

## **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

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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

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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	$\chi^2$	df	<i>p</i>
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

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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

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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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