

**Leadership Education in the Public Relations Curriculum:
Reality, Opportunities, and Benefits**

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The quality of leadership in public relations is a crucial issue, as it is in every profession and organization. What leaders say and do influences our work and social lives, and how we see and evaluate our groups and organizations. Leaders also shape the reputation and future of our professions and organizations (Berger, Meng, & Heyman, 2009).

Long a popular research subject in the social sciences, leadership in public relations has received scant attention until recently. Through grants and other activities, The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations at the University of Alabama has stimulated more than 20 studies of leadership in the field in the past five years. These projects have examined diverse topics, from the power of roles models, to the transfer of ethical knowledge, to key qualities of excellent leadership. This work has yielded an integrated leadership model that includes six dimensions of “excellent” leadership (Berger & Meng, 2010; Meng, 2009; and Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2012).

This study draws from this integrated model and provides insights into another important area: how and to what extent educators attempt to develop leadership skills,

qualities, and values in public relations education. Recent research (e.g., Berger et. al, 2009; Meng, 2009) has highlighted for practitioners the importance of on-the-job experiences and role models as sources for PR leadership development, skills, and beliefs. However, many practitioners rated formal education and professional development programs much lower. This study probes more deeply the perspectives of public relations' educators regarding leadership aspects of formal education.

Some studies in other fields have argued that leadership characteristics are fully developed by adolescence (Doh, 2003). Goleman, Boyatzis, and Mckee (2002) contended that "The original window of opportunity for learning effective leadership abilities extends through adolescence into the early twenties" (p. 104). So far as we know, no studies have examined the role of university education in fostering leadership skills and values in public relations students. Thus, this study is guided by four education-related questions: 1) Do PR educators consider leadership education to be important in their teaching? 2) Do they believe that leadership skills and competencies can be taught? 3) If so, what leadership skills and values do teachers consider essential? 4) What teaching approaches and pedagogies work best in the classroom?

These questions are explored through a survey of university educators (n=159) and two focus groups (n=10). The findings suggest that educators are advocates for leadership education but teach few courses concerned with leadership. Educators also believe that case studies, group discussions, and student-led projects are the best ways to teach leadership content and concepts. Overall, they recommend a holistic approach to teaching that includes more specialized leadership content, greater access to PR leaders and role models, and increased opportunities for related experiences outside of

the classroom. The research provides an important baseline of information for future studies and contributes to an emerging area of study in public relations.

Literature Review and Research Questions

If educational programs are to help students become leaders in the PR field, it is logical to assume that the curriculum includes leadership components to supply future professionals with corresponding skills. Beaudoin (2002) contended that educational structures (e.g., universities and colleges) usually adopt new strategic initiatives in teaching in response to external factors. Examples include responses to the proliferation and use of new technologies, the process of globalization, and pressure from the corporate sector to prepare students to deal effectively with challenges embedded in the professional environment. Heath (1991) encouraged PR educators to exercise leadership in developing and refining university PR programs: Heath argued that when the discipline is on its way toward professionalism, curriculum may follow or even *lead*.

Leadership is a complex construct with a long history of research marked by diverse theoretical perspectives and definitions, as Bass (1990) noted:

Leadership has been conceived as the focus of group processes, as a matter of personality, as a matter of inducing compliance, as the exercise of influence, as particular behaviors, as a form of persuasion, as a power relation, as an instrument to achieve goals, as an effect of interaction, as a differentiated role, as initiation of structure, and as many combinations of these definitions (p. 11).

This range of definitions includes individual traits and behavioral, situational, and transformational components of research. Though hundreds of studies on leadership

have appeared in the social science literature (Northouse, 2007; Pavitt, Whitchurch, McClurg & Peterson, 1995), there has been little direct research on leadership within the public relations field (Aldoory & Toth, 2004).

However, the importance of leadership is implicit in excellence theory and in excellent communication management concepts (Grunig, 1992; Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). These perspectives suggest that excellent leadership means being involved in strategic decision-making, providing ethical counsel, possessing a high level of communication knowledge and expertise, and practicing two-way symmetrical communication. Excellence theory also highlights the influence of organizational culture and structure on the role and practice of public relations.

More recent research (Bowen, 2008) has shown that public relations practitioners consider leadership to be one of the main routes to the dominant coalition, or decision-making authority in the organization. Gaining access to the highest level to participate in strategic management means to practice excellent public relations with a goal of making the organization more effective (White & Dozier, 1992). In addition, leaders of excellent organizations are committed to networking and “management-by-walking-around” rather than an authoritarian system: “Excellent leaders give power but minimize ‘power of politics’” (Grunig, 1992, p. 233).

Recent research (Berger et. al, 2009; Heyman, 2008; Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2012) suggests that practitioners’ leadership values and beliefs are most strongly influenced by work experiences and role models on the job. These results support social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which argues that we learn appropriate behaviors by observing and replicating those behaviors.

For this study, we adopted Meng's (2009) integrated model of leadership and her definition of "excellent leadership" in public relations, which includes personal attributes, behaviors, role relationships, and influences on followers and communication effectiveness:

Excellent leadership in public relations is a dynamic process that encompasses public relations executives' personal attributes and efforts in leading the team to facilitate mutual relationships inside and outside of organizations, to participate in the organization's strategic decision-making processes, and to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members (p. 60).

Meng's model proposes that "excellent" leadership in public relations consists of six major dimensions: self-dynamics, ethical orientation, team collaboration, relationship building, strategic decision-making capability, and communication knowledge and management capabilities. In addition, the model suggests that organizational culture and structure influence leadership effectiveness. The model has been tested and validated with two groups of public relations practitioners and executives (n=384). In this project, we capture public relations educators' perceptions about these dimensions as reflected in educational classes, programs and practices.

Though some scholars have argued that leadership education is a fundamental responsibility of universities and colleges (Connaughton, Lawrence, & Ruben, 2003), others are not so sure. Doh (2003) contended that while technical skills and cognitive abilities can be enhanced through learning experience, personal attitudes (self-motivation, empathy) are hardly teachable. Ongoing debates about leadership competencies among professionals and academicians are also part of the issue

(Northouse, 2007). A recent study (Wright & Turk, 2007) indicated a disconnect between public relations education and occupational practice. Obviously, ongoing dialogue is needed between educators and practitioners. Exchange of ideas and opinions will result in developing a balanced curriculum that will help future graduates to meet expectations of employers, and, at the same time, to satisfy academia with an appropriate level of theoretical knowledge. Leadership seems an important component of educational development, too.

Thus, based on this literature review, and given the scarcity of information about leadership and public relations curricula, this study seeks to create a baseline of information about leadership and PR education. The following four research questions have been developed to capture this information:

RQ 1: To what extent is leadership education incorporated in PR curricula at universities?

RQ 2: What do teachers believe are the most important leadership values or skills that PR graduates should possess?

RQ 3: What pedagogies do PR educators believe to be most effective in teaching leadership values and skills?

RQ 4: What are public relations teachers' perceptions about whether leadership can be taught?

Method

Participants. Participants in this study were full-time university or college teachers--instructors, assistant professors, associate professors, and professors. The membership lists of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass

Communication, International Communication Association, National Communication Association and Educator's Academy of the Public Relations Society of America were combined and used in this and a previous study (Erzikova, 2010). The number of potential participants (450) was not large, so a census of the population was taken.

Instrument. To assess public relations teachers' attitudes toward teaching leadership in the public relations curricula and examine teaching approaches, a three-part quantitative questionnaire was developed based on public relations and business scholarship. The questionnaire was pre-tested for question clarity and question applicability with 60 educators and PR practitioners. Their feedback led to some additional small changes in the questionnaire.

Procedure. A total 450 personal electronic invitations were distributed to the population of PR educators. The email contained a link to a web site with the questionnaire. The web site was constructed via SurveyMonkey after obtaining IRB approval for conducting the study.

After the survey data were collected in the fall 2008, 10 leading PR educators from U.S. and British universities were invited to comment on the results during two group interviews. The goal of the interviews was to discuss and validate the study's results and establish directions for future research through educators' assessments of the current stage of leadership education. The focus groups were conducted during the International PR Research Conference in Miami in March 2009. Each focus group lasted one hour. Participants signed informed consent documents and were rewarded with a small gift card for their time and efforts.

Results

Descriptive data. Out of 450 email invitations, 37 emails were not delivered. A total of 171 educators participated in the survey, and 159 provided valid responses, for a response rate of 38%.

The majority of participants held a doctorate (68%) or master's (20%) degree, and 83% of respondents obtained their degrees in the U.S. Others earned their degrees in Argentina, Australia, Canada, Lebanon, New Zealand, and UK. The majority of participants (60%) obtained their highest degree in mass communication (30%) and communication studies (30%); 13% of respondents held their highest degree in public relations. As for academic ranks, 30% of the participants were assistant professors, 24% were associate professors, 22% were professors, and 13% were instructors.

The majority of participants (77%) taught in state universities, and 64 % of respondents had completed a course in leadership or leadership training at some point in their career.

Participants indicated that they taught at the college or university level from 1 to 41 years ($M=11.79$; $SD=9.04$), and 84% of respondents said that they worked or had worked or consulted as PR practitioners ($M=9.16$; $SD=8.99$). Many respondents combined teaching and practicing public relations.

More females (58%) than males (42%) participated in the survey, and the average age of educators was 47 ($SD=12.19$). The majority of respondents were born (82%) and taught (93%) in the U.S at the time of the survey. PR educators of a foreign origin who currently teach in the U.S. represented 15 other countries. The majority of respondents were Caucasian (86%), and 14% were African Americans, Spanish/Hispanics/Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans.

Respondents (n=148) were asked to indicate all of the professional and academic organizations in which they were members (Table 1). The three largest organizations were the Public Relations Society of America (91 participants), National Communication Association (73 respondents), and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (68 participants).

Table 1

Membership in Professional and Academic Organizations (n=148)

Organization	Number of respondents
1. Public Relations Society of America	91
2. National Communication Association	73
3. Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication	68
4. International Communication Association	50
5. Institute for Public Relations	11
6. International Association of Business Communicators	10
7. International Public Relation Association	8
8. European Public Relations Education and Research Association	3
9. Arthur W. Page Society	1
Other	35

On average, each participant was a member of two professional or academic organizations.

Respondents also were asked whether they perceived themselves as leaders. Overall, 81% of participants thought of themselves as leaders, and 45% said they became leaders and learned about leadership primarily through observing positive role models (Table 2).

Table 2

PR Educators' (n=147) Self-perceptions of Whether and How They Became Leaders

Statement	Number of respondents
Do you think that you...	
a. ...became a leader by observing positive role models	71 (45%)
b. ...became a leader through self-education	23 (15%)

c. ...were born as a leader	14	(9%)
d. ...became a leader through formal education	6	(4%)
e. ...are not a leader	4	(3%)
f. ...don't want to be a leader	3	(2%)
g. I don't know	12	(8%)

Note. Fourteen participants provided more than one answer and were excluded from analysis.

Sample demographics were compared to members of the organizations from which email addresses were obtained. The study sample was consistent overall in terms of gender and academic rank.

The findings. The first research question sought to determine: To what extent is leadership education incorporated in the PR curricula at universities?

Twenty-two participants (14%) reported that a free-standing course in leadership in PR is taught in their departments to undergraduate students, whereas 23 respondents (15%) indicated that their departments had a course in PR leadership for graduate students.

A previous study that examined PR educators' perceptions of ethics education (Erzikova, 2010) showed that the higher rank participants held, the less they believed in value of ethics education to PR students. Therefore, to assess possible differences among the present study participants based on their academic rank, a set of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) with academic rank as the independent variables, and perceptions of whether the current PR curriculum has room for a separate PR leadership course as the dependent variable, was conducted (Table 3). The significance level established for all tests was .001.

Four groups of participants—lectures/instructors (n=21), assistant professors (n=48), associate professors (n=38), and professors (n=35)—were included in the analysis. The fifth group (“Other,” n=5) was excluded from the analysis.

The test indicated a statistically significant difference ($F(3,141) = 3.267, p < .001$) in participants' perceptions of the importance of a PR leadership course in the PR curriculum. Post hoc pairwise multiple comparisons (Bonferroni t test) showed a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$) between the group of assistant professors ($M=4.21; SD=2.03$) and the group of professors ($M=5.37; SD=1.35$). The higher rank participants held, the more likely they were to agree that the PR curriculum is not able to include a free-standing PR leadership course.

Table 3

Participants' (N=159) Evaluation of the Importance of Leadership Education

Statement	M	SD	F
Leadership components should be incorporated in courses throughout the PR curriculum.	6.08	1.02	.565
Teaching students leadership competencies is an essential part of PR education.	5.74	1.30	.035
Some components of PR leadership education are incorporated in courses throughout the curriculum in my department.	5.45	1.45	1.296
The PR curriculum does not have room for a separate PR leadership course.	4.41	1.99	3.267*

Note: On a scale from 1-7, with 1 indicating Strongly Disagree and 7 indicating Strongly Agree. $df=3$; *Significant at $p < .001$.

The second research question focused on values and skills: What do teachers believe are the most important leadership values or skills that PR graduates should possess?

Means of responses indicated that educators thought many leadership skills and values were important, but the most highly rated skills or values were: communication knowledge and skills, ethical values and orientation, and problem-solving abilities (Table

4). ANOVA did not indicate statistically significant differences among the four groups of participants (instructors/lectures, assistant professors, associate professors, and professors) regarding their perceptions of what leadership skills and values PR students should acquire.

Table 4

Participants' Evaluation of the Most Important Leadership and Skills of Future PR practitioners

	M	SD
PR graduates should possess the following leadership skills or values:		
1. Communication knowledge and skills.	6.83	.59
2. Ethical values and orientation.	6.77	.68
3. Problem-solving ability.	6.74	.64
4-5. Relationship-building abilities.	6.64	.72
4-5. Strategic decision-making capabilities.	6.64	.72
6. Ability to promote PR's role and value in the organization.	6.40	.89
7. Ability to handle organizational crisis.	6.37	.88
8. Ability to conduct research project and apply knowledge.	6.37	.89
9. Skills to build successful teams.		6.21
.82		
10. Ability to motivate and inspire team members.	6.09	.90
11. Ability to build a two-way symmetrical system of communication.	5.99	1.34
12. Ability to become members of the dominant coalition.	5.60	1.28
13. Being visionary.	5.92	1.01
14. Power to be a change agent.	5.83	1.06

Note. On a 7-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

The third research question explored teaching approaches: What pedagogies do PR educators believe to be most effective in teaching leadership values and skills?

Educators said that case studies, group discussions, and student-led projects were perceived as the most effective pedagogies in teaching leadership (Table 5).

Mentoring programs and shadowing exercises were rated lowest of all. ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences in instructors/lectures, assistant

professors, associate professors, and professors’ perceptions of the importance of the pedagogies.

Table 5
Usage and Effectiveness of Pedagogies in Teaching Leadership to PR Students

	Pedagogies	
	M	SD
1. Case studies	5.95	1.39
2. Group discussion	5.91	1.39
3. Student-led projects	5.83	1.82
4. Teacher lectures	5.67	1.19
5. Guest presentations	5.55	1.65
6. Service learning activities	5.48	2.21
7. Reading from trade and professional publications	5.26	1.70
8. Research papers	5.07	1.81
9. Socratic dialogue	4.64	2.44
10. Mentoring programs	4.30	2.97
11. Shadowing exercises with practitioners	4.29	2.89

Note. On a 7-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

The last research question sought to determine: What are public relations instructors’ perceptions about whether leadership can be taught?

PR teachers’ perceptions of whether leadership is a natural or nurtured ability were measured by an attitude scale developed for this survey (Table 6). Although respondents agreed that some students might be more prone to become leaders than other, they did not support the statement that “leadership cannot be learned.”

Table 6
PR Educators’ Perceptions of “Nature vs. Nurture” Phenomenon ($\alpha=.80$)

Statements	M	SD
1. Leaders are born, not made.	3.12	1.69
2. Leadership cannot be learned.	2.25	1.14
3. Some people are more prone to be leaders than other.	5.49	1.20
4. Leadership is an inborn talent.	3.72	1.43
5. Some people are genetically predisposed to be leaders.	3.72	1.69

Note. On a 7-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). The lower the score, the more participants believed in that leadership is “nurtured” rather than “natural” ability.

ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference ($F(3,138) = 3.267, p < .001$) in participants’ perceptions about whether leadership is an inborn talent. Post hoc pairwise multiple comparisons showed a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$) between the group of assistant professors ($n=21; M=3.95; SD=1.47$) and the group of associate professors ($n=38; M=4.18; SD=1.27$). A statistically significant difference also emerged between the group of associate professors and full professors ($n=35; M=3.43; SD=1.52$). Associate professors appeared to believe that leadership talent is inherited more than assistant professors. The professor group most strongly disagreed with the statement that leadership is an inborn talent.

Multiple regression analysis was performed to investigate the extent to which perceptions of whether leadership is a “natural” or “nurtured” trait might be predicted by such variables as gender, academic rank, country of birth, country in which a respondent currently teaches, type of university, level of education, country in which highest degree was obtained, the field in which the highest degree was obtained, years of teaching experience, years of PR practice, age, and ethnicity (Table 7).

Table 7

Multiple Regression Analysis Results for “Nature vs. Nurture” as the Dependent Variable

Variable	Coefficient	Beta	<i>t</i>
Gender (1=male)	-1.235	-.148	-1.323
Rank (1=instructor)	.851	.216	.141
Country of birth (1=the U.S.)	-.154	-.042	-.319
Country in which a respondent teaches (1=the U.S.)	.579	.121	.830
Type of university (1=state)	-.235	-.069	-.659
Level of education	-1.033	-.121	-1.170

(1=Bachelor)				
Country in which highest degree was obtained (1=the U.S.)	-1.754	-.090	-.625	
Highest degree in (PR=1)	.722	.049	.453	
Leadership training (1=yes)	-.002	.000	-.002	
Years as a teacher	-.174	-.361	-2.185*	
Years of PR practice	-.014		-.027	-.199
Age	.076	.222	1.195	
Ethnicity (1=White)	-.499	-.090	-.625	
Intercept	17.904			3.657

Note. *Significant at $p < .001$; R^2 is .113.

A regression equation was statistically significant ($F(13,91)=1.076, p < .001$) with R^2 of .113. One out of 13 variables appeared to be a significant predictor (Table 7). The test showed that the fewer years of teaching experience participants had, the more they believed that leaders are born, not made.

Educators also indicated they believe some leadership skills and knowledge can be taught at the university (Table 8). However, they felt less strongly that education could develop leadership traits or shape attitudes.

Table 8

PR Educators' Perceptions of Whether Leadership Skills, Knowledge, Traits, and Attitude Can Be Taught at the University Level

Statements	M	SD
The following leadership attributes can be taught at the university level		
Skills	6.22	.78
Knowledge	6.35	.65
Traits	4.86	1.43
Attitude	5.19	1.38

Note. On a 7-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

ANOVA did not reveal statistically significant differences among the four groups of educators. A regression equation was statistically significant ($F(13,91)=.918, p < .05$)

with R^2 of .116. However, none out of 13 variables appeared to be a significant predictor (Table 9).

Table 9

Multiple Regression Analysis Results for “Leadership Attributes” (Skills, Knowledge, Traits, Attitude) as the Dependent Variable

Variable	Coefficient	Beta	<i>t</i>
Gender (1=male)	.636	.127	1.156
Rank (1=instructor)	.081	.034	.234
Country of birth (1=the U.S.)	-.039	-.018	-.133
Country in which a respondent teaches (1=the US)	-.399	-.139	-.946
Type of university (1=state)	-.182	-.089	-.847
Level of education (1=Bachelor)	1.047	.205	1.961
Country in which highest degree was obtained (1=the U.S.)	.155	.013	.091
Highest degree in (PR=1)	-.929	-.104	-.963
Leadership training (1=yes)	-.374	-.074	-.668
Years as a teacher	-.013	-.044	-.261
Years of PR practice	.036	.120	.871
Age	.022	.104	.558
Ethnicity (1=White)	.171	.068	.641
Intercept	15.881		5.365

Note. R^2 is .116.

To investigate PR teachers’ perceptions of the importance of leadership education to PR students, an attitude scale was developed for the study (Table 10). Two statements, “PR teachers are able to help students become leaders” and “Leadership characteristics are enhanced through PR education,” received the strongest support of survey participants ($M=5.68$; $SD=1.05$ and $M=5.67$; $SD=1.06$). The educators also disagreed strongly with the proposition that “only potential leaders benefit from leadership education” ($M=2.63$; $SD=1.47$).

Table 10

PR Educators’ Perceptions of the Importance of Leadership Education to PR Students

($\alpha=.71$)

Statements	M	SD
1. Leadership characteristics are enhanced through PR education.	5.67	1.06
2. PR education is crucial for leadership development.	5.09	1.45
3. PR teachers are able to help students become leaders.	5.68	1.05
4. Only those students who are potential leaders benefit from leadership education.	2.63	1.47
5. PR education is limited in its ability to prepare leaders.	3.56	1.67

Note. On a 7-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

ANOVA did not show statistically significant differences among instructors/lectures, assistant professors, associate professors, and professors on the attitude scale that measured PR educators’ perceptions of the value of leadership education to PR students.

A regression equation was statistically significant ($F(13,91)=1.742, p<.05$) with R^2 of .199. Three out of 13 variables appeared to be significant predictors (Table 11): country of birth, having a leadership course/training, and the length of teaching experience. First, the test showed that U.S. born educators believed in the importance of leadership education more than teachers who were born abroad. Second, educators who had participated in a leadership course/training program were more positive toward leadership education, compared to those without such training. Third, the more years of teaching experience participants had, the more they believed in the importance of leadership education.

Table 11

Multiple Regression Analysis Results for “Contribution of PR Education into Leadership Development” as the Dependent Variable

Variable	Coefficient	Beta	<i>t</i>
Gender (1=male)	.531	.078	.738
Rank (1=instructor)	-.845	-.264	-1.915
Country of birth (1=the U.S.)	-.818	-.275	-2.181*
Country in which a respondent teaches (1=the US)	.171	.044	.316
Type of university (1=state)	.105	.038	.377
Level of education (1=Bachelor)	.713	.103	1.039
Country in which highest degree was obtained (1=the U.S.)	-.479	-.030	-.219
Highest degree in (PR=1)	-.087	-.007	-.070
Leadership training (1=yes)	-.689	-.216	-2.194*
Years as a teacher	.154	.396	2.506*
Years of PR practice	.041	.102	.825
Age	-.054	-.192	-1.073
Ethnicity (1=White)	.592	.175	1.729
Intercept	15.881		5.365

Note. *Significant at $p < .001$; R^2 is .199.

Focus Group Findings

This study also investigated PR teachers' perceptions of the present state of teaching leadership in PR departments through interviews. Following completion of the online survey, 10 PR educators (five women and five men) met in two mixed-gender focus groups to discuss the results. They represented eight U.S. colleges and universities and one British university. Participants' years of teaching experience ranged from five to 20; nine people had a doctorate and one person had a Master's degree. Their comments and analysis provided more insights into how teachers evaluate leadership education and opportunities.

First, participants of focus groups expressed surprise at the number of programs that offer a course in PR leadership (22 survey participants reported having a leadership course for undergraduates, and 23 respondents said their departments offer a course

for graduate students). Focus group participants thought that the number would be much lower. Some participants suggested this may have been a result of survey respondents equating PR management with PR leadership courses. Since the survey did not ask for university affiliation, it's also possible that multiple respondents came from the same school.

Focus group participants emphasized that “leadership is implicit in the PR curriculum,” i.e., such courses as PR management and PR campaigns are designed to help students develop leadership skills. One participant said that his department “prepares them [students] for entry level technician functions, but really prepares them for five years down the road as leaders.” In another participant’s words, “Leadership is a mindset,” which does not depend on “which level you are in your organization.”

Survey respondents also had noted that the “constraints of accreditation and certification” prevented the PR curriculum from including all courses that educators deem important, including a PR leadership course. Focus group participants added another constraint: Though public relations might be the most popular major in communication departments, the number of PR teachers is so small that they “barely cover mandatory courses,” and teaching elective courses remains “wishful thinking.”

Statistical analysis revealed that assistant professors were significantly more enthusiastic about a free-standing PR leadership course than full professors. This might suggest that years in academia shape more realistic perceptions of the educational process. However, it does not mean that seasoned teachers value leadership education less than junior faculty. Focus group participants, for example, suggested that the lack of room for a separate leadership course might be overcome by introducing extra-curricular activities. One seasoned educator said that a student-run agency could

provide opportunities for developing leadership skills. Overall, participants agreed that leadership education is the process that distinguishes success from failure in the preparation of PR professionals.

Survey participants also had rated communication knowledge and skills, ethical values and orientation, and problem-solving abilities as the most important competencies for PR students to grasp. Participants of focus groups were surprised neither by these evaluations, nor by the relatively low evaluations for the “ability to build a two-way symmetrical system of communication” and the “ability to become members of the dominant coalition.” Focus group members suggested that some survey respondents might have been “outsiders,” or adjunct faculty who were not familiar with these concepts. In addition, a two-way symmetrical model might have appeared “too idealistic” to some educators, and the ability to become a member of the dominant coalition might have sounded “too futuristic” for some survey participants. The term “dominant coalition” appears to be a contested concept.

Survey respondents indicated that such pedagogies as case studies, group discussion, and student-led projects were the most effective for them. Focus group participants agreed that these traditional methods of teaching are the most used in academia. However, they were surprised that pedagogies which appear well-suited to teaching leadership abilities--mentoring programs and shadowing exercises with professionals--were on the bottom of the list and had the largest standard deviation (2.97 and 2.89 accordingly), suggesting a substantial disagreement within the academic community.

Focus group participants provided two possible explanations. First, mentoring programs and shadowing exercise pedagogies might have been valued less because

they are typically executed “out of classroom,” and educators have less or no control over the quality of these experiences. Second, focus group participants believed that survey respondents might have “dramatically different experiences” with mentors and practitioners. As one participant said, “It could be very good or very bad—depending on mentors or whom students shadowed.” Another participant noted that so far, her students had not learned much from internships because hosts practitioners were heavily focused just on media relations. Thus, according to focus group participants, knowledge and skills that PR students obtain in school might not be reinforced in practice. Focus group participants also thought that service learning activities represented rich learning possibilities and “an opportunity to connect dots between theory and practice.”

On the topic of “natural” versus “nurtured” leadership, one focus group participant said, “Some students are predisposed to be leaders, but everyone can learn to be a leader.” Another participant added that leadership is learned not only in classroom, but informally and socially as well. Overall, focus group participants agreed that while teaching leadership knowledge and skills are achievable tasks, developing leadership traits and shaping attitudes is more difficult: “You can inspire them to become leaders, but you cannot make them leaders.” Here again, educators noted that professional skills and knowledge that PR students are taught at school “are generalizable to leadership.”

Commenting on the fact that 81% of survey participants considered themselves leaders, focus group participants thought that PR teachers “have to have a pretty healthy ego” since students perceive them as counselors and mentors. Overall, focus group participants believed that PR educators do “good job” of educating future leaders.

Discussion and Conclusion

One important result of this study is that both survey and focus group participants appeared to be advocates for leadership education, showing enthusiasm for developing future PR leaders. Besides the belief that the PR curriculum is well-suited for educating leaders, all participants of focus groups agreed that PR instructors, leaders themselves, are confident and inspiring educators who perceive leadership education as a way to contribute to a successful future for PR graduates. In addition, those PR educators who had completed a leadership course or training at some point in their careers, or were teaching in the US, showed a stronger belief in the importance of leadership education. In this regard, comparative research is needed to examine what factors contribute to teachers' perceptions of the importance of leadership education.

Although more experienced teachers held stronger beliefs in the importance of leadership education, they were doubtful that a separate course in PR leadership could be added to their curricula. As focus group participants noted, an ideal PR curriculum takes more than four years to complete, and this is why PR educators have to work around constraints to provide PR students with an opportunity to build leadership competencies. This finding suggests another direction for future research: How do PR educators incorporate specific leadership components in classes they teach, and how do they provide opportunities for students to gain leadership experiences outside of the classroom?

Survey results suggested that regardless of academic rank, PR educators agreed on the most important leadership skills and values that PR graduates should possess (communication knowledge and skills, ethical values and orientation, and problem-solving ability). This finding aligns closely with practitioners' perceptions in Meng's (2009, Berger & Meng, 2010) leadership research; surveyed practitioners

affirmed that communication knowledge and skills, ethical orientation, and problem-solving are three of the six crucial dimensions of excellent leadership in public relations. Educators also agreed the most effective pedagogies in teaching leadership (case studies, group discussion, and student-led projects). However, a large standard deviation on statements about a two-way symmetrical communication model and whether PR practitioners should strive to become members of the dominant coalition indicated a possible disagreement within the academic community. This result is consistent with contemporary literature (L'Etang, 2008).

A gap between PR education and practice that was discussed by Wright and Turk (2007) was evident in both survey and focus groups data. Particularly, an indication of PR educators' possible dissatisfaction with mentoring and shadowing exercises emerged in survey data and was verified by focus group participants who felt that student internships were not able to fully reinforce knowledge and skills that PR students obtain during semesters. According to focus group participants, while PR teachers familiarize students with the whole range of PR activities, they might be involved in a limited number of actions (e.g., "pitching to media") during internships. It was suggested that this may be due to PR practitioners themselves performing a limited number of professional activities.

Future research might examine the correspondence between PR competencies received at school and PR competencies employed on the first job. Focus group participants rightly pointed out that leadership education does not start and end in classroom. It is a collaborative endeavor that requires excellent teaching, innovative thinking, and support from PR practitioners. A break through happens when theoretical knowledge is reinforced with "learning by doing," according to study participants. In

other words, students' involvement in real projects is highly desirable. As one focus group participant noted, responsibility makes students leaders.

In this regard, students and teachers may require greater access to leading professionals and role models in the field. Many well-known professionals now visit universities to speak and interact with students, and others are available and willing to meet with students.

At the same time, an increasing number of leadership resources are now available to educators and students. The Institute for Public Relations, for example, has created an online Essential Knowledge Project (http://www.instituteforpr.org/essential_knowledge/). This is a collection of lengthy essays by leading scholars about important topics and issues in the field, e.g., ethics in practice, trust and credibility, and diversity in PR.

The Arthur W. Page Center (<http://pagecenter.comm.psu.edu/index.php>) provides an extensive online library of oral histories of some of the legends in the field. The Plank Center (<http://plankcenter.ua.edu/>) also provides a number online leadership resources, including video interviews with leaders in the field; the book *Legacies from Legends in Public Relations*, which features brief personal essays to students from 34 leaders; and *Platform* online magazine, which is created and produced by PR students at the University of Alabama for other PR students and educators across the country. These resources may be used in the classroom as the basis for reflection papers, group discussions, and many other approaches to examining leaders and leadership in public relations.

It's also important to note several weaknesses in this study. Since participants were members of PR academic and professional organizations, the researchers are not

able to claim that the views and opinions examined in the present study are shared by the overall teaching community. Educators also see and define leadership in somewhat different ways, which may have affected responses. To try to mitigate such influences, the study used qualitative findings to help validate the survey results. Ten recognized PR educators commented on survey results, provided insightful information, shared personal experiences, and, thus, enriched the study.

Overall, this study provides important baseline information about educators' perspectives on teaching leadership in the classroom. As research participants suggested, the reality is that PR education is essentially about teaching leadership skills and values—implicitly and explicitly. The opportunities for teaching PR leadership are embedded in the PR curriculum, and the benefits of increased or enhanced leadership education lies in strengthening the profession and society.

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