



## Exploring ethics education in global public relations curricula: Analysis of international curricula descriptions and interviews with public relations educators<sup>☆,☆☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Using the framework of the *Professional Bond*, issued by The Commission on Public Relations Education (2006), this study explores global public relations curriculum and how educators from other countries discuss ethics education. This study employed a content analysis of curricula descriptions on college and university Web sites and interviews with public relations professors globally. Web sites of over 218 schools in 39 countries not including the U.S. were explored, and 20 faculty members from 20 different countries were interviewed. Findings reveal that ethics is not taught in most countries globally as an independent course within public relations. Educators suggested a cultural approach to ethics education as different ethical norms and standards apply.

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In ever-increasing globalization of organizations, ethics are an important consideration not only in the work environment, but also in the lead-up to the work environment—in the classroom. Although there can be differences between public relations education and practice, education has an influence on practitioners, especially recent graduates entering the job market. A recent study indicates that that U.S. practitioners and educators believe public relations education should include more focus on ethics, as well as research and strategic planning (DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009). While previous studies have explored ethics education in the U.S., previous literature has not addressed how public relations education on ethics is taught globally.

This study addresses literature from U.S. ethics education discussions, raising questions about how ethics is taught globally and whether there are models in the public relations curricula of other country's universities to help U.S. curricula develop better ethics training for a multicultural world. Here, ethics education was studied through a content analysis of curricula descriptions on college and university websites and through interviews with public relations professors globally. This study offers the greatest scope of any data to date on how public relations ethics education is developing across the world.

### 1. Literature review

The Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) defines ethics for the public relations profession as “a set of a priori principles, beliefs, and values that should be followed by all who engage in public relations practice” (p. 21). The

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commission (2006) has established standards for ethics education in the U.S. in the *Professional Bond*, including standards for ethics course content and curriculum development. The *Professional Bond* includes several recommendations for this specific global curriculum development, including incorporating a dedicated ethics course or class, incorporating ethics throughout the entire curriculum, and including ethics principles that transcend geographical boundaries.

### 1.1. A dedicated ethics course and ethics throughout the curriculum

According to the Commission on Public Relations Education, “Professional ethics must not only be integrated into all coursework in public relations, but must also be given priority as a discrete component of the public relations curriculum” (2006, p. 23). A dedicated ethics course is recommended in an ideal undergraduate curriculum, or, if not possible, short courses or seminars are recommended to explore ethics more in-depth. Public relations ethics are also recommended as separate content areas that graduate students should master in their curriculum. The commission recommends that “at least one course in public relations law and ethics should be included in the curricula of public relations programs” (p. 22).

Scholars have called for education in public relations ethics both in independent courses or integrated across the curriculum. Toth (1999) reports on the recommendations of a panel of 24 educators at a National Communication Association Conference, where educators advocate for a model where ethics education occurs both in individual courses and across the curriculum. For the proposed models for undergraduate curriculum, ethics is required in the core program components (Toth, 1999). Although, many advocate that ethics content should be incorporated across the curriculum instead of in a separate course (Erzikova, 2010; McInerney, 1997), Witmer, Silverman, and Gaschen (2009) found that ethics content was not often incorporated into service learning classes.

Creedon and Al-Khaja (2005) note globally that many public relations programs teach ethics as integrated throughout all courses in the curriculum, as opposed to a stand-alone course. Chaisuwan (2009) studied undergraduate ethics education at five different Indian universities and compared this education to that recommended by the *Professional Bond*. Chaisuwan found that most universities offered at least two general or mass media ethics or law courses, but that none were specific to public relations. Gonçalves (2009) studied undergraduate education in Portugal and found that around half of the undergraduate programs offered courses in public relations ethics and law, but that most were communication ethics and law courses and not specific to public relations.

Xifra (2007) found in a study of undergraduate education in Spanish universities that only 28% of Spanish universities taught a separate course in “public relations law and ethics.” Two of 32 universities had required public relations ethics courses and two had elective courses, while less than one-fifth of universities incorporated ethics in their introductory public relations courses. In graduate programs, very few students studied ethics (Xifra & Castillo, 2006).

### 1.2. Ethics course content

The commission recommends that undergraduate education incorporate the study of codes of ethics and credibility (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006). Studies have found that practitioners and educators alike believe that credibility, transparency, ethics codes of practice, and corporate social responsibility should be included in course curricula (DiStaso et al., 2009; Stacks, Botan, & VanSlyke, 1999; Aldoory & Toth, 2000). A study of Indian universities found that of the public relations courses incorporating ethics into the classroom, most covered codes of ethics or public relations effects and corporate social responsibility (Chaisuwan, 2009).

Gale and Bunton (2005) recommend that course content for professional ethics education in public relations should include ethical theory, development of analytical skills, development of moral reasoning, and formation of values and character. Kang (2010), however, states that, although ethics education in public relations emphasizes honesty, the situations that practitioners face are inherently much more complex. For example, remaining silent in some contexts may be seen as ethical; whereas, in other settings, remaining silent may be seen as unethical.

### 1.3. Additional ethics recommendations for graduate education

The Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) recommends that ethics at a graduate level should be mastered much more than that at the undergraduate level. Older recommendations from the Foundation for Public Relations Research (1985) state that ethics should be taught as part of the introductory course in graduate education, and not necessarily as a separate course. Others propose ethics as one of seven core content areas that master's students should cover before the end of their programs (Toth, 1999). Toth notes, however, that, “A separate course need not be devoted to each area” (p. 51), implying that this content may be incorporated into other courses in the program and part of students' readings.

Recent research has shown that few universities require “public relations ethics” courses or provide these as an elective (Shen & Toth, 2008). Similarly, Senat and Grusin (1994) found that only around 13% of graduate programs included ethics as part of the core course requirement, and Aldoory and Toth (2000) found that, of 21 master's programs, only one required a public relations ethics course or had this as an elective. Briggs and Fleming (1994), however, found that the three courses most frequently required at the graduate level were research methods (80%), communication theory (62%), and ethics/law (31%).

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