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Students attend a lecture at West Virginia University's Reed College of Media

A Master's Degree in Public Relations Offers Students More Than Just PR

By Mark Renfree

The relationship between public relations and academia all started at the master's level. So it's perhaps fitting that it's in the nation's graduate programs that working practitioners and recently graduated college students undergo a sort of metamorphosis to better align their skills with the kaleidoscopic reality of the field.

It wasn't until 1947 that Boston University offered the first degree in public relations; it was a graduate degree. While other academic courses were taught on the subject well before 1947, it was at the graduate level that PR became truly inducted into academia.

"Communications is still sort of a newer field—even 10 or 20 years ago there were hardly even degrees in communication," said Dr. Rebecca Heino, executive director, senior lecturer, Communication Division, with the School of Professional Studies at Columbia University.

Since public relations' admission into the ivory tower, the number of universities teaching the subject—at both the undergraduate and graduate level—has grown to where you'd be hard-pressed to enter a university today and not find a PR track.

Between the years of 2000 and 2011 alone, the number of graduate PR programs nearly tripled, according to a 2011 study by the Commission on Public Relations Education. As the discipline continues to gain traction at American colleges, the reality of the workplace awaiting graduating students remains elusively fluid. The lines between fields that were once happy to be tucked away in their respective silos are becoming increasingly blurred.

"There were components of the program that you would expect to find in a MBA program, like finance and accounting for PR practitioners," said Pickering, director, corporate communications with Cone Com-

munications and adjunct professor at The George Washington University.

While enrolled at George Washington, Pickering said that part of his business fundamentals class was to design an agency's business plan from start to finish.

"I worked in the NGO (non-governmental organization) space for about 10 years before joining Cone Communications. I learned enough in the master's program to jump in and develop budgets for hundreds of thousands of dollars, manage staff, bill hours and all those things you might not learn otherwise," Pickering said.



Students enrolled in the Boston University College of Communication Master's in Public Relations program work on a project.

People are now coming to the discipline from a variety of backgrounds to satisfy the changing needs of the workplace. The cliché is the journalist turning to PR to find deliverance from a stagnant and rapidly shrinking media industry—or so the story goes.

"I set out to have a career in journalism, but I didn't see that as a sustainable career," said Grace Bello, brand marketing content manager, Jack Morton Worldwide and current student in Columbia University's Strategic Communications graduate program.

Even though Bello's area of undergraduate study and work experience weren't in PR, she found similarities in the discipline that played to her strengths.

"I realized that a master's degree was a great way to pivot from journalism to marketing and communications. I approached my career with a humanities mindset and I really needed to be able to be approach my

work with a business mindset," said Bello.

While the journalist-turned-PR-pro trope isn't a significant leap because of the reliance in both professions on a keen editorial sensibility, strong narrative ability and pristine writing, it's but one truth among many. As the discipline has grown to envelope a broader spectrum of necessary skills, so too has a need for more versatile teams.

"What I'm looking for as an employer is someone who's not going to be high maintenance, someone who's going to at least know the basics," said Gail L. Moaney, managing partner and director of travel and lifestyle, Finn Partners and adjunct professor with New York University. "[A graduate degree] shows a higher understanding because they've had to take ethics classes and deal with crises. There are a lot of things they learn in a graduate program and they come here better equipped to be part of the team."

Besides being more versatile, practitioners are now expected to be more global as well. Larry Parnell, associate professor and program director, Masters in Strategic Public Relations at The George Washington University, saw this need and developed a global residency program to address it.



Aaron Pickering

*Director, Corporate Communications
Cone Communications*

Graduate School: The George
Washington University

Master's in Strategic Public Relations

When it came time to do my capstone project I chose to do it for the organization I worked for at the time. I was an entry-level communications person at this nonprofit and I spent 12 weeks working on a strategic communications and public relations plan and they actually allowed me to execute it. Which is kind of mind-blowing. But it resulted in hundreds of media placements, dozens of op-eds and speaking engagements for our thought leaders. It was really great to see that application in real life. It gave me a kind of confidence and experience that I may not have gotten otherwise.

"As an elective you can spend a week working in London, Brussels, Istanbul, Johannesburg and Sao Paulo," said Parnell.

“When students come back they’re able to say to an employer that they have a better understanding of Asia, Latin America or Western Europe, and that’s a huge leg up.”

The internet connected the world and made global communications a necessity for PR, but it’s also what’s driving much of the changes in the discipline. As digital age continues to push the world forward along fiber optic cables, it’s becoming more and more of a necessity for practitioners to have the ability to tap into a broad field of knowledge.

“If you look at marketing, it’s always been more based on targeting demographics and analytics and that’s come into our discipline,” said Barri Rafferty, partner, president at Ketchum. “Whether you’re in a big corporation or a small agency you’re still running a business, so business and accounting classes are becoming more important too.”

PR is always changing. Obtaining a master’s degree can help practitioners and recently graduated undergrads adapt to the constantly evolving discipline.

A longtime broadcast journalist who made the jump to communications was looking for a master’s program that was very consumer focused and data driven. Ryan Nolan, global public relations program manager, Johnson Controls, Building Efficiency, went into West Virginia University’s program to expand his knowledge of marketing and communications, but he also challenged himself with a healthy dose of business and public policy coursework too.

“I wanted to vary my experience through this program and take different electives,” said Nolan. “That’s why I took entrepreneurship in integrated marketing communications. It really gave you a good business flavor by teaching you how to set up a small business online.”



Kinya Harte

*Senior Manager of Communications
Lymphoma Research Foundation
Graduate School: Kent State University
Master’s in Journalism & Mass
Communications, Public Relations
Concentration*

I remember that after getting my bachelors degree I felt that just having the bachelor’s was enough. But now I feel like in some industries having a bachelor’s is like having a high school diploma. Now my organization and my supervisors see the value in my obtaining a graduate degree and how I’ll be able to help carry out our mission here at the Lymphoma Research Foundation. And if I ever decide to move on, having that master’s is going to help me land a job anywhere. Getting the degree was one of the best decisions I ever made in my life and I’m using it every single day at work.

Echoing what many in the public relations discipline already know, Nolan said that in his work for Johnson Controls his team needs to measure everything to show his executives that they’re moving the proverbial needle.

“That’s one of the reasons a lot of practitioners, like myself, are going back to school,” said Nolan. “So much business these days is done online and so much is social media driven, so I thought an SEO and web metrics course was an optimal subject to study.”

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Larry Parnell, associate professor and program director, Master's in Strategic Public Relations at The George Washington University, addressing a PR class.

Chad Mezera, director of online programs, West Virginia University Reed College of Media, recognized this shift in the industry as well.

“With some of the changes that have happened in the industry itself, PR folks have been asked to do more, to wear more hats,” said Mezera.

Especially with people going back to school to further their education in the face of such industry changes, choosing the field of graduate study can be difficult.

“One thing I learned overall at Kent State is that public relations in and of itself is immersed in everything,” said Kinya Harte, senior manager of communications, Lymphoma Research Foundation. “So people who are trying to decide between focusing on PR or getting an MBA will learn that the master’s in PR will let them apply their skills to any industry.”

But the simple fact that proves much of the need for graduate-level learning is that many undergraduate programs are struggling to provide their students with a public relations curriculum that spans these disparate topics.

A 2015 study of Arthur W. Page Society members—a professional association of senior public relations executives and educators—found agreement among senior PR

professionals on the importance of business education for budding practitioners. However, researchers discovered that educators should place a greater focus on introductory business topics in undergraduate PR curricula.



Rebecca Francis Ballard

*Head of External Communications
Hill+Knowlton Strategies*

Graduate School: American University
Master's in Public Communication

I wasn't really sure what I was looking for when I started looking for graduate programs. I knew I wanted a strong alumni network of people who went from the program into the professional space. While I was in the program, the academic experience provided by the professors was augmented so much by what I learned from my fellow graduate students. This was a diverse group of people who really pushed pause to dive into the theory and the research that underpins communications. We were a mixture of young professionals from communications, career changers and others were deep into a military career who took this as a sabbatical opportunity. To tap into their experiences and insights into various careers was something I benefited from daily. Getting my master's replaced a few years of experience that I didn't have for that next job after graduation. The coursework and the portfolio you walk out with and the real-world application that you're doing in school replaced that few years of experience for me.

The authors of the study cited the expansion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as an area that required a more nuanced understanding of “the business of business.” They argue that without such an understanding, those working in CSR wouldn’t be able to implement the kind of long-term strategies that the work demands.

Going into her master’s program, Niki Zoli had no idea that her graduate studies at American University would eventually lead her to CSR work.



Barri Rafferty

*Partner, President
Ketchum*

Graduate School: Boston University
Master’s in Corporate
Communications

When I decided to do PR I realized I should go learn more about the discipline. I looked for schools that had specific programs at the time. When I came out, because of my part-time work and my graduate degree I was able to skip the entry level. I think I had a better perspective in writing for the discipline. At the time it was an important skill. I also learned marketing and it allowed me to have more of a business mindset. But in this field, whether you go to grad school or not, you have to be an avid learner and be consistently curious. If you’re not dabbling in and understanding the new technologies, and not on social media yourself, it’s really hard to keep up..

After obtaining her degree, she made a decision not to pursue a job with an agency, and through a contact from the university, landed a job with Discovery Channel’s Global Education Fund (now known as the Global Education Partnership).

“I was able to take the experience I had studying PR as well as cause marketing and apply it to my role at Discovery Channel,” said Zoli. “Ultimately, that job was CSR and a better fit for me.”

Zoli’s graduate education proved to be the launching pad for the rest of her career. The work in the classroom allowed her to thrive in the organizations she joined post-graduation, but the professional network of professors and students proved just as important.

“I came from Texas, drove cross-country in a U-Haul and settled right on the edge of the beltway in Washington, D.C.,” she explained. “In that first job I met some really inspiring people and expanded my horizon. I met people like Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Jesse Jackson. All because my contact at American University opened a door for me at Discovery.”

Peers often prove to be just as essential and informative a resource to a master’s student’s growth as the faculty.

“You’ll be in a classroom with people who are working on The Hill, for major Fortune 500s or NGOs and you get this really different perspective on PR from learning from the people around you,” said Pickering.

Inherent in the nature of graduate programs is that they attract a variety of people coming from different stages of their careers. Compiling all those experiences into a single classroom can have an incredible effect on students.

“I had a great mix of professionals on the younger side and the older side and they had a lot of different experiences,” said Nolan. “I learned probably as much from my fellow classmates as I did from my professors.”



Niki Zoli

*Director, Social Responsibility
and Community Engagement
Marriott International*

Graduate School: American University
Master’s in Public Communication

When I finished graduate school and I started interviewing with PR agencies I quickly realized it wasn’t exactly what I wanted. I had a contact through American University with someone who was working at Discovery Channel and they said there was an opening there. So I was able to take some of the experience I had gained working and studying PR with an international perspective. There’s definitely an element of PR in the work that I’ve done over the years. When people ask me about getting into jobs in CSR, I say don’t limit yourself to pursuing a job with that title. There are many other jobs that you can get at companies today that are related to CSR. I could say the same about public relations. It’s not like you get a master’s and need to go into an agency. There are many ways to use the degree.

Educators who continue to work in PR are a valuable resource enjoyed by many universities across the academic spectrum. These faculty members provide access to valuable networks that have the potential to open doors for students.

“With some of the changes that have happened in the industry itself, PR folks have been asked to do more, wear more hats.” — Chad Mezera, West Virginia University Reed College of Media

“For me, one of the biggest wins about getting that master’s was that it made me a member of an additional network of professionals in the industry, in Washington, D.C., and in the broader world community, which can be powerful in so many ways,” said Rebecca Francis Ballard, head of external communications, Hill+Knowlton Strategies.



Columbia University’s Master’s in Strategic Communication students collaborating in the classroom.

“The power of that network extends from the guest lecturers we had in class who were the best in their field, to a talent pipeline that I can now tap back into as someone who’s looking for junior talent.”

Beyond the value of expanding one’s professional network, working professionals who double as educators offer another, perhaps more essential, benefit to students. They not only understand the complexities

of the workplace, they have experience working at the executive level.

Dr. Rebecca Heino said that in Columbia University’s Strategic Communications graduate program, potential students are looking for the skills they need to effectively work with the C-suite.



Ryan Monell

*Communications Director
New York City Council Member Rafael Salamanaca*

Graduate School: Current student at Columbia University
Master’s in Strategic Communications

The program has a very diverse group of students who act as a really good springboard to help find those best practices that can span across industries. We get a really good foundation in theory and learning how to think outside the box, but then the professors apply it to the day-to-day practical work that we’re all doing every day. It’s really cool to get all this information from class on a Saturday and go back to work on Monday and be able to apply it directly to what I’m working on. It’s incredible to be able to do both at once. Going forward, the power of communications and being a strong communicator is going to be incredibly valuable. I really wanted to be in a position where I can be set out from the pack and that’s what’s happening.

“They ask ‘how do I get a seat at the table and how do I understand what’s going on at the table once I have a seat there?’ That’s a totally different thing than learning how to execute tactics,” Heino said of how graduate programs often build on a student’s previous experience.

However important the study of fundamental PR tactics is to the professional growth of the individual, there’s still a kind of art to dealing with superiors that working practitioners can offer students in graduate classrooms.

“It’s not like you’re dealing with a professor who doesn’t have any real-world, ‘I’ve got to go down to see the boss’ experience,” said GWU’s Parnell.

“I was getting feedback about the program from colleagues who are senior ex-

ecutives saying that their new hires had to understand the business better, they didn't know how to leverage the right things," said Parnell. "Dealing with clients and bosses is one of those things."

One of the things that sets many public relations programs apart is a combination of practical application and empirical research. Boston University, where PR education began all those years ago, is home to the cutting edge of the discipline's research.

"If you are doing the research and you're doing it well, then you know an awful lot about that topic," said Dr. Don Wright, Harold Burson professor and chair of public relations at The College of Communication, Boston University. The depth of knowledge that researchers bring into the classroom can help bring a student's understanding of the discipline to the next level.

"I learned probably as much from my fellow classmates as I did from my professors."
— **Ryan Nolan, Johnson Controls, Building Efficiency**

The ability for graduate programs to teach students how to turn theory into practice helps to differentiate them from their peers in the job market. Not only is their understanding of theory greater than many in the industry, they already have the ability to go beyond the textbook.

"When you get to a certain level in your university career you've read all the textbooks,



Ryan Nolan

Global Public Relations Program Manager

Johnson Controls, Building Efficiency

Graduate School: West Virginia University

Master's in Integrated Marketing Communications

One of the reasons I wanted to pursue the master's degree is so I could stand out in the crowd. It's a crowded field and profession with a lot of practitioners, but not everyone has a master's degree. I'd like to advance my career down the road and this degree sets me apart and puts me in a better position. It also lets my bosses know I'm extremely interested in my job. It shows that extra dedication to the field. And from a strategic standpoint it's really opened my eyes to different types of PR initiatives that I can do, whether that's social media, digital PR or different ways to work with the media.

you know what communications is. You've done the crisis classes, you've done all those things and what you need to know now you can't get from a textbook," said Moaney.

Many find the time and effort needed to graduate from a master's program well worth it.

"I was able to quickly pivot to a leadership role in a nonprofit after graduation," said Pickering.

The differences between undergraduate and graduate coursework are what make that leap possible.

"It really prepared you to be a valuable contributor, not just in a PR or marketing role, but really in an overall leadership role," Pickering said.

That's what employers are looking for

Types of PR Graduate Degrees and Courses of Study

In researching PR graduate programs available in the United States, one fact kept popping up no matter which university PR News looked at. Regardless of the industry you come from—or the one you want to break into—there's a program out there offering the information needed to thrive in any of the disparate corners of the discipline. Looking to move into the nonprofit sector? Take courses like nonprofit and association communications strategies or public relations in nonprofit settings. Is politics your passion? Check out a political marketing course or go even further with a political management degree. Want to enhance your data and analytics skill? Many schools offer entire programs dedicated to the subject on top of the web metrics and SEO courses that are now ubiquitous. No matter what topic you want to become an expert in, there's a program out there to satiate even the most ravenous of PR minds.

when they hire individuals for more senior positions. They want leadership and dedication to the discipline that other people without a master's might not have, Heino said.

"If somebody walks in with a master's I know they've had that opportunity to interact with a diverse group of people from different industries," said Ballard. "Having a master's is definitely something I consider when hiring because it proves that. It's one of the many things that sets you apart."

Differentiation can be a powerful thing in a labor market as crowded as PR.

"A master's degree is a differentiator.

It's as simple as that," said Moaney. "Why wouldn't I want to hire somebody with more credential for the same price salary-wise."

It's inevitable that somewhere along the line a master's degree will help set a candidate apart from the rest. And even in the whirlwind that is life in PR, there are worse ways to spend your evenings.

"Guess what, these two years are going to pass whether you're doing something with your evenings or not. Two years from now you won't even remember these evenings, but what you will remember is the credential you earned," said Moaney. ■

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*"The staff at PR News understands the **modern PR landscape** as well as anyone, and as a result I take away something practical and helpful from **virtually every article**."*

– Director of Communications, Vitamix

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MEASUREMENT

Can You Hear Me? How Communicators Can Good Brands Avoid Making Bad Decisions

After a reported two years of testing recipes, researching and listening to consumers, **PepsiCo** admitted June 27 it had goofed regarding artificial sweeteners. The result: Not even one year after searing aspartame and launching Diet Pepsi with sucralose, the soft drink brand was forced to reverse course. Amid falling sales and consumer outcry, it said Diet Pepsi with aspartame will return shortly. Adding a touch of confusion to the situation, PepsiCo also will continue to offer Diet Pepsi with sucralose. Importantly for our this sour episode occurred when it's easier than ever information about customer preference via social media or sentiment. How about the New Coke fiasco 1980s, when Pepsi rival **Coca-Cola** tweaked its recipe to dissuade effect? Brand missteps it to soft drinks. Seven years ago **Tropicana** decided to switch to sucralose. Seven years ago **Tropicana** decided to switch to sucralose. Seven years ago **Tropicana** decided to switch to sucralose.

EXCLUSIVE RESEARCH

Search Results the #1 Press Release Goal for 25% of PR Pros, Yet 40% Take a Pass on SEO

It's rare when significant parts of business, government or sports change dramatically. Incremental change is far more common. Yet we find both incremental and significant change in a new **Natixia Corporate Solutions/PR** News survey of nearly 400 communicators regarding press release distribution and SEO. Nearly 75% of those surveyed last month said the most important objective of sending a press release is to "generate media interest and/or press coverage." That's a traditional reasoning. Yet a full 25% said their top priority in sending out a release is "to be seen in web search results" [see infographic and chart on page 4].

That finding about SEO seemed inconsequential result: nearly 40% said they fail to consider comes to allocating time and resources for it in other words, while PR pros want their press release to be found in web searches, nearly half are ignoring their releases. A corollary: 25% said they consider SEO or "higher profile releases." In terms of distribution, things look relatively good. Respondents indicated that organizations put media releases in a variety of ways, with cold email (85%), email (80%) and social media posts (85%).

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