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Leadership Development in Undergraduate Public Relations Students: A Case Study

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This qualitative case study considered the relationship between a Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapter at a public state university in Northern California and its local Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) affiliate chapter. Its purpose was to explore student perceptions of the contributions of this relationship to what they learned about leadership while serving as club officers. Research was conducted during the fall semester 2010.

The study explored efforts designed to help PRSSA chapter officers fulfill individual responsibilities. Local and national PRSA representatives provided advice and counsel through diverse channels, the intent of which was to help PRSSA chapter officers meet the challenges of their respective roles. These industry professionals in turn observed leadership development in the students included in this study.

The study also probed student views on leadership related to their PRSSA chapter officer experience. The officers who participated in the study adopted a leadership purpose grounded in advising and guiding fellow students who aspired to enter the public relations profession. Learning about what public relations people do, the different environments in which they work, making contacts, and identifying internship and job opportunities was deemed fundamental for fulfilling this purpose. Chapter officers thus participated in national PRSSA events and activities sponsored by their local PRSA affiliate chapter, and also planned and

promoted programs to build a necessary base of knowledge and experience to fulfill their responsibilities.

This study added to the body of knowledge on leadership development in undergraduate public relations students, a topic that had received minimal attention in previous research. In basing results upon data collected through qualitative research methods, moreover, this study began to fill the void in empirical data on student perceptions of the PRSSA experience. Finally, this study added to the understanding of how PRSA and PRSSA undertake leadership development of future practitioners.

Literature Review

The literature on three topics proved relevant for this study. The first considered was undergraduate public relations education, with a focus on student learning about leadership particularly through participation in PRSSA.

A study conducted for the 1998 NCA (National Communications Association) summer conference served as the starting point. It yielded a public relations curriculum model with experiential components including participation in public relations clubs—albeit with neither detail nor related learning outcomes (Toth, 1999). A separate study identified public relations-specific “applied competencies” expected of students who completed a bachelor’s degree program, which included leadership in activities such as PRSSA. Again, no further information on these activities was provided (Neff, Walker, Smith, & Creedon, 1999).

These NCA conference discussions proved pivotal as they guided the final recommendations of the 1999 Commission on Public Relations Education Report, “Public Relations Education for the 21st Century: A Port of Entry” (Commission on Public Relations Education, 1999). Twelve assumptions guided this work, including that “graduates of public relations programs should be . . . ethical leaders appreciative of cultural diversity and the global society” and “public relations practitioners and educators should be leaders in building understanding that public relations has a fundamental responsibility to society and adds value”

(p. 9).

Moreover, this report concluded, “the purpose of an undergraduate degree in public relations is to prepare students for an entry-level position in public relations and to assume a leadership role over the course of their careers in advancing the profession” (p. 11). Greater support for PRSSA was recommended, although benefits students gained by participation, including leadership development, were not explored.

The Commission on Public Relations Education’s most recent report, “Public Relations for the 21st Century: The Professional Bond” (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006), highlighted the need for academic programs to prepare students for the evolution of public relations from a set of technical skills into an increasingly strategic, professional, and management-focused effort. Critical knowledge, skills, and traits were delineated, including “integrity as team participants and leaders” (p. 43).

The 2006 report also encouraged undergraduate students to join a professional or pre-professional organization. Such organizations through university-based chapters also “provide (students) with opportunities to experience leadership” (p. 75). Yet little indication of what leadership means in these contexts was provided.

These reports pointed to a need for classroom instruction that incorporated experiential learning so students could cultivate skills in leadership and other areas (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006; Toth, 1999). To this end, Bush (2009) identified leadership as an outcome of participation in student public relations agencies yet neither defined the concept nor considered how students cultivated skills.

Neff (2002) integrated a leadership process and service-learning component into the principles of public relations course, with students participating in a leadership training opportunity. Yet she merely outlined this option, without offering either empirical support for its effectiveness in achieving learning outcomes or grounding the course in a concept of leadership relevant to undergraduate public relations students.

In a subsequent article Neff (2008) suggested, "The greatest area of future development is in the leadership development of public relations professionals" (p. 85). In turn, an outcomes-based program would afford students' expanded leadership opportunities through a variety of activities. PRSSA officer experience was not included.

In summary, the literature offered brief references to leadership in discussions of undergraduate curricula and related, albeit isolated attempts to study the subject. PRSSA likewise received limited recognition, with any connection between participation and leadership development virtually absent. In short, it was unclear if public relations undergraduates were learning about leadership, much less what, where, and how.

The second topic considered in the literature review was leadership in public relations, one on which there has been very limited research (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Berger, 2009; Berger, Meng, & Heyman, 2009; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009). To start, Grunig (1992) in the landmark IABC Excellence Study included leadership as one of 12 characteristics of excellent organizations, with leaders networking and "walking around" to meld direction with empowerment rather than authoritarian systems.

Subsequent research attempted to make explicit the concept of leadership in public relations that was implicit in the Excellence Study (Berger, Meng, & Heyman, 2009). For example, public relations professionals worked cross-functionally and aspired to influence decision-making, requiring organization-wide as opposed to within work-group leadership (Aldoory, 1998). Choi and Choi (2009) identified seven leadership behaviors that can help practitioners to improve skills in these areas: upward influence, coordinating, internal monitoring, networking, representing, providing vision, and acting as a change agent.

Other research related the emerging understanding of a distinct public relations leadership style to more traditional concepts. For example, Aldoory and Toth (2004) examined perceptions of leadership style and the influence of gender with results indicating a strong preference for transformational over transactional leadership styles among public relations

practitioners, as well as a preference for situational leadership and support for shared decision-making and participative management.

While the Excellence Study maintained that leadership in public relations required access to the dominant coalition (i.e., the senior managers who control an organization), standards of professional practice in the field highlighted the absence of such access (Sallot, Cameron, & Weaver-Lariscy, 1998). Practitioners, moreover, had limited skills or capabilities in this arena (Berger, 2005).

To address these perceived shortcomings, the literature also explored how professionals might improve abilities to participate in organizational power dynamics and gain access to the dominant coalition. Berger and Reber (2006) concluded that practitioners needed to “become more politically astute, employing more diverse influence resources and tactics, and exerting greater political will in organizational arenas where decisions are shaped through power relations” (p. 2).

Berger, Reber, and Heyman (2007) also identified characteristics that enabled professionals to succeed and maintain their standing as leaders. These included a proactive nature; relationships and networking; communication, interpersonal, analytical, and leadership skills; experience; and curiosity. Jin (2010) introduced an emotional component, concluding that a relationship-and-task balanced leadership style and the strategic use of empathy were significant predictors of public relations leaders’ competency in gaining employees’ trust, managing frustration and optimism, and taking stances towards employees and top management in decision-making conflicts.

Finally, researchers on leadership in public relations attempted to bring these streams together in a concept of excellent leadership in public relations, which

encompasses public relations executives’ personal attributes and efforts in leading the team to facilitate mutual relationships inside and outside of organizations, to participate in the organization’s strategic decision making processes, and to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members (Meng, Berger, & Gower, 2009, p. 21).

Related research identified major dimensions of this concept, including self-dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship building, strategic decision-making capability, communication knowledge, and expertise capability (Meng, 2009; Meng, Berger, & Gower, 2009; Meng & Heyman, 2008).

These studies collectively pointed to a bright future for the study of leadership in public relations, yet failed to probe beyond the experience and needs of advanced practitioners. The relevance of this emerging concept of leadership in public relations to undergraduate students, much less the contribution of an undergraduate education to the formation of leadership-related attitudes and behaviors among individuals who will assume entry-level positions, remained largely unexplored.

The third topic considered in the review of literature was PRSSA. Pohl and Butler's (1994) often-cited study relied uncritically on publicly available PRSSA documents to illuminate membership benefits, national and chapter structures, and officer responsibilities, in the process asserting that student participation in the organization provided the opportunity to implement issues learned in the classroom.

Other studies explored student decisions to join PRSSA (Pritchard, Filak, & Beach, 2006); benefits of participation (Andrews, 2007; Louallen & Riechert, 2005); and self-assessment of learning (Boruvka, 2005). The former two studies largely reinforced assertions regarding PRSSA's value as a bridge between the classroom and professional practice, with nary a reference to leadership development opportunities (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006; Nadler, 1997; Schoch, 1983). The anecdotal nature of the latter work underscored the absence of empirical inquiry into how students perceived the contribution of PRSSA to their undergraduate education.

In short, gaps in these three topics pointed to the opportunities implicit in this study. Students who assume PRSSA officer roles gain leadership experience, yet it remains unclear

what they are learning from PRSA/PRSSA, classes, and elsewhere that shapes skills and attitudes. In turn, hand wringing among public relations educators and practitioners about the state of entry-level employees might be alleviated by a heightened understanding of the constellation of leadership competencies some entry-level employees acquired during their undergraduate education.

Procedures for Collecting Data

A case study framework was employed in this study, the intent of which was to provide description or to “illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomena under study. (Case studies) can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader’s experience, or confirm what is known . . . (and contribute to the) discovery of new relationships, concepts, and understanding” (Merriam, 1988, p. 13). This study, moreover, involved a single case with three embedded units or levels of analysis—the individual PRSSA chapter officers; the PRSSA chapter executive board in which these officers participated; and the PRSSA chapter itself (Yin, 2009)

Case studies also can be described in terms of intent, whether that is to provide description and/or to test or generate theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Merriam, 1998). The former intent guided this study. Finally, case studies combined myriad data collection methods, with evidence being qualitative, quantitative, or both (Eisenhardt, 1989). In this study, qualitative research data collection techniques were employed. These included observations, interviews, and gathering and analysis of written documents.

During the fall semester 2010, the researcher observed PRSSA chapter executive board and general membership meetings and a leadership training event for club officers sponsored by the state university in Northern California where the study was completed. Interviews also were conducted with PRSSA chapter officers, the club’s faculty and professional advisers, and the Vice President of PRSSA and Academic Affairs. Relevant documents produced by the

chapter, its national parent organization, and the host university's student affairs department were analyzed as well.

Findings

Research Question 1.

The first research question was: What do PRSSA and its parent organization, PRSA, provide leaders of student chapters in terms of leadership resources, training, and support?

This research question explored the information and resources made available to PRSSA chapter leaders by PRSSA/PRSA, their representatives, and the university to probe how each aimed to help them fulfill officer responsibilities and learn about leadership. Results are presented below in terms of the provider of information.

PRSSA.

As the organization sponsoring the student group on which this case study was based, PRSSA's resources, training, and support for chapter officers had a potentially significant role in shaping their experiences. The following section discusses their relevance for leadership development.

The national PRSSA organization offered chapter officers a Leadership Rally; the National Assembly; National Conference; counsel provided by ten elected student members of its National Committee, the organization's governing body; a website; and a chapter handbook. Through these resources, PRSSA aimed to "to cultivate a favorable and mutually advantageous relationship between students and professional public relations practitioners" ("Chapter Handbook, 2010-2011," 2010, p. 1).

The Leadership Rally's intent, according to Cheryl Kardman, who served as Vice President of PRSSA and Academic Affairs during the period covered by this study, was "a starting point" in terms of helping presidents identify responsibilities, discover available resources, and network with peers. Sessions held at the 2010 Leadership Rally included "Leading and Managing Your Board," "How to Stay in Touch," and "What Your Members Need

to Know,” with presidents also organized into groups based on chapter size to discuss relevant issues (“PRSSA 2010 leadership rally agenda,” 2010; “PRSSA 2010 leadership rally best practice sharing,” 2010).

The National Assembly was held every spring and attracted students from PRSSA chapters at universities across the U.S. Attendees learned about PRSSA programs and opportunities, leadership strategies and tactics, and chapter programs (“Chapter Handbook, 2010-2011,” 2010; C. Kardman, personal communication, Dec. 10, 2010).

Roundtable discussions at the National Conference also allowed students to “brainstorm” and learn about “key messages” for their position and/or to consider best practices for chapter activities. The emphasis here, according to Kardman, was on peer-to-peer interaction and learning: “We find that students/officers learn so much from each other with respect to hearing how other chapters handle certain challenges.”

Kardman also mentioned the PRSSA chapter handbook, which offered ideas for chapters and individual members as well as a “Benefits of PRSSA” section that included a list of competitions, scholarships, and awards, including three in the latter category that recognized leadership. These were the Lawrence G. Foster Award for Excellence in Public Relations, which solicited applicants to “list leadership qualities they believe are most important in public relations and why;” the National Gold Key Award, which “recognizes students who demonstrate excellence in public relations and PRSSA leadership;” and the National President’s Citation, which “celebrates members who possess professional skills, a strong understanding of PRSSA, and Chapter or National leadership experience” (“Chapter Handbook 2010-2011,” 2010, p. 17, 18).

This package of advice, counsel, events, activities, resources, and recognition aimed to produce chapter officers who Kardman described as follows:

(They) have a clear understanding of the vision and mission of PRSSA and are willing to be held accountable for the continuing advancement of these two elements. This person is knowledgeable about the benefits provided by Society as well as its supporters. A

leader in PRSSA is someone who will diligently and tirelessly work with students and professionals to achieve the goals set forth by either the local Chapter or the Society.

Leadership training at the aforementioned events, Kardman added, “always incorporates PRSA’s strategic pillars as interpreted by the PRSSA National Committee . . . and key principles such as advocacy, ethics, diversity, advancement in public relations via life-long learning, and communities . . . This is the content that PRSSA feels its officers need to know to be effective leaders now and as they become practicing professionals.” She added that individual chapters were encouraged to incorporate these content areas into their leadership programming.

Kardman shared a definition of leadership in public relations after consulting with 2010-2011 PRSSA National President Billy Harding, who described it as about

being a good citizen of the profession. Good citizenship is based on continued learning and education, mentorship of future professionals, and engaging fellow practitioners to share in establishing best practices and ethical principles. When many public relations professionals strive to be good citizens, we can advance the profession and better serve our clients and organizations.

In addition to this support for student officers, PRSSA offered training and resources to help faculty and professional advisers to chapters. These included publications on topics such as building a relationship with the affiliate PRSA chapter, managing student-run firms, and facilitating leadership transition. Faculty and professional advisers also may choose to subscribe to listservs designated for their roles and could seek out national counterparts for support (“Tools for Advisers,” 2011).

In summary, the PRSSA national organization offered myriad resources, including events, materials, and access to other student leaders, to help chapter officers to fulfill responsibilities and learn about leadership. While PRSSA strived to involve chapter presidents and/or other officers, attendance at events and use of resources was optional. Chapter officers, particularly the president, had to take the initiative to find and use them. Faculty and professional advisers likewise had to seek such resources.

The PRSSA national organization, moreover, viewed leadership as necessarily supportive of public relations as a profession, the organization itself, and its PRSA affiliate as well. This advocacy, in addition to diversity, ethics, mentoring of future professionals, and lifelong learning were key components of the leadership concept shared by the two organizations and incorporated into chapter officer training. The PRSSA national organization apparently saw leadership development as one outcome of the counsel, events, activities, and resources offered to student leaders, and established criteria for three awards to recognize leadership experience and achievement.

Professional Advisers.

As working public relations professionals and members of the Board of Directors of the PRSA chapter with which the PRSSA chapter in this study was affiliated, the two professional advisers served as liaisons between the organizations. They advised PRSSA officers and members and linked the world of the university student with the workplace.

Cassandra Schwartz, a public relations specialist for a consumer electronics company headquartered in Northern California, served as one of two professional advisers to the PRSSA chapter during the study timeframe. She worked most closely with the PRSSA chapter president particularly through biweekly conference calls, offering what she described as “candid advice” on fundraising, handling personal issues between officers, and planning/participating in Agency Day, when PRSSA chapter members toured San Francisco-based public relations agencies; the Regional Activity, a student-planned event for chapters in a geographic region that featured presentations on different aspects of public relations; and Media Predicts, an annual dinner sponsored by the local PRSA chapter where reporters, analysts, and other observers shared predictions about the technology industry. Schwartz highlighted the advisory nature of this role in this way: “We definitely don’t go in and communicate for them or try to mediate. I give counsel on how to help manage officers especially being a student and leading a group of your peers can be pretty difficult. So I give them an open ear as to potentially provide

advice on how to interact with one another as well.”

Schwartz identified her ability to connect PRSSA chapter leaders with public relations professionals as fundamental. Whether that occurred when she introduced students to prospective speakers or through invitations to PRSSA members to attend PRSA chapter meetings, her aim was clear and explicit: to make it a “seamless experience” in moving from membership in PRSSA to PRSA.

Schwartz’s insight into the PRSA/PRSSA dynamic and focus on the organizations themselves tied in with her perspectives on PRSSA officer skill cultivation and concomitant emergent leadership skills. Nascent time management and delegation skills, accompanied by a growing confidence in advising peers, represented for her “leadership development” that occurred as a by-product of student interaction with public relations professionals: “And they hear a lot . . . and (attend) a lot of these meetings . . . and they’re in Agency Day. . . they’ve taken in a lot from professionals and you can see that start to be relayed to the other members as well.”

Schwartz went one step further in this arena, making explicit the connection between leadership in PRSSA—and subsequently in public relations—with advocacy for the organization and profession. In the latter sense, she echoed perspectives on leadership in public relations proffered by Kardman and PRSSA National President Harding. “Leadership is progressing the profession and supporting its development,” Schwartz stated, adding that leaders, specifically chapter officers in PRSSA, “(Need to) have passion for PR . . . they want to see both themselves as well as their peers succeed in the profession that they’re trying to be a part of . . . I see (the officers) aiding and encouraging people to be a part of PRSSA . . . so I think overall their leadership comes across to not only help them progress in the field but to help others.”

Martin Miller, who worked at the San Francisco office of an international public relations agency, was the second professional adviser to this PRSSA chapter. His support had a different emphasis than that offered by Schwartz, as he explained.

There's a lot of students out there . . . who are interested in the public relations field and I think a lot of times many of them don't realize what it takes to be successful . . . I felt it was a good opportunity to share my own experience with them . . . how to approach agencies how to interview what are the key skills that they should develop in college that they can translate into the workplace.

In other words, mentoring students to facilitate their entry into the public relations profession largely inspired Miller's work. Whether it was answering questions about public relations classes and agency life or reviewing resumes, his primary focus—and source of joy as well as positive feedback from students—lay in this domain.

Miller, like Schwartz, participated in biweekly conference calls. He also advised officers on how to manage interpersonal conflicts and negotiate with vendors, making the direct connection between competencies in these domains and his view of leadership in public relations. "It's being placed in challenging or difficult situations and being able to navigate them in a way that best serves your client as well as the agency," Miller stated. "So I would say leadership is really having the adversity to deal with something that's challenging and making it work so you can have all parties benefit from that."

Neither Miller nor Schwartz sought or received training to help them fulfill their responsibilities. Both cited personal experience and learning by doing as critical. Miller noted: "You know there really is no rulebook on how to best advise them. You kind of always keep in mind what's good for them in terms of their professional lives."

In short, the two PRSSA chapter professional advisers mainly offered advice through scheduled phone meetings with the chapter president and vice-president with career-related advice offered to members electronically. These individuals highlighted different aspects of leadership as defined by the national organization, with one focusing on service to organization, profession, and peers, and the other highlighting skills in negotiation and facilitating difficult situations. Professional advisers also related the emergence of leadership and related competencies with performance in officer roles. These practitioners largely spoke positively about the PRSSA/PRSA relationship, and each considered membership in the latter as a bridge

to the profession. Finally, these two individuals drew primarily on personal experience to fulfill their responsibilities.

Faculty Advisers.

Faculty advisers received top billing from PRSSA in terms of their importance to chapters. Kardman stated, “the faculty adviser is pillar to the success of PRSSA Chapters . . . (and thus) we want to make sure presidents are keeping advisers up to speed on events (and) continue to network with them.” Interviews conducted with faculty advisers to the chapter in this study illuminated how these individuals perceived their role, as well as their contributions to officer experiences and learning about leadership.

Charles Matthews, the current faculty adviser, assumed the role via a perfunctory handoff from his predecessor with little guidance or direction. Nonetheless, he articulated a philosophy that echoed remarks by Kardman and Schwartz on how they worked with PRSSA student leaders.

I would take the view that I’m an overseer or counselor to them (as it’s) a student-run organization, not a faculty run organization . . . issues come up that they can’t deal with as an executive body and they’ll come to me to help adjudicate things . . . my job is to empower them to be leaders of the group . . . they get very little hand holding . . . They develop leadership skills . . . if there’s a problem they have to solve it themselves unless it’s a major thing I need to get involved with.

Matthews’ relationship with student leaders, in particular his primary contact, the PRSSA chapter’s president, thus was “informal.” He encouraged weekly meetings, an invitation to which Fred Franklin, Immediate Past PRSSA Chapter President, had responded enthusiastically; Felicia Martin, PRSSA Chapter President, had not. Conversations with Franklin focused primarily on “personnel issues . . . group dynamics and all of that . . . my presidents tend to want to do it all themselves and they get burned out and also get burned by sometimes delegating to someone who is not able or willing to do the job . . . (so I provide) advice on how to hand hold in that situation.”

Matthews also witnessed the development of student skills in managing people and

projects as outcomes of visiting public relations agencies, participating in chapter programs, and organizing a Regional Activity. In the latter case, he noted, students gained increased confidence from “taking it to the next level where the magnitude of the project is bigger than just a class project . . . They actually can apply some of those skills they’ve learned in the classroom and make something happen.”

The bigger, and more exciting development from Matthews’ perspective, was the opportunity to witness public relations students transition into professionals who “thought about their roles more strategically as opposed to just coming in and picturing PR simply in the communication role.” Leadership in public relations thus involved “in some sense . . . moving from being a technician to a manager . . . moving from doing things right to doing the right things . . . the primary job being to help organizations accomplish their objectives.” Above all, leaders “help to change the perception of our profession,” a perspective Matthews shared with Kardman and Schwartz, especially in terms of incorporating what he described as ethical elements into daily decision-making. Finally, Matthews differentiated leaders in public relations from followers; in his words, “we know they are leaders because we know they have followers.”

Janet Sidarko, Matthews’ immediate predecessor as faculty adviser to the PRSSA chapter in this study, identified diversity, ethics, and working effectively in teams—topics explicitly connected with leadership development in PRSSA by Kardman and Matthews, and implicitly (in terms of the latter topic) by the two professional advisers—as common learning outcomes in four required public relations classes. With students working in teams in one class, leadership became relevant for those “trying to develop their skills in the direction that if they feel comfortable being leaders what kinds of skills will they need to have in order to succeed at that versus those who would prefer to just never be leaders and only be followers—a member of team versus leader of the team.”

PRSSA chapter officers, noted Sidarko, cultivated skills in event planning, motivating members, and mentoring students, with the latter enabling them to help others to assume officer

roles. Such skills reflected her definition of leadership in public relations for “50-60% of the time” she worked with officers. Like Matthews, she highlighted PRSSA leaders’ role in serving the organization and profession and, as noted above, considered the public relations leader as distinct from followers. Her identification of specific leadership skills and competencies, however, far exceeded his perspective, and melded sentiments expressed by professional advisers and PRSSA national representatives. Sidarko commented that, as a leader in public relations,

I think you have to be able to counsel, you have to be able to advise people based on your experience . . . you have to be able to have a conversation with them (clients or people in your organization) and lead them through why that might not be the best idea . . . and balance sort of taking an authoritative role with one of being willing to work with somebody . . . you also have to be a good listener . . .and be really open to diversity now. You have to be strong enough to say no.

In summary, the current PRSSA chapter faculty adviser offered counsel as needed particularly when the chapter president encountered personnel issues or had logistical questions. In this sense, his purpose seemed similar to that of the professional advisers. This faculty adviser also considered leadership to have an ethical component, which echoed his research interests and one focus of the national organization. He also highlighted the need for public relations leaders to serve the profession, a point made by one professional adviser and the national organization representative as well. Finally, both faculty advisers distinguished leaders from followers, and emphasized attention to the organization or profession, reputation, and officer motivation as key chapter leadership attributes. This focus on organization or profession and reputation echoed the leadership concept shared by national PRSSA representatives.

Research Question 2.

The second research question was: What are undergraduate public relations students’ perceptions of what they learn about leadership by participating as officers in PRSSA?

This research question explored PRSSA chapter leader observations on what they

learned about leadership while serving as officers. Students also were asked to identify sources of learning. Interviews and observations yielded insight on four topics: one, identifying what leaders do and defining leadership in PRSSA; two, student self-assessment of their learning while serving as PRSSA chapter officers; three, student assessment of their officer experience and the PRSSA chapter in general; and four, student identification of resources for learning about officer roles and leadership.

Identifying What Leaders Do and Defining Leadership in PRSSA.

PRSSA officers generally believed chapter leaders had to be “strong, independent, willing to take on big tasks that need to be done, and fearless . . . (yet) not this scary leader person that they (members) have to take direction from,” maintained Sally Strong, PRSSA Chapter Vice President of Professional Development. Franklin argued that PRSSA officers—as leaders—also needed to be individuals who:

The members can turn to with questions and concerns . . . it’s about having people feel comfortable enough to come talk to me without me having to take the initiative . . . something I really want to do is to have people not only succeed not because of me but more because of themselves . . . and to be able to do this and hopefully down the road to be able to do that for other people.

These attributes, among others, informed the higher purpose of leadership in PRSSA expounded on by officers: to provide information and serve as guides to chapter members who wished to enter the public relations profession. Martin spoke passionately of her desire to “bring to members without them having to be an officer to find out things . . . to introduce them to the industry, to show them that these are the topics or things going on . . . and to groom them.” Strong captured this sentiment even more succinctly: “My experience in teaching and being a leader is just to help other people.” She added, “Some students aren’t sure about the next series of classes they need to take and so we’re like ‘you should take this class next or this class and that class together may not be a good idea.’ So we kind of help guide them through that.”

Observations of chapter meetings reinforced this perception of PRSSA chapter officers as providers of information and guides to fellow students. Several gatherings featured presentations by alumni and others working in public relations, which highlighted how they applied their undergraduate education to advance in their careers. Martin's commentaries, with frequent contributions from Franklin, trumpeted the benefits of such speakers and programs, and she often drew on chapter experience and knowledge of public relations to enlighten members. For example, consider Martin and Franklin's exchange from the October 6, 2010 membership meeting.

A student shouts out: "Are you still working on Media Predicts?" Martin responds immediately: "On December 2 there's a huge event that all professionals go to and you probably will do so someday. We help people check in and fundraise for our chapter. A handful of people in the past made videos to these PR professionals who represent companies. They auction for our services, so if you're interested in working for these companies for a day it's a good idea to participate. We'll send an e-mail out about that."

Franklin adds: "You volunteer at it, and you get dinner. And you get to know people."

Martin responds: "you get to schmooze with them. It's a great networking event and you'll realize in PR that half of it is networking."

The message here for PRSSA members seemed to have been attend these activities to one, learn more about what public relations professionals do; two, to reap specific short-term benefits in terms of skills, abilities, or perhaps most importantly, contacts; and three, to derive a longer-term payoff in terms of one's career development.

Moreover, as Strong's observation suggests, informal conversations between chapter officers and members about the public relations major at their, classes, instructors, internships, and jobs also abounded at meetings. The following exchange from the November 10, 2010 meeting was typical.

The conversation turns to registration for classes. "Did you sign up already? Winter or spring? Are you junior standing?" are some questions that are asked in a conversation between Jack Johnson, a member, and Jennifer Jones (PRSSA Chapter Director of Fundraising). Jones cites a conversation with Matthews about what classes to take; Johnson responds to her comment by mentioning his experience in the class she cites. The conversation continues, with Jones driving the discussion as she stands up in front of a group of seated students. Jones asks about Valerie Domingo, an instructor; Strong responds, "She's an easy A."

In some cases, chapter officers cited previous experience as evidence of identification with leadership as a role they felt called on to fill in PRSSA. For example, Alexandra Young, PRSSA Editor-in-Chief, had been active in high school organizations and sought an officer position in her first year of chapter membership. “I didn’t think I was gonna be an officer (but (Martin) said that she had openings that needed to be filled. I said I might as well skip that awkward year where you really aren’t in charge of anything, you’re just watching things happen because I really don’t like that year anyways. So I just jumped into it.”

Young’s observations, together with other student comments regarding the nature of leadership in this PRSSA chapter, also suggested an implicit, clear distinction between officers and members that echoed comments by both faculty advisers. Officers were leaders who guided and served members; officers were, to use Jones’ words, “more involved not just as members.” Yet this distinction was anything but sacrosanct, as several officers also mentioned the path to current roles included nothing more than expressing interest to Martin—suggesting that, at least during the timeframe covered by this study, officer positions were readily accessible to interested members.

Moreover, two visible and active officers, Franklin and Strong, professed reluctance about taking on formal officer roles despite thriving as non-positional leaders in the past. Comments throughout interviews, along with those shared by Martin, suggested that their primary motivation, different from some fellow officers, lay in their belief in PRSSA, the value they derived from it, and their desire to ensure members reaped these benefits—sentiments associated with the concept of leadership in PRSSA that were expressed by Schwartz, faculty advisers, and national PRSSA representatives.

In summary, PRSSA chapter officers considered their primary responsibility as leaders to help members maximize the benefits of membership and gain entry into the public relations profession. This dual information providing and advisory role incorporated sharing insight and

information on classes, instructors, internships, interviewing, and professional practice. Chapter officers passionately and tirelessly strived to meet this leadership objective by planning programs; conversing with members; and sharing details on related activities they deemed valuable.

In addition, the majority of PRSSA officers had prior leadership experience which led them to seek their positions. Two active and visible officers, however, reluctantly assumed officer roles yet nonetheless found in the chapter's goal to engage members in learning about the public relations profession a source of inspiration and motivation.

Student Self-Assessment of Learning while Serving as PRSSA Chapter Officers.

While fulfilling their leadership objective, PRSSA chapter officers identified ways they had improved skills most often mentioning areas related to the information providing and guiding responsibilities they considered critical. Communication skills were mentioned by several individuals, including Strong's assertion "communication can be stronger by getting to know each other" and Franklin's recognition that officers need to "be direct, but not insulting; some matters are public, others are private." Time management, personal planning, organization also emerged as key learning outcomes. In total, these observations—especially the communications skills emphasis—mirrored adviser comments on officer skills associated with leadership development.

Student Assessment of Officer Experience and PRSSA Chapter in General.

A key theme that emerged from student assessment of their overall officer experience and the chapter in general was the desire to make the club, in Strong's words, "interactive and social, versus people coming to a club meeting and breaking up into cliques." It seemed to underlie a conscious but largely unspoken goal: to build a community that marshaled the individual energies and talents of PRSSA chapter members—that in turn supported the overarching leadership purpose of maximizing member development. This goal apparently inspired exercises such as the silent charades activity at the October 6, 2010 membership

meeting as well as opportunities provided for informal conversation. That food was provided at these meetings—and considerable time and energy devoted by chapter officers to its presentation—no doubt was an attempt to foster camaraderie and connection among all chapter members.

Martin's reflections on her experience in helping to plan the Spring 2010 Regional Activity conveyed similar group-oriented sentiments.

Last semester when we held the Regional Activity and it was really late planning, and we had so many things against us as far as money and time and you know heart and soul of officers and that sort of thing. But in the end we really came together and there was like that moment we really bonded as a team. We really were able to accomplish what we thought was the impossible.

This team orientation echoed Franklin's thoughts. His assumption of the chapter president role the previous spring ushered in a period of divisiveness among board members, which both he and Martin had commented on unfavorably and aimed to remedy while in office. Their focus also mirrored Sidarko's emphasis on teams and leadership as interconnected phenomena in the public relations curriculum, as well as related observations by advisers and the PRSSA national organization representative regarding challenges associated with building an effective chapter executive board.

In short, PRSSA leaders focused on the importance of community and team building over other areas in the overall assessment of their chapter experience. This emphasis, in turn, supported the pursuit of their primary leadership objective—as guides and advisers to chapter members seeking to enter the public relations field.

Student Identification of Resources for Learning about Officer Roles and Leadership.

In addition to pinpointing skills, attributes, and lessons learned during their experience as PRSSA chapter officers, students were asked to identify those sources they considered most significant for overall learning. Their remarks highlighted the role played by peers as primary sources of guidance. Officers repeatedly mentioned Franklin and Martin when discussing their

interest in officer positions. The rapt attention paid to Martin presentations at membership meetings and the general whirlwind of activity around her suggested members were keenly interested in what she had to say.

Strong, drawing on her work in planning a Regional Activity, also intentionally observed other officers. "I think that (learning about leadership) comes from your peers and I think it came from going to a National Conference and holding a Regional Activity because you see people in leadership positions so you just pick up on like 'I like that' or 'I don't like that' and you just adopt that into your philosophy as a leader."

On the other hand, Matthews' role as faculty adviser attracted little attention. There were two exceptions, however, both of which supported his characterization of the role as primarily advisory and supportive of student learning. Franklin commented, "I think he's a great adviser because he kind of lets us do our own thing and when we have issues or trouble or questions he's there for us but he lets us try to figure it out on our own." For Jones, the challenge of this faculty adviser role was even more profound. "It'll teach me an aspect of leadership different from high school," she stated, "(where) if the members or the executive board kind of falls apart you still have the coordinator that says we have to get this done. But for college it falls on the president and if the president can't reach out to her executive members then it kind of falls apart."

The professional advisers likewise received minimal attention. Franklin's comment was favorable: "Our mentors for PRSSA . . . They were a huge amount of help and our phone calls we had were great." Elizabeth Brooks, PRSSA Chapter Director of Public Relations, in contrast, bemoaned the fact that the "PRSA mentors were not getting back to her" to help her plan the chapter's participation in Media Predicts.

The PRSSA National Conference was the subject of considerable discussion at meetings with four of the seven officers attending the October 2010 event. Yet only Martin participated in an activity specifically geared towards students holding her position. She found

this President's lunch "helpful . . . as we talked about the kind of things going on in our chapter and challenges. So it was exchanging information."

In short, the students generally did not attend events or find value in National Conference presentations that they felt they could apply to their club roles or to learn about leadership. Yet the value they derived from the event itself as far as furthering their understanding of public relations and how to obtain positions in the field was significant. Consider the following series of brief student presentations about the conference at the November 11, 2010 chapter meeting.

Martin: There was a national conference in the middle of October all the chapters come together . . . so they have different topics and things like we do at meetings.

Franklin: The favorite thing I went to was the ethics one . . . Each person gave a story about a situation when they were ethically challenged and how they dealt with it. They never spoke about ethical problems early in their career; they waited until they were established which I thought was odd.

Brooks: Have a plan. Have a job search folder. (The speaker) suggested to build a personal brand. Make a logo for yourself. Know your personal values and what you want from a job in addition to money. Engage in social media but don't over share. Don't be afraid to take your cover letter and resume to the CEO.

Regarding other national PRSSA events, two of the officers, Franklin and Martin, attended the National Assembly in 2009. The former indicated he had gained insight there into different personalities and challenges of bringing them together to build an effective chapter executive board, echoing his other comments about the importance of teambuilding. Martin did not attend officer workshops but nonetheless found the event helpful for "seeing how the National Committee members were elected, and staying in touch with them since then." Neither Franklin nor Martin had attended the PRSSA Leadership Conference held in June prior to becoming chapter president.

PRSSA publications and resources also received little attention. Three students indicated that they read bi-weekly PRSSA e-mail updates, with Smith referring to them as an "information source on internships and the job search." Strong said she skimmed resources "but didn't take anything from them." Brooks and Young cited the PRSSA website as valuable for

planning their National Conference attendance, while Franklin “only used (it) to obtain chapter president contact information.” The lone meeting reference to PRSSA resources, apart from National Conference discussions, occurred when Martin provided students with a password to access internship and job related information on the national website.

In terms of university resources, Franklin and Martin were the only two PRSSA chapter officers who attended the Student Organization Leadership Conference held on September 25, 2010. Franklin commented favorably on sessions that addressed icebreakers, group dynamics, and leader self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses. The latter session probing how leader styles shape experiences of executive board and chapter members stood out for him. Martin cited her participation in The Marshmallow Challenge, a group activity designed to teach participants about the importance of collaboration, innovation, and creativity, as significant for her learning.

There are so many people that have different ways of doing things and I thought well I should really keep that in mind not that I didn't know it before . . . And then your team does get closer even though you have different ways of dealing with things you hash 'em out and you do build a team . . . as a leader it's your job to make sure that everyone brings what they have individually to the table.

Martin's observation echoed her remark about the powerful team experience she had while planning the Regional Activity, and tied back to Sidarko's comments about public relations students learning leadership skills through participating in team activities.

Finally, only one of the seven PRSSA chapter officers mentioned that leadership was covered in a class they had taken at their university. Tiffany Smith, PRSSA Chapter Director of Membership, discussed a lecture on leadership in a Fundamentals of Management and Organizational Behavior course she completed for her minor in business. She cited qualities of effective and ineffective leaders as the subject.

In summary, PRSSA chapter officers derived considerable value from attending events whose primary purpose was to help them gain knowledge of the public relations profession. While these experiences and related learning were critical for helping them to fulfill their

leadership purpose, they were not otherwise deemed relevant. PRSSA chapter officers learned about responsibilities and leadership from each other, mirroring the national organization's facilitation of peer-to-peer exchanges.

Other sources of learning about leadership garnered limited recognition. Two students acknowledged the faculty adviser's hands-off role as vital to a "learn by doing" approach. With one exception, PRSSA chapter officers were unable to identify leadership as a subject covered in classes. Finally, only one officer cited leadership as a topic addressed at the Student Organization Leadership Conference, while two officers who attended commented favorably on group process/teambuilding presentations.

Discussion

Research Question #1.

On the national level, PRSSA provided chapter officers with access to electronic resources and activities designed to help them meet challenges such as member recruitment, building an effective executive board, and cultivating other skills deemed essential for aspiring public relations professionals. These challenges coalesced around the need to build an organization (i.e., chapter) that served member interests to learn about the profession and secure employment. Leadership and related skill building activities appeared to be subsumed under these efforts. Moreover, while varied delivery mechanisms were used to provide leadership training, peer-to-peer contact seemed most critical as multiple opportunities were provided for chapter officers to connect. These efforts were geared towards PRSSA chapter presidents, who had to demonstrate initiative to find and take advantage of them.

The two PRSA members who served as professional advisers to the PRSSA chapter in this study supported the national PRSSA organization's efforts by providing advice and specific suggestions to officers. This role formally served as a liaison between PRSSA and the local PRSA affiliate chapter and relied on regularly scheduled contact with the chapter president. The foci of the individuals who served in these roles varied, yet the two professional advisers

offered definitions of leadership that echoed what was proffered by the national PRSSA organization and illuminated similar student leadership competencies—despite receiving little formal preparation for their role from either the national PRSSA or PRSA organizations or their PRSA chapter.

PRSSA faculty advisers likewise neither sought nor received formal preparation. The current adviser and his predecessor, like their professional adviser counterparts, relied primarily on past experience and industry knowledge to advise the chapter's president on an as-needed basis. This ad hoc provision of advice contrasted with the bi-weekly phone calls between professional advisers and the chapter president. Yet given the two faculty advisers interacted with students in the classroom as well as in PRSSA and had academic training in public relations undoubtedly contributed to a perspective on student leadership that incorporated skill development and, more importantly, a broader recognition of how undergraduate competencies gained in different contexts contributed to the flowering of leadership in aspiring public relations professionals.

Leadership, however, was not a topic foremost in the thoughts, research, or classes taught by either faculty adviser. At best, leadership seemed to be a peripheral concern they associated with the demonstration of specific skills and aptitudes in a general fashion consistent with the portrayal of leadership in public relations education in the literature. Nonetheless, these faculty adviser perspectives echoed PRSSA and professional adviser reflections on leadership.

These differences in experience and orientation aside, PRSSA staff and PRSA professional and academic advisers who counseled students were guided by an educational philosophy that advocated "learn by doing" through which PRSSA chapter officers were encouraged to assume responsibility for completing necessary tasks. In the process, they were expected to take the initiative in attending to administrative and related matters, make mistakes, and learn from them. The advisers' guidance primarily focused on logistics and personnel issues related to managing a chapter executive board.

PRSSA and PRSA representatives shared different perspectives on leadership in the student organization and profession. These observations nonetheless had core elements in common: that leaders in PRSSA and public relations acted in the best interests of the profession and fostered productive relationships with team members—characteristics that echo those deemed critical for public relations graduates in the report from The Commission on Public Relations Education (2006). Such leaders, moreover, were distinct from followers.

In short, PRSA and PRSSA representatives provided a range of advice and counsel through diverse channels the intent of which was to help PRSSA chapter officers meet the challenges of their respective roles. In turn, these industry professionals observed leadership development in the students included in this study.

Research Question #2.

In general, leadership was not a subject that PRSSA chapter officers interviewed for this study were able to identify explicitly in courses or other training although some noted related information and insight. They also seemed to have paid little attention to electronic resources provided by PRSSA; in fact, the handful of students who attended optional events sponsored by the national PRSSA organization largely panned their contribution to learning and skill development related to their officer roles.

The student participants in this study nonetheless reported that through their chapter officer experience they cultivated skills and aptitudes associated with leadership. These included public speaking, networking, time management, personal planning, and organization—outcomes consistent with those identified in research.

More importantly, PRSSA chapter officers individually and collectively adopted a leadership purpose grounded in guiding fellow students in efforts to enter the public relations profession. Learning about different environments in which public relations professionals work, making contacts, and identifying internship and job opportunities was deemed fundamental. Chapter officers thus took advantage of national PRSSA events, activities held by their local

PRSA chapter, and events they planned and promoted, to build a necessary base of knowledge and experience that they applied in their own work as well as to fulfill chapter responsibilities.

Student comments on leadership also cited the importance of skills in group dynamics, team building, and communication, which also partially echoed sentiments expressed by PRSA and PRSSA representatives. In this fundamental sense, despite what students perceived they learned from organization representatives and resources, they seemed to have derived from their experience a sense of PRSSA leader qualities and behaviors. The students' informal learning and interpretation of experiences, a by-product of facilitated interaction with officers at other chapters as well as observation of predecessors, played a key role. In turn, two officers, the current chapter president and the immediate past president, served as critical resources for peer learning and skill development related to leadership among other officers—and by extension, members.

In summary, PRSSA chapter officers learned primarily about leadership from peers as opposed to other resources which nonetheless played a vital role in helping them to cultivate the knowledge, insight, and confidence to fulfill what they identified as their primary leadership purpose—to advise and guide fellow students on matters related to the public relations profession. In this sense, their approach to leadership echoed comments by PRSA and PRSSA representatives with whom they worked.

Implications

This study's findings have implications for two topics of interest to public relations practitioners and scholars. They are leadership development in PRSSA and professional skills/leadership development in public relations practice.

Regarding leadership development in PRSSA, chapter officers polished or acquired communications and teambuilding skills and demonstrated aptitudes for advising fellow students that fueled the leadership development they experienced while filling specific officer roles during the study's timeframe. Their individual and collective evolution served personal aims in terms of

learning more about the public relations profession and launching careers in it. Moreover, these emerging leadership skills served specific chapter and some broader PRSSA/PRSA purposes.

PRSSA chapter officers' orientation towards members and heartfelt desire to support their professional development seemed akin to the servant leadership model. That is, their individual and collective focus seemed more geared to others rather than themselves, with a commitment to the growth of people and building community foremost in their words and actions throughout the study timeframe. In other words, PRSSA chapter officers above all served as stewards to members, operating in service, rather than in control, of them (Block, 1993; Greenleaf, 2002).

PRSSA's intent, like other professional organizations that sponsor university-based chapters, is to help prepare student participants for careers (Pohl & Butler, 1994; Pritchard, Filak, & Beach, 2006; "What is PRSSA?," 2009). An assessment of PRSSA officer leadership development thus must extend its potential relevance beyond the university setting. That is, the extent to which student leadership development might inform specific attitudes and behaviors identified in the literature as critical for leadership in public relations needs to be explored.

The definition of excellent leadership in public relations (Meng, Berger, & Gower, 2009) allows certain key common threads to emerge and helps provide this bridge between student and professional worlds. These scholars highlighted in their definition the importance for public relations leaders to develop team leadership skills, facilitate relationships, and contribute to the success of organizations that retain their services. In these senses, there seems to be much in common between the practices and attitudes of PRSSA student officers and those deemed critical for leadership among senior-level practitioners. Similarly, the very nature of a student-run PRSSA chapter and national organization is grounded in active participation by undergraduates in the organization's strategic decision making processes. In this sense as well, therefore, PRSSA chapter leaders gained insight into a conception of leadership consistent with recommendations of the "Public Relations for the 21st Century: The Professional Bond"

report (Commission on Public Relations, 2006)—which in turn apparently were designed to serve as a touchstone for practitioners reaching the culmination of their careers.

Finally, the existence of leadership skills among future practitioners in terms of a commitment to and advocacy for the profession should comfort organizations seeking new, dedicated talent. Their challenge is to make explicit the focus on leadership as a critical competency for fulfilling the mandate of the public relations function as counselors to senior organizational leaders. Observations and interviews in this study highlighted a student focus on media relations, event planning, team building, and related skill development—vital starting points for aspiring public relations professionals, but a far cry from the strategic orientation and advisory role integral to excellent leadership. The realization of leadership potential among these new students thus requires an image of the bigger, longer term goal of the public relations profession, which can help elevate the standing of individual practitioners within the realm of organizational politics and as well as the overall status of the profession.

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