



Big Dreams...Small Programs: Using Innovation to Deliver High-Quality Public Relations Education with Limited Resources

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Universities and colleges nationwide are working aggressively to help students prepare for the growing and changing demands of the public relations profession. Not all programs are created equal, though, in terms of available resources. How do small programs stay competitive and relevant in this time of dynamic change?

While developing an annual process for curriculum review, the public relations faculty at Drake University used a variety of AEJMC, ACEJMC, and PRSA resources to compile a list of 451 U.S. colleges and universities that offer public relations and/or mass communication courses. Programs varied greatly, featuring a range of public relations majors, minors, concentrations and “cross-departmental” partnerships (i.e., Strategic Communication, Integrated Marketing Communication). As a small program, Drake University used the findings to identify areas of strength in its current program and opportunities for growth and change. The research also provided a unique opportunity to reflect on public relations education today and led the researchers to ask a critical question: What steps should we take, as a small program, to ensure we offer innovative, cutting-edge opportunities for our students while being mindful of shrinking departmental and university budgets and limited faculty resources?

Examining public relations programs in the U.S., specifically exploring the unique ways small programs are delivering high-quality educational experiences in public relations, the researchers offer the following

ideas for enhancing programs of any size.

One-Credit Special Topics Courses – Several universities offer a series of one-credit, special topics courses when additional, specialized courses aren’t feasible. The additional courses allow the curriculum to remain current and innovative, and many universities use adjuncts or professionals to teach the courses to maximize full-time faculty resources and to ensure the content reflects current industry practice. However, a few universities paid ‘overload’ for full-time, tenure-track faculty members to teach these courses. The flexibility of a one-credit course (or a fraction of the “traditional” course credit offered) provides options for students to customize their specializations, identify new professional strengths and pursue areas of interest often not possible in a traditional curriculum. For example, some small public relations programs have offered media relations, crisis communications and investor relations as one-credit, special topics courses.

Externships and Professional Partnerships – Beyond traditional internship experiences, some universities have developed close relationships with area alumni and employers that not only offer students practical experience in the field, but also provide a pipeline of talent ready for the workplace. The partnerships result in hands-on experiences for students, increased exposure of the communications program in the market, an enhanced professional network for faculty members to maintain currency in the field, and potential

cost sharing for facilities and technology. Some externships required intensive faculty preparation and monitoring. Timelines varied, with most programs offering the immersive experiences in summer terms. Some programs offered course credit for the externship experiences.

Cross-Departmental Collaboration – Given that universities offered a wide range of majors, minors and concentrations, collaborations took on many shapes. Some universities designed experiences that helped students understand the value of integrated campaign development while maintaining distinct public relations, advertising, communication and marketing majors. These opportunities included unique courses, extracurricular activities (i.e., creative exercises and/or executions and crisis simulations facilitated by alumni, professionals in the community or faculty), and student-organization projects led by faculty advisors (i.e., Habitat for Humanity). Others worked with on-campus departments, such as residence life, university communications and athletics, to provide valuable experiences for students.

Co-curricular Activities – Researchers found this category to be the most varied in scope. Some universities—both large and small—have created student-run public relations firms to expose students to client-based projects and build students' professional portfolios. Others have designed converged, multimedia agencies with some even generating revenue for the university. Many programs rely on their on-campus professional associations (i.e. Public Relations Student Society of America, Society of Professional Journalists, American Advertising Federation, Ameri-

can Marketing Association, International Association of Business Communicators, Association for Women in Communications) to provide valuable out-of-classroom experiences for students, relying on faculty advisors for guidance and continuity year after year. Researchers also found that universities near centralized populations often designed partnerships with professional associations, providing unique opportunities for on-campus speakers, meeting discounts for students and professional development opportunities, including job shadows, networking events and workshops or seminars.

Small programs are an investment. They are an investment of time, resources, and sweat equity among faculty and administrators. And, to continue to return value on that investment—successful, accomplished graduates—educators need the proper tools. The first step is identifying how best to maximize resources. This article offers the building blocks to make a good program great. It provides a menu of options to enhance programs through a strong curriculum, focused faculty, dedicated alumni and professional partners, and valuable co-curricular activities. Think of it as caviar dreams on a fish stick budget. Using this snapshot of public relations education as a roadmap, small programs can identify ways to wisely allocate resources while providing the most important deliverable of all—competent, prepared public relations graduates poised for lifelong success.

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