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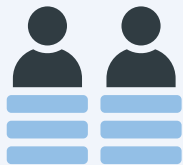
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Journal of Public Relations Education
Editorial Review Board

Journal of
Public Relations Education
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<div style="text-align:center">Letter from the Editor</div>

As the incoming editor of the Journal of Public Relations Education, I've been absolutely blown away and, frankly, dazzled by the dedication and talents of an all-volunteer team. Where else in the academy does one find an open-access journal run 100% on the time, talent, and treasure of volunteers? Are we crazy? Passionate? Both? Maybe. Anyway, I'm here for it and so are you! If you are so inclined to drop a note of thanks to our esteemed volunteers, you can find a listing of the full executive editorial board and editorial review board membership at this link.

JPRE welcomes the following members to the executive editorial board of directors:

- Senior Associate Editor - Christopher McCollough, Ph.D., Jacksonville State University
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- Associate Editor – Book/Resource Reviews - Jiun-Yi (Jenny) Tsai, Ph.D., Northern Arizona University
- Assistant Editor – Digital Media - Kate Stewart., Jacksonville State University

It's my pleasure to thank Dr. Pamela Bourland-Davis for her endless support and enthusiasm for the growth and forward progress of this journal. As just the fourth editor in the journal's history, it's not lost on me that JPRE would not be the success it is without the legacy support of the past editors Pamela Bourland-Davis, Emily Kinsky, and Chuck Lubbers and critical support from Tiffany Gallicano. These esteemed scholars form the past editors' council of JPRE - the foundation and backbone of the journal.

With each new editor, great strides have been made throughout JPRE's history. As such, I'm pleased to announce the first marks that the incoming executive editorial board has made on the journal, starting with this issue:

- Sponsorship from the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin will create the Moody College of Communication Quality Reviewer Award with a cash prize to be awarded in August.
- Sponsorship from The Arthur W. Page Center establishes the Page Center Ethics in PR Pedagogy Award with a cash prize - to be awarded in August.
- Due to generous sponsorships from Moody College and the Page Center, JPRE will pursue CrossRef/DOI supplier registration and SCOPUS database participation to expand the journal's footprint and impact.

As you can see, this good work cannot be maintained without donor aid. If you are interested in supporting JPRE financially, please message me (jpre@gvsu.edu) for a specialized sponsorship package.

JPRE is currently accepting submissions for publication, starting with the 10-3 issue (submitted through Scholastica) and proposals for special issues

in 2025 and beyond. Please email jpre@gvsu.edu if you have an idea for a special issue you wish to be considered.

Finally, those of you who attended the November event celebrating 50 years of the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) understand the blood, sweat, and tears that went into the 2023 CPRE report, Navigating Change. It's my pleasure to present the guest editor commentary for special issue 10-1 below. This issue is a dynamic partner in implementing the report findings into our classrooms. Thank you to Pamela Bourland-Davis and Elizabeth Toth for their insight and lift in bringing this special issue to publication so swiftly.

Adrienne A. Wallace

Associate Professor

Grand Valley State University

The 2023 Commission on Public Relations Education report, Navigating Change: Recommendations for Advancing Undergraduate Public Relations Education, was published in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of the Commission. An 18-month process, the report emerged from crowdsourcing what practitioners and educators felt were the most critical topics for public relations, especially as we emerged from a global pandemic, and a myriad of other social and political issues. The result was a report focused on key elements related to the status of education, repeating key items from previous CPRE studies; the future of the workplace; critical strategic thinking; data insights and strategy; ethics; DEI; and, PR as a driver of social change.

Each of these topics was addressed via questions on an omnibus-style quantitative survey, "Page Conversations," and through secondary research. The key findings are detailed in the report, along with recommendations – largely focused on educators. This issue of the Journal of Public Relations Education provides a deeper dive into some of the data, which was largely descriptive in the report. It also provides teaching suggestions to integrate the findings in the classroom.

Specifically, in this issue you'll find additional information on the KSAs and hiring preferences as seen by practitioners versus educators, along with the differences between U.S. and international curriculum based on the respondents. Future of the workplace team members considered whether current job ads reflect the interests of Gen Z, the primary future employee workforce. Additional data insight and application in the classroom are offered through reports on critical strategic thinking and ethics. And finally, a classroom assignment based on one of the DEI recommendations is offered.

Because of the richness of the data, and the reported importance of these topics, we anticipate you'll see additional publications and presentations emerging from the CPRE report in the future. The 2023 Report, Navigating Change, gives the most current thinking by experts. It also has a wealth of additional resources to learn how the seven-chapter topics are refining public relations knowledge. Here's the link to the full report, the executive summary, and a student guide: https://www.commissionpred.org/navigating-change-report/

We walked away from this project concluding that undergraduate public relations education has made significant progress in establishing the educational

foundations. At the same time, it would appear that we are seeing higher-than-ever expectations of our graduates from the public relations industry. The choice of topics included in the report implies that what is needed from future employees will be to think wholistically about how to create effective relationships for their employers within rapidly changing social and global expectations.

Elizabeth L. Toth, Ph.D., APR, Fellow PRSA
Professor Emerita, CPRE 2023 Report Co-Editor

Pamela Bourland-Davis, Ph.D.
Professor, CPRE 2023 Report Co-Editor

CPRE Study: Educator/Practitioner Perceptions of Student Preparation
and International Comparisons of the Six-Course Standard

Hongmei Shen, Pamela Bourland-Davis and Elizabeth L. Toth

Abstract

This article further examines the 2023 quantitative research by the
Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) on KSAs and
hiring characteristics desired and delivered/found as reported by
public relations educators and practitioners. Specifically, the
examination considers where significant differences between the
groups exist. Another focus was investigating groupings of hiring
characteristics between public relations educators and practitioners.
Finally, a comparison of the CPRE recommended six-course standard
was conducted between educators in the U.S. and those located
outside the U.S. The study aims to guide curricular decisions for
educators across the globe as well as foster conversations between
educators and practitioners in public relations.

Keywords: Public relations education, KSAs, hiring characteristics, PR
coursework

Introduction

Developed through continuing dialogue and research between public relations practitioners and educators, the Commission on Public Relations Education's (CPRE) 50-year mission has been to set standards of excellence for U.S. university undergraduate public relations education so that the public relations industry would welcome their graduates.

Central to this dialogue has been benchmark studies of the perceptions of educators and practitioners on the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that students should achieve while in school (See past CPRE Reports, 1987, 2006, and 2018). Also benchmarked to contribute to CPRE curricula recommendations have been the public relations marketplace's hiring expectations, or the characteristics, traits or abilities that distinguish candidates and elevate their hiring prospects.

This article further examines the 2023 CPRE quantitative research on KSAs and hiring characteristic perceptions of public relations educators and practitioners, covered initially in the Navigating Change: Recommendations for Undergraduate Public Relations Education Commission report. It highlights the similarities as well as differences in educator and practitioner perceptions of what the preparation for entry-level careers should include and looks at groupings of attributes that might add more focus to public relations curricular decisions. Finally, a comparison between educators in the U.S. and those located outside the U.S. suggested some similarities in curricula choices signaling that KSAs for public relations practice may be becoming more universal.

KSAs & Hiring Characteristics

KSAs are often used in job applications, with knowledge reflecting an understanding of a core area, skills highlighting "proficiency, expertise, or competence," and abilities underscoring the application of both knowledge and skills, according to the Federal Employee's Career Development Center (2023, para 4), KSAs have become an accepted framework in public relations research by which public relations practitioners and educators can discuss the outcomes desired and found in undergraduate public relations education. For example, KSAs have been adopted and adapted by the PRSA Universal Accreditation Board (Sha, 2011). Based on a 2010 survey, Sha (2011) identified three core KSA groupings representing business skills, media relations, and theory. Her KSA analysis suggested that respondents' assessments of professional competencies were stable.

Macnamara et al. (2018) reviewed the international practitioner perceptions of KSAs, including research done by CPRE, as well as from the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR on PR activities, 2002), the Global Alliance (2018), and the 2017/18 Asia-Pacific Communication Monitor (APCM). A key finding from the Macnamara et al., (2018) article was the confirmation, in the studies reviewed, of a gap in capabilities in relation to key communication activities as well as a gap in theory and practice. For further analysis of the Global Alliance survey data that sought to develop universal KSAs, see the work of Manley and Valin (2017); and earlier comparative analysis of public relations courses among the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Korea (Chung & Choi, 2014).

DiStaso (2019) reviewed the results of the 2017 study (Commission, 2018) in a separate article in the *Journal of Public Relations Education*, reporting on the KSAs, hiring characteristics, and the curriculum among other findings. In general, the results suggested significant differences in the KSAs, although Ethics led the Knowledge lists for both desired and delivered or found for both educators and practitioners. For Skills, both groups rated Writing, Communication, and Social Media as among the most desired, when rank ordered, and for Abilities, Problem Solving topped the Educator list while Creative Thinking topped the practitioner list as desired. Ratings of the elements for both groups, dropped for their assessments of whether the KSAs were delivered or found. DiStaso only reported the practitioner views of the hiring characteristics with Writing, Internship or Work Experience, and Public Relations Coursework as the top three desired, and the three most commonly found were Social Media, PR Coursework, and Internship or Work Experience.

Fewer studies outside of CPRE's work have been conducted on the hiring characteristics expected by public relations employers. Todd (2014) reported on the ratings of entry-level skills and professional characteristics found by public relations supervisors and Millennial entry-level practitioners "to help undergraduate students and Millennial workers develop proficient job performance and faculty to understand current industry trends" (p. 789). Meganck et al. (2020) by examining what are, effectively, KSAs and "hiring characteristics," looked at attributes listed in job descriptions. Consistent with other studies: "The most frequently requested skills in the sampled postings include written communication skills, organizational skills, administrative

software skills, social/digital media skills, leadership abilities, ability to work in teams, and graphic design" (p. 5). The type of position – whether PR assistant or account executive – did affect the type of skills. The authors recommended that alignment could be improved with "student and faculty internship programs, strong advisory boards, important classroom presentations, stronger alumni involvement, ongoing partnerships, and continuous professional organization support" (p. 5). The authors of this study also emphasized that with such a long list of attributes "educators can't be expected or required to incorporate everything" (pp. 5-6). They emphasized the CEPR- and CPRE-recommended foundations as important, with additional courses or areas supplementing the six-course standard.

Meganck et al., (2020) also highlighted the importance of soft skills needed, especially ones which might not be taught directly through lectures, such as organizational skills. While the soft skills are not directly taught, they are often incorporated into classes. Deline (2022) described an activity used in class to get students to consider KSAs they've developed and/or refined due to the pandemic, and how that could be used to distinguish themselves in the job search, thus combining KSAs and soft skills.

Considering early career, mid-career, and senior practitioners, Krishna et al. (2020) surveyed practitioners on skills and attributes that might be expected. Overall, important skills, when rank ordered, were writing, listening, creativity, possessing business acumen, and research/measurement skills. The value placed on these skills varied on a few items such as research/measurement which was rated more highly by early career practitioners – although rated positively at all levels. Taking a broader view,

Knight and Sweetser (2021) examined public relations competence, or the "foundational ability of a practitioner to add value" (p. 2). Their study of U.S. Navy public relations practitioners and the dominant coalition indicated a gap between how the two groups value the work of the practitioner in technical and management roles to the extent that practitioners appeared to overestimate while the dominant coalition underestimated the competence of the practitioners.

Other research related to public relations education includes reviews of practice based on alumni reports, in which alumni reported choosing the degree because of skills such as writing, strategizing, creativity, oral communication, and design (Plowman et al., 2022). This study also considered those who stayed in the field, with many of the alumni finding other positions where they could still apply the skills they had learned. Other researchers, more recently, have reviewed graduate programs (Capizzo et al., 2022) as well as HBCU students' interests in graduate work in PR (Waymer & Taylor, 2022). But CPRE's work provides the basis for much of the investigation into public relations education, especially based on educator and practitioner viewpoints. Overall, public relations education studies of curriculum and hiring characteristics are limited, although the Journal of Public Relations Education is providing an outlet for more attention to these topics.

Three Hypotheses and One Research Question

Throughout previous literature, the CPRE reports on KSAs and Hiring Characteristics continue to be referenced as the gold standard by which other researchers have conducted their studies. This article takes stock of the

descriptive information presented in the 2023 CPRE Report, *Navigating Change: Recommendations for Advancing Undergraduate Public Relations Education*, (Toth & Bourland-Davis, 2023) by also examining the data through inferential statistics built on three hypotheses and one research question.

Hypothesis 1: There will be significant differences between educator and practitioner perceptions of desired/found KSAs.

From its beginning in 1973, CPRE has advocated for pre-professional public relations education, delivered in partnership between public relations educators and practitioners, Practitioners have contributed valuable opinions on what the KSA demands of public relations practice are and educators have brought theoretical and pedagogical research contributions into the classroom that operationalize industry expectations. This hypothesis tests whether the perceptions of desired and found KSAs by practitioners and educators are similar or if significant differences exist to suggest how curricula and/or industry understanding of public relations education might be improved.

Hypothesis 2: There will be significant differences between educator and practitioner perceptions of desired/found hiring characteristics.

From its beginning in 1973, CPRE has advocated for pre-professional public relations education, informed by what industry professionals expected from entry-level hires. This hypothesis tests whether educator perceptions of practitioner hiring preferences and practitioner preferences for certain characteristics in entry-level new hires are similar or significantly different.

Research Question 1: Will there be differences in how educator and practitioner responses group hiring characteristics?

Prior studies of what characteristics are wanted in new entry-level hires indicate varied expectations. This research question reflected two different ideals. First, do the two most important influencers–educators and practitioners–in hiring agree on the same hiring characteristics; and second, is there some combination of characteristics that would be a more useful approach to help educators prepare students and to help the industry learn more about its expectations? Whether these combinations are similarly valued by practitioners and educators would be of utmost importance in continuing the dialogue between educators and practitioners on what should be the most successful preparation that can be offered to future practitioners.

Hypothesis 3: There will be significant differences between U.S. practitioners and educators and non-U.S.-based practitioners and educators on the CPRE-recommended six public relations courses to be offered.

The Commission on Public Relations Education advocates for a minimum of six dedicated public relations courses to be offered in U.S. university public relations majors/tracks/sequences. CPRE's six-course standard is the result of recognizing the many different ways that U.S. universities have delivered public relations studies. Public relations offerings have been found in schools of journalism, communication, and business. Universities have gone through organizational realignments of their departments, faculty, resources, and interests which have affected public relations studies, especially the renaming of programs, but also efforts to increase course enrollments by merging topics, such as ethics courses centered in broader media or communication courses, topics that have some similar content basis in theory. Because of this history of how public relations might

be affected by university vagaries, CPRE's 2023 research on the six-course standard checks three variables: whether public relations courses are offered; whether public relations courses are required; and whether public relations courses have public relations-dedicated content, despite varying naming of programs and course titles.

Of particular interest herein is how educators residing outside the United States report in what ways their public relations programs offer the CPRE-advocated six courses. Public relations undergraduate studies abroad will reflect different cultures, professional practices, and university missions. If CPRE's recommended six courses are found in international settings, it may be that there are universals in how public relations education is developing to prepare future practitioners.

Method

The 2023 CPRE survey was developed in multiple phases, and is reported in detail in the Navigating Change report (CPRE, 2023). Effectively, brainstorming sessions led to a set of topics which were evaluated by crowdsourcing for priority concerns to public relations practice and education. Those topics led to seven key areas: Future of the Public Relations Workplace, State of the Curriculum, Critical Thinking, Data Insights and Strategy, Ethics, DEI, and Public Relations as a Driver of Social Change. Based on this final selection, teams of CPRE members plus additional topic specialists, totaling 38 volunteers, worked through the Fall of 2022 to develop questions to be addressed in a quantitative survey. Their work made up an omnibus-style survey instrument and with choices of procedures and

sampling, all were approved by the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board in January of 2023.

This article reports on the State of the Curriculum topic incorporating the same KSA indicators used in its 2006 and 2016 CPRE surveys, with adaptation to reflect the changing nature of the field (DiStaso, 2019). Items such as App Development, Audio/Video Production, Speech Writing and Website Development were removed from KSAs in the 2023 study based on their low ratings in the 2016 survey and to help streamline survey length.

Quantitative survey questions that addressed this article's hypotheses included demographics; KSAs; hiring characteristics expectations; and program curriculum related questions. Questions were compiled through Qualtrics, and pretested with CPRE members. Most questions were Likert-type questions based on a five-point scale. Respondents received a filter question which directed them either to the public relations practitioner survey or to the public relations educator survey.

Sampling for the survey involved mixed methods ranging from random sampling in some groups to entire group invitations to participate, along with some "snowball sampling" invitations to other practitioners who might not be part of the groups. Specifically, 24 practitioner and educator organizations are represented in the membership of the Commission for Public Relations Education, and each of those representatives asked their corollary group members to complete the surveys. CPRE's Research Panel also received the survey link. Within three weeks, the responses provided a sufficient number to allow inferential data analysis.

Demographics of Participants

A total of 197 educators, and 269 practitioners responded to the survey. Additional detail on the participant demographics is available in the CPRE report (2023). Effectively, a fair amount of seniority is represented by both educators, with a mean year of experience of 21.5 years, and practitioners, with 22.65 years. For educators, the respondents were around 58.4 years old and for practitioners, 48.22. Most were women (53.4% educators, and 64.5% practitioners), with limited diversity as most reported White (75.1% educators, and 81.5% practitioners). Educators reported mostly teaching in person (61.8%, with 33.5% teaching in-person and remotely, and 4.6% online), while practitioners reported greater differences in their work (19.6% in person, 21.5% remote, and 58.9% hybrid). Most respondents were based in the U.S. (79.2% educators, and 75.1% practitioners).

Results

Hypothesis 1: There will be significant differences between educator and practitioner perceptions of desired/found KSAs.

To examine H1, analysis of variance was performed between educator and practitioner perspectives of desired KSAs, and found KSAs. In other words, the KSAs were examined based on what the two groups felt were important for students to have exposure to as part of their education, and what the two groups felt the students graduated with or came into the workforce with. In addition, we checked for how these KSA ratings ranked in order of their importance as another measure of differences between practitioners and educators.

Significant Differences

Overall, the Knowledge area received some of the lowest ratings especially compared to Skills and Abilities, possibly signifying that the practitioners focus on the application of that knowledge–what the recent graduates can do. Areas such as Business Acumen and Management, often listed as what practitioners want students to know and understand, did not receive higher ratings by practitioners as might be expected.

The area of Skills provided similar results with significant differences between practitioner and educator perceptions of the students or new hires. This includes areas such as Writing, Communication, and Research, that often emerge as most important over different related surveys.

While Abilities of the KSAs contain only four items, each was significantly different for both desired and found characteristics. These elements are Problem Solving, Strategic Planning, Creative Thinking, and Analytical Thinking. Both groups rated the Abilities found much lower than those desired, with practitioners, again, rating items much lower than educators.

The differences between desired and found or delivered for both educators and practitioners reflect drops in ratings, signifying that graduates may not be living up to their potential. While not measured, one must consider that educators are likely working with far more of the students than practitioners are working with public relations-specific new hires within a given year, especially given the seniority of many of the respondents. Educators may not be particularly optimistic about what their students retain or carry over from class to class and from class to practice based on

experience. Whereas, practitioners may be more broadly judging the new generation of incoming employees.

In sum, the analysis of variance showed that educators rated desired KSAs significantly more highly than their practitioner counterparts on nearly all the KSAs. A similar pattern emerged for found KSAs, with educators rating all items significantly more highly than practitioners (See Tables 1). As in previous studies, H1 was supported.

Table 1

Educator and Practitioner Perceptions of KSAs

KSAs	Educators		Practitioners	
	Means/SD (Desired)	Means/SD (Found)	Means/SD (Desired)	Means/SD (Found)
Knowledge				
Business Acumen	4.15/0.97***	3.05/1.18***	3.25/1.16***	1.94/0.85***
Crisis Management	3.79/1.11***	3.57/1.22***	2.69/1.25***	1.67/0.99***
Cultural Perspectives	4.19/0.88***	3.46/1.09***	3.74/1.03***	2.96/1.00***
DEI	4.15/0.96**	3.57/1.16***	3.83/1.11**	3.13/1.08***
Ethics	4.54/0.85	3.99/1.08***	4.41/0.97	3.03/1.10***
Global Perspectives	3.73/1.03***	3.21/1.18***	2.96/1.17***	2.20/0.99***
Internal Communication	3.89/1.01***	3.13/1.18***	3.5/1.17***	2.41/1.00***
Management	3.69/1.04***	3.20/1.14***	2.28/1.16***	1.65/0.76***
PR Laws & Regulations	3.71/1.09***	3.18/1.26***	2.94/1.30***	2.00/0.99***
PR Theory	3.29/1.29	3.58/1.15***	3.22/1.30	2.76/1.19***

Social Issues	4.01/0.90***	3.80/3.83*	3.69/1.02***	3.22/0.92*
Skills				
Communication	4.89/0.45***	4.41/0.87***	4.60/0.78***	3.49/0.95***
Editing	4.32/0.89	3.60/1.07***	4.20/1.01	2.80/1.03***
Graphic Design	3.54/1/02***	3.16/1.25***	2.93/1.20***	2.65/1.08***
Media Relations	4.18/0.93***	3.60/1.11***	3.60/1.17***	2.49/0.99***
Public Speaking	3.93/1.06***	3.71/1.16***	3.32/1.23***	2.60/0.97***

	Educators	Practitioners		
KSAs	Means/SD (Desired)	Means/SD (Found)	Means/SD (Desired)	Means/SD (Found)
Research & Analytics	4.37/0.78***	3.89/1.04***	3.81/1.06***	2.62/1.07***
Social Media Management	4.51/0.69***	4.13/2.22**	3.94/0.99***	3.68/1.04**
Storytelling	4.24/0.92*	3.68/1.06***	4.05/1.07*	2.78/1.00***
Writing	4.83/0.52*	4.18/0.92***	4.67/0.76*	3.08/0.99***
Abilities				
Analytical Thinking	4.51/0.76**	3.90/0.94***	4.25/0.96**	2.57/0.90**
Creative Thinking	4.54/0.73**	3.92/0.90***	4.31/0.87**	3.15/1.07***
Problem Solving	4.66/0.64***	3.92/0.95***	4.34/0.96***	2.72/0.92***
Strategic Planning	4.38/0.92***	4.12/0.98***	3.39/1.32***	2.10/0.99***

Note. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

With the vast majority of KSA elements reflecting significant differences in perceptions, it may be more helpful to highlight the cases where there are no significant differences. Under the area of Knowledge, are the two desired characteristics of Ethics and PR Theory. Ethics is the top-ranked desired knowledge area as well, and although not receiving as high of a rating, PR Theory also reflects much closer alignment in terms of its relevance. In other words, educators and practitioners did not differ significantly on their perceptions of Ethics as a desired knowledge item because they all deemed Ethics as highly important and PR Theory as moderately important.

It should be noted that significant differences in perceptions still emerge in the perceptions of the two groups on whether these areas are found in new hires. And under the area of Skills, there are no significant differences in the perceptions of Editing as a desired characteristic, but with significant differences in that element as a found characteristic. Storytelling and Writing also reflected lower-level significant differences at the desired level, suggesting somewhat closer ratings of those elements as desired skills.

Rankings

We continued to compare and contrast the perceptions of educator and practitioner expectations (desires) on what they saw as desired and delivered (or found) KSAs by adding a ranking of items in addition to the statistical comparisons. The rank order allowed a review of the data based on emerging priorities outside of the possibility of different "scales" of expectations being applied in the ratings. See (Tables 2 and 3). Ethics, DEI, Cultural Perspectives and Social Issues all appeared in the ranking of the top 5 most highly rated

elements. Educators highlighted the value of Business Acumen in this list,

whereas Internal Communication appeared on the practitioner list.

Table 2

Top-Ranked Desired KSAs

KSA	Educators	Practitioners
Knowledge (reporting top 5 of 11)	Ethics 4.54 Cultural Perspectives 4.19 DEI 4.15 Business Acumen 4.15 Social Issues 4.01	Ethics 4.41 DEI 3.83 Cultural Perspectives 3.74 Social Issues 3.69 Internal Communication 3.5
Skills (reporting top 5 of 9)	Communication 4.89 Writing 4.83 SM Management 4.51 Research & Analytics 4.37 Editing 4.32	Writing 4.67 Communication 4.6 Editing 4.2 Storytelling 4.05 SM Management 3.94
Abilities (reporting top 2 of 4)	Problem Solving 4.66 Creative Thinking 4.54	Problem Solving 4.34 Creative Thinking 4.31

Table 3

Top-Ranked Found KSAs Characteristics

KSA	Educators	Practitioners
Knowledge (reporting top 5 of 11)	Ethics 3.99 Social Issues 3.8 PR Theory 3.58 DEI 3.57 Crisis Management 3.57	Social Issues 3.22 DEI 3.13 Ethics 3.03 Cultural Perspectives 2.96 PR Theory 2.76
Skills (reporting top 5 of 9)	Communication 4.41 Writing 4.18 SM Management 4.13 Research & Analytics 3.89 Public Speaking 3.71	SM Management 3.68 Communication 3.49 Writing 3.08 Editing 2.8 Storytelling 2.78

Abilities (reporting top 2 of 4)	Strategic Planning 4.12 Creative Thinking 3.92 Problem Solving 3.92	Creative Thinking 3.15 Problem Solving 2.72

In the Skills classification, while the mean ratings are different, both educators' and practitioners' views of desired skills include nearly the same skills when put in rank order. Both also feel that what students graduate with is not at the same level as what is desired, with practitioners ranking skills found substantially lower than educators. Communication, Writing, and Social Media Management were Skills in the top five lists when rated items were ranked – for both desired and found Skills. Other key items in the rankings were Research and Analytics, Storytelling, and Editing. Editing only appeared in the "found" list for practitioners (and not educators) with a rating just below the midpoint. Research and Public Speaking appeared in the found list for educators only, and storytelling in the found list for practitioners.

The four items under abilities had both practitioners and educators placing Problem Solving as the most desired ability, although all appear to be abilities both groups would consider important. When the mean scores were ranked, educators and practitioners were identical for abilities desired. In the delivered category, Strategic Thinking emerges as the top-ranked item for educators, very likely because it is a critical component of the campaigns class which often serves as a capstone course for seniors.

Based on a review of the rankings, H1 results raise questions on the significant differences of H1 in the sense that top-ranked items are more congruous than incongruous for the educators and practitioners.

Hypothesis 2: There will be significant differences between educator and practitioner perceptions of desired/found hiring characteristics.

In addition to KSAs, the survey included "Hiring Characteristics," a term adopted from previous studies, but which is perhaps better identified as an extension of Abilities as these often reflect the abilities level, which combines the knowledge and skills such as their application in an internship. As in the previous case, we analyzed these elements using both analysis of variance and rank orders.

Analysis of variance results showed that educators rated desired hiring characteristics significantly more highly than their practitioner counterparts on the majority of the item (Table 4). Unlike the KSAs, more elements in the analysis of variance showed greater similarities. For example, in the area of "Desired Characteristics," the following elements reflected significant differences in the practitioner and educator ratings: Active in PR Organizations or Student Media, Certificate in Principles of PR, PR Degrees, Diverse/Multicultural Perspectives, Interest in Culture, Leadership Experience, PR Coursework, Being up to date with Current PR Trends, Volunteer Work, Writing Performance, Teamwork Ability, and Hybrid or Remote Work Capability.

Table 4

Educator and Practitioner Perspectives of "Hiring Characteristics"

Curricular/Extracurricular Characteristics	Educators		Practitioners	
	Means/SD (Desired)	Means/SD (Found)	Means/SD (Desired)	Means/SD (Found)
Active in PR Organizations	3.49/1.21	3.06/1.06***	3.33/1.24	2.47/1.13***
Active in student media	3.50/1.34	3.16/1.78***	3.29/1.17	2.68/1.04***
Active on social media	4.21/0.95***	4.50/0.73	3.67/1.15***	4.35/0.87
Bi- or multi-lingual	3.52/1.14***	2.65/1.04***	3.03/1.18***	2.11/0.92***
Business coursework	3.83/0.97***	2.92/1.02***	3.45/1.09***	2.38/0.98***
Campus involvement	3.54/1.16***	3.40/1.05***	3.05/1.16***	3.09/1.08***
Caliber of university attended	3.47/1.10***	3.29/0.93***	2.74/1.17***	2.93.0.96***
Certificate in Principles of PR	2.45/1.25	2.09/1.12	2.65/1.31	1.91/1.02
Degree in PR	3.62/1.03	3.73/0.93***	3.51/1.11	3.15/1.09***
Diverse/Multicultural perspective	3.95/1.01	3.29/0.94*	3.80/1.00	3.02/0.89**
Diversity of the candidate	3.84/1.08*	2.98/1.07*	3.61/1.09*	2.73/0.94*

| | Educators | | Practitioners | |
Curricular/Extracurricular Characteristics	Means/SD (Desired)	Means/SD (Found)	Means/SD (Desired)	Means/SD (Found)
Public relations portfolio	4.12/0.95****	3.64/0.98****	3.68/1.10***	2.92/1.12***
High GPA	3.33/1.02****	3.47/0.86****	2.91/1.07***	3.04/0.93**
Internship or work experience	4.66/0.66****	4.15/0.79****	4.35/0.85***	3.67/0.96***
Interest in culture	3.19/1.12	3.13/0.94	3.07/1.17	3.04/1.01
Leadership experience	3.74/0.97	3.22/0.90**	3.13/1.08	2.67/0.95***
Liberal arts coursework	3.17/1.13***	3.47/1.11***	2.94/1.24*	3.11/1.09**
Online portfolio	3.82/1.10****	3.52/1.02****	3.21/1.16***	2.88/1.09***
Participation in on-campus student PR agency	3.50/1.13****	2.98/1.04****	2.95/1.20***	2.29/1.03***
Public relations coursework	4.19/0.99	4.15/0.89**	4.07/1.04	3.60/1.05***
Strong references	4.27/0.93****	3.94/0.97****	3.94/1.01***	3.46/0.96***
Study abroad experience	2.77/1.15****	2.70/1.03****	2.11/1.10***	2.11/1.04***
Up to date with current professional trends and issues	4.16/0.88	3.34/0.95**	4.06/0.95	2.97/0.95***

	Means/SD (Desired)	Means/SD (Found)	Means/SD (Desired)	Means/SD (Found)
Volunteer work	3.28/1.06	3.20/0.98*	3.13/1.19	2.97/1.00*

	Educators		Practitioners	
Curricular/Extracurricular Characteristics	Means/SD (Desired)	Means/SD (Found)	Means/SD (Desired)	Means/SD (Found)
Writing performance	4.77/0.60	3.51/0.95***	4.66/0.67	3.03/0.93***
Teamwork ability	4.58/0.70	3.77/0.87***	4.53/0.76	3.54/0.89**
Hybrid/remote work capability	3.81/1.07	3.77/1.00	3.59/1.26	3.57/1.10

Note: * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < .001$.

Again, as in the KSAs, most items reflected significant differences in the traits that were found upon graduation, and in all cases, for both groups, reflected drops in ratings highlighting that while many elements were important, they were often not perceived as being found in recent graduates. And while both groups rated the found elements lower than the desired, significant differences were reflected between the ratings of practitioners and educators. The exceptions in this case were: Active on Social Media, Hybrid or Remote Work Capability, Interest in Culture, and Certificate in Principles of PR, with the latter sharing the lowest ratings out of all options – with the exception of Study Abroad just below the rating of the Certificate for desired traits.

With statistically significant differences in 14 of the 27 desired traits, and 23 of the 27 found traits, it would appear that H2 was supported, as it was in the 2017 study (DiStasso, 2019).

Ranking

While a number of items reflected significant differences, these items were also rank ordered to determine whether the most desired and found traits were also different outside of the rating scale differentials. The items, when ranked based on the mean rating scores, reflect far more substantial similarities, despite some reports suggesting practitioners and educators are not on the same page. (See Table 5.)

Table 5

Ranking of Top "Hiring Characteristics"

Hiring Characteristics	Educators	Practitioners
Desired	Writing performance 4.77 Internship or work experience 4.66 Teamwork ability 4.58 Strong references 4.27 Active on social media 4.21	Writing performance 4.66 Teamwork ability 4.53 Internship or work experience 4.35 PR coursework 4.07 Currency in professional trends 4.06
Found	Active on social media 4.5 Internship or work experience 4.15 PR coursework 4.15 Strong references 3.94 Teamwork ability, 3.77 Hybrid/remote work capability 3.77	Active on social media 4.35 Internship or work experience 3.67 PR coursework Hybrid/remote work capability 3.57 Teamwork ability 3.54 Strong references 3.46

In the area of what makes students more "hirable," practitioners identified Writing, Teamwork, Internships, PR Courses, and Currency in PR (items that scored, on average, above a 4 on a five-point scale). Strong References was close, with an average rating of 3.94. Practitioners also recognized the value of Public Relations Coursework, based on their responses. Specifically, Public Relations Coursework is in the top-ranked items for both desired and found characteristics. Practitioners and educators agree on the experience of graduates with Social Media, although the practitioners' responses do not place that characteristic in their top responses for desired characteristics. Of particular note is that Internships or Work Experience ranked second or third in lists for both practitioners and educators in both desired and found.

Educators similarly rated Writing Performance, Internship or Work Experience, Teamwork Ability, Strong References, and Active on Social Media as what they believed were important for the job application process, indicating the only difference in the top-ranked desired items were practitioners ranking more highly PR coursework and Currency in Professional Trends, while educators ranked more highly Strong References and Active on Social Media.

Of particular note is the ranking of the top three items in found traits for both educators and practitioners were identical, and with the top six (because of a tied rating) for both groups parallelling each other although in a slightly different order. Educators and practitioners, it would appear, have perceptions on the most relevant "traits" that are in strong alignment, even

more important when considering these reflect "abilities" or the applications of knowledge and skills.

Practitioners and educators agree on the hiring value of graduates with Social Media, although the practitioners' responses do not place that characteristic in their top responses for desired characteristics, perhaps because of generational use of Social Media being prevalent. Of particular note is that Internships or Work Experience ranked second or third in lists for both practitioners and educators. When adding in the top-ranked hiring characteristics, H2 is not as clearly supported.

Research Question 1: Will there be differences in how educator and practitioner responses group hiring characteristics?

Educator Responses

We performed a principal components analysis with Varimax rotation on the educators' responses regarding what they perceived to be practitioner desired Hiring Characteristics and identified a four-factor structure (63.45% variance explained). (See Tables 6 and 7.) Factor 1, labeled Higher Education Value, included Leadership Experience, Interest in Culture, Study-abroad Experience, and Volunteer Work, with loadings ranging from .67 to .69. Factor 2 as Work Ready consisted of Writing Performance, Internship/Work Experience, and Teamwork Ability, with loadings from .67 to .82. Factor 3, or Value Added, was made up of Active in PR Organizations, Active in Student Media, and Online Portfolio, with loadings from .58 to .78. Factor 4, labeled Prestige, was comprised of High GPA and Caliber of University attended, with both loadings being .72.

Table 6

KMO and Bartlett's Test on Educators' Desired Hiring Characteristics

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.882
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1963.497
	df	351
	Sig.	<.001

Table 7

Factor Loadings on Educator Responses Regarding Desired Hiring Characteristics

Factors	Scale Items	Loadings
Higher Education Value	Leadership experience	.69
	Interest in culture	.68
	Study-abroad experience	.67
	Volunteer work	.67
Work Ready	Writing performance	.82
	Internship/Work experience	.75
	Teamwork ability	.67
Value added	Active in PR organizations	.78
	Active in student media	.64
	Online portfolio	.58
Prestige	High GPA	.72
	Caliber of university attended	.72

Practitioner Responses

We performed a principal components analysis with Varimax rotation on the practitioner responses regarding desired Hiring Characteristics and identified a six-factor structure, with 57.44% variance explained. (See Tables 8 and 9.) Factor 1, labeled Extra-curricular, included Online Portfolio, Public Relations Portfolio, and Participation in On-campus Student PR Agency, with loadings ranging from .66 to .73. Factor 2, Prestige, was comprised of High

GPA and Caliber of University attended, with loadings of .68 and .66. Factor 3, Value Added, included Bi- or Multi-lingual and Business Coursework, with loadings being .68 and .64. Factor 4, or Work Ready, was composed of Writing Performance and Teamwork Ability, with loadings being .80 and .78. Factor 5, PR-specific preparation, included Certificate in Principles of PR, Degree in PR, and PR Coursework, with loadings from .60 to .68. Lastly, Factor 6, Diversity Characteristics, included Diversity of the Candidate and Diverse/Multicultural Perspective, with loadings of .75 and .64.

Table 8

KMO and Bartlett's Test on Practitioners' Desired Hiring Characteristics

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.843
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2129.375
	df	351
	Sig.	<.001

Table 9

Factor Loadings on Practitioner Responses Regarding Desired Hiring Characteristics

Factors	Scale Items	Loadings
Extracurricular	Online portfolio	.73
	PR portfolio	.73
	Participation in on-campus student agency	.66
Prestige	High GPA	.68
	Caliber of university attended	.66
Value Added	Bi- or multi-lingual	.68
	Business coursework	.64
Work Ready	Writing performance	.80
	Teamwork ability	.78
PR Specific Preparation	Certificate in principles of PR	.68
	Degree in PR	.68
	PR coursework	.60

| Diversity Characteristics | Diversity of candidate | .75 |
| | Diverse/multicultural perspective | .64 |

A comparison of the resulting factors suggests two similarities of desired hiring characteristics. Educator and practitioner factors both included Work Ready Characteristics (Writing Performance and Teamwork Ability) although Internship/Work Experience was absent from the practitioner Work Ready factor. Also similar for both educator and practitioner responses was the prestige factor (High GPA and caliber of university attended).

What differed between the two influencers was that there were six practitioner factors and four educator factors, suggesting less strength of connections in the educator perceptions of practitioner-desired characteristics. Missing from the educator factors were two practitioner factors that we labeled PR-specific Preparation and Diversity Characteristics. Not found in the practitioner data was the educator Higher Education factor, of Leadership Experience, Interest in Culture, Study Abroad, and Volunteer Work. Not found in the educator data was the practitioner factor labeled Extra-curricular (Online Portfolio, PR Portfolio, and Participation in On-campus Student Agency).

The data suggested an overlap that we labeled "Value Added" when comparing educator and practitioner responses. However, the characteristics in this factor differed. The educator value-added factor included Being active in PR organizations, Active in Student Media, and Online Portfolio. The Value Added factor from practitioner responses included coursework (Bi- or multilingual and Business coursework).

In summary, educator and practitioner factors on the topic of desired hiring characteristics suggested some agreement but not as much as we would have liked to have found. The combinations of characteristics as labeled seemed somewhat useful in how they might be applied to advising students by educators on curricular and extracurricular choices that would match employer desires in hiring. But, educator perceptions for what practitioners desire suggests different goals and aspirations. On the other hand, practitioners may have unrealistic desired expectations about what entry-level hires can bring to the workplace. The results furthermore highlighted the individual perspectives whether education or being on the job, although there was a nod by each group to the other.

Factor Loadings on Found Characteristics

Educator Responses

The same analysis was conducted on the educators' responses regarding what they thought were hiring characteristics found among entry-level hires. See Tables 10 and 11. For educators, we found a five-factor pattern (66.12% variance explained). Factor 1, Work Ready, included Writing Performance, Up-to-date with Current Professional Trends and Issues, Teamwork Ability, with loadings from .75 to .81. Factor 2, PR specific preparation, was comprised of Public Relations Portfolio, Public Relations Coursework, Online Portfolio, and High GPA, with loadings from .57 to .72. Factor 3, Diversity Characteristics, included interest in Culture and Diversity of the Candidate, with loadings being .64 and .73. Factor 4, Prestige, composed of Caliber of University attended and Campus Involvement, with

the loadings being .67 and .69. Factor 5, Value Added, included Bi- or Multi-lingual and Business Coursework, with the loadings being .81 and .76.

Table 10

KMO and Bartlett's Test on Educator Responses Regarding Hiring Characteristics Found Among Entry-Level Hires

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.848
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1752.686
	df	351
	Sig.	<.001

Table 11

Factor Loadings on Educator Responses Regarding Hiring Characteristics Found Among Entry-Level Hires

Factors	Scale Items	Loadings
Work Ready	Writing performance	.81
	Up to date with current professional trends/issues	.76
	Teamwork ability	.75
PR Specific Preparation	PR portfolio	.72
	PR coursework	.71
	Online portfolio	.69
	High GPA	.57
Diversity Characteristics	Interest in culture	.73
	Diversity of candidate	.64
Prestige	Caliber of university attended	.69
	Campus involvement	.67
Value Added	Bi- or multi-lingual	.81
	Business coursework	.76

Practitioner Responses

The same analysis of practitioners' responses regarding found hiring characteristics showed a five-factor structure (58.47% variance explained). (See Tables 12 and 13.) Factor 1, Related Work Ready, included Online Portfolio, Campus Involvement, Leadership Experience, and Active in Student Media, with loadings from .61 to .76. Factor 2, Work Ready, consisted of Teamwork Ability, Writing Performance, and Up to Date with Current Professional Trends and Issues, with loadings from .58 to .78. Factor 3, Prestige, included High GPA, Caliber of University Attended, and Liberal Arts Coursework, with loadings from .61 to .73. Factor 4, PR specific preparation, included PR Coursework, Degree in PR, and Active in PR Organizations with loadings from .52 to .76. Factor 5 was Diversity Characteristics, and included Diversity of the Candidate and Diverse/Multicultural Perspective, with loadings being .78.

Table 12

KMO and Bartlett's Test on Practitioner Responses Regarding Hiring Characteristics Found Among Entry-Level Hires

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.851
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2127.797
	df	351
	Sig.	<.001

Table 13

Factor Loadings on Practitioner Responses Regarding Hiring Characteristics Found Among Entry-Level Hires

Factors	Scale Items	Loadings
Related Work Ready	Online portfolio	.76
	Campus involvement	.62
	Leadership experience	.61

	Active in student media	.61
Work Ready	Teamwork ability	.78
	Writing performance	.78
	Up to date with current professional trends/issues	.58
Prestige	High GPA	.73
	Caliber of university attended	.72
	Liberal arts coursework	.61
PR Specific	PR coursework	.76
Preparation	Degree in PR	.74
Diversity	Active in PR organizations	.52
Characteristics	Diversity of candidate	.78
	Diverse/multicultural perspective	.78

In comparing the resulting factors that emerged as found hiring characteristics, the data suggested a closer alignment between educator and practitioner responses. Both influencers reported five factors, of which four were similar: Work Ready, Prestige, PR-specific Preparation, and Diversity Characteristics, although there were some differences in characteristics within these factors so labeled. We labeled the fifth educator factor as "Value Added" (Campus Involvement, Bi-or Multilingual and Business Coursework). The fifth practitioner factor seemed to represent additional work-ready characteristics, such as Online Portfolio, Campus Involvement, Leadership Experience, and Active in Student Media. The only overlapping characteristic between the two labeled categories was Campus Involvement.

Closer alignment in this data between the two influencers suggests more validity in the factors that emerged; thus, perhaps more useful for educators in their advising of students while in school.

It is not surprising that the strongest loading factor for educators would be elements related to higher education value. While the items loaded somewhat differently, both groups recognized the need for some evidentiary work – just another element of support for what educators stress with students. The practitioners on the "Found" characteristics had PR-specific Preparation as the fifth factor, but an Online Portfolio and being Active in Student Media in the first factor which would still provide evidence of preparedness for public relations work. The factor analysis was useful for seeing how items from the "Hiring Traits" grouped together statistically, and while not accounting for a preponderance of the variance, the analysis is still useful for building future studies. These studies would need to consider that the elements may have loaded under different categories.

Hypothesis 3: There will be significant differences between U.S. practitioners and educators and practitioners and educators "not based on the U.S." on the six public relations courses offered.

We also asked educators from both the U.S. and outside the U.S. whether the six public relations core courses were taught and required in their program, and whether such courses were PR-specific.

Courses Taught

Regarding "courses taught," the Introduction to or Principles of PR course, 134 or 97.8% U.S.-based educators responded that the course was taught in their program, as compared to 33 or 91.7% international educators. The difference was not significant: χ^2 (2, N = 173) = 5.03, p > .05.

A similar pattern was observed for Research Methods (χ^2 (1, N = 173) = 5.03, p > .05), with 94.2% (n =129) with U.S.-based educators indicating

the course being taught in their program vs. 91.7% (n = 33) international educators; and for Ethics (80.3% yes for U.S.-based educators vs. 80.6% international; χ^2 (2, N = 173) = .85, p > .05).

On the other hand, significant differences were observed between U.S.-based vs. international educators in their responses to whether the courses of Writing (97.1% yes for U.S.-based educators vs. 77.8% international), Campaign/Case Studies (98.5% yes for U.S.-based educators vs. 88.9% international), and Supervised Work/Internships (97.1% yes for U.S.-based educators vs. 80.6% international) were taught in their program. The Chi-square values were as follows: Writing: χ^2 (2, N = 173) = 16.86, p < .001; Campaign/Case Studies: χ^2 (2, N = 173) = 8.66, p < .05; Supervised Work/Internships: χ^2 (2, N = 173) = 13.08, p < .001.

Courses Required

With regard to whether the six courses were required in different programs, U.S.-based educators did not significantly differ from their international counterparts in two courses: Introduction to /Principles of PR (χ^2 (2, N = 173) = .68, p > .05) and Research Methods (χ^2 (2, N = 173) = 1.60, p > .05) as most programs required the two courses (Introduction to/ Principles of PR: 91.9% in U.S. vs. 91.2% international; Research Methods: 87.3% in U.S. vs. 85.7% international).

Significant differences were found for the remaining four core courses, with higher percentages of U.S. schools requiring Writing (93.3% in U.S. vs. 74.3% international) and Campaign/Case Studies (91.9% in U.S. vs. 74.3% international) but higher percentages of international schools requiring Ethics

(50.7% in U.S. vs. 79.4% international) and Supervised Work/Internships (50.4% in U.S. vs. 74.3% international).

PR-Specific Courses

Lastly, for the question of whether the courses were PR-specific, educators in the U.S. responded similarly in comparison with their international counterparts regarding Research Methods (47.3% in U.S. vs. 47.1% international; χ^2 (2, N = 173) = .54, p > .05), Ethics (35.1% in U.S. vs. 51.5% international; χ^2 (2, N = 173) = 4.17, p > .05), and Supervised Work/Internships (56.5% in U.S. vs. 61.8% international; χ^2 (2, N = 173) = .52, p > .05). Significant differences were shown among the educators regarding Introduction to/Principles of PR (92.5% in U.S. vs. 75.8% international; χ^2 (2, N = 173) = 8.96, p < .05), Writing (85.7% in U.S. vs. 61.8% international; χ^2 (2, N = 173) = 10.14, p < .01), and Campaign/Case Studies (92.5% in U.S. vs. 61.8% international; χ^2 (2, N = 173) = 21.57, p < .001).

Based on these results, Hypothesis 3 received mixed results, indicating increasing global agreement on courses within public relations sequences, and with international respondents indicating greater emphasis on Ethics and Internships.

Conclusion

The undergraduate public relations curriculum is at the heart of CPRE recommendations. Since CPRE's 1973 founding, its mission has been to prepare future public relations professionals for successful careers, advocating a pre-professional preparation tied to public relations industry needs. CPRE accomplishes this mission with continuing dialogue between public relations

educators and practitioners and surveys of practitioner and educator perceptions. Therefore, the results of the 2023 quantitative survey become another touchpoint in how public relations education is doing. The international responses, while the numbers were small, provided indications that the recommended courses are also being implemented abroad.

The 2023 data continue to highlight statistical differences in ratings of desired versus found KSA items. However, we drew the conclusion that these significant differences in perceptions could be the vantage points from which each party sits. Educators see the growth and development of their students in real time; while practitioners perceive entry-level hires from their organizational and client perspectives.

Rankings, instead of ratings, of KSAs and hiring characteristics suggested educators and practitioners were "on the same page" even though their scales of expectations differed. Knowing that the most relevant skills and abilities are important to both educators and practitioners allows greater confidence that the curriculum and educational experience are working to prepare students for the realities of workplace priorities. The factor analysis of the "hiring characteristics" also reflected some key themes across both groups, and is a facet to continue to explore.

While data suggests both significant differences as well as substantial similarities between practitioners and educators on what's important for the new graduates to know and be able to perform, future research is needed, especially in light of research that has begun to explore differences based on early, mid and senior career respondents (Kirshna et al., 2020). Other research that holds some promise for explaining the differences might be in a broader

view of perceived competency as "the roles a practitioner enacts and the knowledge, skill, ability, education, and experience possessed are all pieces of the same equation for defining competence in public relations" (Knight & Sweetser, 2021, p 6).

Recognizing the drops in ratings by both educators and practitioners in desired KSAs vs. found and the drop in scores on hiring characteristics perceived and found suggests a need to achieve better alignment between public relations education and industry expectations. Of note, public relations is not the only area highlighting undergraduate preparation: "A recent report from *Intelligent* found that four in 10 business leaders say recent grads are unprepared for the workforce, citing work ethic and communication skills as the top reasoning why…" (Miller, 2023, para 2). This HR report also highlights the fact that new hires represent a different generation with online education due to the pandemic and substantial familiarity with technology, which also signifies an increased need for better onboarding procedures.

On the other hand, we should always be mindful that public relations educators' perspectives will also be shaped by their scholarly work that contributes new theories and methods to the understanding of public relations. Students benefit from pre-professional applied training that reflects practitioner perceptions and opinions but also new insights not yet industry absorbed. Future studies of career preparedness should seek entry-level hires' perceptions of what they understood were the reasons for their career readiness and employment. Also of value would be research on graduates still in the public relations job market to learn why they thought their training was most helpful or not aligned with the job market they were navigating. For

now, we have assurance from this study that key KSAs and hiring characteristics are reflected in the recommended six-course standard and that those courses are taking hold in programs internationally and locally, helping to prepare the next generation of graduates.

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Are We Speaking Their Language: The Presence of Content
Important to Gen Z in Entry-Level PR Job Advertisements

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Abstract

The recent Commission on Public Relations (2023) report contains a chapter recommendation calling on PR educators to help students understand their priorities and values that might impact job searches and career plans. However, knowledge of their priorities and values is only helpful if the job information discusses them. Numerous studies have investigated employer expectations of PR job applicant's skills based on analysis of the advertisement content. Few, if any, have examined the subject from the job candidate's perspective, in this case, Generation (Gen) Z, those born from the mid-1990s to 2010. Employers need to understand the characteristics of Gen Z that differentiate them from previous generations if they are to effectively recruit and retain them in an increasingly competitive job market. This study examines the content of 102 employment advertisements being used by organizations to fill entry-level public relations positions to ascertain if they effectively communicate organizational values, priorities, and culture that would attract Gen Z candidates, such as the organization's commitment to society and to the employees. Content analysis found that out of ten expectations and priorities important to Gen Z, only a mean of 2.7 were included in each ad. The four most common expectations and priorities included were doing
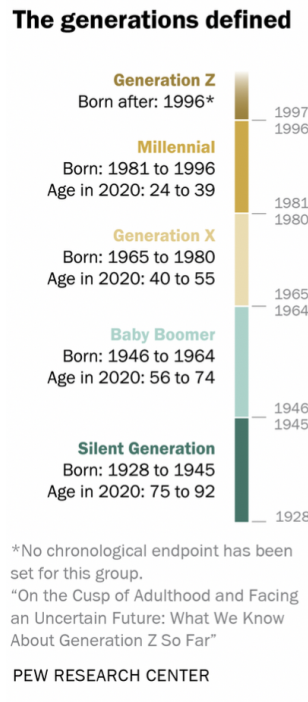
meaningful/impactful work, commitment to diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging, providing modern technology, and workplace flexibility. Surprisingly, only seven ads mentioned the organization's commitment to the environment.

Key words/phrases: Generation Z, PR job advertisement, work-life balance, CPRE-Commission on Public Relations Education, DEIB, workplace expectations

Introduction

Figure 1.
Generation
Definitions
Source:
Parker &
Igielnik
(2020)

The generations defined

Generation Z
Born after: 1996*
1997
1996

Millennial
Born: 1981 to 1996
Age in 2020: 24 to 39
1981
1980

Generation X
Born: 1965 to 1980
Age in 2020: 40 to 55
1965
1964

Baby Boomer
Born: 1946 to 1964
Age in 2020: 56 to 74
1946
1945

Silent Generation
Born: 1928 to 1945
Age in 2020: 75 to 92
1928

*No chronological endpoint has been set for this group.
"On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Generation Z So Far"

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What do we mean when we say Gen Z? While definitions will vary, there is general agreement that Generation Z (Gen Z) includes individuals born from the mid-1990s until about 2010. The two most common age ranges are from 1995 to 2010, or 1997 to 2012. Regardless of the definition, today's traditional-age college students are members of Gen Z. Educators need to understand this generation to create effective pedagogical approaches and guide student career development. Practitioners need to understand the characteristics of Gen Z that differentiate them from previous generations if they are to effectively recruit and retain employees.

Gen Z follows the Millennial cohort that brought new challenges into the workplace and differentiated themselves from their predecessors in Generation X and the Baby Boomers. It appears, however, that changes brought on by Gen Z, will not follow the same path as the millennials. Instead, in some areas, Gen Z members express attitudes and preferences that are more akin to their grandparents than they are to the generation before them. Figure 1, taken from Parker and Igielnik (2020), presents the age cohort categories as defined by Pew Research Center, a respected source of information on Gen Z. The current investigation will look at some of Gen Z's key preferences or priorities and will examine advertisements for entry-level public relations positions to determine if the ads speak to those priorities and preferences.

Ten important workplace expectations or priorities identifying Gen Z are discussed in the review of literature. However, one of the most common and influential characteristics that underlies those ten is that this generation has never known life without instant internet availability. Because the first smart phones were introduced when they were infants, members of Gen Z have always known a world where the internet was available in their hand, and they have had little or no experience with analog media. Recent surveys have found that 96% of Gen Z members own a smartphone, and approximately one-half spend at least 10 hours per day on an electronic device (CSP Global, 2023). This generation has grown up in an era of several major technological shifts, allowing them to view these changes as normal and to navigate the changes with relative ease.

While moving into the US job market more slowly than previous generations (Fry & Parker, 2018), Gen Z is on the cusp of making major strides into the workforce. It is important for employers to take this into account. Koop

(2021) notes that almost two billion people globally fall into the Gen Z age range, and that by 2025 they will account for 27% of the global workforce. A 2022 Work Trend Index Special Report projects that in the US, Gen Z employees will be 30% by 2030 (Hybrid Word). As the most recent entrants into the job market, members of this generation will be looking at entry-level positions in their field. The 2022 Work Trend Index special report (Hybrid Word) also noted that Gen Z employees are changing positions more quickly than previous generations. They note, for example, that in 2021, Gen Z job transitions increased by 22% and that during that same year millennials' job transition rate dropped by 1%.

Job advertisements and/or announcements are an important way for younger workers to discover what is available in the job market, as they do not yet possess a developed professional network. Thus, for entry-level positions it is especially important to have a well-developed position announcement. The current investigation was designed to determine if the content of employment advertisements being used by organizations to fill entry-level public relations positions reflect the unique priorities and workplace expectations of Gen Z.

Review of Literature

Past Research on Entry-Level PR Job Position Announcements

The past research related to advertisements for public relations positions is best exemplified by the work of Meganck, Smith, and Guidry (2020). "By analyzing 1000 job postings, this study unearths the most frequently requested entry-level public relations job skills by employers" (p. 1). Meganck et al.'s work is a recent example of a research line that strives to ensure that public relations education is preparing graduates for entry-level jobs by equipping them with the proper skills. The purpose of this line of research is to align the needs of the

employer with the skill set developed in public relations education. Another example of this skills-based research of job announcement is found in the title of the article by Brunner, Zarkin, and Yates (2018), "What do employers want? What should faculty teach? A content analysis of entry-level employment ads in public relations."

The investigations discussed in the previous paragraph focused on the needs or desires of the employers and many have referred to reports of the Commission on Public Relations Education to justify the need for the research. While the need to assess the skill sets of our graduates in comparison to industry needs is undeniably an important service to the profession and our students, rarely, if ever, has the research focused on the expectations of the job candidates.

Both the employer and the job candidates enter the process with expectations. The employer's expectations have received extensive attention, but the expectations of the potential employee have not, until recently, received significant attention. However, in the most recent Commission on Public Relations Education report, Navigating Change: Recommendations for Advancing Undergraduate PR Education (2023), a chapter (Lubbers, et al., 2023) specifically addresses the future of the PR workplace with a discussion of trends, including Gen Z expectations, and how they might influence the workplace in the future. One chapter recommendation calls on PR educators to "Prepare students to understand their personal values and priorities and how they should fit into their job searches and career plans" (Lubbers, et al., p. 22). Unless hiring organizations provide information related to the expectations of applicants, the student's understanding of their personal values and priorities will have limited usefulness. Since past research on entry-level PR job advertisements has primarily focused on

the skills the employer requires or gives preference to when making an employment decision, the expectations of job candidates have been largely ignored. In the discussion of their research, Meganck, Smith, and Guidry (2020, p. 6) note "… there is little known about the student/entry-level practitioner perspective …." The current investigation is designed to remedy that situation by highlighting ten of the most common workplace expectations and priorities for Gen Z and then looking for content related to those inside the ads for entry-level PR positions. The unique perspectives of Gen Z, the newest entry-level employees, may make it difficult for organizations filling PR positions to attract quality candidates and to retain them. In a more competitive market to hire top candidates with all the required skills, employers may be overlooking an important element of the advertisement, presenting the organization to the candidate. Does the organization accurately represent its values, priorities, and culture? The current investigation is designed to serve as an initial benchmark of employer job advertisements including content that addresses Gen Z expectations.

Gen Z Expectations of the Employer and the Workplace

Before we compare the advertisement content to the expectations of Gen Z, it is important to clearly identify those expectations, because "Generation Z's personal communication preferences and habits demonstrate unprecedented technological experiences and expectations in the workplace" (Janssen & Carradini, 2021, p. 137). Like other generations, salary is important to Gen Z. However, it is less important than previous generations and Gen Z applicants appear ready to trade salary for many of the preferences and expectations identified below (Zurich Insurance, 2023). Andrew Hunter, co-founder of global

job search engine Adzuna, says that Gen Z employee expectations are very different than those of older generations. "'It's imperative that companies understand the unique needs of this group (Gen Z) and build cultures that cater to them,' Hunter said" (Bizouati-Kennedy, 2021, para. 4).

A review of relevant literature related to the preferences and expectations of Gen Z is presented here and is divided into two major sections. First, we review what is known about four of Gen Z's stated preferences related to an organization's commitment to society, or more generally to socially responsible behavior. The second section reviews the literature related to Gen Z's concerns for the organization's commitment to them as employees.

Like research conducted on other generations, the research outlining the opinions of Gen Z is based on a change positively or negatively that is viewed as significant by those conducting the research. Thus, the results should be thought of in terms of Gen Z being more likely or less likely to be interested in something or concerned about something.

Organization's Commitment to Society-Behavior/Commitment to Socially Responsible Actions

While some individuals in every generation express a strong desire for their employer to act in a socially responsible manner, a larger percentage of the Gen Z cohort indicate that it is an important factor when making employment decisions. Research on Gen Z has uncovered a number of preferences related to an organization's commitment to society, but four of the most common are discussed in this section and are the focus of the data collection to be discussed later.

Organization operates in an ethical manner. The famous film quote, "Greed is good" would not be viewed as positively by Gen Z as would some previous generations. While describing four expectations of employers among younger workers, O'Boyle (2021) notes that Gen Z and younger millennials want the organization's leaders to operate in an ethical manner. While older generations also express a desire for ethical leadership, what may separate the older and younger workers is how ethics is defined and their willingness to make employment decisions based on ethical leadership. O'Boyle notes that older generations (Gen X and Baby Boomers) tend to connect ethics with the personal character of the leaders, thus linking concern with ethics to the actions of individuals, rather than to the entire organization. Younger workers are more likely to view ethics as being exemplified in the way that the organization impacts people and the planet.

Organizational leadership is transparent. In addition to the general concept of acting in an ethical manner, members of Gen Z want their organizations to be transparent in their actions. Transparency from organizational leadership helps build the trust that is especially important to Gen Z. As noted by Indeed (2022), Gen Z members have always had social media, giving them the ability to openly share their thoughts publicly and with that came real-time feedback. This real-time ability to express themselves has created an expectation that their opinions will be heard and respected and that other members of the organization, including management, will also be transparent in their communications.

Fernandez, Lee, and Landis (2023) argue that to build trust with Gen Z employees, it is important for organizational leadership to change their communication approach from "need-to-know" to one of "open-access." They

argue for an increase in information even if leadership is tempted to withhold that information for the protection of the employee. An increase of information sharing can alleviate some of the anxiety that is also a defining characteristic of this generation. Fernandez, Lee, and Landis (2023) also note that for Gen Z, salary transparency is important. "For example, with 1.1 billion views and nearly 21 million likes, TikTok account Salary Transparent Street features people from different U.S. cities sharing their profession and salary" (Section 2. Show them paths…, para. 2). Members of Gen Z are openly sharing salary information with the world– they expect no less from their employers.

Organization's commitment to DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging). Members of Gen Z in the United States are the most diverse of any generation. In 2018, Pew Research Center's analysis concluded that Gen Z "is already the most racially and ethnically diverse generation, as a bare majority of 6- to 21-year-olds (52%) are non-Hispanic whites" (Fry & Parker, 2018, para. 1).

Galarza (2023) offers three suggestions for engaging Gen Z employees in the workplace. The first suggestion summarizes this section by noting that to engage Gen Z workers, employers will need to build and actively maintain an inclusive environment. O'Boyle (2021) also notes that Gen Z and younger millennials strongly support diverse and inclusive workplaces, and they want to see organizational leadership actively promote these efforts. These younger workers want the organizations and their leadership to go beyond the "do no harm" to demonstrating an active effort to promote DEIB initiatives. Younger generations grew up in a world that was far more diverse than previous generations. They demand respect, equity, and inclusion – and they are voting with their consumer and employment choices. Diversity, equity and inclusion

(DEI) is not a "nice to have" for this generation; it's an imperative that is core to their personal identities (O'Boyle, 2021, Section 4, para. 1).

Organization's commitment to the environment/sustainability. Jahns (2021) is one of many who note that Gen Z workers want to work for companies that exhibit practices that not just avoid damage to the environment but that actively work to improve the environment. Jen Cannon, vice president of business development at Impax Asset Management indicates that members of Gen Z want a job that lines up with their personal values (Jahns). Jahns also notes the impact of personal values for employment decisions by stating that, "nearly half – 49% -- of Gen Zs surveyed by Deloitte said that their personal ethics have played a role in their career choices" (para. 11).

Deloitte (2021) observes that the environment remains the top concern for Gen Z. The annual Deloitte surveys allow for a trend analysis of how concerns change over time. In the surveys, Deloitte has found consistent concern within the Gen Z generation for the state of the environment and the insufficient efforts of businesses to respond to the perceived environmental crisis.

In last year's pre-pandemic survey, half of all respondents said they feared the environment had passed the point of no return and it was too late to repair the damage caused by climate change. Those figures, though still high, fell this year to 44% for millennials and 43% for Gen Zs. Encouraging environmental signs witnessed during the pandemic lockdown may have stoked optimism. On the flip side, approximately 60% of millennials and Gen Zs fear that business' commitment to reversing climate change and improving the environment will be less of a priority as business leaders reckon with challenges presented by the pandemic and other developments (Deloitte, 2021, p. 21).

Organization's Commitment to the Employee

Like other generations, members of Gen Z are also interested in competitive salaries and benefits, but as will be indicated in the discussion below, there are differences between these younger workers and workers in Generation X and Baby Boomers generations. Members of Gen Z seem more inclined to accept a lower salary to realize gains in some of the preferences identified here. Additionally, some of the benefits they are seeking are different or prioritized differently from earlier generations. This section discusses Gen Z's preferences related to opportunities to build their skills, to advance within the organization (or other organizations), and to work with the latest technology. Additionally, this section outlines Gen Z's desire to have an employer that is concerned about the employee's well-being, offers flexibility in work locations, and provides the opportunity to do meaningful work.

Organization offers opportunities for training and learning. Members of Generation Z are interested in mentoring, training and development, and alleviating gaps in their skill set (Borg et al., 2023). Pendell and Vander Helm (2022) concluded that younger employees highly value career growth. According to Indeed, "The youngest workers (age 18 to 34) are most likely to value opportunities for career growth, learning and skill building" (p. 24). O'Boyle (2021) notes that research shows Gen Z is more concerned with career growth and mentoring from managers than are members of earlier generations. Gen Z's focus is on their long-term career development and broadening their skillset. This focus "may explain why 68% of employees …say they would rather make a lateral move that offers new skills than a vertical move that is more senior but has fewer learning and growth opportunities" (Hybrid Work, 2022, p. 17). The research

goes on to say that over three-fourths of employees would stay at their current company longer if they had greater access to learning opportunities and that "employees consider opportunities to learn and grow as the #1 driver of great work culture" (Hybrid Work, p. 17).

According to LinkedIn Learning's 2023 workplace learning report, Building the Agile Future, the skill sets necessary for jobs have changed by about 25% since 2015 and they expect that the percentage of change in skill sets will double by 2027. To retain employees and expand their skill sets for their careers, employers need to "recognize that people want opportunities not just for promotion but to broaden their skills. Organizations need to make internal mobility a key priority and help employees view their career as a climbing wall or playground, rather than a ladder" (Hybrid Work, 2022, p. 17).

Organization offers opportunities for advancement. The 2022 Work Trend Index Special Report (Hybrid Work, p. 15) notes that "on LinkedIn, Gen Z employees are transitioning jobs at a faster pace than other generations, up 22% in the past year (far exceeding millennials, whose job transition rate dropped by 1% in the same timeframe)." Generation Z is interested in advancing their careers and are more likely than other age cohorts to change jobs to build skills and advance in their career.

Fernandez, Lee, and Landis (2023) argue that it is important to incentivize Gen Z. Demonstrating clear paths for progress in their careers is a strong incentive because Gen Z is concerned about job security and advancement. Many of the oldest Gen Z members report that they or someone in their household experienced losing a job during the COVID-19 pandemic. This may have created

greater concern for job security that requires the employer to clearly explain what it looks like to succeed in their organization.

Organization provides industry-current technology. Gen Z members expect to be working with modern technology and organizations that meet those expectations are most likely to have success in recruitment and retention. Indeed (2022) found that while Gen Z expects to have the most up-to-date technology in the workplace for the completion of their work, some research suggests that they prefer to communicate with professional contacts in person. In fact, one of Galarza's (2023) suggestions for attracting potential employees and engaging Gen Z workers is to leverage technology, such as integrating AI and machine learning to streamline operations. Tech-savvy Gen Z will be motivated by current technology that enhances work productivity. Mahmoud, et al. (2021) also suggest that because of their abilities with technology, Gen Z could easily, "…identify prospective employers who can demonstrate what they recognize as inspiring" (p. 205) for a workplace. Thus, an employer who fails to meet the expectations of this group is at greater risk than at any time of those employees jumping to another employer.

Organization cares about Work-Life Balance (employee wellbeing). O'Boyle (2021, Section 1) says that more than anything else, members of Gen Z "want an employer who cares about their wellbeing."

A national survey of Gen Z adults found that 42% would look for an organization that values work-life balance, working remotely and flexible vacation time as their top priority when looking for a job. The other priorities included career passion (19.6%), money (16.5%), good management and company values (9.7%), high-quality healthcare, (7.1%), and performance

bonuses, (5.5%) (Bizouati-Kennedy, 2021). Clearly the desire for work-life balance is important to Gen Z workers. Craig Miller, co-founder of Academia Labs, notes that Gen Z may be more concerned about work-life balance because they saw a lot of unhappy workers as they were growing up. According to Miller, "Nowadays, people value peace and happiness more than anything else. Intense pressure coming from your job is no longer healthy and a source of inspiration, so Gen Zers choose to have a balance on work and life" (Bizouati-Kennedy, 2021, para. 15).

Another area of employee wellbeing that appears to be a concern in Gen Z is high rates of stress, anxiety, and concern for mental health. Pendell and Vander Helm (2022) report that "sixty-eight percent of Gen Z and younger millennials report feeling stress a lot of the time" (para. 5), and that burnout can lead some Gen Z workers to leave their current employer. Coe, et al. (2022) address the behavioral-health challenges facing Gen Z, finding that those in Gen Z "are reporting higher rates of anxiety, depression, and distress than any other age group" (p. 2). Despite reporting the highest levels of anxiety and depression, Gen Z is the generation least likely to seek treatment, instead turning to "emergency care, social media and digital tools when they do seek help" (Coe, et al., p. 5).

Fernandez, Lee, and Landis (2023) suggest because of the high levels of mental health issues reported by Gen Z workers, that organizations prioritize employee wellness and mental health. The findings from Deloitte's (2021) survey on mental health and work reiterates the extent of the problem, but also notes that organizational responses are seen as inadequate by Gen Z. The results indicated that 35% of the respondents had taken time off work due to stress and anxiety.

"Among the two-thirds who didn't take time off, four in 10 deemed themselves to be stressed all of the time but chose to work through it" (Deloitte, 2021, p. 3).

The high level of stress in younger workers has moved many companies to make mental health a priority, but in the Deloitte survey, workers with higher stress levels perceived less support from their employer.

This perceived indifference from employers may partially explain why only 38% of millennials and 35% of Gen Zs said they've spoken openly with their supervisors about the stress they're feeling. It also could be a factor in their reluctance to tell their managers when anxiety or stress causes them to take time off work. Nearly half of respondents who took mental health days gave reasons other than stress for their absence (Deloitte, 2021, p. 14).

Organization offers flexibility in work location – remote and/or hybrid.

Gen Z may be the first generation that fits work into their life and not the other way around. Pendell and Vander Helm (2022) argue that Gen Z wants flexibility and independence because they view it as an element of their wellbeing, something that can help to avoid the burnout that they have seen in themselves or others.

Nearly 75% of Gen Zers say that workplace flexibility is the number one employee benefit they're looking for" (Pelta, ND, para. 14). Flexibility in terms of where they work and when they work is a benefit that Gen Z members seek when looking for a job (Indeed, 2022). Bizouati-Kennedy (2021) notes that when adult Gen Z workers look for a job, their top priority is work-life balance, working from home and flexible vacation time.

"The pandemic gave employees a true taste of the flexibility that comes with remote work, and understandably, they're not keen on returning to the

office," said Mike Grossman, CEO of GoodHire. "It's important to keep in mind: For some Gen Z, their entry into the world of work was during the pandemic. These individuals are fully acclimated to a remote setting, and the concept of working in an office is altogether alien" (Bizouati-Kennedy, 2021, para. 6).

In their analysis of how HR policies and practices can influence employee task performance and organizational commitment, Aggarwal, et al. (2022) found that flexible work practices was one of the policies and practices that led to improvement in both areas.

Organization provides meaningful/impactful work (provides sense of purpose).

Agovino, (2022) found that 26 percent of Gen Z respondents in a national survey by Deloitte indicated that a sense of purpose at work is important. "Local hospitals and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital topped the list of places that members of Generation Z want to work, according to the National Society of High School Scholars (NSHSS)" reports Agovino. "They beat out Spotify, Amazon and Apple" (Section "Finding a Purpose," para. 1).

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Gen Z

- Technologically sophisticated
- Prefer transparency and personal freedom
- Expect to be informed, to be allowed to respond, and to have their responses heard
- Expect to know how their contribution fits into the big picture
- Prefer work environment which is friendly and allows for flexible schedules
- Prefer organization that values diversity
- Seek socially responsible organizations

Figure 2. Gen Z Expectations and Preferences

Source: Sharma & Pandit, 2021, p. 85

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When asked to identify their top priority when looking for a job, just under 20% of the adult Gen Z workers in a national survey indicated that career passion was their top priority (Bizouati-Kennedy, 2021).

Sharma and Pandit (2021) conducted a comparison of the literature related to the expectations and preferences of three generations of workers – Gen X, Gen Y (millennials) and Gen Z. Based on their review, they identified the seven sets of expectations for Gen Z found in figure 2 and that list provides a fairly complete review of the topics discussed in this review of literature.

Statement of Research Problem

The review of literature has noted that past research related to advertisements for public relations positions have focused on the employer's requirements for the position, especially for the required skills. However, past research has not sufficiently addressed how well, if at all, those same ads address the expectations of the potential employee. Therefore, the current investigation is designed to determine if ads/announcements for entry-level, public relations positions reflect the priorities and expectations of Gen Z.

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Method

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The researchers employed a content analysis approach to investigate the representation of priorities and expectations of Generation Z (Gen Z) in job advertisements for entry-level public relations positions. Content analysis allows for a systematic examination of the textual content within job ads, offering insights into the language, themes, and emphases employed by employers when seeking potential employees.

The sample was drawn from job advertisements for entry-level communication-related positions from Indeed and the Public Relations Society of

America (PRSA) Job Center within the fourth quarter of 2023. The data collection involved the systematic extraction of text from selected job advertisements that included the terms "public relations," "communications" or "marketing" in the position title. The search initially began with only using public relations and/or communication, based on Meganck et al. (2020); however, it became difficult to obtain the goal of 100 job ads to review. It was noted that several positions posted in the PRSA Job Center included only marketing in the title, so the term was added to the search to yield the 102 job ads. Relevant information such as job descriptions, qualifications, responsibilities, and preferred skills were gathered. Additionally, contextual information, such as company type was recorded to facilitate a nuanced analysis.

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1 Organization operates in an ethical manner
2 Organizational leadership is transparent
3 Organization's commitment to DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging)
4 Organization's commitment to the environment/sustainability
5 Organization offers opportunities for advancement
6 Organization offers opportunities for training/learning
7 The organization provides current/modern technology
8 Organization cares of for Work-Life Balance (employee wellbeing)
9 Flexibility in work location – remote or hybrid
10 Doing meaningful, impactful work (provides sense of purpose)

Figure 3. List of Gen Z Expectations or Priorities

To assess the priorities and expectations of Gen Z, the researchers developed a coding scheme based on secondary research identified in Lubbers et al. (2023) and the review of literature. Ten categories of areas important to Gen Z

were identified related to organizational commitment to society (1-4) and to the employee (5-10) as found on Figure 3.

A coding protocol was developed through a code book, tested, and implemented by two coders. The coders underwent training to ensure consistency and reliability. Training involved discussions of coding categories, practice coding exercises, and inter-coder reliability assessments to minimize subjective interpretations. Interrater reliability between the coders was 86% which was deemed sufficient to proceed, since a percentage of agreement of 80% or higher is what is typically required (Salkind & Frey, 2022).

Quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted to interpret the findings. Quantitative analysis involved frequency counts and percentages, and statistical measures. Qualitative analysis delved into the nuanced meanings and context surrounding the identified themes, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how Gen Z priorities are articulated in job advertisements.

Results

The sample for analysis included 102 job advertisements for entry-level positions, equally sourced from Indeed and the PRSA Job Center. The selection process ensured a balanced representation of ads published from the fourth quarter of 2023. The titles of the positions included at least one of the following terms public relations, communication, or marketing.

Table 1
Organization Type by Number of Expectations in Job Ads

Number of Expectations	Agency	Company	Nonprofit	Total
0	0	4	3	7
1	0	13	7	20
2	3	9	9	21
3	2	9	9	20
4	2	10	9	21
5	2	2	6	10
6	0	0	0	0
7	0	1	2	3
8	0	0	0	0
9	0	0	0	0
10	0	0	0	0
Col. Total	9/30	48/115	45/132	102/277
Mean Exp.	3.3	2.4	2.9	2.7

The coding scheme, developed to assess the priorities and expectations of Generation Z, included categories such as work-life balance, social impact, diversity and inclusion, professional development, and the use of technology in the workplace. Quantitative analysis revealed the prevalence of these categories within the sampled job advertisements.

The ads represented included 48 from companies, 45 from non-profits (including NGOs and educational institutions) and nine agencies. Within the ads, 24 of the 102 ads (23.5%) required none or some experience, 11 required at least five years of experience (the maximum parameter of the search) while 18 (17.6%) required at least three years of experience and 21 (20.1%) requested three to five years. These years of experience were used to focus on the entry level nature of the jobs and also because graduates in Gen Z could qualify for these positions.

The ads were reviewed for the ten expectations identified in the literature review. Of the 102, seven did not contain any of them and three contained seven,

the maximum identified. All three included mentions of work-life balance, opportunities for training and learning, ability to do meaningful work and provision of current/modern technology. The vast majority (80.4%) had between one to four characteristics included in their job ads.

Table 2 (Why not add the percentages to the chart?)
Frequency of Ads for Expectation or Priority Category

Number of Ads with Exp	Number of Ads
Doing meaningful, impactful work	44
Organization's commitment to DEIB	41
The organization provides current/modern technology	39
Flexibility in work location – remote or hybrid	35
Organization operates in an ethical manner	31
Organizational leadership is transparent	30
Organization cares of for work-life balance	22
Organization offers opportunities for training/learning	18
Organization offers opportunities for advancement	15
Organization's commitment to the environment/sustainability	7

Overall, the 102 ads analyzed contained references to an expectation or priority 277 times for a mean of 2.7 per ad. Given that the coding looked for 10 expectations, having an overall mean of less than three does not appear to demonstrate a commitment on the part of the organization to address the expectations and priorities of Gen Z. There were also differences between the mean number of expectations identified by organization type. Ads from agencies (M = 3.3) and nonprofits (M = 2.9) were above the overall average for all ads

identified. All of the agency ads spoke to between two and five expectations. The ads from companies (M = 2.4) were below the overall mean.

As found in Table 2, the most referenced category was doing meaningful, impactful work (providing a sense of purpose). This was represented in 44 of the 102 ads (43.1%). The ads conveyed the sense of purpose provided by the organization's projects, emphasizing how employees contribute to meaningful and impactful work aligned with the organization's mission and values. Relevant terms for this dimension that appeared in multiple ads included mission, culture, support and inspire. Phrases such as "'it's not a job we're offering, it's a mission," "honor the agency mission, "plays a crucial role," and "engaging culture" highlighted this sense of purpose.

Second was the organization's commitment to DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging), which was mentioned in 41 ads (40.2%). Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging were portrayed through descriptions of diverse and inclusive work environments, equal opportunities for all, and initiatives fostering a sense of belonging among employees. Reference to being an "equal opportunity employer" was mentioned in 23 of the 41 ads, while others used other phrases such as "we welcome all people," "we take pride in our city's diversity," and "inclusion fuels our creativity and innovation."

Third, was the organization provides current/modern technology, present in 39 (38.2%) of the ads, illustrating a widespread acknowledgment of the importance of technology in the workplace. The use of current and modern technology was emphasized in job ads, showcasing the organization's commitment to providing employees with the tools and resources needed to excel in their roles. Most of these references focused on software and technology that

would be used in the position advertised including Microsoft Office, Adobe Creative Suite, social media platforms and other digital marketing platforms. One surprising finding was that AI was not mentioned in any of the advertisements.

Fourth was flexibility in work location – remote or hybrid. This was described in terms of remote work options, hybrid work models, and technology support to facilitate seamless collaboration irrespective of the physical location in 35 ads. Only 10 of the 102 ads (9.8 percent) mentioned that the position was or could be remote while 25 (24.5%) mentioned hybrid work. Of those, only two were specific in their definition of hybrid and both were the same (three days in the office and two remote).

The fifth and sixth expectations or priorities were related to the organization operating in an ethical manner (31 ads, 30.4 percent) and transparency of organizational leadership (30 ads, 29.4 percent). Job ads often highlighted the organization's commitment to ethical practices by emphasizing fair treatment of employees, and adherence to industry standards. Examples include "we believe in attracting and retaining talented team members who embody our CORE Values" and "every pet deserves a good life." Transparency in leadership was conveyed in the job descriptions through mentions of collaboration, open communication channels, accessibility of leaders, and the inclusion of employees in decision-making processes such as "working collaboratively with key stakeholders (including senior leaders)."

The seventh category was the organization caring for work-life balance (employee wellbeing), which was represented in 22 (21.7%) of the job ads, indicating a lack of emphasis on promoting a healthy work-life equilibrium. The mentions of work-life balance frequently included details about flexible working

hours, paid time off, personal development, and the provision of wellness programs to support employee wellbeing.

The bottom three categories were opportunities for training/learning (18 ads,17.6%), advancement (15 ads,14.7%) and organizational commitment to environment/sustainability (7 ads, 6.9%). Opportunities for career advancement were discussed by outlining career paths, and internal promotion opportunities within the organization. Job ads highlighted the organizational dedication to general sustainability and organizational specific environmental causes such as water conservation. Most were tied to the organization's core business or service.

Discussion

The literature review notes past research on entry-level public relations job position announcements, emphasizing the focus on employer needs rather than candidate expectations. Previous studies, exemplified by Meganck, Smith, and Guidry (2020), primarily analyzed required skills from employers' perspectives, aligning them with public relations education. The current study aimed to fill the gap by investigating whether the expectations and priorities of Generation Z job candidates are addressed in job ads, given the recent emphasis on understanding their perspectives in the workplace.

The literature review outlined four key Gen Z expectations related to an organization's commitment to society: ethical operation, transparency in leadership, commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB), and dedication to environmental sustainability.

Another set of Gen Z expectations revolves around the organization's commitment to the employee. Gen Z values opportunities for training and career growth, a clear path for advancement, access to modern technology, and a work

environment that prioritizes employee well-being. Flexible work arrangements, including remote or hybrid options, are highly sought after, as is meaningful and impactful work that provides a sense of purpose. This highlights Gen Z's unique perspective on work-life balance, placing emphasis on flexibility as an essential component of their well-being.

The results of the content analysis found that all 10 areas identified were present in some form in the 102 ads. The most emphasized category was "Doing meaningful, impactful work," mentioned in 43.1% of ads. This category highlighted how employees could contribute to meaningful work aligned with the organization's mission and values. In previous studies, Agovino (2022) and Bizouati-Kennedy (2021) found that career passion and sense of purpose was important to 20 to 26 percent of their respondents. While this category focused more on the organization's commitment to the employees, the ads revealed far fewer mentions (in 7 ads, 6.9%) of organizational commitment to the environment and sustainability. Most were because the organizations themselves had such a focus. The lack of discussion of the environment is concerning. Jahns (2021) argues that the environment is the number one concern of Gen Z, and other research has noted that the environment is more important than would be demonstrated by appearing in only seven ads.

Surveys have shown that the most important category to Gen Z is work-life balance. For example, O'Boyle (2021) found that 42% identified finding organizations that value that balance as well as work location flexibility and flexible vacation time as their top priority when looking for a position. However, work-life balance was the seventh most mentioned category, only appearing in 22 (21.65%) of the job ads. While work location was fourth, 25 of the 35 ads in this

category mentioned hybrid and the majority of these only mentioned the word itself. No specifics were provided. While benefits, paid time off and wellness programs were mentioned as part of work-life balance, none specifically addressed mental health (including concern for it as well as stress, anxiety, or depression). Gen Z members have reported high levels of stress, anxiety and depression (see, for example, Coe, et al., 2022; Fernandez, Lee, & Landis, 2023; Pendell & Vander Helm, 2022). We would have expected the ads to make reference to these mental health issues, but there was not one mention of any of those issues.

Given that Gen Z is the most diverse generation in the United States (Fry & Parker, 2018), it is not surprising that the second most referenced category was "Organization's commitment to DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging)," present in 40.2 % of ads. These ads portrayed diversity, equity, and inclusion through descriptions of inclusive work environments and equal opportunities.

While all but seven ads included at least one characteristic, none included eight, nine or ten. Only three had as many as seven of those. The vast majority contained between one and four expectations or priorities mentioned in their job ad. Based on research regarding Gen Z priorities, employers are more likely to attract this generation by clearly identifying how their organizations align with the values of the applicants. The current investigation demonstrates that there is a significant gap between the applicant's values and what is being discussed in the ads.

The research problem identified earlier is that past studies have primarily focused on employer requirements in PR job advertisements, neglecting candidate expectations. The study aimed to bridge this gap by examining entry-level PR job

announcements to determine whether they align with the priorities and expectations of Gen Z candidates. The goal was to assess whether employers effectively communicate values, priorities, and organizational culture to attract and retain quality Gen Z candidates in an increasingly competitive job market.

The results presented on table 1 indicate that the mean number of expectations and priorities identified in the 102 ads analyzed was 2.7 out of the 10. Additionally, many of the mentions of the topic did not include any detailed information. The results suggest that the organizations' job advertisements do not relate to the expectations that are important to Gen Z. While content analysis provides valuable insights, this study is limited to the textual analysis of job advertisements. It does not explore the actual experiences or perceptions of Gen Z individuals applying for or occupying public relations positions. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the scope of the analyzed textual content.

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Teaching Critical Strategic Thinking Through the DASA Model

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Abstract

Both educators and practitioners ranked critical and strategic thinking skills highly in the 2023 CPRE survey and stressed them as an important area to consider for future curriculum development. However, the 2023 CPRE report also highlighted that most critical and strategic thinking instruction is taken for granted in undergraduate public relations education. This article underscores the importance of developing critical and strategic thinking skills in public relations students through explicit instruction for future career success. Drawing from diverse perspectives on critical and strategic thinking and building on the findings from the 2023 CPRE report, the article proposes an integrated four-step DASA Model (Detecting, Analyzing, Strategizing, and Acting) for teaching the public relations process. The article offers an in-depth discussion of the DASA model application with specific examples of its in-class implementation and assessment of students' metacognitive skills.

Keywords: Critical thinking, strategic thinking, DASA model, public relations process

Introduction

Critical and strategic thinking skills emerged as one of the recurring themes across all chapters of the 2023 CPRE report. Weiss (2023) argued that critical thinking is essential for good writing, as well as understanding new technology and data. Kinsky et al. (2023) suggested that critical thinking can be developed through teaching data analysis processes. Bortree et al. (2023) reported that practitioners stressed a lack of proficiency in ethical decision-making tied to their lack of critical thinking, strategic planning, and personal code of ethics. They identified the need for ethical critical thinking skills as a top priority for future educational efforts and curriculum development in undergraduate public relations education. Critical thinking was also mentioned as an important skill for graduates to be able to navigate complex social issues, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (Logan et al., 2023), and to crystalize public relations' role in driving social change (Gower et al., 2023).

Although critical thinking is continuously emphasized by practitioners and educators, critical and strategic thinking instruction in undergraduate public relations education is often implicit, not clearly articulated, or structured. In addition, critical and strategic thinking learning outcomes are rarely assessed, unlike other essential public relations competencies, such as writing.

Building competencies in any field requires deliberate, effortful, and intense cognitive work. Schoenberger-Orgad and Spiller (2014) argued that undergraduate programs often focus on teaching the vocational skills of the public relations profession "to become tacticians who are able to produce messages" disseminated through various communication channels in the interests of their organizations (p. 211). Todd (2014) suggested that the Millennial generation lacks critical thinking abilities and requires pedagogical interventions. Glaser (1985) argued that "there is

little evidence that students acquire skills in critical thinking as a necessary byproduct of the study of any given subject" (p. 27). In other words, explicit attention should be given to this purpose to help students cultivate good critical and strategic thinking skills in the classroom.

In our CPRE report chapter, we examined opinions of public relations educators and practitioners on the importance of critical thinking and proposed a pedagogical model of critical strategic thinking (DASA) to help instructors foster critical and strategic disposition in public relations students (Plowman et al., 2023). We also put forth a set of recommendations to encourage a purposeful integration of critical and strategic thinking in public relations classes through the proposed DASA model. In this paper, we dive deeper into the reasons why "strategic is critical" and how public relations educators can make critical strategic thinking instruction more intentional. First, we discuss critical and strategic thinking as separate concepts. Second, we discuss the overlap in critical and strategic thinking characteristics and the codependence of the two concepts when applied to the public relations process. We then report the results of factor analysis to support our argument for a critical strategic thinking model. Finally, we present a discussion of the classroom model and suggest ways how to make critical and strategic thinking instruction more explicit and deliberate.

Critical Is Strategic

In public relations, it is strategically important to engage in critical thinking and assessment of the situation. Defined as the ability to analyze and evaluate thought processes, critical thinking is one of the most sought-after skills in public relations professionals (CPRE, 2023; Schoenberger-Orgad & Spiller, 2014). Sternberg (1986) described it as "the mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to

solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts" (p. 1). Haber (2020) defined critical thinking as structured thinking that (1) makes clear what we or others are thinking or communicating, (2) makes transparent the reasons behind what we believe or want others to believe, (3) has the ability to determine if reasons for belief are justified.

Paul and Elder (2006) argued that critical thinking is a learned skill that involves intentional analysis of the elements of thought, such as point of view, purpose, the question at issue, information, interpretation and inference, concepts, assumptions, implications, and consequences. The authors suggested that the evaluation of these elements of thought must be conducted with a consideration of the universal intellectual standards such as clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness.

In public relations, critical thinkers are in high demand because these are the individuals capable of thinking systematically and independently, engaging in critical evaluation and analysis, reflection, and critique of social norms and social issues (Haber, 2020), which inevitably informs the decision-making process and facilitates problem solving (Ennis, 1987). Through habitual application of intellectual standards, critical thinkers develop such traits are intellectual integrity, intellectual humility, confidence in reason, intellectual perseverance, fair-mindedness, intellectual courage, intellectual empathy, and intellectual autonomy (Paul & Elder, 2006).

In sum, a critical thinker is someone who asks questions, gathers and evaluates information, reasons for conclusions, is open-minded in their thinking, and communicates effectively. Importantly, becoming a critical thinker involves not just knowing but also putting that knowledge to use regularly through strategic thinking (Haber, 2020).

Strategic Is Critical

Effective public relations also involves strategic thinking, which is heavily rooted in one's ability to think critically. Van Ruler and Korver (2019) said that strategy is thinking about ends rather than means – thinking about long-term payoffs instead of quick wins, "strategy, then, means think about how to get to a given point and all the things you need to consider en-route" (p. 15). In 1987, Mintzberg wrote about strategy as a plan, ploy, pattern, or perspective. Strategy as a plan is "a consciously intended course of action" or a set of guidelines to deal with specific situations. Strategy as a ploy can be a "specific maneuver intended to outwit an opponent or competitor" (p. 14). Plan and ploy could be equated to short-term campaign planning in public relations, while pattern is more emergent and could be applicable to change in PR. It acknowledges strategy as something that can be realized regardless of whether or not it was intended: "by this definition, strategy [as pattern] is consistency in behavior, whether or not intended" (emphasis in original) (p. 14). Finally, in Mintzberg's definition of strategy as perspective, he argued that strategy is not just "a chosen position, but . . . an ingrained way of perceiving the world" (p. 18). He points out that in this sense, "strategy . . . is to the organization what personality is to the individual" (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 18). He also said that successful or emergent strategies have evolved as a "pattern in a stream of actions," as differing from a predisposed plan (Mintzberg, 1987, pp. 12-13).

Fiona Graetz (2002) interpreted the term strategic thinking as closer to Mintzberg's pattern of actions and as a creative, dynamic, responsive, and often intuitive process. Liedtka (1998) delved further into the attributes of strategic thinking, saying it embodied a focus on intent as opposed to traditional strategic planning and that it recognized newly emerging opportunities. She also asserted that

left-brain thinking reflects the planning side of strategy (need for logic, attention to detail, etc.) while right-brain thinking reflects strategic thinking that is creative, inquisitive, intuitive, and entrepreneurial. So, if critical thinking is the analytic part, trending toward planning, then critical thinking would come first, followed by strategic thinking to determine the creative direction, and both are involved in the process of creating a communication strategy. The application of operable communications planning would follow in the progression as the implementation portion of the process. So, again, critical thinking, then strategic thinking, and then public relations or communications planning or the process or enactment of strategic communication (SC) that would carry out the plan and incorporate the doing of the process.

Bronn (2021) amalgamated several strategic thinking authors, where she revisited Mintzberg (1994), characterizing strategic thinking as synthesis. She also cited Nuntamanop et al. (2013), who identified seven characteristics of strategic thinking: conceptual thinking ability, visionary thinking, analytical thinking ability, synthesizing ability, objectivity, creativity, and learning ability. Bronn (2014) concluded that communication practitioners with strategic thinking competencies are proactive, issues-oriented, creative and innovative, organizationally well-informed, future-oriented, and systems thinkers.

Critical and Strategic Thinking Competencies

Summarizing the literature on critical and strategic thinking, it is becoming clear that there is an overlap of competencies, skills, and characteristics enjoyed by critical and strategic thinkers. For example, while critical thinking embodies organizational awareness and issue orientation, strategic thinking enables the processing of this information with a view of organizational goals and needs. In other

words, critical thinkers focus on analytical thinking, specifically on analyzing and evaluating information, communication, and thought processes, while strategic thinkers focus on problem-solving and informed decision-making by asking questions "why," making connections between problem and solution and translating the results of their critical thinking into practice. Therefore, the critical strategic thinker in public relations creates sanity out of the chaos of the big data world and the enormous availability of information. That thinker can sift through and create a direction for an organization so the tacticians can create the plans that will successfully push the organization forward according to its mission and vision. Critical strategic thinking, therefore, is proactive and creative, looks at the entire process as part of an organizational and environmental system, and then looks to the future to determine a direction for the organization. As such, it is logical to treat critical and strategic thinking as codependent competencies (see Table 1), which should be taught and nurtured together through explicit and deliberate instruction.

Table 1

Competencies of Critical Strategic Thinkers

Critical thinker (Paul & Elder, 2006)	Strategic thinker (Bronn, 2014)
Gathers and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively.	Has extensive knowledge of important issues within the organization.
Raises vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely.	Has extensive knowledge of issues and changes in the external environment.
Communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.	Proactive and encourages the introduction of new structures, methods, and guidelines.

Thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences;	Comes with very creative and innovative ideas.
Comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;	Rises above the immediate problem or situation and sees the broader problem areas/issues and far-reaching consequences of them. Determines future priorities and can forecast foreseeable changes to meet future needs.

Toward a Critical Strategic Thinking Model for Teaching the Public Relations Process

In our CPRE report chapter, we explained that public relations practitioners, more so than educators, believed that an integrated model of critical strategic thinking should be adopted in the undergraduate public relations curriculum (Plowman et al., 2023), partially due to a notion that critical and strategic thinking are inherently embedded in various educational activities. Therefore, to build the model that would help educators to purposefully incorporate critical strategic thinking into their pedagogies, we adopted and adapted Wooten and Horne's (2010) nine-step process for strategic thinking. Those nine are in order: 1) gather strategic intelligence, 2) assess strategic capability, 3) create strategic knowledge, 4) make strategic predictions, 5) develop strategic vision, 6) create strategic options, 7) take strategic

decisions, 8) create and communicate market-led strategy, and 9) plan and manage projects to implement change.

These nine steps can be separated into critical and strategic thinking. The first three steps (gather strategic intelligence, assess strategic capability, and create strategic knowledge) could be encompassed by critical thinking since those are analytic in nature. Gathering intelligence entails looking at technology, the economy, markets, politics, law, ethics, and society. Wooten and Horne (2010) said that assessing strategic capability involves an audit of nine Ms: morale, morays, market reputation, money, management, mental muscle, materials, movement, and machines. Creating strategic knowledge gathers the results of the first two steps and categorizes them into problems and opportunities.

Step Four starts the strategic thinking portion of the authors' nine steps, where it makes strategic predictions based on problems, market, human resources, finance, competitors, customers, culture, technology, and supplies. Step Five, to continue with strategic thinking, favors innovation, insight, invention, imagination, and creative thinking. These values lead to optimism, high expectations, and hope. Step Six, strategic options identify obstacles, analyzes existing options for removing obstacles, and then thinks creatively about ideas, innovations, and inventing more options. Step Seven is the crystallization of the direction the organization will take for strategic thinking. That direction involves assessing the competitiveness, controllability, compatibility, feasibility, impact, and risk. Then, it considers the role of intuition in making a final option selection. Steps Eight and Nine essentially implement the chosen option in a strategic communications plan for public relations. Number eight creates and communicates the strategy and options. Step Nine is the actual plan and management of projects to implement change.

We adapted the above process as an integrated four-step model for critical strategic thinking and called it DASA – Detecting, Analyzing, Strategizing, and Acting. The first step is Detecting, to identify all of the relevant information that will affect the ultimate implementation of a plan. Second, Analyzing, the analytical reflections on what is germane and important to the issues involved in the process. These two steps could be determined as the critical part of our critical strategic thinking appellation of what is going on in this process. The next step is the strategic portion, called Strategizing, which means selecting options in an innovative direction that will have a highly likely success rate if implemented. Finally, to complete the strategic communications process is Acting, or the performance of the plan, the implementation of the plan.

Based on the model, originally introduced in our CPRE chapter and informed by the literature and data from the CPRE survey, that suggested that critical and strategic thinking are codependent competencies, we seek to confirm the underlying dimensions as a single integrated notion of critical strategic thinking, thus inspiring the use of DASA.

RQ: What are the underlying dimensions of critical and strategic thinking competencies?

Method

Practitioners (N = 269) and educators (N = 197) were recruited from member organizations of the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) as part of the CPRE 2023 undergraduate education project. We used similar wording for survey questions regarding critical and strategic thinking in the two separate surveys for public relations practitioners and educators. The surveys were open on Qualtrics from

February. 2, 2023, to March 8, 2023, after receiving the IRB approval. Participants read an informed consent message before they agreed to participate.

Three Likert-type questions inquired about the importance of critical and strategic thinking, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree." An example question was: "Strategic thinking is integral to student career success." Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .76 (practitioner data) and .86 (educator data).

In addition, six 5-point Likert-type questions inquired about dimensions of critical and strategic thinking, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree." Three statements related to dimensions of critical thinking, and the other three represented strategic thinking dimensions. An example question was: "My students (or "PR graduates" for the practitioner survey) should know how to analyze and evaluate their thought processes." Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .83 (practitioner data) and .95 (educator data).

Educators were presented with an additional question ("select all that apply") on what their educational programs do to promote critical and strategic thinking, with choices ranging from "service-learning projects" to "portfolios."

We performed descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and exploratory factor analysis on the data sets using SPSS. The results are presented below.

Results

Overall, the results demonstrated that educators and practitioners see critical and strategic thinking as one integrated concept. Descriptive statistics were calculated to answer the research question and to highlight the educators' and practitioners' views of critical and strategic thinking competencies PR graduates are expected to possess. As shown in Table 2, educators and practitioners rated all six survey items above a 4 on the 5-point Likert scale, indicating that both groups thought PR

graduates should possess the abilities expressed in all six dimensions of critical thinking and strategic thinking measured in the survey.

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to analyze the underlying dimensional structure of the six indicators used to measure the views of educators and practitioners on PR graduates' critical and strategic thinking competencies. Principal components analysis was conducted separately on the data from the educator and practitioner surveys. For the educator data, the analysis resulted in a one-factor solution [0.83, 0.91] that explained 78.55% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 4.71). For the practitioner data, the analysis also resulted in a one-factor solution [0.71, 0.75] that explained 53.73% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 3.22). The factor loadings for each of the six indicators for both datasets are shown in Table 2.

The results of this data analysis indicate that public relations educators and practitioners think similarly about the critical and strategic thinking abilities that PR graduates should bring with them into the workforce and that both groups see critical and strategic thinking as one integrated concept.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for survey items about critical and strategic thinking competencies

	Educators			Practitioners		
	M	SD	EFA Factor loading	M	SD	EFA Factor loading
Know how to analyze and evaluate their thought processes	4.37	.83	.83	4.23	.67	.72
Engage in the process of analyzing organizational communication problems through assignments and in-class activities	4.57	.78	.88	4.30	.65	.72
Know how to critically analyze communication materials, acknowledging the sources of information and the embedded assumptions	4.59	.76	.88	4.39	.68	.73
Ask "why" questions to make informed decisions independently	4.60	.76	.91	4.55	.66	.75
Know how to translate the results of their critical thinking into practice	4.56	.76	.91	4.39	.65	.77
Make connections between an organization's need and effective solutions	4.60	.77	.90	4.48	.67	.71

Discussion

Because the literature and the data analysis converged on an integrated approach to critical and strategic thinking, we proposed an integrated four-step model that demonstrates the interrelationship between critical and strategic thinking in a public relations context. The DASA Model (see Figure 1) is comprised of Detecting, Analyzing, Strategizing, and Acting. Critical thinking is at the center of the model and has touch points with each of the four steps because critical thinking should be "baked into" the thought processes that occur at each step.

Figure 1

The DASA Model

D: Detecting
An: Analyzing
S: Strategizing
Ac: Acting
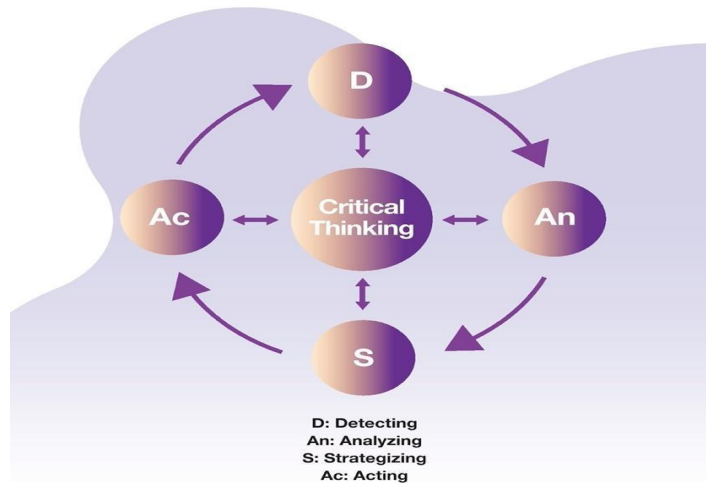
In the Detecting step, we identify all the relevant information needed to solve a public relations problem. In the Analyzing step, we think about and reflect on what is germane and important to the issues involved in the process. In the Strategizing step, we determine a direction and select options to solve the problem based on our evaluation of their effectiveness. Finally, in the Acting step, we implement our solution and monitor results so adjustments can be made to improve performance. Using the DASA Model for Teaching the Public Relations Process

We have noticed that when teaching public relations students, the RPIE planning process, it is tempting for students to treat the steps of the planning process as a checklist. The checklist is so tempting because it removes the critical thinking component from planning steps, speeding up the planning process and lightening the cognitive load. This checklist mentality results in a strategic planning output that is neither well-thought-out nor strategic.

Using the DASA model approach to teaching the strategic planning process can result in deeper dives into each step of the planning process and a better logical flow of ideas across steps, ultimately resulting in smarter and more effective strategic thinking.

Let us look at one example of using the DASA model to deepen students' thinking about a specific step in the strategic planning process: setting goals and objectives. First, students can be asked to Detect key elements of context needed for goal setting, including an organization's mission, vision, and values, as well as the business goal(s) for the given situation. Students will also need to identify the communication outcomes (KPIs) that will define success and the potential benchmarks that might be available to measure progress against

Once students have acquired this information, they can be asked to Analyze the information from a communication perspective so they can figure out how communication goals and objectives need to align with the core identity and purpose of the organization and move key publics to specific outcomes that will signal success

Next, students can use what they learned to Strategize, expressing that strategy through written goals and objectives. We have found that requiring students to write brief rationales for each strategic output helps crystalize their thinking. For example, when writing a communication goal, students can be asked to provide a brief rationale explaining why it is appropriate from a communication point of view and how it contributes to accomplishing the organization's mission and business goal(s). Finally, students can then Act by using the goals and objectives they have set to make the next decision in the planning process, which should be informed by the goals and objectives they have just identified.

Now, let's consider an example of using the DASA model to ensure a logical flow of ideas that links the planning process into a coherent, effective strategy. Once students have completed all of the steps in the planning process, they can be asked to Detect the key components of the plan, including key research insights, goals, objectives, publics, messages, channels, and tactics. Students can then be asked to Analyze the plan's components by simplifying the plan into a chart that can fit onto one page, essentially giving the students a chance to look at their campaign with a broader scope. The analysis of the broader scope campaign view can include such cognitive tasks as tracking whether and how research insights inform decisions at each stage of the planning process. If the students find that some decisions are not anchored in research, this gives them a chance to adjust their Strategy so it can be more data-informed. Another task students can complete is to evaluate the extent to

which messages and tactics map back to the objectives that must be accomplished for the plan to succeed. Similar adjustments to Strategy can be made if messages and tactics are out of alignment with goals and objectives. Finally, students Act when they have confirmation of the logic of their plan and are ready to present their ideas to the class or a client.

In addition, the DASA model can be tailored to emphasize specific aspects of strategic planning. For example, educators can use the DASA Model to foster a better understanding of how ethical considerations should be incorporated in every stage of the planning. Similarly, when emphasizing emerging technologies, the DASA model provides a structured pathway for students to strategically align technology with communication goals.

Using the DASA Model for Teaching Public Relations Ethics

In the Detect phase of the DASA model, public relations educators may want to prioritize the identification of ethical considerations within the strategic planning process. Students can be encouraged to identify potential ethical dilemmas by considering the organization's values, mission, societal impacts, and current practices.

Moving to the Analyze phase, students can be asked to critically evaluate the ethical implications of their proposed goals and objectives. Educators can prompt students to consider the potential impact on various stakeholders and assess whether the communication strategies correspond with ethical standards.

As the process transitions to the Strategize phase, students can articulate how ethical considerations influence the formulation of communication strategies. They can reflect on rationales for strategic outputs that explicitly address ethical implications. Such analysis helps students ensure that the proposed communication strategies resonate with organizational values and societal expectations.

In the Act phase, where goals and objectives translate into decisions, students should uphold ethical considerations identified in earlier phases. Whether presenting ideas to peers or clients, students should be prepared to address questions related to the ethical foundation of their strategic communication plan and demonstrate a commitment to ethical decision-making.

Using the DASA Model for Teaching Emerging Technologies in Public Relations

During the Detect phase, public relations educators can ask students to identify potential opportunities and challenges presented by emerging technologies. Students should consider how technologies such as AI, social media platforms, or data analytics could enhance or complicate the strategic planning process. At this stage, educators can evaluate students' understanding of evolving technological trends and their ability to strategically leverage them.

In the Analyze phase, students can be prompted to critically assess how integrating emerging technologies corresponds with their communication goals and objectives. Students should analyze the potential benefits and risks of using specific technologies and evaluate whether these technologies support the overall strategic direction.

The Strategize phase implies students articulating how the chosen technologies align with the core identity and purpose of the organization. Writing brief rationales for each technological choice ensures that students think strategically about the role of technology in achieving communication goals.

In the Act phase, students implement the goals and objectives, incorporating the chosen technologies. This step involves leveraging technology to make decisions informed by the technological aspects of the plan.

The DASA model walks public relations students up to the point of enacting a campaign – the Acting part of the model, and then RACE or RPIE models could kick in. In an actual campaign, that could be interpreted as the strategies, communication channels, tactics, calendar, and budget of a campaign. Finally, evaluation could loop back to the DASA with evaluation as Detection and then to reexamine Analysis and Strategy to close a feedback loop as in the two-way models of communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), dialogic theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002), back to Schramm's (1949) model of communication with the feedback loop. Whether the focus is on ethics, technology, or any other specific aspect, the DASA model can enrich strategic planning education with targeted insights and practical applications.

Explicit Critical Strategic Thinking Instruction in Public Relations Classes

To help students foster solid critical and strategic thinking skills in the classroom, explicit attention should be given to that purpose. Scholars have often asserted that explicit critical thinking instruction is more beneficial than implicit instruction (Ennis, 1987; Glaser, 1986; Marin & Halpern, 2011). Halpern (2003) proposed a four-part model for purposeful integration of thinking skills teaching into a curriculum that consists of (a) explicit thinking skills instruction, (b) encouraging students' disposition or attitude toward effortful thinking and learning, (c) directing learning activities in ways that increase the probability of transcontextual transfer, and (d) making metacognitive monitoring explicit and overt. Below, we discuss some of the ways public relations educators can make critical strategic thinking instruction more explicit and deliberate.

First, making instruction on critical strategic thinking skills explicit and purposeful might be as simple as articulating it in the course's learning objectives. For example, one may emphasize elements of thought or universal intellectual

standards (Paul & Elder, 2006). In the example below, universal intellectual standards are italicized, and elements of thought are bolded.

Clearly and accurately apply and explain theoretical concepts and models of public relations practice, such as relationship building, dialogue, and symmetric communication by interpreting cases while acknowledging assumptions in reasoning.

Similarly, the DASA model can be explicitly incorporated into learning objectives. In the example below, this learning objective purposefully stresses critical strategic thinking enabled and guided by the DASA model.

Apply critical strategic thinking in the development of a public relations campaign and collateral materials using the DASA model.

Second, encouraging students' disposition or attitude toward effortful thinking and learning can be implemented through a variety of student activities and exercises, such as those discussed above (reflective writing, questioning, need for rationale, etc.). These activities help students be prepared for the effortful nature of critical strategic thinking in public relations and learn to avoid treating the public relations process as a checklist, enabling them not to abandon the process too soon due to the belief that thinking should have been easier. We believe that the DASA model accomplishes just that – it promotes effortful thinking throughout the public relations process to achieve communication effectiveness and meaningful input and participation.

Third, increasing the probability of transcontextual transfer of critical strategic thinking skills in public relations can be achieved through directed learning activities focused on experiential learning, application, and examples. Through DASA, thinking skills can be explicitly taught and then used with many types of examples of

ethical challenges, case studies, service-learning projects, client-based work, etc., through which the critical strategic thinking skillset and its appropriate use are clarified and emphasized. According to Halpern (2003), when thinking skills are taught deliberately, students learn to actively focus on the structure of problems or arguments rather than domain-specific knowledge, thus ensuring the transcontextual transfer of critical strategic thinking skills.

Fourth, to make metacognitive monitoring explicit and overt, educators may add specific tools of evaluation and assessment that focus on capturing students' progress in applying critical strategic thinking. Let us use the following learning objective in an introductory public relations course as an example: "Student will be able to logically reason through public relations ethical dilemmas and defend their interpretations and conclusions (with clarity & relevance), referencing the Public Relations Society of America's Code of Ethics."

To meet this objective, an instructor may require students to conduct an ongoing environmental scanning (following current news and events and interpreting their relevance and significance to the organization) and provide an analysis of the issues pertaining to a specific organization using universal intellectual standards such as clarity, relevance, and logic. Students will be expected to earn a passing grade on the series of environmental scanning analyses and reports as a measure of their ability to apply critical strategic thinking skills.

The assignment itself can be graded using a specifically designed rubric based on the course standards and needs set by an individual instructor. Still, in addition to evaluating student performance on the assignment, educators may also choose to assess student progress toward fostering their critical strategic thinking skills essential for public relations. Figure 2 offers an example of a rubric for such an assessment.

Figure 2

An example of a rubric to assess students' ability to apply critical strategic thinking

Developing Critical Strategic Thinking Skills Through Environmental Scanning Assignment			
Student Learning Outcome	**Fails to Meet Expectations**	**Adequate**	**Excellent**
	(D-level or Failing Work 35 to 0 points)	(B and C-level Work 44 to 35 points)	(A-level Work 50 to 45 points)
	Incomplete assignment.	Exercise is complete.	Exercise is complete.
Students will be able to *logically* reason through public relations ethical dilemmas and defend their **interpretations** and **conclusions** (with *clarity* & *relevance*), referencing the Public Relations Society of America's Code of Ethics.	No evidence of ability to logically reason through an ethical dilemma or case, identify and interpret information, as well as provide appropriate conclusions and interpretations. No reference to PRSA's Code of Ethics as a point of view for interpreting the presented situation.	Student demonstrates an adequate ability to logically reason through an ethical dilemma or case but fails to accurately identify and interpret information, as well as provide appropriate conclusions and interpretations. Reference to PRSA's Code of Ethics as a point of view for interpreting the presented situation is incomplete or vague.	Student demonstrates an excellent ability to logically reason through an ethical dilemma or case, identify and interpret information, as well as provide appropriate conclusions and interpretations. Clearly and accurately references the PRSA's Code of Ethics as a point of view for interpreting the presented situation.

The rubric allows instructors to evaluate how well a learning objective was met and to indirectly capture the extent to which students have been able to master their critical strategic thinking skills through their performance on individual assignments designed to cultivate them. Importantly, such assessment is conducted for the instructor's use as evidence of students' ability to engage in critical strategic thinking. Recorded on a three-point scale (excellent, adequate, and fails to meet expectations), such data helps public relations educators to explicitly monitor the development of metacognitive skills in students and adjust instruction as necessary, perhaps through a more intentional focus on the DASA model in other assignments.

Conclusion

The development of expertise in any area requires deliberate, effortful, and intense cognitive work (Halpern, 2003). In any field, including public relations, models are essential, as they offer systematic approaches to complex processes, enhance understanding of key concepts, and facilitate their real-life application. Drawing from diverse perspectives on critical and strategic thinking and insights from

public relations practitioners and educators, we developed the integrated four-step DASA model (Detecting, Analyzing, Strategizing, and Acting).

The model articulates the role of critical thinking in each step and emphasizes the interrelationship between critical and strategic thinking in public relations. The DASA model serves as both a structured approach to strategic planning in public relations and a framework for educators to enhance students' understanding and application of critical strategic thinking. The model's adaptability allows for an emphasis on specific aspects such as ethics or emerging technologies and, thus, enriching strategic planning education.

Critical strategic thinking capabilities are fundamental to the public relations function as practitioners analyze information, assess risks and opportunities, identify biases, and consider diverse perspectives. These skills enable public relations practitioners to identify patterns, evaluate the reliability of sources, and determine the significance of the information (Spicer, 1991). In addition, critical strategic thinking skills afford professionals to engage in ongoing environmental scanning, media monitoring, and social media listening, as well as consider different scenarios, evaluate the potential impact of each, and make informed decisions about how to proceed.

Research also showed critical thinking skills empower public relations professionals to recognize their own biases, as well as organizational prejudiced positions, in order to address them appropriately in their communication strategies (Schoenberger-Orgad & Spiller, 2014). Critical strategic thinking skills help public relations professionals to see issues from multiple perspectives and to develop communication strategies that consider the needs and concerns of different stakeholder groups (Guth & Marsh, 2016). Overall, the importance of critical

strategic thinking in public relations cannot be overstated. Our contribution to this field comes in the form of the DASA model that can assist educators in preparing students to become effective strategic planners tasked with improving the practice.

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Identifying & Addressing Gaps in Public Relations Ethics Education

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Abstract

Public relations practitioners need to be prepared to serve as ethics counselors and values managers. However, as revealed in the 2023 Commission on Public Relations Education report, public relations managers are not satisfied with the level of ethics knowledge possessed by recent graduates they have hired. Through additional analysis of the CPRE data collected from surveys with public relations practitioners and educators, this study reveals what topics managers believe should be taught related to public relations ethics to adequately prepare students for their careers. The results revealed significant deficiencies, especially in colleges and universities that do not offer standalone ethics courses, but simply integrate ethics content into other public relations courses. We provide specific recommendations of resources and pedagogical approaches for addressing five of the core topic areas.

Introduction

Empirical research (Bowen, et al., 2006; Bowen, 2008; Bowen, 2009a; Neill & Drumwright, 2012) has revealed that there is a consistent need and expectation for public relations professionals to provide counsel on ethical dilemmas (ethics counselor role) and to lead ethics training initiatives, onboarding, and institutionalization of ethical values (values manager role) in their organizations. Yet, higher education institutions are not adequately preparing graduates to fulfill these responsibilities. The 2023 Commission on Public Relations report revealed that 80% of public relations educators indicated that ethics is taught in their program, but only 55% of those same educators indicated that an ethics course was required. Other studies have looked at public relations ethics training globally. The European Communication Monitor revealed that two out every three survey respondents reported that they had faced an ethical issue during the prior year; however, 40% of communication professionals reported that they had never completed ethics training specific to the communication discipline (Zerfass et al., 2020). A related study, the North American Communication Monitor, reported that six out of 10 communication professionals had faced one or more ethical issues during the prior year, 26% had completed an ethics course in college, and 38% had received ethics training provided by their employer (Meng et al., 2021).

Bowen and Erzikova (2013) found international differences in ethics education with a more philosophical and argument-based approach preferred in European public relations programs. Similar to trends from past ethics surveys in public relations (Wright, 1989; Pratt, 1991), principle-based (deontological) reasoning is essential as professionals gain responsibility in their careers, although

the knowledge, skills, and abilities of these approaches are seen as lacking in recent graduates (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018, 2023). Specifically, critical thinking skills for the basis of philosophical analyses are deficient, applying directly to ethical reasoning abilities; therefore, critical thinking is vital to incorporate in ethics courses (Neill, 2021; Neill, 2023). Bowen and Erzikova (2013) found that the deep thinking needed to analyze ethics from a diverse number of perspectives may often be overlooked in favor of learning legal precedents or industry standards, although we acknowledge that some educators are already teaching this topic or one similar, such as ethical use of social media (Bowen, 2013). In-depth interviews with managers in top public relations agencies suggested that new graduates are motivated to work for ethical organizations; however, new employees lack preparation in a number of critical areas such as approaching media relations ethically, understanding confidentiality, demonstrating ethical digital strategies, and raising ethical issues (Bortree, 2019). Further, students often hold the misconception that the major involves manipulation and "spin" (Bowen, 2003) and are often surprised that a large portion of their public relations coursework considers ethics (Bowen, 2009b). Additional confusion in public relations education has been noted when considering ethical professional responsibilities (Wright & Turk, 2007) and codes of ethics across communication fields (Ikonen, et al., 2017).

As a follow-up to the 2023 CPRE report, this study examines the data for additional insights specifically related to ethics education. We examine what content practitioners deem essential to include in public relations ethics curriculum. We also identify the gaps between those expectations and what public relations educators

report they are actually teaching in their courses. Finally, we provide specific recommendations of resources that educators can use to address those deficiencies.

Literature Review

Public relations' roles as ethics counselor & values manager

Public relations scholars and practitioners have long advocated that public relations managers have an obligation to provide ethics counseling in their companies and organizations with some calling this role an ethical conscience (Bowen, 2008; Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Paluszek, 1989; Ryan & Martinson, 1983). The conscience role involves "a lack of impulsiveness, care in mapping out alternatives and consequences . . . and awareness of and concern for the effects of one's decision and policies on others" (Goodpaster & Matthews, 1982, p. 134).

The second responsibility related to ethics in public relations is values management (Bowen et al., 2006), arising from a factor analysis on the activity reporting of almost 3,000 public relations professionals worldwide, who managed values and the communication of those values inside their organizations. The values manager role (Lee et al., 2006) constitutes a large portion of internal communication, including onboarding, employee evaluation, training, and the institutionalization of ethical values across the workforce. The values manager role is often undertaken in internal communication through employee initiatives, strategic listening, refining mission, vision, and values statements, or building employee engagement (Men & Bowen, 2017). However, application across the field is uneven and often depends on job tenure and access to the dominant coalition to create understanding of and support for values initiatives (Bowen, 2008). Neill (2016) found that public relations played a significant role in developing communication plans and distributing messages to employees about

values and ethics, but a lesser role in communication about values during the phases of employment recruitment and orientation. Lee et al. (2006) described the ideal role as instilling "an overarching ethical organizational culture," determining the organization's values, and then rewarding those who adhere to those values (p. 19).

To fulfill these roles and responsibilities requires specialized training in public relations ethics. Some of the ethical competencies identified in previous research included courage and business literacy in general as well as understanding of the specific industry in which they are employed (Neill & Drumwright, 2012). Public relations practitioners also need political astuteness in order to identify who are the influential decision makers in a specific situation, their strengths and weaknesses, personal preferences, and motivations, as well as an understanding regarding how decisions are made in a specific organization (Berger, 2005; Berger & Reber, 2006; Neill & Barnes, 2018; Pfeffer, 1992; Spicer, 1997).

The ethical counselor role also warrants advanced knowledge of ethics and moral philosophy, as well as policy-level analyses and strategic issues management insight (Bowen & Heath, 2020). In this manner, practitioners must have abilities to argue for an ethical analysis of truth rather than a perspective that may have mutually beneficial outcomes but ultimately only satisfice because conflicting values and interpretations of facts are at hand (Bowen & Heath 2020). Inclusion in the dominant coalition, and ongoing influence in that executive-level decision-making group, were found to be dependent on ethical knowledge and the ability to advise on crises, moral dilemmas, hot issue topics, internal issues, and to analyze with credibility (Bowen, 2008) and moral autonomy (Bowen, 2006).

Prior Research on Public Relations Ethics Education

Scholars have found support for the value of ethics education. Gale and Bunton (2005) reported that advertising and public relations professionals who had completed an ethics course in college were more likely to value ethics, were capable of identifying ethical issues, and discussed ethical issues with colleagues when compared to alumni who had not completed an ethics course. Similarly, Neill (2016) found that public relations practitioners who had completed an ethics course were more likely to report they felt prepared to offer ethics counsel (i.e., moral efficacy, M=4.02) when compared to those who had not completed an ethics course (M=3.72).

While the CPRE 2018 report recommended that colleges and universities offer a standalone course in public relations ethics, it frequently is only integrated in other public relations courses. Not much progress has been made as the CPRE 2023 report revealed that 61% of educators indicated that ethics was integrated across their curriculum and only 30% of those same educators indicated their program offers a stand-alone public relations ethics course. In prior research, Silverman et al. (2014) found that ethics was most frequently taught in PR Campaigns (81%), followed by the introductory course (80%) and least taught in PR Management courses (47%). Educators reported using case studies, simulations, and small group discussions for ethics instruction (Silverman et al., 2014). However, Neill (2017) found that some essential concepts "are more likely to be covered when ethics is offered as a standalone course, such as other codes of ethics beyond those of the Public Relations Society of America, classical theories by philosophers, decision-making models, the effect of organizational culture and values, and global perspectives on ethics" (p. 126). Researchers in PR ethics

(Wright,1985; Curtin et al., 2011) have noted that a reliance on classical theories of moral philosophy grows as do years of job experience and increasing responsibility levels in management, indicating a normative preference for moral philosophy education in PR courses among educators. This preference is pronounced in the European Union where a critical approach toward the industry is common and is indicated to assist in a deeper understanding of complex moral dilemmas and ethical resolutions (Bowen & Erzikova, 2013).

Practitioners' Expectations for Ethics Education

Recent survey research with a national sample of U.S. communication professionals explored what topics they believe should be taught in public relations ethics courses. The top five topics were 1) professional codes of ethics, 2) ethics in the digital age, 3) ethics in crisis communication, 4) ethical listening, and 5) diversity and inclusion (Neill, 2023). Similarly, the 2023 CPRE report found practitioners gave priority to the topics of 1) misinformation/fake news, 2) ethics in the digital age, 3) ethics in crisis communication, and 4) professional codes of ethics.

Neill's study (2023) also revealed that while "public relations and communication professionals are confident in their mastery of core ethics competencies… they are less confident in their preparedness to provide ethics counsel in actual practice" (p. 12). This review of the literature and the availability of new CPRE data warrants a further review regarding gaps in ethics education and these specific research questions:

RQ1a: What do practitioners believe is essential (e.g., should be taught) in public relations ethics courses? RQ1b: What are the significant gaps between those expectations and what is actually being taught?

RQ2: To what degree are these topics being covered when ethics is integrated across the curriculum compared to when ethics is taught as a standalone course?

Method

To better understand the gaps in public relations ethics education, two online surveys were administered with 197 educators and 269 public relations practitioners. The online surveys were distributed to organizations affiliated with the CPRE in February and March of 2023. The recruitment efforts resulted in a total sample of 466 public relations practitioners and educators. Both of the samples skewed to the senior levels. The average age of practitioners who responded to the survey was 48 and average years of experience in public relations was almost 23 years. The average age of the educators who responded was 58 and average years of experience was 21.5 years. Additional information about sample and study design can be found in the 2023 CPRE report.

Measures

To examine the priority of public relations ethics content in the classroom, educators and practitioners were asked to rate the importance of a list of ethics topics in the public relations curriculum. The topics were drawn from the 2019 CPRE Ethics Education Report prepared by the ethics subcommittee (Bortree et al, 2019). The list was developed after reviewing existing syllabi from public relations educators and developing a sample syllabus that could be used for a standalone ethics course in public relations. In this 2023 survey, educators were asked to indicate the degree to which these topics are actually taught in the public relations classroom, and public relations managers were asked to evaluate how essential these topics were for young professionals to study. In addition, public relations

managers were asked to what degree ethics knowledge can be found among entry-level hires, while educators were asked to evaluate the degree to which their program delivers ethics knowledge. Educators also were asked whether or not their program teaches ethics or requires an ethics course and in what format ethics is taught.

Findings

The first two research questions (RQ1a & 1b) addressed which topics public relations practitioners believe are essential and thus should be taught in public relations courses, and if there are any significant gaps between those expectations and what is actually being taught. Overall, educators rated their teaching effectiveness for ethics knowledge as above average (M=3.99, SD=1.08) based on a 5-point scale while practitioners perceived their ability to find ethics knowledge among new hires as average (M= 3.03, SD=1.10). A paired samples T-test revealed a significant gap between practitioners' expectations for ethics knowledge (M=4.41, SD = .97) and their evaluation of new hires' ethics knowledge (M= 3.03, SD=1.10); t(263)=19.06. p=<.001. As mentioned previously, nearly 80% of educators reported that they teach ethics in their program and nearly 50% reported that an ethics course is required for their students.

The survey results revealed the top priorities for practitioners (See Table 1).

Table 1

Practitioner Expectations for What Should Be Taught in Public Relations Ethics Courses

Public Relations Ethics Topics	Practitioner Expectation	
	M	SD
Misinformation/Fake News	4.58	0.72
Ethics in the Digital Age	4.56	0.68
Ethics in Crisis Communication	4.54	0.71
Professional Codes of Ethics	4.43	0.80
Diversity & Inclusion in Public Relations	4.42	0.87
Ethical Business Practices	4.41	0.75
Impact of Organizational Culture on Ethical Decision Making	4.31	0.77
Ethics & Persuasion	4.27	0.79
Building Credibility/Allies & Coalitions	4.24	0.80
Ethical Decision Models & Theories	4.24	0.97
PRSA's Code of Ethics	4.24	1.07
Corporate Social Responsibility	4.21	0.87
Ethical Listening	4.19	0.87
Ethics in a Global Context	4.01	0.95
Moral Philosophy/Ethical Theories & Frameworks	3.87	1.08
Developing a Personal Crisis Plan	3.84	0.98
Loyalties in Public Relations	3.81	0.97
Last Resort Approaches-Rocking the Boat & Whistleblowing	3.78	0.94

The second research question examined any differences between practitioner expectations and what public relations educators report is actually being taught in colleges and universities. The results revealed that the biggest gaps in expectations and what is actually being taught are in the areas of 1) ethical

listening, 2) developing a personal crisis plan, 3) last resort approaches (e.g., rocking the boat or whistleblowing), 4) building credibility/allies and coalitions, and 5) the impact of organizational culture on ethical decision making. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1

What Practitioners Believe Should be Taught & What Actually Is
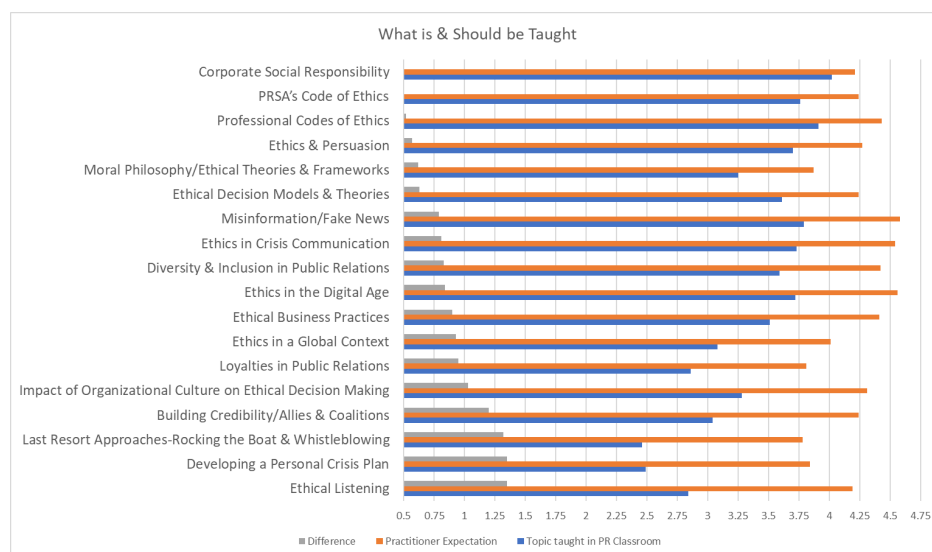
The second research question (RQ2) examined to what degree these topics are being covered when ethics is integrated across the curriculum compared to when ethics is taught as a standalone course. The educators reported the various formats through which students received ethics instruction. Only 31% of educators reported that their college or university provided a standalone public relations ethics course, 40.6% reported that they offer a combined course in ethics and law, 26.4% offer a media ethics course, 5% offer a business ethics course, and 4.6% offer a philosophy course. The majority of the educators (61.4%) reported that

ethics is integrated across the curriculum. To answer the research question, we analyzed what is taught when a standalone ethics course is offered (e.g., public relations ethics, media ethics or media ethics/ law) compared to when ethics is only integrated across the curriculum. The results revealed that the biggest deficiencies are in the areas of 1) ethical decision models & theories, 2) moral philosophy/ethical theories, 3) building credibility/allies & coalitions, 4) ethical business practices, and 5) PRSA's code of ethics. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2

Ethics Content Taught by Format
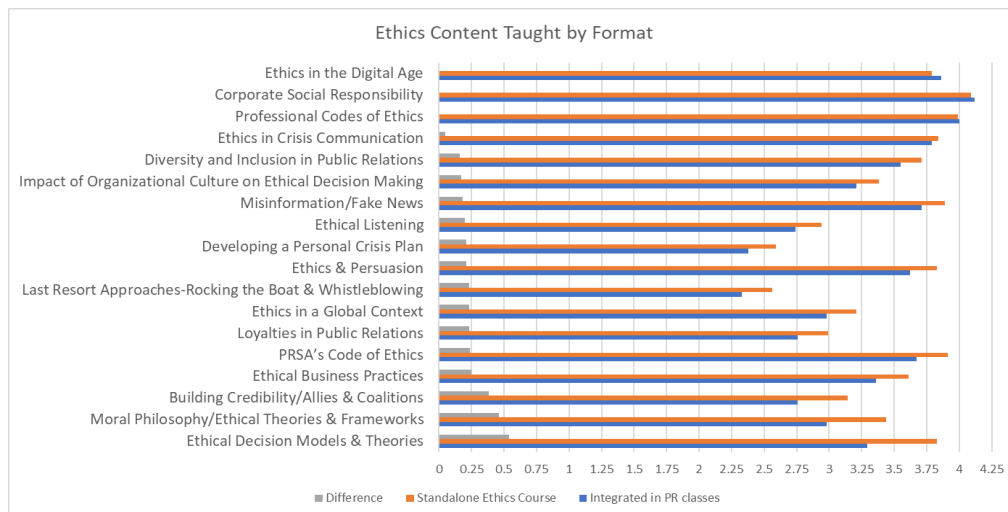
What is Being Taught in Standalone Ethics Courses or Integrated in Public Relations Courses

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare perceptions of how successfully educators are preparing their students in their knowledge of ethics based on whether they offered a standalone ethics course or it was only integrated across the curriculum. The test revealed that educators whose colleges and universities offered a standalone ethics course had more confidence in their

students' preparedness ($M = 4.10$, $SD = .959$) compared to programs which simply integrated ethics into other public relations courses ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.214$), $t(185) = 4.608$, $p =< 0.03$. This finding confirmed researcher expectations that integrating ethics discussions across a curriculum allow less time for philosophical and critical examinations of complex ethical topics than do standalone ethics courses, argued to yield superior outcomes in prior research (Bowen & Erzikova, 2013; Neill, 2017).

Discussion

The survey results revealed that public relations practitioners valued 14 of the 18 ethics topics proposed by Bortree et al. (2019) with average mean scores at 4.0 or above, they are not satisfied with the ethics knowledge of new hires, and that the content they perceive as essential is not being taught in existing public relations courses. Similar to prior research, we identified an even larger deficiency in programs when ethics is only integrated into existing public relations courses rather than offering a standalone ethics course (Neill, 2017). Although our findings are disappointing for PR ethicists and scholars, the study also indicates specific areas of growth and improvement that can be a rewarding and beneficial challenge for public relations educators.

We recommend teaching within the PR ethics course the five content areas with the biggest gaps: 1) ethical listening, 2) developing a personal crisis plan, 3) last resort approaches (e.g., rocking the boat or whistleblowing, 4) building credibility/allies and coalitions, and 5) the impact of organizational culture on ethical decision making. Based on these findings, specifically discussed in RQ2, we offer recommendations for programs, majors, or courses of study to offer PR

ethics as a standalone course, as opposed to a combined course with law and/or media ethics or as integrated into various courses across the curriculum.

Ethical listening

Educators could assign students to interview public relations practitioners about ethical issues they have faced in their careers. Then students could address following the interview how well they listened using Brownell's six-part model, HURIER (hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating, and responding). She emphasized that "effective listeners concentrate on the speaker, hear messages accurately, consider the emotional as well as the content aspects of a message, remember what was said to them, and remain non-judgmental, while listening to the speaker's ideas" (Brownell, 2004, p. 23). In addition, a helpful resource is the Page Center-funded book edited by Katie R. Place titled Organizational listening for strategic communication.

Developing a Personal Crisis Plan

This content is crucial because public relations practitioners have reported either leaving a job due to ethical concerns or being fired after raising ethical concerns (Neill, 2021). This topic was inspired by a panel discussion at PRSA's International Conference in Boston in 2017 led by Bobbi Simmons, Debra Bethard-Caplick, and Marlene Neill. Some of the steps they recommended were having a master resume prepared that can easily be updated, having a personal savings account/emergency fund, maintaining one's personal network so that a practitioner has references that can be sought out when needed, and practicing interview responses involving various scenarios. Students can be instructed on both the need for a personal crisis plan and what comprises one.

Last Resort Approaches

Last resort approaches to address ethical issues may include tactics such as serving as a whistleblower, leaking information to government agencies or the media, sabotaging implementation of a decision, and resigning (Berger & Reber, 2006). Professors can share case studies regarding recent whistleblowers whose stories have been reported in the news such as Frances Haugen at Facebook/Meta and Paula Pedene. Cary A. Greenwood has published a book titled Public relations and whistleblowing: Golden handcuffs in corporate wrongdoing, and Pedene's coauthored book is titled A sacred duty. In addition, Bruce Berger and Bryan Reber discuss last resort approaches in their book Gaining influence in public relations.

Building credibility/allies and coalitions

Neill and Barnes (2018) provide lessons from members of the PRSA College of Fellows and Arthur W. Page Society on how to successfully raise ethical concerns in Public relations ethics: Senior PR pros tell us how to speak up and keep your job. There is one chapter in the book specifically dedicated to this topic. Berger and Reber's book, Gaining influence in public relations, also is a helpful resource for this area of study. Educators could have students engage in a role-playing activity to support instruction in this area.

Impact of organizational culture on ethical decision-making

The impact of organizational culture on ethical decision making is an important area of study but one that takes time to learn, so it is most effectively taught in a standalone ethics course. Bowen (2002) found that a vital component of our ability to counsel on ethics is an organization's willingness to identify issues as ethical and to engage in moral analyses rather than assuming a code of ethics is enough. Without identification of a management decision as an ethical one, no

moral evaluation or analyses can take place. In the study of an ethically exemplar corporation, Bowen (2004) found the following factors to be essential: "a strong organizational culture that emphasizes the importance of ethics, a collaborative Theory Y management style, a symmetrical worldview that values innovation and dialogue, a counseling role for issues management or public relations in the dominant coalition, rewarding ethical behavior, and a commitment to ethical analysis using one of the rigorous approaches of moral philosophy— in this case, a deontological approach consistent with the organization's ethics statement" (p. 321).

These factors are from an interdisciplinary array of fields and take time, reading, discussion, and example implementation in order to understand their interactions, making a standalone ethics course essential. A helpful resource integrating these theories from management and organizational behavior literature is offered in chapters 4 and 5 of An overview of the public relations function (Bowen et al., 2019). Another helpful resource identifies five factors that can impact ethical decision-making in organizations as well as essential ethics resources that should be provided by employers (McDonald & Nijhof, 1999). Educators also could integrate case studies involving prominent organizations in the news related to crises connected to organizational culture issues and unethical practices. The Arthur W. Page Center offers more than a dozen ethics-focused teaching modules on its website (thepagecenter.org), including one titled "Ethical Decision Making" created by Michael Kent. The module explores the process of ethical decision-making and the impact of organizational structures on decisions.

Table 2: Teaching Resources

Topic Area	Resources
Ethical Listening	Organizational listening for strategic communication by Katie R. Place Page Center Module: Ethical Listening. https://www.pagecentertraining.psu.edu/public-relations-ethics/ethical-decision-making/introduction-ethical-decision-making
Developing a Personal Crisis Plan	Neill, M.S. (2021). Public Relations Professionals Identify Ethical Issues, Essential Competencies & Deficiencies. Journal of Media Ethics, 36(1), 51-67.
Last Resort Approaches	Public relations and whistleblowing: Golden handcuffs in corporate wrongdoing by Carey A. Greenwood A sacred duty by Paula Pedene Gaining influence in public relations by Bruce Berger & Bryan Reber
Building credibility/allies and coalitions	Public relations ethics: Senior PR pros tell us how to speak up and keep your job by Marlene S. Neill & Amy Barnes Gaining influence in public relations by Bruce Berger & Bryan Reber Bowen, S. A. (2009). What communication professionals tell us regarding dominant coalition access and gaining membership. Journal of Applied Communication Research, 37(4), 427-452.

Impact of organizational culture on ethical decision making	Bowen, S. A. (2004). Organizational factors encouraging ethical decision making: An exploration into the case of an exemplar. Journal of Business Ethics, 52, 311–324. McDonald, G., & Nijhof, A. (1999). Beyond codes of ethics: an integrated framework for stimulating morally responsible behaviour in organizations. Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 20 (3), 133-147.
Terminology and taxonomy	Bowen, S. A. (2016). Clarifying ethics terms in public relations from A to V, authenticity to virtue. BledCom special issue of PR review sleeping (with the) media: Media relations. Public Relations Review, 42, 564-572. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.03.012 Bowen, S. A. (2010). The nature of good in public relations: What should be its normative ethic? In R. L. Heath (Ed.), Handbook of public relations (pp. 569-583). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Institutionalizing ethics and internal/employee communication	Men, R. L., & Bowen, S. A. (2017). Excellence in internal communication management. New York: Business Expert Press.

Limitations & Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provided new insights regarding public relations managers' expectations for public relations ethics education, the use of a convenience sample limits our ability to generalize the findings. Both the educator and practitioner samples skewed toward more senior levels, offering limited perspectives from entry-level and mid-career practitioners as well as beginning and

mid-career educators. In addition, the samples lacked racial and ethnic diversity. Future research on this topic would benefit from a sample that is more representative of the public relations industry. While Neill's (2023) study included a more diverse practitioner sample, her study did not include educators' perspectives. In addition, we would recommend qualitative research such as focus groups or interviews be conducted with educators to uncover best practices and innovative ideas for teaching some of the core areas identified in this study. This research has a descriptive practice focus on meeting modern ethical challenges, and we recommend future studies with experts on the normative content of a PR ethics curriculum.

Conclusion

This article has identified ethics topics that practitioners view as essential in public relations ethics education and which of these areas are not being covered, particularly at colleges and universities that do not offer or require a standalone ethics course. A standalone ethics course is revealed in these data to be essential to successful preparation of public relations students to successfully be prepared for the realities they will face in practice. Practitioners offered areas in which PR ethics education is lagging, and a standalone course with integration of these curricular demands is vital for a modern PR major/sequence/program of study. We have provided specific recommendations of teaching resources and pedagogical approaches to address these gaps in PR ethics education.

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Actualizing the DEI Mission in Public Relations Classrooms

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Teaching Brief

Building upon one of the five key recommendations of the Commission on Public Relations Education 2023 standards report, this teaching brief examines how educators can actualize their diversity, equity, and inclusion missions in public relations classrooms. Public relations educators can use this teaching brief to help undergraduate students understand the meaning, significance, and current climate of DEI, as they facilitate an in-class, interactive assignment where students examine organizations' DEI missions by engaging in research, critical strategic thinking, and class discussions. Overall, this teaching brief aims to strengthen the ongoing work of embedding DEI in the public relations curriculum, as well as share practical implications for the public relations industry.

Keywords: Public relations education, diversity, equity, inclusion, resistance, belonging, actualizing DEI

The public relations industry is one of the fastest-growing professions in the U.S., and yet it does not reflect the rapidly growing dimensions of diversity in the current population (Bardhan & Gower, 2020). As such, numerous scholars have turned to higher education as the catalyst for change (Brown et al., 2019; Meganck & Kim, 2022; Mundy et al, 2018; Pompper, 2005), recognizing the power of the classroom for igniting critical strategic thinking, reflection, and discussion on topics, such diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

DEI is a term that has gained considerable attention in recent years, and while its definitional terrain and scope continually evolve, DEI is primarily about recognizing and appreciating human differences, treating everyone fairly, and creating a sense of inclusion and belonging implicitly and explicitly in classrooms, workplaces, and elsewhere. In the halls of U.S. higher education, public relations faculty have been at the forefront of educating students about DEI-related topics (Bardhan & Gower, 2020; Mundy et al., 2018; Place & Vanc, 2016; Pompper, 2005; Waymer & Brown, 2018) through curriculum development, inclusive learning environments, and hands-on experiences designed to prepare them for industry careers. As stated in the 2018 Commission on Public Relations (CPRE) report: "Practitioners value job candidates who enter the workforce and exhibit DEI specific knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), and who have a strong multicultural professional lens," (Mundy et al., 2018, p. 143). By underscoring the vital role educators play in shaping students' awareness and comprehension of DEI, the 2023 CPRE report emphasizes the importance of taking an intentional approach to DEI in public relations as it also reinforces that understanding DEI and appreciating its value begins in the classroom.

Through this special issue that highlights key insights from the 2023 CPRE report, this teaching brief was created in response to the key finding that both educators and practitioners desire an increase in DEI KSAs of students and entry-level practitioners. The teaching brief focuses on the importance and application of actualizing the DEI mission. Educators who proactively incorporate DEI into their course content are actualizing the DEI mission and leading by example. For instance, the use of the Diversity & Inclusion Wheel for public relations practitioners serves as a tool to remind students to develop a diversity-first approach mindset at the inception stage of any assignment or project (Luttrell & Wallace, 2021), and hopefully carry this mindset into the industry. According to the PR Coalition (2005), public relations professionals have an important role to play in leading diversity efforts. For example, practitioners can take the lead by highlighting DEI's positive contributions to organizations and finding ways to permeate DEI throughout an organization's culture (Blow & Monzón, 2020) authentically and consistently. One way to do this is by playing an instrumental role in developing and enacting an organization's DEI mission, which is a shared organizational commitment that includes elements of social justice and embodies an "exercise in making implicit intentions and values explicit" (Fuentes, 2021, p. 74). Additionally, professionals can continuously examine their organization's mission, vision, and values through a DEI lens to ensure their organizations provide welcoming environments and that their organizations are well prepared to satisfy the needs of increasingly diverse internal and external stakeholders and publics.

The need to prepare a workforce that is ready to lead communication in an increasingly complex, multicultural world begins in the classroom – a point emphasized by the most recent CPRE reports (Logan et al., 2023; Mundy, et al.,

2018). This need also corresponds to one of the seven key findings from the DEI chapter in the 2023 report: that both educators and practitioners highly value DEI knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs), but are not currently finding them as much as they would like in students or entry-level practitioners. The other key findings include: DEI is essential in PR education; core DEI concepts include gender, race, ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, and social justice; DEI concepts are expanding to include diversity of thought and disability/accessibility; social movements influence curriculum and practice; DEI pushback exists from stakeholders; and more than half of educators teach DEI in their PR courses (Logan et al., 2023, pp. 83-84).

Additionally, the report identified five key recommendations for integrating DEI into the public relations classroom:

1. Actualize the DEI mission in public relations education.

2. Take a comprehensive approach to DEI in public relations.

3. Create PR/DEI course materials; expand awareness of and access to them.

4. Prepare for pushback within higher education and beyond.

5. Understand DEI as an ethical social responsibility.

Therefore, this teaching brief focuses on the recommendation to actualize the DEI mission. From an education perspective, actualizing the DEI mission means embedding DEI into all aspects of the public relations curriculum. This can be done through assignments and discussions, for example, that address the top DEI concepts identified by both educator and practitioner respondents to the 2023 CPRE survey including gender, race, ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, and social justice, as well as emergent topics, such as diversity of thought and disability/accessibility, which educators and practitioners both indicated they would like to see taught more

regularly in the curriculum (Logan et al., 2023). The following teaching brief is presented based on the 2023 CPRE report's findings, recommendations, and the increasing expectations for public relations students to strengthen their understanding of DEI.

The DEI Assignment

In this assignment, students are asked to imagine that they are a public relations practitioner on a communication team that is tasked with a clear objective: to explore an organization's website to determine if and how the organization is actualizing its DEI mission. Students are given a brief 15-20-minute lecture about DEI, divided into small groups of 3-4 students, and asked to select a corporation, government agency, or nonprofit organization to explore its DEI commitment through an examination of prominent website content (e.g., vision, mission, and/or value statements).

Students have four main deliverables as part of this assignment:

1. DEI Talk: students examine an organization's DEI mission, vision, or values statement, and any other relevant DEI messaging available online.

2. DEI Web: students explore at least four sections of the website and create a list of the web pages that emphasize DEI (e.g., leadership, press room, about us, blogs, etc.).

3. DEI Walk: students analyze content and determine if they believe the organization is living up to its DEI talk or not and provide evidence to support their position (e.g., programs, policies, campaigns, philanthropy, and/or other actions).

4. Final Report: students share 2-3 best practices if the organization is walking its DEI talk. If not, students must provide 2-3 recommendations to help the

organization better actualize its DEI mission, including whether the organization should revise its mission statement.

After completing and uploading their one-page DEI reviews online, students participate in a class discussion with their instructor and each group shares highlights from their findings. The following discussion questions are provided as prompts to guide the conversation.

1. How would you explain actualizing a DEI mission in your own words?

2. Why is it important for organizations to actualize their DEI mission?

3. What challenges or push back may organizations face as they work toward actualizing their DEI mission?

4. How can a public relations professional play a role in helping organizations actualize their DEI mission?

5. What unexpected observations or findings did you learn from examining your organization? Did you gain a greater understanding of DEI?

Instructors may also ask students to compare similarities and differences between the organization their group examined and the other organizations examined by their classmates.

This assignment, which can be administered in person, in the classroom, or via online instruction, provides students with an opportunity to conduct a DEI review of an organization. The assignment can be done by students as part of a small group or individually and independently. Alternatively, this assignment could also be offered as a semester-long project for students to engage in primary and secondary research to examine different stakeholder perspectives and other internal or external communication tools, such as annual reports, social media, and newsletter content.

Finally, this assignment allows students to research, write collaboratively, engage in critical strategic thinking, and participate in a class discussion. During the process, students are exposed to the different ways organizations manifest their DEI values and mission through programs, policies, messages, campaigns, philanthropy, and/or other actions, as they also examine different DEI language, acronyms, goals, task forces, and metrics organizations are using to demonstrate actualization. Through this process, students can also reflect on their own intercultural and intersectional identities and gain a deeper understanding of the different dimensions of diversity.

Summary of Student Learning Outcomes

The authors agreed upon the student learning objectives and the main concepts to be covered in the in-class assignment. Key objectives included: 1) understand and evaluate an organization's DEI mission, 2) differentiate between talking and walking a DEI mission, 3) identify best practices for actualizing a DEI mission, and 4) develop strategic recommendations to help organizations actualize their DEI mission.

One of the authors, who teaches an advanced public relations course, shared the interactive assignment with 12 undergraduate students during the 2023 fall semester. Another author, who teaches a mid-level public relations course, gave the assignment to 17 undergraduate students during the 2023 fall semester. The assignment is adaptable and can easily be integrated into different public relations courses. Evidence of learning outcomes can be obtained through class observations, writing components, and class discussions.

Following the instructions of this assignment, the students researched the websites of U.S.-based companies and nonprofits of their choice. Websites, which

provide a window into the organizations, have been used as primary external communication tools to communicate with stakeholders (Kent et al., 2003). As a form of owned media, public relations practitioners often have oversight of the organization's website by controlling the messaging, design, and overall positioning of the web pages that can strategically showcase the organization's brand story, including its DEI mission and commitment to different stakeholders. Previous scholars have examined how diversity is positioned or framed on corporate websites (Maier & Ravazzani, 2019; Uysal, 2013), and the importance of location (where on the website), which can signify to whom an organization is directing their message (Wallace et al., 2014).

Students were able to locate DEI content mostly on web pages such as careers, leadership, and DEI-dedicated sections. The students believed it was important for organizations to actualize DEI and put their money where their mouth is. As one student stated, "Companies need to do what they promised to do otherwise it's just cash grab," and "If an organization does not actualize their DEI mission, then it is simply just words spoken and no action taken." Students also took notice of their organizations' explicit communication when it came to reporting and disclosure.

One group of students examining a retail company noted "they allocated $5 million annually for DEI and a social impact program called "Here to Be" to provide funds for DEI education." Other groups noted similar metric-driven DEI missions by noting their company's diversity action plans, training programs, affinity groups, task forces, chief diversity officers, and DEI reports. For example, one group of students noted that a large beauty brand, "is living up to its DEI messaging. When it comes to diversity, their recruitment efforts reflect diverse

profiles and representative teams. When it comes to equity, they have gender pay gap global monitoring and have worldwide parental leave, including for co-parents. They promote inclusion by training all employees on DEI and have accommodations for employees with disabilities." While most students focused their attention on examining the traditional attributes of DEI (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity), this activity allowed students to comment on additional dimensions, such as accessibility, disability, diversity of thought, beliefs, and experiences.

As they continued to study the websites, some students who chose to examine a global tech company engaged in critical thinking. Students shared their skepticism about the company's stated DEI efforts, sharing comments such as "It's good that they are doing this, but we don't know if they hired someone to fill a quota," and "This seems a bit superficial because [the website] doesn't represent the whole picture. It would be great to hear from diverse individuals and see how they're feeling."

Another group of students observed that a clothing brand's website content about DEI, "is so vague, it is hard to tell if they're living up to their values and mission statement. However, after doing some research, we learned they do have a vice president of diversity and inclusion, which is definitely a step in the right direction."

Overall, the students embraced the assignment as they worked diligently and collaboratively to achieve their objectives. They clearly viewed online content with a critical eye and kept an open mind as they explored different dimensions of DEI. Students underscored the importance of organizations being more inclusive to all individuals, believed leaders should be intentional and authentic in their DEI efforts, and recognized that DEI missions must not be measured superficially as this

can backfire on an organization and hurt its long-term credibility and stakeholder relationships.

Based on these observations, this teaching brief was able to help students learn about an organization's DEI efforts, assess its DEI meaning and commitment based on current website content, and help them to understand what it means for an organization to actualize its DEI mission. Furthermore, the student observations and feedback supported the best practices of having an "organizational commitment to diversity initiatives by communicating the definition and activities across organizational communication to all stakeholders and aligning activities to the criteria identified to allow for assessment" (Wills, 2020, p. 10).

DEI Pushback and Connecting to PR Practice

Three years ago, DEI was heavily prevalent across the U.S. as companies embraced DEI pledges, hired chief diversity officers, and increased their overall recruitment efforts among underrepresented communities. However, in recent years, there has been a considerable drop in DEI investment at both the industry and educational levels, especially in the form of resistance and pushback. In fact, according to the CPRE 2023 report, 40% of educators reported pushback from stakeholders compared to 60% of practitioners (Logan et al., 2023). This pushback has taken many forms. For example, government officials and lawmakers have proposed bills to defund DEI offices and block further investment in these initiatives (Lieb, 2023). The most vocal pushback has come from Governor Greg Abbot of Texas who passed Senate Bill 17 to ban DEI efforts as part of a broader agenda to reshape higher education (Rodrigues, 2023), and Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida who signed a bill into law prohibiting what can be taught in higher education, such as critical race theory (Diaz, 2023). With these realities in mind,

this assignment can be customized or repurposed using terms such as belonging, access, or community engagement for educators living and teaching in places where DEI cannot be explicitly used. It can also be reimagined within the context of public relations ethics or social responsibility, which aligns with the 2023 CPRE recommendation to understand DEI as an ethical social responsibility.

While resistance to DEI is not new, it mostly happens when people misunderstand the purpose and intention of DEI, or why it's necessary (Logan, 2021; Mundy, 2015). As Logan (2021) explains, "DEI programs cannot help right historical wrongs without authentic, purposeful action determined to create real structural and systemic change" (p.12).

Educators and practitioners are encouraged to tap into their professional networks and draw upon available resources as they prepare to face resistance. For example, the CPRE and several of its member organizations (e.g., IPR, PRSA, Page Center, Plank Center, AEJMC- PRD, etc.) collect and feature an inventory of DEI teaching materials and resources, such as assignments, syllabuses, and articles on its website (https://www.commissionpred.org) for educators and practitioners to share best practices.

As U.S. society continues to become more diverse, public relations educators and practitioners will be called upon to lead authentic DEI efforts and build stronger relationships between the organization and its stakeholders. The students of today are the practitioners of tomorrow who will shape the future of the industry and lead DEI actualization efforts.

This teaching brief provides a glimpse into how students interpret DEI missions and perhaps more importantly how they view their role as future public relations leaders who can "develop cultural awareness and create more

organizational climates that foster diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging"
(Vasquez & Neill, 2023, p. 13).

As this teaching brief aims to demonstrate, what the students learn in their classrooms, who they observe around them, and how the content is delivered will impact not only how they view DEI in terms of the profession, but also how they will step in and shape these roles (Brown et al., 2011; Mundy et al., 2018; Muturi & Zhu, 2019; Pompper, 2005; Waymer & Dyson, 2011).

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