

Assessing the State of Public Relations Ethics Education

Deborah Silverman, Ph.D., APR, Fellow PRSA, Karla K. Gower, Ph.D.
and Elmie Nekmat, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Using an online survey and telephone interviews, this study examined how and to what extent ethics is currently being taught in the public relations curricula seven years after the Commission on Public Relations Education recommended that ethics pervade all public relations courses and that the curriculum have, if possible, a dedicated PR ethics course. Overall, educators perceive ethics instruction to be very important for PR students, but few programs require an ethics course or recommend one as an elective. The preferred method of ethics instruction delivery is embedding it into each course in the public relations curricula. The most effective methods for teaching ethics were case studies, simulations, and small group discussions. The least effective were Socratic dialogues, research papers, and lectures. The most helpful materials were current events, the PRSA Ethics Code, and PRSA online ethics resources. Class discussions, reflexive/position papers, and student presentations were the most effective forms of assessment. Several of the interviewees, however, noted how difficult it was to assess ethical knowledge.

Public relations educators and professionals alike place a high priority on the ethical practice of public relations, as reflected in recent surveys of the members of the Public Relations Society of America, who consider the PRSA Code of Ethics to be the top membership value (Fiske, 2011). PRSA's current code, which focuses on education rather than enforcement, sets forth principles and guidelines built on core values such as advocacy, honesty, loyalty, professional development, and objectivity. PRSA and its chapters provide ethics instruction through periodic programs for public relations professionals, including an annual Ethics Month in September; similar programming is offered for students by the Public Relations Student Society of America and its chapters (Public Relations Society of America, 2014).

Attention also has focused on the role of ethics instruction in the public relations classroom. Two reports from the Commission on Public Relations Education, *A Port of Entry* (1999) and *The Professional Bond* (2006), comment on the importance of ethics in the undergraduate and graduate public relations curriculum. *The Professional Bond* noted, "While public relations professional education perhaps cannot make students

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ethical, either professionally or personally, such education can define and teach professional ethics. It can provide a body of knowledge about the process of ethical decision-making that can help students not only to recognize ethical dilemmas, but to use appropriate critical thinking skills to help resolve these dilemmas in a way that results in an ethical outcome.” In *A Port of Entry*, ethical issues were identified as a component of requisite knowledge for undergraduate students and a content area for mastery by graduate students beyond the level expected of undergraduates.

Ethics is one of the core values for communication programs to receive accreditation from the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC). Likewise, ethics is an important component for Certification for Education in Public Relations (CEPR) from PRSA. But to what extent and how is ethics taught in the public relations curricula? This study sought to explore the attitudes of public relations educators toward ethics education and the status of public relations ethics education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Other scholars over the years have considered how and to what extent public relations ethics is taught (Bivins, 1989; Harrison, 1990; Christians & Lambeth, 1996; McInerney, 1997; Port of Entry, 1999). They have also examined effective pedagogical approaches to teaching public relations ethics (Saunders & Perrigo, 1998; Hutchison, 2002; Eschenfelder, 2011; and Smudde, 2011).

Recent studies have underscored the importance of ethics in the curriculum, but whether to embed ethics into existing courses or offer a stand-alone ethics course is an unresolved issue. For example, Shen and Toth (2008) found that few universities require public relations ethics courses or offer them as an elective. At the same time, American public relations practitioners and educators believe public relations education should include a greater focus on ethics and include topics such as credibility, ethics codes, corporate social responsibility, public relations law, and transparency (DiStaso, Stacks & Botan, 2009).

In an online survey of public relations educators in American and foreign universities, Erzikova (2010) found that public relations professors perceived ethics instruction in PR education to be essential; she reported that 70% of respondents believed that the most helpful format was ethics instruction incorporated in courses throughout the curriculum, rather than a separate PR ethics course. Austin and Toth (2011) examined ethics education in the public relations curricula of 39 countries, not including the U.S.; they found that ethics is not taught in most countries as an independent course, but rather is integrated throughout the curriculum.

This study sought to update the 2009 Erzikova study and explore the current state of ethics in the public relations curricula seven years after the CPRE recommended that ethics “should pervade all content of public relations professional education” (2006, p. 6) and that the curriculum have, if possible, a dedicated PR ethics course.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the literature reviewed here, this study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: How important do educators believe public relations ethics education to be?

RQ2: How do educators believe ethics should be taught in the public relations curriculum (freestanding course, taught throughout the curricula, etc.)?

RQ3: How is ethics currently being taught?

RQ4: What do educators believe are the most effective methods and resources to teach public relations ethics?

RQ5: What do educators think about the state of ethics in the profession?

RQ6: What do educators believe professional organizations, such as the PRSA, or the PR profession could do to improve ethical behavior in the practice?

METHOD

Survey

The approximately 600 public relations educators who are members of PRSA's Educators Academy, the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication (AEJMC), and the Public Relations Division of the National Communication Association (NCA) were contacted in January 2012 via e-mail and invited to participate in a web-based survey.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first addressed RQ1 (How important do educators believe public relations ethics education to be?) and RQ2 (How do educators believe ethics should be taught in the public relations curriculum?). A seven-point Likert scale was used to capture these perceptions.

The second part of the questionnaire explored RQ3 (How is ethics currently being taught?) and RQ4 (What do educators believe are the most effective methods and resources to teach public relations ethics?). A 7-point Likert scale ranging from "a little bit" to "a great deal" was used to capture their perceptions on helpful teaching methods, resources, and assessment tools for ethics instruction. The section concluded with an open-ended question to gain their perspective on how educators can do a better job of teaching undergraduate students about public relations ethics.

The final section of the questionnaire contained nine demographic questions.

Interviews

A total of 20 respondents to the questionnaire indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up telephone interview. The interviews were conducted between February 20 and 28, 2012, to probe responses from the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Descriptive data.

A total of 104 educators participated in the survey for a 23% response rate. Of the 20 respondents who indicated a willingness to be interviewed at the time they completed the survey questionnaire, 15 participated in the interview process for a response rate of 75%.

Of the survey respondents, 62 (60%) were female and 40 (38.5%) were male. The majority of the respondents held a doctorate, post-doctorate, or J.D. degree (n=81, 78%). Slightly more than one half of the respondents have taught for more than 10 years (n=59, 56%), with almost 31% having more than 20 years teaching experience. The 15 interviewees have been teaching ethics for an average of 13.9 years, ranging from three years (two respondents) to 38 years (one respondent).

With respect to professional public relations experience, the majority of respondents (n=81, 78%) had at least 6 years of experience, with 22 of those having more than 20 years. Twenty-three (22%) had 5 years or less.

In terms of rank, 32 were assistant professors (31%), 26 were associate professors (25%), and 27 (26%) were professors. The remaining 17 (14%) were either instructors, adjuncts, or graduate students.

One hundred respondents were from four-year colleges (97%), with almost three-quarters of those (n=77, 74%) being from public institutions. Only three respondents were from public, two-year colleges.

When asked about accreditation, just less than half (n= 19, 49%) indicated that their school was accredited by ACEJMC. Nineteen (18%) reported that their school was certified by PRSA. Of those, fifteen (14%) were also accredited by ACEJMC. Another 34 (33%) reported that while their school was not accredited/certified by ACEJMC or PRSA, their college or university was accredited by other accrediting bodies.

RQ1: How important do educators believe public relations ethics education to be?

Overall, the respondents believe teaching ethics to public relations students is important, with 83 (80%) indicating it is “a great deal” important (M=6.51, SD=1.15). They also agree that the PR profession needs a stronger focus on ethics (M=5.63, SD=1.52).

RQ2: How do educators believe ethics should be taught in the public relations curricula (freestanding course, taught throughout the curricula, etc.)?

Educators feel strongly that ethics should be embedded in all public relations courses (M=6.67, SD=0.66) but are in less agreement over whether it should be taught in a freestanding course (M=4.51, SD=1.91). They mostly agree that students should have a working knowledge of the PRSA Code of Ethics (M=5.99, SD=1.18).

RQ3: How is ethics currently being taught?

The majority of respondents (62.5%) teach in programs that do not require an ethics course of their PR students. Thirty-seven (36%) do require ethics, but only seven of those offer a separate PR ethics course. This finding was reinforced in the interviews with the respondents indicating that ethics is most commonly taught as a unit in all public relations courses within a department, rather than as a freestanding course. One respondent whose school does require a freestanding ethics course commented, “We felt that it was important because our field takes such a hit from a lot of sides about ethics, and we believe very strongly that it’s an essential part of our curriculum.”

Two other respondents reported that Media Ethics is a required freestanding course at their colleges, but ethics also is embedded as a unit in all public relations courses.

Ethics is most commonly embedded in PR Campaigns (81%), followed by the introductory course (80%). Ethics is taught least in PR Management courses (47%). Results from the interviews were similar. Respondents reported that ethics is taught as a unit in Principles of Public Relations, Public Relations Writing, PR Case Studies, Public Relations Campaigns, and (at one institution) International Public Relations.

Regarding the content of ethics units, 7 interviewees said that the PRSA’s Code of Ethics or other public relations professional organizations’ codes of ethics are studied; 5 respondents indicated that classical theories of ethics by philosophers such as Aristotle or Kant are included; 3 respondents described a combination approach that includes classical theories of ethics, the PRSA Code of Ethics, and contemporary ethics issues based on current events; and 1 respondent said that the course examines contemporary theories of organization or public relations, such as James Grunig’s theory of excellence.

At some institutions, there is a marked difference between the ethics units in undergraduate courses and graduate courses; the ethics unit in the graduate course at those institutions is likely to involve more reading, include articles from academic

journals in public relations, be more intense and philosophy-based, present advanced theories about media ethics, and have higher expectations for students' papers. At other colleges and universities, however, the differences are not as discernible. "I make the same arguments in both courses, and I don't even want to say that there would be a higher level of discussion in the graduate course, because some of the undergrads get into this pretty well, too," said one educator.

RQ4: What do educators believe are the most effective methods and resources to teach public relations ethics?

Respondents felt that the most effective pedagogical methods for presenting ethics are case studies (M=6.11, SD=1.03), followed by simulations (M=5.78, SD=1.24) and small group discussions (M=5.66, SD=1.24). The least effective method for these educators is Socratic dialogue (M=4.23, SD=1.75), followed by research papers (M=4.28, SD=1.66), and lectures (M=4.56, SD=1.71). These findings are reflected in the interview responses with the majority (12 respondents) saying the most effective pedagogical method is discussion of case studies. "I think [ethics] is something that's particularly apt for discussion," said one educator. "We have a lot of students who face these issues, they have internships, and quite surprisingly, some of them are called upon to do things that are unethical, so they have something to say." Another respondent noted that service-learning projects for a nonprofit client provide another opportunity for ethics instruction.

Regarding the placement of the ethics unit within a public relations course, responses were mixed. Six respondents said their ethics units are at the beginning of the course; one of them noted, "I think if you're going to lay out the principles of PR before students start getting into the process of PR, then you've got to talk about ethics first."

Three respondents stated that their ethics units are at the middle of the course, one teaches ethics at the beginning and again at the middle, and two respondents noted that it depends on the instructor for the specific public relations course. Another teaches ethics throughout the course, noting, "I have an ethics question on each test. It's to get the students to think, to get them to consider it always in all of their actions, as opposed to something to be memorized that they wouldn't use." Two respondents save the ethics unit until the end of the course; one observed, "In the last couple of weeks, I usually cover law and ethics, consistent with my view that this is a finishing topic, and I think you can do it [then] at a more sophisticated level."

Respondents to the survey find the most helpful resources for teaching ethics to be current events (M=6.53, SD=0.74), followed by the PRSA Code of Ethics (M=5.66, SD=1.57). The least helpful are business (M=3.29, SD=1.54) and journalism/mass communication (M=3.69, SD=1.78) textbooks.

The most effective method of assessing student ethical understanding is class discussion (M=5.94, SD=1.09). The least effective are examinations (M=4.70, SD=1.67), followed closely by research papers (M=4.71, SD=1.46). Interviewees assess their students' knowledge of ethics through various means, depending on the specific

public relations class and the number of students enrolled, but most do so through tests, sometimes in combination with papers, case study analyses, class participation grades on ethics discussions, writing a personal code of ethics after studying various professional codes, or portfolio review.

Several educators noted how difficult it is to assess ethics. One commented, "I don't think we assess ethics well. I think other elements of a class are assessed more clearly." Another educator agreed, noting that her department is just beginning its work on assessing ethics by reviewing assignments with an ethical component. A third educator, who assesses through exams and comments in class, pointed to the challenges of assessment: "At the end of the semester you might still have a student who will, if you poll them to see how they would respond to an ethics situation, say it depends on how much they pay me. So there's only so much you can do."

Educators reported a number of most rewarding outcomes of teaching ethics, most notably, an "aha!" moment from their students (6 respondents) and feedback from alumni on their own ethics "war stories" after they begin their PR careers (2 respondents). Others noted a sense of satisfaction when students subsequently mention ethics in term papers or ask ethics questions while preparing a PR campaign for a nonprofit client. One educator said:

I'm always happy when students get good grades but I'm exceptionally happy when they find ways to mention Plato and Aristotle in term papers. And beyond that, when they ask questions in service learning, such as 'Is this ethical, should we be doing this?' With our little agency that the PRSSA runs, 'Do we want to be doing this?'

Two respondents indicated their gratification when students differ on how to handle an ethical dilemma after carefully considering it; one noted, "It's rewarding when the kids are actually discussing it, when they feel like they're absolutely right, but some student disagrees with them. I think that's the best way to make them think about something when they have to actually defend something they do." Another educator commented, "The most rewarding part is to find that my skepticism about the next generation of practitioners is erased once I understand how passionate they are about the field and about defending our ethical premise."

When asked to list the single biggest challenge in teaching ethics in public relations courses, educators offered a number of different responses, most notably, getting students to think about ethics issues (5 respondents). "I believe a lot of the students don't even think about ethical considerations," said one educator. Other challenges include students who come into a public relations course with no idea of right or wrong, having a lot of ethics issues to cover in one course, students who want to find the one "right" answer to an ethical dilemma when there may be shades of gray, and difficulties in assessing ethics instruction.

Despite these challenges, most of the interviewees (11) believe that public relations

educators are doing enough to teach ethics to their students, although the survey respondents felt that educators were not doing an excellent job of teaching ethics to undergraduates ($M=3.56$, $SD=1.27$). Four interviewees wished they could do more, such as add a freestanding ethics course, but noted that their public relations curriculum is already packed with required courses or budget cuts have prevented them from offering certain courses.

Two respondents felt that educators are doing their part, but ethics must be learned by doing, on the job. "I think as long as you have a good foundation as to what some of the questions are, we're preparing students to come to grips with the tradeoff between society, their employer, their profession and themselves," said one educator. Another noted, "I think ethics is pounded in really heavily by educators, but the bigger challenge is those who work in public relations, either those who are a long way away from their education and that ethical foundation or those who never had it to start with."

RQ5: What do educators think about the state of ethics in the profession?

Most interviewees (14 out of 15) felt that PR practitioners, in general, act ethically – with some exceptions. "I think the ones who work in government and for nonprofits do, and agencies above a certain size, but some of the individual practitioners, some of the consultants that I've worked with or seen have played kind of fast and loose," one respondent commented. Another educator felt that some ethics problems arise in the C-suite: "If you don't have a strong leader who's willing to be ethical and put a stake in the ground and stick his or her neck out, then I don't think the best PR person in the world can do his or her job effectively." A third respondent felt that PR practitioners are acting ethically, but some journalists are using a "broad brush" to imply that public relations professionals are not ethical.

A fourth educator, who spent part of the summer of 2011 working in public relations for a major nonprofit organization, was impressed with the ethical behavior of her colleagues: "I like what I see [practitioners] doing. The people who were responding on social media and writing releases were very conscientious. I think everybody's thinking about this greatly and looking at the ramifications."

RQ6: What do educators believe professional organizations, such as the PRSA, could do to improve ethical behavior in the practice?

Educators offered a number of suggestions for professional organizations to help improve ethical behavior, including more continuing education workshops and conferences on ethics, making ethics a topic to be pondered by educators and practitioners alike, more linkages between PR educators and practitioners on ethics topics, more in-house ethics training at large PR agencies and organizations, continuing to maintain professional codes of ethics, and making accreditation more affordable. One educator suggested more communication (columns and blogs) about how ethical PR practitioners are: "Where we see our profession being challenged for not being ethical,

we have to push back and say, ‘Wait a minute, you don’t understand current practice, you don’t understand how we train people, you don’t understand the codes we live by and the expectations that are reasonable for people to have.’” Five respondents believe that professional organizations such as PRSA are already doing a good job on ethics issues, pointing to strong ties between local PRSA chapters and local colleges with ethics presentations by PR practitioners to students.

Educators were divided as to whether licensing of public relations practitioners would lead to more ethical behavior. One respondent commented, “If you had licensing, if you could take away people’s rights to call themselves a ‘public relations practitioner’ or to use a certain term or title that could skirt the constitutional issues, you would have some incentive for people to pay attention to the ethics codes and to abide by them.” But another was opposed: “I have a very strong feeling on that because I was a journalist before I was a PR practitioner and I’m dead set opposed to licensing because it is a First Amendment issue as far as I am concerned. We should be able to say what we say; let the marketplace of ideas judge us.”

Most of the educators believe that accreditation of PR practitioners is a more promising avenue to ensure ethical behavior, provided that the PR industry can convince more employers of the value of the APR (a comment made by five respondents) and that accreditation is made more affordable. One respondent also suggested that PR practitioners should be stripped of their accreditation if found by a board of their peers to be guilty of unethical behavior.

In their closing comments on ethics instruction and ethics in the public relations profession, respondents offered several ideas, such as creating greater awareness of international cultures, embedding ethics education in all PR courses, getting faculty colleagues in communication to realize that public relations is not the “dark side,” and teaching ethics to journalism and public relations majors in the same course, so that future professionals understand the ethical challenges confronting both fields. On that point, one respondent commented, “I think there are too many journalists out there who think the role of a PR practitioner is just to lie through their teeth. I think the more we do in education to have those bodies [journalism and PR students] brought together early so that they can better understand each other’s role, the better they will function with each other in society.”

Another educator said, “I think we have to go past ethics being motherhood. We have to give it real meaning, and we have to make it central to our understanding of how it is that public relations people make decisions. We need to figure out ways to put more emphasis on training people about decision-making.”

DISCUSSION

This study examined the attitudes of PR educators toward ethics education and the status of ethics education in the PR curricula. Consistent with the findings in earlier studies, these PR educators feel strongly about the importance of ethics instruction.

Interestingly, however, they do not think educators are doing an excellent job of teaching ethics to students, a perception that merits further study.

The participants agree that ethics should be taught throughout the curricula rather than in a freestanding course, a finding consistent with Erzikova's (2009) study of PR ethics instruction. That ethics was embedded in PR Management classes the least often is no doubt a matter of course name rather than an indication that ethics is not often addressed in such a course.

The most effective pedagogical methods for presenting ethics information are case studies, simulations, and small group discussions, according to these educators.

The least effective methods are Socratic dialogues, research papers, and lectures. Erzikova (2009) found lectures to be among the top three methods for ethics instruction. The low rating given lectures in this study may be a reflection of class size with lectures being more useful in large classes or the increased emphasis on experiential learning in the last several years.

Respondents to the survey find the most helpful materials to be current events and the PRSA Code of Ethics. Interviewees reiterated the importance of both, although they also mentioned PR textbooks as being useful. The least helpful were business and journalism/mass communication textbooks. As with Erzikova's (2009) study, blogs received mixed agreement over their usefulness in teaching ethics.

The most effective methods of assessing student ethical understanding, according to these educators, are class discussions, reflective/position papers, and student presentations. The least effective are examinations and research papers. The interviewees, however, indicate they assess ethical knowledge through a variety of means including tests. These findings are consistent with Erzikova's study (2009).

Interviewees believe public relations practitioners to be ethical for the most part and that accreditation can help the emphasis on ethics.

Overall, it would appear that educators agree with the Commission on Public Relations Education that ethics education is important for PR students. It pervades the content of most of the public relations curriculum but the recommendation of dedicated PR ethics courses has proven more difficult to realize. At the same time, educators remain cognizant of the challenges of assessing ethics education. As one interviewee put it, "We can attempt to instill ethics in our students, but they have the autonomy to make their own decisions." And that remains the challenge.

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DEBORAH SILVERMAN, PH.D., APR, FELLOW PRSA is an associate professor of communication at SUNY Buffalo State. **Email:** silverda[AT]buffalostate.edu

KARLA K. GOWER, PH.D. is the director of the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations and the Behringer Distinguished Professor in the University of Alabama Department of Advertising & Public Relations. **Email:** silverda[AT]buffalostate.edu

ELMIE NEKMAT, PH.D. is an assistant professor at the National University of Singapore Department of Communications and New Media. Email: elmie[AT]nus.edu.sg