

**WHITE PAPER: PRSA MBA PROGRAM:  
BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS EDUCATION AND  
MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (MBA) CURRICULUM**

By Kristie Byrum, APR

**Summary**

*This white paper provides an overview of the successful assimilation of strategic communications content into Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs nationwide. It also describes the critical gap in corporate communications education in U.S.-based MBA programs, even as highly effective communication with key stakeholders and overall reputation management have become more important than ever for business leaders.*

*In fall 2012, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the world's largest professional society of communications executives, launched a special pilot program in strategic communications/reputation management for five MBA programs: the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland, Quinnipiac University School of Business and Engineering, and the University of Texas at El Paso College of Business Administration. This white paper documents the implementation processes and student experiences at these schools in addition to reactions from the business community. It offers key recommendations based on emerging best practices from the pilot programs for the effective integration of strategic communications coursework into various MBA program formats.*

**PRSA Launches Strategic Communications Coursework Tailored for MBA Programs  
After Successful Pilot at Five U.S. Universities**

The Public Relations Society of America, which provides global leadership in strategic communications, has launched a national program to increase the number of MBA curricula nationwide providing strategic communications content.

In 2008, the PRSA Foundation sponsored a research study that revealed that only 23 percent of graduate business schools consistently provide instruction in reputation

management, corporate communications and related ethical dimensions. The research study encompassed 20 percent of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) member schools, representing approximately 32 universities. This research revealed that only six percent of the schools required communications programs in their program, according to the research study prepared by Robert Pritchard, associate professor at Ball State University. A follow-up study discovered the communications courses by MBA programs differed greatly from the idea of communications held by most public relations practitioners and educators. Rather, they focused on business writing, presentation skills, interpersonal communication or organizational behavior rather than communication as an essential element of management.

While the research study outlined the nature of the dilemma, the practical problems it poses in the highly competitive modern workplace are becoming more and more evident. The majority of business executives enter middle-management and senior-level positions without a full understanding of the role of strategic communications in maintaining corporate reputations, protecting shareholder value and effectively communicating with such key stakeholders as investors, customers, employees, activists and community groups, and others. "Businesses reported a substantial gap between the reputational requirements of the modern corporation and the skills offered by MBA graduates who entered the workforce with finance, accounting and business management expertise, but did not have strategic communications grounding or acumen," Joe Cohen, chair-elect of PRSA, said.

Through its pilot program, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) has sought to provide specific guidelines and recommendations for bridging the gap between academe and private enterprise. The pilot program enabled MBA programs to implement strategic communications curricula into full-time, part-time and executive MBA programs. PRSA leadership and senior professionals, including MBA Initiative Committee Co-Chairs Anthony D'Angelo and Ray Crockett, monitored and documented this critical gap in MBA education and determined the timing was right to move forward, based on the inextricable link between corporate value and communications. The Society commissioned a 2010 study conducted by MWW and Kelton that indicated 98 percent of business leaders agreed existing MBA programs lack necessary instruction of corporate communications and reputation management strategy. Further, nine out of 10 business leaders surveyed admitted their corporate executives required greater training in core communications disciplines. The PRSA report showed that, while

business leaders said they have willingly hired recent MBA graduates, only four out of 10 who were hired demonstrated the skills necessary to protect the company's reputation and credibility. "This research affirmed our professional observations and experiences about the disconnect between traditional MBA education and strategic reputation management. To round out the education of young business professionals, it is imperative to include strategic organizational communications," D'Angelo said, who is senior manager, communications for ITT Corp.

The MBA communications course content is not intended as a tactical communications course of study but rather is directed to executives who make enterprise-wide business decisions. With its content designed for future business leaders, PRSA emphasizes that the program is neither a continuing education program for students who already plan to work in fields such as public relations, nor is it a course designed to teach tactical public relations skills to MBA students. "Our focus remains on the strategic dimensions of corporate communications and how the various disciplines may be used to improve operations and enhance corporate value through trust, credibility and effective communications with key stakeholders," Cohen said.

### **PRSA Involvement: Catalyst for Bridging MBA Education Gap**

The Public Relations Society of America, the largest member organization representing the public relations and communications profession with 32,000 professional and student members, has long played an advocacy role to solidify strategic communications as a foundational asset of businesses, not-for-profit entities and other organizations. PRSA's Board of Directors began in 2010 a collaboration with several business school representatives, including Paul Argenti with the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth and Daniel Diermeier of the Kellogg School of Management, to begin closing the gap in this academic discipline. Argenti, who also has taught management and corporate communications at the Harvard Business School and Columbia Business School, is the author of multiple books, including "Digital Strategies for Powerful Corporate Communications," "Strategic Corporate Communication," and "The Power of Corporate Communication." Diermeier, who has been named by *Fortune* magazine as one of the World's 50 Best Business School Professors, is the author of "Reputation Rules: Strategies for Managing Your Company's Most Valuable Asset."

PRSA appointed a team of professionals to pursue customization and adoption of corporate communications studies at the MBA level. The team developed course formats and wrote syllabi, including one for an 18-session course dealing with topics such as reputation management, issues management, corporate social responsibility, strategic philanthropy, integrated marketing communications and contemporary environments for business communications. A second syllabus makes recommendations for a nine-week mini-mester. The third syllabus documents the schedule for a day-long reputation management seminar focused on business communications, communications strategy, executive branding, media relations and crisis communications. The materials, complemented by support from PRSA and individual committee members, led to the pilot launch in the fall of 2012. Business programs at Dartmouth and Northwestern were founding partners, joined soon after by the Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland, the University of Texas El Paso and Quinnipiac University. Representatives of these schools report positive academic results and student evaluations from their 2012–2013 offerings in strategic communications to MBA students.

Numerous organizations helped fund, support and advance the effort behind the development and rollout of the MBA-Level Strategic Communications Course, including the PRSA Foundation, Arthur W. Page Society, MWW, Kelton Research, Southwest Airlines, Hilton Worldwide and The Mustache Agency.

## **KEY INSIGHTS FROM PILOT SCHOOLS**

### **The Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College**

With an international reputation for business expertise and a 20-year legacy of teaching strategic communications content in the Tuck School of Business curriculum, Dartmouth professor Paul Argenti was a highly valued partner for PRSA. Argenti, professor of Corporate Communications for the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, collaborated with the PRSA committee by drafting several model syllabi. Simultaneously, the Tuck School signed on as the first pilot school, enrolling 38 MBA students into Argenti's strategic communications course. "During the pilot, the course went as well as it ever has. We received feedback that it was one of the students' favorite courses in the entire MBA program," Argenti said. As other schools contemplate the adoption of MBA curriculum, Argenti urges them to consider a full-length course that offers working knowledge of organizational communications strategies. One

Dartmouth student wrote in a recent course evaluation, "I thought this was a great class that taught us a lot about the importance of communications as a leader and how to be more effective in our communications."

### **Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University**

The Kellogg School also has been a leader in developing a strategic communications curriculum, offering courses for more than a decade. Under the leadership of IBM Professor of Regulation and Competitive Practice in the Department of Managerial Economics and Decision Sciences, Daniel Diermeier, Ph.D., the courses focus on reputation management, with a strong emphasis on corporate crises. Diermeier, who is the director of the Ford Motor Company Center for Global Citizenship, carefully crafted numerous case studies, demonstrating various aspects of communications in the United States and abroad. Kellogg's full-time MBA degree requires the course, and the school also offers the communications curriculum for MBA students and teaches the concepts in several executive education programs. With school of management partnerships in other countries, Kellogg has internationalized the curriculum by enrolling students from China and Canada in the strategic communications classes. To advance the program, Diermeier offers supplemental sample teaching demonstrations and will share case studies with participating business schools. "We are happy to make our teaching materials available. We have an inventory of 15 cases with teaching notes, simulations and supplemental materials," Diermeier said.

### **Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland**

Many Smith School students bring work experience in the corporate, government and nonprofit realms of the Washington, D.C./Maryland/Virginia area to their academic pursuits. As a result, Maryland Associate Dean of MBA and MS Programs Ken White, Ph.D., said the need for a course in strategic communications provided a compelling opportunity. In fact, Smith School of Business professors reported that meetings with the business community often included a lament that graduating MBAs lacked communications skills. After learning of the program through his affiliation with PRSA, White set out to gain approval from the Marketing Department of the School of Business for a spring 2013 class. The curriculum rapidly gained approval from the business school, with 27 students initially enrolled in the course. The participants included MBA students in their second year of a full-time program. In addition to the

corporate communications and reputation management dimensions, students also learned media relations and public speaking skills. Students visited with a professional media trainer and learned executive skills for navigating a multimedia environment. Students participated in case study analysis, including both positive and negative perspectives, to identify companies that deftly handled communications crises and ones in which the corporations faltered. Based on positive feedback from the innovative offerings, White anticipates the formation of a Communications Center at the Smith School.

### **The College of Business Administration at The University of Texas at El Paso**

Support from PRSA fueled the University of Texas at El Paso's corporate communications offering to expand to more students in the MBA program. The University parlayed an individual elective course in communications that the school has offered for three years into a broader strategic communications course offering. With 29 students enrolled in the spring 2013 class, the MBA students began an exploration into the dimensions of internal and external communications for global corporations. With the campus' close proximity to Mexico and status as having the top-ranked MBA program for Hispanics<sup>1</sup>, Assistant Dean for MBA Programs Laura Uribarri said global media relations and aspects of international communications were important to MBA students enrolled in the class. Feedback from business administration alumni also has provided strong support, she said, because they recognize the active need for communications skills in the workplace. Further, alumni with careers in corporate communications have stepped forward to offer advice, counsel and guest lectures for students.

### **Quinnipiac University School of Business and Engineering**

Quinnipiac's School of Business and Engineering tapped the resources of an industry professional with a proven track record in strategic communications and offered the course initially to seven MBA students as an elective. With the success of the pilot, Quinnipiac plans to launch the course to a larger group of students in the spring of 2014 and offer the course in an online format. Before the launch, a Quinnipiac representative visited Northwestern to learn best practices. A communications faculty member with ties to PRSA initiated the program, but it quickly gained support from the Business School. "We found that with PRSA stepping forward,

---

<sup>1</sup> At the time of the pilot program launch, the MBA program at UTEP's College of Business Administration was ranked 1st among the Top 10 Business Graduate Programs for Hispanics by *Hispanic Business* magazine.

the course offered a great opportunity to expand our elective offerings,” Susan McTiernan, Associate Dean for Graduate Programs and Associate Professor of Management, said. Quinnipiac launched the course in seminar format, offering the course one night a week for three hours during a 14-week semester. Having received an enthusiastic response from students, the School of Business will offer the course again in the 2013–2014 academic year. As part of its interdisciplinary approach, Quinnipiac blended MBA students with those involved in the master’s program in public relations, sparking interesting discussions in the classroom, McTiernan said.

### **Recommendations for Adopting Graduate Business Strategic Communications Content**

When contemplating the incorporation of strategic communications courses, Diermeier encourages schools to consider their particular market approach and discern how strategic communications and reputation management will fill the academic and career-based needs of students. “I encourage the schools to ask themselves, ‘Whom do you serve?,’ ‘What is the need of our student population?’ With answers to these questions, schools are positioned to make decisions regarding appropriate curriculum innovations at the university.”

Collaboration among multiple academic departments allows interested universities to navigate through the approval process. For example, at Quinnipiac, the course originally was taught by a communications professor and then approved by the graduate school. The pilot schools reported that adopting the coursework was characterized by collaboration across multiple academic departments and instructors in communication studies. White noted an imperative to find the “right fit” for the professor, often utilizing one who had a depth of experience working in the private sector, combined with a solid academic background. At the University of Texas at El Paso, the initial announcement spurred an outpouring of public support for the program. Alumni who had pursued careers in corporate communications applauded the program and offered support.

For Quinnipiac, the launch of the program provided a teachable moment to share definitions of corporate communications and reputation management before the launch of the course. “We also used the time to educate students about what it was all about and to define strategic communications. It was actually surprising the misconceptions that students had about

the field,” McTiernan said.

### **Broadening the Scope of MBA Curricula Nationwide**

As PRSA moves into the next phase of offering communications content for business schools, pilot school officials say they hope many more schools will utilize the content and that fundamental aspects of strategic communications will become a mainstay in MBA education. This approach will allow higher education and the business world to bridge the knowledge gap between the previous lack of understanding about corporate communications and the new, more robust and outcome-based approach to effectively managing organizational communications and reputation. Universities interested in offering the strategic communications curriculum should visit [www.prsa.org/Learning/MBA/](http://www.prsa.org/Learning/MBA/) or contact Jeneen Garcia, PRSA vice president of education at (2120 460-1400).



**About the author:** Kristie Byrum, APR, who teaches at Clemson University, is a public relations executive who has managed national and global brand communications for two decades.