

PRELIMINARY STUDIES BASED ON FOCUS GROUPS WITH PUBLIC  
RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS AND STUDENTS LEADING TO SUGGESTIONS  
FOR AN IN-DEPTH STUDY

by

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## **Abstract**

The study found, based on a focus group with professionals and secondary research conducted in 2007, that public relations (PR) graduates are not prepared for the job market and that nothing has changed in 15 years to improve this situation.

Why? Because there has been no feedback from the professionals, PR students who are hired in PR positions, and PR Students who are not hired in PR positions, to the educators and universities on what is working and what is not working for PR graduates to obtain a position in the PR field. Basically, there is no follow-up after students graduate.

This study did preliminary research and developed a survey of PR professionals, PR students and educators so that they can provide feedback. This study made recommendations based on the main points from the focus group, which centered on educational programs, PR students' curriculum, the importance of developing good writing skills, taking business courses, taking several PR internships, being involved in extracurricular activities, and the importance of learning how to prepare a resume.

In turn, the follow up survey should help provide security for the PR industry to keep PR alive, by increasing the number of graduates due to their success as a PR professional based on their education.

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## **Dedication**

To my mother, Barbara Ubel, and my best friend, Monte L. Wedel.

## **CHAPTER 1 - Introduction**

### **What is the Definition of PR?**

Public relations (PR) is essential to a lasting business. By helping build and maintain a good reputation, PR increases a company's profitability and ensures its continued existence.

The first publicists specialized in promoting theaters, circus's, and other public performances. Professional practice began with promotion of the railroads. It is believed that the term "public relations" was first used in the *1897 Year Book of Rail Way Literature*. The first PR firm, The Publicity Bureau, was established by former newspapermen in 1900 ("History of Public Relations," 2007).

Due to the efforts of Frank W. Wylie, past president of the Public Relations Society of America, and Sam Black, Secretary General of the International Public Relations Society, a sound definition of PR was supposedly adopted that revolved around the concept of PR as an applied social science. However, no definition was actually provided.

It is widely accepted that PR is a cornerstone of business success. However, PR issues are frequently known by another name, such as issues management or public affairs. Corporate communication is the function's most common name. Ironically, King (1981) said PR is becoming more important in business but becoming less recognized. In other words, the PR function may be losing its identity.

Richard Stacy has worked in public relations and communications since 1985, based in London, Sydney, Brussels and Prague. During his career he has covered almost all aspects of the business from consumer brands to corporate and financial communications.

He said, "My view would be that PR doesn't have a future collectively speaking. Defining PR has always been difficult, and there is no other communications discipline that encompasses such a wide range of specialisms. There is a tenuous glue which holds the bits of PR together, which is either the fact that it isn't advertising, or the fact that it operates primarily in non-owned or controlled channels. This isn't strong glue – especially since operating in a non-owned channel is now where everyone is headed" (Stacy, April 10, 2007, ¶ 2).

“So the death of PR as a discipline is both good and bad news for the people in it. The skills PR people have will be in increasing demand, but the houses we currently live in will be knocked down and we will have to find new places to live,” Stacy said (¶ 9).

### **Statement of the Problem**

“Edward Bernays is credited with founding the PR industry, although Ivy Lee is considered the first PR practitioner. Both Lee and Bernays started out at the U.S. Committee on Public Information (CPI) founded during World War I, which helped PR become widely recognized as a profession” (“History of Public Relations,” 2007, ¶ 2).

Edward L. Bernays (1978) closely examined several comprehensive recent surveys of PR education in an article, “Education for PR: A Call to Action.” He concluded there is a wide gap between what is taught and what should be taught to prepare young people for PR careers, both in the United States and internationally. He wrote, “From the vantage point of practicing public relations for over half a century, I consider it high time for those interested in preserving the profession to come to its aid now” (p.18).

Are public relations practitioners who received a proper public relations education more marketable than practitioners who did not receive such an education? Is Kansas State University providing this proper education? The research findings of several outside organizations and data from employers, along with communication with current Kansas State graduates, will allow conclusions regarding the degree of proper education taught at Kansas State University, as well as marketability and the ability to advance in the PR industry with such a degree. The problem is establishing how we measure proper. Many experts and researchers have stated the need for this, but, as with PR itself, no definition is actually given.

In addition, practitioners need to campaign for the PR field, or reevaluate the PR domain within today’s business industry, as Bernays pointed out in the early 1970s and Stacy (2007) points out in the PR industry of today. To support such an effort, universities need to determine industrial needs of the PR field, and graduates need to know the current industrial acronyms for PR, and education needs to become relevant within the PR industry. Again, this suggests the need for real study in this area, but what

to study is vague. Thus, the first step in this process would be to find out exactly what needs to be asked if the researcher is to assess educational programs or industry needs and definitions.

### **Significance of the Study**

This information is important because universities go to great lengths to build a program to meet accrediting standards. That implies hiring qualified faculty and implementing a fairly complex and expensive curriculum. The presumption is that this training will result in more employable graduates. However, there has been no follow-up to determine if building and maintaining an accredited program makes a measurable difference to its graduates. Thus, the implication of such a study will also apply to a wide range of university programs, not just the one at Kansas State University.

It is also extremely important to the PR industry within the business environment, to determine the strength of graduates' effectiveness in the PR industry to keep the heartbeat of PR alive. As Bernays stated (1978), it is becoming apparent that the PR industry is suffering. To address Bernays' concern, we should begin by making a difference at the birthplace of education and knowledge, and that is within the university curriculum and instruction itself.

## **CHAPTER 2 - Literature Review**

### **Concerns About the Education System**

Does the education public relations students receive in a university setting prepare them for jobs in the real world? Many have asked this question, but the answer has not yet been formulated.

#### ***Where Should PR be Taught?***

This important question was addressed by King (1981). King considered the topic of public relations (PR) and business schools, suggesting business courses could be integrated into a combined curriculum with PR to improve education standards.

Bernays questioned, in particular, how PR is taught. “Public relations is treated by and large as a minor adjunct of schools of journalism and communications when it should be treated as applied social science” (1978, p.18).

#### ***What is Being Emphasized?***

Bernays (1978) said present day PR education stresses skills in writing and communication. Since we live in a society where the meanings of words are as fragile as lace and soap bubbles, the PR professionals should stress the true meaning of PR.

He stated, “I have been told by people who should know better, that the emphasis being put on writing skills and the use of words in public relations higher education is because young people go into these primary jobs in public relations. That is, of course, poppycock. Medical college students who want to become surgeons are not taught how to wield scalpels and knives before they are taught the basics about the human body, and blood stream, the skeletal structure, the nervous system and much else. To put emphasis on writing skills in public relations is comparable” (p. 18).

#### ***What Seems to be Lacking***

Hiring public relations graduates is becoming a more risky undertaking than once was the case. Most practitioners tend to consider recent graduates of recognized colleges and universities equally well-equipped for professional practice. That’s less and less the case today said E. W. Brody (1988). Public relations graduates from programs accredited

by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) may be lacking in business courses because most are offered to them only as electives, he said.

Brody added, most PR curriculum today remain housed in departments of journalism or advertising. An increasing number, however, are being developed by speech-communication faculties. Such curricula are logical, speech faculty argues, in that PR, like rhetoric, essentially is persuasive in nature. But, does this emphasis on speech enhance the students writing skills, and does this really make a student any more equipped to practice PR? Many have argued the answer to this question is no.

Business and management courses are said to be increasingly important, ranking just below PR courses. Finance, accounting, economics, and advertising are most frequently cited as other valuable courses (Brodey and Long ,1984). One promising solution to the problem explained above would be a joint degree program between journalism/communication programs and business programs. Similar programs do exist, such as the MBA/MS in industrial engineering (King, 1981).

## **Concerns About Accreditation Standards**

### ***What Are the Standards?***

To investigate the preparedness of PR graduates to function as true members of the management team, a study by Jaspers and Gitter (1982) examined the extent of management education found in the PR curricula. The college catalogs of various MBA and graduate PR programs were examined. A list of core courses for the MBA, as well as the PR programs, was compiled to test the extent of overlap between the two disciplines.

This change in concept for the PR function raised substantial questions about whether or not journalism/communication programs could or should continue to be the primary home of PR instruction in our universities (Jasper & Gitter, 1982).

From the data in Table 1, one can profile an average graduate of a PR program.

**Table 2-1 Profile of the Graduate Public Relations Program**

<b>Required Subject Matter</b>	<b>Average Credit Hours*</b>	<b>Percentage of Core Curriculum</b>
Foundations for Public Relations	4.57	15.38
Communication Skills	7.00	23.56
Communication Research	5.57	18.75
Communication Theory	3.86	12.99
Public Relations Institutions	2.43	8.18
Practicum	2.57	8.65
Terminal Project, Thesis or Comprehensive Exam	3.71	12.49
Required Credit	29.71	
Elective Credit Hours	16.00	
<b>Total Credit Hours in Degree Program</b>	45.71	100.00
*mean of seven graduate public relations programs		

The student's PR background is composed of 46 credit hours – 30 in required subject matter, 16 in electives. Students spend 24% of their total required hours learning communication skills. None of the seven programs require an oral or interpersonal communications course, although several offer such courses as electives said Jasper and Gitter (1982).

The list of elective course offerings is vast. Electives provide specialized, intensive preparation in the area of the student's major interest. As such, the electives offered and chosen vary from student to student, from school to school.

From the data in Table 2, one can profile an average MBA program.

**Table 2-2 Profile of the MBA Program**

<b>Required Subject Matter</b>	<b>Average Credit Hours*</b>	<b>Percentage of Core Curriculum</b>
Accounting	4.53	12.24
Economics	4.64	12.54
Finance	3.64	9.84
Human Resource Management	5.03	13.59
Management Science	7.32	19.78
Quantitative Methods	5.25	14.19
Marketing	3.21	8.68
Production-Operations Management	3.38	9.13
Required Credit	37.00	
Elective Credit Hours	22.70	
<b>Total Credit Hours in Degree Program</b>	<b>59.70</b>	<b>99.99</b>
*mean of seven graduate public relations programs		

The program consists of 60 credit hours – 37 in required subject matter, 23 in electives. MBA students spend 20% of required hours learning management science. In this area, students are acquainted with corporate policy and strategy formulation and political environment.

Jaspers and Gitter (1982) conclude that for the data in both tables, it was evident that the subject matter covered in the two programs was as disparate as the courses of study taken by an electrical engineer and a biologist are to each other.

King (1981) even went so far as to suggest PR be taken out of journalism or speech programs and moved to the business programs. However, such action would violate present accreditation standards. Is it even possible?



## **What Is College Accreditation?**

Accreditation is a voluntary, independent review of educational programs to determine that the education provided is of uniform and sound quality. Being awarded accreditation ensures that an institution has been evaluated and that it met set standards of quality determined by the accrediting organization granting the accreditation. A college or university's accreditation is maintained by continued adherence to the set criteria.

### ***Accrediting Standards***

The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) requires that, irrespective of their particular specialization, all graduates should be aware of certain core values and competencies (ACEJMC, 2003, ¶1). The accrediting council does not define specific curricula, courses, or methods of instruction. It recognizes that each institution has its unique situation, mission, and resources, and this uniqueness is an asset to be safeguarded. The council judges programs against the objectives that units and institutions set for themselves and against the standards that the council sets forth for preparing students for professional careers in journalism and mass communications.

The unit requires that students take a minimum of 80 semester credit hours or 116 quarter credit hours outside of the unit and a minimum of 65 semester credit hours or 94 quarter credit hours in the liberal arts and sciences (as defined by the institution) outside of the unit. ACEJMC expects at least 95 percent of the graduating classes in the two academic years preceding an accreditation visit to meet this requirement.

ACEJMC requires each unit seeking initial accreditation to include in its self-study report the number of semester or quarter hours taken in non-journalism and mass communications and in liberal arts, sciences, and social sciences by all members of each graduating class in the two academic years before an initial accreditation visit.

Units seeking re-accreditation must determine the percentage of students meeting the 80/65 or 116/94 requirement, but they are not required to provide a full census of classes. For most universities this leaves 33 hours in the major. The question is, would a joint journalism/business major requiring, for example, 60 hours of business, plus 80 hours outside, plus 14 hours required in another field, be possible? For example, under

the present Kansas State University system this would be 67 hours in PR and business with just the required courses, plus another 87 required outside of the major by accreditation standards. This equals 154 hours for graduation with no electives and assumes all Arts and Science requirements could be fit within the 87 credits required outside the major. This would add a minimum of 1 and more likely 2 years to the present degree. Would this be acceptable, and if not, which of the required business and PR courses should be dropped? As one can see, this remains a problematic issue because it means required courses would need to be dropped or students would need to spend 1 to 2 more years working on their degree. This raises a question, not easy to answer, were Gitter and King's recommendations actually implemented? One single answer would seem to be dropping accreditation, thus freeing up 87 outside hours but this would have bigger implications.

### **Why is College Accreditation Important? What Type of Accreditation Should I Look For?**

There are several reasons accreditation is important besides quality assurance and adherence to academic standards. Accreditation determines a school's eligibility for participation in federal (Title IV) and state financial aid programs. Proper accreditation is also important for the acceptance and transfer of college credit and is a prerequisite for many graduate programs.

Brody (1988) said most business and journalism programs are accredited, but there is no accrediting body governing speech-communication curricula.

### **Alteration to the Present System**

So, is it even possible to meet the accreditation needs and business needs? Two possible alterations to the journalism and speech models have been suggested for PR programs; however neither meets all the considerations business claims to need, both leave out the management side.

Dan Rich is the University of Delaware's dean of the new College of Human Resources, Education and Public Policy, which joins the former colleges of Urban Affairs and Public Policy, Education and Human Resources. The new college houses the

departments of Individual and Family Studies; Consumer Studies; Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Management; Educational Development; and Educational Studies; as well as the School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy (University of Delaware, 1997). The college also includes more than a dozen major public service and research centers with programs at the local, state, national and international levels. The mergers are designed to maximize the strengths of the faculty and promote new links and connections for learning, research, public awareness and community service.

Under that proposal, five of the university's small colleges were merged to form two new, larger colleges. The proposed reorganization was one option recommended in October 1995 to University Provost Mel Schiavelli by several deans. (University of Delaware, 1995).

The colleges of Education, Human Resources and Urban Affairs and Public Policy were to be merged into a new college for public affairs, human resources, and education.

Schiavelli outlined the proposed reorganization in a letter sent to the faculty in the colleges involved, and asked for review and comments on the proposal from all deans and the executive committees of the University Faculty Senate and the Chairs' Caucus.

In his letter, Schiavelli said trustee bylaws call for the faculty to be "given the opportunity to consider and make recommendations on proposals originating outside the faculty regarding changes in university organization, before final action is taken by the Board of Trustees." If approved, the reorganization would begin as soon as is practical, Schiavelli said, with the names of the new colleges to be recommended by faculty and administrators of the departments involved. Earlier in the fall, the provost had questioned whether the university is organized in the way "best designed to maximize program strength and to affect the most intellectual synergy among related programs" (University of Delaware, 1997, ¶ 8).

Before asking a group of deans to recommend the most appropriate way to organize their colleges, the provost asked them to think about "whether years from now (the academic programs) will have the structure best suited to generating educational connections for students and intellectual vitality for faculty." The deans concluded that the college reorganization should "strengthen academic programs and provide new

opportunities for enrichment and growth as programs build connections with each other” (University of Delaware, 1997, ¶ 9).

In their report, the deans concluded that the current colleges of Education, Human Resources and Urban Affairs and Public Policy are linked “by the common mission of being interdisciplinary preprofessional and professional programs with a policy and service orientation directed to central societal issues and challenges” (University of Delaware, 1997, ¶ 10).

The programs are complementary, the report went on, and share academic and professional values that emphasize interdisciplinary research and instruction to meet societal needs, preparing undergraduate and graduate students to provide essential community and governmental services.

“The proposal for college reorganization poses many challenges and opportunities for the university as a whole as well as for the colleges that will be directly affected,” Daniel Rich, dean of the College of Urban Affairs and Public Policy, said. “While many questions need to be addressed as the discussion of reorganization proceeds, I believe it is most important to insure that any changes serve the overriding goal of academic enrichment and that they enhance the quality of our instructional, research, and service programs.

“My colleagues in the College of Urban Affairs and Public Policy and I look forward to working with our colleagues in the colleges of Human Resources and Education to explore new possibilities that may strengthen all of our academic programs and create greater responsiveness in key areas of societal need,” Rich said (University of Delaware, 1997, ¶ 13).

Dene Klinzing, dean of the College of Human Resources, said she had been discussing the proposed merger with department chairs throughout the process, and that the college faculty had met to discuss the proposed merger. In addition, she wrote letters outlining the proposed reorganization to Human Resources Alumni Association board members and past presidents. “I believe the proposed merger will enhance program development and increase opportunities for interdisciplinary research and outreach,” she said (University of Delaware, 1997, ¶ 15).

This places PR under a wide umbrella, but does not address concerns from King (1981) regarding business emphasis.

Recently, the role of public relations practitioners have evolved in response to new technology and changes in the media. Yesterday students were prepared to work in advertising, or public relations, or marketing. Today, one person may implement all those efforts.

According to an article posted on KU's William Allen White School of Journalism Web site, convergence is driving the curriculum.

“Newspapers, broadcasting and the Web move toward one another as partnerships among media increase. Advertising, public relations and marketing have come together to create what is often called integrated marketing communications. The old divisions are dissolving. And that means what we teach, and how we teach it, also must change” (University of Kansas, 2006, ¶ 3, 4).

In 1997, KU's journalism school began revamping the curriculum to prepare students for 21st-century careers. The result was an innovative converged, cross-platform and cross-disciplinary program.

“One of the main drivers behind the curriculum change was the finding that, within five years, a majority of our graduates had changed careers,” James Gentry, J-School dean at the time, said.

“The goal of the new curriculum is to prepare students to be more flexible, to give them a broader array of experiences and provide an environment for more critical thinking. The faculty agreed to do the best thing for the students by creating a collaborative and dynamic environment” (University of Kansas, 2006, ¶ 6).

### **Direct Concerns**

Jaspers and Gitter (1982) also indicated the majority of graduate PR programs concentrate too much on communication skills and not enough on business and management courses. However, none of the programs investigated requires an oral or interpersonal communications course, but the PR practitioner is still presumed knowledgeable in all areas of communication.

In short, although the graduate in PR and MBA programs respectively devote 18.75% and 14.19% to quantitative studies, this overlap is more de jure than de facto. Course by course, the MBA program provides more rigorous, intensive and in-depth coverage in quantitative subject matter than do PR programs (Jaspers & Gitter, 1982).

Clearly, a minimum of 81.25% and 85.81% of the subject matter comprising the two programs is dissimilar. As the data depicts, a student graduating with an advanced

PR degree has no training in the major functional areas of management: accounting, finance, economics, marketing, management science, or production-operations management of human resources.

In all probability, students also graduate with no knowledge of management techniques, such as rate-of-return-on-investment control (ROI), decision-tree analysis or linear programming, among other areas. Unless graduates in PR studies have undergraduate preparation in business, or continue on for an MBA or engage in self-study, they remain ignorant of the language, concepts, techniques, and principles of management (Jaspers & Gitter, 1982).

On the other hand, business graduates have no more media skills or particular skills at communicating with the public.

If PR is a management function, and if PR education intends to prepare students for the practice of PR as a management function, then the conclusion is evident: students are unprepared. How can practitioners function as true members of the management team, provide guidance, counsel and input into policy, if they are unfamiliar with the principles, language and techniques of their management teammates (Jaspers & Gitter, 1982)?

However, if PR is a matter of dealing with the media and directly with the public, then management may be equally unprepared.

Public relations education should produce graduates not only capable of writing, but also capable of becoming part of an organization's management team. An individual's ascension within an organization could be thwarted; the importance of the PR function in the eyes of management could be questioned or doubted; and the growth and progress of the calling could be hindered, if graduates are not adequately prepared (Jaspers & Gitter, 1982).

The University of Delaware has suggested an alternative that would literally merge several programs to produce not so much a PR person as what they call a public communication specialist.

As previously mentioned, the clouding of the PR definition requires a new translation and one in which educators, universities and graduates need to take part.

It would seem where PR is taught is of less importance than the quality of instruction. As a result, PR and related studies will be taught where qualified faculty may be found. King said that communication skills are of vital importance in PR. They should not be completely removed from journalism/communication programs, but the present system is inadequate (King, 1981).

### **What is Needed?**

In all probability, students also graduate with no knowledge of management techniques, such as rate-of-return-on-investment control (ROI), decision-tree analysis or linear programming, among other areas. Unless PR graduates have undergraduate preparation in business, continue on for an MBA or engage in self-study, they remain ignorant of the language, concepts, techniques and principles of management (Jaspers & Gitter, 1982).

Unfortunately, PR education requires considerably more, and the absence of uniformity in curriculum requires that employers look beneath the label reading “public relations graduate” (Brody, 1988).

### **What Would People Like to See Being Taught?**

“Communication often fails in more than one context, both between students and practitioners, and among professors of marketing, PR and business. Commenting on the latter communications foible, Don Wright of Boston University says, business professors go to conferences where only a very small part of the meeting deals with corporate communication. I just returned from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication conference, and that meeting was 90 percent journalism and broadcasting” (PR News, 2006 August, ¶3).

“We need to stop this foolishness,” said Michael L. Kent, director of graduate studies at Montclair State University. Kent also teaches undergraduate and graduate public relations courses and conducts research on new technologies, international, and dialogic public relations (Kent, 2005, p. 14).

But business schools are no better. King (1981) concluded that business schools were focusing on public policy issues to the exclusion of PR. Business schools, in the preparation of future managers, have tended to focus on the issues of public policy and

not on the implementation of action steps to effectively respond to publics of various organizations.

King was addressing the problem of business schools' lack of appreciation for PR skills, while others were expressing concern over the lack of management and business expertise of graduates of PR degree programs in journalism/communication programs. The practice of PR is beginning to be recognized as a managerial role that required an ability to function at all levels of an organization. The concept that PR practitioners were primarily either technicians who crafted communications or advisors who told others how to communicate is rapidly being dispelled. New texts are affecting the field of PR instruction by defining PR as a management function.

By the 1980s PR is widely recognized as a management function, entrusted not only with speaking for management, but with management. Top officials in the corporate and nonprofit sectors alike are calling on practitioners to participate fully and actively in management (Jaspers & Gitter, 1982).

Meanwhile, other observers noted that PR programs were failing to provide adequate business training. It was becoming apparent that PR should play a part in the policy-making process to improve educational standards to prepare students for the real world.

A study by Buchholz (1982) noted that businesses look to business schools before looking to PR programs in filling issues management positions. A 1979 recommendation by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business stated that business schools should develop a minor or concentration in PR. Unfortunately, few schools have acted upon this recommendation and the courses offered fail to teach management techniques necessary for action (King 1981).

### **Specific Courses**

As for academic preparation, a Bachelor of Arts degree in communication studies, journalism, or PR is perceived as “good background,” and a marketing or advertising degree is “acceptable.” Courses in English, creative writing, economics, business administration, journalism, psychology, sociology, and marketing are recommended. During the past five years, an MBA degree has increasingly been perceived as a plus,



perhaps because it signifies an understanding of business theories and practice (Fenner, 1985). A part-time job in PR, whether voluntary or paid, is regarded as a supporting credential, according to personnel experts cited by Fenner.

Graduates of the relatively few colleges of business that offer PR curricula are apt to be better equipped in basic business courses than their contemporaries from other disciplines. These strengths may be offset, however, by weaker backgrounds in the social sciences (Brody, 1988).

The curriculum of PR programs in journalism/communication programs is generally lacking business courses, perhaps because of a shortage of qualified faculty and also accreditation rules set up by journalists. Worse yet, these curricula are often laden with journalism courses, which may breed distrust of the business environment in which the graduates will have to work, concludes King (1981).

### **Who Should be Teaching PR?**

“Many schools compensate for the shortage of professors by hiring adjunct faculty to teach undergraduate public relations courses. Adjunct teaching positions are great opportunities for public relations professionals who are interested in teaching at their local colleges or universities. The mission of liberal arts education is not skills training, and the most recent public relations research supports the liberal arts approach. Indeed, most public relations practitioners say that their organization is looking for applicants who are more than technicians who can write news releases. The underlying philosophy of the liberal arts education is that well-rounded students become valued members of society” (Kent, 2005, p. 18).

### ***Problem With Getting Qualified Faculty to Teach***

In addition, qualified faculty and professors are leaving the education scene for greater attributes in the business world. “A few years ago, PR-education.org noted that there were nearly 100 unfilled tenure-tracks, faculty teaching positions in public relations courses across the United States. The shortage of Ph.D.s having both professional and academic credentials continues to be a problem for the development of the field” (p.18).

## **Research Questions and Supporting Hypotheses**

The following research question guided this study, which states, what enhancements in public relations curriculum are needed to properly prepare students for the existing public relations job market? The supporting hypotheses state that the curriculum needs improvement by requiring more useful classes for graduation, including business courses and classes that need to offer more practical experience. To continue, universities should encourage an MBA or maybe a business minor or dual major for PR, and universities should offer a course in how to prepare a resume that will best meet requirements of those hiring in the profession. Also, the required PR internship would be improved by allowing PR students to only accept PR internships specifically in the PR field.

## **CHAPTER 3 - Research Method**

### **Research Questions and Supporting Hypotheses**

As stated earlier, the following research question guided this study. What enhancements in the public relations curriculum are needed to properly prepare students for the existing public relations job market? I have also outlined additional supporting hypotheses, which were stated in the previous chapter. The supporting hypotheses state that the curriculum needs improvement by requiring more useful classes for graduation, including business courses and classes which need to offer more practical experience. To continue, universities should encourage an MBA or maybe a business minor or dual major for PR, and universities should offer a course in how to prepare a resume that will best meet requirements of those hiring in the profession. Also, the required PR internship would be improved by allowing PR students to accept only internships specifically in the PR field.

### **Selection of Focus Group Participants**

A focus group was conducted, May 5, 1991, at the Blue Cross and Blue Shield office in Kansas City, Mo. Six Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) members attended this session. Participants were selected from current PRSA members within the Kansas City, Kan. and Kansas City, Mo. area, keeping travel distance and costs down. PR specialists selected held positions ranging from communications specialist to a private consultant. The group was divided evenly by gender: three women and three men. After choosing participants, the researcher contacted each company, and asked for the specific person. Before making calls, a written script was prepared (Appendix A) to keep a systematic and sequential outline during each phone conversation. The location to hold the focus group was convenient for them, as they were volunteers, and lunch would be provided. Each participant was also told this focus group would be conducted according to IRB standards (Krueger, 2000).

## **Human Subjects Protection**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) application for approval of research was submitted after the proposal was approved by the committee members. The moderator received notification that the application had been approved through the IRB process.

## **Data Collection**

After confirming all six participants, the principle researcher then set out to find a location that was convenient for all participants. The Blue Cross and Blue Shield office in Kansas City, Mo., had a private conference room on the third floor at no cost for the focus group meeting. Amenities included free parking and refreshments were available from their in-house kitchen at no cost.

A letter was sent to each participant (Appendix B) to confirm their agreement to participate as a volunteer, reconfirming what the meeting was about, the location, time and contact information in case of a change in schedule. The principle researcher called each member two days before the meeting as a friendly reminder.

Upon making the contacts and sending the confirmation letter, the researcher had confirmed special diet needs. Because there were special diet needs requests from participants, the researcher ordered box lunches (four turkey and three sliced beef) delivered from Bagel and Bagel to the site by 10 a.m. Coffee, water, and tea were set up outside the conference room at 9:30 a.m. by the kitchen staff from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield office. At the conference room, the beverages were also provided for the focus group meeting at no charge.

The researcher arrived on the site at 9 a.m., two hours before the meeting start time of 11 a.m. to check the site. The room was equipped with four long conference tables, arranged in a square floor pattern. There were two chairs around the outside of three tables for the participants, and one chair at the first table through the door. This table was near an outlet just in case the recorder batteries did not keep the machine functioning during the meeting. The room temperature was set at 71 degrees, very comfortable. The lighting was appropriate and the chairs were comfortable.

The researcher then placed a sign on the exterior of the room for the participants ease in finding the room. The researcher also placed a sign in the main lobby close to

front doors listing the room number, time, and meeting name, again to make finding the room more convenient.

After checking the room, signs, and beverages, the moderator tested the audio equipment. The session was audio recorded by a handheld Sony audio recorder. The moderator took extra triple batteries, and the Sony power cord. The moderator used a yellow standard-sized note pad and three black Papermate ink pens. The moderator then took the first page and prepared a sign-in sheet for each participant to write their name, title, address, and phone numbers.

As each participant arrived, the moderator asked them to get drinks and find a place around the table and to complete the sign-in sheet. The moderator greeted each person as they arrived. The moderator allowed members to make small talk among themselves as the moderator observed to learn their mannerisms and personalities, which were recorded promptly on a legal pad before the meeting began.

At 11 a.m. everyone was in place with a drink. The moderator checked the sign-in sheet and noted that everyone had signed in legibly. The moderator began with introductions asking everyone to introduce themselves and announce where they worked and their position. The information was taped so voices were identifiable. As the members introduced themselves, the moderator made a seating chart on the pad to also be able to identify each participant and to make sure the moderator could call them by name. The moderator thanked participants for coming to the session, and then proceeded to the list of questions (Appendix D).

At the completion of the two-hour session, which included a half-hour lunch break, the moderator asked if anyone had anything they would like to add. The moderator then thanked everyone for coming. As people left the conference room the moderator double-checked contact information and thanked them again for making time in the day.

The moderator then sat down to make notes that needed to be placed on paper. They checked the room in case anyone had left anything, pushed all the chairs back in, turned off the lights, picked up all signs and proceeded down to the main doors. The moderator then went to the front reception area and thanked them for the conference room and being of such great help for the session, then drove back to Manhattan, Kan.

That afternoon, the moderator sat down and completed thank you letters to each of the participants and a thank you letter to the human resources department at Blue Cross and Blue Shield for the use of the conference room and refreshments (Appendix C). The letters were mailed out the next morning.

Professional focus group participants consisted of a private PR consultant, a marketing director of a private PR/Marketing firm, several Blue Cross and Blue Shield PR professionals, including a senior marketing communication specialist, health care management communication specialist, and consumer products division communication specialist. All were from Kansas City and had worked in the field 5 to 10 years. All focus group participants had experience in hiring and supervising employees in entry-level public relations positions.

Seven females participated in the student focus group: three from small towns in Kansas and Colorado and four from mid-size cities in Kansas and Nebraska. All were seniors in public relations at Kansas State University. The students were recruited from a PR campaign class and given extra credit for participation. The focus group took place at 6 p.m. November 5, 2007, at the Kansas State University Union, Room 201. All conditions were controlled.

## **CHAPTER 4 - Analyses of Data**

### **Transcription/Discussion**

While transcribing the two-hour focus group session, themes or main points were outlined first. One topic was thoughts on education and what should be added to the PR curriculum. Did the education they received provide them with the background they needed in their first job? This question was very informative because these practitioners were more than 10 years into the PR profession, which provided a rich enlightenment on the research question. The researcher also began to learn what they looked for when they were hiring a PR candidate, how they reviewed resumes, how important an internship was on the resume from the business industry point of view, and for the student during their educational program. The researcher also was able to ask these professionals if PR students needed business courses, and should students be involved in extracurricular activities. A real point of interest came from the probing of how important it was for a student to graduate from an accredited program. These points of discussion are important for the research question and hypotheses analyses. Also, the data collected during the focus group set the outline for the future study into qualitative and quantitative research.

### **Themes**

#### ***Thoughts on Education***

The first question to the focus group was to learn about their education, which was the opening ice-breaker. After all, what better way to build a relationship with people but to get them to talk about themselves? Participant No. 1 stated, “Anything you take helps.” No. 1 went on to say, school cannot address everything, but once you get into an organization and work for several years you learn the rest. No. 6, “A good education is a broad field of knowledge.” A lot of students follow an advisor and only take theory courses and no technical courses. This is where students get into trouble, because they don’t have the ability to write.

### ***What do PR Students Need in Their Curriculum?***

The moderator has concluded that students need to learn how to write for a variety of media and audiences and improve their general writing skills. This skill develops a student's ability to organize their thoughts on paper and in business.

No.1: "Good writing skills helps organize thoughts not only on paper, but also in conducting business." All participants were in strong agreement of the importance of writing skills. No. 1 went on to say, if you are a good writer you can write for any media, ad copy and screen plays. No. 4 added people don't read like they used to. Young people need to read newspapers everyday. They need to know what's going on in the world to learn newspaper and magazine writing styles.

No. 6 stated boldly that the only PR course No. 6 took during college was to develop a presentation, which was never used in the real world. But that No. 6 has written a lot of press releases and was never taught the basic skills of writing in school. "I think schools need to teach students how to determine what's of news value and learn how to identify the audience you're writing for in your press releases and advertisements," said No. 6.

No. 1 said production classes are needed to teach students the basic skills of TV and radio. No. 5 stated electronic courses are good to have so students have a better understanding and have some exposure to electronics. No. 5 also added you must go where the public is and that's TV. So the more you understand the better you are for the job market.

### ***Do Students Need Business Courses?***

The moderator also asked if business courses were needed for PR graduates. No. 2 said, "Business courses are very helpful. Students learn how a company is organized. All students should have statistics courses."

They all agreed that an MBA was a waste of time for a PR student, but students should be encouraged to take more business courses. PR people are interpreters. If the finance office talks to you, you must understand their talk. So, business courses do help. No. 6 said, "It makes PR people more credible. PR practitioners are feel good people. If



you can talk finance it helps with PR credibility.” No. 6 also said, students should learn how to prepare a budget plan for companies.

No. 4 believes students should take more business courses because it’s like learning a second language. “These courses will broaden students’ minds and education so that they can get along in the working world with different offices in an organization.” Students should take business courses so they can speak the language of the accounting office or the managers in an organization. No. 5 added, “Students should understand a spreadsheet and be able to operate desktop publishing.”

### ***Are Internships and Extracurricular Activities Important?***

The moderator concluded that several PR internships were recommended for the PR graduate, paid or unpaid, along with extracurricular activities. The extra activities show that a student takes initiative.

No. 4 said, “There is absolutely no substitute for hands-on experience.” No. 4 looks for future employees who have been on the school newspaper or volunteered for any projects.

No. 2 said, “Internships that are self-initiated say something about the applicant.” (They are self motivated; don’t have to be led around). No. 1, “I don’t believe you could get a job these days without two or three internships.”

As they all agreed, extracurricular activities proves that the person takes initiative to do other things than class work. No. 4 said several times that volunteering for projects or working on the school papers or working a blood drive shows him that a person has motivation and drive.

### ***What They Look for During the Hiring Process, and the Resume***

It was determined by the moderator from the following statements that a student needs to be confident, enthusiastic and arrive well prepared for an interview. The students should have a resume, writing samples and understand how to conduct themselves during an interview. The professionals recommend that students take a course, or learn how to write a resume a cover letter, and to be interviewed.

No. 4 said, “Attitude. If they are excited and they are not just looking for a job.” No. 6: “Enthusiasm, willing to be a team player.” No. 3: “I look at their sample writings.”

No. 4 added that the samples that the candidates have are sometimes cleaned up by a good editor. No. 5: “I give them guidelines and have them write a sample.”

No. 4 said that when a resume comes in he doesn’t look at the quality of paper on which the resume is printed, but the cover letter. The cover letter sells him. If the letter is written directly to him and pointed at the company and they talk about their abilities, this is what sells No. 4 for an interview. No. 1: “There are few applicants that meet your expectations. What I look for is confidence and if you have a good feeling about them.” You really don’t know about their ability until they begin the job.

### ***How Important is it to Graduate from an Accredited Program?***

The moderator learned from these professionals that accreditation did not make a difference during the interview process or if the student would be hired or not hired.

No. 6 said it wouldn’t matter. No. 4 added, when we do job interviews we don’t have transcripts. A college degree proves you can stick with something. No. 1 said, in all the years of employment No. 1 has never been asked what courses were taken in college.

### **Focus Group with Senior PR Students at Kansas State University**

A second one-hour focus group session was conducted on November 5, 2007, with senior public relations students at Kansas State University. The following themes developed from the list of questions found in Appendix D. The first question presented by the researcher was, “How well do you feel your PR program has prepared you for this field?” This question gave the students a chance to reflect on their college years and what they had gained from their education. Another question was, “What do you think will set you apart from other job seekers in this field? This question gave the students a chance to think about their undergraduate experience, and consider how they will compare to other college graduates applying for the same job. The researcher then asked, “Are internships important? And what kind of internships?” Some students had been exposed to PR internships, and other students had not completed an internship.

Next, “Do PR students need business courses?” This allowed the students to interject thoughts regarding their course work and what they thought about business classes in the PR curriculum. The researcher then asked, do students need more electronic courses and Web courses? The researcher also asked a question regarding accreditation.

“How important do you feel it is to prospective employers to have graduated from an accredited program?” Next question was, “What kinds of writing skills do you think PR students need for employment, and what types of electronic skills?” By this time, writing and electronic skills had been mentioned by several students. Next, “Should PR students be involved in extracurricular activities?” The students had strong opinions regarding this topic. The researcher also asked the seniors, which courses they thought were most valuable to them and closed the session by asking if there was anything that they would like to add. This question revealed another theme regarding advising during their years in the PR curriculum.

## **Themes**

### ***Preparation for the PR Field***

How well do you feel your PR program has prepared you for this field?

No. 7 said, “The most valuable parts were definitely the interactive classes, where we worked with real-life clients or went out into the real world to see PR practitioners working.”

No. 8 said that classes that are really hands-on is where you learn. “I really don’t have a good grasp on what I can do in public relations. I wish there was a class that would just explore the types of careers that you can have with a degree in public relations.”

No. 5 said, “I switched when I was a junior. So I kind of have been able to compare my PR experience with my previous college experience in pre-med. I know it’s two different fields, but I think the J-school faculty need to give a little bit more guidance.”

No. 1 said, I would like to go into non-profit public relations, and there’s one class offered. She added, “We go over a lot of the same things in every class, but in terms of actually applying research methods and campaign strategies to actual projects, we don’t do that very often.”

No. 4 agreed. “I think in some classes we learn useful skills – editing, design, and using computer programs and that kind of stuff, but I think we need more instruction on public relations writing. I am terrified that I won’t be able to do this part of the job, and I

know it's the one thing I'm going to need know – how to write a press release and how to write a media alert.”

### ***What Will Set You Apart?***

What do you think will set you apart from others seeking a job in this field?

No. 5 said that an advertising/PR management class she had taken would give her an edge. “Since taking that class I can do multiple things. And it was one of the hardest classes I've ever taken – I'm not going to lie – but it's the one that I probably learned the most in. And I came out of that class with a project, I mean, 50 pages long, and I feel like it gave me hands-on work that I can actually show someone when they ask for a writing sample.”

No. 6: “If I were to say anything that would set me apart from someone else, it wouldn't be from the J school or my education. It'd be from my extracurricular activities.”

No. 8: “I had an internship in New York. I think that it looks good that I went somewhere and did something, and they actually offered me a job. So that gave me a lot of confidence. I don't want to work there, but I know I did a good job, and I know that they valued my work enough so that they wanted to hire me, and they didn't even have a position. What I appreciate most from the J school is that we have to have an internship. It's a requirement.”

### ***The Importance of Internships***

Are internships important? What kind of internships?

No. 8 responded, “I say yes [laughs]. I was actually reading something, it was on a blog, and it was talking about the pay increase when PR companies are looking to hire people. The increase is like \$3,000 for every internship you have. If I had known it was so important, I would have gone out the summer before and done an internship.”

No. 1: Yeah I don't think you can have enough experience in terms of internships, and now that I'm almost done with my education, looking back, I really wish I would've done more internships or looked to do one some place further away instead of here in Manhattan. I think they're very valuable.”

No. 7: “Yeah, I’ve had an internship after every summer and learned a lot about what I want to do and what I hated to do. I learned so much about myself, my work ethic, how to work with people who are old, young, you know old at PR and new at PR.”

### ***The Need for Business Courses***

Do PR students need business courses? Which business courses did you take? Which courses do you think were useful?

No. 6: I would definitely say yes, they would be very important. I’m finding now that since I haven’t taking any business classes, it would be incredible to know how a business works. Because if you’re doing PR for this place, you want to understand the business so you can promote it. That’s the one thing I’m kicking myself over. If I had to do anything over, I would add a business minor, definitely.”

No. 5: “Speaking from experience, I have a business minor. I don’t know if anyone else in the room does, but it’s 15 hours, so I’ve taken everything from marketing 400 to finance 450.”

No. 11: “Yeah, I have to agree, too. I’m just taking Marketing 400 next semester, and I heard it should be pretty beneficial. But didn’t I hear that at KU, their PR is in their business school? It’d be nice to know what their curriculum is like.”

No. 4: “I think business courses would be beneficial. I know that I kind of got scared away from it – the business aspect – just because I’m really bad at math. So, I think it would be amazing to be able to have that business-marketing side of it, but I was told that the writing part was really, really important here, so I kind of veered that way.

### ***The Value of Electronic and Web Courses***

Do students need more electronic courses and Web courses?

No. 11: “They’ve added it because newspapers are becoming more Internet based, but I don’t know much about the PR side of it. It’d be good to know how to run a Web site for your company or organization.”

No. 6: “They offer a Web techniques class that’s not required, but I think it would look good on your resume.”

No. 5: “I feel really passionate about this question because right now I have to design a logo, and I have been doing it for three weeks and I have no idea how to do it.

So technically, I think we need to take a class on every single computer program. I think we need to learn Photoshop, and I think we need another class for editing and design, and another class for Illustrator because it is so frustrating right now for me because I cannot create even a logo.”

### ***The Importance of Accreditation***

How important is it to prospective employers that you graduated from an accredited program?

No. 6: “On a job application, I don’t know if it would matter to the employer if the school were accredited. If I’m applying for a job, and I say I graduated from K-State with a PR degree, are they even going to think to ask if it was an accredited school?”

No. 11: “As long as you have the skills they want, would it really matter to them? I mean in some majors, I’m sure it really would be important for them to be accredited, but when it comes to PR I think that as long as you know what they want you to know, I don’t think they would care.”

No. 8: “See, I guess I kind of think the other way. If I was trying to decide on what school to go to, and I saw that one school was accredited and one wasn’t, I would not go to the one that wasn’t. And I think that if two people are applying for a job, and one person went to an accredited school and the other one didn’t, then I think I’m going to automatically assume that they had a better education at the accredited school. So I would want my school to be accredited.”

### ***The Importance of Writing and Electronic Skills***

What kinds of writing skills do PR students need for employment, and what types of electronic skills?

No. 6: “I learned a lot in my news and feature writing class, so I could write a feature story. I could bang out a couple beats, but my major’s PR, so why was it that my news and feature class was emphasized, but not PR writing?”

No. 1: “I think it’s really important to know how to write concisely. Getting to the point fast. We live in such a fast paced society.”

No. 8: “I guess I didn’t have quite the horrible experience that a lot of people have had here. But I think that’s also because I come from an English background. I’ve taken a ton of English classes, so I’ve had to write a lot.

### ***Extracurricular Activities***

Should PR students be involved in extracurricular activities?

No. 7: “Yes, but I think it’s really, really important to have leadership positions or have things that you know you’re really passionate about, not just joining something to join it.”

No. 5: “Absolutely, because that’s where you’re going to build your connections and contacts.”

No.11: “I think another aspect is that it develops social skills. It’s a way to build relationships.”

### ***What Students Felt were the Most Valuable Courses***

Which courses were most valuable to you?

No. 6: “News and Feature Writing was a bonus. I switched from being an art major to being a public relations major, so I didn’t have to write anything until I came to the J school. Editing and design would be another good class.”

No. 5: “My favorite was Ad and PR Management. I learned so much from that class. I learned more in that class in one semester than I have through all my other classes combined. I think it was so good.”

### ***Presenting Themselves to Future Employers***

Should a resume writing and interview class be required? Would it be important to take a class on how to market yourself?

No. 4: “Those things were included in other classes. They were brief, but one thing that wasn’t included was the interview process. But there are other things at K-State that can help us with that. The Career Center has mock interviews, and they can look over your resume, so I don’t know if a specific class is needed.”

No. 11: “Since I’ve never had to because it wasn’t in a class, I’ve never really taken the initiative.”

No. 5 said, “Maybe not a class, because that’s something your advisor should be able to help you with.”

No. 8: “I think that offering a 1-hour course on something like that would be beneficial. I’ve been meaning to go to Career and Employment Services all semester but haven’t found the time.”

When the moderator asked participants if there was anything they’d like to add, a new theme emerged:

### ***The Importance of Good Advising***

No. 5: “I’ve had a different advisor every semester I’ve been in the J school. That isn’t preparing me well for school or the future when I’ve had to change advisors four times.”

No. 7: “I just wish that my advisor was more knowledgeable in general. I’m taking 12 hours right now in the fall semester, and I have to take 21 next semester to graduate, and if I would’ve known then, I would’ve taken 15 or 18 this semester, but I didn’t know I had to take those extra classes and didn’t find out until this semester. That’s very unfair. I wish my advisor was someone I could go to that I could trust to give me good advice.”

No. 8: “Yeah exactly, because my advisor has been here a year and a half and doesn’t understand the PR sequence or speak English. So I know he doesn’t know and I just don’t go to him. And that’s unfortunate.”

No. 5: “I just wanted to add one last thing. I feel like our J-school could be a little bit more professional. It’s hard to get a straight answer. The curriculum keeps changing. Things need to be more consistent, professional and up to date.”

### **Overview**

As the discussion unfolded it became apparent from these PR students that their previous PR curriculum did not prepare them for the PR business environment. This situation has not changed since 1991 when the first focus group was conducted. Both practitioners and students expressed strong feelings about courses that should be taught, such as writing courses.



In the first focus group practitioners stressed teaching students to write for different audiences. They also stressed the importance of electronic courses. Some 15 years later, students felt they lacked writing skills critical to their success in the PR field. They didn't feel confident in their ability to perform well in entry-level positions.

Practitioners also said that PR students need to have business classes within their required curriculum. They said that even basic business classes could help the students understand business language and help them communicate with different departments in a company. This would enhance the credibility of public relations. Students in the second focus group made a similar observation. They felt that business courses were very important and suggested that students earn a minor in a business field.

An interesting twist was the information regarding accreditation. Three of the six practitioners interviewed responded that the employer does not have this information in front of them during an interview. Some students felt that accreditation might make a difference when considering two equally qualified applicants.

A number of suggestions have been made, but no one has actually asked the professionals or the educators for feedback on ways to enhance the credibility of the PR profession within the business world.

A preliminary study was developed, based on the focus groups, to ask questions of the professionals/firms, educators and graduates about what needs to occur to assist with the stabilizing the PR name within the business industry. A survey should then be sent to these targeted audiences. This study will outline the needs for educators to adapt curriculum, for professionals to give feedback to the universities, and graduates to provide feedback to the universities, advisors, and current students within those curriculum. A set of 12 questions will be developed for each targeted audience.

The questions will be developed from the focus group discussions and the secondary research analysis. The questions will contain information regarding, what electives should be required, what extracurricular activities they recommend, how many internships a student should add to their curriculum, what they think is lacking in the PR curriculum, what is working in the education curriculum for PR graduates. Participants would be asked to provide recommendations – what business courses should be added, should they take a resume, interview and cover letter class, and what do they think about

the teachers/faculty handling the courses – do they need additional education, should PR firms develop a mentoring program?

## **CHAPTER 5 - Discussion and Recommendations**

### **Research Questions and Supporting Hypotheses**

As stated, the following research question guided this study. What enhancements in the public relations curriculum are needed to properly prepare students for the existing public relations job market. I have also outlined additional supporting hypotheses, which were stated in the previous chapters. The supporting hypotheses state that curriculum needs improvement by requiring more relevant classes for graduation, including business courses and classes which need to offer more practical experience. To continue, universities should encourage an MBA or maybe a business minor or dual major for PR, and universities should offer a course in how to prepare a resume that will best meet requirements of those hiring in the profession. Also, the required PR internship would be improved by allowing PR students to only accept PR internships specifically in the PR field.

In all of my findings, the focus group and the secondary research, every question was supported and suggestions were recommended. Students' curriculum needs to be developed for the present day. Meaning, standards need to be re-evaluated and updated for the information age.

An interesting finding is the accreditation standards. Universities place a very high standard on the importance of accreditation, however, professionals hiring not only did not know what accreditation was, but stated very clearly that it made no difference in the person sitting in front of them during an interview. Based on my current research and the results of the focus group 15 years ago, I find that the answers are still not met. However, this one focus group also suggested that the recommendations offered by the "experts" in the review of literature may be wrong. In short, the focus group suggested writing was very important. There was too much theory being taught and not enough practical skills, while management skills were needed, communication skills were more important. Also, while the group saw a need for business classes, there wasn't a great deal of information about what types or how many. This leads to a main

recommendation, which is additional research is needed to find actionable answers to the questions posed at the end of chapter 2.

### **Discussion of Preliminary Studies**

It is my recommendation, based on this study that the continued research should first consist of a telephone survey of 150 former PR students from KSU. This method was chosen to generate a high response rate and to make the gathering of information faster. As the call would come from their own school, and they would be assured the call would not involve a donation, most subjects should be willing to answer. The survey would be split evenly between students who interviewed for PR jobs and received PR jobs within 6 months after graduation and students who interviewed for PR jobs and did not receive PR jobs within 6 months after graduation.

Names for the survey should be picked through a stratified random sample from the Alumni Book in the KSU journalism department, which also gives current employment status. The researcher should also survey 150 employers chosen from the Alumni Book from where the students are being employed. This should provide the ability to give and compare answers of employers, successful PR students and unsuccessful PR students.

The questions for the survey should be developed through further focus groups that would verify and enlarge on the focus group that was conducted in Kansas City, Mo., and would build on the same questions. As chapter 3 showed, this group consisted of professionals who were current members of PRSA. (See Appendix D for questions.) These new focus groups would concentrate on successful and nonsuccessful (in terms of PR employment) students, specifically kept separate, and employers (as apposed to PRSA members).

Students' transcripts also should be analyzed to determine elective courses and grades in PR. Frequencies would be run on the survey data. Then, analysis of variance should be needed to determine differences between the two student groups. Finally, cross-tabs would be used to compare the two groups on extracurricular activities, internships, electives, and grades. Further cross-tabs would be run to compare the above listed items to what employers think is important.

A second survey should be mailed out to 150 PR firms, selected from the Alumni Book. Based on questions from the focus group, this survey would analyze what PR firms think is lacking in the education being provided. To improve the return rate, the firms would first be contacted by phone, thus obtaining their agreement to participate and the name of a person to which to send the survey.

The survey should give PR firms an opportunity to indicate areas in the education program that are or are not being covered well enough. Specific lists of possible classes would be provided, rather than just general areas. This data should be analyzed using frequencies and Chi-square. Answers from professionals and former students should also be compared to look for areas of agreement and disagreement.

These two surveys combined would be used to indicate deficiencies in the present PR curriculum and to provide recommendations to help universities better prepare students for employment and to support the efforts of PR firms. An example of possible questions to be asked and areas to be covered in the survey, based on the group already done can be found in Appendix E.

## **Conclusions**

The focus group and the review of literature suggest PR might be better taught within business schools or at the very least, business courses could be added to the PR curriculum. But, this cannot be at the expense of the communications skills now being emphasized. The focus group also seems to suggest some background in advertising is also needed. The problem is, how can this be done within the accreditation guidelines. While this does not seem to matter to the job world, it does matter to student loans, credit transfers and so on. This would therefore, as mentioned, suggest the need for double majors or at least for a recommended list of classes. This would need to specifically include classes that could fill outside requirements as well as elective hours. This also means PR advisors need to be aware of prerequisites for any courses being recommended.

Since initially beginning this research, 15 years have passed, and I have gained management and business experience, which includes years of hiring, supervising and training employees. During the last 15 years of my management experience, like the

focus group stated, an employee's degree or the institution they graduated from did not matter during the hiring process. But what does matter is that they can complete their work, they are trustworthy, and they get along with other team members. Having a diverse background and being involved in extracurricular activities builds each person's character and makes for a well-rounded person with abilities to think through situations at different angles. In my experience, a person who can resolve issues is really what is needed. But, can this be taught? That is the real question, and one that cannot be answered based on either the literature in the field or this research. The proposed future research may provide that answer.

### **Recommendations**

Based on this study, however, I can recommend informing teachers and advisors to teach and mentor undergraduate and graduate students by directing them to becoming more involved with internships, clubs, volunteering, writing for the *Collegian*, working at part-time jobs within their field of study. Students also need to learn to market themselves. They need to learn how to interview, write a resume, and a cover letter. These activities are advertised by Career Employment Services at Kansas State University at no cost to students but are rarely taken advantage of by students. Future research needs to find out why this is true.

Based on the focus group and my experience in the business profession, I would say they were correct in stating that public relations curriculum should include courses from within the College of Business. That was true 15 years ago and that still holds true today. Improvement of the education program should better prepare PR students for the real world through upgrading the types of classes offered, internships and teachers' handling of the skills courses. This would provide PR firms with better-prepared PR employees as a result of the changes.

Several articles that relate to the topic of business schools, management skills and teaching public relations are cited in the spring 1989 "Education in Public Relations" issue of *Public Relations Review* (Grunig, 1989; Van Leuven, 1989). PR programs need to familiarize themselves with this material that is already available. But, they also need to evaluate how much of this material is based on real research and how much is just

opinion. The focus groups suggest, that “experts” may not really have their finger on the problem yet.

My recommendation is to continue with additional focus groups to gather data to develop a questionnaire to be sent to PR firms and graduates from the Kansas State University PR program within the last 5 years. This should be a continual study to be performed every 5 years to analyze trends or patterns. Completion of only one focus group, which was actually very close to in-depth interviewing, is a limitation in my study. However, the data I have gathered from the focus group and secondary analyses has all pointed to the fact that something needs to be done to improve the PR curriculum. The curriculum needs to add required business courses within the PR curriculum, at least two internships that are PR-related (paid or unpaid), writing classes, and how to write a resume and cover letter. As Steven R. Van Hook states, “I would strongly recommend, while you are still in college do an internship somewhere in PR. You can likely get academic credit for it. A good internship will give you a three-rung boost up the career ladder” (VanHook, Retrieved September 23, 2007, from [aboutpublicrelations.net](http://aboutpublicrelations.net)).

It is also my recommendation that we come to the aid of PR identity by learning the industrial acronyms and presenting this within the education system. The PR identity within the business industry has changed over time, from PR to corporate communications, but has the job really changed? Does this new name really provide anymore of a definition for the occupation that was given by the traditional public relations name? We need to decide what PR really means and then to stand up for that and to insist we be treated as professionals. For example, Steven R. Van Hook, who was quoted above, has a Ph.D. in education, with a specialty in transcultural learning, and conducts international multicultural research. He received a B.A. in journalism and an M.A. in business communications. He is founder of the Worldwide Media Relations and publishes the All about Public Relations website. This would certainly indicate someone who has proven that he is entitled to respect.

All students need training and guidance for learning how to get a job. I would think the university would see the importance of this guidance being added as a requirement to the curriculum. After all, the universities cannot operate without money. If students are not enrolling in the curriculums and these students are not becoming

employable in the business industry, programs within universities die out. We must be willing to be open to change and see the facts when they are made clear. These needed changes in the PR curriculum are for the students and for the economy. After all, isn't the goal of a university to develop a well-rounded and educated student to go forward and succeed?

This study found, based on a focus group with professionals that was conducted 15 years ago, and current 2007 secondary research, that PR graduates are not prepared for the job market and that nothing has changed in those 15 years to improve this situation.

Why? Because there has been no feedback from the professionals, PR students who are hired in PR positions, PR students who are not hired in PR positions, to the educators and universities on what is working and what is not working. Basically, there is no follow-up after students graduate. This study provided preliminary feedback and guidelines for conducting surveys of those PR professionals, PR students and educators. This study started to make recommendations to universities for PR curriculum and for accreditation standards. In turn, this also will provide security for the PR industry to keep PR alive, by increasing the number of graduates due to their success as a PR professionals based on their education.



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## **Appendix A - Phone Script To Focus Group Participants**

May, 1991

Dear Public Relations Professional:

I am calling to ask you to participate in a focus group which will be held in Kansas City, Mo., at the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Center.

The purpose of this study is based on the following research question, which guided this study. What enhancements in the public relations curriculum are needed to properly prepare students for the existing public relations job market? I have also outlined additional supporting hypotheses, which were stated in the previous chapters. The supporting hypotheses state that curriculum needs improvement by requiring more relevant classes for graduation, including business courses and classes which need to offer more practical experience. To continue, universities should encourage an MBA or maybe a business minor or dual major for PR, and universities should offer a course in how to prepare a resume that will best meet requirements of those hiring in the profession. Also, the required PR internship would be improved by allowing PR students to only accept PR internships specifically in the PR field.

You have been randomly selected from the Kansas State University Alumni book.

Your participation in this study will greatly enhance our understanding of the factors effecting professional development for PR graduates. Results from the focus group will be used to develop survey questions. The surveys will be conducted by telephone and by mail to PR firms and PR graduates who are working in the PR industry and who are not working in the PR industry.

Your answers are completely confidential and will be released only as summaries in which no individual's answers can be identified.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you may reach me at 785-494-8229. Thank you in advance for your participation in helping with this important study.

Sincerely,

Mary Ubel

Masters Candidate

Department of Journalism and Communications

Kansas State University

## **Appendix B - Confirmation Note Card Sent to Focus Group Participants**

May 1991

Dear # PR Professional:

Last week you agreed to participate in a focus group in Kansas City, Mo., to be held at the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Center at 11:30 a.m., May 5, 1991. Your name was drawn randomly from KSU Alumni book.

I am especially grateful for your help because it is only by asking professionals like you to share their professional development experiences can others learn more about the factors that support or impede participation in these professional activities.

Again, thank you for your willingness to participate. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at 785-494-8229.

Sincerely,

Mary Ubel

Masters Candidate

Department of Journalism and Mass Communications

## **Appendix C - Thank You Note Card Sent to Participants Who Attended Focus Group Session**

May 1991

Dear #, PR Professional:

Last week you participated in a focus group in Kansas City, Mo. Your name was drawn randomly from KSU Alumni book.

I am especially grateful for your help because it is only by asking professionals like you to share their professional development experiences can others learn more about the factors that support or impede participation in these professional activities

Again, thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Mary Ubel

Masters Candidate

Department of Journalism and Mass Communications

## **Appendix D - Focus Group Questions**

### **Preliminary Study with PR Practitioners**

1. How did you prepare for the field of PR? What was your educational background—what helped you prepare for the job market and what did not help you prepare?
2. When hiring, what do you look for in job candidates?
3. How do you separate candidates if applicants are equal in résumé, grades, transcripts and internships?
4. Are internships important? What kind of internships?
5. Do students need business courses? (i.e. accounting, economics, management, marketing)
6. Do students need more electronic courses? (i.e. radio and TV.)
7. Due to Kansas State University's recent loss (now regained) accreditation I asked how important it was for job applicants to have graduated from a program that is accredited? (I had to explain this question because a lot didn't know what it meant.)
8. What kinds of writing skills do PR students need for employment?
9. Should PR students be involved in Extracurricular activities? (i.e. PRSSA, AD club or business clubs)
10. Did you come from business or PR environments? Were your parents in business or PR and did they own a business? (This was hard to explain.)

### **Follow-up Study with Senior Public Relations Students at KSU**

1. What do you think will set you apart from others seeking a job in this field?
2. Are internships important? What kind of internships?
3. Do PR students need business courses? Which business courses did you take?  
Which courses were useful?
4. Do students need more electronic courses and Web courses?
5. How important is it to prospective employers that you graduated from an accredited program?
6. What kinds of writing skills do PR students need for employment? What types of electronic skills?
7. Should PR students be involved in extracurricular activities?
8. Which courses were most valuable to you?
9. Should a resume writing and interviewing class be required? Would it be important to take a class on how to market yourself to prospective employers?
10. Is there anything you would like to add?



## **Appendix E - Focus Group Questions for Future Research**

1. Which business skills classes and writing skills classes do you think are most important?
2. Which classes were most beneficial to you? (Fill in the blank)
3. Which classes we're of the least use to you?
4. What do you wish you had learned in school?
5. Which business classes, from the list provided, do you feel would be most useful to you in your job? Introduction to Marketing, Business Management, What courses would you like to see added to the curriculum?
6. Should a resume/cover letter class be required?
7. What are new acronyms for public relations?
8. What extracurricular activities did you participate in in college?
9. What internships did you do and how many?
10. Would you be willing to participate in a future survey on this topic
11. Is there anything you would like to add?