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“It Depends on the Degree:” Exploring Employers’ Perceptions of Public Relations Master’s Degrees

Elizabeth L. Toth, Ph.D., APR, Fellow PRSA
Professor and Chair
Department of Communication
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742
eltoth@umd.edu

Rowena L. Briones, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
School of Mass Communications
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA 23220
rlbriones@vcu.edu

Abstract

This qualitative study of public relations employers sought information and clarification about the perceptions those who employ public relations graduates have about university-based master’s degree programs in public relations. Conducted as part of the efforts of the most recent Commission on Public Relations Education, this study reports on the disconnect between what universities provide and what those who hire public relations practitioners want. The timing of this research is appropriate since it comes when an increasing number of master’s degree programs in public relations are being introduced throughout the nation coupled with the void in previous research systematically examining public relations practitioner’s perceptions of the value of a graduate degree in public relations. Major findings include a call for more dialogue and collaboration between practitioners and academics in curriculum planning for public relations master’s degree programs, the need for a greater emphasis on business acumen and experimental learning opportunities (e.g., practicums and internships) and a more pronounced emphasis on practical applications especially in those programs currently dominated by an abundance of theory.

Introduction

Public relations practitioners’ skeptical opinions of graduate public relations education have been a continuing topic in public relations trade publications and blogs (Drake, 2006; Prosek, 2001; Krenn, 2011). Authors on public relations graduate education, in fact, suggest a

disconnect between what universities are providing and what those who hire public relations practitioners want (Wright and Turk (2007).

Yet, the increasing number of professional public relations master's programs advertised suggests that public relations master's degrees are economically valuable to obtain. To systematically examine whether advanced public relations graduate education enhances employment opportunities, this research sought to learn how valuable senior level public relations industry employers perceived public relations graduate education to be. Using a grounded theory approach, we sought to start developing theory about why public relations industry employers might hold the perceptions that they do.

Literature Review

Ideal Professional Master's Studies

Little research has provided systematic examinations of public relations practitioners' perceptions of the value of graduate public relations education. Shen and Toth (2008) explored with 18 public relations practitioners and educators what their perceptions were of graduate public relations education; but the study results did not separately report the educator and practitioner opinions. These 18 participants, nominated by the 2006 Commission on Public Relations Education as industry leaders, envisioned public relations graduate education to be a professional area of study with "an interdisciplinary focus (communication, management, behavioral science, etc.)" (p. 310).

Other scholarly research has examined differences between education and practice on identifying the ideal or standard graduate public relations curriculum (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2000; Hon et al., 2004; Soloski, 1994). Soloski (1994) stated that in general, a professional master's program should also have "a strong academic presence" and avoid being too narrowly focused on technical skills only (Soloski, 1994). Turning specifically to public relations, Hon et al. (2004) echoed Soloski's suggestions and concluded that a dual-focus (i.e., technical and academic)

graduate curriculum can meet students' needs and goals. These studies argue that theory and practice should make up a graduate curriculum.

More typically, the literature on public relations practitioners' perceptions of public relations education has taken the form of commentary. For example, the 2012 Commission on Public Relations Education's practitioner and educator members commented that "professional public relations graduate education should provide students and their employers with a competitive edge in a competitive environment" (Standards for a Master's Degree in Public Relations, 2012, p. 5).

Knowledge in/for the Practice of Public Relations

Scholars have depicted how educators and practitioners value knowledge, in general, for the practice of public relations. Educators (Broom, 2009; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) argued that the field must have an established body of knowledge in public relations to be considered a profession, defined by van Ruler as "developing an occupation to a certain desired level of quality" (2005, p. 160). Also, Grunig stated that practitioners and educators "contribute something different to the body of knowledge -- practitioners develop ideas to use in the profession and academics develop ideas for the profession" (2008, p. 90). He commented that practitioners think that academics are like themselves but have chosen to teach rather than practice. Therefore, academics should learn from practitioners and use this in their teaching (p. 89). On the other hand, academics see their role as critics and analysts of public relations and believe that practitioners should learn from academic research how to improve their practice (p. 90).

Van Ruler (2005) challenged scholars and practitioners to consider their different values about knowledge and to find a way to integrate them. She thought that scholars value a knowledge model that emphasizes the role of theory and a role for education to "generate pre-defined expertise" (2005, p. 164). Practitioners, according to Van Ruler (2005), however, value three other perspectives in advancing professionalism: the status model, the competition model,

and the personality model. The status model wants education, not to “produce rational decisions to solve public relations problems, but to generate status and autonomy -- in order to be more desirable and well paid “(p. 162). The competition model places value on the client relationship. In this model, professionalism depends on education that will generate several knowledge options, whereas education’s role is to provide new knowledge; however the life cycle of knowledge is short. She gives the example of the professional association that provides a knowledge infrastructure and a network of knowledgeable workers (p. 163). Van Ruler’s final model, the personality model, focuses more on the individual’s emotional intelligence. For the practitioner, “it is not what you know but analytical and creative capacities to find solutions for clients”(p. 164).

In sum, literature on practitioner perceptions of graduate public relations education is limited to information regarding ideal curricula but without a systematic focus on whether the industry values a public relations master’s degree in hiring decisions. Broader commentary on practitioner expectations of the body of knowledge suggest that they value education that they can use in their practice to generate status and autonomy and/or to solve their client’s problems. Van Ruler (2005) adds that in the one model what practitioners value is not education but personality or analytical and creative power. Grunig (2008) distinguishes practitioners and educators by knowledge to use in the profession versus knowledge to improve the profession. This study sought to add to the theoretical understanding of whether and how public relations practitioners valued graduate public relations education by exploring one subset of practitioners, the employers who hire public relations managers.

Research Questions

Based on the focus of this study and review of the literature, we have developed the following research questions that guide the findings of this study:

RQ1: What are the important qualifications desired when hiring public relations practitioners?

RQ2: How much of a factor in hiring is a master's degree in public relations?

RQ3: How can a master's degree in public relations be made more available?

Method

A qualitative method via telephone interviews was chosen because this method obtained a greater in-depth information of perceptions, the reasoning behind these perceptions, and suggestions for making public relations education more valuable than was possible with a quantitative survey. In this approach the participant does the majority of the talking, guiding the interview by way of what he/she believes to be important (Berg, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Additionally, one advantage of conducting phone interviews is the ability to give participants a greater sense of anonymity, and can be seen as “ultimately just as good at getting full responses as an in-person interview” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010, p. 190). The study was given approval by the researchers' university Institutional Review Board.

Five Ph.D. students who study public relations at the graduate level were trained to interview the participants. All of these students had previous experience in conducting qualitative interviews. A two-hour training session was held with the interviewers that included how to schedule and log contacts with the participants. They pilot-tested the protocol for understanding the study's purpose and for clarification of the questions' meanings. Part of a larger study, the interview protocol was comprised of eight questions and had two main parts: the first asked for more clarifications regarding a survey of public relations professionals, and the second asked for perceptions of the value of public relations graduate education, which is the focus of this study. After reviewing the interview protocol, the interviewers were then instructed to provide an initial summary of the interviews that they had conducted. The interviewers were compensated for their time.

Email invitations were sent to industry employers who were nominated by 2012 Commission on Public Relations practitioner members as opinion leaders in the public relations field, with a goal of interviewing 20 employers. A total of 21 participants ultimately made up the

sample in this study. When invitees responded to a request, they were connected with one of the student interviewers, and arrangements were made to schedule an interview at the participant's convenience.

Data Analysis

All of the interviews were transcribed by a paid transcription service. Data were then analyzed using techniques from the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), using a constant comparative method to allow for additional themes to emerge from the study exploration. HyperRESEARCH qualitative analysis software was used to assist with the data analysis. First, the research team independently coded the data line-by-line to locate emerging themes and potential categories used procedures. Open coding via this method is useful because it forced the researchers to break data apart and think about data in new ways that may differ from the participants' interpretations. After discussing these initial codes, the researchers then engaged in collaborative axial coding to find how data can fit into the categorical themes that were identified in the first step, relating various concepts to each other. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2010), axial coding is a part of the integration process of the grounded theory approach that narrows down the number of categories by finding similarities across data in order to make the data clearer and more understandable. The researchers then met to identify concepts, discuss, and agree upon themes and conclusions emerging from these data. To increase reliability, selective codes were agreed upon to make up the final themes that emerged through the data analysis process.

Results

Demographics of the Participants

The study participants included 21 public relations employers, 10 of which were CEO's or managing partners and 11 were directors, vice presidents or chief communication officers. Ten of the participants lead corporate communications functions. Nine of the participants lead public relations firms. Two participants lead communication functions in non-profit organizations.

All but one of the participants make or have made hiring decisions for their organizations.

Fifteen of the participants were male, and six of the participants were female.

The participants' undergraduate majors varied: journalism (6); social sciences (4); communication (4); humanities (3); business (2); agriculture (1); and education (1). Seven of the participants had master's or law degrees, and one had two advanced degrees in the following areas: business (4); social sciences (3); journalism (1); and law (2).

These industry employers have had personal experiences with university education. Fourteen of them had been guest speakers or lecturers at universities. Seven of the employers had taught a graduate course, and seven had served on a university advisory board. Two had made financial contributions to universities, and one led a corporate fellowship program with a university.

RQ1: What are the Important Qualifications Desired when Hiring Public Relations Practitioners?

The participants were asked what qualifications they desired in a public relations professional within their organizations. These qualifications included having business acumen, communication skills, critical thinking skills, social media knowledge, and writing skills.

Having Business Acumen

Participants believed that public relations practitioners needed some sort of business acumen in order to thrive in the industry environment. As one participant stated, "if you're going to do it in a corporate setting, having some business acumen is critical...if they don't understand business, they're not going to get very far." One participant thought it was important for public relations practitioners to "really understand how business functions because too many PR people get perplexed that public relations isn't given more, isn't taken more seriously by the most senior executives at a Fortune 500 company, but that's because they don't really understand what the life of a Fortune 500 CEO or CFO or CIO is like." Another participant agreed, stating that public relations practitioners need the "ability to understand and

interact...understand the business and interact productively with business leaders...those would probably be at the top of the list.” Gaining this business acumen in terms of organizational training was believed to be valuable, according to another participant: “I would lean towards someone who has an understanding of organizational training in terms of how organizations work and some knowledge of financials...some financial background so that they understand the difference between profit and loss and revenues and income, etc.”

Communication Skills

Participants especially emphasized the importance of strong communication skills, including both writing and verbal. One participant stated, “all of those basic skills laid on the brick and mortar of the field, which is communicating effectively in writing and verbally.” Another said, “the core skills of communication, the ability to write and express oneself clearly are already fairly variable across the industry in the corporate and the agencies.” Another participant agreed, claiming, “how do you receive information, how can you basically influence people’s decision making based on the information they received, and so fundamentally, I’m looking for people who understand that skill, who have that skill.” Finally one participant mentioned, “what we look for are people who can articulate their experience so they can talk about what they’ve done and why they’ve done it and what they liked about it.”

Critical Thinking Skills

Participants felt that candidates with critical thinking skills, those who are able to think strategically for their organizations, are more likely to be hired. As one participant put it, the candidate needs “a ability to see around corners, ability to deal with ambiguity and strong problem-solving skills and analytic and critical thinking ability.” Another participant saw a trend in his teamwork when good strategic thinking was being brought to the table:

One of the things that struck me, and this is probably more of an answer than you bargained for, but one of the things that struck me in those roles was that my peers within those organizations, when it came time to evaluate my team, one of the things

that always came up was whether or not my team member was a good strategic thinker or not. Invariably it didn't matter if it was in politics or in government or in corporate and now in academia, this idea of others [the team members] valued strategic thinking capabilities very, very highly.

One participant saw critical thinking as being able to break down and deduce information so that it is more readily digestible:

Yes, I think at their heart they have to be individuals who can assimilate complex subject matter usually outside their area of training...be able to assimilate it and understand it and then present it in such a way that a broad audience can understand it as well, and I think that's where journalistic training comes into play. And, again, law study, there's a need to be able to take in a quantity of information, dissect it, order it, insure its veracity or validity and then put it together in a way that's easier for people to understand, so translate it then for different audiences or larger audiences...I think having that skill set is really, really important.

Social Media Knowledge

Participants emphasized the importance of social media knowledge and skills as a public relations practitioner. As one employer put it, "social media, not only a total command, but being fully immersed and engaged in social media, someone who has his or her own blog, Twitter feed, etc., is conversant with all of those things so that they can walk the talk." The participant went on to include that an "understanding of the emerging technologies and blogosphere, knowledge of what's going on day-to-day from a news standpoint" is important.

Another participant discussed how social media skills was needed in her office, as she could not consider herself an expert:

Well, I just think that at this point in my career there were no such things as social networks when I was studying. There were no such things as social networks eight years ago. There were no such things as computers when I was in college, personal

computers, so I don't ever underestimate what I don't know, and I know how much of an impact those have had on my career over the last five years and I also am wise enough to know what I don't know and I know that I'm never going to catch up. I'm hopelessly behind, I'm partly kidding, but I'm serious, I'm not a native, I didn't grow up in it, so I expect somebody that I hire to be a native, to be a digital native, to understand how the world works in a digital setting, how it changes the news cycle, how it changes everything you do, how it changes how you communicate with employees, with potential customers, with audiences, the whole gamut. So, I expect that to be like a basic skill that people would bring in and social networking right now and maybe it will change over time, it obviously will change, but its a tremendous tool for marketing and I would want this person to know how to use that.

Agreeing with this participant's sentiments, another employer discussed how the younger generation is needed to pass along this social media knowledge:

Yeah, I think partially because everybody knows they need to be in it somehow. There's always a worry that you jump in too quickly and not smartly. Not everybody is Nike, so not everybody's up there every day on the Web. On the other hand, you have to have a sufficient amount of engagement. And if you have a workforce that is not all 20-somethings, which most of us don't have, you have a skill gap here that either you'll have some who are early adopters naturally attracted to using new technology quickly, but for a lot of people, you're going to have to train them to think differently. So, for example, the guy who heads up the media relations for my parent company, he's 35 or 40, and he's not inclined with technology as easily as others. So I have to help him understand how to restructure his time so that all the things he naturally does every day, and he does them very well, of engaging and tracking the media and all that, he now has to add other steps like "is that something we should Tweet about?" He's got to have a Tweetdeck up. That's a whole new world that isn't part of what they learned in school or

that they necessarily do personally. So I have a program that I call reverse mentoring in some staff, which is my 20-somethings teach my 40-somethings how to live like this. Another participant agreed with the importance of social media knowledge, but argued that it needs to be coupled with a broader understanding of how business works:

If somebody has the ability to understand what drives social media and what's happening online but is still rooted in the complex of understanding the bigger picture...which is why I keep going back to a macro element of business and of the world...because I think if you get that and, obviously, and you can learn, you have the right disposition to understand what's going on online, then those two things are incredibly powerful.

Writing Skills

For many of the participants, writing skills were vital to the success of a public relations practitioner, put simply by one participant: "I don't think you can be any good in this field long-term without being a strong writer." Another participant claimed that, "they [the practitioners] need to have an ability to write and express themselves clearly, so how concise and strong was their writing and talking and oral presentation and so on. So that's the base level. That's the first line." Another participant lamented over the poor writing skills of new hires: "Writing is something that comes with a whole lot of practice and I think a lot of practitioners today, especially at senior levels, are dismayed with how poor they see new hires writing capabilities. I'm not sure why that is, but it's probably a product of an overall decline in those kind of fundamental skills coming in our K-12 system." Many of the employers assessed writing skills through a series of tests, as mentioned by one participant: "Everybody has to take a writing test, so we want to make sure that they can write...in a strong way."

RQ2: How Much of a Factor in Hiring is a Master's Degree in Public Relations?

Employers discussed how much a master's degree factors into the hiring of public relations practitioners. Several themes that emerged through the interviews include the content

of the degree, experiential learning, investment in career, program reputation, and specialty area.

Content of the Degree

For many participants, the actual content of the degree made a difference in terms of whether or not it would be considered valuable when making hiring decisions. According to one participant, “well, again, it all depends what’s actually covered in the degree program that would be the fundamental issue. I think the degree program has to prove to people like myself that in essence it’s doing that which we otherwise do ourselves for our employees.” Another participant felt it was up to the candidate to make a case for why the degree is useful: “I suppose if the person could articulate why that’s a useful degree or what or how it made them better qualified, that would be a useful thing for them to do.” With similar sentiments, another participant wondered about what makes the degree valuable in the first place:

I mean why would you undertake a master’s for an entry position or a peripheral functional position. I mean, you have to be some advantage to your investment in the master’s. You have to be superior to an entry-level student. So the question then becomes what is in that degree program that would give you that accelerated work experience...on the world that would label you more effective in the workplace.

Finally, a participant discussed the abstract nature of PR master’s degrees and the need for uniformity and comparable programs:

Well, again, I think it depends on what the master’s degree purports to include inside the degree. It’s not just the title of the degree, but what are the elements that are actually being covered within the degree. So, in the abstract, any degree is a good degree to go in for a job, but it’s an abstract to me, that’s the abstract, I’d have to know more about what the actual degree program is including. Right now most public relations programs that I’ve seen around the country are very different from each other, there doesn’t seem to be a core curriculum that’s yet been accepted. That’s one of the weaknesses of

people walking in to places like my own with one of those degrees. The question is what did you really learn and what was really taught. We hire lawyers; we sort of know what the base is. When we hire scientists, we understand what the base is, with respect to PhDs who work in healthcare. With respect to a public relations degree, I don't think we yet have an understanding of what the base is.

Experiential Learning

An overwhelming majority of participants emphasized the importance of experiential learning in PR master's programs, as one participant said, "I think the opportunity to try more practical experience so they're not just approaching the conclusion of their master's with a deeper academic knowledge, but they also have a range of experience, practical experience, that would enable them to demonstrate that kind of acceleration [that a] one-year master's or however long it may be is equivalent to three years in a workplace. I mean something like that would be incredibly helpful." Another participant agreed with this sentiment, stating, "If I were, again, thinking about getting my master's degree, I would make sure that they have really tangible, clear experience."

Employers also talked about experiential learning's impact on the hiring process, as stated by one participant, "it is a factor only when it's tied to experience. Again, if you have a master's with limited experience versus an undergrad with extensive experience, it's going to weigh more on the experience side than the master's side." According to another participant:

Well, I'm not so sure the master's means that much more to me, but the combination of a bachelor's, master's, and experience means more to me. You know what I mean? I don't think the experience necessarily makes the master's more valuable, but to have all three I think is good, especially if the experience has been in a business environment or a corporate environment.

Another participant stated, "if there was any work study type of internships that were particularly attractive, its definitely part of the complete picture were looking for so, yes, it would definitely

factor into the thinking [of hiring].” Another participant talked about how experience factors into hiring decisions made:

Presumably looking at it as I normally would, as someone who would hire a graduate, I would expect that someone with a graduate degree in communication and public relations would have already worked in the field in some capacity either through an internship or potentially they have already worked in the field in some way or a related field.

Additionally, one participant called for the need for practical application outside of textbook learning:

I think that having some way of communicating that there has been some practical application to what this person has learned in the master’s program would be good. A master’s in communication, applied communications or something like that where part of what is kind of the brand of the degree, represents that there has been some practical experience built into the communications master’s program. I think that would be helpful so it isn’t just looked at as a theoretical study of best practices and communications management by reading a bunch of different cases.

Investment in Career

Participants felt that a master’s degree could factor in the hiring process because it demonstrates that the candidate is invested in their career. Some comments made by participants in this regard include: “It would demonstrate certain things to me, that this person was serious about wanting to be in this field and that is important, especially in a field that has a reputation of anybody can do it,” “I would think that if they have taken, shown me the initiative to get a master’s in communications management that, to me, would tell me that they are interested in developing their skill sets”, and “it would certainly beat an entry level position it would be a plus, and it would indicate to me that an individual has made an extra effort to be

educated and knowledgeable about the field.” Another employer felt a master’s degree demonstrated a commitment to the profession:

It’s kind of a shorthand to me for someone who’s serious about the profession...who has invested their time and resources to learn and grow, probably someone who is perhaps maybe more committed to the profession. There’s a seriousness of focus to someone who invests a couple of years and a whole lot of money to learn and develop so that they contribute at a higher level. So that, I mean, that says something to me.

Program Reputation

Participants felt that the reputation of the program played a role in terms of whether or not the master’s degree would be deemed valuable. For example, according to one participant, “well...what university it comes from. Because in general I have a sense of those universities that have robust programs and where it is, what its called, and then, you know, what I try to get a sense of is what kind of experience is it/have they had as a result.” Another participant had similar thoughts, stating, “well, frankly, it would be mostly whether I knew the program or not and also if it was associated with a university that was well thought of because if you’ve got a good university, they’re usually not going to permit [some] kind of a slacker program.” One participant used one of her current employees as an example: “Well, I think there are programs that are part of more respected than others. And if I have, for example, I used to have someone on my staff who was a public relations graduate from _____and she really was good, and she was smart, and she’d been educated properly. But I have found that mostly I have to teach...we have to teach new employees the ropes. And, as I said, we’ve been very good in terms of professional development programs, so that’s all.”

Other participants discussed the need for more visibility of strong PR master’s degree programs in terms of how that would help with building the reputation of not just the program, but also the field in general as well. As one participant put it, “you get a Wharton MBA, you know, people know that that’s a big deal. So, if there’s a way that we can start building the

reputation of communications master's degrees with our business brethren. That would be enormous. So there's a huge opportunity for reputation there. And we just haven't quite landed on how to do that." Another participant made a very valid point:

If I [were] building a great master's program in public relations or communication management or whatever you wanted to call it, I would want to create a lot of visibility around that program. I would want to be sure that people within the profession are aware of the program, build a community, some outreach to those folks to begin to make it stand for something. So I think there's opportunity to do that. I mean, the most obvious case would be someone goes to Harvard Business School, you immediately have things come to mind besides the fact he went to Harvard, so he must be a pretty smart person. You studied case method. You got good grounding in business. I think that schools have to package and create some sizzle and draw attention to these programs.

Specialty Area

Participants were more inclined to consider a master's degree when hiring new practitioners if it included some kind of specialty area. For example, as stated by one participant:

Companies are now looking more and more for graduate degrees when they hire and there are so many pieces of the communications function that are now becoming very specialized, that require for example, we discussed or you brought up before the research communications research is a very important function that requires some specialized knowledge that you probably can't get at an undergraduate level.

Specializing in social network marketing or something like that, which is going to become increasingly important, you can learn on the job but that's very difficult. I could see people going back, getting a graduate degree in a specific part of communications that they know they want to pursue so that's what I think.

Another participant talked about still hiring PR generalists, but how they are more interested in specialists: “We’ll still hire a PR generalist, we still want those people, and they’ll be mainly catalysts. They’ll be the people who know a little bit about everything and run the accounts, but were also now looking for people with specialized skills in other areas so from a hiring perspective we’ve got a much broader base of people to choose from than we ever did before.”

RQ3: How can a Master’s Degree in Public Relations be Made More Available?

Finally, participants were asked how a master’s degree could be made more valuable so that graduating students would be more appealing to employers. Participants discussed several factors, including adding business, having a different undergraduate degree, and guest lecturers and professors from the field.

Adding Business

Participants strongly believed that adding business courses to a PR master’s curriculum would make the degree much more valuable. According to two participants, “if it included courses that helped students understand financial markets and business. So if there were some business courses in it and if there was a lot of writing” and “your basic accounting and just introductory business courses. It doesn’t have to be too fancy, but just understanding the basics of business and how business gets done. A marketing course would be valuable as well.” Another participant agreed, and went into further detail about what would be useful:

Teaching financial skills to graduates so that they can read a balance sheet and, you know, its great to know all the public relations theory in the world, but understanding how those apply in a real world setting is really important. It’s not to say that we need to turn graduate programs into trade schools, but they need to have some practical grounding and I think financial, at least one course in, and you don’t have to have a MBA, but you need to understand how organizations work, how funding happens, the capital markets, etc., so that’s one thing.

Another employer discussed the need for more business courses in the PR master's curriculum, as many practitioners lack business knowledge and skills:

I think that we as public relations professionals need to understand how businesses work. And so I think some business courses would be very good. My problem with a lot of public relations graduates is that they understand how to write a news release, well, sometimes they do, but they've not been educated in sort of the business side of things, how corporations work, why profit is necessary, what profit is used for, how to read a P&L statement, how to read a financial statement, that sort of thing. Because we're all about helping businesses perform better in terms of sales, etc. and I've never come across somebody who's been schooled in those things from a public relations perspective.

Another participant agreed and saw this as a huge problem with current PR practitioners:

Yeah, our biggest problem with communication professionals is they're not always seen as business savvy as their peers in finance, IT and HR, and very, very few come from an MBA kind of environment, so very few have had lets say a deep grounding in finance or understanding a balance sheet, income statements, the kind of things they're sort of dragged through in an MBA curriculum.

Different Undergraduate Degree

Some participants argued that a PR master's degree would be much more valuable if it were paired with an undergraduate degree from a different field. According to one participant, "I'd be much more likely to favor the graduate student who had worked in another maybe related field or even an unrelated field who chose to go into PR, done a rigorous graduate program and got some work. So, it really depends on the individual. I definitely see value in a graduate program, but for the right person. I think a undergraduate and graduate degree in PR is probably not the most valuable thing you can do."

Another participant agreed with this sentiment, stating “if you did a communications degree undergraduate and then you did the master’s in it, to me, I don’t see that that would enhance that person so greatly that I would say, This is really, really better than just the undergraduate degree. I guess what I’m saying is there’s only so much you can learn about communication, and I’m not sure if I saw somebody with an undergraduate degree and a master’s in communication, I would be like, too much, that’s too much focus.” Similar thoughts were shared from another participant:

Yeah, I think most people probably think that if you get an undergrad degree in communications, then you’ll get a master’s in it. And what I’m suggesting is it would be a really neat compliment to somebody with a business degree or any other degree because it would round out whatever else you’re bringing to the table. Its kind of like when you look at people who get law degrees, most of them are not people who go to preliminary-law programs. They’re people that study other things and then it kind of builds off of that interest that you have, to have a law degree. So in a similar way, I could see the benefit of this master’s.

Guest Lecturers and Professors from the Field

Participants believed that having guest lecturers and professors from the field would add more value to PR master’s programs. As one participant stated:

The only thing is I think that a key to managing the transition from a master’s degree to the workplace is to try to bring as much of the work place into the program as possible without threatening the academic integrity. So, lots of guest lectures, again, maybe an internship...make sure that the transition is as easy as possible from the academic setting to the professional setting so that the candidates feel comfortable in immediately applying what they’ve learned to their new workplace. I think that reaching out to the communications field more, its great to have really strong academics for teaching these courses, who have great PhDs, but you need to bring in at least enough professionals

and whether they're adjunct professors or guest lecturers, so that you know what's happening in the field now and what the challenges of those professionals are tomorrow so that you can train people who can fulfill those roles. So, I would try to find that right balance.

Similar thoughts came from another participant, who stated:

Adding more adjunct professors who have actually worked in the field, because if they were any good, if they were worth their salt, then they're going to be able to help those students progress further. They're going to tell them what they're going to see every day, they're going to give them the understanding of how to work the dynamics of a corporation, how to work the politics of a corporation, how to deal with diverse management structures, how to deal with boards of directors, how do you take that and move that along so that you can position your company the right way.

Another participant argued that instructors from the field are much more valuable to this type of degree:

My friends in academia know there's a lot of people teaching theory, there aren't too many people who have done it, so I don't care how long you've been a professor, if you've never had to present in front of a board of directors of a corporation, you don't know how to do it, you don't know what its like, so having the addition of having some people who have done it is also critical to the education system. Guys who took my course came to me and said I got more real world use out of this course because you're teaching me things from the experience of having done them.

Finally, a participant suggested reaching out to retired professionals: "If there's a way for graduate schools to engage more professionals who are recently retired or those who just wish to step away from the rat race of business, that's really useful."

Discussion

The interviews conducted with leading public relations employers in the field demonstrated a sense of agreement across specializations in terms of what is sought out in PR employees, whether or not a master's degree adds inherent value to a potential job candidate, and how PR master's curriculum can be enhanced to fulfill the needs of the PR industry. Results indicated that experiential learning is paramount, which can be improved through the inclusion of business courses, connecting with real-world practitioners, and a strong program reputation.

The employers interviewed agreed that master's programs in PR cannot solely rely on passing down knowledge to graduate students but must integrate an experiential learning component, whether that be via internships, capstone projects, or case study applications. The participants believed that the applied nature of public relations calls for a master's curriculum that provides hands-on projects to develop the various skill sets and qualifications required to succeed in the field. According to the participants, frequent skill-based courses that focus on skill sets such as writing, social media management, and business are necessary for the next generation of PR practitioners, which differs from the push for theory as advocated by Soloski (1994) and Hon et al. (2004).

In addition, the findings of this study emphasize more than ever the need for more collaboration between practitioners and academics in PR. As Grunig (2008) contends, the critique of the profession from academics can prove to be valuable to practitioners; on the other hand, academics must stay connected to practitioners in order to keep a pulse on the ever-changing trends of the field. The comments made by the participants of this study underscore this need, namely through their suggestions for integrating current or retired PR professionals into the classroom. Furthermore, as was relayed by the participants, the content of the degree is important, and this can especially be enhanced through ongoing research by academics in the field, which can work to develop case examples, theories, and models that can prove to be useful to the PR classroom and profession.

Another prevalent theme that ran across the interviews was the need for more business-type courses within the PR master's curriculum. Many of the participants felt that future PR practitioners need to be well versed in areas such as finance and marketing, and business acumen was frequently cited as a skill set that serves a great value to the PR profession. Master's programs can work to partner with business schools to integrate relevant components to their curricula, and while not as focused as an MBA, these collaborations can work to offer knowledge and skills that are appealing to PR employers, making students more marketable. Participants also mentioned the MBA education as an example of program visibility and reputation that is needed for public relations master's degrees. Many of the employers interviewed took program reputation into account in terms of making hiring decisions, and they called for PR master's programs to increase their prestige in a way that makes the degree more sought after and valuable.

These findings provide support for Van Ruler's observations that practitioners value "emotional intelligence" – they value hiring public relations managers who have creative and analytical abilities to solve the problems of their clients. These participants spoke of business acumen, "understanding the life of a Fortune 500 CEO," the ability to "see around corners, to deal with ambiguity," and strong analytic and critical thinking ability. The participants gave little support for textbook learning, called by Van Ruler, "rational intelligence and a pre-defined body of knowledge and skills" (2005, p.167). Evidence of how the status model's value for new and newer knowledge was the emphasis on emerging technologies and social media skills.

While scholars may make the claim that theory is complementary to experience and individual abilities and attributes, their efforts thus far have been unsuccessful with these industry leaders. This disconnect will continue until the brand understanding of public relations master's education is more clearly connected to practice and uniform across the universities granting master's degrees in public relations.

The results also provide more systematic in-depth meaning to what employers believe are important qualifications when hiring public relations practitioners. They do not factor in a master's degree in public relations when hiring very much although they don't count it as a negative if a person has one. Simply put, for these study participants, who are knowledgeable and even supportive of public relations education, a public relations master's degree on an applicant's résumé has little stand-alone value, calling for the field to engage in further research and reflection.

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