

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

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ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

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

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

Literature Review

Overview of Research on Graduate Public Relations Education

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

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

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

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

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

Knowledge and Skills

The KSAs framework, long used in federal job applications,

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

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

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

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

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

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

Related Courses

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Research Questions

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

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

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

Method

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

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

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

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

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

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

Results

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

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

Table 1*Factor Loadings for Knowledge Areas*

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

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

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

Table 2*Factor Loadings for Skills Areas*

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

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

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

Discussion

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

Table 3*Factor Loadings for Courses in Related Disciplines*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Limitations and Future Research

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

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

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

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