

“Unapologetically Original”: Building Creative Self-Confidence in the Public Relations Curriculum

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Visual design has become an important skill for public relations students to develop before entering the field. This study used a quasi-experimental design to examine college students' creative self-efficacy (CSE) and visual design confidence before and after using a template-based design program in public-relations-related classes. Findings indicate that students enrolled in these courses have high pre-existing levels of CSE, but low levels of visual design confidence; however, these design programs significantly improve both visual confidence and some aspects of creative self-efficacy. With limitations on adding courses to the curriculum and a lack of deep design knowledge by public relations faculty members, this study's authors also share ideas for how to incorporate visual content creation opportunities across the curriculum by using free, template-based programs online.

Keywords: visual confidence, creative self-efficacy, design

From slide decks to social media graphics, and data visualizations to event invitations, public relations practitioners are increasingly being called to create materials for their organizations and clients. However, a gap between pedagogy and practice is present according to a study conducted by the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE, 2018); public relations professionals expect entry-level practitioners to have visual design skills more often than they actually demonstrate that skill. Further, according to the CPRE (2018) report, content creation was listed as an essential topic to be covered in public relations courses (see p. 20), and both educators and professionals recommended graphic design as a compulsory course for students (see p. 85). The report emphasized that “public relations practitioners are expected to create a variety of content to go along with written messages, from photos to video to graphics, and new programs and apps constantly emerge to help practitioners and educators with these tasks” (p. 90). Despite these calls from the field, most students studying public relations across the U.S. likely have only one design-related course required before they graduate (if any), which is not enough to master visual content creation skills.

Recent research, in addition to the CPRE study, also suggests a greater need for public relations education focused on visual design competency for the current social and data-driven environment (e.g., Sisson & Martensen, 2017). Thus, this study seeks to better understand the role that free, easy-to-use template-based programs (e.g., Canva, Spark/Express) which have emerged over the last decade might play in helping reduce the gap between professional expectations for visual content creation skills and classroom pedagogy. Specifically, this study uses a quasi-experimental design to examine the impact of incorporating these free tools for design projects in public relations-related classes (e.g., campaigns, research methods, event planning). Through pre/post surveys of students at two universities across two semesters, the authors examine

how using these tools for visual content creation assignments might relate to students' creative self-efficacy and impact students' visual design confidence. In addition, recommendations are made for incorporating free template-based content creation programs into a variety of public-relations-related courses.

Literature Review

According to Garrett (2020), "Visuals have never been more important in the public relations field than they are today" (para. 18). Further, Tanner (2019) points out "the importance of design in business" where design is now seen "as a meaningful differentiator" (p. 1). Public relations practice "has always needed to be nimble to adapt to the ever-changing business landscape and its audience" (Golovatenko, 2021, para. 1), and that is especially the case as businesses and organizations try to meet their current and potential audiences through social media. To illustrate, research shows that employing both visual and text-based content drives engagement and can lead to stronger relationships (Brubaker & Wilson, 2018). However, graphic design is a specialized field wherein an entire core curriculum is necessary to teach the theoretical and technical skills needed for practice (Sickman, 2015). The question then becomes, how do we best prepare public relations students for careers that are marked by a need for visual content and increased competition for differentiation across digital channels? One way to heed the call may be to answer the demand with a blend of creativity and competency.

Because content can lose relevance or become inappropriate due to current events, "successful social media management today sees brands shifting from far-in-advance planning to a more flexible model with content created only for the near future" (Gardner, 2020, para. 4). According to Guinness (2022), "Social media posts have a very short lifecycle, so you don't want to spend hours creating them" (para. 6). Thus, public relations practitioners need to be able to create content quickly—

especially for short turnaround times and temporary use—which means they likely need to create the content themselves to keep up with the frequency and volume required to compete. In sum, creativity and visual content creation competence are now essential to the industry (Garrett, 2020; O’Leary, 2020), thus new training and tools must be presented to public relations students, and students need to be given the chance to apply those skills while still in school.

As Garrett (2020) posits, with “the demand for visuals to accompany all of the content being created, public relations pros who understand visual communication have a leg up in any industry” (para. 18). Further reinforcing the importance of nurturing skill and confidence in creative expression, some reports project that artificial intelligence, automation, machine learning algorithms and robots may eliminate 39 to 73 million jobs in the U.S. by 2030 (Manyika et al., 2017); however, researchers also believe that expressions of human creativity will never be replaced by machines (Oleinik, 2019). In fact, AI tools like Adobe Sensei and PowerPoint Designer currently assist designers working within the Adobe Creative Cloud or Microsoft PowerPoint, respectively, making some design tasks easier and faster as “the design tool offers suggestions for how to improve the design” (Tanner, 2019, p. 4). However, the human eye is still essential as the user makes the final decisions. To this end, it behooves public relations professors to prepare our students with training in visual content creation basics and some easy-to-use tools that improve both their capacity for creative expression and confidence on visual design tasks.

The Visual Design Challenge in Public Relations Classrooms

Although public relations practitioners may not be asked to create an organization’s new logo or brand, they will likely be asked to make design decisions or create content. For example, they may be asked to hire an external designer, draft mock-ups, create a data visualization to clarify

complex information, develop social media content, or communicate client design needs to an in-house artist; in any of these cases, the foundational need for an understanding of visual content creation is present.

Comcowich (2018) agrees with the need for visual creation knowledge: “Linguistic skills are no longer enough in PR. The profession increasingly is image-focused,” (para 8). Further, as some scholars propose, “teaching design to non-designers is a popular way to drive innovative and creative thinking” (Royalty, 2018, p. 137).

Despite the inherent value of learning visual content creation skills, mastering technical proficiency with prominent design programs leads to several challenges in the public relations curriculum. First, requirements for program certification and accreditation from entities like the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) outline extensive requirements for students’ education. These include important competencies related to history, law, diversity, research, statistical proficiencies, theory, and ethics (CPRE, 2019). These foundational learning outcomes necessitate a core curriculum that is robust and may leave little room for adding compulsory design courses focused on technical proficiencies. Further, the cost associated with purchasing the industry-standard design programs (even with a student discount) is oftentimes prohibitive. Finally, many public relations faculty may feel ill-equipped to teach the technical skills needed to develop design proficiency in commonly used industry software (e.g., Adobe CC). To this end, we need to seek alternative pathways to educate our students across existing courses in a manner that does not exacerbate the financial burden of higher education. With some planning, assignments across a variety of public relations classes can be used to spark student creativity, improve design proficiency, and enhance student portfolios. One such pathway is to employ free template-based programs such as Adobe Express and

Canva that have a “low barrier to entry, their resulting professional-looking design, their manageable set of tools, and their support of direct manipulation are all principles of good novice design tools” (Tanner, 2019, p. 22).

While departments face the challenge of adding design to the curriculum, public relations students may face the challenge of intimidation. Waxman (2020) talks about a “bone-chilling fear of an empty screen” (para. 7) as he tries to gin up something creative and new, and the authors propose a similar fear haunts our public relations students when asked to develop a creative execution. With the need for quick content—and loads of it—for social media, public relations students need coping skills to quickly get beyond that fear. As Orland (2019) put it, “The act of starting is more important and courageous than anything” (para. 11). According to O’Donovan et al., (2015), “unfortunately, creating designs can be difficult, particularly for novices, who often wish to create simple posters, cards, or social media designs. Starting from a blank canvas can be overwhelming, and exploring alternatives is time-consuming” (para. 1). One traditional point of inspiration has been to look at others’ work. As Ferguson (2012) stated, “everything is a remix,” and he explained that creativity starts by copying, transforming, and combining ideas in a new form. Ramsey (2017) applied Ferguson’s idea to video templates and made the bold statement that “templates can actually help boost your creativity” (para. 3). Guinness (2022) agreed:

That’s why graphic design apps are crucial: instead of starting from scratch each time, you’ll have a range of great templates and design resources (like stock images, icons, shapes, and text styles) ready to go. Then, all you have to do is mix and match things with your own brand elements to have something unique and powerful. (para. 6)

With free user-friendly, template-based programs like Adobe Spark/

Express and Canva, others' ideas are easy to scroll through because they are built into the platform as design templates for every format imaginable allowing students to jump quickly from a blank screen to their own remix. While some professional designers pan the use of template-based programs because of their potential "cookie-cutter feel" (Tanner, 2019, p. 3), according to designer and podcaster Colleen Gratzler, "I've heard from some designers that they get inspiration from looking at the Canva templates" (2022, para. 50). Gratzler also mentioned a designer who said she found the limited features in Canva actually forced her to be more creative than in Photoshop.

Creative Self-Efficacy & Visual Design Confidence

As Beghetto (2006) posits, while creative ability is indispensable for creativity, this ability alone is not sufficient for the production of innovative outcomes. Instead, he indicates that self-judgments play into the capacity to produce creative outcomes. Thus, two important factors in students' expectations regarding content creation mastery are *creative self-efficacy* and *visual design confidence*. To this end, the current study seeks to better understand how these perceptions of ability and skill may be impacted when the blank screen and technical design proficiency are reduced through the use of user-friendly, free design programs in public relations-related classes.

The literature defines self-efficacy as a personal judgment or set of beliefs about one's capacity to execute a plan of action based on the skills they have (Bandura, 2007). According to Akama (2006), self-efficacy plays a significant role in students' decision making associated with their time, effort, and persistence when addressing challenges in a creative manner. Further, research has shown that students must possess high levels of self-efficacy in order to effectively perform, progress, and create (e.g., Cheng & Chiou, 2010; Tierney & Farmer, 2011). As scholars have noted, the difficulty of creative work is compounded by factors such

as the inherent risk and potential for critique (Schrage, 1999), making high self-efficacy a key factor in creative work (Dow et al., 2010). Tanner (2019), who had similar questions about self-efficacy and the use of simpler design platforms, was convinced that “User-steered, generative design tools can increase a novice designer’s perceived creativity and lead to unique, high-quality designs without sacrificing ease of use” (p. 8). Numerous studies have demonstrated that *creative self-efficacy* (CSE), or the “belief one has the ability to produce creative outcomes,” (Tierney & Farmer, 2002, p. 1138) is critical for creative achievement (e.g., Chen, 2013; Lim & Choi, 2009; Yu, 2013). In fact, research has shown CSE to be a strong positive correlate of creativity (Tierney & Farmer, 2002) as it reflects students’ core beliefs related to their imagination and ability to come up with good ideas (Alotaibi, 2016).

As demonstrated in this review of the literature, CSE is more than just idea generation (Beghetto, 2006); it is also composed of cognitive style and working style/persistence (Tan et al., 2007; Tan et al., 2008; Tan & Majid, 2011). Building on this work that has produced reliable results in other study contexts, the authors explore all three dimensions of CSE. In terms of idea generation, Beghetto (2006) opines that an imagination and a belief in one’s ability to have a lot of ideas is a necessary dimension of CSE. As it relates to cognitive style, Tan et al. (2008) indicate it is also necessary not only for one to believe they can come up with original ideas, but must also possess an ability to pause and reflect, as well as an ability to combine ideas. Finally, as it relates to persistence, Tan and Majid (2011) indicate a need to possess the drive to keep going even when things are difficult, a willingness to master creative tasks and a strong will to improve. Because prior work has found that students with high-levels of CSE tend to seek out opportunities to enhance this type of self-evaluation (Chang & Yang, 2012), the authors anticipate that most students enrolled in public relations courses will have high levels of CSE reflecting their

desire to pursue a career in a creative-focused industry. The question, then becomes:

RQ1: Does the use of free, user-friendly design programs impact students' creative self-efficacy (e.g., idea generation, cognitive style, working style/persistence) in public relations-related courses?

While CSE reflects a student's judgments about their creative mental processes, visual design confidence or perceptions of technical competence reflect another domain that could influence students' abilities to develop visual content. As Alotaibi (2016) indicates, "confidence in creative ability represents the core of creative thinking and performance, which in return enables people to deal effectively and efficiently with challenges" (p. 903). One factor leading to confidence is experience with a process. As extant research demonstrates, experience predicates creative success (Amabile, 1983), and this experience over time increases familiarity necessary for creative work (Weisberg, 1999). As previously discussed, a deep focus on technical graphic design skills is likely beyond the realm of what most public relations degree-granting institutions are currently providing to students, thus the authors posit that task familiarity in visual content creation could be achieved through the incorporation of free, easy-to-use design tools across the curriculum.

In the context of this study, the authors propose that confidence in creative ability is, in part, impacted by visual design confidence (e.g., ability to present information in a visual format). Given the circumstances outlined in this literature review, we do not believe students will have high-levels of visual design confidence coming into public-relations-related courses and wish to understand:

RQ2: Does the use of free, user-friendly design programs impact students' visual design confidence in completing a project in public-relations-related courses?

Method

This study sought to understand if the use of free, easy-to-use design tools impacted students' CSE and visual design confidence in public-relations-related courses. As participants were not randomly assigned to conditions for ethical reasons, this research is considered a quasi-experimental design with a purposive sample of students intended to reflect the educational experiences of students enrolled in public-relations-related courses at two accredited institutions. The study was IRB approved at the researchers' institutions prior to launch. Pre- and post-test questionnaires were used to assess the variables of interest. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to better understand student learning and study variables. Unless otherwise indicated, all study measures were assessed on a five-point scale with one indicating strong disagreement and five indicating strong agreement.

Pre-test data were collected prior to when design-focused assignments were presented to students. Post-test data were collected following the completion of the design-focused assignments such as the creation of social media content (capstone), data visualizations (research methods), event/meeting promotions (PRSSA), and presentations (new media). Data were collected over two semesters in 2020 and 2021 at two different universities. To assure results reflect different learning environments, study participants included varying classification-levels, as well as students in core courses (e.g., introduction to public relations, research methods, capstone, internship experience), elective courses (e.g., event planning, student-run agency), and Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) members. Assignments varied based on context, but all required the development of a creative execution for a specific audience and strategic outcome (e.g., data visualization, social media graphic, event poster, website).

Participants

After removing speeders, incomplete responses, and participants who did not pass the attention check, the pre-test had 223 participants and the post-test included 119 participants. Study participants were asked to respond to a series of demographic questions in the post-test. Based on this data, participants were primarily seniors (42%, $n = 53$), followed by juniors (25%, $n = 32$), sophomores (15%, $n = 19$), and freshmen (12%, $n = 15$). The mean age of study participants was 21 ($SD = 4.59$), with a range of 18 to 43 years of age. Of those providing a response, 70% ($n = 88$) of participants identified as female and 23% ($n = 29$) male, reflecting an approximate typical gender distribution for public relations programs (Meng et al., 2019). All students were voluntary participants whose anonymity was maintained to the extent possible by the researchers. Identifying data were collected via a separate form, when necessary for extra credit, and never merged with the primary dataset.

Overall, participants indicated low levels of expertise with popular design programs that require technical proficiency, including Adobe Photoshop ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.08$), Premiere ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.24$), Illustrator ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.05$), and InDesign ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.08$). For the assignments, most students used either Adobe Spark/Express (68%, $n = 44$) or Canva (23%, $n = 15$), with the remainder of study participants using other free template-based data visualization programs (e.g., Piktochart, Visme).

Measures

Items used to measure CSE and visual design confidence in the pre- and post-test questionnaire were derived from scales found in the extant literature and adapted for the current study context. Internal consistency is reported below with a description of the measures. Open-ended questions were also included to add nuanced understanding of the students' self-perceptions and visual design skills.

Creative Self-Efficacy. In order to measure perceptions of CSE, the questionnaire included measures for idea generation, cognitive style, and working style/persistence. All items were presented in the same format during both the pre- and post-test. For each dimension of CSE, students were asked to assess how well the statements described them. Perceptions of ability to generate ideas included three items adapted from Beghetto (2006) and included, “I am good at coming up with new ideas,” and “I have a lot of good ideas” ($a = .74$). Cognitive style and persistence items were adapted from the work of Tan et al. (2008) and Tan and Majid (2011). Cognitive style included four items such as “I can reach the goal of coming up with original ideas or things,” and “I can delay judgment when coming up with ideas (in other words, pause and reflect before making a decision)” ($a = .74$). Working style/persistence included six items such as, “I am willing to master the knowledge I need for creative tasks,” and “I continue doing my task even if I face difficulty coming up with a good idea” ($a = .86$).

Visual Design Confidence. In order to assess perceptions of visual design confidence, items for the measure were adapted from Newell et al. (2017) and Tierney and Farmer (2002). In the pre-test and post-test, students were asked to rate their confidence level related to the visual design components of the assignment on six items including, “I am confident I can/could design the items needed for this assignment,” “I am confident that I can/could create the visual components of this assignment,” and “I have the design skills needed to complete the assignment (again)” ($a = .97$).

Open-Ended Responses. In both the pre- and post-tests, students were also asked a series of open-ended questions to provide deeper insight into the quantitative findings. For example, in the pre-test, students were asked if they thought they had the design skills needed to complete the assignment, and why or why not. In the post-test, participants were asked

to provide their reflections on the benefits and disadvantages of the design program they used, as well as the features of the program that they both liked and disliked.

Findings

In order to answer the study's two research questions, independent sample t-tests were used to assess the significance of the mean difference from pre-test to post-test. For RQ1, which focused on three forms of CSE, findings indicate students had high pre-existing levels of CSE. In terms of idea generation and work style/persistence, there was not a significant change in CSE from pre-test to post-test; however, cognitive style did produce a significant increase when using these free, easy-to-use programs ($t = -2.94$; $p < .05$). The second research question (RQ2) related to visual design confidence and also resulted in a significant increase from pre-test to post-test ($t = -25.739$; $p < .001$). Table 1 provides a comprehensive review of the analysis.

Table 1

Pre- and Post-test T-Test for CSE

	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	<i>t</i>	Sig
CSE: Idea Generation	4.05 (<i>SD</i> = .82)	4.08 (<i>SD</i> = .75)	-.358	.720
CSE: Cognitive Style	3.97 (<i>SD</i> = .63)	4.15 (<i>SD</i> = .52)	-2.94	.004
CSE: Work Style/ Persistence	4.23 (<i>SD</i> = .63)	4.25 (<i>SD</i> = .54)	-2.85	.776
Visual Confidence	2.13 (<i>SD</i> = .88)	4.35 (<i>SD</i> = .69)	-25.739	< .001

NOTE: All items measured on a five-point scale. Items in bold demonstrate a significant difference.

Pre-Test Perceptions

To add nuance to our understanding of these findings, the authors

also analyzed qualitative data collected through open-ended questions in the pre-test and post-test. As expected, in the pre-test, many study participants indicated they believed themselves to be creative, with representative comments indicating, “I am very creative and love to create new things.” However, common responses also included: “I believe I have the creativity needed to complete the assignment, although I am unsure of my design skills,” and “I am not sure that I have the basic fundamental skills; however, I love to utilize my creative side. Therefore, based on skills, no, I do not but based on willpower, yes, I do.” Confirming the lack of training but presence of desire, many students indicated thoughts such as “I have not taken many design courses, but I am very eager to learn and enhance those skills. I love the idea of marketing/advertising products and events and would like to use this to apply to my job in the near future.” Other students pointed to the lack of experience hindering them: “I have very limited experience with designing so I believe I do not have the design skills to complete assignments that deserve A’s.” As another study participant said, “Well as of right now, no I don’t. I know nothing of design or media design. That could change once taught and I’m open to learn, but as of right now no I don’t believe I have the skills. Time will tell.”

Post-Test Perceptions

In their qualitative feedback in the post-test, students overwhelmingly extolled the virtues of the platform they used as “free,” “easy to use,” “simple to learn,” “easy to navigate,” and they appreciated the “access to templates.” Many students felt the use of the program was a valuable learning exercise that improved their ability to produce creative communication materials. For example, one student said, “It was very flexible and allowed me to create content that looked professional.” Another example focused on how pleased the student was with the outcome and how they appreciated “the freedom of it and being

able to be unapologetically original.” Others felt their content creation skills improved with representative comments indicating, “It provided templates so that I could have an idea of where I wanted to go with the assignment and do it in a timely manner,” and “I learned a lot about what a good design should look like.” While most students indicated they did not see any disadvantages, some students indicated frustration with a lack of fonts and icons, and the requirement for paid upgrades to access some templates, content, and tools. These limitations made some students feel they had a “lack of freedom” or a feeling that they were “creatively restricted.”

Discussion

Not surprisingly the results of this work indicate students in public relations programs possess creative self-efficacy. This manifested as a pre-existing belief in their ability to generate ideas and a work style/persistence to complete creative tasks. The field of public relations needs out-of-the-box thinking (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2021) and new approaches to build and cultivate relationships (e.g., Brubaker & Wilson, 2018; Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021; Pressgrove & McKeever, 2016; Storie, 2017). This need to creatively break through the clutter has likely been a siren call for many students entering programs in pursuit of such career opportunities. While these two dimensions of CSE paint a partial portrait of students’ belief sets, we see less efficacy when it relates to cognitive style, or their mode of problem solving and thinking, prior to being introduced to a user-friendly tool to help conquer their fears of inadequacy.

Perhaps of most noteworthiness, findings indicate low levels of visual confidence across all student groups, regardless of course or year. These findings point to a serious need to close the gap between beliefs (as represented here by measures of CSE) and ability (as represented here by visual confidence). Findings further indicate that free, template-based, easy-to-use design and data visualization tools (e.g., Canva, Piktochart,

Spark/Express) may provide a path forward. As Cohen (2020) suggests, introducing students to template-based programs gives them an “entry point,” and to those who would argue against using template-based programs, he insists, “It’s not lowering the bar, it’s elevating the floor and getting people up to a level” (n.p.). Cohen (2020) further explains how template-based programs can support creativity by removing the hurdles: “It’s important to just build those skills — that creativity lens through visual and verbal communication... you don’t have to have 35 hours of training in professional software” (n.p.). As Cohen suggested, our findings show the use of these programs in multiple courses across two semesters consistently demonstrated a significant improvement in visual confidence. Qualitative insights indicate this change is a function of improved skill and understanding, as well as pride in professional outcomes and the empowering impact of reducing technical requirements to focus on visual content creation success.

Given these insights, support and findings, the pursuit then becomes how to adapt existing courses to incorporate more visual content creation to ignite students’ creativity and boost their visual design confidence. The first step may be to reduce faculty concerns about limited technical skill. To this end, the authors propose that faculty members could familiarize themselves with some of these tools in either a collaborative or independent setting. For example, a department/college could provide a short workshop during a faculty meeting to teach their colleagues how to use one of the free programs (see Appendix) and then have faculty members each create a promotional graphic for an elective course that might need an enrollment boost or to promote recruitment for the major/department. Alternatively, faculty members could use Adobe Express Video to create an introductory video about themselves to their students (Gallicano & Kinsky, 2022) or for use internally among department colleagues to get to know each other better or to share recent updates.

Similarly, faculty members could create an infographic about themselves (see Adobe for Education, 2022).

Once faculty increase their confidence in the ability to support student success, the opportunity to incorporate these tools across the public relations curriculum is limitless. To facilitate experimentation, the authors offer recommendations of project ideas to help strengthen public relations programs, courses, and student learning outcomes (see Table 2).

Table 2

Application Ideas for Design Assignments in PR-Related Courses

Course	Project for Students
Internship	Use Express Page to document the learning journey and share the link within digital portfolios and/or LinkedIn profiles.
Intro to MCOM	Develop a graphic that allows students to introduce themselves to the class (see Adobe for Education, 2022). Create an assignment where students offer advice to their younger self based on what they learned during their first year. Designs can be a department/college contest where the top graphics are shared as an Instagram Story.
Media History/ PR History	Construct a social media graphic spotlighting a little-known historical figure from the field or develop a web page with text, visuals and hyperlinks back to sources using Adobe Express.
Media Law	Use visual communication (graphic, web page, video) to explain a law or how to avoid getting in trouble when posting content online.
New Media	Design an infographic or video giving highlights from the development of a new platform/tool or to explain that tool's benefits compared to others.

PRSSA	Host a meeting where members create social media graphics to recruit new members or to keep members informed of upcoming events.
	Create an Adobe Express web page as a landing page for event registration or as a microsite for event details.
PR Campaigns	Develop graphics for the class client with versions formatted for each platform used in the campaign.
	Create a slideshow to showcase the campaign plan to the client. Then, after a class critique, ask students to recreate their presentation using the templates available in one of the recommended design programs.
PR Cases	Create a graphic relevant to the case study from the required readings (e.g, an infographic timeline to explain what happened).
	Develop a two-minute summary of a case using Adobe Express Video.
PR Writing	Produce a social media graphic related to PR writing (e.g., Top 3 AP Style Mistakes Students Make; Top 5 Ways to Grab Your Reader; Top 7 Ways to Start a Lede).
Research/ Data Analytics	Create a data visualization that explains a complex topic and simplifies it for the reader/viewer.
	Craft an infographic that reports key findings from data collection and analysis.
Student-Run Agency	Create a graphic or short video for recruitment of future student staff or clients.
	Craft an infographic for the agency website related to the history of the firm, the staff hierarchy, or services offered.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the utility of free, easy-to-use design programs in public-relations-related courses. In doing so, the authors acknowledge the call from CPRE to meet the industry demands for students with content-creation ability (CPRE, 2018), while also

acknowledging the limitations imposed by costly design programs and faculty without formal software training. Across myriad course types ranging from research methods to the capstone and event planning class to the student agency experience and PRSSA, findings point to the promise of incorporating these tools across the curriculum. The low learning curve for faculty and students alike, as well as the template-based formatting, offer a simplified path to overcoming limited technical expertise and the fear of the blank page. Further, these free tools offer an equitable opportunity for students who are not seeking design-focused careers and who are not able to invest in costly technology, but rather who will need to quickly create content (e.g., social media content, data visualization) for their employer.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study points to numerous opportunities for integrating visual storytelling across the public relations curriculum, limitations persist, and future research is needed. First, a key aim of this study was to better understand the student experience. For this reason, we did not consult the faculty who teach in these programs beyond anecdotal insights from our own spheres of reference. To this end, there is an opportunity to survey or interview faculty who teach in these programs around the world to more deeply explore challenges and opportunities. Further, a content analysis of the syllabi for courses in public relations curricula from myriad program sizes could shine a light on what is currently being offered both in terms of dedicated courses, as well as expose further opportunities for integration of visual content creation education across the curriculum. Finally, future research could investigate practitioner views of free, template-based programs across sectors to better understand if there are careers in public relations that necessitate training in more technically sophisticated design programs.

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Appendix: Template Based and Free Design Tools

The following list of design tools includes free template-based programs as well as those that offer free trials. Some programs may require an upgrade for enhanced tools and templates.

Illustration

[Adobe Fresco](#)

[Inkscape](#)

Design

[Adobe Express](#)

[Canva](#)

[Dafont](#)

[Mojo](#)

[Scribus](#)

[1001Fonts](#)

Data Visualization

[Easel.ly](#)

[Flourish](#)

[Google Maps](#)

[Infogram](#)

[META-CHART](#)

[Mind the Graph](#)

[Piktochart](#)

[Snappa](#)

[Tableau Public](#)

[Venngage](#)

[Visme](#)

Photography & Photo Editing

Photoshop Express

Photopea

Lightroom

Capture CC

Snapseed

Unsplash

Video & Video Editing

Adobe Express

Headliner

iMovie

LumaFusion

PowToon

Premiere Rush

Splice

Free Image Sites

Wikimedia Commons: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

Stock Exchange: <https://www.scx.hu/>

Pixabay: <https://pixabay.com/>

Morgue File: <https://www.morguefile.com/>

Open Photo: <https://openphoto.net/>

Flickr Commons: <https://www.flickr.com/commons>

The Met Collection Open Access: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>

Getty Images Embed Site: <https://www.gettyimages.com/resources/embed>