COMPARISON OF OUTCOME VARIABLES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS MAJORS: AN INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

Bonita Dostal Neff, Valparaiso University–Indiana
bonita.neff@valpo.edu

ABSTRACT

Standards in the public relations profession must be translated to the students. One source of standards developed over the last 8 years or more focused on *outcome* variables for undergraduates and graduates. Both practitioners and academics agreed these outcomes were critical to the profession. This study used these outcome variables in testing undergraduate students enrolled in public relations courses as they progressed through the program. It was hypothesized that courses based on these outcome variables would show a different level of accomplishment when compared to the years completed in the program. This study focused on students' interpretation of new and more fully developed clusters of outcome variables based on the national Commission on Public Relations Education's earlier studies. This analysis compared and contrasted responses from lower and upper level students enrolled in the PR courses developed for the major.

INTRODUCTION

Two major studies on outcome variables were conducted in October of 1999 and November of 2006. These studies, conducted by the Commission on Public Relations Education, established a list of outcome variables that were key to establishing undergraduate and graduate public relations programs. Several research approaches were merged for the 2006 report. The original survey of public relations practitioners and educators was redone for verification of previous results (results supported previous findings). Another series of reports focused on personal interviews of leading senior practitioners and educators via telephone. There were surveys of leaders of public relations firms that were members of the Council of Public Relations Firms. Another survey contacted the faculty adviser to the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). The last survey contacted the leaders of public relations academic programs at colleges and universities. This latter survey established the development of the public relations curriculum since 1999.

Most importantly, it is essential to note the high agreement between practitioners and academics on these outcomes. When professionals from both the practitioner and academic side are in agreement, a more cooperative effort is likely to transpire. In this instance, this strong agreement gave the researchers confidence in establishing these outcome variables as a national standard and, since this publication, the results have been translated into Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, Arabic, and Chinese (full translation). A copy of the publications *Public Relations Education for*

the 21ˢᵗ Century: A Port of Entry (October 1999) and *The Professional Bond: Public Relations Education and the Practice* (November 2006) can be found at the Institute for Public Relations Web site at www.instituteforpublicrelations.org.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A major in public relations is more than merely "courses." With the support of professional organizations such as the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), the standards for a program to qualify for the PRSSA student chapter include at least five courses to be recertified annually. The commission talks about an ideal undergraduate major as having the following course content in public relations:

- Introduction to public relations (including theory, origin and principles)
- Case studies in public relations that review the professional practice
- Public relations research, measurement, and evaluation
- Public relations law and ethics
- Public relations writing and production
- Public relations planning management
- Public relations campaigns
- Supervised work experience in public relations (internship)
- Directed electives (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006)

To qualify for PRSSA, public relations courses must be clearly identified as public relations, either in the title or in the course description and five or more courses must be offered. Furthermore, the PRSSA chapter must have both an academic adviser and a practitioner mentor. For many programs, three or more internships are recommended.

THE PUBLIC RELATIONS MAJOR IN THIS STUDY

This study focuses on a public relations major that has a recognized PRSSA chapter, including a student agency. This means five or more courses and other requirements are part of the program. For these students, the number of courses required for a major at the university are eight with three additional courses available, if requested. Table 1 shows the required and elective courses in this program:

TABLE 1. *REQUIRED AND ELECTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS COURSES*

Required	Elective
Survey of Mass Communication	Independent Study
Principles of Public Relations	Honors
Advanced Public Relations	Honors Practicum
Public Relations: From Theory to Practice	
Community Relations	

Required	Elective
Crisis Communication	
Public Relations Research: A Seminar	
Public Relations Internship	

All majors are required to take the Survey of Mass Communication course. Majors and minors are found to be well represented in the next three or four courses. Majors are usually found on the research and internship level. Thus, there is an acceptable level of knowledge and expertise for both majors and minors.

Furthermore, two major characteristics of this program no doubt distinguish the experiences of these graduates. First, in the ideal list of undergraduate curriculum, *theory* is not represented. What passes for theory in most introductory courses is a combination of concepts and models. To have a program more fully grounded on theory is critical to the experience of the student. Second, each course is a theory-to-practice experience. These additional characteristics provide a more in-depth experience and develop a higher level of confidence and, thus, a greater potential for leadership (Neff, 2002).

METHODOLOGY

An instrument was developed to address the outcome variables identified in the two previous commission studies. These variables reflected areas of personal attributes, knowledge of public relations, personal understanding of theory and concepts, culture and languages, and a broad foundation of knowledge critical to an academically trained person. Seventy-seven outcome variables were represented from the categories listed above. Twenty-six of the variables were added to the outcomes developed by the commission study because they represented areas considered important to this program (Neff, 1998).

The additional outcome variables pushed the students in the direction of theory, organizational concepts (as in communication audits), and leadership characteristics. This program supports public relations functions that allow for leadership effort. Thus, the teams in the student agency and crisis situation opportunities stress a more advanced approach to the practice of public relations. An advanced student or a junior or senior will most likely have evidence of these kinds of experiences. Examples of the leadership can be found in the following roles:

1. Team leader for student agency team
2. Key PRSSA officer, providing organizational leadership such as developing a regional bid for a conference
3. Multiple internships within significant organizations
4. High-level competitive internships often within an agency setting
5. Major recipient of awards and recognitions

Students from the spring of 2008 public relations classes completed the outcomes variable instrument at the beginning of the course. Students had two, single-spaced lists of variables to respond to as their personal assessment of accomplishments on a scale of 1–7 (1 = *not evident at*

all through 7 = *meaning highly proficient in this particular outcome variable*). A second column asked the student to predict the value of a particular outcome to a future employer for an entry-level position. The students experience is varied and may not have as much familiarity with more advanced concepts like communication audits. Thus, when students were asked to respond as best as possible about their confidence in having such knowledge or skill and to respond as best as possible to an employer's appreciation of outcome variables, one hoped the response would be strong.

Table 2 lists the attributes tested. The outcome variables in the second column were incorporated into the study although they were not part of the original commission effort. The students complete this instrument as a preassessment and postassessment in each public relations course.

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TABLE 2. *OUTCOME VARIABLES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS COURSES*

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Original CPRE variables	Added study variables
Communicate publicly	Leader in PR projects
College PR activities	Plans special events
PRSA (Public Relations Student Society of America)	Budgets project
Active in college media	Reads accounting ledger
Aware of social trends	Speaks a second language
Info on mass media	Writes in a second language
Creative	Experiences other cultures
Problem solving	Knows PR code of ethics
Critical thinking	Makes ethical decisions
Skill in technology	Willing to travel globally
Internship	Sensitive to other cultures
Flexible	Sensitive to diversity
Telephone protocol	Reflects diversity in work
Good attitude	Works well in teams
Good resume/references	Conducts communication audits
Portfolio	Knows theory
Radio news reporting	Applies theory to work
Research	Knows assessment tools
Self-starter	Knows evaluation techniques
Social science background	Knows PR professional associations
Sorts fact and opinion	Has a mentor in public relations
Statistics	Handles crisis communication

Original CPRE variables	Added study variables
Strategic thinking	Has two or three internships in public relations
Takes criticism	Experience in handling clients
TV production	Interviewing expertise
Type – 45wpm	Group decision-making expertise
Knows business	Leader in PR projects
Protocol (media)	Plans special events
E-mail/work processing	Budgets project
Desktop publication	Reads accounting ledger
Interpersonal skills	Speaks a second language
Interest in culture	Writes in a second language
Internet	Experiences other cultures
Current events	Knows PR code of ethics
Liberal arts background	Makes ethical decisions
Organized	Willing to travel globally
Photography	Sensitive to other cultures
Pragmatic	Sensitive to diversity
Presentational software	Reflects diversity in work
Writes ads	Works well in teams
Writes brochures	Conducts communication audits
Writes features	Knows theory
Newsletters	Applies theory to work
News clips	Knows assessment tools
Write news releases	Knows evaluation techniques
Reports	Knows PR professional associations
Pitch letters	Has a mentor in public relations
Video clips	Handles crisis communication

RESULTS

The data was analyzed in three groups: Freshman and sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The freshmen and sophomores were clustered because few freshmen begin their studies declaring a major or minor, consequently the population for this category is less. A total of 50 students responded to the assessment outcomes. Fifteen freshman and sophomores, 12 juniors, and 23 seniors took the assessment at the beginning and near the end of the spring 2008 semester.

RESULTS: PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES

The pretest results indicate the students in their various categories have somewhat different levels of evaluation of personal strength. However, the results do not suggest that a statistically significant test of difference was needed, for the initial assessment scores were high and did not allow for much room for difference. The average of the variables for pretest and posttest personal evaluations was as shown in Table 3 on a scale of 1–7:

TABLE 3. *STUDENTSÍ PERSONAL ASSESSMENTS*

	Freshman and Sophomores *n* = 15	Juniors *n* = 12	Seniors *n* = 23
Pretest	5.60	5.48	5.49
Posttest	5.75	5.98	6.10

This decrease in personal ability ratings from freshman and sophomores to seniors seems contrary to what one would expect on the pretest. However, in adding narrative to the scores, it seems that the first two classes come in with a higher sense of their abilities. As freshmen and sophomores, the students lack the experience to evaluate their expertise in the outcomes identified. The juniors and seniors have almost the same average for personal evaluation, but have lower pretest sores than the freshmen and sophomores. However, this realistic adjustment suggests that upper level students are more aware of their strengths and more aware of their weaknesses after taking one or perhaps two public relations courses.

The hypothesis for this study is focused on course impact as measured by pretest and posttest outcome variable scores. The pretest is taken before the course, the posttest allows for more impact with the class almost completed, and the upper level courses particularly provide a more targeted impact on their experience and should move the posttest score significantly. Therefore, the posttest responses should reflect a higher level of accomplishments and, of course, the assessment indicated the courses accomplished this goal. However, almost all of the scores are well above the middle point and suggest an overall strong evaluation of personal attributes. As mentioned, lower level students do seem to do quite well generally on the pretest outcome variables initially due to greater confidence. However, the upper level student who does not yet have the impact of the more advanced classes, as measured by the pretest, reflects only the learning curve of fundamental courses and consequently his or her confidence level is lower initially. The advanced learning experience brings more confidence to their previous assessment as higher posttest scores reflect. Their view of the employer attributes indicate that something else is reflected.

RESULTS: EMPLOYER ATTRIBUTES

On the pretest, freshmen and sophomores were most likely to rate the internship as one of the lowest personal abilities. This simply reflects the short time that they have been students and their lack of knowledge about how to obtain an internship. The internship rating was slightly better for juniors, for their peer network was more active. The portfolio was ranked low for the

juniors. The freshmen and sophomores rated the portfolio as a "1" or literally nonexistent. The results seem to indicate the portfolio concept seems to be a final-year effort and, thus, not part of the pretest evaluation.

Overall, "ability to take criticism" was most likely to be lower for seniors prior to completing the most advanced public relations courses. This probably reflects some resistance to receiving constructive feedback. In fact, the students might have been likely to rate the employees as not valuing criticism as important. Yet, the practitioner publications will indicate "taking criticism" is a major problem among new employees.

The results indicate the students' view of the employers' requirements of attributes were much higher on the posttest (i.e., after they had completed the courses targeted for this study). However, although the freshmen and sophomores rank their pretest perceptions of the employers' requirements at a 6.53 level, the juniors were lower in their expectations at a 6.12 level (i.e., prior to completing the course). The seniors were even lower at 6.00. Therefore, the posttest assessment reflects the impact of the learning process and greater understanding of what public relations is and a more personal understanding of what aspect of public relations one is interested in pursuing. As the students are clearer about the functions of public relations for their personal career interests, some of the more technical outcome variables are less important. Only the few who intend to do more with a specialty area rank these attribute highly. Therefore, some students have a better understanding of what outcome variables are more fundamental as entry-level, public relations requirements and the interest is greater in developing these tactical skills. Nevertheless, the more strategic abilities are usually better assessed after all the courses are completed and the clustering of the last two levels precludes a refined analysis of this idea Thus, Table 4 provides the total sum for all the variables on perceptions for employee requirements at the pretest and posttest points, before a class is taken and after the fundamental class is completed.

TABLE 4. *STUDENTS VIEWS ON EMPLOYERS*

	Freshman and Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors
Pretest	6.53	6.12	6.0
Posttest	6.72	6.80	6.88

Not surprisingly, the students were convinced that the employers were looking for more specifics than they had originally thought. Thus, the responses to the outcomes increased over time. The feedback indicated that the students were seeing more clearly how the employers' expectations were aligned with the course objectives. The more experiential approach to the public relations major greatly supported the employer viewpoint.

DISCUSSION

Students find the different outcome clusters a challenge. Personal attributes, for example, especially the outcome variables dealing with the "ability to take criticism" and "being flexible" are major learning curves. The skill levels of writing and speaking are particularly difficult in

public relations. The variety of writing styles and the need to be very facile in oral communication makes the major difficult, but also a standard that allows the higher levels of learning to be achieved (i.e., those that are more strategic and teach leadership). Students then reach the level of being valuable to campus divisions (e.g., university relations, alumni relations, institution development, and the campus media). Such skill development provides a great training ground for internships and preparation for entry-level positions.

Perhaps the greatest area of future development is in the leadership potential of public relations professionals where the practitioners' knowledge of diversity and global relations brings a greater sense of perspective. The understanding of ethics and the integration of law into the discipline is likely to provide the kind of moral meaning that is essential for organizations that lack such understanding. It is notable that the role and function of public relations in organizations is developing rapidly within the nonprofit, corporate, agency, and governmental realms. These attributes also contribute to the integrated communication effort.

The adaptation of professional outcome variables to reflect student interpretations was not done without some issues. By expanding responses from a personal interpretation to the perspective of an entry-level employer, the students were greatly challenged. First, students did not always understand words such as "pragmatic" and indicated this. Second, the effort to expand the students' experience to a perspective of another (i.e., the employer) was a new experience for most of them. However, this also suggests the need to address further the issues in transitioning a student to a career mentality, not merely to a job.

CONCLUSIONS

Studies that describe the development of undergraduate students in public relations is critical to understanding what professionals need. The profession is moving beyond war stories and a "flying-by-the-seat-of-the-pants" approach; therefore, an approach with more research and evaluation is critical. The public relations role is a more nurturing and healing in the integrated communication matrix. It will also be a greater connective relationship to a public audience, leading to a stronger bond with that audience. The role of public relations leadership is crucial to an organization; thus, the education and training of these professionals is a serious mission.

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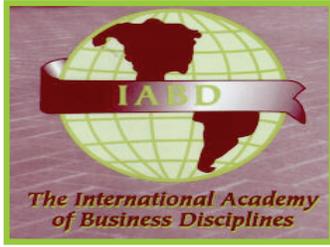
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