

*Top PRD Paper*

**Who's Teaching Future PR Professionals?  
Exploring Professional Credentials of  
Full-Time PR Faculty in Accredited Programs**

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Being Accredited in Public Relations (APR) more closely links educators with practitioners and can help build additional credibility for both the faculty member and their academic unit. This study explores the professional credentials of full-time faculty teaching in AEJMC accredited and PRSA certified undergraduate public relations programs in the United States and seeks to better understand the types of programs and schools where accredited educators teach. This research concludes that most full-time faculty teaching in accredited/certified undergraduate PR programs are not professionally accredited and that PRSA certified programs have a higher percentage of full-time accredited faculty teaching in them than ACEJMC accredited programs. Additionally, Carnegie R2 and D/PU universities with accredited/certified undergraduate PR programs are more likely to have full-time accredited PR faculty than others and that there is a higher percentage of full-time accredited PR faculty members in private schools with accredited/certified programs than in public schools with accredited/certified programs.

*Keywords:* APR, public relations, public relations education, accreditation

Accreditation of public relations programs and the academic units in which they reside is widely discussed and the benefits of accreditation in the United States – whether by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) or the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) – are well known. What is less well-known and studied are the benefits of PR educators themselves being professionally accredited and it is unknown how prevalent APR, CMP and SCMP accreditation is in higher education PR faculty.

Personal accreditation demonstrates professional competence and knowledge of progressive PR industry practices and high standards (Universal Accreditation Board, n.d.), but accreditation by full-time PR faculty can also link educators more closely with PR professionals and can help build additional credibility for both the faculty member and their academic unit.

Additionally, the process of becoming accredited opens opportunities for faculty to gain leadership roles in professional organizations – a recommendation for faculty development in the most recent Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) Report on Undergraduate Education (CPRE, 2018). This research seeks to begin to explore the status of professionally accredited educators by looking at full-time PR faculty who teach in accredited/certified undergraduate public relations programs in the United States and then to profile the universities and colleges where these accredited full-time educators teach. This research informs broad pedagogical practices in public relations research specifically as it relates to *who* is teaching in accredited/certified undergraduate public relations programs.

## Literature Review

### Program Accreditation

Accreditation of academic units and programs at most universities and colleges is voluntary and, in the United States, is often a decision point for students and parents when selecting a school or program (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, n.d.; Massé & Popovich, 2007; Pelligrini, 2017), as well as a reputation enhancement for the accredited academic unit (Blom, et al., 2012; Blom, et al., 2019). Additionally, the process of accreditation gives academic programs the opportunity to compare itself to other programs, reflect on the program's strengths and, more importantly, weaknesses, and implement improvements that benefit the students (Blom, et al., 2012; Seamon, 2010).

Undergraduate PR programs in the U.S. can choose to seek accreditation through ACEJMC, certification through PRSA or both.

### ACEJMC Accreditation

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) recognizes ACEJMC for accrediting professional journalism and mass communication programs in the United States. ACEJMC has an emphasis on a balanced, liberal arts and science curriculum (ACEJMC, n.d. -a). Institutions interested in becoming accredited invite ACEJMC to examine its program and, once accredited, programs must apply for reaccreditation every six years. Programs receive ACEJMC accreditation after a thorough self-assessment and a peer review of the program's academic quality that includes a site visit conducted by a team of educators and industry professionals who interview faculty, staff, and students, visit classes, review documentation and meet with university/college-level administrators. The self-assessment focuses on the extent to which the academic unit achieves its goals and the extent to which the academic unit complies with ACEJMC's current nine accrediting standards: (1) Mission, Governance and Administration; (2)

Curriculum and Instruction; (3) Diversity and Inclusiveness; (4) Full-Time and Part-Time Faculty; (5) Scholarship: Research, Creative and Professional Activity; (6) Student Services; (7) Resources, Facilities and Equipment; (8) Professional and Public Service; and (9) Assessment of Learning Outcomes. ACEJMC has shifted from a 9-point standard to an 8-point standard, beginning with the 2022-23 academic year, including a deeper critical consideration of DEI efforts and an institutionally grounded focus on liberal arts and sciences requirements. For this study, we will focus on institutions accredited on the previous 9-point standard applied through the 2021-22 academic year. Accredited units are required to maintain updated retention and graduation data on their websites. Units which do not meet this requirement by Aug. 15 each year are subject to being placed on probation until the data is updated or until Aug. 15 of the following year when, if the information has not been provided, the unit's accreditation will be suspended. A suspended program will be reinstated when the data is published if ACEJMC dues are current (ACEJMC, n.d.-b).

### **PRSA Certification**

The CEPR was established in 1989 by PRSA and is affiliated with the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). The voluntary certification program is administered through PRSA's Educational Affairs Committee and like ACEJMC accreditation, includes a self-assessment and a site visit that includes meetings with faculty, students, administrators, and key external stakeholders. The on-site review is conducted by two PRSA members — a full-time educator from a PRSA certified school and an APR-credentialed practicing professional. Reviewers also contact the PR program's internship providers, graduate employers and alumni to assess graduate preparedness to enter the workforce and former student's educational experiences (PRSSA, 2021a). CEPR's evolving standards are based on findings of the CPRE.

The eight standards are (1) Public Relations Curriculum; (2) Public Relations Faculty; (3) Resources, Equipment and Facilities; (4) Public Relations Students; (5) Assessment; (6) Professional Affiliations; (7) Relationships with Total Unit and University; and (8) Diversity and Global Perspectives. The final decision and the conferring of the CEPR is decided by the PRSA Board and, once certified, programs must apply for recertification every six years. PR programs that distinguish themselves with the CEPR are determined to provide the faculty, curriculum and resources needed to prepare students to become PR professionals (PRSA, 2020a).

CEPR deals solely with PR programs and is dedicated to the advancement of PR (CPRE, 2006). Unlike ACEJMC accreditation, PRSA certification does not have the “unit” rule (only PR programs within journalism and mass communications programs can be accredited) meaning that PR programs housed in schools of business or other academic units that do not qualify for ACEJMC accreditation may meet CEPR standards (PRSA, 2020a).

### **Professional Accreditation**

Professional certification or accreditation is seen as one way to further the professionalism of public relations (Bernays, 1979; Brody, 1984, 1992). Public relations professionals in the United States have several options for professional accreditation - APR, administered by the Universal Accreditation Board (UAB) (PRSA, 2021), or Communication Management Professional (CMP) and Strategic Communication Management Professional (SCMP), both administered by the Global Communication Certification Council, an International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) initiative (IABC, 2021a). Military communication professionals have the option to earn the specialized APR+M (PRSA, 2021). The CMP and SCMP replace the Accredited Business Communicator (ABC) designation that was

administered by the IABC (IABC, 2021b).

Research has shown that accreditation makes a difference in both professional competencies and public relations work categories (Sha, 2011a), as well as other variables including years of experience and education levels (Sha, 2011b).

*APR vs. CMP & SCMP*

A candidate for APR must have a minimum of five years of professional experience and be a member of one of the UAB's participating organizations that currently includes the Asociación de Relacionistas Profesionales de Puerto Rico, the California Association of Public Relations Officials, the Florida Public Relations Association, the Maine Public Relations Council, the National Association of Government Communicators, the National School Public Relations Association, PRSA, the Religion Communicators Council and the Southern Public Relations Federation (PRSA, 2021). The Accreditation process for APR is a three-step process. First the candidate completes an application that involves writing 14 essays that address the candidate's professional experience. The candidate then participates in the Panel Presentation to discuss the essays and present a portfolio of work samples to a panel of accredited peers. Once approved, the final step is for the candidate to take a multiple-choice, computer-based examination (PRSA, 2020b). Accreditation must be renewed every three years and is achieved through documenting lifelong learning, participating in industry events, and service to PRSA (PRSA, 2020c).

Qualifications to earn the CMP and SCMP are based on years of experience the candidate has in the industry. CMP is for those with six to eight years of experience in the communication field and the SCMP is for those with eight to 11 years of professional experience (IABC, 2021a). The application is the same for both the CMP and the SCMP with candidate's completing an application that includes submitting

documentation of professional experience, including a letter of reference for SCMP candidates, and taking a multiple-choice, computer-based examination.

Both the CMP and SCMP certification must be renewed annually by earning 40 qualifying continuing education and/or professional development points each year (GCCC, 2019).

### **Research Questions**

To understand the professional accreditation status of faculty teaching in accredited undergraduate public relations programs in the United States, this study asks the following research questions:

**RQ1A:** What is the status of public relations accreditation in full-time PR faculty in undergraduate ACEJMC certified programs?

**RQ1B:** What is the status of public relations accreditation in full-time PR faculty in undergraduate CEPR certified PR programs?

**RQ1C:** What is the status of public relations accreditation in full-time PR faculty in undergraduate programs that are both ACEJMC accredited and CEPR certified?

To better understand the accredited undergraduate programs where accredited educators teach, this study asks:

**RQ2:** What are the characteristics of the universities and colleges that have accredited and/or certified undergraduate PR programs where accredited full-time PR educators teach?

### **Method**

To answer this study's research questions, a content analysis was conducted using the faculty biographies and accreditation data for all undergraduate ACEJMC accredited units in the United States with PR programs ( $n = 73$ ) and all undergraduate PRSA certified programs in the United States ( $n = 40$ ). Although program accreditation and individual

professional accreditation are not necessarily conjoined, the analysis of accredited programs has been used in other studies to narrow the sample including examining writing requirements in PR programs (Hardin & Pompper, 2004), determining best practices for leadership development in the next generation of PR leaders (Ewing et al., 2019), exploring how ethics is taught in PR classrooms (Del Rosso et. al., 2020) and investigating how social media, digital media and analytics are taught (Luttrell et al., 2021).

### **Conceptualization & Operationalization**

This study defines accredited undergraduate PR programs as programs housed in ACEJMC accredited academic units (ACEJMC, n.d.-a) and/or PRSA certified PR programs (PRSSA, 2021a) as of November 2021. Individuals who are APR were identified based on their faculty biography on their university websites. Public relations faculty were faculty who specifically mentioned PR in their biography, were listed as teaching PR courses or were listed as PR faculty on their university's website and held an active full-time academic appointment. Accreditation status was cross-checked using the PRSA membership directory. Gender was identified based on the pronouns used in the faculty member's biography and was sub-collapsed into male, female, and non-binary/other. Highest degree earned was determined from their publicly available faculty biography or curriculum vitae.

### **Measurements**

*Carnegie status* was determined through the Carnegie database (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). Universities and colleges were coded as either *public* or *private* as listed in the Carnegie database.

### **Population**

A list was compiled of all ACEJMC accredited units with undergraduate PR programs in the United States and all PRSA CEPR



undergraduate PR programs in the United States. The data in this study represents a census of those programs as of November 2021.

### **Results**

Research Question 1 asked the status of public relations accreditation in full-time PR faculty in undergraduate PR programs in the United States that are ACEJMC accredited (A), PRSA certified (B), and programs that are both ACEJMC accredited and PRSA certified (C). Overall, full-time PR faculty ( $n = 469$ ) in the 113 accredited/certified undergraduate PR programs are about two-thirds women (66.5%,  $n = 312$ ) with the remaining being men (33.5%,  $n = 157$ ); no faculty identified as nonbinary by their pronouns in their faculty biographies. A majority have earned a Ph.D. (68.9%,  $n = 323$ ); 127 (27.1%) have earned a master's degree; and 14 (3.0%) have earned a bachelor's degree. Five (1.1%) have earned a different kind of doctoral degree such as an Ed.D. Most of these full-time PR faculty (83.2%,  $n = 309$ ) are not accredited with only 79 (16.8%) earning professional accreditation. Considering these 79 accredited faculty members, 63 (13.4%) have earned the APR designation, 15 (3.2%) are PRSA Fellows, and one (0.2%) has an international accreditation from the Institute of Public Relations in Ghana. One's (1.27%) highest degree earned was a bachelor's degree, 29 (36.71%) hold a master's degree, and 49 (62.03%) hold a Ph.D. or other doctoral degree.

Of the 469 full-time PR faculty teaching in accredited/certified undergraduate PR programs, 58.0% ( $n = 272$ ) teach in units that are accredited only by ACEJMC, 18.8% ( $n = 88$ ) teach in units that are only PRSA certified, and 23.2% ( $n = 109$ ) are in units that are both ACEJMC accredited and PRSA certified. The vast majority work at public schools (81.2%,  $n = 381$ ) while 18.8% ( $n = 88$ ) are at private institutions. Most of these public relations faculty also work at Doctoral Universities - Very high research activity (Carnegie R1) (53.1%,  $n = 249$ ); 21.1% ( $n = 99$ ) are at Doctoral Universities - High research activity (Carnegie R2); 10.2%

( $n = 48$ ) teach at Doctoral/Professional Universities (Carnegie D/PU); and 12.6% ( $n = 59$ ) are at Master's Colleges and Universities – Larger programs (Carnegie M1). Fourteen (2.9%) are at schools classified as Master's Colleges and Universities - Medium programs (Carnegie M2), Master's Colleges and Universities - Smaller programs (Carnegie M3), or Baccalaureate Colleges.

**RQ1A: ACEJMC accredited programs**

Looking specifically at the 56 units that are only ACEJMC accredited, 67.2% ( $n = 183$ ) of the full-time PR faculty are women and 32.7% ( $n = 89$ ) are men. Most (67.6%,  $n = 185$ ) have earned a Ph.D.; 26.4% ( $n = 72$ ) have earned a master's degree; and 4.0% ( $n = 11$ ) have earned a bachelor's degree. Four faculty members (1.5%) have earned a different kind of doctoral degree. A little more than 9 out of 10 faculty members (90.8%,  $n = 247$ ) are not professionally accredited. Of these 272 full-time PR faculty members, 25 (9.1%) are accredited with 19 (6.9%) having their APR and 6 (2.2%) being PRSA Fellows. The majority work at public universities (83.4%,  $n = 227$ ), and 16.5% ( $n = 45$ ) teach at private universities. Most of these PR faculty members (59.9%,  $n = 163$ ) are teaching in units housed in Carnegie R1 (Doctoral Universities – Very high research activity) schools; 44 (16.1%) teach in units housed in Carnegie R2 (Doctoral Universities – high research activity) schools; 29 (10.7%) teach in units that are Carnegie M1 (Master's Colleges and Universities – Larger programs); 27 (10%) of these faculty teach in units housed in Carnegie D/PU (Doctoral/Professional) Universities; six (0.2%) teach in units located in Carnegie M2 (Master's College and Universities – Medium) programs and three (0.1%) teach in units located in Carnegie M3 (Master's College and Universities – Small) programs.

**RQ1B: PRSA certified PR programs**

Looking specifically at the 23 units that are only PRSA certified, 70.4% ( $n = 62$ ) are women and 29.5% ( $n = 26$ ) are men. Most PR faculty

members (77.3%,  $n = 68$ ) have earned a Ph.D. and 22.7% ( $n = 20$ ) have earned a master's degree. The majority (68.1%,  $n = 60$ ) are not accredited. Considering the 28 (31.8%) accredited faculty members teaching at these units, 24 (27.2%) have earned APR and four (4.5%) are PRSA Fellows. Most of these faculty members are teaching at public universities (73.8%,  $n = 65$ ) with 23 (26.1%) teaching at private universities. More of these PR faculty members (34.1%,  $n = 30$ ) are teaching in units housed in Carnegie R2 (Doctoral Universities – high research activity) schools. Twenty-three (26.1%) of these faculty teach in units housed in Carnegie R1 (Doctoral Universities – Very high research activity) schools while 17 (19.3%) teach in units housed in Carnegie D/PU (Doctoral/Professional) Universities. Thirteen (14.7%) teach in units that are Carnegie M1 (Master's Colleges and Universities – Larger) programs, three teach in Carnegie M2 (Master's College and Universities – Medium) programs and two teach in units located in Baccalaureate Colleges.

**RQ1C: Programs that are both ACEJMC accredited and PRSA certified**

Looking at the 17 units that are both ACEJMC accredited and PRSA certified, 61.4% ( $n = 67$ ) of the full-time PR faculty are women and 38.5% ( $n = 42$ ) are men. Most (64.2%,  $n = 70$ ) have earned a Ph.D.; 32.1% ( $n = 35$ ) have earned a master's degree; 2.7% ( $n = 3$ ) have earned a bachelor's degree; and one (0.9%) has earned a different kind of doctoral degree. The majority (76.1%,  $n = 83$ ) are not professionally accredited. Of the 26 (23.8%) who are accredited, 20 (18.3%) are APRs, five (4.5%) are PRSA Fellows and one (0.9%) is internationally accredited. Most of these faculty members are teaching at public schools (81.6%,  $n = 89$ ) with only 20 (18.3%) teaching at private schools. More than half of these PR faculty members (57.8%,  $n = 63$ ) are teaching in units housed in Carnegie R1 (Doctoral Universities – Very high research activity) schools. Twenty-five (22.9%) teach in units housed in Carnegie R2 (Doctoral Universities

– high research activity) schools. Four (0.4%) teach in units that are in Carnegie D/PU (Doctoral/Professional) Universities and 17 (15.5%) teach in units that are Carnegie M1 (Master’s Colleges and Universities – Larger) programs.

### **RQ2: University/college characteristics**

Research Question 2 asked about the characteristics of the universities and colleges that have accredited/certified undergraduate PR programs where accredited full-time PR educators teach. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationships between full-time accredited PR faculty and the characteristics discussed in RQ1A, B, and C. The relationships between three of these variables were significant. First, undergraduate PR programs that are PRSA certified have a higher percentage of full-time accredited PR faculty teaching in them than ACEJMC accredited programs,  $X^2 (1, N = 469) = 27.08, p = < .001$ ; for this statistic, programs with both ACEJMC accreditation and PRSA certification were counted in both.

Second, there is a higher percentage of full-time accredited PR faculty members in private schools with accredited/certified programs than in public schools with accredited/certified programs,  $X^2 (1, N = 469) = 6.68, p = .010$ . And, finally, Carnegie R2 and D/PU universities with accredited/certified undergraduate PR programs are more likely to have full-time accredited PR faculty than the others,  $X^2 (3, N = 469) = 9.01, p = .029$ .

### **Discussion**

This study found that an overwhelming majority of full-time PR faculty in accredited/certified undergraduate PR programs are not professionally accredited. This data supports the CPRE’s 2018 *Fast Forward* report’s finding that even though PR professionals believe that educators should earn professional accreditations and executives from large public relations firms relate that their best new employees come

from universities with professionally experienced and credentialed faculty, educators do not value them. These findings also fly in the face of previous research that found students prefer professors with a practitioner focus who are more involved with the day-to-day practice of public relations (Tindall & Waters, 2017) — qualities that earning an APR can help to develop and foster — and that students value professors more based on their professional, non-academic experience (Martin et al., 2005; Wilkerson, 1999).

Most of the full-time faculty in this study who are accredited have a Ph.D. or other doctoral degree and may add to Sha's (2011a) discussion about whether experience can be used as a substitute for accreditation.

Conrad (2020) notes that there is ongoing tension between PR theory and practice, the academy and industry. This plays out in the findings of this study. The majority of full-time PR faculty in this study work in PR programs located in academic units that are ACEJMC accredited at public Carnegie R1 universities where the focus is on "very high research activity." However, full-time faculty teaching in undergraduate programs that are only PRSA certified tend to teach in public Carnegie R2 and D/PU schools where there is less focus on research output and a higher percentage of accredited full-time faculty members teach at R2 and D/PU schools. Could this difference be because of the emphasis on research output placed on institutions and programs to maintain R1 status and the professional focus of programs that are only PRSA certified? Additionally, there is a higher percentage of full-time accredited PR faculty members teaching in private schools with accredited/certified programs than in public schools with accredited/certified programs. It stands to reason that this could be an indication of the flexibility and resources afforded a program at a private university versus programs in publicly funded institutions.

### **Conclusion**

As far back as the founding of the Commission of Public Relations Education in 1973 there has been debate about the qualifications that PR educators should have and the relationship between PR practice and the academy. From arguing that PR educators should have a Ph.D. because PR is a research-academic discipline (CPRE, 1999) to observations that those who teach PR courses in undergraduate programs should have practitioner experience (CPRE, 2006) to the realization that the best-prepared PR graduates come from programs that are taught by both Ph.Ds. and practitioners (CPRE, 2018), the debate continues. Yet, through it all, there is little data that paints a picture of both the educational and professional qualifications of those who are teaching the next generation of PR pros. This study lays the groundwork for additional research into the professional accreditation of full-time PR educators and indicates that if, as research shows, accreditation matters, then the UAB, PRSA and other professional associations need to better communicate the benefits of and process for earning professional accreditation to the academy.

### **Implications for the Profession**

This study has supplied insights into the professional accreditation of full-time PR faculty in accredited/certified undergraduate PR programs, an area that has not been explored much to date. These findings also contribute to the continuing emphasis by the CPRE on who is teaching future PR professionals and could aid the UAB, PRSA and other professional associations in understanding professional accreditation of educators and possibly creating an accreditation designed specifically for full-time educators, like the APR+M for military practitioners.

### **Limitations**

This study only examined full-time educators teaching in the ACEJMC accredited and PRSA certified undergraduate PR programs in the United States. A clearer picture of professionally accredited full-time

PR educators could be gleaned by looking at full-time educators in PR programs without accreditation or certification.

### **Suggestions for future research**

PRSSA currently has more than 300 chapters in the United States (PRSSA, 2021b). An examination of full-time educators in PR programs where these PRSSA chapters exist might provide additional insights into PR faculty, as well as the status of PRSSA chapter advisers.

Another area that warrants examination is the accreditation status of adjunct PR faculty.

More than 50% of faculty teaching in four-year schools are estimated to be adjunct or part-time professors (AAUP, 2018) and as highlighted in the CPRE 2018 report, little information is available on these part-time PR faculty members. Toth (2021) looked at teaching interests, needs, and professional experience of PR adjunct faculty but did not specifically address their professional accreditation status. Further exploration of this important group of PR educators is warranted.

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