

Classroom to Boardroom: The Role of Gender in Leadership Style, Stereotypes and Aptitude for Command in Public Relations

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This study uses scholarly literature grounded in organizational communication theory, feminist perspectives and gender theory on the public relations industry to provide a theoretical framework for primary research conducted on both undergraduate public relations majors and public relations practitioners. Results from primary research (interviews with undergraduate students and a survey administered to public relations practitioners) reveals parallels and disconnects between student expectations and professional realities of the role gender plays in the public relations discipline.

To help foster diversity and reduce gendered stereotypes within undergraduate public relations programs and the public relations industry fresh, pedagogical recommendations are explored. Cameron, Lariscy, and Sweep (1992) found that education influences the way public relations is practiced. Thus, with pedagogical changes at the undergraduate level, there is hope for a rebalance of equal gender distribution for female practitioners at all professional levels, as well the capacity to provide more comprehensive and accurate images of the discipline.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to a report from Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, between the years of 1994 and 1995 there were over 10,000 U.S. students majoring in public relations (Benigni, Weaver-Lariscy & Tinkham, 2002). In the fall of 2006, more than 15,000 undergraduate students were majoring in public relations (Becker, Vlad & McLean, 2007). While there has been an increase in students studying the discipline, the industry also continues to grow. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, PR positions in the industry are forecasted to grow by 18% between 2006 and 2016 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008).

The growth of the major and the industry exhibits a clear imbalance of gender in the discipline. According to a recent Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) report, approximately 70% of members are women (Ruiz, Edelman, Ford & MacAfee, 2008). More drastically, a recent report from the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) reveals its membership comprised of 90% women (Ruiz, et al., 2008). The public relations major population is approximately 70% women, while some public relations classes do not even have one male in the classroom (Martin, 2008).

Historically public relations was dominated and practiced by men, with industry heroes like Edward Bernays and Ivy Ledbetter Lee paving the way. Bernays and Lee are

legacies in the profession, considered masters of the art of persuasion. However, today it is apparent that women, not men are finding the public relations discipline appealing; a clear transformation from over a century ago. With this shift and gender imbalance in workforce, arrive two great concerns. Although women are the majority in the industry, they do not dominate the industry. The few men in the industry remain on top. According to PR scholar, Larissa Grunig, public relations is not female-dominated, it is female-intensive (Brown, 1998). There are few women in leadership roles in the public relations industry. The second great concern is the abundance of inaccurate stereotypes. The public relations major and the public relations industry are likened to the nursing career—a feminized career. Furthermore, the reputation of professionals in the industry and students studying public relations are many times questioned as less than, by those outside the industry and academic major. Inaccurate and shallow stereotypes continue to plague the discipline.

Over the last two decades scholars that have examined the gendered nature of public relations in the industry (Aldoory, 2003, 2005; Aldoory & Toth, 2002, 2004; Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2001; Hon, 1995) yet, there are few texts in the last decade that specifically explore the relationship gender plays between the undergraduate major and the industry. There is a need for current research examining the steady growth of women in both the undergraduate major and profession, to discover similarities and differences of gender traits between the classroom and boardroom.

With pedagogical change at the undergraduate level, there is hope for a rebalance of equal gender distribution for female practitioners' at all professional levels. Through an examination of both undergraduate expectations and professional realities, PR educators can begin to address current curriculums through pedagogical changes or modifications, to lessen the impact of the current difficulties women face in the PR discipline.

A literature review that examines the feminization of the public relations industry through the lens of feminist perspectives, organizational communication and gender theory suggest the existence of three distinct characteristics or traits commonly found in the public relations: (1) one's leadership style, (2) inaccurate stereotypes associated with the discipline and (3) one's aptitude for command.

Leadership style

Literature reviewed examines why women are seldom in leadership positions, within an industry practiced by women. Broom and Dozier (1986) established an alternative to the popular glass ceiling theory, which concluded the difference in pay and power between men and women in public relations exists because of the role women play between technician and managerial positions. Women studied did not aspire to possess managerial roles and were more content in the role of a public relations technician (Broom & Dozier, 1986).

The International Association of Business Communicators Research Foundation commissioned two professional research reports in 1986 and 1989 to assess the impact of the feminization of communication in public relations. The first report released, *The Velvet Ghetto* (Cline et al., 1986) focused on why women were not in managerial positions in the public relations profession. The results of *The Velvet Ghetto* (Cline et al., 1986) reiterated Broom and Dozier's (1986) study. Women were relegated to the role of technicians. However, women were relegated to this role due to social expectations that women were poor managers (Cline et al., 1986). *The Velvet Ghetto* (Cline et al., 1986) report contended women self-select themselves into a technician role.

In the second report, *Beyond the Velvet Ghetto* (1989) results repeated similar results from the initial report, but also gave recommendations for future public relations practitioners; the latter report suggested women accept the reality of the velvet ghetto and adjust to its existence, in order to succeed (Toth & Cline, 1989).

Aldoory and Toth (2004) later probed the conclusions of these popular reports through an examination of socialization and structuralism theories. Aldoory and Toth (2004) concluded socialization skills help dictate one's leadership style; therefore, a gender differential exists. Aldoory and Toth's (2004) review of socialization and structuralism theories, specifically their analysis of transformational and transactional leadership styles found that women communicate in leadership positions in a more transformational manner.

Aldoory and Toth (2002) reported women in public relations lacked the negotiation skills and knowledge necessary to request higher salaries. In addition, a transformational leadership style hinders women from effectively moving up the corporate ladder, thus remaining in the technician role, which Broom and Dozier (1986) earlier concluded.

Women effectively communicate in a two-way communication model, specifically a transformational communication style, which enables women to perform "better" in technical roles. Meanwhile, men prefer communicating in a transactional communication model, thus a "better" fit for managerial roles (Aldoory & Toth, 2004).

A study by Mitrook (2004) maintains Toth and Aldoory's (2004) findings and provides additional insight into the large population of women found in technical roles in the public relations industry. Mitrook's (2004) study concluded that women felt technician level jobs suited their level of commitment to their work. Technical level positions permitted low enough involvement for women to allow for a leave of absence from their position (Mitrook, 2004). This behavior lends itself to the corporate culture ideology of women not being capable of committing to the demands required of managerial or leadership positions. Because women often are the primary caregiver, they have to sacrifice work over family, thus women often have lower career aspirations (Toth & Cline, 1991).

Stereotypes

The public relations profession is viewed as glamorous and a “soft” career option to many (Smith, 2008). These stereotypes have only inaccurately served the industry’s reputation. Due to the popularity of HBO’s program, “Sex in the City” large audiences view the Samantha Jones character, a fabulous party-planner as their only image of a public relations practitioner. For many young students and the general population references and images of PR practitioners are inaccurate and limited portrayals on television and film. Characters like Samantha Jones from *Sex and the City*, the cast from MTV’s series *PoweR Girls*, or the main character, Bridget Jones in the film *Bridget Jones* portray female PR practitioners, possessing ultra-feminine qualities, even often times appearing ditzy and consumed with living up to a “party girl” persona.

According to Ames (2010) study, which examines portrayals of PR professionals in American film, the public has had more familiarity in recent years of the profession in both film and television. However, common stereotypes that plague the public relations discipline remain. When students do not have accurate information about different careers, they are forced to rely on stereotypes (Mitrook, 2005). These stereotypes only add to an ultra-feminine view of the profession, positioning the discipline as feminized. Mitrook (2005) suggests that men may major in marketing or management in college, because of the various downfalls with public relations, since so many women have entered the field.

In addition to feminine stereotypes of public relations, Mitrook (2005) contends students perceive public relations as a good job for people who like to work with people, and a job does not require math skills for advancement.

Aptitude for Command

The third discourse commonly researched is reverred to the glass-ceiling theory and explores with a majority of women in the industry, why males continue to hold leadership positions. Brenda Wrigley (2002) contends that the public relations industry suffers from the Queen Bee Syndrome. Researchers Jayaratne, Staines, and Tavis (1974) provided the Queen Bee Syndrome label in their research on the successful women’s discrimination against other women.

Brenda Wrigley states because of increased competition, and the reality that most women do not advance, Queen Bees do not want other women to have it easier (Wrigley, 2002). Queen Bees gain special privileges such as high visibility, male favor, and authority – which other female employees detest (Wrigley, 2002). Queen Bees get along with male executives because they practice the same behavior—they too discriminate against women. Queen Bees are afraid to mentor other women, because should those they mentor succeed, those very women could change the rules for the organization and Queen Bees would lose their special privileges (Wrigley, 2002).

Therefore, Queen Bees maintain the status quo, which means adjusting to the glass ceiling model and sustaining the male-dominated power structure.

Wrigley (2002) contends that the organizational, social and psychological theories explain the patriarchal culture of public relations, all of which are embodied in cultural hegemony (as cited in Gramsci, 1971). Wrigley (2002) supports Gramsci's claim that the dominant class presents its definition of reality in such a way, that others accept it as a common sense (Wrigley, 2002 as cited in Gramsci, 1971). Wrigley asserts there is evidence of hegemony's effects on women, which can be viewed in the behavior of both managers and subordinates. Queen Bees accept the patriarch partly because it is the men's behavior with whom they work with (Wrigley, 2002). Therefore, the relations of uneven power are conceptually resolved in favor of restating the status-quo. Similar to men, Queen Bees believe these patriarchal practices will benefit them. Female managers become victims of a "fake consciousness", thus resulting in a perpetuating discrimination (Wrigley, 2002).

Wrigley's study further established the findings of an earlier study of Tam, Dozier, Lauzen and Real, (1995) on gender and career advancement, which concluded subordinates and superiors of the same-sex tended to have more rich mentoring relationships than mixed-sex pairings. However, male supervisors were more effective in providing subordinates career advancement (Tam, et al., 1995). Practitioners with male mentors, regardless of gender, tended to have more opportunities to advancement and managerial positions (Tam, et al., 1995). Comparisons from both studies (Tam, et al., 1995) and (Wrigley, 2002) suggest that the use of transformational leadership style, which is a communication style that subscribes well to a mentoring relationship, may also serve in hindering subordinate women from attaining aptitude for command.

METHOD

To determine if student expectations and practitioner realities of gender's role in PR are similar, both students and practitioners were asked research questions based on three rubrics; one's leadership style, common gendered stereotypes found in the discipline, and one's aptitude for command. In-depth interviews were administered to students. Since all students study the PR discipline for individual reasons or personal experiences, the interview method provided great breadth and depth for exploring patterns and themes commonly found in such experiences. Practitioners from across the United States responded to an online snapshot survey, this method was used to help provide the most common characteristics found within the culture of PR agency life.

In both the in-depth interviews and online surveys, respondents answered research questions based on three rubrics. Rubric number one tested traits found in one's leadership style. Research questions focused on issues of work/life balance and specific questions regarding technical and managerial level activities, as well as skills required in public relations.

The second rubric tested respondents experience with gendered stereotypes. Research questions probed respondents on common labels and associations they experience either studying or practicing public relations.

The third rubric was based on one's aptitude for command. Research questions were based on respondent's experience with mentoring and personal ambition to obtain leadership roles and one's ability to move up the leadership ladder.

This study first analyzes student expectations of the public relations discipline from the results of the in-depth interviews. This study then reviews the professional realities of working in public relations, examining results from the online survey practitioners responded to. Finally, this study discusses the parallels and disconnects found between both student expectations and professional realities in the discipline of public relations.

In-depth interview- Students

Qualitative interviewing was used for this study because of its strength in answering the research questions. Through a non-probable convenience sampling of students active in their university's PRSSA chapters in New York, New Jersey, Illinois and California, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted.

Sampling

The snowball sample selection was created by inviting students attending universities with active PRSSA chapters in New York, Illinois and California to participate. These regions were chosen, due to the likelihood of students being more exposed to working in public relations agencies in the New York, Chicago and Los Angeles metropolitan areas.

Contact procedure and access

Because of the nature of student confidentiality, the sample was chosen through data available on the PRSSA website. Through this website, e-mail addresses of PRSSA chapter executive board members and chapter presidents were available. Potential participants were contacted via e-mail and were urged to pass the request for participants to fellow students studying public relations.

Procedure

All interviews were conducted via telephone for convenience and cost purposes. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. The interview followed an interview schedule. Participants were asked 21 questions to determine background information, their interest in public relations, as well as questions based on the rubrics of leadership style, stereotypes, and one's aptitude for command.

Data analysis

All interview audiotapes were transcribed. The data was reviewed by highlighting common patterns and themes that emerged, as well as unique comments that emerged from discussion.

RESULTS

Background

Twelve participants were interviewed, three males and nine females. With three respondents being men, this represented a respectable ratio; comparably the major is comprised of approximately 70% women. Participants ranged from sophomores to senior level students, with nine students bearing senior class status, thus more experience in the discipline.

A common pattern that emerged was that students simply “fall” into the major. Results from career aptitude tests suggested either a career in communications or public relations. Four students stated they did not either know about a career in public relations, or they simply had not thought about it. However, after completing a career aptitude test, they decided they would forge ahead and study public relations and indicated contentment with their choice.

Results indicated students are simply not aware of the public relations major, or the vast breadth and scope of the public relations industry. Half of the student participants were not initially public relations majors, indicating a theme that students are unaware of the discipline.

The most common practice area participants showed a specific interest in, was the non-profit sector with four participants indicating non-profit public relations as an interest for their career choice. However, not one male participant indicated non-profit public relations as a career choice. Four participants indicated that they were interested in public relations because of its varied nature, believing public relations professionals are “not stuck working at their desk all day.”

Leadership style

There were inconclusive patterns of gender-related behavior towards characteristics of leadership style. Male and female participants had varied responses, with the most common response for both men and women preferring the notion of holding managerial roles (N=8) over technical roles, albeit some participants indicated a preference to performing both technical and managerial roles, because they are “control freaks.” The choice between preferring managerial work or technical work appeared based on

individual personalities, with male and female students terming themselves as “control freaks” and wanting to both manage and do the technical work.

Participants identified that strong writing skills (50%) and effective communication skills (50%) as the most important skills required for success in public relations.

Only four respondents, all of which all were women indicated concern for managing both career and life, due to the demands of the public relations media environment. This concern was not echoed with any of the male respondents. Few women respondents also indicated the ability to telecommute, a concept that did not reveal itself with male participants. For students, the issue for future work/life balance was slight, yet seemingly only a concern for women.

When students were questioned about their experience with management and business courses in their curriculum, over half of the participants (n=8) showed interest in public relations courses that teach management skills or the business side of an agency. A clear theme emerged demonstrating students’ expectations for success in personal leadership. Participants understood the value of such a course for their career advancement. Interestingly, the majority of students (n=8) indicated a course that taught the business-side of PR would assist in their leadership skills, later helping with entrepreneurship endeavors; a clear indication of a distinguished positive leadership style trait.

Stereotypes

Of all the participants interviewed only two students had a fairly accurate impression of the public relations profession, due to having known a practitioner in the industry, or through a career outreach program which illustrated the work of a public relations professional. Results indicated that more than half the participants (N=8) entered college without knowing what a career in public relations constituted.

A common theme emerged from participants when discussing why they chose to study public relations. Students believe the discipline as a “social”, “varied” and “fun” discipline, not as structured and regimented as other majors found in their universities. However, it is not clear from this study where participants are receiving this image. Almost half of the participants (N=5) suggested a possible reason for women enrolling in the public relations major, is due to women inherently possessing more effective communication skills. A female respondent stated, “Women are natural communicators; they are less “business-y” and more “let’s talk about it.””

Thirty-three percent (N=4) of participants indicated that students studying public relations were viewed by others as lazy, or studying a “cop out” major, or enrolled in an “easy” major. However, when asked about stereotypes of the industry, five students indicated “spinners” as a stereotype associated with public relations professionals.

Twenty-five percent (N=3) of participants suggested that male students may not be as open-minded about a career in public relations and are blind to the various practice areas of public relations, which could be feasible areas of interest to men. One student responded, "Males are going for the sports and entertainment industry and not branching out. They stay in their comfort zone." Three students were concerned that with the lack of diversity in the major. One participant stated, "The lack of diversity is unfortunate because when competing with a male, [for an internship or job] a male would be picked, have an edge over a woman." A male student provided insight to this concern stating, "...for every PR internship I applied for.... I have not been denied once."

Students were displeased of the stereotypes that public relations majors receive. Students find the stereotype of the major being easy, as an uneducated and ignorant stereotype that misrepresents the lengthy and detailed work entailed in public relations.

Students were very well aware of the stereotypes attributed to practitioners in the field, with the "spinners" stereotype being the most common. However, this stereotype was only mentioned by students when discussing the work of practitioners, not for students studying the discipline.

Aptitude for command

In order to identify a common pattern or theme on the role of mentoring in student's ability to learn or possess an aptitude for command, participants were asked questions about their experience(s) with mentoring. Five participants whom had mentors, regardless of their mentor's gender, displayed confidence for negotiation a salary or position title. However, three participants whom had mentors of both sex did not exude confidence for negotiation. These results indicate no clear theme or pattern between the gender of a participant and the gender of a participant's mentor for students' aptitude to negotiate a salary or position title. Two participants who did not have mentors displayed great confidence and aptitude for command. Results suggested that one's aptitude for command is more prevalent in one's personality or socialization than directly due to a mentor's influence.

One male respondent indicated great confidence when asked about future leadership goals. The male respondent indicated that he had a male mentor whom he worked with side-by-side at his internship and shared that he was often brought in on budgeting meetings. Contrastingly, a female respondent indicated that she did not have any management or business-side courses in her PR curriculum, thus she sought out such classes on her own. The female respondent stated, "I haven't had any business classes, PR people generally don't like math." Adding to this perspective, another female respondent stated that she started out as a business major, but found the business curriculum "too generic and math-oriented", she wanted more creative and hands-on and further stated, "PR people are more social and talkative."

Survey- Practitioners

In order to help gauge if student perceptions of the industry coincided with practitioners' perspectives of gender's influence in the industry, a descriptive snapshot survey was administered to view practitioners' perceptions on the three specific gender traits found in leadership style, stereotypes, and one's aptitude for command.

Sampling

The sample was chosen through a non-probable convenience sample of public relations practitioners in the New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles metropolitan areas. The survey was created through an online survey website (SurveyMonkey.com) and was posted on popular public relations professional websites such as; Linked In and PR Peeps, as well as sent directly via e-mail to 145 public relations practitioners through a snowball sample of personal professional contacts that work in agencies in the New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles regions. There were 41 respondents, 40 of which completed the survey.

Procedure

Respondents answered a three part online survey. Respondents answered 10 questions on their career background and 11 questions based on three rubrics of leadership style, stereotypes and one's aptitude for command. The survey asked both open and closed-ended questions.

Background

Sixty-five percent (N=26) of respondents were women and 35% (N=14) were men. Seventy-nine percent (N= 31) of respondents held a Baccalaureates of Arts (B.A) degree and 35% (N= 14) earned a B.A. degree in public relations; only three male respondents held a B.A degree in public relations. Respondents varied from professionals who were at the beginning of their career (1- 3 years of experience), to respondents with over 20 years of public relations experience. Most respondents (N=14) had only one to three years of experience, with only seven respondents on the other end of the spectrum of work-experience, thus possessing over 10-15 years of experience. Respondents professional positions varied across the spectrum, nine respondents were in entry-level positions, as well as an equal number of practitioners holding senior level positions; suggesting that some respondents were career changers, individuals who excelled in public relations having only a few years of public relations experience. The majority of the respondents, 66.7% (N=26) did not have children.

Professionals surveyed were asked an open-ended question, RQ #22 "What skills have you observed as lacking for entry-level professionals? If you are presently in an entry-level position, please indicate what skills you wish you had more training for?" Almost half the respondents (N=17) provided answers that suggested that young professionals do not possess an integral skill set required for management roles. Respondents provided similar statements: "younger generations need to better manage projects",

“more management skills”, “better strategic thinking” and the need for better time-management.

Leadership style

Respondents ranked effective multi-tasking skills (79.5%) and interpersonal communication skills (76.9%) and strong writing skills (71.8%) as the most important skills necessary to move to the next level of one’s career.

Respondents were asked to rate what skills or job tasks they enjoyed most in public relations. These responses were analyzed and coded as either technical tasks or managerial tasks. Respondents in this survey preferred managerial tasks to technical tasks, 64.2% of the men (N=14) and 61.5% of the women (N=26) preferred skills coded as managerial or leadership tasks.

Seventy-four percent of respondents with and without children were not concerned that having children would impede their career path towards a higher position. Results indicated that 15 respondents did not perceive having children impeding their progress into a higher position and 14 respondents found that the issue was not applicable to them. This suggests that either respondents do not plan on moving up the corporate ladder when deciding to have children, or respondents view the work/life balance as a non-issue. It is noted that most of the respondents did not have children.

Of the women without children (N=21) eight did potentially see having children impede with aspiration to move into a higher position. However, for all men with children they felt a career in public relations afforded an acceptable work/ life balance.

Stereotypes

Half of the respondents (N=20), find public relations to be stereotyped as a feminized or “soft” career. Those that did not find the career feminized, specialized in practice areas such as business-to-business, digital, public affairs, employee communication and media relations.

More than half of the respondents (N=21) do not agree with the theory that women are drawn to a career in public relations, because women are better communicators than men. In addition, the majority of respondents (N=26) do not feel that a glass ceiling exists in public relations.

Few stereotypes that respondents associated with public relations are labels such as: “spin” and “fake”. Although almost half of the respondents (N=19) chose not to answer the research question regarding stereotypes on the survey. The lack of response from respondents regarding stereotypes leaves room for question about practitioners’ experiences with stereotypes.

Aptitude for Command

A clear role of mentoring emerged in one's aptitude for command in this survey. Respondents with mentors, regardless of their own gender and their mentor's sex, were more likely to demonstrate behavior to negotiate a salary or position title.

In order to understand the direct role of mentoring and subsequent leadership positions respondents were questioned on their mentoring experiences. Over half of the respondents, (N=25) had a mentor, yet gender did not seem to play a significant role in the respondents negotiation skills; 60% (N=24) of male and female professionals negotiated their salary or position title with either a male or female mentor, or had both males and females as mentors. However, of all the respondents that did not have a mentor (N=15), over half (N=9) never negotiated a salary or position title. Unfortunately, only ten respondents indicated that they enjoy mentoring as part of their job. Even more alarmingly, only four of the 26 professional women indicated they like to mentor others. Contrastingly, five of the 15 professional men indicated that they enjoy mentoring.

DISCUSSION

Similarities between undergraduates' expectation and practitioners' realities

A few paralleled traits in leadership style and aptitude for command emerged when comparing the results from the interviews of public relations students and the survey administered to public relations practitioners.

A consensus from both students and practitioners emerged that challenges the assertion of Mitrook's (2004) study, which contends that women prefer technical level positions, in order to allow for a leave of absence from their position. Broom & Dozier's (1986) assertion that one's gender affects one's leadership style was not evident in the results of this study. Both responses from female students and female practitioners indicate the majority of women enjoy managerial tasks.

This study indicates that both students and practitioners view the public relations career as one that allows for work/life balance, or perhaps respondents accept the realities that exist in the *Velvet Ghetto* (Toth and Cline, 1989). Conceivably, students and practitioners are aware of the *Velvet Ghetto's* existence and understand that one may have to commit to work/life balance sacrifices, in order to move up the corporate ladder in public relations. Female students' notion that practitioners have the ability to telecommute, suggests women's acceptance of working within the parameters set by the *Velvet Ghetto* (1989) and that women are adjusting and complying with the effects of hegemony, as Wrigley (2002) put forward. Students indicated that men may be more interested in public relations, if they are aware of all the various practice areas. The responses from practitioners, who do not find the career as a feminized career correlate

with students' assertions. Practitioners that did not find their career as feminized worked in practice areas such as; business-to-business, digital, public affairs, and media relations which may be specializations more attractive to men, thus less of a gender imbalance in those specific practice areas.

The gender of a mentor had no direct influence on one's aptitude for command; this was true for both practitioners and students. Regardless of a mentor's sex and the gender of the mentored, both students and practitioners demonstrated aptitude for title promotion or negotiating a salary. However, Wrigley's (2002) claim that women are afraid to mentor other women for fear that the mentored may succeed did emerge in this study. Few women practitioners indicated they like to mentor others. Contrastingly, male practitioners were twice as likely to enjoy mentoring.

Disconnects between undergraduates and practitioners

There were few disconnects between the traits of leadership style and stereotypes between students expectations and practitioners realities demonstrated in this study.

Students recognized effective communication and writing skills as necessary skills to succeed in public relations. Meanwhile, practitioners identified multi-tasking as the most important skill. However, interpersonal communication skills and writing were identified as the second and third most regarded skills by practitioners surveyed. Thus, students appear aware of the required skill-set required to excel in the career, but may require more training in one's ability to multi-task more efficiently. Practitioners sentiments amplify this disconnect between students expectations and the realities practitioners experience. Practitioners feel that many recent graduates lack the typical skills necessary required to move into leadership position. Although, there is promise for future change; students interviewed demonstrated genuine interest in curriculum changes, changes that would specifically add managerial and business topics into undergraduate curriculums.

Approximately one-third of the students in this study agree with Aldoory and Toth's (2004) assertion and believe women are better communicators, but the majority of practitioners in the industry disagree. This study reveals that students are more concerned with both gendered stereotypes and general stereotypes than their professional counterparts are. According to students, the feminization of the public relations industry is an unfortunate consequence of misguided labels and inaccurate stereotypes. According to student responses, stereotypes are based upon assumed ignorance or general misconceptions of the profession, which student begin to witness at the university level.

Students demonstrate genuine concern for the gender imbalance. A few students indicated they missed a male's perspective in the classroom. Students indicated that with so few men in the major, the novelty of a man's perspective would serve men well when interviewing for internships or jobs. Students may have a fresher perspective of how the gender gap in public relations is affecting the image of the public relations

major and industry. Meanwhile, practitioners in the industry appear to simply “deal” with the gender imbalance and have heeded Toth and Cline’s (1989) suggestion and have adjusted to the *Velvet Ghetto*.

RECOMENDATIONS

To best address the issues of the ongoing gender imbalance efforts need to start at the university level. This study demonstrates male practitioners are receiving B.A. degrees outside of the public relations major; perhaps studying disciplines such as; marketing or management. Through effective awareness of the breadth and scope of the public relations discipline at the undergraduate level, men will become more aware of the broad and diverse practice areas that one can practice in public relations.

Educators should also continue to teach the necessary writing skills, but also effective critical thinking skills, which help build leadership characteristics. Professionals surveyed demonstrated popular concern for students to possess a well-rounded skill-set, than just the technical skills required in public relations. Faculty need to teach students not only the technical skills of public relations, but also the importance of managing and resourcing a budget; a skill seldom found within the walls of undergraduate public relations programs. This practice will serve students two-fold, for women they need to learn these skills to succeed and receive more managerial roles in the industry; and there appears to be an interest already there amongst students. Thus, undergraduate programs need to implement more wide-ranging curriculums that include courses that provide technical skills, but also theory-driven courses that help provide the critical thinking and leadership skills necessary for leadership positions.

The role of mentoring appears to have a significant role in one’s aptitude for command, with so few professionals mentoring educators should continue to actively mentor students.

In today’s digital media environment, there are fresh opportunities for men and women entering the public relations profession. Currently, men are at senior levels in digital, business-to-business, and technology sectors of public relations (Ruiz, et al., 2008). There is great opportunity in these areas to lessen the gender imbalance. If public relations programs at the undergraduate level implement these sectors into their curriculum, it may increase the potential of attracting more men to the major, as well broadening the comprehensive image of what public relations represents.

Public relations programs at the undergraduate level that implement the significance of digital media, business management, and technology will not only attract young men (who traditionally have higher interest in these areas) but will also teach young women the technical skills necessary to compete and succeed at the industry level within these sectors. A woman’s lack of interest in technology, new media, and business-to-business has the potential to marginalize their existence in these sectors, where men are currently growing in population (Ruiz, et al., 2008).

There is currently an outreach for more men to enter the industry, in order for the profession to remain 'legitimate'.¹ It is important to have men represented in the industry for added diversity to public relations. However, this should be handled very cautiously, Aldoory and Toth (2002) contend the notion that men bring legitimacy to the industry devalues the practice of public relations, a practice women helped build over the years.

Aldoory and Toth (2002) suggest the classroom as an ideal setting for development of feminist values, which could have a great impact on the public relations practice. By having a pedagogical approach with feminist perspectives, lessons could be beneficial for students and provide a significant step in understanding a practice that is truly professional, ethical, and effective (Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2000).

With small measures to change the curriculum at the undergraduate level, the discipline can make strides to achieve greater diversity and provide opportunities for male perspectives in the practice of public relations, and female perspectives in leadership positions. With change at the undergraduate level, educators can begin to transform the classroom into a stepping stone for a student's future in the boardroom.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study used a limited number of participants. Although it was appropriate and necessary for this exploratory study, it does limit findings. In order to obtain a clearer picture as to why more women are choosing the public relations as a major, additional studies are necessary to determine if these results are typical.

Future research could include a comprehensive study students enrolled in public relations programs in universities offering a major in public relations, and not be limited to only active PRSSA chapters.

To discover more breadth and depth to the perspectives of practitioners working in public relations future studies should include professionals that work in public relations outside of agencies as well. Administering in-depth interviews to practitioners could also assist in providing more depth to the experiences of PR practitioners and might unveil clearer patterns and themes between student expectations and professional realities.

¹ (Ruiz et al., 2008). Howard University recently established the "Man Up" program recruiting young men. The PRSSA Diversity group is currently making efforts to enlist more men into the organization. Podcast accessed October 1, 2008, from: <http://www.prsa.org>.

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