

*Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations*  
*David W. Ferguson – 1987*

What a joy it was to be asked to deliver the Vern Schranz Lecture this year! As you doubtless know, this lecture series has received nationwide prominence as the premier lecture series in public relations. I'm particularly pleased that Vern and Mary are with us this evening. Their presence is frosting on the cake, as far as I'm concerned.

Now, it happens that I was at Ball State at graduation time last spring when the university presented an honorary degree to the almost legendary Ed Bernays—the first time to my knowledge that any major university has presented an honorary degree to a public relations professional. During the same weekend, the university paid me a great honor as well, by presenting me with the national Public Relations Achievement Award, thereby linking my name with such outstanding public relations practitioners as Betsy Plank, Pat Jackson, Denny Griswold, and the aforementioned Ed Bernays.

These events plus the Schranz lecture series and the reputation of the Ball State public relations faculty makes it clear that here is a university that really cares about education in public relations and is providing a state-of-the-art education for its students. I feel very fortunate to be a part of it.

Two weeks ago, I was in Connecticut, attending the 45th reunion of my Yale class. Now, I have to admit that I had gone to the reunion with some trepidation. I have not been much of a reunion attendee in the past, and frankly, was afraid that I might be disappointed to be in a group of so many old men. (For the benefit of the young people in the audience, the 45th reunion put me in the 65 to 67 age group.) What I found was something far different from what I had expected. Oh, to be sure most of us either had bald heads or white hair. Almost all wore glasses, and have retired from our life's careers. But what hadn't changed was the zest for life, which had marked our college days. Almost all were devoting their time to new causes and activities, mostly some work in the public interest. And perhaps that's the best news I can give you tonight. You can look forward to a full and meaningful life if you maintain enthusiasm for life.

But what brought the reunion to mind in thinking about being at Ball State, were the remarks of one of the professors who spoke to our group. He is the widely renowned Czech-American biblical historian, Jaroslav Pelikan. Dr. Pelikan spoke to us about the purpose of a university education. A university education, he said, should prepare us to deal with the whole panoply of life's situations; not just train us to pursue one narrow career course. I would like to use Dr. Pelikan's thought as the theme of my remarks this evening.

Now, it would be presumptuous of me to claim any special expertise in the subject of education for public relations. My interest in the subject is of rather recent date, and has only occupied a significant amount of my time since I retired from full time employment at United States Steel three and a half years ago.

However, during the intervening years, I've talked to literally hundreds of people involved in education for public relations—students, faculty members, academic administrators, graduates, practitioners—and have read quantities of articles and other documents. While to pose as an expert would be for me skating on thin ice, I have, nonetheless, developed some pretty clear perceptions

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as to the state of public relations education at this time and I have become very confident that my perceptions are correct. For that reason I'm willing to share them with you. As in most everything in the world, there is some good news and some bad news.

When I was at Yale 45 and more years ago, virtually no institution of higher education offered any courses in public relations. As an academic endeavor, it was virtually unknown. Today by comparison, it can be safely said that every college and university in the country offers at least one or two courses in public relations. While the quality doubtless varies from institution to institution, most students do at least have the opportunity to learn something about the field.

More than 30 institutions offer degrees in public relations, and countless others have full sequences, many of which have professional accreditation. While I readily admit that as an outsider it's hard for me to judge, all indications point to the fact that well developed and accredited sequences are of high quality, indeed.

The number of students desiring to study public relations is growing and growing rapidly. For over 15 years, Professor Paul Petersen of the School of Journalism at Ohio State University has been studying enrollments in Schools of Journalism. During the period from 1984 to 1986, enrollment in editorial and news reporting remained virtually the same, while enrollment in public relations at the same schools increased by about 25 percent. Mary Maples Dunn, the president of Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, has reported that the number one area of academic interest for the women entering that prestigious institution in the fall of 1986 was public relations. As a matter of fact/ the increase in enrollments in public relations have been so rapid, that there is genuine concern by many of us that the profession may not be able to absorb the numbers of men and women desiring to enter the field. Some wonder, too, whether there are sufficient numbers of qualified instructors to give the students the sound grounding they need to pursue a career in the field.

But, back to the good news. I've been impressed with the high quality of professional practitioners who give their time—often without compensation—to teach a course one day a week or to serve as adjunct professors, accept lectureships, serve on curriculum advisories board, or otherwise show their support for education at the university level. Like every other profession and business, public relations is in a state of transition, and in our case, rapid transition. We are forever passing from one order of practice, goals and circumstances to another. The cycles overlap.

Change is constant the implication for educators is more like uranium than gold. What is taught today will have a relatively short life and will have to be altered considerably almost on a yearly basis if education is to continue to keep pace with practice in our profession. Thoughtful faculty members are constantly studying their courses and sequences to see that they do keep pace. It's not an easy task, and we are fortunate to have so many that does so.

Yes, there is a lot of good news about education in public relations. And now for the bad news.

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To the best of my understanding, the bad news centers around the belief that education in public relations is too focused on the technical aspects of public relations: too much emphasis on such subjects as publicity, media relations, history of public relations, fund raising, media analysis, techniques of community relations, and the like. I can't really tell whether the perception is correct. But as I will point out in a few moments, even new graduates, inadvertently I'm sure, strengthen the perception.

Perhaps at this point, it might be a good idea for us to have a clear understanding of what public relations is, or I might better say what it has become. Robert Dilenschneider, president and chief executive officer of Hill and Knowlton, hit the nail on the head not so long ago in an address before the corporate section of PRSA, when he said, "Public relations isn't making slides; it isn't writing press releases, it isn't even dealing with media: its problem solving." Dilenschneider went on to explain that what he meant was that the public relations professional must first establish a feeling of mutual understanding and respect with his clients or management. Then he must identify the business problem faced by the client or company, and develop strategies to meet the business problem. Finally, and only then, does the professional turn to the techniques of public relations and the appropriate media of communication to promulgate the message.

Compare this approach with what happened when I interviewed a group of applicants seeking entry level jobs with our firm. The applicants appeared bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and had carefully prepared resumes. Often they carried portfolios of things they had written, and items they had published. I quizzed them extensively about their public relations studies and the items in their portfolio. And just before they were about to leave, I threw at them what I suspected they thought was an unfair question. With all the innocence I could muster, I asked, "what are your present feelings about the state of the economy in the U.S.?" Invariably a glazed and horrified look came over their faces and it was clear that they never had related their desire for a career in public relations with the economy. And yet how are we ever going to be able to help the companies for which we work or the clients we seek to serve, if we are not fully cognizant of the world in which they must operate.

But don't take it just from me. Recently, Jon White of the Cranfield School of Management, Leslie Hammonds of Amoco Corp., and Frank Kalupa of the University of Alabama published an interesting paper reporting on the results of a study of communication practitioners to determine first, the knowledge and skill competencies and second, the importance of these skills to their practice. While the responding practitioners, all members of either PRSA or IABC, perceived that they had adequate communication skills such as writing, graphics, and publications, they felt themselves weak in such critical knowledge areas as accounting, economics, interpersonal relations, marketing and principles of management.

The authors concluded, "Results show an apparent lack of broadly educated generalists in the public relations function. One possible implication of the study is that, indeed, there may be too many communications mechanics and too few counselors who can aid top management in the complex, dynamic environment in which organizations operate today." This past summer I

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conducted a highly unscientific study of about 100 randomly selected account executives and account supervisors from around the country as to their educational background. Now, all had at least a bachelor's degree.

That was to be expected. But what surprised me was that on a statistical basis only about three and a half out of eight had degrees in the field of public relations, journalism, or mass communications. The rest had their degrees in economics, business management, philosophy, history, law and all the rest. Frankly, that isn't the way it should be. To use a rather earthy expression, other people are eating our lunch.

Public relations will never reach the status of a profession, as long as people can get into the field and prosper without having completed a fairly rigorous course of study in the field. And, until education in public relations becomes sufficiently broad to include study in such subjects as economics, philosophy and law. Oh, I can understand why lack of public relations training is true of us old folks. No training was available. But today, when so many quality programs are available, there is no reason why it should be so.

What seems to me to be needed most is to improve the dialogue and understanding between educators and professionals. I guess what this suggests is that each group should develop a public relations program focused on the other. We must improve the opportunities for educators and professionals to get behind-the-scenes of each other's activities, to no longer consider themselves as "we" and "they." If public relations is to become a true profession, it is essential that mutual respect be developed between those who teach and those who practice public relations.

Clearly, not enough of this is done. Fortunately, there are many ways to accomplish it. Perhaps we should discuss some of them.

One of the most commonly used methods of introducing professional knowledge into the classroom is through the use of guest lectures and lectureships. Of course these are very valuable for the student, who gets to learn from persons actively working in the field. And most of us love the opportunity to prattle on about our favorite subject or accomplishment. Faculty members always seek to treat the guests well and to make them feel comfortable on the campus.

I really question, however, whether the appearance of a guest lecturer really adds much to the faculty members' knowledge of the field or leads to changes in curriculum or courses of study. I believe that to be the most helpful to the faculty, visits by outside professionals should be extended over several days, or a week or more, as is done at a few universities.

The outsider has a chance to immerse himself in the university atmosphere, to have informal and unstaged visits with students and faculty, to attend classes, to learn what makes the faculty members tick, and to discuss the type of changes that will be necessary in university programs to keep them up to date. This should help both sides. For his part, the professional is bound to come away from such an experience with new ideas and fresh approaches for the day-to-day operations within his own professional activity.

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Also, I see the increased use of professional advisory boards as an essential way to improve the dialogue between faculty and the professional community. As helpful as these advisory groups have become, in my view, we have only scratched the surface on their use.

Rather than the fairly typical luncheon meeting, why not consider a weekend retreat on the campus for the public relations faculty and the advisory board, with a few administrators thrown in to add spice to the event. During two days together, participants would learn to trust each other and constructive criticism could result to the benefit of all.

In addition, I believe advisory boards could play an important role in fund raising. Development offices are too often understaffed and have university wide orientation rather than being specifically oriented to any one program or discipline. Couldn't advisory boards be used to raise money for those special extras we need to make programs more effective! One of the advisory boards I'm on is trying this approach. We have started raising money for some much-needed video equipment for use by the public relations faculty. The amount is modest, and I have no doubt our drive will be successful. It should be noted that this idea was suggested by the outside professionals, not the faculty.

I have noticed that, not unexpectedly, those in education tend to concern themselves with how the professionals in practice can help them. They look for advisory boards, lectureships, financial support, and other benefits that will help them do their own jobs better.

I think the time has come for public relations educators to turn the tables around and to start asking the profession how educators can help the professional do his job better. Most counseling firms and larger companies hold regular training sessions for their own people and for their clients. I believe that the quality of such programs would inevitably be improved, if educators conducted the sessions. While, of course, the educators should be paid for this service, an occasional pro-bono effort might break the ice, and prove how much more effective a faculty member could be in conducting a training session. After all, educators ask practitioners to appear at their courses. Would not a return visit by the educator be just as rewarding?

Last summer I attended for the first time the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (AEJMC for short). While the group demonstrated some lack of common sense, it seemed to me, by scheduling their meeting in the middle of August in San Antonio, Texas, I found the quality of the research presentations in public relations to be outstanding—some really at the cutting edge of public relations thought. And yet, with the exception of perhaps one other practitioner, the only persons who heard the research reports were other professors and academicians.

Undoubtedly some will be published in professional journals, but we must seek opportunities for them to appear in publications of more general readership, where the professionals are more likely

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to see them and learn from them. Reports on research at meetings of professional societies and other groups professionals attend is another way of spreading the knowledge.

One of the prevailing views among my practitioners Colleagues is that public relations sequences should be taught in a business school environment. The theory is that public relations is basically a business management matter, and therefore should be taught in tandem with other business courses. I don't agree.

While I'm pleased that some business schools have introduced courses in public relations in their curriculum, and that's good, public relations is well served as part of a communications or journalism school. As I pointed out a few minutes ago, eventually our work comes down to dealing with the mediums of communications. To deal well with these mediums, we must understand them and we learn about them best in schools of journalism and mass communications.

Also, there is a very practical reason to cite public relations educators in such schools. Many of those teaching public relations have earned tenure and good salaries in the schools in which they now teach. Were they to move to business schools, such advantages would be lost and they would be back at square one in their own careers. They don't deserve to have that happen to them.

That does not mean that there are not things to be done at academic institutions to expand the scope of public relations education. As I said a moment ago, it's clear that the way must be found to add quality study in such subjects as economics, interpersonal relations, philosophy law, and business management to public relations sequences. And frankly, I'd rather see this done on a program basis rather than leaving to students the option of what they should study outside the professional field. That's why I'm so much in favor of the interdisciplinary orientation for public relations education that has been proposed by Dr. Sharpe for Ball State. Such an orientation it seems to me would result in Ball State's graduates being far more able to deal with the many-faceted problems they will face in a career in public relations. Rather, it seems to me that this type of education is exactly what Dr. Pelikan was talking about when he spoke to our reunion class. It greatly expands the horizon and vision of public relations education, and prepares the students to be more than a communication technician. Dr. Sharpe's program was thoroughly discussed at the meeting of Ball State's Professional Liaison Committee last spring, and has been substantially revised since then. I probably shouldn't admit it in the presence of so many university administrators but one or two of us on the advisory board have agreed to try to find outside funding to support such an interdisciplinary program. If we're successful, I'm convinced that we will have made a much-needed giant step forward in education for public relations.

Last October 19th, the infamous Black Monday, was a grim day indeed for the American economy. But it made us all aware—many for the first time—how deeply interconnected are the economies of nations around the globe. What happens in markets in Tokyo, London, and Sydney is immediately reflected in New York and Chicago. It follows as naturally as night and day that public relations is no longer a one-nation matter, but is worldwide in its impact. Any attempt to expand the vision and reach of public relations education must include significant involvement in international affairs and

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the international business climate. In this area, too, we must move away from the concept of public relations education as communication mechanics.

Ethics has become a subject of great interest to the professional public relations practitioner, particularly in view of the fact that several governmental and industrial leaders, in the name of public relations, have set aside ethical consideration in the interest of personal gain. To most of us, such behavior is abhorrent. All the public relations sequences I have studied have included study of ethical consideration. I mention it here only to emphasize its importance—not only for a career in public relations, but in fact for all aspects of life.

Those of us in the professional practice also have our work cut out for us if education in public relations is to be more valuable to us. Unfortunately, public relations practitioners have not been strong financial supporters of education for public relations. The Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education, the principal tax exempt foundation in our field, provides less than \$100,000 a year for educational support: a drop in the bucket to what is needed if we are to get the attention that our field deserves in academic circles.

As part of the study I did last summer of account executives and supervisors, I asked how many had given financial support to their alma maters for public relations programs. I'm really embarrassed to report that the number who provided such support was, as the statisticians say, insignificant and meaningless. I know of very few corporate foundations that support public relations education.

Educators and practitioners alike must make a more concentrated effort in this direction. The more we come to understand each other and work together, the more likely it will be that necessary financial support for public relations courses and sequences will be forthcoming.

Practitioners can also be more helpful in providing more internships for students and faculty members. While internships for students are fairly common, it is often difficult to place professors and instructors, eager to learn, in a counseling firm situation, or in an intern situation in a company. The entire practice must do more of this. It is our job as advocates of improved support for public relations education to come up with the creative ideas that make such an arrangement practical and worthwhile for both the educators and the practitioners.

Practitioners can also be helpful in sponsoring research grants for fellowships for educators who desire to pursue such a program. While, as I observed earlier, much high quality research is being done at the academic level, little is sponsored by the practice. Such research could help us eliminate some of the ambiguities that often frustrate the efforts of public relations to become a true profession. By the same token, scholarships to provide graduate study by those who have proven themselves in entry-level positions, would be an important forward step for counseling firms, and companies interested in first class public relations. So there is much to be done by educators and by practitioners alike if we are to have public relations move from a media oriented craft to a full profession. Although progress to date may seem slow, I take great comfort in noting how far we have come during the past couple of decades. When you look at the other professions—law,

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medicine, engineering, and the like—they all developed to professional status over several centuries, not just decades.

One thing is certain: education for public relations is here to stay. The more steps we take to improve it, the sooner our practice will receive the full status of a profession, which is something we all seek.