Journal of

Public Relations Education

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication

Volume 12, Issue 2, Summer 2026

AEJMC
JPRE
Public Relations Division
Journal of Public Relations Education

A publication of the Public Relations Division of AEJMC
ISSN 2573-1742

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Journal of Public Relations Education
Editorial Review Board

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Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
Volume 11, Issue 3, Winter 2025

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Letter from the Editor

Issue 12-2 showcases how public relations education continues to evolve to meet the demands of an increasingly complex profession, while keeping students' learning and futures at the center of our work.

Centering Work-Ready Learning

Across the issue, authors grapple with a fundamental question: what does it now mean to be "work-ready" in public relations, and how should our programs respond. Articles in this volume deepen the conversation sparked by the Commission on Public Relations Education's most recent report, particularly around creativity, critical and analytical thinking, emotional and social intelligence, and the soft skills that employers consistently say they need, but do not always see in new graduates. Together, these pieces argue that work readiness is no longer just a matter of mastering writing and campaigns; it is about integrating knowledge, application, and social intelligence into a coherent professional identity.

Classroom Innovation and Pedagogy

Several contributions offer concrete, classroom-tested approaches that make this integration visible to students and measurable for faculty. From low-stakes in-class creativity exercises that explicitly tie measurable objectives to strategic thinking, to carefully scaffolded crisis and ethics assignments that walk students from memo writing to live Q&A, these authors show how active learning and reflective practice can build confidence, collaboration, and higher-order thinking in accessible ways. These teaching-focused pieces will be especially useful to instructors seeking ready-to-implement assignments that align with CPRE recommendations and accreditation expectations while still leaving room for local adaptation and student voice.

Experiential Learning and Student-Run Agencies

This issue also underscores the enduring and expanding value of student-run agencies as high-impact, interdisciplinary learning environments. The case study featured here offers a rich, multi-stakeholder view of a credit-bearing agency experience, tracing its evolution from a volunteer model to a competitive, prestigious course that blends PR, design, media, and other communication disciplines. Through student, client, and instructor perspectives, the authors illustrate how agency culture, accountability structures, and intentional debriefing accelerate students' professional growth, leadership, and sense of identity as practitioners. Their findings reinforce what many of us see in our own programs: when we treat student agencies as professional spaces—not just courses—students rise to the challenge.

Ethics, Privacy, and Emerging Demands

Finally, this issue highlights the growing expectation that public relations graduates can navigate complex ethical terrain, including data privacy, cybersecurity, and corporate misconduct. The teaching brief on the Wells Fargo scandal exemplifies how privacy, ethics, and crisis communication can be intertwined in a single assignment that feels both immediate and deeply consequential to students preparing for corporate careers. By inviting students to inhabit the tensions between shareholder expectations, stakeholder trust, regulatory scrutiny, and organizational culture, this work demonstrates how PR classrooms can function as labs for ethical leadership in a digital, datafied world.

As editor-in-chief, I am grateful to the editorial staff, editorial review board, authors, individual article reviewers, and practitioners who contributed to this issue, and to the students past, present, and future whose experiences animate every page. I invite you to read these pieces not only as individual studies or teaching notes, but as parts of an ongoing, shared project to design a public relations education that is rigorous, relevant, inclusive, and truly worthy of the students we serve.

Adrienne A. Wallace
Editor-in-Chief

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Do Public Relations Graduates Exhibit Work-Ready Intelligence?

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Elizabeth L. Toth, University of Maryland
Charles "Chuck" Lubbers, University of South Dakota
Hua Jiang, Syracuse University

ABSTRACT

Stage 1 of Professional Identity provides a basis to explore how college helps prepare students for entering the workforce, especially given the prevalence of Generation Z issues represented in the professional literature in the public relations field. The literature review examines Gen Z along with studies of practitioners and students and their views of their preparation. Using in-depth interviews with practitioners, this study explored qualitatively what public relations practitioners consider "work ready" to mean. The interviewees reflected on elements related to Knowledge, Skills and Abilities, and one example was in the area of writing with some expressing satisfaction and others feeling students still need work. Beyond the KSAs, however, were a number of mentions of a variety of "social intelligence" concepts ranging from being curious to interpersonal abilities. In particular, practitioners wanted to see the new hires ready to participate, ask questions, and be engaged. One other area which practitioners identified was the need for experience – in volunteer work, internships, and generally being engaged in extracurricular organizations. Suggestions focus on the curriculum and classroom – especially in helping develop immersive experiences for the students so that they can demonstrate and have confidence in their "Work Ready Intelligence."

Keywords: c

Editorial Record: Submitted June 16, 2025. Revised February 7, 2026. Accepted June 2, 2026.

Introduction

The Commission on Public Relations Education's[1] (CPRE) signature report quantitative surveys (1999, 2006, 2018, 2023b) have highlighted that practitioners expected more competencies than were found in new public relations hires. The CPRE 1999 Port of Entry report concluded that, on the whole, practitioners were not satisfied that desirable knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) were found in graduates (CPRE, 1999). A conclusion from the Fast Forward (2018) report was that practitioners sampled both in the 2006 Professional Bond Report as well as in the 2018 report "didn't see the needed skills of writing; research and analytics; media relations and ability to communicate; critical thinking; and problem-solving in entry-level hires" (CPRE, 2018, p. 53). Practitioners surveyed for the CPRE 2023 Report continued to rate, lower than educators rated, the KSAs they found in entry-level practitioners, a difference perhaps because practitioners' perceptions may be of the new generation of incoming practitioners/employees rather than in their classroom performances (CPRE, 2023b, p. 38).

Prior to the publication of the Commission on Public Relations' 2023 Report, the CPRE research committee conducted two focus groups with Arthur Page Society members to learn from their employer vantage points how they were thinking about the proposed seven Report topic areas (CPRE, 2023b, p. 19). Also in 2022, CPRE's Summit Organizing Committee conducted online focus groups, resulting in key learnings about the needs and expectations of new professionals entering the public relations workplace (CPRE 2023a).

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[1] The Commission on Public Relations Education's membership represents 24 practitioner and educator national and international associations. For 50+ years, it's mission has been to provide public relations education standards for successful preparation of students to enter and advance in their public relations careers online.

This study picks up from prior studies to delve deeper into how students may or may not be seen as work-ready, using in-depth interviews with PR practitioners to explore what they are expecting from new hires from college and what it takes to be perceived as work-ready or competent. To begin, the literature review will consider current definitions of work-ready, while also looking at research that considers practitioner and early career or student views of their job preparation. To understand these elements, consideration is also given to Generation Z (Gen Z), born 1995 to 2010 or 1997 to 2012 (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2023a, p. 29), and to socialization in the workplace.

Literature Review

Work-Ready (WR)

Public relations educators, like educators in other fields of higher education, are tasked with developing future employees who can make meaningful contributions in the workplace upon graduation. The knowledge, skills, and abilities cultivated in the classroom and through extracurricular activities are designed to create a work-ready employee. But how do we know that students are work-ready? Orr et al. (2023), in their systematic review of the use of the work-ready concept in articles related to Australian higher education and the results, "… confirmed differences in conceptualization of WR and that the majority of studies adopted a multidimensional measurement approach, comprising discipline-specific and generic skills" (p. 1714). Peersia et al. (2024) grouped prior work-ready research into three approaches: demand-, equilibrium-, and supply-oriented (p. 1830). According to Peersia et al. (2024), performance-based definitions of work-ready include: demonstrated proficiencies; having personal qualities; people skills/professional abilities; a set of essential behaviors and skills; likelihood of finding employment; and suitability in relation to workplace requirements.

Generation Z

From public relations to human resources surveys, researchers have questioned whether graduates are truly work-ready despite having specific, career-focused education. In some cases, studies raise the question of the value of higher education. In other cases, questions arise on the abilities – beyond college – of Gen Z. Another paradox is emerging as well, where Gen Z is touted as having the needed “fresh perspectives, digital fluency and bold ambitions” (Martinez, 2025, para. 1), but at the same time, many are being terminated soon after being hired.

Martinez (2025) listed the following key issues for employers of Gen Z workers: they may not have the soft skills needed for workplace readiness, Gen Z tends to job hop, Gen Z appreciates diversity and mental health, which may not align with more traditional cultures, and Gen Z may engage less when in unstructured remote or hybrid jobs. Tyler (2024) similarly indicated that not considering Gen Z’s expectations can lead to “disengagement, high turnover, and a failure to capitalize on Gen Z’s fresh perspectives and skills” (para. 16).

On the other hand, Martinez (2025), reported that Gen Z employees perceive the workplace as rigid and not inviting of their input, as not addressing mental health appropriately, as not open to “rapid career growth, meaningful work and competitive compensation” (para. 12), and as not supporting training and mentorship. Crist (2024) highlighted Gen Z as focused on job security and work-life balance, with an interest in skill development to provide greater security. At the same time, Gen Z would question organizational culture, expressing “family” themes that would blur the lines between work and life. Tyler (2024) argued for employers to recognize Gen Z values. With “the importance of flexible work environments, publicly advocating for societal change, and diversity, equity, and inclusion – employers can attract and retain Gen Z talent and foster a dynamic and innovative organizational culture” (para. 16).

Competency Conceptually Defined - Workplace Readiness

Generally, public relations scholars have equated the term "competencies" with the human resources categories of knowledge, skills, and abilities (Federal Employees' Career Development Center, 2023; McNamara, 2018; Flynn, 2014).

Practitioner Views on Competency

One line of research describing practitioner views of preferred KSAs for entry-level hires comes from analyses of job ads. For example, Brunner et al. (2018) content analyzed 199 entry-level job ads posted to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) job center to learn what degrees were sought, what knowledge/skills related to writing formats, social media platforms, design tools, management tasks, and soft skills were sought in employment ads. Among their findings were "hard skills, such as writing, but also soft skill abilities, such as time management, deadline orientation, and collaboration" (Brunner et al., 2018, p. 3). Meganck et al. (2020) in their analysis of skills required in 1,000 PR job ads, reported that the most frequently required skills were "written communication skills, organizational skills, administrative software skills, social/digital media skills, leadership abilities, ability to work in teams, and graphic design" (p. 5). They described as "soft skills" those of organizational skills, leadership abilities, and the ability to work in teams. They recognized that while educators can influence the development of soft skills, they are difficult to teach and may be things that will be "learned over time" (Meganck et al., 2020, p. 6).

Bernhard and Russmann (2023, 2024), having reviewed several United States studies of public relations job ads, conducted a longitudinal automated semantic analysis of 336,639 job ads between 2015 and 2020 in Austria and Germany, finding similarities with US studies in demanded skills (Bernhard & Russmann, 2024). Their analysis continued to categorize job ad requirements as either hard or soft skills. Soft skills categories included social skills, such as ethics, emotional intelligence, or patience (Bernhard & Russmann, 2024). Additional soft skills listed were "methodological skills (professional appearance, being decisive or able to deal with stress); general communication soft skills; presentation skills; work ethics; creativity; teamwork; work methods (multi-tasking, hands-on mentality); analytical skills; innovating thinking; and working with clients" (Bernhard & Russmann, 2024, p. 630).

Lubbers et al. (2024) offer a different perspective on the study of job advertisements in public relations. Instead of focusing on the KSAs expected of the applicants, their research determined if the position descriptions were addressing ten expectations and priorities of the Gen Z employee. The mean score for the ads was only 2.7 out of ten, indicating that employers were not addressing the topics important to Gen Z applicants for entry-level public relations positions. These studies of job ads and quantitative opinions of practitioners provide descriptions of the ideal candidate, with numerous requirements, generally categorized as hard and soft skills, but lacking in qualitative analyses or prioritization of skills needed immediately, that is, work-ready.

Another line of research to learn from public relations practitioners about their expectations for future PR employees has been based on surveys. Krishna et al. (2020), for example, reported on the purposive/convenience perceptions of PRWeek subscribers and members of other PR-related organizations, who overall ranked writing, listening, and creative thinking as the most important skills of aspiring public relations practitioners. The authors noted that these rankings closely followed CPRE's Fast Forward report (DiStaso, 2019). They also found some differences in perceptions across early-career, mid-level, and senior-level practitioners, although writing was essential across all experience groups, as were the soft skills of ability to lead teams and to develop talent. Based on their findings, Krishna et al. (2020) concluded that public relations curricula should include coursework on “listening, digital storytelling, communicating effectively in today’s environment of misinformation, leadership, how to work effectively with PR firms and other outside consultants, and most importantly, business acumen” (p. 53).

Public relations practitioner expectations of future entry-level employees were reported in the Commission on Public Relations Education’s 2023 Report. Among the top knowledge traits practitioners desired were ethics, cultural perspectives, social issues, and DEI (diversity, equality, inclusion). Among the top skills rated by practitioners as desired in entry-level employees were communication, writing, and social media management. Practitioners’ perceptions of graduates’ public relations abilities prioritized problem–solving, creative thinking, analytical thinking, and strategic planning. For all of these knowledge, skills, and abilities traits desired by practitioners, their perceptions of whether these KSAs were found were rated lower (CPRE, 2023b).

Students’ & Early Career Practitioners’ Perceptions of Workplace Readiness & Socialization

Few studies have provided insights from students and early-career practitioners on workplace readiness. Waymer et al. (2018) conducted qualitative interviews of 24 young public relations professionals (six were white and 18 were under-represented racial or ethnic individuals). These early career professionals reported on what elements of their undergraduate public relations education were beneficial to their career preparation and what skills and knowledge they wished they’d learned more about. From their early career employment, they perceived that most beneficial to their preparation were writing-intensive and experiential learning classes. However, they reported that if they had more technical skills and applied business knowledge, they would have had an easier time transitioning from college to work. In their reporting, they saw more benefit in immersive socialization opportunities in order to interact better with professionals “for and/or attempting to secure employment” (Waymer et al., 2018, p. 124), and having enough networking opportunities. Another theme in the interviews concerned the under-representation of males in their public relations courses, which made adjustment to a more gender representative workplace challenging. The Waymer et al. (2018) inductive approach to assessing career readiness centered on key agents of socialization, providing observations from the field as opposed to quantitative analyses that sought statistical competency representations.

Providing a different perspective on early career individuals in a variety of positions in Romania, Ioan (2023) identified three ways early career individuals develop meaning at work, including finding work that is personally meaningful, learning new skills, and considering how their work benefits others. Ioan adapted Goffman’s phases to include Stage 1, lasting about three months, when the employee learns on the job, both in terms of information needed and norms. Stage 2, from one to three years, is the confidence developing stage and the time when the individual becomes part of the group. Stage 3 is a time of routinized work, which typically leads to a new job, and/or burnout. A variation of this is offered by Cohen-Scali (2003), who highlighted two dimensions that influence what is described as Professional Identity. Specifically, there are two phases of socialization, with the initial one being through family and/or school, and the second being the process of becoming part of a work setting.

Another Romanian-based study included interviews of over 400 Romanian student representatives of Gen Z, with no exclusion by fields of study, some with and without work experience (Botezat et al., 2023). Their results align with current thinking on Gen Z, such as their interest in work-life balance, although that was less important for the students with at least two years of work experience. The students also valued meaningful work, especially important to lower turnover.

Emotional Intelligence Theory

As a baseline, exploration of early career work includes the work of Goffman (1959) who outlines three stages in what he identified as the moral career of young employees. The stages included adapting and learning, gaining confidence, and establishing routines. Other related concepts include emotional and social intelligence.

Zhang and Adegboha (2022) define emotional intelligence or emotional quotient as "a wide range of competencies to know and manage one's emotions, self-motivate, recognize emotions in others, and handle social relationships" (p. 1). Based on their empirical review of public relations literature addressing emotional intelligence, they recommended that public relations education offer courses in emotional intelligence, social skills, and listening skills (p. 7).

Another emerging perspective is in the area of social intelligence which is centered in communication and interpersonal relations, including listening, impression management, and adapting to different roles (Riggio, 2014). The elements appear to enact Goffman's (1959) concept of individuals as performers:

> When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess. (p.17).

If one considers the performer in this case as the new hire, especially one coming out of school, the observers clearly have any number of expectations of the degreed individual. But first impressions don't always live out in the daily exchanges in the workplace – especially when that workplace may also exist virtually, and when a generation of digital natives who have also experienced learning around the time of COVID-19 are put into a workforce of colleagues from different generations.

Research Questions

The previous literature on Gen Z, work readiness, social intelligence, and emotional intelligence theories provided context for the following research questions. These RQs focused our theorizing on the Stage 1 socialization in terms of how college prepared students/graduates for their Professional Identity and work in general (Cohen-Scali, 2003). The RQs adopted a multidimensional framework to determine what performance-based criteria, as exemplified by Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs), are used to characterize a work-ready public relations graduate, as well as considered graduate preparation and social and emotional abilities.

1. In what ways do practitioners observe or experience new hires as competent (KSAs, etc.)?
   - 1 a. How do practitioners define “work-ready”?
   - 1 b. Do traditional routes to increasing competency (e.g., internships, master’s degrees) make a difference in student work readiness?
2. How did public relations practitioners reflect on their workplace experiences with Gen Z?
3. In what ways did practitioners recommend improving competency/work readiness of new graduates?

Method

We recognize that work is constituted largely through interactions (Ioan, 2023), and any study of the workplace relies on those social relationships. To capture that essence, we relied on a series of personal, in-depth interviews, which also provided a perspective not limited to a fixed-choice style of survey.

In-depth interviews were conducted under IRB approval from Georgia Southern University. The interviewees were primarily members of the Research Panel[2] of the Commission on Public Relations Education, individuals who were specifically invited to participate in the CPRE 2023 study. Members were contacted by e-mail and invited to participate; 16 agreed. These participants were mid- to senior-career public relations practitioners. With all the interviewees representing mid-career to senior-level practitioners, an additional interview was conducted to ensure an early-career voice was included. The early-career interviewee had less than 5 years' experience. The interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes, and were conducted by the authors and graduate students[3]. The interviews were conducted using Zoom meetings, with initial transcripts created by Zoom and then revised by the interviewer.

The interview transcripts were then reviewed by the authors. Analysis of the data sets involved an iterative process, first assessing the broader themes emerging as they related to the research questions, highlighting what Owen (1984) referred to as recurrence (of themes), repetition (key words or phrases), and forcefulness (emphasis used). The authors begin the data analysis through open-coding of the interview transcripts for participant conversations that reflected work readiness, KSAs, and competencies, as discussed in the literature review, and using initial research questions as a guide. After a first round of identifying themes and concepts as close as possible to participant verbatim responses through the use of the constant-comparative method, the authors conducted axial coding on the data, resulting in thematic categories (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Lindlof and Taylor (2019) note that "axial

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[2] The CPRE Panel is an established group of practitioners who have volunteered to participate in CPRE surveys.

[3] The authors thank graduate students, including Trevor Sconyers, who participated in the training and conducted some of the interviews and students in the Professional Communication and Leadership course at Georgia Southern University.

coding brings previously separate categories (or concepts) together under a new thematic category" (p. 324). The authors continued to use previous conceptualizations of work readiness, KSAs, and competencies found in the literature review as a guide for their analysis and interpretation. The resulting themes represent a consensus interpretation by the authors.

Results and Discussion

Those agreeing to participate in the interviews included 12 female practitioners and five male practitioners, with nine currently working at firms and several indicating they had worked in a variety of other settings as well. The others were in corporate, university, nonprofit, and religious-based public relations practices. The mean number of years of public relations experience was 22.5, with a range of two to 45, clearly a sample representing senior leadership. In addition, 16 had undergraduate degrees, with eight in public relations/communication, three in journalism, three in English, and one in Urban Affairs, with one not reporting. Of the respondents, six had pursued or were pursuing master's degrees, and three had certifications.

The following highlights their responses to questions related to student or new hire preparation in the Stage 1 socialization of their professional identity and their impressions of student readiness.

RQ1: In what ways do practitioners observe or experience new hires as competent (KSAs, etc.)?

Strengths

Participants shared their observations and experiences about new hires' competencies by thinking about their strengths. These observations fell into four themes: *knowledge competencies; skills competencies; soft skills competencies; and abilities competencies. Knowledge competencies* seen by participants in new hires included understanding public relations "and having a passion for it;" having a baseline knowledge of press releases and key messaging documents; understanding the industry standpoint; knowing what public relations looks like in practice; "knowing what we are doing;" and being versed in social media.

Skills competencies reported in new hires included writing. Some participants said: "able to write and communicate," "solid foundation in writing," and "writing/marketing – to look at the numbers and turn them into a story." Participants also indicated that "writing has typically been better" and general writing "ok," still competent in their experience but less so. Other skills competencies reported in new hires were research skills; "design chops;" technical skills, such as with the internet and camera, and strategic communication skills.

Soft skills competencies in new hires observed by the participants included listening skills; creativity; teamwork; prioritization of tasks; getting the work done; self-motivation; empathy; learning mindset; curiosity mindset; enthusiasm for work; having flexibility; desire to be mentored; attitude vs. skills; maturity and poise; and not having fear in asking leadership questions when needed. One participant reported that there was a "sense of the new hire wanting to learn, wanting to grow, and having an understanding of how to go about it."

Abilities competencies in new hires cited by participants included: having a point of view "that was interesting;" "ability to think outside the box;" ability to listen and take instruction; to take direction and work independently; problem-solving; ability to be responsive; great research ability; and "taking a task like media research or topic research and at least doing a first draft of that." Another participant said of a new hire: "ability to ask questions or willingness to ask questions. Our best entry-level person had no problem picking up the phone and calling to ask a question."

Weaknesses

Participants also found weaknesses in new hires that fell into the knowledge, skills, soft skills, and abilities categories. Participants experienced new hires who lacked knowledge of how the business works or general business knowledge. Skills weaknesses of new hires observed by the participants included "a decline in writing ability"; weaknesses in presentation skills/speaking; being able to communicate in a succinct manner; needing better writing styles; and weakness in analytical skills or "how to tie outputs to outcomes." Soft skills lacking in new hires observed by participants included observations of new hires being afraid to ask for help; lacking in listening skills; lacking in punctuality; having trepidation, that is "hiding behind the keyboard;" and knowing when to be quiet. One participant said, "Entry-level people want to throw out a bunch of ideas without really saying what is the strategy – What is the end goal– my reason for this?" Another soft skill lacking that was cited was knowing how to advocate for their needs. One interviewee said, "If you can't get to work or schedule differently, being able to communicate that, and if you are struggling, that's another thing, or if you have done something, to be able to communicate it in a professional way." Other soft skills lacking, as cited, were being unaware of the culture and the ability to find his/her voice and stand up for themselves. New hire's abilities and weaknesses observed by participants were the ability to think strategically, the ability to ask the right questions; lacking ability to pitch the media; and lacking ability to take direction.

RQ 1a: How do practitioners define "work-ready"?

Our participants' discussions of "work-ready" centered on their expectations (demands) of new hires. Three work readiness expectations categories were "foundational skills," "knowledge," and "abilities." Foundational skills referred to communication, editing, and writing. Participants expected graduates to have knowledge of the difference between the classroom and practice, know the day-to-day of interacting with clients or your employer or know how to function in a professional environment; understand the basics of business before they get to the workplace; and understand how the organization works. Participants spoke of these work-ready abilities: “taking in everything fired in your direction;” open-mindedness; willingness or an openness to learning; and being able to contribute “regardless of skill; or add value on day one, “meaning that you understand the responsibilities and are ready to make an impact.” One participant said,” when someone is work-ready, they’re able to start working on those projects that you really need.” In terms of the “supply” approach to work readiness, the participants valued prior internship or immersive experiences.

RQ 1b: Do traditional routes to increasing competency (e.g., internships, master’s degrees) make a difference in student work readiness?

When considering what students could do to prepare for their entry-level jobs, the respondents highlighted a number of expected methods, including *internships, continued education, student group (organizational) work, and what would be considered class-immersive experiences*, along with some references to KSAs.

Internships were important in terms of the “world of work” understanding it offered. At least one respondent indicated that any internship was helpful and it did not have to be a public relations-specific internship for one to learn about communication. Other interviewees highlighted the internship process as “looking for potential hires,” and as such, “we try to create as much of a real working experience for the intern as possible,” including demonstrating the agency culture. Interviewees recognized that internships were helpful for the student to determine areas of interest.

One of the interviewees reflected on his own internship experience, and shared that it occurred in a small office, but he learned “how important it is to collaborate with people who are a whole lot smarter than I am.” Within the small shop, he noted, “Professors were telling me things, but he (the site supervisor) was asking me questions, and I learned a great deal from him.”

Interviewees also recognized their own roles in the internship process as a teacher or guide, including helping students understand that it's "not about the mess up. It's how you recover." This interviewee noted the incremental learning, such as giving interns projects that encourage strategic thinking, but not asking for a strategic plan on day one. This internship supervisor described giving the student the opportunity to work on a plan with guidance initially. The premise here was an intentional process that would allow the intern to be successful. Another supervisor recognized that 10-15 years ago, the intern might be "the master of the clipbook." Now she talks about working with the intern to help come up with the strategy, and then "build out the tactics to execute it."

Another interviewee described successful interns as the ones who "are curious and are willing to take on any project even if it's not what they signed up to do." Another practitioner highlighted that experience can come in other forms such as working on a communication committee for a nonprofit or helping a local church promote an event. "That experience is powerful because it (develops)... a certain level of understanding and as you build on that foundation of understanding, it lets you take the next step."

The concept of *continued education* included seeking a master's degree or APR certification. One interviewee did specify that other certificates are often sought by students, such as those offered by social media platforms, but stressed that "it's about the inquiry," not just the certificate. One interviewee pointed out that a degree reflects "that a person can complete something. It shows that they're willing to work … but it doesn't show me that they're any smarter or any better qualified for the job."

In general, it appeared that most of the interviewees who had continued their education tended to value it more. One specifically pursued an MA "to help with data analytics," and "to be taken seriously."

Another identified that a master's degree could be beneficial for strategy and research. Similarly, another interviewee said that a master's could be helpful to learning about an area within one's career, while another emphasized that it really depended on the individual. That was highlighted by another senior-level interviewee who indicated that he read and learned on his own rather than through any degree. A couple of interviewees placed value on an MBA in helping anyone. And one highlighted the benefits of APR while also recognizing that career advancement may have come a bit more quickly with an advanced degree that would allow one to be more strategic earlier on in the career. But he also noted that APR provided the same support for developing strategic thinking, and provided a recognition that helped him secure his current position.

One practitioner emphasized that the timing of graduate work was important and that it would likely be more valuable after one had experience. "It's really helped me move from tactical to strategic leadership…. As a graduate student, you know about how to apply, how to do or how to run a research program. How to take it and apply it in a corporate setting. I don't know that you would have the work experience that gives the organizational context – how this theory applies…. So, I think a master's degree is very important; it adds a ton of value, particularly for someone mid-career."

In the classroom, practitioners highlighted *immersive experiences* such as the need for students to work in teams. One practitioner focused on the ability to get in front of others. Other recommendations included situational role play, interpersonal communication training, and generally being self-aware enough to be proficient in communication. Another explained that "If I'm bringing somebody to a meeting, I want them to participate. I'll give them guidance on where not to overstep, but you don't want somebody in the room if they're not contributing something." Another interviewee felt the classroom was an opportunity to provide a greater understanding of the PR industry, "different sectors… types of work." This individual felt that "there's a lot of turnover in early careers because students have a tendency to think of PR as a broad bucket, and it doesn't fit with what they … expected." One practitioner extended this idea to having guest speakers and field trips, and finding opportunities for engagement in the sense of "we've got to pull it out of the pages and do it."

Others highlighted *KSAs* in the areas of ethics, news experience, news writing, and Associated Press style. Another interviewee stressed the benefits of courses such as world history and religious studies to help one become more well-rounded. She also related this to having a business sense, where "if you work for a publicly traded company, [you] know the ins and outs of what that means," you know "how that affects what can and can't be said in social media." Another practitioner raised the issue of needing graduates to have "an early adopter mindset." In particular, this individual wanted students to understand algorithms and AI, not just for use, but for collaborating with organizational departments such as legal and regulatory so that Artificial Intelligence, for example, is used in a thoughtful way.

Students who were involved in *groups*, whether the Public Relations Student Society or other groups, including sororities and fraternities, on campus could obtain volunteer activity experience, and see how meetings are managed. It also gave them the chance to get in front of others and develop a better understanding of "the nuances of human behavior."

Mentorships were also mentioned, but most references focused on once someone was employed rather than aligning with the Stage 1 school-level preparation for soon-to-be graduates.

RQ2: How did public relations practitioners reflect on their workplace experiences with Gen Z?

While not asked directly, none of the interviewees mentioned Generation Z specifically at any point when answering the questions. Given the prominence of research and writing about the nature of Gen Z as our most recent generation of employees, the lack of reference to the group was surprising, although some of the interviewers would have fallen within this generation. Further analysis of the responses indicated that there were some references to "entry-level" or "new" employees, as well as a few references to generational differences. For example, one practitioner noted that, "we make a lot of assumptions about understanding the culture of the workplace, and I do think that's probably a real challenge for new hires." The practitioner noted that because of the pandemic lockdown, Zoom meetings, etc., some nuances of the workplace would need to be learned after entering the field.

When discussing the new hires, several practitioners noted themes discussed in other sections of the results, such as a need for the development of soft skills. Two of the practitioners suggested that these entry-level employees come with "tactical skills" but need to develop the ability to think strategically. Another said, "You guys are totally much more digital" while another recognized that "earlier career [individuals] don't like to read the news." Other practitioners indicated that current generations are not up on their manners, while another referenced the higher turnover in early careers. In an effort to help new hires learn soft skills, workplace skills and strategic thinking, several practitioners advocated for incremental development of knowledge, skills and abilities, and once on the job, careful, deliberative mentorship programs

RQ3: In what ways did practitioners recommend for improving competency/work readiness of new graduates?

When participants answered questions about indicators of competencies for public relations, the conversations broadened into recommendations for new hires that centered on three themes: *preparation; on-the-job actions; and lifelong learning*. The *preparation* theme included recommendations fitting into the KSA competencies categories. New hires should know the difference between the classroom and the boardroom. One interviewee said, “Have a broad sense of the future, of what is going on in the business world.” This comment was reflected in recommendations to learn business, finance, and strategic planning. One participant wanted new hires to “be very focused on media and the business of media, how media is covered,” specifically, “read the news to understand how coverage gets pulled together.” Participants were of the opinion that new hires should know change management, reputation management, how to operate in a crisis, and knowing what research looks like. Participants encouraged preparing for new and newer digital, such as AI, and continued to reinforce the need for writing skills: “writing, writing, writing.” In the categories of abilities, in addition to “think strategically,” participants spoke of the need for prior experience. One participant said, “agency experience.” Another argued for the “right balance: experience, knowledge, and confidence.” A third participant argued that a new hire should have a degree and real-life experience. “I think any kind of degree complied with some real-life experience is the killer combination.”

Participants made recommendations for how to achieve competency *on the job*. Three categories of recommendations fit the KSA categories of knowledge, soft skills, and hard skills. We used the “knowledge” label for recommendations when participants’ comments started with the word learn, although their advice suggested that the learning was directed toward improving skills and abilities. Participants advised learning the corporate voice or assuming the brand voice. They advised learning and “doing things specific to your situation. Context is always changing.” They advised learning how to participate in a meeting and understanding the need to modulate. They advised learning the culture of the workplace. One participant said,

> What is the culture like? Do we talk around the water cooler? Are we expected to respond to emails after work? I don't think we can assume that new PR pros will understand them because they are coming to the workplace after [the COVID-19] lockdown.

Soft skills participants directed new hires to include being willing to learn new things and to ask a lot of questions. One participant said, "stay curious and adaptable. Be curious. You have to ask questions." Participants advised new hires to "deliver quality and take advantage of opportunities. One participant encouraged, "get the types of assignments that get closer to the core business." Also mentioned was to continue to improve skills. One participant said: "keep working on communication skills, presenting to clients, colleagues, journalists, and stakeholders.

Finally, a third category of on-the-job actions was *lifelong learning*. Rather than learning to succeed by developing workplace knowledge, skills, and abilities, this category represented a willingness to grow, to be a lifelong learner. One participant said, "soft skills continue to be important and continue to grow throughout your life, if a person is diligent and willing to grow."

Conclusions

In the practitioners' sampled conversations, three key elements stood out: KSAs, workplace behavior, socialization, and experience.
In the qualitative interview format, the foundation of public relations education, as represented by KSAs, is still critical. One of the questions raised was the degree of writing skills present, with some indicating the new hires could write, and others suggesting they were not as impressed with the writing. This is a part of public relations professional education preparation that educators can take on most readily. Although teaching how to write is challenging, there are metrics against which to assess writing competencies. Additional areas to consider in teaching writing are

discussions of organizational styles and brand voices, and the continued relevance of AP style, as these were mentioned specifically.

The second area of conversation found in discussions seemed much less a part of the public relations curriculum than of new hires' abilities or workplace behaviors, such as willingness to learn, ability to advocate for themselves professionally through asking questions, taking direction, understanding, and adapting to the workplace culture. Stage One of Professional Identity highlights what one learns from family and college that prepares one for the workplace. Practitioners noted everything from manners to speaking out – appropriately – to participating in discussions. These are elements that one would classify as soft skills, situated in a broader context of interpersonal communication, areas not usually considered in program assessments and course student learning outcomes. Soft skills, also described as social intelligence, include practitioner comments about being curious and being an early adopter, elements the practitioners had inculcated within themselves, with some choosing additional degrees to further develop their strategic planning and research/data analysis.

Based on the authors' experience, faculty generally focus on the KSAs, self-limiting the full spectrum of what it means to be work-ready. The practitioners here highlighted social intelligence, more than emotional intelligence. Many educators may feel unprepared to teach social intelligence as a part of professional public relations preparation, and some may consider "soft skills" as less important. Stage 1 includes parental and college foundations for Professional Identity, and we clearly cannot assume parents are providing the needed levels of social intelligence within the professional public relations context. Waymer et al. (2018) recommended more immersive socialization opportunities, which could help address this area of soft skills, and would be beneficial to students.

Outside of KSA foundations and soft skills, experience was another common thread, whether that experience came from internships, and/or extracurricular, or volunteer experiences. The experience was important in providing a better sense of how “work works.” The application of KSAs and the development of one’s Professional Identity were critical to developing the “work-ready” candidate. But KSAs have a built-in bias toward rationality that is generally agreed upon. We propose, then, that Work Readiness in public relations is more than the KSAs and the degree. As important as what we call “Work-Readiness Intelligence” is that it represents KSAs, Social Intelligence, and Application/Experience. Simplified, the formula would be: Work-Readiness Intelligence = KSAs + Application/Experience + Social Intelligence.

From our assessments of the practitioner interviews, the current public relations degree prepares graduates more for the foundational KSAs. But if students don’t take the opportunities to get experience or apply those foundations, practitioner expectations will likely not be met. At the same time, perceptions of the “performer,” the graduate, and his or her abilities could clearly be mitigated by perceptions of their abilities to fit in and adapt to the workplace more quickly. While the practitioners did not name Gen Z specifically, their suggestions related to “new hires” indicated the need for increased attention to the socialization process to build upon the tactical skills they acquired prior to their employment. Building up student Professional Identity means giving them a strong platform represented by Work Readiness Intelligence. Educators are encouraged to continue their work in integrating the KSAs through the coursework, to further develop the immersive classroom socialization experiences as part of public relations programs , and to continue to help students identify opportunities for experience beyond the classroom. As one participant said, “know what public relations looks like in practice.”

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Journal of Public Relations Education
2026, Vol. 12, No. 2, 35-66

Experiential Learning in the Public Relations Classroom: A Student-Run Agency Case Study Abstract

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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning is widely recognized as a high-impact educational practice, and student-run agencies offer a unique opportunity to replicate professional environments within academic programs. This study examines a credit-bearing, student-run public relations firm to understand how such experiences foster applied learning, professional skill development, and identity formation. Using a qualitative single-case study design, the research analyzed multiple data sources: open-ended student evaluations across several semesters, client and professional feedback, and instructor reflections. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns of meaning in student responses, supported by triangulation with professional and instructor perspectives. Findings underscore the value of structured, classroom-based experiential learning for preparing students for professional practice. Recommendations include scaffolding onboarding, clarifying roles, and fostering agency culture—insights applicable across disciplines seeking to integrate authentic, high-impact learning experiences.

Keywords: experiential, case study, public relations, career preparation, education

Editorial Record: Submitted September 19, 2025. Revised February 1, 2026. Accepted February 27, 2026.

"Billable hours," "client deliverables," "Gantt charts" – these aren't terms typically heard echoing through university hallways. Yet, within student-run public relations agencies, they're part of the daily lexicon, blending the rigor of academia with the fast-paced pulse of the professional communication world. Picture an undergraduate student, fresh from a lecture on content analysis in a public relations research class, now conducting a competitive sentiment audit to generate a social listening report for a corporate client. This fusion of theory and practice, facilitated by student-run agencies, is cultivating a new generation of communication professionals who are not only knowledgeable in theory but battle-tested in practice.

Classic experiential learning traditions (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984) argue that learning deepens when students cycle through concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation in authentic contexts. Student-run agencies operationalize these principles by placing students in real client settings with measurable deliverables, deadlines, and interdependent teamwork. They bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing students with a simulated professional environment where they can apply their theoretical knowledge to real-world practical communication problems. These agencies also align with high-impact educational practices (HIPs) associated with gains in engagement and learning (Kuh, 2008).

This article presents a multi-stakeholder case study of a student-run public relations firm (The Agency), analyzing the case from student, professional, and instructor vantage points. Merging a comprehensive analysis of existing research and the specific case study, this article demonstrates the significant value of student-run agencies in university-level communication education. The study argues that student-run agencies are not only viable but also an essential component of a well-rounded applied communication curriculum, preparing students for the dynamic and demanding world of professional communication.

Literature Review

Experiential learning is a pedagogical approach grounded in the idea that students learn best by actively engaging in real-world practical situations. Such learning has become increasingly prominent in applied professional communication education, including public relations and advertising. Student-run agencies have emerged as one of the most popular forms of experiential learning, providing students with hands-on experience in managing strategic communication campaigns and projects for real clients. This literature review discusses the benefits and challenges of the student-run agency as a tool of applied communication education.

The concept of experiential learning, while gaining formal recognition as an educational philosophy in the 20th century, is not new, tracing its origins back to ancient apprenticeships and internships. These early forms of experiential learning allowed individuals to acquire skills and knowledge through direct participation in real-world tasks and activities. However, it was not until the 20th century that experiential learning gained widespread recognition as a legitimate pedagogical approach.

John Dewey, an influential American philosopher and educator, played a pivotal role in championing experiential learning. Dewey believed that education should be connected to real-world problems and that students learn best by actively participating in the learning process (Rennie et al., 2018). His ideas laid the foundation for the experiential learning movement, which emphasized the importance of hands-on experiences in fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity.

In the 1980s, David Kolb, an American educational theorist, developed a model of experiential learning that is still widely used today. Experiential learning is best understood as a multi-tradition paradigm that emphasizes learning through experience, reflection, abstraction, and application. This pedagogy places experience and reflection at the center of learning, with Dewey's theory of experience underscoring the iterative reconstruction of experience as the substance of education (Kim et al., 2021; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Kolb, 2017). In this lineage, Kolb's experiential learning theory synthesizes these roots into a dynamic learning cycle (ie. concrete experience → reflective observation → abstract conceptualization → active experimentation) that advances learning. This model has been adopted in educational settings and has informed the development of various experiential learning programs, including student-run agencies. Some scholars caution against treating "experience" as self-evident and advocate alignment within a social context (Kolb, 2017; Miettinen, 2000).

Experiential learning offers a multitude of benefits for students, encompassing both cognitive and affective domains. Research has shown that students who participate in experiential learning activities demonstrate increased engagement and motivation, which can lead to a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts (Swanson, 2019). By applying their knowledge to real-world situations, students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are essential for success in the strategic communication industry. Furthermore, experiential learning fosters improved communication and interpersonal skills, as students often collaborate with peers and clients, honing their ability to articulate ideas, negotiate, and build relationships (Rademacher, 2022). These skills are not only valuable for academic success but also crucial for career readiness, as effective communication and interpersonal skills are highly sought after by employers in the strategic communication field.

Applied forms of experiential learning, particularly project-based and problem-based learning, demonstrate these principles through authentic, extended inquiries that culminate in outcomes and products. Project-based learning (PBL) is defined as work organized around central, challenging problems; driven by sustained inquiry; scaffolded by instructors; and culminating in realistic deliverables (Thomas, 2000; Soloway et al., 2012). Successful outcomes and deep understanding in PBL settings depend on clear learning goals, embedded scaffolds and tools, continual feedback and revision, and social structures that promote participation (Soloway et al., 2012).

These principles map closely to student-run agencies (SRAs): client-driven, semester-long projects; public presentations; specific leadership roles and accountability; and workflow tools (Gantt charts, time tracking, etc.) that emphasize collaboration and time on task. Framing SRAs through the lens of PBL clarifies how authentic client work, structured teamwork, and providing continual feedback support conceptual understanding and professional judgment (Thomas, 2000; Soloway et al., 2012).

Simulation-based learning (SBL), which can be complementary to PBL, has shown that experience alone is insufficient; instead, debriefing is the engine that converts performance episodes into learning. Across adult-learning contexts, post-performance debriefs and feedback are consistently associated with improved knowledge retention and skill development (Fanning & Gaba, 2007). In SRA contexts, regular team critiques, client feedback cycles, and end-of-project reflections function as intentional debriefs that transform “doing work” into “learning from work” (Fanning & Gaba, 2007).

In fact, experiential learning in an agency-type of environment leads to higher levels of learning in higher education. It has been demonstrated that this type of experiential learning leads to increases in intelligence, interest, motivation, and pleasure with learning outcomes within academic fields (Rademacher, 2022). In essence, experiential learning in an agency setting on the university level allows students to learn theory and concepts in the classroom while also applying these concepts in real-world situations (Sahatjian et al., 2025). Comparable case work in marketing education reports similar benefits from a student-run digital marketing agency, including soft-skill development and client-facing professionalism (Gruen et al., 2025).

Experiential learning is proven as a successful pedagogical method facilitating active learning through providing real-world experiences in which learners interact and critically evaluate course material and become actively involved with a topic being taught (Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2019). Going back to a teaching theory of Socrates, experiential learning relies on research-based strategies that enable learners to apply their classroom knowledge to real-life situations to foster active learning, which consequently brings about a better retrieval (Bradberry & De Maio, 2019).

In fact, students in an agency-type environment, enjoying a mix of relevant academic activities and practical work situations, improve their level of inherent motivation for learning (Helle et al., 2007). In their agency work, students are free to choose multiple paths to approach and solve problems throughout the learning process by having choices and being autonomous (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). Experiential learning is student-centric, allowing learners to build and develop information during the renovation of changes (Afida et al., 2012). Students become significantly more responsible for their own learning, which produces a stronger connection between classroom learning, practical applications, and reality (Salas et al., 2009).

Student-run agencies, as a form of experiential learning, started appearing at colleges and universities in the 1970s. Initially small and focused primarily on serving local nonprofits, student-run agencies gained broader momentum in the 1980s and 1990s due to the growing demand for public relations and professionals and the recognition of experiential learning's value (Bush & Miller, 2011). This period saw a proliferation of student-run agencies across colleges and universities, driven by the desire to provide students with practical experience and bridge the gap between theory and practice. Today, hundreds of student-run agencies operate at colleges and universities worldwide, varying in size and scope but united in their mission to provide students with authentic strategic communication experiences.

It is important to distinguish among (a) student-run agencies - sustained, client-facing entities that may be course-based or extracurricular; (b) agency-type courses - classes adopting agency practices for a term with no connections between semesters; and (c) capstones - culminating courses that may or may not involve external clients and involve students in a specific major. For example, this case study is based on the type of student-run agency: a permanent multi-year student-run agency with students of various majors applying to be a part of and receiving an elective class credit for participating in a particular semester.

Student-run agencies offer distinct advantages beyond the general benefits of experiential learning. Kolb and Kolb (2005) emphasize “learning spaces” that match learner needs with institutional environments—relevant to agency studios combining client briefs, creative collaboration, and iterative critique. Learners involved in student-run agencies report increased confidence and self-efficacy, stemming from their ability to successfully manage real campaigns and projects (Rademacher, 2022). This newfound confidence translates into improved job prospects, with student-run agency alumni often landing positions due to their practical skills and industry exposure (Bush, 2009). Moreover, student-run agencies facilitate the development of professional networks, connecting students with industry professionals and potential employers (Ranta et al., 2021). These connections can be invaluable for career advancement and provide students with mentorship and guidance as they navigate the strategic communication industry’s landscape. Importantly, student-run agencies provide a deeper understanding of the profession, its various roles, evaluation approaches, ethical considerations, and the business aspects in the day-to-day practice (Ritsch, 2022). By working with real clients and facing real-world challenges, students gain insights into the complexities of the strategic communication profession and develop a sense of professional identity.

In addition, student-run agencies provide learners with an opportunity to enhance critical thinking skills. As an example, it is shown that student learners working directly with clients affiliated with civic engagement and ethical decision-making themes have higher levels of enthusiasm for learning (Muturi et al., 2013). Civic engagement can be defined as “working to make a difference in the civic life of communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference” (Ehrlich, 2000). Hiring decision-makers report that SRA alumni demonstrate stronger client interaction, awareness of agency operations and culture, and accountability for results (Haygood et al., 2019). The research shows that SRAs are a theory-aligned pedagogy that integrates “real-world” and authentic projects, reflective feedback and debriefs, and enables learning to support transition into professional practice (Soloway et al., 2012; Fanning & Gaba, 2007; Rands & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). In one study, students reported that the agency-type experiential learning coursework helped them to understand community problems, see how communication can provide solutions to these problems, and feel more empowered to solve them post-graduation (McCollough, 2019). Students welcomed the opportunity to engage with causes that sparked enthusiasm and were meaningful to their community and themselves personally. Comparative evidence suggests student-run firms may outperform traditional capstone courses on perceived learning, especially with sustained direct client contact (Kim et al., 2021; Rademacher, 2022).

While student-run agencies offer numerous benefits, they also encounter challenges that warrant attention. Acquiring and retaining clients can be difficult, especially for new agencies with limited experience or reputation (Kim et al., 2021). To overcome this challenge, student-run agencies can leverage their academic affiliations, partner with local businesses and nonprofits, and actively promote their services through various channels. Some of the clients, issues, or campaigns students may be required to work on can be controversial, offensive, stigmatized, or outright traumatic (Madden & Guastaferro, 2024). While such campaigns may generate significant learning and confidence-building opportunities, they also require sensitivity and trauma-informed pedagogy.

Balancing agency work with academic coursework and other commitments can be demanding for students, necessitating effective time management and prioritization skills. Faculty advisors can play a crucial role in helping students manage their workload by providing adequate supervision, especially when agencies have multiple clients and projects (Borgognoni & Wicks, 2021). To address this, student-run agencies can establish clear communication channels, regular check-ins, and project management tools to ensure that students receive the guidance and support they need (Bush, 2009; 2015). Ensuring the quality of work produced by student-run agencies is paramount, as it affects both the agency and the educational institution. Faculty advisors can play a key role in mentoring students, providing constructive feedback, and maintaining high standards for client deliverables (Ranta et al., 2021). As a result, various faculty types (research faculty, teaching faculty, or adjunct faculty) and faculty of various backgrounds (management, designers, journalism) may affect the functioning of student-run agencies in different ways.

Despite these challenges, student-run agencies remain a valuable asset in applied communication education. They bridge the gap between theory and practice, equipping students with practical skills and industry knowledge that are essential for success in the strategic communication field. As the professional landscape continues to evolve, student-run agencies must also adapt and innovate to meet the changing needs of the industry and prepare future professionals. For instance, student-run agencies can integrate emerging technologies, such as social media analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), and virtual reality into their campaigns and projects to provide students with cutting-edge experience.

The existing literature on student-run agencies highlights their positive impact on student learning outcomes, career readiness, and professional development. However, there is a need for further research to explore the long-term effects of student-run agency participation on career trajectories and to examine the evolving role of student-run agencies in the digital age. Additionally, research on the effectiveness of different student-run agency models and the factors that contribute to operations would be valuable for educators and practitioners alike.

In brief, student-run agencies represent a dynamic and effective approach to experiential learning in PR higher education. By providing students with authentic PR experiences, fostering professional development, and bridging the gap between theory and practice, student-run agencies empower students to become competent and ethical PR professionals. While challenges exist, the benefits of student-run agencies are well-supported in this context, and their continued growth and evolution will contribute significantly to the future of PR education and practice.

Guided by the foregoing review, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of students on their experience with the student-run agency?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of industry professionals on their experience with the student-run agency?

Method

The study employs an interpretive, single-case study design to investigate The Agency as a bounded system spanning multiple semesters, clients, and instructional teams (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Data sources for analysis included (a) student end-of-semester qualitative comments (Fall 2022–Spring 2025), (b) written client/professional feedback and records of external recognitions, and (c) instructor reflections and agency artifacts. We conducted reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), maintaining an audit trail and engaging in peer debriefing to support trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017).

A case study approach was appropriate because the research questions sought to understand how and why experiential learning occurs in a complex, authentic setting (Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015). This design allowed for triangulation across multiple data sources—students, professionals, and instructors—enhancing credibility and providing a holistic view of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Materials

The case encompassed the student-run agency, or simply The Agency, with data encompassing multiple semesters (Fall 2022–Spring 2025) at a mid-size private university in the northeastern United States. Data sources included three major categories:

1. Student perspective: Open-ended responses from end-of-semester evaluations (n = 125 across semesters), addressing three prompts: (a) most valuable learning, (b) suggested improvements, (c) other comments.
2. Professional perspective: Client testimonials, notes from mentoring sessions, and documentation of external recognitions (e.g., PRSA awards).
3. Instructor perspective: Reflective memos and agency artifacts (syllabi, role descriptions, project management tools).

These materials were selected because they directly captured experiences and perceptions relevant to the research questions.

Procedures

Student comments were collected through standard university course evaluations administered online at the end of each semester. Professional feedback was solicited via email and during debrief sessions. Instructor reflections were documented throughout the semester as part of routine pedagogical practice. All data were de-identified prior to analysis.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines for educational research.
Such procedures allowed us to rely on the key strength of the case study as a method: the ability to analyze the depth and contextual richness of the case. Unlike large-scale surveys or experiments, case studies enable researchers to explore multiple data sources—documents, interviews, observations—through triangulation, thereby enhancing credibility (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). This approach is especially suited for practice-oriented fields like public relations education, where understanding the lived experience of students and instructors is critical for theory-building and pedagogical improvement (Starman, 2013).

Analytic Strategy

We analyzed qualitative data using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021), which is well-suited for identifying patterns of meaning across diverse experiential narratives. RTA is a theoretically flexible method for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across datasets. Unlike codebook or reliability-focused approaches, RTA emphasizes researcher reflexivity, active theme development, and the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Terry et al., 2017). RTA was chosen because it accommodates both semantic and latent coding, aligns with interpretivist paradigms, and supports nuanced interpretation of student, professional, and instructor perspectives (Terry et al., 2017).

Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, we:

1. Familiarized ourselves with the data through repeated reading and memoing.
2. Generated initial codes inductively.
3. Collated codes into candidate themes.
4. Reviewed and refined themes against the dataset.
5. Defined and named themes.
6. Produced an analytic narrative integrating illustrative quotes and literature.

To enhance credibility and dependability, we maintained an audit trail of coding decisions, engaged in peer debriefing, and sought negative cases (Nowell et al., 2017). We also used thick description to support transferability and reflexive memos to interrogate our assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While thematic analysis is sometimes critiqued for lack of transparency, systematic documentation and reflexivity address these concerns (Guest et al., 2012; Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

In the end, thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and suitability for applied educational research. Compared to content analysis, which often emphasizes frequency counts, thematic analysis provides a nuanced, interpretive account of meaning-making processes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This aligns with our goal of understanding student experiences and perceptions of learning in depth.

Such an approach to the case study design allowed us to capture the contextual complexity of an experiential learning environment, while thematic analysis enabled a systematic yet flexible approach to interpreting meaning across multiple stakeholder perspectives. Together, these methods aligned with the study's exploratory aims and the emphasis on empirical research in experiential education. Case studies also support theory development by generating propositions grounded in empirical realities (Stake, 1995). They are flexible, accommodating emergent design and iterative data collection, which aligns with the interpretive paradigm (Yazan, 2015). For this study, the case design allowed us to integrate student voices, professional feedback, and instructor reflections, offering a multi-perspective view of experiential learning in action.

Results

Case Context

A mid-size university in the United States of America offers several applied communication degrees, such as public relations, advertising, social media, journalism, graphic design, and film and television. While these degrees are mainly siloed in different departments, there are several common core courses where students from all these disciplines meet. Unfortunately, these common classes primarily serve as introductory courses to the communication discipline and thus are taken by students early in their academic programs. At the same time, upon graduation, many students find themselves working in integrated communication environments where their success depends largely on their ability to work together with specialists of the disciplines. As a result, faculty members at the university proposed to create an agency experience for the students. The university had a student-run agency experience for students that was part of the Public Relations Student Society of America chapter. That agency was a volunteer experience for students, and this presented significant issues with continuity – once the students changed from semester to semester and especially year to year, with some of them graduating from college altogether, the organizational history disappeared. Such history included contacts inside and outside of the university, procedural and technical knowledge, and even login information. The experience was also very uneven from semester to semester, depending on the drive of the people who volunteered to lead the effort.

As a result, the university faculty decided to reconceptualize The Agency with students applying and registering for this experience as a credit-bearing class taught by an assigned faculty member. Such a faculty member would serve as a repository of the institutional knowledge and help each new generation of students in The Agency build upon previous students' successes and learn from their failures rather than starting from tabula rasa every semester.

The assignment process of faculty supervisors went through several modifications as well. Originally, the department chair of the public relations department took on the responsibility as they had the most flexibility with assigning course equivalency if students needed to count The Agency instead of some required or elective courses in their programs, scheduling times and classrooms, and even allocating budgets. Once The Agency was better established, a full-time public relations faculty member was paired with a public relations industry professional to provide a blend of theoretical and practical perspectives to students. In the most recent iteration, The Agency, while still housed in the public relations program, is taught by two full-time faculty members from different departments: one faculty member typically comes from public relations or advertising program in order to provide strategy, budget and client management experience; the second faculty member typically comes from interactive media or graphic design program in order to provide hands-on experience with photos, videos, graphics, and social media. Having two full-time faculty members is also beneficial for continuity – even if one of them does not teach The Agency in the next semester due to conflicting class assignments or a sabbatical leave, the other faculty member would stay on and train a replacement.

The Agency secured administrative support by demonstrating educational value (high-impact practices), tangible service to campus clients (including projects led by top University administrators), and prudent resourcing. A dedicated, agency-like workspace (or functionally equivalent configuration) was prioritized to reinforce professional immersion and external legitimacy. Prior scholarship on learning spaces indicates that dedicated, studio-like environments can enhance engagement, collaboration, and professional identity formation in experiential settings. Accordingly, such a dedicated space that is only available to The Agency's students strengthens the authenticity and legitimacy of SRA learning.

Student enrollment also went through changes. Currently, students are required to apply for a spot in The Agency during the previous semester. The faculty members review all applications for previous coursework completed, average grades received, as well as prior internships, and professional or volunteer experience. In addition, the faculty members strive to create a mix of students from different majors that would be the most beneficial for the client work expected during the semester. For example, in one semester, early negotiations with clients showed that much of the work would focus on video production. As a result, faculty prioritized students with video work experience. The Agency is a prestigious and competitive experience – during the most recent semester, there were over 70 applications for 20 seats in the class.

The Agency also tried to recruit different client types every semester, with at least one non-profit client, one corporate client, and one government client. This helps students learn how various sectors of the economy operate, experience different hierarchies and bureaucratic structures, and try different client management configurations. Also, this has a significant impact on budgeting. The Agency typically charges a fee for its work with corporate clients, it provides pro bono work to its non-profit clients, and strives to identify grants or other types of financing for the work with governmental entities.

The latest catalog description of The Agency emphasizes this interdisciplinary nature of the student experience:

> The Agency is a student-run, interdisciplinary firm in which students produce professional work under the direction of faculty. Specializing in public relations, graphic and interactive design, film/video production, and advertising and integrated communications, students collaborate on teams to manage and produce visual, written, and digital work for a variety of clients in the communications field. Students apply different research methods, tools, and techniques, and tactics to achieve desired strategic outcomes and present their projects to clients (The Agency, 2025).

RQ 1. Student Perspective.

A key part of the case study is reviewing students' experience in The Agency. The theme that emerged from students' feedback was the applicability and value of real-world practical experience gained in the Agency class.

Theme 1. Real-World Experience. The culture of the Agency strives to fully replicate real-world agency life. This experience includes working collaboratively with colleagues across disciplines and dealing with the "day-to-day" operation of a communication agency. One of the key aspects of The Agency is to immerse students in all aspects of what is typically experienced in a full-service communication firm. From the first moments of the first class, students are told that this will not be a typical academic experience, and they are now part of a professional, award-winning communication agency. Students are asked to always conduct themselves in a professional manner, work across various disciplines, keep track of their "billable" hours, interact directly with clients, and meet deadlines and expectations.

Students' feedback consistently valued working with real clients in a professional setting, combined with the appreciation of the authenticity of agency work compared to traditional coursework. One student explained, "The Agency was hands down the most impactful course I took… I loved gaining firsthand experience of what it's like to work in a real agency." Another student added, "The fact that I was able to work with real clients and gain experience is one of a kind and helped build my resume." Finally, yet another student summarized this sentiment: "The fact that I was able to work with real clients and get hands-on experience is one of a kind. The Agency gave me REAL-world experience and the ability to further my strategic communication skills." In addition to large-scale learning, students noted the importance of experiencing the in-and-outs of agency daily operation routines. One student explained that they learned to appreciate the importance of "billable hours" and "learning how meetings and Gantt charts work and collaborating with teams in an agency."

Theme 2. Teamwork. Many comments highlighted learning to work effectively in teams, delegate tasks, and manage group dynamics as one of the most impactful learnings from the class. One student reflecting on their experience noted, "I learned how to better work in a group setting and adapt to changes as they happen in a more productive way." Another student expanded on this point: "Working alongside others… picking up where people may have slacked, giving feedback and general collaboration while juggling several responsibilities."

The Agency goes beyond teamwork among students of one semester and instead relies on its multi-year history. To help with establishing a professional culture from the outset, previous student members of The Agency are invited to share their experiences, offer advice, provide client-relation insights, discuss successes and failures, and answer all questions. When they return to speak with new students, agency alumni are current working professionals in the field. This is an invaluable time for the new students, since this meeting takes place at the very start of the semester, they don't have specific client or task-focused questions. Instead, this meeting tends to discuss higher-level concepts such as professionalism, time management, organization of work, creativity and ideas, and more. Students' feedback consistently praises these alumni connections.

Theme 3. Leadership. Every student, in addition to being a staff member, was also assigned a leadership position. This allowed students to practice their leadership skills and develop their management style. As a result, many students' comments noted growth in leadership skills, professional communication, and client interaction. Students expressed the value in learning to work across teams, interact with colleagues, engage clients, and produce successful outcomes:

> The most valuable thing I learned from this course was how to utilize people's strengths within a team to produce the best outcome for a client. This course showed me how important it is to communicate with your account executives and team members in an agency. Working with real clients showed me the challenges I may endure if I work at an agency one day, and how to work through them (Anonymous student participant).

Since students in The Agency are upper-class students from varied majors, they have successfully completed three or four years of communication courses and can start collaborating with colleagues from different disciplines, learning to cooperate to bring about successful outcomes for their clients. A student explained, "I learned to develop a team and push them toward a common goal. I also learned how to communicate effectively via multiple mediums (Slack, text, email, etc.)." Another student was surprised by how important soft skills are in a professional environment, noting that The Agency helped them discover "how to be a good leader and delegate work to others while leading a team. I learned much more soft skills than hard skills." The Agency also allowed students to experience the frustrations of leadership, including task ambiguity and underperformance. Students complained that "some of the people that I worked with didn't care enough" or that "sometimes our roles were a bit unclear."

Theme 4. Accountability. Students consistently noted that The Agency helped them learn the importance of accountability and delivering results on time. An important part of working at an agency is organizing workflow and keeping accurate records of billable hours (Pitts, 2022). These two concepts are woven into The Agency, introducing students to real-life scenarios involving planning, scheduling, time management, deadlines, and other important financial business aspects of the day-today operations. This includes requiring students to use a time-tracking app (Clockify is one example) on a weekly basis to record and track their billable hours.

After a discussion on the definition of "billable vs. non-billable hours" as it relates to a communication agency, students are required to record all work hours for The Agency and specific clients. These hours are submitted in Clockify software on a weekly basis, with a 10-hour minimum set for each week. In class, the hours are discussed, and students are recognized for outstanding contributions. Another student expanded:

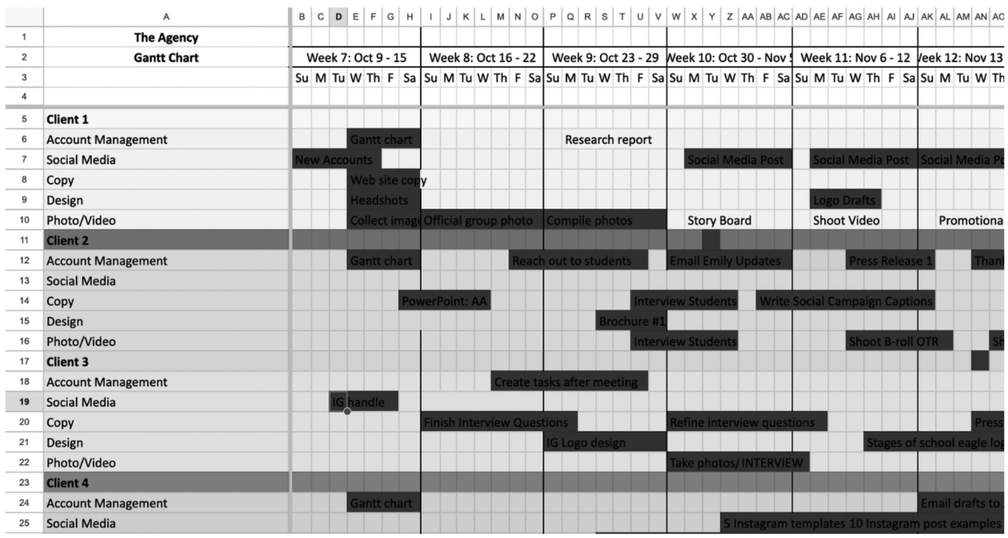
> I learned so much in The Agency, but one of the most valuable is how to manage my time effectively. With such limited time in class together, a lot of the work I did fell outside of class hours. As such, I really had to learn how to balance my time and work effectively to make sure everything was done in time, which I know is a very important skill to have in the real world (Anonymous student participant).

Another student added that the feeling of accountability pushed them to be more actively involved in the class, as it "improved my time-management skills, I initiated more conversations, and I spoke up more to ask questions or give suggestions."

With multiple clients and multiple projects happening at the same time, a Gantt chart is introduced to students at the first meeting of the semester to organize all projects for clients and ensure deadlines are met. This chart is projected on the screen and used during each weekly meeting of all students and faculty advisors to keep work teams and individuals accountable. Deadlines are discussed and moved if necessary, and decisions can be made around the balance of work and the needs of clients. Students are encouraged to be engaged with the cloud-based Gannt chart regularly (not just during the weekly team meeting) to plan and organize workflow and projects. A student summarized, "I really had to learn how to balance my time and work effectively to make sure everything got done in time."

Figure 1

The Agency Gnatt Chart.



Theme 5. Presentation skills. Presentation skills continue to be an essential strength among higher education students, and that is especially crucial for those preparing for the communication fields (Pittinger, Miller, and Mott, 2004). There is an in-person pitch presentation set aside for the end of the semester where the student-run agency presents their research and deliverables to clients. Each student is required to present at least once during these pitches, which is also attended by representatives from each client, industry professionals, as well as the university leaders. Account executives for each client plan and prepare these formal presentations, which must fit into a 12-minute window. This meeting, which is held in a formal boardroom-type environment, allows students to make decisions on what they should share within this limited time. Account executives are responsible for deciding when student leaders from the functional teams (content, social media, design, and video/photography) should present

and offer their expertise. Each presentation ends with a time for questions and answers. Account executives are responsible for fielding questions and either answering or calling on a colleague to provide more detailed information. Students see these presentations as the culmination of their hard work for the whole semester.

RQ 2. Industry Perspective.

Serving the clients and meeting their needs is a major focus of any communication agency, and that is also the case with the student-run agency. Thus, analyzing client feedback is essential for understanding The Agency's value.

One major client of The Agency over the last two years was a university-based safety and wellness initiative. The work began from only the client's idea and grew into a campus-wide campaign. Students brainstormed all aspects of this initiative, creating the name, developing a brand identity, preparing a campaign to launch to numerous audiences and stakeholders, and building brand awareness. The client for this initiative, a university administrator involved with student affairs and conduct, could not have been happier with the partnership between his office and the student-run agency:

> The students who worked on the campaign knocked it out of the park! This initiative is now a familiar campaign around campus, and its message has resonated with students, staff, faculty, student families, and other university partners. The branding, mission, and student-generated and student-focused approach to messaging the campaign have solidified this initiative as part of the university's culture (Anonymous client of The Agency).

Another client discussed a professional relationship between them and students representing The Agency:

> I was impressed at every step of the way as a client. The student account executives and students in other creative positions

> always acted as professionals, from their presentation skills, their communication, their work ethic, their attire, and of course their product. I felt cared for as a client and felt that the students involved were committed to the success of the campaign. The enthusiasm for their work was the most impressive thing to me; these students really put their heart and soul into their projects, and I felt as though I was working with seasoned professionals (Anonymous client of The Agency).

Another important group of professionals is former students who graduated and are now working in the industry. Indeed, one of the major benefits of this experiential learning opportunity is preparing students for positive job searches and career success. For example, one former student used their student-run agency experience during their interviews with two public relations firms, using their leadership and client experiences to qualify for an advanced position (even with less experience than required). This student reports that frequently during their work, discussion and examples of their student agency work came up during staff meetings and one-on-one conversations about their clients. They explained, "I have routinely understood different verbiage and innerworkings of agencies, whereas other candidates for positions have to spend their first weeks understanding what an agency actually does," the student commented. "The Agency played a large role in the person and young professional I am today, and I could not be prouder to call myself an agency alumnus."

The alumni of The Agency note the importance of specific skills obtained from the experiential learning environment of the class: "This background in team leadership, time management, and client experience showed me that I like this field and am comfortable with learning as I go." Another alum added: "As part of the student-run agency, you are treated like a professional and develop work that will make an impact for real-world clients." Alums also note that "The Agency encourages you to work outside your comfort zone and experience the successes and challenges with your colleagues."

The Agency aims to operate as and compete with other professional agencies, not with student classes or organizations. As a result, the work of The Agency is submitted to professional industry competitions. The student-run agency has been the recipient of several prestigious awards and grants in the last year. This includes five professional awards from the local chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), including Gold, Silver, and Bronze Awards in such categories as website design, social media tactics, video tactics, collateral materials, and research.

The Agency's work was also recognized by the NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education awards for the campaign related to brand development for a campus-wide safety and wellness initiative. Furthermore, The Agency was awarded two grants totaling $8,000 for its work with local community clients.

Professional mentoring is a key component of successful experiential learning in higher education (Long, 2018). Each semester, several professionals from the public relations world are brought into the class to meet with students. During this time, agency professionals share first-hand experiences dealing with clients and daily challenges and successes. In addition, the professionals then meet with student work teams individually (in a "speed dating" style) and provide advice, answer questions, discuss client issues, and more. This relationship often continues beyond this one-time meeting with students – the communication professionals often offer suggestions and answer questions throughout the remainder of the projects.

Discussion and Conclusions

Student-run agencies have emerged as a pivotal component in the evolution of applied communication education. This literature review has underscored the substantial benefits they provide, including enhanced student engagement, development of critical professional skills, and invaluable exposure to real-world client interactions. By replicating the dynamic environment of professional agencies, student-run agencies not only bridge the gap between theory and practice but also foster a sense of professional identity and ethical awareness among future communication practitioners. Student narratives of authentic client work illuminate learning gains and professional identity formation. Students emphasized interdependence, feedback, and cross-functional coordination as central to learning. Furthermore, accountability structures (billable hours, deadlines) supported self-regulation and professional norms.

The results of this study map closely to Kolb's experiential cycle: The Agency functions as a designed learning space with authentic constraints that amplify learning while surfacing process frictions requiring instructional design responses (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). From a HIPs perspective, The Agency integrates collaborative projects, writing-intensive deliverables, undergraduate research, and public presentation—conditions associated with deeper learning when coupled with structure and feedback (Kuh, 2008).

The success of student-run agencies, however, is not without challenges. The acquisition and retention of clients, workload management for students, and the provision of adequate faculty supervision all demand careful attention and strategic solutions. The integration of emerging technologies and a focus on continuous innovation are essential for student-run agencies to remain relevant and meet the evolving needs of the communication industry.

In sum, student-run agencies represent a dynamic and impactful approach to experiential learning in applied communication education. Their ability to equip students with practical skills, foster professional growth, and bridge the academic-industry divide solidifies their position as a cornerstone of communication management pedagogy. As the field continues to transform, the ongoing adaptation and refinement of student-run agencies will be essential to ensure they remain a vital force in shaping the next generation of communication professionals.

Despite significant strengths of the case study as a method, case studies face methodological criticisms. First, findings are often context-specific, limiting statistical generalizability (Yin, 2014). While analytic generalization—linking findings to theory rather than populations—is possible, readers must assess transferability to their own contexts (Merriam, 1998). Thus, the implications of the study can be transferable by analytic generalization rather than statistical inference. Second, case studies are time- and resource-intensive, requiring sustained engagement with data (Starman, 2013). Third, the researcher's dual role (as in this study, where authors were instructors) introduces potential bias. We mitigated this through reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and transparent reporting of analytic decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Looking forward, the trajectory of student-run agencies is promising. Further research into the long-term impact of student-run agency participation on career trajectories and the exploration of evolving student-run agency models in the AI age will be crucial, requiring longitudinal data collection. Additionally, a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to successful student-run agency operation will be invaluable for both educators and practitioners.

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Journal of Public Relations Education
2026, Vol. 12, No. 2, 67-75

Teaching Brief/GIFT

Creativity in the PR Classroom: Answering CPRE's Call to Strengthen Students' Critical Strategic Thinking Skills

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ABSTRACT

The 2023 report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) identified key areas of focus for PR educators to enhance students' learning and preparation for successful public relations careers. Their research found both educators and PR practitioners desired strong problem solving, creative thinking, analytic thinking and strategic planning abilities, but scores were lower when asked if students delivered those in the workplace. This in-class exercise, administered in two upper-level courses, included a pre-test to assess students' confidence in creativity and collaboration, small-group work to develop measurable objectives and creative activations for a select "Audience" and "Action" (see worksheet in Appendix C). The session ended with a post-test to reassess the same factors listed above, as well as a whole-class discussion about creativity and critical strategic thinking in public relations (see Appendix A for a step-by-step guide and discussion prompts). This exercise reinforced the CPRE recommendations noted above, as well as their call to "Encourage curiosity" and "…Teach students to align…with measurable organizational outcomes and public relations objectives rather than low-level outputs.".

Keywords: creativity, PR, curiosity, CPRE

Editorial Record: Submitted September 19, 2025. Accepted March 9, 2026.

Overview of the Assignment, Including the Rationale

The 2023 report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) identified key areas of focus for PR educators to enhance students' learning and preparation for successful public relations careers. CPRE leaders called for "experiential learning opportunities… that will enhance…exposure to professional behavior and workplace expectations, as well as helping develop the students' soft skills" and "course content with a strong focus on students communicating on a personal level with key audiences…" (p. 22). They noted, "…employers will expect entry-level graduates who can demonstrate a level of proficiency in the following areas to make a contribution…" and listed creativity, flexibility and adaptability, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and analytical skills among those core competencies (p. 28). Their research found that both educators and PR practitioners desired strong problem-solving, creative thinking, analytical thinking, and strategic planning abilities, but scores were lower when respondents were asked whether students demonstrated these in the workplace (p. 41). They recommended "educators need to ensure their classes connect graduates to the relationships between problem solving, critical and creative thinking, and strategic planning" (p. 37).

This in-class exercise, administered in two upper-level courses, included a pre-test to assess students' confidence in creativity and collaboration, small-group work to develop measurable objectives and creative activations for a select "Audience" and "Action" (see worksheet in Appendix C). The session ended with a post-test to reassess the same factors listed above, as well as a whole-class discussion about creativity and critical strategic thinking in public relations (see Appendix A for a step-by-step guide and discussion prompts). This exercise reinforced the CPRE recommendations noted above, as well as their call to "Encourage curiosity" and "…Teach students to align…with measurable organizational lower confidence.

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Appendix A

Overview of the In-Class Exercise

- Ask Students to Read This Vox Article (Jennings, 2025) Prior to Arriving in Class.
- Administer and Collect Pre-Tests (see Appendix B).
- Divide Students into Small Groups and Distribute Worksheets.
- Invite Students to Pick a Card at Random for Audience and Action.
- Display a Sample Measurable Objective, Reminding Students of Key Elements (Audience, Action, Amount, and Time).
- Provide Time for Student Groups to Develop a Measurable Objective Using Their Audience and Action Cards. Students Identify a Potential Partnership To Achieve Their Objective and Pitch Their Idea to the Class.
- Encourage Student Groups to Develop an Experiential Campaign Idea, a User-Generated Social Media Campaign Idea and a Traditional Media Relations Pitch. All Ideas Must Align With Their Objective. Task Them With Paying Particular Attention to Measurement.
- <Optional: If The Class Has A Client/Community Partner, Complete the Tasks Above On Their Behalf, Incorporating The Client's Key Message(s).>
- Administer and Collect Post-Tests (see Appendix B).
- Whole-Class Discussion About Creativity and Critical Strategic Thinking in Public Relations.
    - Review Recent PRSA Silver Anvil Award-Winners Focused on Creativity. ("7-Eleven Brings Slurpee to a New Generation" is an excellent example. 7-Eleven with Edible, Inc, Dentsu and Intersport won a 2024 Award of Excellence in the Integrated Communications – Consumer Products category.)

- Probe for:
    - Challenges and opportunities when working with colleagues.
    - Approach to developing creative ideas.
    - Mastering the development of measurable objectives.
    - Adaptability and flexibility, especially when inheriting “stiff” or “corporate” messaging from clients/community partners.
    - Thoughts on the importance of critical strategic thinking and analytical skill development in Public Relations.

Appendix B

Pre- and Post-Test

Name: ____

Major(s): ____

I am a creative person.

Completely Agree									Completely Disagree
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

I feel confident in my ability to develop creative ideas on my own.

Completely Agree									Completely Disagree
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

I feel confident in my ability to develop creative ideas with peers.

Completely Agree									Completely Disagree
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

I consider myself an innovator.

Completely Agree									Completely Disagree
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

I enjoy collaborating with peers.

Completely Agree									Completely Disagree
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

I am good at adapting ideas (like current trends or news events) to support my public relations work.

Completely Agree									Completely Disagree
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Creativity is an important skill public relations professionals need for success.

Completely Agree									Completely Disagree
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Appendix C

Worksheet After Students Draw Audience + Action Cards

Potential Audience Cards: Young Children, Suburbanites, Rural Americans, Single Women, City Dwellers, College Students, Gen Alpha, Single Men, Boomers, Millennials

Potential Action Cards: Playing Sports, Reading, Volunteering, Sleep, Lawn Care/Gardening, Learn a Language, Cooking, Gaming, Yoga/Working Out, Crocheting/Knitting

Name: ____

First, let's practice...

Audience____

Action____

Objective____

Now, your pitch + potential partnership

____

Let's get strategic...

Strategic Approach: How will you achieve this objective?

What's the core insight about your audience that makes this approach compelling?

____

What strategic positioning will differentiate this from competitors?

____

What behavior change or perception shift are you targeting?

____

Now, let's apply this further for our client…

Objective: What do you want to achieve?

Audience____

Action____

Objective____

Remember, all work must incorporate the client's key message.

Strategy: Your overall approach to achieving this objective.

____

Next, let's dig into tactics…

Strategic Tactic #1: An Experiential Campaign Idea (An immersive experience or event where the audience can interact with or evaluate the brand)

Rationale: Why is an experiential approach strategically sound for this objective?

____

Pitch: ____

Objective:____

Strategic Link: How does this tactic directly connect to your objective?

____

Strategic Tactic #2: A User-Generated Social Media Campaign Idea

Rationale: Why is a UGC/social media approach strategically sound for this objective?

____

Pitch: ____

Objective:____

Strategic Link: How does this tactic directly ladder up (connect) to your objective?

____

Strategic Tactic #3: A Traditional Media Relations Pitch (Publication, Audience, Idea/Concept)

Rationale: Why is a media relations approach strategically sound for this objective?

____

Pitch: ____

Objective:____

Strategic Link: How does this tactic directly connect to your objective?

____

Final Reflection: How do these tactics work together (synergy)?

____

Journal of Public Relations Education
2026, Vol. 12, No. 2, 76-88

Teaching Brief/GIFT

Integrating Corporate Ethics and Border Privacy Cases into PR Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This teaching brief outlines the banking data breach scandal as an instance of a border privacy and corporate ethics crisis communication case taught to undergraduates. In this assignment, students analyzed and presented the scandal to hone skills necessary for ethical and practical public relations crisis communication management and leadership. Skills emphasized in this assignment were critical thinking, memo writing, and public speaking. Four parts characterize this teaching note. Part I introduces the course within the university, the learning goals, and the key theories emphasized. Part II outlines assignment details. Part III summarizes student performance. Part IV reflects on this lesson and concludes the brief.

Keywords: privacy, data breaches, crisis communication, public relations

Editorial Record: Submitted November 17, 2024. Revised May 27, 2025. Accepted February 7, 2026.

Responding to a contemporary demand to train emerging public relations professionals in corporate crises, this teaching brief details the experience of instructing undergraduates on a public relations crisis surrounding a financial institution. The importance of instructing public relations students in digital privacy and data protection crisis communication cases has reached a new tenor. Such instances have become more common. In 2022, Verizon documented 5,212 data breaches, up from 4,145 in 2021(Verizon, 2022). These figures underscore the importance of continuous cybersecurity vigilance, but they also highlight the vulnerability of personal and digital privacy, their intersection with corporate crises, and the value of instructing PR students to lead in such moments.

This teaching brief presents the experience of teaching one such border case. It presents the case of the scandal, an instance of a venerable financial institution fraudulently opening millions of accounts without their customers' knowledge or consent while charging them fees. There are, unfortunately, many cases of privacy and data protection breaches from which to select, but this instance is compelling for several reasons. For one, the case is relatable: nearly everyone has a bank account with a financial institution. Almost everyone can imagine what it might feel like to have their financial data compromised or misappropriated. Two, the case presents a hybrid case that incorporates corporate ethics, reputation management, and consumer trust, which parallels individual and data privacy challenges facing public relations professionals. Three, the hybrid case also spotlights the catastrophic consequences that follow when corporations violate consumer privacy ethics. From a teaching perspective, the scandal has also matured sufficiently for students to draw on scholarly research and non-academic literature in examining the case. At its heart, this border case is more than an example of fraud; it presents an instance of the vital role public relations expertise can play in managing corporate crises and the importance of ethical decision-making to leadership. These skills are vitally important to impart to emerging professionals.

This teaching brief proceeds as follows. Part I outlines the rationale for the assignment, proceeds with a description of the university, and concludes with details about the course. Part II explains the assignment. It details the core learning objectives and assignment parts. Part III imparts student performance at each stage of the assignment. Highlighted in this section are the initial reactions to the assignment, outcomes of the one-on-one sessions, quality of the memos, oral presentation, and Q&A session. Part IV concludes with a reflection on the assignment and the potential of incorporating cybersecurity cases into undergraduate education more widely.

Part I: The Rationale for Integrating Privacy Cases Into PR Pedagogy and University Overview

The field has started to recognize the importance of public relations expertise in cases involving privacy and cybersecurity. Westin (1967) defines privacy as an individual, group, or institutional claim to determine when, how, and to what extent information about them is released to others. This definition directly maps to data privacy and cybersecurity. Cybersecurity refers to the "art of protecting networks, devices, and data from unauthorized access or criminal use and the practice of ensuring confidentiality, integrity, and availability of information" (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, 2021, para. 1). Cybersecurity is critical for financial institutions to protect sensitive data. Betkier (2019) asserts that data privacy depends on personal autonomy. It follows that data privacy is placed in an individual's autonomous control over personal data (p. 23). This necessarily includes identifiable information, addresses, and financial information.

A January 2025 article in Modern Marketing reports that public relations experts can play a role in helping firms mitigate risk, noting "the challenges of securing sensitive information are not only technical in nature; they also require strategic communication and a comprehensive approach to managing perceptions, relationships, and crises (Torossian, 2025). Anecdotally, a basic Google search yields multiple professional public relations positions that require experience in privacy and cybersecurity. Such positions seek professionals at various career stages. This highlights the value of instructing hybrid crisis communication cases.

As the field calls for public relations experts trained in cybersecurity and privacy, it builds upon a call for active learning evident within PR pedagogy. Coombs and Rybacki (1999) suggest that PR pedagogy emphasizes active learning, while Botan and Taylor (2004) remind us that public relations pedagogy is not separate from the academy due to the tools, theories, and concepts inherent in the discipline. Yook (2024) documents that active learning strategies strengthen student mastery of crisis management theories and practices. The 2023 Guidelines for Certification in Education for Public Relations encourage educators to adapt to shifts in the profession, while the Commission on Public Relations Education and the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications have similarly emphasized the importance of linking theory to practice (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.; Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, 2025). These paradigms thus welcome the incorporation of privacy cases into public relations pedagogy.

For students engaged in this assignment, such issues are not merely esoteric but germane to their immediate and long-term career goals. This upper-level, semester-length course was taught every semester to undergraduates at a New England university that emphasizes business and liberal arts. Recognized for churning out high-achieving, business-minded undergraduates, students join this university planning to enter the corporate world. Career training and placement begin in the first year and last throughout the duration of their college careers. This preparation includes intensive training in business writing and composition. Students also took separate classes in accounting and finance. Prior courses introduced students to the concepts related to business ethics. This included stakeholder theory, utilitarianism, and justice theory by their senior year.

The integrated marketing and communications course was required for all business, finance, and accounting students and draws on foundational concepts in public relations. This course stressed theories foundational to rhetoric and persuasion. Heath (2009) notes that a rhetorical perspective lends itself to a deductive and rational basis for the ethical practice of public relations. Heath (2009) further contends that leveraging rhetoric in public relations engenders environments in which ideas are debated and decisions made collaboratively. This course also explored image restoration theory and corporate apologia. Benoit (1997) describes image restoration theory as image repair strategies that take the nature of attacks or complaints into consideration(178). Benoit (1997) describes that in these attacks, the accused is held responsible for an action and the action is deemed offensive (Benoit, 1997). Hearit (2006) situates corporate apologia within crisis communication and avers that a calamity involving stakeholder expectations constitutes a significant threat to an organization's social credibility. Erickson (2021) emphasizes the primary importance of communication to leadership, transparency, and authenticity. Arendt et al. (2017) assert that apologia can help organizations move past crises. These theories map to real-world dynamics in crisis communication and cybersecurity cases for their direct application. They address newer challenges in a digital world, as privacy violations become more frequent. Students who presented the case were required to outline their strategies to mitigate the fallout.

The assignment's learning goals were outlined in the syllabus. The primary goal was to train the next generation to develop their communication skills. The four primary competencies covered were writing, oral presentations, visual communication, and listening. Students had four major assignments that emphasized informative writing and presentations, structured messaging, and an understanding of ethics as a central tenet of leadership. Readings from scholarly outlets and mainstream sources characterized the course literature. Students gained practice through the in-class exercises and the classroom discussions to prepare for the final assignment. Combined, these experiences underscored the value of active engagement.

As many as two dozen students can register for the course. Given the breadth of the field, instructors had some latitude in how they taught this course and the cases that they selected. A notable feature of the class is the use of the cold-calling method. On the first day of class, the instructor informed students that they would be cold-called upon in class to review the readings and share their insights. The questions revolved around reviewing the readings and sharing their insights. Dallimore et. al. (2013) detail that the cold-calling method facilitates broader classroom participation and prepares students for active participation. For the final assignment, cold calling facilitated class discussion on core learning goals.

Part II: The Assignment

Students first heard about the final assignment during the initial week of class and again at various points throughout the term. The financial scandal was one of three cases from which students could select for the final assignment. The significance of this case underscored its selection: The discovery that the venerable financial institution, known for its customer service, had opened millions of fake accounts due to internal pressure. The scandal is a financial fraud scandal, but it is connected to privacy, too. Over 60% of the students selected the case. The assignment required students to incorporate and articulate ethical reasoning into their communications strategies. The assignment served as the final major writing project in the course, with more than half of the students graduating and preparing to enter the corporate world. The assignment specifics – the learning objectives, memo, professor consultations, and presentation – follow.

Learning Objectives

The case served as a final practice platform to prepare learners for professional careers. The assignment objectives were to:

- Identify central issues and central stakeholder concerns.
- Develop analytical writing skills in crisis communication scenarios.
- Gain further practice with effective oral presentations.
- Integrate ethical reasoning into their assignments.
- Benefit from peer-to-peer collaboration on their assignments.

Introducing the Assignment

The Memo

Each student was required to write an 850-word memo the case and elaborating on the identified privacy violations. The basis of the memo was to address one stakeholder group, i.e., account holders, shareholders, and the public, and assess how they would repair the institution's reputation with that group, drawing on PR strategies. Students could pick any stakeholder group, but to keep this group as the basis for the entire assignment. The assignment required 7 to 10 scholarly sources from peer-reviewed journals.

We reviewed the memo assignment in class and went through each of the details. This part of the assignment was worth 15 points. Each memo was required to include a title and a reference list. The formatting and citation expectations for the memo adhered to APA 7th edition.
The memo required students to double-space their documents and write in 12-point font. The assignment awarded two points based on clarity, conciseness, and comprehensiveness. This part was worth three points. The instructor allotted six points for analysis and use of sources.

To familiarize students with memo writing, the course utilized the Policy Memos Resource, available through the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Students received time in class to craft their memos, feedback through consultations, and a tutorial on proper citation in formal documents. The deadline for submission was 8:59 p.m. on the day before the class presentations.

Consultations

Before submitting their memo, students signed up for a one-on-one 15-minute coaching session with the instructor two weeks before the assignment's due date. Students received a sheet in class with a list of times to schedule a session at their convenience. Students were encouraged to bring their drafts or a working outline to the session. The overarching goal was to offer draft-specific feedback. Students received five points for attending the session.

In-Class Oral Presentation

The in-class presentation consisted of three components: an oral presentation, a PowerPoint slide presentation, and a Q&A session. For the oral presentation, students presented their work before the class in business attire. They engaged with the class by posing questions to the audience or showing a video. A class member timed each presentation and raised their hand to signal a one-minute warning. Another member of the class tabulated the number of "ums" and other filler words that the presenter spoke.

Students used the 7th edition APA style and submitted materials before class. The presentation was also worth 15 points. The evaluation criteria revolved around depth of research, delivery, and professionalism.

Q&A Session

After making their presentations, presenters took questions from classmates, allowing them to elaborate on their research. The instructor also asked questions. Students had up to two minutes to answer each question. This portion was worth five points. Each assignment element was intended to enhance student learning in research, critical reasoning, stakeholder analysis, and leadership.

Part III: Assignment Performance

Initial Reaction

Students perceived the assignment as a natural conclusion to the class. Introducing the assignment through the initial weeks and then mentioning it at various points in the term, combined with introducing exercises to prepare them for the assignment, left little room for shock. Students received the assignment but asked questions along the way.

Memos: Every student conducted research and prepared their documents in preparation for the final submission. Many included image restoration and apologia in their memos. They incorporated a range of scholarly and non-scholarly sources. Introducing students to memo-writing resources elevated the quality of their memos.

Consultations: These improved the overall quality of the various elements of the assignment. Many brought an outline or a working draft of their memo to the session. Feedback revolved around encouraging students to clarify their points and articulate their specific approach to regaining trust. Consultations supported students who brought an outline to think through the organization and sources.

Oral Presentations: Students presented the crisis, provided an overview of the case, and profiled those most impacted. Most of the students selected shareholders or accountholders as their primary stakeholders. Oral presentations included well-designed PPTs. Students also presented their analysis and strategies. Slides were also “text-light.” Students drew on corporate apologia, transparency, and authenticity effectively in their memos and in-class presentations.

Q&A: Following each presentation, each student fielded two questions from their peers. This aspect of the assignment enhanced comprehension of the material and encouraged analytical thinking that builds on the "cold calling" technique employed in the class. No cold calling was necessary, as students had prior practice engaging with their peers.

Part IV: Student Debrief and Conclusion

During the final few minutes of class, for a debriefing session, students recognized that this assignment emphasized technical content and ethical, social, and business dimensions – aspects recognized as essential in cybersecurity education and vital to PR education (Cai, 2018). They critically outlined the ethical and cultural failures, digging into the unrealistic sales targets and unhealthy corporate culture that contributed to the crisis.

Students enjoyed analyzing others' cases nd noted how their approaches helped cement their learning regarding the cross-cutting nature of the assignment. The participatory element of the assignment kept them engaged. Students acknowledged that stakeholder responses challenged them to create internal and external communication messaging that would repair morale. For example, one student expressed concern that the companies had not taken appropriate steps to protect account holders' privacy. Students pointed out that the breaches necessitated corporate change.

Students also commented on their peers' presentations, noting the strengths of the strong presentations while pointing out techniques they planned to incorporate in the future. For instance, one student recognized an excessive use of "ums" in their presentation. Another student pointed out that practicing their presentation beforehand helped calm their nervousness. One remarked that they needed to improve their PPT skills.

The iterative nature of this assignment guided students through a relevant case they may confront professionally. The regular feedback loop, as illustrated in the memo, presentations, Q&A sessions, and debriefs, demonstrates the alignment of developing students' crisis communication and reputation management skills in handling complex cases involving ethics. Course evaluations similarly highlighted the iterative nature of the assignment, solidifying key concepts and improving overall performance. The case offers students a meaningful learning opportunity to merge central public relations theories with ethical decision-making and communication. This assignment, in effect, served as a continuation of the skills students had first learned when they arrived at the university. In summary, this teaching note highlights the critical importance of incorporating real-world crisis communication cases into PR instruction. The spike in privacy violation cases presents an obvious opportunity for instructors to respond by introducing students to privacy and other cybersecurity-related issues in a lab-like environment, such as a public relations classroom.

Recommended Resources

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Acknowledgments

The author extends appreciation to the reviewers of the Journal of Public Relations Education for their generous feedback and gratefully acknowledges the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at the Moody College of Communication, the Cyber Student Fellows Program, and the 2025 AEJMC Diversity and Inclusion Career Development Fellowship for their support and encouragement.

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2026, Vol. 12, No. 2, 89-94

Book Review

Strategic Planning for Public Relations (7th ed.)

Reviewed by
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Authors: Deborah A. Silverman and Ronald D. Smith (in memoriam)
Publisher: Routledge, 2024
ISBN: 978-1032391175 (hardback)
978-1032391168 (paperback)
978-1003348467 (e-book)
https://www.routledge.com/Strategic-Planning-for-Public-Relations/Silverman-Smith/p/book/9781032391168
Number of pages: 556

Anyone who has taught or taken public relations classes is probably familiar with the name Ronald D. Smith, who authored several editions of strategic public relations planning, media writing, and public relations writing textbooks. This seventh edition of *Strategic Planning for Public Relations* is, in part, an ode to Smith, who passed away in 2020. SUNY Buffalo State University colleague and friend Deborah A. Silverman is co-author, picking up where Smith left off. Both authors honed their skills as public relations practitioners and consultants and have taught core public relations classes for undergraduate and graduate students, giving them the chops to showcase how to plan strategically in a public relations career.

Strategic Planning for Public Relations has been a staple in the campaigns textbook carousel through six editions over more than 20 years. This seventh edition has grown substantially from the 344-page premier edition to an extensive 565 pages.

Of note, this book does well to address many of the recommendations by the Commission on Public Relations Education's most-recent report. Its inclusion of "Ethics Minute" – hypothetical dilemmas followed by viable solutions – in each chapter reinforces the Commission's call to "take a systemic ethical approach to the practice… from a broader world view" (Toth & Bourland-Davis, 2023, p. 3) by incorporating "course content (case studies, reports, presentations, etc.) on the ethical challenges of contemporary practice" (p. 4), including "understand[ing] DEI as an ethical social responsibility" (p. 6). Other factors in Silverman and Smith's book recommended by the Commission include opportunities to apply critical thinking in experiential learning, analyze real-world case studies, and hone writing and data analytic skills. Importantly, the book also assesses the pros and cons of artificial intelligence in strategic public relations, something that is having a significant impact on the profession.

Structure and Organization

The four-phase, 10-step format makes it easy to navigate this sizable volume. A detailed table of contents is broken down into these four well-known phases:

1. Formative research focuses on the first four campaign steps: analyzing the situation, choosing research methods, analyzing the organization, and analyzing the publics.
2. The strategy phase has three steps: creating positioning statements, goals, and objectives.
3. The tactics phase focuses on elements of the PESO Model© created by Spin Sucks CEO Gini Dietrich (2024) and devotes a chapter to each of the four types – paid, earned, shared, and owned media. The section also tackles plan implementation.
4. The evaluative research phase addresses the whys and hows of effective campaign evaluation.

The book also has three appendices – media engagement, which focuses on reputation, media relations and credibility; crisis communication, which details types of crises, strategies to respond to crises, and the necessity of having a crisis plan in place; and a content analysis example, to show how an organization might assess media coverage. A 34-page glossary includes definitions from A/B testing to zero-based budgeting, followed by a 15-page index.

In addition to the book proper, Routledge provides several online resources. Instructors must complete a registration form on the Instructor Resources Download Hub page to request access to an instructor's manual, sample syllabi, checklists, PowerPoints, as well as sample student campaigns and relevant online resources. Those looking for a test bank might be disappointed. The authors clearly note the value of experiential learning by doing, rather than by memorizing. Students may access textbook resources on the book's webpage under support material. It includes the 10-step checklists, two extensive campaign documents, and a seven-pager with links to professional organizations and resources in public relations, advertising, social media, communication, broadcasting, communication and diversity, media publications, careers, diversity, ethics, media literacy, and media criticism.

Critique

The only frustration I have with this book – and with many public relations textbooks – is the meandering approach to defining the profession, complete with what it's not, historical definitions, global definitions, comparisons to advertising, and so on. The authors' definition appears eight pages into the 21-page introduction, and on slide 14 out of 21 in PowerPoints. Setting the definition front and center may help ease the confusion and misinformed descriptions from which public relations suffers and perhaps help students whose parents wonder about the murky nature of their career aspirations.

Some of the ethics cases are fairly simplistic, focusing on right/wrong issues – lack of transparency when posting online, fake reviews, misleading bloggers, a fake social media hack, insufficient influencer disclosure, deep-fake videos, and posting false information online. Although there's value in reinforcing basic ethical expectations, it would be helpful to share ethical dilemmas as well, where students must assess competing values that can't be applied simultaneously and come up with a viable solution. For example, how does a practitioner grapple with the competing notions of disclosure while also safeguarding confidences?

In the instructor resources web page, the authors recommend graduate students work on campaigns individually, which discounts the significance of how the profession operates. No one is an island; while some grad students may excel at research and evaluation, others may have more to offer in creating effective tactics.

The instructor resources include a number of expected items – PowerPoint slides for each chapter and chapter overviews. Additionally, it provides helpful undergraduate- and graduate-level syllabi. An added plus is a sample grading rubric for critiquing a campaign project.

Audience

At 556 pages, the book could be a bit daunting for some undergraduate students, but it is packed with valuable insights that could, as the authors note, bridge more than one course. When I select textbooks, there are two key criteria I apply – can the students afford it now, and will they keep it as a resource after the class ends? Although textbooks can be notoriously pricey, the paperback and e-book costs of *Strategic Planning for Public Relations* are not outlandish. The four-phase, 10-step structure with checklists makes it a useful resource; instructors might reinforce that point with upper-level undergraduates and master's students, particularly for those who may seek public relations accreditation through PRSA. The book is among those PRSA recommends to those studying for APR certification; both Silverman and Smith earned APR status.

Conclusion

Overall, the latest edition of *Strategic Planning for Public Relations* is packed with valuable information and offers a hands-on approach that will serve students well. The few downsides are outweighed by its legacy, not only as a textbook, but as a resource that novice practitioners should hold onto.

References

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Journal of Public Relations Education
2026, Vol. 12, No. 2, 95-99

Book Review

Social Media Measurement and Management: Entrepreneurial Digital Analytics (2nd ed.)

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Author: Jeremy Harris Lipschultz
Publisher: Routledge, 2025
ISBN: 978-1032247861
https://www.routledge.com/Social-Media-Measurement-and-Management-Entrepreneurial-Digital-Analytics/Lipschultz/p/book/9781032247861
Number of pages: 308

"Social Media Measurement and Management: Entrepreneurial Digital Analytics" (2nd Edition) is a wide-ranging, resource-rich, and accessible book that explores "how social networks can be understood for context about which accounts have influence, what content satisfies interests, and why specific social media management tactics tend to work within a general context of planning, goals, and strategies" (Lipschultz, 2025, p. 4). The book features 20 diverse contributors, has 10 chapters, and is divided into four units: "Foundations of Social Media Measurement and Management," "Strategic Social Media Measurement Tools," "Best Practices in Social Media Measurement," and "Social Media Planning and Campaigns."

Chapter one, "Social Crowds, Voice, and Personal Branding," covers a variety of essential social media management and public relations industry terminology. Lipschultz defines key concepts such as algorithm, search engine optimization (SEO), search engine marketing (SEM), organic versus paid campaigns, sentiment, social listening, engagement, brand ambassadors, content optimization, and more. He also underscores the importance of continuous research and its critical role in outcome measurement, noting that research is at the core of the RPIE (research, planning, implementation, and evaluation) and SoMe (Share, Optimize, Manage, and Engage) models (Lipschultz, 2025, p. 24). In chapter two, Lipschultz drills down further into campaigns and details the evolution of the International Association of Measurement of Communication's (AMEC's) guiding Barcelona Principles, including laying out the Barcelona Principles 3.0: 1) "Setting goals is an absolute prerequisite to communications planning, measurement and evaluation," 2) "Measurement and evaluation should identify outputs, outcomes, and potential impact," 3) "Outcomes and impact should be identified for stakeholders, society, and the organization," 4) "Communication measurement and evaluation should include both qualitative and quantitative analysis," 5) "AVEs [Advertising Value Equivalences] are not the value of communication. 6) "Holistic communication measurement and evaluation includes all relevant online and offline channels," and 7) "Communication management and evaluation are rooted in integrity and transparency to drive learning and insights." (Lipschultz, 2025, p. 36). Chapter three, "Social Network Sites (SNS) Measurement and Management" provides an overview of the various types of data available across popular social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), Snapchat, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Reddit, and YouTube.

Chapter four, "Social Media Metrics and Management Tools" examines vanity metrics, social media dashboards, social media monitoring, social network analysis, electronic word of mouth, social capital, and the importance of social media audits. Chapter 5, "Academic Social Media Research" highlights that the standards and methods typically employed in social science research can and should be mirrored in industry by practitioners to ensure precision in their data gathering, measurement, and evaluation.

Chapters on "Integration of PR, Advertising, and Marketing Plans" (Chapter six), "Social Media Data Laws and Ethics" (Chapter 7), and "Customer Relationships and Content" (Chapter 8) are included in unit three. Chapter six introduces key elements of the planning process, including conducting SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analyses and setting SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timed) objectives. Ethical and legal considerations are at the center of Chapter seven, which addresses topics such as Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulations, pertinent case law, the PRSA Code of Ethics, and AI's role in shaping the ethical and legal landscape. The final chapter in unit three focuses on topics such as CRM (customer relations management), CSR (corporate social responsibility), and storytelling.

The book closes with chapters on “Employee Engagement” (Chapter nine) and “The Future of Social Media Measurement and Management” (Chapter ten) in unit four. Chapter nine emphasizes the need to recognize that employees can have positive and negative impacts on an organization’s reputation as influencers and brand advocates, while also making the case for engaging with employees via social media to reinforce and amplify important organizational messaging. The book closes with a forward-looking chapter, highlighting how technological advancement – particularly AI – is impacting social media measurement and management and will continue to do so at a remarkable pace.

Critique

A central strength of this book is that it is grounded in a balance of both scholarly and industry references. Lipschultz weaves in theories such as diffusion of innovation; however, it is the thoughtful incorporation of carefully curated practical insights and applications that provide the most value and relevance, particularly for students about to enter a difficult workforce climate. Each chapter features a combination of “Thought Leader” reflections and case studies, “As Seen on YouTube” assignments, project ideas, guiding discussion questions, and details associated with applicable social media tools. Featured “Thought Leaders” include Anna Berlett Vargas, principal at Studio Brand.io; *Chicago Tribune* investigative news reporter and author Ray Long; S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications associate professor Jennifer M. Grygiel; Roberto Gallardo, associate professor and vice president for engagement at Purdue University; and Sam Petto, communications director at ACLU of Nebraska. The “As Seen on YouTube” assignments, project ideas, and guiding questions are designed to engage readers in research, critical thinking, and applying concepts and skills and are helpful for faculty and students. For student audiences, these resources highlight practical industry examples that illustrate best practices and real-world scenarios as they embark on their careers in public relations, marketing, advertising, and related fields.

One suggestion for future editions is to reconsider some of the organizational structure of the book. Chapters 9 and 10 feel a bit out of place in unit four, which is titled “Social Media Planning and Campaigns,” and it does not seem as if that name encapsulates the scope of those chapters. I would recommend moving Chapter 9 to unit three and combining the current titles of units three and four for that revised section, while renaming unit four “The Future of Social Media Measurement and Management.” Future editions should also double-down on AI-focused content, including in the “Thought Leader” reflections and case studies and project ideas. I would also recommend adding a more robust section on TikTok in Chapter 3. While this chapter features specific sections on the aforementioned social networking sites, it does not feature a dedicated section on TikTok (it is referenced under “other popular sites”). Adding this element would make this chapter more robust given TikTok’s growth in usage as a news and entertainment source in recent years (Lipschultz, 2025, p. 91).

Audience

Lipschultz identified upper division undergraduate students and early graduate students as primary audiences for “Social Media Measurement and Management: Entrepreneurial Digital Analytics.” I recommend this book as a required resource for courses such as those emphasizing social media measurement and social media analytics. It – or pertinent select chapters – would also be useful as a recommended or supplemental reading for broader courses in social media strategy and management or public relations and/or marketing research.

The applied nature of this book makes it a useful resource for public relations educators and students as they seek to better understand industry standards and pressures in an increasingly competitive environment.

Journal of Public Relations Education

A publication of the Public Relations Division of AEJMC