, 2023).

Pushback against DEI is not new (Fry, 1992; Hon & Brunner, 2000), although it has heightened since 2021. Both

the survey and public relations research show that resistance to DEI can be multifaceted and dynamic; therefore preparations for it and responses to it may have to be local, situational and specific to the particular form of pushback levied. For example, in the United States, there are efforts to codify pushback against DEI into law in a few states – most notably Florida and Texas (Diaz, 2023; McGee, 2023). DEI advocates in these states may be limited by what the law may allow or the risks they may incur if they do not comply. The situation is especially troubling for educators who work in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). As a field, public relations needs to identify ways to support educators and practitioners living and working in areas facing severe pushback to DEI. For example, support networks can be established so that educators and practitioners dealing with pushback can share their experiences and strategize on how to manage the pushback as well as create solutions to the challenges they face within safe, supportive communities.

Conclusion

In places where DEI is the norm, educators and practitioners have to do two things: first, they must remain steadfast in their commitment to DEI; and, second, they must remain open to engaging in dialogue with those who disagree with DEI. Keeping the lines of communication open allows us to learn more about DEI resistance, which can lead to correcting misperceptions as well as making changes that improve DEI. The reality is that the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and most other developed nations around the world are already diverse. Diversity is here to stay, so it is imperative to find effective ways to maximize it (Mundy et al., 2018; Risi, 2023). As educators and practitioners prepare for pushback and identify ways to address it, they can also draw upon the materials and resources described in recommendation four.

As the Commission on Public Relations Education celebrates its 50th anniversary, it is clear that the public relations field must remain steadfast in its commitment to actualize the promise and potential of DEI so that everyone can benefit. Public relations education is the starting point.

Postscript: Recent Affirmative Action Supreme Court Ruling

On June 26, 2023, after this chapter was written, the Supreme Court of the United States decided that colleges and universities could no longer use race as a factor in the admissions process. The court's historic decision in *Students*

for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College effectively reversed course on decades of precedent on affirmative action. While affirmative action has many interpretations, it is commonly understood as ensuring fair access to opportunity, fostering diversity, and counteracting discrimination. Statistics show that in universities where affirmative action was eliminated, a corresponding drop in the admission of students of color, particularly African Americans, followed. Thus, the court's decision may adversely affect diversity within the workforce by diminishing diversity within the school-to-industry pipeline, unless university leaders, administrators and faculty find innovative ways to maintain their DEI commitments.

Public relations educators committed to DEI should continue to embed DEI within the curriculum so that its value is clear to the students who will one day become practitioners who inevitably work with and communicate with people from a variety of backgrounds. The question is how well can we equip students to do that in light of the recent decision? CPRE remains committed to the effort.

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Table 2.7.1 Prominence of Diversity Equity and Inclusion

	Educators	Practitioners
In the past 5 years, DEI has become a more important part of public relations.	<i>M=3.86, SD=1.14</i>	<i>M=4.59, SD=.74</i>
Social Justice Movements have influenced the practice of public relations.	<i>M=3.79, SD=1.07</i>	<i>M=4.15, SD=.99</i>

Note: Measures based on a 5-point scale.

Table 2.7.2 Practitioner Perspectives of Diversity Equity and Inclusion

Practitioners	
Entry-Level Practitioners should have a basic knowledge of DEI.	<i>M=4.56, SD=.76</i>
Entry-Level Practitioners display a sufficient understanding of DEI.	<i>M=3.71, SD=.98</i>

Note: Measures based on a 5-point scale.

Table 2.7.3 Educator Perspectives of Diversity Equity and Inclusion

Educators	
Entry-Level Practitioners should have a basic knowledge of DEI.	<i>M=3.50, SD=1.09</i>
Entry-Level Practitioners display a sufficient understanding of DEI.	<i>M=3.72, SD=1.09</i>

Note: Measures based on a 5-point scale.

Navigating Change: Recommendations for Advancing Undergraduate Public Relations Education

Section III: Public Relations, Education and Social Change

Section III takes on the potential promise and roles of public relations as a game player, even initiator, in the area of social change. The implications are considered in terms of practitioner and educator experiences and expectations.





Chapter 8

Public Relations as a Driver of Social Change

Karla K. Gower, Chair, University of Alabama

Lee Edwards, London School of Economics and Political Science

Spiro Kiouisis, University of Florida

Regina Luttrell, Syracuse University

Stephanie Madden, Penn State University

Gabriel Sadi, University of Huddersfield

Adrienne A. Wallace, Grand Valley State University

CPRE Recommendations

- Educators must be courageous in addressing challenging issues including gender identity, sexuality, racism, ableism and poverty.
- Public relations educators should ensure undergraduate public relations majors understand their role in driving social change.
- Educators should consider how social change content can be combined with skills-based and technical content, so that it is genuinely integrated, rather than treated as separate from mainstream practice.
- Students' own experiences should be used to enhance the classroom activities and discussions.
- Educators should consider the resource implications of doing social change work, such as engaged scholarship.

Introduction

This chapter on public relations as a driver of social change marks the first time that CPRE has chosen to include a consideration of the role of public relations in civil society. It is an acknowledgement that the profession has a social/collective role and not just an organizational one. To that end, public relations should positively and ethically include and amplify voices that have historically been excluded.

Despite this, such a socially interested approach has not been evident in a disciplinary field whose singular interest on the practice in organizations has tended to exclude the social

world in which those organizations operate. “Public relations itself is a social and cultural practice, a profession with its own dynamics that generates discourses in order to shape our attitudes, values and beliefs in the interests of organizations” (Edwards & Hodges, 2011, p. 2). This had already been made explicit by Karlberg (1996) years earlier, when he warned that little effort had been made to understand the role of public relations—and its effects—in contemporary society.

The notion of driving social change implies that public relations has an active, even activist, role as a catalyst to advance the human condition in the communities and societies it serves. Sison (2016) noted that “sophisticated, sensible, sensitive and socially responsible communication practitioners are needed to help us navigate our complex and fast-changing environment” (p. 31). Indeed, we are currently entering an “era of unprecedented challenges and opportunities,” an era in which organizations must go “beyond what is right and provide real service to humanity, society, communities and the environment” (De Smet et al., 2023, p. 1; Marten, 2021).

Ensuring that organizations take action in addition to communication, however, requires practitioners to have a certain amount of power and social legitimacy within the organization. Berger and Reber, in their 2006 book on the role of resistance in practice, explored concepts of power, dissent and activism in public relations, arguing that practitioners should develop and use a wide range of resources, strategies and tactics to gain that internal influence.

Obviously, new graduates are not going to walk into a public relations position and automatically be granted the power to drive social change. But they need to be prepared to be “sophisticated, sensible, sensitive and socially responsible” because those who are will gain greater power and social legitimacy within their organizations to influence action (Sison, 2016, p. 131). And yet the way that public relations is usually taught in the United States puts the focus on vocational and technical skills rather than strategic and management ones. Somerville et al. (2011) suggest that a balance should be struck between the vocational approach and the critical exploration of social issues to provide students with an opportunity to understand how public relations can drive meaningful change.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore public relations in the context of its social role. It begins with a discussion of public relations’ connection to social change and activism, and then explores how public relations education can best meet the needs of the practice moving forward and prepare students for a complex future. Next, it reports the results of the 2023 survey and two focus groups, concluding with recommendations for incorporating social change into the public relations curriculum.

PR Pedagogy as a Site for Social Change

Social change in the PR classroom is not only about adding activist-related content into our courses, but also about fundamentally shifting how we view the classroom space. The public relations classroom is frequently a site for technical and vocational skills development (Somerville et al., 2011). As such, students are socialized to a managerial perspective of education where they essentially function as workers with the instructor as their boss (Ashby-King & Anderson, 2022).

While technical skills are important, there has been a push within critical public relations pedagogy to “draw attention to the socio-cultural and political issues that frame the practice of PR with the goal of preparing students to use their skills effectively and ethically” (Aghazadeh & Ashby-King, 2022, p. 33). This is aligned with wider perspectives such as the critical pedagogy promoted by the Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire (2005), for whom “teaching and learning are human experiences with profound social consequences. Education is not reducible to a mechanical method of instruction” (Shor, 1993, p. 25). As Waymer and Dyson (2011) argue, “true problem solving involves critical thought,” and PR educators have a responsibility to foster this skill as much as any technical capability.

Meanwhile, Chernin and Brunner (2022) also challenged public relations educators to consider a public interest communication framework to counter predominantly

corporate-focused curricula. Rather than simply thinking about what jobs students can obtain upon graduation, how can public relations education also prepare students to create positive social change on issues they care about?

Aghazadeh and Ashby-King (2022) offered ways to situate activism and social justice into public relations education through critical communication pedagogy (CCP)’s focus on identity, power, and social (re)production. In this way, the public relations classroom becomes a space where students learn to reflect upon their own positionality and identity, center their own agency in the learning process, and critique dominant discourses that PR has helped to produce. By cultivating a classroom environment that recognizes identity as inherently partial, political, and influenced by cultural beliefs, values, and systems of meaning, Hernández and Munz (2021) state that educators should employ critical and intersectional pedagogy within their classrooms to avoid the perils of a singular narrative. Embracing critical and social justice pedagogies fosters a holistic approach to education that extends beyond the confines of the classroom and more accurately reflects the inequalities of the real-world context in which students will eventually have to operate (Waymer and Dyson, 2011).

Molta et al. (2022) note the importance of incorporating equity-based pedagogy, using feminism as one of many approaches that can be used to incorporate social activism in the public relations classroom. Educators who incorporate feminist pedagogy recognize the impact of factors such as race, class, sexual orientation, and geographical location on learners. Through this approach, students are empowered to challenge societal norms, fostering transformative changes within themselves and their communities. Building on this study, Wallace et al. (2023) argue that by engaging in feminist pedagogy, students are encouraged to explore their collective identities, critically analyze disparities both within and beyond the classroom, and gain awareness of their roles in perpetuating systems of domination, superiority, hierarchy, and exploitation. This approach, closely linked to the liberation movement, not only fosters self-reliance but also cultivates a deep comprehension of social (in)equality.

Social Change in the PR Profession

In 1976, Donald K. Wright foreshadowed the impact of PR as a driver of social change in his multi-step theory paper, sharing, “The pressure on public relations practitioners to adopt a posture of “social responsibility” has steadily increased as both consumers, clients, and management look for more harmony in their interrelationships. A great deal of the desire for socially responsible conduct in public relations has come from within the profession itself (p.24).

In his survey sample, most professionals agreed that the “level of social responsibility rises as cooperation by management with its PR colleagues increases, and as the public relations practitioner’s role in decision making is broadened” (p. 26).

A second study related to social responsibility in PR, “detected great frustrations for many public relations counselors because their actual jobs do not provide the levels of professional and social responsibility they expect” (Wright, 1979, p. 20). The majority of those polled in this study felt that there should be some regulation of the profession by peers, that educational preparation for a PR career is good, and that altruism is important. What started as early discussions related to professionalism and ethics, have made way to public relations practitioners having “a seat at the table” for major decision making and strategic consulting; however, with the evolution of social responsibility forming the backbone to social change, comes many tribulations, including the need for social change within a tumultuous environment where everything is political and polarizing.

Social Change and the Impact of Polarization

Many trends globally impact our ability to achieve the necessary collaboration to address world issues as PR practitioners and educators of future PR practitioners; among those is the interplay of partisanship and party loyalty within a country and outside of it, leading to polarization reshaping public relations strategies across the globe. Polarization is a phenomenon that cuts across disciplines equally, yet is understudied specifically in the field of PR. Levin et al. (2021) aimed to examine how polarization emerges and evolves over time, specifically through the actions and interactions of individual voters, those in positions of power, and diverse social networks. The ultimate consequence of such social interactions and individual choices is the segregation of people into a limited number of entrenched factions, rendering the political system unable to effectively address a wide array of issues or devise the diverse set of solutions crucial for the proper functioning of government and the provision of critical societal services. This makes for a tumultuous public relations environment. For example, those who gain information from social networks represent a particularly vulnerable population in that an echo chamber or information bubble exists in which individuals are only surrounded by, and listen to, news they want to consume or already align with, usually without the accompanying counter argument in their feeds (Tokita et al., 2021).

Polarization is everyone’s problem (Cook, 2023). According to the USC Annenberg Center for Public

Relations 2023 Relevance Report, 90% of Americans do not believe polarization will decrease soon, and 56% of those surveyed are worried about what that means to the future of the United States. Furthermore, 75% of corporate communicators state that polarization is a problem for their organizations as it makes it difficult to communicate complex issues, and runs the risk of alienating customers and employees alike. Still, 84% of them also believe that American business should use resources and platform/influence to play a role in reducing polarization. All that said, 59% of Americans say they believe companies should engage with issues that are important to them, and 70% of those surveyed say they consider a brand’s social profile when making a purchase, even being willing to pay more to support a brand that aligns with their personal values (Cook, 2023). This points to acceptance, or a general responsibility, for brands to “stand” for values that resonate with their stakeholders and take actions that support those values, despite the fact that these “values” may produce polarizing results with various audiences. PR can guide these efforts in reconfiguring institutional arrangements that mold or create these tumultuous ecosystems (Fehrer et al., 2022). Through the last 50-years of public relations scholarship and practice, we are moving from a “social responsibility” model to a “social change” impact model, growing from brand awareness to brand action with regard to social issues.

2023 Survey and Focus Group Findings

To assess educator and professional perceptions of the role of public relations in driving social change, a survey was completed (described in Chapter 1) using items assessing opinions along nine dimensions. Practitioners (91.7%) and educators (89.6%) strongly agreed with the definition of PR as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics and serves as a catalyst to advance the human condition in the communities and societies it serves.” See Table 3.8.1 for all results. There was also strong agreement that PR drives social change:

- in its relationship building with internal and external audiences (88.5% practitioners; 84.9% educators),
- in its advocacy role for organizations (85.5% practitioners; 83.2% educators), and
- as the conscience of the organization (80.9% practitioners; 76.3% educators).

They agreed, although not as strongly, that PR drives social change by balancing organizational and society’s interests (76.7% practitioners; 73.4% educators), and by supporting the voices of employees (70.2% practitioners; 71.1% educators).

Practitioners and educators disagreed when it came to whether new employees and students should see public relations as a driver of social change. Only 68% of practitioners thought new employees should see PR as a driver of social change, while slightly more, 74.6% of educators thought the same. With students, 85% of educators indicated that students should view PR as a driver of social change. Only 76.7% of practitioners agreed with that statement. The findings suggest professionals feel this role is less important early on in career development, although even at the early career stage, nearly three-quarters of the respondents on both sides suggested that it was something that new employees should be considering.

In an item asked only of educators, 81.5% of respondents felt public relations as a driver of social change should be reflected in university curricula. Educators seem to recognize that as students progress through their careers, these things are likely to become more in demand in their practice.

Table 3.8.1 Practitioner and Educator Views on PR and Social Change

Driver of Social Change	Practitioners	Educators
Definition of PR & Social Change	91.7%	89.6%
Relationship Building	88.5	84.9
Advocacy Role	85.5	83.2
Conscience Role	80.9	76.3
Balancing Org/Society Interests	76.7	73.4
Supporting Voices of Employees	70.2	71.1
Importance of		
Understanding Social Change for New Employees	68.6	74.6
Understanding Social Change for PR Students	76.6	85.0
Understanding Social Change in Curriculum	n/a	81.5

Two focus groups of senior public relations leaders were conducted in September 2022 as the Page Conversations. The 13 participating practitioners were asked for their thoughts on the idea of public relations as a driver of social change and how they saw it in their communication practice currently and expect it to be moving forward. The following themes emerged from the discussions:

Relevance: Practitioners recognized the importance of driving social change today. As one practitioner put it, *“One thing we are seeing a lot, in the world we live in, in the social and digital environment, is relevance. If you aren’t a driver of social change, you are not relevant, or less relevant.”*

Advocacy: Driving social change is part of a practitioner’s role as an advocate. A practitioner said, *“Students need to be aware of and cognizant of our role as advocate, driving social change and being on the right side of history. It is important to ingrain that early.”*

Education: Some saw themselves as playing the role of educator to both internal and external audiences. One noted, *“Helping your organization, your stakeholders, understand an important issue—why diversity is important—by doing that you are affecting social change.”*

But at the same time, some of the practitioners recommended that caution be applied. Being the driver of social change had its drawbacks. One saw it as a distraction. *“We need to avoid these [issues] from being distractions and get the work of the organization done.”* Another noted that it raises the issue of “who decides,” or in other words, “social change for whom?” The practitioner said, *“Driver of social change can be seen as a PR person applying their own biases, so we’re trying to avoid that with some of the new aggressive talent coming out. They need to put their organization’s agenda ahead of their own.”*

Despite the concerns of some, the similarity in the results from both the survey and the focus groups suggests that integrating social change into understandings of how PR operates is important and widely accepted. The question then become how best to integrate more social change-oriented content into the classroom?

Meeting the Needs of the Practice in the Classroom

Social change often entails taking action, mobilizing resources, and offering support in order to catalyze societal transformation (Dumitraşcu, 2014). Over the past several years we have seen an increase in brands and organizations taking a stance on issues such as political alliances, LGBTQ+ rights, race relations, and gender equity, among others (Dimock & Wike, 2020; Barbala, 2022). What’s more, organizations are increasingly expected to take a stand on hot-button social, political, moral, and cultural issues by stakeholders, including customers, employees and investors (Maks-Solomon & Drewry, 2021). To answer this call, organizations are responding in a variety of ways, including through corporate advertisements that connect to key social causes, or by issuing public statements, press releases, or open letters explaining their stance (Sterbenk et al., 2022). In fact, we’ve seen such actions with brands such as Ben & Jerry’s, Nike, Disney, Airbnb, and Patagonia, among others (Ciszek & Logan, 2018). This calls for stronger connections between the PR classroom and the profession into which public relations students are graduating. PR educators can strengthen connections between the public relations classroom and the practice where social activism is readily pursued through a variety of mechanisms, including engaged scholarship, values-based case studies and classroom activities, guest speakers, and Arthur W. Page Center teaching modules.

Engaged Scholarship

Engaged scholarship involves the generation, transmission, and application of knowledge for the direct benefit of external audiences in ways that align with the course or programmatic objectives and even university values (Doberneck et al., 2010). In engaged scholarship, faculty work directly with the public in order to address social issues and community needs. Providing students with hands-on experience and an opportunity to apply their skills and knowledge in real-world settings, engaged scholarship is a way to facilitate collaborative projects or internships with organizations and brands that are involved in social activism. Engaged scholarship includes three distinguishing characteristics (Glass & Fitzgerald, 2010):

1. Engagement is scholarly: a scholarship-based model of engagement involves both the act of engaging—bringing universities and communities together—and the product of engaging—spreading discipline-generated, evidence-based practices throughout communities.

-
2. Engagement is community focused: campus-community collaboration that cuts across the missions of teaching, research, and service.
 3. Engagement is reciprocal and mutually beneficial: community partners are part of the course activities to plan, implement, and assess each other's performance.

At its most basic level, engaged scholarship includes activities that go beyond the classroom. Many PR educators are already doing this type of work, which includes pedagogical activity, such as client-centered projects. However, a fully engaged approach can be challenging to realize. In practical terms, it requires logistical arrangements to be in place, clear parameters for the project, and a mutually agreed set of expectations for engagement. In terms of power, the reciprocal nature of engaged scholarship means the worlds of academia and practice have to put aside their differences and approach each other as equals—which is sometimes easier said than done. Preparation, communication and ongoing feedback are essential.

Values-Based Case Studies

The integration of social activist values into pedagogical outcomes through the use of values-based case studies represents a powerful educational tool for promoting critical thinking skills and encouraging positive student engagement with social issues. By imbuing lessons with ethical principles such as environmental protection, human rights, and gender equality, instructors can foster a sense of responsibility among learners while simultaneously building their understanding of complex concepts (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Gismondi & Osteen, 2017; Hou & Wang, 2022). Values-based case studies serve to bridge theory and practice by drawing upon real-world examples that underline the importance of taking action on social issues. Utilizing this approach can foster a deep appreciation for citizenship, developing in students both an awareness of their own power as agents for change, as well as empathy toward marginalized communities affected by these issues. At the same time, dealing with complex issues such as these can help to surface differences of opinion and perspective among students, that can be used to remind students of the fact that once in practice, not everyone is likely to agree with them—or the organization—about the causes for which they advocate. Understanding how to navigate difference and division via communication, without imposing agreement, is a vital skill that can emerge from such discussions. The University of Florida's Center for Public Interest Communications has resources for case studies that might be useful.

<https://realgoodcenter.jou.ufl.edu/case-studies/>

Values-Based Classroom Activities

In addition to using classroom activities to practice specific skills, such as public relations writing, the integration of topics related to social change can help students critically consider organizational value alignment as well. For example, Janoske McLean and Marks Malone (2022) offer a classroom exercise to help students reflect on the authenticity of social change messaging by evaluating statements written by organizations and then having the opportunity to write a statement for an organization and issue of their choosing. Using activism to teach applied PR research and theory, Rozelle (2022) created a classroom scenario to have students develop a campaign for the fictional organization Vaccinate Against Hate to help students critically reflect on educating people about hate groups and fighting extremist propaganda. From a different perspective, students can explore cases where brand activism, or campaigns by activist organizations, have generated division and controversy among audiences. Studying these reactions can help them understand how social change itself is a highly contested domain, and how organizational actions play into it, in sometimes unexpected ways.

Guest Speakers

Guest speakers not only enhance the educational experience in a classroom setting, but also bridge the gap between academia and industry and are therefore a mainstay of nearly all educational settings. Guest speakers can be used in a variety of ways; as individual speakers in class, they can provide a valuable practice-based perspective that enhances the relevance of theoretical ideas. However, they can also reflect on the complexities of practice, and particularly on the challenges and possibilities of advocating for social change once in practice. Formats that facilitate these discussions include panel debates among practitioners, Q & A discussions between practitioners and students, or reversals of roles where students visit companies and reflect on what they see and hear during their visit, in relation to what they have learned in class. Importantly, Brown and Del Rosso (2022) argue that as educators we must decenter privilege and promote the ideas and lived experiences of scholars and professionals of color:

Professors must promote and advocate for a diversity of experiences in the classroom. This is crucial to the health of the profession. Students and faculty alike recognize the importance of guest speaker diversity, and there are considerable efforts to bring public relations faculty and educators together to talk about how to better support faculty and students of color (p. 60).

Arthur W. Page Center Teaching Modules

The Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication launched teaching modules specifically related to teaching activism. These modules are a simple way for instructors to include activist-related content into public relations courses. Modules include Digital Media Activism created by Novak and parallels among Public Interest Communication, Cause Communication, and Activism created by Brunner and Hickerson. These resources can be found at: <https://www.pagecentertraining.psu.edu/>.

CPRE Recommendations

Based on current trends impacting public relations and social change, as well as the results of the 2023 Survey and the focus groups, the chapter authors recommend the incorporation of social change and our role driving it into public relations classrooms. We are aware, however, of the current state laws in the United States, which restrict the teaching and practice of issues such as diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and race, among others, in universities. The legal jeopardy, real or potential, that many educators face today within their universities serves as possible limitations to the adoption of our recommendations. But we proffer the following in hopes that those who can incorporate social change content into their classrooms do so.

- Be courageous in addressing challenging issues including gender identity, sexuality, racism, ableism, poverty. These issues, although polarizing, are precisely the locations where ideas about social change can be most productive. They are also the areas where organizations and their actions may be most challenged. While they need to be handled with care in the classroom, so that students and faculty feel they are speaking in a safe space, their potential as a learning experience should not be underestimated.
- Public relations educators should ensure undergraduate public relations majors understand their role in driving social change. This is not to say it's a given, but that there are prospective roles in their organizations or in their personal lives.
- Educators should consider how social change content can be combined with skills-based and technical content, so that it is genuinely integrated, rather than treated as separate from mainstream practice. Service learning, for example, has long been used in a variety of public relations courses, and could be integrated more intentionally.

- Students' own experiences should be used to enhance the classroom activities and discussions. Today's generation of students has often already been addressing social change, if only because they are part of a more diverse generation. Their experiences add value to discussions.
- Educators should consider the resource implications of doing social change work, such as engaged scholarship. It is important to take seriously the implications of such commitments, so that they are done effectively.

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“The Commission seeks to establish benchmarks for teaching public relations that are current, research-based, sensitive to culture and language, and applicable to preparing public relations students for careers in practice, research, teaching, or a combination of all three.”





Chapter 9

Concluding Thoughts

Pamela G. Bourland-Davis, Georgia Southern University

Elizabeth L. Toth, University of Maryland, College Park

A Summary

The 2023 Report presents the findings of an international survey of over 460 practitioners and educators. That survey, along with other research, allowed us to assess how practitioners and educators have been navigating change, inevitable, but of particular consequence given the pandemic and many social and civic issues brought to the forefront during this time period. Content areas of this report begin with an overview of key issues faced in the workplace, and many of these issues such as diversity and technology (as in AI) are included as part of separate chapters. The last chapter addresses the social and civic roles possible in public relations as they affect current and future practice.

Despite a sea of changes since the 2017 study, based on a 2016 survey, we see evidence that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Common elements across chapters include continued support for the six-course standard—including writing, research that includes analytical work, critical strategic thinking evidenced often in campaigns, and above all, managing all of this with a strong moral compass. Ethics and ethical decision making underscore every chapter whether or not explicated; for example, the DEI chapter highlights DEI as a social responsibility which would mandate a moral compass in doing what’s right. This context could also be applied to the role of public relations as a driver of social change.

As with prior studies, practitioners and educators rated elements in ways that were often statistically significantly different. The consistent differences may suggest a lack of confidence in the next generation, and/or the differences may suggest different application of the scales. At the same time, in most cases, when the items were rank ordered, practitioners and educators were in substantial agreement on the elements that were more important.

Of note, in the area of KSAs, practitioners and educators highlighted the area of ethics as a significant knowledge area. The ethics chapter highlights that while ethics are certainly recognized in education, they may be neglected in the classroom. A number of suggestions are provided to develop competencies in ethical decision making.

Ranking higher in the practitioner lists for hiring characteristics was graduates having public relations courses, indicating that the work of the Commission in recommending standards for public relations education may be making a difference beyond the classroom, but in practice as well. Also important in hiring abilities are those elements that have direct and transparent classroom-to-practice applications such as writing and internships. Students also clearly need to hone their critical strategic thinking, and that chapter forwards a model and suggestions for developing student abilities more conscientiously. This area has great impact in the area of data insight and strategies as well, and that chapter recommends developing more data analysis activities across the curriculum while recognizing our students do not have to be “data scientists.” Ultimately, the findings suggest a maturation of standards which can serve as a base for further elevating public relations education. At the same time, these findings suggest high expectations for our graduates, and room for improvement in having graduates meet those expectations—or serious reflection on and study of career readiness.

Key Recommendations

Each chapter provides a number of recommendations, some for educators alone, and some for administrators or practitioners. Choosing one overarching recommendation which is representative of the set for each chapter, we have

these principal recommendations further defined and explained in earlier chapters.

Future of the Workplace

Educators and practitioners should work together to develop experiential learning opportunities for students that will enhance their exposure to professional behavior and workplace expectations, as well as help develop students' soft skills.

Essential KSAs and Six-Course Standard

CPRE must continue to promote the six-course standard. Public relations undergraduate programs should include public relations principles, research, writing, campaigns/cases, internship and ethics courses.

Critical Thinking

Successful public relations program sequencing of critical and strategic thinking involves:

- Principles—introduction to critical strategic model (through learning objectives)
- Writing, Method—practicing the model (learning through failing forward)
- Capstone—applying the model to real-world problems (mastering critical strategic thinking).

Data Insights and Strategy

Educators should integrate KSAs related to data analytics and AI into academic programs.

Ethics

Public relations educators should continue to incorporate ethics into all courses across the curriculum.

DEI

Public relations educators must understand DEI as an ethical social responsibility that should be embedded in the public relations curriculum.

PR as a Driver of Social Change

Public relations educators must be courageous in addressing challenging issues including gender identity, sexuality, racism, ableism, and poverty.

Limitations and Future Research

This report of recommendations responded to what CPRE practitioners and educators felt were the highest priorities in 2022-23 for improving undergraduate public relations education. We were impressed with their choices because they signaled high expectations of new practitioners to

contribute more to organizational and client problem-solving through the wider knowledge of public relations' strategic/critical role in relationship building because these new practitioners should arrive able to navigate a world that is changing dramatically through technology, social expectations, and a changed workplace. These priorities should not be lost on educators who are in the trenches with a generation (GenZ) of students who learn differently and have different expectations for their employment than did their instructors. Nor should they be lost on practitioners who are about to hire new employees who have a diverse worldview, a world that has always had digital technology, and ethical questions to bring with them to the workplace.

No research is ever complete. This report chose to develop standards for navigating the changes to undergraduate public relations education. It represented the best expert thinking of CPRE members; but their ideas were selected just before the sweeping concerns about Artificial Intelligence were felt. We were able only to briefly address concerns around this revolutionary technology. Future research will have to examine AI's impact on public relations practice much more closely. We would have liked to follow up on how and in what ways the topics of strategic planning and ethics differ between practitioners and educators. We would liked to have learned more about the different perceptions on the mastery of essential skills that we found between educators and practitioners.

The Commission on Public Relations Education will also need now to turn its attention to elevating standards for graduate public relations education, not addressed since 2012. We have seen public relations graduate studies mushroom across universities with a variety of foci suggesting again that no common or consistent graduate body of knowledge will be offered. It would be helpful to know if practitioners have different expectations in regard to KSAs; i.e., what different levels of expertise might be expected and/or valued?

CPRE must turn its attention to those who teach public relations, not only those in the tenure-track, but the many professors of practice and adjunct faculty who enrich public relations classrooms. They work sometimes in the shadows of academia without mentoring and with little to no financial remuneration. They are a priority to search out and provide them with the many support resources available.

The report was limited in its research efforts to a convenience sample of practitioners and educators who could have been made up of public relations education's most loyal supporters. Online surveys are becoming more and more difficult to use successfully to find the broader sampling that would make the results even more valuable. Future research should find other ways to learn about practitioners' expectations of new


employees and search out public relations teaching underway that lacks the resources, curriculum knowledge, or awareness of help such as that of the Commission's standards and recommendations.

We know we still have work to do to achieve an excellent standardization of public relations degrees to meet the expectations of the public relations industry. It will take an ongoing dialogue between educators and practitioners, investments of time and finances, and establishment of the highest standards within undergraduate and graduate public relations programs and by accrediting and certification bodies to continue the ambitious mission that CPRE established in 1973. Yet, we believe in this ambitious mission because we know that a profession must have an established body of knowledge and practice standards formed through education. We look forward to continuing the future dialogue that CPRE will lead.

“Providing benchmarks, standards, and guidelines on public relations education for universities, professional associations, and accrediting bodies. Building bridges between public relations education and the profession by facilitating mutually productive dialogue and collaboration. Fostering diversity, inclusion, equity, ethics, and global perspectives as the foundation of its work.”





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Navigating Change:

Recommendations for Advancing Undergraduate Public Relations Education



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Nigeria

Pamela G. Bourland-Davis

Journal of Public Relations Education
Professor
Georgia Southern University

Denise Sevick Bortree

Arthur W. Page Center
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Penn State University

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The Page Society
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Public Relations Division*
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*European Public Relations Education
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Austria

Aeriel Ellis

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Wim Elving

*European Public Relations Education
and Research Association*
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University of Amsterdam
Netherlands

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At Large Member
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PRSA Educators Academy
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Canada

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Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations
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Justin Green

*Global Alliance for Public Relations
And Strategic Communication*
President and CEO, The Global Alliance
Ireland

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Charter Institute of Public Relations
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University of Huddersfield
Great Britain

Anetra Henry

The Institute for Public Relations
Senior Director of Strategic Initiatives
The Institute for Public Relations

Rebecca Honeyman

PR Council
Managing Partner
SourceCodes Communications

Carolyn Kim

At Large Member
Communications Manager
Pacific Northwest National Laboratory

Susan Kinnear

Charter Institute of Public Relations
Senior Academic, Communications Scholar
Cardiff University
Wales

Emily Kinsky

Journal of Public Relations Education
Professor
West Texas A&M University

Spiro Kiouisis

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Professor and Executive Associate Dean
University of Florida

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*National Communication Association
Public Relations Division*
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At Large Member
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Quinnipiac University

Kenneth Plowman

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
Public Relations Division
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Rashpal Rai

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At Large Member
Specialist
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Specialist

Maria Russell

At Large and 2022-23 CPRE Co-Chair, Educators
Professor
Professor Emerita
Syracuse University

Gabriel Sadi

International Communication Association
Public Relations Division
Senior Lecturer
University of Huddersfield
Great Britain

Kevin Saghy

Plank Center for Leadership in
Public Relations
Senior Director of Social Media
The Ohio State University

Kim Sample, ex officio

PR Council
President
PR Council

Hongmei Shen

Association for Education in Journalism
and Mass Communication
Public Relations Division
Professor
San Diego State University

Deborah A. Silverman

At Large Member
Associate Professor
SUNY Buffalo State

Hilary Fussell Sisco

At Large Member
Professor
Quinnipiac University

Stacey Smith

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Practitioners*
Senior Counsel & Partner
Jackson, Jackson & Wagner

Barry Spector

Museum of Public Relations
CEO
Spector PR

Shelly Spector

Museum of Public Relations
President/CEO Museum of
Public Relations

Martha Terdick

Canadian Public Relations Society
Professor
Conestoga College
Canada

Matthew Tidwell

*International Association
of Business Communicators*
Associate Dean
University of Kansas

Elizabeth L. Toth

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University of Maryland

Katerina Tsetsura

At Large Member
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University of Oklahoma

Rosalyn Vasquez

At Large Member
Assistant Professor
Baylor University

Chuck Wallington


Public Relations Society of America
Executive Vice President &
Chief Marketing & Communication Officer
Cone Health

Chelsea Woods

National Communication Association
Public Relations Division
Assistant Professor
Virginia Tech

Richard A. Woods

The Page Society
CCO, Capital One (Retired)



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