"Public Relations Isn't All Rainbows and Butterflies": Student Experiences in Developing a Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Campaign

Stephanie Madden, Pennsylvania State University
Kate Guastaferro, New York University

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of one public relations capstone course to understand students' experiences in developing a child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention campaign. Findings from this research indicated positive changes related to issue salience, efficacy, and knowledge. Furthermore, the sensitive nature of this issue was a motivator for students, although there were concerns about not offending target audiences or triggering survivors. This article provides ways to integrate trauma-informed practices into a public relations campaigns course for instructors engaging with stigmatized issues.

Keywords: child sexual abuse prevention, public relations campaigns, service learning, stigmatized issues, trauma-informed pedagogy

Ample scholarship exists on the various pedagogical benefits of client-based service learning in the public relations campaign capstone course. Not only do students gain real-world experience in research, strategic planning, message design, and evaluation (e.g., Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000; Werder & Strand, 2011), but there can also be more value-added learning outcomes such as enhanced critical thinking, civic engagement, and ethical decision-making (e.g., Allison, 2008; McCollough, 2020; Place, 2018). In their research on student perceptions of service–learning, Muturi et al. (2013) found that the civic engagement element of service-learning was particularly salient for students who welcomed the experience to learn more about important issues facing their communities. As such, instructors in the public relations campaign capstone courses have a ripe opportunity to expose students to communicating about challenging and complex issues.

Willis (2016) argued that "PR has a wider role to play in helping others in society tackle 'wicked' dilemmas" (p. 306). This could include issues like homelessness (Place, 2022), mass incarceration (Pressgrove et al., 2020), HIV/AIDS communication (McKeever, 2021), mental health (Aghazadeh, 2022), and domestic violence and sexual assault (Madden, 2019). While these topics have been explored in public relations scholarship, there may be hesitancy to introduce these topics into the classroom because of the sensitive and potentially re-traumatizing nature of the content. As Madden and Del Rosso (2021) found in their research on trauma-informed public relations, public relations educators get little, if any, guidance on navigating difficult topics with their students. But ignoring hard issues does not make the issues go away, and not incorporating challenging topics into the capstone course does a disservice to the future public relations practitioners who can use the safety of the classroom space to grow as communicators and people. However, the integration of these topics must be approached with care and intentionality.

This paper explores the experiences of one public relations capstone course to understand students' experiences in developing a child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention campaign (Child Maltreatment Solutions Network, 2023). We were interested in understanding how salience, knowledge, and efficacy towards the stigmatized issue of CSA changed, or did not change, throughout the course of the semester. Additionally, we were interested in how students perceived working on the issue of CSA and any accompanying challenges. This was accomplished by using a combination of quantitative surveys timed with in-class reflections to assess salience, efficacy, and knowledge. Additionally, this article provides tangible ways to integrate trauma-informed practices into a course when working on difficult issues as a way to protect students, clients, and instructors without shying away from hard issues.

Literature Review

Service-Learning Pedagogy

Jacoby (1999) defined service learning as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (p. 20). Public relations capstone courses are frequently approached through service-learning pedagogy because of the students' ability to apply what they have learned through their coursework to a real-world context (Fraustino et al., 2019; McCollough, 2018, 2019). Not only can knowledge be applied and professional skills developed, but service-learning projects often help support community organizations and instill a sense of civic awareness in students. Research has found evidence for increased social responsibility, empathy, and community and personal involvement for students participating in service learning as opposed to other forms of assessment (Ryan, 2017).

There can be different goals and motivations behind utilizing

service-learning pedagogy. Britt (2012) outlined a typology of three approaches to service-learning pedagogy in communication: (1) skill-set practices and reflexivity– "developing competence and self-efficacy," (2) civic values and critical citizenship–raising "awareness and critical thinking about social issues and students' values and moral choices/ responsibilities as societal members," and (3) social justice activism– "working with others to transform systems of oppression" (p. 83). Within this typology, different aspects of student identities are "nurtured and called forth–learner, citizen, or social activist" (Britt, 2012, p. 82).

Yet in public relations, we may be missing opportunities to nurture identities beyond learner or future professional in our students. In research on public relations faculty perspectives on service learning, Witmer and colleagues (2009) found that learning outcomes were primarily focused on public relations concepts as opposed to service or community engagement. They wrote that "opportunities for reflection on community service and social responsibility are often not integrated into public relations service-learning courses" (p. 115). University education serves a larger purpose than simply job training, and academic institutions are also "institutions of community engagement" (Schatteman, 2014, p. 17). Universities, and public relations programs, must also maintain a loftier mission of developing informed, self-reflective, and civic-minded graduates (Giroux, 2010; Kuban et al., 2014). In this article, we focus on the opportunity for client-based service-learning courses in public relations to nurture students' identities around civic engagement and raise awareness and critical thinking about social issues.

Service Learning as an Opportunity for Civic Engagement

Civic engagement can be defined as "working to make a difference in the civic life of communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference" (Ehrlich, 2000, p. iv). In a longitudinal study, McCollough (2020) sought to

understand how service-learning coursework may have impacted students several years after graduation. Evidence from this research suggested that service-learning curriculum helps to "cultivate engaged citizens and community members" (McCollough, 2020, p. 13). For example, graduates found the coursework helped them to understand community problems, see how communication can provide solutions to these problems, and feel more empowered to solve them post-graduation.

Service learning may also provide access to populations that students had never considered before. Although not specifically in public relations, Motley and Sturgill (2014) conducted a case study of a multi-class service-learning initiative with a local food bank. In addition to the specific skill development component of each participating course, another goal of this effort "was to see whether direct contact with people in poverty could cause students to reflect on both the situation of the poor and their own responsibility to cover economic diversity accurately" (p. 167). The researchers of this study found that students' opinion of the poor did change positively over the course of the semester, and students showed a growing awareness and understanding of economic diversity.

We believe that client-based service learning within the public relations capstone course offers an additional opportunity to expose students to issues that are stigmatized as (1) a way to educate them about an issue they might not know much about and (2) recognize the challenges associated with communicating about stigmatized issues.

Engaging with Stigmatized Issues

Stigma is a label that attaches discrediting characteristics to a person's identity (Goffman, 1963). As such, it is frequently associated with negative occurrences like blame, shame, social exclusion, discrimination, secrecy, and isolation (Crowe & Murray, 2015). One challenge of stigma is silence and secrecy, causing issues to be perceived as a personal failing rather than symptoms of a systemic problem (Madden, 2019). While

many stigmatized issues are researched in the context of health and interpersonal communication (e.g., Campbell & Babrow, 2004; Corrigan et al., 2009; Murray et al., 2016; Smith & Cashwell, 2011), less work has been done related to stigmatized issues and public relations. Yet, there is a real opportunity within public relations to "break the silence" around stigmatized issues, and service learning is an opportunity to begin a ripple effect of educating our classroom of students about an issue. They in turn, through their personal and professional networks, may begin to educate others. We are interested not only in the transferable skills of campaign development, but the actual knowledge of the issue at the core of the partnering client organizations.

CSA as a Stigmatized Issue

CSA, a subtype of child maltreatment, is a global public health problem affecting 12% of children under 18 (Barth et al., 2013); in the United States it is conservatively estimated to be experienced by 60,000 children annually (DHHS, 2023). Defined as the completed or attempted sexual acts (contact and/or non-contact) by an adult or caregiver with a child under 18 (Mathews & Collin-Vezina, 2019), is associated with lifelong biopsychosocial consequences (Maniglio, 2009; Noll, 2021) and is estimated to confer a lifetime economic burden in excess of $9.3 billion (Letourneau et al., 2018). Also contributing to the burden, though not included in the economic estimate, is the stigma associated with CSA. Stigma is best evidenced by the delay in disclosures of CSA. Indeed, the majority of disclosures do not happen in childhood, when the abuse occurs – research indicates disclosures of CSA are likely up to 20 years post abuse (Hébert et al., 2009; London et al., 2005). For parents, there can also be social stigma around discussing sexual topics with children, even sexual abuse prevention (Prikhidko & Kenny, 2021). As such, the issue of CSA prevention presents a public relations challenge if discussion around the topic is stigmatized.

Research Questions

Based on the literature review, the following three research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How, if at all, did student issue salience, knowledge, and efficacy towards the issue of child sexual abuse prevention change over the course of the semester?

RQ2: How, if at all, did students' perceptions about working on the issue of CSA prevention change over the course of the semester?

RQ3: What, if any, challenges did students experience working on the issue of CSA prevention?

Methods

This study explored 23 senior PR major experiences in a public relations campaign capstone course at Penn State University. The location is important to disclose given the past crisis the university faced with the Jerry Sandusky scandal in 2012. In 2016, Penn State University and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency collaborated to develop and evaluate a comprehensive CSA prevention strategy, the Safe and Healthy Communities Initiative (SHCI; Child Maltreatment Solutions Network, 2023). In the current study, students were asked to develop a public relations campaign in partnership with this effort as part of a service-learning project.[1] Specifically, students were tasked with creating a campaign to increase participation in the community-based *Stewards of Children* program, developed and disseminated by Darkness to Light. Offered as a 2-hour in-person workshop or as a self-directed online course, Stewards of Children has demonstrated effectiveness in

---

1   We recognize that as instructors we do not know all the experiences students bring into the classroom with them. Students would be provided with an alternative client to work with for the semester if unable to work on the topic of CSA for whatever reason. Because CSA would be discussed in class all semester, students were made aware of this class client at the start of the semester, giving them time to switch to a different section of the course if necessary.

significantly increasing participants' knowledge, attitudes, and awareness of protective behaviors (Rheingold et al., 2015). For the service-learning project, students developed campaigns in groups throughout the semester, participating in regular client meetings with the SHCI research director.

Qualitative Student Reflections

As an assignment in the course, students were required to write a one-to-two-page reflection paper at the beginning of the semester, the middle of the semester, and the end of the semester (see Appendix A for the specific reflection prompts) to see how their attitudes towards working on this issue changed over the course of the semester. In total, all students (N = 23) opted in to have their reflection prompts included in this study. However, one student did not submit a final reflection and another student submitted the same reflection twice. Therefore, a total of 67 reflection prompts were analyzed.

Reflections were analyzed by the lead researcher using the thematic analysis process adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify patterns and themes. The first phase involved reading through the reflection memos multiple times, which then led to generating initial codes from the data. Specifically, the lead researcher highlighted salient portions of the reflection in a Word document and used the comment feature to indicate a code. Next, initial codes were collapsed into broader themes in an Excel document, with representative quotes included from across the data set. To help see patterns across individual student reflections, a second Excel document was used with each row dedicated to one student and a column for each of the three reflections. Quotes that most encapsulated the student's feelings about the campaign project during that reflection time point were included. This allowed the researcher to note any changes in reflections over the course of the semester. Through analyzing both Excel documents, themes were then revised and further refined, resulting in the final themes detailed in the results section.

Quantitative Survey

To accompany the written reflections, students were invited to participate in an electronically administered survey distributed via email at the beginning of the semester (Baseline), mid-semester (Time 2) and at the end of the semester (Time 3). Participation in the reflection was noncontingent upon the survey and vice versa. A total of 13 students participated in the survey at Baseline; 11 participated at Time 2 and 8 participated at Time 3 (the same students participated at each time point, aside from attrition). Participants were asked to provide demographic information (i.e., age, gender, race) and if they or someone they knew had experienced child maltreatment. The survey focused on their prior experience with programs talking about the prevention of CSA and if they had previously completed mandated reporter training. Participants were asked to report the degree to which they agreed with statements regarding issue salience (i.e., "CSA is a serious issue in general"), efficacy (i.e., "I feel I can make a difference in preventing CSA"), and CSA-related knowledge (i.e., "Most sexual abuse victims are abused by someone they know"). These items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree) such that higher scores indicated more agreement (unless reverse coding is noted). Due to the small sample size and attrition between surveys, these data are presented descriptively. Items on the saliency, efficacy, and knowledge measures were averaged to provide an item-level mean for each item. All portions of this study received approval from the university IRB.

Results

Description of Survey Sample

Of the 13 students that participated in the online survey, 12 identified as female and none reported being a parent or caregiver. Participants were 92% White, 1 participant identified as Black. The average age of participants was 21.5 (SD = 0.52; Range: 21 - 22).

Approximately half (n = 7) of the students indicated that they or someone they know had been the victim of child maltreatment. Five of the participants reported previously participating in a program talking about the prevention of child maltreatment. Most responses indicated these programs were tied to employment at a summer camp or sports camp, as one participant shared:

> In high school I participated in a program called "Speak Up!" The idea behind this program is to encourage students to speak up about negative experiences they have experienced personally, or seen others experience. While it is not solely focused on sexual abuse, sexual abuse was a topic of discussion. The reason behind my participation was to become more active in trying to better the community.

Issue Salience, Efficacy, and Knowledge

Overall students' issue salience and efficacy nominally increased over the semester (see Table 1). Of particular note, the degree to which students felt CSA was an issue that could impact them increased from a mean score of 4.6 at Baseline to 5.8 at T3. A potential increase was also observed related to their agreement that CSA is an issue that could impact someone they know (6.2 at Baseline to 6.8 at T3). Students' reported self-efficacy in their ability to prevent CSA increased from a mean of 5.2 at Baseline to 6.0 at T3. This corresponds with nominal increases seen in their CSA-related knowledge (see Table 2). All items changed in the desired direction over time, with the exception of the item regarding background checks for new babysitters (Baseline = 6.54; T2 = 6.55; T3 = 6.38). The implication of this finding should be cautiously interpreted as sample size decreased over time as well. A greater potential increase between Baseline and T2 are observed- a small decline in item means is observed at T3. This is commonly seen in behavior change interventions: the students participated in CSA prevention training between Baseline and

T2, it is expected to see a decline in knowledge approximately 4-months post-intervention.

Table 1

Issue Salience & Efficacy

	Baseline	T2	T3
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
Issue Salience			
CSA is a serious issue, in general.	6.9 (0.38)	6.5 (0.69)	7.0 (0)
CSA is a serious issue in my local community.	4.8 (1.59)	5.0 (1.10)	5.6 (1.19)
CSA is a serious issue in my state.	5.7 (0.95)	5.9 (1.04)	6.6 (0.52)
CSA is a serious issue in the U.S.	6.6 (0.51)	6.2 (1.54)	6.9 (0.35)
CSA is an issue that I think about regularly.	3.8 (0.99)	4.2 (1.40)	4.9 (1.72)
CSA is an issue that could impact me.	4.6 (1.56)	5.1 (1.45)	5.8 (1.49)
CSA is an issue that could impact someone I know.	6.2 (0.73)	6.1 (1.04)	6.8 (0.46)
Efficacy			
I feel like I can make a difference in preventing CSA.	5.6 (1.19)	6.2 (0.75)	6.3 (0.89)
I am confident in my ability to help prevent CSA.	5.5 (1.05)	5.1 (1.14)	5.9 (0.84)
I have the ability to prevent CSA.	5.2 (1.48)	5.1 (1.58)	6.0 (1.31)
It is my responsibility to prevent CSA.	5.7 (1.11)	5.3 (1.62)	6.1 (0.83)
It is up to me to prevent CSA.	4.5 (1.85)	4.4 (2.06)	4.8 (1.98)

Baseline N = 13; Time 2 N = 11; Time 3 N = 8

Table 2

Knowledge

	Baseline	T2	T3
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
It is okay to ask for a background check for a new babysitter.	6.54 (0.78)	6.55 (0.69)	6.38 (5.00)
Child sexual abuse is a serious problem that only the police should handle. I do not need to be involved.*	2.85 (1.21)	2.91 (1.70)	3.00 (1.00)
Most sexual abuse victims are abused by someone they know.	6.15 (0.80)	5.73 (1.27)	6.5 (6.00)
If I suspect child sexual abuse, I should not do anything until I know for sure.*	2.85 (1.28)	1.82 (1.08)	2.75 (1.00)
Children who are sexually abused may blame themselves for the abuse.	5.61 (1.04)	6.09 (0.70)	5.75 (5.00)
By making the call to report child abuse, the child will be harmed more.*	2.85 (1.46)	2.73 (1.35)	2.50 (1.00)
In addition to the police, I know who to call to report child sexual abuse.	4.15 (1.28)	4.45 (1.44)	5.50 (2.00)
If a child discloses sexual abuse to you, you should ask, "Are you sure?"*	2.33 (1.61)	1.73 (1.19)	1.88 (1.00)
If I think a child has been sexually abused, I would confirm with another adult before reporting it.*	3.46 (1.56)	2.18 (1.47)	2.88 (1.00)

* item is reverse coded (i.e., lower score is better); Baseline N = 13; Time 2 N = 11; Time 3 N = 8

Findings from the reflection memo data added context to understandings of student baseline issue salience and knowledge. About a third of the students expressed some prior knowledge of the issue in their reflection memos because of their experiences as camp counselors, babysitting, having younger siblings, having a parent who was an educator, online trainings for work at the university, covering the topic in health and wellness classes, and even through their sorority's philanthropic partnership with CSA prevention. One student disclosed that

they personally knew people who had experienced CSA. Interestingly, one student mentioned COVID-19 as the catalyst for them knowing more about CSA because they had seen it talked about more in media coverage with schools being virtual. In the following sections, we focus on the qualitative feedback from the reflections.

Student Perceptions of Working on CSA

In analysis of the reflection memos over the course of the semester, four prominent themes were generated from the data. These were *issue seriousness as a motivator, learning to rely on client expertise, positive change over the course of the semester, and an opportunity for personal and professional growth.*

Issue Seriousness as a Motivator

In the initial reflections students completed at the beginning of the semester, it was clear there was some anxiety and nervousness about working on this topic. Much of this nervousness had to do with lack of familiarity with the issue and it feeling "pretty overwhelming in terms of really having a grasp on the scope of child sexual abuse and all the information about it" (Student 13, Reflection 1). Another student described this topic as "intimidating" but continued that "for me personally something that [is] intimidating is exciting and challenging" (Student 22, Reflection 1). A few students did comment on the "sensitive" and "taboo" nature of the topic, but much of the feelings of anxiety came from wanting "to do these individuals justice" (Student 6, Reflection 1).

Students seemed to appreciate and take to heart the weightiness of the issue, which made them view this as something more than just a class project. As one student wrote, "I didn't have the right mindset 8 weeks ago, I looked at it as more of a project, school work rather than a serious issue that I should continue working on helping even out of school" (Student 3, Reflection 2). The seriousness of the issue was motivating to students in this way. Interestingly, several students indicated that

their feelings toward the topic of CSA did not change over the course of the semester but instead "magnified" (Student 11, Reflection 2) their "motivation towards spreading awareness as a solution to prevention has grown" as they became more aware about the topics, signs, and resources available.

Learning to Rely on Client Issue Expertise

The meeting with the client at the beginning of the semester seemed to assuage some concerns about working on this issue as it "reinforced a sense of urgency for prevention methods" (Student 7, Reflection 1). Students felt that the ability to speak "directly" with the client would "allow us to get a better understanding of what, specifically, she is expecting from these campaigns which will hopefully help us create them successfully" (Student 5, Reflection 1). Regular interactions with the client seemed to help students realize that they were not expected to be the experts on the issue. In the mid-semester reflection, one student reflected on their initial hesitancy towards the topic as being related to their lack of knowledge. They said, "I did not have an extensive background in CSA and when I am not prepared I tend to stress out" (Student 21, Reflection 2). Feedback from the client throughout the semester helped make "the campaign that much more interesting and meaningful" (Student 20, Reflection 3). In the final reflection, one student even explicitly stated that "having the opportunity to speak with [the client] helped better position myself as a PR specialist" (Student 14, Reflection 3).

Positive Change Over the Course of the Semester

Overwhelmingly, students indicated that their feelings about working on CSA prevention became more positive "because of the extensive time, effort, and training dedicated to this issue throughout the semester" (Student 14, Reflection 3). Another student similarly indicated the importance of this longer-term topic issue because "[a]t the beginning of the semester, I was confused and overwhelmed about how to go about

the campaign but I think our ideas are more clear and concise" (Student 13, Reflection 2). Another student further reflected on this positive change:

> My feelings about working on child sexual abuse have changed since the middle and beginning of the semester. At first, I was very skeptical of the topic and how to learn alongside such a touchy topic. As I learned over the semester that child sexual abuse SHOULD be talked about, I realized there are many good ways to go about it. My feelings have definitely become more positive and I am very glad that I learned about child sexual abuse in [this class]. (Student 1, Reflection 3)

One student described the change they experienced as shifting "logically rather than morally," rather than getting too focused on the fact that "child sexual abuse is a terrible, tragic situation" instead "the best way to learn more is to really think about what you/anyone can do to help seek out the warning signs" (Student 2, Reflection 2). Another student described this change as feeling "more inspired to help" (Student 3, Reflection 2). While there was an overall positive shift in feelings toward the topic, it is also important to note that some students still felt "not fully comfortable with it" by the end of the semester and found it "challenging to work on such a sensitive topic" (Student 8, Reflection 2).

Opportunity for Personal and Professional Growth

Students found the topic of CSA an important reminder that "public relations isn't all rainbows and butterflies. Public relations is an extremely important tool in order to get the word out about important causes such as child sexual abuse" (Student 2, Reflection 2). Another student reflected that "I feel honored to have been in this class because if I wasn't, I never would have taken notice to the issue of preventing child sexual abuse" (Student 3, Reflection 3). Students were able to reflect on the limitations of their own lived experiences as "[t]his project made me realize that just because I'm not fully aware of the extent to

which something is happening doesn't mean it isn't a terrible, worldwide problem" (Student 4, Reflection 2).

Many students noted that working on this issue would help them "really grow as a public relations professional and a person" (Student 6, Reflection 1). For some students, this helped them assess if "there is a possibility for non-profit work in my future (Student 21, Reflection 1). Other students valued the opportunity to "diversify what target audiences I have worked with" (Student 20, Reflection 1). Another student reflected about this opportunity for growth in multiple areas:

> I also look at it as a chance to fine tune my PR skills and develop more empathy for the fellow human – who wouldn't benefit from that? I think the skills learned from this project and semester will stick with me throughout life, personally and professionally."
> (Student 9, Reflection 1)

> In their own personal lives, students indicated that they would

more closely monitor the children in their lives as a result of this class and would remember this topic when they had their own children. Other students saw this campaign as an opportunity to have conversations with those close to them about a topic that might not otherwise ever come up. For example, one student said that "I think this campaign is a cool way to open up conversation with my own family and friends outside of class. I know that in the past, when I have worked on campaigns in the classroom, I bring the conversation outside of it" (Student 4, Reflection 1). Another student directly reflected on this "ripple effect" outcome:

> Darkness to Light's efforts are only growing, especially after this class. There were over twenty people in this … section. That is twenty more people educated than a year ago. These people can now educate their peers, family, and others to prevent CSA. It is interesting to see the ripple effect first hand and creating a PR campaign on CSA was a great way to see this effect first hand.
> (Student 12, Reflection 3)

Challenges of Working on the Issue of CSA

Five additional themes were generated from the reflection memos about challenges students indicated facing working on the issue of CSA. These were "people don't like to talk about hard things," personal emotions as impediments, balancing audience discomfort with reality of issue, "nervous our help might hurt," and language precision.

"People Don't Like to Talk about Hard Things"

One of the biggest challenges students reflected on from working on the issue of CSA can be summed up as "people don't like to talk about hard things" (Student 9, Reflection 1). This can lead to people trying "to ignore the issue and pretend it doesn't happen or pretend it doesn't happen to anyone they know" (Student 7, Reflection 1). Related to the public relations challenge of this, "it will be hard to reach and truly engage with the target market about something they don't want to think, hear, or see" (Student 16, Reflection 1). Even if people do talk about the issue, "people try to sugar coat this topic" (Student 12, Reflection 1). Students also reflected on the challenge of the topic more locally as "Penn State has such a stigma around it because of its previous affiliations with staff and employees" (Student 1, Reflection 1).

Personal Emotions as Impediments

Students indicated worrying "that personal emotions can get in the way of creating a successful campaign" (Student 4, Reflection 1). Although this did not happen, in the first reflection one student was concerned that "if a group member decides they do not wish to continue with this topic due to personal reasons. Will the group have to simply carry on while down a partner?" (Student 22, Reflection 1)

In later reflections, there were a handful of students who did discuss that they were struggling with the emotional weight of this topic. One student wrote:

I think the biggest problem that has come up so far for me is the

> emotional side. I didn't realize how much of an impact it would
> have on me. I am a fairly emotional person and this really pulls
> at the heartstrings, if I'm being completely honest. (Student 4,
> Reflection 2)

Similarly, another student wrote that "I still find it challenging to work on a sensitive topic. Even with completing the training myself, it still seems that it's a topic no one likes, or wants, to talk about" (Student 5, Reflection 2).

Balancing Audience Discomfort with the Reality of the Issue

Students frequently discussed "balancing," walking a "careful line," fear of "saying the wrong thing," "adding more stigma to the topic," and not wanting to "cross a line" on how to communicate about CSA. As one student wrote, the challenge is creating a campaign that "appeals to people's emotions and gets the point across while still being sensitive and cautious" (Student 19, Reflection 1). In a majority of reflection memos, students discussed not wanting to "offend" anyone with this campaign. Another student said that "[w]hen developing a PR campaign, it is always essential to word your message so that it is non-controversial" (Student 23, Reflection 1). One student explained this tension as follows:

> I am struggling a bit with how to campaign the program in
> a way that communicates the serious nature and necessity
> CSA prevention requires without making the target audience
> overwhelmed or uncomfortable. I think this is a careful line we
> need to walk but I do think it is necessary that we invoke the
> devastating effects of CSA in our campaign communications.
> (Student 9, Reflection 2)

Similarly, another student indicated a challenge is "using terminology that is sensitive to the general public but still emphasizes the severity of the issue…and creating media that is influential without being graphic" (Student 7, Reflection 1).

"Nervous Our Help Might Hurt"

This theme is related to, but distinct from the previous theme because it goes beyond concern for making people uncomfortable with the content of the campaign to a concern that the content could be triggering to survivors. Related to the balancing act students described above, "if you cross boundaries then the campaign could do more harm than good" (Student 22, Reflection 2). As one student wrote, "[s]ome words that would sound great for the prevention might trigger a former victim of abuse. Our group ultimately wants to help with the prevention but we are sometimes nervous our help might hurt too" (Student 1, Reflection 2). Another student discussed making sure that "people who have experienced this…are the first priority" (Student 2, Reflection 1).

Students took great care to reflect on the messages and visuals for a campaign of this nature. As one student wrote, "[w]ord choice and vulgarity, such as explicit photos of CSA can be very damaging to an audience or viewer. It is imperative to have smart word choice and either a disclaimer before showing explicit photos, or not show them at all" (Student 10, Reflection 2). At the end of the semester, this same student further reflected on this challenge after the creating deliverables for the campaign pitch:

> I realized that even showing a picture of a child with the connotation of child sexual abuse in a visual may be too much for people to handle. Instead, [the client] recommended a picture of a teddy bear or balloons, so that the viewers don't have to specifically think about an actual child getting abused, but rather think about the topic in general. Working with such a sensitive topic, you also should consider who your viewers might be. Viewers may be victims of sexual assault, sexual abuse, and seeing such a graphic image or graphic statistic about child sexual abuse may hit home too hard. (Student 10, Reflection 3)

Language Precision

A common theme from the third student reflection is from an experience they had during the final pitch with the client. Students reflected that one group had used the language of "child sexual assault" instead of "child sexual abuse" when pitching their proposed campaign. This use of language was something that the client immediately highlighted as inaccurate, explaining that it is always abuse because children cannot consent. One student wrote that "I didn't know the big difference between the words 'assault' and 'abuse' so this was a huge takeaway for me. I often hear people using them interchangeably but I learned that that shouldn't be the case" (Student 4, Reflection 3). Many students reflected on this being a huge learning moment for them because that subtle difference in word choice to them had an entirely different meaning in this work. Here is how one student described this experience:

> After four years of Comm classes, I know that language matters; however, I had never even thought about using assault versus abuse when defining CSA. Realizing the ignorance in this statement now, I really appreciated [the client] taking the time to explain why it matters. I could see by her facial expression that the point of what I was saying was lost because of the language I had used. If I want the message to stick, it needs to use the correct terms and language, and there is not always room to correct yourself. This is a lesson I will take with me in everything I do post-graduation. (Student 9, Reflection 3)

Another student said "[w]hile we were crunched on time, [the client] commenting on this was so eye opening to me because wording in not just this campaign but any future campaign I might work on is so crucial and sensitive" (Student 6, Reflection 3).

Discussion

In line with previous service-learning pedagogy research (e.g.,

McCollough, 2020; Motley & Sturgill, 2014; Ryan, 2007), results from this study suggested that students felt more civically engaged and took more responsibility as members of a community for their role in CSA prevention as a result of this course. The findings from the survey data help to support this increased efficacy and issue salience for students that was also indicated in the reflection memos.

As highlighted in the literature review, Witmer and colleagues (2009) argued that opportunities for reflection on social responsibility were often not integrated into public relations service-learning courses. This study offered students multiple opportunities throughout the semester to reflect not only on the process of developing a public relations campaign, but their specific feelings and challenges of working on the issue of CSA. Because of the lack of research on approaching stigmatized issues in public relations (e.g., Madden, 2019), we were curious if there would be a negative reaction to the topic of CSA prevention for a semester-long campaign project. While students expressed some initial hesitation and nervousness about the issue, overwhelmingly students felt that engaging with this issue benefitted them both personally and professionally. In fact, the seriousness of the issue was motivating to students as most of the hesitation they felt towards working on the issue was related to "doing justice" to CSA survivors and not simply because the topic is unpleasant.

In terms of what this research can add to our understanding of stigmatized issues, there was an overwhelming desire to not offend anyone with their campaign. The concern about not offending one indicates a deeper discomfort with conflict and potentially the advocacy function of public relations. Given the strong record of activist public relations (e.g., Ciszek, 2015) and growing interest in corporate social advocacy (e.g., Waymer & Logan, 2021), it may be that our public relations courses are taking too neutral an approach to issues and training students that public relations should be dispassionate. If we do not challenge our students to address hard issues in our classrooms, we are not preparing them for the

reality they will face outside of the safety of the classroom. We also may be missing opportunities to integrate activist history and public interest communication topics more fully into our courses, which may help students see the passion that can be behind public relations.

To us, this concern about not offending anyone or making people uncomfortable with a CSA prevention campaign is a distinct concern from that of the campaign potentially triggering survivors of CSA. This concern indicated a sensitivity that students were attuned to with this project. Importantly, using the public relations campaigns course to expose students to stigmatized issues like CSA must be taken from a trauma-informed approach (Madden & Del Rosso, 2021). Trauma-informed approaches recognize the prevalence of trauma, in this case that a student in the class may have direct or indirect experience with CSA. A trauma-informed approach is not about providing therapy to students, but focuses on safety, building trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, voice, and choice, and cultural, historical, and gender issues (SAMHSA, 2014). Table 3 provides an overview of how these trauma-informed approaches, drawn from this study, are related to developing a public relations campaigns course involving a stigmatized topic.

Table 3

Trauma-Informed Principles for the Public Relations Campaigns Course

Safety	Throughout the semester, students, the clients, and instructor should feel physically and psychologically safe.
Trustworthiness and Transparency	It is clear from the start of the semester what issues will be covered in the course. Campaign and course decisions are made with transparency, and with the goal of building and maintaining trust among students, clients, and the instructor.
Peer Support	The campaign development is framed as co-learning and a growing process. Students work to build connections with each other and value the lived experiences each person brings.
Collaboration and Mutuality	Power differences are acknowledged to support shared decision-making. Everyone has a role to play in developing the campaign. Client feedback and interaction is a regular part of the process.
Empowerment, Voice, and Choice	Because it is impossible to know everyone's experience with an issue, students are supported in cultivating self-advocacy skills Students are given agency over the experience. Individual strengths are validated.
Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues	In developing a public relations campaign, biases and stereotypes that are based upon race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age and/or geography, as well as historical trauma, are recognized and addressed. These issues are considered in all phases of the campaign development process and during interpersonal interactions.

In enacting a trauma-informed approach in the campaigns course, our first major takeaway from this research is that the client relationship is key for working on a stigmatized topic. Students indicated feeling overwhelmed by the issue because it was not one they were highly familiar with. Throughout the semester, though, students began to understand that they did not need to be the issue experts. Their expertise is in public relations and campaign development, and they are using these skills to help the client (the issue expert) meet their specific goals and objectives.

Collaboration with the client and regular feedback sessions were critical to build student confidence on the issue and to feel okay making mistakes. As such, the principles of collaboration and mutuality directly contributed to feelings of safety.

As discussed previously, one of the biggest learning moments for students was being corrected in their final client pitch about the distinction between "assault" and "abuse" when talking about CSA. Because there had been an established and on-going relationship with the client, there was trust and transparency to make this mistake and learn this lesson. As indicated by the reflection memos, this seems like a learning moment that many will carry forward and solidified to them why language is important in a way that previous coursework may have not. The group nature of this project allowed for peer support in these instances, where mistakes were not an individual failing but a collective learning opportunity.

Students developed a sense of empowerment towards working on this issue through the course of the semester and felt more confident they could be a voice of change on the issue. Students chose to view this project as more than a course requirement and saw it as a chance for personal growth. Although it did not figure prominently into student reflections, we took care with this project to recognize the historical trauma connected to Penn State and the topic of CSA. This also allowed for discussions of the issue of CSA across different cultures and genders and creating a campaign that considered this.

Limitations and Future Research

Although student names were removed from campaign memos and were analyzed several semesters after this course ended, students did submit their reflection memos as part of a class assignment and thus knew that their instructor (the lead researcher) would read these. As such, it is certainly possible that students self-censored any particularly negative attitudes about or experiences they may have had working on the

campaign out of their reflection memos. The anonymous survey served to help address this limitation, but of course nearly half the class did not complete the survey and there was attrition across the various time points. The decreasing sample size across surveys makes it difficult to assert meaningful behavior change; however, results suggest that change is feasible and examination may be warranted in a more robust study in the future.

In their reflection memos, students regularly mentioned a fear of triggering survivors of CSA with their campaign messages and images. Based on our review of literature, this is not something many, if any, scholars have studied. As such, we believe that future research could empirically seek to understand how CSA survivors perceive CSA prevention campaigns to provide evidence-based guidance on developing the most trauma-informed campaigns possible. Furthermore, future research should explore the integration of trauma-informed practices into different types of courses and at different types of universities.

Conclusion

This study provided strong evidence that the choice of campaign issues in the public relations capstone course may have ripple effects far beyond the course. As such, we have a real opportunity as educators to have students work to address hard, even stigmatized, issues in our courses. One of the most rewarding parts of this project was students reflecting on how this course not only impacted them professionally but personally. While so much emphasis is placed on skill development and career preparation in public relations courses, particularly the capstone course as students prepare to graduate, the role we play as educators in helping to shape empathetic, caring, and passionate humans cannot be underestimated. When done well, service-learning pedagogy is a natural complement to trauma-informed approaches in the public relations classroom.

References

Aghazadeh, S. A. (2022). Advocacy and marginality: Considering legitimacy, authenticity, and culture to extend fully functioning society theory. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 34*(6), 257-273. https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2022.2118749

Aldoory, L., & Wrigley, B. (2000). Exploring the use of real clients in the PR campaigns course. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator, 54*(4), 47-58. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769589905400405

Allison, A. W. (2008). A best practices service learning framework for the Public Relations Campaigns course. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 8*(3), 50-60. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ854861

Barth, J., Bermetz, L., Heim, E., Trelle, S., & Tonia, T. (2013). The current prevalence of child sexual abuse worldwide: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Public Health, 58*(3), 469–483. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-012-0426-1

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Britt, L. L. (2012). Why we use service-learning: A report outlining a typology of three approaches to this form of communication pedagogy. *Communication Education, 61*(1), 80-88. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2011.632017

Campbell, R. G., & Babrow, A. S. (2004). The role of empathy in response to persuasive risk communication: Overcoming resistance to HIV prevention messages. *Health Communication, 16*(2), 159-187. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327027HC1602_2

Child Maltreatment Solutions Network (2023). Efforts to prevent child sexual abuse. https://www.solutionsnetwork.psu.edu/prevention-trial/efforts-to-prevent-child-sexual-abuse

Ciszek, E. (2015). Bridging the gap: Mapping the relationship between activism and public relations. *Public Relations Review, 20*(4), 447-455. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.05.016

Corrigan, P. W., Kuwabara, S. A., & O'Shaughnessy, J. (2009). The public stigma of mental illness and drug addition: Findings from a stratified random sample. *Journal of Social Work, 9*(2), 139-147. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017308101818

Crowe, A., & Murray, C. E. (2015). Stigma from professional helpers towards survivors of intimate partner violence. *Partner Abuse, 6*(2), 157-179. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1891/1946-6560.6.2.157

Ehrlich, T. (2000). *Civic responsibility and higher education.* Oryx Press.

Fraustino, J. D., Pressgrove, G., & Colistra, R. (2019). Extending understanding of service-learning projects: Implementing place-based branding for capstone courses. *Communication Teacher, 33*(1), 45-62. https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2017.1372609

Giroux, H. (2010). Rethinking education as the practice of freedom: Paulo Freire and the promise of critical pedagogy. *Policy Futures in Education, 8*(6), 715-721. https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2010.8.6.715

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall.

Hébert, M., Tourigny, M., Cyr, M., McDuff, P., & Joly, J. (2009). Prevalence of childhood sexual abuse and timing of disclosure in a representative sample of adults from Quebec. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 54*(9), 631–636. https://doi.org/10.1177/070674370905400908

Jacoby, B. (1999). Partnerships for servicing learning. *New Directions for Student Services, 1999*(87), 19-35. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.8702

Kuban, A. J., O'Malley, M. M., & Florea, L. J. (2014). Students' knowledge and perceived confidence in an interdisciplinary experiential learning environment. *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education, 6*(1), 30-38. https://discovery.indstate.edu/jcehe/index.php/joce/article/view/231

Letourneau, E. J., Brown, D. S., Fang, X., Hassan, A., & Mercy, J. A. (2018). The economic burden of child sexual abuse in the United States. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 79*, 413–422. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.02.020

London, K., Bruck, M., Ceci, S. J., & Shuman, D. W. (2005). Disclosure of child sexual abuse: What does the research tell us about the ways that children tell? *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 11*(1), 194–226. https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8971.11.1.194

Madden, S. (2019). The issue with issues management: Considering the emotional and gendered core of issues. *Public Relations Inquiry, 8*(3), 299-317. https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X19872240

Madden, S., & Del Rosso, T. (2021). "We should have to take therapy classes": The need for a trauma-informed approach to public relations education. *Journal of Public Relations Education, 7*(2), 171-202. https://aejmc.us/jpre/2021/09/01/we-should-have-to-take-therapy-classes-the-need-for-a-trauma-informed-approach-to-public-relations-education/

Maniglio, R. (2009). The impact of child sexual abuse on health: A systematic review of reviews. *Clinical Psychology Review, 29*(7), 647–657. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.08.003

Mathews, B., & Collin-Vézina, D. (2019). Child sexual abuse: Toward a conceptual model and definition. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 20*(2), 131-148. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838017738726

McCollough, C. J. (2018). Competition and public relations campaigns: Assessing the impact of competition on quality of projects, partners, and students. *Journal of Public Relations Education, 4*(1), 25-48. https://aejmc.us/jpre/2018/05/22/

McCollough, C. J. (2019). Visionary public relations coursework: Leveraging service learning in public relations courses to spur economic development through arts, travel, and tourism. Journal of Public Relations Education, 5(2), 41-74. https://aejmc.us/jpre/2019/08/17/visionary-public-relations-coursework-leveraging-service-learning-in-public-relations-courses-to-spur-economic-development-through-the-arts-trave-l-and-tourism/

McCollough, C. J. (2020). Cultivating a civic mindset: Assessing public relations student perceptions of service learning and community involvement beyond the course. *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education, 12*(2), 6-16. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1264721

McKeever, B. W. (2021). Public relations and public health: The importance of leadership and other lessons learned from "Understanding AIDS" in the 1980s. *Public Relations Review, 47*(1), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.102007

Motley, P., & Sturgill, A. (2014). Cultivating a professional ethic in covering marginalized populations: Learning about the poor through service-learning. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator, 69*(2), 166-179. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077695813517886

Murray, C., Crowe, A., & Akers, W. (2016). How can we end the stigma surrounding domesticand sexual violence? A modified Delphi study with national advocacy leaders. *Journal of Family Violence, 31*(3), 271-287. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-015-9768-9

Muturi, N., An, S., & Mwangi, S. (2013). Students' expectations and motivations for service-learning in public relations. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator, 68*(4), 387-408.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1077695813506992

Noll, J. G. (2021). Child sexual abuse as a unique risk factor for the development of psychopathology: The compounded convergence of mechanisms. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 17*(6), 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-081219-112621

Place, K. R. (2018). Exploring ethics and client work in public relations education. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator, 73*(4), 421-438. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077695817735999

Place, K. R. (2022). Toward a framework for listening with consideration for intersectionality: Insights from public relations professionals in borderland spaces. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 34*(1-2), 4-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2022.2057502

Pressgrove, G., Barra, C., & Janoske, M. (2020). Using STOPS to predict prosocial behavioral intentions: Disentanging the effects of passive and active communicative action. *Public Relations Review, 46*(4), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.101956

Prikhidko, A., & Kenny, M. C. (2021). Examination of parents' attitudes toward and efforts to discuss child sexual abuse prevention with their children. *Children and Youth Services Review, 121*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105810

Rheingold, A. A., Zajac, K., Chapman, J. E., Patton, M., de Arellano, M., Saunders, B., & Kilpatrick, D. (2015). Child sexual abuse prevention training for childcare professionals: An independent multi-site randomized controlled trial of Stewards of Children. *Prevention Science, 16*(3), 374–385. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-014-0499-6

Ryan, R. G. (2017). Social and cognitive outcomes of service learning: Results from a pre-post and control group comparison. *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education, 9*(3), 19-34. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1271680

Schatteman, A. M. (2014). Academics meets action: Community engagement motivations, benefits, and constraints. *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education, 6*(1), 17-30. https://discovery.indstate.edu/jcehe/index.php/joce/article/view/215

Smith, A. L., & Cashwell, C. S. (2011). Stigma and mental illness: Investigating attitudes of mental health and non-mental-health professionals and trainees. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education, and Development, 49*(2), 189-202. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1939.2010.tb00097.x

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2014). *SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach*. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2023). Child Maltreatment 2021. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment

Waymer, D., & Logan, N. (2021). Corporate social advocacy as engagement: Nike's social justice communication. *Public Relations Review, 47*(1), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.102005

Werder, K. P., & Strand, K. (2011). Measuring student outcomes: An assessment of service-learning in the public relations campaigns course. *Public Relations Review, 37*(5), 478-484. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.09.014

Willis, P. (2016). From humble inquiry to humble intelligence:
Confronting wicked problemsand augmenting public relations.
Public Relations Review, 42(2), 306-313.
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.05.007

Witmer, D. F., Silverman, D. A., & Gaschen, D. J. (2009). Working
to learn and learning to work: A profile of service-learning courses
in university public relations programs. *Public Relations Review,
35*(2), 153-155. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2009.02.001

Appendix A: Class Reflection Prompts

First reflection

In 1-2 pages, I want you to reflect on the following questions:

- What are your feelings about working on the issue of child sexual abuse prevention? How familiar are you with this issue?
- What challenges do you anticipate in developing a public relations campaign on the issue of child sexual abuse prevention?
- What opportunities do you anticipate for developing a public relations campaign on the issue of child sexual abuse prevention?

Second reflection

In 1-2 pages, I want you to reflect on the following questions:

- Now that we are at the half point of the semester, have your feelings about working on the issue of child sexual abuse prevention changed (either positively or negatively)?
- What have you learned about the issue of child sexual abuse prevention that you didn't know at the start of the semester?
- What challenges have come up so far in developing a public relations campaign on the issue of child sexual abuse prevention?
- What ideas for a successful public relations campaign on the issue of child sexual abuse prevention do you have now that you didn't have 8 weeks ago?

Third reflection

In 1-2 pages, I want you to reflect on the following questions:

- Now that we are at the end of the semester, have your feelings about working on the issue of child sexual abuse prevention changed (either positively or negatively)?
- How do you feel about the public relations campaign on the issue of child sexual abuse prevention that your group developed?
- What was your biggest takeaway from the campaign pitch and feedback session?

- What, if anything, do you think you will do with your new knowledge about child sexual abuse and child sexual abuse prevention after this class ends?