Student-led Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Education in Public Relations: PRSSA as a Space for Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

This article examines student-led teaching and learning of diversity, equity, and inclusion education in the public relations field in a Public Relations Student Society of America chapter at a private liberal arts college in the United States. Student leaders used three tactics – utilization of survey data, DEI-focused guest speakers, and driving student representation and recognition in the chapter – as ways to center DEI education. Implementation showcased that extracurricular clubs like PRSSA can be a space for learning and teaching public relations at the intersections of leadership, mentorship, and DEI. Participating students learned about multiple DEI-based issues in the larger workplace through this approach, and student leaders at the PRSSA chapter gained valuable lessons in advocacy and leadership. These approaches can be replicated by other PRSSA chapters, in addition to serving as a catalyst for change in the public relations industry in future.

Keywords: DEI education in public relations, PRSSA, student-led education in public relations, diversity equity and inclusion, diversity in public relations, equity in public relations, inclusion in public relations, DEI advocacy and leadership

The study and implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the public relations field is a crucial part of addressing and engaging increasingly diverse publics (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2021; Schneider, 2021). DEI initiatives have been proven to positively affect organizational productivity and employee morale in general (Harvard Business Review, 2021), and institutions that lack in DEI suffer from lack of leadership insight as well as workplace bullying issues (Violanti, 2021). Considering that the public relations workforce has traditionally been Caucasian and male (Pompper, 2021), at least at the higher levels of organizations, conversations, research, and implementation of DEI programs need to take center stage when issues in the public sphere call for the need for increased focus. The past few years’ unique issues – from a global pandemic to a reckoning of the place and politics of race in the public sphere through the Black Lives Matter movement, or increasing division and segmentation of political publics – have shown that public relations education is at a transformative moment if it is to reckon with exigent DEI challenges.

Despite the vital need for a spotlight on DEI initiatives, there is scant attention paid to diversity education in public relations (Place & Vanc, 2016). While resources to teach diversity, identity, and intercultural competency in public relations are available online (Toth, 2009), and increasingly find a place in public relations theory-building and research (Mundy, 2015; Pompper, 2021; Sha, 2018), most of the work is largely focused on gender-based issues rather than intersectional or multidimensional aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Logan & Ciszak, 2021; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). Moreover, there is still a large gap between research, and learning in the classroom or application in the field (Mundy, 2015). This reveals an exigent requirement for an emphasis on DEI in public relations education, as research has shown that when students are taught diversity through public relations theory or client
work, they benefit by understanding DEI as a multidimensional concept (Tsutsura, 2011), which can shape future workers in the public relations industry.

This paper highlights initiatives and implementation of DEI-focused education by student leadership in a Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapter of a private liberal arts college on the east coast of the United States, and how the implementation of DEI tools and workshops resulted in teaching and learning about DEI in the field of public relations. While the chapter has a faculty advisor and its logistics are overseen by the student engagement department of the institution, emphasis is laid on the fact that the strategy and implementation of DEI tactics in this paper were initiated and carried out by student members on the executive board of the chapter.

As The Commission on Public Relations Education (2021), in its most recent Industry/Educator Summit Report’s findings, indicates, student participation in the Public Relations Student Society of America continues to be a resource for skill-building and networking for students. This paper shows that PRSSA chapters can also be a place for supplementing classroom public relations education concerning DEI as well as strengthening leadership qualities in students.

Learning And Implementing DEI Initiatives

The implementation of DEI has become more critical than ever before for public relations students and future practitioners. In light of the post-pandemic and racial movements, such as Black Lives Matter or COVID-19 public service education, organizations around the world have prioritized executing response strategies of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their workplaces (Chauhan & Kshetri, 2022; Corrington, et. al., 2022). DEI initiatives are crucial when it comes to creating and maintaining a successful workplace; human capital can thrive personally and professionally by creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive
workplace and driving the growth of leadership and mentorship within an organization (Harvard Business Review, 2021). Moreover, to efficiently contribute toward an impact on DEI initiatives, one must start by developing a diverse pipeline of entry-level public relations practitioners (Place & Vanc, 2016). While most public relations organizations have started having robust DEI conversations, implementation of such initiatives presents a variety of challenges (Mundy, 2015). In public relations education as well, the core value of DEI is not stressed enough.

This paper explores three tactics used in a PRSSA chapter to educate public relations students about DEI issues in the industry: utilizing survey data, inviting guest speakers, and student representation and recognition. This PRSSA chapter is situated in a four-year liberal arts college on the east coast of the United States. It is a small chapter comprised of 30-45 student members in any given academic year. Public relations classes at the institution average 15-20 students per cohort, for a student population of approximately 50-75 undergraduate students in the public relations concentration in total. Membership in the PRSSA chapter, thus, varies between a third and half of the public relations students at the institution, apart from attracting student members interested in public relations who are from other schools and majors in the college.

In detailing the approaches used by the PRSSA chapter in furthering DEI education in the public relations field, this paper will not only reveal the effectiveness of each tactic, but also showcase the challenges that one might encounter during implementation. This examination starts by defining each element within the initiatives, along with their respective implications and benefits. The following definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion were used in this paper.

According to the PRSA Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Toolkit (PRSA, 2021), “diversity can be defined as the sum of the ways that people are both alike and different. The dimensions of diversity include,
but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, culture, religion, mental and physical ability, class, or immigration status” (p. 3). Diversity encompasses individuals with diverse backgrounds, values, experiences, skills, and expertise, and is considered a requirement for implementing social justice. Diversity enables one to understand the presence of differences in a given setting.

Inclusion, on the other hand, builds a culture where everyone feels welcome by actively inviting every individual or group(s) to contribute and participate. The PRSA Toolkit (2021) uses a definition from the Society for Human Resource Management to state that inclusion is “the achievement of a work environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully, have equal access to opportunities and resources, and can contribute fully to the organization’s success” (p. 6). An inclusive work environment is supportive, respectful, and collaborative, and offers respect to everyone in words and actions. By building a robust group of diverse individuals and creating a vibrant climate of inclusiveness, organizations can effectively leverage the resources of diversity to advance their collective capabilities.

Finally, equity provides support based on specific needs, and is manifested in fair access, equal opportunity, provision of resources, and an ability to thrive in an environment of respect and dignity. Equity “look[s] past the ideal of sameness, past the “mechanical application of rules” that purport sameness as the measure of success, and toward systems and societies that treat people as they deserve to be treated” (Belden et al., 2018, p. 1). Whereas diversity refers to the many ways that people differ, equity is about creating fair access, opportunity, and advancement for all those different people. Women, for example, are historically underrepresented in the workplace, as are various racial and ethnic minorities throughout the United States and the rest of the world. Equitable access to the workplace for these groups would require fair
and just access to all the opportunities enjoyed by traditionally powerful groups.

The benefits of DEI initiatives can not only be seen as a political, economic, and social transformation within a public relations organization, but also as securing the future for the next generation toward diverse, inclusive, and equitable contribution. Although implementing DEI initiatives might not traditionally be the norm in most industries, the benefits of DEI initiatives are unquestionably healthy for the growth of an organization (Harvard Business Review, 2021). For instance, diversity and inclusion boost creativity and innovation in a workplace. People from a variety of backgrounds often offer distinct solutions, driving difference in the decision-making process. An increase in creativity fueled by inclusive practices also helps to spark unique client/customer relationships in public relations organizations (Place & Vanc, 2016). Diversity and inclusion in public relations can create a more positive reputation, increase marketplace awareness, and lead to a more diverse, and subsequently, larger client base. Equity, centering on the growth of performance of individuals, not only creates more effective work relationships, but also generates greater productivity within the organization. A team with positive working relationships will be more productive, engaged, and focused. Equity is also important for recruitment and retention, which minimizes the cost of losing diverse talent within the organization.

With society becoming more diverse and social media amplifying DEI issues (Bardhan, 2016), young workers in particular are becoming acutely aware of the diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in the industry and in their potential workplaces (PRSA, 2021). While it is critical for public relations organizations to itemize DEI initiatives as part of their business strategy, educational institutions, such as colleges and universities, should also simultaneously encourage such initiatives to ensure preparation of future practitioners.
However, the reality is that educational institutions lack suitable DEI education in public relations (Mundy, 2015). Pompper’s (2005) findings from focus groups conducted with African American public relations practitioners show that the public relations curriculum falls short in teaching about multicultural issues at the college level. Waymer and Brown (2018) found that race played a role in undergraduate education and practitioners’ entry into the public relations industry – students from an underrepresented racial background reported discomfort and a need to prove themselves both as students and as entry-level practitioners. Similarly, Brown, Waymer, and Zhou (2019) found that minority students found themselves excluded from educational and social public relations experiences during their undergraduate education. Specifically, male and underrepresented racial and ethnic minority students reported unsatisfactory experiences in relation to networking and mentoring opportunities. This showcases a lack of DEI-focused education in public relations.

Bardhan and Gower’s (2020) study on student and faculty/educator views on DEI in public relations details that both students and faculty/educators understand the gaps in DEI education in public relations education. Both groups understood the need for individuals in positions of leadership to herald change in DEI efforts, but within public relations education, the three themes that could help in improving DEI education were found to be, “(1) diversifying curriculum, (2) paying attention to the learning environment, and (3) educator responsibility and structural change” (p. 128).

Acknowledging the need for better DEI-focused education in public relations, this paper details the work of student leaders in a PRSSA chapter at an institution of higher education, who successfully implemented student-led DEI education in public relations. In the academic year 2020-2021, an executive board member at the PRSSA
chapter in question, after attending DEI-specific panels at ICON 2020 (Ferenchak, 2020) the Public Relations Society of America’s virtual conference, proposed a new position on the chapter’s executive board: Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The chapter’s advisor possessed a strong foundation in intercultural and interpersonal communication skills with the ability to recognize the communicative needs and values of people from diverse backgrounds, which they used to execute DEI initiatives through student mentorship and leadership. Recognizing the need for the position, the advisor welcomed the proposal, and the position was added to the executive board of the chapter. The Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion was tasked with promoting DEI learning and practices in the public relations field by organizing both virtual and in-person events. In academic years 2020-21, and 2021-22, the chapter has successfully organized multiple DEI events and learning for the undergraduate student community, using the three tactics of utilizing survey data, inviting guest speakers whose expertise focused on DEI practices in organizations, and student representation and recognition.

**Utilizing Survey Data**

In spring 2020, as the world was undergoing the peak of a global health crisis, the Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the PRSSA chapter initiated the very first virtual DEI event with a guest speaker, along with the first DEI survey. During the planning process for the event, the VP of DEI gathered a variety of questions from the chapter’s general membership, and the guest speaker shared that a practical way to implement DEI initiatives is through surveys. The guest speaker stated that their firm implemented survey use in DEI efforts by sending out an annual survey to all the employees toward the end of the year. They further reported that in response to the 2020 pandemic and various ongoing social justice movements, the 2020 annual survey at the firm covered questions related to understanding the mental and physical health of every employee,
seeking opinions on future working models that met everyone’s needs, as well as future workforce planning on recruiting diverse talent. A survey not only allows the organization to gather a large amount of information, but also allows for analyzing the data, after which the organization can take hands-on approaches to make an impact on the employees and the growth of an organization as a whole.

Immediately after this first event, the VP of DEI took the advice of the speaker and sent out the PRSSA chapter’s first DEI survey to its membership. The survey questions asked respondents questions about their college background, preferred pronouns, interest in areas of public relations, their awareness level about DEI, the DEI topics they would be interested in learning about, and the type of events they would be interested in attending. The goal of the survey was to give members a space for expressing their interest in DEI areas that could be used for future programming. Since this was the first survey being administered, the chapter leadership started with surveying gender identity and pronoun use within the chapter membership, with the understanding that further economic, social, and cultural diversity could be explored in future surveys. The survey received 15 responses, which was 75% of the membership of the PRSSA chapter during the semester.

Results indicated that membership comprised an overwhelming majority of women as opposed to men with 21% of respondents being men, and 79% women. There was more diversity in relation to majors, with 33.3% students from the school of business, 60% from the school of liberal arts, and 6.7% from the school of engineering. Considering that the public relations program was housed in the school of liberal arts, it was expected that most of the membership in the PRSSA chapter would be from this school. Finally, interests in areas of public relations and DEI events showed a greater variation in professional interests among student members, with 13.3% interested in beauty or lifestyle PR, 13.3%
interested in sports PR, 26.7% interested in celebrity or entertainment PR, 20% interested in fashion PR, 6.7% interested in event planning, 13.3% in crisis communication, and 6.7% responding ‘not sure.’ Similarly, DEI topics of interest were varied, with stereotypes and bias being the topic students were most interested in, with more than a third (35.7%) of respondents being interested in the topic. Cultural diversity and generational diversity were ranked second and third, showing that 21.4% and 14.3% of respondents were interested in them respectively. The initiation of the survey method and participation by members showed development of student leadership as well as the recognition of DEI from the current generation.

Surveying students can be a valuable way of understanding their needs and interests. Brown & Del Russo (2022) found that guest speakers appreciate knowing about students’ interests and career goals, and surveying students beforehand is a good way to invite speakers who can address students’ professional inquiries. Students’ preferences about topics or speakers can prove to be helpful as this can supplement classroom learning with practitioners’ expertise, and links formal classroom instruction with informal settings and interaction with individuals working in the field.

In addition to being helpful for speakers, using surveys to organize events that are attractive to underrepresented students in the field is also a way of providing equitable programming. Since men and students from certain racial and ethnic groups are often the minority in public relations (Brown et al., 2019), surveys provide them with a way to register their interest in different areas within public relations. Kapucu (2012) recognizes that student participation in choice of learning topics develops communities of practice by transforming spaces of learning into networked and interactive environments.
DEI Guest Speakers

Based on the analysis of data collected through the survey, the VP of DEI concluded that one of the issues generating the most interest among current members was the gender pay gap inequality in professional settings. Thus, in fall 2021, the VP of DEI put forward a second DEI event titled “Empowering Women: Salary Negotiation and Gender Wage Gap.”

The director of the career development center at the college, as well as a professor heading the women and gender center at the college were invited as the two guest speakers. Both speakers represented female leadership in the college community with their respective expertise, and had organized leadership, mentorship, and DEI initiatives with college students over the years.

The first speaker presented statistics about the average male and female salary range in the public relations field, which included a huge gap despite women having taken over most positions within the industry in recent research (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). She then illustrated the causes of the gender wage gap, including potential discrimination, differences in years of experience, and differences in hours worked. While it is critical to be aware of the potential issues that women might encounter regarding the pay gap, knowledge of how to negotiate salary and benefits is more practical for individuals to recognize their value in their future workplace, especially ones who were looking forward to implementing their learning at entry level positions in the industry in the next few months or years.

The guest speaker then led students through the steps in negotiating salaries. The first step, she mentioned, is to conduct research and practice the negotiation. Students could use websites such as Glassdoor, Indeed.com, or Salary.com, to review the average industry salary for a similar position. Next, students could brainstorm and list their non-negotiable requirements, such as flexibility of workplaces, sick days, vacation days,
or relocation opportunities. The second step, she said, was to adjust and listen. This step was considered the most vital part of the negotiation process as one might be directly communicating with the hiring manager. Therefore, the speaker emphasized that students should listen carefully and respond respectfully. However, students should also use the preparation from the first step to resell their potential value to the company. The final step, then, was to confirm and respond after negotiations. While some students might not be able to negotiate the entirety of what they expected, the understanding of knowing when to stop was also mentioned as a major part of the negotiation. The speaker then led attendees through a mock exercise, ending with an assessment of students’ mistakes from the mock negotiation to avoid similar situations in the future.

The second speaker at this event took a different approach of sharing her personal experience working at the college. As a Caucasian female professor, she emphasized the importance of increasing faculty diversity across campus. Since students at higher educational institutions are becoming more diverse than ever before, recruiting and retaining diverse faculty and staff becomes critical (Washington et al., 2021). This speaker related DEI initiatives to her work environment and concluded her speech by stressing the importance of implementing a DEI-focused education that could make a significant impact on current and future generations.

Inviting DEI-focused guest speakers provided an opportunity for attendees to discuss gender equality from an educational institution and public relations industry standpoint, and leveraged students’ practical skills such as salary negotiation for future endeavors. In addition to that, students who organized the events understood the critical role of student leadership and initiative in advancing DEI in student clubs.

The chapter also platformed other DEI-focused guest speakers, among them, a 2016 alumna and former active member of the PRSSA
chapter of the college. The alumna, who worked as a recruiter in the financial services industry, detailed her past internship experiences at numerous public relations firms. Those and her existing role provided her with a distinct understanding of the challenges in implementing DEI initiatives in organizations.

This event provided a comprehensive overview of DEI in a workplace and outlined the obstacles that one might potentially face during its implementation. For instance, the speaker shared her knowledge of each element of DEI. She stated that she never paid much attention to such initiatives when she was enrolled at the institution, but after a few internship experiences in professional settings, she recognized that there is indeed a lack of diversity within the public relations industry. She shared that when it came to brainstorming strategies and tactics for clients, innovation and creativity matter, expanding the spectrum of new perspectives and ideas. Furthermore, she emphasized that maintaining healthy and transparent relationships with clients and journalists from differing backgrounds is also incredibly critical to working in the public relations industry. Successful implementation of DEI initiatives not only allows employees to speak candidly from their authentic selves, but also increases trustworthy engagement with and among multiple stakeholder groups.

Merle & Craig (2017) surveyed mass communication students’ perceptions of guest speakers, and found that an in-person interactive presentation style emphasizing personal examples and professional tips shared by speakers was found valuable by students. Similarly, Ji, Jain and Axinn (2021) found that students relate to speakers who they find relatable, notably, alumni and recent graduates who are able to speak about career-related topics. In line with the literature on best practices for invited speakers, it can be seen that the guest speaker events outlined above were from a practitioner standpoint, and involved interactive elements like
workshops and/or questions from attendees as a part of the event.

Inviting guest speakers can benefit students by providing them with insights from practitioners currently working in the field as well as an opportunity for networking and guidance from professionals (Kim & Freberg, 2017). Students can reach out individually to speakers for internship help or career guidance, and will also be able to continue the conversation about diversity, equity, and inclusion by reaching out to the speaker after the event. In this way, guest speaker events can serve the purpose of providing mentorship and a platform for connecting students and educators to practitioners in the public relations field.

**Student Representation and Recognition**

Besides the implementation of surveys and DEI-focused guest speakers, representation and recognition were also used as effective tactics to strengthen leadership skills among students and allow their voices to be heard. First, considering representation, the chapter recruited student members and leaders from multiple schools and departments of the college. While students from the business school, traditionally marketing or management majors, had participated in the chapter for a number of previous years, 2021-22 was the first year where a few engineering students were also actively recruited and joined as members and leaders in the organization. The results of the survey mentioned above indicated that membership included diversity and inclusivity in relation to gender, majors, and professional interests among student members. Minority groups often are underrepresented and feel uncomfortable as public relations students (Brown et al., 2019; Waymer & Brown, 2018), therefore, a deliberate effort was made toward inclusive recruitment and welcoming a diverse membership in the PRSSA chapter, particularly in relation to educational backgrounds and professional interests. The recognition of DEI initiatives in improving the overall health and impact of a group led student leaders in the chapter to focus on recruiting and retaining diverse
membership, which in turn led to inclusive education and activities for students. This tactic is in line with Brown, Waymer, and Zhou’s (2019) recommendation that experiential learning through PRSSA chapter activities should be equitable and inclusive of underrepresented groups, and minority groups should also take part in mentorship and networking opportunities.

Other than the push for more diverse and inclusive representation, recognition was also deemed important for individuals to be rewarded for their good work. As an element of recognition, in the fall of 2021, the chapter advisor nominated the 2021-22 VP of DEI for a Social Impact Award given by PR News (PR News, 2022). The awards recognize industry leaders and students who advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and honor communicators who use their platforms to help create a diverse, equitable future within the communication industry. The 2021-22 VP of DEI was recognized as an undergraduate student diversity leader by PR News and was named a Social Impact Award finalist.

Additionally, the initial creation of the VP of DEI position itself was an act of recognition among student leaders of the club that DEI was an important element in the future of public relations, which demanded the creation of a separate role on the executive board. This recognition of needs and initiative to create a new DEI-centered position was entirely student-led, although aided by the advisor of the chapter.

Student representation and recognition is not merely including students for its own sake, or rewarding students’ one-time achievement. Such an approach aims to set a blueprint for future students in the organization as well. For instance, the VP of DEI mentioned that his experience while working in the role allowed him to partake in professional development activities and to strengthen his social skills, including communication skills, networking, collaborating with others, being a committee leader, and shaping decision-making processes. The
2022-23 VP-elect of DEI has already shown her interest in furthering the work undertaken by her predecessors in her ballot statement. Essentially, the skills learned through this position not only developed due to initiatives being led by members and leaders of a student organization focused on DEI, but the implementation also led to a more diverse and inclusive campus experience as well, providing a model for future members to start and sustain advocacy for DEI initiatives in other student clubs.

**Conclusion**

This paper explored the effectiveness of three tactics used by a PRSSA chapter in a private liberal arts school in the United States, namely, utilization of survey data, inviting guest speakers with expertise in DEI, and student representation and recognition of student leadership, in advancing DEI education. Implementation of surveys in the chapter ensured everyone was heard, and the tactic had the additional effect of transforming the future decision-making process and programming. Multiple DEI-focused guest speakers provided an opportunity for students to learn and explore the implications of DEI in various professional settings. Lastly, diverse student representation and recognition of student leaders not only set up a model for future students and other clubs on campus, but also recognized students’ achievements in advocating for DEI.

This PRSSA chapter’s student leaders have only utilized three tactics so far, but applications can be further expanded to other areas like setting up mentor-mentee relationships between underrepresented groups in the field and current PRSSA students, education about other intersectional DEI issues, conducting research about barriers to DEI issues in the public relations field, brainstorming solutions to gatekeeping, and engaging more industry leaders in conversations about DEI issues, to name a few. Additionally, the tactics mentioned in this article, as well as
the institution of a Vice President of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion position can be emulated by other PRSSA chapters’ executive boards at other institutions.

One of the needs identified was stronger evaluation methods to determine whether the tactics employed were effective in increasing student attendance, engagement, and morale in members. For instance, surveys conducted after the guest speaker events would provide more feedback about effectiveness and further topics of interest to student members. Further efforts by the chapter can include programming about intersectional DEI issues or issues that are not generally discussed in public relations education.

While this paper explores DEI education of public relations students who are about to enter the industry, there is also recognition of the fact that change within the field about DEI issues is still slow in coming (Mundy, 2015). However, student leaders expressed hope that educating the current cohort will lead to a transformation toward DEI-focused initiatives when they assume change-making abilities within the industry.

Since public relations research and pedagogy largely do not focus as much on DEI issues, or do so in a manner that primarily highlights race or gender as a point of diversity (Brown et al., 2019; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017; Waymer & Brown, 2018), this examination shows that student organizations can be a powerful place of education about intersectionality and DEI issues in the public relations field. Through reviewing specific tactics used by a PRSSA chapter in a private liberal arts college in the United States, one can understand how PRSSA and other extracurricular activities and clubs can be seen as a site for learning and teaching public relations at the intersections of leadership, mentorship, and DEI. These tactics showcased the role of student leaders on the executive board of the chapter in advancing DEI education, as well as the
role of leadership, mentorship, and networking in cultivating a diverse and inclusive generation of future leaders. More importantly, this paper shows how the creation of platforms and networks to connect educators, practitioners, and students can improve leadership, mentorship, and DEI education in public relations.

References


