Experiential Learning Labs in Public Relations Programs: Characteristics of Undergraduate Student-Run Public Relations Firms on U.S. College Campuses

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Abstract

Advisors from 55 of 119 student-run public relations firms on U.S. college campuses provided data about firm characteristics. A listing of student-run public relations firms, or agencies, was created and through an online survey questionnaire, results show that firm characteristics (years in operation, funding, workspace, hiring process, types of clients, and student involvement in decisions) are more similar than dissimilar even when comparing student-run public relations agencies of varying years in operation. Statistically significant results were found for the difference between firm types for the average number of hours students worked per week (F=6.612, eta-square= 0.18) and ACEJMC accreditation (F=3.71, eta- square=0.13). Recommendations and research ideas about this type of experiential learning lab are explored for future study.

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Experiential learning labs in public relations programs:

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Students have long had the opportunity to hone their newsgathering skills working for the campus newspaper. In more recent years, students interested in public relations began honing their craft at student-run campus public relations firms. With the recent call for more hands-on education in journalism schools (Mangan, 2012), it seems logical to better study the mechanisms already being used to deliver such learning. To date, a few single firm descriptive studies and one qualitative study have been published specifically about student-run public relations firms. Analyzing the experiential labs created for student learning is important to establish best practices and benchmarks for measuring student experiences. The research questions posed in this study are designed to look at student-run public relations firms: 1). What are the common characteristics of student-run firms at institutions of higher education in the U.S.? and 2). Is there a significant difference between firm types (Bush, 2009) and

- firms' years in operation?
- student involvement?
- average number of hours students work at firm per week
- firms within Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) accredited programs?

The purpose is to better identify and typify the experiential learning labs, the student-run PR firms, already in place. Noting differences between longer established firms and younger firms provides clues as to keys for longevity. It also lays groundwork for future analysis and potential trend studies. The significance of this study is the starting point it provides for future

research. Other studies have only looked at individual case studies or a handful of firms. A bigger picture of the firms in the U.S. and a listing of firms give researchers tools to create theoretical and analytical studies. This research paves the way for researchers to conduct studies comparing student firm characteristics with student success measures.

Literature Review

Historically, public relations educators and practitioners have cited the importance of internships and practical experience. The 1985 Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education, Blanchard and Christ's New Professionalism of 1993 (Dickson, 2000) and The Public Relations Society of America's 1999 Port of Entry all supported internships, on-campus apprenticeships and hands-on learning. Student work on the campus public relations firm is at its core hands-on or experiential learning. John Dewey, a champion for experiential learning, said students learn best by experiencing the problems that surround them (Ehrlich, 1997). He said every experience is a "moving force" (Dewey, 1938, p. 38) and an interaction where something is learned (Campbell, 1995). This experience can educate or mis-educate and lay groundwork for subsequent experiences. Fulfilling definitions by Kolb (1984) and Hativa (2000) and others, students at the firms are learning by doing and participating in the experience teaches them about client interactions, tactical skills and ways to address problems. It is one thing to understand the parts of a news release, but the process of crafting an actual release for a client's approval creates an experience of learning. Similarly, Cohen reflects on writers covering modern dance, "The lesson, however, is learned in a considerably deeper way when the novice writer actually has to struggle with the process of both observing the movement and then putting those observations into clear prose" (1988, p. 51).

Lee (1947) said practical experience and motivation were more important than certain education to producing public relations leaders of the time. This is still echoed today in recent calls for the medical field's teaching hospital model in journalism schools (Mangan, 2012). In this experiential learning model, ala student-run firm, students must feel their way around a simulated work environment, with guidance from advisors, for their chose fields. The experiential learning is a "sequence of events with one or more identified learning objectives, requiring active involvement by participants" (Walter & Marks, 1981, p. 1). Gibbons and Hopkins created a scale to determine how experiential a task was - simulated experiences are on lower end of the scale. As more of the planning and execution of the experience moves into the learner's responsibility, the experience becomes more experiential (Gibbons & Hopkins, 1980). In the firm setting, students are meeting with clients and making decisions about what messages to distribute, making it more experiential than simply writing a news release in a public relations course. This study asks advisors to comment to what degree students fulfill planning or administrative roles in order to gauge how experiential the experience is. In a pilot study, U.K. journalism educators created an experiential learning situation where journalism and political science postgraduate students worked together to cover a general election (Steel et al., 2007). Students cited anxiety at first that eventually transitioned to a greater confidence and they saw how even a group with some problems can effectively cover a news event when team members focus on the same goal. The experiences at the student-run firm are not simply simulations, they are real experiences that educate, or mis-educate, and provide hands-on learning preparing students for their next experiences.

Student-run firms

A listing from the Public Relations Student Society of America shows 124 of its members self-reporting a student-run public relations firm. A few student-run public relations firms have received recognition in academic journals. Imagewest, a student-run agency, was established in 2004 at Western Kentucky University (Imagewest, 2005). Students working for the firm receive course credit and a stipend during what they call an internship. Students apply and interview for positions at the firm. Their clients are both on-and-off campus and are diverse. Their list includes a hospital, attorney, church, nonprofits, credit union, and many campus departments and organizations. Services seem full-service ranging from logo creation and other graphic design to research to event planning to news release writing to printing.

Much earlier than Imagewest, Del-Com was awarded a contract to help its university promote summer programs. In 1980, the student-run agency at the University of Delaware even beat out professional agencies for a campaign (Mogavero, 1982). Del-com was designed to provide agency functions for the State of Delaware, corporate Wilmington and the University of Delaware. Students working for the firm had finished their core coursework and most already had one internship experience. About fifteen students worked for the agency and it was run out of a course covering two semesters. The students' campaign to promote university enrollment was deemed a success; a five-year decline in enrollment halted.

Central Coast PRspectives is the student-run public relations firm at California Polytechnic State University (Swanson, 2008, 2011). It began in 2002 with a client base of community nonprofits. Students working for the firm are enrolled in a capstone course called advanced public relations practice. The firm has an open-door policy where any student may volunteer. The student leader for the firm earns academic credit for his or her role. Students were

required to attend a one-hour planning meeting and then work four hours weekly on a campaign. CCPR receives $2,500 from the university per year and has its own office.

Bush (2009) used a snowball sample to learn more about the pedagogical benefits and risks of student-run public relations firms. In-depth interviews with advisors from ten student-run firms showed three pedagogical benefits: experiential learning/process learning, professional identity development and career choices/opportunities. Bush created a schema for the "types" of agencies. Type 1 most resembled a real-world firm and had a low risk of dissolving. Firms exist on a continuum of participation and professionalism and the Type 3 firms had a high risk of dissolving and there are no required meetings. Type 2 was in between. Bush cited the Type 1 agencies as the model that can fill voids in coursework. She asserts that agency work fills in where campaigns courses or service learning cannot. The agency work also focuses on process-oriented work, as opposed to the sometimes task-oriented work from an internship. While only 120+ programs have student-run firms, most do have campaigns courses or internship programs.

Other Learning Labs

For many of the U.S. public relations programs, a campaigns course is where hands-on learning is acquired. Eighty-eight % of programs responding to a 1999 study required public relations majors to take a campaigns course. Researchers behind the study asserted that a campaigns course "can never be sufficient to fully prepare students for real-world experiences" (Benigni & Cameron, 1999). A difference between agency work and the campaigns course is that courses typically end with a presentation. Implementation is left to the client. In the agency setting, *students* are creating, presenting and then implementing the campaign. In 1999, a study found that ninety-two % of campaigns students in the sample used had actual clients, but only

half of the campaigns courses use an agency-type backdrop for the class environment (Benigni & Cameron). Researchers suggested an agency structure should be more widely adopted. In a larger 2004 study, 96% of the campaign teachers invited actual clients to participate in the campaigns class and 90% used an agency structure (Benigni, Cheng & Cameron, 2004).

The campus public relations firm could be likened to an in-house internship program. Journalism students view internships as highly valuable, according to a phenomenological study in 2002. Basow and Byrne (1993) analyzed pre-internship and post-internship questionnaires to reveal that students completing longer internships agreed more with statements about career insights than the students completing shorter stints. A position at the student-run firm would likely last longer than a holiday break or summer internship. Receiving payment for internship experiences increased student perceptions of educational preparedness and career insights and "perhaps the most valuable experience students gain is in the learning to adjust to the climate and structure of the workplace" (Basow & Byrne, 1993, p. 52).

When students work at the student-run public relations firm, it could be likened to an extensive problem-based learning scenario. The student-run public relations firm is a model of a real-world public relations firm and students work to solve their clients' communication *problems*. PBL focuses on the process more than the products of learning and creates a situation that is open-ended with no one correct solution (Hativa, 2000). Students in public relations courses at a Midwestern university acted as public relations agencies for clients and were asked to view themselves as *professional problem-solvers*. Using analysis of questionnaire responses and student evaluations, researchers asserted that students felt like they learned a lot and found "real-world applications appropriate for their needs" (Attansey, Okigbo & Schmidt, 2007).

The composite provided by research studies on experiential learning, campaigns courses, problem-based learning, and internships, gives a basis for this study: an analysis of student-run public relations firms at U.S. colleges.

Method

Survey data was collected from advisors of public relations programs in U.S. institutions of higher education with student-run public relations agencies. To search for universities with student-run public relations firms, a benchmarking study was conducted. That list was compared to the listing of student-run firms kept by the Public Relations Student Society of America; it is a self-report item on the membership form. The combined list created the population from which the study began. The Fashion Institute was excluded because of its differences from all other universities. The population of the study was the 120 firms in the U.S. and the sample consisted of the survey respondents. The 29-question survey was submitted to a panel of experts to look at its validity. Questions covered firms characteristics like years in operation, types of clients, types of office space, funding, how and if students are compensated, etc. The questionnaire is available upon request. IRB approval was acquired and measures were followed to properly maintain confidential data. A pilot study was conducted by administering the questionnaire at a school not selected to participate in the larger study. Minor changes were made and the survey instrument was uploaded to www.surveymonkey.com. After the first invitation, undeliverable e-mail addresses were updated or alternative e-mails were entered. Four subsequent e-mail reminders were sent over a two-month time frame. Forty-six responded. Phone calls and voice mail messages garnered another 16 responses. Two incomplete surveys were kept in the dataset because of the value in analyzing the responses made. Another two respondents reported no firm at their institutions and those universities were deleted from the list. Five cases were deleted for

noncompletion. Two advisors from the same university responded with similar answers. The non-advisor's comments were deleted from the study. One university has two firms, so both advisors' responses were included in the study. Fifty-five usable surveys of the 119 possible means 46% of firms are represented.

Data Analysis

Data was exported into PASW® Statistics and an alpha of 0.05 was used. Where advisors reported ranges, the mean was used. For questions with an "other" response, advisor comments were analyzed and categorized. For example, one question was, What is the primary workspace for the student-run public relations firm? a. Dedicated office space, b. Shared space with other student organizations, c. No Space, d. Other (please explain). Advisors reported other workspace options like department labs, conference rooms, empty classrooms and other spaces. These were deemed "shared space" by the researcher. In future administrations of this instrument, the shared space could be more inclusive. Students working from their own residences were classified as no space. Responses for student payment were handled in a similar way. If a respondent said "credit hours and a few scholarships" the case was coded into the category paid in credit hours. Another example was that most are unpaid, but the executive director receives three credit hours of practicum. In this case, credit hours would have been entered. A category was added for cooperative payment accounts where students can use funds for travel and professional development. In subsequent administrations a question should be added to qualify which students, or what percentage of students, are compensated. Firm funding received "other" responses produced new categories (PRSSA or student dues, a combination of university funds and client fees, no funding, and fundraisers) that were added as the data was coded in PASW®.

One respondent said the firm was taught as a class, so the funding was classified as university funds.

Advisors were asked how often students handled certain firm responsibilities. The question was an effort to determine student involvement to create a metric of how "student-run" the firm actually was. Advisors responded never, rarely, sometimes, often, or always to how often students 1) are involved in the firm's planning; 2) are involved in the financial aspect of the firm; 3) negotiate with clients; 4) handle client complaints; and 5) solicit new clients. Reliability analysis was run for the five elements used to create the student involvement metric. The Cronbach alpha was 0.828. The Cronbach alphas for each item, if deleted, were similar, so no item was deleted from the metric. The metric was also coded into high, medium and low involvement. Scores from 9-12 were low, 13-16 were medium and 17-20 were high.

While not an exact replication, the student-run public relations agencies were classified into one of Bush's (2009) types. Questions from the survey classified the firms. The following questions were used to determine each quality that was counted toward the larger variable of firm type:

- What is the primary workspace for the student-run public relations firm?
- Does the student-run firm have a written policy or employee manual?
- How are students paid for work at the student-run public relations firm?
- Do students have titles when working for the firm? If yes, what position or titles can students occupy at the student-run public relations firm? Mark all that apply.
- How are students selected to work for the student-run firm?
- What is the primary type of client your firm serves?

- On average, what percentage of YOUR (advisor) week is devoted to the student-

  run public relations firm? (Please give a percentage.)

Table 1 outlines how responses from the seven questions were used to classify the

student-run firms into types.

Table 1

How Firms in Study Were Divided Into Types

Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Primary workspace as dedicated space	Primary workspace is shared	No primary workspace
Has a written policy or employee manual		No written policy or employee manual
Students paid an hourly wage, credit hours, stipend or a combination of these	Students can access a cooperative account for travel or professional development	Students are not paid
Students have titles like account coordinator, account executive, area-specific titles, assistant account executive and executive director	Students have titles like intern, secretary, treasurer or associate; lacking hierarchical titles	Students do not have titles
Students are handpicked by faculty or through a competitive application/audition/ interview process	A noncompetitive application/audition/ interview process is used	Firm participation is open access
Primary clients include area businesses and national/international clients, or a mix including these		Clients are nonprofits, campus departments, or pre-packaged/ simulated clients

Advisors reported spending 50-100 percent of their week devoted to firm	Advisors spent 20-49 percent of week devoted to firm	Advisors spent 0-19 percent of week devoted to firm

Predictive discriminant analysis (PDA) was used to test rater consistency. PDA can determine a classification role for assigning units into groups (Huberty, Wisenbaker, & Smith, 1987). Seven items were loaded with the rater's type assignment producing a hit rate of 65.9 and the I index (effect size) was 0.49 (Huberty & Lowan, 2000). The rater reviewed cases for inconsistencies. The secondary selection by the statistical analysis matched the rater's original type in all but one case. It was even parts Type 1, Type 2 and Type 3 and was therefore classified as Type 2. After a case-by-case analysis, no changes were made.

One-way ANOVAs tested hypotheses about differences between types on variables like years established and student involvement. An alpha of 0.05 was used and homogeneity of variances and post hoc tests were checked.

Results

Of the 55 advisor responses, all but one could be identified and therefore connected to institutional data. As shown in Table 2, more public institutions ($n=35$) were represented in the study. Two firms came from the same university, an accredited public institution.

Table 2

Characteristics of Responding Universities with Student-Run Public Relations Firms

	ACEJMC Accredited	Not Accredited	Total

Public Institutions	16	19	35
Private Institutions	6	13	19
Total	22	32	54

Note: n= 54; one university from the dataset is not reflected here because the advisor's incomplete survey could not be aligned with its corresponding university. ACEJMC is the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

About the Firms

The length of operation for firms was from the newest beginning in 2009 to 37 years. The mean number of years was 9.36 years (*n*=51, SD=9.45). The majority of firms (44 of the 53 responding) reported operating in a continuous manner. Nine advisors said there was a period when firms did not operate. Advisors offered explanations for the hiatus. One said a lack of an active advisor led to periods of inactivity for firms. Another advisor said his firm was suspended for a two-year period due to a lack of qualified participants. Lack of interest from students and clients was cited by one advisor for a hiatus. Others responded they did not know because of limited time in the advisor position. Other firm characteristics are cataloged in Table 3.

Table 3

Firm Characteristics Reported by Advisors

Firm Characteristic	No. of Firms
Years in Operations	
0-4 years	22
5-9 years	8
10-14 years	8
15 or more years	13
Firms Primarily Funded By	
Client fees	20

University funds	14
Combination of university funds and client fees	5
Fundraisers	4
PRSSA or student dues	4
Private donations	3
Not funded	3
Grant/foundations	1

Firm Workspace

Dedicated office space	20
No space	17
Shared space	16

Student Selection Process

Open access	26
Competitive application/audition/interview	17
Non-competitive process	5
Combination of methods	3
PRSSA elections/membership	2
Course enrollment	1

Compensation Method

Not paid	29
Combination of wage, credit, stipend	8
Paid in credit hours	7
Paid an hourly wage	4
Cooperative account for student travel and	3
Stipend	2

Student positions/titles

Account executive	43
Executive director/director	35
Area specific titles	33
Assistant account executive	22
Account coordinator	19
Secretary	8
Treasurer	8
Intern	1

Primary Type of Client

Community nonprofits	22
Campus departments or organizations	12
Mix of types	11
Area businesses	9

Thirty-six firms reported having written policy manuals. The average number of students working at the firm each semester or quarter ranged from four to 125 (*n=50*, SD=19.06) with a mean of 19.4. Advisors reported students spending between one and five semesters working at the firm. The mean was 2.42 semesters (*n=46*, SD= 0.98).

Firms handled accounts for a variety of clients. The average number of clients per semester/quarter was 5.41 with the least amount of clients at one and the most at 25 (*n=52*, SD=4.627). Of the eleven firms reporting a mix of primary clients, one reported having a national client and two were a mix of campus organizations and community nonprofits. One received referrals of start-up businesses from the Small Business Development Center.

Advisors were asked to what degree students share in the decision-making process. Forty-one of the 54 respondents said "all" and 13 said "some." Advisors were asked to divulge how often students handled certain aspects of the firm's business. Table 4 shows that the majority of advisors responded students "always" were involved in the firm's planning and handling client complaints.

Table 4

Frequency of Tasks Handled by Students Working at the Student-run Firm as Reported by Advisors

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Are involved in firm's planning (*n=53*)	0	0	6	13	34

Are involved in the financial aspects of the firm (*n=52*)	3	4	9	12	24
Negotiate with clients (*n=53*)	0	4	3	19	27
Handle client complaints (*n=53*)	1	0	7	17	28
Solicit new clients (*n=52*)	0	1	14	12	25

When these variables were summed for a total reflecting student involvement (never=0, rarely=1, sometimes=2, often=3, always=4), the lowest student involvement was a 9 and the highest was 20 (mean=16.39, mode=18, SD=3.578). This metric was checked for reliability, using reliability analysis in PASW®, and the five variables had a Cronbach alpha of 0.828.

The majority of advisors are full-time university employees (*n=50 of 53*) and are assistant (*n=16*) and associate (*n=16*) professors. Nine were lecturers or instructors, 4 were adjuncts, 2 staff, 5 full professors, and 4 professionals in residence.

Table 5 divides firms into categories of firm age to compare qualities by highlighting the most frequent advisor responses. Firms are largely similar when viewed in this manner.

Table 5

Firm Characteristics by Years in Operation

	Number of Years Firms Have Been Operating			
	0-4 years	5-9 years	10-14 years	15+ years
Has a written policy manual (*n=36*)	16	5	4	11

Does not have a written policy manual (*n*=13)	5	3	3	2
How majority of students are paid (*n*=50)	Not paid (*n*=12)	Not paid (*n*=5)	Combination of wage, credit, stipend (*n*=3) and not paid (*n*=2)	Not paid (*n*=8)
Primary workspace (*n*=50)	Dedicated office space (*n*=9), no space (*n*=7), shared space (*n*=6)	Dedicated office space (*n*=4), shared space (*n*=4)	Dedicated office space (*n*=4)	Shared space (*n*=5), no space (*n*=5), dedicated office space (*n*=3)
Student titles (*n*=54)	Hierarchical titles (*n*=20)	Hierarchical titles (*n*=5)	Hierarchical titles (*n*=4)	Hierarchical titles (*n*=10)
How students selected (*n*=50)	Open access (*n*=9), competitive process (*n*=8)	Open access (*n*=2), competitive process (*n*=2), through PRSSA (*n*=2)	Open access (*n*=4), competitive process (*n*=3)	Open access (*n*=9)
Primary type of clients served (*n*=50)	Community nonprofits (*n*=8); campus department/ organizations (*n*=7); mixed (*n*=6)	Community nonprofits (*n*=4)	Community nonprofits (*n*=2); campus department/ organizations (*n*=2)	Area businesses (*n*=5); community nonprofits (*n*=4)
% of advisor workweek devoted to firm (*n*=43)	0-19% (*n*=10)	20-49% (*n*=5)	20-49% (*n*=5)	0-19% (*n*=8)
Student involvement metric for student-run (*n*=47)	High involvement (*n*=12)	Medium involvement (*n*=5)	High involvement (*n*=3); medium involvement	High involvement (*n*=9)

	($n=3$)

Note: Table shows most frequent responses. Hierarchical titles references account coordinator, account executive, area-specific titles, assistant account executive and executive director.

Firms were grouped into types using Bush's 2009 schema. Two respondents did not provide enough data for classification. The other 53 fell into these types: 20 as Type 1, 20 as Type 2, and 13 as Type 3. Analysis of variance was used to compare firm qualities between the types (Bush, 2009). Using a null hypothesis of H_0=Type 1=Type 2=Type 3, years of operation and student involvement were tested. Both variables passed tests of homogeneity, but n's for the three types (Type 1 n=19, Type 2 n=20, Type 3 n=11) were not evenly distributed. ANOVAs were run despite this fact. Neither variable was statistically significant and failed to reject the null hypothesis. For years in operation, eta-square was 0.037 (F=0.91) and student involvement was 0.018 (F=0.44). ANOVAs producing statistically significant results were for the average number of hours students worked per week (F=6.612, eta-square= 0.18) and ACEJMC accreditation (F=3.71, eta-square=0.13). Both variables passed tests of homogeneity; Tukey post-hoc analysis was used.

Discussion and Conclusion

Firms may advertise themselves as one-of-a-kind phenomena, but they are more alike than dissimilar. The majority operated continuously and is primarily funded through client fees and university funds. The bulk of the firms have written policy manuals. Open access and competitive applications were the selection processes most used for student staffs. The majority of firms do not pay students, but almost all of them use a titled structure for the students. More firms serve a nonprofit client base. Students are the decision makers and the majority handle the firm's planning, finances, client negotiation, client complaints and new client development most

or all of the time. As one advisor phrased it, he or she only spent five % of each week with firm activities because "it's student run." Programs looking to start a student-run firm could use these general characteristics as a preliminary roadmap to decisions it would need to make, like do we need office space?

The descriptives for the firms surveyed raise some questions. What was the key to success for the firms making it to the 15 year mark? Like their younger counterparts, students were not paid, it was an open access admission, and the students had a high involvement. One difference was the older firms' reliance on area businesses as their client base. Nearly all of the advisors for firms of all ages were assistant and associate professors, which could point to the value programs place on these learning labs.

Statistical support for significant differences between types depended on the variable. Average number of hours students worked at the firm per week and program ACEJMC accredited were, but with modest effect sizes. Years in operation is interesting because Bush suggested Type 1 would have a low risk of dissolving and Type 3 would have a high risk. Research would need to include data from dissolved firms to provide a better analysis. This dataset reflected a crop of newer firms that could be watched in the future to provide information on variables tied to dissolution of firms. Average number of hours students worked at the firm per week and ACEJMC accreditation were statistically different between the types. Previous studies looking at accredited vs. not-accredited program only showed small differences (Benigni, Cheng & Cameron, 2004, and Masse & Popovich, 2007). This is worth further examination. While different, what effect does accreditation have on the firm and the students' experiences? The average number of hours students work at the firm differing among the firm types makes sense. Bush (2009) reported that Type 1 firms had required work hours and Type 3 firms had no

required meetings. How often students were required to meet was not collected in this study, but the average hours work reported is consistent with Bush's study.

Student involvement, a construct created from how often students handled certain tasks, across the board was strong. Most advisors answered that students handled the five tasks often or always. Would students report the same frequencies? Would "more successful"—job attainment, GPA, years to graduation or other variables—students come from firms with higher student involvement? This might be where the firms would differ on the student involvement metric.

Even when firms were divided into four groups based on years in operation, the firms were more alike than dissimilar. More had written policy or employee manuals and most had firms where students were not paid. More of the younger firms had dedicated office space. The firms operating fifteen or more years were divided between shared space and no space. One take away could be that the space does not make the firm successful or lead to longevity. Community nonprofits were the primary clients for firms of all ages, but area businesses were more frequently the primary client for the firms fifteen years or older. This could provide insight into why some firms survive longer than others.

Limitations

Broad generalizations must be limited because half of the firms are not represented in this study. Research needs to include data from dissolved firms to provide a better analysis. Institutional characteristics reported were limited to accreditation status and public versus private. And, the study included only U.S. institutions. The timing of this study may have missed the mark; the first survey invitation was toward the end of a fall semester. While an online survey e-mail to respondents is easy, it may not collect the nuances a semi-structured telephone

interview would. Questions were designed to determine how much decision-making students handled. It might be interesting to compare advisors' philosophies and approaches to their role.

Recommendations and Future Research

Student-run public relations firms are a way to give students a taste of a prospective career and its nuances while re-enforcing concepts in the classroom. In an environment demanding more accountability, advisors and programs will need to be able to provide some proof of student learning and development and we recommend:

- First, keeping a current list of universities with student-run firms, while a moving target, would allow researchers to investigate aspects of the firms.

- An annual survey would be one way to gather data consistently for a database that could provide opportunities for trend study. Collecting data each year would create opportunities for trend studies and an annual survey distributed by participating universities to its graduating seniors as part of the graduation process could help acquire student responses.

- The most crucial recommendation is for researchers to find ways to study the students working at the firms and the learning that is happening, or not, at the firms.

This study focused on the firms, but what about the student workers? The firm environment's effect on student workers and their learning is another area of possible investigation. In a study of practicing journalists, researchers found that day-to-day interaction with editors and colleagues was the most powerful force guiding values, ethics and professional practice (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). When a student worked at the firm during his or her

collegiate career might have varying effects on learning. Placing the firm experience into students' continuum of learning while in college might illustrate when it provides the most impact. Is a 10-hour a week student-agency position as intensive as a forty-hour a week summer internship? Would mimicking some of the agency tasks in a classroom setting be as effective or is the complete agency experience necessary?

A handful of the firms are in the beginning stages of development. Checking back in with them in a year or two to see which ones survived might give clues to success factors for firms. From research, best practices could be bolstered or research could probe into the dissolved firms for common themes or warning signs of future trouble.

To answer the "so what" question of this study, we point to the expansion of the research to include a larger understanding of public relations firms run by undergraduates on U.S. college campuses. The current study was able to piece together characteristics of about half of the working student public relations firms. Moving to the next stage, investigating measures of success beyond years in existence will provide more empirical data to satisfy the accountability of today's higher education.

Appendix A: List of Schools with Student-Run Public Relations Firms Invited

to Participate in Study

1. Abilene Christian University
2. Anderson University
3. Appalachian State University
4. Augustana College
5. Ball State University
6. Belmont University
7. Bloomsburg University
8. Boston University
9. Bowling Green State University
10. Brigham Young University
11. Buffalo State College
12. California State University, Chico
13. California State Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo
14. California State University, Dominguez Hills
15. California State University, Fresno
16. California University of Pennsylvania
17. Capital University
18. Central Michigan University
19. Central Washington University
20. Colorado State University
21. Drexel University
22. Eastern Illinois University
23. Eastern Michigan University
24. Elon University
25. Emerson College
26. Ferris State University
27. Flagler College
28. Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University
29. Franklin College
30. George Mason University
31. Georgia Southern University
32. Georgia State University
33. Gonzaga University
34. Grand Valley State University
35. Howard University
36. Illinois State University
37. Indiana State University
38. Indiana University
39. Indiana University of Pennsylvania
40. Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis
41. Iona College
42. Kent State
43. Louisiana State University - Baton Rouge
44. Marshall University
45. Messiah College
46. Miami University of Ohio
47. Michigan State University
48. Middle Tennessee State University
49. Murray State University
50. North Carolina State University

51. Northern Illinois University
52. Northern Kentucky University
53. Northern Michigan University
54. Northwest Missouri State University
55. Ohio Northern University
56. Ohio State University
57. Ohio University
58. Oklahoma State University
59. Otterbein College
60. Pennsylvania State University
61. Pepperdine University
62. Purdue University
63. Quinnipiac University
64. Radford University
65. Rowan University
66. Rutgers University
67. Saint John Fisher College
68. Salisbury University
69. San Jose State
70. Seton Hall University
71. Slippery Rock University
72. Southeast Missouri State University
73. Southern Illinois University, Carbondale
74. Southern Utah University
75. St. Cloud State University
76. Susquehanna University
77. Syracuse University
78. Temple University
79. Texas State University
80. Texas Tech University
81. University of Alabama at Birmingham
82. University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa
83. University of Arkansas, Fayetteville
84. University of Central Missouri
85. University of Florida
86. University of Georgia
87. University of Indianapolis
88. University of Iowa
89. University of Kansas
90. University of Maryland
91. University of Miami
92. University of Minnesota
93. University of Missouri
94. University of Nebraska, Omaha
95. University of New Mexico
96. University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
97. University of Northern Iowa
98. University of Oklahoma
99. University of Oregon
100. University of South Carolina
101. University of South Dakota
102. University of Southern California – Annenberg
103. University of Southern Indiana
104. University of Southern Mississippi
105. University of St. Thomas
106. University of Texas at Austin

107. University of Texas at San Antonio
108. University of Washington, Eau Claire
109. University of Wisconsin, Whitewater
110. Utica College
111. Valdosta State University
112. Valparaiso University
113. Virginia Polytechnic Institute
114. Wartburg College
115. West Virginia State University
116. Western Carolina University
117. Western Kentucky University
118. Wilkes University
119. York College of Pennsylvania

Note: The Fashion Institute of Technology also has a firm, but it was not included in this study. The list was compiled in 2009.

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