

# AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF UNDERGRADUATE PUBLIC RELATIONS CURRICULUM IN THE UNITED STATES

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## ABSTRACT

*This study analyzes the public relations curricula of forty-four American colleges that have PRSSA chapter. Through content analysis, this study examines general requirements, core public relations courses, requirements of public relations programs and strategic communication programs, and optional public relations courses offered by the colleges. The findings of this study reveal that very few public relations programs offer courses involving new media, crisis communication and PR ethics. In order to keep in touch with the fast-changing public relations landscape, more PR programs should require and integrate new media, crisis communication and ethics courses.*

**Key words:** Strategic, PRSSA, Digital System.

## INTRODUCTION

Public relations education in the United States has continued to grow with the professional field for the last 25 years. During that time, public relations education has been increasingly called on to provide strategic, ethical, international, and research methods training and leadership (DisStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009). One of the most important reasons for this change is the increased role of public relations as it is driven by new technologies and globalization, and the changing role of public relations practitioners as strategic planners (DisStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009).

Because of these powerful advances, public relations education is being asked how well undergraduate public relations curricula are keeping up with these changes. To respond to this question, public relations institutions need to evaluate their curricula regularly to reflect what public relations practitioners want and need. Therefore, examining how public relations educators prepare students for the demands of the profession by analyzing their public relations curricula is necessary. After evaluating current public relations curricula, public relations institutions and those teaching public relations should develop, revise, and/or change the curricula to help tomorrow's practitioners for their projected public relations responsibilities (DeSanto, 1996).

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of the state of undergraduate public relations curricula and identify an ideal curriculum for an undergraduate program in public relations. This study analyzes the public relations curricula of American colleges that have a Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapter. Through an exploratory content analysis, this study examines general requirements, core public relations courses, requirements of public relations program and strategic communication programs, and optional public relations courses offered by the colleges. This study also tries to identify an ideal curriculum for an undergraduate program in public relations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have focused on undergraduate curricula in public relations. DiStaso et al., (2009) examined the perceptions of the effectiveness of public relations education by surveying 312 public relations executives and educators. This study specifically looked at whether public relations education is adequately preparing students for work in the profession Kruckeberg & Paluszek (1999). The sample consisted of 500 executive-level public relations practitioners and 500 academics in the United States drawn from the Public Relations Society of America, Association of Women in Communication, Arthur W. Page Society, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, International Communication Association, and the National Communication Association. A total of 312 questionnaires were received, yielding a response rate of 32.9 percent Curtin & Witherspoon (1999).

The results of this study indicated several things. For one, there was some difference regarding perceptions of actual skill levels regarding students between executives and educators. However, both executives and educators agreed on entry-level skills as a whole. For the advanced-level practitioner, educators and executives agree on the following criteria: ability to handle the media professionally, teamwork experience, critical listening skills, experience in public relations, research skills, networking, knowledge about public relations management, issue management knowledge, ability to prepare crisis plans, and so on. Executives and educators agreed on four essential areas necessary for the curriculum: planning, writing, producing and delivering print communication to audiences Shakra et al., (1992). Judgments regarding the desired characteristics among job applicants and essential curriculum content were extremely similar between the practitioner and educator groups with both wanting more emphasis on research, ethics and strategic planning.

Gower & Cho (2001) analyzed use of the Internet in the public relations curriculum. Their study tried to determine what skills public relations practitioners consider important for Internet public relations. By using an exploratory e-mail survey, the study examined what purposes for which public relations agencies are using the Internet and which of the Internet's tools and technologies they employ. According to their findings, public relations practitioners "seem to lack the skills needed to take advantage of the Internet's potential as a communication medium" (Gower & Cho, 2001, p. 91). Therefore, they suggest that students should be exposed to the different Internet tools and technologies and should be able to assess their capabilities and limitations.

DeSanto (1996) discusses how institutions and those teaching public relations are preparing those practitioners for their projected research responsibilities. All public relations professors from each institution that had a PRSSA chapter – 179 chapters in all at the time – were surveyed with a mail questionnaire Turk, (2006). There were 126 respondents, earning this study a 70 percent response rate. More than half of the program coordinators required undergraduate majors to take some type of research course. Only 37 percent, however, said a separate public relations research course was offered.

Therefore, many of these institutions rely on a communication studies or mass communication research course to fulfill this requirement. A total of 77 percent of instructors of introductory-level public relations courses said they spent less than seven hours a semester focusing on research. Instructors teaching advanced public relations courses said they spent more than eight hours a semester focusing on teaching research. The only difference between accredited and non-accredited universities in this study was the question of whether research was addressed at all. Consequently, this study's findings imply there is much improvement that could be made regarding undergraduate curricula and research education in public relations.

The PRSA's (1999) Commission on Public Relations Education is a lengthy transcript of the goals, study and results set by the PRSA regarding public relations education in the United States. This commission is very strategic in its attempt to conceptualize what makes up an exemplary public relations curriculum and program. The commission used findings from a survey compiled by the commission and the National Communication Association. The study wanted to report what skills, knowledge and concepts practitioners and educators think are currently being taught in public relations curricula, compare these with what educators and practitioners think should be taught, and document the level of agreement between practitioners and academics as to what is taught and what should be taught.

Questionnaires were mailed to a stratified random sample of 564 educators and 748 practitioners, yielding a sample of 1,312. The response rate ranged from 30 percent for academics to 12 percent for practitioners, resulting in an overall response rate of 20 percent. Most significant findings discuss the importance of learning outcomes, the streamlining of assessment techniques, compiling a comprehensive curriculum, understanding teaching and pedagogy issues and demographic issues regarding education and standards of learning. Academics and practitioners agreed that theories, ethics, research, planning/management, writing, implementation and internships were all essential and key regarding public relations curricula.

The Frontline article discusses the globalization of public relations education. This article explains the most recent and comprehensive account of this globalization in *A First Look: Analysis of Global Public Relations Education – Curriculum and Instructors*. In this analysis, Toth and Aldoory (2008) examine the websites from 218 educational institutions in 39 countries. This analysis only looked at international programs. Toth and Aldoory (2008) found that most educators identify public relations as “strategic management of relational communications and locate it within a social science framework.” Undergraduate programs were very practical and geared toward providing students for work-related challenges, and cultural distinctions played a very large role in each program De Santo, (1996). These distinctions include religion, political landscapes, as well as the media environment and educational infrastructure of the respective culture/country Schwartz et al., (1992). Also, the analysis suggests many barriers inhibit the “ideal” public relations program, such as financial resources, relationships with actual practitioners, etc. This article explains the area of globalization of public relations has a lot of room for further debate, research and development.

The Professional Bond (2006) report looks specifically at public relations education, and makes recommendations for educators (undergraduate and graduate) and practitioners. The report posits that all undergraduate students need writing skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, a good attitude, an ability to communicate publicly, and personal initiative. The report specifies that an internship should be mandatory for undergraduate students. The report also discusses the issue of ethics in public relations. Ethics should be included in all public relations education and practice. Other areas of interest in the report include technological advances and public relations, globalization of public relations and diversity in public relations education and practice VanLeuven, (1989).

The commission identifies the following courses as “ideal” for the public relations undergraduate program: introduction to public relations, case studies, public relations research, public relations law and ethics, public relations writing and production, public relations planning and management, public relations campaigns, internship and directed electives. The report also discusses the lack of qualified public relations instructors. The commission states this needs to

improve if public relations education hopes to improve. Finally, the report presents a call of action to public relations educators and practitioners – to improve current standards and to adhere to the commission’s recommendations for improved success in the area of public relations education.

## Method

This study analyzes the public relations curricula of American colleges that have a Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapter. An exploratory content analysis is conducted to investigate each public relations curriculum of selected institutions and compare curricula among these institutions. To analyze the public relations curricula, this study examines: 1) all course names and course descriptions; 2) the general requirements; 3) the actual courses required to attain a bachelor’s degree in public relations; 4) requirement difference between public relations program and strategic communication program; and 5) the optional courses. To examine those areas, five research questions were posed.

**RQ1.** Which department does the public relations program belong to?

**RQ2.** What are the most prominent public relations courses of the selected colleges?

**RQ3.** What are the difference between requirements of public relations programs and strategic communication programs?

**RQ4.** What are the general requirements in public relations curricula of the selected colleges?

**RQ5.** What are the optional or elective courses offered by selected colleges?

## Sample

Forty-four universities were chosen to analyze and identify the public relations curricula. The selection process came from data obtained from the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). PRSSA’s website identifies every university in the United States that has an active PRSSA chapter. Six states do not have universities with active PRSSA chapters. Therefore, 44 universities from 44 states were collected and analyzed. Some states have numerous active chapters. In these instances, a university from each state was chosen from several criteria: (1) the largest state university; (2) the university with the most comprehensive (or comparable) public relations program; (3) or the university with these combined criteria.

## RESULTS

To answer research question 1, this study analyzed PR programs and their departments, and empirical results indicate two major factions of public relations curricula at U.S. universities. The public relations program either falls under the Department (or School) of Communication Studies or the Department (or School) of Journalism and Mass Communication. Some public relations programs under the communication studies department call the public relations program “strategic communication.” Those in the journalism and mass communication departments most commonly refer to the program as “public relations.” Out of 44 PR programs, four programs (9.1%) called themselves “strategic communication” sequences, leaving 40 programs (90.9%) calling themselves “public relations” programs Table 1.

<b>Department Name</b>	<b>School Name</b>	<b>Program Name</b>
Department (or School) of Journalism and Mass Communication (28 schools)	Drake U, Kansas State U, U of Arkansas, Arizona State U, U of Southern California, U of Utah, Texas Tech U, Quinnipiac U, U of Oklahoma, Colorado State U, American U, U of Florida, Ohio U, Purdue U, Appalachian State U, U of Georgia, Pennsylvania State U, Hawaii Pacific U, U of Louisiana, U of New Mexico, West Virginia U, Roger Williams U, U of Nevada, U of Oregon, Middle Tennessee U, U of South Dakota, Champlain U	Public Relations
	U of Minnesota-Twin cities	Strategic Communication
Department (or School) of Communication Studies (16 schools)	U of Delaware, U of North Dakota, U of Alabama-Birmingham, Boston U, Mississippi State U, Illinois State U, U of Maryland, Andrews U, Missouri State U, Syracuse U, U of Washington, Clemson U, George Mason U	Public relations
	U of Alaska-Anchorage, U of Nebraska, U of Wisconsin-Madison	Strategic Communication

Although most strategic communication programs fall under communication studies departments, this was not true across the board. To specify, 16 (36.3%) schools out of the 44 universities had programs under the communication studies department, with three of those 16 (18.7%) programs named “strategic communication” programs. The remaining 13 schools called the program under the communication studies departments “public relations.” Table 1 illustrates the difference between strategic communication programs and public relations

programs.

Research question 2 asks what the most prominent public relations courses are in the United States. Regarding all course names and descriptions, the most prominent public relations courses are principles of public relations (34 schools), public relations writing (25 schools), and public relations campaigns (24 schools). Other popular courses are public relations research (18 schools), public relations cases (17 schools), and crisis communication (5 schools). There are various other courses required, but none were offered in more than five schools. Table 2 shows the number of universities offering these prominent courses (required in each sequence to graduate).

<b>Prominent PR Courses</b>	<b>Schools Offered</b>
Principles of Public Relations (Introduction to PR; PR Principle; Fundamentals of PR )	34 schools
Public Relations Writing	25 schools
Public Relations Campaigns (Strategic Communication campaigns; PR programs)	24 schools
Public Relations Research (Research Methods; Communication Research Methods)	18 schools
Public Relations Cases (Case Studies in PR)	17 schools
Crisis Communication	5 schools

To answer research question 3, a comparison was made between strategic communication and public relations programs. Aside from the program names (strategic communication versus public relations), these programs were similar. In fact, at the four strategic communication schools, (University of Minnesota, University of Alaska-Anchorage, University of Nebraska, and University of Wisconsin-Madison), the required courses were very similar. All four schools required strategic communication research and strategic communication principles.

Also, strategic communication cases, as well as strategic communication campaigns were common requirements. This is in line with most other public relations programs studied. Again, the only major discrepancy is the actual name of respective courses within each department. Within public relations scholarship, there has been continued debate as to whether the field should be distinguished as public relations or strategic communication.

Research question 4 looks at the general requirements in public relations curricula. General degree requirements ranged from 30-hour programs to one 60-hour program. The range from 30 to 60 hours is counting only courses within the department. All schools required a mix of mass communication (or communication) courses with out-of-department courses for graduation. Therefore, complete degree requirements could be anywhere from 110 to 150 total hours. All schools also allowed for electives both within and outside of the department. General degree requirements were surprisingly varied.

<b>School Name</b>	<b>Program Hours Required</b>	<b>Program Description</b>
Arizona State University	30 mass communication hours required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within school of journalism and mass communication</li> <li>• Required mixture of mass communication and journalism courses</li> </ul>
Texas Tech University	39 mass communication hours required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within school of journalism and mass communication</li> <li>• Required mixture of mass communication, public relations and journalism courses</li> </ul>
University of North Dakota	45 communication hours required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within school of communication</li> <li>• Required strategic communication and communication courses</li> </ul>
University of Maryland	51 communication hours required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within department of communication</li> <li>• Required PR and communication courses</li> </ul>
Quinnipiac University	39 public relations hours required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within department of public relations in school of communications</li> <li>• Required public relations and mass media courses along with courses outside the public relations department</li> </ul>

To analyze detail differences in general degree (public relations degree) requirements between selected schools, this study chose five schools (Table 3), which represented different factions of PR curriculums. Public relations programs at Arizona State University and Texas Tech University are both under school of journalism & mass communication with somewhat similar sequences. University of North Dakota and University of Maryland are both communication studies programs with similar requirements. Quinnipiac University was chosen because it is a little different from most of the other programs researched. The Quinnipiac PR program functions within the school of communications (department of film, department of journalism, department of media studies, and department of PR). It is interesting because the departments in the school of communication at Quinnipiac University fuse together mass communication and film studies. It is an interesting mix of other programs. These schools are shown to illustrate the variance among programs.

To attain a degree in public relations, most schools required similar courses. Specifically, universities required students to take an introduction to public relations, public relations writing, public relations campaigns, and also public relations cases. These requirements were found in almost 100 percent across the sample of schools. Also, many schools require students to take a public relations research course and a graphic design course as well as a public relations ethics course. In addition, all schools require students to take a public relations writing course to graduate. Almost every selected school requires those courses because those courses are very important to learn skills for students to master and maintain as future public relations practitioners.

<b>Prominent Required Courses</b>	<b>Schools Required</b>
Public Relations Writing	31 schools
Principles of Public Relations	28 schools
Public Relations Campaigns	22 schools
Public Relations Research	16 schools
Public Relations Cases	12 schools

Furthermore, the prominent required public relations courses of the selected colleges are public relations writing, principles of public relations, public relations campaigns, public relations research, and public relations cases (Table 4). In addition to these required courses, schools require a certain number of credits within the public relations major. These hours range from 27 hours to 62 hours within the public relations department. There is quite a wide variety of requirements, electives and other nuances within the public relations departments analyzed Table 5.

<b>Prominent Elective Courses</b>	<b>Schools Offered</b>
Public Relations and New Media	14 schools
International/Inter-cultural Public Relations	10 schools
Public Relations and Marketing	9 schools
Financial Public Relations	6 schools
Non-Profit Public Relations	6 schools

Finally, to answer research question 5, elective courses offered by selected universities were examined. The selected schools allow public relations students varied choices when it comes to department electives. Some of the more common electives are focused public relations courses, such as health public relations or entertainment public relations. Also, relatively few schools offered new media courses as public relations electives. Other common electives include financial public relations, non-profit public relations, public relations management, international public relations, and public relations and marketing.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to explore the current public relations curricula at American universities and identify an ideal curriculum for an undergraduate program in public relations. To do that, this study examined general requirements, core public relations courses, requirements of public relations (or strategic communication programs), and optional public relations courses offered by the American universities.

This study found that only three schools (University of Arkansas, Texas Tech University, and University of Southern California) offer new media and public relations courses, and five schools offer crisis communication courses. However, none of them actually required these two courses for graduation. In addition to these two courses, public relations ethics was offered as an elective at some universities, but it was also not required at many universities.

Almost all universities required similar courses such as public relations writing, principles of public relations, public relations campaigns, public relations research, and public relations cases. These required courses are very important for students to prepare and maintain as future public relations practitioners because these courses provide basic skills that public relations practitioners should have for performing their jobs successfully. However, in order to keep students as future PR practitioners up-to-speed with current trends in media technology, public relation programs should also offer new media and public relations courses. With such an evolving media landscape, it is important for PR practitioners to understand and possess skills involving new media technologies because they need to use new media technologies for conducting public relations campaigns. Thus, new media course should be offered as a required course at public relations programs.

Also, public relations programs need to train their students how to handle crisis situations because public relation practitioners face and handle crisis situations very often. Crisis



communication course would better prepare students for working in industries more and more involved in image management and/or restoration. Specifically, with so many recent public relations crises, public relations students should learn how to manage these crisis situations through effective campaign planning. With the onset of very public corporate crises, such as the Toyota recalls or the BP oil spill, future PR practitioners should be required to learn how to conduct successful crisis communication campaigns. Therefore, public relations departments should at the very least offer a crisis communication course, or even better, require one for graduation.

In addition, this study revealed that public relations programs need to teach public relations ethics courses because students must have a concrete idea of what is right and wrong in public relations work before they enter the field. Thus, public relations ethics course should be a requirement because for public relations to advance as a professional field, students must be equipped with a strong ethical foundation.

Consequently, this exploratory study uncovered a wealth of specific knowledge about public relations programs at the American universities. The findings of this study suggest that in order to keep in touch with the fast-changing media landscape, more public relations programs should require and integrate new media, crisis communication, and public relations ethics courses.

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