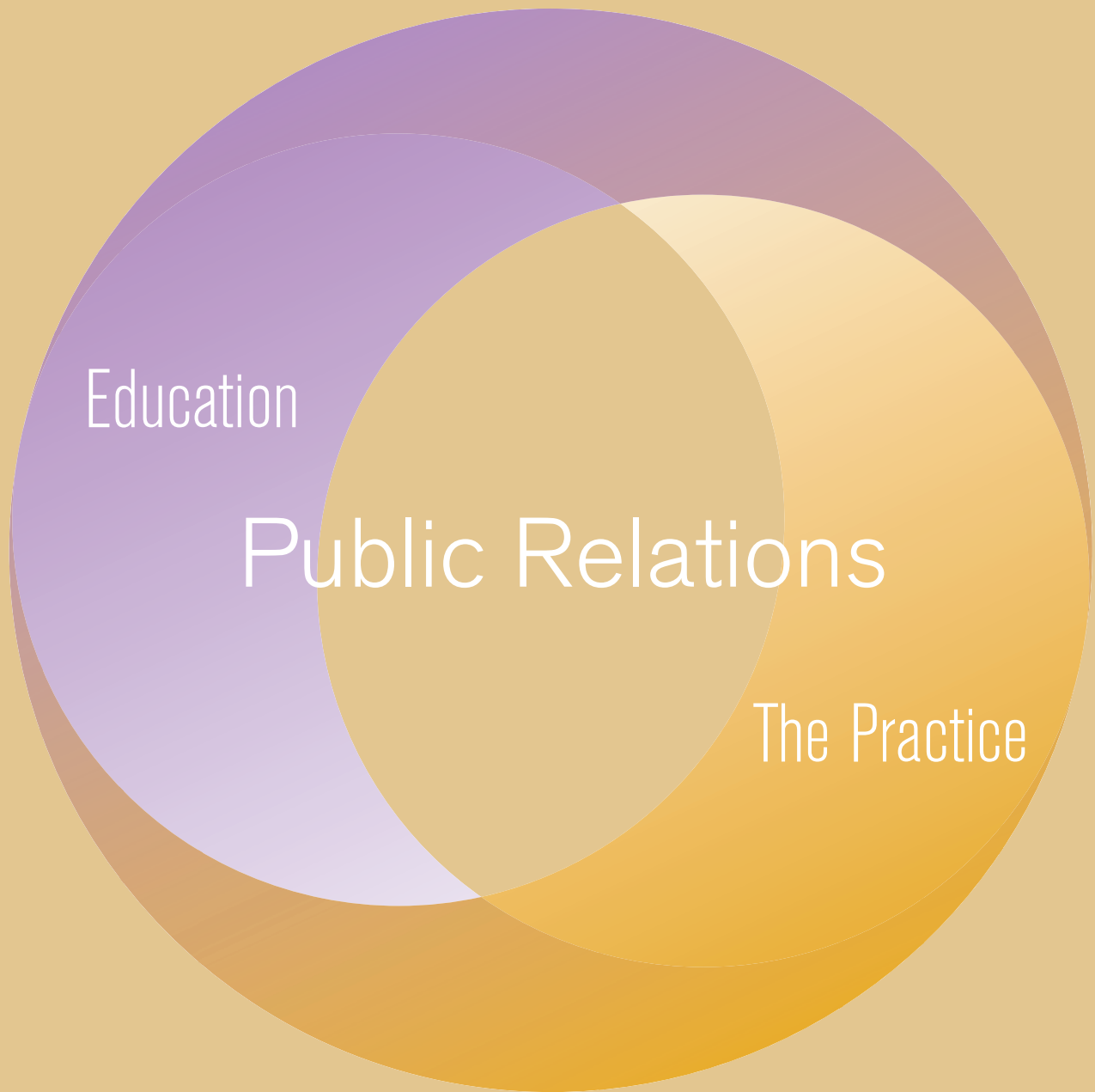


PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION  
FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

# The Professional Bond



## **Executive Summary**

THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION  
[WWW.COMMPRED.ORG](http://WWW.COMMPRED.ORG)

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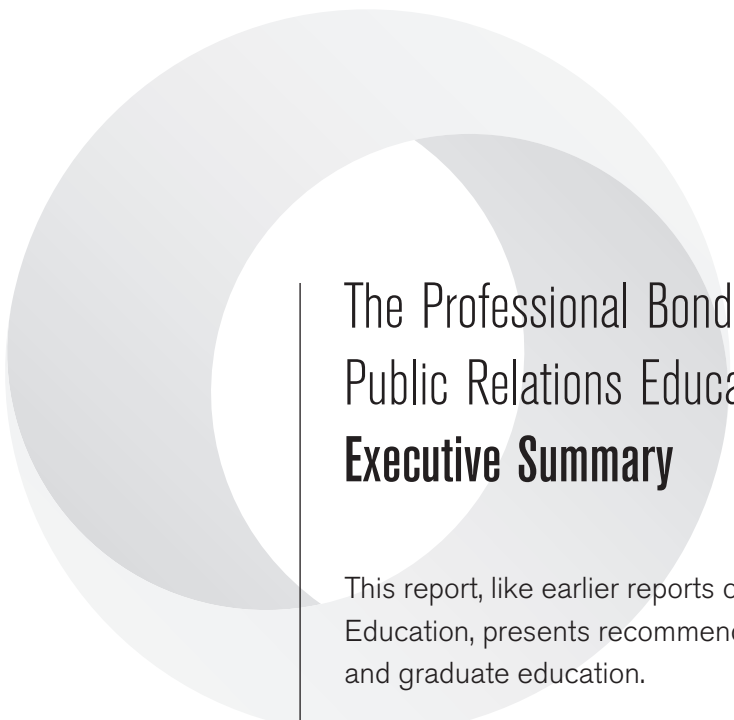
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The Commission is also grateful to its active members—those individual educators and practitioners who have played a central role in producing this report, thereby helping to strengthen the bond between public relations education and the practice.



# The Professional Bond— Public Relations Education and the Practice **Executive Summary**

This report, like earlier reports of the Commission on Public Relations Education, presents recommendations for public relations undergraduate and graduate education.

But beyond this traditional purpose, “The Professional Bond” report has also been developed *to demonstrate, facilitate and encourage the kind of linking of public relations education and practice that is the hallmark of any profession.*

There is much to be done—by every public relations constituency—to complete this bonding. So, to emphasize the importance of this mission, the Commission has prepared the special section, “A Call to Action,” as the conclusion of the report.

“The Professional Bond” report is not meant to be prescriptive. Its recommendations are presented as objectives for excellence as identified by a cadre of distinguished educators and practitioners. And, developed in North America, it is simply a point of reference for the development of public relations education in other parts of the world.

Because it is so ambitious, the report is, necessarily, lengthy. This summary is presented as a stimulant to the reader to partake of the entire report or, at a minimum, to select those topics from among the report’s four basic categories containing seventeen sections that are most relevant to his or her interests. The complete report is available in both “hard copy” format and on the Commission on Public Relations Education website at [www.commpred.org](http://www.commpred.org)

Selected highlights of the report follow.



## Research for the Report

Based on five “waves” of research, the Commission concludes that there is substantial agreement between educators and practitioners on what a public relations undergraduate student should learn, and therefore be able to perform at the practitioner entry level.

Needed at this level: writing skills; critical thinking and problem-solving skills; “a good attitude”; an ability to communicate publicly; and initiative.

There also was agreement that a public relations education should include an internship, practicum or some other work experience in the field.

The research also found considerable support for interdisciplinary study in subjects such as management and behavioral science.

## Public Relations Ethics

In addition to noting that professional ethics is largely predicated on the personal ethics of everyone in the public relations professional community, the Commission emphasizes that:

- ◆ A consideration of ethics should pervade all content of public relations professional education.
- ◆ If a curriculum cannot accommodate a dedicated ethics course, short one-hour courses or mini seminars can provide a meaningful ethics forum for undergraduates.

## Diversity

“Successful managers of organizations now recognize that a diverse workforce—recruited, trained and retained—can deliver valuable insights and performance,” the report states.

This section presents an in-depth treatment of defining diversity, identifying its major elements essential to public relations education and how, in the practice, public relations can advance diversity in society.

## Communication Technology

“Public relations educators must ensure that their students are prepared not only to be proficient in the use of the most recent communication technology, but also to understand and appreciate the societal ramifications of its use. Educators also must use this technology to maximize the effectiveness of their own instruction,” the report states.

The Commission therefore recommends that the latest communication technology used in the public relations practice be integrated into coursework to the extent that institutional resources will allow; and that student proficiency with such technology may be achieved largely through internships.

## Global Implications

“Public relations is now arguably becoming a global profession in an increasingly connected world where mutual understanding and harmony are more important than ever,” the report states.

In recognizing that public relations varies, understandably, with the society in which it is practiced, the Commission in this section presents seven levels of analysis to profile public relations education and practice in various parts of the world.

These levels of analysis are: cultural values and beliefs; laws and public policies; external groups, organizations and associations; institutional factors in the academic setting; international exchange programs; inter-personal factors within an institution; and intra-personal factors among students and educators.



## Undergraduate Education

“Undergraduate public relations education has been shifting and repositioning itself in step with the practice of public relations... When practitioners aid organizations in developing mutually beneficial relationships among diverse publics, organizations thrive,” the report states.

Therefore the Commission recommends more emphasis on ethics and transparency, new technology, integration of messages and tools, interdisciplinary problem solving, diversity, global perspectives and research and results measurement.

This section identifies a broad spectrum of knowledge and skills that should be taught in the undergraduate public relations curriculum.

Knowledge to be acquired ranges from communication and persuasion concepts and strategies, relationships and relationship-building and societal trends to uses of research and forecasting, multicultural and global issues and management concepts and theories. A similar sampling of the skills to be attained ranges from mastery of language in written and oral communications, issues management and audience segmentation to informative and persuasive writing, critical listening skills and applying cross-cultural and cross-gender sensitivity.

The Commission has identified the following courses for an “ideal” undergraduate major in public relations:

- ◆ Introduction to public relations (including theory, origin and principles)
- ◆ Case studies in public relations that review the professional practice
- ◆ Public relations research, measurement and evaluation
- ◆ Public relations law and ethics
- ◆ Public relations writing and production
- ◆ Public relations planning and management
- ◆ Supervised work experience in public relations (internship)
- ◆ Directed electives

“Although some academic programs will find it difficult to offer seven courses devoted entirely to public

relations, the Commission believes the topics covered in the courses above are essential for a quality public relations education. While these topics could be combined into courses in different ways, and some of these courses might also address additional topics, a major should offer sufficient courses to address the knowledge and skills identified as necessary for success in the field,” the report states.

The report continues: “A minimum of five courses should be required in the public relations major.” An academic emphasis should minimally include the following courses:

- ◆ Introduction to public relations (including theory, origin and principles)
- ◆ Public relations research, measurement and evaluation
- ◆ Public relations writing and production
- ◆ Supervised work experience in public relations (internship)
- ◆ An additional public relations course in law and ethics, planning and management, case studies or campaigns

## Graduate Education

In qualitative research conducted for this report, 18 public relations leaders supported several types of graduate public relations programs rather than endorsing the MBA or dismissing public relations graduate education as unnecessary. The Commission’s research suggests that graduate education should move toward understanding business, management and public relations as strategic management functions.

### MASTER’S LEVEL

The graduate student should master the following content areas beyond undergraduate competencies:

- ◆ Public relations theory and concepts
- ◆ Public relations law
- ◆ Public relations ethics
- ◆ Global public relations
- ◆ Public relations applications
- ◆ Public relations management
- ◆ Public relations research



- ◆ Public relations programming and production
- ◆ Public relations publics
- ◆ Communication processes
- ◆ Management sciences
- ◆ Behavioral sciences
- ◆ Internship and practicum experience
- ◆ Thesis and capstone project and/or comprehensive exam

The Commission also notes courses such as these can be configured in three different models, depending on student intent—doctoral program, advanced career preparation or a specialization in public relations.

#### DOCTORAL LEVEL

The Commission notes that the production of doctoral graduates has not kept pace with the need, either in education or in the practice. So it recommends academic credentials and “increased partnerships with professionals [practitioners] and professional organizations to help educators stay current with the practice of public relations.”

It also recommends “the development of additional doctoral programs where undergraduate and master’s degree public relations program strength and faculties exist” and lists a series of initiatives to help achieve this outcome.

## Supervised Experience

This section provides a valuable checklist of 16 issues to be confronted in developing internships appropriate to the academic institution and its students. In addressing the difficult subject of paid or unpaid internships, the Commission notes that “students almost always select the organizations to which they apply for internships, and organizations offering pay attract the best candidates.”

For this and other reasons, the Commission recommends that “sponsoring organizations of all types—companies, firms, government agencies and nonprofits—pay public relations students for internships.”

Among its other recommendations: academic credit for internships should be reserved for workplace ex-

periences that include an on-site supervisor knowledgeable in public relations, and organizations should assign student interns to supervisors who will routinely and clearly instruct students and evaluate their performance.

## Distance Learning

Commission research determined that despite the rapid growth of online education (distance learning) in the United States, no complete undergraduate public relations online program appears to be available at the time of its research. However, the six universities in the Tennessee Board of Regents System offer a five-course public relations sequence (principles, writing, research, case problems and campaigns) in their organizational leadership concentration for an online bachelor of professional studies degree.

At the graduate level, there is no entirely public relations program that is totally online.

In summary, the Commission suggests that “public relations in the next decade will need to include online education in its mix of delivery methods if it is to keep pace with professional education.” To introduce quality online programs, public relations program administrators and faculty must address resources (incentives, design and development costs), pedagogy and quality assurance.

## Governance and Academic Support

The placement of academic programs within the administrative structure of universities seriously affects the ability of such programs in public relations to independently respond and adapt to the needs of the public relations profession.

“Too, a dominant influencing factor at an institution of higher education is the degree of outside funding support provided for, or, in some cases, state legislative direction in political response to a profession,” the report states.

The Commission therefore cites two critical needs if public relations is to achieve status as a profession with generally accepted education requirements for



performance:

- ◆ Increased economic influence
- ◆ Increased involvement of professionals and the profession to influence the development of public relations education.

This section recommends specific steps that will increase responsiveness and accelerate advancement as well as intra-institution structural commitments that will strengthen public relations programs appreciably.

## Faculty Credentials

There is a shortage of qualified public relations educators, being made more acute by the increasing number of public relations students.

This challenge for the profession is compounded by the fact that colleges and universities are being pressured by accrediting bodies to fill faculty positions with Ph.D.s.

The Ph.D. degree prepares faculty not only as teachers but also as scholars who conduct research using multiple methodologies to help build theory that adds to the public relations body of knowledge.

“While the Commission believes there is a place in the academy for former practitioners with substantial and significant experience, those practitioners may be expected to earn their terminal degrees, i.e., their Ph.D.s, as a credential for becoming full-time faculty,” the report states.

## Professional and Pre-Professional Organizations

Students studying public relations in the United States have the opportunity to join any of a number of professional organizations or pre-professional organizations before they graduate. By becoming active members of such organizations, they can begin to see how they might fit into the profession and, perhaps, form a link to an entry-level position.

This section provides detailed information on a number of U.S. and global organizations that assist

students in such orientation. The section also presents information on establishing student-managed firms through universities and opportunities for scholarships, awards and other support by organizations such as The LaGrant Foundation (internships and scholarships for minority students studying public relations), the Council of PR Firms, the Arthur Page Society and *PRWeek* magazine.

## Program Certification and Accreditation

Many public relations academic programs benefit by being certified by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and/or accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC).

These programs gain from the extensive self-examination against certification and accreditation standards of excellence. And they also acquire stature for having met these standards.

PRSA Certification examines the public relations program exclusively while ACEJMC accreditation is a “unit” examination, i.e., it reviews all mass communication programs at the institution, which often include print and electronic journalism, advertising and public relations.

Both programs are voluntary. Each has nine standards of review with recent added emphasis on diversity and outcomes assessment. Currently, public relations programs at 14 U.S. universities, one Canadian college and one university in Argentina are certified by PRSA. ACEJMC currently has granted accreditation to 88 mass communication units with public relations programs.

The Commission recommends that more public relations programs seek certification and/or accreditation and that more practitioners volunteer to serve on site visiting teams for these important evaluations of academic excellence. In addition, it urges public relations associations not now members of ACEJMC to consider joining the Council, thereby increasing public relations’ “share of voice” in this important endeavor.

## A Call to Action

Contemporary public relations education is still young, searching for its “home”—and often its legitimacy—in academe. The field is largely populated by practitioners who never had an opportunity for its formal study, thus learning their craft primarily from lengthy experience.

That picture is changing. Graduates from public relations academic programs are entering the field in increasing numbers.

“While the record of broad support for public relations education by professional groups is growing, there is a critical need for similar action by individual practitioners and the firms, companies and organizations with which they are associated and in which they are influential,” the report states.

“Too few are contributing financial support to public relations programs in colleges and universities of their choice,” according to the report.

This final section is the Commission’s clarion call to practitioners for a new level of commitment to public relations education. It enumerates eight specific actions—some financial, some “in kind”—that practitioners can take to strengthen the professional bond between education and the practice. And, the Commission notes, educators likewise can have a vital role in strengthening that bond, mainly by taking the initiative to establish or nurture relationships with practitioners and their organizations.

The “A Call to Action” section also presents the first known “Sampling of Major Gifts to Public Relations Education,” a valuable compendium of such largesse provided to stimulate additional support to public relations programs.

*“Today, there are too few ‘angels’ supporting public relations education, but just a few can lead the way.”*

Betsy Plank, APR, Fellow PRSA  
50-year public relations executive and donor

*“What a wonderful service you have done for public relations in compiling the list of major gifts to forward public relations education”*

Harold Burson, APR, Fellow PRSA  
Burson-Marsteller

## A Good Place to Start

*Here’s how:*

Contact the development staff at your *alma mater* if it has a public relations program. If not, select a program from the list of PRSA-certified units in the Program Certification and Accreditation Section ([http://prsa.org/\\_About/overview/certification.asp?ident=over5](http://prsa.org/_About/overview/certification.asp?ident=over5)) or from the list of ACEJMC accredited units (<http://www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/STUDENT/PROGLIST.SHTML>). A third option is to identify a program that sponsors one of the more than 270 chapters of the Public Relations Student Society of America ([www.prssa.org](http://www.prssa.org)).

Any of these first steps will put you on the road to supporting not only the individual public relations program but also...

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[www.commpred.org](http://www.commpred.org)