

## Report on the Entry-Level Certificate Program

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Throughout its existence, the UAB has spent untold hours and effort attempting to get senior-level practitioners to sit for the examination, but with mostly no luck. Five years ago, in a discussion about how to increase the number of APRs, the suggestion was made to create an entry-level process for graduating seniors in public relations that would lead to taking the APR examination after appropriate years in the profession. Our idea was to get the students involved early in the process so that 20 years from now there would be a larger number of accredited professionals.

### **Background**

When we began this process, the first thing we did was to identify about two dozen educators (all of whom were APR, some of whom had been APR chairs) to assess their attitudes toward an entry-level credential. (Jay Rayburn, APR, CPRC, Ph.D., Fellow PRSA conducted these interviews.) It was then, and still is, our belief that the educators are the key for student involvement. An entry-level credential had been “tried” in the early 1990s, and had failed. The most probable explanation of the failure is it was discussed for 11 months, and then the students were just thrown into the examination with no preparation. We did not want this to happen again. We also felt that without the support of educators, the credential was doomed to fail. What we found was a unanimous support for the credential.

We also conducted research in numerous other venues. In addition to the Educators Academy (beginning in 2009, and again in 2010 and 2011) at the PRSA International Conference, we also discussed the credential with the Institute of Public Relations at its 2010 International Public Relations Research Conference in Miami, as well as with the public relations divisions of numerous scholarly associations, including the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication, the National Communication Association, and the International Communication Association.

Student input was obtained early on through the PRSA Vice President of Education Jeneen Garcia, who is also a PRSA staff liaison to the UAB and attends all UAB meetings. PRSSA members were surveyed in 2011, with another survey done in May/June 2012. In the first survey, more than 70 percent of the 703 students surveyed said they would be either very likely or somewhat likely to take the entry-level examination as it was described. In the 2012 PRSSA survey, 77 percent agreed that they would take an examination for an entry-level credential designed for college graduating seniors. In addition, 92 percent said they would take the examination in order to differentiate themselves from others in the job market.

In 2010, the UAB conducted a survey of 1,634 randomly selected PRSA members to update the practice analysis on which the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) covered in the Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations are based. (We surveyed only PRSA members because the first practice analysis completed for the Computer Based Examination surveyed this population, and we wanted to be able to compare “apples to apples.” In this survey, we asked seven questions related to the entry-level credential. The three relevant questions are displayed below. The credential was described as follows:

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*The UAB is considering a certification process for entry-level practitioners that would assess whether the new professional has attained a basic level of knowledge in public relations. Please indicate how you feel about this potential credential by marking the extent to which you disagree or agree with the following statements.*

### **A certification process for entry-level practitioners is a good idea in principle.**

60.7 percent either strongly agreed (14.2 percent) or agreed (46.5 percent); 23 percent were neutral; and 20.7 percent either disagreed (11.9 percent) or strongly disagreed (4.4 percent)

### **As an employer, I would find a certification process for entry-level practitioners to be helpful in our hiring process.**

56.6 percent either strongly agreed (11.1 percent) or agreed (45.5 percent); 27.1 percent were neutral; and 16.3 percent either disagreed (12.5 percent) or strongly disagreed (3.8 percent)

### **A college degree (in any subject) is sufficient for entry-level public relations practitioners.**

20.8/ percent either strongly agreed (3 percent) or agreed (17.8 percent); 18.2 percent were neutral; and 60.9 percent either strongly disagreed (16.9 percent) or disagreed (44 percent)

In this survey, 38.8 percent of respondents were Accredited; 64.2 percent were not. When we ran a crosstab to see if being Accredited was significantly related to the responses, APRs were more likely to agree with the first two statements and to disagree with the third statement. We believe that APRs were significantly represented in this sample — almost 40 percent of the respondents were Accredited, and they expressed strong support for the entry-level credential.

### **Some Early Comments and Criticisms**

#### **Myth: Our motivation was purely financial.**

**Reality:** The UAB began this process for one reason and one reason only: to increase the number of accredited professionals. This program, if implemented, will be self-sustaining, but it will not be a profit-maker. It is designed to pay for itself. Granted, students obtaining the credential must be a member or student member of one of the eight UAB participating organizations, so there is some revenue derived for the organizations, but the fees for the examination cover seat time at the Prometric testing center, and administrative time to process applications, etc.

#### **Myth: A diploma from an accredited institution of higher learning ought to indicate that the student has demonstrated that he or she knows the principles of his or her profession, and thus no examination is needed.**

**Reality:** We certainly would hope that is the situation, but take into consideration the following:

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- First, not all public relations majors make straight As; some are mediocre at best. However, they all receive a diploma certifying that they have graduated and they are awarded a degree. The entry-level credential is a way to differentiate the “good” student from the “average” student and to externally validate that a graduate has attained a baseline understanding of the principles of the profession.
- Second, many states are now requiring that colleges and universities demonstrate outcomes and show accountability. Some have even specified that this accountability be assessed by an independent organization — grades are just not enough, in the opinion of some legislators. This entry-level certificate program is a means to demonstrate outcomes and show accountability.
- Third, a frequent lament we hear over and over again is that public relations is a profession, but is not treated as one. Is there anyone among you who would NOT want to be treated as a professional in a recognized profession? Of course not. The UAB believes that by creating this certificate program, ultimately we develop more Accredited professionals. Over time, this critical mass will help our profession become more like law, medicine and engineering.

Engineering, for example, follows the early credentialing model in the same fashion that the UAB is suggesting. Shortly before graduation, engineering students take the Fundamentals of Engineering (FE) examination, a prelude to the Professional Engineer (PE) exam. A student must pass this examination and be in the profession for four years before becoming eligible to take the PE. The FE is available for students in chemical, civil, electrical, environmental, industrial, and mechanical engineering. Once the student has been graduated and passed the FE, he or she is designated EIT (Engineer in Training). In most states, after four years of work, the individual is eligible to sit for the PE. The UAB believes the same rationale is applicable to the proposed entry-level certificate program in public relations

After the initial reaction to the new program announcement, and its then-name, Principles for Accreditation in Public Relations (P-APR), we surveyed the APR chairs in the partner organizations. Following are the results.

### 1. Do you support the creation of an entry-level credential for college students graduating with a major in public relations?

Yes	42.7 percent (38)
No	40.4 percent (36)
Unsure	16.9 percent (15)

### 2. Do you support the name Principles for Accreditation in Public Relations for this entry-level credential?

Yes	33.0 percent (29)
No	67.0 percent (59)
Did not answer	(1)

From initial results throughout the research, we felt it would also be appropriate to survey all practitioners holding the APR. To accomplish this, the UAB conducted a survey during February 2013 of individuals holding the Accredited in Public Relations (APR) credential

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throughout its partner organizations. The purpose of the survey was to ascertain attitudes from accredited professionals toward a proposed entry-level credential designed for graduating seniors who majored in public relations. An online link was sent to all APRs who were members of the Public Relations Society of America or who had been accredited through the computer-based examination. This database is managed by PRSA. To reach other accredited individuals who are not in this database, the link was sent to all partner organizations with a request to forward it to their accredited members. A total of 1,274 individuals responded to the survey. Highlights of the findings are detailed below.

### **Benefits of a Credential**

The first set of questions sought to ascertain a respondent's perception of the benefits of a professional credential. For this set of questions, the Morrison et al., (1992) Credential Scale was used.

- 94 percent either strongly agreed (53 percent) or agreed (42 percent) that certification programs encourage professionals to continue their education and professional development
- 93 percent either strongly agreed (55 percent) or agreed (39 percent) that certification programs raise the standards of practice in a profession
- 85 percent either strongly agreed (44 percent) or agreed (41 percent) that certification programs increase the recognition and credibility of the professions
- 43 percent either strongly disagreed (16 percent) or disagreed (38 percent) that certification programs do NOT protect customers from incompetent practitioners

### **Support for an Entry-level Credential**

The second set of questions sought to determine support for an entry-level credential. The results indicated:

- 63 percent either strongly agreed (15 percent) or agreed (48 percent) that a certification process for entry-level practitioners is a good idea, in principle
- 60 percent either strongly agreed (15 percent) or agreed (45 percent) that as an employer, they would find a certification process for entry-level practitioners to be helpful in our hiring process
- 19 percent either strongly agreed (4 percent) or agreed (15 percent) that as an employer, they would be willing to pay for an entry-level practitioner to take a certification exam before hiring the person
- 62 percent either strongly agreed (23 percent) or agreed (42 percent) that in principle, having a certification or accreditation process for all levels of public relations practitioners is good for our field

While these findings strongly support the idea of an entry-level credential, the data become even more compelling when those who were neutral are removed from the calculations and support is re-calculated. Neutral responses ranged from 16 percent to 27 percent across the four statements. Results for those expressing a positive or negative preference are as follows:

- 75 percent either strongly agreed (18 percent) or agreed (57 percent) that a certification process for entry-level practitioners is a good idea, in principle.

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- 76 percent either strongly agreed (19 percent) or agreed (58 percent) that as an employer, they would find a certification process for entry-level practitioners to be helpful in our hiring process.
- 26 percent either strongly agreed (6 percent) or agreed (21 percent) that as an employer, they would be willing to pay for an entry-level practitioner to take a certification exam before hiring the person.
- 79 percent either strongly agreed (28 percent) or agreed (51 percent) that in principle, having a certification or accreditation process for all levels of public relations practitioners is good for our field.

When asked if they thought there should be a designation after the name of a student who passed an entry-level examination, 31 percent said yes, 69 percent said no.

### Beta Test for the Examination

Based upon the overwhelming support from faculty, students, APRs and public relations professionals as reported above, the UAB next began the development and testing for the examination. The development of the beta test of the computer-based examination began in 2011, based on a Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSA) assessment by UAB members and a professional psychometrician with whom the UAB contracts. The full board reviewed each KSA and its associated questions to determine if a particular question was one that a graduating public relations senior should know based upon what he/she had learned in class or if that question would be one that would address an issue that a practitioner with a few years of practical experience would know. About one-half of the questions fell into the first group and the other one-half fell into the second group. Group 1, therefore, constituted the beta examination for the students. A study guide was created, and all of the participating schools (eight) conducted a review course for beta test candidates.

The beta exam was administered to 114 graduating seniors from Florida State University, the University of Georgia (in fall of 2012), Mississippi State University, Virginia Tech, San Diego State University, Howard University, California State University Sacramento, and Lee University (in spring of 2013) at Prometric testing sites around the country. These universities represent a good cross-section of large and small, public and private, and rural and urban universities. Sixty-nine percent of those who took the beta exam passed. This is the approximate pass rate for the APR credential since the UAB began using the Computer-based Examination.

Upon approval of the proposed certificate program, the final step in the program-creating process is to add more questions to the examination for testing in order to expand the pool of available questions. This is the same process that the UAB follows for the APR Computer-based Examination.

### Issues to be Resolved

#### Naming

The UAB's initial research indicated a preference for Principles for Accreditation in Public Relations (P-APR), but the all-APRs survey indicated a strong preference NOT to have a

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a credential *per se*. As a result, the UAB re-analyzed both statistical and open-ended responses from the various data sets to identify a possible alternative. From this research, the UAB concluded an alternative to a credential would be a Certificate in Principles of Public Relations with the emphasis that no credential, shortening or acronym should be made from this name. Students will be instructed that they may use “Certificate in Principles of Public Relations” on their resumes and business cards, but they may not use any variation of the name.

When PRSA’s legal representative reviewed this proposal, it seemed that it was too close to the Certified Public Relations Counselor from the Florida Public Relations Association (FPRA). The UAB requested FPRA to review and comment. The Executive Committee of FPRA unanimously agreed that it had no issue with the UAB-proposed certificate. A letter so-stating has been sent to PRSA.

### Funding

Two funding issues remain. For the first phase of the project, the UAB raised approximately \$16,000 from partner organizations, foundations, PRSSA, UAB board members, public relations and research firms, and public relations practitioners. In the short term, the UAB needs approximately \$10,000 to complete the program-creation process. These funds will cover trademarking the name, testing additional questions, and marketing the roll-out of the program. Currently we are soliciting these funds.

In the long term, the Certificate must be able to sustain itself just as the APR program must do. The Certificate was designed to be self-sustaining. The cost of the examination (\$125 plus a \$25 application fee) covers all fees associated with administering and up-dating the examination. Some expense is expected for marketing, but because the primary audiences for the Certificate are faculty advisors and students, most of the marketing can be done electronically. Currently the Marketing Workgroup of the UAB is completing the roll-out marketing plan.

### Sustainability

The final possible issue is the sustainability of the Certificate. Our research indicates this should not be an issue. Consider the following:

Comments from faculty in numerous venues indicate strong support for two reasons. First, faculty members see the Certificate as a mark of professional achievement for the student. They see it as a way to distinguish the excellent public relations student from the average public relations student. Second, many see the Certificate as a way to demonstrate accountable outcomes from an independent organization as directed by their state legislatures. A diploma, the legislatures have said, is not “good enough.”

Students see the Certificate as a way to distinguish themselves from the competition. Not all public relations students are created equal. They see the Certificate as a potential differentiator for their first job. In the 2011 PRSSA survey, more than 70 percent of the 703 students surveyed said they would be either very likely or somewhat likely to take the entry-level examination. In the 2012 PRSSA survey, 77 percent agreed that they would take an

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entry-level credential designed for college graduating seniors. In addition, 92 percent said they would take the examination in order to differentiate themselves from others in the job market.

**Practitioners strongly support the Certificate.** In the PRSA 2010 practice analysis of 1,634 practitioners, 61 percent agreed that a certification process for entry-level practitioners is a good idea in principle; and 57 percent agreed they would find a certification process helpful in the hiring process. A survey of APR chairs found that 43 percent supported the creation of an entry-level credential for graduating public relations seniors, 40 percent were not in support, and 17 percent had no opinion. In 2013, a survey of 1,274 APRs found that 75 percent agreed that a certification process for entry-level practitioners is a good idea in principle, and 76 percent agreed they would find a certification process helpful in the hiring process.

Clearly strong support exists for an entry-level process that ultimately leads to certifications. The UAB would like to thank all its partner organizations for their support. Within a short time, this process will become a reality.



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