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Developing Standards of Professional Performance in Public Relations

ABSTRACT: A survey instrument derived from sixty in-depth interviews was administered to 598 public relations professionals across the nation with a 42 percent response rate. Based on a review of literature and the interview phase of the current study, twenty-four elements of professional performance were operationalized in the survey. Survey respondents assessed the extent to which a standard of professionalism currently exists for each of the twenty-four items.

Respondents tended to view ethical guidelines, accreditation and writing/editing skills as enjoying well established standards. Licensing, location of public relations on the organizational chart and inclusion of public relations in the dominant coalition were viewed as most lacking in a standard of professional performance. The twenty-four items factored into eight dimensions. Assessments of professionalism along these eight factors differed significantly as a function of age, education, race and both length and geographic region of practice of public relations.

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose

"I find the continuing discussion and emphasis over public relations professionalism interesting, but also damn irritating." This statement by Richard Alan Nelson (1994), then-Head of the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, may capture the view of many scholars. Some would argue more for interest, while others claim that introspective research is simply "navel-gazing" or unnecessary when true respect is accorded a profession. But Nelson points out that professionalism is particularly challenging and important in public relations because of the increasing recognition of public relations as essential across a vast variety of organizational objectives.

This study is based on the view that both educators and practitioners must look inward and define standards of specific performance. Only then will we ultimately achieve and maintain professionalism in the field. Particularly in light of the relative youth of our profession, academic research can serve as a sort of nurture of ideas and attitudes toward professional practice of public relations. The study of professionalism in public relations must challenge the assumption that professional standards have yet been defined, much less achieved in our field. The current survey of practitioners began with a review of professionalism in nearly a dozen other professions, then grounded a multi-faceted definition of standards in public relations in sixty in-depth interviews. Once a comprehensive, 24-item battery of components had been defined, the national survey reported here was conducted as a first implementation of the multi-faceted definition.

Literature

Interdisciplinary guidelines for a "profession" generally include requirements for (1) a well-defined body of scholarly knowledge; (2) completion of some standardized and prescribed course of study; (3) examination and certification by a state; and, (4) oversight by a state agency which has disciplinary powers over practitioners' behaviors (cf. Wylie, 1994).

Other criteria include intellectualism, a code of ethics, a comprehensive self-governing organization, greater emphasis on public service than self-interests such as profits, performance of a "unique and essential service based on a substantial body of knowledge," broad autonomy, and "having practitioners guided by altruism" (cf. Wright, 1981, p. 51).

State licensing has become the primary means of regulating occupations serving the public. There are estimates that as much as one-third of the work force is directly involved in licensed occupations (Hogan, 1983b). Rose (1983) notes that forces on the side of licensing across professions include expertise, tradition, and politics; forces opposed entail individual liberty and individualism, theories of free enterprise, and egalitarianism.

Hogan (1983a) argues that licensing may not improve quality of professional services because licensing boards often fail to discipline errant practitioners, and that actions taken against the licensed are as likely to be aimed at eliminating competition as they are targeting incompetence. Further detriments cited include increased costs of services, creation of shortages in supply, ineffective use of para-professionals, and impediments to needed reforms in education, training, and services. Instead of licensing, he advocates a registration system for professionals in all aspiring professions.

Bernays (1992, 1993) has been the most vocal proponent for licensing of practitioners in public relations as a way to enhance credibility in the practice and to elevate the practice to a profession. Some have publicly supported Bernays' position (cf. Forbes, 1986). Although legislation to introduce licensing in public relations was introduced in Bernays' home state of Massachusetts in the early '90s, no state has yet adopted licensing of practitioners as a standard.

Others have vigorously opposed licensing in the practice, including the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC)¹ (cf. Baxter, 1986; Lesly, 1986; "What Public Relations Leaders Are Saying," 1993). The opposition reasons that government involvement would be ineffective, restrictive, unwelcome, and superfluous.

Nelson (1994) offered five major characteristics of professionalism:

- professional values;
- membership in professional organizations;
- professional norms;
- an intellectual tradition; and
- development of technical skills.

These five elements serve as a fine summary of a number of initiatives in our professional organizations, as well as articles in the trade literature (PR Reporter, 1993; Bovet, 1994; Fenton, 1977; Jackson, 1988; Marston, 1968, McKee, Naysman & Lattimore, 1975; Ranney, 1977; St. Helen, 1992; Warner, 1993). As evident in the review that follows, these five elements also capture most of the components of professionalism offered over the past twenty years of academic work on professional standards in public relations.

Wright (1978) conducted ground-breaking work by providing empirical analysis of professionalism in public relations. Using the McLeod and Hawley (1964) measure of professional orientation, Wright obtained 143 responses from public relations practitioners. The use of an instrument adapted from occupational sociology enabled Wright to conclude that "public relations counselors want to be more professional than their present positions will allow" (Wright, 1978, p. 28).

Wright (1981) continued his stream of research by comparing practitioners accredited by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) with those lacking accreditation. The analysis supported the supposition that accredited practitioners

would reflect greater professionalism. More importantly, there was some evidence of professionalism, but a serious lack of professional orientation in placing public interest above private interest. Perhaps the greatest contribution of the study was the development of 26 professionalization variables and 16 common procedures in public relations. This work provided part of the grounding of the 24 items used in the current study, although the items in the new battery are more specific to public relations and relate to particular areas of performance necessary for an occupation to become a profession.

The remaining articles in the public relations literature take more of a topical, polemical focus. A number of articles have been written arguing for and against licensing of public relations practitioners (Baxter, 1986; Bernays, 1983, 1986, 1992, 1993; Forbes, 1986; Lesly, 1986). Similarly, the importance of education and accreditation of programs have been argued (Hainsworth, 1993; Wylie, 1994). A number of articles question the code of ethics and social responsibility in the field (Olasky, 1985) and call for clear, specific standards of ethics and social responsibility (Bivins, 1992; Judd, 1989; Ryan, 1986; Sharpe, 1986). Several articles compare professionalism across national lines (see Wright's study of Canadian public relations cited in Wright, 1978 and Pratt's study of professionalism in Nigeria, 1986) or across professions (Gitter & Jaspers, 1982). Professionalism also has been linked with Grunig's models, with several studies reported by J. Grunig and L. Grunig (1990, p. 20) having found relationships between professionalism and the two-way models.² One study even makes an attempt to assess the place of spin doctoring as professional performance in the field (Sumpter & Tankard, 1994).

These topical articles are thought-provoking and useful in positing aspects of professionalism. But only four of these articles argue from data, from the empirical base that best informs our attempts to define professionalism and then assess our progress to professional standards. Gitter and Jaspers (1982) administered a Social Perception Test to 227 undergraduate students to compare trust accorded to four professions: public relations, accounting, social work and sales. The authors concluded that "trust in public relations is still badly needed" (Gitter & Jaspers, 1982, p. 31).

Ryan (1986) surveyed 135 PRSA and International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) members about the importance of social responsibility, both to the respondent and the performance of the respondent's organization. The overriding finding was a conviction that socially responsible action is good for the company, for society and for individual practitioners.

Judd (1989) addressed social responsibility as a possible indicant of professionalism and a means of increasing credibility of public relations. His survey of 100 active professionals found a link between social responsibility and participation in policy decisions. The majority of respondents would subordinate personal gain to the public interest, but practitioners did not believe that the majority of Americans view public relations as credible.

Rentner and Bissland (1990) conducted an extensive survey of PRSA and IABC members, focusing on job satisfaction and its correlates. The 649 respon-

dents were happiest when challenged by a variety of tasks that employ their skills, while having autonomy about doing that work and opportunities to be rewarded for success. Managers were more “apt than technicians to be happy with both their jobs overall and most facets of them” (Rentner & Bissland, 1990, p. 955).

The views offered in the trade literature, combined with opinion pieces and the empirical studies in the academic literature, suggest a number of facets of professionalism in public relations. Less is known about how well we are progressing in settling on standards for these facets. Furthermore, no attempt has been made to pull facets such as education, social responsibility, credibility with management, etc. into one battery of measurable items. The following research questions attempt such a synthesis.

Research Questions

The current study set out to learn the extent to which professionals in public relations perceive standards to be in place for each of the following items. The items and the wording of each item were derived from a review of literature in public relations and nearly a dozen other professions and from sixty in-depth interviews with agency and organizational executives in public relations.

- Educational background.
- Continuing education/training.
- Research strategies for campaign planning.
- Management skills.
- Ethical guidelines for media relations.
- Ethical guidelines for client/practitioner relations.
- Accreditation.
- Research strategies for program implementation.
- Research strategies for program evaluation.
- Licensing.
- Documented accountability of public relations to clients/employers.
- Technical skills—writing and editing.
- Technical skills—graphics and production.
- Budgeting skills.
- Managing public relations through goals and objectives (a system).
- Gender equity in opportunity.

Racial equity in opportunity.

The location of public relations on the organizational chart.

The inclusion of public relations in the "top decision team".

Public relations as an *advocate* for a client or a point of view.

How public relations should operate, i.e., as publicity, public information, liaisons, etc.

Salaries for technicians.

Salaries for managers.

Salaries for executives.

METHOD

Data reported here are drawn from a national survey of public relations practitioners conducted in February, 1993. The survey instrument was developed from information compiled in a series of depth interviews conducted with a regional sample of corporate and non-profit executives. Information from these depth interviews, labeled Phase I, served both as the guide for survey development and as insight and elaboration for the raw data.

Phase I

Sixty interviews were conducted on the general topic "standards in public relations." Interviewers were eleven graduate students at a large southeastern university enrolled in a public relations seminar in spring, 1993, dealing with the topics of standards and excellence.³ An interview guide was developed in the seminar based on literature findings written about standards from across many professions, including public relations (see Sallot, 1993, for related analysis of relative status of public relations to other professions). The guide lists broad concepts that emerged from the literature examination, and includes topics such as education, training, ethics, research, management skills, gender and minority issues, and relationships among publics.

Each student was assigned a quota of six completed interviews, for a sample-size goal of 66. Three class sessions were spent training the students in the use of the guide and interviewing techniques. All interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed. Length of interviews varied, ranging from 45 minutes (one interview) to three hours.

A purposive sample was selected from lists of corporate and non-profit executives in the southeastern region. Three general criteria were applied to selection: five of each student's interviews were to be conducted with heads of public relations departments or agencies, and one had to be with the CEO/head of an organization that has a public relations department. Second, each of the interviewer's

respondents was to be in the same or similar business area. Thus, one student selected all interviewees from medical centers, one from universities, one from industrial manufacturers, and so on. Students selected their respondents' area of practice based on personal interest and research-based familiarity with the particular specialty. Finally, all interviews were specified to be conducted with organizations of national or regional scope (see Appendix A).

Over 90 percent of executives who were asked did participate. The large majority of interviews was conducted in participants' offices; three interviewees traveled to campus for their interviews. The achieved sample-size is 60. The relatively homogeneous sample consists of 35 male and 25 female respondents, of whom 57 are Caucasian and three are racial minority respondents.

Phase 2

Instrument

The survey instrument, designed in three parts, was developed in a graduate public relations course during the Winter Quarter, 1994.⁴ Each part and each question resulted from content analysis of the interview transcripts and analyses of the secondary data from Phase 1. Part 1 of the instrument asks respondents to indicate, across a variety of topics, whether or not a uniform standard exists in public relations. Instructions read:

We would like to know your opinions whether or not there are any uniform standards that exist in public relations. For each of the activities or issues listed below, please tell us if you believe there is a widely recognized standard, no standard at all, or something between.

Part 1 then consists of a list of twenty-four specific performance items, each measured by a five-point Likert-type scale where one equals "no standard exists/no uniformity at all" and five equals "a widely accepted, generally agreed upon standard exists across much of the profession." Sample topics include: educational background, ethical guidelines for client relations, racial/gender equity, salaries, and several management systems and techniques.

A second battery of questions was included in the instrument. The items were designed to enable coorientational analysis of practitioner perceptions of professionalism and of their peers' perceptions of professionalism. Part 2 consists of 45 questions, each that respondents were instructed to answer two times:

For all questions in this section, please circle a number from 1 to 5 where 1 is "strongly disagree" and 5 is "strongly agree." Remember there is no right or wrong answer. Your first thought is what we want. You will answer each question two times. The first time is your personal opinion. The second, or "b" item, asks how you think the majority of practitioners in your field would answer the same item.

Each of the subsequent 90 opinion statements was drawn from the general topics in Part 1. For example, the following pair of scaled questions elaborates upon the general concept of "public relations role" in organizations.

32a. Public relations in most organizations is part of the decision-making team						
strongly						strongly
disagree	1	2	3	4	5	agree
32b. A majority of practitioners in our field would:						
strongly						strongly
disagree	1	2	3	4	5	agree

All items were pre-tested with a sample of 22 faculty and graduate students to verify their categorical representation. Inter-coder reliability on item classification was 98-100 percent across all 45 statements. The data gathered in Part 2 of the instrument is being analyzed in a separate manuscript founded on theoretical coorientation literature.

Part 3 included personal demographics and professional descriptive information.

The Sample

The sample of 598 names was randomly drawn from the 1993 national membership directory of the Public Relations Society of America. Questionnaires were mailed with a cover letter requesting participation; it was signed by the students. Followup telephone calls were made to non-respondents the second week after the mailing. Usable responses received from 598 practitioners yielded an effective response rate of 42 percent. Because the focus of this study was on practicing professionals, two educators were omitted from the analysis presented here.

RESULTS

Description of Sample

Of the 251 practitioners participating in the survey, 55 percent were female and 43.4 percent were male. About a third were aged 41-50, almost another third were aged 31-40, with the remainder almost equally younger or older. Nearly 95 percent of the respondents were Caucasian, with the rest Hispanic, African-American, Native-American and Asian-American. Nearly equal numbers reported working in corporate settings, in government-nonprofit and in agencies. More than half said they held managerial posts, while 19 percent described their functions as "executive," 12 percent as "technical," and the rest as some combination. Sixty-two percent reported having bachelor's degrees and 32 percent had master's degrees. A third majored in journalism, 13 percent in English, and 12 percent in speech communication; only 6 percent majored in

public relations. Almost one-third reported practicing public relations for 4-10 years; almost half 11-25 years; 11 percent more than 25 years; 8 percent three years or less. More than one-third of the practitioners reported being APR-accredited by PRSA. Just over half of the respondents reported annual incomes from public relations ranging from \$20,000-\$50,000; 28 percent \$51,000-\$100,000; 16 percent in excess of \$100,000; and only 2 percent less than \$20,000. Almost a third of the professionals practiced in the Midwest; just over 20 percent practiced in each of the Northeast and Southeast; 15 percent in the Southwest; and 7 percent in the Northwest.

Professional Activities and Roles

When asked to indicate "the type of public relations model that most closely describes what you do," 38 percent marked "public information," 21 percent indicated "publicity," 12 percent "some combination" and "persuasion-compliance," 5 percent "negotiation-adaptation," and 4 percent said they practiced "all" models.

Asked to indicate "which of the following best describes the relationship between public relations and marketing in your organization," nearly 25 percent of respondents said the departments were "separate but equal." Eighteen percent reported that "PR functions are within the marketing department," while 14 percent said the departments were "separate but unequal," 12 percent said both functions are managed under another department, and 2 percent reported some combination of relationships. About a quarter did not respond to the question.

Asked to rank order the top three tasks that "take the majority of your time," respondents most frequently cited media relations, marketing communications, maintaining organization's reputation, planning, and special events management.

Questioned about types of research they conducted in the last year, 78 percent of the practitioners had conducted interviews, 59 percent had written questionnaires, 58 percent had conducted library research, 50 percent had engaged in issues tracking, 38 percent had conducted focus groups, and nearly a third had conducted telephone surveys.

Current Standards

The first column in Table 1 presents the mean rating of the extent to which an agreed-upon standard exists for each performance item. Respondents tended to view ethical guidelines, accreditation and writing/editing skills as enjoying well established performance standards. Relatively positive response was also given for standards of education and for the view of public relations as advocacy. Licensing, location of public relations on the organizational chart and inclusion of public relations in the dominant coalition were viewed as most lacking in a performance standard of professionalism. Overall, there was a tendency to means close to the neutral value on the five-point scale.

The second column presents the percentage of respondents offering a neutral rating for each item. Both the means and the sizable component of neutral

TABLE 1

Mean Rating of Extent That a Standard Exists for
Twenty-Four Dimensions of Professionalism

<i>Professional Standard</i>	<i>Mean Rating</i>	<i>Percent Neutral</i>
Ethical Guidelines for Client/Practitioner Relations	3.71	27
Accreditation	3.59	18
Ethical Guidelines for Media Relations	3.53	28
Technical Skills—Writing and Editing	3.47	23
Educational Background	3.12	29
Public Relations as an Advocate for a Client or a Point of View	3.12	39
Technical Skills—Graphics and Production	3.06	38
Managing Public Relations through Goals and Objectives (a system)	3.02	39
Salaries for Executives	2.97	38
Gender Equity in Opportunity	2.96	26
Continuing Education/Training	2.94	28
Research Strategies for Program Implementation	2.88	42
Management Skills	2.84	40
Research Strategies for Campaign Planning	2.83	41
Research Strategies for Program Evaluation	2.82	37
Salaries for Managers	2.78	44
How Public Relations Should Operate, i.e., as Publicity, Public Information, Liaisons, etc.	2.76	36
Racial Equity in Opportunity	2.71	28
Documented Accountability of Public Relations to Clients/Employers	2.68	35
Salaries for Technicians	2.66	42
Budgeting Skills	2.63	38
The Inclusion of Public Relations in the "Top Decision Team"	2.35	28
The Location of Public Relations on the Organizational Chart	2.34	28
Licensing	1.71	14

Each item was rated on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being "No Standard Exists/No Uniformity At All" and 5 being "A Widely Accepted, Generally Agreed Upon Standard Exists Across Much Of The Profession."

respondents suggests that there is little consensus about most facets of performance in public relations. Not only is there a fairly strong tendency to a neutral response, there is also a fairly consistent pattern of bi-modal distribution of responses among those who are not neutral regarding an item.

In other words, the respondents were split on most items. This split in opinion was not highly polarized, however. Only a minority of respondents offered ratings at either end of the scale from 1 to 5. Of the 48 opportunities to select either a strong positive (5 on the rating scale) or negative opinion (1 on the rating scale) for the 24 items, only 9 of these cells in the data set had more than 10% response. Expressed in terms of Kurtosis, only licensing derived a value greater than 1. Only 6 of the 24 items had values greater than .50 (+/-) for Kurtosis. In simple terms, about one-fourth to one-third of respondents selected one of the middle three values for each item, with the sole exception being licensing.

Dimensions of Professionalism

To determine if any dimensions of professionalism in public relations could be identified, responses to the 24 items measuring uniformity of standards across the profession were subjected to factor analysis. A principal components extraction using a varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization yielded eight factors with eigenvalues greater than one and which together explained 71.8 of the variance. The rotation procedure converged in ten iterations.

Among the 24 variables, the first factor, consisting of five variables describing activities, skills and managing through goals and objectives, accounted for 29.6 percent of the variance. The second and third factors, each consisting of three variables, accounted for 8.5 and 6.9 percent of the variance, respectively. Salary variables described the second factor while research variables described the third. Factor four, consisting of four variables describing public relations' role in the organization, explained 6.3 percent of the variance; factor five, with two variables describing ethical guidelines, 6.1 percent of the variance; factor six, with three variables describing education and training, 5.5 percent of the variance; factors seven and eight, each with two variables, 4.7 and 4.2 percent of the variance, respectively. Variables in factor seven described racial and gender equity while variables in factor eight described accreditation and licensing.

All eight factors were subjected to Cronbach's alpha test of internal consistency. With alpha scores ranging from .73 to .90, six of the eight factors showed reasonable-to-high internal consistency (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). The alpha score for factor six describing education and training was .69 and for factor eight describing accreditation and licensing was only .22. Factor eight represents two theoretically coherent components, although often counterpoised as alternative directions for the profession. The alternative status may account for the low alpha.

Post Hoc Analysis

In an attempt to learn more about practitioner views of professional standards, a series of analyses of variance were conducted. The eight dimensions of professionalism derived from factor analysis were treated as dependent variables in Oneway ANOVA computations employing selected demographic variables as factors. Table 2 presents the statistically significant findings from the analysis.

The degree to which technical skills enjoy an established, agreed-upon standard varied significantly as a function of age and ethnicity. Young practitioners, i.e. 20-to-30-year-olds, rated standards for technical skills higher (3.36) than did those aged 31 to 40 (2.92) or aged 41 to 50 (2.81). Caucasian respondents rated technical skills lower (2.97) than all other ethnic groups did (3.43) in terms of an accepted standard being in place.

Regarding the extent that a professional standard exists for organizational status of public relations, three demographic variables were significant. As with the technical skill dimension, Caucasians rated the standard for organizational role

TABLE 2

**Significant Differences in Rating Dimensions of
Professionalism as a Function of Demographic Variables**

<i>Dimension of Professionalism^a</i>	<i>Demographic Variable</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Technical Skill in Graphics, Writing, Editing, Budgeting, Documented Accountability and Managing by Objectives	Age	4.22	244	.003
	Ethnicity	3.91	246	.049
Organizational Status Reflected in Location on Organizational Chart, Inclusion in Top Decision Team, Role as Advocate And Model of Public Relations in Organization	Ethnicity	4.08	246	.044
	Region of Practice	2.50	241	.031
	Length of Practice	3.71	244	.006
Salaries for Executives, Managers and Technicians	Ethnicity	6.64	244	.011
Ethical Guidelines for Media Relations and for Client/Practitioner Relations	Region of Practice	2.68	241	.022
Educational Background, Continuing Education and Management Skills	Age	4.64	244	.001
	Region of Practice	3.04	241	.001
Racial and Gender Equity	Education	2.63	245	.05

Note: All analyses were conducted using Oneway Analysis of Variance. Non-Homogeneity of Variance as checked in all cases. Where appropriate, Tukey's range test was conducted to obtain honestly significant differences between group means.

^a Dimensions were derived from the factor analysis.

lower (2.65) than other ethnic groups did (3.11). Organizational role received a range of values as a function of region of the country where the respondent practices public relations. The highest rating of a standard occurred for those in the Southeast (2.93) and for those practicing all over the country (2.88). The lowest rating was in the Northwest (2.40). Notably, all group means were below the neutral point, inclined toward rating no standard as being in place for organizational status. For this same dimension of professionalism, length of practice was a significant factor. Those practicing 4 to 10 years rated the dimension higher (2.84) than those practicing 16 to 20 years (2.36).

In rating the degree to which a standard exists for executive, managerial and technician salaries, significant differences were found as a function of ethnicity. Once again, Caucasian respondents rated the standard lower (2.80) than did other ethnic groups (3.42).

The existence of ethical standards was rated differently as a function of the region where the respondent practices public relations. Again, respondents practicing in the Southeast (3.89) and those practicing all over the country (5.00)

rated this dimension of professionalism higher as an agreed-upon standard in the field than did respondents in the Northwest (3.35).

For the educational preparation dimension of professionalism, the youngest (mainly in their twenties) and the oldest (sixties or older) respondents differed significantly from those in their thirties. The oldest practitioners gave the highest rating (3.42), with the youngest practitioners also offering a high rating (3.26) when compared statistically with those in their thirties (2.75).

The extent of standards for educational preparation was rated from a low of 2.73 in the Northeast to a high of 4.33 for respondents practicing public relations all over the country. Southeastern practitioners, again, offered high ratings of an existing standard (3.21), while ratings from the Southwest (2.83) were nearly as low as in the Northeast. Other regions fell in the middle range for this dimension.

Ratings of the extent of standards for racial and gender equity differed significantly by educational level. Those respondents with some college training held a higher rating of equity (3.93) than did either bachelor trained respondents (2.80) or masters trained respondents (2.81).

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

The twenty-four items offer a carefully developed battery of items specific to public relations performance. The battery follows the lead of Wright (1978; 1981) by developing a set of questions. However, primarily through a thorough development phase entailing sixty in-depth interviews, the battery developed here is more specific, more performance oriented and is grounded in rich description from about two hundred hours of interviewing.

All in all, the inchoate nature of performance standards is evident in the tendency to neutral response and the mixed opinion for most items (bi-modal grouping on either side of the neutral response). Nevertheless, some generalizations are in order aside from the conclusion that we have not yet galvanized opinion about performance standards in public relations.

Given the social responsibility thread in the literature over the past twenty years, it is encouraging to note the confidence offered by respondents for ethical guidelines. It is less striking to find that writing and editing, primary skills in the field, would be viewed as having a uniform standard. Standards are not yet clear for the alter-ego to the technician, i.e., the well-placed, powerful manager playing a crucial role in the organization. Status in the organization, along with licensing, were the closest to a resounding "probably not" in terms of established professional standard.

The twenty-four items were reduced through factor analysis into eight dimensions. These dimensions offer considerable coherence and face validity. In future research and initiatives of professional organizations, it is hoped that a broader, more comprehensive array of components will be considered in discussions of

professionalism in public relations. Reflecting, but building upon the various lists of key elements of professionalism, this study offers the following.

Technical Skills.

Salary Levels.

Research Competency.

Organizational Status.

Ethical Performance.

Education.

Gender and Racial Equity.

Accreditation.

Post hoc analysis reflects several recurring themes. Southeastern and national practitioners tend to hold a more positive view of the extent that a standard is in place for organizational status, salaries and educational preparation to manage. Perhaps this reflects greater confidence in the state of the profession, particularly for those undertaking practice all over the country. Regarding the Southeastern respondents, the work climate may be different than in other regions. Furthermore, a number of large, active PRSA chapters and college programs in public relations enjoy strong support in that region. This may account, in part, for the confidence expressed regarding established standards for certain dimensions.

A similar confidence in the progress of the profession occurred for the younger practitioners and for those with less experience in the field. This may be youthful enthusiasm about the field. But it may also reflect formal education that has socialized the younger practitioner, instilling a faith in standards for educational preparation, technical expertise and confidence that a standard exists for the organizational status of public relations. Similar optimism about standards was found for minority practitioners rating technical skills, organizational status and salaries. Interestingly, the confidence in an agreed-upon standard is shared by those typically viewed as lacking power or status in organizations, younger practitioners and members of minorities.

Practical Implications

The consistent splits in opinion, combined with large neutral responses, suggest we are a long way from consensus or from confidence in any shared standards of professional performance. The findings intimate that recent training in public relations raises the sense that standards exist. Educators must build upon this apparent success in imparting a focus to recent graduates about performance standards. As a profession, public relations practitioners should look forward to the continued influx of practitioners actually trained in public relations who may carry a clearer sense of how to perform as professionals.

Clearly, the current sample included only a minority of practitioners formally schooled in public relations. The field should address this through continuing education and stronger publication in the trade journals of academic work that defines standards.

Further Research

The battery of performance items shows promise as a standardized means of monitoring progress of the public relations profession in establishing standards for an array of skills, conditions and states believed to reflect professionalism. The eight dimensions distilled from the instrument also offer a fairly comprehensive, graspable set of goals for professionalizing public relations. The eight dimensions should be the basis for programs and discussion of professionalism in the trade and academic literature. Future analyses should examine the impact of practitioners' backgrounds on their assessments of professional standards.

Given the promise of the battery to establish norms over time for professional progress, further reliability and validity testing could be undertaken in the course of replicating the current study. A separate study might be undertaken to refine the instrument derived here from the 60 interviews. However, given the extensive efforts in the qualitative phase of the current study, instrument refinement may not offer a noteworthy return on research investment. Probably more important is the need for surveying of professionals every several years to monitor trends in professionalism. Such surveys should include a weighted sample to capture larger numbers of important sub-groups such as African-American practitioners.

To conduct regular replications of the current instrument would enable time-series analysis and a closer look at patterns such as regional and youthful optimism about established standards. An important side-benefit would be to accord regular attention to professional performance standards in public relations similar to the focus on the annual salary survey done by PRSA.

Finally, a survey using the same instrument should be conducted with public relations educators to assess the views of this important factor in the promulgation of standards.

CONCLUSION

Using a more complete battery of items charting professional performance standards in public relations in a national survey of active practitioners revealed practitioners lack much conviction that standards are in place for most items. Further work is needed to fully encompass all aspects of professionalism and to monitor the field's progress toward a sense of shared standards.

APPENDIX A

The authors and graduate students gratefully acknowledge participation by individuals from these organizations during the interview phase of the current study:

ABOA Strategic Partnership—Scott Mall
AHA—Opal Jones
Alumax Corporation
Athens Area Technical Institute—Dr. Kenneth Eason
Athens Regional Medical Center—Mickey Montevideo
Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games—C. Richard Yarbrough
Atlanta Journal Constitution—Mae Gentry
Atlanta Marketing Center
Jim Beck
Bell South Corporation—Yolanda Thompson
Bell South Telecommunications—Richard Miles
Amanda Brown-Olmstead
Centers for Disease Control—Michael Siska
Bob Cohen
Columbus Technical Institute—Meri Robinson
Crawford W. Long Memorial Hospital—Debra Bloom
DeKalb Technical Institute—Rita Bass
Jay Downer
Duffey Communications—Lee Duffey
Egleston Childrens Hospital—Gail Eaton & Kelly Curran
Steve Ellis
Fieldale—Sammy Smith
Fleet Finance, Inc.
Fleishman Hillard—Rick Gove
French-American Chamber of Commerce—Leslie Perry Wingate
Georgia State University—Sandra Carnet
Georgia Technical University—Barry Walker
Gwinnett Hospital System—Cheryl Iverson
Medical College of Georgia—George Foster
University of Georgia—Tom Jackson
Goodwill Industries
Historical Preservation Foundation of North Carolina—J. Myrick Howard
H. J. Russell & Company—Connie Smith
Institute of Continuing Legal Education in Georgia—Barry Brannen, Jr.
U.S. Congressman Don Johnson's Office—John Blanchard
Kennestone Hospital—Lynn Weller
Ketchum Public Relations Worldwide—Jane Shivers
Lanier Technical Institute—Paula Newton
McCurdy & Chandler Law Firm—John Sammon
Morehouse College—Lillian Jackson

Northeast Georgia Medical Center—Cathy Bowers
Red Food Stores—William B. Stubbs III
Savannah Technical Institute—Lori Parnell
Southwire Communications
Spelman College—Andrea Ashmore
Hugo Taliaferro—retired professor
United Way—Misty Jay
United States Army—Barry Morris & David Phillips
Doug Verdier
West Georgia Technical Institute—Lorette McNeill
WSB Radio—Maria Taylor

NOTES

1. Both PRSA and IABC oversee and make money from professional accreditation programs for their members.
2. In these studies, mostly unpublished master's theses, indices of professionalism include, for example, membership and participation in professional societies, and readership of professional journals.
3. The following graduate students, enrolled in the public relations seminar taught by Ruth Ann Weaver Lariscy during spring quarter, 1993, conducted the depth interviews and provided their transcription: Mark Dorgan, Laura Fowler, Guerry Glover, Amy Higgins, Jaye Johnson, Ozlem Ocalan, Leslie Phillips, Karen Rodgers, Dan Smith, Michael Spillars, Kim Wilkes.
4. The following graduate students were enrolled in the public relations seminar taught by Ruth Ann Weaver Lariscy during the winter quarter, 1994, that developed and administered the survey: Francie Armstrong, Mike Bridgeman, Katrina Childers, Beth Flowers, Tracie Hickman, Jeannette Patient, Kirsten Polentz, Anthony Roake, Melissa Sims, Rebecca Thompson, Star Vanderhaar.

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