Assessing Learning and Performance in the Student-Run Communications Agency

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Abstract

This presentation is a case study illustrating methods and instruments used successfully to determine learning in a student-run agency where students are engaged with real-world clients and projects. Through enrollment in a capstone course in campaign management, Communications undergraduates become part of a student-run advertising and public relations agency. Seven formative and summative evaluations by students, graduate teaching assistants, instructors, and clients are used to assess students’ individual and collective concept knowledge and demonstration of specific skills. Although the assessment effort presented here is specifically tailored for the student-run agency, it could be adapted to work well in a variety of college student media workplaces and/or high-impact practice courses.
Introduction

More than a decade ago, James Axtell noted the disheartening environment in higher education – too many students, too many curricular and institutional demands, and grossly insufficient resources to help support it all (2003). This assessment could still be made today. Higher education faculty members are still strained to provide students the best possible learning experience as resources continue to diminish.

This is especially true in the mass communication disciplines. Although there has been a recent slight decline in undergraduate enrollments, a consistent upward trend has been seen in U.S. undergraduate enrollment in mass communication programs since the mid-1990s (Vlad, Becker, Simpson, & Kalpen, 2013).

Although employers recognize that development of skilled workers is a key outcome of the higher education experience (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002), employers continue to be unhappy with the knowledge and skills of new graduates. In 2008, a survey found many employers believed undergraduates were underprepared for the realities of the workplace (Kuh, 2008). A recent study focusing on communication educators reached the conclusion that educators are not as proactive as they need to be in finding out about the realities of the workplace and how undergraduates need to prepared (Moody & Bates, 2013). In the workplace, many professional communicators “are not convinced that educators are teaching students the communication skills they need to effectively work in today’s industry” (Todd, 2009, p. 80).

At the same time, undergraduates are increasingly interested in higher education for its career benefits more so than for learning and personal growth. A recent study
showed undergraduates’ main reason for attending college is “to get a better job” (Grasser, 2013, p. 88).

It is conceivable that academic programs will always need to find ways to educate greater numbers of students to higher levels of performance, using fewer faculty and institutional resources. It is also conceivable that there will always be some level of disconnect between academics and workplace professionals.

One method for educating Communication students to real-world realities and easing the professional disconnect is to establish a student-run media agency. Typically, such agencies serve students in advertising, integrated media communications, or public relations by allowing a place where students can develop hands-on work that is based on concepts taught in the classroom. Student-run agencies also “fill a void in the curriculum by exposing students to disciplined business practices that may be missing in campaigns or service learning courses” (Bush, 2009, p. 35).

Student agencies require interaction “with an authentic audience” – something Lent identified as an ideal culmination of the undergraduate learning experience (2012, p. 105). Student agencies are consistent with a recommendation of Todd (2009) in that they “merge writing skills, higher order cognitive skills, and new media technology capabilities in a single course” (2009, p. 83) to maximize student learning and career preparation.

A search of scholarly and professional literature reveals several profiles of student-run agencies. These profiles have merit in illustrating how the student-run agency concept has been applied in different educational institutions. But the profiles are chiefly promotional in nature (Cardinal Communications..., 2008; Davison, 2007; Imagewest..., 2005). The profiles do not document how a student-run agency might fit into an
undergraduate curriculum, how it could help an academic program meet established professional goals (Larsen & Len-Rios, 2006), or how student learning would be affirmed.

Swanson (2008) and Bush (2009) previously pointed out that little scholarly research focuses on student-run agencies, and that more study is needed to understand how students are motivated to perform in them. It is from this point that the present case study continues the scholarly exploration by focusing on student learning and performance. Specifically, this case study will illustrate assessment methods and instruments used successfully to verify whether students in one agency are acquiring the knowledge and skills that are most valued in the workplace. Although the examples offered here are not the only ways to conduct learning assessment, their successful use makes them worthy of consideration by faculty who oversee similar programs.

Assessment of Student Learning

The purpose of assessment is to make a conscious effort to support student learning, measure that learning, gauge the impact of learning, and initiate program changes to improve future learning (Accreditation standards, 2012). Although many faculty members and academic programs claim to be assessing student learning, assessment is often confused with teacher evaluation. Student like or dislike of a particular instructor is not a measure of what a student has learned or the relevance of that learning to workplace expectations any more than a grade awarded to a student is an objective measure of growth in knowledge.

Many faculty members resist learning assessment for a variety of reasons. Some are not interested in inquiring about student learning, do not want colleagues to know what’s happening in their classrooms, or simply shun collaboration (Banta & Associates, 2002).
Other faculty members are insufficiently invested in their work to care whether students are professionally prepared (Bresciani, 2006). Other faculty members hold to outmoded ideas that those in academe bear no accountability for their actions (Suskie, 2009). Still others approach their work from a perspective of delivery of knowledge, rather than from a perspective where student learning is the focus and the organizing principle (Tagg, 2003).

The ideal assessment plan is faculty-driven and linked to an ongoing research agenda. It is built around the regular work of faculty – teaching – and involves a conversation with colleagues, students, and workplace employers (Hutchings, 2010). It is “authentic assessment” if it involves students in “real-world activities that professionals in the discipline encounter” (Allen, 2004, p. 8). It should measure student performance with established real-world rubrics and evaluate with standards consistent with those used by working professionals (Stassen, Doherty & Poe, 2001). The assessment plan described in the following sections builds on these concepts.

Agency Profile and Learning Outcomes

The agency upon which this case study focuses is housed in one of the largest Communications departments in the United States. The department has about 2,400 undergraduates in five subject concentrations. The agency serves students in the two concentrations of Advertising and Public Relations, which, combined, make up about half of the department’s undergraduate enrollment. The department is ACEJMC-accredited (ACEJMC Accredited programs, 2013) and the public relations concentration is accredited by CPRE (Commission on public relations education, 2012).

The student-run agency was initiated by the dean in 2011 to bring together students from the two different subject concentrations in a single capstone course experience to
blend knowledge of scholarship gained in the classroom with a demonstration of professional skills (See Rodrick & Dickmeyer, 2002). The agency was and remains student-driven; first class of students created the agency name and logo, wrote the mission statement and policy manual, and developed much of the agency's operating structure.

The department’s large enrollment makes it impossible to offer all students the agency capstone experience. Therefore, faculty approved learning outcomes for the agency that are general, so as to be nearly identical to those for non-agency capstone course sections. The agency course learning outcomes are shown below:

By the completion of the course, students will be able to:

• Use analytical and research strategies to develop an integrated communications campaign for a client.

• Utilize basic processes, tools and techniques of writing common to advertising, marketing and public relations professions.

• Apply appropriate management strategies to execute an integrated communications campaign.

• Draw on a variety of measurement and evaluation strategies to assess the effectiveness of an integrated communications campaign.

• Recognize and strive for excellence in the ethical practice of communication.

• Recognize the value and impact of personal and professional engagement in community service.

The agency operates as two separate course sections that meet together and are team-taught by two faculty members, one in Advertising and the other in Public Relations. The agency has at least one graduate teaching assistant each semester to supplement the
instructors with additional hands-on guidance to students. A non-enrolled student lab assistant is employed to provide clerical assistance. Enrolled students are required to take one semester of the course for capstone credit and may take a second semester for elective credit.

The agency is operated as a ‘real’ business in almost every way. Students are senior-level undergraduates, assigned in teams to multiple clients. Each team has a student account executive. Within the first three weeks of the semester, each team must perform a consultation and present a campaign proposal for approval by the client and instructors. Teams collaborate to produce a strategically sound, successful campaign for each by the end of the 16-week semester. Even though clients are not billed, teams keep track of billable hours, with a performance expectation of 80% billable by the end of the semester. At the end of the term, students make final campaign presentations to instructors, their peers, and clients.

The course meets twice a week and has dedicated lab space available to students by passcode lock any time the building is open. A successful campaign requires student investment of many hours above and beyond what they spend in class each week.

Agency financial support comes mostly from university activity funds granted through a competitive award process. The agency does not seek funding from nonprofits with which it works. The agency solicits donations from for-profit clients. These funds, totaling about $3,000 per year on average, come as philanthropic donations to the college and support long-term equipment and infrastructure needs. In its three years of operation, the agency has produced 50 campaigns for businesses and nonprofits, and has enrolled more than 200 students.
Assessment of Student Learning and Performance

The assessment program for the agency was designed to result in quantitative and qualitative measures of student knowledge gain and performance using data from a variety of sources. The end result of the evaluations is the computation of a point score that determines a final grade for each student. More importantly, though, the measures allow the instructors to determine whether student learning and performance is in line with professional expectations. Changes in curriculum and pedagogy to improve future student learning can be made from an educated standpoint, rather than from guesses or conjecture.

This section will offer a brief description of assessment methods and instruments.

**Instruments are shown in figures at the end of the manuscript.**

- **The rubric**
  A simple, one-page rubric is used as a general evaluation guideline for all work completed by students in the agency (Figure 1). At the very first class meeting, students are provided with a copy of the evaluation guide and know what the instructors expect.

- **Student evaluations and reflections**
  Much of the evaluation in the agency comes from the students themselves, as they judge the performance of their fellow team members. Students complete a team member evaluation on Survey Monkey. With identical questions at midterm and at the end of the semester, the instrument allows students to evaluate in five areas: Preparation, dependability, quality of work, attitude, and contribution to morale (Figure 2). Students also complete a Survey Monkey reflection survey (Figure 3). This gives students an opportunity to reflect on the class and consider that they learned or may not have learned. Students are asked to offer suggestions for change. Over the years, many of the
student suggestions were adopted in the following semester to make the agency more efficient and help it better meet student needs.

- **Graduate teaching assistant evaluations**

The graduate teaching assistants primarily serve to support the instructors, although the TAs provide an important listening ear to guide the student teams. As students themselves, TAs are less threatening to undergraduates. As a result, teams will sometimes share information with a TA that they would otherwise hesitate to share with an instructor. As needed, TAs will deliver class lectures on topics they're experienced with. TAs also oversee the Time Fox time management software, making sure student teams are using Time Fox regularly and correctly. TAs view all student presentations and provide informal feedback to the instructors that contributes to student grades and helps with overall assessment of the agency program.

- **Instructor evaluations**

The instructors provide extensive feedback to students to document performance in the class. An evaluation is provided of the student proposal presentation (Figure 4). In addition, the proposal itself is red-pencilled by instructors and returned to the team. A similar process is undertaken at the end of the semester for the final client presentations (Figure 5) and final campaign book (Figure 6). All of these evaluations are consistent with the course rubric, which is grounded in the course learning outcomes.
• Client evaluation

At the end of the semester, one of the instructors directs each client to the Survey Monkey link to perform the evaluation of the team (Figure 7). Clients are urged to complete the evaluation form and make any comments that will help the students understand their performance, as well as help the instructors see what happened from the client’s perspective. The client evaluation of a student team’s work is critical to students knowing whether they demonstrated proficiency in concept knowledge and demonstration of skills. At the same time, experience has shown that clients may not accurately gauge the level of performance of the students or professionalism of the campaign. Sometimes a client will give high marks based more on personal affinity with students than on professional quality of the completed campaign. Other times, a client will give low marks for student performance when students were unable to control problems caused by the client that hampered the project.

Success – and Future Directions

Assessment in this student-run agency is a constantly evolving process. Initially, the instruments shown here were all offered in hard copy form. As a result, data collection – particularly of student and client evaluations – was a cumbersome process. Storage of data and reporting of conclusions generated was difficult. Transitioning to Survey Monkey for much of the assessment not only made the process easier, but also eliminated confidentiality and storage issues associated with collecting paper forms.

The department’s public relations concentration maintains a professional advisory panel made up of three working professionals in public relations. That panel meets every three years to review samples of student work. The panel met in spring 2012 and reviewed
19 campaign books selected at random from the agency and other sections of the capstone course. The panel concluded that none of the work was substandard in quality.

- Number / proportion of portfolios considered “excellent” in quality: 5, or 26%
- Number / proportion of portfolios considered “very good” in quality: 7, or 36%
- Number / proportion of portfolios considered “satisfactory” in quality: 7, or 36%
- Number / proportion of portfolios considered “substandard” in quality: 0

Because the books from the agency were not isolated from the books produced for other sections, it was not possible to determine differences. This issue will be addressed in future assessments so faculty can explore how student learning in the agency does or does not compare to learning in the other capstone sections.

Overall, the advisory panel made these positive comments about student work:

- *Some excellent research and very impressive presentation.*
- *Some of the hours spent on activities, fundraisers and materials were impressive.*
- *Some very impressive media presentations. Broad problem-solving skills.*
- *I was impressed by the presentation of many of the campaign books.*
- *Creativity and persistence in obtaining measurable goals was noteworthy.*

The panel found shortcomings in student work, primarily in research methods and writing and organizational skill, as noted here:

- *Relied too much on basic social media tactics – couldn’t quantify results. Too much unnecessary research.*
- *Well organized but a little short on real substance.*
- *Well organized and written, lots of good work, a little short on creativity.*
- *Well written, but no discussion of campaign strategy or tactics.*
• Not enough detail on campaign strategy or tactics.
• Good organization and strategy – could have devoted more effort to tactics.
• Numerous spelling and grammar errors. Incorrect AP style.
• Not correctly formatted according to directions and table of contents.
• Lacking a few important dates.

Administrators and faculty responsible for the establishment of the agency are pleased with the documentation of success over the first two and a half years of the agency’s existence. Student concept knowledge and demonstration of professional skills has met learning outcome goals. College and department leadership believe there is a sound body of evidence to support the department’s overall assessment of student learning – as well as the department’s forthcoming reaccreditation efforts.

Agency operations have been completed under budget for each operating year, and the agency’s student funding allocation was increased in 2013. Philanthropic donations continue to grow. The agency recently secured two strong working partnerships with firms in the commercial sector. These partnerships will allow a pipeline for new projects to the student agency, and allow agency students to do job shadowing with the partner firms.

College leadership recently allowed the instructors teaching the capstone courses associated with the agency to submit a proposal to expand into larger workspace in a new building recently acquired by the university. This could allow integration between the agency and a proposed center for entrepreneurship. Faculty members in the department’s Entertainment & Tourism Communications concentration are developing a plan to allow their students to earn their capstone credit in an agency course.
However, not all faculty members are supportive of the concept. For two and a half years, a small group of recalcitrant faculty has taken issue with the agency. They were incensed when students were allowed to name the agency, create its logo, and write its mission statement and policy manual. No amount of argument about the importance of student autonomy was successful in changing minds. These faculty continue to question the agency course syllabus, textbooks, and pedagogical approach. No amount of documentation verifying student learning successes has been sufficient to persuade these tenured professors that the agency is working and students are learning. The lesson to be learned here is that no matter how effective an academic program is, opponents will always be present – especially in academe, where tradition is often valued over innovation. The loudest objectors can be the colleagues armed with the least rational arguments.

Throughout its existence, the student-run agency profiled here has operated consistent with current thinking in the disciplines of advertising and public relations. It offers students the best possible agency experience before they are graduated from the university. It allows students to adjust their expectations about the realities of the workplace while they are still students – before it’s too late for them to make changes in career direction (See Crawford, Fudge, Hubbard, & Filak, 2013). The agency is providing the means for faculty to do “a more careful assessment of what students actually know and how they acquired their knowledge” (Moody & Bates, 2013, p. 169). The agency closes the loop in the assessment process (Allen, 2004) by using the information gained to improve the academic program. The agency is providing the real-world experience needed by students and demanded by employers in a way that is academically sound. The agency has a bright future.
References


benefits, risks, and a framework for success. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator, 64*(1), 27-38


Figure 1

The following two pages show the structure for the final campaign book used in the student agency and the rubric used for evaluation of the book.
The concentration areas in our department are subject to regular assessment of student learning. Therefore, consistency of documentation is essential. All PRactical ADvantage Communications campaign books will follow the same general structure:

- **Title Page** – Identifies the client and all contributing team members.
- **Executive Summary Page** – A summary of the totality of the project, including client, consultation, strategy, methods, results, and assessment of success – see instructors for guidance.
- **Table of Contents Page** – Listing of chapters and appendices.

**(Chapter 1) Background, situation analysis, core problem/ opportunity**
Offers background on the client and the communication situation your campaign addressed. Briefly reviews research that provides background on industry, external environment, product or program, market situation, and current trends in opinion and attitudes. Identifies a communications theory under which your project was developed. Includes an analysis such as a SWOT that discusses the current situation and describes challenges or opportunities. Presents a statement identifying the prospect for success, or potential consequences for harm if the campaign had not been undertaken.

**(Chapter 2) Goals and objectives**
A clear distinction is made between goals and objectives, and a rationale is offered. The end goals of campaign are clearly identified and explained simply and clearly. In-process objectives are specific, measurable, attainable, time-bound and mission-driven. Supportive research is identified. Narrative uses past tense (campaign is complete).

**(Chapter 3) Key audiences/ publics and messages**
Key audiences/publics are identified, including profile information, motivating self-interests, status of current relationship with client, third party influentials and opinion leaders, and achievable objectives. Extensive research separates fact from guesswork and address not only 'what' the messages were but 'why.' All messages are clearly identified and reasonable for the campaign and situation.

**(Chapter 4) Strategy, tactics, tools**
Strategies (overall plan of attack), tactics (action steps), tools (communication outreach) are clearly identified and professionally appropriate. All are simply explained and fully detailed.

**(Chapter 5) Calendar and budget**
Illustration of how campaign elements were strategically planned over time, and appropriately accounted for in a campaign budget. The chapter includes full TimeFox documentation of billable and non-billable hours. All hours are reported in summary (for the team) and for each individual member of the team.

**(Chapter 6) Campaign outcomes**
All intended and unintended outcomes of the campaign are fully documented, so that the evaluation of success of these outcomes can be shown in the chapter that follows. (All relevant work samples referred to here or elsewhere in the book will be shown in the Appendix as separate files from the narrative.)

**(Chapter 7) Measurement, assessment and evaluation of success**
This chapter offers 'multiple measures of success' (both quantitative and qualitative). The chapter can end with a brief discussion of 'where the client goes from here' based on the success of this campaign.
- **References** – A complete reference list, in APA format, follows as a separate file from the narrative.
- **Appendix** – Any work samples referred to elsewhere in the book are shown here in their entirety.
The above structure is adapted from:


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**Copies and distribution**

- **One spiral bound copy of the book will be provided to the client** in sufficient time for the client to review and write an evaluation of the team's work. Ideally, the client should get a copy of the book no later than the last regular class day of the semester *before finals week begins*.
- **One spiral bound copy of the book will be provided to each instructor** at the time of the team's final presentation. There will be no extension of time without prior instructor approval.
- **One electronic copy of the book** will be posted in the team's Google Drive folder. The chapters will have numbered file names for ease of identification, e.g. "ABC Client Final Book Chapt1." All files will be saved in PDF format.

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**Grading rubric**

**Excellent work:**

The team demonstrated *mastery* in development of the campaign. Nothing could be added to significantly improve the effort. The work is creative and professional in every way. There are no errors, or, at most, no error of any consequence.

**Very good work:**

The team demonstrated *proficiency* in development of the campaign. Some improvements could still be made. Perhaps an important question wasn’t addressed in depth or breadth, or a disputable claim was made without sufficient support for the claim. Errors exist in format and/or content. Errors have an impact on the perceived credibility of the work. More attention to proofreading was needed.

**Satisfactory work:**

The team demonstrated a *developing knowledge* of campaign work. But the work reflects an error-laden response to the assignment. While acceptable in a classroom, the team's demonstration of knowledge and ability falls below workplace expectations. Errors greatly impact the perceived credibility of the written work. Further study of the concepts and attention to writing skills is needed.

**Poor work:**

The team demonstrated *little or no concept* of the assignment or made content errors so significant that any positive elements of the work were negated. The campaign is sloppy in its construction and reflects a completely unsatisfactory and unprofessional response to the assignment.
Students in the agency individually complete evaluations of the fellow team members at midterm and at the end of the semester, using a Survey Monkey form similar to the one linked here.

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/RJDQYB5
Students in the agency individually complete a student reflection survey at the end of the semester, using a Survey Monkey form similar to the one linked here.

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/RJMS893
Instructor evaluation of campaign proposal presentation

DATE ____________

CLIENT ____________________

TEAM MEMBERS ____________________________________________

Introduction: ________________________________________________

Total time __________

Transitions:

Performance (includes eye contact [e.c.] and gestures):

Professional dress and appearance:

PowerPoint and/or other visuals:

Effectiveness of presentation – Was it engaging? Unique? Impact of deliverable(s)? Rehearsed?

Conclusion/Wrap-up/Call-to-Action/Suggestions to client:

QUICK GLANCE @ ACCOMPANYING PAPER:

Formatted correctly?

Content:

Other comments and opinion: Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Good Other
### Overall presentation
- Presenters appeared confident and articulate
- Presenters talked **to the audience**, not to the visual aid
- Presentation was credible and authoritative
- All relevant issues were addressed

### Comments:

### Introduction
- Professionally introduced presentation, including student names & relevant client information
- Gained audience attention quickly
- Built a rapport with the audience
- Explained client basics without being simplistic
- Transitioned effortlessly into facts of the situation

### Knowledge of client
- Superior knowledge of the client & related issues
- Portrayed a ‘helping’ not ‘dictating’ attitude/ client
- Showed how the work has/ will benefit client

### Presentation of campaign
- ‘Basic’ enough for those unfamiliar with client, yet ‘advanced’ enough those who are familiar
- Persuasive – this is **the answer** for the client
- Put all the situational facts in perspective and context
- **Claims supported with appropriate research**
- Organized and understandable

### PowerPoint and/ or other visuals
- Professional in design and appearance
- Text was limited and easy to read
- Minimal use of appropriate illustrations
- Minimal use of ‘flying graphics’ and other distractions
- **No typographical errors**

### Conclusions
- Conclusions appear sound, based on evidence shown
- It’s clear what the campaign did for the client and why
- “Success” of the effort was defined and explained
- **Client has been given a road map for future success**
- Conclusions all focused around **communication**

### Communication skills
- **Professional dress & appearance**, enthusiastic attitude
- Articulate, understandable verbal communication
- Minimal use of vocalized pauses (“um,” “uh,” etc.)
- Professional, responsible nonverbal skills
- Technology was handled with ease
- Presentation pacing ok (**20 min. time limit**)

---

SEE REVERSE SIDE
Please make additional comments here:

✓ Overall quality of the presentation:

___ Excellent work - The presentation was organized well, and transitioned easily between points. It was consistent with what one would expect in an advertising/ PR agency presentation. The quality of the verbal presentation was excellent, and the PowerPoint offered a pleasing visual support. The presentation took a clear point of view and documented all facts and claims. Very little could be added to improve the team's work.

___ Very good work – The presentation was organized appropriately. Major concerns of the client were addressed. However, one or more issues appear to not have been fully developed. There are areas where improvement could be made, to allow a greater understanding of the issues faced by the client or the campaign developed on the client's behalf.

___ Good work – The presentation was targeted at the concerns of the client. But the presentation did not clearly explain important elements that relate to the campaign. Perhaps the PowerPoint presentation was not sufficient in its content, or the inclusion of the PowerPoint in the presentation was problematic. The student presenters did not appear prepared to make certain claims, or made claims with little or no substantiation. While acceptable in the classroom, this presentation would be insufficient for an agency situation.

___ Poor work – Poorly prepared, grossly unacceptable – even for entry-level public relations practitioners.
Instructor evaluation of final campaign book

**TOTAL HOURS/ TIME FOX:**

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<th>Comments</th>
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<td>CLIENT TEAM</td>
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- Title Page, Executive Summary, Table of Contents

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- References (APA format), Appendix

Print and electronic copies provided?

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**Comments:**

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Satisfactory
- Poor
At the end of each campaign, the client is asked to complete an evaluation of the student team using a Survey Monkey form similar to the one linked here.

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/RQQ7VXR