"Ask the UAB"

A conversation with Janet Kacskos, APR, Fellow PRSA, chair of the Universal Accreditation Board, and Dr. Jay Rayburn, APR, CPRC, Fellow PRSA, chair of Entry-Level Accreditation about a new entry-level certification in public relations.

What is the new entry-level credential being considered?

The Universal Accreditation Board (UAB) is proposing an entry-level credential program in which graduates of affiliated academic programs undergo an examination that evaluates their knowledge of public relations principles and ethics. If the candidate passes, he or she will be allowed to use an entry-level credential on resumes and other professional materials.

The rationale behind this entry-level credential is to provide opportunities for graduating college seniors to enter into the "pipeline" to pursue a credential sooner than is often the case currently. UAB believes that this credential will reach a new audience, and create excitement and interest around the APR process. The entry-level credential expires five years after the student graduates, which provides an incentive to pursue their APR as soon as they feel they have the experience and knowledge to go through the APR process.

What is the history of this initiative?

The UAB, of which PRSA is one of eight participating organizations, has been working on (gathering information, conducting research, seeking funding for) this entry-level credential program for more than five years, in consultation with numerous stakeholder groups. The pilot for this accreditation program is expected to begin in the fall of 2012 and continue into the spring of 2013, with test programs at selected colleges and universities across the country. Once the pilot has ended, the program will be evaluated, and if determined (or found) successful, a broader nationwide program will launch.

Why was this new credential created?

Since the 1980s, public relations leaders have sought to create a multi-tiered accreditation program for entry-level, middle-level and senior-level practitioners. The entry-level certification in public relations targets the entry-level practitioners, whereas the existing APR and APR+M credentials target middle- and senior-level practitioners.

Has the proposed credential been given a name?

The UAB is considering many. Suggestions and recommendations from various organizations and multiple stakeholders have been and will continue to be solicited and considered. One idea generated by the UAB in order to maintain synergy with the APR trademark, owned by PRSA, is Principles for Accreditation in Public Relations, P-APR.

How is the credential being paid for?

A fundraising campaign has been launched for the initial development and testing of the examination. Within two to three years from the launch, this program should be self-sustaining through the fees required of candidates taking the examination.

Who will oversee the entry-level credential and examination?

The Universal Accreditation Board (UAB) oversees Accreditation for public relations professionals aligned with the Public Relations Society of America and other P.O.s (listed below). The UAB is a consortium of individual public relations professional organizations whose mission is to oversee the Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) and Accreditation in Public Relations + Military Communication (APR+M). The organizations that are members of the Universal Accreditation Board include:

- Agricultural Relations Council
- Florida Public Relations Association
- Maine Public Relations Council
- National School Public Relations Association
- Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)
- Religion Communicators Council
- Southern Public Relations
- Federation, and Asociación de Relacionistas Profesionales de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico Public Relations Association)

Why would colleges be interested in the entry-level credential? Isn't a degree enough? And are college students even interested?

Through research with academic faculty, students and members of the industry, the UAB has identified a need to have a national certification for college graduates that would help university-level programs with assessment of learning outcomes. University public relations programs may also find value in the ability to promote "national certification in public relations" for their graduates. This examination provides an independent evaluation of degree programs, and while a degree should be sufficient, in this economic climate, practitioners have expressed an interest in (and some states have demanded) having external certification of students that would enable them to compare students across universities/programs. The interest from students across the nation has been overwhelming. They have been excited about the possibility of a credential that differentiates them from other graduates.

What research did the UAB conduct in developing this entry-level credential?

Input on the new credential and its name was actively sought and obtained by the UAB through multiple venues. These included presentations/input sessions at PRSA with the Educators Academy, the Institute for Public Relations at its 2010 International Public Relations Research Conference in Miami, as well as with the public relations divisions of numerous scholarly associations, including the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication, the National Communication Association, and the International Communication

Association. Input from the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) was obtained through the PRSA director of education, who is also a PRSA staff liaison to the UAB and attends all UAB meetings. In addition, PRSSA members were surveyed a year ago, with another survey in the field in May 2012.

How do the entry-level credential and the APR in public relations differ?

The entry-level credential is designed for college seniors with a public relations concentration. The examination for these candidates will focus on items that are strictly related to textbook knowledge — foundational knowledge of the public relations profession. It will be a one-step process: a computer-based examination. A person who has earned the entry-level credential must maintain her or his membership in one of the UAB participating organizations. After five years, the entry-level credential will expire and will be no longer applicable.

The APR is designed for experienced public relations professionals who have gained practical expertise, have extensive experience and possess a wide variety of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs). The UAB recommends the professional seeking the APR credential have at least five years' experience. There are two components of the Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations: a Readiness Review and the computer-based Examination. Once a person has passed both of these components and is granted the APR designation, he or she must maintain the APR credential by belonging to one of the UAB participating organizations, and by advancing his or her career and knowledge through continuing professional development.

How does the entry-level credential in public relations enhance the value of Accredited in Public Relations?

The entry-level credential enhances the value of the existing APR credential in several ways. First, because it is an entry-level credential, it helps to position more clearly the APR as a mid-level + credential appropriate for those moving into managerial roles in public relations. Second, because it expires after five years, the credential creates a pipeline of young practitioners who not only recognize the value of professional credentialing, but also will be more likely to pursue the APR as they gain professional experience. Finally, because the entry-level credential is a baseline in a multi-tiered system of professional accreditation, it helps to raise the professionalism of public relations practice in general, as do the existing APR and APR+M.

Which schools have expressed interest in participating in the beta testing?

Several schools have already completed the requirements to become part of the beta test program. Others are in various stages of joining the initial testing phase. A full commitment means the school will provide a review course/training, an on-site administrator/mentor, and is committed to the professional development of its public relations graduates. The schools that have expressed an interest in participating in the beta test include Brigham Young University (Utah), Elon University (N.C.), Flagler College (Fla.), Florida State University, Howard University (Washington, D.C.), Husson University (Maine), Millersville University (Pa.), Mississippi State University, Radford University (Va.), Rowan University (N.J.), San Diego State University, Southern Methodist University (Texas), University of Florida, University of Georgia, University of Miami, University of North Texas, Valparaiso University (Ind.) and Virginia Tech.

What is the beta examination for the entry-level credential?

The beta examination is the first "run-through" of the new examination in which the process will be refined and the questions evaluated to ensure that they meet certain statistical standards.

How and who will be evaluating the results of the beta test of the entry-level credential?

The results of the beta examination will be evaluated by test-development professionals who will apply scientific analysis to determine which questions will ultimately be included in the final examination. It will then be evaluated by the UAB and the individual organizations for its effectiveness and viability.

Why is it necessary to conduct a beta test of the examination questions?

This process represents the best practice in professional certification testing.

Does the entry-level certification in public relations credential "water down" the APR credential?

An entry-level credential will not dilute the APR. To the contrary, the entry-level credential has the potential to enhance the APR credential by encouraging public relations graduates to pursue the APR as soon as they are eligible. The entry-level credential expires five years after graduation, and according to research and best practices, those who hold the credential will be more likely to "sit for" the Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations.

What do local Chapters of UAB participating organizations need to do for the entry-level program?

At this time, the program does not require any participation from PRSA Chapters, beyond providing moral support to candidates and beta test sites. Preparation of entry-level candidates is the responsibility of the beta test site coordinator (usually a faculty member), not the local Chapter Accreditation Committee.

Currently, the entry-level program is in the beta testing stage. Schools in the beta testing process are required to provide some kind of formal preparation program for candidates. In some cases, beta test schools may wish to collaborate with local PRSA Chapters to provide the formal preparation, but such collaboration would depend on the needs and preferences of the beta test school, as well as on the interest of the PRSA Chapter.