THE ANXIOUS PROFESSION:
A STUDY OF COMPETENCIES, QUALIFICATIONS, AND EDUCATION IN CANADIAN PUBLIC RELATIONS

By

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Abstract

Public relations’ anxiety in identifying as a specialized profession has been documented since its modern foundation in the early 20th century. One of the root causes of public relations’ anxiety is its lack of empirical and theory building knowledge, due in part to Canadian universities refusal to actively teach it at the undergraduate and graduate-level until the beginning of the 21st century. Through interviews with 22 leading practitioners and academics and a survey of 231 practitioners, this study provides an overview and insights into the current state of education, competencies, and accreditation in Canadian public relations. A consensus is found amongst practitioners and academics regarding the value of specialized education and strategic thinking skills for contemporary practitioners. A discernable skillset for public relations practitioners is also found and included in the curriculums of most of post-secondary programs. Despite this, public relations’ anxiety is evident within its accreditation and certification programs which after four decades remain unrecognized by the industry, practitioners, and academics. However, the recent growth of graduate-level public relations appears poised to alleviate public relations’ anxiety by offering practitioners access to internationally recognized credentials as well as contributing to the establishment of a theoretical and empirical foundation of knowledge for the practice.
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Declaration of Academic Achievement

I, Dustin Manley, declare this PCOM661 thesis to be my own work. I am the sole author of this document and no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication. Dr. Terence Flynn’s CPRF-funded research project, of which I was a research assistant for, provided a foundation for this thesis’ methodologies. Guidance at all stages of the research has been provided by my committee members Drs. Jennifer Walinga (Royal Roads) and Terence Flynn (McMaster), as well as Dr. Alex Sévigny (McMaster).

I alone have completed the research and bore all costs for this thesis. I was responsible for organizing, conducting, and transcribing all 22 interviews. I also created the online survey used to gather insights from Canadian practitioners; however, David Deschênes, my colleague at ETS Canada, translated the survey into French.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, my thesis does not infringe upon anyone’s copyright nor violate any proprietary rights and that any ideas, techniques, quotations, or any other material from the work of other people included in my thesis, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices of the American Psychological Association manual (sixth edition).
Author Note

The term “public relations” is used in this study to represent both public relations and communications management; it is not the author’s intent to conflate the two disciplines. As both disciplines are frequently discussed in the study, it would be ineffective and confusing to write out both terms in full. Additionally, when asked if there is a difference between public relations and communications management, most interviewees said that the two disciplines overlap and are now essentially the same.

Only the accreditation processes of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) are evaluated in this study.

Full disclosure: the author is a board member of CPRS Hamilton and a member of IABC Toronto. Membership in these associations has not influenced results found in this study.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. ii  
Descriptive Note................................................................................................. iii  
Declaration of Academic Achievement ............................................................... iv  
Author Note......................................................................................................... v  
Table of Contents............................................................................................... vi  
List of Tables and Charts................................................................................... vii  

Introduction ........................................................................................................ 1  
Literature Review.............................................................................................. 5  
  History and sociology of public relations as a profession in Canada .............. 6  
  Competencies and responsibilities of the public relations practitioner .......... 9  
    (i) overview of the competencies issue....................................................... 9  
    (ii) social media......................................................................................... 12  
    (iii) strategic thinking.............................................................................. 12  
  Post-secondary public relations programs in Canada .................................. 14  
  Accreditation in Canada.............................................................................. 17  
Methodology...................................................................................................... 20  
  Semi-structured interviews........................................................................ 20  
  Online survey.............................................................................................. 22  
Summary of Findings........................................................................................ 23  
  Semi-structured interviews........................................................................ 23  
    RQ1: Required core competencies........................................................... 23  
    RQ2: Post-secondary education............................................................... 26  
    RQ3: Accreditation.................................................................................. 30  
  Online practitioner survey........................................................................ 32  
  Strategic Thinking Questionnaire............................................................... 37  
Discussion.......................................................................................................... 38  
  Work autonomy and colleague control......................................................... 39  
  Cognitive base and institutionalized training.............................................. 43  
  Professional associations, licencing, and code of ethics............................. 46  
Conclusions........................................................................................................ 49  
  Limitations.................................................................................................... 49  
  Recommendations for future research......................................................... 50  
References......................................................................................................... 51  

# List of Tables
Table 1. Core competencies and skills in public relations
Table 2. Description of strategic thinking skills
Table 3. List of interview participants
Table 4. Practitioner salaries by education level
Table 5. Practitioner salaries by experience and education
Table 6. Salary by accreditation and experience level
Table 7. STQ scores compared against benchmarks in validation study
Table 8. STQ scores and education level of 231 Canadian practitioners
Table 6. STQ scores and education level

List of Figures

Figure 1. Timeline of public relations university programs in Canada
Figure 2. Salary comparison between men and women
Introduction

Public relations’ status as a profession in Canada and internationally is a heavily contested and debated topic that speaks to a number of issues plaguing the field since the early 1920s. These issues include its fragmentation through sub-disciplines (e.g., corporate communications, crisis communications, public affairs, media relations); negative reputation with the public; lack of support for the accreditation process amongst practitioners and employers; and public relations’ struggle to find a place within the executive role of organizations. Despite these issues the public relations industry in Canada has experienced significant growth in employment and university education during the past 20 years. That growth, impressive though it is, does not assuage an industry that is still coming to terms with these problems.

As a result public relations remains insecure and anxious in claiming its status as a profession. This “anxiety” is a complex quality and defined here as something owing to multiple and convergent factors. This anxiety is the product of a self-consciousness within the industry and among practitioners about public relations’ professional identity; a certain scepticism within the executive function of organizations, and in the public at large as to the value of public relations; a reluctance to teach and study public relations as the university level during the 20th century; and a yet-to-be realized standard for accrediting competent professionals or for measuring the results of the work they do. This anxiety, a theme that preoccupied public relations’ intellectual founders like Edward Bernays and Harold Lasswell at the field’s very origins in the first decades of the 20th century, thus offers a productive point of entry into the nature and development of public relations in the early 21st century. Through this theme of anxiety that we can witness the field at its most introspective, as public relation’s best
practitioners turn their traditional interests in reputation, messaging, and brand management on the discipline itself.

For the past 20 years, the public relations industry has been anxious to establish itself as a profession outside the auspices of marketing and media relations tactics. In many respects it has succeeded. As demonstrated from the doubling of employment from 23,780 to 54,703 between 1991 and 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2013) and 12 university programs (Figure 1) established since 2003, Canadian organizations are hiring public relations practitioners with increased skillsets and capacities for strategic thinking and leadership. Furthermore, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) is preparing to launch a public relations certification program that complies with the standards of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). All of this suggests, and was supported by survey results and interviews with seasoned practitioners and academics, that public relations is increasingly recognized by executives as a strategic management function which contributes to the business objectives and bottom line of Canadian organizations.

Sociologists have defined and characterized professions using Durkheim’s functionalist model by identifying the key traits that differentiate professions from occupations. Through the framework of the functionalist trait theory, a profession possesses the following characteristics: "professional association, cognitive base, institutionalized training, licensing, work autonomy, colleague control... [and] code of ethics” (Larson, 1978, p. 208). In Canada, the public relations industry has gained most of these characteristics, albeit to varying degrees. Additionally public relations desire for professional status in Canada, and its recent growth in employment and post-secondary education is indicative of Freidson’s sociological power theory. Despite these professional accomplishments in public relations there is a paucity of published empirical and
historical research in Canada to properly support it as a profession. Most available evidence--
including its recent growth in employment and education--is primarily perceived as anecdotal,
and takes the form of “hunches, guesswork, and ‘gut feelings’” or spin (Piekos and Einsidel,
1991, p. 1). This type of self-doubt among practitioners has contributed to public relations being
deemed as a tactical luxury within organizations, and impaired its reputation within the public
throughout much of its 100-year history.

There is a marked lack of empirical and theory-building scholarship in Canada
demonstrating public relations’ growth as a profession, and several probable reasons for the
absence one of which being the lack of research-based graduate programs. For over 60 years
public relations was taught as a tactical function within Canadian community colleges, and not
strongly present as a curriculum at more research-oriented universities. Organizations such as the
Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA), Communications +
Public Relations Foundation (CPRF), and the Luc Beauregard Centre of Excellence in
Communications Research, and the Chair in Public Relations and Marketing Communication
provide research and funding opportunities, but these have generated relatively few publications.
Despite the opportunity for public relations research in Canada, the most recent seminal study on
competencies and responsibilities in public relations was published in an American periodical in
1991 (Piekos & Einsidel); however, the Canadian Journal of Communication will be publishing
a manuscript by Dr. Terence Flynn in late 2014. The 2011 creation of the McMaster University-
based Journal of Professional Communication signalled a new seriousness relating to Canadian
public relations and communication management scholarship within the professional, academic,
and public spheres, but the Journal’s capacity to contribute to a research profile for public
relations in Canada has only just begun.
In response to market demand and defined against the relative absence of empirical and theory-based academic research relating to public relations’ growth in Canada, the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) has provided a relatively large amount of scholarship relating to professional accreditation, ethics, and education in the country. In 2011, the CPRS released the *Pathways to the Profession* policy document to assist post-secondary institutions in structuring their curriculums to ensure students are entering the profession with a strong foundation in technical skills, liberal arts, and communication theory. Following the *Pathways* document the CPRS introduced the Public Relations Knowledge (PRK) exam in 2013 for new graduates of undergraduate and post-graduate programs. The PRK exam was designed as a national benchmark of novice practitioners’ workplace readiness through the evaluation of their public relations skills, competencies, theory, ethics, and strategic thinking.

For over 40 years, the CPRS and IABC have offered accreditation (i.e., ABC, APR) as a signifier of an intermediate and seasoned practitioner’s ethical conduct and proficiency. Both the IABC and CPRS state that accreditation is important to the professionalization of public relations but offer little evidence to support this claim. However, less than 1.5% of all practitioners in Canada have earned these designations and few employers are requesting them (CPRS, 2013; IABC, 2009). Additionally, there are few third-party empirical studies examining the differences in proficiency, strategic thinking, and ethical conduct between accredited and non-accredited members that do not have high risks of confirmation bias (e.g. Sha, 2010). In order to demonstrate the tangible and professional value of accreditation an empirical body of knowledge needs to be established.

The growing employment and university-level education in Canadian public relations is promising for the professionalization of the field and pedagogy. However, as it stands Canadian
public relations appears to be simply reacting to industry demands instead of directly addressing the issues affecting its status as a profession. Through a mixed methodology research design this study examines the discernable competencies, university-level education, and accreditation systems that help define public relations as a profession in Canada. Empirical and theoretical knowledge of these characteristics is at the root of understanding what kind of profession public relations is, where it is in its development, and why it is inherently anxious in claiming its status as a profession. By establishing what public relations is as a form of knowledge, examining the institutions and programs where that knowledge is taught, and evaluating the prospects for certifying that knowledge through accreditation, this thesis contributes to easing the anxiety that inhibits its development for those practitioners, scholars, and students who would otherwise be confident to call public relations a profession.

**Literature review**

A primary professional trait which the Canadian public relations industry lacks is a “cognitive base” (Larson, 1978, p. 208). Canada’s empirical and theoretical contribution to the practice and pedagogy of public relations is minor in comparison to countries like the United States and the United Kingdom. Seminal theories of public relations developed by international scholars such as Glen Broom (practitioner roles; 1986), Robert Heath (strategic issues management; 1997), and James Grunig (four models approach; 1984) are taught in Canadian post-secondary programs and have advanced public relations as a professional strategic management function in organizations worldwide. However, despite the lack of empirical and theoretical contributions to global scholarship Canada played a significant role in the evolution of modern public relations.

Although his contribution is overshadowed in historical literature by American pioneers
like Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays, William Lyon McKenzie King, before serving as Canada’s Prime Minister for 22 years, played an important role in shaping the history of modern public relations. While working as counsel for John D. Rockefeller during 1914-1919, King left an indelible mark on public relations by using an early model of two-way symmetrical communication to significantly enhance labour and community relations (Hallahan, 2003, p. 410). In a 1914 magazine profile King denounced business leaders for their mistreatment of employees: “one of their leaders writes you a letter, and you do not answer it, and you expect to meet them on a plane of sweet reasonableness” (King, 1914, p. 763). Both the CPRS (2008) and Public Relation Society of America (PRSA, 2012) echo King’s view of public relations as a strategic management function used to achieve mutual understanding and to serve the public good. Unfortunately King’s role as a pioneer in the history of modern public relations is not highlighted in most literature or textbooks, and as a result even most Canadians are unaware of his contributions to the profession.

McKenzie King saw public relations as an organizational function to serve the public good and Ivy Lee helped to establish the traits used in the practice. These historical precedents, with regard to function and traits, encourage the use of the functionalist and trait theories of professions in this study to better understand to what extent public relations is a profession in Canada. The trait and functional theories were dominant perspectives in thinking about the nature of professions and professional practices for much of the 20th century, and continue to benchmark the professionalization of industries including education, engineering, accounting, and social work (Evett, 2003, p. 407).

**History and sociology of public relations as a profession in Canada**

The sociological functionalist and trait models of professions are concerned with defining
the characteristics of a profession and the role they play in society (Hewitt et al., 2007, p. 6). The primary difference between the two theories is that the trait model provides a description of a profession’s qualifications while the functionalist model provides an explanation for the role professions fulfill in society (Quigley, 2011, p. 22). The literature suggests that the classic professions of medicine, law, and clergy act as a benchmark against which all other occupations seeking professional status compare themselves and their traits (Hewitt et al., 2007, p.4).

Public relations meets a number of the criteria qualifying it as a profession as outlined in the trait model. Public relations has professional associations (e.g., CPRS and IABC); university-level training (there are post-secondary programs, including graduate degree programs, across Canada); increasing responsibilities (notably as public relations becomes a strategic management function); and a non-binding code of ethics (notably developed through the CPRS and IABC). In the functionalist model there is a relationship between a profession’s traits and its relationship to society. Medicine and law are two prime examples where professions “strike a bargain with society” in which they exchange the provision of high standards of competency and integrity for “protection against unqualified competition as well as substantial remuneration and higher social status” (Quigley, 2011, p. 23). The case for the functionalist model in public relations has been argued as early as the 1920s by individuals such as Harold Lasswell and Edward Bernays.

The trait and functionalist models were the dominant sociological theories of professions until the emergence of the power approach in the 1970s; however, the trait theory remains influential in the sociology of professions (Burns, 2007, p. 70). The power approaches state that the motivation for occupations to seek professional status is rooted in self-interest (e.g., occupational security, increased social status, authority, large salaries) rather than altruism and public service as the trait and functional approaches posit.
The power approach is largely attributed to Eliot Freidson who researched how occupations secure and maintain dominance in their area of practice when threatened by competing occupations and political and social institutions (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008, p. 282). According to Freidson a profession has a monopoly over their area of practice and content of work due to the underlying beliefs that the practice is specialized and inaccessible to those without proper training and experience, and that the practice cannot be standardized or commodified (Freidson, 2001, p. 17). The gatekeeping of resources, information, and clients is identified as an activity many professions engage in to maintain dominance in their practice. Journalism has played a significant gatekeeping role of the public relations function since the early 1900s.

Public relations’ anxiety as a profession has been a recurring theme since the early 1920s. In his article, “The Function of the Propagandist” Lasswell highlights the democratic public’s misunderstanding of public relations, seeing it “as an epithet of contempt and hate” (1928, p. 260). In response to this negative connotation practitioners were shielding themselves by adopting titles such as “public relations council…specialist…advisor” much as contemporary practitioners do today with titles in communication (p.261). Using the functionalist model, Lasswell nonetheless situated public relations as a profession which serves the public interest and is in similar standing to professions such as law (p. 268).

As was the case in 1928, one of the primary issues plaguing public relations as a profession is its negative reputation perceived by the public. Lasswell attempts to dismiss the public’s contempt of public relations by writing that it “is no more moral or immoral than a pump handle” (1928, p. 264). This is of course an overly naïve statement as there is an extensive historical record of the abuse of power through public relations throughout the 20th century.
While Lasswell attempted to publically frame public relations through the functionalist model in his article, his insistence that public relations is a specialized practice which will gain equal cultural standing or, become assimilated, with the practice of law is evident of the power approach to professionalization (p. 264).

Public relations meets many of the characteristics required of professions as outlined in the trait perspectives, a number of which were achieved during the past two decades. Even the Government of Canada defines public relations as a “professional occupation” (Statistics Canada, 2014). Despite this public relations appears be as anxious in establishing its status as a profession as it was in the 1920s. Through this anxiety public relations’ approach is characteristic of the power approach to professionalization rather than the rationale of the functionalist model. This is evident through public relations’ claims of being a specialized strategic management function as well as an increase in influence through journalism’s diminishing gatekeeper role. The professional traits that public relations has made the most significant advances in—establishing a discernable set of competencies, university education, and accreditation—are examined to determine where public relations currently is in its development as a profession and how it is working to secure this status.

**Competencies and responsibilities of the public relations practitioner**

(i) Overview of the competencies issue

One of the primary issues public relations faces as a profession is a lack of a documented and unique skillset. The largest shift in public relations competencies and responsibilities over the past two decades is the demand for practitioners to utilize objective research methods and quantitative evaluations in their activities; with these methods and evaluations, practitioners can then demonstrate their contribution to their organizations’ business objectives and bottom lines.
(Watson & Noble, 2005; Gregory, 2008; Jeffrey & Brunton, 2010; Grunig, 2011). Canada’s last seminal study on roles and competencies in public relations focused on this shift and determined that practitioners were “not yet ready to apply [empirical research and evaluation] in their work” (1990, p. 108); however, a manuscript by Dr. Terence Flynn is currently in press with the Canadian Journal of Communication will provide additional insights on this. Research and evaluation techniques are often mandatory courses in Canadian public relations curriculums as employers are demanding these skills (CPRS, 2011, p. 217). Formal education and training in research methodologies and evaluation provided by colleges and universities may increase the overall effectiveness of public relations activities.

A number of recent international studies have determined that the core competencies public relations practitioners require are writing, research and evaluation, application of theory (e.g. RACE, two-way symmetrical), strategic communication, issues management, and resource management (Tench et al., 2013, p.29; Global Alliance, 2012, p. 12). The number of recent studies attempting to define the required competencies and skills required in public relations is indicative of the changing professional nature of the field, and its awareness of its lack of a discernable skillset. It should be noted that most competency-based studies, including this study, also entail skills and knowledge. Anne Gregory’s (2008) following definitions of terms are used in this study:

Knowledge: what practitioners need to know in order to undertake their role competently.

Skills: what practitioners need to be able to do to undertake their role competently.

Competencies: behaviour repertoires or sets of behaviours that support the attainment of organizational objectives. How knowledge and skills are used in performance (p. 216).

An overview of the leading skills, competencies, and knowledge highlighted in recent
significant studies as requirements for practitioners can be found in the table below:

Table 1

**Core competencies and skills in public relations**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leading and deciding</td>
<td>Client reputation management</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Research and evaluation</td>
<td>Counselling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting and cooperating</td>
<td>Relationship management</td>
<td>Critical/strategic thinking</td>
<td>Application of theory</td>
<td>Organizing and executing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interacting and presenting</td>
<td>Persuasive communication</td>
<td>Research and evaluation</td>
<td>Strategic communication</td>
<td>Managing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing and interpreting</td>
<td>Evaluation management</td>
<td>Business acumen</td>
<td>Issues management</td>
<td>Performing and creating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating and conceptualizing</td>
<td>Environmental monitoring</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Writing and presentations</td>
<td>Analysing and interpreting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing and executing</td>
<td>Socially responsible communication</td>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>Resource management</td>
<td>Supporting and guiding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapting and coping</td>
<td></td>
<td>Results/time-oriented</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enterprising and performing</td>
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There are few discrepancies between the required competencies, skills, and knowledge determined by most recent studies. However, there are a number of emerging skills and competencies, such as social media management and an understanding of business, that novice and intermediate practitioners are expected to possess. A number of studies have pointed out that while executives are aware of the organizational value of public relations, relatively few public relations practitioners become executive officers; this lack of professional mobility to the executive tier is another issue facing the professionalization of public relations. Public relations practitioners are not as common at the executive level because they don’t possess high-level and broad business skills in areas such as finance, marketing, and human resources (Gregory, 2008, p. 216; Moss et al., 2000; Murray & White, 2005). Fortunately, the majority of applied diploma
and degree programs in Canada are working to solve this issue by including business foundation courses in their curriculums.

(ii) social media

Social media provides contemporary public relations with an unprecedented opportunity to quantitatively measure communication activity and demonstrate a strong return-on-investment to their organizations. In addition to measurement opportunities social media has been a significant game-changer in public relations, and as Deirdre Breakenridge wrote, may have “put the public back in public relations” (Breakenridge, 2008). In a competencies-based study of five multi-national corporations (Phillips, Allianz, Enel, Novo Nordisk, Petrobas) the Global Alliance concluded that the “measurement of the effectiveness of PR activities, particularly ‘share of voice’ metrics, is now established as a necessary commitment” (Global Alliance, 2012, p.7) for public relations practitioners. Recent studies by Theaker (2008) and the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (2007) determined that seasoned and executive-level practitioners do not either actively use, or have a strong knowledge of social media. Employers expect novice and intermediate-level practitioners are expected by employers to be proficient in social media and these skills are provided by post-secondary education.

(iii) strategic thinking

Strategic thinking is an emerging competency highlighted as a prerequisite for public relations practitioners in the majority of recent studies (CPRS 2011, p. 21; Global Alliance, 2012, p. 12; Green, 2007, p. 124; Jeffrey & Brunton, 2010, p. 204). The concept of strategic thinking is found in communication job titles, names of organizations, and post-secondary education curriculums. Despite its prevalence in the public relations lexicon, there is a lack of literature defining what exactly strategic thinking is and how it relates to the field of public
relations. This study uses Dr. John Pisapia’s concept of strategic thinking as a leadership skill which allows an individual to suspend critical judgment, search for new ideas and insights, recognize patterns, and adapt to change (Pisapia et al., 2011, p. 2). In order to empirically evaluate leaders’ abilities to think strategically Pisapia created the Strategic Thinking Questionnaire (STQ). The STQ measures a leader’s strategic capability through the dimensions of systems thinking, reflection, and reframing—each a crucial function in public relations and communications management (Grunig et al., 2002, pp. 93, 265).

Table 2

Description of strategic thinking skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Thinking Skills</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Systems Thinking</td>
<td>System thinking refers to the leader’s ability to see systems holistically by understanding the properties, forces, patterns and interrelationships that shape the behaviour of the system, which hence provides options for action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Reflecting means the ability to weave logical and rational thinking, through the use of perceptions, experience and information, to make judgments on what has happened, and creation of intuitive principles that guide future actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reframing</td>
<td>Reframing refers to the leader’s ability to switch attention across multiple perspectives, frames, mental modes, and paradigms to generate new insights and options for actions.</td>
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</table>

This is the first study to use the STQ with public relations practitioners. Previous applications of the STQ focused on professionals such as university professors and managers at profit and non-profit multinational organizations (Pisapia & Reyes-Guerra, 2014, p. 4). The STQ was chosen because the dimensions of strategic thinking are highly relevant to public relations: systems thinking reflects the holistic organizational analysis; reflection is found in issues and crisis management; and reframing reflects the need for public relations to gain insights and perspectives from all departments of an organization. This study examines whether the market
demand for practitioners with strategic thinking is a primary reason for the recent shift of public relations education from colleges to universities.

**Post-secondary public relations programs in Canada**

Applied education in public relations has been delivered by colleges in Canada for over 60 years; however, during the past decade there has been a shift towards university-level education. While recent, this shift to university training is indicative of professional growth. In September 2014 there will be 14 applied public relation and communication degree programs in Canada. This is a significant rise from the three programs available in 2003, and the one program available from 1977 to 1996. However, as a result of many factors including the recent establishment of university-level education, there is a paucity of peer-reviewed studies examining the history of public relations education in Canada. Much of the information used to establish a background of post-secondary programs in Canada in this study was gleaned from university websites, interviews, and internal documents. The relationship between the market demand for practitioners with specific competencies like strategic thinking and the rise of university-level public relations education is examined to provide further insight into the Canadian field.

The following Canadian post-secondary institutions have established public relations and professional communication degree programs since 1996:

- Royal Roads University (MBA, 1999; BAPC; 2003; MAPC, 2004)
- Mount Saint Vincent University (MPR, 2006)
- McMaster University (MCM, 2007)
- Mount Royal University (BCPR, 2008); University of Ottawa (BPR, 2010)
- Conestoga College (BPR, 2011)
Canada’s first public relations degree program was established at Mount Saint Vincent University in 1977 (MSVU, 2013). Mount Saint Vincent’s bachelor of public relations (BPR) program stemmed partly from a need recognized by CPRS which demonstrated that “university-educated [public relations] professionals would be in high demand in the latter half of the 20th century” (MSVU, 2013). Canada’s next degree programs were established in 1996 at Université du Québec à Montréal (Bachelor of Arts in Public Relations) and Royal Roads University (Bachelor of Arts in Applied Communication, now Bachelor of Arts in Professional Communication). This large growth in post-secondary education is indicative of a pedagogical
recognition of public relations as a function in business and society. The doubling of employment in public relations from 1991 to 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2013) is a significant factor in the growth of formal education in the field to supply the growing market.

It is important for recent graduates of public relations programs to have a strong foundation in technical skills and communications theory. The majority of college diploma and post-graduate programs emphasized technical skills while omitting traditional liberal-arts education in order to meet the demands of the industry (Flynn & Sévigny, 2009, p. 7). With employers now requiring competencies such as strategic thinking from new hires, the CPRS published the *Pathways to the Profession* policy document to provide a new framework for post-secondary public relations programs to include in their curriculums. That framework defined career progress in public relations through the following pathways: technical, career, management, leadership, and scholar (CPRS, 2011, p. 223). The influence of the CPRS’ *Pathways to the Profession* document is evident in a number of new and proposed degree programs.

A subject not discussed at length in the *Pathways* document is ethical education and conduct (CPRS, 2011, p. 226). The lack of ethical education is noted by Patricia Parsons who writes “ethics has often been touted in PR’s educational literature as something that ‘ought’ to be addressed. However, there is little consensus about what, how, when, and by whom it ought to be taught” (2013, p. 18). A 2004 study of Canadian college and university public relations programs found that “only three of nine programs offered a stand-alone course [in ethics], and only two of those were mandatory for graduation” (Parsons, 2013, p. 19). Several degree programs have been established since 2004 so there may be additional stand-alone ethics courses.

Following the *Pathways to the Profession* document the CPRS introduced the Public
Relations Knowledge (PRK) exam in 2013 to provide hiring managers with further insights into a candidate’s competencies. The PRK exam evaluates a candidate’s “workplace readiness and strategic analysis” as well as their grasp of “public relations history, theory and concepts, and the fundamentals of practice” (CPRS, 2013) and workplace ethics. As of publication, there is no published literature evaluating employer use and industry recognition of the PRK exam.

**Accreditation in Canada**

This study examines, among other factors significant to defining public relations as a profession, how accreditation in public relations (APR) or business communications (ABC)—designations possessed by less than 1.5% of Canada’s 54,703 practitioners—are recognized as practitioner competency benchmarks and influence the professional perception of the industry. The two primary accrediting bodies in Canadian public relations and communications are the CPRS and IABC. The first iteration of the CPRS was established in 1949 and implemented the Accredited in Public Relations (APR) designation process in 1968 (CPRS, 2013); it has 1,700 members, 487 of which are accredited (CPRS, 2013). Established in 1970, IABC Canada has a membership over 4,500 of which 306 are accredited (IABC, 2009). The Institute of Communication Agencies (ICA) established in 1905 offers the Communications and Advertising Accredited Professional (CAAP) designation; however, a literature and information search on the CAAP’s recognition and value in the Canadian industry yielded few results.

In order to be eligible for accreditation individuals must be members in good standing of the accrediting body and have a minimum of five years professional experience. An application for the APR designation requires the applicant to be a CPRS member and must include at least two letters of reference from APR accredited practitioners (CPRS, 2012, p. 10). The three-part accreditation process for the APR involves submitting a work sample as well as undergoing a
written and oral examination. To earn the APR designation a candidate must receive an overall evaluation of 65%.

The IABC and CPRS state that accreditation is important to the industry and practitioners as the designations signify high levels of skill, professionalism, credibility, and ethical conduct (CPRS, 2013; IABC, 2013). For employers and practitioners it is important to identify tangible benefits of accreditation “beyond a sense of personal accomplishment and commitment to the field” such as higher salaries or promotion rates amongst practitioners who earn them (Sha, 2010, p. 2). A survey of relevant literature did not find a strong correlation between accreditation and salary or whether the designations are significant hiring differentiators for employers. As a signifier of competency some studies have shown that, accredited practitioners are more effective in categories such as account management, strategic planning, project management, and issues/crisis management (Sha, 2010, p.10). However, it is important to note that many studies attempting to demonstrate the value of accreditation are led or funded by accrediting organizations or their board members, as is the case with Sha’s (2010). Additional third-party studies will need to be conducted to determine if there is an empirical difference in competencies between accredited and non-accredited practitioners.

While ABC and APR designations are the most commonly used in North American public relations, organizations such as the Global Alliance encourage the development of a global standard (Global Alliance, 2007, p. 1). The IABC is planning to pilot a new professional certification program in 2014 to provide public relations with an international designation similar to those used by other professions, including accountants, financial planners, pathologists, and business managers (IABC, 2014). The IABC’s clearly used the power model in its rationale on why public relations deserves professional status. It should be noted that these other professions,
listed by IABC as examples of areas of endeavour with formal accreditation or other signifiers of competency for the sake of comparison, were not long ago in the same anxious position as public relations. Additionally, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is considering transitioning the APR accreditation to a professional certification in response to decreased membership and criticism of the existing process (PRSA, 2013, slide 28). The PRSA may also allow the APR designation process to become available to non-members, similar to what the CPRS has done with the PRK exam (PRSA, 2013, slide 23). Opening the accreditation and/or certification process to non-association members may increase the perceived legitimacy of the designations, and potentially the practice of public relations.

Through the examination of 16 international credentialing associations including the CPRS and IABC Canada, the Global Alliance found that the majority of public relations associations share the same core competencies and hold their members to a code of professional standards and ethical behaviour (Global Alliance, 2007). A common argument is that although CPRS and IABC have members sign into a code of ethical conduct, they are unable to enforce them. Violation of the code of ethics and professional standards may result in being stripped of accreditation and membership; however, since public relations and professional communications are not licenced professions this does not impede the unethical individual’s ability to continue practicing. In July 2014 the Global Alliance announced an initiative to work with 19 public relations and communications management associations, and employers around the world to “lay the foundations for professional recognition of public relations and communications management across the world” through globally recognized and accepted credentials (Global Alliance, 2014).

Public relations pioneer Edward Bernays insisted that public relations will not become a profession with a reputation of “credibility, efficiency and authority” unless it becomes certified
or licenced (Valin, 2005). The practice of government regulation and licencing of public
relations is active in Brazil, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, and Puerto Rico (Sha, 2010, p. 2). Research
in Nigeria indicates that licensure has arguably “enhanced the prestige and legitimacy of the
profession” (Molleda & Alhassan, 2006, p. 66). While licensure is unlikely to happen in Canada
or the United States in the near future, certification will likely occur through the IABC. It was
also recommended by the Organizational Performance Group that the PRSA open the APR to
non-members and establish an entry-level credential, a step which the CPRS has taken with the
PRK exam (PRSA, 2013, slide 23).

Methodology

This study used a mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) cross-sectional research
design to identify current trends and attitudes in the practice and education of Canadian public
relations. A mixed methodology is ideal for this study as “the use of quantitative and qualitative
approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either
approach alone” (Cresswell, 2006, p.5).

The methods include:
1. 22 one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 22 Canadian practitioners and academics.
2. 231 responses from an online demographic survey and Strategic Thinking Questionnaire.

Semi-structured Interviews

Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with seasoned public relations
practitioners and scholars. The interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes and were facilitated by
the researcher, Dustin Manley. Most of the interviews were conducted in-person across four
provinces (Vancouver, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec) and eight cities; three interviews were
conducted over telephone or Skype. Each participant signed a consent form allowing the sessions
to be recorded and 19 allowed their names to be used in this study. The researcher, Dustin Manley was responsible for recording and transcribing each interview.

Interview participants were recruited through email with a snowball sample of contacts from professors at Royal Roads University, McMaster University, and the CPRS. Participants included 12 practitioners and 10 academics with at least 10 years of experience; the interviewees represented a variety of professional backgrounds including university administration, government (federal and provincial), policing, consulting, journalism, and research. Fifteen participants were male and seven were female.

Table 3

List of interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joe Couto</td>
<td>Director of Government Relations</td>
<td>2013/09/11</td>
<td>32:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barry Waite</td>
<td>Program Coordinator and Professor</td>
<td>2013/09/17</td>
<td>56:01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Centennial College</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginny Jones</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>2013/09/18</td>
<td>47:57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-CPRS Hamilton and Acuity Options</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Pullen</td>
<td>Manager of Public Relations</td>
<td>2013/09/18</td>
<td>38:30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Hamilton Health Sciences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine Schryer</td>
<td>Professor and Chair</td>
<td>2013/09/19</td>
<td>31:28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Ryerson University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia Parsons</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>2013/09/23</td>
<td>29:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Mount Saint Vincent University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew Anderson</td>
<td>Wildfire Information Officer</td>
<td>2013/09/27</td>
<td>36:04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Government of Alberta</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atul Sharma</td>
<td>Vice President and Deputy Group Leader</td>
<td>2013/10/03</td>
<td>28:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Hill+Knowlton Strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Tisch</td>
<td>President and CEO</td>
<td>2013/10/07</td>
<td>38:44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Argyle Communications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernard Motulsky</td>
<td>Professor and Chair of Public Relations</td>
<td>2013/10/15</td>
<td>20:05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Université du Québec à Montréal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Valin</td>
<td>Director-General (retired)</td>
<td>2013/11/06</td>
<td>49:22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Government of Canada</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Laing</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>2013/11/06</td>
<td>32:51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Cormex Research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Online survey

An online survey including a demographic and Strategic Thinking Questionnaire (STQ) was completed by 231 Canadian practitioners. The survey was created using LimeSurvey software and was hosted on the Royal Roads University website. The 2013-14 CPRS membership directory was used to send the survey to its 1,700 members. Email invitations were sent using a token system to ensure that only the intended recipient could access the survey.

Factoring in approximately 200 maternity and vacation-leave bounce-backs there was a response rate of 14.7%. An open survey was promoted through CPRS, IABC, and Twitter but only received 12 full responses. The total survey response rate was 20.9% but 94 of the surveys were incomplete and therefore not used. The survey was available in both English and French to accommodate practitioners in Quebec and New Brunswick. Each respondent agreed to a consent form in order to participate in the survey. Of the available responses 92 participants were male and 134 were female. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 85 with an average age of 50.

The demographic questionnaire included forced-choice questions relating to variables including province/territory, sector, industry, experience level, education, accreditation, and salary. This information was gathered to provide a broad representation of public relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position and Affiliation</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Josh Greenberg</td>
<td>Associate Director and Professor - Carleton University</td>
<td>2013/11/07</td>
<td>46:32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Workman</td>
<td>Associate Faculty, Royal Roads University</td>
<td>2013/11/26</td>
<td>15:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie Houley</td>
<td>Senior Communications Officer, CBC Edmonton</td>
<td>2013/11/28</td>
<td>24:52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy Gombita</td>
<td>Co-content editor - PR Conversations</td>
<td>2013/12/13</td>
<td>52:42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex Sévigny</td>
<td>Director of Professional Communication programs - McMaster University</td>
<td>2014/01/07</td>
<td>47:23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ira Basen</td>
<td>Senior Producer; Instructor - CBC Toronto; McMaster University</td>
<td>2014/01/14</td>
<td>33:42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda Andross</td>
<td>President; Immediate Past President - APEX PR; IABC Toronto</td>
<td>2014/02/06</td>
<td>33:29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
practitioners currently practicing in Canada.

The Strategic Thinking Questionnaire (STQ) was included in the survey to measure how contemporary practitioners use the cognitive skills of systems thinking, reflection, and reframing in their daily practice. Permission to use the STQ was provided by Dr. John Pisapia, professor at the Florida Atlantic University in the United States. Strategic thinking is a crucial function in public relations management, highlighted in job titles and taught in university programs (Grunig et al., 2002, pp. 93, 265). This is the first study to use the STQ with public relations practitioners.

Summary of findings

The key research questions asked of the interviewees will be used to organize that portion of the findings section, as indicated below, that derives from the 22 interviews with practitioners and academics.

Interviews

**RQ1: What are the industry required core competencies, skills, and qualifications of practitioners?**

The essential skills and competencies novice (0-2 years) and intermediate (3-5 years) practitioners require to succeed in public relations are as follows: writing, graphic and web design, research and evaluation, strategic thinking, business acumen, and social media. Most of these findings are similar to the competencies outlined in most recent international studies (Gregory, 2008, p. 18; Jeffrey & Brunton, 2010, p. 204; Global Alliance, 2012, p. 29; Tench et al. 2013, p. 29). Seasoned practitioners noted that the core competencies of public relations had not significantly changed over the past two decades; rather, the tools and technology available to practitioners had significantly increased. New competencies such as social media, as well as graphic and web design are generally expected from newcomers but not seasoned practitioners.
Post-secondary institutions have acknowledged these market expectations of newcomers and now include training social media management and graphic/web design in their curriculums (CPRS, 2011, p. 217). However graduate programs at Royal Roads, McMaster, and Mount Saint Vincent provide specialized education in these emerging competencies for mid-career and seasoned practitioners. While the basic competencies of the public relations practitioner have not significantly changed, the emergence of social media, advent of big data, and democratization of technology--the process of technology becoming more accessible and affordable to general society--have magnified their role within organizations.

Social media’s most significant effect on public relations is that it has led to a shortening of time. Before social media, practitioners were able to take the time to assess an issue and plan a strategy that could adapt to the situation. Social media has also contributed to a blurring between the lines of internal and external communication, and by extension, communications and public relations (H. Pullen, personal communication, September 18, 2013). When a CEO is communicating to their staff or stakeholders through social media or email, they are communicating to the world.

New practitioners are expected to be proficient in emerging competencies such as graphic and web design--not necessarily experts. Before the democratization of technology analog communications technology (e.g. video, photography, audio) required extensive technical training and education. A recent Ipsos Reid poll showed that close to 47% of Canadians own smartphones providing users with constant access to social media and quality intuitive cameras and audio-recorders (Ipsos Reid, 2013). With relatively affordable and user-friendly tools like smartphones and DSLRs new practitioners are able to shoot basic photographs and video, edit them in programs like the Adobe Creative Suite, and publish them to a webpage or news release.
The technology allows organizations to produce a quality product using only basic tools and proficiency.

Proficiency in quantitative research and evaluation is more significant than ever as organizations are demanding increased accountability from practitioners. The advent of big data has led to the “perceived increase in the value of quantitative data” and public relations is increasingly pressured to provide measurable results on their activities (A. Sharma, personal communication, October 3, 2013). However, similar to Peikos’ (1991) findings, while data gleaned from media like social media are “affording [public relations] a greater opportunity to have some big data…at the end of the day we’re still not there” (M. Houley, personal communication, November 28, 2013). Andrew Laing, president of Cormex Research, noted that while there is an increase in the use of metrics in public relations few practitioners have a strong understanding of research methodologies. As a result, many practitioners are creating data sets composed of unreliable sources. “So you see more of it, more use of metrics, and less understanding of it. Eight miles wide, one inch deep” (A. Laing, personal communication, November 6, 2013). To combat this university, particularly graduate, programs in public relations are educating students in measurement and analysis so they are able to effectively demonstrate the value of their work to an organization’s business goals and bottom line.

Understanding how public relations contributes to an organization’s business objectives and financial bottom line is a requirement for all practitioners. The curriculums of applied post-secondary degree programs include courses in areas such as human resources, marketing, finance, and advertising to ensure that new practitioners are entering the workforce with this mindset (B. Waite, personal communication, September 17, 2013). Strong business acumen is important for public relations to establish “credibility” at the executive-level and demonstrate
strategic value to organizations (H. Pullen, personal communication, September 18, 2013). To increase the recognition of public relations as a strategic management function and produce more executive communication officers, practitioners require a strong understanding of business. Fortunately universities and colleges have recognized this and are providing contemporary practitioners with the business education they require.

In addition to business acumen, practitioners must possess strategic thinking mindsets to become leaders in both the field and their organizations. Strategic thinking is what “separates a journeyperson from a leader in public relations” (D. Tisch, personal communication, October 7, 2013). A strategic thinking mindset composed of systems thinking, reflection, and reframing is identified in a number of public relations theories such as the RACE (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation) and two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig et al., 2002, pp. 93, 265). The addition of strategic thinking to public relations curriculums at post-secondary institutions is a response to parallel transition in organizations, one where public relations is recognized as a strategic and not merely tactical function. This modification of curriculums is notably evident in the university public relations programs, given their mandate to encourage critical and liberal thought. While one to two-year college programs primarily “train you to do specific tasks, universities train you to think big” (M. Anderson, personal communication, September 7, 2013).

RQ: 2 Why has there been a relatively large rise in university public relations programs since 1996?

The rise in undergraduate and graduate education in public relations is primarily in response to employment in the field doubling during the past 20 years (Statistics Canada, 2013). Other contributing factors mentioned by interviewees included the increased recognition of the
industry’s professionalization, the decline of the general liberal-arts undergraduate degree, the transformation of the university into a vocational training ground, and a lucrative revenue opportunity for post-secondary institutions. Additionally, college professors noted that the industry is expecting research skills from new practitioners and these skills have typically been delivered at the college level. As a result, a number of universities are partnering with colleges to offer public relations undergraduate degrees to provide students with applied technical skills as well as critical, theory-based education.

Most seasoned practitioners experienced relatively little difficulty entering public relations in the past with liberal-arts or journalism undergraduate degrees. This is no longer the case for most individuals entering the field, who are now enrolling in applied public relation degree programs or enrolling in post-graduate certificate programs to get their foot-in-the-door at most organizations. General enrolment in the humanities where communication studies are traditionally housed is declining: of the 461,517 Canadian post-secondary graduates in 2011, only 57,144 (12.4%) were in humanities programs compared to 18% in 2005 (Statistics Canada, 2013). There is an increasing trend of students enrolling in applied degree programs with job-related skills curriculums. Testifying to this trend toward more vocationally oriented higher education choices, nearly half of all students in 2011 graduated from business, management and public administration (21.8%); social and behavioural sciences and law (14.5%); and health, parks, recreation and fitness (14.0%; Statistics Canada, 2014).

A number of interviewed professors noted that liberal arts faculties across Canada are losing income due to low student enrolment. As a result, communication studies departments are offering applied public relations degree programs to attract more students and generate revenue. It was noted that in offering these applied public relations degrees, universities are “unable to
resist the need to cater to the industry, and provide a [vocational] training ground” (A. Laing, personal communication, November 6, 2013). Further lamenting this practice, another practitioner noted “post-secondary isn’t about higher education anymore; it’s about butts in seats…so what gets butts in seats? Telling them they can do this training in this field to get a job in this field” (M. Anderson, personal communication, September 27, 2013).

Most public relations agencies require new hires to have formal education in public relations. Daniel Tisch, president and CEO of Argyle Communications noted that “virtually 100% of the people we hire at the entry-level have professional education in public relations” (personal communication, October 7, 2013). However, according to interview participants, employers are hiring new practitioners for both their technical and strategic thinking skills, suggesting a continuing role for liberal arts education capable of inculcating critical thought, theoretical foundations in communication, and cultural literacy. Discussing the structure of the proposed McMaster-Mohawk BPC program McMaster University associate professor Alex Sévigny notes that “we were very careful to preserve…knowledge of politics, government, culture, society, psychology,” as a wholly applied/technical program “is not a good choice for a student” (personal communication, January 7, 2014). Echoing this view, Mount Saint Vincent University professor Patricia Parsons argues that a public relations degree is not required to learn how to write a feature story or news release; however, “you do need a PR degree to understand the world around you and how communication is a powerful influence and how it fits in with a democratic society” (personal communication, September 23, 2013).

The majority of public relations graduate programs have been designed for the mid-career and seasoned practitioner. Similar to the undergraduate degrees these programs provide students with a combination of liberal arts theory and applied education. Royal Roads University’s MBA
in Public Relations and Communications Management was Canada’s first public relations
graduate program and pioneered the hybrid/correspondence delivery model used by the graduate
degree programs that followed: Royal Roads’ MAPC, Mount Saint Vincent’s MPR, and
McMaster’s MCM programs. These hybrid programs allow practitioners to complete most of
their coursework online and through on-campus residencies held for a few weeks each year.
Practitioners are able to continue working while earning their degree, allowing the opportunity to
apply their new skills and knowledge to their jobs. A number of instructors were initially
apprehensive of a hybrid/correspondence program structure for public relations graduate
programs. “When I first started teaching in the MCM in 2008 I was extremely skeptical of the
hybrid model; I actually thought it was a diminishment of the education. But now I have totally
changed my opinion” (A. Sévigny, personal communication, January 7, 2014).

Graduate education in Canadian public relations is currently not as significant a hiring
differentiator as undergraduate education is for novice practitioners. While the industry is
becoming more aware of the value graduate-level education offers intermediate and seasoned
practitioners, “public relations is not at the point yet where they value the master’s degree
preparation over a certain number of years of experience” (P. Parsons, personal communication, September 23, 2013). However, for practitioners looking to switch into public relations from
another unrelated field, graduate education “offer[s] people an ‘in to the profession’” (A.
Sévigny, personal communication, January 7, 2014). Practitioners also pursue graduate education
in order to qualify to teach or retain a position at the college and university level. A number of
college instructors interviewed in this study were pursuing public relations graduate degrees in
order to remain teaching at their institutions. While graduate-level education does not currently
outweigh professional experience, it is effective in helping to “fast-track somebody who has all
sorts of great skills and aptitudes in other ways for a management or leadership role” (D. Tisch, personal communication, October 7, 2013).

**RQ3: Is accreditation (i.e. APR, ABC) recognized as increasing the professionalization of public relations by practitioners, employers, and clients?**

Accreditation (i.e., APR, ABC) is not recognized as a benchmark of proficiency or as a significant hiring differentiator by employers and clients, according to a near-unanimous response from interviewees—seven of whom were accredited. The designations are even less recognized outside of the public relations industry. Although the APR and ABC designations have been available to Canadians for over 40 years less than 1.5% of the 54,703 practitioners possess them. Accreditation in provinces such as Quebec is especially low: “in Quebec we had last year two APR. The year before one…it’s not recognized by the employers; it’s not really recognized by the industry” (B. Motulsky, personal communication, October 15, 2013).

The primary motivation for the accredited interviewees to enroll in the process was for professional development and validation. As applied graduate education in Canadian public relations did not start until 1999 accreditation was the next closest opportunity for many practitioners. Post-secondary instructors cited their primary reason for earning accreditation was because it was “important for students to see from that professional point-of-view that somebody teaching in a university also has the professional capability” (P. Parsons, personal communication, September 23, 2013). However, provincial ministries of education do not recognize accreditation as an appropriate teaching credential and require ABC and APR accredited practitioners to also possess a master’s or PhD degree (B. Waite, personal communication, September 17, 2013).

Each non-accredited interviewee stated that they are not planning on pursuing
accreditation at this point in their career. A number mentioned that they had considered enrolling in an accreditation program earlier in their career but decided against it. Practitioners with graduate-education in public relations or business administration felt that they had already covered the material provided in the accreditation process. One interviewee defended their preference for graduate education over accreditation because “a degree is a learning experience, and when you’re doing the accreditation you have to summarize something you already did” (Director in Government of Canada, personal communication, October 4, 2013). This reason was echoed by a number of interviewees: “the reason for me that it doesn’t have appeal is that accreditation tests you on existing knowledge as opposed to teaching you a body of knowledge” (J. Gombita, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

Many practitioners seem to have a misconception of the APR accreditation process. One of the primary complaints regarding the APR was that candidates are only evaluated on a sample of their professional work. However, the work sample component only accounts for 20% component of the accreditation process; practitioners must also complete a written and oral examination testing their theoretical and practical knowledge (CPRS, 2012, p. 20).

In order to make accreditation more desirable to practitioners during a time with increased competition from graduate programs the CPRS and IABC will have to demonstrate the value it offers practitioners. According to interviewees the first step would be to open the APR and ABC designations to all practitioners and not just CPRS and IABC members (J. Valin, personal communication, November 6, 2013). The next step would be to convince seasoned practitioners to earn accreditation because if “senior-level professionals feel that these are really relevant to daily practice, they’re more likely to send their senior people to go and get their credentials and they’re more likely to market their own credentials if they already have them”
Online survey

The results from the online survey completed by 231 practitioners provide valuable insights on trends in education, accreditation, and strategic thinking. A summary of the findings include:

- Experience: >10 years (75%); <5 years (7%).
- Highest Employment: Ontario (33%); British Columbia (23%); Alberta (16%)
- Sector: public/government (41%); private (30%); non-profit (14%); multiple (11%)
- Industries: agency/consultancy (30%); education (18%); government (17%).
- Average salary: $100,000-$109,999

Practitioners in Canadian public relations are highly educated with 85% having earned at least an undergraduate degree and nearly 30% with a graduate degree. Applied public relations education only accounted for 14% of undergraduate and 8% of graduate degrees; however, 6% of practitioners had earned an MBA. The relative lack of practitioners with specialized education in public relations is not unexpected as these programs did not become readily available in Canada until the early 2000s. As graduate programs are still relatively new employers are not expecting them as much undergraduate education. However, findings from this survey indicate that practitioners with higher levels of education and experience earn higher salaries.
Table 4

Practitioner salaries by education level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Average salary range</th>
<th>Average salary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school (N=8)</td>
<td>$90,000-$99,999</td>
<td>$96,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College diploma (N=27)</td>
<td>$90,000-$99,999</td>
<td>$94,800</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undergraduate (N=66)</td>
<td>$100,000-$109,999</td>
<td>$103,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR undergraduate (N=33)</td>
<td>$100,000-$109,999</td>
<td>$104,600</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-graduate certificate (N=29)</td>
<td>$90,000-$99,999</td>
<td>$92,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s (N=29)</td>
<td>$100,000-$109,999</td>
<td>$100,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR Master’s (N=19)</td>
<td>$100,000-$109,999</td>
<td>$108,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBA (N=13)</td>
<td>$110,000-$119,999</td>
<td>$113,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate (N=7)</td>
<td>$160,000-$169,999</td>
<td>$163,300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

Practitioner salaries by experience and education frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience level</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Average salary range</th>
<th>Average salary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Novice (1-2 years; N=5)</td>
<td>Undergraduate (N=2)</td>
<td>$50,000-$59,999</td>
<td>$52,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Certificate (N=1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s (N=2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate (3-5 years; N=10)</td>
<td>College (N=3)</td>
<td>$60,000-$69,999</td>
<td>$61,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Undergraduate (N=2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Certificate (N=3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s (N=3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasoned (6-9 years; N=42)</td>
<td>High School (N=1)</td>
<td>$70,000-$79,999</td>
<td>$76,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College Diploma (N=6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Undergraduate (N=19)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Certificate (N=5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s (N=14)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MBA (N=1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive (10+ years; N=155)</td>
<td>High School (N=7)</td>
<td>$111,000-$111,999</td>
<td>$114,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College Diploma (N=18)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Undergraduate (N=76)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Certificate (N=20)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s (N=29)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MBA (N=12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doctorate (N=7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The relatively minor salary difference between practitioners with undergraduate and 
graduate degrees can be attributed to the fact that most of the responding practitioners are in the 
advanced stages of their careers. As interviewed practitioners noted, at the seasoned and 
executive levels work experience and portfolios are the most important factors; however, 
education is still a differentiator. On average, however, practitioners with public relations 
degrees do earn slightly more than those with other educational backgrounds.

Forty-five percent of the practitioners who responded to this survey had earned either an 
APR (40%) or ABC (5%) designation. Represented in this study are 92 of the 487 (19%) 
practitioners with the APR designation in Canada. The highest level of education most accredited 
practitioners had earned was an undergraduate degree. There is an inverse relationship between 
accreditation and education: the lower a practitioner’s education credentials the more likely they 
were to have accreditation; conversely, those with higher academic credentials are less likely to 
have accreditation. This is likely attributed to the fact that accreditation was the next closest 
option to public relations graduate education for nearly 30 years. If practitioners had already 
earned accreditation and were in the advanced stages of their career, there may not be as much 
incentive for them to earn a graduate degree.
Table 6

*Salary by accreditation and experience level*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience level</th>
<th>Accreditation</th>
<th>Average Salary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Novice (1-2 years; N=5)</td>
<td>APR (N=0) ABC (N=0) Other (N=0) N/A (N=5)</td>
<td>APR ($0) ABC ($0) Other ($0) N/A ($48,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate (3-5 years; N=10)</td>
<td>APR (N=0) ABC (N=0) Other (N=1) N/A (N=9)</td>
<td>ABC ($0) ABC ($0) Other ($75,000) N/A ($60,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasoned (6-9 years; N=42)</td>
<td>APR (N=4) ABC (N=1) Other (N=1) N/A (N=36)</td>
<td>APR ($75,000) ABC ($75,000) Other ($90,000) N/A ($76,100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive (10+ years; N=155)</td>
<td>APR (N=77) ABC (N=9) Other (N=3) N/A (N=65)</td>
<td>APR ($121,700) ABC ($122,200) Other ($133,300) N/A ($106,200)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Controlling for education and experience levels, APR and ABC practitioners earn approximately $20,000 more than those without the designations. The average salary for a practitioner with an APR or ABC designation is in the $110,000-$119,999 range; the average salary of a non-accredited practitioner is in the $90,000-$99,999 range. Interestingly, 73% of accredited participants stated that accreditation did not lead to a salary differential. Those practitioners who indicated that accreditation did not increase their salary earned an average of $10,000 more than those who said accreditation did lead to a salary increase. The reason for this response may be similar to that of executive practitioners with graduate-level education; they are already advanced in their careers, therefore accreditation may not add much to their salary and was instead pursued as professional development. The researcher of this study received a number of emails to this effect from accredited practitioners who had completed the survey.
A particularly troubling finding was evidence of gendered income disparity. Even when controlling for experience, education, and accreditation men earn higher salaries than women.

The average salary reported by women surveyed in this study was in the mid $90,000’s while the average salary for men was in the low $100,000 range. Furthermore only 38% of women reported annual salaries of $100,000 or above while 58% of men reported salaries above $100,000; this discrepancy is given particular salience in view of the fact that nearly 70% of public relations practitioners in Canada are women (Statistics Canada, 2013). Similar results were found in a study that analyzed four surveys of PRSA members during 1979, 1991, 2004, and 2006. In 2006, women in public relations earned 69 cents on the dollar by men (Dozier &
Sha, 2010, p. 12). While wage discrimination based on gender is found in nearly all professions in Canada and internationally, it is especially troubling to find it in a female dominated industry like public relations (OECD, 2002, p. 97).

**Strategic Thinking Questionnaire**

Public relations practitioners possess high levels of strategic thinking, which is a significant indicator of professionalism and effective leadership competencies (Pisapia et al, 2011, p.3). The overall strategic thinking capability of public relations practitioners was 4.04 on the 5-point scale. Additionally, public relations practitioners earned higher mean scores than those found in 1117 individuals who held leadership positions in for-profit and not-for-profit sectors in the USA (Pisapia et al., 2011, p. 10). The rank order of public relations practitioners strategic thinking skill usage are similar to those found in Pisapia’s STQ validation study: systems thinking (4.12); reflection (4.13); and reframing (3.79). Additionally, public relations practitioners had higher means for each strategic thinking skill, with the exception of systems thinking, in comparison to the leaders evaluated in Pisapia’s study.

Table 7

*STQ scores compared against benchmarks in validation study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>M (Manley)</th>
<th>M (Pisapia)</th>
<th>SD (Manley)</th>
<th>SD (Pisapia)</th>
<th>N (Manley)</th>
<th>N (Pisapia)</th>
<th>#Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Systems Thinking</td>
<td>4.1216</td>
<td>4.1678</td>
<td>.622</td>
<td>.544</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>1117</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reframing</td>
<td>3.7851</td>
<td>3.6861</td>
<td>.989</td>
<td>.739</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>1117</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting</td>
<td>4.1304</td>
<td>3.8750</td>
<td>.624</td>
<td>.676</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>1117</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

High levels of strategic thinking are related to education and accreditation. The highest averages of strategic thinking were found in practitioners who possessed MBAs (4.31) and doctorates (4.3). Further research will needed to corroborate this finding as practitioners with
MBAs (N=13) and doctorates (N=7) were the least represented among respondents. When controlling for education and experience accredited practitioners were found to have higher levels of strategic thinking (4.14) in comparison to those without (3.97). Furthermore, the levels of strategic thinking signified by practitioners with accreditation were similar to practitioners with graduate degrees. On average, high levels of strategic thinking corresponds with higher salaries. Additionally, practitioners with salaries less than $100,000 had an average STQ score of 3.97; however, those with salaries over $100,000 had STQ scores of 4.18.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Reframing Mean</th>
<th>Reframing STD</th>
<th>Systems Mean</th>
<th>Systems STD</th>
<th>Reflection Mean</th>
<th>Reflection STD</th>
<th>Strategic Thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school (N=8)</td>
<td>3.675</td>
<td>0.811</td>
<td>3.975</td>
<td>0.704</td>
<td>4.175</td>
<td>0.639</td>
<td>3.966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College diploma (N=27)</td>
<td>3.942</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>3.976</td>
<td>0.641</td>
<td>4.161</td>
<td>0.596</td>
<td>4.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate (N=66)</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>0.918</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.603</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>0.613</td>
<td>3.983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR undergraduate (N=33)</td>
<td>3.518</td>
<td>1.007</td>
<td>4.041</td>
<td>0.569</td>
<td>3.977</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>3.877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-graduate certificate (N=29)</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>0.979</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>0.594</td>
<td>4.207</td>
<td>0.717</td>
<td>4.108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s (N=29)</td>
<td>3.883</td>
<td>0.915</td>
<td>4.188</td>
<td>0.634</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>0.663</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR master’s (N=19)</td>
<td>3.863</td>
<td>1.122</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.728</td>
<td>4.291</td>
<td>0.604</td>
<td>4.137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBA (N=13)</td>
<td>3.867</td>
<td>1.189</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>0.735</td>
<td>4.462</td>
<td>0.449</td>
<td>4.313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate (N=7)</td>
<td>3.971</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>4.543</td>
<td>0.457</td>
<td>4.343</td>
<td>0.884</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APR/ABC (N=104)</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>1.026</td>
<td>4.194</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>0.631</td>
<td>4.141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The data gathered from interviews with seasoned practitioners and academics along with 231 completed demographic and strategic thinking information questionnaires has provided valuable insights into the status of public relations as a profession. Using sociological trait and power models of professionalization this data was analyzed to determine how public relations meets, and is working to maintain, the professional characteristics of "professional association, cognitive base, institutionalized training, licensing, work autonomy, colleague control... [and]
code of ethics” (Larson, 1978, p. 208).

**Work autonomy and colleague control**

For most of the 20th century the primary function of public relations was media relations. With the rise of social media the gatekeeper function of the press has diminished and now “public relations’ main function is public relations…you can deal with the public without going through the media filter” (I. Basen, personal communication, January 14, 2014). As a result public relations’ role and influence in the production, promotion, and presentation of information has significantly increased, and organizations are noticing, as evidenced by recent hiring trends at all levels of experience (Statistics Canada, 2013). The current role of public relations for organizations according to practitioners and academics interviewed is to provide counsel to management, safeguard the reputation of the organization, act as a trust agent and boundary spanner, and foster mutually beneficial relationships with key publics and stakeholders.

Current public relations practitioners have more responsibility than their predecessors. As a result public relations practitioners must be strategic leaders with proficiency in planning, measurement, media design, and business. In the past public relations practitioners had time to assess and plan a response to a situation. With social media there has been a “shortening of time” and a blurring of internal and external communications. Practitioners are essentially on call 24-hours a day to deal with emerging issues and crises. As a result, practitioners must be adaptable and time-oriented strategic leaders with excellent judgment.

The term “strategic” is now an integral part of the public relations lexicon. Strategy or variations of the word are found in job titles, organization names, and educational program names--“strategy” is used 36 times in the CPRS’ *Pathways to the Profession* document. The concept of strategic thinking as posited by Dr. Pisapia is an intuitive fit for public relations. The
strategic thinking questionnaire provided the opportunity to empirically evaluate the strategic thinking skills of Canadian practitioners; the results indicate that they are higher than those possessed by the for-profit and not-for-profit leaders in Pisapia’s validation study (2011).

The components of strategic thinking—systems thinking, reframing, and reflecting—are apt descriptors of the role and competencies practitioners now have in organizations. Systems thinking is the ability to see systems such as businesses and organizations holistically and recognize patterns and relationships within them. In public relations this is important when defining a situation or issue before breaking it into separate parts or causes. One of the reasons public relations practitioners scored lower in the systems thinking ability than the profit and not-for-profit leaders in Pisapia’s validation study could be attributed to the lack of practitioners in a broad range management and executive-level roles.

Reflection is the ability to combine “logical and rational thinking with perceptions and experience to make judgments” (Pisapia et al., 2011, p. 13). A strategic thinker would look “beyond the facts and reasons in an inductive manner to see ‘invisible’ influences in a situation” (Pisapia et al., 2011, p. 13). This is one of the primary strategic abilities of public relations separating it from functions like marketing and advertising; however, it is also one of the reasons public relations was designated as a tactical luxury for most of the 20th century. The most recent seminal study on the roles of public relations in Canadian organizations determined that practitioners were “not yet ready” to use empirical and quantitative research, instead relying on “hunches, guesswork, and ‘gut feelings’” (Piekos and Einsidel, 1991, pp. 1, 18). Practitioners were looking “beyond facts and reasons,” to be sure, but primarily just through a qualitative framework (Pisapia et al., 2011, p. 13). A number of practitioners noted that even though quantitative research is emphasized in strategic public relations today it is still ineffective.
Despite the debate surrounding the use of quantitative data in public relations, reflection was found to be the highest-ranked ability among Canadian practitioners. A reason for the increased emphasis on quantitative research and measurement in 21st century public relations is that the profession is being held more accountable for its deliverables. This was emphasized by hiring managers who stated during interviews that research and evaluation was among the leading competencies expected from novice and intermediate-level practitioners. Additionally, according to interviews with academics and relevant literature, research and evaluation is an integral part of the curriculum in public relations programs, especially at the graduate-level (CPRS, 2011, p. 230).

Reframing is the ability to take into consideration past experiences, decisions, and different perspectives when dealing with current situations. This is a primary aspect of the public relations role in organizations through issues management and crisis communications. Interestingly, reframing was identified as the weakest strategic thinking ability by Canadian practitioners; however, their scores were still higher than the validation study’s average. A potential reason for this may be attributed to public relations not incorporating the perspectives of other functions such as human resources, finance, and information technology. A number of interviewees said that the public relations function still needs to demonstrate a broad understanding of business objectives and functions and this may be contributing to a lower reframing efficiency. However, additional studies will need to be conducted to corroborate this finding.

While the autonomy and responsibility of the public relations function has grown substantially, public relations does not have a seat at the executive level in most organizations and this is causing the profession a great deal of anxiety. As demonstrated by results of the
online survey, a large number of practitioners have positions at the managerial, director, and vice-president level. However, there were no practitioners found at the chief-executive level outside of those who owned the organization. Despite this, public relations practitioners have established themselves as autonomous managers within organizations representing most industries and sectors across Canada. One notable exception of autonomy for public relations practitioners was found in the Government of Canada.

Jean Valin, a retired Director General in the Government of Canada, discussed a centralization imposed upon the communications and public affairs functions around 2006, reducing the authority and autonomy of seasoned practitioners. As a result “every single communications activity, document, decision had to be funneled through…[into] the hands of someone at the Prime Minister’s Office” (J. Valin, personal communication, November 6, 2013). Valin noted that while the communications community in the government was still professional, it was no longer strategic as “we became order takers as opposed to strategic counselors and partners” (J. Valin, personal communication, November 6, 2013). Before 2006, practitioners in the Government of Canada had extensive responsibility and autonomy. The primary reason for the diminishment of responsibility and autonomy given to the public affairs function can likely be attributed to message management decisions made by the Conservative government.

Despite the current situation in the Government of Canada, the public relations function appears to be recognized as a strategic management function in most industries and sectors across Canada. While the public relations function is not represented at the executive table of most organizations it has been firmly established as a managerial role. However, the rate at which public relations has climbed the organizational hierarchy during the past few decades is expected to continue establishing its status as a recognized and strategic profession.
Cognitive base and institutionalized training

Public relations’ shift from providing institutionalized training at the college-level to the undergraduate and graduate-level at the end of the 20th century has arguably improved its status as a profession. Students are graduating with high proficiency in technical skills and strategic thinking while the profession benefits from having new generations of practitioners entering the workforce with a benchmark of competencies and knowledge. Professional associations like the CPRS are working to establish a benchmark of practitioner competency and knowledge through initiatives like the Pathways to the Profession document and the PRK exam. Despite the advances in institutionalized education and benchmarking proficiencies, there remains a paucity of empirical and theory-building publications focusing on public relations in Canada. In particular, the initiatives of Canada’s post-secondary institutions appear to be reacting to market demands instead of an inherent interest in enriching the pedagogy and practice of public relations.

The negative reputation public relations had gained during the 20th century, some of which it still carries today, contributed to the lack of university-level education and scholarship into the profession. An article written by Ira Basen regarding the establishment of the first academic chair in public relations at the Université du Québec à Montréal in 2002 illustrates this perception:

And despite their best efforts to reach out and gain a greater appreciation and understanding of the media, the public relations of the PR industry remains nothing short of dreadful. In December 2002, the University of Quebec at Montreal announced the creation of the country’s first ever academic chair in public relations. Most of the one million dollar cost was being picked up by media and PR firms. A press conference was
held in Montreal to announce the good news. This was something the industry had been looking forward to for a long time. At least one other Canadian university [Ryerson] had rejected the establishment of a chair in public relations after objections had been raised by its journalism faculty and students. This was a chance to showcase PR’s progress towards respectability and professionalism. But it didn’t quite work out that way. The headline in the Montreal *Gazette* the following day was “Flacks get their own chair at UQAM”. (personal communication, January 27, 2014)

The negative reception the first academic research chair in public relations received from academia and the press helps to clarify why empirical and theory-building scholarship in Canada is so scant. The relatively large establishment of public relations degree programs that followed the chair in public relations were also not designed to fill this void. The majority of interviewees, a number of whom were program heads, noted that the primary reasons for the rise of university-level education in public relations was market and student demand, as well as a promising revenue opportunity for arts and social science faculties which traditionally house communication studies programs. Additionally only a handful of these degree programs are titled “public relations,” with many--including Ryerson University, which rejected establishing a chair in public relations--titled professional communications, or communications management.

The apprehension about using the title “public relations” is not uncommon. As noted by interviewees, many practitioners prefer to use “communication” in their job title to distance themselves from public relations’ negative reputation. This is also common in government where the public relations function is known as public affairs. This practice by current practitioners and organizations is similar to Lasswell’s note on how practitioners in the 1920s were adopting titles such as public relations advisor/counselor/specialist; they are basically the same thing but
presented a little differently (1928, p. 261). This apprehension is indicative of public relations’ continuing anxiety as a profession and its attempts to distance itself from its past use as propaganda. Overcoming this anxiety will require practitioners, organizations, and governments to use the term of public relations more actively. Establishing a strong foundation of knowledge through research and university-level education will contribute to assuaging public relations’ negative public perception and its own professional anxiety.

Most of the individuals interviewed for this study said that there was not really a difference between public relations and communication(s). For much of the 20th century external communication could be regarded as public relations; however, with the advent of social media the lines between internal and external communication are getting blurred. Technically, public relations is an action which develops relationships and communication is the process used to build that relationship; however, while they are slightly different they are inseparable (D. Tisch, personal communication, October 7, 2013). This study does not focus on the differences between public relations and communication; however, the hesitancy of Canadian universities to explicitly teach public relations, and evidence of practitioners shying away from the title, are indicative of the negative reputation the profession maintains.

Regardless of the reasons why the programs are established, the increase of undergraduate and graduate-level public relations programs will be a contributing factor to the professionalization of the industry. The increase of student graduation from these programs (hiring managers note that nearly all new hires have formal education in public relations) will contribute to the establishment of a common skillset and body of knowledge in the profession. Additionally, more individuals with graduate education in public relations will join the faculty of Canadian public relations programs, and consequently teach the next generation of public
relations practitioners with a more established theoretical and cognitive base.

**Professional associations, licensing, and code of ethics**

The public relations industry in Canada has been strongly supported by the IABC, and particularly the CPRS, for several decades. Both of these associations have contributed to the establishment and betterment of public relations as a profession through community development, accreditation opportunities, and voluntary codes of ethics. The CPRS was also strongly involved in the development of Canada’s first BPR program at MSVU and continues its initiatives in education through the *Pathways to the Profession* document and PRK exam. Without these two associations public relations’ status as a profession, anxious as it may be, could be in a much more precarious situation.

Both the CPRS and IABC have a national code of standards and ethics that their members must agree to and sign. However, these are not binding codes of ethics and the only sanctions for violating them are normative. The establishment of a global ethical code to increase the perceived professionalization of public relations is an important goal of organizations like the Global Alliance. In Canada there is a lack of stand-alone ethics education in public relations programs. A 2004 study of Canadian college and university public relations programs found that “only three of nine programs offered a stand-alone course [in ethics], and only two of those were mandatory for graduation” (Parsons, 2013, p. 19). As there have been 10 degree programs established since 2004 there may be additional stand-alone ethics courses; however, content analysis of each program’s curriculum will be required for reliable information.

The CPRS and IABC have offered the APR and ABC designations for over 40 years to help further public relations as a profession and establish a benchmark of proficiencies by the practitioners who possess them. With less than 1.5% of all practitioners in Canada possessing
either an APR or ABC, the accreditation programs in Canada have failed. Non-accredited practitioners stated they were not interested in pursuing accreditation because of the cost, its lack of recognition in the workplace, and because it only evaluates practitioners on previously completed work; this is a common misconception of the APR, which also includes a written and oral examination. Most of these practitioners stated their preference for graduate-level education as it is a learning experience and provides internationally recognized credentials.

Due to the lack of success accreditation has had in Canada, and globally, the IABC is planning an ISO certification program. In defense of retiring the ABC for a new certification program, the IABC claims it is attempting to further establish public relations and communications as a profession. “If accountants, podiatrists, pathologists, financial panners [sic], construction managers, auditors, business managers, and others can be certified to an international standard, why not communications professionals” (IABC, 2014). As viewed by the trait and power theories professional associations and accrediting bodies exist to ensure the standards of quality and control the supply of practitioners. Accredited members benefit from an increase in wages and work opportunities because there are fewer people who can do the work. Meanwhile society is said to benefit because there is less risk as the signifier of accreditation ensures a benchmarked quality of work.

For industries like public relations and communications “what is the risk to society of a poor writer? I’m not sure. Therefore there has not been a great societal demand for accreditation” (T. Workman, personal communication, November 26, 2013). Accountants, podiatrists, and auditors are certified because each of those functions can pose significant measurable and long-lasting consequences to individuals and if not performed appropriately. In this sense the certification of communications is arguably even more important due to its ability to reach and
influence larger groups. For example, during a health crisis like the 2003 SARS outbreak in Toronto, more effective crisis communications by certified practitioners may have limited the death toll before it reach 44 people (Health Canada, 2003). The risk of miscommunication in this type of situation can pose significant consequences to the public so the certification of practitioners is not unreasonable. However, more effective certification processes and binding codes of ethics would be required for certification to be reasonable in organizations, particularly within government.

Interestingly, this study found mixed results on the effect accreditation has on practitioner salary rates. While nearly 75% of all practitioners indicated that their accreditation did not lead to a salary increase, it was found that accredited practitioners made approximately $20,000 more than those without. Additionally accredited practitioners’ average STQ scores were similar to practitioners with graduate degrees. These findings will require further corroboration but are positive indicators of the value of pursuing accreditation or certification. However, it should be noted that the salary range and STQ scores between practitioners with accreditation and those with graduate degrees are the same.

Before graduate public relations programs became available in 1999, accreditation was the closest option to professional education and development for practitioners. As a result the case can be made that the growth of graduate public relations programs will further diminish the relevance of voluntary accreditation and certification. Naturally associations like the CPRS and IABC will argue that a lack of consistency in these programs’ academic and ethical standards would lead employers and the public to question the value of the degrees and programs. Despite this, graduate education fulfills the CPRS’ expectation of a commitment to lifelong learning (p. 217, 2011), while offering the practitioner professional development and intrinsic
accomplishment signified by a globally recognized standard.

Conclusions

Although public relations industry in Canada remains relatively anxious and insecure in its status as a profession, significant advances have been made in its development as a profession during the past 20 years. As a result of these advances in establishing a discernable skillset and university-level education, public relations is generally recognized as a strategic management function in most industries and sectors across Canada. However, public relations advances and attempts to secure its position as a profession are indicative of power model as opposed to the altruistic functional model of public relations which was promoted by Lasswell in 1928 and the CPRS in 2008. Although it is more successful in some areas than others, the public relations industry in Canada has established the general traits of professions including "professional association, cognitive base, institutionalized training, licensing, work autonomy, colleague control... [and] code of ethics” (Larson, 1978, p. 208). With its rising levels of employment, recognition as a specialized management function, and growth of undergraduate and graduate level programs, public relations will likely be secure in its status a profession in Canada within the near future.

Limitations

Although this study yielded a large amount of primary data in Canadian public relations, a number of limitations were encountered, primarily as a result of lack of time and funding resources. Online surveys were originally intended to be sent to the IABC and Health Care Public Relations Association of Canada (HCPRA), in addition to the CPRS. Member lists were not readily available for the IABC and HCPRA; IABC’s policy on spam email, which included email for research purposes, deterred the researcher from sending the online survey to IABC
Canada East and West members.

The largest limitation this study faced was page and word requirements. A third methodology was completed for this study in which content analysis was performed on 600 public relations job postings from 2009-2013. In order to provide a focused analysis on public relations’ status as a profession in Canada this methodology and its findings were omitted. Instead, the data will be used for future studies.

**Recommendations for future research**

Due to the growing number of graduate public relations programs there are increased research opportunities as students must complete major research projects, theses, and/or capstones contributing to the field. Funded research opportunities are also available through the Communications + Public Relations Foundation (CPRF) and the Global Alliance’s Global Accepted Practices (GAP) initiative. The author intends to pursue further research in public relations competencies, qualifications, as well as a critical history of public relations and communications management education in Canada with Dr. Jennifer Walinga (Royal Roads) through the CPRF.
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