Fall October, 2017

Rewarding Collaborations: Opportunities Abound With University Student-Run PR Agencies

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By Douglas J. Swanson, Ed.D., APR

October 2, 2017

Many PR professionals struggle to make entry-level staff hires. They wonder why it has to be so difficult to find someone fresh out of college who has real, hands-on campaign experience.

In reality, hiring someone new in the profession who has a degree and valuable experience is not that difficult at all. There are dozens of reservoirs of talented young PR people all over the United States and in other countries. The problem is that many senior PR professionals don’t know these reservoirs exist.

In the United States alone, there are more than 150 university student-run communications agencies. Each is a business that operates within an academic environment to give undergraduate students a “learn-by-doing” experience in advertising, marketing, public relations, social media management or related fields. Student-run agencies allow undergraduates to take the concepts they have learned in the classroom and apply them, with minimal faculty guidance, in a real project or campaign for a real client.

Student agencies have been around since the early 1970s, but the number of agencies is increasing dramatically. Universities are discovering that these high-impact practice programs are optimal learning environments.

These agencies provide students with an opportunity to cultivate the skills employers find most valuable prior to graduation. At the same time, agencies work on campaigns and projects that solidify the university’s presence as a community partner. It’s a win-win for everyone.

Reap the benefits.

As a working professional, there’s a lot to gain by connecting with your local university student-run agency. Here are just a few benefits:

- **Student agencies are a huge source of experienced talent.** My agency has graduated more than 500 students in the past six years. Every one of those students walked out the door with a campaign portfolio documenting real work for one or more real clients. Many graduates had multiple job offers based solely on the strength of their agency work portfolio.

- **Student agencies offer great opportunities for project collaboration.** Have a campaign or project that you just can’t get a grip on? Partner with a university student agency and you can do amazing things. One of my agency clients is a national fast food chain that came to us, asking that we help develop social media messaging that would resonate with 20-somethings. Who better to do that than digital native college students who’ve grown up with Facebook and fast food?

- **Student agencies can take on clients or projects that aren’t a good fit for you.** All of us get solicited for work that we can’t do. PR practitioners get pro bono work they’re too busy to take on. Commercial...
PR agencies are solicited by potential clients who can’t afford the fees. When work comes your way that’s not right for you, offer it to your local student agency. Chances are, the students will be delighted. Student agencies that charge clients usually do so on a donation basis, or have fees that are a fraction of those of a commercial firm.

- **Student agency interactions bring rewards at multiple levels.** A student agency is not a typical college class. Undergraduates who take the initiative to get involved are the high achievers. They want to learn it all, and try it all. They crave networking opportunities. Likewise, faculty who oversee student agencies are hungry for professionals to visit, give guidance, and maybe sit on an agency advisory board. Pick up the phone. Reach out. Introduce yourself. Arrange a visit. You’ll be building strong connections, simultaneously, at multiple levels.

- **Student agencies help educate the public on what public relations is and why it matters.** As a part of a university, the student agency has a purposeful role in educating the campus and the community as to what public relations is and how people professionally and ethically practice it. Agency students, with their youthful energy and optimism, are living testimony that public relations is essential in a democratic marketplace of ideas. It’s not an occupation that involves burying the truth, or taking bad ideas and making them look more palatable. It’s not about selling more widgets. Student agencies demonstrate through their very existence that public relations is a vital communication function that’s relevant for every business and every nonprofit or charitable organization.

Share your experience.

Ultimately, student-run communications agencies are about teamwork, mentoring and professional development.

Working in teams from the start of their agency experience, students learn what it takes to be collaborative and productive. Students put down their phones and step away from the lighted screen that previously beckoned for their attention. Here, they learn what interpersonal communication is. They talk. They question. They interact with their teammates. They assess each other’s level of professional development. Then, peer-to-peer mentoring comes into play as students collaborate to identify and overcome individual and team-based challenges.

Reverse mentoring is part of the learning, too. Many campaigns involve undergraduate 20-something digital natives working with 50- and 60-something typewriter owners to help modernize communication. Of course, that modern communication often involves social media.

So, the young people who know everything about Snapchat but know very little about the inner workings of business learn a lot of lessons. And clients who know business but don’t know a tweet from a hashtag learn how to connect an organization’s values with customers in the digital marketplace. It’s a win-win for everyone.

It’s been my experience that agency students will jump through hoops to educate their clients and perform at the highest level, because client opinion is typically seen as more valuable than that of the faculty member. When I give instruction, students listen. But when a client gives the identical instruction — whoa! Students snap to attention and follow through.

Tap the potential.

In the end, agency students embrace their teamwork and client relationship experiences and take the lessons learned to their first job. On that job they’ll demonstrate maturity beyond that of college graduates who didn’t go the agency route and spent their years in school just listening to lectures and taking tests. This is the No. 1 reason student agencies work so well when compared to traditional classroom methods: Agencies graduate students who are superbly prepared in concept knowledge and hands-on skills.

There are lots of benefits to getting involved with a university student-run agency. Should you feel threatened in any way by one or more student agencies in your community? No.
Every student-run agency’s relationship with area professionals and commercial firms will depend on the structure and goals of the student agency itself. But most agencies simply aren’t in business to compete with commercial firms in the marketplace. Student agencies exist to educate students, provide a reservoir of talented new professionals for employers and serve the community. The student agency doesn’t have the infrastructure and resources needed to compete with commercial firms. It likely has institutional financial support, doesn’t have to turn a profit, and has no reason to poach clients from other professionals.

If you’re one of those professionals who struggles to find entry-level hires with youthful energy and exceptional skills, then consider reaching out to one or more student-run agencies in your area. You’ll be glad you did.

Doug Swanson, Ed.D., APR, is professor of communications at California State University-Fullerton where, in 2011, he founded PRactical ADvantage Communications. He and three other faculty oversee the CSUF student-run agency. He is author of the book Real World Career Preparation: A Guide to Creating a University Student-Run Communications Agency (Peter Lang, 2017).