

Corporate, Agency Professionals Bring Expertise and Experience

The Number of Public Relations Graduate Programs Increasing – but Inconsistent Curricula Create Confusion

Research Findings Presented at Annual Meeting of PRSA Foundation

Orlando (Oct. 17, 2011) – While the number of public relations graduate programs in the United States nearly tripled since 2000, inconsistent curricula and degree requirements may be lowering the perception of the value of this education and is creating confusion for students, educators and employers. This was the message delivered at the annual meeting of the [PRSA Foundation](#) during the Public Relations Society of America's International Conference in Orlando, Fla., Sunday. The Foundation supported the study as part of its mission to fund research that influences the public relations profession and its ability to serve the public good.

Three studies by the [Commission on Public Relations Education](#) include a detailed review of the curricula of 75 U.S. public relations graduate programs, the opinions of a sample that included more than 400 public relations practitioners and educators on what should be included and what students should expect from a master's degree in public relations/communication management, and in-depth interviews with major public relations employers on how a master's degree in public relations influences their hiring decisions.

"This is a first comprehensive look at the status of U.S. graduate public relations education in over 10 years, and it shows we have a long way to go before an advanced degree in our field has clear meaning and value," said Elizabeth L. Toth, Ph.D. APR, Fellow, PRSA, professor and chair of the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland and the study's principal investigator.

The Commission on Public Relations Education, which has periodically presented recommendations on public relations education the past three decades, will use the research results as a basis for a 2012 report on the status of master's degree education and recommendations for its standards. The 2012 report will be sponsored in part by the [Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations](#).

No comprehensive standards of this sort have been attempted in at least two decades.

"When an employer is hiring for an advanced public relations position, a graduate degree in the field should count in the decision, just as relevant experience counts," said Frank Ovaitt, APR, practitioner co-chair of the Commission on Public Relations Education and CEO of the Institute for Public Relations. "Standards for graduate public relations education will help employers and students understand the value of such education."

Included in the findings are:

The Audit of Graduate 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 uniform curricula or required credit hours

Lack of uniform admissions standards

Inconsistency in a “capstone” program experience

Quantitative Survey of 400+ Public Relations Practitioners and Educators

Respondents see four major groupings of knowledge categories for graduation public relations education: strategic management, business, theoretical foundations and globalization

Most highly rated topic is ethics

Highest-rated skill is mastery of language (oral and written)

Completing of a comprehensive project rated highest as the culminating experience

Split opinion on whether a master's degree is important in hiring, but the overall finding is that it should add the equivalent of three years' professional experience

Higher ratings for a master's degree making a student eligible for research positions

Qualitative In-Depth Interviews with 21 Public Relations Industry Employers

Employers are “on the fence” on the value of graduate education when making a hiring decision, and they expect professional experience regardless of degrees

Employers recommend building a better brand for graduate public relations education

Employers see three possible reasons for the “split opinion” of survey takers on the importance of a master's degree in hiring decisions: the difference in quality of graduate programs, the likelihood that educators give a higher rating than practitioners and a generational change

“Supporting this type of research – to drive professionalism in graduate education as well as in public relations practice – is a top priority for the PRSA Foundation,” said Debbie Mason, APR, Fellow PRSA, and President, PRSA Foundation Board of Trustees. “We are looking forward to the full report and curricular recommendations next year.”

The PRSA Foundation is an independent, 501 (c) 3 charitable foundation which enhances the role of the public relations industry in serving the public good, by raising funds to support scholarships for public relations students, research projects that support the practice of public relations, and public education initiatives that build greater awareness among business and government leaders about the role of public relations in serving the public good.