



University Student-Run Communication Agencies after Coronavirus: ‘Back in business’ or ‘Unable to locate’?

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Abstract

The student-run agency [SRA] is a valuable service-learning experience for university students planning communication careers. During the Coronavirus pandemic, program cuts, course cancellations, and stay-at-home orders hindered service-learning opportunities. This content analysis of student agency website and social media data suggests as many as 44% of SRAs operational in 2019 may have been non-operational by 2022. A presumed loss of many operational SRAs threatens decades of growth of this resource. It suggests fewer opportunities for collegial support among remaining supervisory faculty. Observed substandard online communication by SRAs presents an additional issue of concern regarding perceptions of agency professionalism.

Introduction

The student-run communication agency (SRA) is a business operating within or in close association with an academic program. The SRA allows university students to gain first-hand knowledge and skills in advertising, marketing, public relations, or similar disciplines by planning and conducting campaigns or projects for real-world clients (Ranta *et al.*, 2021). Through this service-learning experience, students demonstrate readiness for the communication workplace (Haygood *et al.*, 2019).

The first student agencies were established in the 1970s. There were only a handful of agencies through the 1980s and ‘90s (Avery & Marra, 1992). SRAs grew quickly in number through the early 2000s. In 2016, an extensive search found 158 student agencies operational, with most in the USA and a few in other

countries (Swanson, 2017). By early 2022, additional searching combined with self-reporting by agency supervising faculty had increased the number of identified SRAs to 182.

A successful student agency requires strategic planning and resources well beyond what is needed for a typical university course (Haley, Ritsch, & Smith, 2015; Maben, 2010). Many different obligations must be balanced (Kim *et al.*, 2021). The agency must model professional realities while aligning with an academic calendar, not a marketplace calendar. Industry-related obligations include guiding students in concept learning and creative execution, overseeing client services, administering business operations, and engaging with a variety of internal and external stakeholders to establish and maintain the SRA’s brand and marketplace relevance.

Keywords: Student-Run Agency, Service Learning, Advertising

Operating a student agency became more difficult on February 3, 2020. On that date the Trump Administration declared Coronavirus to be a national public health emergency in the U.S. (A timeline of COVID-19 developments..., 2021). Universities and colleges went into lockdown. In the months that followed, the pandemic generated many negative impacts for higher education including reduced enrollment, academic and co-curricular program cancellations, and faculty and staff layoffs. Service-learning programs were significantly disrupted by stay-at-home and social distancing orders (Kehl *et al.*, 2022). As service-learning entities, SRAs would have been disrupted during this period. However, no existing studies have documented the extent of that disruption.

The present study involved estimating the number of SRAs that ceased operations during the pandemic. Because there are many organizational variables that constrain researchers' ability to determine an exact number of operational SRAs at any given time, the findings are based on observable agency website and social media data. Much more needs to be learned about how SRAs dealt with the huge challenges presented during the Coronavirus years; the present study is a valuable first step to begin building a collective understanding of this difficult time.

Literature Review

This section reviews the impact of Coronavirus on higher education in general and service-learning in specific. It discusses the inherent challenges in gathering data about the operational status of SRAs. It concludes with a presentation of the theoretical framework that guided this study and the rationale for using this approach.

Prior to Coronavirus, many universities and colleges were invested almost exclusively in a system requiring the physical presence of students and teachers. In 2019, more than 19.6 million students were enrolled in U.S. higher education; 63% were taking all their courses in person. By fall 2020, student enrollment had dropped to 18.9 million and 74% of students were enrolled in at least one distance learning course (Digest of education statistics, 2021).

Coronavirus resulted in significant institutional losses in academic financial support, program stability, and co-curricular engagement. Students suffered with financial hardships (Martirosyan *et al.*, 2022), mental health instability (Hager *et al.*, 2022) and a myriad of

other problems. Coronavirus brought "disproportionate harm to people of color, women, people living in or near poverty, and those with disabilities" (Barrett-Fox *et al.*, 2020, p. 149). An estimated 296,000 students planning to transfer between two-year institutions or from a two-year program to a four-year program simply gave up and dropped out (COVID-19 transfer, mobility, and progress, 2022) while others postponed their graduation (One in four..., 2020).

Many higher education institutions quickly adopted Zoom and similar teleconferencing technologies. But the technology "magnified [existing] issues and created new ones" (Gould, 2020, p. 45). Students lacking preparatory skills and experience struggled "to navigate the new landscape of remote learning" (Gould, 2020, p. 46). Online instruction was seen as especially problematic in subjects where "learning outcomes cannot be met without in-house training" (Gamage *et al.*, 2020, p. 3). SRAs were among those programs impacted by governmental and institutional mandates suspending in-person learning.

Capturing data about SRAs

Quantitative and qualitative data about the Coronavirus pandemic impact on higher education was routinely provided to the U.S. Higher Education Commission, federal and state departments of education, and other educational stakeholders (List of higher education associations and organizations in the United States, 2022). Information about specific institutions' budgets, programs, employment, student enrollments, and strategic planning was routinely self-reported and readily available via news stories.

However, the student agency is a pedagogical structure, not an institutional one. There is no system to collect information about the status of SRAs. A curriculum-based SRA is not a degree-granting unit. It need not be identified by name in a course description and may not have disaggregated enrollment statistics. The SRA may exist only as a name on an office door, and perhaps even less than that. The agency's name likely represents a marketplace entity and not a recognized academic unit.

SRA supervision often rotates among faculty; identifying who is currently in charge can be difficult. Some SRAs use adjunct instructors who lack campus offices. Many SRAs do not have campus directory-listed telephone numbers.

SRAs operating outside the curricular structure have even less institutional presence. These agencies,

operating without course enrollment or academic credit, are likely to be volunteer based. Student activity may not be institutionally recognized. There may be no faculty supervisor.

Theoretical framework for the current study

This study proceeded from the standpoint that regardless of a student agency's structure and service focus, an SRA's existence is dependent upon constant informational and persuasive communication with internal and external stakeholders. Previous research has identified that a strong online presence is central to communicating that SRAs are open for business – and what type of business they're open for (Swanson & Assaf, 2019).

Because of the many complexities that prevent a direct assessment of the operational status of SRAs, the decision was made to undertake data collection for the present study via Media Content Analysis. This approach is routinely used to investigate communication by higher education institutions and programs (Barger *et al.*, 2022; Ely, 2021; Lalchandani *et al.*, 2022). It allows the objective identification, location, and categorization of relevant qualitative and quantitative data presented via media narratives and visual images – in this case, Web-based and social media content.

Tenets of Media Content Analysis were followed to systematically guide collection of data presented online by SRAs. The presence or absence of basic information about what agencies do, who they serve, what services are offered, and whether services were currently available was used to determine whether SRAs were likely to be operational or non-operational by late 2022, approximately two and a half years after the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Materials and Methods

This section begins with a brief profile of the known population of student-run agencies. It then presents methods used to collect data. The section ends with the study's two research questions.

The population for study consisted of 182 SRAs: 177 in the USA and five in other countries – Australia (two), New Zealand (one), Peru (one), and South Africa (one). Of the total, 158 had been identified through an exhaustive search in 2016 and then assembled into a database published as a component of an academic text a year later (Swanson, 2017). The remaining 24 SRAs in the population for study were

identified between 2017 and 2022, usually through self-report by the SRA's supervising faculty member.

The inquiry began August 1 and concluded November 30, 2022. During that period, the researcher and a student assistant worked independently using the same set of procedures to locate Web-based and social media content offered by each of the 182 SRAs that would suggest whether each agency was operational. Operational status was broadly defined as currently engaged in client work, the single major differentiator between the SRA and a traditional classroom experience (Kim, *et al.*, 2021). The two resulting sets of content analysis data were cross-checked for accuracy. As data were collected, additional notes were compiled about the perceived strengths and weaknesses of online content.

The study addressed two research questions:

RQ1: As higher education institutions emerged from the Coronavirus pandemic, what observed online content of university student-run agencies suggested operational or non-operational status?

RQ2: Based on a systematic analysis of student-run agencies' online content, how many agencies appeared to be non-operational?

Results

RQ1: As higher education institutions emerged from the Coronavirus pandemic, what observed online content of university student-run agencies suggested operational or non-operational status?

A study undertaken before Coronavirus found approximately 80% of SRAs employed a public-facing website (Swanson & Assaf, 2019). The rate of website use by SRAs exceeded that of all small businesses in the U.S. – which was estimated at 73% in 2023 (Emnace, 2023). The current inquiry posited that the primary indicator to suggest an SRA's operational status would be the existence of an operational website with content dated 2019 or later.

Secondary indicators to suggest an SRA's operational status included online content dated 2019 or later identifying specific students, clients, projects, activities, or calendar events. Other secondary indicators would be an agency online contact form or email address, and one or more social media platforms with content dated 2019 or later. Figure 1 illustrates the steps of the inquiry, in order, to reach the conclusion that a particular SRA's online content suggested op-

Figure 1
Procedure Employed in Inquiry and Analysis of Student-Run Agency Online Content

1. **Locate, access, and review** the SRA website identified in the database for content dated 2019 or later that would suggest activity since the onset of Coronavirus.
 - **If the website URL is functioning**, search the site for dated content that may include information about clients or campaigns, information about students working in the agency, an agency calendar, or an agency news story or blog link.
 - **If an SRA website URL cannot be located or is non-functioning**, conduct a web browser search for the SRA by name and by college or university.
 - **If a web browser search is unsuccessful**, search the college or university institutional domain for institutional page(s); search for mentions of the SRA by its name and/or with the terms “student-run agency” and “student-run firm.”
 - **If an institutional page search is unsuccessful**, search the college or university institutional website for news stories about the SRA and/or its students.
2. **If no website content suggesting recent SRA activity is identified**, conduct a web browser search for SRA social media content (ex.: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter).
 - **If social media site(s) are identified**, search for content dated 2019 or later that would suggest activity since the onset of Coronavirus.
3. **Additional observations** of SRA online content:
 - College or university name (verify)
 - Agency name (verify)
 - Primary area(s) of work focus, as stated in online content
 - Agency mission statement?
 - Agency structure – curricular or extracurricular?
 - Photographs of SRA students engaged in client work?
 - Noteworthy quotations or testimonials from students or clients?
 - Presence of agency contact form or email address

erational or non-operational status.

An SRA was suggested to be non-operational if at least two of the following conditions were met: An existing agency website (unique URL) could not be located, or was not operational; a newer agency website could not be located; an agency website linked to the university or college institutional domain could not be located, or the URL identified there was non-operational; no agency information dated 2019 or later could be found during a term search on the university or college institutional domain; no agency information dated 2019 or later could be found during a search of the university or college institutional website for news stories; no agency social media activity dated 2019 or later could be identified; or an agency online contact form or email address could not be located.

In a few cases, online content was immediately located that communicated the agency’s non-operational status. No additional searching for content was needed.

RQ2: Based on a systematic analysis of student-run agencies’ online content, how many agencies appeared to be non-operational?

Of the 182 agencies that comprised the population for study, a total of 81 SRAs (44%) met two or more of the conditions that suggested non-operational status, as shown in Figure 2. SRAs that appeared to be non-operational included six of seven SRAs in Minnesota, five of seven SRAs in Michigan, four of seven SRAs in New York State, four of seven SRAs in Ohio, five of eleven SRAs in Texas, and three of five SRAs outside of the U.S.

Discussion

Every norm of higher education from the years before Coronavirus has been radically altered. SRAs are no exception. The results of this study of student agencies’ online communication are important to educators who supervise an SRA or plan to launch one in the future. While the methodology of the present study cannot bring about a definitive declaration of

Figure 2

Identified Online Content Suggesting Non-Operational Status of Student-Run Agency (n = 81)

Website was non-functional, and no Web link or relevant content could be found on the college or university institutional domain

(65 agencies, or 35% of the total)

Web-based or social media was functional but offered no contact form or email address to facilitate inquiries

(51 agencies, or 32% of the total)

Website was functional but offered no content dated 2019 or later

(12 agencies, or 6% of the total)

Social media page(s) functional but offered no content dated 2019 or later

(11 agencies, or 6% of the total)

Website functional but provided content linked to non-functional SRA social media site(s)

(2 agencies, or 1% of the total)

(Each of the 81 agencies met two or more of the conditions that suggested non-operational status.)

the operational or non-operational status of SRAs, the study offers an idea of how the population of agencies is likely to have been diminished during a time when other service-learning programs were cut back or cancelled.

The criteria for RQ 1 were clear: An SRA either had a working website, or it didn't. It either had locatable social media, or it didn't. It was either locatable via the institutional website, or it wasn't. These are basic content elements that are important contributors to user perception of operational status.

Post-Coronavirus content was often easy to identify. In absence of any dated content, each SRA was allowed the benefit of the doubt. Online content was assumed to be within the range of currency if it did not suggest or specifically reference its creation before the onset of Coronavirus.

The answer to Research Question 2 was based on the presence or absence of content elements identified in RQ1. Appearance is the issue. A student agency that doesn't appear to be operational may easily be perceived as 'out of business' even if it is still operational. Online users have expectations of the content they search for, and these expectations create a reality (Ogunlimi, 2016). People seeking information about a student agency want to know how it works, how it can help them, whether it can help them now, and how to make contact. Students seek this information as they make decisions about career preparation. Potential clients seek this information as they decide if an SRA's services would benefit their organization.

An evaluation of the appropriateness of online content is indirectly related to this issue of perceptions of operational status. The issue of appropriate content needs to be discussed briefly.

Common strengths of content noted by the researchers but not tracked quantitatively included: An agency mission statement or similar narrative; a narrative explanation of the SRA's educational value for students and service value for clients; testimonials by current or former students and clients; and photos showing students at work for clients. SRA online content was informally evaluated as appropriate when it appeared to be error-free and all links within the content were functional.

Common weaknesses of SRA online content noted by the researchers but not tracked quantitatively included: Websites with lengthy URLs that discouraged engagement; calendar pages devoid of any calendar entries; multiple active social media pages on the same platform (e.g., an agency with two different Facebook pages, both listed under the agency's name); online content focused on social experiences (e.g., glamor shot photos, gag photos, stories about mixers and field trips) rather than on career preparation and client service; and online content comprised of classroom-based hypothetical assignments rather than actual client work. Some observed weaknesses that seemed to amplify the other content problems were quantitatively noted and are identified in Figure 3.

A study by Rademacher (2022) identified the need for SRAs to increase their diversity, equity, and

inclusion initiatives. Most SRA online content gave no indication that this is happening. Even though many SRAs are known to operate in multi-lingual communities, only one agency website contained content in both English and Spanish.

Even among agencies that appeared to be operational, many relevant details about agency structure, work specialties, policies, and types of clients sought were not communicated. Some online content contained little or no indication that actual client work was ever conducted.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

Despite widespread endorsement of the SRA concept (Bush & Miller, 2011), the student-run agency is a rarity in academe. In 2022, more than 600 U.S. universities and colleges offered undergraduate degrees in advertising or marketing (Hartley *et al.*, 2019; Peck, 2019a); almost 900 offered undergraduate degrees in communication (Peck, 2019b). Very few of these programs had ever offered a student-run agency. SRAs are such an unusual occurrence that even many industry professionals are unaware that student agencies exist (Swanson, 2019). The apparent non-operational status of such a high percentage of SRAs is troubling when SRAs already lack recognition in academic and professional environments.

Because student agencies are unique service-learning programs, faculty supervisors need to be able to reach out to colleagues at other universities in the area for best practices suggestions and related support. That support vanishes if six of seven SRAs in a particular state (Minnesota), or five of seven (Michigan), or four of seven (Ohio and New York) have ceased to function.

The literature offers a variety of case studies of how service-learning programs dealt with program reductions, stay-at-home mandates, social distancing, teleconferencing, and the wide range of student anxiety during Coronavirus. Some programs adapted and survived. Others shut down, either temporarily or permanently. No existing literature could be found that focuses on adaptation by student agencies. This deficiency needs to be addressed.

Finally, regardless of actual operational status, it is difficult to argue that any SRA would be seen favorably by online users without communicating clear, informative, persuasive messages about its work. The ancillary observations made during this study strongly suggest SRAs need to communicate more effectively online not only about their operational status, but also about their values, services, and relevance to internal and external stakeholders.

Figure 3 Observed Common Weaknesses of Student-Run Agency Online Content

Websites that offered no narrative to explain whether the SRA was structured within the curriculum (credit bearing) or outside of the curriculum (volunteer-based)

(38 agencies, or 20% of the total)

Websites that offered no narrative content about the SRA's work focus (e.g., advertising, marketing, public relations, social media) or offered content that was unclear

(31 agencies, or 17% of the total)

SRAs known to have PRSSA affiliation that were not listed on the PRSSA's directory of student firms Web page or were listed with a URL that was found to be non-operational or incorrectly coded (Example: one affiliated SRA was identified on the PRSSA directory page and was incorrectly hyperlinked to the Facebook page of "*a Talent Focused Entertainment Public Relations Agency with offices in Los Angeles & New York.*")

(6 agencies, or 3% of the total)

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