

DEMONSTRATING PROFESSIONALISM

By Patrick Jackson, APR

On November 12, at the PRSA National Conference, the assembly will discuss and vote on a proposed professional progression model, developed by the Future of Public Relations Committee. In light of this action and the importance of professionalism issues to public relations practitioners as a whole, this special section, written by Pat Jackson, APR, senior counsel of Jackson Jackson & Wagner and co-chairman of the committee, presents a historical overview of the subject, an explanation of the model, and the arguments in favor of a formalized professional progression track.

PUBLIC relations practitioners have been talking about professionalism, in one way or another, for at least half a century.

First came the underlying question: Can public relations be a true profession? The answer to that one is hardly debatable any longer.

To qualify as a profession, rather than a vocation, a field of endeavor must be endemic to the human condition. Lawyers are professionals because the need for government by law rather than by the mob affects every person. Doctors are professionals because everyone needs mental and physical health. Teachers are professionals because education is an essential part of all of our lives.

Public relations fits this criterion of professionalism: It is devoted to the essential function of building and improving human relationships. As soon as there was Eve as well as Adam, there were relationships; in every society, no matter how small or primitive, public communication needs and problems inevitably emerge and must be resolved.

Public relations is also, like other professions, an art applied to a science. We employ replicable data from psychology, sociology, and the other social sciences in our efforts to influence public relationships. In fact, PRSA has compiled a Public Relations Body of Knowledge that is maintained and updated for this very purpose.

Most important, public relations qualifies as a profession because it is an endeavor in which the public interest must be served. Practitioners and organizations simply cannot succeed in building good, long-standing public relationships

unless their actions are in concert with the public interest.

How far have we come?

Still, as every practitioner will recognize, there is a problem in all of this. *We* may know we can qualify as a profession, but does the rest of the world know this? The resounding answer is no. What is needed, then, are strategic methods of demonstrating our professionalism.

The first one, obviously, is that each of us use the Public Relations Body of Knowledge, subscribe to the Code of Professional Standards, and exemplify the behavior of true professionals in all we do.

Second, many programs have been advanced through public relations organizations to help demonstrate the professionalism of public relations practitioners:

- Edward L. Bernays, APR, and others have advocated licensing.
- PRSA first discussed mandatory accreditation in 1980, qualified to grant CEUs in 1981, and started planning for formal professional progression in 1984.
- The Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) has voted to make accreditation mandatory in 1990.
- The Calgary unit of CPRS successfully worked to get a registration law passed by the Alberta legislature. This differs from licensing in that the use of the term *public relations* will be controlled.
- The National School Public Relations Association demands re-accreditation every five years.
- The Academy of Hospital Public Relations, now merged with PRSA, offers "Fellow" status.

MILESTONES TOWARD PROFESSIONALISM

1922 First professional public relations society formed, Social Work Publicity Council, later National Public Relations Council for Health and Welfare Services (merged with PRSA in 1976); begins publishing *Channels*, the oldest public relations publication.

1923 Edward L. Bernays, APR, writes first book on public relations, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*; later teaches the first course, at New York University.

1929 Religious Public Relations Council founded, the oldest existing society.

1938 Florida Public Relations Association (FPRA) founded, the oldest regional organization.

1947 Public Relations Society of America founded, with goal of uniting the profession and advancing its standards.

1949 First college department in public relations established, at Boston University; Frank T. LeBart, APR, receives the first master's degree in the field.

1950 PRSA adopts Code of Ethics, first ethics canon for public relations. Revised five times (now called the Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations), it remains the only public relations code with enforcement procedures.

1952 Scott M. Cutlip, APR, and Allen H. Center, APR, publish *Effective Public Relations*, the first widely used text in the field.

1956 Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education founded to work in the interest of both the public and the profession.

1960 Licensing of practitioners debated. Bill is introduced in California legislature the following year; PRSA President Walter W. Belson, APR, opposes it in inauguration speech.

1961 PRSA and the American Public Relations Association merge, creating 4,000-member organization.

1962 Public Relations Institute started by PRSA as week-long, graduate-level seminar held on campus of major university (Institute phased out in 1981).

1964 Accreditation program launched offering "APR" designation upon successful completion of a day-long written exam, an oral test, and five years of practice. Soon, Canadian Public Relations Society, FPRA, International Association of Business Communicators, and the National School Public Relations Society adopt similar programs.

1964 First bibliography of field compiled by Cutlip, covering 1900 to 1963; subsequently, L. Robert Bishop and Albert Walker, APR, add annual compilations.

1976 Sections inaugurated by PRSA to add service to members related to their place of employment, following success of Counselors Academy (formed in 1960).

1977 FTC asks for a consent decree, gets "cooperative compliance" from PRSA to remove any ethics code items that "restrain competition."

1979 First career-track handbook, *Your Personal Guidebook to a More Successful Career in Public Relations*, written by Kalman B. Druck, APR, and Ray E. Hiebert, APR. (Texas Public Relations Society issues a new version, by Jim Haynes, APR, in 1988.)

1980 North American Public Relations Council formed; 13 organizations work together toward uniform accreditation, uniform ethics code (currently being ratified by member societies).

1981 American Society for Hospital Marketing and Public Relations adopts three-step progression leading to "Fellow" designation (after submission and judging of original research project).

1986 Symposium on "Demonstrating Professionalism" held in Itasca, Illinois; 80 leading practitioners start the process of pursuing increased professional standing through the societies. Three subsequent sessions with increased participation outline goals and program.

1988 Committee of scholars and practitioners, chaired by George M. Fowler, APR, publishes first codified Public Relations Body of Knowledge outline (entries currently being summarized; expected to be published next year).

- The American Society for Hospital Marketing and Public Relations has a three-step progression that ends with fellowship.
- The Florida Public Relations Association offers two levels of accreditation, including a higher one for counselors.
- The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and PRSA offer voluntary accreditation.
- PRSA's Counselors Academy has studied the idea of certifying public relations firms, and now requires new members to be accredited.
- The North American Public Relations Council (NAPRC), founded in 1980 to ally 13 organizations, is working toward a uniform ethics code, uniform accreditation, and other options that might be offered professionwide, rather than by individual societies.

A majority of practitioners—and all of these public relations organizations—agree that professional development and training activities are key. (In 1986, for the first time, *pr reporter's* annual survey of the profession found professionalism to be the issue of most interest to practitioners. Previously, it had ranked far down the list.)

Some are now proposing that, to retain membership in a society of true professionals, one must earn CEUs or formal academic credits, or give speeches, write monographs, or otherwise advance the field.

The next big step

In short, after years of talk—mainly complaining—professionalism has become a serious topic.

To formalize the discussion, the Task Force on Demonstrating Professionalism was appointed in 1986. It held a symposium for 80 PRSA leaders, plus invitees from sister societies, and presented a long list of options to the PRSA Assembly the following spring. The task force was then re-formed as the Future of Public Relations Committee. An additional symposium and other national meetings were held; the result was the presentation to the profession of a professional progression model.

While PRSA will be first to act, at its assembly meeting in November, the model was shared with the 13 member organizations of the North American Public Relations Council by PRSA President Dwayne Summar, APR, early this year. The hope is that several societies will adopt it or a similar plan, so public relations will be unified in its approach.

—P.J.

Four cornerstones

Indeed, unifying the profession heads a four-point list of prerequisites for the future that was circulated by the committee. The others:

- Making the commitment to promote accreditation;
- Putting in place professional-progression opportunities through which practitioners can demonstrate their professionalism;
- Educating managers and society on the critical role played by public relations in contemporary life.

In an era in which cosmetologists and plumbers, to say nothing of the professions, have developed sophisticated continuing education and attainment programs, more than 400 attendees at the symposia concurred that the time had come to devise such a system for public relations.

Making accreditation count

Accreditation, now in its 24th year, remains the bulwark. While only a quarter of PRSA members are accredited, and some still strongly resist it, there is evidence that the new generation of college-trained professionals eagerly embraces it. Accreditation chairmen in PRSA chapters and in other organizations tell of young practitioners who cannot wait until they meet the five-year standard.

While "APR" may not yet have the cachet the field would like, it also has not been heavily promoted outside the practice—where it really counts—with employers and headhunters. Adding new promotional clout and budgets was the first recommendation of the symposia. How long did it take "CLU" and "CPCU" to gain acceptance in the insurance industry? Or even "CPA"?

As drafted, the professional progression model (see summary chart, page 30) creates personally rewarding milestones that will focus practitioners' attention on continuing study and development. Those who do not wish to partake will be under no compulsion to do so. However, as the competition for top positions increases, and if the experience of other professions is a guide, those who do not keep up with the growing body of knowledge and rapidly increasing research findings could find themselves obsolete. To avoid that dire situation is the ultimate goal of the project.

(A detailed description of the proposed model, with accompanying rationale, is available by writing Professional Services Department, PRSA, 33 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003.)

Demonstrating Professionalism Through Societies: The Options

EASE

- Anyone can become a member
- Membership requirements
- Required orientation before membership
- Voluntary accreditation
- Educational requirements for membership
- Government-sanctioned control of the term *public relations*
- Continuing education/service requirements to maintain accreditation
- Continuing education requirements to maintain membership
- Formal professional progression tracks
- Reaccreditation
- Mandatory accreditation after "x" years
- Specialty accreditation
- Fellow status
- Accreditation test as entry exam for membership
- Registration or regulation short of licensing
- Licensure

RIGOR

When it comes to adopting professional requirements, associations have a wide range of alternatives open to them. PRSA's goal has been to choose from among these in such a way as to produce an equitable, realistic, and meaningful professional progression path.

WHY NOT LICENSING?

IN 1987, PRSA's Study Group on Licensing and Registration reviewed the new call for licensure against the environment of current state regulatory trends.

Recognizing that discipline for those who practice public relations and adding stature to the field are the objectives of those who favor licensing, the study group's investigation nevertheless confirmed that the trend is toward less, not more, state regulation.

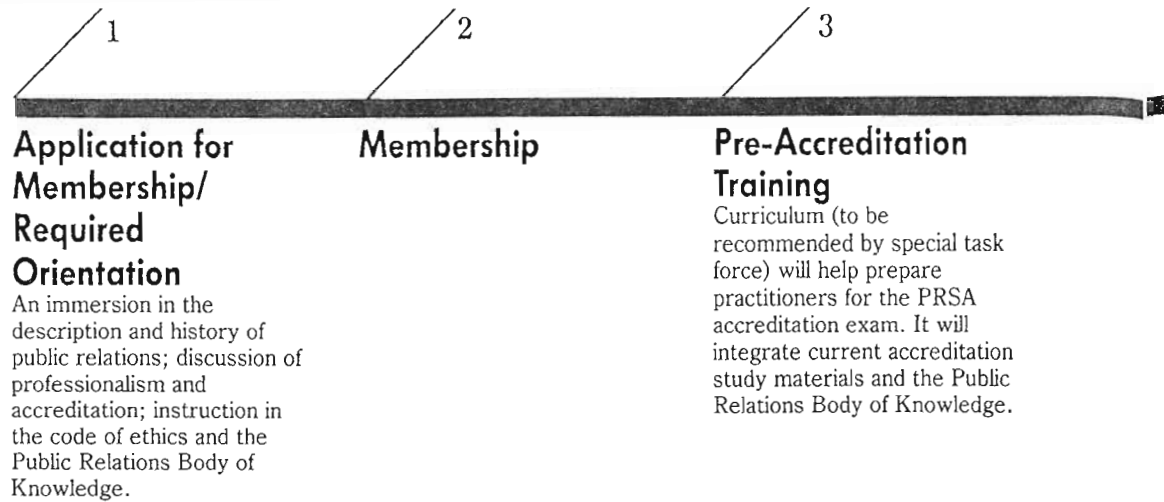
The group's report, written by chairman Ronald Goodman, APR, and the late Herbert Kassner, APR, vice chairman, included the following findings:

- There is an almost universal disdain among state legislatures toward licensing, and a sharp dislike of any type of government oversight of public relations practice.
- There is little likelihood of any state legislature passing a bill that would license the term *public relations*.
- A more comprehensive accreditation program and a renaissance of a professional continuing-education program can yield the levels of professional knowledge and skill sought.
- It is our judgment and common agreement that the ethics code and sense of public and professional morality that must be maintained by public relations professionals cannot be delegated to government. The process of morality, while personal, is democratic and cannot be legislated. It can best be sustained through peer-imposed discipline based on a common code of ethics and consistently maintained, high levels of professional excellence in practice.
- Due to the absence of any significant base of support and the absence of any broad-scale public interest, we find that state licensing is not warranted for the foreseeable future.

In a related development, the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education issued a request-for-proposal suggested by the Task Force on Demonstrating Professionalism, following the first symposium.

A position paper will investigate how ethical and unethical public relations practice affects the public interest. Building a body of cases to demonstrate the impact of public relations on society as a whole is an essential step toward gaining professional status.

PROPOSED MODEL FOR PRSA PROFESSIONAL PROGRESSION



THE TIME HAS COME

John Paluszek, APR

I wasn't *always* deeply interested in public relations professional progression.

Sure, about nine years ago, when Kalman Druck, APR, led the development of *Your Personal Guidebook to a More Successful Career in Public Relations*, it caught my eye. But having been in the field for more years than I care to admit, I didn't put a lot of thought into the broader implications of that seminal work.

The same with the subsequent valiant efforts to structure a career path—or track for public relations professional development.

It all seemed a bit esoteric.

Then, not long ago, with three children having entered the profession, it struck me that they need—and, really, we *all* need—a road map for growth and credentialing in this vast, vital, and ever-changing field.

"Licensing is the answer," some say. But that puts government's big nose into our tent. "Accreditation is the credential we need," say others. Yes, it's vital. But what happens en route to accreditation? And, since there's life *after* accreditation, how do you keep growing and demonstrating that professional growth?

One answer, of course, is the *way* you practice public relations—ethically, and with high value and ever-deepening knowledge and understanding.

But surely there's something else needed—a comprehensive path from entry level to senior professional, cleared

and marked by public relations professionals themselves. "The challenge," as the "Report of the PRSA Task Force on Demonstrating Professionalism" put it, "is how to ensure that practitioners continue their professional development throughout their careers and how to demonstrate that professionalism to others—especially to employers."

It's happening.

What follows is a brief report on what has evolved in this area in recent years and the significant events scheduled for the next few months.

Four Levels of Practice

Virtually all models of public relations professional progression refer to four basic levels of practice.

One of the latest attempts to describe the four levels was recently completed by Jim Haynes, APR, of Jim Haynes Communications in Austin, Texas, for the Public Relations Foundation of Texas and the Texas Public Relations Association. Haynes is working on an adaptation of this structure as the basis for curriculum recommendations for PRSA's proposed professional progression track.

The structure lists the typical functions of public relations practitioners at each of the four levels, as well as the basic skills required at each level. (See *accompanying diagram*.) Once a skill is acquired (say, at level one, assistant), it may be used throughout the practi-

tioner's career.

There are, of course, some functions, skills, and titles unique to a type of public relations practice—counseling, corporate, trade association, and government, to name a few. But, for the most part, the similarities far outnumber the differences.

The Professional Progression Curriculum Task Force, chaired by Haynes, aims to help professionals answer the question: What do I need to know as I grow?

Eventually, that will mean a full-scale curriculum—articles, monographs, books, and courses—recommended for each level of practice. It will more than likely relate to the Public Relations Body of Knowledge recently assembled by a special task force of PRSA's Research Committee, and, perhaps, to the "body of experience" that has accumulated in the awards program archives of public relations professional societies.

The curriculum should be of use both to generalists and specialists in the practice. And it will likely be tied into university public relations curricula by reference to, or summary of, "The Design for Undergraduate Public Relations Education," a report of PRSA's 1987 Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education.

The curriculum task force is also a critical part of the proposed professional progression track that has been developed for PRSA members by the Future

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Accreditation

Current PRSA accreditation process would be left essentially in place. However, preparation material would be adapted to the Public Relations Body of Knowledge. Intention would be to move toward mandatory accreditation.

Maintenance of Accreditation

Every three years, the accredited practitioner would have to demonstrate continued professional development. This would be done in two modes: continuing education units (CEUs) and activity credits (for writing, research, public service, speeches, and the like).

Specialty Certification

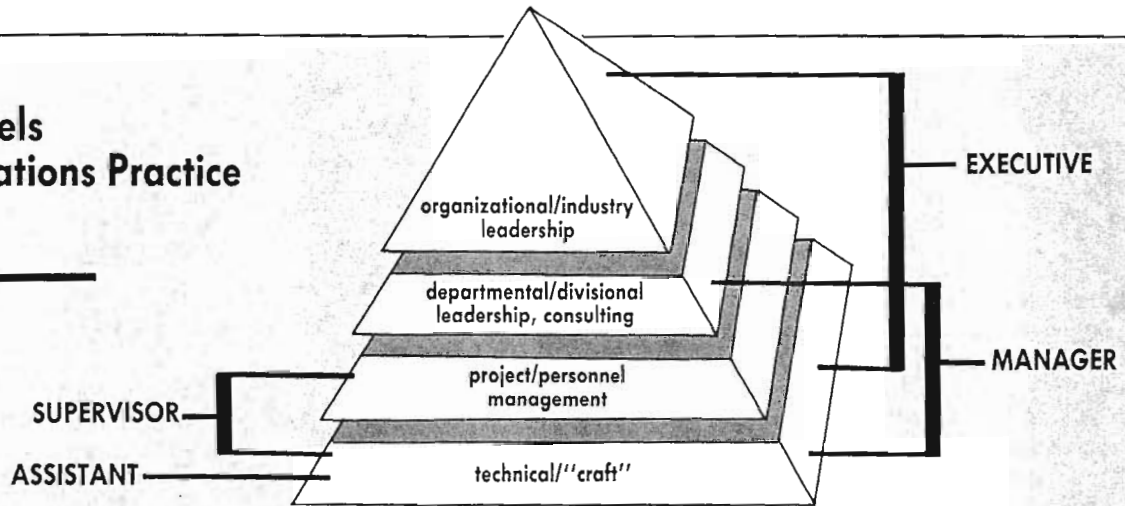
Each PRSA specialty section would determine whether to set up exams (based on need) and whether to grant certification. Certification would be available only to accredited members.

College of Fellows

Senior practitioners (APRs with 20 years of practice) would be eligible for election if they have advanced the state of the profession. Purpose: role models of distinction.

The Four Levels of Public Relations Practice

TYPICAL SKILLS



TYPICAL FUNCTIONS

Assistant	Supervisor	Manager	Executive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses technical/"craft" skills to disseminate information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervises work of specialists • Responsible for research/analysis of issues, trends, constituencies • Supervises communication operations/planning at sub-department level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervises work of supervisors • Monitors/predicts consequences of government regulations/legislation, and social trends • Counsels senior executives • Manages communication operations/planning at departmental level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interacts with stakeholders • Develops organizational mission, goals, strategies, policies, systems • Provides industry leadership • Counsels senior executives • Directs communication operations/planning at organizational level

Typical skills and functions of practitioners at each of the four practice levels, as described by Jim Haynes, APR. The Professional Progression Curriculum Task Force will use this outline in shaping the curriculum for PRSA's proposed professional progression model.

of Public Relations Committee and that will be discussed and voted on at PRSA's Fall Assembly next month.

Finalizing the Structure

Of course, there is as yet no unanimity on how to finalize a progression struc-

ture. Public relations professionals are a diverse, opinionated, and articulate lot. There will be plenty of healthy debate on the subject in the months ahead.

But one thing is certain: Public relations professional progression is on track. How soon it will arrive, and in

what final form, is in the hands of each practitioner who cares about demonstrating public relations professionalism.

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