

**REVIEW OF THE B.A., B.S. IN PUBLIC RELATIONS**  
Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) Code: 09.0902  
Public Relations, Advertising, and Applied Communication

**OVERVIEW**

The B.A., B.S. Public Relations program at Illinois State University is housed within the School of Communication in the College of Arts and Sciences. The School offers four undergraduate degree programs—Communication Studies, Journalism, Mass Media, and Public Relations, as well as a master’s degree program in Communication. The Public Relations program leads to a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science in Communication and is the only program in Illinois accredited by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) through its Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR). The program emphasizes strategic and ethical communication, preparing students through a curriculum grounded in public relations theory, research, media production, and applied skills in writing and project management. Students gain professional experience through opportunities like internships, student-run media outlets, and participation in the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). The School encourages interdisciplinary collaboration and offers access to state-of-the-art facilities including the Social Media Analytics Command Center (SMACC), WZND radio, and TV-10. Students also benefit from the School’s robust alumni network and targeted professional development initiatives.

**Enrollment and Degrees Conferred by Plan of Study, Fall Census Day, 2017-2024**

**B.A., B.S. in Public Relations, Illinois State University**

First Majors Only

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Enrollments	220	207	201	202	158	122	142	145
Degrees	76	78	82	79	89	75	64	41

Table notes:

Graduating Fiscal Year consists of summer, fall, and spring terms, in that order. For example, Graduating Fiscal Year 2024 consists of the following terms: summer 2023, fall 2023, and spring 2024.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**  
**PROGRAM REVIEW SELF-STUDY REPORT**

**Self-study process**

This program self-study report, like the others for the School of Communication, benefitted from elements that are identical (e.g., self-study process description, enrollment trends, recruitment, advising, etc.), because the School applies its resources strategically for all its programs, while also attending to program-specific matters as required, to gain efficiencies and achieve effectiveness for the whole School and the individual programs. The previous program-review cycle served as a guide in formulating our approach for this program review cycle. COM’s associate director served as the project manager for this Program Review. Together with COM’s director of advising, the associate director collected and posted needed data and information for all programs and the whole School, reviewing completed drafts of all self-studies for correctness, accuracy, and completeness. Guidance for all personnel involved in the development of self-studies was provided through e-communication and meetings, giving those personnel direction for and resources about working on their self-studies with others in their respective areas. A complete digital library of documents, data, and other sources of necessary information for both the entire School of Communication and its individual programs was established and open for faculty use in preparing their self-studies. Public Relations faculty in the program (including TT and NTT), led by the program coordinator, through multiple means, obtained and utilized all necessary documentation and data from internal and external stakeholders relevant for this program review over the spring 2024 semester and summer 2024. Concerted efforts were made to collect information and gather feedback from current (including graduating)

students, alumni, colleagues, community partners, federal and state higher education agencies, and peer institutions for this self-study.

### **Program curriculum**

The Public Relations major prepares students to research, plan, execute, and evaluate communication between an organization and its publics, monitor the organization's environment, and counsel management on policies and programs. This major is designed to prepare students to help private industry and public organizations improve the quality of communication among themselves, their employees, the general public and government. Students will learn how public relations is instrumental in corporate strategy, complements advertising and marketing, and is vital to managing organizations' images and reputations. Because PR is an important aspect of every organization in every commercial, civic, or other organization, students are encouraged to have a minor or second major in a department or school outside or inside the School of Communication. Since the 2015 Program Review, the Public Relations program has made significant changes in two ways. First and easiest are editorial changes that have been made for multiple courses so that (1) their descriptions are clearer for students and (2) prerequisite courses were adjusted (usually reduced or streamlined). Because public relations is about as dynamic as business, technology, and society, we consider whether revisions to our courses' content are needed to any significant degree and in what ways for student learning. The PR program also has undertaken efforts to address equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging in the PR program. Three particularly important subjects are the profession overall, ethics, and management. Retention rates F1-S1 for the PR program are very steady, with one aberration in 2021, but the F1- F3 retention rates vary year to year and show a slightly declining overall trend. In comparison to the School's respective retention rates, the PR program has done better than the School on F1-S1 but slightly worse in F1-F3 for four of the six years tracked.

### **Program or academic unit faculty**

The PR program has had three tenure-track (TT) faculty and two principal (permanently funded) nontenure-track (NTT) faculty and several individual NTT faculty lead courses in the program. The TT faculty lead the graduate courses and the upper-level undergraduate courses. All TT faculty are graduate faculty members and have had substantial industry experiences in addition to their doctoral degrees. The NTT faculty, all of whom hold master's degrees in communication and have had industry experience, lead only undergraduate courses and, most often but not exclusively, at the lower levels.

### **Program goals and quality indices**

The PR program has two goals: (1) ground the undergraduate public relations major in specialized knowledge and theories, and (2) emphasize specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities in particular areas, especially writing, research, critical analysis and decision-making, media production, business, and project management. We measure the program's quality through its students' successes, faculty's teaching and research performance, favorable program review feedback, and successful Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) reaccreditation efforts.

### **Student learning outcomes assessment plan and process**

The program's detailed assessment plan, which includes important factors required for the program's accreditation, measures student learning along eight learning outcomes/objectives:

1. Recall foundational knowledge about the practice, management, value, and history of public relations.
2. Demonstrate competence through application of foundational and specialized knowledge in public relations problems and discourse.
3. Construct a view of the profession and its future that integrates lessons across all realms of experience about public relations.
4. Navigate organizational structures and processes for public relations and beyond.
5. Demonstrate about and value ethical work in a professional setting in every respect and about the general roles of public relations technicians and managers/leaders.
6. Identify resources and strategies for life-long learning about effective and ethical public relations.
7. Foster sound skills for effective project management within the public relations process.

8. Apply principles/rules for argumentation, discourse, grammar, AP style, and APA style correctly and appropriately in written work.

Student learning is assessed directly and indirectly. Direct assessments of students' work are gained from tangible evidence from students of what they have and have not learned. The use of rubrics would be instrumental in codifying the criteria on which students' work would be evaluated within the specific context of given assignments and within the broader context of an overall course. Faculty would use students' assignments as data about student performance that also can be used to drill down into what works and what doesn't work in courses and the PR program by tracking performance over time. Methods for direct assessment include: tests and quizzes, comprehensive exams, oral exams, interviews, papers, projects, case analyses, performances, exhibitions, and portfolios. Indirect assessments of student learning are gained from "proxy signs" outside of course-based assignments that show students probably learned content. Methods for indirect assessment include: student and alumni surveys, interviews, focus groups, and reflective essays; feedback about interns' performance (also can serve as direct evidence when coupled with a specific performance rubric); program reputation and quality; selected items from faculty course evaluations; retention and graduation rates; job placements; career advancements; honors and awards; and anecdotal information from individuals related to the program in any way.

### **Specialized accreditation**

Our PR program is the first on the only accredited program in Illinois. The PR program is accredited by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), which includes its student-focused branch, the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). The accreditation is called Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR), which the PRSA administers. CEPR is a voluntary program of quality-assurance endorsement for studies in public relations at colleges and universities worldwide. Programs with CEPR credentials are located in the U.S., Canada, Europe, South America, and New Zealand, plus more than 40 additional programs on four continents are in various stages of the review process. Each school is assessed according to an indigenously appropriate application of standards. CEPR credentials distinguish those programs that provide the faculty, curriculum, and resources needed to prepare students for professional public relations positions and career growth. Certified programs are listed in the annual PRSA Member Services Directory, and they are highlighted in information provided by PRSA regarding schools where public relations is taught. The complete report for the program's reaccreditation is included.

### **Responses to recommendations resulting from the previous program review**

From the 2015 Program Review, eight recommendations were given for the PR program to address. All of them were met, and they involved meeting instructional demand for PR courses by hiring new faculty, including faculty from underrepresented groups; co-locating all programs for the School of Communication, which for the PR program affects only its large-lecture class that is an introduction to the PR field; exploring internationalization opportunities, which were done in conjunction with the whole School and especially so with programs in France and Netherlands; bolstering student participation in the Honors program, which we largely address by personal invitations for students; increasing number of male students, which benefits from the School's recruitment efforts for the program; increasing alumni contact, which has been done by regular and frequent communications with alumni; and using assessment data for the program, which was quite a challenge during the pandemic.

### **Changes in the academic discipline, field, societal need, and program demand**

Public relations is a management function in organizations of all kinds in numerous industries, and PR is needed in some way in all of them. Although there are, ostensibly, numerous changes in the field of public relations that affect everything, from people to technology, three of the most-prominent ones on which we have seen, felt, and addressed in PR education for our students: (1) social media, (2) virtual teams and remote work, and (3) artificial intelligence.

### **Major findings of this program review self-study**

- Our Public Relations program outperforms all comparator institutions, which is structured effectively through the program's assessment plan, accreditation, and connections with professionals in the field.
- Our program compares favorably to aspirational programs in terms of our potential to adopt features of those programs, if and only if funding and other support can be secured.

- Our students benefit from a strong, highly respected, and accredited program in public relations, which prepares them very well for their next steps after graduation.
- Our faculty are very active and known scholars of public relations and very effective educators, which is essential for the program's continued strength and success.
- Our PR program's alumni have great affinity for our program and ISU, which is facilitated by frequent communication between the School and them as well as evidenced by their continued support of our program by financial, academic, and professional contributions.
- Limitations of course offerings over the years largely has been a function of a continually small number of faculty for a very popular major.
- Additional resources to address technological and professional changes in the PR profession are needed.

### **Initiatives and plans for the next program review cycle**

To strengthen an already strong Public Relations program, the following efforts seem most appropriate to undertake for the next Program Review cycle:

- (1) hire one or two more full-time faculty members so that students have more PR courses than we have been able to offer in the past with only three faculty,
- (2) scrutinize the PR program's existing courses for ways to address field-specific changes,
- (3) consider whether any new course(s) should be developed to meet industry factors,
- (4) consider redesigning the major to better meet industry changes and future direction,
- (5) collaborate more closely and strategically with the Honors Program, and
- (6) inspire reasonably more alumni engagement in the program's classes offered each semester.

## **PROGRAM REVIEW OUTCOME AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ACADEMIC PLANNING COMMITTEE**

**Review Outcome.** The Academic Planning Committee, as a result of this review process, finds the B.A./B.S. in Public Relations to be in Good Standing.

The Academic Planning Committee commends the program on the development of a comprehensive and well-structured self-study report that substantiates its claims with data and reflection. The report clearly documents the program's strengths and challenges, and includes input from faculty, students, alumni, and other stakeholders.

The committee commends the program on its continued national accreditation through the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). The Public Relations program is the only undergraduate program in Illinois to hold the Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR), a distinction that affirms the program's commitment to excellence and professional alignment. The committee acknowledges that the program is currently preparing for reaccreditation in fall 2024.

The committee commends the program for its thoughtful curricular design. The program's learning goals emphasize writing, research, media production, and project management—skills that are critical for success in the public relations profession. The curriculum is regularly updated in response to changes in the field and alumni input. The committee further commends the program's integration of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEI) content into courses and co-curricular opportunities.

The committee notes the program's longstanding emphasis on experiential learning, particularly through its internship program. From 2016–2023, students in the Public Relations major completed more internships than any other major in the School of Communication. The program's new Career COM-petency initiative, which provides monthly professional development programming led by alumni, was also recognized as an innovative and meaningful addition.

The committee commends the program for implementing a student learning outcomes assessment plan that aligns with CEPR standards and uses capstone portfolios and other tools. The plan includes both direct and indirect

measures and incorporates feedback from stakeholders. The program intends to update its assessment plan following reaccreditation—a reasonable and appropriate approach.

The committee acknowledges the program's efforts to support student success and to improve retention. The program has developed initiatives such as a weekly student newsletter and increased outreach to internal transfer students. Time-to-degree data show that most students complete the program in four years, and the program is well-structured for both first-time-in-college and transfer students.

The committee also recognizes the program's commitment to inclusive excellence. The percentage of Public Relations majors from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups reached 31% in 2023, a level that exceeds institutional and national industry benchmarks. The committee commends the program's efforts to recruit and support a diverse student population and to engage alumni from diverse backgrounds in mentoring roles.

The committee appreciates the program's analysis of comparator and aspirational institutions. The self-study used this analysis to inform modest goals related to curriculum and diversity. The committee encourages the program to further expand its vision in future planning cycles.

### **Recommendations.**

In addition to the program's noteworthy efforts and accomplishments, the Academic Planning Committee provides the following recommendations for consideration. These recommendations are to be addressed within the next regularly scheduled review cycle. Details describing the actions and outcomes associated with each of the committee's recommendations should be included in the next program review self-study report that is tentatively due October 1, 2032.

**Continue to refine the program's enrollment management strategy.** The program experienced a 34% decline in enrollment between 2016 and 2023. While recent gains are encouraging, current recruitment efforts are not program-specific. The committee recommends the development of a targeted enrollment plan to increase visibility, attract diverse applicants, and sustain healthy enrollment. Additional faculty resources may be required if enrollment rebounds.

**Continue to monitor and support student retention.** Retention data, particularly fall-to-fall and fall-to-third-year rates, indicate room for improvement. The committee recommends that the program develop additional supports for first-time-in-college students and continue analyzing retention trends disaggregated by student population.

**Investigate the decline in internship participation.** Although the program has a strong history of internship engagement, participation has declined since 2018. The committee encourages the program to examine potential causes and reinvest in efforts to promote and support internships, especially given their alignment with career readiness.

**Continue to implement and refine the student learning outcomes assessment plan.** The committee commends the existing plan and encourages the program to continue using assessment data to inform curricular improvements. Following reaccreditation, the program should revisit its plan to ensure continued relevance and alignment.

**Advocate for increased tenure-track faculty lines.** The program has the fewest tenure-track faculty lines among School of Communication majors despite its size and significance. The committee recommends that the program continue advocating for additional faculty to support instruction, advising, assessment, and scholarship.

**Expand efforts to promote the CEPR credential.** Only a small number of students pursue the Certified in Principles of Public Relations credential, despite its potential value. The committee encourages the program to increase awareness and advising around the credential, especially now that financial barriers have been reduced.

**Develop more ambitious aspirational goals.** The comparator and aspirational analysis identified appropriate peers, but the committee encourages the program to think more broadly about innovation, new academic initiatives, and program development in future strategic planning.

**Continue collaborations with Milner Library.** Build upon a strong existing relationship to evaluate and maintain resource availability. Consider expanding digital resources, integrating information fluency outcomes and assessment into the curriculum, and integrating library tools into assessment plans. Such efforts ensure that both faculty and students have ongoing access to the information and skills needed for effective scholarship.

**Continue to foster strong alumni and stakeholder engagement.** Monitor ties with alumni and external stakeholders to remain current with industry trends and job market needs. Regular alumni surveys, advisory boards, and panels can inform curriculum updates and highlight career pathways for prospective and current students, enhancing the program's relevance and attractiveness.