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Student-Run PR Agencies and the Three Rs: REALITY, RIGOR, RESPONSIBILITY

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Recently, I saw a social media discussion on advantages of the "fake it till you make it" philosophy. People were chiming in on this as a career builder, but I can't support it. To me, "fake it till you make it" suggests bulldozing toward an outcome, regardless of your knowledge or preparation.

As public relations educators, we are especially sensitive to conceptual knowledge and hands-on skills. We shouldn't hope for our students to "fake it" because we know workplace standards mean something and employers won't be fooled about what students know and can demonstrate.

The student-run PR agency is an outstanding curricular and pedagogical tool for increasing student knowledge, skills, and overall workplace readiness. I've managed student agencies at two universities, and I've written the first published guidebook for establishing a student agency. Over 12 years I have learned a successful agency is tough to start but can offer learning opportunities far beyond those of the classroom.

**Reality**

The key benefit of the student-run agency is the injection of professional reality into the curriculum. An agency is a high-impact practice environment where students work with real clients and real situations, with real consequences. Nothing is hypothetical. It's real life.

Sometimes that means mediocre concepts or an unresponsive or uncooperative client. Sometimes it means dealing with team members who won't pull their weight. And, sometimes, even the best student agency campaign goes down in flames (metaphorically speaking). In the student agency, these are not necessarily bad things as long as they're viewed in the perspective of learning and career preparation. We don't hope for failure, of course, but bad things do happen in the workplace. Students who are faced with those real-life bad things in the agency are prepared when they show up again at some point in a PR career.

**Rigor**

In our student agency, we have a cartoon that shows a student talking to the agency's supervising faculty member. The student says, "Professor, your standards are too high." In response, the faculty member says, "That's funny. Our clients never say that." This is exactly the attitude the student agency should maintain. Students should be pushed to demonstrate the highest standards for client consultation, research, strategic planning, creative execution, timeline and service delivery, and assessment of outcomes.

In so doing, students learn quickly that they can't bluff their way through a proposal. Unsupported, unworkable ideas will be cast aside.

Agency students' work can be more rigorous because the agency isn't a classroom. There's little lecturing and no busywork. The agency is a business, working with clients who expect the absolute best.
Responsibility

While the agency strives to deliver the best possible work for clients, learning remains the number one goal. Toward that end, there are shared responsibilities.

Clients have the responsibility to work with the agency, helping to educate students about business realities as students complete a campaign or carry out an event. Agency faculty are responsible to be guides, not hand-holders. Sometimes that means seeing the team headed for a crash – and letting it happen, so students can figure out what they need to do to pick up the pieces.

As for students, well, they take responsibility for their own learning. Much of that learning comes through peer-to-peer mentoring. (This is not a bad thing, by the way. A national survey of college media students I conducted a few years ago found a majority of students preferred learning new concepts from their peers as opposed to learning from a professor.)

Ultimately, students in the agency must take ownership of their learning. They alone are in charge of what they learn, how they apply that learning, and how far they stretch to prepare for the career field ahead of them.

Take-Aways

Here are three take-aways if you are considering launching a student agency:

- An agency is a complex, multi-faceted operation that can be started fairly quickly but may take years to reach maturity. That’s okay. Good things take time.
- The agency must integrate student learning with client service in ways that are antithetical to some academic traditions.
- When starting an agency, study how existing agencies are structured and how they work, but find a format that works for your university, program, faculty, students and community. Every agency is different.

To Learn More

This how-to manual shows how to plan and launch a student agency. It includes 22 Agency Spotlight sections that illustrate best practices from agencies all across the U.S.:


Many agencies don’t use a textbook, but if you’re looking for a text that frames PR work as a team-based practice, this book would be ideal. In fall 2018 it will be available as an eBook or in loose-leaf print form:


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Password-protected site link:

https://connect.prsa.org/home/community-home/digestviewer/viewthread?GroupId=211&MessageKey=aa9fc6ed-8909-4169-9147-70a51e1599da&CommunityKey=2c54e890-4f54-4375-9c53-daf5e1ac20ef&tab=digestviewer&ReturnUrl=%2fhome%2fcommunity-home%2fdigestviewer%3fcommunitykey%3d2c54e890-4f54-4375-9c53-daf5e1ac20ef%26tab%3ddigestviewer%26SuccessMsg%3dThank%2byou%2bfor%2bsubmitting%2byour%2bmessage.