

Eight-Year Program Review IBHE Report Summary: see attached Resources page

PROGRAM REVIEW REPORT SUMMARY

1. **Reporting Institution:** Eastern Illinois University
2. **Program Reviewed:** B.A. in Public Relations
3. **Date:** January 22, 2025
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5. **OVERVIEW**

The Public Relations major is one of 5 undergraduate majors in the School of Communication and Journalism. Launched in 2016, it is currently in its 9th year. The major emerged from the former option areas in Public Relations within the Communication Studies and Journalism majors. The curriculum was developed in line with recommendations from the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE), and it continues to align closely with the most recent recommendations (CPRE, 2023).

EIU's public relations major is 1 of 3 designated public relations undergraduate majors at public universities in the State of Illinois and 1 of 9 among all Illinois universities. With ten PR-specific required classes, the major is among the most comprehensive public relations majors among its peer programs.¹ It further stands out with its accelerated graduate program option and its broad range of elective clusters.

The newly formed School of Communication and Journalism (2019) defined its mission statement as follow; *"The School of Communication and Journalism prepares students to think critically, act responsibly, and produce creatively to better communicate in a diverse, democratic society. Our school offers a variety of majors that combine liberal arts education with professional and hands-on training. Courses are designed to develop oral, written, relational, digital and visual skills critical to the fields of communication and journalism. We foster communication approaches that facilitate freedom of expression, transparency, advocacy, and civic engagement."* The school's mission directly supports the university's mission, which emphasizes clear and effective communication skills, diversity and inclusion, reasoning, critical thinking, and leadership skills as well as responsible citizenship.

The public relations major contributes to the university's and department's missions as it equips students with the knowledge and skills to succeed in a dynamic and growing profession (faster than average projected growth of 6-7% by 2033 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023)) as well as to pursue graduate studies. The program's learning objectives are: 1) acquire **disciplinary knowledge** of public relations, 2) enhance their **critical thinking** skills, 3) cultivate a sense of **responsible citizenship** through social and ethical responsibility. 4) be able to create and implement **written**

¹ Illinois State University, Western Illinois University, Loyola University, DePaul University, Bradley University, Lewis University, Monmouth College, Olivet Nazarene University

message strategies in a diverse range of contexts. 5) create and implement **oral** message strategies in a diverse range of contexts. 6) use **quantitative data** to analyze, interpret, and evaluate material in an effort to inform strategic decision-making processes.

The learning objectives are realized across a core curriculum of required classes (37 Credit Hours) which emphasize hands-on education grounded in rigorous standards, communication ethics, critical thinking, and academic knowledge. In addition, students take elective classes (15 CH) and complete an elective cluster of their choice. Two registered student organizations under the advisement of public relations faculty, further offer opportunities for professional development (Public Relations Students Society of America (PRSSA)) and hands-on work outside of the classroom (The Agency). Public relations students have also competed in the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) National Bateman Competition, participated in the national PRSSA assembly, and served clients on campus. In 2020, our student team received an honorable mention for the campaign they conducted for the prestigious national Bateman competition.

6. MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.a. Description and assessment of any major changes in the program

School of Communication and Journalism: In 2019, the Department of Communication Studies and the Department of Journalism formed the joint School of Communication and Journalism. The public relations major, formerly housed in the Department of Communication Studies, is now part of the new school located in Buzzard Hall. The school consists of two divisions with separate curriculum committees. The public relations major is housed in the Communication Studies division whose undergraduate curriculum committee reviews and votes on curriculum proposals for the major. The curriculum committee in the journalism division has an advisory function and provides feedback on all proposals. While the new structure had no direct effect on the program, the closeness with student media (formerly Department of Journalism) both in location and structure have added opportunities for our students to gain experience outside of the classroom, for instance, by working with WEIU, NewsWatch, the Warbler Yearbook, and the Daily Eastern News.

Human resources: Since the launch of the major, the department has recruited two tenure-track PR faculty with an active research agenda in public relations. In total, the PR faculty is currently comprised of four tenure-track faculty (2 assistant professors, 2 associate professors). Our faculty are active researchers and recognized experts in their field. They have been committed to creating and fostering engaging learning experiences for our students.

Accelerated Graduate Program: In 2019, the public relations program was designated as a partner of the accelerated graduate program in Communication Studies. PR majors with a GPA of at least 3.25 can apply for admission, take up to 3 advanced public relations (CMN 4920Z, CMN 4921Z, CMN 4919Z) and communication classes as graduate classes during their senior year, and apply them to our M.A. in Communication Studies, which also includes an emphasis in Strategic Communication. In total, more than 6 PR majors have enrolled in the program and pursued their M.A. in Communication Studies as accelerated graduate students at EIU. The success of our students in the graduate program also shows that our undergraduate program prepares them well for advanced studies.

3+3 Accelerated Law Degree Program: The PR major also participates in EIU's 3+3 Law School program with Northern Illinois University since 2019 and added an interdisciplinary elective cluster for students enrolled in the program. Undergraduate public relations students who aim to enroll in law school can start NIU's program during their senior year and obtain their law degree one year earlier. So far, PR majors have not taken advantage of this opportunity, which is valuable for students with very specific goals and interests. The faculty still see it as a valuable opportunity to maintain for future students and the public relations major will continue to be part of the 3+3 program.

Study Abroad: One faculty member has developed a major-specific exchange program

between our public relations major and the degree program in media management at Jade Hochschule, Wilhelmshaven, Germany. PR students can now spend one semester, a full academic year, or a summer semester at our partner university in Germany while applying the credits earned abroad to their major. This exchange is particularly valuable as our students can take classes in English while abroad and do not need prior German language skills for this exchange. It also includes provisions for faculty exchange. We are sending our first student to our partner university in the spring 2025 and aim to continue to extend and build this partnership. Beside the major-specific exchange, PR students have also participated in faculty-led study abroad trips and other opportunities through EIU's Study Abroad office.

Curriculum: The PR faculty have continuously worked to refine the curriculum and made several revisions to adapt to changes in the profession and to student needs. First, the growing importance of social/digital media communication and management in public relations practice (e.g., CIPR, 2018, 2022, 2024) along with high demand for social media relations skills necessitated, in the view of our faculty, the requirement of a distinct class on the topic. CMN 3980 (3 CH, Strategic Social Media Communication) was designed and added to the core curriculum in 2021. In this course, students learn how organizations and PR professionals use social media strategically to engage various organizational stakeholders and how to develop and implement a strategic social media plan using multiple platforms and professional tools. Students further obtain a professional social media management platform certificate as part of the class and understand and practice social media evaluation using different metrics. The development of this class led to the new minor in Strategic Social Media Communication (launched in 2022), which was initiated and developed by PR faculty. In addition, a faculty member developed CMN 3982 (3 CH, Digital and Social Media Analytics and Evaluation) as an elective for PR majors and a required class for Social Media Communication minors. The importance of this class along with the required class in Public Relations Research and Evaluation (CMN 3020) was further underscored by the CPRE's 2023 recommendation for undergraduate public relations education to "integrate knowledge, skills, and abilities related to data analytics and AI into academic programs." (p. 15).

Second, helping students' professional development and career readiness at a university serving many first-generation students has been a key concern and challenge for our faculty. Career readiness has also been a key recommendation of the latest CPRE (2023) report on undergraduate public relations education. In response, faculty developed and designed CMN 4460 (2 CH, Public Relations Capstone), which was approved as a required class. The class aims to help seniors for learn and practice how to effectively present themselves as PR professionals to prospective employers, among others. The class also plays a key role in our revised assessment plan as students submit a portfolio for purposes of assessment as part of this class. Based on student feedback, this class has filled a gap in their preparation for their transition from student to professional.

Third, while our PR writing classes introduce students to informative and persuasive message creation, our faculty developed a new class, CMN 3930 (Strategic Messages and Influence), which focuses explicitly on the development of persuasive messages based on middle-range theories and research on persuasion and influence. This hands-on class allows for more thorough and critical engagement of how audiences process information and make decisions as well as how practitioners can build on existing knowledge and primary research to develop ethical persuasive strategies. CMN 3930 was added to the curriculum as a required class and is the applied and hands-on partner of CMN 3100 (Persuasion), which is a more theoretical introduction focused on surveying persuasive messages and persuasion in society. The class has been successful based on student feedback and learning outcomes. It further reinforced several program learning objectives as it engages students in research and data analysis, critical thinking, disciplinary knowledge, writing strategic messages, oral communication, As part of the class, students have, for instance, participated in service-learning projects and developed persuasive strategies and content based on original focus group and survey research as well as existing social scientific knowledge on persuasion and influence.

To create space for the new classes, our faculty chose to move two required classes (BUS 3010 - Organizational Behavior and Management; JOU 4420 - Communication Law & Ethics) to the list of electives²) and reduced the credit hours of CMN 4921 (Seminar in Public Relations) from 3 to 2. It is now a 2-credit hour class, which allows students to easily classes on more than one special topic. In total, the revisions resulted in an 1-CH increase, and students now complete 37 CH to complete the major.

Finally, PR faculty updated and refined the electives. Because scheduling electives outside of our major is not in our control, our faculty and advisers saw a need to have at least four classes in each elective cluster. The CPRE (2017 & 2023) has stressed the importance of diversity equity and inclusion as an ethical social responsibility, which “should be embedded in the curriculum.” (p. 15) and led to the creation of an elective cluster in “intercultural communication and diversity.” The addition and revision of several elective clusters have broadened students’ choices and options for specialization while strengthening alignment with current recommendations for undergraduate public relations education (new elective clusters include social and digital media communication, law, intercultural communication and diversity, and political communication.)

6.b. Description of major findings and recommendations, including evidence of learning outcomes and identification of opportunities for program improvement

A revised assessment plan was adopted in 2021 in line with EIU’s new assessment process (see 6a). Assessment includes annual assessment with biannual reporting of written and oral communication, disciplinary knowledge, communication flexibility and professional ethics, quantitative reasoning and critical thinking using established rubrics and instruments. The key change is that students submit a professional portfolio with a variety of visual and written content as a base for assessment of strategic writing during their senior year while taking CMN 4460 where they also complete the post-test on disciplinary knowledge.

The major’s assessment plan focuses on assessing 7 competencies and values in line with the major’s six learning objectives. The assessment of learning outcomes is integral to curriculum development and delivery of classes. The assessment coordinator for the public relations major collects data each semester using established rubrics and survey instruments. The results are communicated biannually and discussed with faculty. The data helps identify skills, competencies, and concepts that need additional practice and emphasis. It further assists faculty revise class sessions and identify potential needs for curriculum changes and course revisions.

We are currently in the second cycle of implementation of the revised assessment plan, which has been effective. Reviewers have found the assessment plan to be effective at meeting the goals for the assessment of learning outcomes. The VPAA Review of our recent assessment concluded; *“The B.S. in Public Relations program utilizes a well-tiered and carefully articulated network of instruments for assessing the growth of students in the course of their undergraduate careers. The recent approval and offering of a Public Relations senior capstone and a final portfolio seem extremely useful as vehicles for taking stock of a major’s acquisition of skills in preparing for the job market or further schooling [...].”* The Dean’s review of the latest assessment noted; *“In addition to the synthesizing of 2 years of useful data, the report evidences thoughtful evolution of several aspects of the assessment plan since its re-imagining in 2021 – particularly in identifying more precise timing of assessment measures. The targets set for the measures seem to have revealed useful tidbits about what aspects of the curriculum are strong and which could be re-examined. (Worth noting, however, that the scores meeting/exceeding targets outnumber those not met, which is very encouraging!) The program has provided a helpful narrative attachment that carefully enumerates the faculty’s engagement with the data analysis, and it seems clear to us that the curriculum is already being*

² The Journalism Division revised JOU 4471 (Communication Law), which had been part of the curriculum and is offering the revised class as JOU 4420 (Communication Ethics & Law).

influenced by the conclusions drawn, which, of course, is a primary goal of the assessment process [...]”

Specifically, assessment results from the 2-year report³ showed that our students exceed expectations on disciplinary knowledge (pre-test result (mean): 73/100; post-test result 82/100), critical thinking (3.28/4 at the 2000-level; 3.54/4 at the 4000-level), writing (3.23/4), oral communication (3.42/4), and quantitative reasoning (3.37/4). The results show that students retain knowledge of key concepts over time – a reflection of the strength of the PR curriculum, which reinforces introduced processes and concepts across multiple classes - and that the program is rigorous and successful at achieving its learning goals. Additionally, assessment results (responsible citizenship) revealed that students enter the program with good levels of professional ethics (3.98/5) and multicultural sensitivity (4.53/5) and maintain those levels overall.⁴ Lastly, the results from the communication flexibility survey used to support assessment of oral communication are the only ones that did not meet the basic expectation of at least 3.49/5 (results: 3/6 among sophomores; 3.3/5 among seniors). This shows that students would benefit from additional opportunities to practice interpersonal and professional communication skills to build their confidence and comfort communicating with others. While this particular result may be due to lower degrees of in-person interactions current students had in high school and at EIU during the pandemic, interpersonal communication and professional communication skills are among the most important to succeed in the workforce (for instance, Pew Research Center, 2024) and the importance of fostering “soft skills” has also been underscored by the latest recommendations from the CPRE (2023). The PR faculty will continue observing learning outcomes in this area and has discussed increasing opportunities for and guidance on interpersonal, professional, and small group communication within our existing classes and registered student organizations. In addition, faculty will explore enhancing the role of communication skills in the PR curriculum as part of a strategic curriculum discussion across all majors in the School of Communication and Journalism in Spring/Fall 2025.

Other findings:

During the past 8 years, our faculty and school have built and fostered a rigorous and effective undergraduate public relations degree program at EIU that prepares students well for a growing profession. PR faculty have fostered and emphasized close mentorship and community to help students learn and grow as professionals and people. This is evidenced by a good 4-year retention rate (71.43%), which was highest among all majors in the School of Communication and Journalism in 2023/24. During the pandemic, we graduated our largest classes of PR majors. While we have not been able to get back to the enrollment numbers of 2020/21, the projections of growth for employment in public relations and social media relations are faster than average among all professions (by 6-7% percent by 2033⁵ (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023)). This growth has also additionally been fueled by the emergence of social media relations and management as a professional specialization within public relations. The demand for specialized competencies and knowledge in the profession remains high (CISPR, 2023) and a PR career continues to have good earning potential⁶ and offers career paths with advancement from PR or Social Media Specialist to Manager and Chief Communication Officer (CCO). It is also highly versatile, providing career opportunities in almost any industry and sector. At the same time, public relations is a career that is often misunderstood or even unknown among those not familiar. The website and promotional

³ The full assessment report can be provided upon request

⁴ Low variations in scores between sophomores, juniors, and seniors are most likely due to measurement and differences in the number of respondents per class. Thus, they most likely show maintenance of professional ethics and multicultural sensitivity.

⁵ The Bureau of Labor Statistics collects data on public relations careers under different categories; 6% for Public Relations Specialists, 7% for Public Relations Managers.

⁶ Median salary - PR Specialist: \$66,750; PR Manager: \$130,480 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023)

materials can be improved by communicating these facts more effectively as we aim to increase enrollment and make the major and career paths even more prominent on campus and to prospective students while continuing to work closely with EIU's admissions, enrollment, career services, and central advising units.

A big topic for the coming eight years is Artificial Intelligence (AI), which will continue to impact the classroom and the PR profession. Current studies show that PR practitioners use AI to assist with content creation, idea generation, and data analysis, among others (see McCorkindale, 2024; USC Annenberg Center, 2025). AI also brings additional tasks and challenges for PR professionals; particularly for crisis and risk management/communication. It hyper-charges misinformation (e.g. deep fakes, AI bots) which can threaten organizations' reputations in new ways and potentially changes how stakeholders receive and seek information (McCorkindale, 2024; Guzman & Lewis, 2024). The CPRE (2023) thus recommends integrating "knowledge, skills, and abilities related to [...] AI into academic programs" (p. 15). The importance of interpersonal relationships and connections, authenticity and trust in organizational-stakeholder relationships strategy, and management and coordination of communication processes and strategy across multiple organizational units will continue to require human public relations specialists and managers in organizations. Yet, developments in AI make critical thinking skills (Larson et al., 2024) and students' preparedness for higher level PR manager tasks beyond those of entry-level PR technicians potentially even more important (see McCorkindale, 2024). A higher education in public relations is ideally positioned for students to build those competencies.

In response to technological innovations and developments, one PR faculty member has already pursued extensive professional development in AI. We will continue to closely monitor PR practice to observe what changes manifest over time and what AI skills students will need. We have also started discussions about potentially revising CMN 3965 (Public Relations Writing II) so that it focuses more specifically on elements of digital and social media content creation; AI skills have been part of that discussion.

While the impact of AI on the profession is a key emerging question, its effects on our students' learning and growth is a separate important matter. AI use has undoubtedly impacted our classrooms and raised questions among faculty about AI policies, handling plagiarism with AI, providing instruction and guidance on appropriate AI use, and maintaining rigor so that students' learning (especially critical thinking, processing, evaluating, and articulating complex information, writing and editing) is not compromised by their use of AI. So far, faculty have been in communication and made changes to their teaching strategies individually and as applicable. This major technological shift in progress, however, will necessitate ongoing departmental and campus-wide communication as well as new tools and resources. Our faculty will actively participate in these discussions and processes.

Finally, the accessibility of AI tools requires a close look at how to best assess student writing as part of the program's assessment plan in the future. The PR faculty will discuss this question to determine if changes to the assessment strategy are needed.

6.c. Description of actions taken since the last review, including instructional resources and practices, and curricular changes

See 6 a)

6.d. Description of actions to be taken as a result of this review, including instructional resources and practices, and curricular changes

Summary from 6a and 6b:

- Monitor and engage how AI is changing PR practice, what AI skills students and what resources

the department will need, and how to integrate them in the curriculum.

- Seek resources and encourage professional development on AI among faculty
- Consider revision of CMN 3965 to include AI skills
- Explore and decide how interpersonal, professional and small group communication skills can be fostered even more among PR students within the public relations program/curriculum.
- Consider if AI accessibility necessitates changes to the assessment plan; specifically, the assessment of writing based on portfolios.
- Revise website and promotional materials to more effectively communicate the value of a public relations career and degree based on strong projected growth in the profession, among others.

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Comments from the College Dean:

The PR major within the School of Communication and Journalism (SCJ) has become, as anticipated, a sought-after degree program within CLAS, and is frequently inquired about during recruitment events. Having it as a stand-alone degree, only one of three among Illinois publics, has been an asset to Eastern. Over the course of eight years, the curriculum has been refined to respond to industry trends and student needs, and is currently poised to engage the challenges of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to the profession. Assessment practices have quickly matured and are evidencing excellent outcomes. Retention rates within the major are encouraging, reflecting a student-centered faculty and good advising practices. We anticipate growth in the student population in the major in the coming years, particularly because of industry demand.

We recommend a decision of **Program in Good Standing**.

VPAA Decision:

- ☒ Program in good standing
- ☐ Program flagged for priority review
- ☐ Program enrollment suspended

VPAA Explanation:

09.0902 B.A. in Public Relations

The summary above describes several key developments within the B.A. in Public Relations program. In step with the ambitions and goals of the new School of Communication and Journalism (est. 2019), the B.A. in Public Relations (est. 2016) has continuously improved its curricular offerings and enhanced the overall educational experience of students. Of particular note are the program's focus on hands-on and immersive career development and on digital/social media. The new course (2022) Digital and Social Media Analytics and Evaluation is vital for addressing the professional demands of a PR career, especially in understanding the role of AI in communications and in publicity across the board. In its measurement and calibration of student learning outcomes, the program has carefully responded to industry standards advised by the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE).

We recommend a decision of Program in Good Standing.