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

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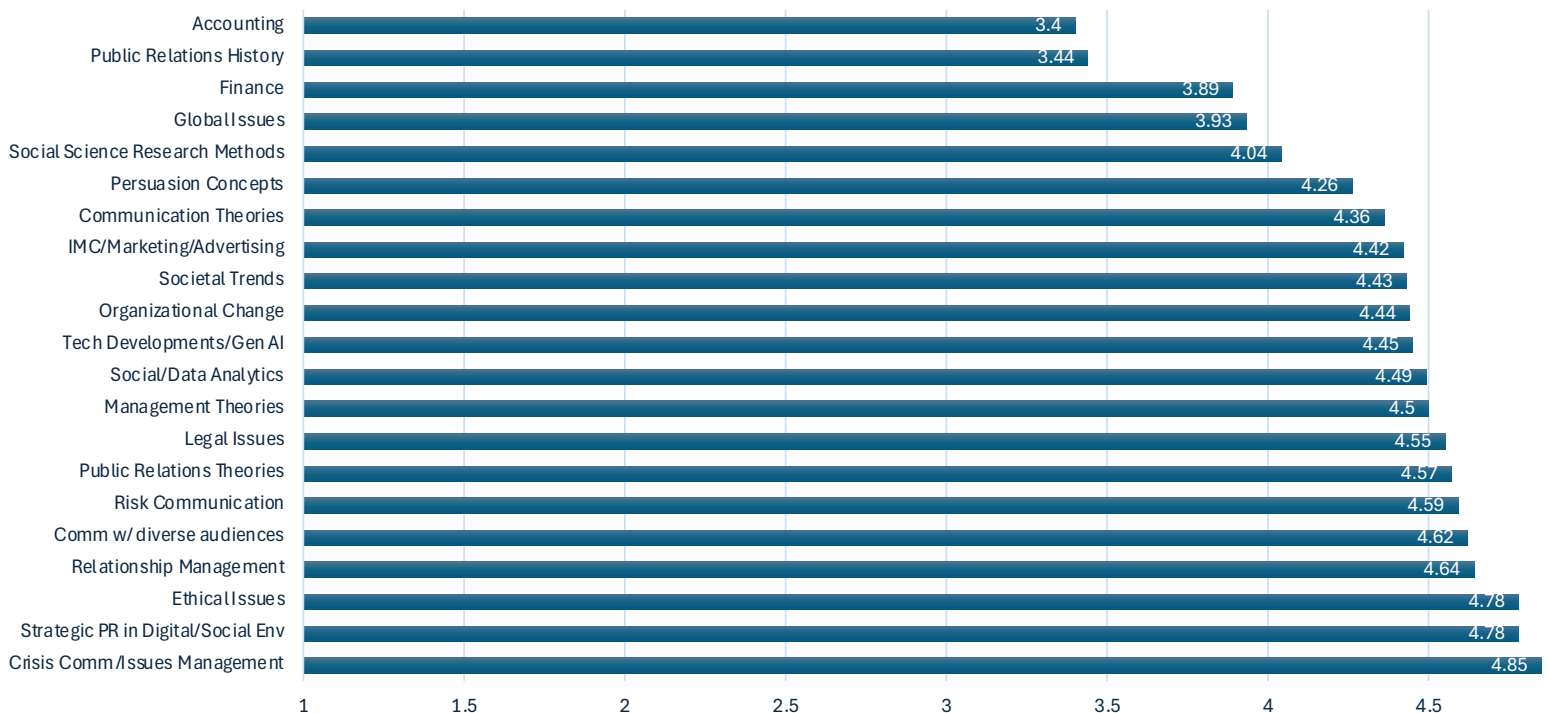
the opportunity to enter additional skills through an open-ended response question, which resulted in eight entries, such as budgeting, media relations, business acumen, project management, and measurement.

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

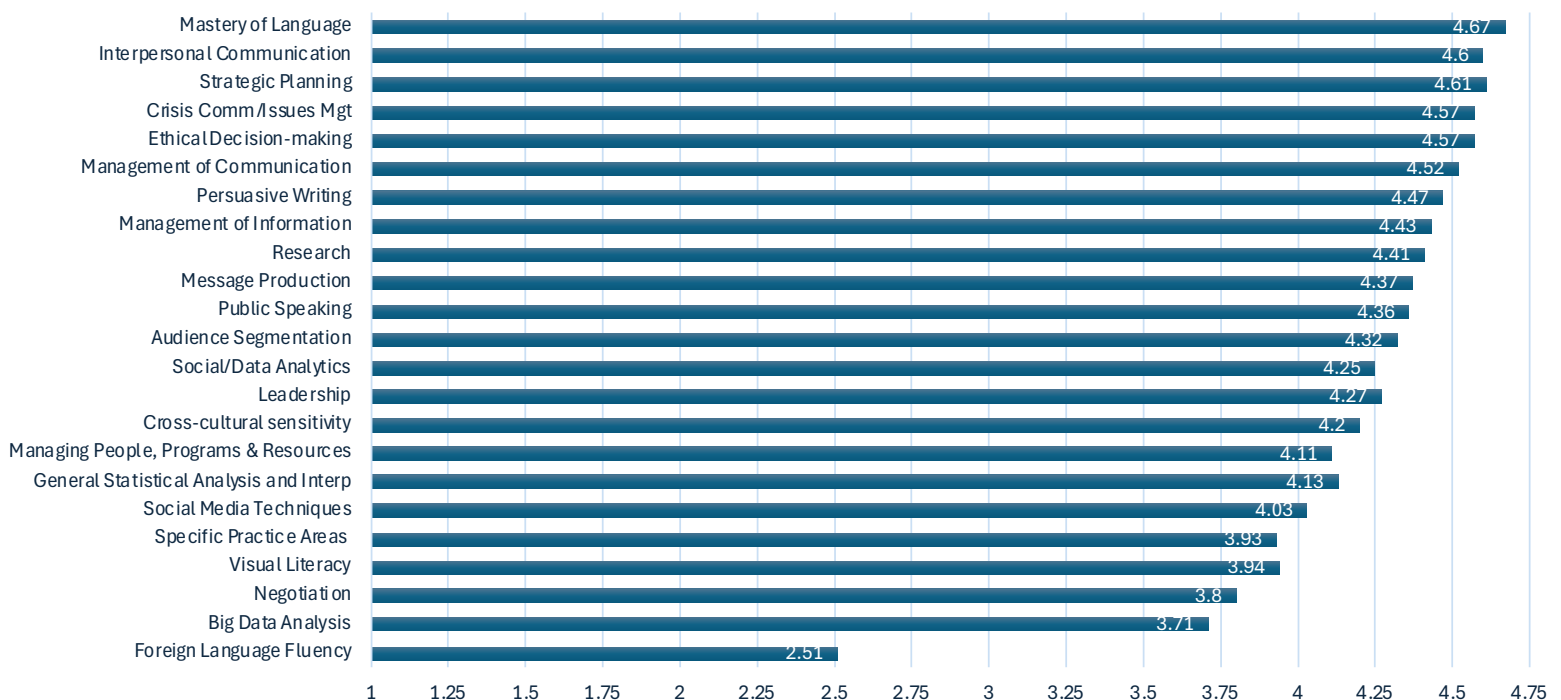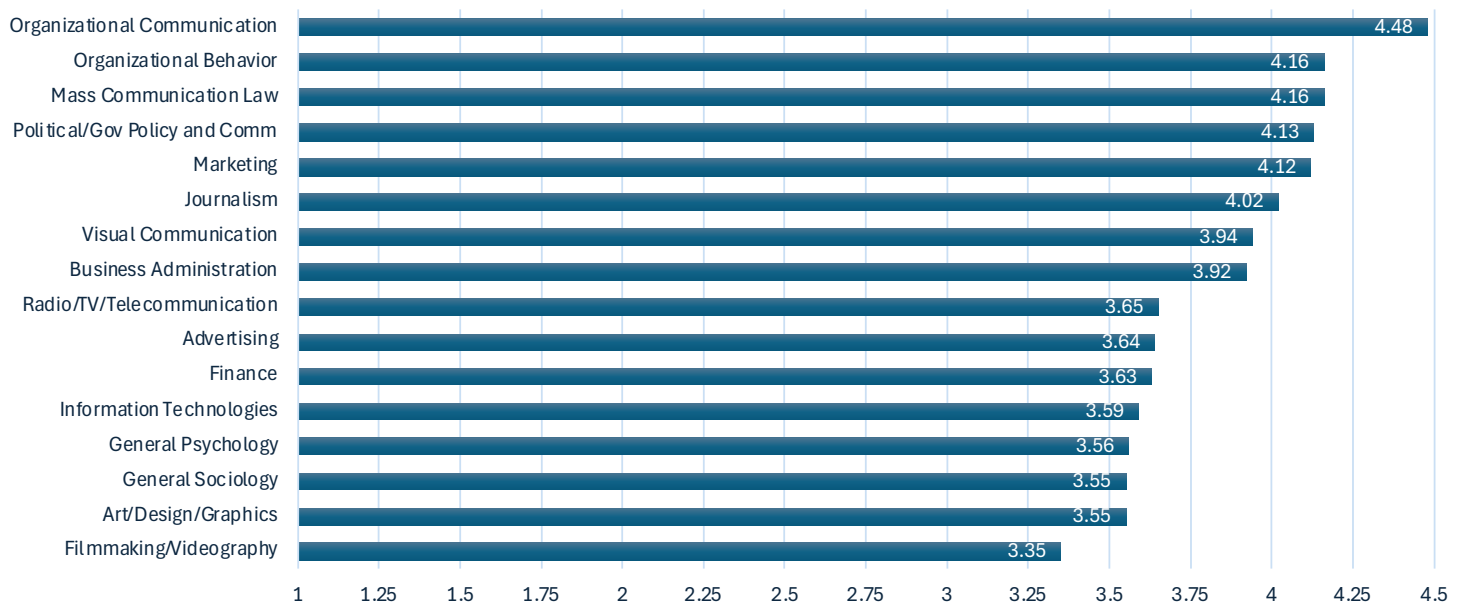*Desired Skills in Public Relations & Communication Management Master's Degree Programs*

Skill	Value
Mastery of Language	4.67
Interpersonal Communication	4.6
Strategic Planning	4.61
Crisis Comm/Issues Mgt	4.57
Ethical Decision-making	4.57
Management of Communication	4.52
Persuasive Writing	4.47
Management of Information	4.43
Research	4.41
Message Production	4.37
Public Speaking	4.36
Audience Segmentation	4.32
Social/Data Analytics	4.25
Leadership	4.27
Cross-cultural sensitivity	4.2
Managing People, Programs & Resources	4.11
General Statistical Analysis and Interp	4.13
Social Media Techniques	4.03
Specific Practice Areas	3.93
Visual Literacy	3.94
Negotiation	3.8
Big Data Analysis	3.71
Foreign Language Fluency	2.51

Figure 3

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

Organizational Communication	4.48
Organizational Behavior	4.16
Mass Communication Law	4.16
Political/Gov Policy and Comm	4.13
Marketing	4.12
Journalism	4.02
Visual Communication	3.94
Business Administration	3.92
Radio/TV/Telecommunication	3.65
Advertising	3.64
Finance	3.63
Information Technologies	3.59
General Psychology	3.56
General Sociology	3.55
Art/Design/Graphics	3.55
Filmmaking/Videography	3.35

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
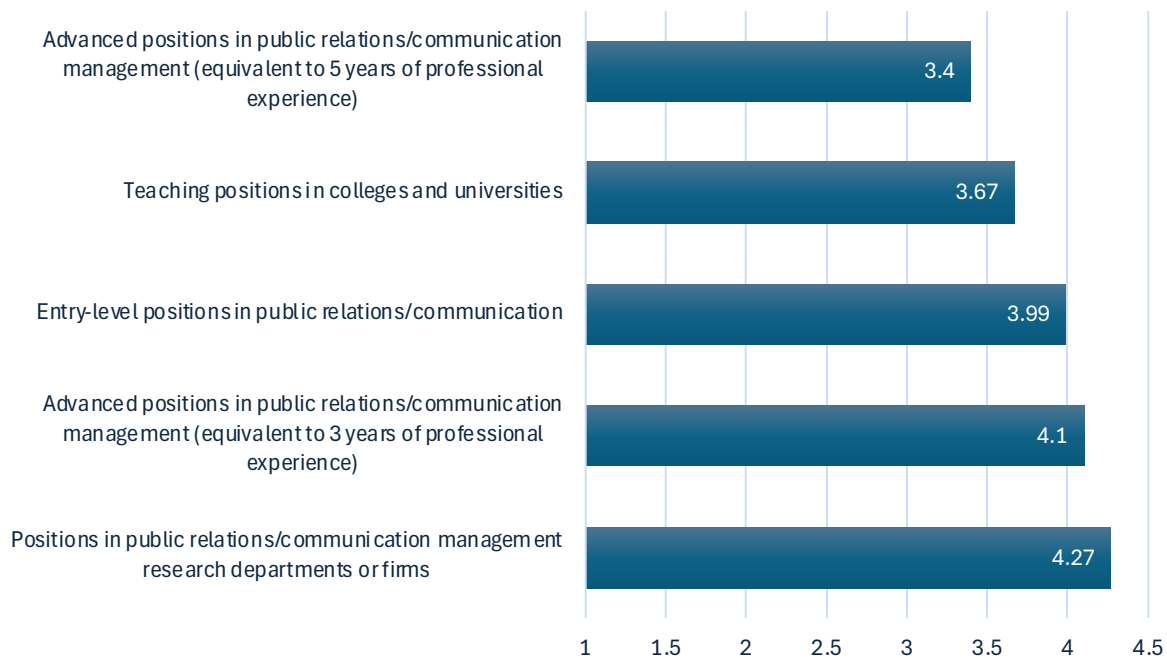
The participants were then asked for their agreement regarding various statements related to the perceived value of master's degrees. They were most likely to agree with the statement that a master's degree is valuable to the profession ($M = 3.99$), followed by a master's degree is beneficial ($M = 3.91$), 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

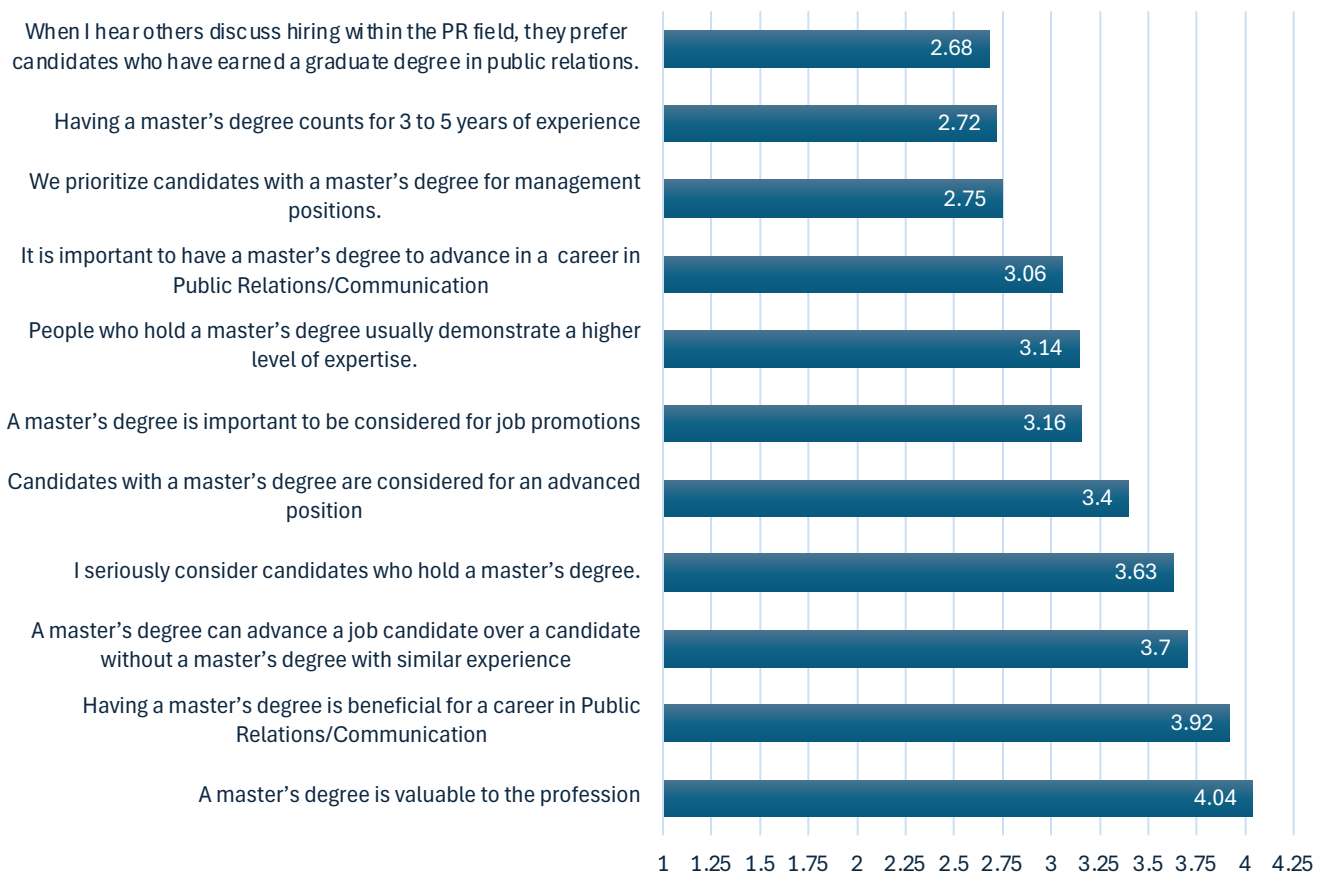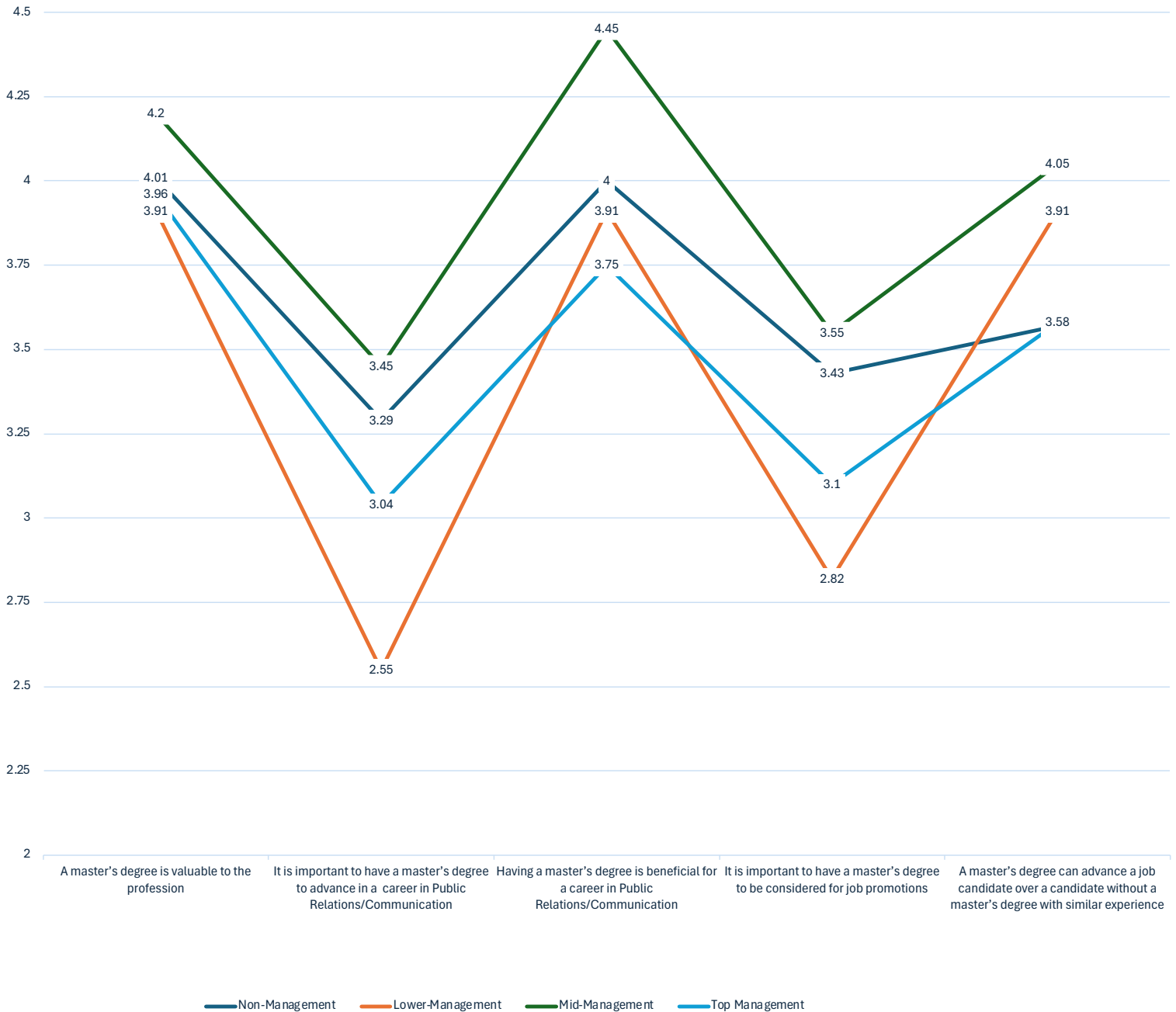*Perceptions Regarding the Value of Public Relations/Communication Management Master's Degrees*

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

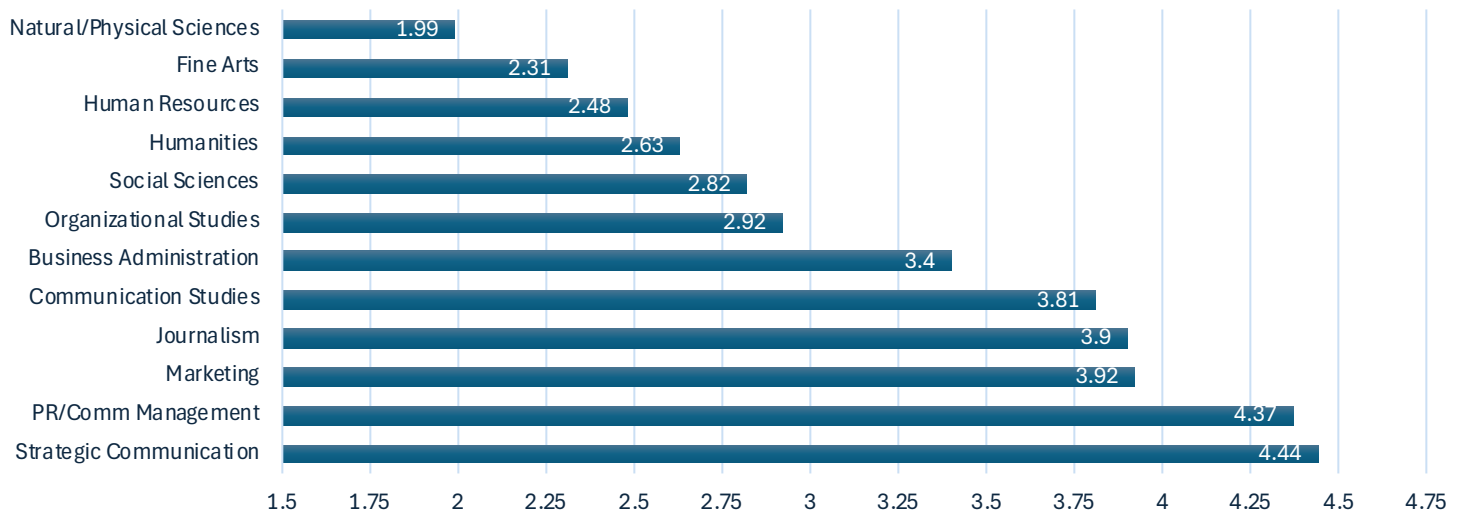*Perceptions of Public Relations Master's Degree Benefits by Education Level*
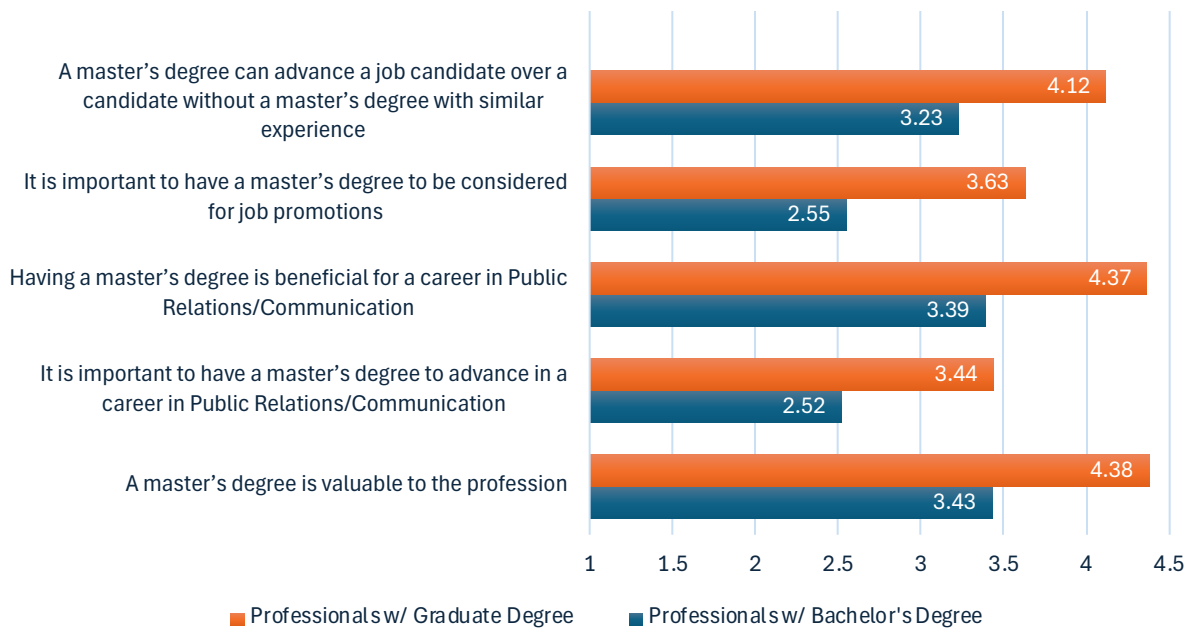
Note: bachelor's degrees only ($n = 44$), graduate degrees ($n = 57$), no response ($n = 18$)

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

Discipline	Value
Natural/Physical Sciences	1.99
Fine Arts	2.31
Human Resources	2.48
Humanities	2.63
Social Sciences	2.82
Organizational Studies	2.92
Business Administration	3.4
Communication Studies	3.81
Journalism	3.9
Marketing	3.92
PR/Comm Management	4.37
Strategic Communication	4.44

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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