

Taking Your Public Relations Experience from the Boardroom into the Classroom

By Michael L. Kent and Maureen Taylor

Several sources have dealt with the issue of making a transition from practicing public relations to teaching public relations. Notably, John Guiniven (1997), whose article in *Public Relations Tactics* dealt with making the switch to the academy. More recently, Fearn-Banks (2004) in her *Public Relations Quarterly* article wrote about teaching opportunities for practitioners. Given the continued interest in this topic we would like to respond to a few of the issues raised by both authors and focus on preparation and expectations when making the transition from the boardroom into the classroom.

A few years ago, PR-education.org noted that there were nearly 100 unfilled tenure-track, faculty teaching positions in public relations courses across the United States (<http://lamar.colostate.edu/~pr/>). The shortage of Ph.D.s having both professional and academic credentials continues to be a problem for the development of our field. Many schools compensate for the shortage of professors by hiring adjunct faculty to teach undergraduate public relations courses. Adjunct teaching positions are great opportunities for public relations professionals who are interested in teaching at their local colleges or universities.

The authors of this article both direct the undergraduate and graduate public relations curriculum at their respective schools. Our goal is twofold. First, we will explain what colleges and universities are looking for when hiring adjunct faculty. Second, we will identify the ways that public relations professionals can best obtain and maintain positions as valued and respected adjunct faculty members. We will begin by first discussing the mission or goal of undergraduate education.

Understanding the Liberal Arts Education

In every college class, professors are expected to teach students not only how to do something (write a news release, pitch a story idea, give a news conference), but also why something is done (i.e., what theory guides the activity, what persuasive tactic is better in this or that circumstance, etc.), and how to do it better in the future.

The mission of liberal arts education is not skills training — contrary to what a lot of undergraduates and some practitioners think — and the most recent public relations research supports the liberal arts approach. Indeed, most public relations practitioners say that their organization is looking for applicants who are more than technicians who can write news releases. A recent report in *The Wall Street Journal* (Alsop, Sept. 22, 2004, p. R8) entitled “How to Get Hired” supports this position. As



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Also notes: of the top 20 skills rated most important to M.B.A. graduates' success, the top three, in order, are "Communication and interpersonal skills," "Ability to work well within a team," and "Personal ethics and integrity," all skills that departments of communication and liberal arts colleges emphasize. As most of the readers of *Public Relations Quarterly* probably know, verbal and interpersonal communication skills have consistently come out on top of rankings of desirable business skills for more than twenty years. What *never* come out on such lists (in public relations or any other business field) are *skills* such as writing news releases, creating fact sheets, or writing reports.

Liberal arts students typically complete coursework in a variety of areas including communication, history, foreign languages, mathematics,

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science, and the arts. The underlying philosophy of the liberal arts education is that well-rounded students become valued members of society. The last decades have brought about the growth of more professional, skill-based curriculums in areas such as business administration, computers and technology, journalism, and media production. For the most part, however, skill based courses and curriculums are the exception rather than the rule in undergraduate education.



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Indeed, there is substantial debate in the academy about whether there should be *any* skills-based training. Many professors worry that higher education is becoming a training ground for corporations, rather than places of intellectual development. When higher education focuses on skill training at the expense of critical thinking and reasoning, students become *less*, not more capable of succeeding in public relations. Skills-based training robs students of the critical thinking skills needed to generalize from one task to another. Given that most workers will change jobs (and often careers) as many as seven times in their lifetimes, students who have been trained in only one area are done a disservice.

Here is where we make our first response to both Guiniven (1997) and Fearn-Banks' (2004) suggestions for practitioners. Both authors suggest that the reason that professors are "hostile" or defensive about practitioners joining a faculty might be because of insecurity, or a desire to maintain some intellectual turf. We believe that this misses the point entirely. The goal of a liberal arts college or university is to intellectually train students to become productive members of society, and not how to write press releases or pitch letters. As Guiniven notes, community colleges have no qualms about hiring practitioners (1997, p. 9). But that is because they have a different mission. Organizations must focus on their core mission. The reluctance of certain liberal arts schools to hire practitioners is not about turf, it is about the way the public relations fits into its core mission. The next part of this article offers advice on how to become a part of the core mission of liberal arts educational and professional experiences.

Pitching Your Expertise to the Course Supervisor

As in any professional interaction, the way that you approach an organization or individual is crucial in determining your overall success. The same is true in seeking teaching opportunities. Imagine if a professor just "dropped in" on a senior or middle manager of a *Fortune* 100 company (the equivalent of a department head or professor at a research university) without an appointment to talk about employment opportunities.

Here's how it would go: I drive to the corporate headquarters, ask the receptionist where the president's office is, take the elevator to the president's floor, and saunter over to their office. I knock on the president's door and introduce myself: "Excuse me, Mr. Big? Hi, my name is Michael Kent. I'm a professor with Rutgers University (dropping the name of the biggest university that I am affiliated

with), and I'd like to work in your international business department." "Tell me a little about yourself," the president would warmly respond, "...what do you know about our company?" "Well nothing really but I am a *professor*, and I took a course in business 25 years ago when I was an undergraduate at Party State." "Uh huh, really?" the president responds, wondering how I got past security.

A similarly absurd exchange occurs whenever some eager practitioner shows up at our door wanting to teach classes — and we do not have gates and ID badges to stop them. The first step in effective public relations is research, the first step in securing a teaching position is also to conduct research. Just as you have certain expectations about potential employees, so do colleges and universities. You should thoroughly research the school, the department, and the faculty members before you contact anyone. Your research should include the mission and goals of the school and department, the names and accomplishments of the full-time faculty members, and the types of public relations and communication courses that are taught.

The astute applicant should also get copies of some introductory public relations textbooks and read them before the meeting. The two most used texts are: *This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations* (Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2004), and *Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics* (Wilcox, Ault, Agee, & Cameron, 2004). If you are interested in a public relations writing course, read Treadwell and Treadwell's (2004), *Public Relations Writing: Principles in Practice* and Diggs-Brown and Glou's (2004) *The PR Styleguide: Formats for Public Relations Practice*. Treadwell and Treadwell's text is a good choice for learning about what is taught in the public relations writing course and it has great explanations, with examples, of how to write an assortment of public relations documents. Diggs-Brown and Glou's (2004) book is essentially a writing reference book and will give you an idea of the kinds of things that you might teach. For mid or upper-level managers looking to make a transition to the academy and who haven't taught someone how to write a news release in a long time, Treadwell and Treadwell's text is a great refresher and comes with a teacher's guide and a workbook.

Of special note are the discussions of *theory* in the introductory and writing textbooks. Interested professionals can also consult popular press books written by practitioners as a supplement to the academic textbooks. However, most experienced public relations practitioners are probably already familiar with the books available in the popular press. What potential teachers need to understand is what the academic texts are teaching because

that is what they will be expected to use in the classroom.

After you have consulted various texts, it is time to contact the course supervisor or department chair. In some schools, a course coordinator oversees the hiring, training, and evaluation of adjuncts. In other schools, the department chair is the person to see. Either way, be aware that full-time faculty members who are currently teaching public relations courses will probably have some say in the decision making process. Make sure you do not step on anyone's toes by forgetting about who might be part of the dominant coalition.

We recommend that you contact the department secretary of the unit that supervises the public relations course curriculum to find out three key details: (1) the name and contact information of the undergraduate supervisor (if any) or key faculty

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members (many schools have a basic course director who is in charge of training adjunct faculty and teaching assistants); (2) the process for introducing yourself and offering your services to the program; and (3), whether current copies of course syllabi used in public relations courses are available (these are often available on faculty member's home pages). The answers to these three questions will help you in your initial contact.

This preliminary telephone call is crucial because some schools have specific procedures for hiring adjunct faculty such as completion of a related Master's degree, five to ten years of professional experience, teaching or guest lecturing experience, or the submission of a teaching portfolio (a portfolio of sample assignments, syllabi, and teaching materials).

All professors hold office hours each week to meet with students. When you contact the public relations course supervisor (or basic course coordinator), offer to come to meet him/her during their office hours. We recommend that you contact the supervisor in advance to set up the meeting and find out what samples they might like to see of your professional materials. You should gather some of your best writing samples (academic ones if you have them like conference papers or journal

articles). In place of academic writing, clippings, program or campaign proposals, and other support materials that show that you have the basic experience needed to teach should be gathered. You should also be ready to answer a variety of questions about your professional experiences and expectations of students. Be aware that because you can write a news release does not mean you can teach someone else to write one.

The best way to prepare for this meeting is to become familiar with the leading public relations textbooks and journals. Being able to identify the leading theories and issues in the field goes a long way, and being able to explain the pedagogical features that make up an effective reading, assignment, test, or course will also speak to your strengths. Finally, you should be able to identify your philosophy of grading. What skills or behaviors will you expect students to master? What constitutes excellent performance rather than just satisfactory performance? And how will your courses be structured in terms of tests, writing assignments, group work, etc.? We like meeting with practitioners who are well informed and well prepared to show us how they can meet our programmatic needs. At the end of the meeting, you should leave your materials with the course supervisor and follow up on any requests for additional information that they have made.

We have one piece of advice for you: do not attempt to hard sell yourself in this meeting. Professors are a subtle lot and much like journalists, they do not like being told their business. If at any point you begin a sentence with "Don't you think" ("Don't you think your students would benefit from...") you have probably lost the job. First, good communicators do not ask leading questions. Trying to *persuade* a professor to hire you will be like trying to nail jelly to the wall. Second, many administrators and professors are wary of practitioners who lack the theoretical training and experience with current research and theory. Being seen as competent will be better reflected in your ability to mesh practical experience with current academic practices rather than how long you have practiced public relations or reciting a list of the companies you have worked for.

Be aware that each department has a different calendar for scheduling classes. Typically, classes are scheduled a year in advance and instructors are finalized up to 6 months in advance. Even if a course supervisor is interested in offering you a teaching slot, they may not be able to schedule you for a class until the next semester (or year). If you *are* offered a course in an upcoming semester, then you have a lot of work ahead of you.

Creating a Class and Preparing Assignments

Adjuncts and part time lecturers (PTLs) often have little say in what they will teach or how they will create their courses. At many schools, there are master syllabi that every faculty member who teaches a class must use. Standardized texts, assignments, and syllabi allow for consistency in content. Some schools, however, expect professors to create their own syllabus, assignments, and readings. In these cases, you will need to do some additional research by examining an assortment of syllabi, textbooks, and scholarly readings, as well as making an effort to find out what the other faculty members in the department are doing. After all, if word comes back that your class is "too hard," or worse, "too easy," you might find yourself out of a job the next semester.

Important issues to consider include: How would you structure a class? What materials and skills should the students learn about first? What would you do if you had a problem with a student (chronically late, turns in work late, always has an excuse for not having his/her work ready, can't write a complete sentence, etc.)? Many departments have rules and policies that can help guide you in your course development and setting policies. Ask if a PTL handbook exists or departmental policy statements that you can follow as you begin to develop your course. As you work to prepare your course, be

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sure to ask other public relations professors (both adjunct and full-time) for their advice. The most common question that we get from practitioner adjuncts is about grading.

The creation of effective assignments/supporting materials and grading are the hardest parts of teaching. Do you know how to grade a news release or create a test? Although you undoubtedly have taken many tests, you probably never gave much thought to how to create one and what exactly the test was trying to measure. Most textbooks these days come with an assortment of teaching resources: Web sites, test banks, CDs, instructor's manuals, etc. In order to facilitate the adoption of new textbooks, supplemental materials and textbooks are

free for teachers. Once you know you are teaching a course, all you have to do is ask the department secretary to request a copy of all of the materials available for you. You can learn about these resources by visiting the Web sites of the publishers of the textbooks you are interested in using or by contacting a book publishers' sales representative.

A professor is also expected to know how to create syllabi, grade an assortment of assignments, select textbooks, provide constructive feedback to students who are often sensitive to criticism, and deal with plagiarism (a rampant problem these days with the Internet). One way to ease this process is to find a mentor — just like in your professional career. We also encourage potential teachers to create a relationship with a public relations professor. Offer your services as a guest lecturer; ask your mentor if they could recommend some scholarly readings in areas that interest you; or ask if you can review some of their teaching materials.

Once you have done some guest lecturing and received some serious feedback (which you should insist on), talk to your mentor about helping to develop a class or some new assignments. Ask to see some student work so that you can know what to expect if you *do* teach a class. Examine syllabi from a variety of professors who have taught the courses that you are interested in teaching so you can learn what can be taught in a typical semester (many of these can be found online). Better yet, ask if you can attend a training seminar on teaching at one of the schools where you would like to teach. Virtually every university requires adjunct faculty and graduate student teachers to attend such meetings at least once every year.

Another good idea is to attend one of the major conferences held yearly. The National Communication Association (NCA), International Communica-

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tion Association (ICA), Association for Educators of Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) and other professional associations hold annual conferences in major cities across the U.S. (Chicago, New Orleans, New York City, Seattle, etc.). Periodically, conferences offer "short courses," or "preconferences," devoted to teaching specific public relations courses/curriculum (Public Relations Writing, Crisis, etc.). Preconferences are great opportunities to learn

how other professors are teaching a course that you might be teaching, and to get some new ideas for assignments.

Financial and Professional Benefits to You and Your Organization

Being an adjunct professor is probably the most work for the least pay you will ever find. The pay is incredibly low at most schools in the country. The stipend ranges from about \$1,500–\$3,000 per class. To teach a class properly (after you've taught it the first time, which takes a lot of preparation) takes approximately 10-hours per week of work (three hours in the classroom, two hours in office hours, two hours of preparation for class, and three hours of grading) for sixteen weeks. Some weeks, you will work three hours, other weeks you will work 30. Using this formula, if you taught four classes per year (2 per semester), you might earn \$12,000 — that would only be about 20 hours of work per week (not counting commuting). Obviously, it is not the pay that prompts people to teach!

Many adjuncts hope that the time spent in the classroom will help them to secure a full-time position as a faculty member. However, as Guiniven (2004) pointed out many years ago, corporate experience tends not to mean as much in the academy as it does in the working world. This should not come as a surprise; when we look for management positions in public relations, they typically ask for "5–10 years of experience with a *Fortune* 500 company." We have never seen high-level management jobs asking for "5–10 years of teaching experience."

We have been approached by many professionals who believe their vast work experience should count toward getting a tenure track job. It does not. We know of perhaps two jobs nationwide that will hire professionals for tenure track jobs based solely on their public relations experience (and the jobs are currently filled). Those jobs almost-always still require Master's degrees and some evidence of successful teaching. A few schools (perhaps a dozen nationwide) pay reasonably well (\$40–\$55,000) for "one-year-renewable" teaching posts. The NCA, the ICA, and the AEJMC regularly post tenure and non-tenure track job announcements. Tenure track jobs are very hard to find for someone *without* a Ph.D. degree. Twenty years ago, for someone to be hired without a Ph.D. degree for a tenure track line was not uncommon. However, today such hiring practices are rare. Most schools would rather hire a Ph.D. with little or no actual public relations experience than hire a professional with 20-years of experience and a Master's degree. One of the reasons for this is in how people become accepted into the academy.

Being Accepted into the Academy

Gaining a PTL or full time position at a college or university comes with certain professional and personal responsibilities. Our second point of response to previous articles about teaching is about the role of the public relations lecturer in an academic department. Fearn-Banks (2004) suggested that a "professor who has the strength to say 'no' to committees, extra student advising, and public service, can look at his/her job basically as a part-time position" (p.5). Such behavior will also, almost certainly guarantee that s/he is not respected or taken seriously by his/her colleagues. With the exception of a few research schools that shelter tenure-track faculty members from departmental service, faculty members are *expected* to contribute to advising, serve on committees, and publish in scholarly jour-

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nals. Adjuncts are paid poorly because they are typically less experienced than full-time faculty (lacking Ph.D.s and the skills needed to conduct original research and publish in academic journals) and expected to do a lot less.

The expectation by many who want to teach full-time that being a professor will be "easy" is what makes academics wary of professionals. Hard working professionals in every field occasionally take on extra work if they want to be seen as "team players." Professors are often asked to oversee "independent studies" for students, or teach "overloads" to meet departmental needs. Although a tenure-track professor's flexibility in work assignments might make it appear that they don't do a lot of work, a professor who teaches at a university with a course load of three or four classes per semester (a fairly typical workload) works more like 60 hours per week when advising, grading, meetings, office hours, publishing, research, new course preparation, and participation in conference and professional associations is factored in. Although professors get summers off, they are also not paid over the summer—even if their pay is distributed over the entire year, they only receive ten months of salary. Many tenure track faculty actually conduct "adjunct teaching" themselves over the sum-

mer just to make ends meet. This in part helps to explain why the practitioner who expects to come in, teach a few classes, and go home is typically met with resistance.

If you want to learn to be a fulltime or part time public relations educator, then do the same thing that you would do with a potential client: create a relationship. Network with some of the members of the faculty. Ask to attend a class to see what professors do. Likewise, invite us to one of your professional functions so that we might get to know *you* better. In other words, show some respect for the mission of higher education, network, and do your homework. We support increasing the number of qualified professionals in the academy. We just do not think that having *been* a "professional" necessarily makes one qualified to teach.

We agree with Guiniven and Fearn Banks that teaching is a great opportunity. But the benefits of becoming a public relations adjunct are not found in the monetary realm. Teaching is an incredibly rewarding experience. Everyone benefits when serious, mid and upper-level professionals participate in the academic training of future public relations practitioners. You will get to work with the next generation of public relations professionals. Your professionalism will become a yardstick for them to measure their own careers. And, your organization will be able to have first-pick of the best and the brightest students for internships and entry-level positions.

Currently there are dozens of unfilled positions in public relations nationwide. Finding public relations professionals to teach is easy; finding *qualified* professionals is difficult. We hope that this essay raises awareness of teaching opportunities and helps those of you who are interested in teaching at the college or university level. As academics, we want the most qualified people teaching our students. We wish you the best of luck and look forward to seeing you in the classroom. **PRG**

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