

Shaping Future Professionals: Industry Perspectives on Graduate Internships

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ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Literature Review

Overview of Graduate Education in Public Relations

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

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

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

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

Graduate Students as Industry Interns

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

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

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

Gaps in Graduate Programs' Preparation of Students for Employment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How Graduate Programs Can Better Prepare Students for the Workplace

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Method

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

Participants

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

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

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

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

Researcher Reflexivity

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

Procedure

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

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

Data Analysis Approach

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

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

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

Results

Most valued personal qualities, professional skills, and experiences

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

Clear Communication

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

(NOTE: Descriptive anchors are provided on the first reference of each participant in the results; a full table of anonymized information collected on each participant is available in Appendix A.)

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

Writing Proficiency

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

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

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

Teamwork and Adaptability

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

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

Relevant Professional and Classroom Experiences

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

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

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

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

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

Preparing Graduate Students for Successful Internships

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

Building Soft Skills through Accountability

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

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

Client-Facing Projects

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

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

Emphasizing interdisciplinary and technical competence

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

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

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

Organizational Factors & Hiring Priorities

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

Understanding the Cultural Fit in Different Environments

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

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

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

Being Prepared for Different Work Environments

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

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

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

Being Professionally Present

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

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

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

Discussion

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

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

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

Curriculum Development

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

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

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

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

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

Building a Career-Ready Mindset

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

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

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

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

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

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

Employer Practices and Internships

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

learning and growth.

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

Limitations and Future Directions

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

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

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

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

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

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Appendix A
Table of Participants and Demographics

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

Appendix B
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

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

Appendix C

Preliminary Codebook to Guide Thematic Analysis for Project

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

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

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

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

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

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

Analytic Notes

- Unit of coding: Meaningful segment (sentence/paragraph) expressing employer perspective or program insight.
- Theme relationships: RQ1 (inputs: qualities/skills) → RQ2 (program processes) → RQ3 (contextual outcomes).
- Potential higher-order themes: Professional Readiness, Curricular Gaps, Workplace Expectations.

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

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

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