

Summary of Research on the State of Public Relations/Communication Management

Master's Degree Education in the United States\*

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Commission on Public Relations Education

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## Summary of Research on the State of Public Relations/Communication Management Master's Degree Education in the United States

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The Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) is composed of public relations educators and practitioners who represent several professional societies in public relations and related fields of communications. For several decades, the Commission has periodically produced recommendations on undergraduate and graduate public relations curricula and associated subjects. While graduate education has not been ignored in previous CPRE reports, it has gotten a rather cursory review. In fact, no comprehensive standards have been attempted in at least two decades. Yet, the PRSA Educational Affairs Committee is already offering graduate program certification. Thus, the Commission believes it to be in the long-term interests of the public relations profession that it offers standards for graduate education in public relations that reflect public relations' body of knowledge and practice expectations.

### Research on which Standards will be Based

The Commission has completed a year-long program of research to learn about the kinds, delivery, and value of U.S. master's level public relations education.

### Objectives

1. To learn the perceptions of public relations employers/human resources directors of how they value master's level public relations/communication management education when seeking to hire.
2. To learn the perceptions of executive-level public relations practitioners and academics of what should be the deliverables (knowledge, skills, abilities, instruction, and job placement) of a master's level degree in public relations/communication management.

3. To learn what (if any) master's level educational standards, certifications, accreditations, across universities are expected by executive-level public relations professionals and academics.
4. To learn the perceptions of executive-level public relations practitioners and academics of whether master's level programs in public relations/communication management are preparing students to help lead the public relations/communication management field.
5. To learn whether and in what ways universities delivery systems (traditional, interdisciplinary, commercial on-line, hybrid) are valued by executive-level public relations practitioners and academics.
6. To provide an analysis of schools offering master's level programs in public relations/communication management, including curriculum, entrance requirements, target audiences, and whether accredited.

To achieve these objectives, the Commission collected a bibliography of secondary sources of information such as articles, research reports, websites, advertisements, and published commentary. It conducted an audit of the descriptions of graduate public relations programs found on university websites. It conducted a quantitative survey of public relations practitioners and academics to allow for greater representation and general perceptions of master's level public relations/communication management programs. Finally, the Commission collected perceptions of public relations industry employers through the use of in-depth interviews.

### Summary of First Stage – Results of Research

#### The Audit of Master's Level Programs

- An increase from 2000 to 2011 in the number of graduate public relations programs from 26 to 75
- Wide variety of graduate program titles
- Lack of uniformity in admissions standards
- Lack of uniformity in total required credit hours
- Inconsistency in reference to a “capstone” program experience
- Lack of uniformity in curriculum across programs

Findings from a website audit of 75 graduate programs revealed that graduate programs in public relations/communication management are only slightly more similar in content and scope than found in a 2000 study of program websites (Aldoory and Toth, 2000)<sup>1</sup>. The master's level program curricula that were examined suggests some similarities to the *Professional Bond* recommended content areas, with 64 percent of the programs requiring a public relations research course; 52 percent requiring a communication theory course; 50.7 percent requiring a public relations course; and 50.7 percent requiring a public relations programming and production course. However, these results suggest that there is sufficient inconsistency across curricula that it would be difficult to communicate what one should expect have in a master's level public relations program curriculum. To add to the variety of course offerings found, there is wide variety in the titles of the graduate programs, with the highest percentage (24 percent) of the programs called "public relations." The next highest percentage of programs (14 percent) had the title "strategic communication." About one-third of the programs required that the applicant take the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). Another 30 percent required either the GRE or the TOFEL. Required credit hours ranged from 48 to 21. A majority of programs did not publish that they had a culminating experience.

#### Quantitative Survey of 400+ Public Relations Practitioners and Educators

- Knowledge categories grouped as "strategic management," "business," "theoretical foundations," and "globalization"
- Most highly rated knowledge category was "ethics"
- Highest rated skill is "mastery of language in oral or written form"
- A comprehensive project completion rated highest as the culminating experience
- Split opinion on whether a master's degree is important in hiring
- Higher ratings for a master's program completion making a student eligible for research positions, and equivalent to three years of professional experience
- A variety of graduate program titles

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<sup>1</sup> Aldoory, L., & Toth, E. L. (2000). An exploratory look at graduate public relations education. *Public Relations Review*, 26 (1), 1115-125.

Combined agreement on the knowledge items revealed four conceptually intriguing categories of knowledge: strategic management, business, theoretical foundations, and globalization. The focus on the concept of management is repeated in the findings of the skills that should be included in a master's program. The participants reaffirmed the need for a mastery of language/oral or written form, but they agreed next on the inclusion of skills in strategic planning, ethical decision-making, persuasive writing, the management of communication, issues management, and research. Even in the corollary courses agreed upon, the most highly rated courses were management related: organizational communication, mass communication law, digital media, organizational behavior, journalism, and marketing.

In relation to what were agreed upon program standards for a master's degree in public relations/communication management, external evaluations were rated highly, particularly accreditation by the U.S. Department of Education and certification by the Public Relations Society of America. The participants valued some sort of "capstone" experience, such as a comprehensive project, exam or thesis, and an internship or co-op assignment. The participants also most agreed on delivering master's education in traditional on-campus classroom experiences or a hybrid of on-campus instruction and online delivery of courses. In spite of the growing number of on-line master's programs in public relations, this sample did not agree with the strictly on-line delivery of courses with no face-to-face contact with the instructor.

These stakeholders approved most of the master's programs entitled public relations, communication studies, or journalism. However, master's level public relations program titles historically have not had meaningful distinctions. They are most likely to reflect in which

academic departments they are located. Business administration was rated fourth in agreement in the list of 10 program titles, still showing a strong value to the practitioners in the survey.

The study participants contributed agreement to the value of a master's degree in public relations/communication management by responding that students graduating from programs in public relations/communication management would be qualified for positions in public relations/communication management research departments or firms and for advanced positions in public relations/communication management equivalent to three years of professional experience, as well as entry level positions. This value of education equivalency to experience suggests that there is some marketability to master's level public relations education that has been questionable.

Generally, educators and practitioners had differences in agreements on two of four knowledge groups, skills, requirements, delivery systems, and potential hiring; however, most of the average scores of practitioners and educators were above the mean average on the 7-point scales. This suggests that these differences may be more nuanced rather than points of dispute.

As part of a comprehensive information-gathering process for the Commission on Public Relations Education, this study provides current perceptions, values, and agreements by public relations educators and public relations practitioners who have important stakes in the quality of master's programs in public relations/communication management. Their opinions provide useful guidance in building model curricula and standards for master's programs in public relations/communication management.

#### Qualitative In-Depth Interviews with 21 Public Relations Industry Communication Executives/Employers

- Employers emphasize “characteristics of applicants when hiring,” rather than knowledge or skills.

- Employers perceive public relations graduate education as preparation for entry-level jobs, but still expect professional experience.
- Employers recommend building a “better brand” for graduate public relations education.
- Employers interpret the “split” in the value of public relations graduate education in hiring in three ways: as a reflection on the difference in quality of graduate programs, likely higher ratings by educators than academics, and perhaps a generational change.

Throughout the telephone interviews, it was clear that these communication executives thought of hiring people for positions concerned with the executive level of public relations, not the management function of public relations itself. Wright (1995) defined communication executives as holding the role of senior vice president or CEO. They are “vigorous members of their organization’s ‘dominant coalition’ and function within the ‘inner circle’ of organizational decision-making. They spend most, if not all of their time performing managerial and executive tasks.”<sup>2</sup>

Although these employers continued to stress the need for writing skills, they implied that advanced positions in public relations involved how business was conducted, setting the strategy for their organizations or clients that is based on an understanding of client needs, the competition, and the specific business setting. Because of this, they preferred hiring people with degrees in the humanities and business and/or seeking people with “intellectual capabilities, leadership potential, that would make them ‘critical thinkers’ and ‘creative and innovative.’” These employers perceived of master’s degree programs in public relations or communication management would be “more of the same” as undergraduate studies in public relations and “too narrow.” Clearly, master’s degrees alone would not be sufficient for these employers to hire for advanced positions. Almost all of the participants spoke of the need, if not the requirement, for job experience.

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, D. K (1995). *The role of corporate public relations executives in the future of employee relations. Public Relations Review, 21, 181-198.*

Based on this worldview, these employers did not provide responses that meshed well with the knowledge and skills that are generally found in master's programs in public relations or communication management. Although there were a few points of agreement among the categories that were highly rated on the CPRE quantitative survey, the emphasis of these employers was on business knowledge. They were also less concerned about knowledge and skills and were more concerned about the individual traits of potential hires, such as critical thinking, intellectual capability, and curiosity.

These employers provided concrete suggestions for how a master's degree in public relations/communication management could be made more valuable. They suggested a more "practical" curriculum that would be tied to "real world experiences." They suggested making the programs rigorous and selective. By implication, they suggested that programs were "too theoretical" and that faculty should have industry experience or be industry professionals themselves. They called for more standardization of programs so that graduate programs in public relations or communication management would be more clearly understood, and they focused attention on "building the brand."

While the perceptions of these leading public relations industry employers do not represent all public relations employers, they do provide several insights about how public relations master's education is currently perceived. Two provocative insights that were shared are that employer perceptions might be generational, with younger people in the practice more comfortable using the criterion of a master's degree in making hiring decisions. These employers also gave further insights into what is meant by communication management, separating it from the function of management to a "business focus" of communication management.

### Next Stage: 2012: Development of a Report and Standards

The Commission's next year will be spent developing a report of the status of master's level public relations education and recommending standards for graduate public relations education to be presented at the 2012 PRSA national conference in San Francisco. To accomplish this report, the Commission has expanded its membership, adding individuals who have expertise in master's level public relations education.