

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

“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 & Guastaferrero, 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-to-

day 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 Gantt chart regularly (not just during the weekly team meeting) to plan and organize workflow and projects. A student summarized, “I really

Figure 1

[illegible]

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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