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# Creating Spaces Revisited: Students' Perspectives on International and Multi(inter)cultural Public Relations Education

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Creating Spaces Revisited: Students' Perspectives on  
International and Multi(inter)cultural Public Relations Education

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### Abstract

In a global market employees need the skills to be able to work in a multicultural market. International public relation skills are becoming a necessity. Public Relations practitioners are educated on various fundamental skills through their educational programs, but there has been a lack of international and multi(inter)cultural education. This paper is a restudy of Nilajana Bardhan's 2003 study *Creating Spaces for International and Multi(inter)cultural Perspectives in Undergraduate Public Relations Education*.

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As technology continues to rapidly advance, our ability to work globally continues to strengthen as well. The digital and social media aspects of public relations have increased and “digital was the top growth driver in every region” of the world according to a survey conducted by the in 2015. The Holmes Report and the International Communications Consultancies Organization (ICCO) (Growth & Opportunity, 2015). We now function in a global marketplace where employees need the skills to be able to work in a multicultural market. International public relation skills are becoming a necessity as public relations campaigns are often seen on a global scale.

Public Relations practitioners are educated on various fundamental skills through their educational programs. “International courses help future practitioners understand the intercultural aspects of practicing PR in an international or global context” (Hatzios & Lariscy, 2008 p. 254). Students need to be educated on skills like writing and research, but they also need the ability to adapt to new and changing publics. International courses help teach and introduce students to new ways of thinking and allow them to utilize PR in a variety of international and multicultural situations (Hatzios & Lariscy, 2008).

Has public relations education adapted to the changing marketplace? Are international public relations courses available and are students seeing the necessity in such skills? Nilanjana Bardhan asked a very similar questions in her 2003 study *Creating Spaces for International and Multi(inter)cultural Perspectives in Undergraduate Public Relations Education*. Past research has called for an increase in international education, but are these actions being taken in the classroom? This study seeks to reexamine Nilanjana Bardhan's 2003 research and determine if there has been a change in the students and programs.

### **Literary Review**

Public relations is a communication process between organizations and their publics that creates mutually beneficial relationships (About Public Relations, n.d.). In the Hatzios and Lariscy (2008) study they created an international public relations definition based on practitioner and educator views. They defined international public relations as “practicing public relations in a different place outside your own by applying communication, management of relationships, and understanding and taking into account cultural differences” (Hatzios & Lariscy, 2008, p.247). Hatzios and Lariscy (2008) found that a core word in their interviews was ‘communication.’ Public relations students need the ability to effectively communicate with their stakeholders both domestically and abroad. “A survey of communication executives (conducted by Guiniven in 1998) revealed that ‘good writing skills’ and ‘good oral communication skills’ were the most important traits for a person entering public relations” (Wang, 2004, p. 11).

As the public relations field continues to grow, a PR Council survey found that more than 70% of firms saw their revenue grow in 2014 (Cripps, 2015). “This year’s *Fortune* Global 500 companies employ 67 million people worldwide and are represented by 33 countries” (Global

500, 2015). Companies are now more than ever before working across the world. Omnicom, the largest advertising and public relations organization, has over 1500 agencies spread throughout over 100 countries (Global Leader, 2016). “Organizations with multinational operations need public relations practitioners who can manage communication programs across borders, understand the risks of dynamic situations, and adapt quickly to either opportunities or problems” (Richardson & Hinton, 2015, p. 217). International public relations managers stated that when looking for people for international positions they are looking for “some type of work experience, such as one or two internships, and a strong foreign language background” (Hatzios & Lariscy, 2008, p. 252). They also want international experience and an understanding of cultural sensitivity (Hatzios & Lariscy, 2008). Student’s need a multicultural education background in order to be competitive in today’s global market.

Creating an educational environment where students have the ability to learn the communication skills critical to their success in an international market should be an essential part in their education. Unfortunately, previous literature shows that although programs see the benefits these skills provide to their students they are struggling to incorporate these skills into their curriculum. Professors and programs have limited resources. Which makes adding courses like international public relations challenging from both an economic and time management standpoint (Hatzios & Lariscy, 2008). Students are also finding it difficult to incorporate classes that focus on these skills because they are forced to manage their time carefully in order to complete their university general requirements and the classes mandatory for their particular degree (Bardhan, 2003). Another aspect that could be holding back an increase in international education is the accreditation standards (Creedon & Al-Khaja, 2005; Hatzios & Lariscy, 2008).

In Creedon & Al-Khaja's research, they examined history courses in accredited programs and discovered that very few require international or non-Western history courses. "While a requirement for a non-Western history course will not change cultural schemas, we felt examining the number of non-Western courses required might provide some insight into the orientation of accredited programs" (Creedon & Al-Khaja, 2005, p. 352). Requiring students to take courses where they are educated on western civilizations is one way to broaden students understanding, but programs are traditionally focused on U.S. based education. "A major challenge for curriculum designers, then, is to negotiate the expectations of an industry or profession in their own country, university policies around internationalization (which demand equivalence in learning outcomes, regardless of delivery location), and arguably, the expectations of the industries in the countries where the degree is taught" (Fitch & Desai, 2012). Individually and in combination, these issues are preventing the establishment of international focused education and are putting students at a disadvantage in the global market.

It is evident that universities need to increase their international education opportunities for their students. Adding intercultural and international aspects to every course will help students begin to think about other cultures instead of focusing solely on their own (Hatzios & Lariscy, 2008). An international emphasis can be incorporated in a variety of ways from exploring international case studies to quizzing students on geography and political matters to introducing online conversation partners. One study reported U.S. students were unprepared when they did have conversations with online partners because of their lack of knowledge about foreign countries and their cultures (Brooks & Pitts, 2016). Brooks and Pitts concluded that cultural competency training is needed and would help students be more prepared and sensitive

to other cultures (2016). “If expanding the curriculum is not an option, alternative means of including more international perspectives when teaching existing PR courses should be implemented” (Peterson & Mak, 2006, p. 419).

The addition of international courses and the integration of international content is important; however, students should also have access to experiential learning through internships and study abroad opportunities. These opportunities will allow students to “immerse themselves completely in a different culture and acquire the perspectives and skills to operate efficiently and independently in a new environment” (Jackson, 2011, p. 83). Short-term study abroad programs can have significant impact on a student if they are committed to exploring and understanding the culture (Jackson, 2011). When students study in another nation they are pushed to explore new aspects of that culture and when they return they have a new perspective on both their own culture and the culture they have explored (Fitch & Desai, 2012). Wang (2004) stated, “acquiring practical experience during studies is no longer optional” (p. 15). Students in Bardhan’s (2003) study wanted public relations experiential learning that would allow them to interact in a multicultural world. This shows us that experiential learning opportunities are not only needed but also wanted by students.

“One of the best ways to ensure that future public relations practitioners are comfortable and competent in dealing with international publics is to incorporate the discussion of international public relations into undergraduate education” (Taylor, 2001, p. 86). This study will explore public relations students’ perspectives on international multicultural education. Do students feel that they are given the opportunities needed to grow and are universities working to increase opportunities for their students?



### **Theoretical Framework**

Participatory action research (PAR) is a method of conducting research where researchers and the intended beneficiaries of the research work together to not only discover the problem, but also to solve the problem (Whyte, 1989; Turnbull, Friesen, & Ramirez, 1998; Bergold & Thomas, 2012). This methodology has participants play a more active role in the study (Whyte, 1989, p. 369). Critical theorist have studied the importance of international public relations education, but there seems to be little improvement since their initial research was conducted. Bardhan's study, along with this study, asks for the students' perspective in order to gain their insight into the problem to better help understand the challenges and create improvements. By including the students in the discussion of possible solutions we gain insight on what is lacking in the courses and how to better their education.

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted with students from a small state university with approximately 11,000 students. The University is situated in a rural part of the state where the closest access to an interstate is roughly 30 minutes away. The University is located in a small town of less than 18,000 people. Students at the University come primarily from the region, although some come from larger cities found across the country. In addition, the University has an international population of students from over 59 countries. The University has a predominantly Caucasian student body with 7% of the students identifying as African American and 1.5% identifying as Hispanic. The international student population makes up 6.5% of the student body. The University has recently created a strategic plan that included goals of increased international engagement via recruitment and study abroad.

The public relations program is housed in the journalism and mass communication department within the college of business. The public relations program has approximately 100 students, and there are no foreign language requirements for public relation majors. Within the program there are only two electives specifically involving international topics: mass media study abroad and international mass communications. These two courses are electives and are not required in order to graduate with a PR degree.

The program offers a competitive internship program with Omnicom Media Group. Omnicom is a global network of marketing communication companies that hire student interns from the various programs within the journalism and mass communication department. This internship sends students across the nation to work in large metropolitan cities like New York City, New York, Atlanta, Georgia, and Austin, Texas. This is a competitive program accepting only a select number of students each year.

In 2015 and 2016, a public relations professor offered a journalism and mass communication course during a two- week winter England program. The University has popular study abroad programs including a semester program to Germany. The German semester program includes German language, culture and a variety of university required classes i.e. humanities, history, etc. The campus also has a variety of clubs and organizations that have international and multicultural aspects. These programs and clubs are available to students as optional opportunities to get involved and explore. The University does offer a variety of study abroad opportunities, but there are a limited number of journalism and mass communications courses offered.

The method for this study was based off of Nilanjana Barhan's 2003 study. Barhan (2003) choose to do a qualitative study with written interviews instead of the traditional face-to-face long interviews. This restudy used the qualitative method of personal interviews and conducted interviews with five upper level public relation students. The participants were all female and were between 19-24 years old at the time of the study.

This study wanted to see if the results Barhan found in *Creating Spaces for International and Multi(inter)cultural Perspectives in Undergraduate Public Relations Education* remains accurate while also gaging how students feel in today's programs. There are 13 years between when the original study was published and when this study was conducted. Following similar procedures to the original study will allow us to better compare the perspective of students then and now. Data was collected during the Spring of 2017.

These students were asked to express their views on their international public relations education by answering a few questions including Barhan's original three questions from her 2003 study on student's perspectives. In this restudy I have chosen to ask the same questions and analyze their answers for trends.

- Previous research shows that undergraduate public relations students are mostly disinterested in widening their international and intercultural knowledge as it relates to the profession. Please explain, based on your own experience and understanding, some possible factors behind the reported lack of interest among undergraduate students.
- Creating interest in global and multicultural issues is not limited to the classroom. It's an interest that often develops naturally through various experiences and

cannot be forced. Discuss how activities and experiences outside the classroom (could be on-campus) could make a difference (either way). Draw from personal experiences if you can.

- o Suggest as many ways as you can think of in which a public relations educator can help students build international and multi(inter)cultural communication skills/ knowledge. In other words, what teaching strategies and activities do you think would interest you? (Barhan, 2003, p. 166).

## **Results**

### **Question 1: Students' Interest**

The first discussion point states students are often disinterested in widening their international and intercultural knowledge. The interviewees stated they had an interest in international and multi(inter)cultural studies and disagreed with the statement that students were disinterested in learning about these topics in relation to public relations.

*Our world has become a lot more global and global minded and intercultural communications are much more needed now than ever.*

However, they suggested that some students might be hesitant about speaking about international topics in their courses due to their lack of knowledge on the subjects. Students at this university often come from small surrounding counties with little diversity. The students spoke about their interest in the diversity around them at the University, but expressed that they have not learned much about other cultures or nations.

*I feel that a lot of my classmates will participate but they won't be the one to bring it up. I feel like it's more of our professors trying to coax us just because in America we don't know a lot about international stuff.*

Another interviewee suggested that many students might feel that they have international or multi(inter)cultural connections through their use of social media but those students-are not as interested in learning these topics as they lead others to believe.

*We think we are so educated on international issues and we think we have so much culture because we can sit on our couch and go to foreign countries on social media. We are almost satisfied by that but we aren't actually learning anything.*

During one interview the respondent spoke about an experience in which they were impressed with how much an international student knew about the United States, but were also shocked about how little they knew about the international student's home country. The interviewees felt their peers were not disinterested in learning about international and multi(inter)cultural public relations. However, their interviews led to a conclusion that most had interest in the topics, but limited knowledge and experience with this type of public relations education.

## **Question 2: Extra-curricular Influence**

There were two main points that the interviewees mentioned during this section: international population and the need for study abroad experiences. The University has an international population of approximately 650 students on the campus. The African American population is approximately 550 students and Hispanic or Latino population sits at about 130

students. The respondents during this question often referred to the University as diverse and having a large international population, but the numbers show a smaller level of diversity.

*International population:* Many interviewees suggested that having an international presence on campus helps them with their international and multi(inter)national communication. By interacting with international students, they felt they were given different perspectives about the world and the societies around them. The interviewees referred to programs like cultural exchange programs and conversation partners, which pair up international students with American students for guidance and language practice.

The interviewees spoke about the need for better promotion of international or intercultural programs available on campus. They explained that events held in cafeterias, sporting events, etc. allowed them to meet and interact with people of different ethnicities. However, they felt these events need more promotion so students are reached regularly and consistently. One respondent mentioned how they felt there was very little interaction with these international groups outside of the few events they host.

Responses suggested the international student population was very helpful in growing their international and multi(inter)cultural knowledge. While the international students make up only a small percentage of the campus population for those native students who are curious and take initiative there are ways to interact with international students.

*Study abroad:* Students at the University are often from the region and have very little exposure to outside cultures prior to college. These students rely on their education to help expand their realm of experience. Immersion into a culture was felt to be one of the best ways to

experience and learn about others. Study abroad opportunities were one of the ways to explore another country and learn more about the people. The respondents' responses all lead to a similar conclusion that meeting people and exploring different cultures through travel was seen as a preferred way to educate themselves. International education was seen as something that needs to be experienced with direct interaction with a diverse group of people. However, from 2011- 2016 only 60 people have studied abroad from this department.

*We don't have to put in the time and effort and money to travel and learn but take things at a surface level because of social media and the technology at our finger tips. Of course there are the outliers and we just want to travel all the time...we want to learn more and more by traveling so our needs aren't met by social media.*

The need for study abroad opportunities and the benefits that students receive from travel has become a very prevalent conversation. Of the students interviewed, they all have or have expressed desire to study abroad. They discussed seeing things in different ways and exploring outside their comfort zone. One respondent said, "if you do not travel you might know of a culture, but you cannot really know about them."

### **Question 3: Changes to the Educational Program**

Interviewees gave a variety of suggestions to increase the international/multi(inter)cultural communication. Suggestions included increased discussion, to more diversity among professors, to the addition of new courses.

*Increased Discussion:* Incorporating more international topics into the already existing program would be a practical way to get the students thinking in a more diverse way. In the

program students often use existing businesses when creating public relations plans. When choosing companies for students to use in a class project professors could assign more international companies or organizations with a more diverse public. One respondent suggested working with local international businesses. There were also suggestions about students being assigned countries to study as a way to learn about other places.

*Even in our examples if we could showcase more things that are on a greater scale than just doing something for a local bank that could be helpful.*

Interviewees suggested that many professors are enthusiastic about international topics and including international student perspectives in their course, but many felt that not all professors included these ideas. They suggested that it is beneficial to include outside perspectives for them to get a well-rounded understanding of various subjects.

*International population:* One interviewee suggested bringing in more diversity among the professors in the program. They suggested that hearing from others and their perspectives could help them breakdown cultural barriers. If international professors cannot be brought in then it was also suggested to have more guest speakers. Students suggested they were interested in how to handle cultural differences and intercultural communications and a guest speaker could give insight into these cultural differences.

*You never know if you are going to have a client who is foreign or you are going to do international affairs or anything. So if you know more about another culture then it might help you come up with an idea for a campaign.*



*Courses:* In addition to improving the current classroom some suggested the addition of new courses. Almost every interviewee spoke about how they would love to take an intercultural public relations or mass media course. However, when informed that the University had that courses listed on the curriculum guide all the students were shocked. These interviewees were unaware that such a course existed within their program. Increased advertising of such courses could lead to higher enrollment in international multi(inter)cultural courses that already exist within programs.

In addition to international communication courses one student mentioned having a Public Relations Leadership course that could allow them to highlight diversity in the workforce and these individuals' personal experiences in leadership. When asked about foreign language requirements student had mixed perspectives. They believed that being able to speak a second language could be useful particularly if you were planning to go into an international sector of public relations. However, many suggested that they do not enjoy that type of course. The increase in course options and the addition of international aspect in current courses would help ensure that students are getting an international background during their program

### **Limitation**

A limitation in this study is that the students who volunteered to be interviewed had an interest in studying abroad or had previously studied abroad. Students who have studied internationally make up only a small portion of the student population so future studies should work to include a more diverse student population.

Also, all the respondents were female. According to Kim and Goldstein (2005), female students were significantly more likely to be interested in intercultural communication and learning new languages, as well as have less apprehension and ethnocentrism.

### **Conclusion**

This study of student perspective on international and multi(inter)cultural communication supports the idea that students still feel that there is a lack of this type of education in their public relations program. The results of this paper show that the students' perception on this topic are similar to the conclusion of Nilanjana Bardhan's 2003 study. "The history of multicultural/global education in the United States has been a difficult one, and the students' comments reflect that fact" (Bardhan, 2003, p. 170). Through the interviews, students suggested that while the program is growing and more opportunities are becoming available improvements still need to be made. Although the international public relations course is offered, it is an elective, and there has only recently been the addition of department specific study abroad courses. While changes are beginning to occur, they are not keeping up with the global workplace.

Responders often commented specifically on international understanding and often missed the idea that multi(inter)cultural perspectives could also refer to things in one's own home country as well. Having an understanding of international and multi(inter)cultural learning is often about learning broad ideas and seeing how the world is constantly interacting. Students might not work directly with a foreign nation, but they could be dealing with a multicultural area or dealing with culture in a variety of other ways. Incorporating international and

multi(inter)cultural education should be treated with the same importance as understanding publics in public relations.

Barhan concluded that a top down understanding of the importance of international multi(inter)cultural public relations might not work for students. “A more holistic style is needed, an approach that meshes content throughout the curriculum in a manner that reforms the very focus of the curriculum and makes multiculturalism and the idea that the world is an interconnected entity ‘natural’”(Barhan, 2003, p. 171). This idea was also expressed in the responses. Students felt that getting to know students of a different culture was best done outside the classroom through events and getting to know individuals on a personal level. Many felt that education abroad allowed for immersion into a culture, which was the most efficient way to educate oneself about a new place. These experiences need to be included as part of the student's educational journey so they have an academic and personal experience with international and multi(inter)cultural situations. This restudy showed that students still feel there is a lack of education on these topics, but that through increased discussion in classroom and extracurricular opportunities students are gaining and will continue to gain a better understanding of international and multi(inter)cultural public relations.

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