

All Glamour, No Substance? How Public Relations Majors and Potential Majors in an Exemplar Program View the Industry and Function

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Studies in public relations often conclude that the field is misunderstood (Kopenhaver, 1985; Stacks, Botan, & Turk, 1999) and misrepresented in media (Spicer, 1993). Public relations professionals themselves often do not know what is involved in or support public relations education (Wright & Turk, 2007). Both the special issue (Public Relations Review, 1999) on public relations education and a following study published in this journal (Bowen, 2003) argued that public relations majors often do not realize what is involved in the academic discipline or the professional field. This research builds on the findings of those studies to ask: Are public relations educators doing any better in communicating the core competencies, responsibilities, knowledge requirements, skills, and abilities of the discipline and the public relations major? Through the use of focus groups across majors at a top research university, we can see that little is known about public relations among non-majors, but public relations majors can articulate the requirements and functions of the field. Several major areas of confusion emerged about public relations related to: marketing or promotion, spinning the truth, image, and public relations as a career choice. These ideas show a critical lack of transparency in public relations. Credibility of the public relations function is hampered by this failure to communicate about the functions and core competencies of the field. Implications for both the public relations practice and for public relations education are discussed.

Purpose

In 2006, “The Professional Bond” report of the Commission on Public Relations Education issued a call to action in support of public relations education. The Commission members argued that, like other professions, public relations practitioners and educators must struggle to contribute a shared vision of “what constitutes strong, ethical practice in service to society” (p. 85). Is public relations practice really acting in service to society? Many scholars (Cheney & Vibbert, 1987; Grunig, 2000; Heath, 2001; Heath & Ryan, 1989; Spicer, 2000) argued for a positive social role for public relations. But, does society know and value the role of public relations as information provider, access equalizer, problem solver, mediator, ethical counselor, crisis manager or a facilitator of social change?

This research argues that public relations educators and practitioners need to do public relations for the field of public relations. According to the literature collected in support of this study, it appears that public relations has failed to communicate its worth to society as a whole as a valuable contributor to the communication allowing society to function. The researcher seeks to emphasize the urgent need for awareness of the role and functions of public relations in society, in organizational life, within governments, in innumerable publics, and as an academic pursuit. Awareness of the value and functions of public relations should be focused on journalists, government officials, non-governmental organizations, top management teams and their CEOs, broadcast media, and the entertainment industry. Greater awareness among these influencers of the true management functions of public relations would benefit the practice as a whole. It would help public relations achieve professional status, help it to attract motivated

students with appropriate abilities and goals, and assist in its interaction and functional ability within organizations.

Professionalism of Public Relations

Pratt and Rentner (1989) argued that a body of knowledge based on definitive research should give public relations legitimate claim as a profession. Ehling (1992) determined that the qualification of public relations as a profession is “hardly debatable” (p. 455) but the stature of the discipline lags far behind that of other professions and is nebulous to those outside the industry. Ehling (1992) quoted comments at a symposium delivered by public relations leader Patrick Jackson: “We may know we can qualify as a profession, but does the rest of the world know this? The resounding answer is no” (p. 455).

Not much has change in the years since those comments were delivered, although the major industry associations insist that public relations is a profession. PRSA (<http://www.prsa.org/aboutUs/mission.html>) states that their number one mission is to “build the public relations profession” (np). However, critics argue that public relations has yet to achieve professional status and exists only as a trade or a skilled technical communication activity. In order to achieve professional status, the field would have to adopt some form of licensing before practice, equivalent to a CPA, a bar examination, or medical boards. Further, it would have to hold to consistent ethical standards and monitor infractions, barring those who transgress from participating in the profession. Public relations falls short of those professional standards, although the field does meet the standards of having a body of knowledge and a definitive area of practice based on learned technical skill. Perhaps the failure of public relations to hold professional standards and therefore be generally recognized as a profession is part of the problem in a lack of credibility for the field.

Media Perceptions of Public Relations

Cutlip’s (1994) book “The Unseen Power” speaks to the opaque nature of the public relations industry. To further complicate matters, when public relations is not perceived by those outside the field as a hidden or nebulous function, it is often viewed in worse terms, especially by contemporaries in the news media. For many decades, researchers (Aronoff, 1975; Bishop, 1988) have argued that journalists held contemptuous views of public relations, did not consider it a profession equal in status to their own (Kopenhaver, 1985), or held what Cline (1982) found to be “an insidious bias that characterizes public relations practitioners as journalists who have sold out” (p. 63). Spicer (1993) found that the print media connect public relations with meanings such as distraction, disaster, challenge, hype, ‘just p.r.’, war, and schmooze. 83% of Spicer’s sample used negative or pejorative depictions of public relations, and only 17% (the public relations challenge category) were neutral or positive. He contended “All too often, the terms are used to indicate, if not a flagrant disregard for the truth, a willingness to engage in communication activities to hide or obscure the truth” (pp. 59-60). Spicer concluded that connotations of public relations as a positive social force used to provide information and resolve conflict was not present in his sample of print media.

Research by Jo (2003) examined how the media handled the term public relations. Jo quantified 303 stories from 2 prestige press newspapers and 3 evening newscasts, and found that public relations was most frequently equated with image-reputation management and persuasion. Further, 41% of the mentions in Jo’s study had negative terms attached to public relations, such

as “public relations stunt,” compared to only 12% positive uses, such as “public relations advice.” Jo (2003) concluded:

The use of public relations terms was likely to refer to publicity, image, campaigns of persuasion, and marketing efforts to promote an organization’s products or services. Contrary to the recent emphasis on public relations as relationship management, the overall news portrayal of public relations suggested a discrepancy between the normative definition of public relations and media usage in news stories. (p. 406)

A common misconception perpetuated by the news media shown throughout these studies mentioned above appears to be that public relations is little more than publicity or press agency. News media tend to be unaware of or ignore the other functions of public relations, particularly the managerial roles that more experienced practitioners frequently enact.

The news media are just one source of misinformation about the full role, purpose and functions of public relations. Entertainment media are also responsible for perpetuating many of the negative stereotypes about public relations that those outside the discipline often hold. Recent television programs and films provide numerous examples. The Home Box Office “Sex and the City”[®] series and film portrayed one of the main characters as a public relations professional who was seen doing little other than attending parties and special events. The Samantha character was never portrayed doing statistical research, advising senior management on issues, or undertaking any of the real professional practice we know as public relations management. “Sex and the City”[®] consistently depicted modern public relations as little more than a series of parties and special events involving obsequious flatter as the primary skill of the practitioner.

Many portrayals in entertainment media mistake press agency or media relations for the entire field of public relations. The reality television show Lizzie Grubman’s “P.R. Girls”[®] was another example of entertainment that misconceptualized public relations as exclusively press agency and special event planning. The successful feature film “Thank You for Smoking”[®] depicted the managerial world of public relations through the story of a tobacco lobbyist who demonstrated no sense of ethical responsibility and proclaimed that he does not hide the truth, he just spins it. “Phone Booth”[®] was a film in which the lead character is the archetypal sleazy and despicable press agent who was singled out for retribution by a sniper as a result of his dishonest lifestyle. The character nearly escapes death for his misdeeds; clearly, this scenario is a metaphor for an indictment of the industry.

Along these lines, Miller (1999) examined novels and films from 1930-1995 for representations of public relations practitioners. Miller concluded that public relations was viewed with skepticism and scorn, that “representations of public relations are woefully inadequate” (p. 3). These forms of media had archetypal or recurrent characteristics of: ditzy, obsequious, cynical, money-minded, isolated, accomplished, and unfulfilled (Miller, 1999). Immoral actions such as lying, cover-ups, or denial were common place, and according to Miller, these themes remained consistent over several decades.

There is little doubt that these popular representations of public relations practitioners as manipulative and unethical operators impact perceptions of the practice among the general public. Those not familiar with the discipline of public relations have no reason to question the accuracy of these representations. Why would audiences question depictions of public relations when they are consistent across both news and entertainment media? Audience members become socialized by these pervasive images and learn from their messages (Weber, 1957). In the

socialization of accepting a common definition based on these depictions, audiences believe that they understand public relations at a basic level, never realizing that they are unfamiliar with the majority of what the practice actually does. The industry and academic discipline of public relations do not respond to these misrepresentations in any meaningful way, and therefore misconceptions of the field among the general public are perpetuated.

Critical Perceptions of Public Relations

One would hardly believe that the news and entertainment media representations of public relations are not the most damning depictions of the field until she or he examines what the actual critics of public relations say. One theme that pervades the critical literature is that public relations exists to undermine democratic governance. Many of the critics of public relations hold that perspective, such as Miller and Dinan (2007), who argued:

Public relations was created to thwart and subvert democratic decision making. Modern public relations was founded for this purpose and continues to be at the cutting edge of campaigns to ensure that liberal democratic societies do not respond to the will of the people and that vested interests prevail. (p. 11)

The authors also equate public relations with unabashed advocacy, involving manipulation, lying, and spin. Millar and Dinan maintained that the “P.R. industry is allergic to openness and transparency” (p. 13) and that public relations practitioners must have some effective way to manage their own deceitfulness allowing advocacy to continue. Industry watchdog groups such as P.R. Watch echo these claims. Stauber and Rampton’s (1995) book also employed the “thwarting of democracy” theme and labeled corporate public relations practitioners attending the meetings of activist groups as espionage agents.

Propaganda and persuasion are also common themes arising in the critique of the public relations industry. One scholar (Snow, 2003) described public relations as a bottom-line based employment of “a propaganda technique to assign a sense of meaning to the meaningless” (p. 31). Snow explained, “News media outlets are likely to expand integration of voice, spin, and slant to the packaging of information” (p. 31). The historical development of the public relations function along with its association with propaganda are hotly contested areas of debate. Wartime propaganda effort and the membership of prominent public relations practitioners on the Creel Committee (The Committee on Public Information) supporting US participation in World War I gave rise to much of the suspicion surrounding modern day public relations. Public relations practitioners and scholars who endorse a persuasion (Miller, 1989) or advocacy (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006; Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995) model see public relations in a similar vein as that of an attorney, acting as a vocal advocate in the court of opinion. Although many public relations practitioners do not see their role as one of outspoken advocacy, this perception now surrounds the entire industry of public relations, thus inculcating skepticism and suspicion.

Academic Perceptions of Public Relations

Do public relations practitioners and academics even agree on an accepted definition and function of the field? Stacks, Botan and Turk (1999) surveyed public relations practitioners and educators to assess the congruence or divergence in their perceptions of public relations. With a sample of 258, they tested the statement: “Overall, the general public understands what public relations is.” Those who strongly disagreed with the statement were 24% of the sample, and

those who disagreed comprised 61%, for a combined majority of 85% expressing concern regarding the ambiguity of public relations in the minds of the public. Their (Stacks et al., 1999) study found that “educators and practitioners are in agreement as to the essential skills, knowledge and concepts that should be and are being taught in public relations programs” (p. 27). However, the knowledge of core competencies does not appear to travel outside the field, as represented in the 85% of the sample who thought that the general public does not understand what public relations is or understand its functions. Further, 42% of their respondents disagreed with the statement: “Overall, most working journalists understand what public relations is.” The confusion exists at various levels in universities offering public relations degrees. For instance, one scholar (Xifra, 2007) concluded that “Public relations is the invisible major in Spanish Universities” (p. 212). If only the journalists who rely on public relations for information do not understand the role and functions of the discipline, the effectiveness and credibility of public relations are constrained. Many other groups rely on public relations sources for information, so the impact of the negative level of understanding of public relations is compounded.

Public relations educators tend to agree on what courses make a good degree program in public relations (Hornaman & Sriramesh, 2003). Wright and Turk (2007) noted that many public relations practitioners did not see the value of public relations education “that goes beyond the technical level” (p. 575). When discussing the appropriate curriculum for public relations students, Hornaman and Sriramesh (2003) reiterated a point made by J. Grunig when they wrote “that students need education in public relations, rather than journalism or another field, in order to practice a more sophisticated model of public relations” (p. 4). An ideal education in public relations is well described by Russell (2007), including what she termed “essential curriculum content” in ethics. Pratt and McLaughlin (1989) advised meaningful content in ethics is the public relations curriculum, and this attention to ethics is one way of addressing negative conceptions of the field.

Prior research (Bowen, 2003) established that students in the principles of public relations course were unaware of the management focus and models of public relations, did not understand the level of strategic decision making and ethical counsel required of practitioners, and were unfamiliar with the research required to be a successful public relations manager. That scholar concluded that a key failure of public relations was “that we have not made those outside of our boundaries aware of what responsibilities and functions the discipline involves” (p. 210). The research found that the students majoring in public relations often do not know what the field involves, and asked if we, as public relations educators, are communicating with our publics effectively in order to attract the most promising student who have an intellectual fit with the field.

The questions remain: Do students know what functional areas of study are involved in public relations? Do majors and potential majors understand the emphases of the public relations discipline, or do they fall prey to the negative or narrow interpretations provided by critics, news sources, and entertainment media?

Method

To answer these research questions, focus groups were conducted at a major university with a preeminent public relations program. It was reasoned that students at this university should be well-aware of the nationally top-ranked public relations major as a choice. Focus groups were the method of choice because, according to (Morgan, 1997), they allow the discussion of topics among a group with varying levels of knowledge about an issue, as is

germane to this research. Lindlof (1995) pointed out that the group dynamics of focus groups allow for new and emergent ideas to be pursued, rather than the more scripted discussion of interviews or surveys. The discussion in these focus groups often took unpredicted turns that were nonetheless enlightening regarding the research questions posed here.

A total of 10 focus groups were conducted over a two-year period, to vary the students who participated and to gather longitudinal data that could be used to show general knowledge levels rather than events specific to a certain semester or university promotion. Participants signed informed consent forms and were advised of their rights and focus group procedures. They were all undergraduate students enrolled at a public university over 18 year of age.

Focus groups were conducted with university students of various majors, with communication majors, and with public relations majors. Some groups were mixed with all students comprising participants; other focus groups were specific to public relations majors or general university students. Students were anonymous participants who were assigned a number by subject management software, and then given extra credit in the course of their choosing through that software. Focus groups were video and audio recorded and transcribed by a research assistant. Data were analyzed through thematic coding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the use of the constant comparison method (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Focus groups were discontinued once the point of theoretical saturation was reached and no new information was gained.

Findings

Participants discussed several areas of misconceptions regarding their knowledge of public relations and the functions of public relations. Generally, the students who were public relations majors had a better knowledge of the field than either communication majors or university students majoring in other areas, such as physics or business. Even the public relations majors did not have a complete knowledge of the functions of public relations, as they often omitted ethics or issues management from their discussion. Public relations majors normally did not hold the common misconceptions of the discipline portrayed in the news and entertainment media, as discussed earlier in this paper. Non-majors held misconceptions of the field that included a number of the concepts found in prior research, as discussed in detail below.

Marketing Emphasis

A primary theme among many of the students participating in this research is a confusion of public relations and marketing. Confusion between marketing and public relations was the most commonly occurring theme in the focus groups conducted for this study. Many students equated public relations with both marketing and advertising, noting that, "Public relations is designed to sell something." Many students echoed the general sentiment that public relations is a marketing support function or is entirely product promotion and publicity, and this perspective was frequently held by those who were general university students or communication majors, rather than public relations majors. For example, one student, a non-public relations major, explained: "I guess it relates to a glam marketing and advertising field, so if you're trying to promote a product, you need someone in P.R. promoting, you need someone to get it out there." General confusion with the marketing function was displayed in numerous comments in non-public relations major groups, such as: "p.r. is brainstorming meetings for marketing."

Many students held the belief that public relations is an advertising function or product branding, as displayed in comments along the lines of: "I think there is more of an advertising aspect of it than anything else" or "P.R. is branding, creating an image." One student expounded,

“P.R. as more of a skill than a career, it is a great skill to have. But. . . many jobs just don’t come to mind, it’s like advertising but being a public face, too.” Another student agreed: “Yeah, something like that - it almost seems like in P.R. they are just designing an ad campaign.” One defined public relations as “a sort of consumer communications -- more promoting a product, advertising it.” Most students tended to sound like the woman who said, “I feel like it’s just trying to make up a fancy term for marketing to hide what they are really doing, but P.R.’s like the same old advertising and marketing, just with a smile on your face.”

Other university students outside the public relations major regarded it as having a less-than-credible reputation as a second-rate major: “It’s a fall back major because the business school is so hard to get into.” One student explained: “The ones who can’t get into the business school go into P.R.” Another student said, “I think business people think communication and P.R., especially, are like the lazy ones who don’t want to work.” Another explained:

Well, a lot of people do P.R. because they do want to go into the advertising/marketing, and it gets them out there and you’re in the P.R. field, you know? Because Marketing is in the business school, right. And business is hard...so you go P.R. instead, like the easier way.

Public relations majors were only slightly less confused about the relationships of the function to marketing and advertising than were non-majors. For example, on public relations major said, “I um learned the term marcomm like marketing and communications from one of my classes this semester and it’s like more like brochures and posters and stuff like that. I personally like design and stuff like that and I’m not sure it is part of P.R. job or not.” Another major made a comment exemplary of this confusion: “When I think public relations I think of graphic design, like if you are doing marketing and advertising with the websites in general and graphic design.” Another major admitted, “I still don’t know much about it. I didn’t know it was all that strategic stuff going out there and advertising, kind of both.”

Some of the public relations majors did not confuse the field with marketing, but instead seemed to lack any real knowledge of the business-oriented basis of public relations, confusing it instead with image management or publicity. For instance, one major exclaimed, “When I think P.R., I think about relationships between people. I didn’t even consider the business aspect like marketing, advertising!” Another major explained a deficit of information thus:

I was clueless about P.R. I remember going in our first day, our assignment was write ‘what you think P.R. is’ and ask two other people what they think and then like compare and contrast. I had a hard time figuring out what I was going to say because I just had no idea.

Although a lack of information was a common theme, confusion with marketing or advertising were more common, even among public relations majors. The closely-related nature of public relations initiatives employing advertising agencies, conducting product promotion, and so on appears to have led many students to believe that those activities define the entire practice of public relations. These misperceptions harm the ability of the function to be understood for the value it adds to organization-public relationships, to the information provided for the functioning of society, and for the problem-solving ability of public relations. Specific functions such as issues management, financial relations, community relations, or government relations were not

mentioned. Some of the public relations majors did not confuse the field with marketing, but instead seemed to lack any real knowledge of the business-oriented basis of public relations, confusing it instead with image management or publicity.

Image Management

As discussed earlier, the entertainment and news media are particularly prone to portraying public relations as an image management function, with activities based on little or no substance but on an often-pleasing façade. As we might expect, students outside of the public relations major ascribed to this misperception frequently. On many occasions, students made comments like this one: “P.R. is all that goes into developing an image.” Students frequently equated image with puffery, such as, “You see it on TV. People use the P.R. stuff loosely, like trying to ‘Get in good’ with someone” or “It is like image and making the image all good, more positive image than anything else.” Other students held that idea, as well, but perhaps equated it with special events, such as indicated in this comment: “I thought it was NYC red carpets -- a lot of people hear P.R. and glamorize it.” A non-public relations major explained: “It’s a lot of event planning. It’s very media driven, as well.” One public relations major added, “It’s very hard and busy so I don’t think of it as glamorous; it is exciting to be the spokesperson though.”

Many students equated public relations with schmooze or favors, along the lines of statements such as this one: “P.R. is, like, anyone who can schmooze, like this one guy that worked for me this summer, he could talk his way out of anything.” A similar theme is that public relations tries to be all things to all people: “A lot of it, I feel like, is pleasing everyone. Trying to find the best of everyone’s world.” Or the statement: “I think people throw around P.R. when they’re trying to make a good impression on someone, just being the image that they want to see.” Another student observed, “P.R. is trying to make everyone happy and be in good with everyone” or “get them to like you by being outgoing, personable, warm.” Outside majors were inclined to link this aspect of what they perceived as public relations with manipulation. For example, one student said, “I feel like P.R. people have to put on this front. It’s all fake.” Following that statement, others in the group were quick to agree and added comments along the line of these: “Conniving. It’s all about just saying something to look good, like politicians” and “That they (public relations professionals) can’t care less about other people’s feelings because they just want their money.”

Some of the students directly attributed the image they held of public relations to the entertainment industry, as illustrated in this comment by a non-public relations major:

In a lot of (television) shows you see a portrayal of the P.R. person. Like ‘Sex in the City,’ like Samantha. It’s just like the idea of being a people person, being all over town. Everyone wants to be like her. She portrays ‘everything to everyone’.

Another general university student majoring in another discipline agreed, as seen in the statement: “You see it on the news. You hear about certain things people do, and I can identify it as ‘that’s’ was probably a bad P.R. move, or that’s’ probably a good P.R. move’. It’s all image like with celebrities.”

Public relations majors held some of the same misperceptions based on entertainment, but were also inclined to know other areas of the public relations function in addition to special event planning and media relations. Though the students were not articulate at naming the functions per se, they did describe responsibilities that are more akin to the management role of

public relations. For example, one major explained key factors of what educators know as issues management in response to a question about the responsibilities of public relations, in saying:

To see steps ahead and anticipate like “This is the problem we’re trying to fix now, this is how we fix it. What might we have to do, what might happen then?” I feel like P.R. people are very aware of the variety of scenario’s that can play out so the way they act is to minimize the bad and maximize the good.

Other public relations majors also described the functions of community relations and financial relations without using those terms, but through identifying the responsibilities they held. The students did know many of the responsibilities of the public relations function hinge on maintaining relationships with publics, as exemplified by this statement from one public relations major: “It is broad in terms of just managing communication between any type of publics. Publics doesn’t mean consumers, it could be internal publics, external publics, stakeholders, people who invest in a company or organization.” The students showed a limited knowledge of the application of ethics in public relations, of public affairs, or of risk management, although they did show awareness of crisis management.

Covering up the Truth

The general idea that public relations is lying, manipulation, covering up the truth, or “spin” of a message into something positive was a recurring, prevalent theme. Students seemed to hold the idea that public relations is manipulative or deceptive by nature. The university students from majors outside of public relations were particularly prone to hold this idea. Their beliefs were along similar lines as these examples: “I think P.R. is more manipulative,” “Public relations is strategic manipulation,” “It’s creative in, like, a manipulative way,” or “I think you have to be good at manipulating so it’s strategic.”

When asked to elaborate on how and why these ideas came to mind along with public relations, students offered explanations similar to this one: “I just feel like P.R. people are like fake. They have to be manipulators.” Another student who was an accounting major said: “If you’re not covering up the truth then you are not doing your job in P.R. That is what they want and it’s all about keeping the truth spinned and hidden.” Other students agreed, such as the one who added, “-No they don’t always tell the truth: depends on the situation” or the non-public relations major who said, “Sometimes they have to fabricate to make something more desirable, to appeal to the customer.”

Those who majored in public relations might have been expected to hold differing beliefs, but they also discussed public relations in terms of deception. They were less likely to mention public relations as intentional manipulation than students from other majors. Although they did not make comments as negative as the other university students, they still included having to omit negative information, “spin” for positive coverage, and not disclosing accurate information. For instance, on public relations major explained: “It’s not like you just lie, you just omit the negative.” Another explained, “Whenever the people you are representing have done something that comes out negatively, your job is to spin it so it doesn’t look as bad or make it even look good.” Another public relations major explained the function: “It’s hard - people do P.R. in a way that isn’t blatantly lying it’s kind of like omitting the truth without actually lying. I can imagine that being stressful.”

Even the public relations majors did not link the field with ethics until specifically asked by the moderator. Then, comments were cynical, such as: “the P.R. people cover it up – there are not ethics in that.” Another elaborated, “Yea, my professor glossed over it, like, there is some code on ethics, go and read it sometime. Yea, whatever!” A few students, when prompted, did elaborate in a less cynical manner. For example, one woman said, “You have to be advising on ethical stuff with the CEO and that means you really need to do what is right.” These comments were rare, and many students, including those who identified themselves as public relations majors, believed that public relations was unethical at best or manipulation at worst, with no solid foundation in ethics to guide the practice.

How did I End up in Public Relations?

When students in the focus groups including only public relations majors were queried as to how or why they selected the major, they tended to express some confusion and articulated a winding path that led them into public relations. Some explained that they had wanted to go into the business school but had not met certain entrance requirements, while others explained that they “just wound up in public relations because they liked communication.” Many students offered that within the field of communication, public relations seemed like the choice of major offering “real job opportunities when you finish.” Another student offered this indicative explanation:

I wanted to go into advising but had to get an easy second major. I had to pick a track and P.R. seems like it had the most career options with it. At that point I wanted to do psych anyway, and I didn’t really know or care what P.R. is.

Some public relations majors were happy with their choice of the discipline and seemed pleased at the level of responsibilities and disparate career opportunities associated with the field. One student explained the job satisfaction she anticipates along with a career in public relations as “Knowing you have a role in the company that is more than just a writer, more of a valued team member, how important are you in a company.” Another student said that she was glad to be a public relations major because “It makes you more valued and it is substantive, the strategy and stuff - it’s more than just events.”

A large number of students explained that they ended up in public relations “by accident” or were not sure when they decided it would be a good major. Several students exclaimed something similar to the woman who said: “How did I end up in P.R.? I don’t even know – I think it was just like there and easy to do so I thought that it might be a good way to get a job later.” Public relations majors also expressed confusion about what was involved in the public relations major, how they came to study it, and how it would help them in their future careers. For instance, this public relations major at a top-ranked public relations program said:

I don’t know why I went into the major like this. When I went to comm., I went in saying I’ll do P.R., and then, I honestly don’t remember anything we studied in 350, that’s the theory of P.R. class right?

Some students believe that the top-three national ranking of the public relations program was meaningless and that the major was a holding ground for those undecided about their future career direction. For example, one major said: “I think it’s definitely amped up like, no one

knows what they want to do when they study P.R. and communications.” Others echoed this sentiment throughout the different focus groups, such as the woman who said, “P.R. is just like the anything major you can do until you figure out what you really want to do.”

Some students expressed the firm belief that they did not need to major in or even study public relations in order to get a job in the field. Many offered sentiments along the lines of a student majoring in general communication studies who said, “They make you take all these writing classes and it seems hard so I just wanted to do communication because I can still get a job in public relations.” Another non-public relations major concurred and said, “All three internships I had have been in public relations and I don’t even major in it!” Students expressed a belief that the public relations classes for majors, although appearing to be time consuming or difficult “according to what the public relations majors say” were not necessary knowledge for success in the field. One student offered this example:

This girl, she graduated from Penn State with a history degree, and is the head of P.R. at Crayola. Like, she’s at the top. Like, she didn’t do PR, but that’s what she fell into. She started at the bottom and just moved up through Crayola.

One student summarized this deficit in understanding the study of public relations by saying, “The only difference is just the classes you’re taking. You can do the same thing with them. It doesn’t matter if you take the P.R. classes or not.”

Discussion and Conclusions

This study has illustrated that the common misperceptions of public relations as marketing or promotion, image enhancement, manipulation, and an overall veiled idea of the responsibilities of the function are prevalent. Misconceptions of what public relations is and does are common among both general university students in various majors, those majoring in general communication, and on a more limited level, by those majoring in public relations. The prevalence of these common misconceptions about public relations lends an air of both deception and mystery to the field, or perpetuates a confusion of the field with the related disciplines of marketing and advertising. Credibility of the public relations discipline itself is undermined by these misunderstandings about the very purposes, activities, and ethical principles involved in public relations. Senior management is not likely to understand the public relations function and the potential contributions to the bottom line of strategic communication as long as the field remains murky defined and ethically challenged.

What type of research and decision making can public relations be a part of when it is viewed as simple promotion and event planning or a support function of marketing? How can public relations advise on the ethical responsibilities involved in maintaining relationships with publics when it’s viewed as obfuscating the truth or outright manipulation? How can future public relations professionals effectively advise toe-to-toe in the dominant coalition against more respected and credible managerial functions?

Public relations educators and professionals are undermining their own credibility and the future credibility of the field. Clearly, the misconceptions of what the function is and does are hampering the influence it can have in organizations, the ability to be perceived as a first-choice major, and the ability to attract students with aptitudes for analysis, honesty, and strategic management. The public relations discipline is therefore self-constraining by allowing these ideas to proceed unchallenged into the minds of future and potential public relations students.

The discipline is also self-limiting its own definitions by allowing the news and entertainment media to portray it as spin and event planning or image promotion alone. What becomes of issues management, public affairs, acting as a liaison in internal relations, community relations and corporate social responsibility, acting as an ethical conscience, financial relations, activist and advocacy or NGO communication, coalition building, relationship management, and policy analysis? Are these functions of public relations to be kept secret from potential public relations students until they have declared it as their major or reached graduate student studies? Does that approach not limit the field to those who might prefer and be better suited to the technical role, entertainment publicity, and other public relations roles less rooted in business management?

Implications

The future existence of the public relations function is at stake, Are we to become a fully-recognized and accepted management function? Or should we play a support staff role, implementing the strategic decisions of others through communication campaigns? These questions are not small ones; they drive to the heart of the matter of the credibility of the public relations function as a field that began with less-than-credible pursuits. For public relations to progress as a profession or management discipline, this ideological and pedagogical issue must be resolved.

In this study, university students of diverse majors, who are socialized by the news media and entertainment media were studied. These students often were socialized to accept an incomplete and often inaccurate view of public relations, portraying the field as less diverse, management-oriented, and strategic or research and knowledge based than it is in actuality. These conceptions, most often depicted in entertainment and news media, remain un-counteracted by the public relations industry. Future leaders and influencers are subject to these misconceptions that are perpetuated by the mass media, including tomorrow's private sector and governmental leaders, educators, CEOs and members of top management, lawyers and judges, health care providers, administrators, lobbyists, and so on. Little difference was seen among the focus groups held with general communication majors and with public relations majors. Public relations majors held the misconceptions discussed herein a bit less frequently than communication majors or university students of any major. The discipline of public relations is doing a great disservice to itself by not countering the negative and inaccurate representations of the public relations practitioner as a professional manipulator, face of marketing, front of superficial image, or accidental professional, completely devoid of the ethical responsibility inherent in professionalism.

Potential public relations professionals, students, and educators are affected by these representations and either drawn to the field or repulsed by these depictions. From these data, it appears that what is needed for the future professionalism, credibility, and management stature of public relations is education about the function and its core responsibilities. What is needed is for public relations educators and professionals, especially industry associations, to use their expertise to conduct public relations on behalf of the function of public relations.

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