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The Student-Run Public Relations Firm in an Undergraduate Program: Reaching Learning and Professional Development Goals Through 'Real World' Experience

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Abstract: A student-run public relations firm can offer a variety of benefits for an undergraduate program in which there are limited resources for professional involvement by students. The article is a case study that profiles a student-run firm launched in conjunction with a capstone course in a journalism department. Specific learning and professional development goals were established for students, the department, and for clients served by the firm. The article presents a brief summary of successes, along with a discussion of opportunities and challenges. General recommendations are offered for establishing a student-run public relations firm.

The Student-Run Public Relations Firm in an Undergraduate Program: Reaching Learning and Professional Development Goals Through 'Real World' Experience

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1.1 Introduction

With each succeeding year, higher education programs have more difficulty supporting excellence in teaching and learning (Kelderman, 2008; Hersh & Merrow, 2005). Budgets have been cut, resources lost, and classes cancelled. For many instructors, undergraduate education represents a disheartening environment with too many students, too many demands, and insufficient resources to help support it all (Axtell, 2003). Student enrollment remains high even as programs have tightened resources and delayed faculty hiring (Rampell, 2010; Becker, Vlad, Desnoes, & Olin, 2009). Almost half of communication faculty recently surveyed said they had too many students and not enough time (Swanson, 2006).

In particular, public relations educators continue to be challenged as a result of rapid technological change that requires teaching of new media skills (Cahill, 2009; Barry, 2005). While there's no one answer for maintaining excellence in teaching and learning with fewer resources, one strategy that has proven successful for public relations programs is the implementation of a student-run public relations firm.

There has been one qualitative study of student-run public relations firms. In 2009, Lee Bush offered a summary of findings from ten in-depth interviews with supervising faculty members. Bush affirmed that student-run firms "fill a void in the curriculum by exposing students to disciplined business practices that may be missing in campaigns or service learning courses" (2009, p. 35). Her article discusses, in general terms, potential benefits and risks of establishing a student-run firm. Bush pointed out that little academic research exists on student-run firms, and that more study is needed in a variety of areas. Indeed, a search of scholarly and professional literature reveals that most past work consists of student firm profiles that are chiefly promotional in nature (Cardinal Communications. . ., 2008; Davison, 2007; Imagewest, 2005). While interesting, these profiles do not document the establishment, goals, and outcomes of specific firms.

In order to build on existing literature, this case study profiles a student-run firm successfully launched in a small academic program with limited resources for fostering students' development of PR skills. This profile is noteworthy because the firm was developed at a time when the academic unit had no full-time faculty member teaching public relations. As the firm became established, specific learning and professional development goals were developed for students, for the academic department, and for the firm's clients.

Consistent with Bush's recommendations (2009), this case study includes illustrations of specific challenges and opportunities of the student-run firm. It offers general recommendations for academic units and shows that implementation of a student-run firm has potential to boost student learning outcomes and, perhaps, ease some of the burdens felt by faculty.

2.1 University and community profile

The university in this case study was founded in the early 1900s as a public vocational high school. Now part of a large state university system, the campus has 66 undergraduate and two-dozen graduate programs, mostly within agriculture, architecture, and engineering. The university enrolls about 18,000 undergraduates, and receives about 35,000 freshman applications each year. The Journalism Department, one of about a dozen within a liberal arts college, was not ACEJMC accredited (ACEJMC Accredited programs, 2011). The department offered a single undergraduate major with three emphasis areas: news/editorial, broadcasting, and public relations. Students completed 60 units of major coursework including a 30-unit core with courses in writing, law, ethics, visual communication, global communication, a required internship, senior project, and electives. The public relations emphasis included 18 units, with an introductory course, a writing course, a campaigns course, and a capstone course integrated with the student-run firm. In the 2009-10 academic year, the department had 269 majors and seven full-time tenured or tenure track faculty members. At this time, the university was involved in a budget crisis that resulted in a general funding cut of 13 percent, a faculty furlough/ pay cut of 10 percent, and loss of all but one of journalism’s few adjunct instructors.

3.1 Student-run firm profile

A departmental curriculum change in 2004 established the senior-level capstone course beginning with the 2005 academic catalog. One quarter of enrollment would be required for each PR student; the course would have an enrollment 12-15 students per quarter and operate in conjunction with a student-run PR firm in fall, winter, and spring quarters. Otherwise, little structure was established. Outcome goals were not initially established and pedagogical links between the firm and the curriculum were not strongly defined.

Most full-time journalism faculty were former practicing journalists. None had public relations expertise and only one had a terminal degree. The department was more editorially than scholarly oriented. As noted in 2.1, the university is known for curriculum that is more vocational than scholarly in its approach. Ideally, the faculty should have developed a strategic plan justifying the firm and identifying learning and professional development goals for it and the integrated capstone course. This is an issue of concern, and will be addressed further in sections 4.1 and 6.1.

In 2006, a new tenure-track faculty member was hired to teach the course and oversee the student-run firm. The hiring allowed the department to increase consistency of instruction and advising in the PR course sequence. Enrollment in the emphasis area increased from 12 percent of all majors in 2004 to 40 percent of all majors by 2009-2010.

The remainder of this case study begins with a description of the structure established by the new faculty member to more fully integrate the firm with the capstone course and develop established outcome goals, as briefly previewed in section 1.1 above.

3.1.1 Administrative and creative structure

The faculty member was responsible for firm oversight and integration with the capstone course. To free the faculty member from routine clerical duties, a student manager was hired to work six hours a week in the firm office. By 2007, designated office/ office space was acquired, with a pass code entry system and 24-hour access.

The manager performed clerical duties and provided additional assistance with client projects. The manager and all enrolled students attended a weekly staff meeting for project discussion and limited instructional support.

At the beginning of the academic term, each student enrolled in the capstone course was assigned to two client teams comprised of three to four students. Each team met with its client and developed a strategic plan. The strategic plan was presented to the faculty member for approval by the end of the fourth week of the term. Upon approval, the team then had eight weeks to carry out a campaign supporting that plan. A campaign presentation was made in the final week of the term, along with written campaign summary document that included all supporting evidence. Each student was required to complete a minimum of 60 clock hours of production work for the student's clients during the academic quarter, and document all work in an individual portfolio.

3.1.2 Client recruitment

Clients were recruited through word of mouth referrals and through news releases about firm successes publicized on the university's webpage. Prior to the start of each academic term, the faculty member interviewed clients; clients signed a services agreement acknowledging their understanding of the time frame for the students' work, as well as the strengths and limitations of working with college students. In its first five years, about half of the firm's clients were nonprofit and charitable groups. About 30 percent were university programs, offices or student clubs. The remaining 20 percent were small businesses in the community. During these years, there was often a waiting list of up to three academic terms for new clients to be taken on by the firm.

Although the university prohibited the firm from billing for services, students were required to compile 'billable' and 'non-billable' service hours in order to understand the concepts and work accordingly. The compilation of service hours allowed clients to have an additional measure of success to validate students' work.

4.1 Outcome goals

After the curriculum change of 2005, the department's faculty expressed little interest in development of the public relations curriculum or assessment of its effectiveness. Related strategic planning became the sole responsibility of the new faculty member. Strategic planning for the firm and its integrated capstone course was based on the broad outcome goals of AEJMC's Professional Values and Competencies (2000), the specific curriculum recommendations of The Professional Bond: The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (2006), and capstone course development and integration suggestions of Rodrick and Dickmeyer (2002). The following section details the four learning goals established for students, three outcome goals for the department, and three outcome goals for clients. Extensive documentation of 'success' in each area was achieved, but available space here permits only brief examples.

4.1.1 Student outcome goals

The first student outcome goal was that of 'real world' experiential and concept learning. This goal stipulated that students would 'learn by doing' in the firm and perform in the context of an agency-client relationship without constant faculty oversight. Experience showed students quickly became responsible for translating concepts learned in the classroom to real-world practice. Students had to initiate and follow through with all client communication and experienced direct consequences of any failure to be proactive with clients. In an anonymous summative evaluation at the end of the capstone course, one student reflected on this goal, saying, “The experience has definitely been the most challenging class that I have ever taken at (this university), not because of the amount of time involved, but because of the wide-range of tasks to be completed for two vastly different clients. In the end, I feel like I have a better understanding of how a public relations firm operates and the role of a public relations practitioner within the firm.” Another student commented, “. . . this was the perfect venue for me to gain experience working for a firm.”

The second student learning outcome goal was that students would, on their own initiative, improve their ability to work in project groups. The goal stipulated that by the end of their experience with the firm, students would improve their time management, delegation, and team communication skills. Because they were assigned to two different client teams, students were forced to immediately develop interpersonal communication skills that are not often addressed in the PR classroom. Observation showed that students planned their work not within the time frame on the course syllabus, but within the timeline established for each client campaign. Although the literature has shown that time management is a problem for college students (van der Meer, Jansen, & Torenbeek, 2010), experience showed that students are capable of quickly adjusting to professional expectations. One student’s end-of-course evaluation affirmed this by saying, “Working on my own throughout the class, or with a group on some parts, allowed me to gain experience about deadlines and how to work with a team toward a common goal.”

The third student learning outcome goal was for students to make networking contacts in the marketplace. This goal stipulated that because entry-level public relations jobs are often not advertised, it would be important for undergraduates to interact in the local marketplace and meet professionals. In the firm, students had to work directly with each of their assigned clients, as well as with other businesspeople they contacted to bring client campaigns to conclusion. Students regularly required information and guidance from professionals in the community. This work strengthened students' professional contacts and communication abilities, something that has been identified as an important goal for any academic program (Segrist & Pawlow, 2009).

The final student learning outcome goal was development of a professional portfolio. The goal stipulated that students would produce a high-quality portfolio of 'real world' work to show future employers. Students were required to submit a non-returnable portfolio at the end of the capstone course. The portfolio was used for immediate evaluation and for ongoing assessment of student learning. The portfolio affirmed student readiness for entry to the workplace by presenting ten items, including a resume, full campaign documentation, work samples, and a report of service hours. Undergraduate portfolios have been identified in the literature as important learning and assessment tools for students (Buckley, Coleman, Davison, Kahn, Zamora, et al., 2009), and the experience here echoed that conclusion. One student wrote, "I am proud of the work I did, and I feel confident that the skills that I've learned from this class will make me more prepared to enter the workforce after I graduate this spring."

4.1.2 Departmental outcome goals

The first department outcome goal was to facilitate experiential learning. The goal stipulated that students would learn concepts that cannot be developed in a classroom. More correctly – and perhaps more significantly – experience with the firm showed students teach themselves, because they quickly realize that they alone are responsible for their learning and performance. Neglect of a campaign obligation or poor performance on a client project had immediate negative consequences with the student work team, and with the client. Though there were occasional rare exceptions, individual student performance in the firm exceeded what was exhibited in classroom-based assignments. The executive director of a non-profit organization served by the firm wrote a letter commending the students' work. He wrote, "(The students) conducted themselves in a highly professional manner at all times. They are respectful, dedicated and motivated young women and I am grateful for the immense amount of work they have put into this project. It has been an absolute delight working with (the students). (The firm) is invaluable, both to nonprofits as well as to students – learning by doing while benefiting our community."

The second departmental outcome goal was to contribute to opportunities for program assessment. The goal stipulated that the public relations capstone course would provide demonstrable evidence of learning that could be used by the department, college and university to document success of student learning. Positive end-of-course evaluations from students, together with positive evaluations from clients demonstrated that students learned public relations skills with marketplace value. This is consistent with general recommendations presented by Peterman (2003) as well as with current thinking about evaluation of success in undergraduate education.

The final departmental outcome goal was to build community presence and goodwill. This goal stipulated that the student-run firm would be in a unique position to help the department and university build stronger ties to the community. In the first four years of operation of the student-run firm, more than 100 clients were served and more than 3,658 clock hours of service time was completed by public relations undergraduates for organizations and small businesses in the community.

4.1.3 Client outcome goals

The first of three client outcome goals was to offer quality public relations assistance in the community. This goal stipulated that the agency would help non-profits and small businesses without economic harm to local advertising and PR agencies. Experience showed this goal was reached. The community in which this student-run firm operated had more than 1,000 non-profit organizations. Many were small businesses without the financial ability to support PR assistance. The student-run firm developed good relationships with advertising/ PR agencies in the community and was able to coexist by not competing with them, something that is consistent with good professional practice. In several instances, the student-run firm was asked by local agencies to partner on charitable and community service projects. After one such project, the owner of a local PR agency wrote, "The results were tremendous, and the students were as well. They brought new ideas and a young perspective to our work. They opened up new venues of participation in our event and participated in creating a successful project."

A second client outcome goal was the development of valuable expertise through reverse mentoring. Reverse mentoring involves a structured workplace relationship between senior staff members and younger/less experienced workers. Typically, the younger workers have less expertise within the organization but more technological familiarity and skills. There is a demonstrated need in the business community in general for reverse mentoring (Cotugna & Vickery, 1998). This goal stipulated that the student-run firm would help fill that need. The firm conducted numerous campaigns in which clients were trained to effectively utilize social media and other communication tools. Allowing students to create and develop reverse mentoring opportunities for businesses and non-profits in the community is a win-win situation for both students and professionals (Greengard, 2002). One small business owner served by the firm offered a letter of thanks saying "(The firm) is vital as a resource for entrepreneurs. This program aids and offsets some of the most expensive start-up costs that new businesses face. That means more jobs in the community and that is what we need to help this economy get past these challenging times."

A final client outcome goal was the development of collaboration across different campus communities. This goal stipulated that through the firm's work with different academic, athletic, and extracurricular organizations, the firm would increase awareness of the department, its students, and their abilities. Students in the firm were exposed to parts of the campus community they might not otherwise have interacted with. On-campus clients included student clubs and organizations in architecture, agriculture, athletics, business, engineering, English, history, and modern languages, along with administrative units in admissions, athletics, career services, development, and student services. Actions of the student-run PR firm were consistent with recommended good practice for building strong campus-community ties (Kim, 2006).

5.1 Assessment of effectiveness

Available space here does not allow presentation of all measures of success. Primary quantitative measures involved numbers of clients served and total service hours completed for those clients. Over time, an increasing efficiency of administration allowed larger numbers of students to be accommodated in the capstone course, as enrollment in the PR emphasis area steadily increased. As enrollment increased, so did the number of clients served by the firm and the service hours completed for those clients. In 2006-2007, the firm served 25 clients and generated 491 potentially billable service hours. See comments in section 3.1.2 about billable hours. In 2009-2010, the firm had 39 clients and provided 1,305 hours of service. Each student was required to complete 60 clock hours of service time, with 80 percent designated as 'billable.'
Student and faculty evaluations served as quantitative and qualitative measures, as did client rankings of campaign quality, student performance, and campaign impact. The client evaluation form is shown in Figure 1. The criteria for review of student performance and award of course grade are shown in Figure 2.

6.1 Recommendations

Establishing a student-run public relations firm is challenging. It took several years for this firm to reach the point where it was producing work at a level of quality commensurate to the amount of effort expended to establish the firm. Constant adjustment in the first years was necessary. Patience was indispensible.

Consistency of faculty involvement is important. Curriculum and administrative decisions, client recruitment and follow-through need to be consistently coordinated. While adjunct and part-time faculty can bring valuable skills and experience to the firm, ever-changing leadership will not allow consistency in policies and actions. The experience with this firm verified Bush's observation (2009) that supervising a student-run firm can, at least in the formative years, be quite time consuming. But experience shows the demands on the faculty member lessen as the firm becomes established.

Full support of faculty within the academic unit is critical. As already suggested in section 3.1, it is difficult to establish a student-run firm without collective engagement in planning, implementation, and assessment strategies. In this case, it was fortunate that the curriculum decision was made that linked the firm with a capstone course. Bush (2009) identified the potential for "agency disintegration" (p. 33) as among the biggest risks facing a student-run firm. In her interviews with faculty, Bush found that "lack of student participation was the biggest contributor" to the risk. In the situation profiled here, the student participation issue was programmatically corrected through the student-run firm operating in conjunction with the capstone course.

A significant expenditure of resources is needed to establish a student-run firm. Due to the strategic planning lapses already detailed in section 3.1, no accounting for expenditure on this firm was established at the outset. The estimated cost of operation after 2008 was approximately $4,000 annually. A student-run firm needs dedicated classroom and laboratory space, along with computers and software. In this case, no dedicated space was found until 2007, and the firm growth in early years suffered. Some faculty did not take the firm seriously because the firm had no designated space and, thus, did not appear 'real.'

It could be desirable for a student-run firm to bill clients for services, so that a constant revenue stream could be available. At the same time, local professionals need to know that the intent of the student-run firm is not to plunder their client base. This is a difficult argument to make if the student firm aggressively recruits paying clients. There is a decided advantage for the student-run firm to work with different types of clients, especially in a structure in which students work on more than one campaign simultaneously. However, transportation and other logistical issues need to be considered – especially if enrolled students are demographically non-traditional, part-time, or commuter students. Clients need to be aware of their obligations and have reasonable expectations regarding student-produced work. Students working for clients are not interns and should not be viewed as such. Extensive client pre-qualification was through interview and client services agreement is recommended.

7.1 Conclusion

In 2006, the Commission on Public Relations Education recommended that undergraduates be exposed to seven curriculum areas that are essential for a quality public relations education. One of these categories was "supervised work experience in public relations" (The Professional Bond, 2006, p.7). In 2010, a worldwide study of PR programs showed curriculum generally reflects this minimum standard. But at the same time, faculty reported limited time, not enough staff, insufficient funding, and less than adequate relationships with public relations professionals in their local workplace (Toth & Aldoory, 2010).

This profile of a working student-run public relations firm shows that establishment of a student-run PR firm can allow an academic unit to meet some of the CoPRE's goals as well as overcome some of the criticisms and shortcomings noted in previous studies. Multiple measures of assessment can be utilized to document firm success. Utilization of a student-run public relations firm can help an academic program – especially one of small size or limited resources – enhance student learning, maximize faculty support, build community relationships, and contribute to the overall health and vitality of the academic curriculum. Granted, the student-run PR firm is not the cure for every curricular problem. But it is a good place to begin 'plugging holes' that for one reason or another cannot be taken care of with additional faculty, new courses, or application of additional educational resources.

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***Highlights**

- The article focuses on establishment of student-run public relations firms in collegiate undergraduate programs.
- The article is a case study of a successful student-run public relations firm.
- The firm discussed in the article was linked with a capstone course.
- The article lists and discusses relevant outcome goals for students, the academic unit, and clients served by the firm.

Figure

Figure 1
Client evaluation form

Client organization ________________________________

Name of client organization representative _______________

Date: _______________

Please read each statement below, and respond by marking 'X' in the appropriate box in the table.

5 - I agree wholeheartedly; there were no problems whatsoever in this area.
4 - I agree with the statement and am comfortable with the students' work.
3 - I am sorry, but there were problems in this area.
2 - I encountered many problems in this area.
1 - I found the students' work to be grossly insufficient.

5	4	3	2	1	
					The students contacted me promptly to begin discussion of the tasks involved in this assignment.
					The students conducted themselves professionally at all times.
					The students were assertive and pro-active. They did not need much prompting from me to move forward with the project.
					The students brought their own suggestions and questions when we began our discussion.
					The students conducted research that was sufficient for them to draw intelligent conclusions about what needed to be done.
					The students interacted sufficiently with my organization (staff, policies, procedures, etc.) so that they could fully understand what my organization does and why.
					The students made effective recommendations about strategies my organization needs to take.
					When disagreements arose, the students were expert in resolving them to everyone's satisfaction.
					The public relations campaign and related materials produced by the students were of professional quality.
					I would welcome an opportunity to work with students again on a project like this.

Please leave additional written comments here, or attach a separate sheet.

Figure 2
Criteria used to evaluate student's work for final grade in capstone course

- Initial signature form completed properly and submitted promptly.
- Meeting attendance as expected, during scheduled class time.
- Sufficient interaction and communication with the student manager.
- 60 clock hours of service time for client/ 80 percent billable.
- Team participation assertive, equitable, professional.
- Client services agreements signed and on file.
- Client tracking logs complete and included in student's portfolio.
- Computer server folder includes relevant documentation of all client work.
- Client consultations prompt and complete.
- Individual client action plans detailed, complete, with appropriate theoretical grounding and research support for all claims.
- Oral and written presentation of client action plans.
- Frequent updates of office project status board.
- Proactive communication with client (no inappropriate back-channel communication from client to instructor).
- Final client presentations detailed, complete, professional, referenced.
- Attendance at final presentations of other student teams.
- Final evaluation paper reflecting on student's experience in the firm.
- Client evaluations received, with favorable ratings and comments.
- Individual student portfolio received, complete (all ten elements), professional.
- Responsible use of office computers, software, and other equipment.
- No unexplained incidents, mysteries, or messes to be cleaned up by instructor or office manager.

A = Student's performance was superior in every way. Documentation was thorough and completely professional. Nothing could be added to make any substantial improvement to the work that was done.

B = Very good performance. Most work completed was of professional quality. Some improvement would still be warranted, either in work quality, personal initiative, or time management.

C= Satisfactory performance. Work completed was less than professional quality. Perhaps lab hour requirements were not met in full, or documentation was incomplete. Perhaps the client had significant concerns about the work.

D = Unsatisfactory performance, reflecting work incomplete or of poor quality.

F = Lacking any performance for which credit could be earned.