

Sailing through the Port: Does PR Education Prepare Students for the Profession?

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Abstract

Creating and maintaining a public relations curriculum that reflects industry changes and growth is a continuous task for university PR programs. In order to assess how well university PR programs are preparing future practitioners, this survey study asked beginning PR practitioners to rate themselves and employers to evaluate their new hires on PR-related knowledge and skills. Findings indicate that beginning PR practitioners believe that they are knowledgeable and skilled in many areas, whereas employers are skeptical of their new hires' confidence. Implications for PR educators are discussed.

Introduction

Many academic majors such as engineering, business, journalism and others that are producing industry professionals make great efforts to ensure that their curricula reflects changes and growth in the industry. Public relations is in the same boat. One of the most pressing questions for public relations educators has been whether or not university public relations programs are providing future practitioners with adequate training reflective of changes of the industry (CPRE, 1999, 2006). And, this question has become increasingly important in the past few years, as the communication media environment becomes more and more complex with technological advances (Alexander, 2004).

The public relations industry has experienced remarkable growth and changes in the past 20 years. Public relations companies have enjoyed continuous revenue growth (Council of Public Relations Firms, 2008), and the industry projects that employment will grow from 18 to 26 percent between 2004 and 2014 (Bureau of Labor, 2006, cited in the Commission on Public Relations Education Report, 2006). In responding to this growth, the public relations industry has become much more professionalized and specialized. Increasing numbers of universities train future public relations professionals with their specialized majors and minors, and the number of Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapters has increased to 284 with 9,600 students participating as members.

This study intends to assess how well university PR programs are preparing future practitioners by asking practitioners to rate themselves and others on PR-related knowledge and skills. The Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) has issued the Port of Entry reports (1999, 2006) with suggestions for undergraduate and graduate PR curriculum, and we used their list of knowledge and skills that PR majors should possess.

Findings indicate that beginning PR practitioners tend to believe that they are knowledgeable and skilled in many of the CPRE-recommended areas, whereas industry employers are skeptical of their new hires' knowledge and skill levels.

Public Relations Education

Public relations educators and professionals have made significant efforts to ensure that university PR programs reflect current changes in the industry. Since the CPRE's 1999 Port of Entry report, several influential studies were conducted (e.g., Neff, Walker & Creedon, 1999; Stacks, Botan & Turk, 1999; Turk, Botan & Morreale, 1999), and the findings of these studies were applied to PR curricula to ensure PR practitioners meet the demands of the industry.

While educators and practitioners often agree on what they want and need at both the entry level and the advanced level of practice, both agree that keeping up with the changes is a challenge and more improvement in this process can and should be made. In addition to keeping up with technology, some surveys found students need additional preparation in some other areas including crisis planning and business skills and concepts (Gower & Reber, 2006; Sriramesh & Hornaman, 2006).

Studies in the past have determined the skills and knowledge students need (CPRE, 1999, 2006; Sriramesh & Hornaman, 2006) and what level is actually found, but these studies must continue since the skill sets and the knowledge areas are changing and growing rapidly. Web and social media skill needs are rapidly changing as new uses for new media emerge and as new types of media adaptation occur. New theory is evolving about how Web 2.0 and social media are affecting communication and public relations campaigns and the goals and objectives the campaigns are in place to reach.

Public Relations and Web 2.0

Advances in communication technologies seem to be one of the most significant changes in the PR industry. PR practitioners today produce print news releases, newsletters, and brochures using InDesign and edit audio and visual materials with Avid. In addition, they seek out multiple communication venues using blogs, virtual worlds, wikis, and online social networks.

Recent developments including online social networks and PDAs expand the parameters of communication and provide PR practitioners a wide range of options for reaching the public. At the same time, Web 2.0 technologies enable audiences to become active participants of the communication process, and thus, challenge PR practitioners to re-think their relationship with the audience. More specifically, many PR practitioners welcome the potential of new media as technological advances enable them to directly communicate with their audiences without going through traditional media gatekeepers (Gillin, 2008). On the other hand, PR practitioners have to give up control over their messages and allow audience feedback and participation while determining the most effective way to reaching their target audiences.

Whether PR practitioners are ready to embrace new media technologies for their practices or not, technologies seem to advance at a faster rate than ever and the PR industry's adoption of technologies are widespread. A survey of working PR practitioners found that although the rate of adoption varies, new communication tools are continuously being adopted by practitioners (Eyrich et al., 2008). Some of the more established tools such as e-mail and intranet, the study found, have been widely adopted, and the newer tools such as blogs and podcasts are adopted at an increasing speed. Practitioners, however, seem to be a little slow in adopting the more

complicated and unfamiliar technologies such as virtual worlds and text messaging, the authors found.

In another survey conducted recently, Wright and Hinson (2008) found that a large number of practitioners (61%) believed that the emergence of social media including blogs has changed the way their organization communicated. About 66 percent of participants of this study also believed that blogs and social media have enhanced public relations practice.

Although the adoption of some of the new technologies is clearly happening, it is too early to predict the implications of this adoption. Many PR practitioners believe that some technologies such as podcasting, blogs, and video sharing will be prevalent as strategic tools in a few years (Eyrich et al., 2008). However, practitioners are not sure about the potential of other technologies such as gaming, virtual worlds, and micro-blogging (Eyrich et al., 2008). Yet, an overwhelming number of practitioners in one survey (94%) agreed that PR programs in colleges and universities should include instructions on blogging and social media in preparing future PR professionals (Wright and Hinson, 2008).

Because today's new technologies are developed and evolved so rapidly, the PR industry is still trying to figure out the most effective way to incorporate new technologies. Systematic research on this topic is rare but much needed.

Research Questions

RQ 1a. In what areas do beginning PR practitioners find themselves knowledgeable?

RQ 1b. In what areas do the PR industry's employers find their new hires knowledgeable?

RQ 2a. In what areas do beginning PR practitioners find themselves skillful?

RQ 2b. In what areas do the PR industry's employers find their new hires skillful?

RQ 3. In what ways is employers' evaluation of their new hires similar to or different from new hires' self-evaluation?

Method

A survey study was conducted among PRSA members, IABC members and other public relations practitioners in two Mid-western states. Researchers created an online survey and sent all members of PRSA and IABC in Indiana and Illinois (N=354) an e-mail request to participate in an online survey about public relations education. The authors explained the potential risks and voluntary and anonymous nature of the study and included the link to the survey site in the request e-mail. Of those who received the e-mail request, 117 participated in the survey, reaching the response rate of 33.1 percent. E-mail reminders of the survey were sent out three times during the months of February and March 2009, and the relatively high response rate is likely to be resulted from this.

Both PR practitioners who are new hires and employers answered a series of questions regarding PR practitioners' level of experience in the industry, courses taken at college, perceived competence with conceptual and technical skills, and perceived competence with technological tools. The Commission on Public Relations Education's (CPRE) 1999 report suggested a set of knowledge and skills that undergraduate public relations majors should master, and these knowledge and skill sets were incorporated in the survey. Perceived competence with

public relations knowledge¹ areas was measured by asking participants to indicate how knowledgeable they believe they are in 12 knowledge areas on a five-point Likert scale (not at all, barely, somewhat, quite, completely).

Perceived competence with the public relations-related skills² was measured by asking participants to indicate how competent they feel with 24 skills specified in the CPRE's 1999 report and with two technology-related skills on the same five-point Likert scale (not at all, barely, somewhat, quite, completely).

The study compared new hires' self-evaluation and employers' evaluation of new hires in terms of knowledge and skills. All participants were asked to self-rate their competence with PR-related knowledge and skills, but those who have been involved in hiring or evaluating their organizations' new employees in the past three years were also asked to rate their new hires' conceptual knowledge level and skills competence on the same categories.

Findings

As mentioned earlier, the study had a high response (33.1%) with 117 of 354 people participating the survey. Sixty-six percent of the participants were female and 32 percent were male. Among those who indicated their age, the age of participants varied from 23 to 79 with the average age of 43. Participants' years in the industry varied as much as their age reaching from 9 months to 40 years. Average work experience of the participants was 16.3 years.

Beginning public relations practitioners in the sample showed different statistics. There were more women (70.6%) than men; the average age was 29 (mode = 26); and the average work experience was a little short of three years (mean = 2.8 years).

In what areas do beginning PR practitioners find themselves knowledgeable?

Distinctions in areas in which PR practitioners find themselves knowledgeable and where they feel that they lack expert knowledge were found. As table 1 indicates, relationships and relationship building was the area where beginning PR practitioners felt they knew the most

¹ Communication and persuasion concepts, communication and public relations theory, relationships and relationship building, societal trends, ethical issues, legal requirements and issues, marketing and finance, public relations history, uses of research and forecasting, multicultural and global issues, organizational change and development, and management concepts and theories

² Management of information, mastery of language in written communication, mastery of language in oral communication, problem solving, negotiation, management of communication, strategic planning, issues management, audience segmentation, informative writing, persuasive writing, areas specialty (such as community relations, consumer relations, employee relations), technological and visual literacy, development of new media/message strategies, design and layout of messages using new media, managing people, programs and resources, sensitive interpersonal communication, fluency in a foreign language, ethical decision-making, participation in the professional, public relations community, message production, working with a current issue, research methods and analysis, public speaking and presentation, and applying cross-cultural and cross-gender sensitivity

(mean = 3.79; 1 being not at all knowledgeable and 5 being completely knowledgeable). More than 7 out of 10 practitioners answered that they are either quite (4 on a scale of 1-5) or completely (5 on a scale of 1-5) knowledgeable in relationships and relationship building.

More than 60 percent of those with 5-years-or-less work experience in PR said that they are quite or completely knowledgeable in communication persuasion concepts (64.3%, mean = 3.66), followed by the area of communication strategies where almost equal number of people (63.6%, mean = 3.65) indicated that they are quite or completely knowledgeable. Slightly over half of the practitioners in this study also rated their knowledge with ethical issues above average (57.1%, mean = 3.64).

In some other areas, however, beginning PR practitioners in this study expressed their lack of knowledge. Fewer than 2 out of 10 practitioners felt that they are quite or completely knowledgeable in public relations history (16.1%, mean = 2.86) and multicultural and global issues (16.1%, mean = 2.91). Legal issues and requirement (mean = 3.12), research and forecasting (mean = 3.21), and organizational change and development (mean = 3.25) are the other areas where beginning practitioners felt that they are not at all, barely, or somewhat knowledgeable.

In what areas do the PR industry's employers find their new hires knowledgeable?

Perhaps not surprisingly, employers in the PR industry have high expectations of their new hires. There was not one knowledge area where majority of employers rated their new hires' knowledge good or very good. A varying number of employers in this study said that their new hires have good or very good knowledge in CPRE-recommended 12 knowledge areas (8.3% -- 43.1%), but the percentage never exceeded 50 percent.

To be more specific, table 1 shows that about four out of every 10 employers indicated that their new hires have good or very good knowledge in communication and persuasion concepts (43.1%, mean = 3.80), communication strategies (40.0%, mean = 3.79), and relationships and relationship building (38.9%, mean = 3.89). Only a small percentage of employers was very satisfied with new hires' knowledge in public relations history (8.3%, mean = 3.05), management concepts and theories (11.3%, mean = 3.45), and legal issues and requirements (13.9%, mean = 3.30).

Examining from the mean score clearly showed that employers find new hires' knowledge in these areas only acceptable. A good number of employers appear to believe that their new hires have an "acceptable" amount knowledge in almost all areas. Overall mean of 12 items was 3.5, right between acceptable (3) and good (4), with the lowest mean of 3.0 (Multicultural & global issues) and the highest mean of 3.9 (relationships & relationship building).

When we included the percentage of those who rated new hires' knowledge level acceptable, over 80 percent of employers indicated that their new employees have at least "acceptable" knowledge level in relationships and relation building (83%), societal trends (89%), ethical issues (89%), communication and persuasion concepts (90%), and communication strategies (91%). More than 60 percent of employers rated their new hires' knowledge at least acceptable in management concepts and theories (63%), organizational change and development (65%), marketing and finance (67%), multicultural and global issues (67%), public relations history (68%), and research and forecasting (68%). However, even when acceptable responses were included, only 43 percent of employees were satisfied with new employees' knowledge in

legal issues and requirements, leaving more than half of employers rating their employees' knowledge in this area poor or very poor.

In what areas do beginning PR practitioners find themselves skillful?

As table 2 shows, beginning PR practitioners believed that they were more than somewhat competent with 24 skills areas examined in this study (22 CPRE-recommended areas plus 2 new media-related areas). On the scale where 1 indicated not at all competent and 5 indicated completely competent, practitioners with 5-years-or-less experiences rated their competence level in skills areas at least acceptable (3), with the exception of "fluency in a second language" (mean = 2.0). Overall average on all of the 24 items was 3.7.

Beginning PR practitioners indicated that they were at least quite competent with 12 skill areas out of 24 skill areas. More than seven in every 10 PR practitioners with 5-years-or-less experiences said that they are quite or completely competent with written communication language mastery (89%), writing and production of specific communication messages (88%), management of communication (86%), problem solving (84%), informative writing (82%), ethical decision making (82%), area specialty (82%), management of information (80%), working within a current issue environment (73%), oral communication mastery (73%), persuasive writing (72%), and sensitive interpersonal communication (70%).

Beginning PR practitioners indicated that they are "not at all" or "barely" competent in only one of the 24 skill areas examined: fluency in a second language.

In what areas do the PR industry's employers find their new hires skillful?

Judging from the mean score, PR industry's employers in this study rated their new employees' skills "acceptable" rather than "good" or "very good," with the mean score varied from 2.0 to 3.7. Employers rated their new hires' competence level at least acceptable in 14 of the 24 skills areas. Those included: management of information (3.4), mastery of written communication language (3.5), mastery of oral communication language (3.4), problem solving (3.2), management of communication (3.2), informative writing (3.3), persuasive writing (3.1), area specialty (3.1), technology and visual literacy (3.7), new media message strategies (3.3), design and layout (3.3), writing and production of specific communication messages (3.4), working within a current issue environment (3.2), and applying cross-cultural and cross-gender sensitivity (3.1).

However, there were many areas where employers rated their new hires' skill competence less than acceptable. In 10 of the 24 skills areas, new employees' skills were rated "less than acceptable" and those included: strategic planning (2.8), issues management (2.8), audience segmentation (2.96), managing people, programs and resources (2.8), sensitive interpersonal communication (2.9), fluency in a second language (2.0), participation in the professional PR community (2.8), and public speaking and presentation (2.9).

Although employers evaluated new hires' competence with various skills as only slightly beyond "acceptable," few employers believe their new employees' skills competence is poor or very poor. Regarding 18 of 24 skills areas, at least 70 percent of employers rated new hires' competence acceptable, good, or very good. Only in five of 24 skills areas 30 to 40 percent of employers rated new hires' skills competence as poor or very poor. Those were: managing people, programs, and resources (33%), issues management (34%), participation in the professional PR community (35%), strategic planning (40%), and negotiation (41%). Fluency in

a second language was the only area where a large number of employers said that their new employees are not competent (73%).

In what ways are employers' evaluations of their new hires similar to or different from new hires' self-evaluation?

Perhaps not surprisingly, new employees' evaluation of their own knowledge and skill levels seems to be more generous than employers' evaluation of their new hires' knowledge and skill levels. However, the comparison between new employees' self-evaluation and employers' evaluation of their new hires presents both similarities and differences. First, both beginning practitioners and employers similarly evaluated beginning practitioners' knowledge of communication and persuasion concepts, communication strategies, and societal trends. Forty to 60 percent of beginning practitioners stated that they are quite or completely knowledgeable in these areas, and about forty percent of employers rated their new employees' knowledge level in these areas good or very good.

However, the two groups' evaluation differed greatly in some knowledge and skills areas. For example, while more than half of new employees stated that they are quite or completely knowledgeable in ethical issues, only 26 percent of employers said that their new employees' knowledge in ethical issues is good or very good. Knowledge levels in relationships and relationship building are another area. More than 75 percent of beginning practitioners said that they are quite or completely knowledgeable in this area, whereas only 39 percent of employers rated their employees' knowledge level the same way.

Discrepancies between beginning practitioners' self-evaluation and employers' evaluation of new employees also exist in several skills areas. Negotiation, management of communication, command in written language, ethical decision making, and writing and production of specific communication messages are the areas with sharpest discrepancies. For example, about 9 of 10 beginning practitioners (88.2%) stated that they are quite or completely skillful in negotiation, while only one of 10 employers (11.0%) stated that their new employees' negotiation skills are good or very good. Beginning practitioners indicated that they are skilled in management of communication (76.4%), but employers tended to disagree (24.7%). Similar discrepancies were observed in command in written language (94% vs. 45%), ethical decision-making (82% vs. 34%), and writing and production of specific communication messages (88% vs. 40%).

The comparison of the two groups also reveals knowledge and skills areas to which public relations educators might need to pay attention. Both beginning practitioners and employers expressed new employees' lack of knowledge and skills in several areas. The knowledge areas where both groups rated poorly included: legal issues and requirements (5.9% of beginning practitioners & 13.9% of employers), marketing and finance (17.6% & 17.8%), PR history (5.9% & 8.3%), research and forecasting (17.6% & 22.2%), multicultural issues (11.8% & 17.1%), organizational changes and development (11.8% & 16.9%), and management concepts and theories (23.5% & 11.3%). The skill areas where both groups rated poorly included: issue management (5.9% & 12.4%), audience segmentation (23.5% & 21.9%), strategic planning (35.3% & 19.5%), design and layout using new media (23.5% & 40.2%), managing people, programs, and resources (41.2% & 11.1%), fluency in 2nd language (5.9% & 8.2%), professional organization participation (47.1% & 22.2%), public speaking and presentation (41.2% & 21.9%), and cross-cultural and cross-gender sensitivity (41.2% & 25.3%).

Discussions & Conclusion

By examining beginning public relations practitioners' perceived competency in the CPRE-recommended knowledge and skills areas and by comparing it to employers' evaluation of new hires' knowledge and skill levels, this study intended to shed light on public relations education.

The findings of this study indicated that beginning public relations practitioners and employers in the industry do not necessarily agree on the competence levels of PR practitioners new to the field. Public relations practitioners with five years or less experience seem to believe that they are knowledgeable and skilled in many CPRE-recommended areas, whereas the industry's employers are rather skeptical of their employees' knowledge and skill level.

The findings also revealed that both beginning practitioners and the industry employers are not confident in several of CPRE-recommended areas. Beginning practitioners and employers agreed that knowledge in legal issues, research and forecasting, and organizational change and development should be strengthened and that skills in issue management, strategic planning, and managing people, persons, and resources should be honed. Public relations educators should pay attention to this finding and provide more education and training to increase students' competence in these areas.

One of the interesting findings of this study came from qualitative inquiry. Employers expressed their concerns about new hires' writing skills in the survey's open-ended question. More than half of employers who indicated other areas in which they wish their new employees had more knowledge stated better command of English language, writing and editing ability, and knowledge of AP style. More than 70 percent of employers wrote in writing and editing skills when asked to indicate the areas where they wished their new employees had further skills. This finding tells us that the most important communication skill for public relations practitioners and perhaps other communication professionals to possess is the most basic communication skill – clear writing for intended audiences. This finding is particularly poignant as many of us mistake the use of the newest technologies and techniques available for the most effective way of communication.

Public relations educators should be mindful of this study's findings in training of future PR practitioners and strive to better prepare students for knowledge and skills that can help them succeed in professional field.

Table 1. Evaluations of PR Practitioners (self-evaluation vs. evaluation by employers): Knowledge/Conceptual Understanding

Knowledge Areas	Beginning PR Practitioners' Self-Evaluation	PR Employers' Evaluation of New Hires
	% ^a of “Quite” or “Completely”	% ^b of “Good” or “Very Good”

Communication and persuasion concepts	58.8	43.1
Communication strategies	58.8	40.0
Relationships, relationship building	76.5	38.9
Societal trends	41.1	37.5
Ethical issues	53.0	26.4
Legal issues and requirements	5.9	13.9
Marketing and Finance	17.6	17.8
Public relations history	5.9	8.3
Research & Forecasting	17.6	22.2
Multicultural & global issues	11.8	17.1
Organizational change & development	11.8	16.9
Management concepts & theories	23.5	11.3

- a. Percentages represent those who answered “quite” or “completely” to the question, “How knowledgeable do you believe you are in the following areas? The scale categories were not at all, barely, somewhat, quite, and completely.
- b. Percentages represent those who answered “good” or “very good” to the question, “How would you rate your new hires’ knowledge in the following areas? The scale categories were very poor, poor, acceptable, good, and very good.
- c. Percentages represent those who answered “quite” or “completely” to the question, “How competent are you with the following skills? The scale categories: Not at all, barely, somewhat, quite, and completely
- d. Percentages represent those who answered “good” or “very good” to the question, “How would you rate your new hires’ competence with the following skills? The scale categories: Very poor, poor, acceptable, good, and very good

Table 2. Evaluations of PR Practitioners (self-evaluation vs. evaluation by employers): Skills

Skill Areas	Beginning PR Practitioners’ Self-Evaluation	PR Employers’ Evaluation of New Hires
	% ^c “Quite” or “Completely”	% ^d “Good” or “Very Good”
Management of information	70.6	35.6

Mastery of language in written communication	94.1	45.2
Mastery of language in oral communication	56.3	38.4
Problem solving	70.6	32.0
Negotiation	88.2	11.0
Management of communication	76.4	24.7
Strategic planning	35.3	19.5
Issues management	5.9	12.4
Audience segmentation	23.5	21.9
Informative writing for various audiences	82.4	39.7
Persuasive writing for various audiences	53.0	29.1
Area specialty (community relations, investor relations, etc.)	58.9	26.0
Technology & visual literacy	53.0	57.6
New media message strategies	41.2	38.3
Design & layout of messages using new media	23.5	40.2
Managing people, programs, or resources	41.2	11.1
Sensitive interpersonal communication	56.3	18.1
Fluency in a second language	5.9	8.2
Ethical decision making	82.4	34.2
Participation in the profession PR community	47.1	22.2
Writing & production of specific communication messages	88.2	40.3
Working within a current issue environment	70.6	30.6
Public speaking & presentation	41.2	21.9
Applying cross-cultural & cross-gender sensitivity	41.2	25.3

Table 3. Top 5 Strong and Weak Knowledge Areas

	Beginning practitioners' self-evaluation	Employers' evaluation of their new hires
Strongest	Relationships and relationship	Communication & persuasion

	building Communication & persuasion concepts Communication strategies Ethical issues Societal trends	concepts Communication strategies Relationships & relationship building Societal trends Ethical issues
Weakest	Legal issues PR history Multicultural & global issues Organizational change & development Research & forecasting Marketing & finance	PR history Management of concepts & theories Legal issues Organizational change & development Multicultural & global issues

Table 4. Top 5 Strong and Weak Skill Areas

	Beginning practitioners' self-evaluation	Employers' evaluation of their new hires
Strongest	Command over written language Negotiation Writing & production of specific comm. messages Ethical decision making Informative writing	Technology & visual literacy Command over written language Writing & production of specific comm. Messages Design & layout of messages using new media Command over oral language

Weakest	Issue management 2 nd language Audience segmentation Design & layout of messages using new media Strategic planning	2 nd language Negotiation Issue management Managing people, programs, or resources Sensitive interpersonal comm.

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