

---

# **Public Relations Career Development**

---

A Study of Experiential and Academic Factors  
That Have Shaped the Career Paths of  
Local Public Relations Practitioners

**Melissa M. Motschall, Ph.D., APR**

**Eastern Michigan University**

**July 2005**

**Compiled by Erica Pilon for PRSA-Detroit**

---

---

# The Complete Public Relations Profile

## Work Tasks, Professional Development Activities, Academic Experience

### Introduction

Recent issues of *The Public Relations Strategist* and *Public Relations Tactics* feature several articles on career-related topics directed to new graduates, as well as to professionals who are desiring career changes or advancement. The articles focus on required job skills, dos and don'ts of job searches, mentoring, career advancement tips, and other related topics. While these articles provide helpful information, it is important to consider the question: how do these general guidelines compare with the experiences of local practitioners?

This report presents the results of a survey of Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)-Detroit Chapter members' early and continuing professional development and formal education activities that have shaped their career paths. The results confirm that professional development activities, along with a solid public relations education, are integral in preparing individuals for entry-level public relations jobs, as well as in contributing to practitioners' advancement in the field.

**How do general PR career guidelines compare with the experiences of local practitioners?**

### Goals of the Study

The primary goals of this study were to identify and describe:

- Public relations tasks/activities currently assumed by practitioners to determine if they correspond to more management-oriented public relations roles in the workplace.
- Professional development activities that professionals perceive to be valuable to practitioners' early and continuing career development.
- Formal education factors, such as coursework and extra-curricula activities, which professionals have experienced and believe are influential in shaping practitioners' career paths.

**Professional Tasks Professional Development Education**

---

## Methods

The findings were derived from an online survey that was sent to the membership of the PRSA-Detroit in July 2004. Of the 465 members who received the survey,<sup>1</sup> 38.7% responded, which is considerably higher than the average 25% response rate for chapter surveys, according to the Institute for Public Relations Research. The extensive 75-item survey assessed a wide range of factors that describe and contribute to one's career path.

## Key Findings

The findings of this study are helpful in providing a general description of the experiential and academic "profile" of public relations professionals at various stages in their careers. The results also help to assess the characteristics of active professional organizations that provide experiential opportunities and forge linkages between academics and practitioners.

### **PRSA-Detroit members practice and expect "excellent" public relations.**

According to the career development survey, which asked a series of questions about current job activities, more experienced, senior-level practitioners tend to perform more management-oriented activities that involve program planning, counseling and relationship building. These activities and skills, which underscore research on excellence and professionalism in public relations practice,<sup>2</sup> were developed in part on the job and through professional development activities, such as internships, mentoring and service. These practitioners tended not to receive preparation in program planning and management through their education programs.

As a whole, less experienced, entry- to mid-level professionals reflect the "new school" of graduates/practitioners – that is, those who value, support and practice the National Commission on Public Relations Education's model recommendations for excellent undergraduate public relations. These new professionals who were schooled in public relations or related majors were more likely to have received practical experience *and* a more formal public relations education in a wider range of technical skills development and project management. Many of these respondents are performing management-oriented activities earlier on in their careers.

**These new professionals who were schooled in public relations or related majors were more likely to have received practical experience *and* a more formal public relations education in a wider range of technical skills development and project management.**

Consistent with national guidelines for a well-rounded public relations education, respondents who majored in public relations or communications tended to receive instruction in public relations principles and writing, various forms of media, strategic management, problem solving, project management, and other related disciplines. When asked which courses they would have liked to take in college if they had been available,

---

<sup>1</sup> The survey was sent to the 500 members of the PRSA-Detroit, but 35 were undeliverable, thus bringing the total number of potential survey participants to 465.

<sup>2</sup> See contributions to the International Association of Business Communicator's "Excellence" project, which includes Dozier, D. M. & Broom, G. M. (1995). Evolution of the manager role in public relations practice, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 7, pp. 3-26; and Grunig, L.A., Grunig, J.E., & Ehing, W. (1992). What is an effective organization? In J.E. Grunig (Ed.), *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 65-90.

respondents listed general public relations education, program planning, strategic communication, research; business, including marketing, management and accounting; graphic design and desktop publishing; and various forms of public relations writing as courses they felt would have prepared them for their positions.

### **Professional experience is both multifaceted and a necessary aspect of successful career development.**

Respondents believe a variety of professional experiences that help individuals develop their skills beyond the classroom are essential in the early *and* continuing development of practitioners' career paths.

Respondents believe a variety of professional experiences that help individuals develop their skills beyond the classroom are essential in the early *and* continuing development of professionals' career paths. These experiences include internships, professional association involvement, mentoring, and service to volunteer/nonprofit organizations. Student membership in PRSSA and continuing membership in PRSA after graduation are catalysts for many of these professional development experiences.

PRSA-Detroit respondents fit the profile of those individuals who incorporate a wide spectrum of professional development activities into their early and continuing career preparation. A majority of respondents indicated that they had participated in internships and professional associations while they were in their undergraduate programs. Also, the vast majority of practitioners who had been involved in mentoring relationships believed this form of professional development had been valuable to their careers.

In addition, service as a form of professional development was reported as important to practitioners' career development. More than half of respondents cited continuing PRSA involvement as the most important service activity followed by nonprofit board/community organization involvement as a second most important service activity. According to one practitioner:

"My participation [on a PRSA committee] has helped me learn more about PR challenges and how the profession is viewed in the community."

These types of service activities were viewed as both personally rewarding and essential to one's professional growth.

### **Professionals' experiences suggest that career development activities should begin early on and continue throughout one's professional life.**

In this local study of public relations practitioners, three stages of professional development seem to emerge along the career development spectrum. These stages can be described as: (1) Pre-college Professional Development, (2) Early Professional Development, and (3) Continuing Professional Development. In the **Pre-college Professional Development** stage, students are likely to receive their initial introduction to the field. The majority of respondents in this study (64%) indicated that they thought students should begin to learn about careers in public relations in high school. Recognizing the importance of early education, the PRSA Foundation established Communications Career Academies in select cities throughout the United States to

increase high school students' knowledge of and interest in public relations.<sup>3</sup> However, there are few local initiatives that present communication fields other than journalism and creative writing.<sup>4</sup>

The **Early Professional Development** stage is characterized by several experiential and academic factors. This study shows that based on local practitioners' experiences, college-age students should:

- Be involved in service activities, such as PRSSA *and* nonprofit organization volunteer work. Survey respondents indicated that there was a clear relationship between service involvement and career advancement.

- Undertake an internship. Most respondents had an average of two internships before working in full-time public relations.

- Establish a relationship with a mentor in the field. One-third of respondents had developed a mentoring relationship with a professional while in college, and 41% of respondents started a mentoring relationship with a professional in their entry-level PR position.

- Network with professionals and interact frequently with faculty who have worked in the field.

- \*Take a solid undergraduate academic program that combines PR project management with technical skills development. As stated earlier, survey respondents recommended classes in all areas of public relations, communication skills development (especially writing), all forms of media, management, research, marketing, business, and others.

- Prepare to take writing tests as a criterion for selection of entry-level candidates. Half of respondents' organizations require a writing test for entry-level PR positions.

The **Continuing Professional Development** stage is characterized by the continuation and evolution of professional development practices that began early on in one's professional development. For example, respondents in this survey cited participation in professional organizations, which for many began in college, as critical to one's career growth. PRSSA to PRSA membership was the primary service activity perceived as most valuable, along with nonprofit board membership.

The continuation of mentoring also is highly valued by the majority of respondents. Many indicated that their mentoring relationships began in their entry-level public relations positions; others have had multiple mentors at various points in their career development. One respondent stated:

---

<sup>3</sup> For more information on PRSA Communication Career Academies, please go to [www.prsa.org/\\_About/pracademy/](http://www.prsa.org/_About/pracademy/).

<sup>4</sup>One known exception is the Eastern Michigan University Write-Link Community Connections program, launched in July 2003, which introduces high school students to the four major writing/communication fields of journalism, public relations, creative writing and technical communication within a service-learning context. The one-week summer program, which emphasizes a different discipline each day, is available to Southeast Michigan area high school juniors and seniors. Students learn about each field, develop published work for their portfolios and apply their knowledge and skills to a public relations project for a nonprofit community organization. Write-Link is the first of its kind in its presentation of the interrelationship among disciplines, especially within a service-learning context. It also is the only other known local program that formally exposes high school students early on to public relations.

“I have had a few different mentors in my career. They were not long-term mentors, but were valuable relationships during certain stages of my career.”

Thus, regardless of the length of the mentoring relationship, career guidance from experienced professionals is viewed as an important career development factor.

In addition, at the Continuing Professional Development stage, many practitioners pursue higher education goals. In this study, more than a quarter of respondents had graduate degrees. Many also consider becoming accredited in public relations (APR) in order to demonstrate that they have comprehensive knowledge of the field. The APR credential is often pursued to fulfill a personal goal or to gain knowledge of the field if the practitioner did not receive a formal public relations education. Whatever the reason, practitioners see it as an opportunity for professional development and advancement. A little more than one-third of survey respondents are accredited, and one-quarter of respondents indicated that they plan to pursue accreditation in the future.

### **PRSA chapters are important vehicles for shaping professionals' and students' career paths.**

Active PRSA chapters, such as PRSA-Detroit, provide lifelong professional development opportunities that begin in practitioners' formal academic programs and remain a continuous source of career development. Evidence of the value of PRSA membership is in the findings of this study. The average number of years for PRSA involvement is eight, with less than a year for some (mainly entry-level professionals) and more than 40 years for others who are longtime practitioners. The majority of respondents have been active members by participating on committees and serving in leadership positions. One respondent stated that serving as a chapter board member provided the experience of running a large organization, while another respondent said it was an opportunity to give back to the profession. Respondents also cited board or committee membership as an opportunity to broaden their perspective on the industry in which they work.

Through activities such as statewide conferences, monthly luncheons and committee-sponsored special topics meetings, the PRSA-Detroit chapter provides award-winning programming that serves members' continuing education and professional development needs. One respondent stated:

“PRSA has helped me to develop real world skills, e.g., speaking, presenting, leading small groups, working with teams, managing budgets.”

In addition, the chapter is instrumental in developing the experiential side of students' and new professionals' education. As the sixth largest chapter in the nation with 500 members, the PRSA-Detroit offers a series of professional development programs for public relations students at universities primarily in the Detroit metropolitan area but throughout the state of Michigan as well. Since 1995, the chapter has initiated the following:

- Established a student development and internship committee.

- Launched a student development conference that brings dozens of Metro Detroit area professionals together with students from Michigan and Ohio colleges for a discussion of current issues and resume/portfolio development.
- Increased an annual \$500 scholarship to two \$2,000 awards.
- Sponsored the “Rising Star” award for an outstanding student intern.
- Created a “Shadow Day” program, which pairs students with professionals for a half or full day on the job with a professional.
- Involved students in the planning and execution of the chapter’s biannual statewide conference.
- Created internship and/or special project opportunities with chapter committees to build skills, increase networking, provide committee heads with resources and increase students’ interest in retaining membership in the PRSA after graduation.
- Created a unique mentoring program, Protégé, which pairs senior-level undergraduates with experienced professionals in mentoring partnership for one year.
- Nominated and elected a university public relations professor to be part of the executive board.

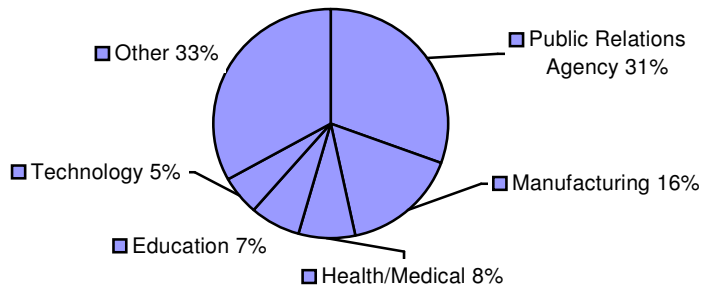
Other longtime efforts include inviting students to monthly luncheons, providing guest speakers at PRSSA meetings and classes, and informing chapters about internship and entry-level job opportunities. PRSA chapters serve as models of educator-practitioner interaction and should be regarded for their instrumental value in a public relations curriculum.

## Results

The following results describe the demographics, work tasks, professional development activities and formal education of PRSA-Detroit respondents who participated in this study. The findings increase our understanding of PRSA-Detroit Chapter membership, as well as provide insights into career development factors.

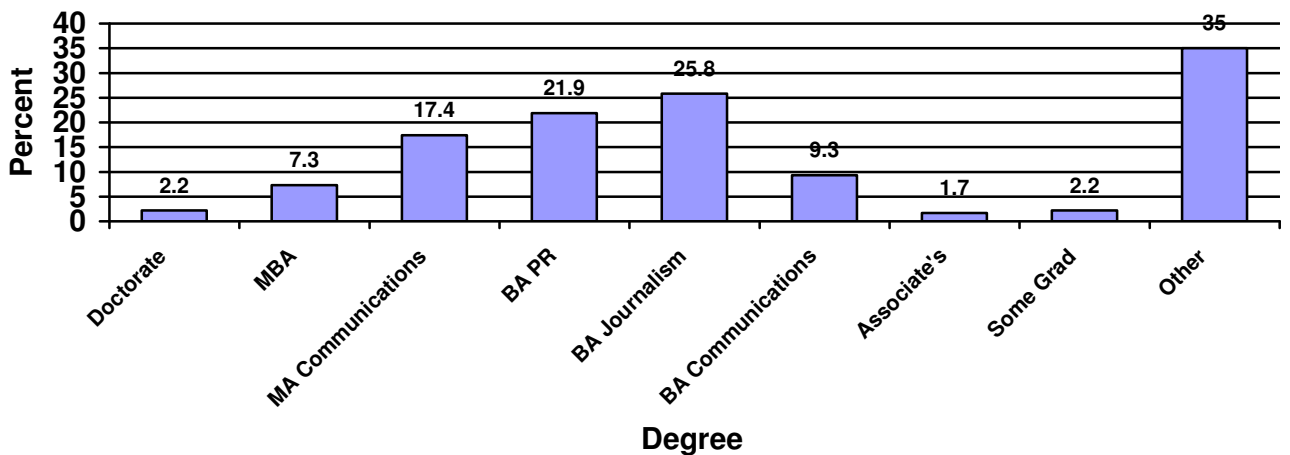
## Description of Respondents

### Employment Sectors



About two-thirds of respondents were female and one-third of respondents were male, which closely reflects the gender composition of the profession nationwide.

### Total Degrees Completed

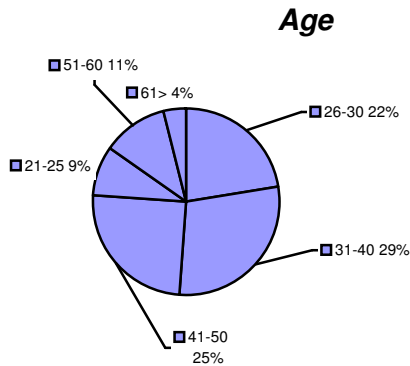


*The data reflect more than one degree for some respondents*

Respondents were asked to list their completed degrees, and more than half of undergraduate degrees were in the communication fields, including journalism, public relations and communication. In addition, more than one-third of respondents listed their

undergraduate degrees as “other,” which included political science (3.8%), English (6.5%) and business (3.3%).

Nearly all respondents (97%) indicated that they currently work full-time in their positions. The most frequent position title indicated was supervisor/director/manager (37.5%), followed by 20.8% who indicated they are specialists, and 15.5% who are senior managers. A little more than 8% of respondents indicated that they are CEO/owner/president, and a little more than 10% indicated that they are entry-level/technicians, educators or freelancer/consultants.



Thus, the vast majority of respondents indicated that they are in mid manager positions or above, and 44% reported that they have at least 11 years of experience in the field and receive an annual salary of \$60,000 or more. An additional 20% of respondents reported that they have at least six years of experience working in public relations. About 18% stated that they receive an annual salary of \$45,000-\$55,000.

## Public Relations Work Activities

Respondents were asked to report on a scale of 1-5 (1=never, 2=seldom, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=daily), which types of work activities they perform. Various types of writing and editing, media relations, program planning and management, certain types of research and client counseling were the activities that respondents indicated they perform most frequently. These activities relate to the major role divisions as defined by Dozier (1995) in his work on public relations manager and technician roles.

### Writing Activities

Writing news releases for print media was cited as an activity that 71% of respondents perform often or sometimes (M=3.54). However, respondents also indicated that they write business correspondence even more frequently, with 70% stating that they do so daily or often (M=3.89). These results are consistent with prior research on the typical writing activities of senior-level managers who delegate assignments and edit the work of those they supervise.

Equally typical is the type of writing activities that managers indicated that they never or seldom perform, including developing advertisements (M=1.92), creating audio and video productions (M=1.95), designing communications using desktop publishing (M=2.01), and preparing television and radio spots (M=1.92).

The most frequently cited types of research performed include searching the Internet (M=4.38) and to a lesser extent, evaluating processes and outcomes (M=3.06) and gathering information about public opinion, trends, political climate, media coverage, special interest groups (M=2.82).

## Media Relations

Research on roles indicates that senior-level practitioners typically undergo a role shift regarding media relations activities. Technicians perform the daily tasks of writing press releases, while managers are involved in media relationship building activities. The experiences of those in this study illustrate this shift. The most commonly cited media relations activities for respondents was establishing and building relationships with key media (M=3.86), followed by responding to media requests for information, verification and access to sources (M=3.81), and generating publicity (M=3.75). Also, higher-level positions were more likely to be associated with certain types of activities. For example, media training and counseling activities, such as strategy development and decision making, were more likely to be performed by practitioners in senior-level positions.

**Technicians perform the daily tasks of writing press releases, and managers are involved in media relationship building activities.**

## Program planning and management

Management-oriented activities performed by a majority of respondents include: “respond to client requests” (M=3.95); “manage and direct people, e.g., teams, consultants, vendors” (M=3.82); “develop program strategies and tactics” (M=3.78); “set program goals and objectives” (M=3.72); and “assign tasks” (M=3.70). Up to half of the respondents also “conduct program planning in collaboration with other managers” (M=3.47), “manage budgets” (M=3.63) often, and “understand and interpret client requests” (M=3.60).

More than one-third of respondents indicated that they often engage in counseling activities. These activities include “developing strategy for reputation management” (M=3.1) and “participating in senior-level decision making” (M=3.23). Also, certain program planning and management activities are more closely associated with senior-level positions than lower-level positions. The higher the position, the more closely associated the activity. For example, “managing budgets” and “managing and directing people (e.g., teams, consultants, vendors)” were more closely associated with higher-level positions such as executive management than they were with lower-level positions such as entry level.

**Respondents perform certain types of program planning and management-related activities most frequently as compared with all other categories of work tasks.**

## Research Activities

Research-related activities often are associated with the management role in public relations. In this study of Detroit area professionals, 61% of respondents indicated that they search the Internet and use electronic data bases daily (M=4.38). About 40% of respondents evaluate processes/outcomes often or daily (M=3.06). Respondents also listed some kinds of research activities they indicated they seldom or never conducted. These included “design and conduct media content analyses” (M=2.44), “design and conduct surveys” (M=2.22), “design and conduct focus groups” (M=1.78), “hire research firms and oversee projects” (M=1.93) and “design and conduct communication audits” (M=2.12).

## External Events/Relations

Other activities, such as external events, were performed less frequently. More than half of respondents indicated that they sometimes or often “build alliances with key groups” (M=3.11), which is consistent with management activity. In addition, slightly more than half of respondents indicated that they “establish and build relationships with community leaders” (M=2.84). More than 60% of respondents stated that they “plan and manage conventions” (M=2.83) and “coordinate event logistics” (M=2.93). However, with the exception of more than 60% of respondents who sometimes or often “instruct others on how to improve writing, speaking and other communication skills” (M=3.07), most professionals stated that they never or seldom engage in training or teaching/presenting activities.

## Professional Development

### Service Activities

In an effort to examine all the factors that influence a public relations professional's career path, PRSA-Detroit member respondents were asked which types of service and professional development activities they have been engaged in since beginning their public relations careers. Slightly more than 45% indicated that they have been active in a PRSA-Detroit committee, 36% have been a board member of a nonprofit organization, and nearly 47% have been a community organization volunteer. When respondents were asked to list the top two or three service activities they felt had contributed the most to their professional development, PRSA involvement was the most frequently cited activity by 50% of respondents. Many indicated that they have been involved in their local chapters as board members, committee chairs or members of committees. They cited personal and professional growth, including networking, developing skills, learning new strategies, discussing issues and ideas with other colleagues, and serving in a leadership capacity among the main reasons for being involved in the PRSA.

#### Reasons Given for PRSA involvement:

- Learn new skills and knowledge
- Gain wider perspective
- Collaborate with other professionals; share resources
- Develop and share subject expertise and leadership abilities
- Network with top PR pros
- Participate in mentoring opportunities
- Guide students and new professionals

One-third of respondents cited work with nonprofit/community organizations as a second most important activity that had contributed to their professional development. Some respondents have served as board members; others have provided direct professional assistance with public relations activities.

Respondents described the value of serving nonprofit/community organizations to their career development as:

- A creative outlet for developing skills
- A networking opportunity

- Giving back to the community
- Personally rewarding

For most respondents, service activities often are extensions of their full-time public relations work, and they provide opportunities to learn about different sectors, understand different types of organizations, and build relationships. As one practitioner explained:

“Nonprofit board member and community organization volunteer opportunities allow one to learn more about all aspects of business, where my jobs usually keep me more focused on one area. Frequently, volunteers in nonprofits have more decision making power than in the corporate world (filled with red tape).”

Therefore, it appears that service activities do indeed provide professional development experience that augments one’s work life.

Other respondents described what appeared to be a direct link between their service activity and career development. One respondent stated:

“Volunteer work with community organizations...has given me an opportunity to take the lead role in developing overall communication plans.”

Another respondent said that volunteer activities taught him/her how to manage time and other resources more effectively. This suggests that service activities can serve as outlets for doing higher level work and/or doing existing work better and more efficiently.

## **Academic Preparation**

Formal coursework in public relations and related fields is important to examine when assessing career development influences. National studies of educator-practitioner perceptions of critical skills and knowledge areas have yielded important recommendations for undergraduate and graduate public relations programs. This local study sought to examine whether or not practitioners had received instruction in key skill and knowledge areas that have ultimately helped them in their public relations positions.

### **Theory, principles and practice**

As with current job activities, respondents were asked to report on a scale of 1-5 (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree), which types of educational experiences they had gained from their undergraduate programs. Up to 45% of respondents agreed that they had gained experience in all of the theory, principles and practice areas listed, except for about one-quarter of respondents who disagreed that they had gained experience in “exploring how different models and theories of PR practice are used in practice” (M=2.91). The highest mean averages were for “developing a variety of speech and rhetorical communication knowledge areas and skills” (M=3.94) and “understanding the relationship between public relations and other fields, such as journalism, marketing, advertising, psychology, business and others” (M=3.63). This is not

surprising given the number of respondents who had stated that they had communication undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Further analysis showed that particular items were less likely to be associated with greater number of years worked in the field than with fewer years worked. For example, “understanding and applying ethical and professional standards to ethical dilemmas” was less likely to be associated with practitioners who have worked more years in public relations than with professionals who have worked fewer years. These and other items relating to “understanding the distinctions among other fields and public relations specializations,” as well as “understanding the functions of public relations departments/agencies” also were less likely to be associated with more experienced practitioners. This is not surprising, for some practitioners who have more years of experience did not have a public relations major available to them as undergraduates. As the demographics of this study show, however, some respondents were schooled in related areas, such as journalism, communications and English, which may not have emphasized public relations ethics or the distinctions among fields. On the other hand, new professionals, who have worked fewer years in the field, have had a greater opportunity to be educated in undergraduate programs that require classes in public relations where these topics are discussed.

**Even today, while some public relations textbooks devote parts of chapters to discussing the role of printers, graphic designers and other vendors in total project management, instruction in this area of public relations skills development remains sketchy. It is an area that is more likely to be learned on the job.**

### **Message development and production**

Approximately 88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had gained experience in different message development/production areas, except “producing a variety of online communications” (66% disagreed or strongly disagreed). This is understandable given the relatively recent development of Web-based communications and their incorporation into

public relations curricula. In addition, nearly half of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had gained experience in “understanding the role of vendors/outside suppliers.” Even today, while some public relations textbooks devote parts of chapters to discussing the role of printers, graphic designers and other vendors in total project management, instruction in this area of public relations skills development remains sketchy. Moreover, this is an area that is more likely to be learned on the job.

### **Planning and management**

Practitioners indicated that they had some academic preparation in the area of planning and management. More than half of practitioners agreed or strongly agreed that they had “designed strategies and tactics” (M=3.33) and had “developed timetables and calendars” (M=3.40). More than 40% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had gained experience in “applying PR programming principles to the development of a complete project plan” (2.95) and had “formally presented a PR project proposal to students or professionals” (2.99). In addition, 79% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had gained experience “working in a team or small group to carry out a project” (M=4.03).

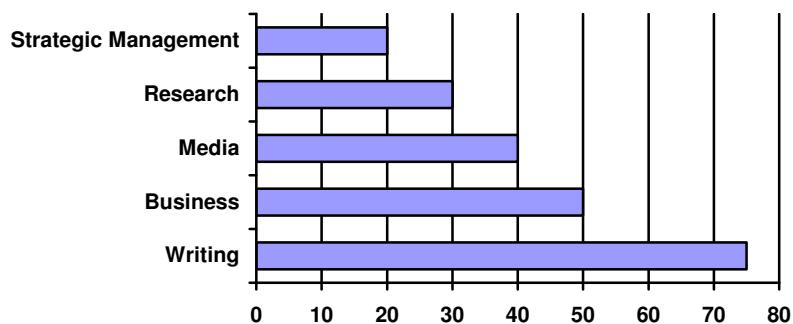
A sizable percentage of respondents had not gained certain types of planning and management experiences in their undergraduate programs: 44% had not experienced “developing a project budget” (M=2.7); 43% had not experienced “formally presenting the results of a public relations plan that was implemented” (M=2.7); and 42% had not been involved in “working with clients to execute a project that meets a public relations need” (M=2.8). This is not surprising given the relatively recent emphasis on the need for public relations students to take business and finance courses. Moreover, the Commission on Public Relations Education’s recommendations included course instruction and practical methods that incorporated work with outside “clients” as part of real-world class projects.<sup>5</sup>

Further analysis shows differences between groups based on experience. For example, more experienced, senior-level practitioners, including those who did not have a formal public relations education, were less likely to have taken courses in “preparation in planning and management.” This is not surprising, for older and experienced practitioners are less likely to have participated in undergraduate programs that offered instruction or project experience in program planning principles and applications. However, it is likely that these topics are positively associated with newer professionals who have fewer years on the job because they are more likely to have been schooled in formal public relations majors or related fields that offered such academic preparation.

### **Skills and Knowledge Areas Graduates Should Have**

In addition to listing which knowledge areas respondents actually developed in their academic programs, they also were asked to list the top three to five competencies they felt graduates should possess upon graduation. Consistent with views of PR professionals held nationwide, more than three-quarters of respondents cited writing as the most important skill graduates should possess. This was followed by general knowledge of business, the media, research and strategic management.

#### ***Skills and Knowledge Graduates Should Have***



To illustrate the importance of these areas, one respondent listed the top five skills as “Writing, Thinking, Writing, Thinking, Writing.” In fact, several respondents emphasized writing by stating and restating its importance.

<sup>5</sup> A comprehensive list of recommendations is contained in the *Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, for the 21st Century: A Port of Entry*, October 1999.

## Professional Development

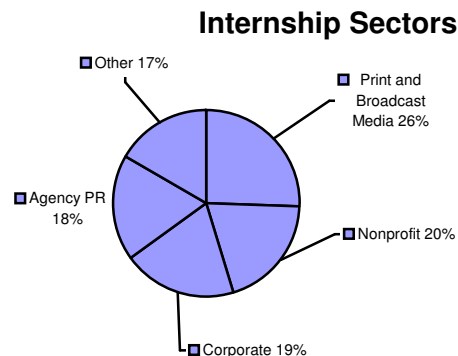
Up to three-quarters of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they had engaged in a number of professional development activities to augment their undergraduate education experiences. These include **attending on- or off-campus meetings** of a professional organization, holding **memberships in pre-professional organizations**. PRSSA was the most commonly cited professional organization among 47% of respondents. Respondents also cited **networking with professionals** as an important pre-professional activity. Occasions cited by respondents for networking included PRSA national conferences and events, classes and special meetings where guest speakers were featured, PRSA luncheons/meetings. Another professional development activity that was considered important by the majority of respondents was **interacting with program faculty** who had professional experience. Aside from internships (M=3.93), interaction with program faculty (M=3.82) had the highest mean averages of all the activities.

### Important Professional Development Activities:

- Attending on- or off-campus meetings
- Memberships in pre-professional organizations
- Networking with professionals
- Interacting with program faculty who had professional experience

## Internships

It is significant that more than 70% of respondents indicated they had participated in at least one internship during their undergraduate education experience; at least half of respondents had been involved in two or more internships. Of these respondents, 80% said their internship was either very relevant or relevant to their future work in public relations.



## Mentoring

Nearly two-thirds (65.7%) of respondents stated they currently did not have a relationship with a mentor or an experienced professional in the field who could provide information and guidance on a host of career issues/situations. However, a little more than one-third of respondents indicated that they currently were involved in a mentoring relationship. In addition, 60.7% stated that they had been in a mentoring relationship at some point in their career, and of those respondents, 58.5% had communicated with more than one mentor. Of those who did have a mentor, 88% stated that their mentors worked in public relations, and 40.8% said the mentoring relationship began in their entry-level public relations position. This was followed by 32.7% who said their mentoring relationships began in college.

Nearly 90% of respondents said that their mentoring relationship(s) had been either very valuable or valuable to their career development. The perceived value of mentoring may be exceptionally high for this sample of PRSA members. All chapter student development efforts are geared toward assisting, teaching and guiding students and new professionals. One example is the chapter's unique mentoring program, *Protégé* (Professionals Together Enriching Graduates' Experiences), which pairs professionals with college seniors in mentoring partnerships.

## Discussion

"Nobody manages your career like you do," notes one longtime PRSA-Detroit member who has served in several leadership positions and is a mentor to students and practitioners. If that is the case, professionals need to know how to identify and access the most effective professional development resources available to help them manage their own career paths. This study of PRSA-Detroit chapter members provides a starting point. The data from this survey is helpful not only for individuals managing their career paths, but also for mentors and senior-level professionals who are seeking career profile information in guiding others.

Through the actual experiences of PRSA-Detroit practitioners, we have gained important insights into the factors that shape one's career path. These include professional development activities and the full range of skills and knowledge areas that should be gained in academic programs. While the findings are descriptive and only applicable to one sample of public relations practitioners, they do seem to underscore national trends in public relations professional development and education. Clearly, for the majority of local practitioners who participated in this study, experience and education are multifaceted and ongoing factors in one's career development.

Survey responses also were consistent with the Commission on Public Relations Education's recommendations for educating students in a wide variety of knowledge and skill areas, all within a public relations management orientation. As Berkowitz and Hristodoulakis (1999) state in their study of the relationship between education and work socialization on role development:

If the intention of public relations leaders is to encourage excellent public relations practice within a management orientation, then public relations education should follow the same path. In other words, students planning careers as public relations practitioners need to be trained in strategically solving public relations problems. The technical aspects of public relations practice must also be presented from this perspective (p. 100)

A majority of survey respondents placed a high value on students' ability to think strategically in a public relations management orientation. Clearly, practitioners who have taken public relations courses that enable them to develop and apply strategic thinking, problem solving and project management principles early on are poised for career advancement.

However, formal education is only one of several factors on the career preparation spectrum. Respondents also underscored the importance and value of professional development activities, such as mentoring, which was discussed in recent issues of both *Public Relations Tactics* and *The Public Relations Strategist*.<sup>6</sup> The majority of respondents in this survey indicated that they had benefited from mentoring relationships, which they felt had helped them in their overall career development. An important finding was that respondents had established their mentoring relationships either in their entry-level positions or in college. Most formal mentoring programs are geared towards junior or mid-level professionals. However, it is equally important for students to establish relationships early on with field professionals who can help guide and teach them the ropes, as well as to serve as trustworthy sources for discussing sensitive workplace issues. The PRSA-Detroit Protégé program addresses the important need for early mentoring.

**The majority of respondents in this survey indicated that they had benefited from mentoring relationships, which they felt had helped them in their overall career development.**

This study also highlighted the importance of involvement in service activities, such as nonprofit organization board or committee membership. Responses showed that there was a clear relationship between volunteer activities and professional and personal growth. Again, the value for such involvement must be encouraged at the college level – and even earlier, if possible. Ways in which students can develop a strong sense of professional and community volunteer involvement include active membership in PRSSA chapters, volunteer work with nonprofit organizations and internships. In addition, more and more universities are encouraging instructors to incorporate academic service-learning projects into their courses, which enable students to work with nonprofit organizations on public relations problems for course credit and real world experience while also gaining a greater sense of social responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

These and other early career preparation activities require a strong educator-practitioner link. Teachers and practitioners are urged to build bridges that connect students with the practice of public relations. Such connections also should be *systematic*; that is, they must be built into the very structure of a public relations academic program in order to have the greatest impact and to be assessed adequately. The innovative programming offered through strong PRSA chapters, such as PRSA-Detroit, can serve as the bridge between academia and the professional world. These chapters are instrumental in providing a wide range of professional development experiences to complement formal academic programs. Clearly, then, PRSA chapters play an important role in the early formation of students' career paths, as well as in the ongoing professional development of practitioners.

**The innovative programming offered through strong PRSA chapters, such as PRSA-Detroit, can serve as the bridge between academia and the professional world.**

---

6 See F. Whiting, The joys of mentoring: A value-added benefit of PRSA membership, *Public Relations Tactics*, April 2005, p. 20; C. Carlton, Making it work: How to build a successful mentor relationship, *Public Relations Tactics*, April 2005, p. 20; L. Billingsley, Mentoring young PR practitioners of color: Helping to shape the future leaders of an increasingly diverse profession, *Public Relations Tactics*, April 2005, p. 21; and C. Ahles, Mentors: Who they are and what they can do for you, *The Public Relations Strategist*, Spring 2005, p. 26-29.

7 For a comprehensive discussion of the value and application of service-learning from both academic and professional perspectives, see Daugherty, E. (Winter 2003). Service learning integration in a public relations program: Pedagogy for enhanced learning, *Teaching Public Relations*, No. 58; and Hendrix, L. (March 2003). Give students a chance: Volunteer experiences often win-win situations, *Public Relations Tactics*, p. 10.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the PRSA-Detroit members who took the time to complete the extensive career development survey. I am especially grateful for the support of PRSA-Detroit Past President Mary Henige, APR, whose education platform was the catalyst for this research study. In addition, many individuals contributed to the design, development, implementation or review of this research study and report. They include: Dr. Liqun Cao, Eastern Michigan University Department of Sociology, Criminology and Anthropology; Melanie Davis, APR, Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce; Jennifer Day, APR, consultant; Richard Donley, APR, Bianchi Public Relations, Inc.; Susan Ferraro, APR, Franco Public Relations Group; Glen Foldessy, APR, GMAC Residential; Mary Henige, APR, General Motors Corporation; Dr. James Measell, Wayne State University professor emeritus; Dr. Bonnie Neff, Valparaiso University; Roy Richardson, APR, Richardson Public Relations; Kim Skeltis, APR, Strat@comm; Nancy Skidmore, PRSA-Detroit secretary; Lisa Vallee-Smith, APR, Airfoil Public Relations; and Pamela Young, APR, Eastern Michigan University. Finally, I want to extend my special thanks to Erica Pilon, technical communications consultant, for her excellent work in designing and formatting this report.