Lead time: An examination of workplace readiness in public relations education

ARLENE PELTOLA[1]
Long Island University, New York, United States of America

A recent (2017) study of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that the unemployment rate for 20-24-year-olds, the age when many graduate from university and enter the workforce, is nearly twice that of all other age groups. The startling statistic suggests that more can be done to better prepare undergraduates for the workplace. This three-year study explores gaps in workplace preparation as identified by practitioners in the field of public relations. Based on job bank data from the Public Relations Society of America and interviews of industry leaders, this research emphasizes the imperative of student exposure to authentic work experiences for boosting graduate employability and further informing curriculum content and format. What practitioners feel to be important, what industry trends demand and what is achieved in the classroom broadly align with the best practice principles for work-integrated learning (WIL) programs.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, public relations, skill gaps, graduate employability, professionalization

"Hiring for U.S. openings for Class of 2017 graduates is expected to be relatively flat," projects the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2016a). This outlook is in line with the final projections employers reported for last year's graduates and, in fact, marks the fourth consecutive year of this trend (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016b). Employee tenure rates, too, are decreasing at an alarming rate for younger workers: the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) reports the median tenure of years (n=2.8) to be only a third of that of older colleagues. A subsequent study further testifies to the challenges facing new college graduates, citing the unemployment rate for 20-24-year-olds, the age when many graduate from university and enter the workforce, as nearly twice that of all other age groups (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

While flat hiring projections, low retention rates, and higher unemployment percentages for new alumni can be attributed to a multitude of factors, students and their families are more concerned than ever about the effectiveness of undergraduate preparation for employment, particularly following four years of exponential rises in tuition fees. According to The Institute for College Access & Success' *Project on Student Debt* (Cochrane & Cheng, 2016), almost seven in ten (68%) American graduates carried student loans into the workplace last year. Scholars and higher education administrators are keenly aware of this, and are constantly evaluating learning outcomes and adapting curricula to align with real-world practice (Livingston, 2016; Fahnert, 2015; Morris, 1996). To a certain extent, educators are wary of letting fickle markets drive curricular and pedagogical revision; but lurking under the surface of this dismal employment outlook is an astounding note that transcends the classroom. Among the employers surveyed by NACE, converting students who have participated in an internship program into full-time employees is a primary goal. Recruiting statistics support this: the current average offer rate to interns is 72.7%, the highest since the peak of the pre-recession market, and the overall conversion rate (offer: acceptance) is 61.9%, a thirteen-year high (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016a).

What is it about the internship experience that gives graduates and their employers a mutual leg up on the career ladder? Are there certain sets of skills that are best cultivated in the field, or only realized in

[1] Corresponding author: Arlene Peltola, arlene.peltola@liu.edu

practice? Are there other competencies sought by employers that are most readily attainable in the classroom? Internships are becoming the norm says the Society for Human Resource Management (2016); and while nearly 70% of recruiters and college seniors feel that the internship experience is "more valuable than a high college grade point average when applying for a job" (Maurer, 2017b), few academic programs in America provide for structured, integrative curricula in fieldwork experiences. Moreover, employers today are expecting interns to show up with specific industry skillsets. "Employers are being a lot more specific about the skills they expect from interns. A trend that continues from previous reports is that internships offer experience, not training" (Maurer, 2017a). Workplace readiness is more than just the acquisition of discipline-specific skills and knowledge. In the field of media, communications and public relations, a profession which ranks in the top cohort for college internships across a broad spectrum of industries (Maurer, 2017a), the time is ripe for new substantiated, collaborative connections between institutions of higher learning and industry.

Providing students with real-world experience and practice-based learning has gained traction in business curricula across the globe; and while there is an emerging body of literature that examines work-integrated learning (WIL) for business students, much focused effort remains in the field of public relations. This paper considers the workplace readiness of new public relations graduates by examining job descriptions and practitioner needs in the field. Based on job bank data from the Public Relations Society of America and structured interviews of industry leaders, this three-year analysis clusters various skills and attributes under five descript groups - communication, social media, critical thinking, interpersonal, and time management – to consider the degree to which what is needed in practice is achieved in the classroom, and identify gaps which might inform curriculum content and format. Although this study focuses exclusively on employers, the findings are highly relevant for educators and their students; hence, implications for academic and professional practitioners are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The extant histories of public relations (PR) take a decidedly corporate-centric view of the practice, and this orientation informed its early push for professionalization and the concomitant curricular and pedagogical developments of the last century. Today, public relations practitioners from around the world are redefining the profession and, together with educators, animating cooperative curricula that broadly align with the best practice principles for work-integrated learning (WIL) programs.

The Nature and Origins of Public Relations Education

Public relations emerged as a profession in the late nineteenth century, at a time of swift industrial growth and vigorous political campaigning in America (Cutlip, 1994). Edward Bernays, public relations pioneer and the first teacher of public relations at the college level, explains the advent of the public relations profession in this way:

> …public relations counsel arose, perhaps, in the early years of the present century as a result of the insurance scandals coincident with the muckraking of corporate finance in the popular magazines. The interests thus attacked suddenly realized that they were completely out of touch with the public they were professing to serve, and required expert advice to show them how they could understand the public and interpret themselves to it (Bernays, 1918, p. 41).

This need for expert advice, observed historian Merle Curti (1964), gained momentum by mid-century: "…corporations gradually began to realize the importance of combating hostility and courting public

favor. The expert in public relations was an inevitable phenomenon in view of the need for the services he could provide" (p. 634). Indeed, the PR professional was, at inception, considered by many intellectuals to be only an "inevitable phenomenon;" but when social forces continued to rail against business, corporate leaders of the day hired more and more of them to combat the negative publicity and public opinion generated in print. The medium of print proved a powerful tool for the influencing of public opinion and, consequently, *public relations* quickly became a euphemism for press agentry (Nayman, McKee, & Lattimore, 1977). As the axis of publicity shifted to the journalist, the imperative to differentiate between publicity and public relations quickly surfaced, and industry founders did so unequivocally: publicity, they said, is a one-way street and public relations, a two-way street (Bernays, 1952).

This elemental definition helped shape the early role of the public relations practitioner, but as the scope of public relations shifted late century, so did its name. While practitioners and organizations reassessed what public relations could and actually did do, alternative names for the discipline began to emerge within corporate culture. Internal units had a scattering of names relative to various PR functions. Publicity departments, literary bureaus, promotions departments, press offices, public affairs offices, community relations, promotions, consumer affairs all swam in an amorphous office pool until the 1980s, when many large businesses placed these divisions under the decisive umbrella of corporate communications departments (Turney, 2009). This denotation has stuck, even as the term communications continues to transform and regenerate in the digital age. Smaller companies and other types of organizations, too, have since ascribed to PR new names. Marketing communication is popular among small and mid-sized businesses; promotions has long been, and continues to be, the most common in broadcasting; publicity departments abound in the entertainment industry; public information is most often used in government agencies; and community relations is preferred by non-profits. What has this meant for educators?

Sixty years ago, the practice of public relations was an outgrowth of three factors: recognition of the power of public opinion, continuous competition among institutions for public support, and the development of media through which the public can readily be reached (Steinberg, 1958). As public opinion, public support, and the modalities of media change, so too does the way in which public relations is practiced. As such, the very nature of the profession and its constant adaptation to the needs of society make it difficult to both define and teach. Definitions of the field are frequently conflicting and generally diverse (Aronoff & Baskin, 1983) and this has proved a formative task for the profession and those who endeavor to teach it. As recently as 2012, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the largest professional, accrediting organization serving the communications community, led an international effort to modernize the character of public relations. They did so by initiating a crowdsourcing campaign and public vote of its membership (comprised of over 30,000) to produce the following definition: "Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (Public Relations Society of America, 2017a). Ever-evolving and in transition, public relations practice was, and still is, principally about relationships between organizations and their publics (Cutlip, 1962) and educators adhere to this principle. As organizations and their publics continue to change, so too do the curricular and pedagogical approaches to preparing students for professional practice. PRSA's millennial definition - an invocation of Bernays' two way street couched in global intelligent enterprise - has helped educators gain a foothold in the industry by creating strong theoretical foundations in the classroom that allow for individual development later in the field (Bernays, 1952).

Public Relations in a Cooperative Context

"For generations," said E. B. Hinckley, president of the Babson Institute of Business Administration, "teachers have been trying to prepare young people for business success" (Bernays, 1952 p. 335). For generations, also, businessmen have been unhappy about the preparation given young people for business (Bernays, 1952). To correct this situation, the First Annual Conference of Businessmen and Educators was convened in an effort to narrow the gap between them. Since then, American businesses and educators continue to make meaningful connections between didactic and experiential learning by honing college curricula to keep pace with rapidly evolving markets and practices (Wolfbein, 1959; Shaw, 1973; Suutari & Smale, 2008; González, 2012). Bridging the gap between what is taught in the classroom and what is practiced in the profession has, traditionally, been most readily achieved through the internship experience.

Cooperative learning in the public relations profession began to take off in the early 1980s, at the dawn of the digital age, when media and the modes of communication were evolving at astounding rates and large businesses were creating corporate communications departments to handle this (Cutlip, 1994; Turney, 2009). At the same time, the profession was moving from trade to a manner of theory and practice (Grunig, 2013). Peer-reviewed, scholarly journals, such as *Public Relations Review* and the *Journal of Public Relations Research*, emerged quarterly to complement up-to-the-minute, word-on-the-street information conveyed in the trade press. By 1990, practitioner-based publications, like *PR Week* and *PR News*, shared office space with seminal research on public relations theory, measurements and evaluations, history, ethics, philosophy, and bibliography. Lines between the classroom and the office merged; educators responded with new courses of study involving practical education; and in just a generation, assumptions about the time and location of learning were turned on end (Boyer, 1987). Experientially-based curricular innovations provided students with a way to apply classroom concepts to the workplace as the word intern found its way into public relations syllabi across the nation.

Internships are the most widely recognized and frequently practiced form of experiential education in public relations. Today, nearly 90% of programs in public relations include a field study component (Public Relations Society of America, 2017a). There are no standards in this area, however; and the nature of experience is largely determined by the employer (Beard & Morton, 1999; Gault, Leach & Duey, 2010). Some PR internships are paid and some are not (Casanova & Bates, 2017), and this has sparked new debate about its cost and cogency. Supervised work experience, typically approved for academic credit and designed to accomplish specific learning goals, is often (and oddly enough) not integrated at the curricular level. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2016a), most students secure an internship from a source distinctly *outside* the classroom - linking up with practitioners at career fairs, online, or through a mentor. Some universities recognize the lack of integration between internship experiences and the classroom and have sought educational models that will foster this integration (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). Work-integrated learning (WIL) programs maximize the educational value of both classroom and workplace by fostering conditions for transformative learning (McRae, 2015) and graduate employability (Jackson, 2015). Because WIL is a more formalized program of work/study, its programs can promote consistency within the public relations field and cultivate clearer discourse between practitioner and educator. This is vitally important in the context of an exceedingly dynamic, multinational public relations practice.

While the value of internships is largely measured qualitatively by universities (Mchugh, 2017; Silva et al., 2016; Green, Graybeal & Madison, 2011; Rothman & Sisman, 2016), employers in the business fields articulate important mismatches between competencies acquired by graduates and those required for

the field (Martin & Alleyne, 2017; "Businesses Still," 2017; Smith, 2017; "Time to," 2017; Hernandez-March, Martin & Leguey, 2009). This study aims to examine such mismatches as they relate to the PR profession, and posits WIL as an effective, integrative approach to advancing workplace readiness.

METHOD

This study meets the guidelines, and was conducted under the approval of, the Institutional Review Board of Long Island University. It was accomplished in three parts over the course of thirty-eight months, from March 2015 to May 2017; and involves two distinct qualitative methodologies - content analysis and structured interviews.

Content Analysis

In January 2016, and again in May 2017, entry-level job postings from the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) *Jobcenter* database were randomly selected and deconstructed according to skill requirements. The descriptive headers varied in each posting: "skill requirements," "key requirements," "requirements," "skills and qualifications," "requirements and qualifications," "position qualifications," "preferred skills and qualifications," "job responsibilities," "knowledge, skills and abilities," "specific skills," "desired skills and experience," and "skills and talents" were all considered in the samplings.

A total of 100 entry-level job descriptions were analyzed and 955 descriptive keywords harvested. Searches were filtered according to entry-level, function, industry, organizational setting, and full-time. Field criteria included all fifty states. Each skill requirement was recorded in excel in a chronologically descending order. When patterns began to emerge, skills and attributes were coded according to five descript groups - communication, social media, critical thinking, interpersonal, and time management. Competencies and characteristics specific to each classification, or group, were counted and measured by year. These skill groups are the cornerstone of entry-level work in the field of public relations.

Structured Interviews

Practitioner interviews were conducted from March 2015 to January 2016. Ten participants were selected according to the following criteria:

1) Respondents must have over ten years in public relations practice.
2) Respondents must have direct experience with entry-level employees, supervisory or other.
3) Respondents' agency or organization need not currently participate in an internship or cooperative program.

The interview guide was developed iteratively; questions were developed, tested, and refined based on a survey of the literature and previous dialogue with practitioners. Interviews were conducted via telephone and averaged thirty minutes in length. Ten practitioners, ranging in function from executive to manager and in geography from New York to San Francisco, were asked the same series of questions:

Q1. Name and describe three skill sets that new public relations graduates bring to the workplace.
Q2. Name and describe three skills sets that new public relations graduates lack when entering the workplace.
Q3. What suggestions do you have for the public relations educator to best prepare students for entry-level positions in the field?

While Q1 and Q2 have a limited set of response with room for variation, Q3 is open-ended to provide for adequate understanding and relevant close-ended inquiry. Ordering and phrasing of the questions were kept consistent and produced coherent data that could be compared across the field of response. Interviews were transcribed by the author and coded by theme (skill group) and keyword attribution. A practical assessment of workplace readiness resulted.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Public Relations Society of America Jobcenter

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) job center is a targeted source of public relations jobs connecting users to a niche market of over 80,000 professionals, including 22,000 PRSA members and 12,000 Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) students. It is the go-to resource for both employers and employees in the field. Figure 1 shows grouped skill comparisons by year. In 2016, individual job descriptions contained an average of seven requisite skills; in 2017, an average of eleven. Skills relating to written and oral communication, social media, and critical thinking nearly doubled; while requisite competencies in time and project management almost tripled.

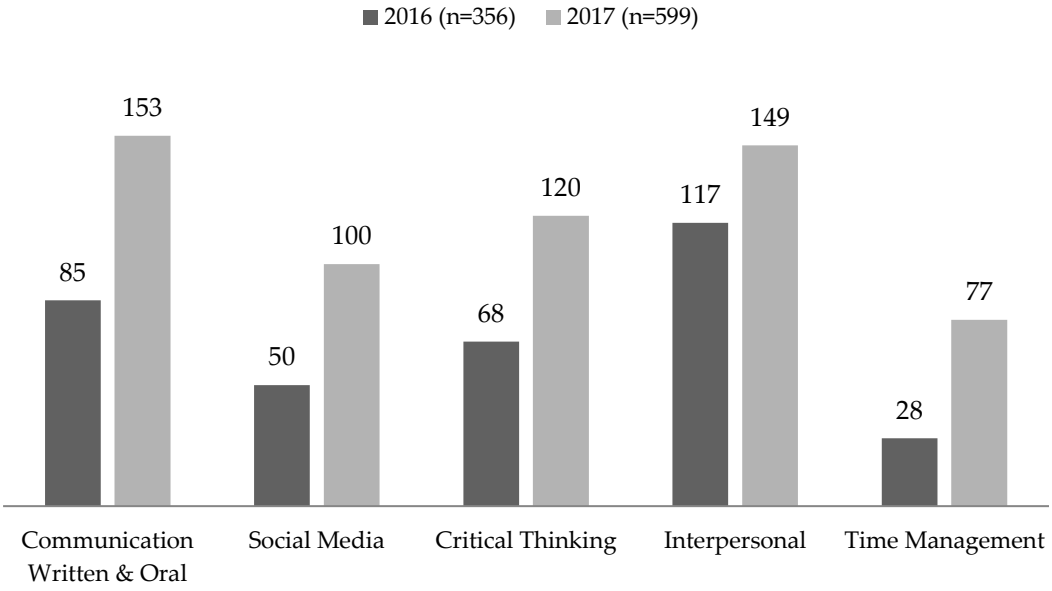

FIGURE 1: Five skill groups are strong and growing as the cornerstone of entry-level work required in the field of Public Relations.

Keywords, populated randomly, ranged from "good with animals" to "software integration." Results in keyword frequency are surprising. Table 1 exhibits keywords scaled to function and frequency of mention. The top five skills are noted under each group, with absolute and percentage changes. Some skills, such as "content development" and "organization," are new in 2017. "Attention to detail," "public speaking," and "market strategy development" show a marked increase; while "press releases," "interpersonal," and "self-management skills" declined. These fluctuations can attest to the dynamic nature of public relations work. In a year's time, for example, creating press releases gives way to other skills involving video production; and "sales" is significantly less important than "thought leadership."

TABLE 1: Specific skills categorized by skill group, displayed by frequency of mention, current year versus year ago.

Skill	2016	2017	Absolute Change (n)	Percentage Change (%)
Communication: Written & Oral				
Advanced Writing	22	40	18	+ 82
Content Development	1	23	22	+ 2200
Proofreading / Editing	17	20	3	+ 18
Public Speaking	13	26	13	+ 100
Press Releases	12	11	-1	- 8
Social Media				
Social Media	15	23	8	+ 53
Digital Marketing	17	44	27	+ 159
Web Development	8	14	6	+ 75
Graphic Design	--	10	10	
Video Production	1	4	3	+ 300
Critical Thinking				
Critical Thinking	24	26	2	+ 8
Media Strategy Development	18	27	9	+ 50
Market Analysis	10	2	-8	- 80
Trend Identification	8	21	13	+ 163
Attention to Detail	1	11	10	+ 1000
Interpersonal				
Interpersonal Skills	22	13	-9	- 41
Forming Relationships	18	26	8	+ 44
Business & Media Contacts	30	25	-5	- 17
Maturity	3	26	23	+ 767
Influence Others	1	7	6	+ 600
Time Management				
Work Under Pressure	10	15	5	+ 50
Project Management	3	21	18	+ 600
Self-Management	11	10	-1	- 9
Event Management	1	16	15	+1500
Organization	--	12	12	

Skills related to tangential fields and functions, such as advertising, marketing, product testing, event management, and information technology are prominent. Oral and written communication, broadly defined, remains the largest consistent grouped set. Six new skills appeared in the 2017 random sample: "design graphics," "influencer management," "intercultural skills," "organizational skills," "data analytics," and "thought leadership." Thought leadership is commonly discussed in the business world, but rarely articulated in public relations literatures or curricula. A "thought leader" is an informed opinion leader, one who cuts through the "noise" and offers something worth listening to (Fallon, 2016). Thought leaders encourage new ways of thinking by creating methods, processes, guidelines, and sets of best practices for others to follow (Brosseau, 2014) and codify the steps necessary to build foundations for others to follow and then build on. The fact that "thought leadership" is mentioned seven times in the 2017 random sample of fifty merits attention; firstly, because the term is

virtually absent in the PR vernacular, and second, because it provides for stark contrast between curriculum and practicum.

Practitioner Interviews

Structured interviews are based on the principle that forecasts from an arranged group of experts are more reliable than those from unstructured groups. This technique provides qualitative findings that are insightful, but not projectable. Data in Table 2, derived from the interview transcripts, show respondents' answers to Q1 and Q2. Attributes and deficiencies are listed and coded according to skill group. Table 3 articulates the scale of attribute: deficiency in number (*n=60*).

In sum, there is agreement among the respondents that recent PR graduates are only partially equipped with the skills that practitioners expect when entering the workplace. The appendix features various practitioner statements relative to each skill group. First-jobbers are characterized by a distinct capacity for technology, various personal and global values, natural curiosity, and hands-on internship experience. The cooperative effect is not isolated as a discrete variable in this research. Practitioners acknowledge that recent college graduates are digital natives, technologically savvy, comfortable with multiple communication apparatus, and possess a level of access and immediacy that distinguishes them from previous generations.

Others remark that new graduates are comfortable with diversity; they care about their local and global communities. Applicants aspire to a centered, balanced lifestyle and readily adapt to fast-moving landscapes. One respondent notes that new hires "…are tuned into civic justice and understand how societies work on a global scale." More graduates are starting their first job out of college with one, two, and sometimes three, internship experiences (Maurer, 2017a) and "…come with prior advertising, marketing, digital media experience" and "honed skills not readily apparent on the resume or at the interview." And yet, all respondents consider new PR graduates to be lacking in skills relating to written and oral communication, strategic and critical thinking, and individual initiative – attributes that are critical for success in the workplace. Practitioners agree that the lack of advanced writing and oral communication skills is distressingly evident. Smart content development, attention to detail, proofreading, basic spelling and grammar, ideation, and concise articulation are wanting. "There is only an *occasional* great writer," one respondent remarks. A persistent gap exists in strategic thinking: "Despite regular use of digital tools including social media, [they] lack the understanding of when and how to use them to achieve a specific objective." There remains a continuing misunderstanding of business concepts. "Send me someone who has mobile mastery on the strategic level," pleads a renowned executive. In terms of critical thinking, students seem not to possess the full capacity to formulate questions, assess relevant information, consider alternatives, and determine solutions. Respondents concur that graduates often do not know what questions to ask, and suggest that experiential activities relating to writing, business, case analysis, globalization, and technology be fully integrated into the curriculum and formally assessed as a component of program performance.

Programs for public relations in higher education generally emanate from schools of communication or media arts, but it is evident from the data harvested in this study that, in today's shifting global landscape, the business of public relations demands acumen beyond these departments.

TABLE 2: Assessment by practitioner of workplace readiness, coded by skill group, displayed by attribute or deficiency. Social Media and Interpersonal are key attributes while Critical Thinking and Communication are key deficiencies.

Interview	Attributes	Skill group	Deficiencies	Skill group
Practitioner 1	Computer literacy	S	Basic news writing	C
	Natural curiosity	I	Attention to detail	CT
	Consumer of social media	S	Self-confidence	I
Practitioner 2	Comfortable with diversity	I	Business acumen	CT
	Optimistic about applied skills	I	Understanding of PR	CT
	Collaborative and communal	I	Writing, grammar, spelling	C
Practitioner 3	Technology	S	Responsibility (project)	T
	Blind to ethnicity	I	Initiative (project)	T
	Social media	S	Polished communication	C
Practitioner 4	Trend identification	CT	Writing	C
	Social media	S	Brand journalism and content	CT
	Compassionate	I	Market research / analysis	CT
Practitioner 5	Digital media	S	Independence	T
	Organized	T	Practical knowledge	CT
	Work under pressure	T	Public speaking	C
Practitioner 6	Integrated digital tools	S	Verbal communication	C
	Fresh ideas	I	Problem solving	CT
	Drive to succeed	I	Strategic thinking	CT
Practitioner 7	Global orientation	I	Personal communication	C
	PR fundamentals	CT	Work under pressure	T
	Digital survey tools	S	Analytics / research	CT
Practitioner 8	Enthusiastic	I	Confuse PR & marketing	CT
	Aptitude for digital tools	S	Misuse social media	S
	Open minded	I	Irreverence for history	I
Practitioner 9	Written communication	C	Marketing acumen	CT
	Confidence	I	Disinterest	I
	Professionalism	I	Problem solving	CT
Practitioner 10	Confidence	I	Preparation	T
	Digital media	S	Work under pressure	T
	Creativity	I	Written communication	C

C = Communication; S = Social media; CT = Critical thinking; I = Interpersonal; T = Time management

TABLE 3: Practitioner's perspectives on attributes and deficiencies by skill group (*n=60*)

Skill group	Attribute	Deficiency
Communication / Written & Oral	1	8
Social Media	10	1
Critical Thinking	2	12
Interpersonal	15	3
Time Management	2	6

"Foreign language translation" and "intercultural communication" are recurrent skills, as is "storytelling," which increased in mention 800 percent this year. Are these addressed in the PR curriculum? "Multilingual" is listed four times, and yet, few public relations programs require a foreign language component. "Knowledge of employer" merits repeated attention in practitioner interviews, but are our students trained in the use of library databases, for example, in researching company profiles? Are public relations students conversant in the peripheral languages of their field (business, government, entertainment)? Do they have a clear sense of the big picture, or where PR situates in global, corporate enterprise? Furthermore, can our professors begin to espouse heuristic techniques for cultivating skills such as thought leadership in the classroom? The revitalized PRSA definition and the profession's rapidly growing student population is a timely call for educators to rethink cooperative learning programs and reframe the experiential model in a more formalized, WIL context.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Although several important pedagogical implications can be made through the results of this study, there are some limitations. While the use of structured interviews with practitioners served to identify what employers felt to be lacking in their new hires, and by extension, what might not have been taught in PR programs, they do not account for myriad other factors affecting student learning. Failure to learn, failure to transfer, failure to teach, and all of the in-betweens are not considered in the scope of this study.

Acknowledging that skill keywords are derived from a biennial random sampling, future research might include an analysis of the full content of all PRSA job postings on a regular, successive schedule. Also, it may prove useful to both professors and practitioners to further evaluate the connections between experiential learning and academic outcomes in preparing students for the workplace by introducing a formalized, longitudinal examination of the relationship between competencies sought for the workplace and current curricular offerings, as expressed in course descriptions, programmatic learning objectives, and syllabi. A cross-sectional, multinational study with a large sample of diverse, global public relations graduates would serve to further advance this research and promote professionalization.

Importantly, academic departments could examine experiential learning assessments to quantitatively measure skill attainment and examine linkages with the basic, applied, and knowledge-based skills articulated today as shortages. Finally, it may be useful for scholars in disciplines other than public relations to model this study.

CONCLUSION

Although there is general agreement on the importance of business skills and on the need to include them in related curricula (Du-Babcock, 2006), growing evidence indicates a substantial number of inadequately prepared entry-level applicants in the field of public relations. Conrad and Newberry (2012) suggest that this may be the result of practitioners demanding outcomes-based, functional skills and academics teaching the basic, formal fundamentals. A study by the Society for Human Resource Management (2016) reports that, across industries, employers are experiencing a more challenging recruiting environment because of skills shortages: more than half of those surveyed indicate some level of *basic* skills/knowledge deficits among job applicants; 84% report *applied* skills shortages in job applicants in the last year; and nearly one-third of respondents state that they are working without a training budget (SHRM, 2016). What is achieved and not achieved in today's classrooms have a protracted ripple effect on both workplace readiness and long-term productivity. In the field of public relations, curricular objectives and practitioner needs can come into balance through placement-based WIL programs. Given the dynamic nature of public relations practice and the outstanding challenges facing new graduates for finding employment, a purposefully designed curriculum that best integrates theory with the practice of work and provides for assessment and improvements at the student, curricular, and practitioner levels is essential.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate prevalent gaps between curriculum and practicum with the aim of developing undergraduate employability skills. The research objective is to identify requisite competencies, as expressed in job postings and by industry leaders. Further investigation involves critical curricular analyses - evaluating program curriculum guides and comparing them against the skill groups. WIL fosters partnerships between higher education and industry, and this approach is essential for designing a curriculum which is responsive to the needs of both the PR practitioner and the industry as a whole. Promising a better investment to students; meeting employer demands; and providing industry with skilled employees at a low cost with no additional training required (Abeysekera, 2006) is vital in today's marketplace.

Both the job descriptions and expert interviews highlight important skills expected at entry-level for public relations graduates. Although the effect of experiential learning on skill achievement is not isolated in the primary research of this study, the skills honed by having had internships or cooperative experiences are seen as an advantage in the labor market, both in terms of job offers and starting salary (NACE, 2016). The insights from this study suggest a framework for educators in the field of public relations for future experiential activities and guided academic assignments; that is, that professors build in-class and out-of-class experiential programmatic goals around the key skills identified in this study: communication, social media, critical thinking, interpersonal, and time management. Workplace readiness at the entry-level requires educators to inculcate a strategic approach to assignments and align their students with emergent skills - social intelligence, novel and adaptive thinking, cultural competency, new media literacy, transdisciplinary digital platforms, and virtual collaboration. In order for students to prepare for entry-level workplace requirements, there must be greater synergy between higher education's programmatic learning outcomes and the practical competencies that develop from theory and training. In the end, higher education's ability to deliver competent graduates to industry is tied to students' capacity to transfer core skills and competencies that enable them to adapt quickly to changing opportunities; empower them to recover quickly from difficulties; and further advance the operational goals and professionalization of the field.

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APPENDIX: Practitioner Statements by Skill Group

Skill Group	Statement
Communication / Written & Oral	"…only an occasional great writer."
	"Basic news writing skills are lacking; not current with AP style changes."
	"Blur words and thinking; write news releases as if they are speaking to friends."
	"Lack confidence in presentation of self; an 'uptalking' epidemic."
	"Poor attention to detail, proofreading and polishing a piece. I almost lost a client due to a typo."
	"Modest aptitude in business writing; poor grammar and spelling; few grasp 'active voice,' fewer still have an authentic one."
	"Great writers have to start as great readers, or it won't work."
	"Difficulty communicating while brainstorming; see things from a technological point of view, not a personal one."
	"Would rather text than have a one-on-one conversation; they avoid looking you in the eyeballs."
Social Media	"They have to know that it is not technology, it's content."
	"Impressive capacity for technology; astute in digital media, social platforms, and creative approaches."
	"Lack mobile mastery on the strategic level. Having the technical skill is not enough; they need to understand the tactical approach."
	"There's a name for PR people who know business. It's BOSS.
	"Social media is often misused or not used optimally. The new grads are typically telling someone about themselves with no benefit to the reader."
Time Management	"Passionate and driven to succeed; will often seek out additional projects, sometimes to their detriment."
	"Can't turn things around fast, as in crisis communication; can't quickly articulate an idea or a position."
	"Are comfortable with many communication vehicles; they operate from a high level of access and immediacy."
	"Lack patience for advancement."
	"Hasty and error-prone."
	"To stay organized and deliver under pressure is a skill often honed by managers, early on."
	"'Newsworthiness' – the first three letters are NEW. Finding the trend and figuring out where it fits, fast, does not come easy."
Other	"Math skills need to go up two notches."
	"Poor problem solving abilities."
	"Lack the responsibility to own a project without complaining."
	"Should know infographics, and use it."

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues dealing with Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE). Since then the readership and authorship has become more international and terminology usage in the literature has favoured the broader term of WIL. In response to these changes, the journal name was changed to the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning in 2018.

In this Journal, WIL is defined as "*an educational approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum*". Examples of such practice includes work placements, work-terms, internships, practicum, cooperative education (Co-op), fieldwork, work-related projects/competitions, service learning, entrepreneurships, student-led enterprise, applied projects, simulations (including virtual WIL), etc. WIL shares similar aims and underpinning theories of learning as the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training, however, each of these fields are seen as separate fields.

The Journal's main aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL primarily of two forms; 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider best practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data. And a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Best practice and program description papers. On occasions, the Journal also seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of best practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or is situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.

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