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## **Civic engagement: An examination of public relations students' perceptions and attitudes in the field.**

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*This article explores the perceptions of student participants in civic engagement public relations projects. The reported research is a pilot project which will lead into a much larger, longitudinal study, and the author is keen to hear from other researchers examining similar issues or using related methodologies. Contact details are available at the end of the article.*

### **Introduction**

Numerous educational theorists have put forward support for civic engagement in university courses (e.g. Bok, 2003; Colby, Ehrlich, & Beaumont, 2003; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002, 2000; Eyler, Giles, Stenson & Gray, 2001; Checkoway, 2001, 2000; Bringle, Games & Malloy, 1999; Hollander & Hartley, 1999; Morton & Troppe, 1996). Likewise various public relations theorists (e.g. Kruckeberg, 1999; Grunig, 1984, 1992) have argued in favour of integrating civic engagement and communitarianism into public relations practice and, therefore, curricula. Many educational institutions offering public relations courses in the United States of America are now including civic engagement projects as part of the curriculum, as demonstrated by the high volume of programmes requiring client-based campaign management courses. However, very little work has been done to assess the impact of this inclusion on the various parties involved. In particular, studies that specifically examine public relations students' attitudes toward civic-based projects (e.g. Tilson, 1999) are scant. Hence, this pilot study begins the process of identifying ways to fill that gap. This is a preliminary and exploratory study, designed to serve as a springboard for future studies, and

does not provide widely generalisable results. However, it does take the important first steps of a) throwing up key issues and concerns for further exploration, and b) testing how best to examine public relations students' perceptions of civic engagement projects offered in their courses, particularly in relation to who benefits from community interaction by students. It is hoped that early publication of this research project in commentary form may spark comment from the academic community that will help to develop the broader longitudinal study.

### **Civic Engagement**

Civic engagement is a broad topic and cannot be summed up in one finite definition. However, a comprehensive attempt to map the territory of civic engagement in higher education was made in 1999 by O'Meara and Kilmer, and their definitions are useful here. They suggested that, at its most basic core, civic engagement was "the interaction of citizens with their society and their government" (Patrick, 1998, cited in O'Meara & Kilmer, 1999, n.p.), but that, in higher education, it also referred to "those activities which reinvigorate the public purposes and civic mission of higher education" (O'Meara & Kilmer, 1999, n.p.). Civic engagement activities within higher education include objectives such as "developing civic skills, inspiring engaged citizenship, promoting a civil society, and building the commonwealth" (O'Meara & Kilmer, 1999, n.p.). Given the broadness of civic engagement's scope, all three definitions were used as theoretical underpinnings for this study.

There is clear support in the literature for the argument that postsecondary institutions offer viable proving grounds for civic engagement- and service learning-oriented activities (e.g. McLeod, 2001; Checkoway, 2000; Lubbers, 2000; Maloney, 2000; Spanier, 2000; Ties Between Urban, 1999; Arthur, 1998; King, 1997; Zemsky, Shaman & Iannozzi, 1997; Cartwright, 1996). In fact, many argue that it is one of our inherent responsibilities as educators. McLeod (2001) coins the term 'communiversality' to represent a connection between an institution and its community; it converges the goals of many publics, including university faculty, staff, students, civic groups, local governments, and more.

Graham Spanier, president of Pennsylvania State University, addresses various issues that affect the future of our societies and our universities, the first being engagement. Spanier (2000) states:

Engagement is an especially important priority for public universities whose mission historically has emphasised access, progress, and the transfer of technology to the publics. However, these are traditions that must be revitalised in keeping with the needs of a new age. Universities have disciplines, while society has problems ... An engaged institution ... will be organised to respond to the needs of today's students and tomorrow's, not yesterday's. It will seek to prepare students broadly for life through academic and other experiences (p. 237).

### **Communitarianism**

Grunig has extensively researched the four models of public relations: press agency / publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical (Grunig, & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, J., White, Grunig, L., Dozier, Ehling, & Repper, 1992). Of the four models, the last is particularly significant to this study.

Emphasising a two-way flow of communication, the symmetrical approach has a

central goal to establish and maintain mutually beneficial and long-term relationships between an organisation and its publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig et al., 1992).

Extending Grunig's model, Culbertson and Chen (1997) discuss 'communitarianism' as a foundation for communication symmetry. Their work complements that of Kruckeberg and Starck (1998), who suggest that the public relations profession needs to place more emphasis on building a sense of community that involves stable but flexible relationships based on mutual understanding and trust. Culbertson and Chen (1997, pp. 37–40) highlight six assumptions of communitarianism:

Tenet 1) Whether a behaviour is right or wrong depends in large part on its positive contribution to, commitment to, and quality of, relationships

Tenet 2) Community requires a sense of interconnectedness and social cohesion

Tenet 3) Identification of – and humble but firm commitment to – core values and beliefs is essential to a sense of community

Tenet 4) People who claim rights must be willing to balance them with responsibilities

Tenet 5) Community requires that all citizens have a feeling of empowerment; of involvement in making and implementing decisions that bear on their lives

Tenet 6) Community requires a broadening of one's social world – one's array of significant others – to reduce fragmentation and enhance breadth of perspective.

In *A Port of Entry*, the report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (1999), commission members recommended that the public relations curriculum enable students to become competent in an array of skills and industry specialties, including community relations. They also stress the importance of offering students the opportunity to actually implement what they have learned in the classroom via practical projects such as campaigns, meetings and workshops, crises and isolated incidents, organisational activities, and special events. Further, the commission strongly recommended that students have opportunities to engage in supervised work

experience (for example field experience and internships) in the public relations industry. Considering the kinds of experiences that civic-engagement-oriented or 'service learning' activities provide students, coupled with the commission's recommendations, a public relations curriculum would seem the ideal home for such relationship-building activities between students and various organisations within their communities (Kruckeberg, 1998).

### **Lack of Research Related to Civic Engagement and Public Relations Education**

Like civic engagement, service learning has a plethora of definitions. One of the most commonly paraphrased was developed by The American Association of Higher Education in 1993, and defined service learning as:

a method under which students learn and develop through thoughtfully organised service that is: conducted in and meets needs of a community and is coordinated with an institution of higher education, and with the community; helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students enrolled; and includes structured time for students to reflect on the service experience. (cited in UNESCO International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 2003)

Several public relations pedagogy researchers have investigated service learning in relation to class projects. For example, Fall (1998) used management-by-objectives evaluation to assess the success of special-event management students assigned campus-wide fundraising projects. Lubbers (2000) gave an overview of service learning literature and highlighted key concepts and resources for public relations educators. Tilson (1999) wrote about a citizenship formation campaign experience in which students were assigned to raise awareness for a community hospital programme. In other studies, Clark (1998) discussed the integration of service learning in a corporate communications curricula. Fall and Bourland-

Davis (1997) examined service learning in the context of a practicum in which students designed and implemented campus-wide publicity, and promotional strategies and tactics, for a local non-profit organisation. Fall, Brown, and Boudreaux (2004) assessed internship literature related to public relations education. They found that it focuses on three main areas: the importance of internships, the skills students and academicians believe are important for interns to possess, and the significance of internships to academic programmes.

Daugherty (2002), and Corbett and Kendall (1999), have specifically investigated students' perceptions of service-learning-based programmes. However, there is little other research assessing students' perceptions of the civic engagement projects offered in their courses, particularly in relation to who students believe benefits most from their contributions, how valued they believe these contributions are to the community, and how their participation in community-based service influences their career path decisions. Much literature touts the importance of reflection techniques, yet asking students which kinds of techniques *they* deem most valuable has not been explored in depth. Hence, this exploratory action research study seeks to fill these gaps in the literature and to provide a blueprint for further research opportunities.

### **Research Questions**

The focus of the research questions addressed in this study is binary. The first set (RQ 1–4) examines student attitudes while the final (RQ5) explores significant relationships among various civic engagement and communitarianism-oriented variables being investigated:

**RQ1:** How do students perceive who benefits from their community service contributions?

**RQ2:** How do students perceive the value of their community service contributions?

**RQ3:** How do students perceive the usefulness of various reflection techniques required for these projects?

**RQ4:** How much of an influencing factor is future career planning on students' pre- and post-field experience decisions?

**RQ5:** What kinds of significant relationships evolve among the measures of students' perceptions of: who benefits from their contributions, the value of their contributions, on-the-job training, the opportunity to apply what they have learned in the classroom, end-of-term reflection techniques, and their future careers?

## Method

Action research was used for this study because it is "a way of generating research about a social system while simultaneously attempting to change that system" (Troppe, 1994, n.p.). Further, it is "an iterative process which converges towards a better understanding of what happens" (Dick, 1999, n.p.). The participants consisted of students majoring in public relations enrolled in a formal field experience course at a large South-Eastern state university in the United States of America, over two semesters.

Given the nature of the research method, which aims to 'understand' the action (e.g., the community-based internship experience), *all* students were invited to participate instead of randomly selecting them. Within the context of public relations education, these upper division classes are typically small (particularly lab-based and writing classes), and to randomly sample this small group creates too limited a final respondent pool. Ethically, students cannot be compelled to fill out surveys. Combine a reduction due to randomisation with a proportion of the typical non-responses, and there is the risk of a diminished final sample size with less variance and, ultimately, far less robust data. Also, in a randomly-sampled situation, generalisations could only be made about the particular institution under observation. Hence, in this case, the goal of obtaining information helpful to curriculum design outweighs the argument for randomised sampling. In this pilot study, it was considered that the skew created by the self-selecting method was offset by the need to increase

overall sample size; however other methods may be considered for future larger-scale work.

At the completion of their 150-hour field experience in either Summer or Fall (Autumn) semester, 2002, students were given a voluntary, anonymous three-page, self-administered questionnaire. Five categories were included: how much students perceive that various entities benefit from their field experience contributions; how much students perceive that various entities value their contributions; how much training the students have received; how useful they believe the end-term-assignments are; and how much the field experience had influenced their career decisions. Variables were measured via Likert-type scales where 1=not at all, 2=slightly, 3=moderately, 4=highly, and 5= extremely. Remaining questions addressed information regarding previous field experiences and demographic characteristics.

Of 93 students, 67 elected to participate, resulting in a 72% response rate. Notably, 67 students is not nearly robust enough to make substantial research claims. However, since the study is longitudinal in nature, the small-scale population serves as a snapshot examination for the foundation from which future hypotheses will be derived. The sample is gender-imbalanced with 78% females to 22% males. However, this female inclination is indicative of the undergraduate public relations students represented in this institution as well as across the US. Ages range from 20-25 with the mean being 22. The sample is balanced in terms of field experience site industry representation: half the respondents worked in non-profit organisations while the other half worked at for-profit organisations. Half had worked in a non-profit organisation prior to this field experience; of those respondents, the majority of students reported that their position was unpaid. Three-fourths of the students had not yet participated in a formal field experience capacity before this one.

Descriptive statistics were calculated to determine frequency and mean scores. A correlation analysis was then conducted to test for significant relationships among the variables, thereby addressing the final research question.

## Results

### **RQ1: How do students perceive who benefits from their community service contributions?**

Students were asked to rate four individual ‘benefactors’: their employer, the community, the primary public, and themselves. More than half of these students report that they perceive their employers as highly benefiting from their contributions, and nearly another half report that they view the target publics as highly benefiting. Also, nearly half of the students believe that they, personally, obtain extremely benefit from their own contributions to these projects. (See Table 1.)

### **RQ2: How do students perceive the value of their community service contributions?**

Students were asked to rate two variables in terms of how much they are valued for their contributions to the organisation in particular: themselves and their supervisor. Results indicate that there is not much variance in scores. While 58% believe their supervisor highly values and 18% believe their supervisor extremely values their contributions, 43% report that they personally highly value and 18% extremely value their own contributions to the organisation.

### **RQ3: How do students perceive the usefulness of reflection techniques required for these projects?**

Three reflection techniques were examined during this study: weekly logs, end-of-term opinion papers, and end-of-term portfolios. In rank order, from most to least important, are portfolios, end-of-term reflection reports, and weekly logs. More than half report that portfolios are highly useful while another one-fourth report that they are extremely useful. Nearly one-third report that end-of-term papers are highly useful. Weekly logs earned the lowest usefulness scores (e.g., 21% highly, 8% extremely). Another question, which directly related to reflection techniques, addressed the level of opportunity students had to actually incorporate, on the job, what they learned from their public relations programme. More than half of these students indicate that they had sufficient (e.g., high or extreme) opportunities to do so. (See Table 1.)

### **RQ4: How much of an influencing factor is future career planning on students’ pre- and post-field experience decisions?**

Students were asked two questions related to future career planning. One addressed how much of an influencing factor their career plans were on their *initial* decision to participate in their field experience. More than half report that future career plans did influence their decision. A total of 31% report that *after* completing the field experience, they are now considering pursuing a career in this type of industry. An additional 33% report that they had, beforehand, planned to pursue a career in the industry their field experience represented. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1 – Results of Student Attitudes Scores (n = 67)**

Variable	Frequency Scores in Percentages					Mean / Standard deviation
	1 not at all	2 slightly	3 moderately	4 highly	5 extremely	
#2 Employer Benefiting	0%	0%	29.9%	56.7%	13.4 %	3.83/.64
#3Community Benefiting	3.0	14.9	46.4	25.4	10.4	3.25/.94
#4 Primary Publics Benefiting	0	10.4	26.9	46.4	16.4	3.68/.87
#5 You are benefiting	0	6.0	19.4	32.8	41.8	4.10/.92
#6 Level of Training	14.9	17.9	35.8	22.4	9.0	2.92/1.17
#7 Frequency of Training	14.9	7.5	9.0	68.7		1.68/1.13
#8 Supervisor Values Contributions	3.0	7.5	13.4	58.2	17.9	3.80/.92
#9 You Value Your Contributions	1.5	10.4	26.9	43.3	17.9	3.65/.94
#10 Use what you learned	0	13.4	31.3	38.8	16.4	3.58/.92
Usefulness: #11 Weekly log	22.4	19.4	29.9	20.9	7.5	2.71/1.24
Usefulness: #12 End-of-term report	9.0	17.9	32.8	35.8	4.5	3.08/1.04
Usefulness: #13 End-of-term portfolio	3.0	3.9	13.4	55.2	25.4	3.97/.88
Pre-influence: #14 Future career plans	9.0	3.0	22.4	28.4	37.3	3.82/1.23
Post-Influence: #15 Future career plans	10.4	11.9	13.4	22.4	9.0	4.05/1.73

**RQ5: What kinds of significant relationships evolve among the measures of students' perceptions related to who benefits from their contributions, the value of their contributions, on-the-job training, the opportunity to apply what they have learned in the classroom, end-of-term reflection techniques, and their future careers?**

As revealed in Table 2, four 'themes' of relationships were revealed: who benefits, training, end-of-term requirements (e.g. reflective techniques), and future career plans. Only moderate or stronger correlation results are discussed.

### **Who Benefits**

The first theme focuses on students' perceptions regarding how much they believe various entities are benefiting (the employer, the community, the primary affected public/s). Two moderately strong positive relationships are identified: the more students think the community is benefiting, the more they think the primary affected publics are benefiting, and the more they think they personally are valued. Additionally, three moderately strong positive relationships are illustrated: the more students think their employer is benefiting, the more they think their employer values their contributions; the more they think they personally are valued; and the more useful they rate the end-of-term portfolio requirement. (See Table 2.)

The other results regarding the benefit variable concern students' personal perceptions. Three moderately strong relationships are demonstrated: the more they believe they are personally benefiting, the more they think their employer values their contributions; the more training they received; and the more influential their future career plans initially were on their decision to participate in the field experience. A fourth moderately strong relationship is also evident: the more they believe they are personally benefiting, the higher their perception that their contributions were valued by the organisation. Finally, there is a strong positive relationship between students'

perception of their feeling valued and their supervisor valuing their contributions. (See Table 2.)

### **Training**

The data in Table 2 illustrate a second theme, which takes into consideration the amount of training students received during their field experience. In short, the more training the students received, the higher they personally perceived the value of their contributions to be to the organisation. Further, lower value placed on training strongly and negatively correlates with less frequency of training received.

### **End-of-Term Programme Requirements**

The third thematic category of results depicted in Table 2 demonstrates relationships regarding usefulness of end-of-term reflection assignments and various variables. The more training students receive, the higher they report the usefulness of having to keep a weekly log of completed tasks. The higher their scores that rate the usefulness of having to write an end-of-term paper, the higher their scores that rate the usefulness of having to keep a weekly log of completed tasks. And the more opportunity students have had to incorporate during their field experience what they learned in classroom, the more useful they report having to put together an end-of-term portfolio.

### **Future Career Plans**

The final group of results in Table 2 illustrates how much students' future career plans are influenced – before and after – in relation to their overall field experience. Data reveal a moderately strong relationship between the two variables: the more influential students' future career plans are on their decision to initially participate in their field experience site, the higher are their scores indicating that they have been positively influenced to change their minds (e.g., they are now planning a career in this industry/capacity upon graduation).

Table 2 – Results of Pearson Correlation Student Attitude Scores (n = 67)

Student Attitude Scores	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
2	1.00													
3	.270*	1.00												
4	.393**	.521**	1.00											
5	.336**	.335**	.304*	1.00										
6	.205	.292*	.376**	.525*	1.00									
7	.074	-.251*	-.254*	-.244*	-.635*	1.00								
8	.481**	.387**	.186	.503**	.392**	.175	1.00							
9	.504**	.422**	.289*	.406**	.427**	-.329**	.765**	1.00						
10	.343**	.245*	.136	.265*	.321**	-.185	.258*	.197	1.00					
11	.226	.347**	.210	.357**	.412**	-.248*	.361**	.238	.292*	1.00				
12	.068	.069	-.085	.211	.353**	-.195	.270*	.201	.008	.513**	1.00			
13	-.133	.417**	.190	.390*	.226	.231	.196	.204	.410*	.254*	.134	1.00		
14	.231	.340**	.257*	.510**	.235*	-.117	.129	.142	.307*	.304*	.131	.064	1.00	
15	.200	.167	.093	.290*	.323**	-.052	.111	.188	.111	.057	.140	.110	.468**	1.00

\*p < .05    \*\*p < .01

## Discussion / Implications

A few conclusions can be drawn from this study's results. In sync with the philosophy of 'doing well by doing good,' students who believe they are making a strong contribution to the community tend to feel more personally valued for their contributions. Further, students' personal sense of self-worth during their community service experience is related to their future career plans, which reinforces the premise that young citizens are civic-minded and proactively seek to engage in community service-oriented activities before, as well as after, graduation. Also, the more students feel valued during their community service experience, the more they believe they are contributing to a bigger 'world' than just the field experience site or organisation.

Training is also a key indicator. In short, the more on-the-job training students receive, the higher they perceive their contributions to be. This finding reinforces the critical need for training. Students who receive frequent and appropriate training during a field experience or internship are more apt to feel positive about the contributions they are providing. In turn, this positive experience may influence their future decisions to seek community service and nonprofit-oriented careers as well as to actively participate in civic-oriented programmes within their communities.

Additionally, results from this study provide strong overtones of the essential role intrinsic satisfaction plays among interns. In fact, the evidence is overwhelming. Even though the majority of these field experience positions do not provide financial payment, students still report high scores related to how they perceive themselves personally benefiting and being personally valued for their contributions. In short, non-payment does not appear to dampen the students' spirits, as long as they believe they are making a worthwhile contribution to the organisation.

In terms of educational requirements for institutions that offer public relations field experience programmes, internships, and community-based projects, results further

substantiate the idea that supervisors need to empower the students by providing them with ample opportunities to actually use skills learned in the classroom. Also, offering students writing-oriented (technician) tasks is only a small portion of what they learn while enrolled in public relations programmes. Students need the chance to use their analytical and critical thinking skills to strategically solve problems and to be able to turn such problems into opportunities for the organisation they are serving.

Often, field supervisors are not in touch with what goes on in the classroom. This places an important responsibility on field experience and internship coordinators; they need to effectively communicate with site managers and provide them with ample information ahead of time. Suggestions include sharing class objectives and outcomes as well as various activities, projects, and assignments with managers to aid them in a better understanding of the kinds of things students have been trained in and are capable of accomplishing. By doing so, educators diminish the likelihood of the 'Peter Principle,' (e.g., setting individuals up for disappointment because they have not been amply trained or provided with appropriate instructions prior to tasks being delegated to them). In this case, not letting students do what they were trained to do may lead to feelings of personal failure.

Another key finding is applicable to students' career planning. The more influence the field experience or internship site has on students' initial decision to seek a field experience or internship with that industry, the more apt they are to be positively influenced to consider pursuing a career in that industry upon graduation, provided their experience was a positive one. This finding demonstrates a 'diamond in the rough' for potential employers. Non-profit and community service-oriented organisations should become more involved with college students, by means of offering field experiences, internships and volunteer opportunities, to cultivate relationships before graduation. Many students are unsure of the career avenue they want to pursue upon graduation. Therefore, early relationship-

building strategies may entice them to the non-profit/community service employment path. At minimum, early engagement during study plants seeds for potential volunteer activity upon graduation.

Finally, as encouraged among service learning projects, reflection techniques serve as important components to include in civic-engagement / community-based projects. The portfolio continues to be one of the most highly rated projects required by students. This finding makes sense from a personal exchange standpoint. Students exert much time and effort into their field experiences; upon completion of their internships and field experiences, their portfolios serve as tangible ‘brag rights’ that they can take on interviews.

### Future Studies

There are numerous opportunities for future research related to postsecondary public relations education and civic engagement. Suggestions include continuing to probe professional communities to find out what we can do to continue strengthening relationships with our institutions. The results of this pilot study suggest that it will benefit students, institutions, communities and the industry if educators strive to find ways to intrinsically motivate students to become more involved in community projects. And we should work toward helping them to better understand that what they do (or do not do) has an affect on the greater society.

Related specifically to this study, the researcher is continuing to collect data. And, hypotheses derived from this study’s results will be tested.

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