

## 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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