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Editors' Note: "Elevating PR: Insights and Trends in Graduate Education"

It is with tremendous honor and deep gratification that we introduce this special issue of the *Journal of Public Relations Education*, a collection of scholarly work that addresses a critical and timely gap in our field: the state of graduate education in public relations. This issue comes at a pivotal moment in our discipline, when the landscape of higher education is shifting, our industry is navigating technological disruption, and questions about the value and structure of advanced degrees are being asked with unprecedented urgency.

The Impetus for this Special Issue

Since 1975, the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) has maintained a steadfast commitment to studying and improving public relations education standards and practices. However, much of that effort has focused on undergraduate education and the crucial transition from the academy to the profession at the entry level. In 1999, the CPRE "Port of Entry" report established the university as the official pathway for those seeking to establish careers in public relations, recognizing both undergraduate and graduate education as essential "tooling and retooling centers" for the profession. Yet, despite the substantial growth in master's-level public relations programs over the past decade, the last comprehensive CPRE report dedicated exclusively to graduate education was published in 2012, well over a decade ago.

The intervening years have witnessed profound transformations. The global pandemic reshaped how we work and learn, fundamentally altering the pedagogy of graduate education. Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged not merely as a technological tool but as a force reshaping job functions and competencies. The profession itself has fragmented

and rebranded across multiple disciplines and specializations, such as strategic communication, integrated marketing communication, corporate communication, and beyond. Master's programs have proliferated, diversified, and dispersed across various academic units and delivery models. In the face of this complexity and growth, the need for scholarly attention to graduate public relations education became undeniable.

This special issue, titled "Elevating PR: Insights and Trends in Graduate Education," was conceived to further bridge this pedagogical gap in tandem with the 2025 CPRE report and to spark contemporary dialogue about the future of graduate education in our field. We sought to invite research articles, teaching briefs, scholarly essays, and case studies that would explore both the challenges and opportunities inherent in graduate-level public relations education. The call extended an open invitation to examine how practitioner expectations align with graduate curricula, how best practices in internships and applied learning can be designed, how research and data analytical abilities are cultivated, and how graduate programs connect, or fail to connect, with the demands of contemporary professional practice.

What This Issue Reveals

The manuscripts brought together in this collection offer a multifaceted portrait of graduate public relations education in the United States, which expands upon the work recently published by the CPRE research committee in the *Graduate Education in Public Relations: 2025 Report*, released in November. Collectively, they represent the work of educators, researchers, and practitioners committed to understanding and improving the graduate student experience and, ultimately, the competency of the professionals our programs produce.

Several critical themes emerge from this collection. First, the issue addresses the persistent challenge of curricular inconsistency and lack of standardization across graduate programs. Despite decades

of recommendations from the Commission on Public Relations Education, programs continue to vary significantly in their structure, titles, course offerings, and culminating experiences. Some programs house themselves within journalism schools; others reside in business colleges, communication departments, or interdisciplinary centers. This fragmentation raises important questions about what prospective students can expect, what employers should anticipate, and how our field can signal its credibility and value.

Second, this special issue grapples with the critical question of alignment—the alignment between what the industry needs and what our programs teach. The gap between employer expectations and graduate preparation surfaces repeatedly across these manuscripts. Practitioners emphasize the importance of writing proficiency, interpersonal communication, strategic thinking, and professional maturity in their graduate interns, yet many find these competencies underdeveloped. This disconnect demands our attention and our response.

Third, these articles illuminate the reality of contemporary graduate student diversity—not only in terms of students' demographic characteristics, but also in their goals, backgrounds, and contexts. Graduate programs now serve students pursuing doctoral degrees, career advancement in practice, and specialization in niche sectors. They serve full-time and part-time students, residential and online learners, career-changers and industry veterans. The "one-size-fits-all" approach to graduate education is no longer viable…if it ever was.

Fourth, these research endeavors document important efforts to innovate pedagogically. From service-learning models that bridge community engagement with research methods training to intentional curriculum design informed by industry input, this issue captures creative and thoughtful responses to the challenges of contemporary graduate education. These examples demonstrate that excellence in graduate public

relations education is not only achievable but is already taking place in pockets across our discipline.

The Articles in This Issue

The collection opens with research examining curriculum and standards insights provided by educators, followed by an audit of graduate program websites analyzing curricular offerings and assessing alignment with existing recommendations. These first two articles provide valuable empirical documentation of the current master's-degree landscape and inform ongoing efforts by the Commission on Public Relations Education to revise and update standards.

We are also pleased to feature an examination of practitioners' expectations for graduate education, a timely survey that captures the voices of industry leaders and updates prior research in light of seismic shifts in practice brought about by the pandemic, technological advancement, and changing social dynamics. This research provides empirical grounding for conversations about what skills and knowledge matter most in contemporary professional contexts.

This issue includes scholarship focused on inclusion, equity, and representation in graduate education, a critical imperative for our discipline. Research exploring the lived experiences of Black graduate students and faculty in public relations illuminates systemic challenges in recruitment, retention, and support. These insights are essential reading for all who work in graduate education and aspire to create more welcoming, affirming, and equitable learning environments.

Additionally, we include research examining what industry professionals expect from graduate interns, the skills, competencies, and dispositions they value, and the gaps they perceive in graduate preparation. This work provides actionable guidance for program directors and faculty committed to strengthening the professional readiness of their graduates

The last full article shares how public relations is presented, or absent, in sport management master's programs. This work challenges us to consider whether our field maintains visibility and voice in related disciplines, and whether professionals in adjacent fields are being adequately prepared to leverage public relations expertise.

Finally, this issue includes two teaching briefs. The first demonstrates the pedagogical value of service-learning in graduate research methods instruction, offering a practical model for educators who seek to bridge theory and application while fostering meaningful community partnerships. The second explores the creation of thought leadership articles by graduate students on LinkedIn. Such examples of class-tested project ideas are invaluable for faculty considering pedagogical innovation.

Looking Forward

As we reflect on this collection and consider its significance, we are struck by several observations. First, there is genuine consensus in these articles about what matters: graduate education must be intentional, theory-grounded, professionally relevant, and equitable. There is, however, less certainty about how to achieve these goals within the constraints of institutional structures, resource limitations, and competing pedagogical philosophies. That uncertainty reflects the genuine complexity of graduate education in an applied discipline.

Second, the research findings within this issue reveal that graduate public relations education is not in crisis. It is in transition. Our programs are responding creatively and thoughtfully to changing contexts and emerging needs. Yet they would benefit from greater alignment, more explicit communication of their value propositions, and renewed commitment to standards that ensure quality and consistency without stifling innovation and specialization.

Third, we are grateful that these articles attend carefully to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. As of late, and way too

often, discussions of curriculum and standards abstract away from the human experiences of students, particularly students from historically marginalized communities. This issue reminds us that excellent graduate education is not only intellectually rigorous but also humane and affirming.

We would be remiss if we did not mention the role our dear friend Pamela Bourland-Davis had in this issue - she aided in dreaming and scheming this idea. She was so enthusiastic about the potential of an entire issue of JPRE dedicated to *just* graduate education. Dr. Bourland-Davis, we dedicate this issue to you. We are certain your heart guided our work.

We are also grateful to the authors who contributed their scholarship, the peer reviewers who provided constructive feedback, and the practitioner-partners who participated in the research and shared their insights. Finally, we thank the CPRE research committee and leadership team, as well as the JPRE editorial team, for their commitment to supporting this issue and advancing scholarship in public relations education.

This special issue on graduate public relations education is offered in the spirit of generative dialogue. We hope this issue will spark conversations on campuses, in professional organizations, and in industry settings about what excellent graduate education in public relations looks like and how we, collectively, can ensure that our programs prepare the next generation of public relations leaders to navigate complexity, lead with integrity, and serve the public interest with wisdom and skill.

As we move forward, may we do so together, committed to elevating the quality, relevance, equity, and impact of graduate public relations education.

With warm regard and deep appreciation for our scholarly community,
Drs. Kinsky, Lubbers, Wallace, & Bourland-Davis (in memoriam)

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A Look into the Public Relations Master's Education in the United States: 2025 Curricular Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

This article shares insights based on analyses of the 2025 CPRE online survey on master's education in public relations in the U.S. The study focuses on knowledge areas, skills areas, and courses in disciplines related to public relations, which are identified as necessary curricular components by a national sample of public relations educators (N = 111). The core knowledge areas and skills identified by the findings suggest a graduate curriculum that is strategic, theory-based, and professionally grounded, crucial for graduates to thrive in evolving communication environments. The recommended courses in related disciplines underscore an interdisciplinary focus to enable graduates to think strategically and apply their knowledge effectively in diverse professional settings.

Keywords: CPRE curriculum standards, graduate public relations education, knowledge, skills, Commission on Public Relations Education

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As part of its ongoing commitment to shaping and guiding public relations education, the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) regularly releases guidelines based on a series of benchmark studies. CPRE provided specific curricular guidance on master's degree programs in its 2012 report, while the preceding 1999 and 2006 reports included graduate education recommendations for 30-36 hours or up to 12 courses.

Since then, the social, economic, cultural, political, and technological contexts of public relations practice have undergone profound changes. The past decade has been marked by a decline of public trust in media (Eddy et al., 2025), a growing emphasis on social justice and sustainability issues (Ciszek et al., 2025), the multitude of social media platforms, the transformative rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI), and a shift to hybrid work brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Wu et al., 2023). Among these forces, the rapid evolution of AI tools stands out as a unique challenge and opportunity for public relations education. AI's capability to automate tasks that are traditionally performed by public relations practitioners pushes public relations graduates entering the workforce to potentially move into strategist and managerial roles. This shift marks the need for graduate education to foster business acumen, management competence, ethical decision-making, and advanced problem-solving (Ragas et al., 2015). It is paramount that public relations graduate education addresses these challenges and changes.

Accordingly, CPRE released new sets of standards focused on master's-level public relations education in 2025, informed by extensive research that began in 2024. This article presents curriculum insights derived from analyses of the CPRE quantitative research that examined perceptions of public relations educators. Specifically, findings highlight recommended core knowledge areas, skill sets, and courses in related disciplines that should be emphasized in master's programs.

These recommendations reflect changes from the CPRE 2012 report on graduate education, and by proxy, the 2006 and 1999 reports that include recommendations for graduate education, as well.

Literature Review

Overview of Research on Graduate Public Relations Education

A number of studies have explored best practices or ideal curricula in graduate public relations education (e.g., Briones et al., 2016; Briones & Toth, 2013; Capizzo et al., 2022; CPRE, 1999, 2006, 2012; Shen & Toth, 2013; Weissman et al., 2019). A lack of standardization of graduate public relations curricula and a lack of uniformity in the structure of graduate public relations education were noted (e.g., Briones & Toth, 2013; Capizzo et al., 2022; CPRE, 2006; Weissman et al., 2019). To enhance the value of an advanced public relations degree, the most important issue is the "content of the curriculum" (Briones & Toth, 2013, p. 130), despite that public relations programs may have different names and have different academic homes (Briones & Toth, 2013; Capizzo et al., 2022; Weissman et al., 2019).

Although there have been a few studies on graduate public relations education, only some have offered suggestions for curricular content areas, such as knowledge, skills, and abilities, and in courses from related disciplines. For example, Weissman et al. (2019) examined online master's programs and reported a professional rather than scholarly focus in most programs, but it was unclear what specific curricular content was taught in online master's public relations programs.

The CPRE 1999 report provided some sample courses for a 30-hour and 36-hour master's program. For instance, a sample 30-hour program would include courses on public relations theory, research, management, and law, integrated communication, strategic planning, and business courses such as accounting, finance, and marketing (CPRE, 1999). The CPRE 2006 report outlined three master's program models:

model A focusing on preparing students for doctoral studies, model B on higher-level positions, e.g., management in public relations and management disciplines, and model C on interdisciplinary specialization in public relations, offering such courses as negotiation, persuasive writing, interpersonal communication, and cross-cultural sensitivity. Each model included a list of course names (CPRE, 2006). The CPRE 2012 report adopted a "fork in the (curriculum) road" approach to master's-level public relations education and further explicitly detailed core knowledge and skills areas. The forked approach was designed for both programs that prepare students for academic work in doctoral studies and for professional practice upon returning to the field (CPRE, 2012, p. 15). According to the CPRE 2012 report, master's-level programs should provide five core content areas: strategic public relations management, basic business principles and processes, communication/public relations theory and research methods, global influences on the practice of public relations, and ethics (CPRE, 2012). In addition, scholarly-focused students who intend to continue with doctoral studies should take additional research courses and a thesis. In contrast, professional-oriented students who aim to enter professional practice should take additional courses in specialized public relations practice, such as health care, and an internship or practicum experience (see CPRE, 2012, p. 16).

Given the changing social, economic, political, and cultural environments since 2012, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the changing power dynamic of political parties, immigration reform, and tariffs, it is important to research what constitutes an ideal curriculum for master's-level public relations programs. In the following sections, we review past research on key curricular components: knowledge, skills, and courses in related disciplines.

Knowledge and Skills

The KSAs framework, long used in federal job applications,

distinguishes among knowledge (understanding of a core area), skills (proficiency or expertise), and abilities (application of knowledge and skills) (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.). This structure has been widely accepted in public relations education and assessment. For example, the PRSA Universal Accreditation Board adopted this framework to evaluate public relations practitioners (Sha, 2011), categorizing core KSAs into business, media relations, and theory. A grounding in theory, along with a supporting background in strategic management and public relations practice (Grunig & Grunig, 2002), was noted as vital, as were knowledge and skills in business practices (Meng et al., 2012). Additionally, globalization was considered vital to KSAs, and with emerging technologies, social media, and generative AI, increasing digital sophistication seems important (Wright & Hinson, 2017).

Also noted in the 2012 CPRE report was ethical training (Bortree et al., 2019), and DiStaso (2019), reporting on the 2018 CPRE undergraduate study, identified ethics as a leading knowledge component in both desired and delivered categories. In addition, an in-depth analysis of global public relations education at both the graduate and undergraduate levels noted that advanced theoretical foundations were emphasized in graduate public relations programs around the world (Toth & Aldoory, 2010).

Soft skills—such as organization, leadership, and adaptability—are often developed indirectly through coursework. Deline (2022) demonstrated how classroom activities encouraged capstone students to reflect on soft skills refined during the pandemic. In a series of reflective assignments, Deline asked students to identify and assess skills they discovered during the pandemic and how those skills can assist with opportunities in the public relations field. While the study was on undergraduate students, graduate programs often emphasize more advanced mastery of these soft skills (Toth & Aldoory, 2010).

Krishna et al. (2020) found differences in perceived skill importance across career levels, with early-career practitioners valuing research and measurement more highly, while senior managers placed greater emphasis on business acumen. Knight and Sweetser (2021) noted gaps in perceived competence between public relations practitioners and leadership, particularly in technical and management (the ability to supervise others) roles.

Ragas et al. (2015) and Krishna et al. (2020) both highlighted the importance of business acumen. Plowman et al. (2022) found that a variety of surveyed alumni valued writing, strategy, creativity, and communication as key takeaways from their degrees. Waymer and Taylor (2022) explored graduate education and interest among historically black colleges and universities. Their focus group interviews indicated students were advised to seek training beyond the undergraduate degree, and others were self-motivated to continue to develop their skill sets. While CPRE provides a comprehensive framework, ongoing research on public relations graduate education and career preparedness remains limited.

These findings from previous studies suggest that graduate public relations education should be structured around a clear set of advanced KSAs. More importantly, programs could include theoretical grounding in communication-related fields, fluency in business-related language, and adaptable skills in research and the creation of PR-related products to meet the complex demands of public relations careers.

Related Courses

Courses related to public relations, such as journalism and advertising, are important to the graduate curriculum because they provide a broad range of knowledge essential for the profession. Shen and Toth (2008) conducted interviews with senior-level public relations practitioners and performed a content analysis of the websites of top-ranked public relations master's programs. Their findings emphasized

the importance of interdisciplinary components, such as communication, management, behavioral sciences, and communication processes, for meeting the extensive knowledge requirements of professionals in the field. Specifically, they suggested building coursework in areas such as business and marketing by partnering with MBA programs to strengthen the course offerings in the public relations master's curricula.

Further reinforcing this perspective, the 2012 CPRE report recommended the need for students to understand the historical roots of persuasion, theories about persuasive communication from disciplines such as social psychology, and concepts such as cognitive dissonance, selective attention and retention, ethos, pathos, and logos, message sources, message content, and propaganda.

Skills-focused courses that strengthen the public relations technician role are frequently included in required coursework. Luttrell et al. (2021) identified that web design, graphic design, video production, and photography all appear in the course descriptions of domestic ACEJMC and/or CEPR undergraduate and graduate accredited programs. Although their study primarily aimed to examine the incorporation of social media, digital media, and analytics courses into the curriculum, the findings underscore the prevalence of instruction in content production and visual communication.

Early calls to include technology in the public relations curriculum could be traced to Gower and Cho (2001) in their study of undergraduate public relations programs. Their study recognized the emergence of the internet and new media technologies and suggested integrating skills such as email, online research tools, website design, and industry-standard software to prepare students for the evolving landscape. The importance of technology for public relations graduate programs has grown tremendously since then, and more curricula recommendations have been made to keep up with the changes (CPRE, 2012).

The 2018 CPRE undergraduate report also emphasized the need to include technology-based topics in the undergraduate curriculum. It highlighted that instruction in digital technology equips students "to recommend applications, channels, media and management practices to support organizational objectives" (p. 63). As the public relations workforce continues to evolve in response to societal changes, these competencies have become increasingly vital, as noted in more recent research on both undergraduate and graduate public relations curricula. Luttrell et al.'s (2021) study analyzed the incorporation of emerging technology in the public relations curriculum. The research team reviewed course descriptions from ACEJMC or CEPR-accredited graduate and undergraduate programs and found that the focus on technician skills in production and writing was consistent with the CPRE (2012) report, although the CPRE (2012) report emphasized strategy setting being valued by employers in its qualitative research. The 2021 study (Luttrell et al., 2021) also identified data analytics as an increasingly prominent concept within the curriculum.

Lastly, the rising use and growing discussion around AI and its implications for the public relations practice and pedagogy have begun to receive scholarly attention. Recent literature explores the application of AI in the public relations classroom (Duckett & Westrick, 2024) and its relevance for both public relations educators and practitioners (Porter & Dupont, 2023). Furthermore, Yang (2025) explored the transformative impact of AI on public relations education. In her essay, which includes a sample syllabus, Yang (2025) emphasized the importance of integrating foundational principles such as legal and ethical considerations and programming with information security and responsible use.

Research Questions

Based on the above-reviewed literature, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: What should be the deliverables (knowledge and skills) of a master's degree in public relations?

RQ2: What are the courses in related disciplines deemed important by public relations educators?

Method

After reviewing the survey instrument used in the CPRE 2012 report, the survey instrument was developed through brainstorming sessions by the research team members, who were part of the broader 2024-2025 CPRE Research Committee. The final survey instrument incorporated items from the 2012 CPRE report and changes suggested by the research committee members to reflect current trends. Standard procedures as dictated by the IRB process were approved and followed.

The research team sent invitations to all the CPRE membership organizations as well as their personal contacts, including public relations divisions of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), International Communication Association (ICA), Educators Academy (EA) of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), and the National Communication Association (NCA). A total of 111 participants who identified primarily in the public relations field participated in the study. The sample size is comparable to the number of participants in the 2012 CPRE report.

The sample consisted of 27 cisgender men, 61 cisgender women, 10 people who preferred not to disclose their gender information, five people who preferred to self-describe, and eight people who did not want to reveal their gender information. Participants ranged in age from 28 to 85, with a mean of 51.72. Most participants were White (66.7%) and had a doctorate (92.5%). The participants had titles across academic ranks, from adjunct professors to full professors. On average, they worked 12.13 years in their current positions and reported a mean of 13.34 years of professional experience, including academic experience in public relations

overall. Most participants were U.S.-based (95.2%).

The survey used seven-point scales, with 1 being "not at all" or "strongly disagree", 4 "neutral" or "neither agree nor disagree", and 7 "very much" or "strongly agree." Questions asked about knowledge areas and courses in related disciplines necessary for a master's programs in public relations, skills to be mastered by master's students upon program completion, and other questions related to program requirements, value, and delivery.

The survey data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) were performed. A series of principal component analysis with varimax rotation were conducted. Items without cross loadings (.40 threshold) and loaded greater than .55 were retained.

Results

RQ1: What should be the deliverables (knowledge and skills) of a master's degree in public relations?

The EFA results identified key components of knowledge areas and skills that public relations educators considered necessary for a master's degree in public relations. Regarding knowledge areas (see Table 1), a four-factor pattern (68.15% variance explained) emerged: theoretical foundations, business acumen, globalization and technological trends, and social, ethical, and foundations in media law and regulatory issues. The theoretical foundations factor included communication theories, social science research methods, and public relations theories, with loadings ranging from .74 to .77. The business capabilities factor comprised marketing, advertising, finance, and accounting, with loading from .70 to .81. The globalization and technological trends factor was composed of global issues and technology developments/generative AI with loadings above .65. The last factor (social, ethical, and legal foundations) included ethical and legal issues and societal trends with loadings greater than .65.

Table 1

Factor Loadings for Knowledge Areas

Factors	Scale Items	Loadings
Theoretical Foundations	Communication Theories	0.77
	Social Science Research Methods	0.76
	Public Relations Theories	0.74
Business Acumen	Marketing	0.81
	Advertising	0.79
	Finance	0.73
	Accounting	0.70
Globalization and Technological Trends	Global Issues	0.71
	Technology Developments/Generative Artificial Intelligence	0.65
Social, Ethical, and Legal Foundations	Ethical Issues	0.87
	Legal Issues	0.80
	Societal Trends	0.67

On the other hand, skills questions revealed a seven-factor structure (see Table 2), accounting for 69.31% of the variance. Factor 1, global diversity and ethical competence, touched on sensitivity to diversity, equity, inclusion, cross-cultural sensitivity, and ethical decision-making, with loadings between .79 and .82. Factor 2, labeled as content creation and delivery, included skills on public speaking, message production, and social media techniques, with loadings from .58 to .78. Factor 3, strategic planning and targeting, covered competencies on strategic planning and audience segmentation, with loadings above .70. Factor 4, specialized practice and communication versatility, covered specific practice areas (e.g., community relations, consumer relations, employee relations), visual literacy, and fluency in a foreign language, that loaded above .60. Factor 5, research and data analysis, consisted of general statistical analysis and interpretation and research, with loadings above .65. Factor 6, communication leadership and negotiation,

comprised competencies such as management of communication and negotiation, with loadings above .65. Lastly, factor 7, information and language mastery, included management of information and mastery of language in written and oral form, with loadings greater than .60. The skill sets expected of master's students upon program completion nicely complement the core knowledge areas outlined above, expanding them with practical competencies in data-informed strategic communication management and content creation.

Table 2

Factor Loadings for Skills Areas

Factors	Scale Items	Loadings
Global Diversity and Ethical Competence	Sensitivity to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion	0.82
	Cross-cultural Sensitivity	0.80
	Ethical Decision-making	0.79
Content Creation and Delivery	Public Speaking	0.78
	Message Production	0.76
	Social Media Techniques	0.58
Strategic Planning and Targeting	Strategic Planning	0.83
	Audience Segmentation	0.74
Specialized Practice and Communication Versatility	Specific Practice Areas (e.g., community relations, consumer relations, employee relations)	0.82
	Visual Literacy	0.62
	Fluency in a Foreign Language	0.61
Research And Data Analysis	General Statistical Analysis and Interpretation	0.81
	Research	0.69
Communication Leadership and Negotiation	Management of Communication	0.90
	Negotiation	0.66
Information and Language Mastery	Management of Information	0.73
	Mastery of Language in Written and Oral Form	0.61

RQ2: What are the courses in related disciplines deemed as important by public relations educators?

The EFA revealed five main clusters based on questions about courses in related disciplines (see Table 3), explaining 72.67% of the variance. The five factors were: visual and digital communication, organization and policy communication, digital and AI literacy, marketing and advertising foundations, and social and behavioral foundations. Factor 1, visual and digital communication, included courses on visual communication, art/design/graphics, information technologies (including web design), filmmaking/videography, and radio/TV/Telecommunication. Factor 2, organization and policy communication, covered courses on organizational communication and political/government policy and communication. Factor 3, digital and AI literacy, consisted of courses on digital intelligence and AI capabilities. Factor 4, promotional foundations, suggested courses on marketing and advertising. Factor 5, social and behavioral foundations, included general sociology and general psychology. All factor loadings ranged from .69 to .86. These courses in related disciplines, as suggested by public relations educators, reflect an interdisciplinary focus that contributes to a comprehensive educational experience for master's students in public relations. The content draws from communication, public affairs, emerging technologies, business, and social sciences.

Discussion

Our study presents an updated list of recommendations for knowledge, skills, and related courses required of master's students in public relations, filling in the research gap on master's-level curriculum content in public relations (e.g., Briones & Toth, 2013; Capizzo et al., 2022; Weissman et al., 2019). These recommendations attest to the profound changes occurring in our society since 2012, when the last CPRE graduate report was released. The identified core content areas in our study suggest a graduate curriculum that is theoretically based, professionally grounded, and interdisciplinary.

Table 3

Factor Loadings for Courses in Related Disciplines

Factors	Scale Items	Loadings
Visual and Digital Communication	Visual Communication	0.80
	Art/Design/Graphics	0.71
	Information Technologies (Including Web Design)	0.70
	Filmmaking/Videography	0.69
	Radio/TV/Telecommunication	0.69
Organization and Policy Communication	Organizational Communication	0.86
	Political/Government Policy and Communication	0.81
Digital and AI Literacy	Digital Intelligence	0.82
	AI Capabilities	0.76
Marketing and Advertising Foundations	Marketing	0.77
	Advertising	0.75
Social And Behavioral Foundations	General Sociology	0.82
	General Psychology	0.80

The knowledge core reflects a theoretical foundation and business intelligence that remain important, and it also underscores the growing importance of understanding global and local social/cultural/ethical contexts. Our study identified four key knowledge areas: theoretical foundations; business acumen; globalization and technological trends; and social, ethical, and legal foundations. Master's students, whether they look to enter future professional careers or advanced doctoral studies, are expected to learn about general communication theories and public relations theories as well as social science research methods, which can provide them a solid theoretical foundation. Their business acumen can be strengthened by taking classes in marketing, finance, advertising, and accounting. On the other hand, their contextual knowledge will be equally crucial in today's environment. Core curricular content on globalization and technological trends (e.g., AI) and social, ethical, and legal issues

are necessary for master's students in public relations. The well-rounded curriculum can certainly prepare academic-focused master's students for future competencies in their doctoral programs (Capizzo et al., 2022), but it can also well-position professionally oriented graduates for management roles in the workplace. The knowledge core is consistent with the CPRE (2012) recommendations of five content areas, but also reflects updated societal expectations of graduates in navigating sophisticated social, cultural, and political environments while maintaining integrity in ethical decision making when they apply advanced competency in emerging technologies.

The recommended skill sets identified by educators complement the aforementioned knowledge domains, extending beyond the usual traditional strategic and tactical skills required by the ever-evolving media landscape and communication tools, but also reflect the rising attention to global diversity and ethical decision-making in everyday life. Students are expected to master seven main skill sets: global diversity and ethical competence, content creation and delivery, strategic planning and targeting, specialized practice and communication versatility, research and data analysis, communication leadership and negotiation, and information and language mastery – suggesting that graduates must not only create compelling messages but also navigate cultural complexities, interpret data, and lead teams. These findings mirror research that called for a stronger integration of leadership, analytics, and DEI-oriented skills in public relations education (Krishna et al., 2020; Plowman et al., 2022). The high loadings of negotiation and communication management skills further indicate an expectation of graduates to function as organizational strategists rather than technicians – a theme consistent with the CPRE 2018 *Fast Forward* report.

Furthermore, the recommended list of courses in related disciplines (visual and digital communication, organization and policy communication, digital and AI literacy, marketing and advertising

foundations, and social and behavioral foundations) represents a distinct interdisciplinary focus that broadens and deepens the core curriculum of a master's degree in public relations. These courses equip students with complementary competence beyond traditional communication practice, drawn from fields that are increasingly essential to excellent public relations practice in a complex environment.

The most frequently recommended courses by the educators contribute to comprehensive skill development, focusing on production, design, and mass communication. Notably, the importance of proficiency in visual communication aligns with the findings of Luttrell et al. (2021), who highlighted the value of graphic design, web design, and photography in enhancing students' skills in designing engaging materials that effectively convey messages and resonate with diverse audiences. Further, recent reports (e.g., Canva, 2025) indicate that Gen Z — a growing segment of the workforce — shows a strong preference for visual communication, underscoring the imperative for graduate public relations programs to integrate visual communication training into their curricula.

Courses in organizational and public policy received the next highest rating among the recommendations. These areas equip students with the knowledge to navigate complex organizational structures while addressing public concerns and expectations in an ever-changing political landscape. This finding underscores the recommendations in the 2012 CPRE report that students should be knowledgeable about various elements of organizational management.

Educators understand that as technology continues to shape the public relations landscape, proficiency in digital tools and an understanding of AI are increasingly important, as evidenced by new literature (Duckett & Westrick, 2024; Porter & Dupont, 2023). Familiarity with the responsible use of AI tools will be vital to students' successful performance in the classroom and the workplace, which aligns with Yang's

(2025) suggested course offering. Additionally, digital literacy prepares students to leverage analytics, social media, and other digital platforms strategically.

The inclusion of advertising and marketing courses is also justified by the findings, as strategies from these disciplines are often combined with public relations tools in programming. Integrated marketing communication has been a frequently used multidisciplinary approach for reaching an organization's internal and external publics (Rose & Miller, 1994). The recommendation to incorporate business-related courses aligns with Shen and Toth's (2013) suggestion to collaborate with MBA programs on course offerings.

Lastly, related courses in social and behavioral foundations are essential for "research methods and theoretical ideas" as noted by J. E. Grunig (1989, p. 20) in his prediction of the future of public relations education. He posited that public relations departments should be included in divisions alongside social and behavioral sciences. Our findings extend this perspective by suggesting students take foundational courses in these disciplines, as they can provide insights into audience motivation and communication preferences.

While research on the public relations graduate curriculum is scarce, these recommendations for master's students to take related courses reflect a consensus among educators. This comprehensive approach not only enhances students' skill sets but also aligns their education with the evolving demands of the industry.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size is small and primarily U.S.-based, although the educator sample size is comparable to the 2012 CPRE report. It is hard to estimate the total number of public relations educators in the U.S. For example, the PRSA Educator's Academy consists of approximately 400 educators and practitioners

(PRSA.org, n. d.). Additionally, the sample size is at the lower end of an acceptable size for EFA. Relatedly, future research should extend the study to educators outside the U.S. to examine graduate-level education deliverables on a global scale. Second, other research methods, such as qualitative ones, will help generate additional insights, too. Beyond the master's level, further scholarly inquiry is needed into graduate public relations education at the doctoral level to provide us with a fuller understanding of graduate public relations curriculum and instruction.

In addition, we acknowledge that the manuscript addresses *what* knowledge and skills are taught, but not *why* these elements matter in defining public relations as a scholarly discipline or professional practice. Future discussions of the normative and philosophical purposes of public relations—its social, ethical, and theoretical grounding—will be much needed. As public relations education continues to evolve in a hyper-technological global context, future scholarly work will benefit from addressing what distinguishes this discipline's mission, role, and intellectual identity from adjacent fields such as marketing, advertising, and journalism.

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To Degree or Not Degree: The Unclear Expectations of Public Relations Graduate Education

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ABSTRACT

Over the last 25 years, scholars have periodically analyzed public relations graduate program websites to understand how these programs present themselves and structure their curricula. This body of research has consistently highlighted a lack of program uniformity across programs, despite recommendations such as those provided by the Commission on Public Relations Education's (CPRE) 2012 report, *Standards for a Master's Degree in Public Relations: Educating for Complexity*, which was its most recently published report focused on graduate public relations education. Building on this research, our study analyzes how public relations graduate programs currently present their curricula on their websites, with a focus on assessing alignment with the 2012 CPRE curricular report and identifying the various required and elective course offerings, as well as cumulative experiences. The findings reiterate the lack of curricular uniformity, suggest that the growing diversity in course offerings and titles may blur expectations for public relations graduate programs, and offer implications for a recommended core curriculum.

Keywords: public relations, curriculum, graduate education, master's programs, strategic communication, higher education, Commission on Public Relations Education

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While graduate education in the United States has been booming, recent reports warn of potential saturation of programs. In its 2024 report, *The Future of Graduate Education*, the Chronicle of Higher Education noted the importance of differentiation for master's programs in such a market. Yet, as programs seek to demonstrate their uniqueness in a crowded marketplace, questions of standardization of knowledge and skills expected of postsecondary graduates to ensure the quality of education also arise.

Public relations graduate programs have also experienced significant growth and have not been immune to the expansion of curricular variety (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2012; Weissman et al., 2019). Examining the curricula of various public relations programs helps track shifts in the field and identify who or what drives the widening of curricular approaches to public relations graduate education. In a 2013 study of the curricula of Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs, Rynes and Bartunek noted that it is "hard to think of any aspect of management education that is more important than the curriculum" (p. 179). The same can be said of public relations programs. The curriculum is crucial because it "represents an institution's best attempt to capture the most essential content relevant to" public relations practice (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009, p. 211). If the goal is to prepare individuals to be effective practitioners, the curriculum should be a signal reflecting the profession itself.

To understand the current state of curricula in master's education in public relations, we analyzed 92 academic program websites, focusing on required courses, elective courses, and capstone experience requirements as key indicators of curricular focus. By examining websites, we can better understand how programs present the knowledge and skills that students can gain, offering a broader view of the messages conveyed about the scope and value of public relations graduate education.

Literature Review

An Overview of Public Relations Graduate Education Research

In 2000, Aldoory and Toth benchmarked graduate public relations programs using the recommendations provided by the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education (1985), which later became the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) in 1989. After conducting a content analysis of program websites, Aldoory and Toth (2000) reported that "the significant pattern found across all graduate programs was the lack of consistency" in degree requirements, the number and type of public relations courses, and optional components (e.g., elective, capstone options) (p. 112).

After more than a decade of prolific growth in public relations graduate degree programs across a variety of schools, departments, and programs, Briones and Toth (2013) explored the evolution of public relations master's degree programs in their content analysis of program websites, using as a benchmark the 2006 report from the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE). While some consistency was noted in requirements among the 75 programs studied for courses in research methods, ethics, and global public relations, the results again indicated a lack of uniformity in the curriculum. The conclusion left Briones and Toth (2013) "to consider whether public relations graduate curricula are still without standardization" (p. 128). They further argued that this lack of standardization limits perceptions of the value of an advanced public relations degree, echoing scholarly and professional claims that standardization promotes consistency and legitimizes the profession (e.g., Sallot et al., 1998; Watson, 2024).

Possible explanations for the lack of uniformity in public relations graduate education have ranged from the fact that early studies were of journalism and mass communication graduate programs (Aldoory & Toth, 2000) to the variety of program specializations or models (academic,

professional, and doctoral preparation), titles and degree names, and academic departments (Briones & Toth, 2013). The constant evolution of public relations itself has also been (and continues to be) an underlying factor leading to the less-than-cohesive nature of public relations master's programs. As noted by Briones et al. (2017), "in reaction to the continuously shifting identity of the public relations field, academics in higher education have attempted to stay on pace with industry by shifting curricula to match the field's dynamic trends and needs" (p. 155).

The lack of uniformity in public relations master's degrees was central to the CPRE's prioritization of its 2012 report. Unlike its 2006 report, which largely addressed undergraduate public relations education, the 2012 analysis and recommendations focused exclusively on graduate public relations education. While the CPRE had studied, reported on, and published recommendations for undergraduate public relations education since 1975, the "burgeoning growth" in the types of public relations master's programs and the range of providers, called for "rigorous standards" (CPRE, 2012, p. 3) for graduate public relations education. The CPRE report noted that before 2012, the only graduate standards identified were an International Public Relations Association (IPRA) Gold Paper called *A Model for Public Relations Education for Professional Practice* from 1982, along with a 1985 report *Advancing Public Relations Education: Recommended Curriculum for Graduate Public Relations Education* (National Commission on Graduate Study in Public Relations, 1985).

The standards CPRE published in October 2012 were based on three research studies: (1) a website audit of master's degree programs; (2) a survey of public relations practitioners and educators; and (3) in-depth interviews with public relations industry employers. The 2012 standards recommended five core courses in (1) strategic public relations management; (2) basic business principles and process; (3) communications/public relations theory and research methods; (4) global

influences on public relations; and (5) ethics. The report noted that individual programs should determine how to integrate content areas into their curricula while also proposing experiences to align with the goals of doctoral studies or advanced professional roles. For doctoral-bound students, it suggested additional research courses and a thesis; for those working in or entering the profession, it advised specialized courses and an applied capstone (e.g., practicum, internship).

Rebranding PR Graduate Education: Impact of Industry Influence?

Five years following the CPRE's publication of graduate public relations standards, Briones et al. (2017) conducted interviews with 20 administrators of public relations master's programs in an exploratory study to track the evolution and alignment of the programs. The study sought to examine whether the existing range of master's degree programs truly lacked consistency, as suggested by Briones and Toth (2013), or if it represented an evolution away from treating public relations as a distinct field, shifting instead towards a broader and more diverse area of study for communication-oriented master's students. Results suggested that the lack of curricular alignment identified across master's programs found in earlier studies might not indicate a lack of uniformity, but instead "reveal that some programs had evolved away from identifying themselves as public relations-specific programs" (Briones et al., 2017, p. 163).

While Briones et al. (2017) contacted 85 public relations master's degree programs identified by their title or curricula, only 20 responded, suggesting to the researchers that some of the initially selected programs no longer defined themselves as purely public relations programs. The researchers concluded that despite CPRE's earlier efforts (2006, 2012) to broaden the definition of a public relations master's program, their study supported existing research "that the industry expects a more interdisciplinary approach to education that may not even look like a public relations degree whatsoever" (Briones et al., 2017, p. 162). Two years later, Weissman et al. (2019) also described an "identity crisis" in

public relations graduate programs, citing "porous" boundaries with fields like advertising and marketing (p. 372). Through website analysis and interviews with graduate program directors, they highlighted a growing trend toward interdisciplinary titles driven by "[a]lignment with industry trends toward integration" (p. 381), echoing Briones et al. (2017).

Even defining what public relations is can be challenging, though. The Public Relations Society of America defines public relations as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics." (PRSA, n.d., para. 4). Yet, strategic communication is often used as an umbrella concept to embrace goal-directed communication covered by public relations, health communication, public diplomacy, and marketing, among others (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014). This often leads to public relations and strategic communication being used interchangeably, which Zerfass and colleagues (2018) caution against. Instead, they argue for strategic communication as a distinct field, defining it as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals" (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493). But public relations is different from strategic communication in that it involves the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, internal and external. Implied is that public relations has a fiduciary responsibility to the public to communicate ethically (Myers, 2021). The idea that public relations serves not only the organization's interest, but also the public's, is missing from the definition of strategic communication. However, the degree to which this distinction is upheld in professional and curricular practice is unclear.

Today, other factors are causing an upheaval in public relations. A 2025 study by USC Annenberg's Center for Public Relations examined four trends impacting the field: (1) artificial intelligence, (2) hybrid and remote work, (3) the changing media landscape, and (4) political

polarization (Michaelson & Cook, 2025). When asked what the most important skills are for entry-level practitioners, given these trends, the respondents' top four answers were writing (68%), social media content creation (43.5%), strategic communications (43.25%), and research and analytics (41.5%). Although the Annenberg report's focus was not on education, the authors suggested that educators could help prepare students for an uncertain future by equipping them with ethical standards, proficiency with AI tools, understanding how to visualize data, and mastering content creation for various formats. Thus, for the Center for Public Relations, it is important for educators to keep abreast of industry trends to help prepare their students for the workplace.

Changing Industry Trends for Graduate Education in Other Disciplines

Public relations graduate education is not alone in considering the relevance of coursework to industry expectations or the implications and sources of curricular variety. As Amblee et al. (2023) noted, research examining the alignment of the MBA curriculum with the competencies required of the next generation of managers has been steady over the last 25 years. The MBA, like public relations graduate education, does not require an undergraduate education within the same or related discipline, resulting in student populations that consist of those who have had exposure to the foundational curriculum and others who need to catch up, sparking debates about the merits of standardization versus specialization in MBA programs (e.g., Dey, 2024; Guillotin & Mangematin, 2018). Stohs (2019) proposed that "understanding the relationship of the undergraduate and graduate (MBA) business curriculum provides the key to understanding the health of business education" (p. 118) and found that differentiation "allows students with a solid undergraduate foundation in business to seek even higher and more sophisticated levels of education" (p. 124). Unlike MBA degrees, however, public relations graduate

education has featured increasingly diverse degree names (Woods et al., 2025), adding another unique layer of differentiation to the equation.

The Role of Websites in Presenting Program Curricula

Previous literature also highlights how websites serve as information hubs that relay details about a program's curriculum, culture, values, and vision, thereby playing a vital role in recruiting students (Briones & Toth, 2013; Diwanji et al., 2023; Lampley & Owens, 2015). Graduate programs rely on websites for student recruitment, and prospective students often use these websites as their primary source for program information (Rios et al., 2019). For some graduate students, their initial interaction with a program occurs through its website, underscoring the importance of how programs "present and market themselves to prospective, current, and former students" (Diwanji et al., 2023, p. 397). However, the utility and design of a website can also affect prospective graduate students' decisions to seek more information and apply (Ivan et al., 2017; Lampley & Owens, 2015).

Understanding how public relations graduate programs present their curricula to prospective students provides insight into how institutions define and position their programs in an evolving academic and professional landscape. To track the state of public relations graduate education, researchers have conducted website audits throughout the last 25 years (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2000; Briones & Toth, 2013; CPRE, 2012; Weissman et al., 2019). This article extends this line of inquiry and examines how public relations graduate programs structure and present their curricula on their websites, aiming to determine the current state of consistency in public relations master's programs. We also seek to understand how program websites present public relations graduate education to potential students. To guide our analysis, we ask:

> **RQ1**: To what extent are public relations master's programs, as presented on their websites, aligned with the five curricular recommendations outlined in the 2012 CPRE report?

RQ2: In addition to the five recommendations outlined in the 2012 CPRE report, what course topics appear most frequently in the required and elective offerings of public relations master's programs, as reflected on program websites?

RQ3: To what extent, if at all, do programs with "public relations" in their program, concentration, or certificate titles differ in required courses compared to those without "public relations" in these titles?

RQ4: What are the consistent culminating experiences of public relations education graduate programs?

RQ5: What types of institutions, based on Carnegie research classification and private or public classification, are most commonly represented among public relations master's programs that hold ACEJMC or CEPR accreditation?

Methods

We conducted a content analysis of 87 university and college websites, examining a total of 92 academic programs. Following previous research (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2000; Briones & Toth, 2013; Weissman et al., 2019), our goal was not to compare programs but to offer a "descriptive compilation" (Luttrell et al., 2021, p. 17).

Sample

To reflect the range of public relations graduate education, we included programs titled "public relations" as well as those in related areas, such as strategic communication and generalist fields that offer public relations concentrations or present their programs as preparing students for public relations careers.

We used a multi-step process to identify our sample. First, we began with the CPRE's (2012) list of graduate programs. This study was part of a broader initiative led by the CPRE Research Committee to produce an updated report on public relations graduate education (Kinsky & Wallace, 2025). Given that the 2012 report represents the CPRE's most recent work dedicated to graduate education, we adopted this program list as a foundational source. Using this list, we removed programs that no longer offer a master's degree, no longer accept applications, or are limited to doctoral-track students. We also added new programs that were developed at these institutions since 2012.

Next, we added U.S. post-graduate programs that have achieved Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) from PRSA, as well as relevant graduate programs with accreditation from the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC), because of their pursuit of and adherence to professional and academic standards. Finally, we checked CEPR-accredited undergraduate programs for relevant graduate offerings (PRSA, 2025); we anticipated that because these programs offered accredited undergraduate public relations degrees, they would be more likely to offer graduate-level education in the field. After compiling the initial list using these steps, one member of the research team conducted an online search for each identified program to locate its official website and identify the academic unit housing the program. This step allowed the team to determine if the institution offered additional graduate programs relevant to public relations.

The final sample included 92 programs across 87 institutions, with some institutions offering multiple relevant master's programs. Most programs were housed in public institutions (n = 51, 55.4%), with 40 programs (43.5%) located at private institutions. Using the Carnegie Foundation's 2025 Research Activity Designators, 53 programs (57.6%)

were classified as Research 1 (Very High Spending and Doctoral Production), 15 (16.3%) as Research 2 (High Spending and Doctorate Production), and 9 (9.8%) as Research Colleges and Universities (RCU). The remaining 15 programs (16.3%) were not classified under this system.

Analysis

We used a systematic approach to data analysis. Codebook development began deductively, identifying general categories (e.g., culminating experiences), drawing on the CPRE (2012) report. We also inductively identified certain codes, such as specific culminating experience options, within these larger categories. We collectively brainstormed additional inductive categories, along with specific codes for each category. After completing the initial codebook, one researcher converted it into a QuestionPro survey to collect team responses.

The unit of analysis for our study was each master's-level program's website. The team reviewed each program website and, if needed, any available academic course catalogs. Website structures varied, but we typically navigated through multiple levels of the website to ensure we acquired all publicly available data for each category of analysis. We often started on a general graduate program landing page, then selected the relevant master's program or an option such as "Master's Degrees." Once we identified the specific program website, we worked through the linked pages to access curriculum details, including degree plans, tracks, capstone experiences, and course listings.

We began with a pilot test comprising 16 randomly selected programs (17.4% of the sample). We divided this pilot test sample among the four researchers and manually coded each website. Each researcher took notes to refine the codebook. After completing the pilot test, the research team met to discuss the process, incorporate inductive codes, resolve protocol questions, and update the codebook. Additionally, one researcher re-entered the data into a new Qualtrics Pro survey to

consolidate all coding for analysis. During this process, the researcher performed a verification procedure by comparing the pilot test coding with the information available on each program's website or course catalog to ensure consistency. The remaining programs in the sample (n = 76, 82.6%) were then divided among the research team for manual coding.

Coding occurred between October 2024 and March 2025. In total, we coded for 35 categories (e.g., university name, program title, degree type, modality, concentrations, certificates, required hours, required hours for programs with multiple tracks, time to completion, "fast track" options, required courses, elective courses). Several categories were straightforward, such as required hours or whether a degree was an MA or MS, and thus, involved objective distinctions with minimal room for interpretive variation. A verification check conducted by one member of the research team after the pilot test further confirmed consistency on these codes.

For the most complicated categories, required and elective coursework, we used a peer-check process. This allowed two coders to work through course listings to ensure consistency and shared interpretation across these codes, with one researcher conducting the initial coding and a second researcher reviewing and confirming this analysis. To account for curricular diversity, we also included an "other" option for culminating experiences and course offerings. After coding was complete, we revisited the "other" responses for culminating experiences, assigning them to the appropriate categories. The extensive diversity of course offerings and unique course titles made categorization more challenging. As a result, two researchers worked to consolidate the "other" required and elective course offerings into larger categories (see Weissman et al., 2019). One researcher conducted the initial coding of course titles, which was then reviewed by a second researcher. The researchers discussed and resolved any discrepancies to ensure consistency. SPSS 29.0 and

Microsoft Excel were used for data analysis. Due to the complex coding schemes, we did not calculate intercoder reliability, which is consistent with prior work in this area (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2000; Briones & Toth, 2013).

Findings

This section presents key findings from the analysis of 92 program websites, building on the chapter by Woods and colleagues (2025) in CPRE's graduate public relations education study. It begins with program alignment to the 2012 CPRE recommendations, followed by the most frequently listed courses, differences in required content based on program naming, an overview of culminating experiences, and a comparison of accredited programs based on institutional designators.

RQ1: Program Alignment with 2012 CPRE Recommendations

The first research question inquired about the extent to which public relations master's programs, as presented on their websites, align with the five curricular recommendations outlined in the 2012 CPRE report: (1) strategic public relations management, (2) basic business principles and process, (3) communications/public relations theory and research methods, (4) global influences on public relations, and (5) ethics.

We conducted frequency analyses to determine how many CPRE (2012) core content areas each program addressed (for reasons discussed below, we simplified "strategic public relations management" to "public relations"). Of the programs reviewed, 19 (20.6%) addressed all five core content areas, 25 (27.2%) included four, 28 (30.4%) covered three, 14 (15.2%) offered two, and six programs (6.5%) incorporated only one.

We also examined the prevalence of each core content area using frequency counts. We treated research methods and theory as distinct categories, while grouping "law" with "ethics" due to potential content overlap. The core content areas, ranked by frequency, are: (1) research methods; (2) public relations; (3) ethics and law; (4) theory; (5) business principles and practices; and (6) global influences.

Research methods were by far the most common core area, offered by nearly all programs (n = 87, 94.6%) and required by most (n = 82, 90.2%). Course titles varied widely from general (e.g., "Communication Research Methods") to specific methods (e.g., "Focus Groups") or areas (e.g., "Digital Media Analytics").

Approximately 65% of programs (n = 60) offered at least one course in public relations, typically as electives (n = 39, 42.4%) rather than requirements (n = 36, 39.1%). Assessing the focus on "strategic public relations management" was difficult due to vague or varied course titles. While some explicitly referenced management (e.g., "Public Relations Management"), others may embed it within other courses (e.g., "Advanced Public Relations," "PR Issues and Strategy"). Recognizing a shift away from the "public relations" label, we also analyzed strategic communication courses. These were required in 26 programs (28.3%) and offered as electives in 20 (21.7%).

The third most common core area was ethics or law (n = 59, 64.1%). Thirty-five programs (38%) required a course in ethics, law, or both, while 28 (30.4%) offered them as electives. Ethics-only courses were most frequent, required in 21 programs (22.8%) and offered as electives in 20 (21.7%). Law-focused courses were less common, required in 10 programs (10.9%) and offered as electives in six (6.5%).

Approximately 60% of programs (n = 56) offered a theory course. Slightly more than half (n = 50, 54.3%) required it, while 17 (18.5%) offered it as an elective.

Fifty-five programs (59.8%) listed a course with a title that incorporated an area of business, such as business fundamentals, finance, leadership, management, and marketing. These were more often offered as electives (n = 41, 44.6%) than required courses (n = 31, 33.7%).

Courses on global influences, such as global, international, and intercultural communication, were offered by over half of the programs

(*n* = 51, 55.4%), most commonly as electives (*n* = 43, 46.7%) rather than requirements (*n* = 14, 15.2%).

RQ2: Most Frequent Course Offerings

The second research question examined the most commonly included course topics (see Table 1 for a complete list). We offer the most frequently taught courses, then categorize them into required and elective courses.

Using frequency analysis, we identified the most commonly offered courses, whether required or elective. Research courses were the most frequent (*n* = 87, 94.6%), followed by social and digital media (*n* = 61, 66.3%). Public relations and writing/content creation courses were listed by 60 programs (65.2%), followed by ethics and law (*n* = 59, 64.1%). Approximately 60% offered capstone experiences and theory (*n* = 56), followed by business principles and processes (*n* = 55, 59.8%), global, international, and intercultural communication (*n* = 51, 55.4%), and crisis communication (*n* = 48, 52.0%).

Required Courses

As noted in the CPRE's 2025 study, the most frequently required content areas included research (*n* = 83, 90.2%), which entailed general research methods courses, quantitative or qualitative research courses, specific methodologies (e.g., focus groups), analytics courses, and industry-specific research courses for public relations or strategic communication. The next most frequent course category was theory (*n* = 50, 54.3%), including general communication theory, mass communication theory, or select foci (e.g., "Public Relations Theory," "Journalism Theory").

Capstone experiences (*n* = 44, 47.8%) were the third most frequently required course (e.g., capstone courses, theses, projects, exams, practicums, and internships), followed by courses explicitly focused on public relations (*n* = 36, 39.1%) and courses in ethics and law (*n* = 35, 38.0%). Writing and content creation offerings (*n* = 35, 38%)

Table 1

Frequencies of Required Courses and Electives by Content Area

Content Area	Required Course (*n*, %)	Elective Course (n, %)	Required or Elective Course (n, %)
Branding	12, 13.0%	16, 17.4%	28, 30.4%
Business Principles and Processes	31, 33.7%*	41, 44.6%	55, 59.8%
Campaigns	11, 12.0%	22, 23.9%	32, 34.8%
Capstone Experience	44, 47.8%*	26, 28.3%	56, 60.9%
Crisis Communication	8, 8.7%	39, 42.4%	48, 52.0%
Diversity and Inclusion	2, 2.2%	22, 23.9%	24, 26.1%
Ethics and/or Law	35, 38%*	28, 30.4%	59, 64.1%
Global, International, and Intercultural Communication	14, 15.2%*	43, 46.7%	51, 55.4%
Health and Risk Communication	1, 1.1%	28, 30.4%	28, 30.4%
Introduction to Graduate Studies	16, 17%*	3, 3.3%	19, 20.7%
Organizational, Internal, and Employee Communication	18, 19.6%*	22, 23.9%	36, 39.1%
Political Communication	1, 1.1%	30, 32.6%	31, 33.7%
Public Relations	36, 39.1%*	39, 42.4%	60, 65.2%
Research	82, 90.2%*	34, 37.0%	87, 94.6%
Social and Digital Media	27, 29.3%*	46, 50%	61, 66.3%
Strategic Communication	26, 28.3*	20, 21.7%	26, 28.3%
Theory	50, 54.3%*	17, 18.5%	56, 60.9%
Writing and Content Creation	35, 38%*	47, 51.1%	60, 65.2%

Note: Figures with an asterisk (*) were previously reported in the 2025 Commission on Public Relations' graduate education report.

encompassed a wide range of course titles, categorized into subcategories of writing, multimedia communication, storytelling or message design, visual design, web design, and general design.

Business principles and processes (*n* = 31, 33.7%) included courses in business fundamentals, finance, leadership, management, and marketing. Next, social and digital media courses (*n* = 27, 29.3%), which included a diverse range of topics, including analytics, strategy, influencer management, and content creation, were followed by courses focused on strategic communication (*n* = 26, 28.3%); organizational, internal, and employee communication (*n* = 18, 19.6%); global, international, and intercultural communication (*n* = 14, 15.2%), and introduction to graduate studies (*n* = 16, 17%).

In addition to these previously reported findings, the analysis also indicated that other required course offerings included branding (*n* = 12, 13.0%), comprising courses in brand management, strategy, design, and analytics, as well as personal branding. Persuasion (*n* = 9, 9.8%) and crisis communication (*n* = 8, 8.7%) completed the 15 most frequently identified required course topics.

Elective Courses

We also identified the most frequently listed elective content areas, presented in order of prevalence.

Writing and Content Creation. Writing and content creation was the most common elective category (*n* = 47, 51.1%). The most common topics were storytelling or message design (*n* = 20) and writing (*n* = 19), multimedia communication (*n* = 16), and visual design (*n* = 13).

Social and Digital Media. Half of the programs offered a social and digital media elective (*n* = 46, 50%), ranging from broader approaches (e.g., "New Technologies of Mass Communication") to more specific topics, such as strategy, analytics, influencers, or ethics.

Global, International, and Intercultural Communication. Courses in global, international, and intercultural communication (*n* = 43, 46.7%) included "Global Communication for Professionals," "Global Cases and Campaigns," and "Global Reputation Management."

Business Principles and Processes. Forty-one programs (44.6%) offered an elective with a business-related title, ranging from "Investor Relations" to "Strategy in the Global Economy."

Crisis Communication. Crisis communication was listed as an elective in 39 programs (42.4%), with course titles including "Crisis Management" and "Public Relations Strategies for Managing Scandal in Business and Politics."

Public Relations. Public relations courses appeared on 42% of program websites (*n* = 39), with titles ranging from general (e.g., "Case Problems in Public Relations") to niche offerings like "Entertainment Public Relations" and "Non-Profit Public Relations."

Research. Research methods electives were offered by 37% of programs (*n* = 34), covering broad topics (e.g., "Communication Research"), specific approaches (e.g., "Case Study Method"), qualitative or quantitative methods, and industry-focused courses (e.g., "Organizational Research and Evaluation").

Political Communication. Almost one-third of programs (*n* = 30, 32.6%) provided an elective related to political communication. Along with "Political Communication" classes, other titles highlighted related areas, such as public affairs, public policy, and government relations.

Ethics and Law. Twenty-eight programs (30.4%) offered an ethics or law elective. Some were specific to public relations (e.g., "Public Relations Ethics"), whereas others were broader (e.g., "Organization Ethics").

Health and Risk Communication. Twenty-eight programs (30.4%) provided an elective in health or risk communication, ranging

from more general topics (e.g., "Strategic Health Communication") to narrower approaches (e.g., "E-Health Communication").

Capstone Experiences. Approximately 28% of programs (n = 26) offered a capstone experience for elective credit, with course titles ranging from internships and practicums to "Master's Project" and "Project in Strategic Communications."

Campaigns. Twenty-two programs (23.9%) offered a campaign-based elective, covering public relations, specialized contexts such as "CSR Campaigns," and broader courses like "Integrated Communication Campaigns."

Diversity and Inclusion. At the time of coding, 22 programs (23.9%) listed an elective focused on diversity and inclusion, ranging from broader (e.g., "Diversity in the Workplace") to more specific areas (e.g., "Engaging Latinx Communities").

Organizational, Internal, and Employee Communication. Twenty-two programs (23.9%) offered an elective in organizational, internal, and employee communication with titles such as "Organizational Communication," "Building Publics: Employees and Other Constituencies," and "Organizational Culture."

Strategic Communication. Strategic communication electives (n = 20, 20.7%) tended to focus on specific areas, such as "International Strategic Communication" and "History of Strategic Communication."

RQ3: Required Content in PR-Titled Programs and Non-PR-Titled Programs

We conducted chi-square analyses to determine any associations between program type (defined by the presence or absence of "public relations" in the program title, concentration, or certificate) and required content areas. Two significant associations emerged (see Table 2). First, programs with "public relations" in the program, concentration, or certificate title were significantly more likely to require public relations

courses, $\chi^2(1, 92) = 7.074$, $p = .008$. Second, programs without "public relations" in the program, concentration, or certificate title were more likely to require strategic communication courses, $\chi^2(1, 92) = 4.062$, $p = .044$.

Table 2

Chi-Square Test Results for Required Courses by Program Type

Required Courses	χ^2	df	*p*
Branding	0.0001	1	.978
Business Principles and Processes	0.1298	1	.719
Campaigns	1.101	1	.314
Capstone Experience	1.435	1	.231
Crisis Communication	1.617	1	.203
Diversity and Inclusion	0.064	1	.801
Ethics and/or Law	0.453	1	.501
Global, International, and Intercultural Communication	1.104	1	.293
Introduction to Graduate Studies	2.124	1	.145
Organizational, Internal, and Employee Communication	0.054	1	.816
Public Relations	7.074**	1	.008
Research	1.498	1	.221
Social and Digital Media	0.121	1	.728
Strategic Communication	4.062*	1	.044
Theory	0.655	1	.418
Writing and Content Creation	0.404	1	.525

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

RQ4: Culminating Experiences

The fourth research question examined culminating experiences in public relations master's programs. Most program websites (*n* = 81, 88.0%) listed a culminating experience, with nearly half (*n* = 43, 46.7%) giving students an option. Two programs (2.2%) required a comprehensive examination alongside another option, such as a directed project, internship, or thesis. In comparison, 36 programs (39.1%) had a single culminating experience.

Despite the frequency of culminating experiences, their formats varied widely. The most common were a thesis (*n* = 45, 48.9%) and a directed or professional project (*n* = 36, 39.1%). Less prevalent options included a capstone course (*n* = 18, 19.6%), comprehensive exams and non-thesis research projects (*n* = 13, 14.1%), an applied culminating option (*n* = 10, 10.9%), or an internship (*n* = 8, 8.7%). Three programs (3.3%) allowed extra coursework as an alternative.

Programs used varied titles for culminating experiences. Non-thesis research projects were labeled as "special project," essay, or non-traditional thesis. Applied options also varied, including portfolios, case studies, or participation in the Page Society Case Study Competition.

RQ5: Accreditation and Institution Designators

Six graduate programs (6.5%) across five institutions held CEPR certification, including one institution that offered both a traditional accredited program and an online option. Another six programs (6.5%) were accredited by ACEJMC, while only one program (1.1%) held dual accreditation from both CEPR and ACEJMC.

In response to RQ5, among the five institutions hosting CEPR-accredited programs, four (80%) were classified as Research 1, one (20%) was classified as a Research 2 institution, and one (20%) was unclassified. Three of the institutions (60%) are private, while the remaining two 40%) were public.

Among the six ACEJMC-accredited programs, five (83.3%) were housed at Research 1 institutions, and one was classified as an RCU. Two-thirds (n = 4) were located at private institutions, while the remaining two (33.3%) were at public institutions. The sole program with both CEPR and ACEJMC accreditation was located at a private Research 1 institution.

Discussion

A program's curriculum represents what it believes to be the most essential content to the field of practice (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). Holistically, this project inquired about the messages prospective graduate students might receive regarding public relations graduate education when encountering various program names and curricular structures on institutional websites. As the "storefronts" of higher education, what do the websites for graduate programs in public relations and strategic communication have "in store" for graduate-level students, including those with an undergraduate degree in public relations and those without that foundation? From our review, the landscape of graduate public relations education may be becoming less clear to prospective students, as the variety of program names and course options continues to widen, making the value proposition of programs unclear and leading to suggestions for a required core curriculum.

Lack of Curricular Uniformity

When examining the required and elective courses, as well as capstone experiences, across 92 public relations master's programs, it appears that there are still varying expectations for what constitutes essential content in the field of public relations. This finding aligns with previous research that has identified a lack of uniformity in master's education in public relations (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2000; Briones & Toth, 2013; CPRE, 2012).

The standardization of graduate education is inherently challenging because it involves a more individualized experience tailored to the

background that each student brings. For example, students may have extensive professional experience or have completed an undergraduate degree in public relations from an accredited program, which would result in significant prior exposure to much of the coursework. Others may have varying expectations for the degree outcomes. Is their final project intended to directly tie into their paid work? Are they planning to pursue a career in academia after their master's program? Similarly, the courses offered, particularly electives, may reflect topics relevant to faculty areas of expertise.

One promising finding is that our audit indicated the core content areas from the 2012 CPRE report are generally covered. The website analysis included in the updated 2025 CPRE report on graduate education only examined required course content, so this study's expanded analysis of elective courses may offer a more holistic, and potentially optimistic, view of the alignment of master's program in public relations standards with CPRE's five suggested core curriculum components.

Our analysis revealed that a research methods course is the most uniform curricular requirement across programs, aligning with previous research by Briones and Toth (2013) and indicating a growth in research courses over the last twelve years. This is unsurprising given that research methods are important to both applied work within public relations practice and preparing students to pursue an academic career, particularly if they want to continue their education at the doctoral level (Capizzo et al., 2022). Additionally, we identified an increase in ethics courses since Briones and Toth's (2013) study. Ethics has been identified as one of the most critical issues facing the public relations profession (Michaelson & Cook, 2025), partly due to the rapid acceleration of technological changes, such as AI, and the broader political and social environment.

Despite the presence of core content areas, the current study also showed that when the specifics of graduate public relations education

are under the microscope, the wide variety of program names and course choices largely remains unexplained, although Weissman et al. (2019) found course offerings can rest on the need to offer students a level of customizability or embrace "a 21st century focus" (p. 380). While this array of electives can benefit students by permitting specialization and flexibility, programs should clearly communicate to prospective students about how programs' structure, focus, and curricular options impact their academic experiences and contribute to career advancement. Additionally, the only curricular distinctions between programs with titles containing "public relations" and those without were the requirement of a public relations course (for programs labeled as "public relations") and the requirement of strategic communication (for non-public-relations-labeled programs). This limited curricular distinction suggests blurred boundaries rather than notable differentiation. While academic debate seems to want clarity between public relations and strategic communication (e.g., Zerfass et al., 2018), in practice, it seems to be more of a labeling issue than a distinct difference in substance.

Without a strong push for accreditation standards in graduate public relations education as there is in undergraduate public relations education, it makes sense for master's programs to seek differentiation in an increasingly saturated market (e.g., Future of Graduate Education, 2024). This trend is also emerging within business schools as some scholars advocate for more specialized graduate degree programs to assist with program differentiation and catering to students' educational and vocational needs (Dey, 2024; Guillotin & Mangematin, 2018), which is a limitation of a highly standardized MBA curriculum. But at the same time, without strong communication of what the standards in graduate public relations education mean to potential students and their career advancement, prospective students are unable to make fully informed decisions about these programs.

Unclear Communication of Value Proposition for Prospective Students

This study also suggests that the value proposition for graduate public relations education is often unclearly communicated across program websites. For instance, the distinctions between graduate degrees labeled "Strategic Communication" versus "Public Relations" or the suitability of programs for students with or without an undergraduate degree or any professional experience in public relations are rarely articulated. Prospective students may struggle to determine which programs align best with their professional goals or academic preparation. Moreover, when marketing to prospective students without an undergraduate degree or extensive experience in public relations, programs may need to communicate the strategic value of a master's degree in public relations.

Putting ourselves into the shoes of potential students, it was unclear what a master's degree in public relations entails and what would make a program credible without a clear indication of accreditation standards. As a third-party review process, accreditation can provide a degree of certainty to prospective students that they will receive a relevant and quality education (Jalal et al., 2017). Findings from this study suggest that master's programs in public relations education may need to reassess their external communication efforts to articulate the purpose and value of their offerings more effectively. Such revisions may include clarifying why students study specific topics, which courses are designed for those with foundational knowledge of public relations, the value of foundational standards, and which courses or tracks are intended to develop the advanced, managerial-level skills expected at the graduate level.

We encourage graduate program directors and other individuals overseeing online communication efforts to ensure that information is readily available, current, and easily accessible. Websites should include key details (e.g., information about the program, including curriculum

and expectations, the application process, and financial considerations), be visually appealing, and present current and accurate information, while also being easy to navigate (Ivan et al., 2017). AI also draws from university websites and is increasingly used by students to research institutions (Peeler, 2025), underscoring the need for programs to regularly review and update content.

Suggestions for Revised Core Curricular Areas

The study also suggests it may be time to revisit the core areas from the 2012 CPRE report, given changes in society and industry. In the 2012 report, the core curriculum umbrella of "strategic public relations management" may be too large and may benefit from clearer delineation or subcategorization. For example, "strategic public relations best practices in a digital environment" (p. 12) is one of seven bullet points listed in this section. When considering both required and elective courses, those with a focus on social and digital media were found in two-thirds of the programs. Given the increased role of social media within the profession (Michaelson & Cook, 2025) since 2012, incorporating social and digital media as a core curricular area, independent of "strategic public relations management," may warrant further consideration. Similarly, during our analysis, we separated the combined category of "communication/public relations theory and research methods" into two distinct areas to allow for a more nuanced understanding of how each is represented across program curricula.

From a practical perspective, we also recognize the constraints influencing the feasibility of meeting these core requirement areas, which include a compressed master's program timeframe and faculty availability. While the core content areas reflect an "ideal" approach to public relations graduate education, adjustments may be required to reflect available resources or situational constraints.

Limitations

One limitation of the study is that not all programs with a connection to public relations graduate education may be represented. Additionally, the analysis only represents information available on websites, which may be limited, outdated, or inaccurate. Relatedly, these listings indicate the courses that a program offers in theory, but do not guarantee that each course is regularly scheduled or delivered; as a result, some of the courses may not be part of the current, active curriculum. Another limitation was the lack of clarity on many of the master's program websites we analyzed. Our team of experienced researchers, all of whom are familiar with both public relations education and practice, found it challenging to code even the basic information we were looking for on a majority of websites. Similarly, although we implemented procedures to promote coding consistency, we did not conduct quantitative tests of intercoder reliability.

Another limitation of our approach is the lack of clarity regarding course content, which is based solely on website descriptions. We also could not always determine the specific material covered in a course based on vague titles (Aldoory & Toth, 2000) or brief descriptions, underscoring a broader concern with relying on publicly available web-based information, which may not provide an accurate or comprehensive representation of a curriculum. Another challenge was matching the course titles to specific recommended content areas from the 2012 CPRE report (e.g., "strategic public relations management").

Future Research

Because of the limitations of the content analysis method itself, we found ourselves asking "why?" many times during this project, sparking ideas for future research in public relations graduate education. This study, along with the updated 2025 CPRE report on graduate education, suggests

that graduate public relations education programs may have evolved away from presenting themselves as public relations-specific programs, as evidenced by their course offerings and program, concentration, and certificate titles. Future research should examine the extent of this potential shift and explore why programs that have evolved from identifying themselves as public relations-specific programs have done so. Furthermore, additional research is needed to determine if specific graduate degrees better support career advancement in the PR industry or if they carry equal weight. Relatedly, future research should explore the factors that influence prospective-student decisions when selecting graduate programs, including program title, accreditation status, and curriculum design.

Relatedly, further research is needed to better understand the factors driving the increasingly interdisciplinary approach. Potential influences include the industry, faculty expertise, internal structural changes (e.g., departmental mergers), and low awareness of CPRE standards and CEPR certification at the graduate level. Similarly, although the number of accredited programs in the current sample was limited, accreditation appeared more prevalent among Research 1 and private institutions. Future studies should explore the factors that drive or inhibit accreditation at the graduate level, including program size, faculty composition, program focus, and administrative support. Next, to build on the foundation laid by this study and the forthcoming CPRE report, we urge scholars to adopt more complex methodologies promptly, moving the field beyond description and toward explanatory and evaluative research. Finally, we need a deeper understanding of the relationship between the undergraduate and graduate public relations curricula.

Conclusion

Websites are critical tools for graduate programs seeking to attract and inform prospective students, but their effectiveness depends

on being user-friendly and offering clear, current, and relevant content. This analysis of public relations graduate program websites highlights the growing diversity of program titles and curricular offerings, revealing inconsistent expectations among master's-level programs regarding what constitutes essential content in the field of public relations. For prospective students, especially those unfamiliar with the field, this lack of clarity can make it challenging to assess a program's purpose and value. The findings suggest that many of these programs could benefit from enhancing the clarity, substance, and usability of their websites to communicate their identities and value propositions more effectively.

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Public Relations Practitioners' Expectations for Graduate Education

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ABSTRACT

Members of the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) surveyed U.S. practitioners to assess needs for graduate education, specifically desired knowledge and skills. This study updates findings from an October 2012 report, particularly how the global pandemic and technology developments in the areas of Artificial Intelligence and video conferencing affect PR practitioners' perceptions. The new study reveals the most desired areas of knowledge were crisis comunication and issues management, strategic communication in a digital environment, and ethics. The most desired skills included written and oral communication, strategic planning, and interpersonal communication. Results revealed lukewarm perceptions regarding the value of advanced degrees among lower-level and top managers, but some support for professional certifications, particularly in leadership and AI. Implications for graduate education are provided.

Keywords: core competencies, public relations, curriculum, graduate education, master's programs, certifications, Commission on Public Relations Education

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Public relations has undergone significant changes since the global pandemic, shifting to hybrid and remote work and adjusting to video conferencing technology (Meng et al., 2024). More recently, the industry is grappling with the rise of generative Artificial Intelligence (Zerfass et al., 2023). While many studies have focused on the impact of these forces on public relations practice, less attention has addressed how this may impact graduate education. This study intends to fill this gap.

The Commission on Public Relations Education last published a report on recommended standards for master's degree programs in October 2012. While there have been a few studies published on graduate education since then, they have tended to involve content analyses of university websites (Briones & Toth, 2013; Weissman et al., 2019), interviews with graduate program directors (Briones et al., 2017), or surveys with faculty (Quesenberry et al., 2015), which provided valuable insights on pedagogical trends but not a perspective on industry needs and expectations.

To address this deficiency, a survey with U.S. public relations practitioners registered with the Commission on Public Relations Education was administered to assess their views regarding the knowledge and skills that they believe should be honed through master's degree programs, as well as their perceptions on the value of advanced degrees.

Literature Review

Professional Graduate Education

The 2021 Journalism & Mass Communication Enrollments survey revealed that among 154 programs, 49.3% offered a professional master's degree, and 33.7% a research master's degree (Cummins et al., 2023). In addition, 29.2% offered a professional master's degree online, and 4.5% offered a research master's degree online (Cummins et al., 2023). Cummins et al. (2023) also reported growth in professional master's student enrollment compared to 2018, which they attributed to the increase in programs offering online degree options. At the time of the last CPRE

report on graduate education (2012), there were only eight online graduate education programs in public relations or communication management in the U.S., which has certainly changed in recent years and justifies the need for new research.

Master's programs in public relations tend to be classified as professional degree programs (Hon et al., 2004; Soloski, 1994). The 2012 CPRE report defined a professional graduate program as:

> a post-baccalaureate academic program that prepares students to think strategically and critically and to master the skills and to be able to fulfill the responsibilities of professional public relations practice, as well as to understand and respect the ethical decision-making requirements for a public relations management position. (p. 4)

As Senat and Grusin (1994) pointed out, "While the programs rely on subject-based knowledge, they also teach practical skills and techniques" (p. 23). Soloski (1994) cautioned that the programs need to "teach students to be critical thinkers and train them to be professionally competent" (p. 6). In contrast, the teaching/research-focused master's degree programs prepare students for academic careers and doctoral programs and focus more on applying their knowledge to problems associated with scholarly interests (Senat & Grusin, 1994). The 2012 CPRE report referred to this second type of program as an academic graduate program and defined it as a "post-baccalaureate academic program that prepares students for university teaching and research careers that are grounded in professional practice" (p. 4).

In interviews with public relations practitioners, they emphasized the importance of "practical experience" in professional master's degree programs because graduates "do not want to be perceived as over-educated and underexperienced" (Hon et al., 2004, p. 133). Similarly, graduate students expressed frustration that the coursework was inadequate for

teaching them practical skills to prepare them for the job market (Hon et al., 2004).

Prior Research & Recommendations for Public Relations Graduate Education

Prior to the development of the Commission on Public Relations Education, the first significant study on graduate education in public relations was commissioned by the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) in 1982 (Aldoory & Toth, 2000) and resulted in the development of a curriculum model in 1985 published as the *Report of the National Commission on Graduate Study in Public Relations*. This model was based on 30-33 credit hours and included courses in 1) Research Methods, 2) Communication Theory, 3) Communication Processes, 4) Public Relations Principles, Practices and Theory, 5) Public Relations Management, 6) Public Relations Programming and Production, 7) a Public Relations Specialty Option, 8) Electives, and 9) either a thesis or project. Subsequent studies have assessed universities' adherence to those standards issued in the *Report of the National Commission on Graduate Study in Public Relations* (1985). In one study, Aldoory and Toth (2000) found "a lack of adherence to the Foundation's recommendations and a lack of consistency across programs in the number and type of courses required or offered" (p. 115). They further concluded that the "call for master's programs distinct from undergraduate degrees has not been put into practice" as the master's courses offered by universities were similar to the 1999 *Port of Entry* report by providing two curriculum models, one based on 30 and another based on 36 credit hours. The recommended courses included research methods, theory, public relations management, ethics, and law, as well as business courses and strategic planning. A few years later, some public relations scholars provided a 15-credit-hour model, based on qualitative research with public relations practitioners,

graduate students, and educators (Hon et al., 2004). Their five-course recommendation included Public Relations Theory, Public Relations Practicum, Public Relations Management, Public Relations Research, and Mass Communication and Society. Hon et al. (2004) reported there were approximately 70 colleges and universities offering master's degrees or an emphasis in public relations, but only two programs (Syracuse and USC-Annenberg) adhered to the CPRE recommendations.

The next CPRE report was issued in 2006 and was based on a content analysis of graduate program websites, interviews with public relations leaders, and a survey of both educators and practitioners. The CPRE (2006) offered three potential master's models based on whether the student was planning to enter a doctoral program or public relations practice. In addition to earlier recommendations, the CPRE encouraged master's degree programs to include content related to public relations ethics and law, global public relations, as well as management and behavioral sciences.

Briones and Toth (2013) later conducted a content analysis to assess to what extent graduate programs reflected the 2006 CPRE recommendations. They found "little movement toward uniformity of curriculum" (Briones & Toth, 2013, p. 128). While the majority of the programs did offer courses in public relations research, communication processes, theory, and programming and production, less than one-third provided courses in public relations ethics, law, and global public relations. They cautioned, "Without more standardization across graduate programs, public relations educators and practitioners risk greater disaffection with the value of an advanced public relations degree" (Briones & Toth, 2013, p. 130).

In the 2012 report, the CPRE shifted their recommendations to focus on specific content areas rather than courses, including strategic public relations management, business principles, communication/

public relations theory, research methods, global influences on public relations and ethics. The strategic public relations management focus area encompassed organizational management, relationship management, public relations in a digital environment, ethics, law, crisis communication and risk communication. The Commission also listed a range of skills that students should acquire during their graduate education including oral and written communication, strategic planning, ethical decision-making, issues management, leadership, critical thinking, and problem-solving. At the time, the CPRE (2012) described practitioners' perceptions of master's degrees as "lukewarm support" (p. 35). Finally, they discussed a "fork in the road" depending on whether students were pursuing an academic or professional career, and recommended that students intending to pursue a doctoral degree complete a thesis and additional courses in research while students pursuing a professional career in public relations complete additional courses focused on a specialized area of practice (e.g., healthcare, sports) and an internship or practicum.

In recent years, the rapid growth of fully online courses and hybrid learning models, which combine online and face-to-face instruction, has highlighted the increasing demand for adaptable learning methods in higher education (Gotlieb et al., 2017; EAB, 2015). Online courses provide significant flexibility, catering to public relations professionals who must balance both career and family responsibilities (Gotlieb et al., 2017). The hybrid model has progressively established itself as a highly effective approach in public relations master's education, combining the adaptability of online learning with the essential benefits of face-to-face interaction (CPRE, 2012). Research indicates that students tend to favor hybrid learning, as it provides the convenience of online education while ensuring meaningful interaction and sustaining learning depth (Weissmann et al., 2019). However, the expansion of online courses in public relations education is not without its challenges. These include

not only instructors' skepticism regarding the effectiveness of online teaching and the complexities of curriculum design and management but also the potential experiential dissolution that students may experience in environments lacking face-to-face interaction, further leading to lower levels of motivation and engagement (McKeever, 2019).

In 2019, scholars examined online master's degree programs through a content analysis of university websites and interviews with graduate program directors (Weissmann et al., 2019). They found that 45% of the programs required 36 or more credit hours, and the majority of the programs required a capstone or applied project as a degree requirement.

Learning Theories in the Context of Graduate Education

Senat and Grusin (1994) applied different learning paradigms to the study of graduate education, including perennial analytic, practical inquiry, and critical praxis (Schubert, 1986). The perennial analytic paradigm is focused on gaining specific knowledge, and the "scholar and textbook are considered the subject experts" (Senat & Grusin, 1994, p. 21). The practical inquiry paradigm is associated with solving specific problems (Senat & Grusin, 1994). This type of learning would be associated more with case studies, internships, campaigns, and capstone projects. The critical praxis paradigm "seeks justice and the correction of inequities," and primary research would be the source of knowledge (Senat & Grusin, 1994, p. 21).

In a similar vein, Russell (1999) recommended specific pedagogical approaches in her report on the "ideal" professional master's degree program. Her recommendations included dialogic learning with class discussions, individual learning such as research assignments, collaborative learning through group projects, and experiential learning/ problem-based learning, including case studies, campaigns, internships, theses, and projects (Russell, 1999).

Industry Needs Related to Emerging Technologies in Graduate Education

The growing reliance of the public relations (PR) industry on digital media, data analytics, and artificial intelligence (AI) has introduced new challenges and developmental directions for public relations graduate education (Luttrell et al., 2021; McCollough, 2021). Jeong and Park (2023) emphasized that continuous advancements in digital technology require PR practitioners to acquire proficiency in social media strategies and data analytics to remain competitive in a rapidly evolving market.

In particular, AI and big data technologies play a critical role in relationship management and media management, providing precise data-driven insights that enable public relations professionals to formulate more scientifically informed strategies and achieve higher returns on investment (Phillips, 2024). The rise of generative AI has introduced new possibilities in crisis management. By simulating crisis scenarios for training or using data analysis for issue tracking, AI is helping public relations practitioners provide more efficient support in navigating complex public opinion and crisis situations (Luttrell & Wallace, 2025, p. 136). These digital technology trends have emerged as key drivers of changes in public relations curricula. However, when designing a master's program in public relations, educators often find it overwhelming and time-consuming to balance the ideal course content with emerging trends (Briones et al., 2017). This review of the literature leads to the following research questions:

> **RQ1:** What competencies do practitioners value in master's degree programs? More specifically, a) What areas of knowledge should public relations master's degree programs include? b) What skills should graduate students master? c) What courses in related disciplines should public relations master's degree programs include?

RQ2: To what degree do public relations practitioners value master's degrees in public relations or related disciplines?

RQ3: To what degree do practitioners value different delivery formats for master's degree programs (e.g., traditional on campus, online synchronous, online asynchronous, hybrid)?

RQ4: How do practitioners' preferences align with learning theories?

RQ5: To what degree do practitioners value professional certification programs?

Method

Based on the research questions, an online survey was conducted with an existing panel of practitioners recruited by the Commission on Public Relations Education to participate in research projects. This approach would be consistent with purposive and convenience sampling. The initial panel was comprised of 213 professionals who self-identified as working in public relations or a related discipline.

Considering survey research has previously been utilized for earlier reports published by the CPRE (1999, 2006, 2012), a thorough review of these reports took place prior to developing the questionnaire. Prior to data collection, the study was reviewed by the IRB at one of the research team member's universities and determined to be exempt.

The survey was conducted using Qualtrics, and a survey link was distributed to the CPRE panel of practitioners. In addition, the link and invitation to participate were shared on the CPRE's and its partners' social media accounts. Responses were collected between November 2024 and May 2025.

Sample

After removing responses from full-time educators and incomplete survey responses, the final sample included 119 practitioners. Specifically, the sample was comprised of predominantly women (64%) with an

average age of 47, almost 71% identified as white/Caucasian, and 42% of the respondents reported having 20 or more years of experience in public relations (see Table 1). In addition, 44.5% of the respondents reported that they serve in top management, and 19% in mid-management. More than 60% of the respondents reported that they are responsible for hiring public relations or communication practitioners in their department.

Measures

The 12 educators on the full CPRE Research Committee updated specific questions from the 2012 CPRE graduate education report to allow for comparison to prior studies and to ensure that measures were similar. New questions were added to address online/hybrid course delivery options and certification programs. The practitioners were asked to assess their degree of agreement regarding specific knowledge and skills that should be included in a master's degree program in public relations/ communication management using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The respondents were also asked questions regarding the importance of courses in related disciplines, program completion requirements, and their perceived value of master's degrees and professional certificates. The survey data were analyzed using SPSS.

Findings

Practitioners' Perceptions Regarding Essential Competencies

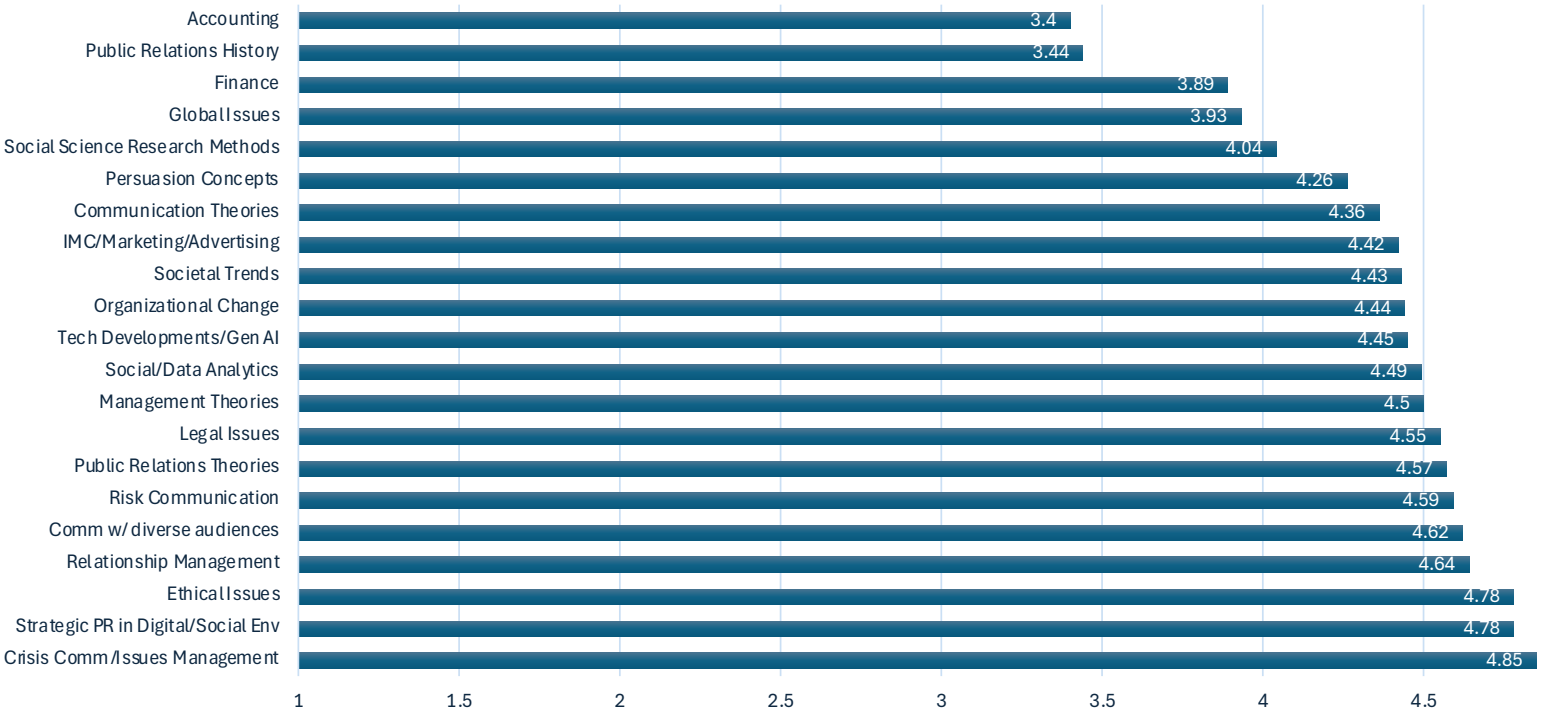
The first research question addressed practitioners' beliefs about what areas of knowledge, skills, and courses in related disciplines that master's degree programs should address. The participants were asked to evaluate 21 areas of knowledge and given the option to add to the list. The top areas of knowledge desired were: (1) crisis communication/issues management (M = 4.86); (2) strategic public relations in digital/social environment (M = 4.77); (3) ethical Issues (M = 4.74); (4) relationship management (M = 4.66); and (5) communicating with diverse audiences (M = 4.62) (see Figure 1). Only four areas of knowledge were rated lower

than 4.0 (i.e., agree), which indicates that practitioners valued many of the competencies. Participants also had the opportunity to enter additional areas of knowledge through an open-ended response question, which resulted in 15 entries, such as professional work behaviors, work ethic, time management, working as a team and critical thinking.

The respondents were next asked to rate 23 skills they believed should be mastered upon completion of a graduate degree program (see Figure 2). The top skills included: (1) mastery of language in written and oral form ($M = 4.66$); (2) strategic planning ($M = 4.6$); (3) interpersonal communication ($M = 4.55$); (4) crisis communication/issues management ($M = 4.54$); and (5) management of communication ($M = 4.52$). Only five skills were rated lower than 4.0 (i.e., agree), which indicates practitioners highly valued many of the skills included in the list. Participants also had

Figure 1

Desired Knowledge in Public Relations & Communication Management Master's Degree Programs



the opportunity to enter additional skills through an open-ended response question, which resulted in eight entries, such as budgeting, media relations, business acumen, project management, and measurement.

Finally, the participants were provided a list of 17 subject areas outside of public relations and asked to evaluate their importance in a public relations graduate program (see Figure 3). The top five types of courses preferred outside of public relations were: (1) organizational communication ($M = 4.45$); (2) organization behavior ($M = 4.17$); (3) marketing ($M = 4.15$); (4) mass communication law ($M = 4.13$); and (5) political/government policy and communication ($M = 4.10$). Participants also had the opportunity to enter additional areas of study through an open-ended response question, which resulted in six entries, including human resources, change management, and technology.

Figure 2

Desired Skills in Public Relations & Communication Management Master's Degree Programs

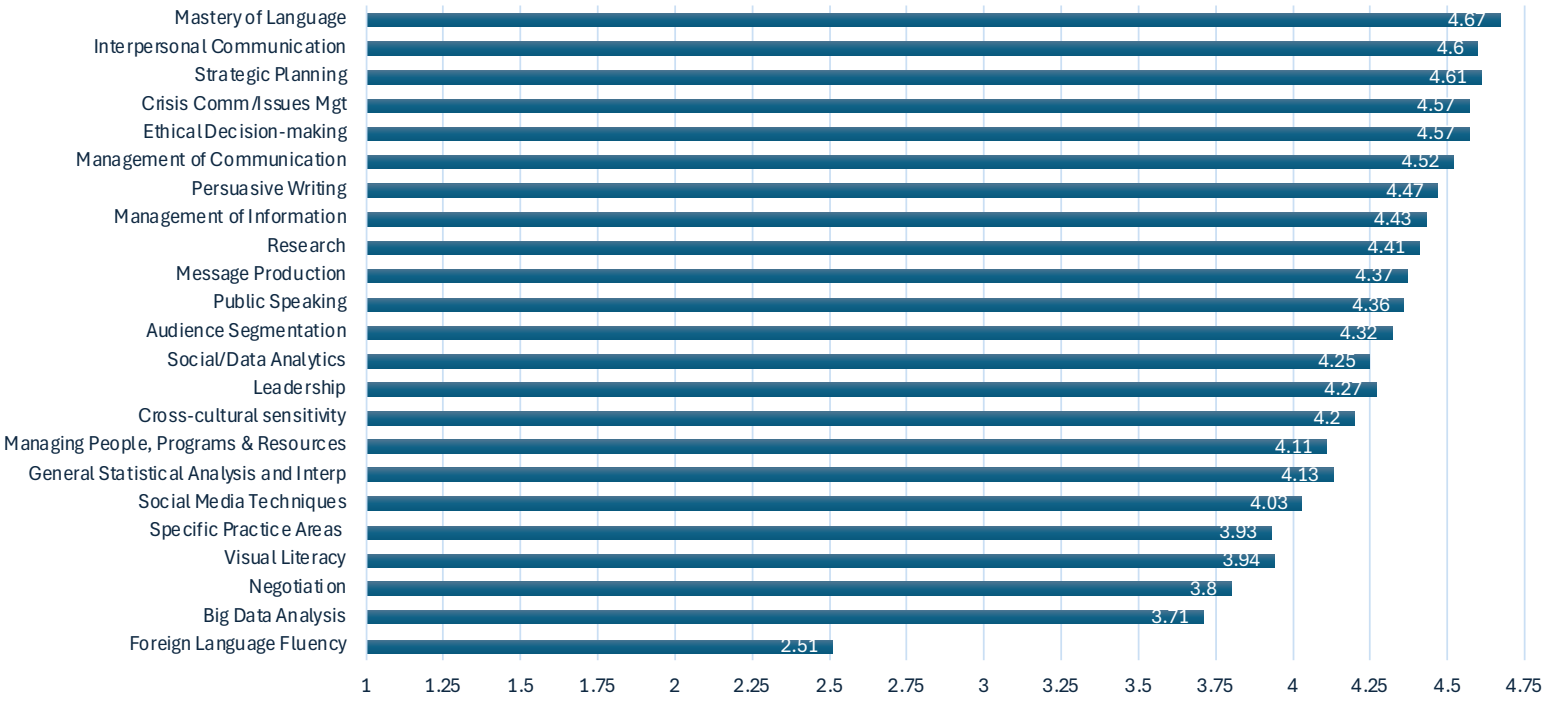
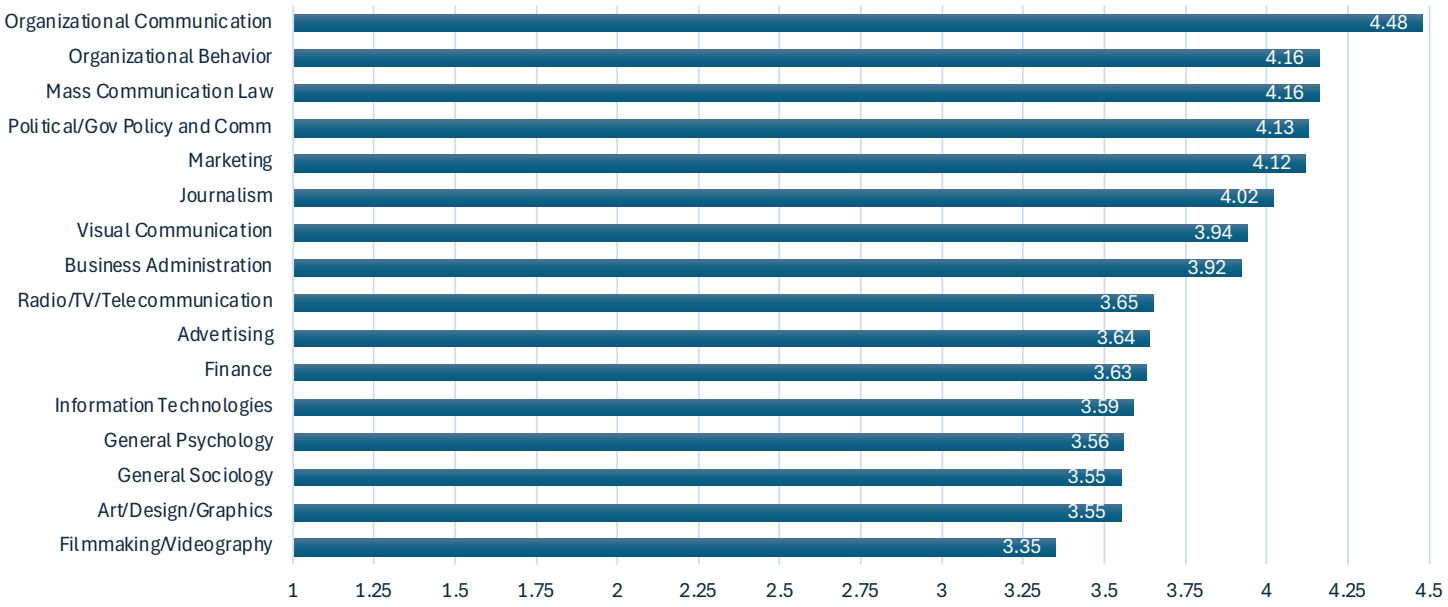


Figure 3

Desired Complementary Areas of Study in Public Relations & Communication Management Master's Degree Programs

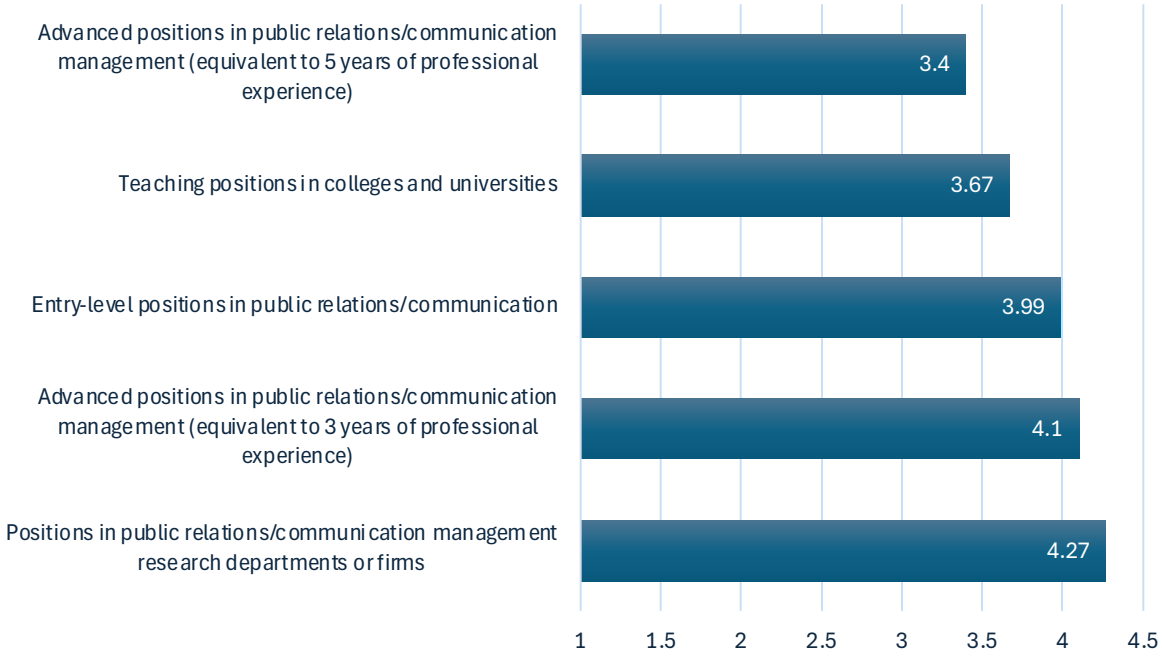


Perceived Value of Master's Degree Programs

The second research question addressed the degree to which public relations practitioners value master's degrees in public relations or related disciplines. First, practitioners were asked if their organization provides funding support for employees to pursue advanced degrees, and 41.2% responded "yes" ($n = 49$), 42.9% responded "no" ($n = 51$), 8 indicated they do not know, and 11 did not respond to the question. When asked the type of positions that a graduate with a master's degree would likely be qualified to fill, the strongest agreement was for positions in research departments of firms ($M = 4.25$) and advanced positions requiring at least three years of experience ($M = 4.05$) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Perceptions of Career Preparedness of Graduates with Master's Degrees



The participants were then asked for their agreement regarding various statements related to the perceived value of master's degrees. They were most likely to agree with the statement that a master's degree is valuable to the profession ($M = 3.99$), followed by a master's degree is beneficial ($M = 3.91$), and that a master's degree can advance a job candidate over a candidate with similar experience ($M = 3.71$) (see Figure 5). Perceptions of degree benefits also were examined by position level, which revealed that those in mid-management valued advanced degrees the most, and those in lower-level management and top management positions tended to place less value on graduate education in public relations (see Figure 6). The highest agreement across all four groups

was for the statement regarding a master's degree being beneficial for a career in public relations. An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare mid-management and top management perceptions. The test revealed only one statistically significant difference in perceptions and that was regarding a master's degree being beneficial for a career in public relations (mid-management $M = 4.3$, $SD = .87$, top management $M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.00$, $t(74) = 2.11$, $p < .05$). The sample sizes were too small to make valid comparisons among the lower-management and non-management respondents.

Figure 5

Perceptions Regarding the Value of Public Relations/Communication Management Master's Degrees

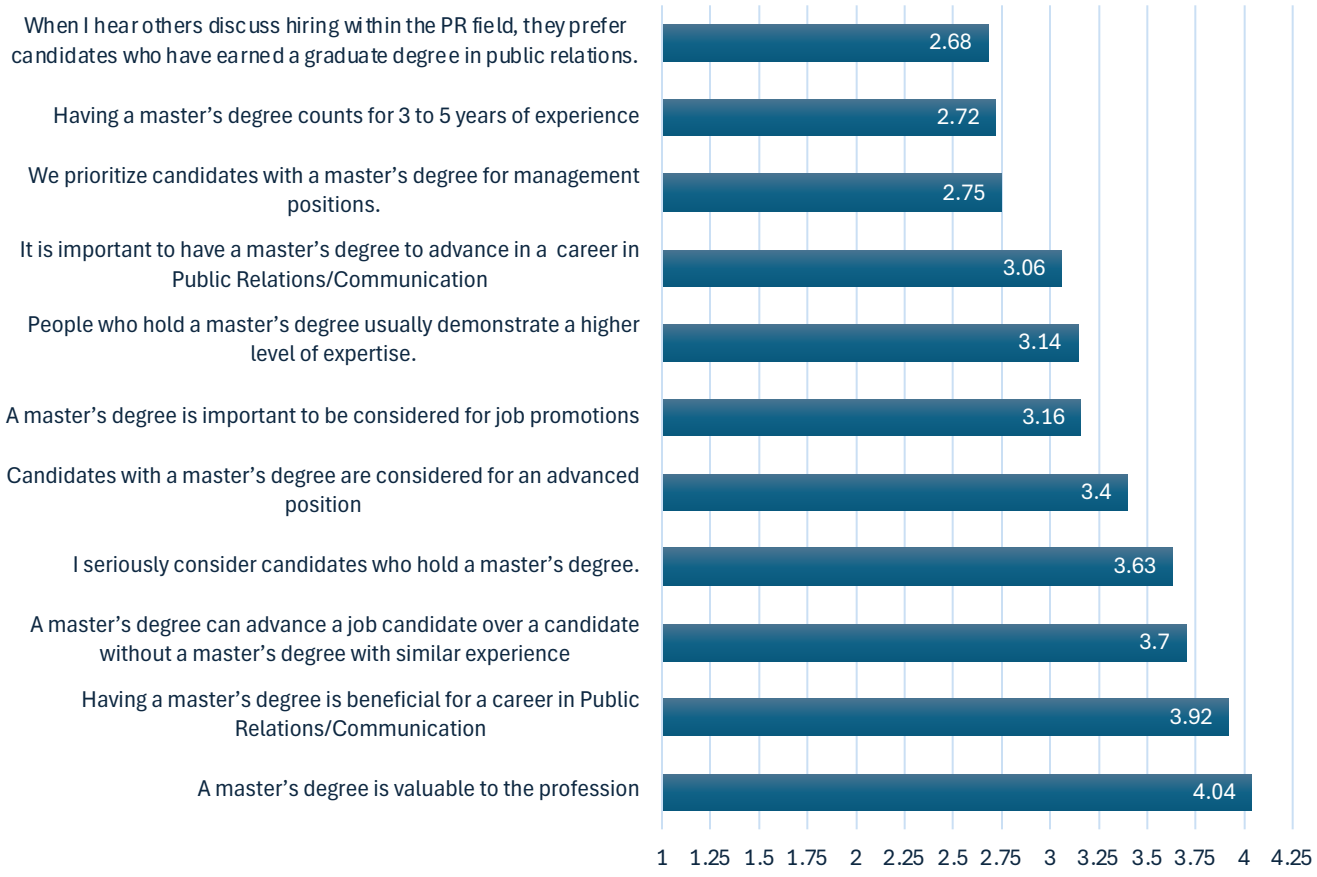
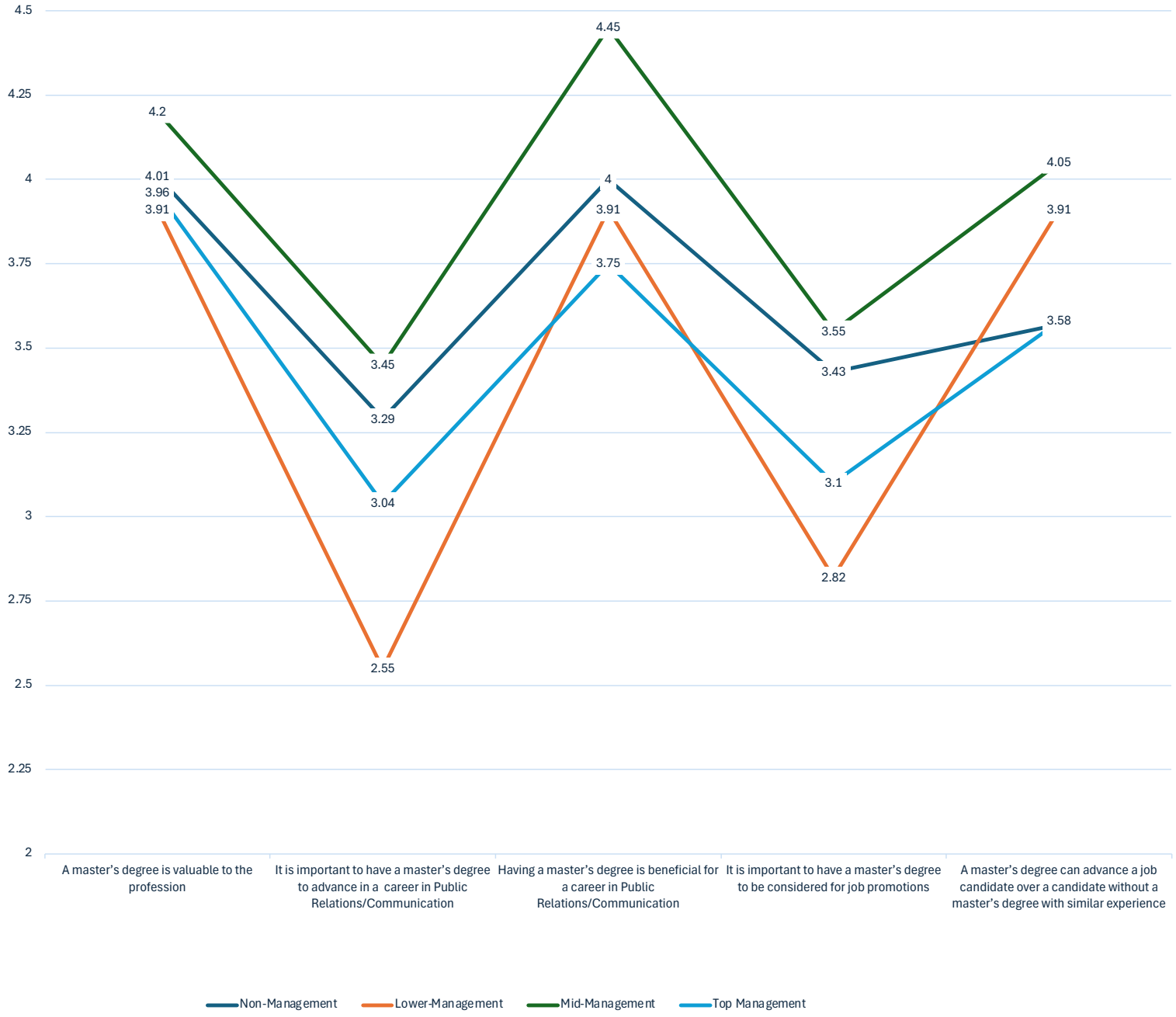


Figure 6

Perceptions of Public Relations Master's Degree Benefits by Position Level

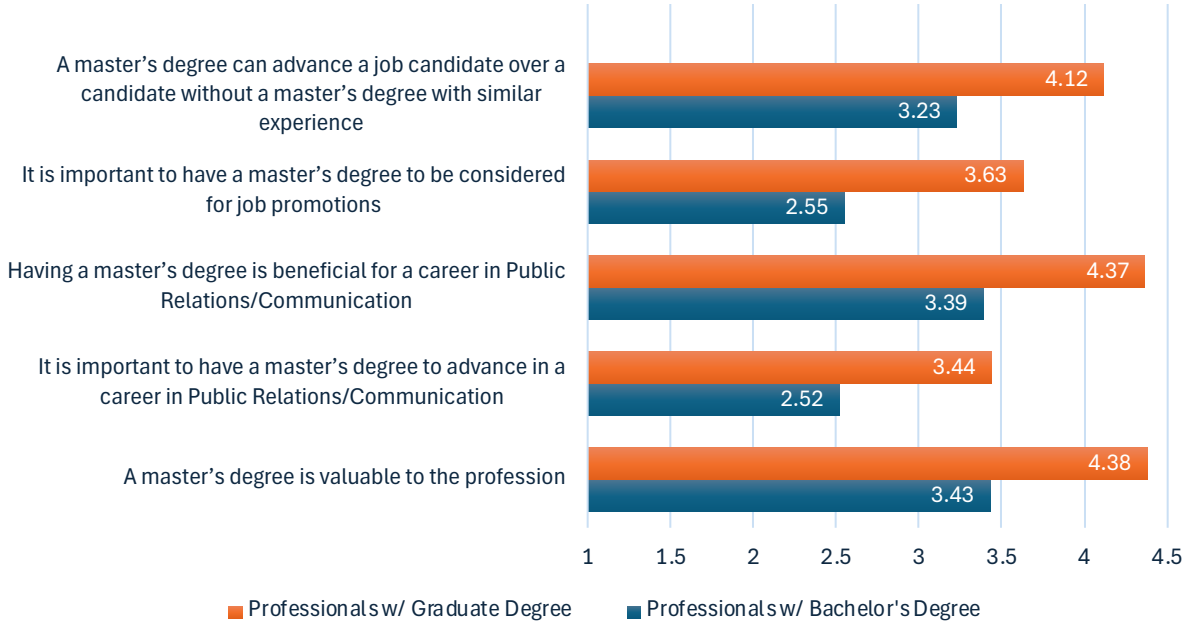


Note: Nonmanagement (n = 10), Lower-management (n = 16), Mid-management (n = 23), Top Management (n = 53); 17 participants did not complete the question regarding their position level, and 8 participants did not complete the questions regarding the perceived benefits of a master's degree.

We also analyzed perceived value by education level by comparing responses among those who had graduate degrees (i.e., master's or Ph.D.) and those with only a bachelor's degree. The responses to all of the statements were statistically significant when comparing the two groups ($p < .001$). T-test analyses revealed that groups significantly differed in their perceptions of the benefits of a master's degree. However, there was less agreement among those with graduate degrees that it was important for job advancement ($M = 3.63$ or career advancement ($M = 3.44$).

Figure 7

Perceptions of Public Relations Master's Degree Benefits by Education Level

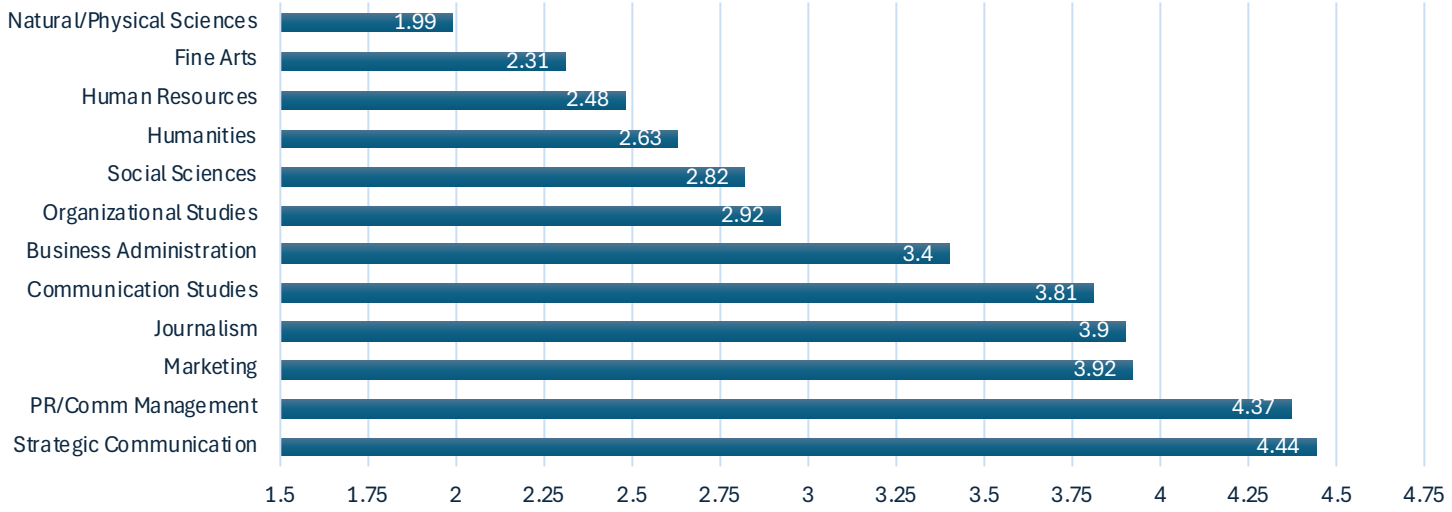


Note: bachelor's degrees only ($n = 44$), graduate degrees ($n = 57$), no response ($n = 18$)

Next, respondents were asked to what degree they value master's degrees in various disciplines in preparing candidates for jobs in public relations or communication management. There was a strong preference for degrees in strategic communication, public relations/ communication management or marketing, and less preference for degrees outside the discipline (see Figure 8). This aligns with the respondents' own personal educational backgrounds as the most common graduate degrees held by the participants were in public relations (n = 19) and communication/ journalism (n = 17), and the most common undergraduate degree major was in communication/journalism (n = 42) followed by public relations (n = 19).

Figure 8

Perceptions of the Value of Various Master's Degrees for Preparing Candidates for Public Relations or Communication Management Jobs



Preferred Course Delivery Formats

The third research question addressed the degree to which practitioners value different delivery formats for master's degree programs (e.g., traditional on-campus, online synchronous, online asynchronous, or hybrid). Their strongest preference was for a hybrid of in-person and synchronous delivery of courses (M = 3.92), followed by a traditional on-campus classroom experience (M = 3.84). The evaluations for other delivery modes were 3.66 for a hybrid of in-person and asynchronous delivery of courses, 3.11 for strictly synchronous delivery of courses, and 2.82 for strictly asynchronous delivery of courses.

They had strong agreement that the university housing the master's degree program should be accredited (M = 4.65), but lesser agreement regarding the type of accreditation (ACEJMC M = 3.9; PRSA certification M = 3.78).

Comparison of Practitioner Preferences & Learning Theories

The fourth research question examined how practitioners' preferences align with learning theories. When asked about their preferences for master's degree completion requirements, practitioners strongly favored a comprehensive project (M = 4.52) and internships (M = 4.10) rather than a thesis (M = 3.60) or comprehensive exam (M = 3.61). These forms of learning would be consistent with the practical inquiry paradigm (Senat & Grusin, 1994) and experiential learning (Russell, 1999).

Perceived Value of Professional Certification Program

The final research question addressed the degree to which practitioners value professional certification programs. The participants were asked about how much their organization values certifications generally and in specific areas. The strongest preference was for certificates in leadership (M = 4.64), followed by Artificial Intelligence (M = 4.51) and DEI (M = 4.44), and less agreement for certificates in Analytics (M = 4.25), Ethics (M = 4.12), or certificates in general (M = 4.23).

Discussion

Based on the results, there are several recommendations for graduate education in public relations and communication management. Practitioners indicated a strong need for skills and knowledge in the areas of crisis communication/issues management and ethical decision-making, and outside courses in mass communication law and organizational communication. Both ethics and law were recommended as core requirements in the November 2006 and October 2012 CPRE reports. More specifically, in the 2012 CPRE report, law was included in a section titled Strategic Public Relations Management that also encompassed organizational management, relationship management, ethics, crisis communication, and risk communication. While not directly related to graduate education, every five years, the Universal Accreditation's Practice Analysis conducts a national survey to assess the skills that are necessary for mid-career professionals. The 2024 study revealed the highest rated competency was managing relationships, followed by leading the public relations function/business literacy, crisis/issues management, and strategic planning (Neill et al., 2025). The results are similar to the core competencies identified in this study.

In the knowledge domains of graduate public relations education, areas such as strategic PR in digital/social environments, social/data analytics, and technology developments/generative AI received high ratings, reflecting the ongoing transformation within the industry. However, in the skills domain, traditional public relations competencies remain a high priority in practitioners' evaluations. Despite the growing demand for technical expertise, foundational communication skills continue to be viewed as essential for success. Practitioners recognize the value of technology but believe it should enhance rather than replace core skills in communication and management (Freberg & Kim, 2018). Regarding preferred courses, traditional public relations topics still dominate, closely aligning with practitioners' emphasis on core skills.

Despite the increasing role of technology, practitioners believe that the work still heavily depends on interpersonal interaction and situational judgment (McKeever, 2019). In this context, technology is considered more of an auxiliary tool, rather than a replacement for the human role in decision-making and emotional communication.

As expected, practitioners indicated a strong preference for capstone projects and internships as graduate degree completion requirements. This is consistent with Hon et al.'s study (2004), which found practitioners had a strong desire for practical experience. This finding is also consistent with results from the 2012 CPRE report and aligns with the practical inquiry paradigm or experiential learning (Russell, 1999; Senat & Grusin, 1994). At the same time, practitioners agreed that people with a graduate degree could be considered for advanced positions requiring at least three years of professional experience, which is also consistent with the 2012 CPRE report. Unfortunately, analysis by position level revealed that those serving in lower-level management and top management positions perceived less value in graduate degrees in public relations. These findings are consistent with the 2012 CPRE report that found a "lukewarm" perception regarding the value of graduate education, suggesting that significant progress has not been made in improving the perceived value of advanced degrees in public relations. However, those working in mid-management positions did have more favorable perceptions regarding the value of master's degrees by agreeing that they are valuable, beneficial, and can advance a candidate over someone who has not obtained an advanced degree.

Following the shift to online education, which accelerated during the global pandemic, it was important to assess practitioners' perceptions regarding course delivery options. Based on this survey, they preferred in-person, synchronous, and on-campus instruction, and disfavored strictly asynchronous delivery of courses. This latest result aligns with existing research, which revealed that hybrid models, offering flexibility while

maintaining critical in-person interaction, are favored in fields like public relations (McKeever, 2019; Weissmann et al., 2019). This preference reflects broader trends in public relations education, where environments that offer flexibility are valued without compromising these essential interactive elements. Regarding another trend, the rise of professional certifications, the practitioners valued them; however, the focus area mattered, with a preference for training in leadership, AI, and DEI.

Implications for Public Relations Graduate Education

Educators continue to face the primary challenges associated with professional degree programs, which have to balance teaching students critical thinking and practical skills (Soloski, 1994). While practitioners are always going to prefer practical experience, educators also realize the importance of theory and research courses in master's degree programs, especially because master's degree programs also need to meet the educational needs of students interested in pursuing careers in academia. To address this dilemma, graduate students should continue to be able to choose between a thesis or capstone project based on their career goals. In addition, educators can build experiential learning into their curriculum through team projects, use of case studies, campaigns, and internships (Russell, 1999).

It was also enlightening to see that ethics was third among desired knowledge and sixth among desired skills. Two recent studies provided insights regarding what types of ethics skills are desired and considered lacking in public relations today (Neill, 2023; Neill et al., 2024). Neill et al. (2024) also provided recommendations of teaching resources and pedagogical approaches to address these deficiencies.

Finally, it is interesting to note that 33% of the sample indicated that they had obtained the APR credential through the Public Relations Society of America, which some consider comparable to a master's degree. However, it can typically be obtained in less than one year. Educators must continue to enhance the perceived value and relevance of a

graduate degree or other professional education training programs, which might be perceived as better alternatives.

Limitations

While this study provided relevant insights regarding practitioners' perspectives on graduate education, the sample lacked diversity as the majority of the participants were women, and almost 45% were serving in top management roles. This reality limited the ability to analyze the results by different segments such as gender, position level, or experience. In addition, the respondents were primarily from the U.S., as only 11 participants indicated living outside the U.S. (e.g., Canada, United Kingdom, India, and Australia). Finally, the survey had a high dropout rate, as 158 accessed the survey and completed the screening questions, but 29 eligible participants failed to complete the first question regarding areas of desired knowledge. This demonstrates a limitation to the use of volunteer samples and the need to provide incentives for longer surveys. Despite multiple attempts to share the survey link with CPRE partner organizations and an extended data collection time of seven months, the final sample size is smaller than desired, limiting the ability to generalize the findings. However, the majority of those who completed the survey were seasoned practitioners with many years of experience and were serving in leadership roles. In comparison, the 2012 CPRE study reported a sample of 292 practitioners (Shen & Toth, 2013), and the 2023 CPRE report on undergraduate education reported a sample of 269 practitioners. Future research should be conducted with practitioners working in other nations to determine their priorities for graduate education and understand whether differences exist between cultures and countries. Perhaps, a global study might reveal stronger preferences for skills in cross-cultural sensitivity or fluency in another language. Qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews might also provide valuable insights regarding why those in lower-level management and top management did not value graduate education as much as those in mid-management positions.

Conclusion

This study, led by a team of scholars within the CPRE Research Committee, provides important insights regarding the knowledge and skills practitioners believe should be addressed in public relations graduate education. In addition, the results revealed that the perceptions regarding the value of master's degrees have not improved over the past decade, particularly among lower-level management and top management.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Gender	74 women, 22 men, 1 non-binary, 18 prefer not to disclose
Race/Ethnicity	White/Caucasian 71%, African American 6%, Asian 1.7%, Spanish/Hispanic 6%, Prefer not to answer 12%
Undergraduate Major	Communication/Journalism 33.3%, Public Relations 16%, Humanities 5.9%, Social Sciences 5.9%, Business 4.2%
Graduate Major	Public Relations *n* = 19, Communication/Journalism *n* = 17, Business *n* = 12, Social Sciences *n* = 5, Humanities *n* = 2, Other *n* = 13, no response/inapplicable *n* = 51
Years of Experience	6.7% 1-5 years 10.9% 6-10 years 13.4%, 11-15 years 12.6% 16-20 years 42% 20+years
Years of Management Experience	21.8% 1-5 years 16.8% 6-10 years 9.2% 11-15 years 7.6% 16-20 years 23.5% 20+years
Position Level	Non-management 8.4% Lower-level management 13.4% Mid-Management 19% Top Management 44.5%
Highest Degree	Bachelor's 37% Master's 42.9% Doctoral 5%
Credentials (e.g., APR)	PRSA *n* = 38 IABC *n* = 2 Chartered Institute of Public Relations *n* = 5 Florida Public Relations Association *n* = 4

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Appreciative but Battered: The Bittersweet Experiences of Former Black Public Relations Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

This study extends the scholarly literature that addresses diversity issues in public relations graduate education by focusing on the lived experiences of former Black graduate public relations students (all of whom were practitioners before full-time or part-time university teaching). By conducting in-depth interviews of nine participants, we assess the experiences they had in their graduate programs as well as how those experiences manifest in the relationships that they have (or had) with their Black graduate students. Results from this study provide practical insights that have the potential to assist public relations graduate programs in the recruiting and retaining of Black graduate students.

Keywords: public relations, graduate education, Black students, challenges, opportunities

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Despite attacks in the United States levied against both the higher education degree and the longstanding belief of the degree's value (see Naz, 2025 or Kurtzleben & Nadworny, 2025, respectively), the historical and contemporary data highlighting the benefits of earning a college degree are robust (Newton, 2021; Rose, 2013). These data indicate that college graduates amass greater lifetime earnings in comparison to high school graduates; they experience lower unemployment rates; they experience greater civic involvement; they are more likely to have full-time jobs, and they tend to secure jobs with better benefits, including paid vacation, flexible work arrangements, health insurance, and retirement. All these factors contribute to greater long-term financial stability and security (Newton, 2021; Rose, 2013). Most projections show that despite public skepticism about the cost and value of a college degree, a bachelor's degree will significantly increase the chances of securing a well-paying job in the future (Palmer, 2024). It is for these reasons that education has been touted as the mythological great equalizer, the means of social class mobility and more positive health outcomes, particularly for first-generation college students and other marginalized community members (Holmes & Zajacova, 2014).

If the bachelor's degree is perceived to be the panacea, the proverbial golden goose, or the ladder to social mobility, particularly among marginalized community members, the thought of pursuing graduate education might feel unnecessary to some if the bachelor's degree has equipped them with the requisite knowledge and skills to land a job in the industry (Waymer & Taylor, 2022). However, in their study of undergraduate applied communication students attending a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), Waymer and Taylor (2022) found that the majority of their participants believed that the master's degree was the de facto modern day "new bachelor's degree"; therefore, participants "knew they needed to go back to school eventually to 'stay ahead,' earn

their desired salary, or achieve other long-term goals" (p. 55). Thus, most expressed some desire to pursue a master's degree at some point in the future. This logic aligns with the logic espoused on several graduate programs' websites that promote the master's degree as a means of upskilling and advancing (e.g., Georgetown University, 2025).

Waymer and Taylor's (2022) study, albeit an important one, represented only one side of the coin. In essence, they explored how, as a discipline, public relations and other applied communication disciplines might recruit more Black students into graduate programs by gauging interests, unearthing barriers to application or entrance, and identifying tactics, initiatives, strategies, and programs that might be useful for the successful placement of Black undergraduates into graduate public relations and communication-related programs. On the other side of the coin, this study extends the scholarly literature that addresses diversity issues in public relations graduate education by focusing on the lived experiences of former Black graduate public relations students (all of whom were practitioners before full-time or part-time university teaching). In this study, we assess the experiences they had in their graduate programs as well as how those experiences manifested in the relationships that they have (or had) with their Black graduate students. From a practical perspective, these experiences have the potential to assist public relations graduate programs in recruiting and retaining of Black graduate students.

Literature Review

The Chicken or the Egg: Diversity Issues in the Public Relations Industry Begets Diversity Issues in PR Education or Vice Versa?

The public relations industry has long struggled with representative workforce diversity. For decades, the profession has been disproportionately White. A 2018 *Harvard Business Review* analysis found that the U.S. public relations workforce was about 87.9% White and only 8.3% Black or African American (Chitkara, 2018). This imbalance led

Vardeman-Winter and Place (2017) to describe public relations as still a "lily-white field of women" (p. 326), harkening back to Layton's (1980) first use of the term in the early 1980s.

Recent data suggest modest improvements; however, the disparities in racial/ethnic composition of the public relations workforce remain stark between White individuals and those constituting non-White groups, including Black or African Americans. By 2021, some studies indicate that government statistics reflect that about 83.7% of PR specialists were White, with roughly 12.3% Black/African American (Tsai et al., 2023) (an increase in Black representation compared to a few years prior). As of 2024, research shows that "Black people comprise just 9% of those working in entry-level PR specialist roles" (Carter, 2024, para.1). Despite the modest increase in the percentages of Black practitioners working in the public relations field, industry observers continue to describe PR as "too white," noting it does not reflect the rapidly growing diversity of the U.S. population.

A particularly troubling aspect is the lack of diversity at leadership levels (Bardhan & Gower, 2022), meaning that once we advance beyond the entry-level positions, the disparity is further exacerbated. Some scholars in the discipline have examined this phenomenon under the framework of glass ceiling effects (Pompper, 2011; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017); more recently, however, public relations education researchers have described this phenomenon as a PR industry "bottleneck"—whereby professionals of color are less likely to ascend to senior management (Tsai et al., 2023). Regardless of the label we use to conceptualize this workplace challenge, industry reports indicate that this issue is the result of rooted and systemic flaws in recruitment (see Waymer et al., 2025), retention (Wallington, 2020), and promotion practices (see Bridgen & Zele, 2025; Tindall, 2009a). In response, major PR associations such as the Public Relations Society of America's Diversity & Inclusion

Committee have called for concerted efforts to improve recruitment, retention, and advancement of racial and ethnically underrepresented practitioners

While Black practitioners are underrepresented in the public relations industry, they are also underrepresented in the academy. Crucially, many scholars and practitioners point to the "Pipeline" problem – the notion that the dearth of diversity in the PR workforce is rooted in a lack of diversity among students and educators in PR programs (Waymer & Brown, 2018; Waymer & Taylor, 2022). This is likely the case because public relations is an applied discipline; it is an academic discipline with close ties to industry and one that leans heavily on industry connections to inform the curriculum and to prepare students for industry (see Commission on Public Relations Education, 2025); and as some scholars have put it: students cannot be what they cannot see (Brown et al., 2011); therefore, the lack of Black faculty, mentors, and guest speakers is a major contributing factor to the small number of Black individuals entering the profession (Brown et al., 2011; Waymer et al., 2015).

In short, there are systematic problems in public relations education. These problems include a lack of diverse racial/ethnic representation among the educator ranks—as indicated above—as well as a lack of underrepresented concepts, theories, people, and voices in learning—as indicated below. For more than three decades, scholars have been highlighting this issue (see Kern-Foxworth 1990). More contemporary work highlights the need for scholars and teachers to use frameworks such as Whiteness or Critical Race Theory (CRT) (see Pompper, 2005; Waymer, 2021) to help faculty and students engage with race, ethnicity, and broader diversity themes to enrich the academic environments by incorporating and interrogating these themes—connecting them with and grounding them within historical and social contexts (Holbert & Waymer, 2022; Waymer & Dyson, 2011).

This literature review and, by extension, this study are significant. Here is a brief summation and overview of the challenge that prompted this study. There is a dearth of Black public relations practitioners (see Wallington, 2020). Due to systemic flaws in retention and promotion practices, Black practitioners do not advance in the industry and, at times, leave the industry altogether (Bridgen & Zele, 2025; Taylor et al., 2025; Tindall, 2009a; Wallington, 2020). Black students have indicated that they desire more Black faculty (Brown et al., 2011). Having more Black faculty is one way for academic units to appear more attractive to potential Black undergraduate public relations majors (Waymer et al., 2025). The issue is compounded because in many states in the United States, accrediting bodies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (2018), require that faculty hold, at a minimum, a master's degree to be qualified to teach. Thus, in order to increase the number of Black faculty teaching at a university, then we must focus on increasing the number of Black students pursuing graduate degrees.

As a discipline, it is difficult to staff courses with more Black faculty, full-time or adjunct, if they do not possess a graduate degree. So, a critical question explored via the literature unearthed factors that impeded HBCU undergraduate students from pursuing graduate education in the discipline (Waymer & Taylor, 2022). This study explores the other side of the coin: when Black students decide to pursue graduate education, what were their lived experiences like?

We now turn to a review of Black graduate students' experiences in the academy writ large.

Black Graduate Students in the Academy: Challenges and Experiences

To understand more fully the experiences of Black students in public relations, in general, and in graduate education, specifically, it is essential, first, to situate this discussion within the broader context of

Black graduate students' experiences across the academy. The Whiteness of the academy manifests not only in demographic composition but in epistemological assumptions, pedagogical approaches, and professional socialization processes that position Whiteness as the unmarked norm (Patton, 2016). Black graduate students often face pressure to assimilate into White academic culture while simultaneously being viewed as representative spokespersons for their entire race (Park & Bahia, 2022). This double bind is particularly pronounced for first-generation doctoral students, who navigate academia without the cultural capital and insider knowledge that their White, continuing-generation peers often take for granted (Posselt, 2018). We further explore the challenges and experiences, per the academic literature, of Black graduate students below.

Research consistently reveals that Black doctoral and master's students experience significant difficulties as they navigate predominantly White institutional spaces. This difficulty is experienced by Black students in a myriad of forms. Forms that are important but less critical include, but are not limited to, non-White graduate students frequently experiencing racial tokenization, frequently feeling the pressure to conduct deficit-focused research on their own communities, and often lamenting the systematic lack of diversity in curricula and faculty (Park & Bahia, 2022). The difficulties experienced by Black graduate students that take on more dire consequences include, but are not limited to, social isolation, microaggressions, hypervisibility and its related effects of being surveilled constantly, feelings of impostor's syndrome, and other indicators of not belonging to a social space (Merriweather et al., 2022; McGee et al., 2021; Miles et al., 2020; Wallace, 2022). These difficulties experienced are not insignificant—as research has found that due to their severity, these experiences have contributed to some Black students exhibiting symptoms of PTSD (Smith et al., 2007).

If there is a salve, or universal balm, if it were, to soothe some of these challenges Black graduate students encounter, it would be high-quality, effective mentorship—as mentorship emerges across disciplines as a critical protective factor. Studies show that sustained mentorship can reduce isolation for Black graduate students; furthermore, studies indicate that culturally responsive mentoring relationships—particularly those relationships with faculty who share racial identity or with faculty who demonstrate cultural humility—play a positive and significant role in Black graduate student persistence and success (Felder, 2010; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008). Yet access to such mentorship remains limited, given the severe underrepresentation of Black faculty. Black professors compose only about 6% of college faculty nationwide, while Black graduate students constitute about 11% of domestic graduate students, creating a mentorship gap that leaves many Black graduate students without same-race role models or advocates (Kim et al., 2024; Pew Research Center, 2019).

In sum, the marginalization of Black early-career scholars extends beyond graduate school into faculty positions, where those who successfully complete doctorates face continued barriers in hiring, tenure, and promotion (Griffin, 2020). This creates a self-perpetuating cycle: the scarcity of Black faculty limits mentorship for current Black graduate students, which in turn affects doctoral completion rates and the pipeline of future Black faculty (Posselt & Grodsky, 2017). The young, Black mentors themselves need mentorship, yet find themselves being thrust into the mentor role or feeling compelled to be THE mentor for the underrepresented before they themselves might be ready or equipped to do so (Waymer, 2012). This can lead to burnout or less-than-ideal mentorship of graduate students. This is a general problem across the academy and persists in the context of Black PR faculty and graduate students. We now shift our focus to relevant literature pertaining to Black graduate students in public relations.

Black Graduate Students in Public Relations

This link between industry and academy underscores the importance of addressing diversity issues in graduate education. Specific to this study, it is important to note that Black professors remain severely underrepresented nationwide, comprising only about 6% of college faculty even as Black students make up roughly 14% of undergraduates (Pew Research Center, 2019). Given the pipeline concerns, understanding the status of Black students in PR graduate programs is essential. Unfortunately, specific data on Black enrollment in PR master's programs are limited, as PR often falls under broader communications disciplines. Available statistics indicate that Black students remain a minority in graduate communications fields (Esters, 2017). Analysis of the available data indicates a concerning lack of Black students pursuing advanced PR degrees, which affects the talent entering the profession (Landis, 2019; Waymer & Taylor, 2022).

Most existing research on Black students in public relations education is almost exclusively conducted with undergraduate populations (e.g., Brown et al, 2011). For example, research by Brown et al (2019) found that underrepresented PR students (including Black/African American students) often reported a less positive experience compared to their White peers. These students were less likely to develop strong support networks, felt lower levels of comfort in peer interactions, and struggled with a sense of belonging in their programs. Such outcomes are linked to the racial makeup of PR classes – underrepresented students may be one of only a few people of color in a predominantly White cohort, which heightens feelings of isolation or tokenism (Brown et al, 2019). However, new evidence offers hope: one study found that, for those who do make it through and enter the PR field, race/ethnicity itself did not hinder early-career success among young professionals (Waymer & Brown, 2018).

Regardless of academic discipline, mentorship emerges as a recurring theme – having Black faculty or mentors, identity-based student associations, and inclusive peer communities can significantly bolster underrepresented students' confidence and persistence (Tsai et al., 2023). Even though most of the published research on Black students in public relations has been conducted with undergraduate populations, the findings remain relevant to this current study because they provide the impetus to explore whether similar sentiments are held by Black students who pursued graduate education in public relations. In short, Black graduate students, like their undergraduate counterparts, remain underrepresented in PR education, and they are likely to face distinct challenges once enrolled. As such, we suggest that to improve recruitment and retention of Black graduate students, researchers should highlight the importance of culturally responsive support systems. Broadening and developing further the pipeline will require both increasing the number of Black students who enroll in these programs and creating and fostering an environment where Black graduate students can thrive. This involves proactive mentorship, accessible role models, and a curriculum (e.g., Place & Vanc, 2016) that validates diverse perspectives.

Hence, we present the following research questions:

RQ1: How do former Black graduate students talk about their experiences as graduate students in public relations or applied communication graduate programs?

RQ2: Considering their experiences as Black graduate students, how do Black faculty talk about strategies for Black graduate public relations student recruitment and the impediments to successful Black graduate public relations student recruitment?

Methods

The purpose of this study was to focus on the lived experiences of former Black graduate public relations students (all of whom were practitioners before full-time or part-time university teaching). To do this,

we conducted a total of nine in-depth interviews for this study. Consisting of five women and four men, all participants identified as African Americans. We asked participants specifically about their experiences in public relations graduate programs. The breadth of participant experience ranged from recent doctoral graduates to adjunct professors to academic deans to nonprofit leaders, all of whom had some industry experience prior to positions in academia. Each participant attended full-time graduate programs. Prior to graduate school, participants attended both predominantly White institutions and historically Black colleges and universities. Lastly, some participants reported being affiliated with professional organizations such as the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), the National Communication Association (NCA), and the International Communication Association (ICA).

We used Zoom (a cloud-based video conferencing platform) to conduct these interviews based on spatial alleviations and the transcribing capabilities afforded by the platform. To ensure rich responses, we developed a thorough and structured interview guide, allowing for open-ended responses to the questions. Questions presented in this study were divided into two categories: their graduate education and their faculty member experience as related to their encounters with Black graduate students. We asked follow-up questions when appropriate to further expand on the concepts presented when answering the initial question. We concluded the interviewing process once we reached saturation – redundancy of themes across participants (see Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Tracy, 2025).

While the sample size may appear small in comparison to other studies, repetition of themes and concepts is more important in qualitative research. Given the specific focus of this study (the lived experiences of Black graduate students in public relations programs), rich insights are more appropriate than attempting to make broader generalizations

(see Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Tracy, 2025). We recruited interview participants using the purposive sampling approach; specifically, we relied on the authors' personal and professional networks, as three of the authors identify as Black and have all attended full-time public relations graduate programs in years prior. In purposive sampling, the goal is not generalizability; rather, the goal is to gather rich, in-depth data from participants who can share the most valuable information, such as those with unique expertise or experiences. Purposive sampling allows for the targeted selection of "information-rich" cases to explore complex phenomena. We felt that this approach was best-suited given the small number of Black professors in the academy. Furthermore, we were careful not to recruit faculty who likely could serve later as blind peer reviewers on this project. As such, via our purposive sample, we recruited from across the United States tenured faculty at research institutions, persons who held graduate director roles in their academic departments, junior-level HBCU faculty, adjunct faculty, full-time lecturers, and current doctoral students. We hoped that these varied institutional types, geographical diversity, and varied faculty ranks represented would add to the richness of our responses.

The first author and second author are tenure-track faculty members at large, U.S. Carnegie-designated research institutions. The third and fourth authors are currently doctoral students at large U.S. Carnegie-designated research institutions. Although participants were recruited, their participation was completely voluntary, and participants were free to skip any question they were not comfortable answering. The recording times ranged from 43:17 to 1:09:10 for the nine interviews. Interviews were recorded via Zoom and stored in the cloud. The platform's transcription service was used, and all transcripts (and recordings) were reviewed for accuracy.

Interview Protocol

There were three categories of questions asked during the interviews: graduate education, Black faculty member experience in PR graduate programs, and final thoughts. Under the category of graduate education, five questions were asked: (1) what inspired you to pursue your graduate education, (2) what challenges (if any) did you encounter as a Black graduate student in your graduate program, (3) what opportunities (if any) were afforded to you as a Black graduate student in PR and how did you learn of these opportunities, (4) what strategies are you using to create opportunities for current Black PR students, and (5) were you mentored as a graduate student and do you mentor graduate students.

All nine of the participants have taught public relations courses either currently or in the past. Therefore, a category that focused specifically on their experience as a Black faculty member in public relations related programs was included in the interview to gauge (1) their assessment on if they have seen an increase or decrease in Black students in their classrooms, (2) what they see as their role in recruiting and retaining Black graduate students in PR, (3) their relationship with Black graduate students in PR, (4) any strategies they could offer institutions of higher learning for recruiting Black graduate students in PR, and (5) what role they saw organizations such as AEJMC, NCA, and ICA playing in recruiting Black graduate students. Before the interview concluded, all participants were asked if they had any final thoughts related to the topic of their experiences as a Black graduate student and/or faculty member in public relations.

Data from the interviews were analyzed by both rewatching the saved Zoom recordings and reviewing the transcripts provided by the platform. Upon rewatching the videos and verifying the accuracy of the transcripts, all nine of the interviews were coded deductively in

response to the research questions at hand. The answers to the questions were explored and coded into themes. The coding process was complete once the list of themes proved to be repetitive and exhaustive (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Tracy, 2025). Due to the sensitive nature of sharing one's lived experiences, the identity of the participants is confidential, and pseudonyms are used throughout this study.

Findings/Results

In this study, we sought to examine the lived experiences of Black practitioners and academics who matriculated through a public relations program of study, whether at the master's or doctoral level. To gather their accounts of their lived experiences, we asked participants about their graduate education experiences, their experiences as a Black graduate faculty member, and we provided them the opportunity to share any final thoughts as they pertained to the topic of graduate education in public relations. We developed the interview questions with the intent of being able to assess both the challenges and opportunities participants faced during their graduate education and to illuminate the ways in which their graduate education experiences manifest, or not, in their role as Black faculty members in a graduate program. Each of these categories produced its own themes. The results of these interviews are as follows. We present, first, the dominant themes in response to RQ1.

Reasons Why Black Public Relations Graduates Pursued Graduate Education

Responses for the question of what inspired participants to pursue graduate education yielded four key reasons: encouragement of others, lack of representation in the field, credibility for career advancement, and the underperforming economy.

Encouragement of Others

Several of the participants noted that encouragement from others was a primary factor in their decision to pursue graduate study. Two

responses are highlighted as they best reflect the sentiment of other participants. Respondents Olivia and Johnathan note that the decision to get an advanced degree was motivated by others. While Johnathan, a communications leader for a nonprofit, highlighted his parents as being motivators because of their own advanced degrees, Olivia, a recent Ph.D. grad and current instructor, shared that it was her mentors who saw something in her that was the catalyst. She stated, "It was mostly just mentors, I guess, seeing the potential in me and, you know, I'm very appreciative of that. And that was why I decided to, you know, go to graduate school."

This shows the important role that faculty advocates or mentors (or parents as graduate degree holders) can play in encouraging and, in some instances, convincing Black students to pursue graduate education. If Black undergraduates are eager to graduate and earn money to live (Waymer & Taylor, 2022), faculty advocates or mentors likely must play a pivotal role in helping them see the opportunities that graduate education affords them. Without such encouragement, they are likely not to pursue advanced degrees.

Lack of Representation in the Field (and its Associated Challenges)

All respondents noted the lack of representation in graduate academic public relations spaces. Katrina (a recent Ph.D. graduate student with decades of industry experience) said her reasons for obtaining an advanced degree were twofold. First, she was looking to make a career change from journalism to public relations. She, however, believed that such a transition would be more difficult for her, being a Black woman; therefore, she sought out a master's degree to get her the "credential" she needed to transition—something that she believed her White counterparts did not do if they wanted to transition. Second, she was dissatisfied with Black underrepresentation in academic spaces and figured she could be a

part of the solution. She lamented:

> I wanted to transition into PR from being a journalist but couldn't [do so easily] like white counterparts. So I needed to go back and get a master's; only saw one Black professor in the J-school of undergrad and realized that the lack of representation in the space was a problem; I knew from my experiences that mentorship and that allyship, and that someone who knows your lived experiences and can talk to those with you are critical. And I thought through, you know, like, maybe if I had had someone that looked like me in my undergraduate experience that could talk me through what it was going to be like when I went into the industry.

Having a Black mentor or ally likely could have made a considerable difference in assuaging the challenges this participant encountered as a graduate student. Stated simply, the belief that it is easier for White persons in comparison to Black persons to transition into public relations without the degree in the discipline highlights, whether real or perceived, the barriers to entry for underrepresented persons in the field of public relations.

Credibility for Career Advancement

Two responses are highlighted to demonstrate this theme. Cameron (a tenured professor) and Tia (an adjunct professor and industry professional) shared that their motivations for graduate education were to earn a credential and credibility to move up the ranks in their careers. In particular, Tia discussed the importance of advanced degrees for Black women by suggesting the following:

> I feel like for women of color, particularly African American women, you having advanced degrees is a key way to credibility, and so I couldn't just rely on having a bachelor's degree. I had to keep going, in my opinion, to demonstrate to employers to my colleagues that I was competent enough to do the job, and so, whereas I do feel like a lot of my white counterparts can just rely

> on one degree, I often feel like from my personal experience, I was not going to have that luxury. And so that was really a main motivator. I needed the credibility and so I feel like it's necessary for the earning potential. In order for me to be able to climb the ladder, or to be in a position to make the money that I feel like my intelligence can afford me, I needed those degrees behind my name.

Tia's response reflects a common perception in the Black community that Black individuals face: deep-seated, systemic barriers that require them to put in additional work and effort to achieve the same level of success as their White counterparts –that is the Black Tax (Hicks, 2021; White, 2015).

Underperforming Economy

The last theme we highlight that reflects why Black graduate students pursued graduate education is related to the underperforming economy during their time of completing their undergraduate degree. For Catherine, a business owner and online instructor, the economy was "trash" when she graduated, and it was hard to get a job in the industry.

Research has shown that "Black workers have historically been the first to have their employment terminated when times get tough for businesses" (Dean, 2025, para. 2). In these situations, higher education can be thought of as a safe investment during economic downturns. However, for Black individuals, it can be the differentiator needed to set them apart (see credibility for career advancement theme above).

Most Significant Challenges Encountered As a Black Graduate Student

In our attempt to answer RQ1, we also highlight two dominant themes that represent the most significant challenges that Black graduate students encountered in their academic programs. In some form, these themes were present in the responses of all participants: being the only one and a lack of mentorship.

Being the Only One

Cameron, Johnathan, and Tia forcibly noted that being Black, sometimes the only one, in their programs became an obstacle for a number of reasons, including being on an island, not having community, or seeing representation. Cameron (a tenured professor) explained:

> I think the master's program, like the biggest challenge, actually was being, like, the only black male in a program that was predominantly, almost exclusively, composed of white women. But you know, it kind of put me on an island. And part of it was also I was the only one that was doing a thesis, whereas the rest of them were doing a project….having a mentor who just kind of identified that, you know. It might be helpful to actually get a perspective from a black man that is, like, doing this now was a good first step.

Isolation, for Black students, is magnified in graduate school (Johnson-Bailey, 2008). And in this instance, Cameron's mentor played a pivotal role in connecting him with another Black man in public relations, at another university, who could serve as an additional mentor to help Cameron navigate the academic space.

Lack of Mentorship

A recurring theme from the literature review and from our findings is that mentorship (or the lack thereof) matters significantly. And as indicated above, even when addressing issues of being "the only one," culturally responsive research can mitigate the negative feelings of isolation. Donovan, Tia, and Johnathan recall there not being any opportunities for them in graduate school, with Donovan in particular noting that it was "kind of sink or swim" environment.

We asked the respondents to reflect on the support they offer or the opportunities they seek out or create for their Black PR students. What is revealing is that many respondents discussed their motivation for providing such opportunities as a manifestation of the fact that they longed for such experiences–but never received them–as students. In thinking

about creating opportunities, Donovan said the fact that he did not have any mentors became a motivator to create opportunities for his Black PR students. Julia and Cameron noted that while they create opportunities for all of their PR students, they specifically offer mentorship (both formally and informally) to their Black students, with Cameron adding that he brings students along to help with his research. Catherine stated that she provides opportunities for her Black PR graduate students to work with her company on various PR related projects so that they can gain experience as well as research opportunities. Regrettably, Tia (an adjunct professor and industry professional) reported that she just didn't have the time to create opportunities for students. As she noted:

> I did not have the bandwidth to be able to even extend myself to help those students. That comes with so much invisible labor . . . we as faculty are trying to keep our head above water while trying to support these students. It's just not sustainable. So, I feel like as my tenure as a professor, I just didn't have the bandwidth to even help students in need, because I was just trying to help myself.

While not all participants taught graduate students, the ones who did shared that they do mentor their Black graduate students through sharing their experiences, creating research opportunities for them, and being a safe space. Surprisingly, one participant, Catherine (a business owner and online instructor) shared that she has stopped mentoring students as it relates to them seeking advanced degrees. She expressed the following:

> I did but I have stopped in the academic space because I was mentoring a few students, and they got their master's, and some of them wanted to get their PhD. But some of them had experiences that were really, like, similar and because I was not at their university, I felt terrible for leading them into it. Like, the very thing that I know was detrimental for me emotionally, and so I stopped mentoring on that level. I'll mentor in life, and if you want to go in the industry, like, I'll help mentor there. But on the

> graduate student, I mean, of course, like getting your master's yeah, for sure. I've helped a lot of students get their master's. But like going beyond that, I relinquish. You know, because if I'm there, it's one thing, but if I'm not there at the institution, then I just can't vouch for it.

As Smith et al. (2007) found, Black graduate students can exhibit symptoms of PTSD. Catherine, in her experiences, has taken the approach of shielding students from the trauma she experienced. So, she has stopped advising Black graduate students to pursue the Ph.D. in most instances.

Impediments of Successful Black Public Relations Graduate Student Recruitment —A Faculty Perspective

In answering RQ2, none of the respondents stated that they saw an increase in the number of Black students pursuing graduate degrees in public relations. Instead, they reported either seeing a decrease in the number or flat enrollment as it pertains to the number of Black students interested in public relations-related graduate programs. Three participants all noted that they mostly see Black students who are interested in studying public relations in undergraduate classes, but unfortunately, that interest does not translate to interest in graduate programs. When asked directly what factors they thought are contributing to flat or declining interest of Black graduate students interested in pursuing public relations, participants articulated students being job-focused, lack of outreach and awareness about the field, changing communication landscape, and lack of diverse faculty representation as the key factors. Given space considerations, brief examples of each are provided.

Students Being Job-Focused

Just as economic factors might contribute to Black students pursuing graduate degrees in public relations, when the economy is strong, Black students tend to be job focused as Catherine noted. Donovan, an academic administrator, suggested:

> Most of the students who are studying PR, that I've seen are more like, "Can I get a job?" I know during the pandemic a lot of

> students—because the economy was so bad—were, you know, going to you know, going into graduate school. Because they said, "Well, might as well." And that's not necessarily a good motivation for pursuing it…But again, I just don't see that level of proactive outreach for our students of color.

Lack of Outreach and Awareness of the Field.

Oliva (a recent Ph.D. graduate), however, noted that there just might not be an awareness that graduate school is an option. Speaking from her own experience, she stated:

> The option probably was just never mentioned to them. Like, I know for me personally, I did not think about graduate school until someone pointed out to me, so I did not even think it was an option for me, you know, and that may also be the case for them. I know that there's this preconceived idea or notion where you only go to graduate school if you can afford it, or if you're like an exceptionally smart student, and a professor tells you that, "Hey, you should do graduate school," which I know now is not the case. But I'm still seeing with a lot of undergrad students who still feel that way. And then from what I've heard from one or two students, I don't believe they know that, you know, it's open to them, that they have the option to do it.

Changing Communication Landscape

"Tia" (an adjunct professor and industry professional) declared that the changing communication landscape, which involves economics, converging media, and the rise of influencer culture, can potentially explain the lack of interest by Black graduate students in public relations. She suggested:

> I think it may just be because where I teach, I teach at a predominantly white institution that doesn't hide its political ideologies the best. And so I think that that may be a reason why I don't see the amount of students of color in my graduate program. And I also think societal forces. There's a bit of a negative

> connotation when it comes to getting a communication degree or communication-related degree, such as PR, because we see so many influencers, so much citizen journalism, that people may think like, "Wow! The cost of college is going up. Do I really need to go to school to go do this thing that I see somebody doing on TikTok?" And PR is so specialized, and people often don't know the difference between PR-related jobs activities versus marketing versus advertising, that the value of having a PR-related education is conflated with those other subjects that students may not even know that it's worth pursuing.

Lack of Diverse Faculty Representation

Cameron and Katrina mention that there is a lack of representation in the field, as public relations is still viewed as a "White woman's industry," and that there is a need for more proactive recruitment of students of color.

Because faculty members often play a role (whether formally or informally) in the recruitment of students, we asked the nine participants what they felt their role was in recruiting and retaining Black graduate public relations students. The responses were mixed, with some participants detailing what they currently do to recruit Black students into the discipline and others blatantly stating that they actively try to dissuade students from seeking out graduate school. For Julia, talking to students, sharing her experiences, and writing letters of recommendation for graduate school is how she sees herself as recruiting Black students to graduate programs. Similarly, Katrina finds that being hands-on and transparent, in addition to having conversations about her experiences and writing letters of recommendation, is her way of recruiting. For Olivia, she states that her role in recruiting and retaining Black graduate students in public relations is the representation that they need to see. For Olivia (a recent Ph.D. graduate):

> It's representation, you know. If you can see them, you can be them, and I don't believe that they're exposed to enough black faculty. Who's telling them that "Yes, you can do this. Yes, you can go to grad school," you know. "Yes, you can work in PR. Someday, yes, you can get your master's. Yes, you can get your Ph.D." Representation is kind of like to put Black faculty in front of these students and let them know, like, even if you don't take these classes, I'm still here.

For Tia, she feels that her role in recruitment and retention is limited in her role as an adjunct. However, Cameron and Catherine shared similar views of not recruiting Black students to graduate programs. For Catherine, as indicated above, she noted that she recruits for master's level studies, but that she cannot vouch for the doctoral level because of her experiences as both a student and professor. Cameron (a tenured professor), on the other hand, feels that there might be an oversaturation of Ph.D. students in general. He stated, "I try to talk more students out of academia than I do like talking them into academia….I think we're oversaturated with doctoral, with doctoral students".

Strategies for Successful Black Public Relations Graduate Student Recruitment —A Faculty Perspective

Aside from what they personally do to recruit and retain Black graduate students to public relations graduate programs, participants were also asked what other strategies they thought could be used. Recruiting from HBCUs and fixing the academic system were the two most salient themes. Having honest conversations and meeting students where they are on social media, for example (undergrads), talking to high school students about the field (meeting them where they are), or having conversations with professionals looking to leave the industry, were also mentioned as viable strategies to employ. But we highlight the two prevailing themes below.

HBCU Recruitment

Johnathan (a nonprofit director) shared:

> I went to an HBCU. I was a communications major, and so, you know, there were classes full of Black people trying to make a career in public relations type activities…I would suggest recruiting from HBCUs…And I think, as an industry they're missing out. We're missing out on a lot of talent that could be, you know, accessed.

Fixing the Academic System

Participants noted that recruiting Black students is a wonderful goal, but unless the systemic issues in the academy are addressed, we would not be able to retain these students. According to Catherine (a business owner and online instructor):

> I think we have begin to fix a systematic issue because we can recruit more of them, and they can come, and they can have bad experiences, and they cannot get jobs, even though they have degrees. It's an issue at the core…If the systematic issues are not fixed. they're just gonna bounce all around.

An aspect of fixing the system is getting academic organizations such as AEJMC, NCA, and ICA to make a united front, share resources, and "include recruitment and matters of people of color in their overall mission as opposed to just only focusing on these issues in subgroups like the Black Caucus" according to "Malcolm" (a teaching professor). At the very least, Tia and Olivia believe that these organizations should be facilitators of awareness in ways that increase the credibility of the field, showcase mentorship programs, and provide opportunities for Black graduate students. For Donovan, these organizations should form an alliance, especially during this time. He shared:

> I think it's critically important. And frankly, I don't know what the NCA or ICA or others are doing particularly

> during this this time of you know, intense pressure and persecution. But I mean, I firmly believe in kind of like what Dr. King said, "You know it's not where you stand in times of comfort." It's time it's where you stand in times of controversy and conflict. So where do we stand on that?

Cameron (a tenured professor) suggested fixing the system by going beyond grad school fairs and implementing an intense, immersive mentor program for potential Black graduate students. He noted:

> Have like an academic workshop weekend, where you actually bring them to a campus or something like that, and they work with Black PR professors. I would actually be interested in doing things like that if you sat there and told me. All right. Look where we're gonna invite 20, you know, potential doctoral students to campus for a weekend and have them like pair up with a Black faculty member. And just basically like, you know, work for a weekend on a particular project or something like that. Yeah, I'll do it because I feel like that's a lot more beneficial than some of the more formalized like group things that we're doing now. I think that's a lot more beneficial than a grad school fair will be.

Discussion and Conclusions

Black undergraduate public relations students have indicated that they desire more Black public relations faculty (Brown et al., 2011). In many states in the United States, accrediting bodies such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (2018) require that faculty hold, at a minimum, a master's degree to be qualified to teach. As a discipline, it is challenging to staff courses with Black faculty, full-time or adjunct, if they do not possess a graduate degree. So, while prior studies have examined factors that might impede HBCU undergraduates from pursuing graduate education (Waymer & Taylor, 2022), this study asks individuals to reflect on their lived experiences

as former Black graduate students in public relations. We believe that understanding the lived experiences of Black students in public relations graduate programs is essential for recruiting and retaining them.

As such, this exploratory study is guided by two research questions:

> **RQ1:** How do former Black graduate students talk about their experiences as graduate students in public relations or applied communication graduate programs?
>
> **RQ2:** Considering their experiences as Black graduate students, how do Black faculty talk about both strategies for Black graduate public relations student recruitment and the impediments to successful Black graduate public relations student recruitment?

We articulated three broad takeaways from the findings. First, Black undergraduate students really are unsure about what a graduate degree in public relations is or what such a degree can do for them professionally, so pursuing a graduate degree felt a bit foreign to them. Second, a trusted mentor or advocate identifying Black undergraduates as promising graduate students can be one of the largest influencers in their decision to pursue graduate study. Such an action mattered greatly to our participants. Third, our findings are consistent with the broader scholarly literature that highlights the challenges that Black graduate students encounter in academic spaces, regardless of the discipline they are pursuing. These challenges include feelings of isolation, a lack of culturally responsive mentorship, feelings of hypervisibility, and the feeling of being expected to represent their race in research and in other avenues. Black graduate students in general have exhibited symptoms of PTSD, and some scholars have referred to this phenomenon as racial battle fatigue (Ragland Woods et. al, 2021). Some of our participants spoke of their experiences using language that is akin to a trauma-like response.

Our findings indicate that the experience of Black students in public relations graduate programs has been bittersweet. All our

participants earned their graduate degrees and currently teach college students in some capacity. While they are all grateful for the opportunity to attain graduate degrees and stand in the gap to be the representation they wish they would have had, the opportunity does not come without its challenges of loneliness, systemic hurdles, and invisible labor.

These participants had the unique perspective of being former Black graduate students and currently serving as faculty members; therefore, they can speak to the challenges facing contemporary Black public relations graduate students. Participants attributed the current lack of an increase of Black graduate students interested in public relations as a field of study in part to the lack of Black representation in both the industry and within the faculty teaching them. However, what is noteworthy is that after these faculty were "shown" by a mentor the possibilities and potential promise of what the future could hold for a Black public relations graduate degree holder, they jumped into a program—motivated to pursue the advanced degree (so that they can be present and mentor others like them). Yet, it was in those experiences as graduate students and then subsequently as faculty that they realized that the academy was lonely, and they barely had the capacity to survive the academy themselves. So, they experienced a double bind of reliving their loneliness that they experienced as graduate students, and those negative feelings were compounded when they also recognized they had limited ability as a faculty member to adequately address the needs of those students in need. They, too, as faculty suffered, as they shouldered the invisible labor that accompanies being "the only one"—in this case, a Black public relations faculty member—in these academic spaces. Sadly, because of these experiences, some participants have decided to discourage Black public relations students from pursuing advanced degrees, as a means of shielding and protecting them from loneliness and trauma-like experiences they themselves endured as graduate students.

Nearly 20 years ago, Natalie Tindall (2009b) wrote an article

titled "The Double Bind of Race and Gender: Understanding the Roles and Perceptions of Black Female Public Relations Faculty." In this study, she found that the intersecting aspects of race and gender deeply affect the lives of Black women professors who teach in the public relations discipline. Black women faculty, according to Tindall (2009b), must traverse a difficult road as they navigate the responsibilities of teaching, service, mentorship, and in some instances scholarship. Our findings indicate that, while progress has been made in this area since Tindall's study, the industry and academy are moving at leaden, dilatory speeds in addressing the issues that Black faculty, in general, and Black women faculty in the field of public relations encounter routinely.

Despite these obstacles and challenges, we believe that recruiting and retaining Black public relations graduate students is a worthwhile and noble pursuit. However, participants via their responses overwhelmingly indicated that even though there is a need for more Black people in the public relations field, in both academia and industry, they believe that positive systematic changes in the academic environment are needed to occur before active recruiting of more Black graduate students can take place. Specially, creating an environment where students feel a sense of belonging would be beneficial to their success in the program. Student groups, mentorship, community, and representation are all ways that we can begin to ensure that Black students thrive in our programs of study.

With that thought from the participants in mind, we provide at least one possible direction forward. To successfully recruit and retain Black graduate students to public relations programs, universities and national academic organizations alike should ensure that these universities have community-building mechanisms in place. For example, just like faculty cluster hiring initiatives have been touted as a way to increase faculty diversity at universities (Flaherty, 2015), public relations academic units across the country interested in increasing diversity in their graduate

programs should partner with national projects such as the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program or the Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) Compact for Faculty Diversity Initiative.

The intent of the McNair Scholars Program, a federally funded program, is to encourage students from underrepresented or low-income backgrounds to pursue a Ph.D. The program provides support through academic advising, mentorship, research opportunities, and financial assistance. In a similar vein, the Compact for Faculty Diversity is part of a national initiative designed to produce more underrepresented Ph.D. graduates; the intent is to encourage those graduates to pursue faculty positions. Public relations programs in academic/athletic conferences such as the Big Ten or SEC could each recruit approximately two Black graduate students into their programs via McNair or SREB. To build community, they could rotate hosting the students on their campuses for mentoring and professional development, and they could schedule routine virtual meetings for the students as a part of a comprehensive effort to provide a supportive academic environment for these students. Not every Big Ten or SEC university would have a Black public relations faculty member; however, the conferences as a whole can lean on the willing faculty who can serve as mentors to a cohort of Black graduate students. In this way, the mentorship load can be shared among Black faculty, and this can also serve as a means for them to establish community and mitigate feelings of isolation. As indicated above, national-level funding and longstanding programs with proven success exist—public relations as a discipline should find innovative ways to partner with these initiatives to do a better job of recruiting and retaining Black graduate students.

In conclusion, understanding cultural differences means understanding the different needs and challenges that one might face. As the common idiom goes, doing the same things repeatedly but expecting different results is insanity. If we truly want to diversify public relations

with more Black graduate students, we can no longer continue to recruit Black students into an atmosphere where they feel they do not belong, where they don't see themselves, and where they don't have mentors. We must create a space and atmosphere where these students can thrive and want to stay. If they stay and complete, at minimum, the master's degree, they can be the instructor of record for the next great Black public relations pioneer (Heinrich, 2015) whether they be an industry icon or an academic wiz.

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Shaping Future Professionals: Industry Perspectives on Graduate Internships

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ABSTRACT

For graduate students in public relations, internships are essential in translating theory to practice. Their supervisors often presume they will deliver on day one, due to the depth of knowledge and experience gained as advanced degree seekers. However, there is increasing criticism that colleges may not provide them with enough practical preparation, as many pause that development at the undergraduate level. To explore how graduate programs can better prepare advanced students for industry expectations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with public relations experts. Results indicated that professionals are concerned about graduate students' writing, interpersonal and networking abilities. Suggestions for curriculum improvements are discussed, along with future directions and limitations.

Keywords: public relations, industry perspectives, internships, interviews, graduate education

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In a rapidly evolving communication landscape, the field of public relations (PR) demands not only strong theoretical understanding but also advanced professional skills that can be applied in high-pressure, real-world contexts. Graduate programs in strategic communication face increasing pressure to produce graduates who are not only intellectually equipped but also professionally agile (Briones & Toth, 2013). Internships (sometimes interchangeably referred to as apprenticeships or practicums) are structured, professional field experiences that provide applied learning opportunities for graduate students in public relations. They have emerged as a critical bridge between the classroom and the workplace. These experiences allow graduate students to test concepts, refine competencies, and contribute meaningfully to professional organizations. However, while much attention has been paid to undergraduate internships, there is comparatively little empirical insight into what PR professionals specifically expect from or value in graduate students in similar roles (Waymer & Taylor, 2022; Zheng & Bluestein, 2021).

Graduate students occupy a unique space in the talent pipeline. They are generally older than undergraduates, often possess previous work or internship experience, and are expected to contribute at a more strategic or leadership-oriented level. This distinction raises important questions about how industry professionals perceive their roles, readiness, and value (Shah et al., 2015). Are graduate students being utilized in distinct or elevated ways compared to their undergraduate counterparts? Do public relations firms and departments see them as high-performing assets, or do expectations fall short of their potential? Most crucially, how can graduate programs adapt their curricula to better align with industry standards and needs?

The existing literature on experiential learning in PR largely focuses on undergraduate internships and student-run agencies (Maben & Whitsen, 2013), emphasizing skill development, résumé building, and

early professional exposure (Rodino-Colocino & Berberick, 2015). These studies, while valuable, tend to overlook the role that graduate students are expected to play within organizations—roles that often require a deeper understanding of research methods, campaign strategy, organizational behavior, and media analytics. Additionally, industry bodies such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE, 2023; 2012) have increasingly encouraged stronger university-industry partnerships, but few formal guidelines exist for how graduate student internships should differ from their undergraduate counterparts.

This gap in the literature signals a need to investigate the expectations, priorities, and evaluations of those directly involved in supervising and mentoring graduate interns. This study seeks to uncover what an array of public relations professionals from all three sectors—agency leaders, nonprofit communication directors, and government communication staff—find most valuable in graduate interns and asks them what graduate programs in strategic communication can better prepare their students for the challenges of current industry practices.

The aim of this study is not only to identify desirable traits and skills of potential graduate interns, but also to illuminate broader dynamics at play in these relationships, including mentorship, institutional support, and professional development. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing more intentional, outcome-driven internship experiences that benefit both students and host organizations. These insights are particularly relevant for program directors, internship coordinators, and course leads who seek to strengthen graduate-level experiential learning in public relations. By collecting qualitative insights from professionals who work closely with graduate apprentices, this research hopes to contribute to a more nuanced, practical understanding of graduate-level experiential learning in public relations. Specifically,

it offers (1) an industry-informed competency profile for graduate interns, (2) actionable curriculum recommendations, and (3) practical implications for internship design and assessment within graduate PR education.

Literature Review

Overview of Graduate Education in Public Relations

Conservatively, there are at least 120 U.S. institutions of higher education offering graduate degree programs in strategic communication and public relations across both public and private universities (Briones & Toth, 2013). Enrollment per program varies widely from smaller professional cohorts that range from 15 to 30 per class to online cohorts that serve more than 100 students per year.

U.S. master's degree programs typically require between 30-36 credit hours, completed over 1-2 years, often in hybrid or evening formats to accommodate working professionals. Graduate programs in communication and public relations differ widely in focus and format. Models such as the Master of Science in Journalism (MSJ), Master of Mass Communication (MMC), and Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) each balance theory, research, and applied practice differently (Quesenberry, 2015; Weissman et al., 2019). These programs also vary in delivery, residential, hybrid, or online, affecting how students access professional networks, mentorship, and internship experiences. Core curricula emphasizes strategic communication theory, research methods, writing and analytics, ethical decision-making, crisis and stakeholder communication, and media relations**.** The pedagogical focus integrates experiential learning—through capstones, internships, and professional mentorship—to prepare students for increasingly strategic and leadership-oriented roles (Briones et al., 2017). Undergraduate and graduate public relations curricula differ significantly in both scope and depth, reflecting the academic maturity and professional goals of their respective student

populations (Watson & Wright, 2011). At the undergraduate level, PR programs typically emphasize foundational skills including writing press releases, creating social media content, managing media relations, and understanding campaign development, to equip them with applied skills and entry-level job readiness.

In contrast, graduate programs prioritize advanced, strategic thinking, and leadership preparation. Graduate students are expected to analyze complex case studies, lead campaign design, and evaluate communication strategies using data-driven insights. Unlike undergraduate programs, which are generally structured around learning core concepts, graduate curricula focus on solving real-world communication challenges, often through capstone projects, client-based internships, or thesis research (Watson & Wright, 2011).

Graduate Students as Industry Interns

Public relations professionals often view graduate students as more strategically aligned, skillful, and mature than undergraduate candidates. Empirical studies published in *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* reinforce the value of practitioner-modeled experiential learning environments. Notably, Bush et al. (2017) analyze student-run PR agencies and demonstrate how participation cultivates advanced leadership, strategic planning, and real-world client engagement skills. Industry practitioners frequently cite that graduate interns bring a higher level of writing proficiency, analytical abilities, and professional maturity to the workplace (Rothman, 2017). Graduate students are often positioned to take ownership of projects, operate with minimal supervision, and contribute more significantly to campaign development and analytics. These expectations mirror the Commission on Public Relations Education's 2012 call to educate master's students for "complexity" and strategic decision-making, as well as the 2025 follow-up graduate education report.

In recent focus group studies with marketing practitioners representing agencies, nonprofits, and government institutions, consensus was reached that internship hiring managers favor graduate candidates when seeking interns capable of contributing at a higher strategic level rather than entry-level execution (Gault et al., 2010; Hoyle & Deschaine, 2016; Kroon & Franco, 2022). In contrast, undergraduates are more commonly preferred for roles focused on basic tactical execution, making them less appealing for organizations needing deeper analytical or strategic support (Daugherty, 2011; Hynie et al., 2011).

Taken together, prior research points to a clear set of competencies employers expect from graduate interns (e.g., strong writing, analytical ability, strategic thinking). However, existing scholarship also suggests that while these competencies are valued, they are not always systematically cultivated within graduate curricula, signaling a persistent preparation gap that warrants further examination.

Gaps in Graduate Programs' Preparation of Students for Employment

While graduate public relations programs have expanded in scope and enrollment, significant gaps remain in how well they prepare students for the complexities of today's communication workforce. These shortcomings span both curricular design and practical training, often leaving graduate students underprepared for the strategic demands of professional roles (Neill & Schauster, 2015).

One of the most commonly cited gaps is the disconnect between academic instruction and workplace application. While graduate curricula emphasize theory, research methodologies, and strategic planning, they often fall short in offering opportunities for applied learning, which typically occur as group projects in campaign/capstone courses (Watson & Wright, 2011). According to the CPRE, although strategic thinking is a central goal of graduate instruction, few programs require internships that

embed students directly in the working world (Gregory & Willis, 2022).

Additionally, many graduate students report limited exposure to project management tools, client relations, or cross-functional collaborations that are increasingly expected in agency and corporate environments (Schoenberger-Orgad & Spiller, 2014). While students may be strong writers or researchers, they often lack hands-on experience with industry-specific software, lack an understanding of how internal and external relationships develop within the workplace, and have trouble navigating internal politics of organizations. Employers routinely express a desire for interns and entry-level hires who can manage multiple deadlines, communicate across departments, and respond to rapidly shifting priorities—capacities that are rarely taught explicitly in traditional graduate courses (Baez-Rivera et al., 2011; Baron-Puda, 2017). These examples underscore a broader misalignment between what employers expect and what programs emphasize, raising questions about how graduate curricula can more effectively bridge classroom instruction and workplace realities.

Another concern is the under-emphasis on professional development and networking in existing curricula. Career readiness support—such as portfolio building, mock interviews, and industry mentorships—is inconsistent across institutions (English et al., 2021). Graduate students are frequently assumed to be self-directed, but without formal pathways for connecting to the professional world, many struggle to transition from academic to industry roles effectively.

Additionally, questions of equity and access continue to shape how internship experiences are structured and who can participate. Recent public relations scholarship and industry reports highlight ongoing disparities between paid and unpaid positions, as well as unequal access to remote or flexible opportunities (Giomboni, 2025; Marcus, 2021). These inequities can disadvantage students with financial or caregiving

responsibilities, underscoring the need for programs to consider inclusive internship policies that expand participation across socioeconomic contexts.

Finally, programs often overlook emerging competencies such as artificial intelligence, paid media integration, and content strategy. Without coursework aligned to evolving industry needs, students risk graduating with outdated or incomplete skillsets.

How Graduate Programs Can Better Prepare Students for the Workplace

Graduate programs in public relations bear a responsibility to develop professionals capable of navigating a fast-changing, strategically complex industry. The Commission on Public Relations Education (2012) emphasized the need for graduate education to extend far beyond tactical skills, but many graduate programs fall short in developing competence in strategy, new industry practices, and business dynamics.

CPRE (2012) recommended that internships should be core requirements, designed to expose students to mentoring, supervised project assignments, and reflective analysis of professional practice. Yet, these requirements remain unevenly enforced across institutions.

A systematic review published in the *Journal of Public Relations Education* found that while PR curricula increasingly cover digital topics, integration remains patchy; many professors still treat social media as a module rather than a strategic dimension of communication (Luttrell et al., 2021). As the field continues to evolve technologically, graduate students risk graduating without fluency in platforms, campaign metrics, or digital audience engagement.

Third, experiential and active learning—which enhances ethics, writing, and leadership capacity—is frequently confined to case studies rather than real-world execution. *JPRE* scholarship shows that student-run agencies and service-learning projects foster real accountability, crisis

responsiveness, and client relations competence (Plowman et al., 2022). Beyond expanding experiential opportunities, recent scholarship in public relations education also emphasizes the importance of work-integrated learning (WIL) assessment to strengthen the connection between classroom learning and professional practice (Friedman, 2023). Studies have demonstrated that structured evaluation methods, such as reflective portfolios, client-based rubrics, and project assessments, enhance both accountability and student self-awareness in PR campaigns and internship contexts (Friedman, 2023; Peltola, 2018; Swart, 2014). Embedding such reflective and outcomes-based assessment approaches helps students articulate competencies gained through practice and provides faculty with clearer evidence of professional readiness.Yet, such opportunities are still underutilized in many graduate programs.

The inclusion of business, finance, management, and global communication perspectives is often absent. CPRE (2023) advocated for programs to integrate management sciences and behavioral theories alongside PR coursework to prepare students for global and organizational complexities. Without this interdisciplinary breadth, graduates may lack the ability to craft communication strategies that align with organizational goals, budgets, and stakeholder behavior.

Finally, professional development elements (e.g., seeking mentors and networking support, resume and portfolio review) are often left to a student's initiative. According to accreditation standards from PRSA (2025) and ACEJMC (Spencer, 2022), graduate programs should ensure faculty and advisors guide students through professional transitions, yet institutional support remains inconsistent.

By aligning coursework and experiences more consistently with the Commission on Public Relations Education's vision and empirical findings from PR education scholarship, graduate programs can better ensure that their students don't just understand public relations—they

enter the workforce as strategic, analytic, and ethically grounded practitioners ready to lead. Yet, questions remain about how these competencies are defined and applied in practice, where preparation gaps persist, and how organization settings shape expectations for graduate interns. This study, therefore, examines (a) the competencies employers most value, (b) the alignment between academic preparation and industry needs, and (c) how organizational contexts influence intern selection and expectations.

Given the focus of this research to improve the public relations graduate program experience for students in regard to workforce development, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1a-c: What personal (a) qualities, (b) skills, and (c) experiences do employers value most in student interns, particularly at the graduate level?

RQ2a-b: How can graduate-level public relations programs better prepare graduate students for (a) successful internships and (b) careers in public relations?

RQ3a-b: How do (a) organizational contexts (e.g., agency, corporate, nonprofit) and (b) hiring priorities (e.g., culture, work environment, delivery model) shape intern selection and expectations?

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore communication professionals' perceptions of graduate students and how academia can better align with industry expectations. This method offered a thematic approach to address the research questions and was chosen because it is a common, flexible and powerful way to acquire in-depth information from participants, particularly in an educational context (Ruslin et al., 2022). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the affiliated university.

Participants

Participants, all of whom were strategic communication professionals, were recruited through purposive sampling. This sampling technique was selected to align with the study's research goals and to ensure subject matter experts were interviewed (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). Participants were identified through personal networks and public relations industry associations and were invited via email to participate. Inclusion criteria required that participants (1) held professional roles in public relations or strategic communication, (2) had at least three years experience, and (3) had supervised, mentored or recruited students/interns. Some participants had prior professional relationships with the researchers through industry or academic networks; however, these connections were disclosed during recruitment and interviews were conducted in a professional manner to minimize bias. Participants were intentionally recruited from multiple sectors (e.g., public relations agencies, nonprofits, government agencies, international businesses) to capture a wide-breadth of internship settings and professional communication experiences.

Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved. Saturation was reached when participant responses began to replicate previously established insights, with no new themes, categories, or perspectives emerging from additional interviews. Signals of saturation included repeated descriptions of desired intern qualities, similar examples of organizational expectations, and overlapping recommendations for academic preparation. These patterns became consistent by the ninth interview, and three subsequent interviews confirmed theme stability (Guest et al., 2020).

The final sample included 12 strategic communication professionals, who are summarized in Appendix A based on demographic and professional characteristics. The majority of participants (10) were women and two were men, which represented a typical gender distribution

in the strategic communication field, as women make up the vast majority of the workforce (Global Women in PR & Opinium Research, 2024). Participants had worked in strategic communication roles for a minimum of three years, to a maximum of more than 20 years. Their respective organizational affiliations were geographically diverse in scope, spanning international, as well as national and regional areas of the United States. All participants had completed at least an undergraduate degree and two had completed a communications and/or marketing graduate program (i.e., M.A.; M.B.A.). Each participant had varied experience working alongside and/or supervising student interns in a professional setting. Eleven out of the 12 participants noted direct experience with graduate students. Others discussed their ongoing involvement in recruiting and evaluating graduate applicants for internship positions. As the study focuses on employer expectations rather than solely past supervision experiences, all participants' perspectives were relevant to the research questions. Thus, although the sample size was modest, it was appropriate for qualitative research emphasizing depth, and it provides an exploratory, yet sufficiently diverse-enough group to fulfill the stated purpose of the research (Koerber & McMichael, 2008).

Researcher Reflexivity

The research team included two current public relations professors who are also former industry professionals, along with one graduate student researcher. This mix of academic and professional experience informed the development of interview questions and the interpretation of findings. We recognize that our backgrounds could shape how we understood participants' perspectives, so we made a conscious effort to let participants' voices guide the analysis. Regular team discussions and peer review of emerging themes helped check interpretations and reduce potential confirmation bias.

Procedure

After consenting to be interviewed, all participants agreed to be video and audio recorded. Once participation was confirmed, interview sessions were scheduled accordingly. Interviews were held online using Zoom, with each session fully recorded through the platform and transcribed word-for-word. The interviews ranged from approximately 20 minutes to 37 minutes and were on average 30 minutes. While transcriptions were automatically carried out using the Zoom software, the accuracy was checked using another free online software program (OtterAI). Audio recordings of the Zoom interviews were uploaded into OtterAI after being reviewed by the graduate student research team member; issues of transcription discrepancies were reviewed by the graduate student to produce the fully transcribed data, which wound up including 150 pages from the completed interviews.

To foster participant comfort, all interviews began with an introductory dialogue to establish trust and create a relaxed environment. Afterward, participants were asked to describe their current role, experience as strategic communication professionals, and highest level of education attained. Then, a series of more specific open-ended questions related to their expectations and perceptions of graduate-level interns were asked. For consistency, a set of eight guided questions were used by the researchers (see Appendix B for the full list). Prompts and probes were employed throughout the interviews to elicit deeper insights from participants.

Data Analysis Approach

The process of thematic analysis was used to identify patterns or themes within the data that were important and interesting from the study, which can be used to address the research questions. To complete the thematic analysis, researchers used two tools from the Microsoft Office suite rather than using Atlas.ti or NVivo from QSR International.

Microsoft Office provides Word and Excel, which allowed us to use digital versions of the transcription files to copy, cut, paste, and reflect on various themes that emerged in our data analysis steps. While the visual appeal of the Microsoft Office tools is not as pleasant to the eye as software specifically designed for qualitative data analysis, it can be just as effective and less costly for researchers that have access to Microsoft provided by their institutions. Thematic analysis allows the research to not just summarize the data gathered but to interpret what was said by the participants and make sense of it (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Braun and Clarke (2006) stated there are two levels of themes when using thematic analysis: semantic themes, which look at the surface meanings of the data, or latent themes, which examine the underlying ideas and assumptions. This study focused on semantic themes to capture practitioners' stated perspectives on graduate interns and to reflect their explicit expectations and experiences. Because the study aimed to inform educational and professional practice rather than explore deeper ideological meanings, a latent analysis was not warranted. The analysis was driven by the research questions using a top-down approach. Researchers read the transcripts to clean the data and familiarize themselves with what was discussed (see Appendix C for the preliminary code book used for the first stage of thematic analysis). Member checks were carried out to clarify answers when necessary (McKim, 2023). Initial codes were iteratively grouped and reviewed to ensure that the resulting themes accurately addressed the study's purpose. Throughout the analysis, the research team met regularly to discuss coding decisions and theme development, maintaining notes on analytic choices and returning to the data to check for alternative or divergent interpretations. These steps helped support the trustworthiness and consistency of the findings.

Results

Most valued personal qualities, professional skills, and experiences

The first research question asked what qualities, skills, and experiences employers most valued in graduate students. Findings revealed that employers across public relations firms and organizations place substantial value on a mix of foundational communication skills**,** interpersonal competencies, and relevant experience when evaluating graduate student interns. These expectations fall into several key categories: clear communication, strong writing skills, soft skills, and practical experience.

Clear Communication

The most consistently cited trait among all participants was the ability to communicate clearly and effectively. Graduate students are expected to enter internships not only with technical proficiency but with the emotional intelligence to navigate dynamic work environments. Participant 1, a 36-year-old female director of communication at a nonprofit, emphasized reliability, timeliness, and clear communication as minimum standards, while Participant 2, a 46-year-old female assistant director of communication at an academic institution, focused on curiosity and the confidence to ask questions: "Asking a lot of questions is super important [because it] shows the perspective that they have that many don't reveal." Participant 4, a 59-year-old female assistant director of communication at a state government agency, noted that "knowing how to work on a team" is one of the issues that she has encountered because graduate interns often don't ask questions about how different components contribute to the big picture. These findings highlight that proactive communication is more valued than passive compliance. (*NOTE:* Descriptive anchors are provided on the first reference of each participant in the results; a full table of anonymized information collected on each participant is available in Appendix A.)

Participant 6, a 37-year-old female associate member of a marketing acceleration team in a corporate communications office, noted that many new hires struggle to "live up to expectations," particularly when it comes to communicating delays or misunderstandings. She further reflected, "Are they… incorporating and listening and learning, so if somebody, you know, tells them and gives them feedback, are they actually listening to it, or do they just disregard anything they don't want to hear?" These questions are difficult to screen for during interviews, but they are ones that participants often mentioned. Graduate students, who may assume that their academic qualifications are sufficient, must demonstrate a mature understanding of team dynamics**,** deadlines, and workflows through consistent, transparent communication.

Writing Proficiency

Writing remains a cornerstone skill in PR, and it was universally identified as a top priority. Employers view strong writing not just as a basic competency but as an indicator of critical thinking, media literacy, and strategic awareness. Participant 2 noted that "writing is a strong indication of your ability to think critically." Participant 3, a 45-year-old female partner and executive managing director at a marketing agency, referred to the lack of writing ability as a "deal-breaker," underscoring its foundational role for intern success. Participant 12, a 23-year-old female public relations associate at a communication agency, added that an authentic human voice "is going to be even more unique as the years go by with how oversaturated AI-generated content. We look for candidates with the ability to write to our audiences."

Writing skills include not only grammar and syntax but also the ability to tailor content for different platforms—social media, email newsletters, and press releases. Participant 7, a 60+ years of age female office manager at a state government agency, noted the need for interns to "not just write for social media" but understand the content strategies

specific to each platform. Several organizations, such as those led by Participants 4 and 11, conduct writing tests as part of their selection process, reinforcing the idea that writing proficiency is a non-negotiable gatekeeper to internship opportunities—even for graduate students.

Teamwork and Adaptability

In addition to writing and communication, graduate student interns were expected to bring well-developed soft skills such as teamwork, self-awareness, and adaptability. Participants 3, 6, and 7 emphasized traits like collaboration, emotional intelligence, and the ability to listen to and incorporate feedback.

Participant 4 framed hiring decisions around the "three Cs"—competency, character, and chemistry—noting that character traits like integrity and work ethic are just as important as technical skills. Graduate students should demonstrate an eagerness to contribute beyond their job descriptions and an openness to learning from every task, no matter how small. Participant 11, a 29-year-old female marketing and advertising director at a communication agency, added that being a self-starter who takes initiative is one of the most critical soft skills, especially in high-performing environments.

Relevant Professional and Classroom Experiences

While soft skills and communication are foundational, employers clearly prefer graduate students who also bring applied experience, such as internships, agency work, or participation in PR campaigns. This theme recurs across multiple responses, including this one by Participant 1, commenting on how experience extends beyond internships:

> Graduate students might have had more volunteer experience with a certain organization that aligns with the work … or maybe they've been more involved in projects for class, or outside of school, so they are a little more well-versed on the client issues we talk about every day.

Participant 7 noted that graduate students "have just been around a little longer, they've just had a little more life experience. They would… best meet my needs with working with clients." However, the presence of a graduate degree alone does not guarantee preference in the hiring process. Participant 11 stated:

> If we had a graduate student apply for an internship with us, but they hadn't yet had a prior internship at a PR firm, and we also had an undergraduate who did a previous internship at a firm, we would probably prefer the undergraduate candidate simply because they have had that exposure already.

This response indicates that graduate students must complement their academic qualifications with tangible, demonstrated work in the field to remain competitive.

Preparing Graduate Students for Successful Internships

The study's second research question asked what universities can do to better prepare graduate students for successful internships and future careers in public relations. Participants offered detailed insights into how academic institutions can close the gap between the classroom and the workplace**,** particularly for graduate-level students. Two central areas emerged: enhancing soft skills and providing extensive writing practice, supported by campaign experience and exposure to industry tools.

Building Soft Skills through Accountability

Participants recommended active development of soft skills through real-world applications. Participant 4 advised universities to foster environments where "all the students are accountable," and where they understand the value of "working on teams, on projects." Participant 6 elaborated, "I always think when students ask me what they should be doing, as they're preparing for their full-time roles, I usually tell them, like, from a coursework perspective, focus on the soft skills." Participant 2 recommended assignments that simulate integrated campaign work: "It's

writing original content and presenting it… maybe even across multiple formats." Participant 3 urged universities to raise awareness among graduate students of on-campus opportunities for applied experience, such as club leadership or community-based campaigns, to develop teamwork skills.

Client-Facing Projects

Graduate programs that include campaign design and management are highly valued. Nearly all participants praised courses involving real clients and deliverables mirroring the agency environment, thereby preparing students for post-graduate careers. The value of campaign coursework was repeatedly affirmed. Participant 3 emphasized, "Even if they don't have tons of real-life experience… a lot of these classes are structured in a way that you are building campaigns." Participant 11 praised semester-long team projects with clients: "It's very similar to working in a real agency."

Participant 7 added that students who have done this type of work are better prepared. She commented, "If somebody knows how to shoot and edit video on their phones from a class project, that's very valuable today" and makes them stand out from other applicants. These immersive courses not only build hard skills but also encourage peer collaboration**,** strategic planning, and problem-solving—making graduate students better prepared for high- responsibility roles.

Emphasizing interdisciplinary and technical competence

Several participants recommended including coursework in analytics, entrepreneurship, psychology, and media design, pointing to the evolving demands of PR work. Participant 12 suggested minors in psychology or political science can enhance a student's versatility in today's charged environment. Participant 4 recommended courses in analytics and entrepreneurship to improve business acumen. Participants 2 and 6 pointed to the value of marketing, digital media, and media planning

courses. These help students understand audience segmentation, channel strategy, and data-informed decision-making—skills increasingly in demand in today's digital landscape.

In sum, academic programs must offer more than theoretical instruction. They must strategically integrate soft skills, campaign experience, and interdisciplinary learning to prepare graduate students for real-world public relations.

Organizational Factors & Hiring Priorities

The final research question asked how organizational factors and hiring priorities shaped the selection and expectations of graduate student interns. Employers' decisions around hiring graduate interns are deeply influenced by organizational culture**,** team dynamics, and the evolving nature of work**,** including hybrid and remote models. These contextual elements significantly shape both the selection criteria and expectations for performance**.**

Understanding the Cultural Fit in Different Environments

Many participants emphasized that a good cultural fit can outweigh technical proficiency. Participant 1 succinctly stated, "Personality-wise and culture-wise… is way more important to me than their portfolio." Participant 5, a 55-year-old male assistant director of a state government agency, referenced the Chick-fil-A philosophy: "We don't train culture, we hire it." This trend suggests that graduate students who demonstrate emotional intelligence, enthusiasm, and adaptability may be more desirable than candidates with a polished resume but a mismatched work style or attitude.

Participant 6 explained that even highly skilled workers need to adjust to organizational nuances, making willingness to learn and cultural alignment a more sustainable hiring factor. Participant 11 affirmed, "Every time, we will go with the cultural fit." That said, several participants clarified that culture should not come at the expense of basic competence**.**

Participant 10, a 45-year-old female human resources coordinator, noted their firm leans toward skilled candidates because they "don't have time to teach the basics." In this sense, graduate students must clear the technical threshold while demonstrating interpersonal and cultural compatibility.

Being Prepared for Different Work Environments

The rise of hybrid work has transformed expectations for student interns. Most employers now expect interns to navigate both remote collaboration tools and in-person engagements.

Participant 3 encourages hybrid attendance at least twice a week, noting that "some things can only be learned in an office." Participant 6 echoed this need for presence, requiring interns to come in at least three days per week to immerse in company culture**.** Others, like Participant 8, a 60+ years of age co-founder of a nonprofit organization, acknowledged that hybrid is "here to stay," but in-person time remains critical for relationship building and mentorship.

Conversely, Participant 10 operates an 80% remote workplace, noting "We do a lot of Zoom Meetings, a lot of Google meetings… communicate on Slack." This indicates that flexibility in communication tools is a baseline expectation. Participant 12 described a flexible culture that supports working parents and diverse schedules, reinforcing that the internship experience must now align with broader workforce realities**.** Graduate students should be prepared to demonstrate productivity in any format—remote, hybrid, or in-office**.** Participant 9, a 49-year-old female manager of a recruiting and training program at a state government agency, felt that "graduate students who have worked in hybrid environments through the [COVID-19 pandemic] are positioned to stand out from their peers because of their understanding of how teamwork and collaborative efforts functions remotely, at least in the public sector."

Being Professionally Present

Participants also stressed the importance of developing professional networks, especially in small or relationship-driven industries like public relations. Participant 6 "encourages interns to engage with people across the team and network with those people." Participant 8 described an outreach system using stewards who help students build their connections.

Participants 1, 2, 7, and 12 noted the value of student involvement in professional associations whether at the state (e.g, Florida Public Relations Association) or national (e.g., Public Relations Society of America) level. These offer exposure, networking, and often direct paths to internships and employment. Participant 12 said, "We always push for going to local association events… networking in the PR field is really important to us."

Participants also encouraged ownership of project work. Participant 5 explained the importance of coaching interns on how to present and position their contributions, a key element in career advancement and confidence-building. Graduate students, in particular, are expected to go beyond task completion and engage in strategic reflection and communication about their work. Participant 3 further explained, "We spend some time [with our graduate interns] in terms of how do you position it, how do you talk about it. Because I want them to get credit for the work that they did."

Discussion

The findings from these interviews show that employers in the public relations field expect graduate student interns to bring more than a degree. They expect strong communication skills, polished writing, applied experience, and the ability to work well within organizational cultures. Universities must prioritize campaign-based coursework with opportunities to work on teamwork and group dynamics, and

interdisciplinary skill development. Meanwhile, employers are increasingly attentive to how well interns fit their cultural expectations, especially in hybrid work environments. Ultimately, graduate students who pair professional competence with curiosity, communication, and culture-awareness are best poised for success in the public relations workforce.

The interviews offer clear, actionable implications for universities, graduate students, and prospective employers. Together, their collaboration is essential to bridge the gap between academic preparation and professional success in the evolving field of public relations.

Curriculum Development

One of the strongest implications of the research is the need for PR graduate curricula to move beyond theory into intensive, applied skill development**.** Interview participants consistently emphasized that writing and communication are essential to career readiness—and yet, many graduates arrive at internships underprepared for the pace, tone, and format of real-world PR writing.

Participant 3 remarked that a student lacking the ability to write is a "deal-breaker," but most participants concluded that graduate students write well academically but are not prepared for public relations writing. This suggests that graduate programs should integrate writing for public audiences into courses in addition to graduate level projects and reports. Lane and Johnston (2017) note the challenges students face when having to convert their writing style from academic writing to the style of public relations practitioners.

In addition to writing, programs should require campaign-based coursework where students work in teams to design and implement strategies for real or simulated clients. Krishna et al. (2020) concluded that more courses need to incorporate "real world" work for clients given the increasing demand from employers on potential hires having experiences that provide context for public relations challenges. Public relations

graduate programs can incorporate a range of pedagogical design elements into their course offerings to provide a variety of real-world challenges for their students, including client work where students rotate roles (strategist, research analyst, writer, graphic designer, project manager) during different implementation stages; assignments that challenge students' hybrid-readiness by focusing on virtual meeting etiquette (e.g., Slack and Zoom), asynchronously updating team members with status reports, and instructions on maintaining file hygiene in collaborative virtual teamwork environments; and professional identity and networking assignments, including professional association event attendance, informational interviews, and mentorship shadowing logs. These curricular innovations offer vital experience in collaboration, messaging strategy, client relations, and reporting results—competencies that employers expect, but students may lack.

Graduate curricula should also embrace interdisciplinary learning to reflect the complexity of modern practice. This has been an issue highlighted by public relations research over the years (Aldoory & Toth, 2000; Auger & Cho, 2016; Petrausch, 2008; Todd, 2009). Employers stress the need for students to take elective courses in business schools and social sciences; however, university policies and constraints often limit students' abilities to take such courses. Offering elective options outside the standard PR graduate sequence can strengthen graduate students' ability to adapt and specialize. Public relations faculty and administrators need to work with others across campus boundaries to foster their students' abilities to take classes in other graduate programs outside public relations.

Building a Career-Ready Mindset

While curriculum changes are essential, students themselves must be proactive in their development. The interviews reveal a clear expectation that graduate students should enter internships with more than just classroom knowledge. Advising offices and graduate faculty must do

more than help students complete credits; they must guide students toward meaningful career development strategies.

First, internships should be strongly encouraged or required during graduate study. Multiple participants made clear that real-world experience was more important than a degree alone. Graduate programs must make internship pathways clear, accessible, and flexible**,** including offering course credit for internships or integrating internships into academic calendars.

Second, advising should help students translate academic work into professional portfolios. Developing the ability to talk about how they contributed to group work (e.g., decisions they made and results they achieved) during graduate education prepares students for job interviews and client meetings alike. Faculty and mentors should encourage students to practice reflective summaries of their individual work rather than simply summarizing group projects, helping them move from task completion to strategic articulation.

Third, students must develop the confidence to network, a skill repeatedly mentioned by participants as vital. Nigar (2021) observed that students at all levels are having a difficult time developing their networks after their interpersonal communication skills suffered losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Networking not only opens doors for internships and jobs but also helps students develop a more nuanced understanding of industry dynamics and expectations.

Universities can enhance this by hosting guest speakers, arranging informational interview sessions, or incorporating mentorship programs directly into their graduate PR courses.

Employer Practices and Internships

The employer interviews also reveal that companies and agencies have their own role to play in shaping the future of graduate internships. While students and schools must do the work of preparation, employers must commit to meaningful, structured internship experiences that foster

learning and growth.

One major theme across interviews was the importance of cultural fit, sometimes even over technical skill. As Participant 1 shared, "Positive, up for anything, reliable, professional—that is way more important to me than their portfolio." This presents an opportunity for employers to invest in interns who align with their culture and values, rather than expecting them to arrive fully formed. Conversely, educators need to stress the importance of understanding how students can assess organizational cultures to ensure a good fit. Organizations and individuals have different perspectives on interactions, relationships, and behaviors, and it is important for graduate students to determine with which prospective employers they have similar values.

Furthermore, the format of internships is changing. Many employers described hybrid or remote. This shift toward hybrid or remote means interns must be trained in a range of digital communication tools (e.g., Slack, Zoom, Google Meet), and employers must be intentional in onboarding and supporting interns remotely (Principale et al., 2025). Hybrid internship design should strike a balance between accessibility and immersion, ensuring interns feel like part of the team while also having the flexibility modern work demands.

Finally, in some work environments, interns are exposed to founders and decision-makers—an incredible opportunity, but also a test of maturity and professionalism. Employers need to view graduate interns not just as short-term help but as future hires and ambassadors, and design internship roles with that long-term vision in mind. But educators also have a role to play in advising students on how to manage their relationships with these workplace leaders (Clementson, 2023).

The future of graduate PR internships rests on a triangular relationship where academic programs must align with employer needs,

students must take active ownership of their development; and employers must create inclusive, skill-building environments that value learning. With shared responsibility and communication across these groups, the field of public relations can better prepare its future professionals.

Conclusion

Graduate students in public relations are expected to be more skilled, experienced, and expert than their undergraduate counterparts. Internships offer them a critical opportunity to bridge the gap between classroom and career. However, as hiring practices evolve and technology rapidly expands, strategic communication professionals report that students' job-readiness often falls short of initial expectations. Specifically, professionals are seeking a stronger practical skillset (one less reliant on AI), more developed interpersonal skills, and a growth mindset. Curriculum must be realigned with these professional expectations to allow graduate students a seamless transition into the workforce and to maximize the value of their internships. Simply put, graduate students should be better prepared to quickly transition from training into active professional work. As a result, they fulfill the long-held assumption that they bring advanced capabilities to the role and, in turn, enables them to gain a more impactful internship experience.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study should be viewed in light of some limitations. Saturation was reached, with no new themes emerging by the final interview, but it is possible that a larger group of participants would reveal subtle variations in responses. Similarly, although all participants were known to the researchers as experts in their field, a wider scope of recruitment may offer a broader set of experiences and help mitigate potential selection bias due to purposive sampling. Since participants were current or former supervisors, social desirability bias may have also influenced how they described their expectations or interactions with

interns. The sample was predominantly female, reflecting the gendered composition of the communication profession, but it may limit the diversity of perspectives represented. Additionally, because participants volunteered their time (and to avoid participant fatigue) there was a narrow list of questions asked. Longer form interviews, bolstered by incentives, may have allowed for additional follow-up questions.

One limitation of the current project focuses on the nature of the analysis, which can be taken as suggesting that internships are needed by graduate students in public relations programs. This is not necessarily true for all students in graduate programs, especially those in evening and online courses who are currently working in the field. These students may better be served by programs that give students choices for how they conclude their graduate programs. The authors' institution, Florida State University, for example, offers students four different culminating experiences to select the best option for each student. One option includes completing an internship of at least 150 hours; a second option includes completing a traditional academic thesis while a third option offers students to complete a research-based creative project that students can tailor to scenarios that are based in real-world situations that students are curious about. The final option graduates can choose at FSU is an all-course work option. These different program-ending options give students the flexibility to choose the concluding scenario that is most appropriate based on their own needs and future career paths. Future research ideally would be carried out to explore the satisfaction that students had with these different options to see how well graduate students are served with these choices and to see whether they had any regrets with choosing one path over the other based on their experiences.

Future researchers should consider expanding the scope of the study, to see if its core themes ring true across a wider range of experiences. Moreover, the themes presented here could be translated into

a survey to better understand their prevalence within a larger population. Particularly, since this study was limited to the United States, it would be pertinent to explore whether the same sentiment exists globally among strategic communications professionals. Future work might also include multi-site or cross-sector comparative studies to examine contextual variation, longitudinal research to track graduate interns' career trajectories, and quasi-experimental designs to assess the impact of specific curricular or internship model changes on student readiness.

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Appendix A
Table of Participants and Demographics

Participant #	Age	Gender	Position	For-Profit/Non-Profit
1	36	Female	Director of Communications	Non-Profit Organization (At-Risk Children/ Families)
2	46	Female	Assistant Director of Communication	Non-Profit Organization (Education Sector)
3	45	Male	Partner and Executive Managing Director	For-Profit Organization (Private Agency)
4	59	Female	Director of Marketing	Non-Profit Organization (Government)
5	55	Male	Assistant Director	Non-Profit Organization (Government)
6	37	Female	Senior Manager, Content Excellence	For-Profit Organization (Corporation – Health Sector)
7	60+	Female	Communications Manager	Non-Profit Organization (Government)
8	60+	Female	Co-Founder	Non-Profit Organization (Private Agency)
9	49	Female	Manager of Recruiting and Training Program	Non-Profit Organization (Government)
10	45	Female	Office Manager/ HR Coordinator	For-Profit Organization (Private Agency)
11	29	Female	Marketing and Advertising Director	For-Profit Organization (Private Agency)
12	23	Female	Public Relations Associate	For-Profit Organization (Private Agency)

Appendix B
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

- What are your expectations for new student hires (interns/residents)?
- In your opinion, how can universities best prepare students to meet these expectations?
- When deciding between a graduate and undergraduate student for a role, what factors do you consider?
- Are there particular personality traits or professional qualities you actively look for in student hires?
- From an academic standpoint, what aspects of a graduate student's curriculum make them stand out to you?
- When faced with a choice between a highly skilled candidate who might not be the best cultural fit, and a less skilled but great cultural fit, how do you typically approach the decision?
- How do you encourage students to actively develop their professional network and presence?
- How does the remote, hybrid, or in-person nature of a role influence your expectations or the student experience?

Appendix C
Preliminary Codebook to Guide Thematic Analysis for Project

RQ1: What personal (a) qualities, (b) skills, and (c) experiences do employers value most in student interns, particularly at the graduate level?

Theme	Code Description	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Example Indicators
Personal Qualities	Traits or attributes employers identify as desirable in interns	Attitude, motivation, professionalism, adaptability, curiosity	Technical or academic skills	Eager to learn; takes initiative; handles pressure well
Professional Skills	Specific communication, strategic, or analytical skills required for success	Writing, research, digital media, strategic thinking, data analysis	Generic personality traits	Strong writing and editing; knows how to evaluate campaign data
Experiential Background	Prior education, work, or extracurricular experiences that enhance employability	Internships, volunteer work, leadership roles, client projects	General academic achievements	Had real client experience; managed a student PR campaign

RQ2: How can graduate-level public relations programs better prepare graduate students for (a) successful internships and (b) careers in public relations?

Theme	Code Description	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Example Indicators
Curricular Alignment	Alignment between coursework and professional expectations	Theory–practice integration, applied learning, curriculum relevance	Non-educational experiences	We need more hands-on projects that mirror agency life
Skill Development	How programs cultivate core professional competencies	Training in writing, analytics, ethics, leadership, teamwork	Broader career readiness issues	Students should learn to translate research into strategy
Professional Readiness	Preparation for workplace adaptation and career advancement	Confidence, workplace culture, networking, soft skills	General personality traits	They should know how to navigate client meetings

RQ3: How do (a) organizational contexts (e.g., agency, corporate, nonprofit) and (b) hiring priorities (e.g., culture, work environment, delivery model) shape intern selection and expectations?

Theme	Code Description	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Example Indicators
Organizational Context	How sector or structure shapes internship roles	Agency, corporate, nonprofit, or government settings	Personal or skill-based factors	Agencies want multitaskers; nonprofits value mission alignment
Hiring Priorities	What drives intern selection beyond skills (fit, culture, logistics)	Cultural fit, hybrid work, mentorship, expectations	General qualities or skills	We look for someone who fits our team dynamic
Expectations and Evaluation	How employers define or measure intern success	Performance criteria, deliverables, mentorship structures	Recruitment logistics	They're expected to contribute like junior staff

Analytic Notes

• Unit of coding: Meaningful segment (sentence/paragraph) expressing employer perspective or program insight.

• Theme relationships: RQ1 (inputs: qualities/skills) → RQ2 (program processes) → RQ3 (contextual outcomes).

• Potential higher-order themes: Professional Readiness, Curricular Gaps, Workplace Expectations.

Appendix D

Competency-to-Curriculum Matrix for Graduate Programs in Public Relations

Core Competency / Theme	Illustrative Learning Activities	Suggested Assessments	Intended Learning Outcomes
Strategic Public Relations Management	Case-based campaign simulations, stakeholder mapping, issues management workshops	Strategic communication plan, campaign proposal and defense	Develop and evaluate strategic PR plans aligned with organizational goals
Research and Data Literacy	Research design labs, data interpretation exercises, analytics tool use	Research proposal, data analysis report, presentation of findings	Apply research methods to diagnose problems and measure impact
Ethical and Legal Decision-Making	Ethics debates, policy analysis, scenario-based dilemmas	Reflective essay, applied ethics case study	Integrate ethical reasoning and legal awareness into strategy
Leadership and Organizational Behavior	Team leadership workshops, group projects, peer feedback	Leadership self-assessment, group project evaluation	Demonstrate leadership and team management in PR contexts
Global and Cultural Competence	Cross-cultural communication simulations, international campaign analysis	Comparative case study, cultural adaptation plan	Adapt strategies for culturally diverse and global contexts
Digital Media and Technology Fluency	Social media analytics, content strategy labs, digital crisis simulation	Digital campaign design, analytics report	Use emerging technologies for strategic communication
Communication and Writing Excellence	Advanced writing workshops, media relations role-plays	Portfolio of strategic writing (press releases, op-eds, briefs)	Produce persuasive written and oral communication
Systems Thinking and Strategic Integration	Organizational systems mapping, interdisciplinary problem-solving	Systems analysis paper, integrative capstone project	Integrate PR strategy within broader organizational systems
Professionalism and Lifelong Learning	Guest seminars, reflective journals, professional development planning	Professional portfolio, reflective statement	Commit to ethical practice and continuous professional growth
Capstone Integration / Applied Project	Thesis, applied research project, client-based practicum	Comprehensive project defense, written report, client evaluation	Synthesize research, ethics, and management in a professional project

Based on: Commission on Public Relations Education (2012), *Standards for a Master's Degree in Public Relations: Educating for Complexity.* (The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education). http://www.commissionpred.org/commission-reports/standards-for-a- masters-degree-in-public-relations-educating-for-complexity/

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In the Lineup or on the Bench? Searching for PR in Sports Management Master's Programs

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ABSTRACT

Sport management master's programs are young and increasingly popular graduate programs at many United States universities. As public relations is a key employment area within sport organizations, this research reviewed whether public relations is taught at sport management master's programs, and if so, what strategies and tactics were presented. Results indicated that a majority of sport management master's programs included at least one course with public relations learning outcomes. However, PR management, strategy, and tactic presentation were inconsistent among programs, and some programs reported only an ancillary address of PR. Implications for more consistent and pedagogically-grounded PR learning outcomes are discussed, along with opportunities for curricular development bodies in PR to play more active roles in advising non-PR master's programs on PR education.

Keywords: sport management, graduate education, public relations, sport communication, master's degree

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Interest in academic majors in the sport industry has expanded in the past decades (Schwab et al., 2013). Many students report that they choose sport majors because the career options are evident—they can see sport staff in highly visible positions near game action (Coche & Haught, 2021). Undergraduate degree programs in sport management, sport administration, sport marketing, sport journalism, and sport communication have increased manyfold as universities rush to meet student demand, especially in an enrollment-uncertain era in higher education (see Emmons et al., 2025; Hancock & Greenwell, 2013; Hull et al., 2019; Schwab et al., 2013).

Sport industry graduate programs have likewise increased in popularity (Pierce et al., 2022; Willett et al., 2017). With graduate enrollments also experiencing uncertainty (Knox, 2023), there is a simultaneous rush to expand graduate school offerings in areas that support student demand. Undergraduate sport media and communication programs have been studied for curricular content and related career preparation (see Coche & Haught, 2021; Emmons et al., 2025; Hull et al., 2019), and graduate programs have seen some but less research attention, mostly centered within the program curricula themselves (see Pierce et al., 2022; Willett et al., 2017). Researching curricular content adds key insights into what skills and concepts are deemed foundational in such programs and highlights any gaps that exist.

Public relations and sport industry graduate degrees inevitably collide when considering the strategic communication role in the sport industry. Many early career experiences in the sport industry are through marketing and communication positions, with public relations and event management in sport even listed as entry-level career ideas (What, n.d.).

A concern emerges when reviewing the rise of sport master's programs; many of the degrees stake claims over one another as the major for a career path in sport operations broadly defined, without

acknowledging varying skill sets that might be more impactful for students interested in certain areas of sport. With sport public relations, undergraduate programs have uncertain learning objectives for understanding the industry (Emmons et al., 2025), so reviewing graduate programs for how and where public relations is presented may better address the industry or similar uncertainty at the graduate level. This research reviews master's degree programs in the sport industry, specifically through accredited sport management programs, to discern how public relations is presented and taught.

Literature Review

Public Relations Career Paths in Sport

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook (2025b), positions within public relations (public relations specialists) are expected to grow faster than average at 6% between 2023 and 2033. When looking specifically at media/communication positions under the sport and entertainment umbrella (arts, design, entertainment, sport, and media occupations), the expected growth reaches 8% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025a). These numbers make sense as universities have shown an increased interest in developing and offering sport communication and media majors to meet student demand (Hull et al., 2019), which has been attributed to the growing attention toward sport (Coombs, 2024).

As L'Etang (2013) argued, sport as a modern enterprise would not exist without the media and PR; the foundation of professionalized sport depends on media and promotion. Sport as an industry requires effective strategic communication. From a longevity standpoint, businesses within the sport space need to drive revenue and positive reputations, which can be fostered through strategic communication functions such as public relations (Coombs, 2024; Coombs & Harker, 2022). In addition, the broad impact of the sport industry overall lends itself to communication. "Sport

connects us to community, sport is entertainment, and sport even offers us a platform for social justice and helps our communities—through the entertainment of sport—to work toward cultural equalities" (Coombs & Harker, 2022, p. 4). Knowledge of public relations and strategic communication is a vital part of reaching business objectives in sport.

Sport at the Graduate Level and Sport Management Programs

In order to discern how a prospective student with an interest in a graduate degree in sport PR might find programs, researchers conducted a Google search. Internet searches of graduate program websites are a primary way for prospective students to learn about graduate degree options (Rios et al., 2019). The researchers based the search on the premise that a prospective student would look for graduate degrees available for someone interested in the public relations and strategic communications aspect of the sport industry.

Finding graduate programs as a prospective student in the sport industry might be done via online search engines or through college aggregator sites. For the purposes of this research, a Google search was conducted to learn what sport industry graduate program options existed. A query for "sport master's program" yielded a Google Gemini result that the sport management degree would offer opportunities in administration, marketing, and analytics in sport. A Google search of the term "sport public relations graduate program" did not yield results for graduate program options in communication, but rather sport management programs. Finally, a follow-up search of "sport master's degree" showed two primary paths: kinesiology-related sport graduate programs and sport business-related programs.

To ensure that the search results were valid, a follow-up query was conducted on the U.S. Department of Education's College Navigator site. This site uses university CIP (classification of instructional program) code data to populate degree program information. The site displayed

similar results for sport management as the appropriate master's degree for someone interested in sport, while mentioning that sport business and sport communication jobs would be applicable from a sport management program. In other words, someone interested in sport public relations as a graduate degree option would be steered toward a sport management master's degree.

Kinesiology and exercise science graduate degrees sometimes include management aspects of the sport industry, but the field has mostly divided into separate sport management focused graduate programs, as the latter part of the 20th century demonstrated (Jones et al., 2008; Zeigler, 1987). Sport management is any function that "includes any combination of skills related to planning, organizing, directing, controlling, budgeting, leading, and evaluating within the context of an organization or department whose primary product or service is related to sport and/or physical activity" (DeSensi et al., 1990, p. 33). The *Journal of Sport Management*'s inaugural issue spoke to the rise of the academic area, with primary attention given to the fact that sport was business and those rising into leadership in sport already had physical education and exercise knowledge, but less management training (Zeigler, 1987). Tellingly, Zeigler (1987) also noted in *JSM*'s inaugural issue that, "sports managers need a better understanding of marketing... promotion, publicity" (p. 9) and advertising. Research about sport management master's programs continues to lag behind undergraduate program study; a recent review of *Sport Management Education Journal* noted few graduate-focused studies (Miller et al., 2025).

When Jones et al. (2008) researched sport management curricular outcomes, sport marketing was listed as a needed aspect, while public relations and communication were not. Willett et al. (2017) joined "marketing and communications" as a singular outcome during a study of master's degree exclusive programs, finding at the time that only 67%

of master's programs listed by the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) contained a marketing and communication course. Since marketing and communication were not subdivided, and sport media were not mentioned at all, specific learning outcomes related to public relations were not studied. Pierce et al. (2022) noted that marketing courses were in more than 70% of sport management graduate programs, but public relations was not discussed either as its own learning outcome or as separate from marketing. This is key—although marketing and public relations may cross over in job function at times, the two industries serve separate and distinct purposes in sport (Stoldt et al., 2020).

The current Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) undergraduate accreditation curricular requirements, dated from 2022, have three content pillars, one of which is the "functions of sport management." Two of the four functions relate to public relations: "sports marketing, sales, and public relations" and "sports media and communications" (COSMA, 2024). The "sports marketing, sales, and public relations" curricular definition is as follows:

> Includes promotions, sales, fundraising, advertising, branding and sponsorship. Strategies need to be created for individuals, teams and/or events, depending on the marketing needs and projections. Includes sport sales principles and philosophy, selling skills and techniques, steps in the sport selling process, prospecting, buyer motives, customer retention, closing the sale, careers in sport sales. (COSMA, 2024, p. 18)

The sport media and communications curricular needs are defined as follows:

> Includes fostering two-way communication with key stakeholders. Such communications include, but are not limited to: social media, all aspects of media guides, press releases, websites, statistical archives, record keeping and game-day obligations. (COSMA, 2024, p. 18)

The COSMA accreditation requirements for the master's program note that all core areas of sport management must be accounted for and that at least half of the coursework for the degree comes from graduate-level course designations. The master's program requirements do not expound upon specific content areas, so the undergraduate foundations apply.

As prior research has shown, the sport management master's program is primarily pursued to move toward management positions in sport organizations (Willett et al., 2017). Therefore, presenting PR strategy and tactics would seem beneficial as such elements are key to the job functions within sport and to provide communication counsel within sport organizations. During a 2025 Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) conference panel presentation, a panelist with a master's degree in sport management noted that her sport management master's degree did not have any marketing or public relations courses (L. Leck, personal communication, August 6, 2025). She further noted that, from the outset of her career in athletics, her roles have included marketing and communications, and she noted a knowledge gap in her program (L. Leck, personal communication, August 6, 2025).

Public Relations at the Graduate Level

Grunig (2013) and other public relations academics have long argued that the public relations function works most effectively when it is a separate management role that supervises and directs organizational communication and provides counsel to other leadership. The media relations and publicity work of the public relations function fall into specialized areas of the career, under the umbrella of public relations management (Grunig, 2013).

Public relations developed as an academic major in the latter part of the 20th century (Grunig, 2013). Given the mediated foundation of most public relations communication, the major is predominantly housed with journalism programs, although the major can also be found

in business schools and communication departments. Graduate programs for public relations also tend to be housed within journalism schools. Prior research on public relations graduate programs demonstrated some gaps in agreement on foundational degree requirements (Aldoory & Toth, 2000), yet consensus was found that the graduate degree was primarily for professional development, rather than a preparatory program toward doctoral education (Weissman et al., 2018).

Accreditations for graduate programs in public relations exist through both AEJMC and the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) educational affairs committee. Both are in conjunction with the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE). The CPRE noted five areas of emphasis in public relations graduate education in its 2012 report. The report explained that the areas should be emphasized whether in a public relations-centric degree or in, "a track, sequence, or concentration in a broader master's degree program" (Turk, 2012, para. 7). The areas include strategic PR management, business principles, PR theory and research methods, ethics, and global perspectives (Turk, 2012).

Researchers have noted that public relations, as a term in academia, tends to be in a moment of disruption itself; terms such as strategic communication and integrated marketing communications are just as likely to be used when learning outcomes still align with public relations (Weissman et al., 2018). Further, public relations master's degree program learning outcomes continue to evolve without uniformity due to modern converged media, problematizing boundaries of public relations' distinctions in curricula (Briones & Toth, 2013; Briones et al., 2016).

The current research views the landscape of COSMA-accredited sport management master's degree programs to learn how public relations is presented. Given the rise of sport management master's programs to address professional needs in the sport industry alongside the simultaneous evolution of public relations in graduate education, it is uncertain how

public relations is being taught in sport management master's programs. Since both COSMA and CPRE recommendations note that public relations receives adequate academic attention, such a study will help demonstrate the current landscape of public relations and expose gaps in curricula.

The following research question is posed:

RQ: How is public relations being taught in sport management master's programs?

Methods

This study used a two-step methodological approach to understand how public relations education appeared in sport management master's programs. To identify the universities for analysis, the directory of the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) was used. In total, 17 universities had their sport management master's programs accredited through COSMA. This formed the sample for the study.

The first step included a website analysis of each program and its curriculum (Table 1). Each of the 17 programs was viewed online via its website, and the course descriptions were analyzed to identify which courses specifically included and mentioned public relations curricula. For each program, the following elements were noted: university name, specific college/school of program, title of degree (MS, MA, etc.), a count of the PR courses, a list of the PR courses, and the email for the program's contact person (director or chair). Researchers reviewed the required components of public relations curricula, along with a sample website review, to ensure consistency in data collection.

The second step of the research included in-depth interviews. Through the website analysis, a faculty member or administrator from each of the 17 programs was identified and contacted for an interview. These contacts included graduate program directors, program coordinators, and chairs. Of those, five participants (including program directors and faculty) replied and participated in interviews, representing

various programs under business, health, and education programs, assuring a breadth of academic background. Interviews were conducted either via email or phone with the same interview guide. The questions were reviewed by the researchers in advance of the interviews and were approved by the primary investigator's Institutional Review Board. Responses were kept per IRB protocol, which included anonymity of responses and safekeeping of data.

The analysis of the website analysis and interview data followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis. The researchers familiarized themselves with the data, searching for patterns and identifying themes.

Results

Program and Course Details

Results of the website analysis found that there was no distinct home for sport management master's programs (Table 1). Two programs were in colleges of health sciences, six were in colleges or schools that included education, five were in colleges of business, one was in a school of communication, one was in a college of applied studies, one was in sport science, and one was in professional studies.

The COSMA-accredited programs had varying titles, all with sport in their names. Table 2 shows the frequency of each. All programs were master's of science, with the exception of four programs—one was a master of education (MEd), one was a master of business administration (MBA), one was a master of sports leadership (MSLD), and one was a combined MBA/MSA (master of sport administration).

Table 1

List of COSMA-Accredited Sport Management Master's Programs Used as Sample

University	College/Department	Degree Title	Degree Type
American Public University System	School of Health Sciences	Sport Management	M.S.
Arkansas State University	College of Education and Behavioral Sciences	Sport Administration	M.S.
Bowling Green State University	College of Education and Human Development	Sport Administration	M.S.
East Stroudsburg University	College of Business and Management	Management and Leadership in Sports Business	M.S.
Endicott College	School of Communications	Sport Leadership	M.S.
Liberty University	School of Sport Science	Sport Management	M.S.
Louisiana State University	College of Human Sciences and Education	Sport Management	M.S.
Northeastern University	College of Professional Studies	Sport Leadership	M.S.L.D.

Ohio University	College of Business	Sports Administration	M.S.A./ M.B.A.
Shorter University	College of Business	Sport Management	M.B.A.
Troy University	Sorrell College of Business	Sport Management	M.S.
University of Central Missouri	Harmon College of Business and Professional Studies	Sport Management	M.S.
University of Indianapolis	College of Health Sciences	Sport Management	M.S.
University of Louisville	College of Education & Human Development	Sport Administration	M.S.
University of Southern Indiana	Pott College of Science, Engineering, and Education	Sport Management	M.S.
Wichita State University	College of Applied Studies	Sport Management	MEd
Winthrop University	Riley College of Education, Sport, and Human Sciences	Sport and Fitness Administration [Sport Management Track]	M.S.

Table 2

Titles, Frequency, and Type of COSMA-Accredited Sport Management Programs

Degree Title Frequency	Degree Type
Sport Management (9)	M.S. (7), M.B.A. (1), M.Ed. (1)
Sport Administration (4)	M.S. (3); M.B.A./M.S. (1)
Sport Leadership (2)	M.S. (1), M.S.L.D. (1)
Sport and Fitness Administration (1)	M.S. (1)
Management and Leadership in Sport Business (1)	M.S. (1)

Of the 17 accredited programs, 10 had one public relations-centric course, based on information from the curriculum lists on the university websites. One program had two courses related to public relations. Six programs did not offer a specific PR course. Few of the courses listed public relations as a term specifically in the course description. There was no course title agreement among the programs. Each course title was different for each program. Table 3 demonstrates the variety of course titles.

Program directors were first asked where in the sport management program public relations, strategic communication, or organizational communication was taught. One director replied that students did not receive any course instruction in these areas and were sent to a separate public relations master's program when expressing interest in such an area. Another director noted that there was a combined marketing and public relations course for these subjects. A director from a program housed in a school of education noted that, "different courses deal with PR in different contexts. I teach administrative processes of intercollegiate athletics, where I cover PR in terms of risk management."

Table 3

Titles of Courses with Public Relations

Course Titles
Sports Marketing, Promotion, and Public Relations
Sales and Promotion in Sport
Sport Communications
Sports Marketing and Public Relations
Sports Media Relations
Sport Public Relations
Strategic Communication
Sport Communication Theory and Practice
Strategic Sport Communication
Communication in Sport
Sport and Fitness Promotion

PR Learning Outcomes

Since it was possible that sport management programs covered public relations or strategic communication as embedded within other learning outcomes, program directors were also asked whether specific public relations strategies and tactics were taught. The list, modified for sport use from the PRSA list of course learning outcomes for PR education, included:

- Writing for media (press releases, media advisories, etc.)
- Sport-specific PR writing (game notes, media guides, etc.)
- Social media content creation
- Strategic campaign planning
- Event planning
- Branding
- Community and non-profit partnerships

One program director noted uncertainty about whether the concepts were taught in sport management courses. A second program director said that none of the concepts were taught. A program with a combined marketing and public relations course noted that all but event management were taught. A contact for one program responded similarly by stating that all of the learning outcomes mentioned were taught, while noting that event management was taught to a lesser extent than the other elements. In addition, this participant added that their class covered crisis communication, sport social responsibility, and the legal and ethical implications of public relations in sport-centric contexts.

External Program Partnerships

Athletic department partnerships are popular ways for graduate students to either work in an assistantship capacity or as applied learning, especially in sport management (Navarro et al., 2015), so a question was asked about whether the programs had formal athletic department partnerships. Most athletic department roles for graduate students include communication and stakeholder-centric work (Jowdy et al., 2014), and thus, a partnership would indicate some applied learning options that include public relations tactics. One program did not have an athletic department at all. Three other programs noted that while an official partnership might not be in place, there is a relationship that has led to applied learning opportunities for students and collaborative efforts. One program noted, "There is no official partnership with athletics, but a fair number of our graduate students are GAs for the department. And we also have full-time employees in the athletics department taking the graduate classes for the degree." Another program director explained that the sport management program was a popular choice for students who were already hired as graduate assistants for the athletic department, so they often applied for admission to the program after earning the graduate assistantship.

Careers

Program directors were finally asked what sorts of jobs graduates tended to gravitate toward or move to after completing the degree. Each program director noted that graduates worked in a broad range of roles in the sport industry, and each mentioned that communication roles were popular. One program director explained, "Those specifically interested in the sport media and communication field usually have the combination of the two different degrees in their resume (e.g., undergraduate degree in journalism or communication or vice versa)." Another program director noted sport marketing was a popular choice, while another director mentioned athletic department management at the high school level, specifically, as many program graduates had military backgrounds and were transitioning into second careers. One participant mentioned that the shift reminded them of the earlier days of the program, noting that they perceived a decrease in interest surrounding communication-focused roles. Instead, they saw a more focused interest in event management and marketing. In addition, the participant stated:

> We have more and more high school coaches that are in the program right now because they're trying to position themselves for both the salary bump that comes with the master's degree but also position themselves for an AD [athletic director] position down the line.

Discussion

The findings of this study uncovered the evolving nature of sport management master's degrees and their inclusion of public relations in programs. Specifically, the analysis found inconsistencies in the inclusion and manner of public relations curricula within the accredited programs, which leads to ample opportunity for public relations educators and programs to expand offerings for students interested in sport industry careers.

Sport Management Master's Programs are Still Evolving, and PR Should be Included

There was representation of public relations in the majority of sport management master's programs but not all. Given the COSMA-stated outcome of professional communication and media knowledge as pillars of graduate-level education, this is concerning. Organizational communication for a media-centric industry such as sport requires an understanding of public relations and the media relations role, at a minimum. Internal public relations, such as within a sport organization's stakeholders (e.g., coaches, front office staff, players, vendors), is likewise foundational to sport management. Opportunities in many sport management programs are missed for students to learn public relations strategy, crisis communication, media relations tenets, and proper use of tactics. As COSMA recognizes that communication and media fundamentals are a separate learning area from marketing and sponsorship, we argue that every sport management master's program should include a separate public relations and strategic communication course.

While not all students within a sport management program will be interested in communication-specific careers, outcomes of effective public relations aid in overall organizational goals (Coombs, 2024; Coombs & Harker, 2022). As our interviews uncovered, many sport management master's candidates want to lead athletic departments or are currently part of athletic departments. By exposing students, including future athletic directors, to public relations learning outcomes such as crisis communication, writing for media, and strategic campaign planning, sport management programs can prepare students to more effectively manage organizational reputation. In addition, as Coombs (2024) stated, "fans are at the core of sport goals," and the relationship building that is central to the public relations function can strengthen fan engagement and identity. Athletic directors at the secondary school level, in fact, rarely have distinct

PR support as school systems may or may not have dedicated PR staff. An athletic director with an understanding of PR is an advantage in the modern mediatized, NIL-infused secondary school athletic development landscape.

Additionally, when public relations is understood as a separate management function that is not marketing-focused or "under" marketing but mutually supportive (Gruning, 2013; Stoldt et al., 2020), sport management professionals will better understand how the public relations function uniquely assists with media representation. Modern sport organizations include an intense output of owned media, from podcasts to video production to in-house reporting and website development—which all fall under public relations. This is in addition to the social media content ubiquitous in modern sport, including for athlete promotion and name, image, and likeness (NIL) support. Thus, public relations, as required learning in sport management programs, provides a foundational understanding of the purpose behind media use.

Public Relations Graduate Educators Have Many Opportunities

The breadth of academic homes that sport management master's degree programs lie within suggests that public relations is not a steadfast area of curricular strength. Faculty with public relations backgrounds are most likely to teach in journalism and mass communication programs or business schools. Therefore, faculty from the program's academic home teaching public relations courses likely come from the academic background hosting the program. Schools of education, health sciences, and related programs will not have a strong presence of public relations faculty. While not necessarily a hindrance for public relations education, sport management master's programs are likely relying on textbooks and outside expertise for teaching the PR curriculum. We suggest that this is an opportunity for public relations graduate faculty and educational oversight bodies. Sport management is a key major with an expressed media and

communications learning outcome—public relations academia can answer this call with specially-designed graduate-level PR resources, as well as tailored professional development opportunities for faculty teaching sport management PR master's courses.

A potential opportunity for journalism and mass communication programs is building a sport communication certificate or specialization that can be offered alongside the master's degree in sport management. This offering would allow students within a sport management master's program to gain more exposure to strategic communication and public relations without adding substantial time to their degree programs. A Google search of programs found graduate certificates at some institutions (i.e., Northwestern University, University of Kentucky, Purdue University, and Texas Tech University). The key to building this certificate as a stackable component for sport management master's degrees will require promotion that highlights its relevance and benefits to accomplishing organizational goals in a sport context. We note that this should be in addition to at least one public relations-centric course so that those with further interest can develop knowledge and skills in PR.

Accreditation in Public Relations: Expansion in Education

It is unknown if faculty members teaching in sport management master's programs have a background in PR themselves or have pursued formal accreditation, such as the Accreditation in Public Relations (APR). This was beyond the scope of this exploratory research; however, either encouraging public relations-experienced faculty or certification, such as the APR for current faculty, would be key for a public relations foundation in sport management programs.

Since many faculty in programs such as sport management already have graduate degrees, a separate degree in public relations/strategic communication does not seem necessary or practical. However, some sort of additional accreditation or education in public relations, through the

APR process facilitated by the Universal Accrediting Board (UAB) or a similar education certification, is a practical way for faculty to understand best practices in PR. The UAB's partner organizations, such as PRSA, are available throughout the U.S. and offer certification courses. PRSA notes that at least five years of PR experience is ideal for earning the APR, and we note here that the APR exam process includes leadership of a PR campaign—this would require an understanding of PR strategic campaigns. However, we further note that the APR process can easily be expanded or augmented to offer an educator option so non-PR faculty can be trained in campaigns, as well as the other aspects of PR unique to the industry.

While not currently formally available, certificate programs for PR are another option to assist faculty teaching PR courses in sport management master's programs. A "teaching PR" course designed for sport management would be another solution to ensuring PR best practices make it to sport management classrooms. As online certificate programs are readily modifiable, such an option may be ideal given the rapidly changing media landscape sport industry professionals work within.

Finally, we argue that sport management is representative of many other master's programs that may benefit from a clearer presentation of public relations. The master's of business administration, master's of public health, and master's of education administration are three programs that could benefit from a more distinct address of public relations, and while some programs may include this, many likely do not. Thus, such findings as discussed here could have cross-program applicability.

Limitations and Conclusion

While using COSMA-accredited programs for research was a good way to demonstrate parity in study, it limited the size of the study pool for this research. There were more than 220 U.S. sport management master's programs noted in 2017 research, although most are "in their infancy"

(Willett et al., 2017, para. 23), so the sample size of accredited programs is not representative of all programs. However, this parity criterion will allow this research to be replicated as accredited programs grow.

This research is based on program curricula and director interviews in order to provide a view of sport management from the institutional perspective. Graduates of sport management master's programs will offer a different perspective on whether they can articulate and employ public relations strategies and tactics. Follow-up research to learn program graduate competence and learning outcomes will help demonstrate how public relations education with programs helps or hinders employment opportunities within sport.

Public relations, in conclusion, has many opportunities to continue to demonstrate its unique and necessary role in organization management in graduate programs. As this research notes, the need for sport organizations to pay attention to public relations as a key foundation in reputation management, content creation, and stakeholder engagement is necessary. In fact, the need will only grow.

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GIFT: Graduate Instruction with Purpose: Theory Building and Community Engagement in Quantitative Methods Courses

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ABSTRACT

This class-tested GIFT demonstrates the value of service-learning in an academic master's degree quantitative methods course. Students in small groups developed a theory-driven research project to help a local nonprofit understand donation motivations among the undergraduate student body. The assignment required them to build public relations and communications theory while developing meaningful takeaways for the partner nonprofit. Students reported feeling less intimidated by quantitative methods, learning principles of scholarly research, and feeling good about helping their community. The nonprofit partner also said they valued the data collected by the students for their fundraising planning. The GIFT illustrates how a quantitative research assignment with a real-world application may serve a classroom of communication students who express different goals—either pursuing a Ph.D. or entering the profession—while benefiting town-gown relations.

Keywords: service-learning, graduate education, quantitative research methods, nonprofit, public relations

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Assignment Overview

Rationale

In an industry-based field of study, public relations graduate students pursue advanced degrees to prepare for career paths in various communication-related industries or academic fields (Aldoory & Toth, 2000; CPRE, 2012). Therefore, students in master's level graduate classes may have different goals, with some seeking to pursue a doctoral degree while others enter the practice. Graduate-level education typically splits each type of student into different research tracks, whether that's through offering different degree programs (practitioner-focused degree vs. a research-focused degree) or different class requirements based on tracks (e.g., CPRE, 2012). This class-tested GIFT demonstrates that research methods instruction can serve a communication classroom with students pursuing both practical and academic career paths.

The current GIFT was utilized in a master's degree program that would be considered an "academic graduate degree" (CPRE, 2012), meaning it focused on teaching and research preparation in a university setting but included students pursuing both professional and academic careers post-graduation. The semester-long assignment asked students to develop and execute a theory-driven research study that also helped a small nonprofit learn more about donation behavior in the local community and how theory could inform future decisions. The assignment had a dual purpose: providing rigorous research training that will prepare students for a university career while also instructing students to apply these methods to industry-based problems.

To accomplish this dual purpose, the class applied a service-learning instruction model (e.g., Fraustino et al., 2019), which educates students in public relations principles while using a real-world partner's needs as the basis for a communication campaign. The benefits of service-learning in undergraduate public relations campaigns classes

(Aldoory & Wrigley, 1999; Fraustino et al., 2019; McCullough, 2019) and nonprofit management classes (Addams et al., 2010; Cuyler, 2017) has been well documented for both student learning and operational benefits to community organizations. Yet, research in public relations has not explored the merits of service-learning at the graduate level. This GIFT suggests that service-learning can be applied at an advanced level of education with similar student and community-partner benefits.

While this description may sound similar to methods used to teach undergraduate research principles, this GIFT was appropriate for a graduate-level class for its emphasis on building theoretical knowledge in the communications discipline. This class was taught in a master's program that did not have a history of community-engaged learning; instead, the program focused only on traditional research methods building theoretical knowledge. This GIFT was recognized across the department for demonstrating that both student instruction and community partnerships can benefit from a model of theory-driven service-learning in a graduate curriculum.

As a pedagogical tool, using a real-world partner to illustrate principles of research design may help address intimidation that first-year graduate students face in taking quantitative methods courses (e.g., Ramos & Carvalho, 2011). Students who are pursuing a degree with intentions of entering the profession may not understand the value of academic research training (e.g., Bowen, 2003). Modeling a research project from a real organization's concerns may help to make principles of quantitative methods more accessible to all students in the classroom.

Additionally, service-learning may enhance town-gown relations (McCullough, 2019), particularly at the graduate level. Service-learning may help graduate students learn about their community, especially when many of them are moving to a location for the first time (see student feedback in Evidence of Learning Outcomes). As in the case of this class-

tested GIFT, the assignment can also help the broader community engage with the university's research arm and learn the importance of rigorous research-backed decision-making, which is especially important for organizations like small nonprofits that often do not have the capacity to undertake data collection themselves.

Learning Objectives

The main learning objective of this assignment is to design and execute a scholarly research project in small groups. Students learn to gather academic literature by focusing on using a communication theory to support their research design. Then, they design a hypothesis, write a survey, analyze statistical data, and interpret findings and limitations. Students are trained in ethical principles of conducting research by receiving their Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) certification. The goal of the research project is for the paper to be ready to submit to a national-level academic conference such as the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) or the National Communication Association (NCA) upon completion of the class. Therefore, theoretical rigor was required to prepare students for submission to an academic conference, yet the theory was grounded in a real-world problem facing the partner nonprofit.

Importantly, students implemented the class partner's research needs and goals within the study design. After meeting with the nonprofit's executive director (ED) early in the semester, students looked for scholarly literature and wrote hypotheses that addressed a question or need posed by the ED. For example, in our class, the ED wanted to learn how to better engage undergraduate students at the university as volunteers or donors with the nonprofit's food pantry. Students in the class then found theories related to empathy, transparency, social norms, and social identity theory to support their study design. As a class, we mapped out at least one hypothesis for each study and chose measurement scales from the

academic literature to represent these variables. Hypotheses had to test at least one premise of their chosen theory, which helped to demonstrate the process of academic theory-building. Students were taught to assess reliability, validity, and variance of the scales they chose.

At the end of the semester, the students were tasked with interpreting their findings for both an academic audience (the instructor) and practical audience (the nonprofit executive director) (see Assignment Requirements). Importantly, they had to contribute to or assess the main theory they chose while also explaining to the nonprofit how this theory impacted their respondents' motivations to donate or volunteer with the nonprofit. For example, we discussed how communication theory could be updated to better understand Gen Z donation preferences.

To summarize, the learning outcomes included:

1. Understand how theoretical knowledge is developed and the limitations of such knowledge.
2. Practice principles of quantitative methods and hypothesis building.
3. Articulate how theory can address real-world problems in nonprofit public relations.

Connection to Public Relations Theory and Practice

This GIFT helps address several of the "knowledge, skills, abilities, and traits (KSATs)…desired of emerging public relations practitioners" (Wallace & Weed, 2024, p. 7). According to the list in Wallace and Weed (2024), this GIFT helps students develop knowledge of public relations (and broader communication) theory through an extensive literature review, ethics through their CITI training certification, and business acumen and management by engaging with a real-world problem to ground their theoretical insights. They developed skills in communication, public speaking, and writing, and abilities related to problem solving, critical thinking, and analytical thinking while

developing the study and interpreting results for both theoretical and practical outcomes. Lastly, because students worked in small teams of three to four people, they developed traits related to collaboration, hard work, and creativity in developing hypotheses incorporating theory and practical goals.

Additionally, this class helped to further advance the theory of donor relations in public relations (Kelly, 1994). Kelly (1994) was the first to explain how fundraising is a specialization of public relations focused on donor publics, and no degree-granting academic program has yet been established to specifically train future nonprofit fundraisers (Mack et al., 2016; Shaker & Nathan, 2017). Public relations may be the most appropriate discipline in which to teach fundraising communication because of its emphasis on relationship building and strategic planning (Mack et al., 2016; Wallace & Weed, 2024). Incorporating service-learning principles from public relations campaign courses into graduate-level research methods courses can provide graduate students with motivation to consider nonprofit careers (Harrison, 2022) while learning how to apply rigorous research design principles to real-world nonprofit challenges.

How the Assignment was Class-Tested

This assignment was implemented in fall 2024 in a quantitative methods class with 15 master's students, the majority of whom (14) were in their first year of graduate education. The class did not have any Ph.D. students and was designed to be an introductory graduate-level research methods course focusing on study design principles and an introduction to academic scholarship. Students were required to complete the full research project, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation, and present their completed study to the instructor and nonprofit partner.

Evidence of Learning Outcomes

This GIFT was peer-nominated for a university-wide graduate school award for community engagement. In the nomination packet, both

students in the course and the nonprofit ED described the benefits of this service-learning research project for educational instruction and awareness of community needs. One student wrote that the course offered "a unique and impactful opportunity for experiential learning" that allowed them to see the "tangible impact of their work." According to one nomination letter:

> This partnership allowed us, as students, to not only apply theoretical knowledge to a practical setting, but also to directly contribute to a meaningful cause. The work we did with [Nonprofit X] became the main focus of our course, and it provided us with an unparalleled opportunity to engage in research that directly benefited the [university] community.

Another nominating student said:

> This project was both rewarding and educational. I learned how to create and carry out a quantitative research study, however I also discovered my own unawareness of serious issues in my community. Collaborating with a local nonprofit organization not only brought awareness to these issues, but provided an opportunity for us students to play a positive role in helping these issues in our community.

Post-course anonymous evaluations indicated that 13 of 14 students who responded "strongly agreed" that "the course challenged me to think critically and communicate clearly about the subject." Additionally, 12 of 14 students "strongly agreed" that "the course assignments were related to the course learning outcomes." Many indicated that the applied project helped illustrate concepts and overcome feelings of intimidation in taking a quantitative methods course. Students wrote in the free response section of the anonymous evaluation:

> I was very scared to take this course but I am SO glad I did. … The applied element of this course, with us doing real research for

> a real client, really helped me learn the material. I also liked how class was split between instructional material and research project time.… I have NEVER in my life understood how to do math and here I am feeling pretty confident about stats.

Anotther student evaluator wrote:

> Over the semester, I have gained a base-level understanding of quantitative methods in communication research and feel more comfortable coming up with research methods. [The instructor] made this class extremely engaging, especially because she centered our work around a real-life organization, which made our work meaningful and not just something to turn in.

The nomination letter from the nonprofit partner explained the value of the partnership in helping its own operations. "With each project, [our nonprofit] has come away with information that has proven to be valuable to us." Additionally, the ED valued the class partnership as an opportunity to educate the transient student community about the needs of local permanent residents, which often go unnoticed in a college town. "I have been impressed by… [the instructor's] desire to ensure her students are aware of the community that they are a part of during their college experience."

Assignment Guide

Brief Description

The GIFT assignment is a semester-long, full-length research paper comprised of in-class workshops and homework. The weekly 3-hour class is divided into two halves: first is instruction based on textbook readings, and the second half consists of the workshops focused on developing the research project in incremental steps. The lectures provide instruction on research concepts (e.g., variables, validity, regression analysis) that are then practiced during the workshop, which often includes small participation-graded activities (see Appendix for examples and Teacher's

Note for schedule). Workshops also include instruction on how to write an academic manuscript. Three drafts of the research manuscript are due throughout the semester: (1) literature review, (2) methods, and (3) results with preliminary discussion. Students are required to make edits suggested by the instructor on the new version of the manuscript so that each draft improves on the previous one. Importantly, the written paper is required to be academic-conference ready, holding students to higher standards for theoretical development and a literature review more aligned with a master's thesis than an undergraduate methods course.

Data collection is managed by the instructor. With instructor guidance, students write surveys and populate them into the Qualtrics online platform provided by the university. The department's SONA research recruitment system is utilized for data collection. All undergraduates enrolled in introductory public speaking courses at the university are enrolled into the SONA subject pool. The instructor manages the surveys on SONA for the participants, but students in the class use the Qualtrics system for downloading results. Students earn their CITI certification early in the semester, and IRB approval for data collection is obtained by the instructor.

Students give a final presentation to their classmates, the instructor, and nonprofit ED to help develop oral speaking skills and check that they can explain their research. Presentations are structured like an academic conference presentation (12-15 minutes) but with special emphasis on practical implications. Among other criteria, students are graded on how well they convey theoretical research concepts in layman's terms for the class partner (see Grading Criteria/Rubrics).

Learning Outcomes

First and foremost, students learn how to design and execute an academic research study and build confidence in their ability to design and interpret a quantitative study. Students create one hypothesis and

choose appropriate theory-backed variables from literature to test this hypothesis. They write the survey questionnaire on their own with input from the instructor, who provides questions on demographic and control variables (e.g., familiarity with the partner nonprofit, donation behavior). Students determine their own independent variables, dependent variables, and moderators with instructor guidance. The paper is structured as an academic research paper with the standard literature review, methods, results, and discussion sections.

Upon completion of the assignment, students should understand the importance of bridging the gap between academia and practice. Students will learn how to interpret research results in two ways: (1) for academic rigor by justifying the choice of variables and statistical analyses and (2) for practical benefit by developing research-backed outcomes to help the nonprofit partner. Students should be able to see how theoretically grounded research can inform real-world solutions or address data deficiencies, which is the reality for many nonprofits who do not have staff or resources to undertake research and planning (Fraustino et al., 2019; Rogers & Andrews, 2016). This perspective should not only help the students in their careers but also help them understand the realities of public relations at all kinds of organizations, broadening their knowledge of the field (e.g., Harrison, 2022).

The final paper should be complete and thoughtful enough for submission to a national academic conference competition or journal. For example, after taking the class, one student group actively prepared to submit their paper to an academic journal. Students will also be able to discuss this research project in job interviews as an example of real-world experience and add it to a portfolio.

Learning outcomes also exist for the class partner. The final presentations should be clear enough for the class partner to feel that at least one of their initial questions or problems presented at the start of the

semester was addressed. Additionally, the goals of the assignment may help inform the class partner about the value of bridging the gap between academia and practice through theory-driven research and collaboration. While nonprofits may shy away from academic collaborations because of the differing expectations for a scholarly project (Rogers & Andrews, 2016), this class should demonstrate the benefits. Particularly for a field like public relations, having practice-informed theory can benefit both the scholarly community as well as the practice itself (Aldoory & Wrigley, 1999). For example, after partnering with this class, the nonprofit partner received data and analysis about the university's undergraduate student population and their likelihood to support the nonprofit. This data was valuable for the nonprofit partner, as the ED had identified current undergraduate students as an area of growth and challenge.

Assignment Requirements

Instructions for the final research project and class presentation are listed below. However, this paper followed a scaffolded approach with three previous drafts due throughout the semester and additional graded activities (see Appendix for these assignments and activity rubric). These final instructions are a culmination of workshops on how to write a scholarly paper and principles of research design as described above.

See the Teacher's Note for an outline of the semester-long schedule that informs these instructions.

Final Group Research Paper Instructions Template

Here it is! Now is the time to put all of the pieces together to produce an academic research paper. Follow the steps we've talked about in each class workshop. Make sure your paper is formatted in APA style and includes the following:

1. Title and your names
2. Introduction: See Week 14 lecture.
3. Literature review**:** See Week 4 lecture and my feedback on three previous drafts.
    A. Theory and variables properly cited
    B. Hypothesis properly written
4. Methods: See Week 13 lecture and my feedback on two previous drafts.
    A. Procedure, Sample, and Measures sections
5. Results: See Week 13 lecture and my feedback on one previous draft.
    A. Analysis and outliers
    B. Statistical results
6. Discussion**:** See Week 14 lecture and my feedback on one previous draft.
    A. Theoretical and practical implications sections
    B. Limitations section
    C. Future directions section
7. References list in APA style: Fix any errors marked on previous versions. Check citation generators for accuracy.
8. Appendices (as necessary): Any tables/figures as needed in

APA style. (Do not copy and paste SPSS tables; they are not in APA style.)

Tips:

- I am mostly concerned with you including the necessary content in each section and addressing any feedback from previous drafts/meetings. For example, report the appropriate results. Make sure you have demographics and stats (scale *M*, *SD*, alpha) for your measures in your Methods section. Make sure your hypothesis is written correctly.
- Make sure your paper is consistent from start to finish. For example, your literature should explain your variables, methods and results should include those same variables, and conclusions should make sense for those variables you tested.
- Do not say anything that gives away our participants' identities, including the name of our university or local geography.
- Check and correct any typos. Follow APA style accurately. Make the final version professional.
- Don't miss the deadline.
- Grades subject to peer reviews.

Final Group Research Presentation Template

Submit your group's presentation visuals (PowerPoint or PDF) here. Be prepared to present your project to [nonprofit ED name] during class. One submission per group.

Presentations must be no longer than 12-15 minutes. I will cut you off if you go over your time to ensure everyone has a chance to present equally. I will randomly choose the order with a random number generator. Please dress professionally (like you're going to work; no t-shirts or sweats). Expect Q&A to last an additional 5-10 minutes, and *everyone in the group should participate in answering questions*.

Consider that you are presenting your research to an academic (me) and also to a professional partner. This assignment will follow the format of a conference presentation with a special emphasis on practical implications.

1. Introduction/Research (3-4 slides): Explain the rationale for your project. Answer the "so what?" question. Provide background on your theory and the variables you chose. State your hypothesis.
2. Methods (2-3 slides): Explain how you collected your data. Who took your survey (demographics)? How did you measure your variables?
3. Results (2-3 slides): Explain how you analyzed your data and what you found. Are your findings statistically significant, and can you accept/reject your hypothesis? Why or why not?
    - Report your findings on the [nonprofit name] familiarity question.
4. Discussion (3-4 slides): Explain theoretical implications, practical implications, limitations, and future research. Provide at least one full slide of practical implications specifically tailored to [ED name and nonprofit name]! What can [ED name] learn from your results? Do you have practical recommendations for them?
    - Be careful not to *overstate your findings,* i.e., say that all college students will respond positively to an appeal using empathy.

Grading Criteria/Rubric

Below are rubrics for (1) the final manuscript and (2) the final in-class presentation. Interpreting results with a focus on the nonprofit partner's needs was a critical part of the discussion section in each paper. Students' ability to take findings and convey them in layman's terms was an important part of feedback for the presentations

.

Table 1

Research Paper Rubric

Criteria	Points
Content Do you have all of the required sections listed in the instructions? Do you meet the academic standards for the required sections as we discussed in your textbook, example article, and lecture? Have you interpreted and applied citations from outside sources properly to your work? Have you accurately reported necessary statistics and interpreted them appropriately? Did you incorporate instructor feedback from drafts and meetings?	100 pts
Writing Is your grammar, punctuation, and spelling error-free? Is your writing reflective of a graduate-level student? Proofread everything!	25 pts
APA style Follow all rules for citations, formatting, and titles per APA Style 7th edition. I will be strict with this to follow standards from academic journals. Check everything from a citation generator; they are often wrong!	25 pts
	Total: 150 pts

Table 2

Final Class Presentation Rubric

Criteria	Points
Error-free visual aid (group grade) Ensure your visual aid is engaging and visually appealing. It should be easy to follow. No typos, grammatical, or spelling errors. Follow correct APA style to cite sources.	15 pts
Explanation of Research (group grade) You included all of the key information required in the presentation. You have one full slide of practical implications tailored to the class partner. The explanation of your research is easy-to-understand and accurate. You justify and explain the choices you made to execute your study.	20 pts
Speaking skills (individual grade) Everyone must speak! Speak confidently and clearly. No excessive use of filler words (like, um, you know). You dressed professionally for the presentation.	10 pts
Q&A (individual grade) Everyone should speak during the Q&A portion of your presentation. Did you answer the question succinctly, strategically, and informatively?	5 pts
	Total: 50 pts

Teaching Note

The instructor managed the relationship with the nonprofit partner and provided some limitations to the project to help manage students' workloads for the semester. For example, students were required to write only one hypothesis and create one survey for the SONA subject pool audience (undergraduate students at the university). This requirement ensured that each group was able to find enough participants within the 17-week semester and provided undergraduate classes with opportunities to earn their research participation credit through SONA. Additionally, the instructor purposely engaged a class partner that was located near the university, and thus, the data were relevant to their operations. In other words, this GIFT was successful because the instructor made sure the data collection requirements were realistic for the students while being methodologically rigorous yet relevant to the class partner.

The class focused on designing a survey questionnaire because of the ease of access to SONA participants. Instead of having students stress over finding their own participants, using a survey method would ensure the instructor could manage data access without burdening students. This class template could also be used to teach experimental or content analysis methods.

Below is a sample schedule for the research project workshops (held in the second half of the 3-hour class). The schedule lists the activities and drafts due leading up to the final full research paper and presentation which are described under "Assignment Requirements."

Table 3

Sample Class Schedule to Support Research Paper and Presentation Assignment

	Suggested Workshop Topics	**Example Workshop Activities**
Week 1	Introduce research project	Choose groups for project
Week 2	Introduce class partner	Guest lecture from partner
Week 3	Literature Reviews and writing a hypothesis	Consider "so what?" question, determine key theory and concepts for project
Week 4	Find appropriate measures for your hypothesis	Literature Review outline due start of class
Week 5	Variables and hypothesis mapping activity	Final hypothesis due by end of class workshop
Week 6	Instructor feedback on Literature Review outline and written hypothesis	Due: Complete CITI training certificate
Week 7	Write your survey instrument	Revised hypothesis due by end of class
Week 8	Target launch of surveys on SONA	Input final survey instrument on Qualtrics by end of class
Week 9	University holiday	

Week 10	Continue writing Literature Review and write Methods section	Check data collection progress
Week 11	Begin cleaning and analyzing your data	Draft full Literature Review and Methods sections due
Week 12	Check descriptive statistics of data Instructor feedback on Literature Review and Methods sections	
Week 13	Determine tests needed to address hypothesis with your data (inferential statistics) Write Results section	Cleaned, final data from Qualtrics due start of class
Week 14	Finalize data analysis Write Discussion section	Revised Lit Review and Methods sections due with corresponding cleaned data
Week 15	Feedback meetings with instructor Continue finalizing paper and prepare for presentation	Draft of Results section and Discussion outline due
Week 16	Final group research paper presentations for class partner Instructor feedback on Results and Discussion sections	Presentations due in class
Finals Week	Final Research Papers due	Group research papers due (full conference-ready paper)

Appendix
Instructions for Scaffolded Paper Assignments and Graded Workshop Activities

The "So What?" Question (ungraded)

By the end of class today, your group should:

1. Review your notes from last week when you started brainstorming variables and research questions. These ideas should be related to our **overall goal** of *how <<nonprofit>> should use communication to encourage donation and/or volunteer support from current <<university>> students.*
2. Revisit concepts from last week. Begin to show the relationship between your variables.
    - What is the ***independent*** and ***dependent variable***? What are potential ***third variables*** that might affect this relationship?
    - Brainstorm at least one ***research question*** (exploration) or ***hypothesis*** (prediction) for these concepts.
    - Remember the research goal of ***explanation***!
3. **Answer the "so what?" question** for your team's project. Why should anyone care about your variables or question/hypothesis? What is the bigger picture? Consider:
    - Why should other people pay attention to your research?
    - How will this impact the "big picture" for nonprofit communications?
    - What knowledge are you building? Why does this matter?
    - How will your study help communications practitioners (e.g., public relations practitioners, nonprofit executives)?

4. **Take notes during <<client's>> presentation** to help inform these choices. Something she says may affect your original brainstorm; be adaptive! Keep your notes for next week's class.

Literature Review Outline

1. What **theory of communication** might help you understand how these variables fit together?
    - Begin searching for relevant literature that can place your study in context. Refer to our discussion on how to write literature reviews.
    - Your **ideas may change** as you conduct your literature review. That's OK!
2. Begin **explicating your variables**. Define what they mean and how they should be measured.
    - Again, refer to previous research to help inform these decisions!
3. Outline of your literature review is **due next class.**
    - I want to see the theory and variables you are considering for your project.
    - List a few citations in APA style for your literature review (steps 2 and 3).

Turn in your group's outline by the start of next class. One submission per group; please include everyone's names. You will be graded on 15 participation points for your contributions to your team.

Finding Appropriate Measures & Finalizing Hypothesis

Step 1: Continue finding sources for your theory and explication of your concepts. Your literature review should have about 15-20 quality citations. Add more content to your outline as you find more sources. The goal is to begin writing your literature review.

Step 2: Begin to make a list of possible measures for your variables. How are the concepts operationalized? What kind of measurement scales are being used? When I am conducting research, I find it helpful to start a list of the measurement scales (and their citations) in a Google document.
Step 3: Submit your **draft hypothesis by the end of class**.

Draft of Survey Questionnaire

Submit a Word document draft of your group's questionnaire for your survey. We will use these drafts to create a Qualtrics survey. Your draft should include:

- The universal class questions we discussed in class.
- Scales for variables with citations, scale type with scale points, items, and question wording/instructions.
- Put the questions in the order you plan to ask them.

You will be graded on participation only for submitting whatever progress you have made so far.

Literature Review and Methods Draft

While we are waiting for your data, it's time to write the first half of your paper.

- **STEP 1**: Return to your activity from Week 5 when you outlined your **Literature Review**. Now it's time to write! Aim for 10-20 citations total for 5-7 double-spaced pages in length.
    - Required sections: Every literature review should (1) detail the overarching theory your paper is contributing to and (2) briefly explicate your independent and dependent variables. Include third variables if applicable to your hypothesis/theory.
    - At the end of your literature review, you should provide one paragraph explaining the rationale for your hypothesis, tying together your literature review.

        - Then, propose your hypothesis as approved by your instructor in class.
            - Follow our example article for guidance
    - **STEP 2**: Begin writing your **Methods** section. This is where you detail every step you took to collect data. You should include enough detail so that anyone reading your study should be able to replicate it. This section is usually 3-4 double-spaced pages.
        - Required sections:
            - **Sample**: Who took your survey? (Leave spaces for sample size (*N*), demographics, and donor behavior.)
            - **Procedure**: How did you distribute the survey? What was the process of collecting responses?
            - **Measures**: How did you measure each of your variables? What scale did you use with its sample indicator and scale type? (Leave spaces for mean, standard deviation, and reliability [Cronbach's α].)
    - **STEP 3**: Check citations, formatting, and titles for appropriate APA Style 7th edition. Journals are often strict with formatting, so get in good practice now!

You will receive a group grade *subject to peer review* from your group members. Everyone should contribute equally to this project. You may gain or lose points based on your peer reviews.

One submission per group. This will be the first draft of your group project; you will receive feedback from me before your next draft is due.

Prep Data for Statistics Workshop

Come to class prepared to analyze the statistics of your sample. To be prepared, you will need to clean your data *before coming to class*. Follow the steps we reviewed in the class workshop.

1. Download the "choice text" from Qualtrics in an Excel spreadsheet. Clean the test responses (anything dated prior to xx). Convert the choice text to the appropriate numerals.
2. Recode any reverse-coded items.
3. Import the Excel data into SPSS.
4. On the variables tab, convert your nominal variables to numerals using the labels column. Label your interval Likert scales appropriately.
5. Run descriptives on all of your variables to evaluate the measures of central tendency, dispersion, and skew/kurtosis. At this point, you are looking for indications that something is amiss with your data. Check for missing data.
6. Run frequencies to begin assessing your demographic data for your Methods section.

Submit your cleaned Excel file here. I will assess your SPSS file when we are in class.

Literature Review and Methods Revisions

- **STEP 1**: Make changes to your literature review as noted in your first draft. Be sure every sentence that is not your own work is cited!
- **STEP 2**: Finish your Methods section including Sample, Procedure, and Measures as described in the previous draft. Include your demographic data. Create your composite scales and list *M*, *SD*, and Cronbach's alpha.
- **STEP 3**: Check APA style for citations and formatting. Follow the proper indentation and headings!

Grade: Same rubric as last draft. I want to see completeness in this draft as well as good participation. No peer review for this draft but let me know if you are having any difficulties working in your group.

Results Draft and Discussion Outline

Let's begin writing the remaining two major sections for our paper. You will receive a grade for this draft based on quality and completeness.

- **STEP 1**: Write your results section using the format discussed in class. If your results are non-significant, report them anyway! Use APA format for reporting statistics.
- **STEP 2**: Outline some key points for your discussion section as discussed in class. Make sure you have all of the key sections represented and some thoughts listed for each one.
- **STEP 3**: Submit your draft by xx. We can talk about your discussion section and any other questions you have prepping for the presentation and final paper during our meetings (see schedule from sign-ups).

Peer Review Template

The author would like to thank
Brandon Boatwright, assistant professor, Clemson University,
for inspiring the peer review portion of this assignment.

Instructions

This is your peer evaluation for your team's Lit Review and Methods draft.

THIS EVALUATION IS CONFIDENTIAL AND WILL ONLY BE VIEWED BY YOU AND YOUR PROFESSOR.

By completing this peer evaluation, you acknowledge this evaluation is truthful and based on participation and contribution for each individual member. You did not let personal issues influence the assessment of your peers. You understand that peer scoring can negatively or positively impact grades on all group work in COMM xxxx.

1. Consider the assignment requirements as well as all activities accomplished by the group for this assessment. Participation and contribution in group activities is vital in the success of the group. Based on the total output produced by the team, how much has each group member contributed? Place the names of team members in the space below in alphabetical order by last name. DO NOT include yourself in this evaluation. Next to each name, indicate their contribution toward the group's accomplishment using a 0-10 scale (0 = very low contribution to 10 = very high contribution). NOTE: All team members (excluding you) must be rated and no more than two members can have the same score.
2. Take a moment and reflect on the group experience. Please write a few sentences per team member to explain in detail the contribution and participation of EACH team member (including yourself!). Explain what each person worked on toward this draft of the project.

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GIFT: Demonstrating Course Competencies and Student Expertise through a Thought Leadership Assignment

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ABSTRACT

This teaching brief presents an end-of-course essay assignment that tasks graduate students to share their expertise publicly through a thought leadership-style article. Through stepping out of the role of "learner" and into the role of "expert" and publishing their articles on LinkedIn, students face the heightened stakes of sharing their insights beyond the classroom walls. By highlighting key knowledge, skills, and abilities they have gained through their graduate education, students can demonstrate the unique perspective and value they offer future employers while further developing their own professional brand. This assignment was developed for a course focused on accessibility, diversity, and inclusion on social media; however, the thought-leadership style essay can be adapted to fit the learning outcomes of many public relations courses.

Keywords: graduate education, thought leadership, reflection, social media, writing

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Assignment Overview

Aligning with the public relations strategy of thought leadership, this assignment creates an opportunity for students finishing their master's in public relations to demonstrate their expertise in a professional, public way. This end-of-course essay was developed for an elective on accessibility, diversity, and inclusion on social media for a professionally oriented graduate program. The assignment prompt asked students to reflect on the course material and offer practical recommendations for public relations practitioners (and others engaged in the development and approval of digital content). Students had to determine, from all the knowledge they have gained through a class, which ideas they can write about in a novel and interesting way to communicate their expertise. Students were tasked with publishing their essay as an "article" on their LinkedIn accounts and submitting the URL to their article through our course learning management system. Finally, students were asked to read and engage with at least three of their classmates' articles to underscore the dialogic affordance of the social platform and role of dialogue in thought leadership. The core competencies for a course focused on social media content and strategy were particularly germane for this assignment design. However, many courses across public relations curricula could incorporate thought leadership assignments to encourage students to highlight the knowledge, skills, and abilities they have gained through their graduate education to their professional networks.

Assignment Rationale and Connection to Public Relations Practice

According to the *Standards for a Master's Degree in Public Relations: Educating for Complexity* (CPRE, 2012), professional graduate programs should "provide students and their present and future employers with a competitive advantage" by teaching the "nuances of public relations and management techniques as well as leadership, business, and communication skills" (p. 5). Additionally, the Commission on Public

Relations Education recommended that "educators and practitioners need to forge closer relationships in order to share the latest knowledge, skills, and ethical practices with students" (CPRE, 2023, p. 8). Therefore, to best prepare students for their future careers, educators within professional graduate programs must stay on top of changes within the field and teach our students to do the same. By modeling attending to trends, participating in professional organizations and networks, and collaborating with practitioners, we can help ensure that our programs set our students up for where the industry is headed. However, providing such training is insufficient for students to be competitive on the job market. As written communication is a critical hard skill and interpersonal communication is a necessary soft skill for public relations practitioners (Brunner et al., 2018), our students need to feel confident in their ability to communicate the unique value they can bring to an organization. Thus, our programs must incorporate opportunities for students to practice demonstrating their expertise.

Thought leadership provides industry-specific insight and guidance publicly, which helps brands, organizations, and individuals stand apart from their peers and competitors. As explained in Thelen et al. (2020), thought leadership is generally viewed as "the act of creating and publicizing valuable and innovative ideas that influence the way people think about a wide range of topics" (p. 28). For example, the Arthur W. Page Society has shared thought leadership content focused on the role of Chief Communication Officers over the last two decades (Bolton, 2022). When our graduates enter the workforce, they may propose a thought-leadership strategy to a client to help establish or maintain the client's reputation as an expert in their field. Therefore, the assignment presented in this paper provides hands-on practice drafting and posting the kind of content this strategic recommendation requires. Being a thought leader means becoming a "source of trusted intelligence that people feel inspired

to follow" (Anderson & Marshall, 2025, p. 70). The Communications Network's (2023) research-based, online tool kit on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) promotes thought leadership as one of eight specific communications areas, arguing it is "critical to equip leaders with messaging that uplifts the values of DEI" (para. 1). As such, this assignment gave my students the opportunity to further establish their own professional brands and identities as industry experts by demonstrating their authority over the specialized knowledge related to accessibility, diversity, and inclusion on social media acquired through the course.

Young (2013) argues that effective thought leadership generates dialogue and inspires thinking and learning. The dialogic affordances of social media platforms make for fertile ground for thought-leadership tactics. With this in mind, the present assignment had students share their thought-leadership essays with their LinkedIn networks because this social media platform caters to users who want to connect, network, and build their professional brand. Students were then asked to read and respond to a few of their peers' articles, engaging in thoughtful dialogue about their specialized knowledge, demonstrating their ability to appreciate a colleague's work, ask follow-up questions, and develop ongoing conversations about relevant public relations topics. This engagement with their peers' articles created an opportunity for students to engage in the primary ways that leaders show empathy: (1) paying attention and listening well, (2) identifying other team members' strengths and limitations, (3) always asking questions to be sure they understand others, and (4) caring about the personal well-being of others and showing sensitivity and understanding (Meng et al., 2024). As an empathetic leadership style is predominant within communication teams and is positively associated with workplace satisfaction (Meng et al., 2024, p. 41), public relations graduate students are better prepared for the industry when given opportunities to develop this skillset.

LinkedIn's article feature allows members to share long-form, in-depth content that can be distributed beyond their personal connections, which is ideal for gaining recognition as an area expert in a relatively easy and low-cost way. The wide reach of the LinkedIn article feature offers the additional benefit of extending course discussions beyond the walls of the classroom, inviting engagement from practitioners whose feedback otherwise would not be accessible and introducing students' ideas to professionals with whom they may not connect otherwise. This directly corresponds with CPRE's (2023) recommendation to "develop course content with a strong focus on students communicating on a personal level with key audiences, including effective networking for the short and long term" (p. 22). In addition, this potential network-building outcome can positively impact employment opportunities, as Harrison et al. (2024) found support for a positive, indirect effect from network building on the probability of obtaining an interview and being hired.

In addition to the course's explicit learning outcomes discussed below, this assignment can meaningfully impact students' presence within their online professional networks. Although graduate student-specific data is not available, Carmack and Heiss (2018) found that undergraduate students tend to be infrequent and passive users of LinkedIn. Passive and infrequent use of the social platform limits the ways in which students can benefit from the networking site. Through publishing their articles, students who tend to passively use LinkedIn experience a new way to actively participate on the site. Beyond recognition as an expert, proving knowledge to one's followers through thought leadership has been shown to build trust with the audience and gather social capital (Barry & Gironda, 2018). By providing students with the opportunity to show what they have learned through their graduate education to potential employers and colleagues, this assignment can also help students build trust and social capital within their networks. Finally, these articles can also advance

students' ability to communicate effectively in writing, a critical skill for public relations practitioners (CPRE, 2012).

Student Learning Goals and Evidence of Student Learning

The student learning goals for the thought leadership assignment aligned with the overall goals of the Social Media Strategies for Accessibility, Diversity, and Inclusion course. By completing the thought leadership assignment, students demonstrated their ability to:

1. Distinguish unique characteristics and concerns related to accessibility, diversity, and inclusion.
2. Distinguish contemporary social media trends and trend forecasts in relation to accessibility, diversity, and inclusion.
3. Recognize concepts related to accessibility practices for social media.
4. Recognize concepts related to concerns connected to diversity and inclusion for social media planning and practices.
5. Understand and apply the mechanisms for evaluating social media efforts.
6. Adapt theory and research findings to practical social media planning and content.
7. Participate in interactive and collaborative discussions about various accessibility, diversity, and inclusion concerns.

Specifically, the content of the articles and comments served as indicators of what the students learned from the course by providing space to demonstrate expertise on material of their choice related to accessibility, diversity, and inclusion on social media (learning goals 1-5 and 7). Students brainstormed topics, researched and wrote articles related to various relevant topics, including the perils of inauthenticity for DEI efforts (Scalenghe, 2024), the value of SMARTIE goals (Taylor, 2024),

why digital accessibility must be a priority for public relations (McIsaac, 2024), the public relations practitioner's role in guiding accessible content (Gass, 2024), and the importance of having a diverse public relations team (Marks, 2024). Moreover, students had the chance to apply best practices presented in the course within their articles, such as adding alternative text to images embedded in their articles, using #CamelCase for any hashtags included, and using people-first language (learning goal 6).

As their submissions were shared publicly, students received feedback from connections outside of the class roster, a unique aspect of this assignment design. This feedback included reactions available within LinkedIn (e.g., like, love, celebrate, insightful, curious), comments, and reposts. The average number of reactions each student received on their LinkedIn article (M = 12.5, SD = 5.1) was greater than comments (M = 3.9, SD = 2.0). The comments on the articles were markedly positive, regularly featuring adjectives such as "informative," "insightful," and "actionable." In addition, five of the 12 published articles were also reposted at least once.

Students reflected on their experience drafting and publishing their articles in a follow-up discussion. Some students described initial apprehension about what topic(s) to focus on in their article, and several more expressed concern about how they would frame their articles or what example(s) to use to best inject their own insights and point of view. They acknowledged that once they decided on a particular topic and example, they felt more confident about how to approach the assignment. The discussion also highlighted that the class varied on how frequently students tended to log in to LinkedIn and the ways in which they used the platform. This assignment was the first time anyone in the class had used the article feature, and students described this experience in the following ways:

- "I'm glad to have learned more about the article feature. I've read many thought leadership articles on there

before, but I didn't know I could publish one myself."

- "I am surprised by how many people have read my article already. A previous internship supervisor of mine commented on my article and tagged every member of their team!"
- "I like how much more substantial and professional an article looks than normal post."
- "Having professionals and peers on LinkedIn as my target audience [instead of my professor] made me pause and think about how to show my learning in a different way than we're normally asked to do. It was a fun mental exercise, and I'm proud of what I ended up publishing."

After this discussion, a few students also shared with me that members of their LinkedIn network private-messaged them to ask about their experience in the graduate program because they were impressed by their articles. This was an unforeseen outcome, and we expressed our pride in their ability to represent our program so well.

Assignment Template

Format Instructions

Instead of submitting a Word document or PDF for this assignment, you will be posting your writing as an "article" on LinkedIn and then submitting the URL to Blackboard. Your article should be between 500-750 words and must include at least one image. Guidance on how to publish an article on LinkedIn is available here (https://www.linkedin.com/help/linkedin/answer/a522427) and here (https://theinacademy.com/how-to-write-great-linkedin-articles/).

Prompt

This assignment is designed to help you further develop your professional brand through the drafting and publishing of a thought leadership article on LinkedIn.

To begin, you need to reflect on the material from this course and decide what topic(s) you would like to share insights about. A few example topics include current best practices for developing accessible content, why it is important for PR practitioners to understand the distinction between allyship and activism, or what multidimensional diversity means for campaign planning and implementation. Take some time to think deeply about what content you found most valuable from the course that you believe would resonate with other public relations students, practitioners, and others engaged in the development/approval of digital content.

As a piece of thought leadership, your article should demonstrate mastery of the topic and offer insightful recommendations. The strongest articles will include an actual scenario or example to illustrate your point(s) more fully – this should NOT be an example from our course material. Additional guidance on writing a thought leadership article is available here (https://www.clearb2b.com/news-views/Howtowriteathoughtleadershiparticle/). Moreover, as your article will be published through the social media platform LinkedIn, be sure to follow the best practices for accessible and inclusive content that we have focused on throughout the term.

Finally, you will need to read and comment on at least three of your peers' articles to further develop the discussions happening there.

Assignment Grading Rubric

The following rubric corresponds with the thought leadership assignment. The three primary concerns considered in the grading of the articles were the quality of insights offered, the integration of relevant course concepts, and the application of best practices in accessible content (60% of the grade). Of secondary concern, the structure, clarity, and professional style of the writing and engagement with peers' articles were assessed (30%). Finally, the inclusion of a visual element and formatting were assessed (10%).

Table 1

Thought Leadership Assignment Grading Rubric

Criteria	Excellent (Full Points)	Good (85%)	Fair (75%)	Needs Improvement (65%)	Points
Content & Insight	Deep understanding, original insights, strong example not from course material	Good insights, relevant example	Basic understanding, limited insight, underdeveloped example	Lacks clarity or understanding, no or inappropriate example	/30
Structure & Clarity	Clear, logical structure, smooth transitions, concise and engaging writing	Mostly clear, minor flow issues	Some structural or clarity issues	Disorganized or hard to follow	/10
Professional Tone & Style	Professional, confident tone, strong personal voice and branding	Generally professional, minor inconsistencies	Tone may be too casual or inconsistent	Unprofessional tone or style	/10
Use of Course Concepts	Effectively integrates key concepts with clear application	Appropriate use, may be surface-level	Limited or unclear use	Missing or misapplied concepts	/15
Accessibility & Inclusivity	Follows best practices (alt text, plain language, inclusive language)	Mostly accessible, minor issues	Some practices missing	Lacks attention to accessibility/inclusivity	/15
Visual Element	Relevant, high-quality image enhances the article	Image included, may lack relevance or quality	Poorly integrated or low-quality image	No image or inappropriate image	/5
LinkedIn Publishing & Formatting	Properly published with appropriate formatting (headings, spacing, etc.)	Minor formatting issues	Major formatting issues	Not published correctly	/5
Peer Engagement	Thoughtful, constructive comments on at least 3 peers' articles	Comments present but lack depth	Fewer than 3 comments or superficial	No peer engagement	/10

Teaching Note

As previously stated, the thought leadership assignment design could be adapted to a variety of course contexts. The primary component of the grading rubric that would require revision is the "Accessibility & Inclusivity" row, as it is unlikely that these best practices are a student learning goal for public relations courses focused on other topics. Regardless of course content, it is recommended that this type of assignment only be implemented toward the end of a graduate program. By extending the audience beyond classmates and the instructor, this assignment comes with higher stakes than most traditional assignment types. Assigned too early in a graduate program, students may feel they have not yet gained enough critical knowledge or skills to serve as a content expert, and the resulting articles may be less effective at demonstrating the impact of the program's curriculum. Furthermore, students' professional networking and job hunt can particularly benefit from being more active on LinkedIn in the semester leading to graduation.

If students have not been introduced to the strategy of thought leadership previously in the curriculum, it would be helpful to incorporate class time focused on what thought leadership is and how it can be used by both organizations and individuals to build and maintain relationships. The Anderson and Marshall (2025) article cited previously offers clear and succinct recommendations for drafting thought leadership content. Prahl et al. (2022) present thought leadership within an issue management context. Thelen et al. (2020) specifically examine thought leadership efforts by U.S. public relations agencies on Twitter. Additionally, I recommend finding some examples of thought leadership articles on LinkedIn relevant to the class materials so students can familiarize themselves with both contemporary, professional discussions on the topics they have been learning about and the format of LinkedIn articles.

Finally, it is necessary to confirm that all students have a LinkedIn profile and understand the value of developing their professional brand and

network through the website, well ahead of introducing this assignment. It should not be taken for granted that all students are on the site – or even that they wish to be. In a situation where a student has a legitimate reason why they would prefer not to create a LinkedIn account or publish a publicly available article (for example, safety concerns related to being publicly searchable), then you can adapt this assignment to remove the requirement to publish their article on LinkedIn. The student(s) can submit their article draft directly to the instructor, and copies of their peers' articles can be provided to the student to read and develop comments to be submitted back to the instructor as well. Depending on the specifics of the student's concern about publishing a publicly available LinkedIn article, it may be appropriate to encourage them to explore other avenues to gain the experience of publishing their work, such as student media outlets on campus or some other industry publication.

Conclusion

Offering graduate students the opportunity to step out of the role of learner and into the role of expert through a thought-leadership assignment helps to prepare them for the next step in their career, where they will be expected to offer insights and recommendations in professional settings with regularity. The assignment also gives them experience thinking through both the conceptual and practical aspects of developing thought leadership content via LinkedIn's article feature. Plus, unlike a traditional assignment due directly to their professor, by publicly publishing their ideas as articles, the assignment helps students further develop their own professional brand as they begin their job search ahead of finishing their degree program. Having implemented this assignment last spring, students reported positive experiences sharing their expertise with their professional networks and received encouraging feedback on their articles. As soon-to-be-graduates and alumni are key representatives of any university program, the work produced through a thought-leadership

assignment shines a light not just on individual students' knowledge, skills, and abilities, but also on the educational and professional development opportunities provided by their graduate program.

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