

The Creation of Student-Run Public Relations Firms:

A Historical Look at Student-Run Firms

A Senior Project

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the history and background of student-run public relations firms on college campuses and the benefits, if any, that students receive as a result of working in such a firm. The public relations industry estimated at growing 18 percent between 2006 and 2016 (Todd, 2009). Even with the sudden expansion of the public relations industry, and subsequently, public relations education, evidence suggests that recent public relations graduates often times do not meet entry-level outcome expectancies of employers, leaving a need for a change in curriculum (Creedon, Dostal, Gael, Smith & Walker, 1999). It is becoming increasingly more important to evaluate public relations education and look for alternative methods of teaching public relations skills that meet or possibly exceed public relations employer's expectations for entry-level outcomes. "Given their important pedagogical benefits, it may be time for [academic] departments to take a serious look at student agencies as an integral part of their curricula," (Bush, 2009, p.36).

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

This study focuses on collegiate student-run public relations firms and how they contribute to the development and enrichment of both public relations curricula and student's professional development. Public relations practitioners and employers frequently express their concern about how public relations students are not graduating prepared for entry-level jobs in the profession. There is a significant gap between what graduates can do and what employers expect of them. Bush (2009) says,

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. Thus, they should be considered a valuable supplement to public relations coursework (p. 35).

Students gain experience while working in student-run public relations firms through hands-on, experiential learning. This type of valuable learning and experience may be only be possible for students to experience through working in such a firm.

Background of the Problem

A student-run public relations firm can provide students multiple benefits who are enrolled in a program in which there are limited resources for professional

engagement (Swanson, 2011). Swanson (2008) says “Students benefit by getting immediate exposure to real-world clients, and by experiencing the challenges clients present that cannot be replicated through hypothetical classroom discussions or case studies” (p. 19). Student-run public relations are beneficial because they give students the chance to receive “real-world” training through experiential learning. Since the career development during college is vitally important to obtaining a job after graduation, it is important to conduct further research on the benefits and effects student-run public relations firms have on students and educational outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

With the existing gap between a public relations education and what public relations professionals and practitioners expect of graduates, it can prove difficult for graduates to secure a job upon graduation. By studying the development and educational outcomes of student-run public relations firms, one can use the information to help shorten the gap between educational and professional outcomes.

A student-run public relations firm provides hands-on experiential learning that students don't receive studying case studies in the campaigns courses. Therefore, through content analysis and respondent interviews pertaining to student-run public relations firms, the research will provide an understanding of why and how a student-run public relations firm is developed, as well as the benefits students receive while working in such a firm. This research could provide

valuable information for universities looking to start such a firm for their public relations students.

Setting for the Study

This study is a single site case study of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo's student-run public relations firm, Central Coast PRspectives. The use and interpretation of data collected will be used as a Senior Project. Interviews will be conducted with three experts in public relations including, two of the founders and the current director of Central Coast PRspectives. These experts will be asked a list of interview questions developed to get an insight and understanding of why a student-run public relations firm was needed at Cal Poly as well as the benefits and career development participating students will receive upon completing a term working in the firm.

Research Questions

The following research questions were designed to answer gaps in the existing research and literature on the need and development of student-run public relations firms. Each question was created after searching the existing research on the subject in order to gain additional important and necessary information from actual student-run public relations firms founders and educators.

1. What is a student-run public relations firm?
2. Why were student-run public relations firms needed in public relations programs?

3. How did this student-run firm come to fruition?
4. What benefits do students receive as a result of working in the student-run public relations firm?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to simplify numerous terms on the subject and help the reader and add context to the rest of the study.

Public Relations Majors: Undergraduates who will graduate with a public relations degree from a journalism department or school (Maben, 2010).

Student-run firms: Student-run agencies who are modeled after professional public relations firms by giving students a chance to work on real campaigns for real campaigns in a professional environment (Bush, 2009).

Outcomes: Desired characteristics of public relations practitioners and educators at different phases of their professional careers (Creedon et al., 1999).

Descriptors: cognitive, behavioral, or affective outcomes (Creedon, et al., 1999).

Experiential Learning: Active learning where students work on real projects or activities outside the classroom (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000).

Student Portfolios: File encompassing evidence of the evolution of development of student learning and experience (Todd, 2009).

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 includes the background of the problem, purpose of the study, setting of the study and a list of key term definitions. Chapter 2 will present and summarize what the current literature has to say about the history, need and purpose of student-run public relations firms. Chapter 3 will present the methodology of the study, including limitations and delimitations. In Chapter 4, the information will be organized based on the research questions. The respondent findings will then be interpreted and analyzed alongside the current literature on the topic. Chapter 5 will be comprised of a summary of the study and recommendations for universities who currently do not have student-run public relations firms, but wish to develop such a firm as a means of supplementing and enriching students' public relations education.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The review of literature defines student-run public relations firms and focuses on why they are needed in collegiate public relations programs, including how they came about and the benefits participating students receive.

Defining a Student-run Public Relations Firm

Todd (2009) says that, “More than 15,000 undergraduate students were majoring in PR in fall 2006. The Bureau of Labor Statistics forecasts that PR industry positions will increase by 18% between 2006 and 2016” (p. 71). Swanson (2008) says that, “Today more than ever, journalism is being relied upon to turn out productive, critical thinkers who are media literate and technologically savvy -- prepared for jobs ten years from now that do not even exist today” (p. 20).

Most colleges and universities support various media outlets for their journalism students to successfully implement their classroom knowledge in the real world. In order for public relations to receive this same experiential learning opportunity, some universities have created their own student-run agencies (Bush, 2009).

Bush and Miller (2011), define a student-run public relations firm as a “Student-run communications agencies [who] mimic professional public relations and advertising agencies by providing students with a professional environment in which to work on real projects for real clients” (p. 485). Although there is no

concrete research or record as to the history or amount of student-run public relations agencies, anecdotal evidence leads some to believe that they have been in operation for over 23 years (Bush, 2009).

Although structures of student-run agencies vary from campus to campus, they generally consist have a student director or manager, an assistant director and the rest of the students working as account executives. Some agencies also implemented specific agency protocols into an agency manual that all account executives were to abide by. These protocols included maintaining time sheets, office hours, standard business practices, client contracts and dress codes. Some agencies also charged their clients while others required an application process for students interested in working in the firm (Bush, 2009).

Even though campaigns courses are structured in many different ways, they also possess clear similarities. In a 2004 study conducted by Bengini, Cameron, and Chen, the authors found that,

Most public relations programs offer campaigns courses (about 79%), primarily to undergraduate students (about 73%), and generally students are required to take this course. The campaigns courses, almost all requiring prerequisite classes, are also often considered as a capstone course in the program (81%) (p. 269).

Almost 90% of collegiate campaigns courses are set up and work in an “agency” type structure.

The Need for a Student-run Public Relations Firm

In 1956, Benjamin Bloom alongside educational psychologists, invented a taxonomy for classifying educational objectives into six main areas of thinking skills. These six different areas consist of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Sultana, 2010).

Swanson (2008), assures that, “Those of us who teach public relations within higher education are always under pressure to provide the most relevant knowledge and skills to our students. We aim to provide students with an appropriate balance of theoretical/conceptual skills and ‘hands on’ training. We want new college graduates going out into the public relations workplace not only to know what to do, but why they’re doing it” (p.15).

According to Benigni and Cameron (1999), J.E. Grunig said, “Teaching theory is the most important thing we can teach public relations students in a university.” (p. 51). He said that the two most important aspects in teaching theory are teaching students how all public relations theories fit together in a complete whole, and “showing students applications of these theories in the real-life practice of public relations” (p. 51).

Cutlip, Center and Broom (1985) advocated for an organized union of practical and theoretical theories in the public relations curriculum. Benigni and Cameron (1999), say that in Cutlip, Center and Broom’s five criteria for success in the profession, “The authors first criterion is acquisition of specialized educational preparation in the attainment of knowledge and skills based on theory developed through research, with an emphasis on knowledge over skill” (p. 51). Academic

public relations programs are in danger of not having a sound theoretical foundation without requiring an advanced research course.

Todd (2009), says “Although consensus regarding a definition of critical thinking does not currently exist, researchers frequently cite the last four categories of Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives” (p. 75). While the first two areas, knowledge and comprehension, don’t require critical-thinking, the last four (application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation) all do. Todd says, “The last four require the higher-order thinking that characterizes critical thought” (p. 75).

While central writing skills remain at the basis of public relations education, the 2006 Commission on Public Relations Education thinks said that they should not “Usurp time from teaching students higher order knowledge such as problem-solving, strategic thinking, and management skills” (Todd, 2009, p. 83).

In addition to developing critical thinking skills and working at a higher order knowledge level, there have been psychological changes documented in public relations students who work with real clients in a student-run agency (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000). Students gain confidence and have increased self-esteem while working with real clients in a course modeled in an agency setting (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000). The Outcomes Task Team (Creedon et al., 1999), said that cognitive understanding and behavior are the second more important traits and skills that public relations practitioners should know or possess. Creedon et al. says that, “Affective characteristics such as flexibility, a positive attitude, organization, pragmatism, initiative, and the ability to take criticism”, are communication competencies that practitioners should possess (p. 31).

The Birth of Student-run Firms

There is established concern for how well public relations students are being prepared for the imminent work world while taking a capstone course in a professional major such as the campaigns or agency course. Getting students ready for the real world is of the utmost importance in journalism capstone courses (Benigni & Cameron, 1999).

Evidence suggests that recent public relations graduates often times do not meet entry-level outcome expectancies of hiring employers, leaving a need for a change in curriculum (Creedon et al., 1999). A task force from the 1998 National Communication Association Summer Conference, registered a significant gap between what graduates can do, and what employers expect them to do (Bush, 2009). College curriculum seems to always be lagging in teaching more of what industry experts are looking for (Todd, 2009). Creedon et al. says,

The hiring requirements most desired were critical thinking and problem solving, writing skills, practical experience, communication skills, and two affective characteristics, good attitude and self-starter. This background prepares an entry-level professional to contribute to the public relations profession and society (p. 30).

It is argued that graduates need a better understanding of how public relations agencies work before being able to be hired at an agency (Bush & Miller, 2011).

Various literatures prove that there are several different public relations curricula that can help in shortening the gap between what graduates are prepared

to do and what professionals expect them to do (Bush, 2009). One approach that has been confirmed to be successful for collegiate public relations programs is the creation of a student-run public relations firm (Swanson, 2011). Bush (2009) 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. Thus, they should be considered a valuable supplement to public relations coursework (p. 35).

Student-firm experience is typically less focused on tasks like internships, but rather centered more on teaching more of a professional processes type experiential learning.

Gibson and Rowden (1995) Say that “Undergraduate agencies overcome the limitations of classroom instruction and provide structured responsibilities and tasks not always associated with internships” (p. 30). The establishment of a student-run public relations firm can help in augmenting student learning, especially in a small program or one that has few resources (Swanson, 2011).

Student Benefits of Working in the Firm

Many educators already understand the value of “real world” activities in experiential learning. This kind of learning gives more meaningful context and critical thinking for public relations students (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000). Student-run public relation firms are believed to be beneficial to student learning in understanding business applications and furthering student learning. This is evident

in the fact that more programs are being asked to include more “hands on opportunities” into their curriculum (Bush & Miller, 2011). Swanson (2008), states that, “students benefit by getting immediate exposure to real-world clients, and by experiencing the challenges clients present that cannot be replicated through hypothetical classroom discussions or case studies” (p. 19).

Bush and Miller (2011), state that student-run public relations firms provide three different levels of learning, “Applying theory to practice, learning business protocols, and gaining professional skills” (p. 486). More importantly, student-run firms can introduce students to the “convergence and integration” that happens in the public relations workplace more quickly than is generally taught in collegiate programs (Bush & Miller, 2011). Benigni et al. (2004), state that research suggests students who have more “real world” experience are more competitive in public relations job searches today.

Bush (2009), says, “The second and larger benefit of student agencies [is] the development of students’ professional identities. Students learn leadership and management skills, how to motivate employees, negotiate with clients, and gain professional confidence” (p. 32). The need for educators to teach professionalism has been continually repeated in various studies.

The professional agency setting allows for students to learn how to speak with a client, how to ask questions, how to dress and how to present resolutions to clients without sounding critical (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000). Students gain significant confidence after getting to work in agencies with real clients, Worley (2001), agrees saying this is largely due to the fact that, “Students are accountable

not simply to instructors, but to clients and to each other” (p. 51). Gibson and Rowden (1995) say that students gain more confidence because they have “acquired new skills and refined old ones; they deserve to feel better about their professional preparation” (p. 28).

Alongside increased professionalism, student-run agencies allow for students to form relationships and make contacts while networking with clients, community members and industry professionals (Gibson & Rowden 1995). It is vitally important to make contacts and network due largely to the fact that entry-level jobs in public relations aren’t advertised all of the time (Swanson, 2011).

Portfolios are the customary format in showing potential employers and clients what you are capable of and showcases what you have already accomplished (Gibson & Rowden 1995). In a study conducted by Bush and Miller (2011), “Between 85% and 90% of advisors agreed that agencies agreed that agencies were especially beneficial in regard to portfolio building...” (p. 488).

“Given their important pedagogical benefits, it may be time for communication departments to take a serious look at student agencies as an integral part of their curricula” (Bush, 2009, p. 36).

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter will be used to examine the methods of data collection used containing data sources, data presentation, and both limitations and delimitations.

Data Sources

For this study, experts in the field of public relations and education were chosen and interviewed using an identical questionnaire. This questionnaire takes from the original research questions utilized to find why, if at all, student-run public relations firms, were and are, needed in college public relations curriculum.

Participants

The public relations expert and current CCPR advisor interviewed was Jennifer Saxon, Communications Manager at Mind Body, a software company based out of San Luis Obispo, California. The public relations education expert interviewed was Dr. Doug Swanson, Associate Professor and PR Concentration Coordinator at California State University Fullerton, in Fullerton, California. The student-run public relations expert interviewed was Krista Scarbrough, former student manager at Central Coast PRspective and current Marketing and Events Coordinator at Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance based in Paso Robles, California.

Interview Design

The following questions and additional probes were asked to each of the data sources as part of the collection of data for the study:

1. How would you, as a public relations expert and educator, describe what a student-run public relations firm is? What do students actually do in this firm? Please give a day-in-the-life example of a student who works in such a firm.
2. Why were/are student-run public relations firms needed in public relations programs? What would students do who don't have the opportunity to work in such a firm instead?
3. How does one who wants to start a student-run public relations firm on their college campus do so? How did this student-run firm come to fruition?
4. In your opinion, what benefits do students receive as a result of working in a student-run public relations firm? Are students who work in the firm better prepared for employer's expectations? Please give an example of a skill a student who worked in the firm would have over a student who didn't.
5. In your opinion, would an intensive public relations internship prepare students for entry-level work in the same magnitude that a position in the student-run public relations firm would? Why?

Data Collection

Data collection for this study consisted of three singular, individual interviews with three experts in the public relations industry. The interviews were administered and completed during November 2012 and all lasted about 30 minutes each. Each respondent was asked a series of questions from a questionnaire aligned with the original research questions in order to get the most thorough answers in the success of student-run public relations firms in both program curriculum and student development.

Data Presentation

Two of the interviews were conducted and recorded using a basic audio recorder and then transcribed into written verbatim scripts that could then be used to describe the answers of the experts. One of the interviews was conducted via email so as to work within the expert's schedule. This interview was read and then clarified with the respondent as to ensure absolute understanding. These methods of data collection ensure the most honest and clear representation of the data collected during the interviews.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study chiefly due to the limited time available for research and the collection of data. California Polytechnic State University uses and runs off of the quarter system. The quarter system is comprised of three quarters throughout the regular school year, September through June, that are 10 weeks

long. More intensive and comprehensive research on the subject was limited due to the time restraints of the university.

Delimitations

Delimitations are present in this study due to the time constraints. The delimitations in this study pertain to the amount of survey respondents collected. Due to the short amount of time allotted for the study, only three respondents were collected for data collection. These particular respondents were chosen based on specific positions, knowledge and needs pertaining to student-run public relations firms. If there were more time allotted, additional respondents from multiple universities and professional practitioners, both with knowledge of public relations education, would have been interviewed. An additional delimitation was that due to tight work schedules and long distances of two of the respondents, one interview had to be conducted over the phone and the other through email.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Chapter 4 will present the experts' explanations as well as their answers to what is asked in the questionnaire. The data will be summarized and condensed into paraphrased answers and quotations for direct answers. The experts' answers will then be compared to what the research had to say, in response to the original research questions, from the literature review of chapter two.

Description of Participating Experts in Related Fields

Education

Dr. Doug Swanson, Ed.D APR, is the public relations education expert chosen as a respondent for this study. Dr. Swanson has been teaching college students in the areas of journalism, public relations, communication and broadcasting since 1990. He is a former Associate Professor in the Journalism department at California Polytechnic State University, having taught all four PR concentration specific courses and working as the Faculty Advisor to the student-run PR firm on campus, PRspectives. He is a published research scholar, having had numerous articles published in multiple peer-reviewed journals and publications. Swanson is now the current Associate Professor and PR Concentration Coordinator in the College of Communications at California State University, Fullerton. He is also responsible for their student-run public relations firm, Practical Advantage Communications.

Professional

Jennifer Saxon is the public relations professional chosen as a respondent for this study. Saxon has gained extensive industry experience throughout her career as a public relations professional. Currently, she is the Communications Director at Mind Body, Inc., a health and wellness software company located in San Luis Obispo, California. Saxon is also an adjunct lecturer in the Journalism Department at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo where she is the advisor to Central Coast PRspectives, Cal Poly's student-run public relations firm.

Public Relations Student Firm Manager

Krista Scarbrough is the student-run public relations firm expert chosen as a respondent for this study. Scarbrough possesses extensive college public relations firm knowledge after having served as the student manager for the student-run public relations firm at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, Central Coast PRspectives. She is currently still practicing public relations in the professional world as the Marketing and Events Coordinator for the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance in Paso Robles, California.

Student-run Firms Questionnaire

Each expert respondent was asked to answer each of the subsequent questions concerning student-run public relations firms on college campuses, and their affects on students:

1. How would you, as a public relations expert and educator, describe what a student-run public relations firm is? What do students actually do in this firm?

Please give a day-in-the-life example of a student who works in such a firm.

Question #1 was asked in order to obtain an understanding of what the experts believe a student-run public relations firm is, and what students would day-to-day in such a firm.

- Doug Swanson: "I kind of see the agency as a bridge between academics and the real world in that we want to simulate a real world environment within the academic program so that the students know what they're in for when they get out there. I think students perform the kind of tasks we would expect them to perform in an agency in the real world. I think that I would look at the agency experience and the typical duties of a student as not so much a, this is what we're going to do every day, but almost like seasons or the phases and so it's kind of like four seasons." (Appendix A).
- Jennifer Saxon: "...It's really an opportunity for students to work at a firm, do all the things that are needed at a firm, experience the pace of a firm and work with actual clients in real business settings, but also be able to come back to the instructor for guidance and not worry if things aren't perfect. We start out assigning teams based on the student's interests and their skills and assigning them clients that we hope match those interests and skills ...tell the teams to go and interview the clients...and then do a little SWOT Analysis, create a public relations plan for the team of two students... and in the plan is a set of tactics that they plan on implementing for the rest of the quarter. At

the end of the quarter they evaluate how their plan went...they end the course with a presentation to the class,” (Appendix B).

- Krista Scarbrough: “A student-run public relations firm is an opportunity for students to gain practical public relations experience in an encouraging environment within a university...students work to execute a campaign that will produce immediate and measurable results for the client,” (Appendix C).

2. Why were/are student-run public relations firms needed in public relations programs? What would students do who don't have the opportunity to work in such a firm instead?

This question was asked to get an understanding as to why public relations firms were originally created and what students would do otherwise without a firm.

- Doug Swanson: “. They're needed from a student perspective in that students need the kind of hands-on experience, students need to know what agency life is like. Faculty need them because we have to have ways to show students that the realities of the workplace. Faculty also need student-run agencies because frankly, there are things that students can teach themselves more effectively than we can teach them... The university needs the student-run agency because the university needs more opportunities to outreach to the community and more opportunities to show the community how we interact with the community. I think the community also needs the student-run agency because there are non-profits and other entities in the community that

need communications help and they're not going to be able to get it from professionals because they can't afford to pay for it. I think they look for ways to group together and take on campaigns for non-profits," (Appendix A).

- Jennifer Saxon: "Most of the classes are very insular, they're theory based, you're doing a lot of work, a lot of research, but you aren't really out in the working world, working with real clients. I know some of the classes here do a little bit of that but there really isn't any experience that mirrors an agency experience. I'd recommend volunteering; you could also do special projects. It's really tricky to get the same kind of experience," (Appendix B).
- Krista Scarbrough: "A student-run public relations firm is an unparalleled opportunity to develop the skills crucial to future success in the field. Without such a resource, students would be reliant upon internships to supplement the lessons in the classroom," (Appendix C).

3. How does one who wants to start a student-run public relations firm on their college campus do so? How did this student-run firm come to fruition?

This question was asked in order to get an insight as to how student-run public relations firms are started on college campuses.

- Doug Swanson: "...It's critical that you get very strong support from administration and faculty to move forward. I think those are the two most critical elements. If you've got good research on what other agencies have done and if you're faculty and administration are behind you, you're in a

really good position to move forward. It came about as a result of a senior project,” (Appendix A).

- Jennifer Saxon: N/A
- Krista Scarbrough: “The first step would be to garner the support of peers and faculty in the public relations department, and other areas of campus,” (Appendix C).

4. In your opinion, what benefits do students receive as a result of working in a student-run public relations firm? Are students who work in the firm better prepared for employer’s expectations? Please give an example of a skill a student who worked in the firm would have over a student who didn’t.

This question was created to see if student-run public relations firms are actually beneficial to public relations students in college and outside in the professional workforce.

- Doug Swanson: “...It’s that hands on experience. That’s a big one. Another benefit is learning how to deal with very uncomfortable situations. So if the agency is structured the way a real world agency would be structured, than absolutely. The students are going to be in a great position to benefit.” (Appendix A).
- Jennifer Saxon: “Well, you get definitely a much more realistic idea of what working in a firm would be like. You get an idea of the pace of work, the expectations. It’s probably the only place that you can experience what it’s like to work in firm and make mistakes and not worry about it. I hope so. At least if I were the employer. I’ve hired a number of people; I’ve worked at a

number of different industries and a number of different firms,” (Appendix B).

- Krista Scarbrough: “An intern is typically limited on the responsibilities he or she is able to assume in that program, often working for a single client. In a student-run public relations firm, students are able to gain an understanding of the day-to-day operations within a working agency,” (Appendix C).

5. In your opinion, would an intensive public relations internship prepare students for entry-level work in the same magnitude that a position in the student-run public relations firm would? Why?

This question was asked in order to gain an insight as to the difference between an internship and a student-run public relations firm.

- Doug Swanson, “...I think that with the internship, probably you’re not given the level of responsibility, in most cases, that you are in the agency. So essentially in the agency, you and your team are on the line for the entire project, and most of the time in the internship, you’re not that way. The company you’re interning for doesn’t expect you to be totally responsible so I would say that the student run firm is somewhat of a different experience,” (Appendix A).
- Jennifer Saxon, “ “ I don’t think so. The reason being is because I’ve seen a number of different internships at a few different firms and the ones that have been given the most responsibility still aren’t given ownership of a client campaign... I don’t think most internships will give students the same degree of experience as the firm will,” (Appendix B).

- Krista Scarbrough, “There are without question, many benefits that overlap between an internship and a position within a student-run public relations firm...The distinguishing factor is the degree of that experience. A student-run public relations firm provides a view of a campaign from concept to completion,” (Appendix C).

Student-run Firms Research Questions

The following research questions were designed to answer gaps in the existing research and literature on the need and development of student-run public relations firms. Each question was created after searching the existing research on the subject in order to gain additional important and necessary information from actual student-run public relations firm’s educators and managers.

Research question 1: What is a student-run public relations firm?

- “Student-run communications agencies [who] mimic professional public relations and advertising agencies by providing students with a professional environment in which to work on real projects for real clients,” (Bush & Miller, 2009, p.485).

Research question 2: Why were student-run public relations firms needed in public relations programs?

- “Those of us who teach public relations within higher education are always under pressure to provide the most relevant knowledge and skills to our students. We aim to provide students with an appropriate balance

of theoretical/conceptual skills and ‘hands on’ training,” (Swanson, 2008, p.15).

Research question 3: How did this student-run firm come to fruition?

- “Evidence suggests that recent public relations graduates often times do not meet entry-level outcome expectancies of hiring employers, leaving a need for a change in curriculum,” (Creedon, et al., 1999).
- “It is argued that graduates need a better understanding of how public relations agencies work before being able to be hired at an agency,” (Bush & Miller, 2011).
- “The establishment of a student-run public relations firm can help in augmenting student learning, especially in a small program or one that has few resources,” (Swanson, 2011).

Research question 4: What benefits do students receive as a result of working in the student-run public relations firm?

- “Students benefit by getting immediate exposure to real-world clients, and by experiencing the challenges clients present that cannot be replicated through hypothetical classroom discussions or case studies,” (Swanson, 2008, p.19).
- “...Research suggests students who have more “real-world” experience are more competitive in public relations jobs searches today,” (Benigni et al., 2004).
- “...The development of students’ professional identities. Students learn leadership and management skills, how to motivate employees, negotiate with clients, and gain professional confidence,” (Bush, 2009, p.32).

Student-run Public Relations Firms Data

This study required interviews with experts on the subject of the study in order to shed light on the unclear or missing parts of the research available. To discover the indistinct information, Doug Swanson, a public relations education expert, Jennifer Saxon, a professional public relations expert, and Krista Scarbrough, a student-run public relations firm expert, were all chosen to be interviewed for this study. Each of the experts was asked a list of questions supported from the original research questions, in an interview-like setting. The following tables display their answers to the research questions and are based on their experiences and thoughts acquired in their specific area of expertise.

Research Question #1: What is a student-run public relations firm?

This particular research question was studied so that a definition could be formed from how the current literature defines it. According to Bush and Miller (2009), student-run public relations firms are, "Student-run communications agencies [who] mimic professional public relations and advertising agencies by providing students with a professional environment in which to work on real projects for real client," (p.485). Student-run public relations agencies are an important experiential learning opportunity.

Bush (2009) says, "Most colleges and universities support various media outlets for their journalism students to successfully implement their classroom knowledge in the real world. In order for public relations to

receive this same experiential learning opportunity, some universities have created their own student-run agencies”.

This question was created to give a better context and understanding as to what a student-run firm is specifically, and who exactly is involved. The literature was able to provide clear and specific definitions and examples as to not only what, student-run public relations firms are, but why, they were needed, saying that it is a form of experiential learning for public relations much like a student newspaper for editorial students.

Table 1 summarizes the experts’ responses in how they would define a student-run public relations firm. The table displays answers from the three respondents that are almost identical in agreeing that student-run public relations firms are a way for students to do actual public relations for clients but have an academic safety net to fall back on and learn from. All three of the interviewees also said that students in the public relations firm are actually doing real-world agency tasks

Table 1

Defining a Student-Run Public Relations Firm

Respondent	Student Run Firm is...	What students do in the firm
Doug Swanson	Bridge between academics and the real world	Real-world agency tasks.
Jennifer Saxon	Real firm experience in a safe academic environment	All things needed at a firm.
Krista Scarbrough	Practical PR experience in Encouraging environment	Executing a campaign to produce results

Research question #2: Why were student-run public relations firms needed in public relations programs?

This research question was chosen to be studied in order to discover how student-run public relations came about and why it was necessary to establish one. The literature on the subject of student-run firms says that public relations students need to not only learn theory, but also learn how to apply these theories in real practice. Swanson (2008) says, "We aim to provide students with an appropriate balance of theoretical/conceptual skills and 'hands on' training," (p.15). It was stated in the literature that the practical theories in the public relations curriculum was advocated to be combined with theoretical study. J.E. Grunig said that ...showing students applications of these theories in the real-life practice of public relations is an important part of teaching theory," (Benigni & Cameron, 1990, p.51).

This question was developed to get an understanding as to the importance of student-run public relations firms to public relations programs and its students. The literature shows that learning practical theory through "hands-on" experience is one of the most important things to be taught in public relations programs.

In Table 2, all three of the experts had the same answers in different terms of why student-run firms are needed. All three maintained that public relations students need hands-on and real-world experience. Both Swanson and Saxon said that while it wouldn't be the same level of experience, volunteering to do campaigns for groups would be the closest way to get the agency experience if a student didn't have such a firm to work in. Scarbrough had a relatively similar answer, in that

doing an internship that would supplement the classroom lessons would be the next best thing to actual agency experience.

Table 2

The Need for a Student-run Public Relations Firm

Respondent	Need	What students do without a firm
Doug Swanson	Hands-on experience	Volunteer campaigns for non-profits
Jennifer Saxon	Real Agency experience	Volunteering or special Projects
Krista Scarbrough	Develop crucial skills	Supplemental internships

Research Question 3: How Does a Student-run Firm come to Fruition?

This research question was studied in order to get an insight as to what leads to, and how, student-run public relations firms are first created and started on college campuses. The literature mentions that there was an ever-present gap in what graduates could do and what employers expected of them to be able to do. This left a need for a curriculum change. Bush and Miller (2011) argue that graduates need a better understanding of how public relations agencies work before being able to be hired at an agency. "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," (Bush, 2009, p.35).

This question was asked to get an idea from the experts as to the steps for starting a student-run public relations firm after an established need largely due to void in curriculum.

Table 3 shows that of the experts that agreed to, or could, answer the question, strong support from administration and faculty is the most important factor and step in starting a student-run firm on a college campus. Only Swanson was able to provide an example for a real startup of an actual student-run public relations firm.

Table 3

Starting a Student-run Public Relations Firm

Respondent	How	Examples of successful Startup firms
Doug Swanson	Support from Administration & faculty	Senior Project
Jennifer Saxon	N/A	N/A
Krista Scarbrough	Support of faculty & peers	N/A

Research question 4: What benefits do students receive as a result of working in the student-run public relation firm?

This question was studied to discover what exact benefits students receive while working in a student-run firm as to ascertain whether or not students would better meet employers expectations. The literature affirms that student-run firms

can only help public relations students by giving more hands-on opportunities to learn from. "Students benefit by getting immediate exposure to real-world clients, and by exercising the challenges clients present that cannot be replicated through hypothetical classroom discussions or case studies," (Swanson, 2008, p.19). A larger benefit that students receive as a result of working in the firm is the development of students' professional identities. "Students learn leadership and management skills, how to motivate employees, negotiate with clients, and gain professional confidence," (Bush, 2009).

This question was formed to see examples of what particular skills students who work in the student-run firm would have over a student who didn't. This question was to see if there was a significant difference in development of tangible skills.

Table 4 shows that all of the respondents had similar answers. Swanson answered that the primary benefit to working in a student-run firm is the hands-on experience, while both Saxon and Scarbrough agree that is the realistic understanding and idea of how an agency works and what the work is like. Only Swanson and Saxon were able to provide me with a specific skill a student would possess over a student who didn't work in a student firm. Swanson referred to students learning how to deal with uncomfortable situations in a professional setting, while Saxon answered that one would have the experience of the agency work pace and agency expectations.

Table 4

Benefits of Working in a Student-run Public Relations Firm

Respondent	Benefit	Example of Skill
Doug Swanson	Hands-on experience	Learning how to deal with Uncomfortable situations
Jennifer Saxon	Realistic idea of agency work	Experience of work pace & Expectations
Krista Scarborough	Understanding of agency work	N/A

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

Summary

This study was decided to be undertaken due to the fact that even though the numbers of student-run public relations firms seem to be increasing, there is a significant lack of information readily available regarding these firms and their history. Due to the current and projected growth of the public relations industry, and thus collegiate public relations programs, it is important to study student-run firms as a possible way to provide hands-on, experiential learning opportunities for these students. In order to find the most pertinent information regarding the history of student-run firms, it was vital to gather data from experts in the professional and educational sectors of public relations.

To gain more information on the history, development and practices of student-run public relations firms, experts in the public relations industry answered the following questionnaire based on research questions pertaining to the study:

1. How would you, as a public relations expert and educator, describe what a student-run public relations firm is? What do students actually do in this firm? Please give a day-in-the-life example of a student who works in such a firm.
2. Why were/are student-run public relations firms needed in public relations programs? What would students do who don't have the opportunity to work in such a firm instead?

3. How does one who wants to start a student-run public relations firm on their college campus do so? How did this student-run firm come to fruition?
4. In your opinion, what benefits do students receive as a result of working in a student-run public relations firm? Are students who work in the firm better prepared for employer's expectations? Please give an example of a skill a student who worked in the firm would have over a student who didn't.
5. In your opinion, would an intensive public relations internship prepare students for entry-level work in the same magnitude that a position in the student-run public relations firm would? Why?

Discussion

The following study conclusions can be made pertaining the research questions below by comparing the data gathered from the experts in Chapter 4, alongside the research taken from the literature of Chapter 2.

Research Question #1: What is a student-run public relations firm?

All three of the experts answered this question with essentially the same answer, with one of the respondent's answers differing in wording choice. They all concluded that a student-run public relations firm is a form of opportunity for students to gain real-world experience in an academic environment. Swanson worded his answer differently than the other two experts, saying that a student-run firm is a bridge between academics and the real world.

The literature reflects the statements of the experts in emphasizing the aspect of real experience. "Student-run communications agencies [who] mimic professional public relations and advertising agencies by providing students with a professional environment in which to work on real projects for real clients," (Bush & Miller, 2009, p.485).

The general consensus believes that a student-run public relations firm is a professional environment set in an academic setting in which students have the opportunity to gain real world, hands-on experience while working for real clients.

Research Question #2: Why were student-run public relations firms needed in public relations programs?

Based on the answers of the respondents, some form of experience and skill building is what was most needed from a student-run public relations firm within a public relations program. They all had one form or another of the same answer. While Swanson and Saxon both said hands-on and real agency experience was the most needed, Scarbrough thought that the development of crucial skills was what was most important in the need for student-run public relations firm.

The literature aligned with what the experts stated by saying that public relations students are in need of professional hands-on training, "Those of us who teach public relations within higher education are always under pressure to provide the most relevant knowledge and skills to our students. We aim to provide students with an appropriate balance of theoretical/conceptual skills and hands-on training," (Swanson, 2009, p.15).

Overall, student-run public relations firms were needed in public relations programs as a way for students to gain real agency experience and develop crucial skills that are needed when working as a public relations professional following graduation.

Research Question #3: How did this student-run firm come to fruition?

The experts who answered the question all were in complete consensus in agreeing that strong support from administration and faculty is the most important factor and first step in starting a student-run firm on a college campus.

The literature mentions that there was an ever-present gap in what graduates could do and what employers expected of them to be able to do. This left a need for a curriculum change. Bush and Miller (2011) argue that graduates need a better understanding of how public relations agencies work before being able to be hired at an agency. "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," (Bush, 2009, p.35).

Overall, the responses from the experts and the answers that the literature provides to the research question are different in that they are answering different parts of the question. The literature answers it in a bigger picture type manner in that a firm comes to fruition when there is an established need, while the respondents answered from a literal standpoint of how you would actually go about in starting a firm. Both the respondents and the literature provided useful answers that can be combined to get a much larger look at the question.

Research Question #4: What benefits do students receive as a result of working in the student-run public relations firm?

The experts all shared some variation of the same overall opinion in regards to student benefits in a student-run firm. Swanson answered that the primary benefit to working in a student-run firm is the hands-on experience, while both Saxon and Scarbrough agree that is the realistic understanding and idea of how an agency works and what the work is like. The realistic understanding and idea of how an agency works will occur while getting the hands-on experience.

The literature helps to affirm that student-run firms provide endless important benefits to their students like hands-on and professional agency experience. "Students benefit by getting immediate exposure to real-world clients, and by exercising the challenges clients present that cannot be replicated through hypothetical classroom discussions or case studies," (Swanson, 2008, p.19). A larger benefit that students receive as a result of working in the firm is the development of students' professional identities. "Students learn leadership and management skills, how to motivate employees, negotiate with clients, and gain professional confidence," (Bush, 2009).

Overall, the general consensus and agreement between the literature and the opinions of the experts is that the student-run public relations firm gives students the unique opportunity to gain hands on experience while being exposed to the real operations and expectations of a professional public relations firm. Incidentally, students also develop leadership skills while working with campaign teams and real clients.

Recommendations for Practice

The conclusion of this study has brought significant research and documentation on the history and established need for student-run public relations firms on college campuses. After examining and evaluating the research findings and information, it is imperative that the significant elements in which a student-run firm is needed and the benefits it can provide students be highlighted for the possible creation of future student-run public relations firms on additional college campuses. Recommendations for practice include establishing the need for a student-run firm in your program's curriculum and judging all of the possible benefits that such a firm can give to a program's public relations students.

Establishing a Need

A way to get started in trying to start a student-run public relations firm on a college campus is to establish a need. Establishing a need is the first step in the entire process because without a need, there would be no use if starting such a firm. There is evidence suggesting that new public relations graduates are not meeting entry-level outcome expectations, leaving a need for a change in curriculum (Creedon, et al., 1999). Graduates need a better insight and awareness as to how public relations agencies work before being able to be hired at an agency. An approach that has been confirmed as a successful option for gaining such experience and shortening the curriculum gap is the establishment of a student-run public relations firm.

According to Swanson, an Associate Professor and PR Concentration Coordinator at California State University, Fullerton, there is an established need for

a student-run public relations firm for more than just the students. The faculty, university and the community also need the student-run firm.

They're needed from a student perspective in that [they] need the kind of hands-on experience, [they] need to know what agency life is like. Faculty need them frankly, because there are things that students can teach themselves more effectively than we can teach them...the university needs [it] because they need more opportunities to outreach to the community...and I think the community also need [it] because there are non-profits and other entities in the community that need communications help...and they can't afford it [from professionals].

Student-run public relations firms help to supplement a public relations education by filling holes that are left in the campaigns courses by teaching and showing students how a real agency works and letting them experience what is expected before even leaving the gate.

Benefits Students Receive

Student-run public relations firms are the form of experiential learning necessary for a PR student to get hands-on experience much in the same way a school newspaper is to an editorial student. Students can benefit from such a firm in gaining contact with real clients and by undergoing and facing the problems that clients can give that cannot be experienced through any other method or classroom case study (Swanson, 2008). Jennifer Saxon, Communications Manager at MindBody, Inc., says that a student working in the firm will get a much more practical idea of what a public relations firm is like and what the expectations are, "it's probably the

only place that you can experience what it's like to work in a firm and make mistakes and not worry about it".

While gaining hands-on experience is the primary benefit students would receive while working in a student-run firm, developing the student's professional identity is another major benefit. The need for professors to teach professionalism has been repeated in many studies. The professional agency setting allows for students to learn how to speak with a client, how to ask questions, how to dress and how to present resolutions to clients without sounding critical (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000).

Study Conclusion

Given the findings of this study, there is a great need for qualitative research to be carried out on the current state of student-run public relations firms and where they are headed in the future. More consistent collections of data should be made for student-run firms for development and expansion purposes. For this study, the data was gathered by interviewing experts in different sectors of public relations including education and career/professional. These interviews, alongside the research gathered from reviewing the current literature available on the subject of student-run firms were both opinion and study-based, meaning that the study and the recommendations for practice can be applied and used to public relations programs looking to establish a student-run firm on their college campus. The study is useful for students and faculty who are searching for a way to supplement their largely theoretical coursework.

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Appendix A

Interview Transcripts: Doug Swanson, Ed.D, APR

This interview was given in order to acquire opinions and beliefs from experts about student-run public relations firms, based on a questionnaire concerning student-run public relations firms for student experience and success.

Interviewer: Hannah Hazdovac

Respondent: Associate Professor and PR Concentration Coordinator,
Communications Department at California State University, Fullerton.

Date of Interview: 11/16/12

Interview Transcription:

Hannah Hazdovac: "How would you as a public relations expert and educator, describe what a student-run public relations firm is?"

Doug Swanson: "I think I would start by actually describing what it does more than what it is. The student-run firm has to offer a strong learning experience for students in as much of a real world context as possible. So knowing that students are going to go out and work in an agency environment, a lot of students will work in an agency environment, we want to give students an opportunity to experience that environment before they graduate so that they understand the kinds of pros and cons of being in that type of environment. So in that sense, I kind of see the agency as a bridge between academics and the real world in that we want to simulate a real world environment within the academic program so that the students know what they're in for when they get out there."

HH: "What do students actually do in a student-run public relations firm?"

DS: "Every firm is going to be a little bit different. I think students perform the kind of tasks we would expect them to perform in an agency in the real world in that if somehow the student run agency does not reflect the real world, then students aren't getting the right kind of value out of it. In other words, if in some way the agency is set up with students completing assignments, you know busy work kind of assignments, stuff that doesn't relate or translate in to the kind of work students will do as graduates then I think that agency isn't doing its job because it's going to be involving students in things that are not realistic in the real world."

HH: "Can you please give an example of a day-in-the-life of a student who works in such a firm? What they would do on a daily basis?"

DS: "Again, it would vary by agency and it would also vary by time of the semester, because at the beginning of the semester the student is spending most of his/her time getting to know the client, doing research on the client, understanding client needs. That's going to transition into developing a campaign proposal and then in developing the proposal phase, students have a different set of tasks that they'll all be working on. That is going to transition into a phase in which students are actually

conducting a campaign and then that is going to transition to the end of the semester. That's kind of where we are now, where students are looking back on the work that they did, they are documenting their success, they're starting to write-up their final report. So in that sense, I think that I would look at the agency experience and the typical duties of a student as not so much a 'this is what we're going to do every day', but almost like seasons or the phases, and so it's kind of like four seasons."

HH: "Why were/are student-run public relations firms needed in PR programs?"

DS: "I think there's a couple of different reasons for that. They're needed from a student perspective in that students need the kind of hands-on experience, students need to know what agency life is like. Faculty need them because we have to have ways to show students that the realities of the workplace. Faculty also need student-run agencies because frankly, there are things that students can teach themselves more effectively than we can teach them. We put you guys together in teams, you will learn things and learn them better than if I stood in front of the class and did a lecture. The university needs the student-run agency because the university needs more opportunities to outreach to the community and more opportunities to show the community how we interact with the community. So it's very good for the university. I think the community also needs the student-run agency because there are non-profits and other entities in the community that need communications help and they're not going to be able to get it from professionals because they can't afford to pay for it. If they don't get it from you guys, they're not going to get it at all, and so I think the community also needs the agency. Every stakeholder if you will, every stakeholder in the agency benefits from it in some way because there is value for everybody. It's like win-win-win, everybody wins."

HH: "What would students do instead if their school doesn't have a student-run public relations firm?"

DS: "I think they look for ways to group together and take on campaigns for non-profits. SO maybe their university doesn't have an agency, but they have a PRSSA chapter, so they use the chapter as their organizing structure to get a group of students together to take on a campaign for a non-profit. That would be great. Even really small universities don't have a PRSSA chapter, okay, well the students just have to organize on their own as individuals and find a way to bring together six or eight students in a cooperative group to take on campaigns themselves, individually. If that fails, then the student individually has to go out and look for an internship experience that he or she can get involved with, volunteer opportunities or whatever. What it all boils down to I think is having that hands-on experience doing public relations work. You have to find ways to get it for yourself. "

HH: "How would one who wants to start a student-run PR firm on their college campus do so?"

DS: "I think you look at what other agencies are doing and study what has worked and not worked for other agencies, I think that's critical. It's also critical that you get very strong support from administration and faculty to move forward. I think those are the two most critical elements. If you've got good research on what other agencies have done and if you're faculty and administration are behind you, you're in a really good position to move forward."

HH: "How did CCPR come to fruition?"

DS: "It came about as a result of a senior project. There was a student who did her senior project, Rebecca Gherce. She did her senior project on student-run agencies. She got a little band of cohorts and they all went to the administration and said we need to have an agency. They went to George Ramos who was the chair at the time, and he said okay we'll go ahead and put together an agency for you, and they did. Very early on, when it first got going that first year, they were allowing basically anyone who wanted to take the class, take the class if you had the pre requisites or not just to get warm bodies in there so the class would make. Then they plugged the class into the curriculum. By the time I got there, they said okay we have to really get serious about this, they didn't have any office space or money. By the time I got there, we enforced a lot. We enforced the prerequisites and once we primed the pump with students the agency was up and running. Another big step forward was getting an actual office space that's the only way the agency will succeed. It cannot operate in a faculty member's office, it cannot operate in a classroom, you've got to have designated space, and George was great. Every time I went to him and asked for something, I got it. From that initial proposal that Rebecca did, it really sprang forward and really went well and once we got more resources back behind it, it was in a very good position. San Luis Obispo is a great place for a student-run agency because there are about 1,000 nonprofits in San Luis Obispo County. We had people just banging on the door all the time for us to do work for them, so I never had problems finding the clients. The environment there was ideal for this, so it was really great that it sprung forward from a student proposal. "

HH: "In your opinion, what benefits do students receive as a result of working in a student-run PR firm?"

DS: "Again, it's that hands on experience. That's a big one. Another benefit is learning how to deal with very uncomfortable situations. You end up working with clients who don't understand what PR is and you have to educate the client and you have to say things to the client that you don't feel prepared to say. You have to say to the client 'your mission statement stinks' and you want a communications plan but you don't even know what your own business is all about. It puts the student in a very challenging position where you the person who is 21 to 23 years old, you have to talk to mister fifty-something year-old client and say 'hey, look, you don't know what you're business is about here or you're not going to be able to succeed. It's a very uncomfortable thing, but it's a very valuable thing for students to learn how to do this because in the real world, in the agency environment, we have those uncomfortable conversations all of the time. It's great to be a new college graduate

and be able to tell that potential employer that you have had those uncomfortable conversations and confrontations with clients and you know how it works and you're able to do it. So, students sometimes find the agency experience unpleasant but I think that unpleasant learning experience can actually be really good. And so aside from all of the pleasant things that we can identify as benefits of the firm, there are some unpleasant things that I would also identify as very beneficial."

HH: "Are students who work in the firm better prepared for employer's expectations?" 16:56

DS: " Absolutely. I'll qualify that. It depends on how the firm is structured. If the firm structured around more like a class and it's got busy work and stuff like that, then no. As a real agency would be structured with real clients, and face real demands, keeping track of billable hours, all of that kind of stuff. If they're structured that way, then absolutely, because a student can go to a job interview and say 'billable hours? Yeah, I know all about that. Meeting with clients for a consultation? Yeah I know all about that because here's what I did for this client. Talking to clients about difficult things? Absolutely my client was xyz, and their mission statement sucked, and blah blah blah. Clients who won't return emails or phone calls? Yeah, I know all about that, and here's how I worked with it. You know, all of that kind of stuff. Yeah, so if the agency is structured the way a real world agency would be structured, than absolutely. The students are going to be in a great position to benefit. I've done public relations for 27 years, and he prefers to hire students with student-run agency experience because he knows that if he hires somebody who has not had that kind of experience he doesn't know for sure if they can handle the pressure of the real world."

HH: "Okay, I know you just kind of touched on this but can you give an example of maybe other skills that a student who worked in the firm would have over a student who didn't?"

DS: "Yeah, you know interpersonal skills. You have to work with a group of your peers and somebody has got to be the leader, somebody has got to be the executive in that team, so that's putting one student in a leadership position and it's a challenging position to be in because the account executive is responsible for the success of the campaign. You're going to have to have, perhaps, a difficult conversation with one of your students on your team who isn't pulling their weight, and that is a difficult thing to do also. But it prepares you for a relationship in the real world.

HH: "In your opinion, would an intensive public relations internship prepare a student for entry-level work in the same magnitude that a position in the student-run PR firm would?"

DS: "Yes and no. Again, it depends on the internship. I think that with the internship, probably you're not given the level of responsibility, in most cases, that you are in the agency. So essentially in the agency, you and your team are on the line for the

entire project, and most of the time in the internship, you're not that way. The company you're interning for doesn't expect you to be totally responsible so I would say that the student run firm is somewhat of a different experience.

Appendix B

Interview Transcripts: Jennifer Saxon

This interview was given in order to acquire opinions and beliefs about student-run public relations firms, based on a questionnaire concerning student-run public relations firms for student experience and success.

Interviewer: Hannah Hazdovac

Respondent: California Polytechnic State University's student-run public relations firm's advisor and Communications Manager at MindBody, Inc., (Jennifer Saxon)

Date of Interview: 11/15/12

Interview Transcription:

Hannah Hazdovac: "How would you, as a public relations expert and/or educator, describe what a student-run public relations firm is?"

Jennifer Saxon: "At Cal Poly, the student-run public relations firm is a transition course. It's meant to give students an idea of what a working environment is like within the safety of a class structure. So, in other words, it's really an opportunity for students to work at a firm, do all the things that are needed at a firm, and experience the pace of a firm, work with actual clients in real business settings, but also be able to come back to the instructor for guidance and not worry if things aren't perfect and not be concerned that if something doesn't work out that you're gonna be fired. It gives that kind of safety net while still giving that real world experience, a working world experience. For the students in this class, what we try to do is open their eyes to more of a client/associate relationship. In classes, you typically learn from theory but you don't really have experience in the hands-on relationship making that is involved in public relations. We give each student-team two clients to work with and it's their responsibility to get to know them, to identify what their challenges are for the quarter, create actual working public relations plans for them, and then implement the plans and hopefully be able to measure the success of those plans all within the 10 week period. So it's really a kind of intensive relationship building experience while also focusing on strategy, so it's mostly strategy and relationship building and then hopefully we have enough time to implement the tactics we've created in the public relations plan.

HH: "What do students actually do in this firm? I know you kind of went over that in the previous question. So like what's a day-in-the-life of a student who would be working in the firm?"

JS: "Well we start out assigning teams based on the student's interests and their skills and assigning them clients that we hope match those interests and skills sometimes we can, sometimes we can't. It depends on the list of clients we have that quarter. The clients that we have range anywhere from non-profit organizations to school organizations, to maybe some smaller clubs. People essentially who don't have the funding to hire a public relations firm out in an agency, but would still like to have somebody who has enough of an understanding of public relations to help craft a public relations campaign, or a

program for the year ahead. So we give them a couple of clients and tell the teams to go and interview the clients. We give them a set of questions that will help them identify the key problems that these clients are having that they hope public relations support can solve, then they come back with the answers to all of those questions and then do a little SWOT Analysis, create a public relations plan for the team of two students and they get the plan approved, and in the plan is a set of tactics that they plan on implementing for the rest of the quarter. At the end of the quarter they evaluate how their plan went, whether they were successful or not, why or why not, and then they end the course with a presentation to the class on what they did and how it worked.”

HH: “Why were/are student-run public relations firms needed in PR programs?”

JS: “Well, as I mentioned, most of the classes are very insular, they’re theory based, you’re doing a lot of work, a lot of research, but you aren’t really out in the working world, working with real clients. I know some of the classes here do a little bit of that but there really isn’t any experience that mirrors an agency experience. I’ve worked at public relations firms before so I’m trying really hard to give these students an idea of not only what is expected at public relations firms but the idea of the pace of the work that happens. Two clients feels like a lot for the students but it’s still not as much work as they’d be getting at an actual public relations firm. The need to actually be able to focus on strategy and how do you solve a problem in a way so you can measure it, and how do you do it in ten weeks? So really giving them the limitations they’re going to see out in the real world and giving them the opportunity to create relationships with business professionals, and giving them the opportunity to really behave in a professional setting in a professional way and giving them accountability of having to implement tactics and then measure their success. It’s not just a plan and theory where at the end of the ten weeks they’ve created a plan, at the end of those ten weeks, they’ve not only had to create a plan, they had to implement the plan and then they had to measure the plan. And they also had to interact with clients. They had to professional about it and be accountable; they’ve had to learn to work with each other, so it’s a lot of relationship building too.”

HH: “What would students do that don’t have the opportunity to work in such a firm do instead to get the same experience?”

JS: “Well you can do internships, the trick with internships is that even if you have an internship at a public relations firm you aren’t given ownership of a client, you aren’t given ownership of a plan. In this case, if people couldn’t actually get into the class I would recommend shadowing the class I’d recommend volunteering, you could also do special projects. It’s really tricky to get the same kind of experience. It would really be hard to do that, even if you were an intern at a firm because they just aren’t going to give you the same responsibility.”

HH: "In your opinion, what benefits do students receive as a result of working in a student-run PR firm?"

JS: "Well, you get definitely a much more realistic idea of what working in a firm would be like. You get an idea of the pace of work, the expectations. It's probably the only place that you can experience what it's like to work in firm and make mistakes and not worry about it. Although sometimes there's student who instinctively understand what professional behavior is and some students don't, but in this environment we can work with students to impress upon them how you're supposed to dress, how you're supposed to act, how you're supposed to behave in a way that's a little safer than if you are actually hired and then your supervisor having to tell you that you're doing wrong within the first couple of days. It's a safer environment. Benefits are just like what I said about what the students are getting here that they aren't getting elsewhere, the pace and relationship building. They'll come out of here with more confidence in terms of being able to represent a company, being able to work with professionals. They won't come off as green graduates, they'll come off as someone who's had at least some experience in the professional environment just because they've had a taste of it through this class. So they'll have a much better transition period into the work environment".

HH: "Are students who work in the firm better prepared for employer's expectations?"

JS: "I hope so. At least if I were the employer. I've hired a number of people; I've worked at a number of different industries and a number of different firms. I've worked in house and I've worked at firms, so I have a pretty good idea of the difference between various environments, but there's always a thread through them of responsibility, accountability and presentability, professionalism. So that's what I always try to make sure students leave here with an understanding of that. That there is a professional environment. Cal Poly and San Luis Obispo can be very casual, so trying to help them 'up' their game so when they leave here they're prepared to make an impression.

HH: "Please give an example of a skill a student who has worked in the firm over a student who didn't".

JS: "A lot of the students come in here with good writing skills, but not necessarily good strategic thinking skills. So I like to think that students leave here with a better ability to analyze options, to analyze opportunities, to analyze just the client and the need of the client, and also their own ability to perform their own skill set and what can be applied to the needs of their client. Just the ability to build and maintain a relationship. Some clients are easy to work with, some aren't. Some clients start out easy and end hard and some clients start out hard and end easy, and it is always a surprise. To run into that surprise here is so much easier than running into it at your first job or your second job or your third

job. So just leaving with a little bit better of an understanding of what it's like to work with clients.

HH: "In your opinion, would an intensive PR internship prepare students for entry-level work in the same magnitude that a position in the student-run PR firm would? And why?"

JS: "Well what do you mean by intensive public relations firm internship?"

HH: "Maybe an internship at an agency where you do get a little bit more responsibility than the typical intern who checks emails and enters data."

JS: "I don't think so. The reason being is because I've seen a number of different internships at a few different firms and the ones that have been given the most responsibility still aren't given ownership of a client campaign. This gives these students ownership of two client campaigns. I don't hold their hands; I don't go with them to client meetings. I help them behind the scenes, we have a student manager who helps them behind the scenes, but they're really frontline point-of-contact for these clients and interns aren't going to get that. Some interns are going to get coordination of an event. Maybe coordination of a big campaign, but it's the coordination side, so it's not the planning side. I don't think most internships will give students the same degree of experience as the firm will."

Appendix C

Interview Transcripts: Krista Scarbrough

This interview was given in order to acquire opinions and beliefs from experts about student-run public relations firms, based on a questionnaire concerning student-run public relations firms for student experience and success.

Interviewer: Hannah Hazdovac

Respondent: Marketing and Events Coordinator, Paso Robles Wine County Alliance and former student manager of California Polytechnic State University's student-run public relations firm, PRspectives (Krista Scarbrough)

Date of Interview: 11/13/12

Interview Transcriptions:

Hannah Hazdovac: "How would you, as a public relations expert and/or educator, describe what a student-run public relations firm is? What do students actually do in this firm?"

Krista Scarbrough: "A student-run public relations firm is an opportunity for students to gain practical public relations experience in an encouraging environment within a university. Because of semester/quarter time constraints, students work to execute a campaign that will produce immediate and measurable results for the client. Students in such a firm perform a range of tasks on a daily basis, including, but not limited to: strategic communication planning and implementation, social media marketing strategy, media tracking, news releases, media kits, media contact lists, special events coordination, social media marketing strategy, graphic design and promotional materials, SEO, research, data analysis and presentations for, and on the behalf of clients.

HH: "Please give a day-in-the-life example of a student who works in such a firm."

KS: "A day-in-the-life of a student public relations practitioner would consist of a constant search for balance between the items above for his or her client(s), along with general administrative tasks such as responding to emails and participating in weekly staff meetings. While a student-run public relations firm offers a great experience for its students, the firm is also a great way for a university to provide a service to its campus and local community, particularly for non-profit organizations and small businesses with minimal marketing and media budgets.

HH: "Why were/are student-run public relations firms needed in public relations programs? What would students do who don't have the opportunity to work in such a firm instead?"

KS: "A student-run public relations firm is an unparalleled opportunity to develop the skills crucial to future success in the field. Without such a resource, students would be reliant upon internships to supplement the lessons in the classroom. While internships are also an essential role in preparing students for a career in

public relations, the availability of such positions is often scarce and highly competitive. A student-run public relations firm would ensure each student in the concentration is provided with a hands-on approach to learning their field by working with real-life clients.”

HH: “How does one who wants to start a student-run public relations firm on their college campus do so? How did this student-run firm come to fruition?”

KS: “The first step would be to garner the support of peers and faculty in the public relations department, and other areas of campus. While one person can begin the initiative, it takes a group to see it to fruition. Concerning the formalities of starting any campus organization, the Associated Student Incorporated (ASI) offices should be the first stop. The staff will direct you in the proper procedures and documents needed. There are many resources that can assist with the logistics associated with creating a student-run public relations firm, such as establishing the organizational structure, attracting participation, and more. Referencing similar student-run firms at other universities and building a relationship with the nearest Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) would be great starting points. Learning from their successes and missteps is a great way to form a solid foundation for a recently launched firm.”

HH: “In your opinion, what benefits do students receive as a result of working in a student-run public relations firm? Are students who work in the firm better prepared for employer’s expectations? Please give an example of a skill a student who worked in the firm would have over a student who didn’t.”

KS: “An intern is typically limited on the responsibilities he or she is able to assume in that program, often working for a single client. In a student-run public relations firm, students are able to gain an understanding of the day-to-day operations within a working agency. From this approach, students learn to balance the assignments and needs of multiple clients simultaneously, a lesson not available on the same in-depth level from an internship or in a traditional classroom. That ability to adapt as priorities shift is a crucial skill in any public relations practice, whether in an agency or private organization.”

HH: “In your opinion, would an intensive public relations internship prepare students for entry-level work in the same magnitude that a position in the student-run public relations firm would? Why?”

KS: “There are without question, many benefits that overlap between an internship and a position within a student-run public relations firm, including sending press releases, working on deadline, etc. The distinguishing factor is the degree of that experience. A student-run public relations firm provides a view of a campaign from concept to completion. Students create a strategy, and implement tactics.”