

# **PRNews** **GRADUATE** **EDUCATION GUIDE** **FOR COMMUNICATORS**

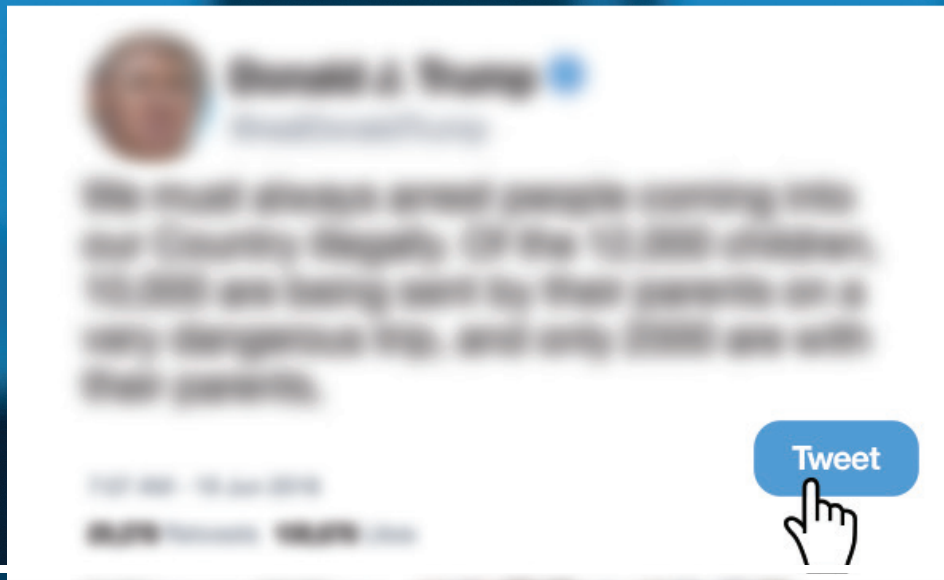


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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



# Master's Programs Seek to Provide a 360 Degree View of a Career in Communications

By Mark Renfree

It turns out there's more to a master's degree in communications than career advancement, higher salaries and prestige, although these perks don't elude degree holders for long.



**Carolyn Hedges**  
*Director, Communications@Syracuse, Assistant Professor*  
 S.I. Newhouse School at Syracuse University

"With a master's degree you have the benefit of myriad experiences, not just your own but the faculty and your classmates," said Carolyn Hedges, director at Communications@Syracuse and assistant professor at the S.I. Newhouse School at Syracuse University. "You also get a

deeper understanding of your own experience in the context of the industry, as well as understanding the potential of where your work could go."

The expectations of public relations professionals aren't what they used to be. Other departments aren't just bleeding through into the PR space, they're becoming integral parts of the business of communications.

BP's senior director of regulatory advocacy Suzanne Swink is in a field—government relations—in which the lines between PR and everything else continues to be obscured. She's currently pursuing a master's from Georgetown University in public relations and corporate communications to be better positioned in the changing field.



**Suzanne Swink**  
*Senior Director of Regulatory Advocacy*  
 BP

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**"You have to have a 360 degree approach. It's not just about one angle when it comes to corporate communications, and successful organizations have an integrated and collaborative structure."**

—Suzanne Swink, Senior Director of Regulatory Advocacy, BP

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"You have to have a 360 degree approach. It's not just about one angle when it comes to corporate communications, and successful organizations have an integrated



George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management students on a global residency trip to South Africa.

and collaborative structure,” Swink said.

Swink’s field increasingly entails working closely with the communications side of her organization, and her graduate education is helping her get a valuable academic foundation in work she’s already doing, just from a different side of things.

Similarly, at the George Washington University’s Strategic Public Relations Program in the Graduate School of Political Management, the curriculum is designed to prepare students to create comprehensive communications strategies that integrate elements of

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*—Carolyn Hedges, Director, Communications and Assistant Professor, Syracuse University*

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marketing, social media, political and public relations goals to fuse into a fully integrated approach to solving the multifaceted challenges that today’s organizations face.



**Larry Parnell**  
Associate Professor and  
Strategic Public Relations  
Program Director  
George Washington  
University Master’s in  
Strategic Public Relations  
Program

“The communications landscape has changed,” said Larry Parnell, associate professor and strategic public relations program director of the George Washington University Master’s in Strategic Public Relations program. “Seasoned PR professionals are now expected to employ more than the traditional methods of

impacting public opinion and enhancing organizational reputation.”

## OPENING DOORS TO THE CORNER OFFICE



**Tia T. Gordon**  
VP, Global Communications  
Catalyst Inc.

For many communicators, bringing a mixture of experience is essential to their jobs. Tia T. Gordon, vice president of global communications for nonprofit organization Catalyst Inc., saw her master’s degree in public communications from

American University as a way for her to expand on her 10 years of experience across the automotive, political and nonprofit sectors. She believes communicators need to have a diversity of experience to advise organizations and individuals. Getting her

**PRNews**

ISSN 1546-0193



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George Washington University Strategic Public Relations graduate students speaking with San Juan, Puerto Rico, Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz (at right), who famously challenged President Trump during his visit after hurricanes wiped out large sections of her city and country.

master’s degree was another way for her to broaden her skill set to meet the needs of the discipline.

“Especially as a woman of color, it was important to me to tick every box along my career journey,” said Gordon. “The last box for me was to make sure I had my education in check and that meant going back and getting my master’s.”

A master’s degree can have even more value to people of color looking to advance in a field that’s historically lacked diversity at its highest levels. Gordon said that people of color must be fully prepared when trying to advance in the industry, which means having the background and the education to affirm their talent. For many, it’s not enough to come with years of experience.

“As people of color we have to make sure that we are ticking all the boxes that we possibly can just to get a foot in the door, which doesn’t necessarily mean we’re going to have a seat at the table. But just to get in we have to have all the education we can possibly put our hands on,” Gordon said.

## A DIFFERENTIATOR IN THE SCRAMBLE FOR TALENT

The value of a master’s degree to employers continues to be felt. The degree is one of the fastest-growing employment credentials

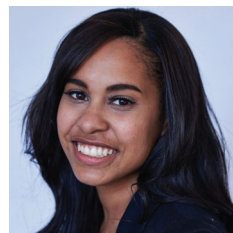
in what Dr. Richard Dool refers to as a war for talent in the public relations discipline.



**Dr. Richard Dool**  
Professor and Director  
Rutgers University’s Master  
of Communication and  
Media Program

“There’s still an argument that you might be over-qualified, but since it’s growing so quickly the need to differentiate somehow is still important,” said Dool, who is a teaching professor and director of Rutgers University’s Master of Communication and Media program. “The PR agencies just can’t afford to not find talent.”

When Kati Fernandez started at NFL Network, she was the only Latina producer at the company. She may not have had the same opportunities if she didn’t have her master of science in communications degree from Syracuse University backing her up.



**Kati Fernandez**  
Project Producer  
Hulu

“When you are a woman of color, and a young woman at that, you have some hurdles to overcome,” Fernandez, who is now a project producer with Hulu, said. “You have to arm yourself with the right tools because no one can debunk facts.”

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Students in Rutgers University's Master's of Communication and Media program at a dinner with the school's deans.

One of the most valuable benefits of going to graduate school, according to Dool, is intangible: confidence. Graduate programs have the unique ability to give students the fluidity to think at a strategic level and easily pivot to the micro, more detailed levels of analysis required by PR work.

This level of critical thinking can be attuned to specific industries or kept eclectic, depending on the direction a student wants to take. Many universities allow students to specialize in areas like public health, hotel tourism, nonprofit, global communications and digital media, to name a few.

Purdue University's Master's of Science in Communications program continues to work to implement more specific concentration paths for students looking to document what they studied.

"You could study PR here, but also help fill missing pieces about the healthcare environment that can be provided in collaboration with other programs too," said Bart Collins, clinical professor and director of graduate studies at Purdue University's Brian Lamb School of Communication.



**Bart Collins**  
Clinical Professor and  
Director of Graduate Studies  
Purdue University's  
Brian Lamb School of  
Communication



**Lyndon Taylor**  
Managing Associate  
Finn Partners

Lyndon Taylor, managing associate at Finn Partners, took a different approach, choosing to pursue a master's in journalism and then an MBA in media management to help his transi-

## Four Communications Master's Programs at a Glance

### The George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management Master's in Strategic Public Relations:

The program is focused on preparing students for a wide range of communications careers and provides students with an understanding of how politics and government impact business, technology and communications. Since the inception of the program, the curriculum has focused on applied and practical communications skills building, as opposed to a solely academic understanding. Students can also take shorter programs in global PR and digital communications to add to their skills without committing to a full master's program. There are both online and on-campus programs that issue the same degree.

<https://gspm.gwu.edu/strategic-public-relations>

### Syracuse University's Newhouse School Master of Science in Communications:

There are three main components to the program. The first is the assignments that students do on their own time. Then there's the asynchronous piece, which is a live session that meets once a week with discussions and group work on the issues of the day. The third component is immersions experiences, which are a weekend-long event in a specific location. The school does at least one each year in Syracuse with others all over the country. This program is online, with the exception of the in-person immersion experiences.

<https://communications.syr.edu/>

### Purdue University Master of Science in Communication:

The online program enhances student understanding of strategic communications with a strong PR orientation to better prepare individuals to operate in the industry. The program offers specific concentration paths to help people align their coursework with their specific career goals. Students can also take a more general approach, with the program requiring three courses with the remainder decided by the student. <https://online.purdue.edu/comm/masters-in-communication>

### Rutgers University Master in Communications and Media:

With seven specializations, Rutgers' program allows students to tailor their academic plan to their career goals. The program offers on-campus, online and hybrid options to help accommodate students who are working full time. This program has an emphasis on practical skills taught by experienced professionals. <https://comminfo.rutgers.edu/academics/graduate/mcm>

tion from journalism to PR. While pursuing an MBA, he found that much of his coursework applied to the media pitching work he was doing.

“We covered the whole gambit of the media so I could bring to bear that knowledge when I started pitching media. I could look through some other lens as well when preparing those pitches,” Taylor said.

## FLEXIBILITY FOR A FLUID PROFESSION



**Cory Streetman**  
Co-Founder and Principal  
Barefoot PR

For anyone coming from a background outside of PR, a master’s degree can give them the foundation that they need to make a fluid switch into the industry. Cory Streetman, co-founder and principal of Barefoot PR, had an academic back-

ground in anthropology but decided to pursue PR to follow her dual passions of writing and community work. However, before she could go on to found her own



George Washington University Strategic Public Relations graduate students speaking with Josh Earnest, who visited a Strategic Public Relations Ethics class to discuss his experience as a White House Press Secretary.

agency, she had to learn the basics.

“Getting the degree gave me those technical skills that I would have never had,” Streetman said. “I’m a believer in learning in the real world and getting your hands dirty but I had to go back [to school].”

Taylor also sought out higher education to prepare him to be in the boardroom working with senior members of the agency, as well as with high-level clients. Many

## Will Your Master’s Degree in Communications Get You Hired?

**Kati Fernandez, Project Producer, Hulu:** “For me it really depends. When people have a master’s degree I understand in the simplest terms that they’re not idiots, and form a more tactical perspective that they’re coming armed with a tool. They have the previous knowledge about how the industry is moving and it’s not just somebody coming in with life experience. I want really well-rounded people and I look for people with a healthy balance. I find that people with multiple degrees have that balance.”

**Tia T. Gordon, VP of Global Communications, Catalyst Inc.:** “I consider a couple of things. I consider whether the person has gone straight through school and if their journey has been underscored with experience in the workplace. If I see someone who has a gap in their education and went back, I can resonate with that. I don’t see it as if you have your master’s that you’re guaranteed to be candidate for a particular position.”

**Cory Streetman, Co-Founder and Principal, Barefoot PR:** “I’ve sat and interviewed countless

young people coming into the profession and while I really believe in academics, I also believe in the value of working. Real work in the world is important because it teaches other skill sets and has a level of accountability that internships and school don’t always afford, so I think the most well-rounded professionals are the ones with a little bit of everything. I get asked by a lot by people if they need to go to grad school and I think it’s different for everyone. My business partner didn’t get a master’s and she’s an amazing practitioner.”

**Suzanne Swink, Senior Director of Regulatory Advocacy, BP:** “The degree itself is not the most important, it’s what someone can tell me that they gained from it. It’s the experiences and what they learned, not just the piece of paper. Washington, D.C., is a relationship-based city and the communications and government relations field is a relationships-based field. The on-the-job experience cannot be underscored enough. It’s extremely important. But an academic degree on top of that can put your resume closer to the top of the stack.”





Communications graduate students get the opportunity to meet in-person during an immersion event at Syracuse University.

communicators look to graduate programs to strengthen their managerial skills and ability to work with executives. In her work with iHeartRadio, senior vice president of marketing and communications Angel Aristone found that her courses in Seton Hall's Master's in Strategic Communications and Management program helped her communicate with employees coming from different backgrounds.



**Angel Aristone**  
SVP, Marketing and  
Communications  
iHeartRadio

"I'm a communications professional, but I also lead a team," Aristone said. "There was a whole module on diversity in the workforce and also talking to today's workforce. There are five different generations in the workforce and [we learned] how to accom-

modate all the different age groups, from millennials to baby boomers."

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**"Seasoned PR professionals are now expected to employ more than the traditional methods of impacting public opinion and enhancing organizational reputation."**

*—Larry Parnell, Associate Professor and Strategic Public Relations Program Director, George Washington University*

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Taking lessons from the classroom to the workplace is a common thread among students who have master's degrees, but that might not always be the case. Being that many students come from backgrounds outside of communications, more experienced practitioners may find that some coursework covers old ground.

"There were times where I didn't feel like I was learning anything new," Gordon said. "You'll find that along the way and I found that and got a little frustrated early on, but I realized I was in it for the long game."

This kind of frustration can be part of the journey for some practitioners, but it's important to remember that in each program students move into other courses that will offer an opportunity to think critically about topics and issues that students hadn't had the chance to think about before.

If students keep their goals in mind, and trust the process, the reality is that by completing a master's program, they will be more competitive in the labor market, and become better practitioners.

What GWU's Parnell said about George Washington University's program rings true across the board: "In short, we offer a practical education, career enhancement and improved long-term earning potential."

Amid a war for talent in public relations, the comprehensive experience of a graduate program in communications can only add more value to that talent. ■

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