

Racial and Gender-Based Differences in the Collegiate Development of Public Relations Majors: Implications for Minority Recruitment and Retention

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Overview

In order to increase diversity in the public relations profession, a key strategy used by agencies is to build a pipeline of diverse practitioners among millennials, whom constitute the largest and most racially and ethnically diverse generation in the workplace today. This pipeline is established through the initial recruitment of underrepresented racial and ethnic persons (UREP) and more gender-balanced students into the public relations curriculum, and the retention of those students through the completion of the curriculum and into entry-level communication positions. In fact, a team led by Dr. Bruce Berger found that finding, developing and retaining top talent is a key issue for public relations executives.

Because of the importance of recruitment and retention of future practitioners at the college level, this project was designed to examine the collegiate development of public relations students, from an educational and social perspective, to uncover any differences based on race and gender. The study helped identify areas of need, concern and opportunity that could help improve the development of underrepresented groups, which will lead to them potentially entering the profession and advancing to management positions. Based on the findings from this study, the research team will draw conclusions and provide academic and professional recommendations that will assist in the recruitment, mentoring and retention of potential underrepresented students, which will in turn hopefully lead to an increase in diversity among practitioners entering the field.

Methods:

Phase I: Email interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of 24 young professionals (five years of experience or less) in order to examine and uncover themes related to their educational and social development, and the influence of race and gender towards their development.

Phase II: Using the themes that were uncovered in Phase I, a survey was conducted among 294 current public relations majors to examine racial and gender differences in their collegiate development.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1) Males and UREPs must be informed that public relations is not a “white girl” major.

Qualitative responses from professionals in Phase I continually stated that the perception of the major is that it was created for Caucasian females. Males and UREPs both stated instances when they felt alienated and isolated. These realizations were confirmed in Phase II results, with males and UREPs scoring lower in agreement with statements about educational and social satisfaction with their collegiate experiences. One reason that was repeated during Phase I for the perception of public relations is that the major is stereotypically presented as a “white girl” major. Creating programs and communication materials that show males and UREPs that the major is not just for Caucasian females could potential lead to attitude and behavior changes about the major.

2) Males and UREPs, once in the major, must be informed of the opportunities available to gain professional experience and guidance.

Male and UREP respondents in Phase I also continually stated that they felt uninformed about opportunities to gain professional experience and mentorship. In addition, many Caucasian female respondents admitted they felt they gained better opportunities because they “fit the mold.” Phase II results confirmed this disparity, with Caucasians and females agreeing that they have built a professional network and have received better opportunities for leadership positions and internships compared to their counterparts. Males and UREPs must be informed better of their opportunities.

3) *Diversity must start at the classroom level in order to embrace diversity at the professional level.* Male and UREP respondents in Phase I discussed their feelings of alienation and “oppression” in the classroom and in extra-curricular groups, which had an influence on their willingness to pursue a career in public relations. Phase II confirmed these sentiments, with Caucasians and females agreeing that they have strong peer support groups, are comfortable interacting with other students, and feel that other students value their contributions more than their counterparts. Professors, instructors and advisors must work to increase diversity at the classroom level by recruiting male and UREP students in extra-curricular groups, as well as making groups for classroom projects more diverse.

4) *Make diverse professionals more visible to all public relations majors, and urge them to proactively mentor and network with male and UREP students.*

One reason that males and UREPs feel alienated in the major is because they are not presented with opportunities to network with a diverse pool of professionals in college – this claim was supported in both phases of the study. Participants in Phase I repeatedly stated that they wished they interacted with mentors that “looked like them.” This could explain why males and UREPs scored lower in agreement that they have built a network of professionals and seek career advice regularly from professionals compared to their counterparts. These differences illustrate a need for a more visible presence of UREP and male professionals, and a need for these professionals to be more willing to mentor and network male and UREP students.

5) *Proactively discuss racial and gender differences related to the public relations industry in the classroom.*

There is a stigma of disrespect among males and UREPs when discussing their counterparts – several male and UREP participants in Phase I discussed how they felt alienated and separated from other female and/or Caucasian students in the classroom. This was confirmed in Phase II, with both UREP and male participants scoring less in agreement that their contributions in PR settings are valued compared to their counterparts. Part of this could stem from a lack of substantial focus in the classroom on the racial and gender disparities in the industry. Discussing these differences in major courses could help to balance classrooms and remove this stigma of disrespect.

Practical recommendations stemming from these five conclusions:

- Create recruitment materials for incoming freshmen that better explain the need for (and importance of) diversity in public relations.
- Recruit a diverse representation of student ambassadors when reaching out to incoming freshmen and other potential majors (for open houses, orientations, etc.).
- Incorporate discussion of racial and gender differences in the public relations industry in all major courses.
- Proactively recruit males and UREPs to join PR and communication-related organizations (i.e. PRSSA, Ad Team, Bateman, etc.).
- Create a more diverse pool of professionals for networking, guest speaking and mentoring opportunities.
- Inform all public relations students universally of internship opportunities to eliminate alienation of UREP and male students.
- When placing students in groups for classroom projects, create diverse groups when possible.