

Challenges confronting PR education

By Kirk Hallahan, APR

Interest in PR education is booming. Undergraduate enrollments in PR programs at U.S. four-year colleges and universities are conservatively estimated to be well in excess of 20,000 majors. These include 7,730 members of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) in 234 campus Chapters — an impressive jump from 5,820 aspiring practitioners on 209 campuses only five years ago.

Despite public relations' popularity as a field of study, however, PR education is at a critical juncture. PR education faces an identity crisis, exploitation at some schools and a critical faculty shortage.

Identity crisis

The debate continues about whether public relations is fundamentally a communications or a management function. Today, PR education remains concentrated in journalism and communications programs (including a growing number of speech departments) and has

made few inroads into business schools.

Practitioners and employers also disagree about whether a degree in public relations or communications is even required to enter the practice. Many successful practitioners wandered into the field, capitalizing on their specialized training in the sciences or technology or their broad grounding in the liberal arts.

Identity problems are exacerbated by recognition among faculty — including this author — that public relations might be too narrow of an educational focus in today's changing communications environment. More and more schools have adopted a strategic communication approach that combines public relations with the study of advertising, promotion and organizational applications of new technology. The curricula at schools such as the Universities of Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin treat these specialties as converging fields that all craft coordinated campaigns to help attain organizational goals.

A "cash cow"

The boom in interest among students had led to public relations comprising one-third to one-half of all students in some of the nation's largest communications programs. Despite a flagging job market, college administrators welcome higher enrollments. But staff and other resources often don't follow student preferences. Public relations has become a "cash cow." For example, introductory PR courses have evolved into large lecture courses where one instructor teaches 100 or 200 students. Meanwhile, gateway courses in other concentrations within the same departments are taught in small lab sections with fewer than 20 students.

Many smaller schools also have jumped on the PR bandwagon, but lack the resources to properly implement a comprehensive program. These schools try to meet demand by staffing programs entirely with part-time instructors.

The profession has few mechanisms to address quality concerns in higher education. Only about 105 out of the nation's 400-plus journalism programs are now accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC). ACEJMC is the only agency recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation to assess professional undergraduate and master's programs in journalism. However, ACEJMC does not prescribe specific minimum curricular or faculty requirements.

PRSA's Educational Affairs Committee has created an alternative certification program called CEPR: Certified in Education for Public Relations. To date, only 11 schools have pursued the CEPR designation. The independent Commission on Public Relations Education, supported in part by PRSA, offers many useful recommendations — but exercises no enforcement authority.

Faculty shortage

PR education also faces a critical shortage of qualified faculty.

In job postings for the academic year

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that begins this fall, universities advertised more than 110 faculty vacancies mentioning public relations. These can be found on the Web site www.PR-education.org, which will compile listings again during the coming year.

Many PR jobs go begging because of the lack of qualified Ph.D. graduates with teaching and research interests in public relations.

A terminal degree — academic jargon for a Ph.D. or its equivalent — is required at better universities for both hiring and tenure. Colleges are under increased scrutiny from their regional accrediting agencies to demonstrate institutional quality. Two frequently used metrics are the percentage of Ph.D.s on the faculty and the quantity and quality of faculty research in scholarly journals.

Journalism departments that focus on professional training are sensitive about the issue and must work hard to preserve their credibility in the eyes of doubting colleagues in other, more purely academic departments. ACEJMC accreditation standards state that faculty members must engage in research or creative activity. Training obtained in doctoral programs helps faculty members to be competitive in the research game.

Although demand is booming, the faculty supply is limited by a shrinking number of graduate schools offering a PR emphasis. Several schools with Ph.D. programs have seen faculty with interests in public relations leave in recent years. Pending retirements raise questions about the fate of other programs, most notably at the top-rated University of Maryland.

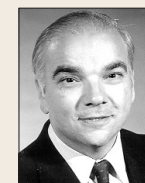
Although the outlook remains bright overall, these are important issues that must be addressed. Otherwise, they will cloud PR education in the future. **T**

Improving the state of PR education

What can be done to improve PR education?

Kirk Hallahan, APR, suggests the following:

- More practitioners should consider careers in teaching and pursue doctoral degrees. A good way to start is to teach part-time at a local university, then consider full-time alternatives.
- University departments with graduate programs in communications should encourage more students to focus on public relations as a teaching specialty with attractive employment prospects — in addition to a student's other areas of interest.
- Schools seeking to hire the brightest and best new faculty members should re-examine recruitment policies by offering higher starting salaries. Salaries in colleges of liberal arts and natural sciences, where many PR programs are domiciled, tend to be lower than in professional disciplines — despite the fact that schools prefer PR candidates with five to 10 years of experience. Schools should also give some credit for years of professional service, in addition to teaching service, when scheduling tenure reviews. Timely promotions are one way to make sure salaries remain competitive.
- Institutions that cannot compete for faculty (due to the flight to quality schools by Ph.D. graduates) should consider joint venture programs with other nearby institutions or drop public relations as a field of study.
- Professional organizations, such as PRSA, should place a priority on fostering doctoral-level education through more fellowships, scholarships and research grants for qualified professionals.
- ACEJMC and CEPR site visit teams should be vigilant to assure that PR concentrations are treated equitably in terms of staffing and other resources.
- PRSA Chapters should make educational affairs a priority. Practitioners should become more familiar with the PR curricula at local schools, serve on advisory boards, sponsor student programs and impress upon college administrators the needs in their communities. — K.H. **T**



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