



Graduate Education in Public Relations

2025 Report

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Report sponsored by



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The Commission on Public Relations Education gratefully acknowledges the valuable support for its 2025 CPRE Graduate Education Report from the following:

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The Commission on Public Relations Education, the authoritative voice on public relations education, was founded in 1973 by the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and the Public Relations Society of America to address the quality of public relations education in the United States. CPRE has issued periodic research reports and recommendations on undergraduate and graduate education in public relations for universities, accrediting bodies, and professional associations around the world. Today, with more than 20 member organizations, CPRE operates year-round as a 501(c)3 organization in partnership with the Institute for Public Relations and continues to offer a forum for public relations education with a global perspective.

To learn more about the Commission or for access to all of the CPRE research reports, go to CPRE's website: www.commissionpred.org

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Overview

By Adrienne Wallace and Emily S. Kinsky,
co-chairs of the CPRE Research Committee

The Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) launched three studies in 2024 examining the current state and future needs of master's-level graduate education for public relations—an initiative that was desperately needed to update the last master's-level CPRE study that was published in 2012. This work continued through 2025, and the research committee's efforts culminated into this report.

Within this report, you will find results from (1) a content analysis of master's program websites, (2) a survey seeking public relations practitioners' thoughts on graduate education, and (3) a survey pursuing educators' views of graduate PR education.

Drawing on those practitioner and educator perspectives, as well as the content analysis of U.S. master's programs, the findings highlight both progress and persistent challenges in standardizing curricula, aligning with industry needs, and preparing graduates for evolving professional roles.

In the first chapter, you can read details about the thorough content analysis conducted on 92 websites of university programs offering master's programs related to public relations in the U.S., which involved 87 higher education institutions.

Public relations practitioners' expectations for graduate education are examined within the second chapter, which is based on a survey of 119 professionals conducted between November 2024 and May 2025.

In the third chapter, you can read the findings from a comprehensive survey of 111 public relations educators focused on curricular standards for master's degree programs in public relations education.

It was an honor to work with this outstanding research committee for almost 2 years of monthly meetings in order to provide a much-needed update on the status of graduated public relations education in the U.S.

What's in a PR Master's Degree? A Content Analysis of Graduate Public Relations Curricula Across University Websites

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Abstract

For over three decades, educators and practitioners have called for greater standardization in public relations graduate education, culminating in a series of studies that reaffirm this goal and track progress toward it. To assess the current status, we analyzed 92 graduate program websites, examining program, concentrations, and certificate titles; delivery modalities; accelerated or executive tracks; credit and coursework requirements; admissions criteria; and accreditation. Master's programs continue to diversify in structure, focus, and offerings, with notable shifts toward strategic communication, generalist, or interdisciplinary approaches, and an increase in online and hybrid formats. The findings suggested some convergence, particularly in required courses on research methods and theory. However, they indicated a less emphasized focus on coursework in ethics, business principles, or global, international, or intercultural communication. Programs also varied widely in admissions standards and credit-hour requirements, with few offering advanced or executive tracks for professionals.

Keywords: public relations, curriculum, graduate education, master's programs, strategic communication, higher education

Recommendations

- Graduate programs can move toward greater standardization and increase uniformity.
- Graduate programs must coalesce more closely around existing recommendations to achieve standardization.
- Graduate programs need to better understand the factors and decision-making processes influencing graduate students' program selections.
- Graduate programs should place greater emphasis on ethics.
- Graduate programs should require a minimum of 30 credit hours.
- Graduate programs should explain and emphasize the value of accreditation and certification.

Previous research on public relations master's degree education has revealed a consistent lack of program uniformity, despite recommendations and evolving standards. Studies by Aldoory and Toth (2000) and Briones and Toth (2013) identified inconsistencies in curriculum and requirements across different universities. Variations included the number of available public relations courses, the types of public relations courses offered, and optional elements such as electives or the option to pursue a thesis. In fact, Aldoory and Toth (2000) found no required course common to all 21 universities in their sample.

Possible explanations for the lack of uniformity in public relations graduate education have ranged from the fact that early studies focused on journalism and mass communication graduate programs (Aldoory & Toth, 2000) to the variety of program specializations or models (academic, professional, and doctoral preparation), titles and degree names, and placement within academic departments (Briones & Toth, 2013). The constant evolution of the field of public relations itself has also been (and continues to be) an underlying factor leading to the less-than-cohesive nature of public relations master's programs. As noted by Briones et al. (2017), "in reaction to the continuously shifting identity of the public relations field, academics in higher education have attempted to stay on pace with industry by shifting curricula to match the field's dynamic trends and needs" (p. 155).

Recognizing this issue, the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) focused its 2012 report exclusively on graduate public relations education, aiming to establish

rigorous standards for the field. This led to recommendations for core courses in areas such as strategic management, basic business principles, communication and PR theory and research, global influences on the practice of public relations, and ethics, as well as setting a minimum of 30 hours for graduate study. However, even after these standards were published, a 2017 study by Briones et al. found a lack of curricular alignment that might reflect programs evolving away from being solely focused on public relations, embracing a more interdisciplinary approach to communication education.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore whether alignment with the 2012 CPRE standards for public relations graduate education has advanced or if the conceptualization of what constitutes a master's program in public relations has continued to broaden.

Method

We conducted a content analysis of 87 university and college websites, reviewing a total of 92 programs (please see the Appendix for the complete list). This analysis was not intended to evaluate or contrast programs, but to offer an overview and summary of master's programs, in line with earlier work (e.g., Briones & Toth, 2013; Briones et al., 2017; Del Rosso et al., 2020; Luttrell et al., 2021).

The constant evolution of the field of public relations has been an underlying factor leading to the less-than-cohesive nature of public relations master's programs

Sample

Because some programs may offer certificates or specializations in public relations, we did not limit our selection to those specifically named “public relations.” We also included related areas, such as strategic communication, as well as broader programs, including communication or mass communication, which may encompass public relations concentrations or coursework (Briones et al., 2017; Commission on Public Relations Education, 2012).

To identify our sample, we began with the list of programs from the CPRE (2012) report on graduate education. We updated it by checking each program’s website, adding new ones, or removing those that no longer offered a master’s degree, were not accepting applications, or only admitted students continuing in doctoral studies. Then, we reviewed the websites of U.S.-based postgraduate programs with a Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Finally, we examined CEPR-accredited undergraduate programs to determine if they also offered relevant master’s degrees.

Analysis

We created an initial codebook using existing sources, including those outlined in the 2012 CPRE report, which helped identify areas such as program titles, admission criteria, modality, and credit-hour requirements. We worked together to identify and add other categories, such as concentration and certificate titles, accreditation, and the availability of accelerated degree or executive programs.

We reviewed each program’s website and, when necessary, checked publicly available course catalogs for details like course offerings

and credit requirements. We piloted the process with 16 randomly selected programs, which were approximately 17.4% of the sample. Afterward, we met to discuss the process, clarify any questions, and update the codebook by adding or adjusting categories as needed. The remaining 76 programs were then randomly assigned for coding. Coding occurred between October 2024 and March 2025. We manually completed the codebook and coded the data, then used SPSS 29.0 and Microsoft Excel for data analysis.

Due to the wide variation in certain categories, we included an “other” option for content that didn’t fit within predefined codes. After collecting the data, we reviewed these responses and reassigned them to the most appropriate categories. This process was applied to areas such as program and certificate titles, modalities, admission standards, and accreditation. However, the variety and uniqueness of required course offerings made them more challenging to categorize, so two team members worked together to group the “other” courses into broader categories.

Findings

The following section provides key findings based on analysis of the 92 program websites regarding (1) program, concentration, and certificate titles, (2) program modalities, (3) accelerated degree options, (4) an advanced or executive track for professionals, (5) required credit hours, (6) required coursework, (7) admission standards, and (8) program accreditation.

Program Titles

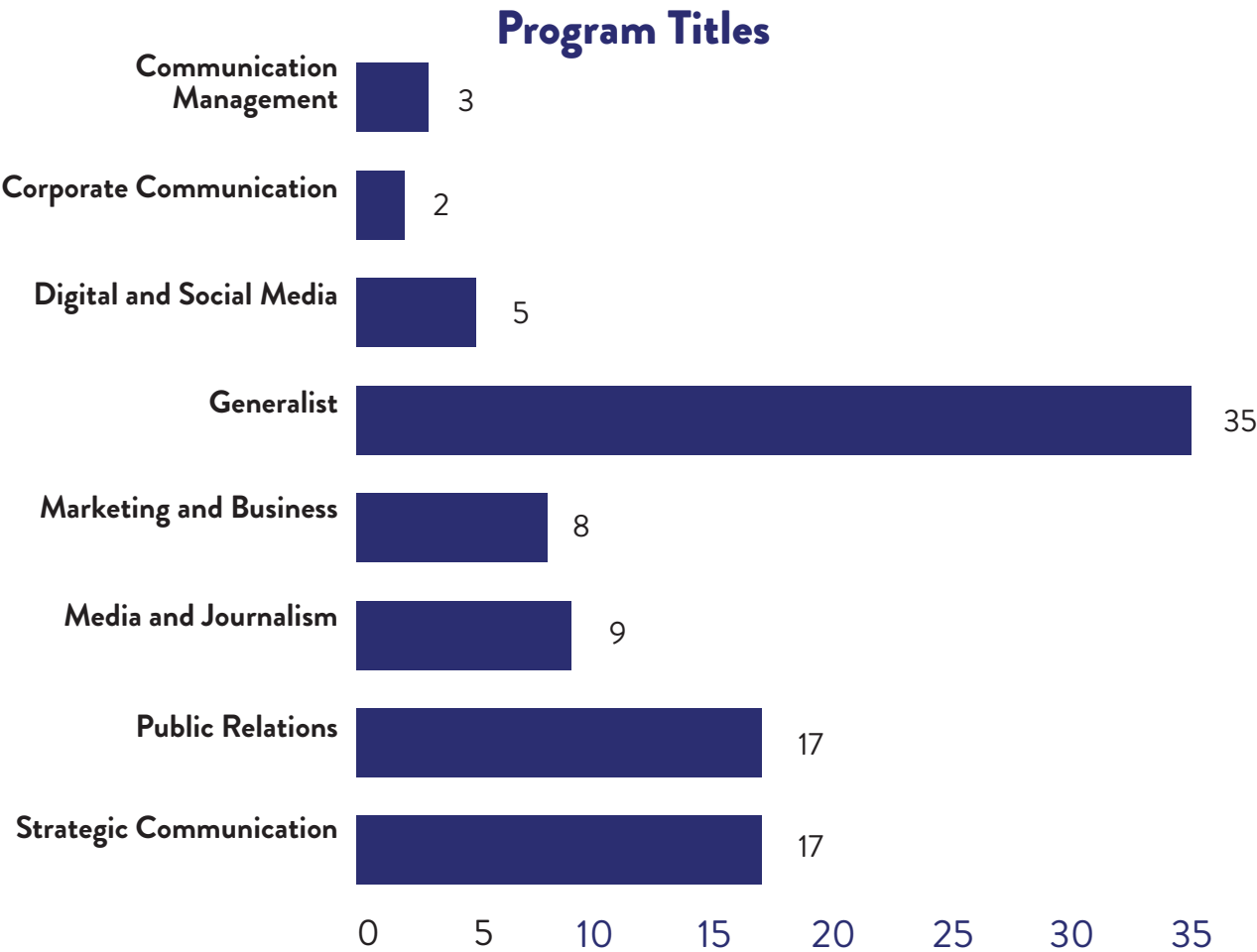
The analysis of program websites revealed a wide variety of program titles across several areas (see Figure 1), similar to findings

reported in previous studies (Briones et al., 2017; Commission on Public Relations Education, 2012).

Seventeen programs in the sample (18.5%) featured public relations in the title, comparable to the number of public relations programs identified in the 2012 CPRE study. However, only eight of these program titles, representing approximately 8.7% of the entire sample, reflected a public relations-focused identity with titles such as “Public Relations” ($n = 7, 7.6\%$) or “Public Relations Innovation,

Strategy, and Management” ($n = 1, 1.1\%$). The majority of program titles infused “Public Relations” with other disciplines or areas, including advertising ($n = 4, 4.3\%$), corporate communication ($n = 2, 2.2\%$), or communication ($n = 1, 1.1\%$). Others adopted titles that combined three areas (e.g., “Public Relations, Advertising, and Social Media,” “Journalism, PR, and New Media”), reflecting previous findings that programs continue to move toward interdisciplinary approaches (Briones et al., 2017).

Figure 1



Please note: Categories are not mutually exclusive; program titles with more than one element (e.g., “Public Relations, Advertising, and Social Media”) may appear in more than one category.

The analysis also revealed a growing focus on strategic communication programs, which have almost doubled since the 2012 CPRE study on graduate education. Seventeen programs (18.5%) incorporated “Strategic Communication” in their titles, comparable to public relations programs. Title variations included “Strategic Communication,” “Global Strategic Communication,” and “Strategic Media Communications.” Others also included digital elements, such as “Strategic Communication and Digital Strategy” and “Strategic and Digital Communication.”

Generalist program titles constituted the most prevalent category, representing 38% of the sample ($n = 35$). These broader names featured titles such as “Communication,” “Mass Communication,” “Applied Communication,” “Communication Arts,” and “Communication Studies.”

In addition, the analysis revealed nine programs (9.8%) involved media and journalism, eight (8.7%) featured marketing and business dimensions, and five (5.4%) included digital and social media aspects. Emerging areas of focus included three programs (3.3%) focused on “Communication Management” and two programs (2.2%) featuring “Corporate Communication.”

Concentration Titles

This study also examined relevant concentrations offered within these programs. A majority of sampled programs ($n = 50$, 54.3%) indicated that they offered concentrations, with the number of concentrations per program ranging from one to seven. Figure 2 shows the frequency of concentration titles grouped by focus area.

Concentrations with a public relations

focus were overwhelmingly the most common within the sample ($n = 22$, 23.9%). Thirteen concentration titles (14.1%) focused solely on public relations, including “Public Relations,” “Public Relations Studies,” and “Public Relations Management,” while the remaining nine titles (9.8%) joined it with distinct but similar areas, such as “Public Relations and Advertising,” “Organizational Communication and Advertising,” and “Public Relations and Communication Management.”

Compared to program titles, concentration titles tended to focus on more specific areas of study. The most prevalent concentration areas included strategic communication ($n = 9$, 9.8%), digital and social media ($n = 9$, 9.8%), corporate and organizational communication ($n = 9$, 9.8%), and specialized areas ($n = 9$, 9.8%), such as nonprofit communication, sports media and communication, media strategy, and government communication and global affairs.

Other concentrations included advertising, marketing, and business ($n = 8$, 8.7%); health, risk, and science communication ($n = 7$, 7.6%); generalist studies ($n = 6$, 6.5%); and media, journalism, and storytelling ($n = 5$, 5.4%).

Less common titles for concentrations included a focus on leadership and management ($n = 3$, 3.3%), pro-social communication ($n = 2$, 2.2%), and diversity and multicultural communication ($n = 2$, 2.2%).

A small number of programs employed concentrations to distinguish between professional (executive), traditional (thesis or research), or pace (full-time or part-time) paths.

Certificate Titles

Since the 2012 report by the CPRE,

graduate certificate programs have experienced significant growth in higher education. This gain is consistent with trends in higher education, as one study reported an estimated 9.5% increase in enrollment in graduate certificates between 2023 and 2024 (Donadel, 2024).

Slightly over one-third of the analyzed programs offered certificates ($n = 32$, 34.8%), with frequencies ranging from one to six certificates per program. Similar to

concentrations, certificates collectively focused on more specific areas or specializations within the larger public relations and communication domains (see Figure 3).

The number of certificate titles involving public relations was lower than that of programs and concentrations ($n = 6$, 6.5%). These offerings included “Public Relations” and more specific applications, such as “Public Relations Leadership.”

Figure 2



Please note: Categories are not mutually exclusive; concentration titles with more than one element (e.g., “Public Relations and Strategic Communication”) may appear in more than one category.

Figure 3



Please note: Categories are not mutually exclusive; certificate titles with more than one element (e.g., “Public Relations and Social Media”) may appear in more than one category.

The largest category of certificates focused on digital and social media ($n = 11$, 12.0%). These certificates encompass a variety of titles, including “Social Media,” “Interactive Media,” “Digital Communications,” and “Digital Marketing Analytics.” Other prevalent certificate offerings focused on health, risk, and crisis communication ($n = 9$, 9.8%), strategic communication ($n = 8$, 8.7%), leadership ($n = 7$, 7.6%), and specialized focus areas ($n = 7$, 7.6%), which included nonprofit communication, sports media, and media management.

Smaller categorizations included corporate or organizational communication ($n = 4$, 4.3%); advocacy and public affairs ($n = 4$, 4.3%); advertising, marketing, and business-

focused offerings ($n = 3$, 3.3%); and journalism and media ($n = 2$, 2.2%).

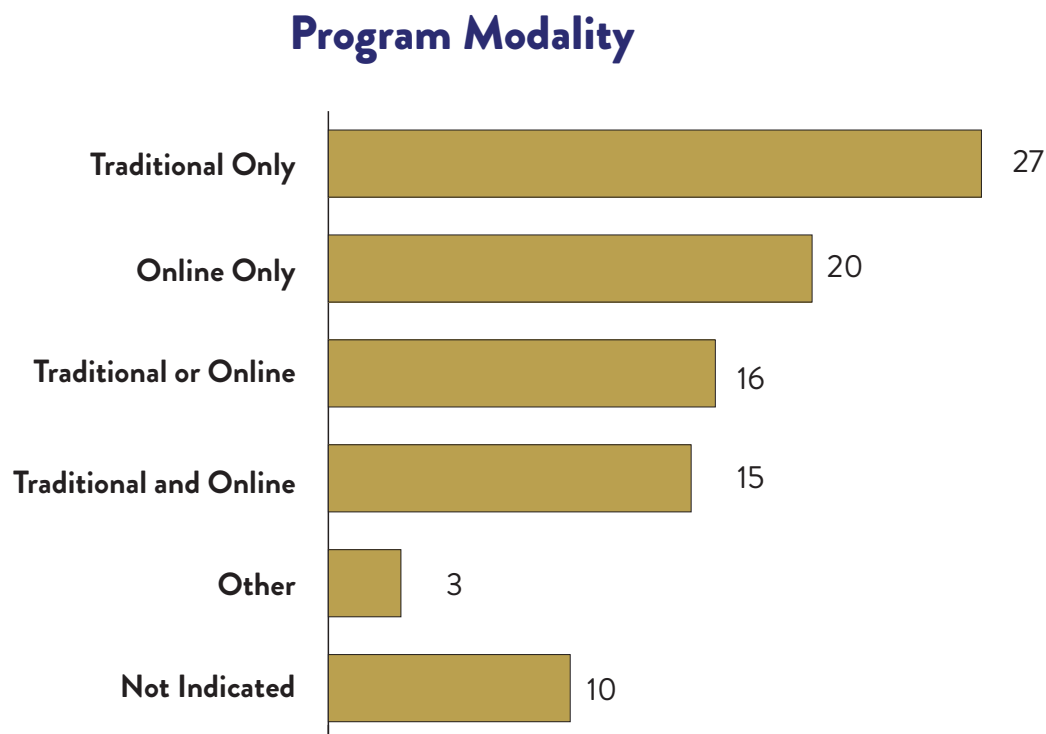
Two programs (2.2%) indicated a “Communication Graduate Certificate” or general certificate classes without specifying the available certification.

Program Modalities

Recognizing the shift beyond traditional classroom settings to other course delivery formats, the analysis also included an examination of instructional delivery models. Figure 4 depicts the breakdown of delivery models. Notably, 10 program websites (10.9%) did not indicate instructional modality.

Some programs offered only one method for instruction, with traditional (i.e., in-person

Figure 4



or on-campus) options ($n = 27$, 29.3%) being slightly more prevalent than online-only delivery ($n = 20$, 21.7%).

Over one-third of the analyzed programs offered a combination of instructional approaches. The most common offering was providing students with flexibility, allowing them to select between traditional and online options ($n = 16$, 17.4%), followed by a blended approach in which students could take a mixture of both online and traditional course offerings ($n = 15$, 16.3%). Others offered multiple options, including a combination of online, HyFlex, or hybrid ($n = 3$, 3.3%). For one program, the modality depended on whether students enrolled in the theory and research-based program, offered via the traditional model, or the online

professional track.

These findings indicate a fairly drastic shift from the 2012 CPRE report. Notably, they indicate an increase in online offerings, up from eight programs with purely online delivery and four programs with “blended” or “hybrid” models in 2012 to 20 online-only and 34 programs with varied hybrid or blended offerings in 2025. Likewise, the analysis shows a decline in the traditional model of delivery, down from 62 programs in 2012 to 27 programs that only offer traditional delivery in 2025.

Accelerated Degree Options

A growing trend in higher education is the accelerated undergraduate degree programs, which permit undergraduate students to begin graduate work early, often by double-counting

select courses toward both an undergraduate and graduate degree (Weinberg, 2021). These programs may also be referred to by other terms, such as “3+2,” “4+1,” “fast-track,” “dual degree,” or “expedited degree.”

The analysis of graduate websites indicated that 26 programs (28.3%) offered an accelerated degree option. Most programs ($n = 66$, 71.7%) did not indicate on their websites if they offered this option.

Advanced or Executive Track for Professionals

Advanced or executive track options for professionals were limited. Only five programs (5.4%) included in the study sample indicated on their websites that they offered an advanced or executive track degree designed for working professionals. Identified tracks featured titles such as “Master of Science in Strategic Communication: Executive Path,” “Professional Cohort for Accelerated Option,” and “Executive MS in Marketing and Strategic

Communications.”

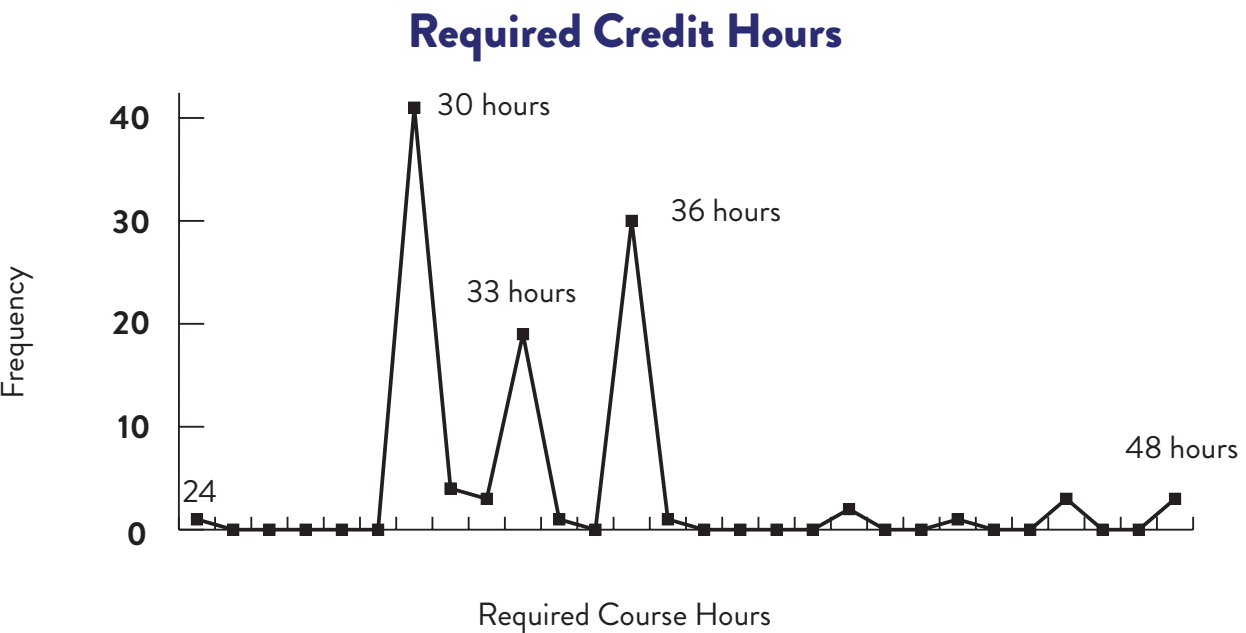
Required Credit Hours

Consistent with the 2012 CPRE report, an analysis of program websites revealed a wide variation in the required hours for program completion (see Figure 5).

The required semester credit hours ranged from 30 to 48 credit hours ($M = 33.09$, $SD = 3.46$), with most programs meeting or exceeding CPRE’s recommended minimum of 30 credit hours (Commission on Public Relations, 2012). Approximately 44.6% of programs required 30 hours ($n = 41$), followed by 32.6% of programs requiring 36 credit hours ($n = 30$). Three programs (3.3%) did not indicate the required credit hours on their websites. One program indicated that it required 24 “unit hours.”

Forty-four programs (47.8%) offered only one track option. Among programs with more than one track (e.g., thesis or directed

Figure 5



project), 34 programs (37.0%) required the same number of hours, whereas 11 programs (12.0%) required a different number of hours, depending on the track.

Required Coursework

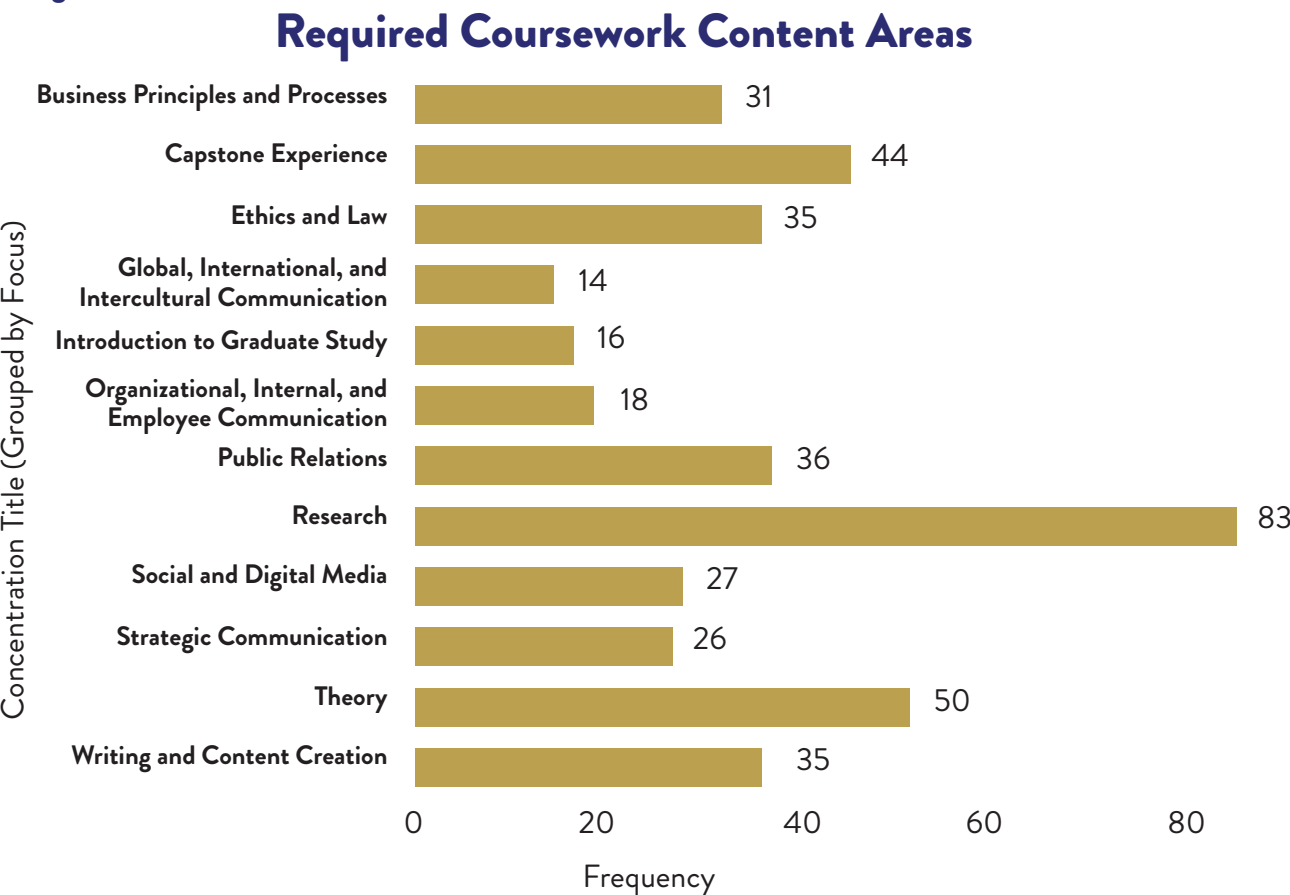
Similar to the 2012 report, we observed a lack of curriculum uniformity across programs. In general, the most prominent content areas for required coursework included (1) research; (2) theory; (3) capstone experiences; (4) ethics and law; (5) writing/content creation; (6) business principles and processes; (7) social and digital media; (8) organizational, internal, and employee communication; (9) global, international, and intercultural communication; and (10) introduction to graduate study. Figure 6 provides

a breakdown of the content areas.

Public Relations and Strategic Communication

Half of the programs in the sample offered at least one course in public relations ($n = 36$). One significant challenge in analyzing these program offerings, and a resulting limitation of the study, was the broad diversity of course titles, which complicated efforts to categorize many offerings by specific focus areas. For example, whereas some course titles indicated a specific focus (e.g., “Public Relations Management”), others invoked broader labels, such as “Seminar in Public Relations,” “Public Relations Foundations,” or simply “Public Relations.” Additionally, select programs combined public relations with similar content

Figure 6



areas, such as “Reputation Management and Public Relations” and “Practice of Public Relations and Organizational Communication.” It is also possible that other courses with more general titles incorporate recommended concepts such as public relations management (e.g., “Campaign Management and Planning,” “Advertising and Public Relations Strategies”).

We experienced the same challenge with strategic communication courses, which comprised a smaller portion of the sample, represented in 26 programs (28.3%). Similarly, these courses featured titles including “Strategic Communication,” “Foundations of Strategic Communication,” “Strategic Communication Leadership,” and “Seminar in Strategic Communication.”

Research

Consistent with previous CPRE recommendations (e.g., Commission on Public Relations, 2006, 2012; National Commission on Graduate Study in Public Relations, 1985), the overwhelming majority of programs ($n = 83$, 90.2%) did require at least one research methods course. A total of 17 programs (18.5%) required students to take a research methods course specifically focused on public relations, while an additional two programs (2.2%) required a research course tailored to strategic communication. Three programs (3.3%) required both a research methods course specifically focused on public relations and an additional research credit. This number has decreased dramatically since the 2012 report, which indicated that 64% of programs ($n = 48$) required a PR research course.

Comparatively, most of the programs ($n = 68$, 73.9%) required a more general

More than 90% of the master’s programs in this study required students to take a research methods course, and more than half required a theory course

research methods course, with offerings that encompassed broad approaches (e.g., “Communication Research,” “Research Methodology in Mass Communications”), quantitative research methods courses (including statistics), qualitative research methods courses, analytics courses, and applied research methods in communication (e.g., “Data and Media Analytics,” “Brand Insight and Analytics,” “Applied Communication Research”). Other listed courses included journalism research methods (e.g., “Journalism Research Methods”), rhetorical research methods (e.g., “Rhetorical Criticism”), and media research (e.g., “Media Content Analysis,” “Media Research”).

Theory

More than half of the programs required a theory class ($n = 50$, 54.3%). This finding indicates an increase in the number of programs requiring a course in communication theory since the 2012 report, which reported that 52% of sampled programs—approximately 37 programs—required a course in communication theory (Commission on Public Relations, 2012).

However, the number of programs requiring a public relations theory course remains lower ($n = 14$, 15.2%), with titles including “Principles and Theories of Public Relations” and “Theory, History, and Practice of Public Relations.” Two programs (2.2%) noted both a public relations theory course and an additional

theory requirement, such as “Public Relations Theory” and “Communication Theory.” One additional program (1.1%) offered a course in strategic communication theory.

The remaining 38 programs (41.3%) with a theory requirement included general communication offerings (e.g., “Communication Theory”), mass communication theory, or specific areas (e.g., “Journalism Theory,” “Public Interest Media Theory and Practice”).

Capstone Experience

Forty-four programs (47.8%) indicated that they offered credit hours for a capstone experience. These options included thesis or project credit hours, internship credit hours, comprehensive exams, a practicum, or a capstone course.

Ethics and Law

Slightly over one-third of programs ($n = 35$, 38.0%) required a course in ethics, law, or both. Most of these programs ($n = 21$, 22.8%) required a class in ethics, such as “Communication Ethics in the Digital Age” and “Ethical Practice in Advertising and Public Relations.”

Ten programs (10.9%) required a course in communication or media law. Seven programs (7.6%) had a class in both ethics and law (“Communication Ethics and Law,” “Law and Ethics in Public Relations”). Only three programs (3.3%) required a class in ethics and an additional class in law.

Writing and Content Creation

Similar to ethics and law, 35 programs (38.0%) required at least one writing or content creation course, reflecting a greater focus on skill development. Because of the wide range

of course titles, we grouped these courses into larger categories: writing ($n = 22$, 23.9%), multimedia communication ($n = 10$, 10.9%), storytelling or message design ($n = 7$, 7.6%), visual design ($n = 4$, 4.3%), web design ($n = 1$, 1.1%), and general design ($n = 1$, 1.1%).

Business Principles and Process

Nearly one-third of programs ($n = 31$, 33.7%) required a course with a title that indicated business principles and processes. These program offerings included courses in business fundamentals, finance, leadership, management, and marketing.

Social and Digital Media

Twenty-seven programs (29.3%) required a course in social and digital media. Social media offerings featured “Social Media,” “Social Media for Public Relations Professionals,”

and “Influencer Relationship Management.” Courses in digital media included “Digital Content

Strategy,” “Foundations of Digital Media,” and “Digital Strategic Communication.”

Organizational, Internal, and Employee Communication

Almost one-fifth of sampled programs ($n = 18$, 19.6%) required a course in organizational, employee, or internal communication. Course titles included “Organizational Communication,” “Internal Communication,” “Seminar in Organizational Communication,” “Organizational Communication in Project Management,” and “Organizational Behavior.”

Global, International, and Intercultural Communication

The 2012 report called for a heightened global perspective in public relations graduate

Only three programs required a class in ethics and a separate class in law

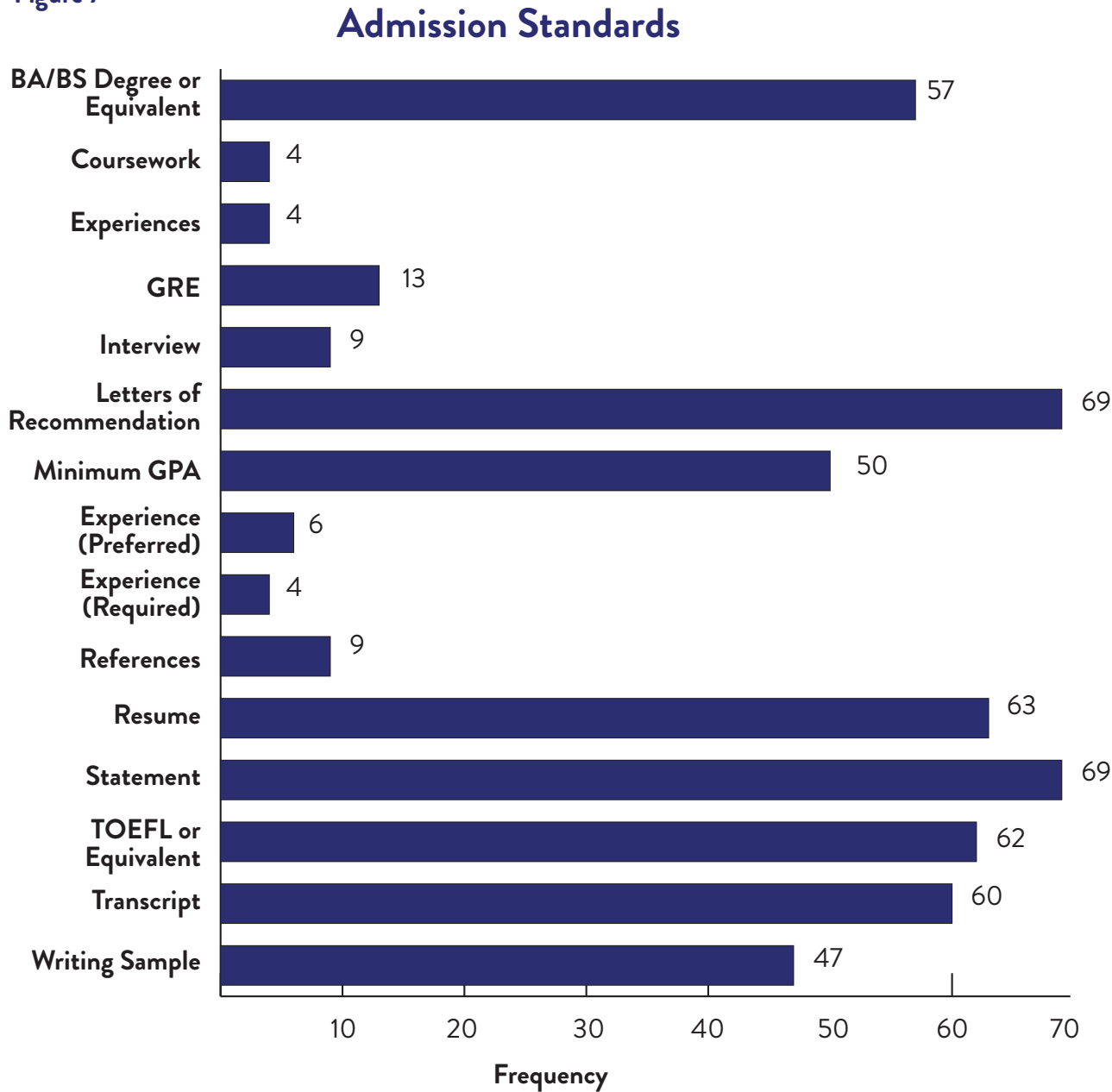
education (Commission on Public Relations, 2012). Findings indicated that 14 programs (15.2%) required a course with a global, international, or intercultural focus in the title. The most common were courses with a global emphasis ($n = 10$, 10.9%), such as “Global Strategic Communication,” “Global Media and

Communications,” and “Case Studies of Global, Digital, and Ethical Public Relations Practices.” In comparison, courses related to international communication ($n = 2$, 2.2%) and intercultural communication ($n = 2.2\%$) were less prevalent.

Introduction to Graduate Study

Finally, approximately 17% ($n = 16$) of

Figure 7



program websites mentioned an introduction to graduate study or a proseminar course.

Admission Standards

Program websites indicated variations in admission requirements (see Figure 7), consistent with the 2012 report's findings, which highlighted a lack of uniformity in admission standards (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2012).

The most common requirements across programs included letters of recommendation ($n = 69, 75\%$), personal or professional statements ($n = 69, 75\%$), and a resume ($n = 63, 68.5\%$).

Consistent with trends across higher education (Sullivan et al., 2022), the website analysis revealed a decline in the use of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) requirement, whereas the requirement for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or other proof of English proficiency increased from the 2012 report (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2012). In 2012, 30% of programs, equivalent to around 22 programs, required the GRE or the TOEFL. In 2025, only 13 programs (14.1%) required the GRE, although others recommended it or listed it as optional. In contrast, 62 programs (67.4%) required a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or other proof of English proficiency. Only seven programs (7.6%) required both.

Programs also indicated other requirements, such as an unofficial or official transcript ($n = 60, 65.2\%$), a bachelor's degree or equivalent ($n = 57, 62\%$), or a minimum GPA ($n = 50, 54.3\%$).

Approximately half of the programs ($n = 47, 51.1\%$) requested some form of writing sample. These entailed a general writing sample ($n = 26, 28.3\%$), essay ($n = 17, 18.5\%$), research paper ($n = 1, 1.1\%$), timed written reflections ($n = 1, 1.1\%$), professional work samples ($n = 1, 1.1\%$), or demonstration of writing proficiency ($n = 1, 1.1\%$).

Other admission requirements included an interview ($n = 9, 9.8\%$), references ($n = 9, 9.8\%$), coursework requirements ($n = 4, 4.3\%$), or select experiences ($n = 4, 4.3\%$), such as a demonstrated ability for critical thinking ($n = 1, 1.1\%$), experience in analysis of communication phenomena ($n = 1, 1.1\%$), experience in writing in an academic context ($n = 1, 1.1\%$), or exposure to research and statistics ($n = 1, 1.1\%$).

Only 10 program websites indicated professional experience was required or preferred for program admission.

Specifically, six programs

noted industry experience was preferred (6.5%), and four programs stated it was required (4.3%).

Program Accreditation

The majority of programs ($n = 67, 72.8\%$) did not mention accreditation on their websites. Among those that did, most referenced the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC; $n = 10, 10.9\%$) or regional accreditation bodies ($n = 9, 9.8\%$), such as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. At the time of analysis, only three program websites (3.3%) mentioned CEPR certification. According to the Public Relations Society of America (2025), only six programs across five U.S.-based institutions hold this credential.

Program websites should communicate the programs' structures and ensure they meet or exceed the recommended 30-credit-hour threshold

The lower number of accredited programs may be related to several factors, including the move from strictly public relations to more generalized graduate degree programs.

Conclusion

More than 10 years after the publication of the most recent CPRE standards for public relations graduate education (Commission in Public Relations, 2012), it is clear that the conceptualization of what constitutes a master's program in public relations continues to broaden. Results from this content analysis indicate a growing emphasis on strategic communication as a complementary approach to public relations, or one that may even supersede it, as evident in both program and course titles. There is also greater accessibility to online and hybrid offerings for completing a master's-level education in public relations.

There are some curricular commonalities between programs, such as a focus on research, theory, and writing/content creation, but how these are operationalized within each program varies widely. As programs continue to adapt to evolving industry demands and institutional priorities, the findings in this chapter underscore the need for ongoing discussion around shared expectations and shifts toward greater uniformity, ensuring that programs equip graduate students to navigate an increasingly complex communication environment.

Recommendations

Graduate programs can move toward greater standardization and increase uniformity.

Despite calls for increased structure and standardization across public relations graduate curricula, the analysis revealed substantial variation across graduate programs in areas such as program and concentration names, required

Understanding the diverse perspectives of graduate students can yield valuable insights

coursework, and admission standards, reinforcing the pattern of variability among programs. Despite attempts by professional organizations, such as CPRE, to outline what constitutes a graduate education in public relations and offer certification in this area, a broader approach continues to prevail. This variation may stem from a range of factors, including evolving industry expectations and attempts by programs to distinguish themselves from competitors. As suggested by previous studies, public relations graduate programs are adapting their curricula to align with shifting industry standards, which often favor an interdisciplinary perspective over a purely public relations approach (Briones et al., 2017; Shen & Toth, 2008). Similarly, the need to reconcile traditional academic pursuits, such as theory and research, with a rapidly changing profession can also create challenges for programs. Other potential influences include student interests and expectations, market positioning to recruit students, faculty areas of expertise, resource availability, and institutional priorities. Efforts to meet multiple and potentially competing goals may contribute to the significant variation seen across the sample.

Graduate programs must coalesce more closely around existing recommendations to achieve standardization.

Although the 2012 CPRE report on graduate education identified clear content areas to comprise the core curriculum, the findings suggest these recommendations

have often been loosely attended to in implementation. While a significant portion of programs required a course in research methods, we observed that approximately half required a theory course. Even fewer programs mandated offerings in ethics, business principles and processes, and global, international, or intercultural communication—all of which the 2012 CPRE report identified as recommended content areas. In addition to the 2012 report’s recommendations, graduate program coordinators may also consider the guidelines outlined by the Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR; see Public Relations Society of America, 2024). The CEPR recommendations complement and build on those offered by the Commission, encompassing and expanding on desired content areas such as strategic public relations management, basic business principles and processes, theory and research methods, ethics, and global influences (p. 14).

Underlying the findings and recommendations in this chapter is the assumption that a standardized curriculum can support the professionalization of the field, offering advantages to the public relations industry, academic institutions, and students. If achieving greater uniformity in public relations graduate curricula is the collective goal, educators and practitioners must reach a consensus on the core components of graduate education and align more closely with established recommendations.

Graduate programs need to better understand the factors and decision-making processes influencing graduate students’ program selections.

Previous studies have primarily focused on the much-needed perspectives of graduate

program directors or their designees (e.g., Briones et al., 2017), educators (e.g., Shen & Toth, 2013), and industry practitioners (e.g., Toth & Briones, 2013). Despite the insights gained from existing research into public relations graduate education, one voice that has been underexamined is that of graduate students (e.g., Waymer & Taylor, 2022). Understanding the diverse perspectives of graduate students, including both working professionals and those attending in a more traditional capacity, can yield valuable insights into key aspects of program structure and delivery, such as modality. These insights can help ensure that programs meet the needs of graduate students while maintaining the rigor expected of a master’s-level education. One specific area for further consideration and development is executive-focused programs. As noted in the 2012 CPRE report, master’s degrees in public relations often prepare students for a doctoral (Ph.D.) degree or the “strategic-level professional practice of public relations” (pp. 15-16). Concerning the latter, including those students already holding such positions, the findings highlight a noticeable lack of programs with offerings tailored to this particular constituency.

Graduate programs should place greater emphasis on ethics.

Both the 2012 CPRE report (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2012) and the CEPR guidelines (Public Relations Society of America, 2024) identified ethics as a recommended content area for public relations graduate education. Approximately one-third of the programs in our sample ($n = 31$, 33.7%) required a designated ethics course, and seven of these programs combined ethics and law into a single course. Public relations

scholars and practitioners have long advocated for public relations practitioners to serve as an ethical conscience for their organizations (e.g., Neill & Drumwright, 2012). Amidst rapidly evolving technology that raises new ethical concerns on a seemingly daily basis, including AI-generated content and misinformation, along with an increasingly turbulent socio-political environment, practitioners face increased pressures, including heightened public scrutiny and accountability. To better equip students for managing the complex moral challenges of today's socio-political environment, both broadly and specifically in the profession, more programs should incorporate standalone ethics courses as a core component of their curriculum.

Graduate programs should require a minimum of 30 credit hours.

Collectively, the findings from this study demonstrate significant growth toward a recommended minimum of 30 semester credit hours to ensure a comprehensive experience across several content areas (Commission on Public Relations, 2006, 2012; National Commission on Graduate Study in Public Relations, 1985). Only three of the sampled programs did not list required credit hours on their websites, and an additional program with a non-credit, professionally focused degree required fewer than 30 unit hours. Program websites should communicate the programs' structures and ensure they meet or exceed the recommended credit-hour threshold, in addition to the content areas recommended by previous CPRE reports (Commission on Public Relations, 2006, 2012; National Commission on Graduate Study in Public Relations, 1985). Programs that fall short of this recommendation

More programs should incorporate standalone ethics courses as a core component of their curriculum

may risk offering a less comprehensive and less credible curriculum, potentially limiting graduate students' exposure to theoretical foundations, research methods, or other critical content areas.

Graduate programs should explain and emphasize the value of accreditation and certification.

The CEPR (Certification in Education for Public Relations) is a voluntary program by PRSA that offers external review and endorsement of graduate and undergraduate public relations academic programs, ensuring they meet professional standards. This rigorous, standards-based evaluation, with regularly updated criteria, is crucial for graduate programs. Only three programs explored in this study noted CEPR certification on their websites. In fact, at the time of this report, while 40 undergraduate programs have earned CEPR recognition, only six graduate programs have achieved this distinction. As CEPR programs can attest, pursuing CEPR certification enhances a program's quality, relevance, and reputation, attracting top students and strengthening employer confidence. It also fosters continuous improvement and standardization. The small number of graduate programs pursuing CEPR may contribute to the lack of curriculum standardization, serve as another indication that few graduate programs meet the standards for CEPR, or reflect a perception that CEPR is viewed as a certification primarily offered for and focused on undergraduate programs.

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Appendix

Master's Degree Websites Analyzed

American University	Loyola University Chicago	University of Florida*
Arizona State University	Marist College	University of Georgia
Auburn University	Marquette University	University of Hartford
Austin Peay State University*	Michigan State University	University of Houston
Ball State University	Mississippi State University	University of Kansas
Baylor University	New York University	University of Louisiana at Lafayette
Boston University	Norfolk State University	University of Miami
Brigham Young University	Northeastern University	University of Minnesota Twin Cities
California State University, Fullerton	Northwestern University	University of Missouri
Columbia University	Point Park University	University of Nebraska-Lincoln
DePaul University	Purdue University	University of North Texas
Drake University	Quinnipiac University	University of Northern Iowa
Drexel University	Radford University	University of Oklahoma
Duquesne University	Rowan University	University of Oregon
East Tennessee State University	Seton Hall University	University of Pacific
Emerson College	St. Cloud State University	University of South Carolina
Fairleigh Dickinson University	Suffolk University	University of Southern California
Florida International University	Syracuse University*	University of Southern Mississippi
Fordham University	Temple University	University of Tennessee, Knoxville
George Washington University	Texas Christian University	Villanova University
Georgetown University	Texas State University	Virginia Commonwealth University
Grambling State University	The George Washington University	Virginia Tech
High Point University	The University of Memphis	Wayne State University
Illinois State University	The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	Webster University
Indiana University – Indianapolis	Towson University	West Virginia University*
John Carroll University	University of Alabama	Wichita State University
Johns Hopkins University	University of Arkansas	
Kent State University	University of Central Missouri	
La Salle University	University of Cincinnati	
Lasell University	University of Colorado Denver	

Note: Institutions with an asterisk (*) had more than one program featured in the sample.

Practitioners' Expectations for Graduate Education

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Patrick Merle, *Florida State University*
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Abstract

Researchers within the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) surveyed U.S. practitioners to determine their expectations for graduate education in the areas of desired knowledge and skills. This chapter updates findings from a similar report published in 2012, which was particularly important to update in light of major transformations such as remote and hybrid work environments following the COVID-19 pandemic and new technology developments in the areas of generative artificial intelligence. Practitioners continue to value traditional public relations competencies such as strategic planning, issues and crisis communication, and ethics. The results demonstrated modest evaluations regarding the value of master's degrees among lower-level managers and top managers. Recommendations for graduate education are discussed.

Keywords: core competencies, CPRE, master's degree, survey, certifications

Recommendations

- Public relations graduate education should continue to focus on traditional fundamental knowledge and skills such as oral and written communication, crisis and issues management, and strategic planning.
- Ethics education merits additional attention as it consistently ranks among the top 10 KSAs.
- Practitioners value professional certification programs, particularly in the areas of leadership, DEI, and AI. This finding offers opportunities to develop certificate programs for those practitioners who need to enhance their skills in a short time frame.
- We recommend that educators continue providing instruction related to global issues and cross-cultural sensitivity, as successful public relations requires both understanding and respecting multicultural audiences.
- While some practitioners see value in master's degrees, educators need to better communicate and demonstrate the value of their programs in preparing students for careers in public relations management.

Public relations practice has undergone significant changes since 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of generative artificial intelligence. During this same period, U.S. colleges and universities significantly expanded their graduate-level online programs and professional certification offerings, reflecting shifts in both institutional strategy and learner demand (Shankar et al., 2021; Cummins et al., 2023). These developments make it necessary to examine how such societal and technological changes have shaped public relations practitioners' expectations for graduate education.

The last CPRE report on graduate education was published in 2012, when there were merely 8 online graduate education programs focused on either public relations or communication management in the U.S. More recently, a 2021 survey reported that approximately 52 programs offered graduate degrees online (Cummins et al., 2023), demonstrating significant growth.

Master's programs in public relations tend to focus on subject-based knowledge, practical skills, and techniques, as classified by Senat and Grusin (1994) as professional graduate education. Many students enrolled in such programs seek to enhance their professional skills rather than pursue careers in academia. Soloski (1994) emphasized that professional graduate degree programs need to “teach

students to be critical thinkers and train them to be professionally competent” (p. 6). Similarly, a study with practitioners revealed their emphasis on the value of “practical experience” in master's degree programs, as graduates “do not want to be perceived as over-educated and underexperienced” (Hon et al., 2004, p. 133).

A 2021 survey of journalism and mass communication programs revealed that 2,837 students were enrolled in professional master's degree programs, compared to 557 students enrolled in research master's programs (Cummins et al., 2023). The 2012 CPRE report found that employers desired a more “practical” curriculum that would be visibly tied to “real world experiences” (CPRE, 2012, p. 10). The results of the latest survey research with public relations practitioners reflected a similar expectation.

Method

In the 2025 wave of research on graduate PR education, the survey sample consisted of 119 public relations practitioners recruited from a panel of volunteers registered with CPRE and through CPRE's social media channels. The online survey was conducted between November of 2024 and May of 2025. The majority of respondents were women (65%), with an average age of 47. In addition, 42% of the participants had more than 20 years of experience in public relations, and 44.5% indicated they work in top management positions.

Findings

Overlooked Global and Digital Priorities

When presented with a list of 21 areas of knowledge and 23 skills that could be addressed in public relations master's degree programs,

Traditional competencies should be viewed not as static legacies of the field, but as dynamic, transferable tools for strategic leadership

participants’ top priorities revealed few surprises (see Figure 1) and tended to be focused on the traditional fundamentals such as Mastery of Language in Written and Oral forms, Strategic Planning, and Crisis Communication. These preferences reaffirm the field’s continued reliance on foundational communication proficiencies, even amid calls for digital and global transformation, specifically changes associated with the rise of AI.

Through factor analysis using statistical software, the lists of knowledge and skills were classified into three broad categories of knowledge and three broad categories of skills. The three areas of knowledge would be consistent with 1) strategic management, 2) theoretical foundations, and 3) emerging trends. While the first two categories align with the 2012 CPRE report, the current analysis combines strategic management and business into a single

domain comprising 13 competencies, including ethics, law, accounting, global issues, and crisis and issues management (see appendices).

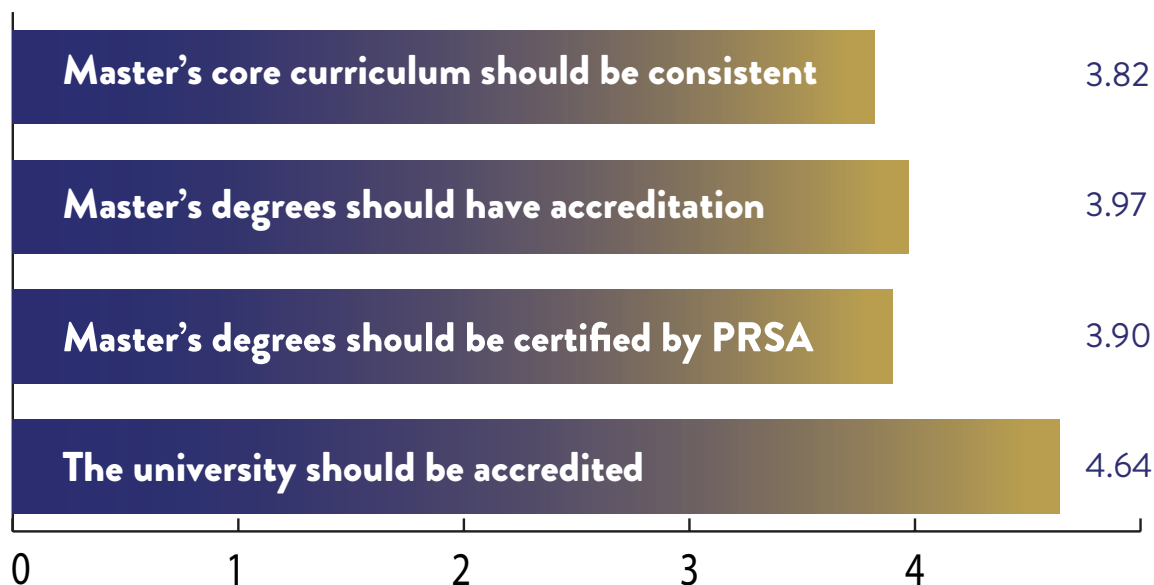
Theoretical foundations included knowledge in areas such as public relations and communication theory, as well as public relations history and social science research. The emerging trends category covered knowledge in the areas of society trends, technological developments, and strategic public relations in a digital environment. Unlike the 2012 CPRE report, three categories of skills emerged rather than just one: 1) core communication skills, 2) insights, and 3) research (see appendices).

Due to the global economy, the low rank of “global issues” and “fluency in foreign languages” was surprising. In addition, “AI/technology skills” was ranked #11 in knowledge, and “social/data analytics” was ranked #14 in skills. These rankings suggest persistent blind

Figure 1
PR Practitioners’ Competency Priorities



Figure 2
Practitioner Expectations for Accreditation



Note: On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree

spots in how the profession values preparedness for international, multicultural, and tech-driven environments. Additionally, it may possibly reflect the historical focus on traditional skills seen as overarching to succeed across industry types and contexts, regardless of technological changes. Overall, such rankings may be indicative of biases from a sample largely influenced by practitioners in higher management positions who are less likely to engage in AI and data analytics, yet may be more mindful of the importance of interpersonal communication as well as crisis and issues management.

Preferred Learning Formats and Delivery Modes

Consistent with the CPRE's 2012 findings, practitioners in the 2025 study expressed strong preference for applied learning formats. Capstone projects and internships were rated significantly higher than thesis

or comprehensive exams (CPRE, 2012), suggesting that employers value graduates who can demonstrate readiness through real-world application. These formats were perceived as more reflective of job expectations and more effective in preparing students for day-one workplace readiness.

Despite all the advances in online education, practitioners said they most valued in-person and synchronous delivery of courses. This indicates that interpersonal engagement, real-time feedback, and classroom-based collaboration remain important in professional graduate training. It also further validates practitioners' perceptions of the value of interpersonal communication skills and issues management that occur synchronously rather than asynchronously and remotely. Programs may benefit from maintaining hybrid models

that incorporate flexibility without compromising peer interaction and collaboration quality, and perceived rigor.

When asked about accreditation status, practitioners strongly valued master's programs offered by accredited universities ($M = 4.64$). They slightly preferred ACEJMC accreditation to PRSA certification (See Figure 2). There was less agreement that the core curriculum be consistent across programs ($M = 3.82$).

Interdisciplinary Coursework and Degree Preferences

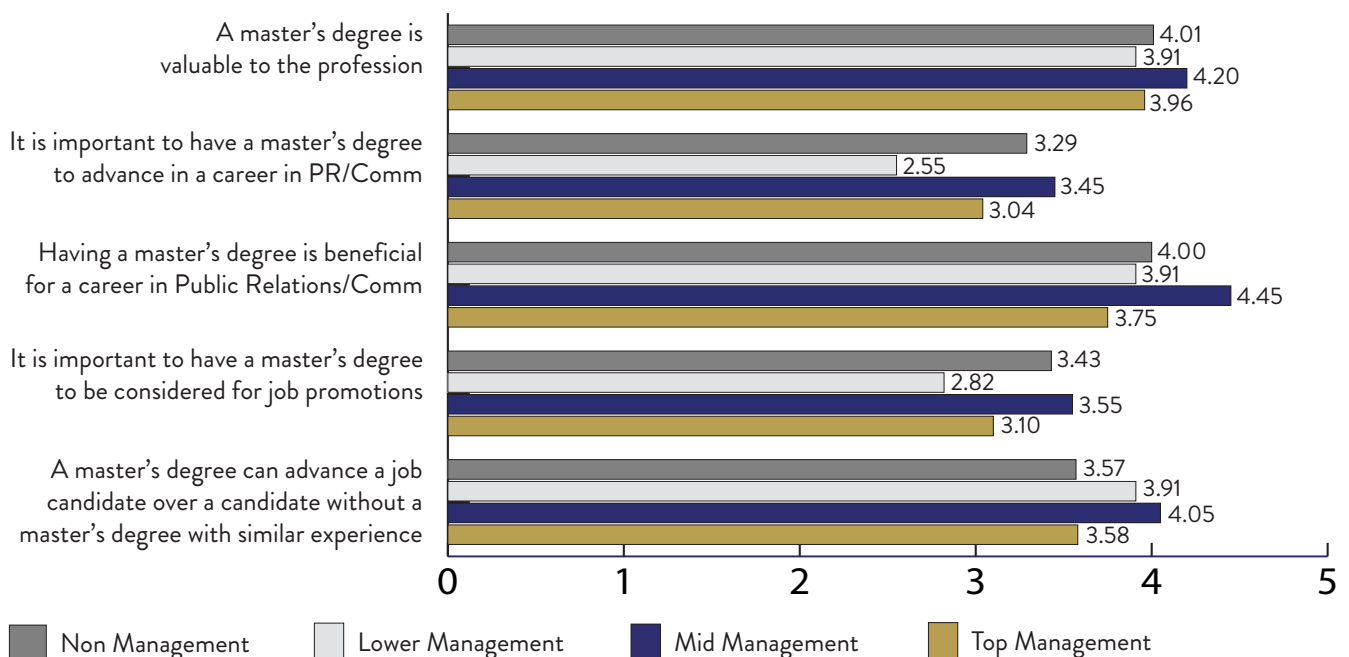
When asked about the value of specific courses outside of public relations, the highest priorities were 1) Organizational Communication, 2) Organizational Behavior, 3) Marketing, 4) Mass Communication Law, and 5) Political/Government Policy and Communication. The emphasis on these areas reflects the

Practitioners indicated they value in-person and synchronous course delivery the most

interdisciplinary nature of modern public relations, which increasingly intersects with business strategy, regulatory environments, and public policy. These findings are consistent with the strategic management category of knowledge desired, which encompasses business literacy, integrated communication, along with ethics, law, and crisis and issues management. These findings demonstrate the breadth of expertise expected for careers in public relations management.

When provided with a list of different types of graduate degrees, participants' strongest preferences were for degrees in

Figure 3
Perceptions of Value by Rank



Note: On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree

strategic communication, public relations/communication management, marketing, journalism, and communication studies. A higher number of agencies provide integrated marketing communication strategies and consequently seek future practitioners who are already familiar with such concepts and ideas.

Perceptions of Graduate Education Value

Practitioners were also asked about their perceptions regarding the value of master's degrees. They tended to agree that master's degrees are valuable, beneficial, and would qualify candidates for advanced positions equivalent to 3 years of professional experience, positions in public relations/communication management, or jobs in research departments or firms.

However, they were less likely to agree that master's degrees were necessary to advance in a public relations career. They also were less likely to agree that job candidates with master's degrees demonstrate a higher level of expertise. This ambivalence may stem from perceived tradeoffs between academic credentials and hands-on experience. Analysis by rank revealed that those in mid-management positions most valued master's degree programs. While those in lower-management positions valued advanced degrees the least, they still ranked their value highly (see Figure 3).

These differences point to the need and the opportunity for graduate programs to clearly articulate their value proposition, not as a replacement for experience, but as an accelerator of leadership readiness. By doing so, it would enable academic units to bridge what

has traditionally been depicted as an academic-practitioner gap.

Professional Certifications and Practitioner Preferences

For the first time as part of a CPRE report, practitioners were asked about their perceptions regarding the value of professional certifications. Practitioners rated training in leadership as a top priority, signaling a growing recognition of its relevance to effective public relations practice. Additionally, they expressed an interest in training in DEI and AI (see Figure 4).

Interestingly, AI and data-related competencies reveal a more complex pattern.

Although data analytics were not prioritized among the top-ranked knowledge and skill areas, they emerged as high-

interest topics for certification training. This disconnect suggests that while practitioners recognize the urgency of acquiring technical capabilities, they may not yet view them as part of the profession's core competency structure, treating them instead as specialized tools to be learned externally. Further, it remains possible that such findings shine a light on the perceptions more specifically, of practitioners in higher management positions who are indeed more acutely aware of leadership training needs and see AI as an exponentially growing area of emphasis.

Conclusion

Balancing Educational Priorities

While it is important to understand what practitioners identify are the industry needs

As the industry is challenged by the growing ubiquity of AI, ethical judgment is critical

Figure 4
Perceptions Regarding Value of Certifications



Note: On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree

and the perceived value of a master's degree, it is also necessary for educators to develop a curriculum that meets emerging needs. The 2012 CPRE report identified five core content areas for graduate education: strategic public relations management, basic business principles and processes, communication/public relations theory and research methods, global influences on the practice of public relations, and ethics.

What was less prioritized in the practitioner rankings in the 2025 survey were theory, research, and global/cross-cultural literacy. While applied skills may drive immediate workplace success, theory and research equip students to critically engage with complex problems and lead long-term change. Maintaining this balance is essential to preserving both the professional utility and intellectual integrity of graduate education.

Recommendations

Reinforce Foundational Competencies through Applied Learning

PR graduate education should continue to emphasize foundational competencies—particularly oral and written communication, crisis and issues management, and strategic planning—as these remain the bedrock of effective practice. In this study, practitioners consistently identified these three areas as among the most essential for graduates to master, receiving the highest ratings for knowledge and skills. Despite ongoing technological shifts and pedagogical innovation, these core proficiencies continue to define professional readiness in the field. Their relevance has not diminished with the emergence of new tools; rather, they serve as the foundation upon which additional competencies are built.

Traditional competencies should be viewed not as static legacies of the field, but as dynamic, transferable tools for strategic leadership. To ensure these competencies are not merely theoretical, graduate programs should embed them within applied learning environments.

Advance Ethical Competence through Curriculum Integration

Ethics emerged as a consistently high priority, with practitioners ranking ethical issues third out of 21 knowledge areas, and ethical decision-making ranked sixth out of 23 skills. Such rankings reinforce the view that ethics is not peripheral to practice, but integral to professional competence. Many PR decisions occur in contexts where choices are not guided by fixed procedures or clear policies. In such moments, ethical reasoning is not an abstract exercise but a practical necessity. Given its recognized importance, ethics should not be confined to a single course or treated as secondary but integrated throughout the curriculum as a practical skill developed through applied discussions, casework, and decision-making exercises. Additionally, as the industry is challenged by the growing ubiquity of AI, ethical judgment is critical.

Advance Readiness in Leadership and AI through Certification Pathways

Among all certification topics, leadership, DEI, and AI received the highest practitioner ratings in this study highlighting a strong preference for structured, skills-based

development outside of formal degree programs. While the study does not explain the reasons behind these rankings, their position suggests that PR professionals are pursuing targeted opportunities to enhance their strategic and technological competencies. The prominence of leadership, DEI, and AI within these preferences signals more than individual interest. It marks a shift in how the profession defines readiness and underscores the need to recognize certification priorities as signals of evolving professional expectations.

Sustain Education in Global and Cross-Cultural Competence

In this study, global issues and cross-cultural sensitivity ranked lower in practitioner

priorities. Yet this does not imply a lack of relevance—it reflects a persistent undervaluation of competencies that are often invisible until their absence causes damage. Cultural awareness rarely

announces itself in performance metrics, but it quietly determines whether communication fosters connection or breeds misunderstanding. As PR continues to evolve in a world shaped by demographic complexity, geopolitical tension, and cultural fluidity, missteps rooted in cultural insensitivity can undermine trust more rapidly than technical errors. Graduate programs must therefore continue to embed global and intercultural competence as cross-cutting lenses, not as niche concerns, ensuring that students learn to interpret difference not as a challenge to

PR graduate education should continue to emphasize foundational competencies—particularly oral and written communication, crisis and issues management, and strategic planning—as these remain the bedrock of effective practice

overcome, but as a condition to understand.

Strengthen the Positioning and Industry Relevance of Graduate Programs

This study found that while practitioners generally view a master's degree in PR as valuable to the profession and beneficial for long-term career development, their responses reflect more mixed views regarding its practical weight in hiring and promotion. Statements emphasizing conceptual or reputational value received the highest levels of agreement, while those related to job advancement, management placement, or hiring preference ranked noticeably lower.

This disparity suggests that, although graduate education is respected in theory, its distinct role in preparing candidates for leadership and management is not consistently recognized in practice. To close this gap, educators must ensure that their programs are aligned with evolving industry needs and communicate their value more clearly. A master's degree should not be seen merely as a general credential, but as a professional accelerator. To ensure continued relevance in a competitive field, that value must be made visible to both students and employers.

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Appendix A

Rankings of Areas of Knowledge

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1) Crisis Communication/Issues Management | 11) Technology Developments/Generative AI |
| 2) Strategic Public Relations in Digital/Social Environment | 12) IMC/Marketing/Advertising |
| 3) Ethical Issues | 13) Organizational Change |
| 4) Relationship Management | 14) Societal Trends |
| 5) Communicating with diverse audiences | 15) Communication Theories |
| 6) Risk Communication | 16) Persuasion Concepts |
| 7) Public Relations Theories | 17) Social Science Research Methods |
| 8) Social/Data Analytics | 18) Global Issues |
| 9) Legal Issues | 19) Finance |
| 10) Management Theories | 20) Public Relations History |
| | 21) Accounting |

Appendix B

Ranking of Skills

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1) Mastery of Language in Written & Oral Form | 12) Audience Segmentation |
| 2) Strategic Planning | 13) Leadership |
| 3) Interpersonal Communication | 14) Social/Data Analytics |
| 4) Crisis Communication/Issues Management | 15) Cross-cultural sensitivity |
| 5) Management of Communication | 16) General Statistical Analysis and Interpretation |
| 6) Ethical Decision-making | 17) Managing People, Programs and Resources |
| 7) Management of Information | 18) Social Media Techniques |
| 8) Persuasive Writing | 19) Specific Practice Areas |
| 9) Research | 20) Visual Literacy |
| 10) Message Production | 21) Negotiation |
| 11) Public Speaking | 22) Big Data Analysis |
| | 23) Fluency in a Foreign Language |

Appendix C

Categories of Knowledge

Strategic Management

- Management Theories
- Relationship Management
- Ethical Issues
- Legal Issues
- IMC
- Finance
- Accounting
- Global Issues
- Communicating w/ Diverse Audiences
- Organizational Change
- Crisis & Issues Management
- Risk Communication
- Social/Data Analytics

Theoretical Foundations

- Public Relations Theories
- Communication Theories
- Public Relations History
- Social Science Research

Emerging Trends

- Society Trends
- Technology Developments
- Strategic PR in Digital/
Social Environment

Appendix D

Categories of Skills

Core Communication Skills

- Oral & Written Communication
- Negotiation
- Management of Communication
- Strategic Planning
- Crisis & Issues Management
- Audience Segmentation
- Persuasive Writing
- Specific Practice Areas
- Visual Literacy
- Managing People, Programs & Resources
- Leadership
- Interpersonal Communication
- Fluency in a Foreign Language
- Ethical Decision Making
- Social Media Techniques
- Social Data Analytics
- Message Production
- Public Speaking
- Cross-Cultural Sensitivity

Insights

- General Statistical Analysis & Interpretation
- Big Data Analysis

Research

- Research
- Management of Information

Educating for Complexity 2.0: Curricular Standards for a PR Master's Degree

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Abstract

We report insights from an online survey based on a sample of 111 public relations educators in higher education. The survey inquired about participants' perceptions in areas of knowledge, skills, courses in related disciplines, degree program graduation requirements, post-graduate job prospects and program value, mechanisms for external evaluation, as well as delivery modalities. Educators endorsed theory and research-based knowledge cores with a strategic, ethical, and global focus. Recommended skills align with these knowledge cores. Educators also identified courses in related disciplines—such as organizational communication, AI capabilities, and business—as particularly important. Regarding program graduation requirements, a clear preference for experiential, outcomes-based education was observed among educators' responses. Lastly, educators deemed a master's degree necessary for management jobs in public relations and considered formal external evaluation important for establishing the legitimacy and credibility of graduate degree programs in public relations. A traditional face-to-face delivery was most preferred.

Keywords: CPRE standards, knowledge, skills, related courses, graduation requirements, job prospects, external evaluation, delivery

Recommendations

- The core curriculum of a master's degree program in public relations should address knowledge in these areas: strategic public relations management, public relations/communication theories, research (e.g., digital/social/AI), and ethical/legal/global issues.
- Skill instruction should focus on strategic management, writing/messaging, research, ethical decision-making, and cross-cultural sensitivity.
- Students are advised to complete courses in organizational communication, AI capabilities, and business.
- Graduate programs should require program-culminating activities, which will provide students with valuable real-world experience.
- Faculty need training in digital pedagogy and investment in technology infrastructure to deliver high-quality, interactive online sessions.

Since 1973, the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) has set standards for education in public relations. It was not until 2012 when the CPRE signature report (*Standards for a Master's Degree in Public Relations: Educating for Complexity*) provided formal guidelines for U.S.-based master's degree education in public relations. Based on both quantitative (website content analysis and survey) and qualitative research (interviews with industry employers), the CPRE 2012 report laid out expectations for a professional master's degree vis à vis an academic master's degree in public relations, noted a comprehensive project as the highest-rated culminating experience for a master's degree, and equated a master's degree to 3 years of professional experience. Regarding curriculum, the report suggested five main content areas as core deliverables for master's degree programs in public relations: strategic public relations management, basic business principles and processes, communication/public relations theory and research methods, global influences on the practice of public relations, and ethics (CPRE, 2012).

Since then, some academic research has examined growth and trends in graduate public relations education, both at the master's and doctoral levels (e.g., Briones et al., 2016; Briones & Toth, 2013; Capizzo et al., 2022; Shen & Toth, 2013; Weissman et al., 2019). Shen and Toth (2013) noted similarities between practitioners and educators on knowledge, skills, and related courses, reaffirming the importance of oral and writing skills. Briones et al. (2016) highlighted a more interdisciplinary shift by some graduate programs in response to industry

needs while noting that the majority of programs modeled after CPRE recommendations. In the first study of online master's programs in public relations and strategic communication, Weissman et al. (2019) revealed that most online graduate programs were leaning more towards a professional focus, characterized by their "flexible formats, customized curricula, industry-current content, and substantial use of practitioner-faculty" (p. 380).

With the advancement of technology and changing social, economic, and cultural environments, it is important for CPRE to provide an update to curriculum recommendations for master's degree programs in public relations.

Method

Invitations to an online survey were sent to the public relations divisions' membership of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), International Communication Association (ICA), and the National Communication Association (NCA) as well as other CPRE membership organizations. The authors of this chapter also sent invitations to their individual departments/schools and personal contacts. A final sample of 111 educators responded to the survey. Standard procedures were followed for conducting research involving human subjects.

The participants included 26.2% cisgender¹ men, 59.2% cisgender women, and 9.7% people who prefer not to disclose their gender information, as well as 4.9% who prefer to self-describe. On average, the participants were 51.72 years old, most of whom held a

¹ For definition of cisgender: <https://dictionary.apa.org/cisgender>

doctorate (92.5%). The majority of participants were White (66.7%), followed by 5.4% Hispanic/Latinx, 4.5% Black or African American, 4.5% Asian and Pacific Islander, 2.7% multiracial, and 5.4% other. About 9.9% of participants chose not to share their racial information. The participants worked on average 12.13 years (Median = 10.50) in their current positions, with an average of 13.34 years of professional experiences in public relations overall (Median = 10). The vast majority of participants were located in the U.S. (95.2%).

Seven-point scales were used for most questions, with 1 indicating “not at all” or “strongly disagree,” 4 “neutral” or “neither agree nor disagree,” and 7 “very much” or “strongly agree.”

Findings

Knowledge and Skills

Among 23 knowledge areas to be included in a public relations master’s program, the top five most important areas to educators are: public relations theories ($M = 6.60$), ethical issues ($M = 6.56$), strategic public relations in a digital/social environment ($M = 6.50$), social media/digital analytics ($M = 6.50$), and crisis communication ($M = 6.46$). The five lowest ranked areas of knowledge were accounting ($M = 4.11$), finance ($M = 4.68$), advertising ($M = 4.94$), marketing ($M = 5.15$), and management theories ($M = 5.23$). The “other” option was also ranked low ($M = 4.72$), with participants suggesting knowledge areas such as basic coding for

social analytics, corporate social responsibility, advocacy/social change, and advanced public speaking.

The top-ranked knowledge areas suggest that educators consider it a must for master’s students to have a strong ethical, theoretical, and strategic foundation in the social/digital environment. Additionally, knowledge in social/digital analytics allows graduates to conduct applied research, while knowledge in crisis communication fits naturally in the strategic management knowledge core.

Among the top 10 knowledge areas, technology developments/generative artificial intelligence (AI) is also deemed as important for master’s students to learn. The numbers (see Table 1) show that, compared with the 2012 report, educators today continue to emphasize knowledge on strategic public relations management, global influences, ethics, and communication/public relations theory and research methods, with new attention to technology and AI. Knowledge in business, such as finance and accounting, is seen as less important as core knowledge for public relations

master’s students, unlike in 2012.

The top-ranked skills (see Table 2) among the 22 listed skills include strategic planning ($M = 6.60$),

mastery of language in written and oral form ($M = 6.48$), research ($M = 6.44$), ethical decision-making ($M = 6.35$), and issues management ($M = 6.27$). The bottom ranked skills are fluency in a foreign language ($M = 3.55$), negotiation ($M =$

Educators consider it a must for master’s students to have a strong ethical, theoretical, and strategic foundation in the social/digital environment

Table 1*Knowledge Means and Standard Deviation*

Knowledge Areas	Mean	Standard Deviation
Public Relations Theories	6.60	0.80
Ethical Issues	6.56	0.93
Social Media/Digital Analytics	6.50	0.67
Strategic Public Relations in a Digital/Social Environment	6.50	0.80
Crisis Communication	6.46	0.78
Relationship Management	6.41	0.85
Communicating with Diverse Audiences	6.33	0.99
Social Science Research Methods	6.29	1.08
Technology Developments/Generative Artificial Intelligence	6.20	0.94
Communication Theories	6.19	1.15
Legal Issues	6.09	1.02
Global Issues	6.05	1.04
Risk Communication	6.03	1.10
Persuasion Concepts	6.01	1.14
Societal Trends	5.99	1.17
Integrated Marketing Communication	5.86	1.18
Organizational Change	5.56	1.28
Public Relations History	5.29	1.15
Management Theories	5.23	1.35
Marketing	5.15	1.27
Advertising	4.94	1.30
Other	4.72	1.93
Finance	4.68	1.41
Accounting	4.11	1.63

5.08), interpersonal communication ($M = 5.30$), big data analysis ($M = 5.37$), and managing people, programs, and resources ($M = 5.40$). The “other” option received a low average rating, with suggestions such as grant writing, basic business communication, data analytics, and internal communication.

Even the lowest-ranked skills are above 5 (“somewhat agree”) on average, meaning that most skills are regarded as important for public relations master students. The only exception is fluency in a foreign language with a mean value of 3.55 (close to “disagree”). The top skills align well with the preferred core knowledge areas.

Courses in Related Disciplines

Educators also shared their opinions about which courses in related disciplines should be included in a public relations master’s program, in addition

to public relations courses. Among the 18 options, educators favored organizational communication ($M =$

5.70), AI capabilities ($M = 5.43$), business ($M = 5.35$), digital intelligence ($M = 5.33$), and political/government policy and communication ($M = 5.21$). They deemed the following courses least important for master’s students to take: filmmaking/videography ($M = 3.94$), finance ($M = 4.15$), general sociology ($M = 4.25$), general psychology ($M = 4.29$), and radio/TV/telecommunication ($M = 4.33$). The “other” option ($M = 4.23$) provided ideas such as creative writing, tourism/recreation management, leadership theory, community engagement, and business communication.

This data presents organizational

communication as the highest-rated course from a field related to PR, which is consistent with the 2012 study’s finding that curricula should include a category of strategic management skills that are directly applicable to public relations practice. The emphasis on AI indicates a recognition of the growing role of technology and suggests curricula incorporate training in a variety of digital tools, platforms, and data analysis.

Business was also suggested as a curricula category in the 2012 study, and current survey respondents found it as a favorable course. Business principles are strongly suggested so that students will gain an understanding of management, return on investment, and other strategic business outcomes.

The inclusion of creative writing,

leadership theory, and community engagement in the “other” category reflects a desire for a broader educational

scope, suggesting public relations educators value skills that foster creativity, leadership, and social responsibility.

The lower mean ratings for courses such as filmmaking/videography and finance suggest that educators view these subjects as less critical for master’s students in public relations.

Requirements

Participants rated a comprehensive project as the most critical component of a master’s program ($M = 6.17$), which reflects an increasing emphasis on applied, integrative learning experiences. Educators appear to favor this model as a culminating experience that

Participants rated a comprehensive project as the most critical component of a master’s program

Table 2*Skills Means and Standard Deviation (1 = strongly disagree , 7 = strongly agree)*

Skills	Mean	Standard Deviation
Strategic Planning	6.60	0.80
Mastery of Language in Written and Oral Form	6.48	0.83
Research	6.44	0.68
Ethical Decision-making	6.35	0.99
Issues Management	6.27	0.80
Persuasive Writing	6.18	1.05
Audience Segmentation	6.09	1.09
Management of Communication	6.08	0.87
Message Production	5.96	1.08
Cross-cultural Sensitivity	5.96	0.92
Social Media Techniques	5.93	0.96
Sensitivity to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion	5.86	1.27
Management of Information	5.81	0.94
General Statistical Analysis and Interpretation	5.80	1.16
Public Speaking	5.75	1.24
Specific Practice Areas	5.72	1.01
Visual Literacy	5.42	1.10
Managing People, Programs and Resources	5.40	1.05
Big Data Analysis	5.37	1.20
Interpersonal Communication	5.30	1.35
Negotiation	5.08	1.03
Other	4.56	1.98
Fluency in a Foreign Language	3.55	1.67

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviation for Courses in Related Disciplines (1 = strongly disagree , 7 = strongly agree)

Courses in Related Disciplines	Mean	Standard Deviation
Organizational Communication	5.70	1.05
AI Capabilities	5.43	1.30
Business	5.35	1.22
Digital Intelligence	5.33	1.16
Political/Government Policy and Communication	5.21	1.17
Mass Communication Law	5.13	1.26
Marketing	5.08	1.31
Visual Communication	4.97	1.35
Organizational Behavior	4.96	1.30
Journalism	4.85	1.51
Advertising	4.78	1.41
Information Technologies (Including Web Design)	4.66	1.16
Art/Design/Graphics	4.58	1.29
Radio/TV/Telecommunication	4.33	1.50
General Psychology	4.29	1.49
General Sociology	4.25	1.50
Other (please specify)	4.23	1.71
Finance	4.15	1.48
Filmmaking/Videography	3.94	1.35

reflects real-world competencies and provides measurable outputs of student learning.

The relatively high valuation of internships and cooperative-education experiences ($M = 5.35$) affirms the importance of bridging academic instruction with industry practice. While slightly lower in perceived importance than the comprehensive project for master's students, internships are still recognized as essential in equipping students with workplace readiness, professional networks, and experiential context.

The lower ratings assigned to the thesis ($M = 5.06$) and the comprehensive examination ($M = 4.97$) raise meaningful questions about the ongoing role of traditional academic assessments in professional public relations education. While these requirements have historically served as indicators of scholarly rigor and critical inquiry, their diminished prioritization suggests a possible shift in graduate education away from research-centric training toward professionally oriented outcomes.

In 2012, CPRE recommended that master's degree programs intended primarily to prepare students for doctoral studies should require additional research courses and a thesis, while master's degree programs designed mainly to prepare students for the professional practice of public relations should require courses in an

area of public relations and an applied project related to the field where students wanted to continue to practice.

Job Prospects and Program Value

Educators felt that a master's degree in public relations/communication management should qualify students for advanced positions in public relations (equivalent to 3 years of professional experience) ($M = 6.15$), followed by positions in public relations research departments or firms ($M = 5.94$), entry-level positions in public relations ($M = 5.77$), advanced positions in public relations (equivalent to 5 years of professional experience) ($M = 5.17$), and teaching positions in colleges and universities ($M = 4.94$).

The majority of educators (64.9%) in our sample agreed that a master's degree was important in hiring people in public relations/communication management jobs. Then, among 10 different master's degrees, educators mostly agreed that a degree in public relations/communication management would be most valuable ($M = 6.55$), followed by communication studies ($M = 5.42$), journalism ($M = 5.03$), social sciences ($M = 4.78$), organizational studies ($M = 4.58$), and humanities ($M = 4.18$). Mean ratings below 4 indicate that educators disagreed that such a degree would be valuable for job needs in public relations/communication management. Those rated below 4 included human resources ($M = 3.96$), fine arts ($M = 3.78$), and natural or physical sciences ($M = 3.31$).

Based on the current data, public relations educators believe that a master's degree in public relations/communication management is crucial for advanced positions, suggesting a consensus that higher education significantly enhances employability in the field. A total of

Educators felt that a master's degree in public relations/communication management should qualify students for advanced positions in public relations or in public relations research departments or firms

64.9% of educators agree on the importance of a master's degree in hiring.

In terms of positions, the mean ratings indicate a hierarchy in the perceived appropriateness of a master's degree for various roles. Educators strongly believe that a master's degree prepares individuals for advanced positions. This finding is somewhat consistent with the 2012 study, where educators reported that the graduate degree sometimes qualifies students for positions in public relations that require 3 years of professional experience, provided that practical work is integrated with academics. Employers from the 2012 study, however, placed greater emphasis on job experience and less on theoretical requirements.

Both studies suggest that students who complete public relations graduate programs are qualified for entry-level and research roles, but the current study found that the master's degree is perceived as least valuable for teaching positions. This may be attributed to university and accrediting body requirements for faculty positions at 4-year institutions.

The respondents strongly agreed that people hired for public relations/communication management positions should have degrees in public relations/communication management. This indicates a preference for specialized education over broader fields like communication studies or journalism. Degrees in social sciences and humanities, as well as others listed, received lower ratings, suggesting that they are not seen as directly applicable to public relations roles.

External Evaluation

The high average rating for accreditation by the U.S. Department of Education ($M = 5.31$) suggests that educators view national-level accreditation as essential for establishing the legitimacy and academic credibility of a program. The strong support for PRSA certification ($M = 4.65$) indicates the value educators place on professional alignment and industry relevance. Programs that integrate professional standards and collaborate with bodies like PRSA are likely to enhance student employability and career-readiness. Moderate support for ACEJMC accreditation ($M = 4.40$) reveals that, while educators appreciate specialized oversight, it may be perceived as too narrow in scope or less impactful than professional recognition. The lower rating for a consistent

core curriculum without formal accreditation ($M = 4.30$) suggests that internal efforts alone are not as respected. While curricular alignment is necessary for academic coherence, educators

appear to believe that external validation provides an added dimension of accountability, transparency, and prestige that internal mechanisms lack on their own.

In the 2012 CPRE report, graduate education had just recently become a focus of accrediting organizations. Thus, most master's-level programs that had been examined to that date had been vetted through essentially the same standards used for undergraduate programs. External standards for graduate students may still need to be modified so they

Graduate programs in public relations and communication management should actively pursue external accreditation and certification

can be applied across all formats, including in-class, blended/hybrid, and online delivery.

Delivery

The preferences expressed by educators have several key implications for the design and implementation of master's programs in public relations and communication management. There is still, as in the 2012 report, a strong preference for traditional on-campus classroom experiences ($M = 6.33$). That preference suggests that educators value face-to-face interaction, immediate feedback, and the immersive learning environment that physical classrooms provide. There is continued support for a hybrid approach of in-person and synchronous delivery of courses online ($M = 5.38$). This positive view of hybrid delivery indicates that flexibility combined with real-time interaction is an acceptable and potentially effective alternative.

There was lower support for other types of learning – for asynchronous learning ($M = 4.92$) and fully synchronous online models ($M = 4.92$), though both were still on the positive side of the scale. This rating suggests some openness to these formats but also points to a need for careful instructional design to maintain engagement and communication in these settings. The lower average rating for fully asynchronous delivery ($M = 3.93$) likely reflects concerns about reduced interaction, lower engagement, and potential declines in learning quality. Programs relying solely on this model may face resistance from faculty and should reconsider or limit their use in core curricula. The 2012 CPRE report aligns with the current report, in that all faculty should be held accountable to deliver quality instruction,

whether in-person or online.

Conclusion

Administrators of master's degree programs in public relations continue to navigate the rapidly evolving media, economic, social, and cultural landscape. The standards outlined in this report provide timely and clear guidance regarding various aspects of a master's degree program in public relations. The report will assist graduate program administrators and educators in the U.S. and globally in delivering high-quality education that prepares students for their next stage after completing their master's degree, whether they pursue professional practice or doctoral-level education.

Recommendations

Knowledge and Skills

Graduate programs should provide four main areas of knowledge. First, various aspects of strategic public relations management are strongly recommended, ranging from crisis communication and relationship management, to risk communication and persuasion. A strong foundation in public relations/communication theories is also important, as well as research in a digital/social environment while integrating AI. Students should learn about ethical/legal and global issues. The required skills align with these core knowledge areas, with a focus on strategic management, writing/messaging, research, ethical decision-making, and cross-cultural sensitivity.

Related Courses

Public relations master's programs should adapt their curricula to prioritize courses that align with industry demands and emerging trends (Farmer, 2024). Educators' preferences for organizational communication and AI highlight

the importance of offering these courses as electives in conjunction with the public relations core categories. Doing so will better prepare graduates to meet the challenges of the evolving public relations landscape.

Program Requirements

The Commission is well-positioned to guide institutions in designing curricula that not only reflect academic standards but also meet the evolving needs of the profession. More professional-aligned courses could be adapted from many of the recommendations in this report (i.e., AI, strategic management, writing and messaging, leadership, and cross-cultural sensitivity).

Job Prospects and Program Value

Given that educators believe the graduate degree qualifies graduates for advanced positions, programs should emphasize the incorporation of practical experience and skills training to align with industry expectations. This recommendation applies regardless of students' existing practical experience, and will equip students with a diverse set of skills. This can be achieved through program-culminating activities such as a professional project or internship, which will provide students with valuable real-world experience, which might involve work at a higher level than internships pursued as an undergraduate student.

External Evaluation

Graduate programs in public relations and communication management should actively pursue external accreditation and certification. Doing so can enhance program appeal, institutional reputation, and alignment with industry demands, all of which are increasingly important in a competitive academic landscape.

Institutions should also consider blending internal curricular improvements with external evaluation to ensure both academic rigor and professional relevance.

Delivery

While there is increasing flexibility in program delivery methods, a clear preference among educators remains for models that retain real-time interaction, whether in-person or online. Institutions should align delivery strategies with these insights to maintain educational quality and faculty support.

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Key Takeaways

By Adrienne Wallace and Emily S. Kinsky, co-chairs of the CPRE Research Committee 2024-2025

In conclusion, the three studies on graduate education in public relations, which were undertaken by the 2024-2025 research committee of the Commission on Public Relations Education, provided key takeaways consistent across the methods and participants. These findings led to calls to action for practitioners, educators, and prospective students.

Key Findings Across All Three Studies

1. Core Knowledge and Skills Remain Central, but Gaps Persist

Both practitioners and educators agree on the importance of foundational competencies such as strategic planning, communication, crisis and issues management, and ethics. Educators tend to prioritize theory and research, including digital, social, and AI issues, as well as ethical, legal, and global concerns. In contrast, practitioners focus on applied skills and real-world readiness, favoring capstone projects and internships over traditional theses or exams. Their top three skills involved mastery of language, strategic planning, and interpersonal communication. Despite the field's global and technological transformation, practitioners continue to rank skills in global issues, cross-cultural sensitivity, AI, and data analytics lower, exposing potential blind spots.

2. Curricular Variation and Lack of Standardization

An analysis of 92 graduate program websites shows wide variation in titles, concentrations,

required courses, and capstone experiences. Although most programs include research and theory requirements, fewer emphasize ethics, business principles, or global and intercultural communication—domains highlighted as essential in CPRE standards. A growing shift toward interdisciplinary and strategic communication degrees is also evident, alongside expanding options for online and hybrid learning formats.

3. Evolving Program Delivery and Accreditation

Practitioners and educators alike prefer in-person or synchronous learning environments, emphasizing the benefits of real-time interaction and peer collaboration. While hybrid models are becoming more popular, asynchronous online formats remain less favored, particularly for core coursework. Accreditation and external certifications such as PRSA and ACEJMC are valued for enhancing program legitimacy and industry alignment, though few programs mentioned having these credentials on their websites.

4. Professional Certifications and Emerging Competencies

Interest is growing in short-term, skills-based certifications—particularly in leadership, DEI, and AI—as professionals seek ongoing development beyond traditional degree programs. Practitioners view these certifications as valuable complements to graduate education, supporting adaptability in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

5. Perceptions of Graduate Education Value

Master's degrees are widely regarded as advantageous for career advancement and leadership roles, though not a substitute for professional experience. Educators are more likely than practitioners to consider the degree essential for senior positions. To maximize impact, graduate programs must better convey their value to students and employers, highlighting their role in accelerating strategic and leadership capabilities.

Calls to Action

For Practitioners and Employers:

Collaborate with academic programs to identify emerging skill needs, support experiential learning opportunities, and recognize the value of both graduate degrees and professional certifications in hiring and advancement.

For Professional Associations:

Promote the importance of accreditation and certification, support research on educational outcomes, and advocate for standardization that balances academic rigor with professional relevance.

For Graduate Students and Prospective Applicants:

Seek programs that offer a balance of theoretical depth, practical experience, ethical grounding, and global perspectives. Consider the value of both degree and certification pathways for long-term career success.

For Academic Leaders and Educators:

Commit to greater curricular alignment with established standards, prioritize ethics and global competence, and pursue external accreditation. Invest in faculty development for hybrid and online teaching, and foster partnerships with industry to keep curricula current.

The future of graduate public relations education depends on a renewed commitment to standardization, experiential learning, ethical leadership, and adaptability to global and technological change. Stakeholders across academia and industry must collaborate to ensure that master's programs equip graduates with the knowledge, skills, and credentials needed to lead in a complex, dynamic communication environment.

