

УДК 070

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Are PR Students Prepared for the Profession? American and Kazakhstani Perspectives

This paper, based on the problem of training a seasoned professional PR professionals. American and Kazakh perspective. The authors hope to help improve coordination between educators and professionals to better students for works communication professionals.

Кен Харви, Аскар Адильханов, М.А. John Л. Купер
**Достаточно ли подготовлены PR студенты для своей профессии?
Американские и казахстанские перспективы**

В статье рассматриваются проблемы профессиональной подготовки PR-специалистов, американские и казахстанские перспективы.

Кен Харви, Аскар Адильханов, М.А. John Л. Купер
**PR студенттерінің кәсіби дайындығы қандай?
Америкалық және қазақстандық перспективалар**

Мақалада PR мамандарының кәсіби дайындығы талданады. Америкалық және қазақстандық перспективалар тұрғысынан бағаланады.

It is widely agreed that universities should meet the needs of the organizations that employ their graduates. However, many see widespread misalignment between what is taught in University classrooms and the needs of employers. The resulting training deficiencies and communication barriers apparently serve neither University programs, employers, nor graduates.

Research into the degree of alignment between University instruction and industry-required skills has been conducted for decades. The current research replicated, updated and augmented questions used in previous studies, to understand how media professionals in Kazakhstan and the U.S.A. evaluate university instruction as preparation for working in the field.

This paper, based on elements of two separate but comparable investigations, reports on the perceptions of professionals about how universities

prepare students for mass communication positions. Results indicate both the extent and characteristics of the problem, with both theoretical and practical implications. The authors hope to help improve coordination between educators and professionals to better students for work as communication professionals.

The authors addressed the following research questions:

1. How do media professionals in the U.S. and Kazakhstan, in a range of new and non-journalistic industries, evaluate the quality of University instruction?
2. How do media professionals see the value and availability of internships and other experiential student activities?
3. Which reforms in educational programs are desired by media professionals?

Background: This topic has been the subject of

many professional and academic studies over many years, many of which reach similar conclusions (Harvey et al, 1979, 1980, 1982). Harvey and Smith (1982) warned that “60.8% of [newspaper and magazine] executives agreed that journalism training in American colleges and universities needed ‘major reforms’ or ‘need to be totally revamped.’” Harvey and Smith (1982) concluded that “Just one successful program might be enough to change the relationship between the journalism profession and journalism education forever.” Many executives seemingly gave up on university journalism education: 57.1 percent expressed at least some interest in starting and/or participating in independent training programs as alternatives to University programs. Despite this dissatisfaction, during the subsequent 30 years few communication executives have worked to develop alternative preparatory programs for their workforce.

Public Relations as a separate science appeared in Kazakhstan in the early years of the 21st century. This fact is mostly connected with the appearance of such organizations as NASO (The National Association of Public Relations in Kazakhstan appeared in 2001) and PR-shi Club (a Kazakhstani PR-community appeared in 2002), which promote the importance of the notion and the development of Public Relations around the country.

Through the time, the idea of relations with publics was getting more and more popularity amongst Kazakhstani businesses: gas and oil companies needed to promote the social responsibility activities, the government needed more relations with citizens, and Kazakhstan needed positive image promotion as a prosperous state in on the Asian market.

The demand of Kazakhstani PR-market, according to PR-experts and university professors, for PR-specialists was reasonable and universities in Almaty were following that demand by providing PR-education.

The analysis of the current situation of PR-education was realized through observing the literature which in this or that level deals with the topic of PR-education. They include collections of scientific articles devoted to PR-educational problems (Проблемы PR-образования в Казахстане”, Saule. Barlibayeva, Almaty, published by «Нурай Принт-Сервис», 2008), different types of reading books, provided by agencies which teach and provide PR-

services (“Практическая журналистика в Казахстане”, released by MediaNet agency). The list of sources also includes on-line and print newspaper articles, which cover the matter as well, articles which study problems related to the current topic.

Literature Review

Concern within communication industries is long-held and widespread. Many studies have shown that mass media executives want their employees to have a particular set of knowledge and skills; to a greater or lesser extent, many executives feel university mass communication programs do not adequately provide the skills. Lepre and Bleske (2005) summarized the current literature: “there are, indeed, discrepancies between how journalism educators and journalism professionals think about the purpose of a college degree in journalism and about the skills or knowledge students...should have upon graduation.” Mass communication executives think journalism educators emphasize too much theory and would prefer an emphasis on practical skills (Lancaster, Katz and Cho, 1990). Lepre & Bleske (2005), Du & Thornburg (2010) and others have referred to this phenomenon simply as “the gap.”

Dickson and Brandon (2000) commented that this gap has been documented as long ago as the 1960s. Educators tended to support specialized subjects such as media law, media history, communications theory, media criticism, and ethics, while media professional have emphasized the importance of skills courses, such as reporting, editing, design and technology. Although Dickson & Brandon and other researchers concluded that, though a problematic gap exists, they did not see it as particularly wide.

Lepre and Bleske (2005), researching gap between magazine editors and educators, found that, educators rated 18 courses and educational experiences (from a list of 23 communication skills) higher than did editors. For example, the editors rated clerical skills, grades and creativity higher than educators, although the difference was statistically insignificant, as was the difference in the educator-editor ratings of media theory courses and interpersonal skills.

Methods

For the US portion of this study, a survey was sent to 22,094 representatives of mass communications organizations which included print, television, and

radio media executives as well as public relations and “new media” executives. To survey this population, executives were contacted by email through the Qualtrics survey research program. The Qualtrics program sends each respondent an introductory letter and email with an embedded link to our survey. Surveys were emailed to all members of six media databases: EasyMedalist.com, Data-Aide.com, Contacts on Tap, Congress.org, Editor & Publisher, and the Expedite email service. Three follow-up emails were sent after the initial contact. Respondents were asked a total of 55 questions, designed to assess the importance of the education, training and experience benchmarks needed to help a graduate become an effective communications industry employee.

Respondents evaluated whether students need more education, training and experience in specific job skills, and how proposed university reforms might affect the quality of graduates. The researchers used five-point Likert-type graded preference scales (strongly agree to strongly disagree) to identify the attitudes of respondents.

The Kazakh component of this study used two methods: depth interviews of PR professors and professionals, and content analysis of documents related to the topic. Nine in-depth interviews were conducted with university professors who have taught Public Relations, PR experts and leaders of PR communities. This respondent set represents a “theoretical sample” of experts from the educational and professional fields.

The content analysis examined documents from three universities: KIMEP, UIB, and Kazakh University of Foreign Languages. The access to the documents describing PR specialization at Kazakh National University after Al Farabi was not available, and the graduate program has not been offered in recent years. Other documents analyzed included the Educational State Standard of Master’s PR program, university catalogues for the 2008-2009 academic year, and student record books.

Results

U.S. Results: One set of questions investigated attitudes toward industry specific skills. The need for training in new media technology was considered moderately important (ranked number 8 to number 11), especially, and predictably, among new media executives. Similarly, broadcast executives considered broadcasting skills as a fairly

high priority. However, all executives considered training in industry-specific technology only moderately important, though its exact placement reflected the industries represented by the various executives. Clearly, technical skills were ranked lower than interviewing, reporting and writing.

Data on necessary skills across the various industries showed remarkably little variance. The greatest range was seen in responses to the value of in-depth and analytical writing, which was a higher priority among broadcast than print executives. If the executives showed relative consensus on technical issues, there was more variance in their responses to additional questions about their levels of satisfaction with current educational quality. The respondents all very strongly disagreed that University graduates are prepared to handle a professional position; this dissatisfaction was strongest among magazine executives and weakest among newspaper executives. Strongly, but to varying extents, the respondents felt that recent graduates are less prepared for work than those 10 years ago. Those dissatisfied with hands-on experience were almost unanimous-- approval ranged from 0 to 4 percent. Questions on the value of internships also yielded high levels of dissatisfaction, especially for shorter internship periods. When asked whether students should have internships in a range of industries, the attitudes varied from clear agreement among new media executives to strong disagreement among newspaper executives. When the executives were asked about the value of a broad, general education, they expressed strong agreement overall-- compared to fairly weak approval for content specialization, such as economics and politics. This could be significant in light of only moderate desire for industry-specific skills courses. Despite some variation, all the executives clearly supported internships; roughly half say that they provide paid internships.

About a third of the respondents felt that mass comm education “needs to be totally revamped.” This response was strongest among PR executives. However, a seemingly – contradictory result was moderate agreement that “mass communication education needs only minor reforms.” The reason for this contrast was not clear within the data.

When asked about specific reforms, the executives took a more radical position. Across all categories, they felt that discipline specific coursework should be almost doubled.

The 2009 – 10 respondents most strongly supported the strongest reforms. Clear majorities proposed a single year of general education, two years of intensive mass communication training, followed by a year of “professional apprenticeship.” The idea of student apprentices was strongly supported and substantially different than the idea of internships, since these were seen as full-time training activities... although at reduced pay.

Most radically, the idea of a four years work-study program was very strongly supported by every group, especially magazine executives.

Overall, in both the survey and open ended responses, executives expressed a desire for more professional orientation, even within general topics. For example, editors complained that students who have taken political science courses do not know how to cover a city council meeting.

Kazakhstan Results

Respondents included those who only teach, those who practice and teach, and those who only practice. One KIMEP professor with past experience was quite negative about the training system for PR-professors at nearly all universities, aside from KIMEP where there are professors who “are experienced”. He added that people who work at other colleges “don’t know how to do it...they teach a lot of Journalism theory”. Based on these examples it may be assumed that PR education for teachers has little value. This opinion was shared by a Kazakhstani professor, who remarked that there was no such system and no modern PR at the time current professors were in university. She compared PR at present with attitudes toward sex information during the Soviet Union.

Another academic described several ways to improve and upgrade the knowledge of PR professors at UIB, such as inviting PR-specialists with some PR-education, such as Asel Karaulova or Larissa Pak, to give master-classes or short-term training courses for students. UIB also invites foreign PR-practitioners who come to big conferences to Almaty. Polls concerning master-classes help (in the words of one professional/educator) “to design an interconnection mechanism between students and practitioners, and educational process.”

PR specialists who currently work at PR departments include a former president of PR-shi Club, who said that many professionals have no special education in PR. University professors were forced to switch from the History of the Communist

Party to teaching PR practices. Their lectures were based on the books available to them. Concerning a PR-Club, one professor said that the experience that matters for her was the criterion for selection. Some members may not be qualified in public relations but all should have 8-10 years experience and base their lectures on personal experience. Theoretical material may be gained during regular staff trainings, which are organized for PR-shi and PG Communications members.

Nearly the same points are raised by a PR professional/instructor, who agrees that no educational system currently exists for PR professors in Kazakh universities. Professors who work at universities include PR-students who dreamed of teaching, practitioners who attended some kind of training courses locally or abroad. However, none of the PR educators have a PhD degree to help them approach the profession scientifically.

The last group contains those who work in PR but have no experience in teaching, such as. cannot say that there is a strong system of PR professors training, since professors typically have no direct professional knowledge of PR.

The majority of respondents, however, tended to see the need to separate Public Relations and Journalism programs. One felt that that it was a “stupid action” by the Kazakhstani Ministry of Education and Science to make Public Relations part of the Journalism program. According to her, PR specialists move in a wrong direction while developing local, traditional PR, which could destroy the profession. On the other hand, journalism students should know what PR is and how it works, just as PR students should know how to deal with journalists and journalism texts and topics.

One practitioner/instructor sees a very big role for internship for PR students in Kazakhstan. The significance of this importance lies in the current PR market, where everything is new because it is at an early stage of development and practitioners, who have some experience in the Kazakhstani PR market, are the best source of information. She also sees another positive side of internships in providing additional skills, which students often get only from PR practitioners, not PR theorists. At KIMEP University, “I hear from my students that real cases are given...the information accumulates in the students’ heads. They know that in certain conditions certain PR-tools are used”, she said. Theories of Public Relations can play

a separate but crucial part in the learning process, so she proposes a balance of both components.

Referring to internships, three educators concluded that, without practice, no student can graduate from university as a true specialist. One added that theory is the consequence of practice – a practical process that is ongoing generates theory, which is why the two components combined are an inevitable requirement. Another agreed that internships also play a major role because, without it, graduates must relearn what they learned in university. Finally, an internship can offer a student a positive image of a PR graduate.

Beyond real-world skills, these three educators list additional qualities and skills needed by a PR practitioner. These include sociability and literacy, supported by related disciplines: sociology of communication, psychology of communication, the ability to write materials, conduct surveys, arrange a PR-event, write press releases, and many others. In addition, one educator stressed the knowledge needed on the basics of economics and an ability to work with budgets. Other skills include working in teams, being a public person, managing projects, and speaking several languages.

Another respondent had a different view of the knowledge required for a PR specialist. In her opinion, the PR major includes various subdisciplines, each of which requires developing a particular set of skills. For instance, a student in an Image Management course should be able to develop both a personal image and the image of the organization. In this case, the skills needed include positioning a company, analysis, creation of internal public relations, how to defend a client from competitors, etc.-- skills that may not apply in a different PR subdivision.

In the Kazakhstani market, the quality of PR education is described as unsatisfactory by current PR-specialists. The reason for this problem is caused by several main factors:

- There are too few PR-courses because the PR major was cancelled in 2005;
- The PR-specialization programs do not correspond to what the PR-market representatives expect, due to the lack of Kazakhstani oriented courses and books;
- The teaching staff of many universities is not experienced in public relations, and those experienced have problems in teaching;

- There is a weak scheme of internship conduction for many universities in Almaty;

- More practical methods are needed in the educational process.

Discussion

The results of each component of this larger study strongly show very similar perspectives toward how well higher education prepares students for professional work in these two distant and different nations.

The results are strongly suggestive. It seems clear that little communication and coordination are currently used to improve University training for his graduates in the professional communications fields. Respondents reported a broad and fairly deep dissatisfaction with the skills taught in University courses. “The gap” seems to be widening rather than narrowing. Despite this, the degree of overlap between needs and instruction appears to be great enough to facilitate the kind of communication and collaboration. PR in Kazakhstan faces the additional obstacle of rapid change from a sociopolitical context in which PR has been treated as marketing, or simply dismissed, to a business environment that sees western PR priorities and techniques as important.

These results are significant because they come from prospective employers of many university graduates as well as from educators. Executives are concerned not only with specific skill sets, but with the entire approach and outcomes of university education. Almost all new media and public relations executives agreed with executives of the traditional news media. The new media and PR fields will not decrease in the foreseeable future, so these results cannot be dismissed. Responses confirm the general observation that barriers between professionals and educators that challenge change are long-held and entrenched within institutional cultures. Both groups would probably say that they already are too busy to support improvement. Suggesting a problematic institutional influence on perspective, the data showed a relationship between attitudes toward the training that is necessary and the employment of the respondent: for example, the educators (with one exception) were more in favor of including theoretical aspects to training, while this was much less of a priority among the pure professionals.

However, underlying these negative conclusions are some positive dynamics. First, the professionals

(like educators) want students to learn and succeed. Second, the respondents imagine specific, concrete changes that could and should be implemented collaboratively with educators.

Educators now operate in a post-modern era that increasingly questions the value of existing institutions; during a prolonged economic crisis that de-values interns; in the Digital Age when work-study students can access virtual classrooms online; and when the University of Phoenix, (with about 500,000 students), demonstrates that a public corporation can successfully challenge established institutions. These results suggests that universities should recognize the very real threat of competing educational institutions that operate more like trade schools.

The authors hope that this study leads to not only further academic research into the attitudes of educators, but also to recommendations on how to improve the current mixed – to – negative situation. For example, members of the two groups could meet to consider rapid changes to Internet – age communication and the skills needed by University graduates. Periodic meetings by representatives of the groups, perhaps by region, could consider changes to the programs; support by professionals would encourage university administrators to allow and even support such improvements. Increased involvement by each group in the workings of the other would only benefit both higher education and communication professions, such as PR and journalism.

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