
Public relations interns and ethical issues at work: Perceptions of student interns from three different universities.

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Abstract

Empirical investigations of internships have increased our understanding of variables influencing the success of the internship. Few of these investigations, however, have focused on the internship as a process of socialisation through which interns learn the values associated with the profession. And while ethics has also been investigated, the focus on public relations student perceptions of ethics as they are applied or experienced during their internships has not been studied to any extent. This study was designed as a multi-university, multi-method investigation into student perceptions of their encounters with ethical issues at work. In general, the study determined that not all students will face ethical issues, yet many students were able to identify particular issues of concern to them. These issues included general business ethics and office politics as well as legitimate public relations concerns applied to issues ranging from billing to media relations and promotions. While students recalled addressing ethics in classes, they generally did not feel prepared for managing the issues especially related to office politics when confronted with them during their internships.

Introduction

Internships provide many advantages to students ranging from gaining experience and obtaining career-related direction to networking. “Another advantage of the internship experience is how it socialises the student as

public relations professional. This can occur through training, teamwork assignments, meetings with clients or employees, and various events hosted by the organization,” according to Bourland-Davis, Graham & Petrausch (2004, p. 423).

Previous studies of internships have elucidated the highly interpersonal nature of these experiences, especially through the work described as encounters (Bourland-Davis, Graham & Fulmer, 1997). Whether networking, contacting vendors or attending meetings, the intern will not work in isolation, frozen in time before a computer and devoid of human contact and decision-making activities. These interactions provide students with opportunities to learn by observing how seasoned professionals, their mentors, handle ethically sensitive situations. Student encounters with other professionals are an essential part of their professional development, including moral development. As Labacqz (1985, p. 52) has noted, “One of the most important aspects of professional socialisation is access to role models—real persons who embody some of those ideal images.... The professional in training looks to established practitioners to gain a sense of what it means to be a member of the profession and what constitutes acceptable or normative behavior in the profession.”

While decision-making at the internship level would likely be limited to observation, interns, at least at the senior-level, will likely still have some editorial control in communication design and copy writing. Identifying good

intern supervisors as good managers, Beard (2002, p. 2) wrote, "They provided specific direction and examples, some autonomy and independence, positive and constructive feedback and the physical and personal resources needed to accomplish work."

In addition to the standard professional expectations in preparing students for work in public relations, others have underscored the need for students to have a more full understanding of the broader issues related to professionalism. Fitzpatrick (2004, p. 235) in "Teaching Public Relations Ethics," wrote, "Our graduates must be equipped with not only the skills and expertise required for successful practice in this field, but also with an understanding of the professional standards and social obligations of *public relations professionals*" (author's emphasis). Martinson (2001, p. 2) similarly advocated ensuring students have some grounding in social/political philosophy so that they can understand "... their societal responsibilities to others and to the more common good as something involving much more than the narrow obligations relative to injecting client or organisational viewpoints into the marketplace of ideas."

Academic preparation, then, along with public relations interns' observations and experiences will set the stage for their perceptions of ethical issues and how they are to be handled professionally. To better understand this socialisation process, the purpose of this exploratory study is to fill in the gaps of the internship and ethics literature by investigating the perceptions of student interns as to if and how ethical issues are evidenced during their internships. This paper summarises some of the current reflections on the internship process and ethics investigations in other fields, and then turns to a multi-university, exploratory study of public relations students' perceptions of ethics relative to their internships.

Literature review: Public relations internships

Little attention has been given to ethics and ethical situations the public relations student interns might face or witness. There is literature on the related topics of public relations in-

ternships and internship ethics in other academic fields. The internship literature has predominantly focused on administrative issues (Bourland-Davis, Graham & Petrausch, 2004; Fulmer, 1993; Maynard, 1999), types of work (Bourland-Davis & Graham, 1997) and determinants of successful internships (Basow & Byrne, 1993; Beard, 2002; Beard & Morton, 1999; Gibson, 1998).

Administrative issues have covered a range of topics from credit and grades to payment for the intern's work. For example, Maynard (1997) examined 167 letters which were sent to an intern coordinator over a two-year period and which sought interns. Maynard found "that letters written by businesses offering paid internships emphasised work related skills such as writing and other public relations tasks" whereas letters written by businesses offering unpaid internships emphasised the words "opportunity," "flexibility," and "for credit" (p. 377). Beard (2002) also raised the issue of the need to examine further unpaid internships with the view that some students simply cannot afford them. He found, in interviews, that balancing internships with classes and possibly another job led to reports of "physical and mental exhaustion." Another study by Maynard (1999) examined the necessity of having a 3.0 grade point average requirement for internships.

Assessing the work of public relations interns, Bourland-Davis, Graham and Fulmer (1997) conducted a content analysis of public relations intern letters describing their activities and encounters during the internship. A total of 47 different acts and encounters were identified in the letters, with preparing press releases and planning events as the most common acts. Given the nature of the analysis, it may not be surprising that there were no references to ethical considerations during the internship. Of relevance, herein, however was the number of references to the encounters, or interactions with others, and the relative importance attributed to those encounters by the public relations interns, underscoring the interpersonal and social realm – as perceived by the students – of the internship experience.

Perceptions of the successful internship are determined in part – as would be expected –

by academic preparation (Beard & Morton, 1999). Academic preparation also influences the level of the internship (Beard, 2002). However, previous studies have not addressed academic training in ethics as preparation for internships.

Another vital factor in the successful internship is emotional intelligence, akin to social skills, as forwarded by Maynard (2000). While emotional intelligence includes concepts ranging from self-awareness and self-confidence to integrity and political savvy, of particular note is that it continues to develop. If emotional intelligence is part of life-long learning, it is important to recognise the potential reciprocal influence of emotional intelligence and the internship on each other.

The dearth of literature addressing the ethical situations faced or witnessed by public relations interns is one of the primary reasons for the current investigation. Nearly 15 years ago, Fry (1989) presented the results of a survey of journalism interns. Fry (p. 186) found that while the interns at U.S. newspapers did appear to “reflect the values of the profession,” that they also perceived conflicts between professional ethics and their own private ethics.

Internship ethics in other academic fields

While there is little discussion of ethical issues faced by public relations interns, a limited amount of research on the subject is available from other academic fields. Paulins (2001) compared the perceptions of retail merchandising students and their site supervisors on the ethical environment of the internship site. The results showed that the students thought the work environments were less ethical than did the site supervisor, although both groups thought the ethical practices of the organisation were generally good. The student interns identified a number of questionable ethical practices during their internship experiences.

DuPont and Craig (1996) also investigated ethics practices in the retail business sector, but their purpose focused on the formation of ethics by attempting to determine if retail management experience from a practicum or internship experience is a critical factor in the formation of business ethics. Students and alumni were exposed to 14 vignettes presenting

different actions. They found no differences in the student responses to the vignettes. DuPont and Craig concluded that alumni had slightly more ethical responses than students, but less ethical responses than managers reported in other research. Additionally, these responses did not appear to be influenced by internships and management training programs. DuPont and Craig say that the results indicate that formation of business ethics might take place at the mid-management level, and, thus, internships and management training programs would have little effect on developing a student’s knowledge in the area.

Tackett, Wolf and Law (2001) argue that for accounting interns to have a positive experience that the intern and the employer share the same perception about the internship and the student’s contribution to the organisation. They suggest that perceptions between the two tend to be in disagreement on several dimensions, including the area of ethics. Tackett, Wolf and Law wrote: “It has been relayed to us that on several occasions interns have refused directives from partners in CPA firms because they perceived that their actions would constitute a violation of professional ethics. The end result of these refusals is often a damaged relationship between the intern and the CPA firm. The intern may be reassigned to less challenging work and not receive an invitation to interview with the firm for a full-time position upon graduation (p. 54).”

In 1995, Dodd and Pearson presented an ethics case study in which an accounting student is placed in an ethical dilemma by a request from a professor. Later in that same year, Ponemon summarised the student and practitioner responses to the case study. The diversity of opinion among undergraduate accounting students and practitioners indicated no standard ethical response to the situation being employed.

The review of literature clearly indicates the importance of public relations internships to the students, to academe and to the sponsoring organisations. Evidence also suggests that interns may be placed in situations where they face ethically-questionable actions by employees of the sponsoring organisation. This exploratory investigation is designed to obtain

initial insight into the ethics knowledge of public relation interns and their experiences with ethical issues. To further detail these two issues, the following five research questions were used as the foundation for the investigation.

Research questions

RQ1 Have public relations interns experienced anything that made them uncomfortable?

RQ2 Have public relations interns observed anything that made them uncomfortable?

RQ3 What was the public relations interns' knowledge of professional ethics prior to the internship?

RQ4 What ethics issues do public relations interns confront?

RQ5 How has the public relations interns' understanding of professional ethics been influenced by the internship?

Method

To begin to understand the nature of student exposure to ethical issues during their internships, a multi-university, multi-method qualitative research program was established. The three universities included a mid-sized university in the southeast, a mid-western Research I level university, and a large western, private university. As the study was exploratory in nature, the researchers selected focus group interviews (conducted at the mid-sized and private universities), and focused e-mail interviews (used at the Research I university) as the basis for the study in an attempt to garner as wide of a variety of responses as possible.

Both methods used a standard interview guide based on the research questions identified. Additionally, efforts were taken to ask general "comfort" questions prior to the specific ethics questions, so as not to bias the answers in the direction of ethics issues. Given that the study would rely on public relations majors who had or were at the time interning, the methods relied on convenience sampling. Efforts were made by the individual researchers to include students representing a diverse sample of internship sites, and all students participating in the study had completed or were in the process of completing their internships. A total of 65 students were interviewed for the

study, and all interviews were completed within a two-month time frame.

Results

Based on the results of the focus group interviews and the responses to the e-mailed questions, the next five sections summarise the themes identified in the student responses to the open-ended questions, as they pertain to the five research questions. The first two research questions were developed to determine whether students would identify ethical issues without being specifically asked to do so.

RQ1: Have public relations interns experienced anything that makes them uncomfortable?

In general, it would appear the answer to this question would be a resounding "No." However, in follow-up questions, student perceptions of "discomfort" tended to be related more to things students did not like to do or did not feel confident completing, or related to politics and protocol. The telephone appeared to be the primary instrument of discomfort for the interns, although most of them indicated that they did not like using the telephone to seek donations, call reporters, or deliver bad news. Other discomfort expressed stemmed from fear that the students could not perform a specific task such as conducting a television interview or writing science stories.

Students also questioned being asked, as an intern, to deliver bad news such as telling volunteers that funding for supplies would not be provided. The students also did not like being told "no" in terms of not being able to do something they felt needed to be done. One student expressed concern over job-related errands in terms of not being sure that it was appropriate to ask the intern to run these errands, yet was entirely comfortable doing personal jobs for other employees that were tied to professional skills but for a personal project or group. This student noted that she did not have a problem doing the personal work because she had the time, but that others on the job responded in a way that made her feel she should have a problem in doing the work for the employee.

The critical link to discomfort in other student reports was tied directly to office politics identified by students as office gossip, getting caught between two supervisors and turf wars between offices. For instance, one student reported knowing that an employee would be fired before the employee knew which caused the intern considerable discomfort. Similar situations were identified such as one employee leveraging a “slander campaign” against another employee and the intern feeling the employee was drawing him into that campaign. These students also talked about being uncomfortable about not knowing the rules relative to personal phone and e-mail communication which was the norm in college.

Personal values and ethics addressed occasions when a student reported he or she attended an office party with alcohol present although he or she did not personally drink, or that the firm represented clients with products such as alcohol which were not accounts he or she would feel comfortable representing. Another student raised the issue of being uncomfortable knowing he was getting paid \$10 an hour while knowing the client billing was \$110 an hour. And one intern reported feeling uneasy because she was asked to make up quotes for the organisation’s CEO, for publication.

RQ2: Have public relations interns observed anything that makes them uncomfortable?

This second research question was designed to determine if the intern had witnessed anything disturbing that did not directly involve them, based on the assumption that the interns would not be involved in any high-level decision making but would have ample opportunities to learn by observing. Again, most interns indicated they did not, but in follow-up questions, some issues did surface. Several interns noted that their coworkers were very professional and that led to a positive, comfortable work environment. Most of the incidents that were identified dealt with office politics, the treatment of subordinates, the use of vulgar language and inappropriate comments. One student reported observing “an office structure that leaves a lot of room for misunderstandings and confusion.”

Participants from the western university addressed this question with their concerns about the issue related to billing (how one bills something to a client when “goofing off”). With this direct connection to ethics established, answers to this question for this university, are presented with RQ4 which asked for specific ethical issues. Their responses do indicate that they also linked witnessing issues related to office politics and general business or work ethics (e.g. do interns get paid overtime?).

RQ3: What was the public relations interns’ knowledge of professional ethics prior to the internship?

Most students indicated they had a minimal/basic level of ethics knowledge, although there were references to personal ethics or value systems. Only a few claimed they were pretty well or well informed. Emphasising their basic level of knowledge, students identified several sources of their understanding of ethics. Several students referred to exposure to ethics in a mass communication law and ethics course, although others in the transcript emphasised the course focused on law and did not address ethics. Others reported their minimal knowledge came from the introductory public relations course. A wide variety of classes (e.g. mass communication ethics, public relations campaigns, media relations, case studies, and introduction to advertising) were also mentioned, and some respondents just made a blanket statement referring to all of their major courses.

An interesting, recurring, comment was student references to individual or personal ethical codes being used to guide them when making decisions, and that those personal ethical codes were more rigorous than what they had been taught in class. Others indicated that ethical decisions are just “common sense.”

Only one student from the various interviews identified a supervisor from the sponsoring organisation as sitting down to discuss related expectations. He said, “...I was set aside by the VP who gave me a whole spiel on what their ethics were, and the quality of work that they wanted to maintain, and it was actually very concurrent with PRSA’s (code of ethics). And I thought it was very good.”

Several went so far as to suggest that ethics training should be more extensive and should be required of all public relations majors. One student reported on a business ethics course she was aware of and recommended one for the program. Another student said she felt comfortable with the business side of public relations ethics, but that inter-office ethics and dynamics “surprised me the most.”

RQ4: What ethics issues do public relations interns confront?

Table 1 (over the page) provides a list of the intern responses (other than “none”) from all three universities to the question asking for ethical issues they had faced. The responses have been grouped into several sections based on the thematic analysis of student responses. In some cases, references to an organisation or individual have been deleted, and some answers have been edited for space considerations. These ethical issues have been grouped by content areas to help highlight concerns.

Confidentiality disclosure, attribution, channels of approval, sourcing, authenticity were broader ethical issues woven into many of the examples related to media relations, writing and client relations. While nonprofit concerns focused on fairness, accountability related to donations, and legitimate messages and appeals. Other issues raised focused on human behavior within the world of work.

While most students said they confronted no ethical issues, this response comes with even fewer who reported facing uncomfortable situations. This result appears counter-intuitive since it suggests that for some of these individuals, a situation that they perceived as unethical did not also cause them to be uncomfortable. Of course, this could be an artificial contrivance resulting from the framing of the questions.

RQ5: How has the public relations interns’ understanding of professional ethics been influenced by the internship?

Several of the students reported that the internship experience had little or no influence on their understanding of professional public relations ethics. Several responded that their internship experiences reinforced their understanding of ethics held prior to the internship. Others indicated that while they may or may not have faced an ethics issue, the internship experience pointed out to them the importance of being cognizant of ethics issues in the daily practice of public relations. “I understand now that ethics must be kept in mind at all times, no matter what job you are performing.”

The previous two ideas are summarised by a student who said, “I have confirmed that it would be very easy to push the ethical line and cross it for the good of the organisation, but that maintaining a good professional reputation is more important.” This same student echoed a theme of individual ethics that has appeared among the answers to every question. “As well, I think it is important personally and individually to act ethically.”

On the opposite extreme are the students who believed that the internship influenced their understanding. One student noted, “My internship influenced my current understanding of professional ethics greatly.” Of the students who indicated that the internship did influence their understanding of ethics, there was virtually unanimous support for the idea that it was the “real world” examples, and the ability to observe others that helped to improve their knowledge on the subject. One intern noted that, “It is one thing to read how to conduct PR affairs out of textbook, but it is quite another to actually get out into the real world and practice it.” Apparently being in the “real world” offered the students an opportunity to learn from those around them. Sometimes the learning was by positive example. “I guess I understand more now about PR ethics, just by watching the staff members here interact and communicate with different publics.”

Table 1 – Summary of Ethical Issues Faced by Public Relations Interns

Area	Responses
Media relations	<p>When trying to research media calendars for various pubs, the name of the company I was working for was not to be disclosed until we actually decided to pitch a story. Since I worked for a hospital, patient confidentiality came up several times in press conferences, advertisement, etc. Dealing with the media at a funeral of a girl that had been murdered—TV stations battling for the best coverage and maintaining integrity of the church.</p>
Sources and the writing process	<p>Just making up quotes for the CEO. I did not really confront any ethics issues except for how to deal fairly with people and writing the truth in my news releases. Sometimes it was time-consuming and annoying to have to check news releases with sources before releasing them, and it seemed the easy way out would have been just to release them without source approval. I wrote stories that had many contributing sources. At times I had difficulty remembering all sources, but felt it was my duty to acknowledge all sources I used. I was often given assignments with extremely short deadlines. I could have "borrowed" previous documents to mock, but I never did. We wanted to get the best testimonials; we could have made them up and have them pass them off, but we needed to actually say them.</p>
Client relations	<p>We began doing work for a client before they had signed a contract and they never ended up signing with us. I could have chosen to inflate the audience numbers for each medium (TV, radio, print, Web) to make my agency's advertising and PR efforts more appealing to the client. ... when people are just standing around goofing off, do they bill those hours?</p>
Internal office politics and behavior	<p>I would say loyalty would be the only thing that would be an ethical issue... Whether or not to include peoples' names when talking to upper staff about problems. In the **** office, I got an earful about the **** executives. I heard stories about inappropriate behavior among employees and blackmailing etc. I saw what could sometimes go on in the corporate world and what people will do to get ahead, which is a little scary. ... embezzling money by a previous employee ... There was a lot of overlap between (between two offices). And sometimes things didn't get done, and there was a lot of blaming. ... when I see things done wrong by people who have been here longer than me, I don't know how to deal with it. Somebody in the office had leaked the story to *** ... to see how far out of control with one person getting fired. ... the old ladies in the office gossiping.</p>
Non-profit, fund-raising, philanthropy	<p>Using the Christian-death card... I just feel like we were draining the same people for money. And I'm just like how much money are you going to ask one person to give? (for a fundraiser) If buy a table once, always expected to buy a table. And when you walk in, you can buy a book. Now paying for a table plus a book. And while there, we'll play a sappy video, so we're going to make you donate more money.... A rule was a rule except when it came to some person (related to guides applied to volunteers and sponsors who might have special requests). How to use donated money. Should we use it to pay for materials the donators didn't know about? It is hard to see large businesses support a cause solely to improve their image.</p>
Others	<p>We administered a survey, and my supervisor wanted to throw some of the responses out. We had a lot of political candidates who were members of the chamber of commerce, we had to show our support without taking a political stance. I wasn't allowed to work overtime, but I was because they needed some extra help.</p>

The focus group interviews resulted in similar responses ranging from it “definitely” and “didn’t really” influence their understanding of professional ethics. Students elaborated with comments such as, “I think what solidified it for me is that you have to be up front going in to it.” Another recognised, “We have a lot of power and influence in PR because we’re affecting people’s perceptions. So we can’t throw out unethical perceptions; we’re negatively affecting our publics.”

These students, however, also raised the point that ethical issues were not just things that were observed, but also addressed at times at their internship sites. For example, one student said:

“A lot of times, they would bring up situations that would not even occur to me that might be unethical. Even though I consider myself to be a pretty honest person. There’s just things that sometimes you don’t really think about, and then all of the sudden you realise, maybe that wasn’t really above board, or whatever. So just hearing those discussions, that they were still kind of doing, it helped me think about what I should watch out for.”

And another student followed with, “I remember some discussions, but often they were done as humorous stories. I remember my boss telling a story about some guy he knew that was breaking some ethical rules in the agency he was working in....”

Another issue which likely factored into student responses in general was perhaps best encapsulated by one student who said, “I don’t personally deal with clients or anyone, besides the media, so I don’t know if I have a full understanding of proper PR ethics. I am just trying to do the best with the position I have and make the best decisions I can.” These students also were concerned following the discussion of ethics that they had presented their internships as “bad ones,” when in actuality they had learned a tremendous amount and had some minor concerns over just a few issues they confronted.

Conclusions

In summary, it would appear that soliciting over the phone, delivering bad news, and of-

fice politics appear to be the areas which students identified as uncomfortable throughout all of the various types of interviews at the different universities. While students may have been involved in solicitations and certainly would have had to be involved in group conflict prior to their internships, the solicitations and politics related to the particular internship office or organisation, it would appear, are seen as different in the eyes of the students. To some extent this may also be part of the “rose tinted glasses” through which they view the world of work. Certainly they have been told to be professional in the work setting, and it would be easy on their parts, with less experience, to assume everyone in the work setting would be “professional” at all times. Students had far less to say about issues they witnessed which made them uncomfortable, although the primary concern again pointed to office politics

Additional responses, although somewhat related to issues which made the students uncomfortable, were identified when students were asked about ethical issues they may have confronted. The growing number of issues may well be an artifact of the method or question development in that earlier questions and answers provided instances that they may not have recalled initially on their own. Still, one would consider that issues of ethics would likely be ones that would make them feel uncomfortable. Additional research may help define this response further. An initial overview suggests that the ethical issues were ones over which they felt they had less control or autonomy and thus they could not have had an impact on the results. So the issues making them feel uncomfortable tended to be, in this study, ones in which they played a more central role.

The basic conclusion is that the internship experience for many students increased the importance of ethics in professional practice, whether the student experienced or observed any ethical issues. “My internship increased my understanding that PR ethics is necessary and essential in the professional world. If it is used on a day-to-day basis, then there will be fewer situations in which a person is faced with uncomfortable issues.” Finally, one intern noted the critical role of the internship site. “I think ethics are more important than ever. As a

company accepts interns, you have a responsibility to teach them and train them appropriately.”

Another student also commented on possible preparation considerations, “I think that it would be really important to add something that helps interns understand how to deal with supervisors or other workers that might be making bad decisions because it is a very intimidating and compromising position to be in, especially when you are in your first ever PR position and trying to have everyone like you and think that you are doing a good job.”

In general, no individual student intern in this investigation was exposed to a litany of questionable ethical practices. A combination of factors would likely be at play including the approving and monitoring of internships, as well as site supervisors protecting students (for example, one student was not allowed to attend meetings where ethical issues might be addressed). Additionally, students may simply not be given duties sensitive enough so as to expose them to situations of ethical concern.

Unlike the results reported in Paulins (2001) and Tackett, Wolf and Law (2001), the interns in the current investigation appeared to have a more difficult time identifying ethically questionable behaviors. An implied conclusion from the results may be that the limited or basic knowledge of professional ethics may be sufficient for the students, since they are not likely to face any ethical dilemmas. However, an alternative explanation would be that because they have limited training, the students are less likely to even perceive an ethical issue. In that case, additional training may be necessary to help them not only determine that something is an ethical issue, but to provide them the skills necessary once they make such a determination.

No research is ever perfect, and the current investigation suffers several limitations. First, while it represents different opinions and many different internship venues and locales, the results come from students situated at three universities. Secondly, the responses are limited to the experiences of interns during two academic terms. And fi-

nally, the research relies on different methods for gathering the same information from the students, with different types of results. For example, the focus group interviews, because of their nature in providing aided recall, tended to produce more examples of ethics per person than did the e-mail interviews using the same question set.

Nevertheless as qualitative research that is exploratory in nature, the results provide an interesting starting point for future research into ethics and public relations interns, professionalism and socialisation. Obviously, some of the socialisation appeared to have occurred by observation while others may have been influenced more by direction discussions with colleagues and supervisors. Future research should address how the professional socialisation occurs. Additional research in a broader international context would also help identify a broader base of issues, especially if students of one nationality are completing internships that are either in another country or address international organisations.

The students herein did report a number of concerns related to issues which made them uncomfortable and/or ethical issues that they encountered. Generally students referred to the internship in ways that support the internship as part of a future practitioners’ curriculum in that it appears pedagogically sound operating to elucidate values, and thus connecting the class to practice or vice versa. These issues suggest that the internship is a point of socialisation and professional awakening for a student; the internship is the arena in which the student’s understanding of professionalism is challenged, reinforced or possibly learned, at least in application.

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