

US-Canada study of PR writing by entry-level practitioners reveals significant supervisor dissatisfaction♦

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ABSTRACT

This study, combining survey results of the membership of North America's two largest public relations associations, confirms the existence of significant dissatisfaction among public relations supervisors in both the US and Canada with the quality of writing performance of entry-level PR practitioners. It also demonstrates the degree to which these entry-level practitioners overestimate their writing competency. The study also highlights a need for increased attention to writing training for future PR practitioners, and creates an opportunity for an on-going study to track writing performance of entry-level PR practitioners in North America over time. The US study (Cole, Hembroff & Corner, 2009) and the more recent survey of Canadian practitioners provide the basis of this comparative analysis.

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Wilcox and Cameron, authors of a best-selling first-year public relations text, argue that writing is at the top of the list of five essential abilities needed in public relations (2009). There is general agreement among scholars and practitioners assembled to produce the 2006 Professional Bond report of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), that writing is one of the fundamental skills needed in public relations (2006). This finding is consistent with the 1999 PRSA Port of Entry report and has been supported by subsequent studies led by practitioners and educators alike, as part of the research phase of the Professional Bond (2006).

While employers agree that writing is an essential skill in public relations (PR), it seems few are happy with the writing of entry-level PR practitioners. The perceived decline of writing skills has been well documented (Erb, 1992; Haberstroh, 1995; Harden & Pompper, 2004) at least anecdotally. In 2008, Cole,

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Hembroff and Corner conducted a descriptive study to determine the perceptions of the PR supervisors from across the US of the writing-skills of entry-level PR practitioners (2009). The comprehensive descriptive study documented significant discontent among seasoned PR practitioners with entry-level PR writing in America (Cole, et al., 2009). Cole, et al. surveyed more than 800 members of PRSA and found significant documentation that entry-level practitioners have trouble writing – from press releases, to memos, to emails (Cole, et al., 2009). Their report has stimulated discussions among academics in the US, and in Canada, prompting this international, comparative study. In 2009/2010 Mount Royal University partnered with Michigan State University to conduct this expanded study. In conducting this writing-competency study, we also sought to learn more about the significance of internships and entry-level writing tests in obtaining entry-level PR positions comparing previously unpublished US data with new data from this Canadian study.

Besides numerous published studies and reports highlighting the importance of writing in public relations, several reports demonstrating the perceived value of PR internships also exist in scholarly and professional publications. These reports provide general agreement that internships have become necessary for a smooth transition from university to the workplace (Beard & Morton, 1999; Bourland-Davis, Graham & Fulmer, 1997; Gibson, 1998). Indeed, the PRSA, in its 2006 Professional Bond report states: “internships and other pre-professional work experiences have become essential in public relations education” (p. 46). Two previous Commission reports (1987, 1999) cite the importance of internships in public relations curriculum, a point made finer in the 2006 report: “Research conducted by the Commission for this report reaffirmed the central importance of supervised work experience to public relations students. Practitioners surveyed identified it as the highest-scored essential ingredient of an undergraduate education” (p. 58). Stacks, Botan and Turk found similar results in their 1999 survey of 258 public relations educators and practitioners. In that survey, internships received the highest mark of all assessment techniques available in a college/university public relations environment (1999).

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Research questions

The principal purpose of this descriptive study was to determine how Canadian public relations practitioners, particularly those occupying supervisory roles, assessed the quality of the writing of the PR practitioners they encountered entering the field. We adapted the survey that had been developed and administered by Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, and we collectively adapted the US questionnaire for the Canadian population and administered the questionnaire in an identical manner (The Canadian questionnaire was administered in both English and French while the US study had been administered exclusively in English). This procedure was designed in order to allow the new Canadian data to be compared and combined with the previously collected US data for this international report. Both studies – individually and when combined – provide baseline data for future international studies.

While the majority of the research question categories used in the Canadian study were identical to those reported in the published US study, we are reporting one previously unreported category of US questions (shown below as RQ5) for this report.

RQ1. What are the major categories of writing upon which Canadian entry-level PR practitioners are spending their “writing time” during a normal work week, and how does this vary from how similarly experienced US practitioners are spending their time?

RQ2. What categories of writing do Canadian PR supervisors feel are most important for entry-level practitioners to be able to complete without assistance, and how different are these findings from US findings?

RQ3. From the perspective of Canadian PR supervisors, how skillful are these entry-level practitioners in performing writing tasks in the various categories of assignments, and do these supervisors perceive that the writing of recent college and university graduates is improving or declining over time? Again, we will report differences between these Canadian perceptions and those of their US counterparts.

RQ4. What underlying components of the writing function have the greatest influence on shaping the judgment of supervisors in both countries regarding the overall perceived writing capabilities of entry-level practitioners?

RQ5. What relative roles do internships, writing tests, or both play in screening and selecting of entry-level PR practitioners?

Methodology

The comparative study combines survey samples of 848 US PR practitioners and 109 Canadian PR practitioners. The US practitioners were members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the Canadian practitioners were members of the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS). We excluded retired PR practitioners and members of the educators divisions of both organizations. The Canadian questionnaire mirrored the questions included in the US survey, conducted in the fall of 2008, and which was reported, peer-reviewed, and published in the *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* (Cole, et al., 2009).

For the Canadian study, the national office of the CPRS forwarded an introductory memo from the principal investigators to 1542 CPRS members (6700 in US study) along with a survey designed by Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, with which co-author Hembroff is affiliated. This effort yielded 109 (848 in the US sample conducted through the auspices of PRSA with a similar solicitation) completed questionnaires producing a crude response rate of 7% (US response rate was 13%). As in the US survey, we included questions to examine skill components of PR writers. We also sought to determine whether senior practitioners perceive a decline or an improvement in the preparation of entry-level professionals over time, and whether PR writing tasks are increasing in variety and complexity. In most cases, respondents were asked to respond to questions on a standard Likert-type scale ranging from a score of one (for the lowest level) to five (for the highest), or on a "yes, no, don't know" format for a series of questions. Generally, we use percentages to report findings. We used standard statistical tests to analyze the responses.

Characteristics

Respondents in the Canadian study were members of the CPRS at the time of the survey period: March 19 through May 25, 2010.

We found some variation from the US study, conducted in September 2008, in the type of enterprise in which the Canadian respondents are conducting their PR work. In contrast to the US study of PRSA members, nearly half of the CPRS members reported working in government departments (46.2% vs. 11.0% in the US study). Another 30.2% reported working in non-government, communications-related departments (roughly half of the percentage, 60.1%, in the US study) with another 14.2% working in a communications-related agency and 9.4% working as sole practitioners (compared to 22.1% and 6.8% respec-

tively in the US study).

In contrast to the aforementioned variation, we found clear similarities between Canadian and US respondents in terms of tenure as PR practitioners. More than two-thirds (68.9%) of the Canadian respondents reported working in public relations-related jobs for more than 11 years (similar to the 65.5% in the US study), while 14.7% reported working for five years or fewer (also similar to the 16.4% in the US study) and the remaining 16.5% for 6-10 years. Three-fourths (75.0%) of the Canadian survey respondents described themselves as supervisors – virtually the same as the 75.9% in the US study. Also similar to the US study, 94.4% of the respondents reported having a bachelor's degree (compared to 98.2% in the US study), and of these 31.8% (35.5% in the US study) have a master's degree.

Roughly half of the respondents (44.0% in Canada vs. 50.3% in the US) described the community in which they work as a major metropolitan area (more than 1 million people), with 23.9% (20.5% US) selecting large city (300,000 – 1 million people), 27.5% (22.1% US) a medium city (50,000 – 300,000 people), 4.6% (4.9% US) a small city (10,000 – 50,000 people) and none (2.2% US) in a rural area or small town (less than 10,000 people).

The majority of Canadian respondents, 55.0%, reported living in the Western provinces of Canada. Over one third, 35.8%, reported living in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, while the remaining 9.2% reported residing in Atlantic Canada. In the US study, residence was a bit more evenly spread: 31.7% of respondents reported living in the South, followed by 27.9% in the Midwest, 21.2% in the West and the remaining 19.1% in the Northeast US census regions.

Results (RQ 1-4)

In the first question, (RQ1) Canadian practitioners were asked to estimate the hours in an average work week (40-hour) an entry-level practitioner would spend doing writing tasks (and only writing tasks.) The data, presented in Table 1, are compared to the published data from the US (Cole, et al., 2009). All questions in both studies were asked from the framework of “thinking of recent college and university graduates (you have observed) in public relations-related jobs,” as was the case with the 2009 study (Cole, et al.).

In both questionnaires, we compared the estimates of time entry-level practitioners spend on various writing tasks to the estimates given by the entry-level practitioners themselves. The questionnaire provided respondents with a list, rotated, of seven writing categories (with an option for including “others”). This list included:

- 1) Press releases and backgrounders

- 2) Conversational emails to clients and colleagues
- 3) Newsletter and annual report copy
- 4) Business letters and internal memoranda
- 5) Website content
- 6) Blogging and other social media
- 7) Fundraising appeals and proposal copy

Table 1: Avg hrs/wk reported spent by entry- level practitioners on various types of in average 40-Hour work week, overall and by experience in the field (US vs. Can respondents).

Writing Task	All Respondents		Respondents (≤5 Yrs Exp.)		Supervisors (11≥ yrs exp)	
	US	Can	US	Can	US	Can
Website Content	5.2	5.95	4.6	6.06	5.3	6.11
Business Letters/ Internal Memoranda	4.3	4.06	4.3	5.75	4.4	3.69
Newsletters/ Annual Reports	5.5	4.72	5.1	4.94	5.6	4.72
Fundraising Appeals/Proposals	1.7	1.75	1.6	1.69	1.6	1.67
Blogging/ Other Social Media	3.3	3.52	3.3	5.13	3.3	3.39
Conversational Email	8.3	6.43	8.6	7.94	8.1	6.02
Press Releases/ Backgrounders	9.3	6.38	8.9	7.31	9.5	5.9

In the US, entry-level practitioners and their supervisors reported that entry-level employees spend the largest average number of writing hours during an average 40-hour “writing week” on traditional PR news writing activities as defined by press releases and backgrounders (9.3 hours). While estimates in Canada are significantly lower (6.38 hours), they are roughly equivalent to the time spent sending and receiving conversational email (6.43 hours) and also significantly less than their US counterparts (8.3 hours).

In Canada, supervisors of entry-level practitioners estimate that their junior counterparts spent the most writing time on website content (6.11 hours) while Canadian entry-level practitioners estimate that much more of their time (7.94 and 7.31 hours) is spent on writing conversational email and press releases/backgrounders respectively. US supervisors estimate that entry-level employees spend 16.8 writing hours a week on new media writing (website content, blogging/other social media, and conversational email) whereas their Canadian counterparts place the new media writing estimate for the entry-

level practitioner at 15.9 hours. In Canada, while supervisors estimate that entry level practitioners are spending these 15.9 hours writing for new media, the entry-level practitioners' estimation of their own time spent in new media is nearly four hours more per week – 19.3 hours. In any event, in both countries a significant portion of the work week of entry-level practitioners is dedicated to writing for new media by either their own assessment or that of their supervisors.

The questionnaire, just as it did in the 2009 Cole et al. study, asked respondents (RQ2) to judge how capable “recent college and university graduates you have observed are to prepare clean, final copy” when writing assignments within the aforementioned seven writing task areas.

These writing categories, as well as the specific wording referring to unedited “final, clean” copy, were selected based upon focus group research within the US PR community (Cole, et al., 2009).

We asked respondents to rate entry-level writing capability on a scale from 1 to 5 with the number 1 being “incapable” and 5 being “very capable.” The number 3 represents the midpoint. Table 2 shows the mean capability ratings respondents gave new entry-level employees for each of the seven types of writing tasks.

Table 2: Mean rating (out of five) of capability to produce clean, final copy the first time seen for various types of writing by experience in the field.

Writing Task	All Resp.		≤5 fld yrs		11≥ fld yrs	
	US	Can	US	Can	US	Can
Website Content	2.87	2.86	3.15	3.20	2.74	2.70
Bus. Letters/Internal Memos	2.59	2.50	2.96	3.27	2.46	2.25
Newsletters/Annual Reports	2.56	2.56	2.90	3.27	2.42	2.42
Fundrais. Appeals/Proposals	2.28	2.42	2.58	3.21	2.15	2.26
Blogging/Other Social Media	3.19	3.18	3.51	3.53	3.08	3.02
Conversational Email	3.17	3.12	3.53	3.53	3.03	2.88
Press Releases/Backgrounders	2.73	2.58	3.09	3.27	2.61	2.41

There are no significant differences between US and Canadian respondents on the judged capability of new PR employees on any of the tasks. In both countries, supervisors give entry-level PR practitioners low writing performance ratings. And among both US and Canadian respondents, we found significant disparities between the ratings supervisors gave entry-level employees and the higher ratings new employees gave themselves as a group. Without exception, the supervisors judged the new employees as less capable than did these new employees judge themselves. And with only two exceptions, both

categories of new media – website content and blogging – Canadian supervisors rated new entrant performance significantly lower by comparison to the employees’ scores than did their American counterparts.

Table 3: Percentage distributions of grades and grade point average (GPA) given by US and Canada respondents for competency of recent college and university graduates entering the public relations field on various writing skills.

		% of Respondents Who Gave Recent Graduates the Letter Grade* . . .					GPA*	n
		E/F(0)	D(1.0)	C(2.0)	B(3.0)	A(4.0)		
US	Accurate Grammar	6.2	26.2	37.6	25.3	4.7	1.96	837
	Accurate Sp. & Punct.	6.5	25.3	34.9	27.4	6.0	2.01	835
	Organized ideas	3.9	26.6	43.7	21.7	3.9	1.95	837
	Style guidelines used	11.4	33.6	31.4	20.0	3.7	1.71	837
Can	Accurate Grammar	4.6	29.4	47.7	16.5	1.8	1.82	109
	Acc. Spelling & Punct.	5.5	31.2	43.1	15.6	4.6	1.83	109
	Ideas organized	4.6	22.0	40.5	21.1	1.8	1.94	109
	Style guidelines used	8.3	34.9	31.2	21.1	4.6	1.79	109

*Average grade given by respondents to recent graduates entering the field

US PR supervisors judged recent college graduates least capable of writing in the persuasive-skill category identified as fundraising appeals and proposal copy. In Canada, this skill category ranks second worst (behind writing business letters and internal memoranda). Both cases provide evidence of concern among supervisors for the capability of recent graduates to engage in what might be seen as traditional business writing.

Supervisors in both countries gave the highest ratings to their junior peers for writing conversational email and blogging or writing for social media. As noted earlier, when we compared the average rating supervisors gave new entrants with the scores the less-experienced practitioners gave themselves we found significant differences on all categories of writing. This indicated to us that, in both countries, entry-level practitioners think they are better at writing than is the general perception of their supervisors.

We converted this 5-point Likert-scale rating to the equivalent of a collegiate (0-4) grade point average, with a score of 4 being equal to an A grade and a 0 equal to an E or F grade. Using this scale, Canadian supervisors would give their junior peers an average writing grade between a C and D in all categories except blogging and other social media, and conversational email for which they would grade their junior peers a solid C. This is virtually identical to the assessment of US new PR practitioners provided by the supervisor respondents in the US study.

The results above indicate that current practitioners, especially those who have been in the field for more than a decade, seem to view new college graduates entering the field as falling short of the desirable level of proficiency. Although these results indicate which kinds of writing the new graduates are more or less capable of performing, they do not identify which particular elements of writing skill are inadequate.

To do this, our questionnaire listed four skills (RQ3), just as Cole, et al. did in their 2009 study. These included “use of proper grammar,” “correct spelling and punctuation,” “ability to organize ideas,” and “use of Canadian Press (AP, in the US) or other appropriate style guides.” For each of these skills, we asked respondents to rate entry-level practitioners on a 5-point scale from incompetent (adjusted to 0) to very competent (4) – again, adopting a scale much like that for grading students in US and Canadian college and university classes.

Table 3 shows US respondents grading new entrants to the field highest on correct spelling and punctuation, and lowest on the use of AP style or other appropriate style guides. In Canada, the highest marks – still below a “C” grade – went to organizing ideas and the lowest to use of CP or other style guides. Unlike the US study, there are no significant differences across types of organizations on grades given on all four skills. There were no significant regional differences in the average grades awarded regarding the writing, nor did we find any systematic pattern to the average grades given.

Again, we found significant differences between the grades given by supervisors to their new employees and the better grades the new employees gave themselves. (See Table 4 below).

Table 4: Average GPA* given by Canadian and US respondents to new graduates entering PR field for four writing skills, overall and by experience in PR field

Writing Skill	All Resp.		≤5 fld yrs		11≥ fld yrs	
	US	Can	US	Can	US	Can
Accurate Grammar	1.96	1.82	2.49	2.06	1.82	1.68
Acc. Sp. & Punct.	2.01	1.83	2.55	2.38	1.84	1.63
Ability to Org. Ideas	1.95	1.94	2.4	2.56	1.78	1.77
Use of AP/CP/Oth.	1.71	1.79	2.17	2.56	1.55	1.61

*Letter grades A to E/F converted to numeric grade points 4.0-0.0

In an attempt to ascertain which writing skill elements are most-closely associated with Canadian respondents’ ratings of the capability of new practitioners, we conducted a series of seven linear regressions. We provided one regression for each of the seven types of writing tasks upon which we judged

the capabilities of entry-level practitioners. The capability score is the dependent variable in each regression model. These ratings are then regressed on the respondents' grades given to the new practitioner on each of the specific writing skills.

Table 5 (below) shows the results for each of the seven regression analyses separately for both the US study and the Canadian respondents in the current study. It shows the non-standardized (b) and the standardized (Beta) regression coefficients. As a standardized coefficient, Beta, enables us to compare the relative effects of the four skills' ratings on the overall assessment of ability. In the US study, ability to organize ideas was the most powerful significant predictor of capability scores for all seven types of writing, while use of AP style/other style guides and proper use of grammar were weaker but significant predictors of capability scores for six of the seven types of writing. In the Canadian study, largely because of the much smaller sample size, few of the coefficients across the seven regressions are statistically significant. The noteworthy exception is the ability to organize ideas. Among the seven writing types evaluated by Canadian respondents, the ability to organize ideas is either the only significant predictor or the most powerful predictor of judged ability on four of the seven types of writing. The four types of writing are business letters/internal memos, newsletter or annual reports, fundraising appeals or proposals, and press releases or backgrounders. The coefficients are all positive indicating that the higher the grade for ability to organize ideas, the higher the estimated writing capability of that new practitioner. Higher skill on spelling and punctuation was also a significant but weaker positive factor in judging competence at writing newsletters or annual reports and fundraising appeals or proposals.

Unlike the US study, among the Canadian respondents, the competent use of a formal style guide (CP or AP) and the proper use of grammar were not significant predictors of performance in any of the seven writing categories.

Table 6 (below) shows the percentage distribution of responses and the mean response to five opinion questions. The responses include all respondents (in Canada n= 109) to these questions, including entry-level professionals and their more senior peers and supervisors. There were no significant differences based on Chi-square tests between the distributions of responses of US and Canadian respondents on any of the five opinion items. That is, the Canadian respondents generally shared the same assessments of changes in the writing environment of PR professionals and the preparedness of new entrants into the field to perform well as writers.

We found strong overall disagreement (42.1%) and corresponding weak agreement (18.7%) with the description of entry-level professionals as "good writers," (the corresponding percentages in the US study were 41.2% and 13.7%) and even stronger disagreement (48.5%) with the statement that entry-

level professionals seem better prepared, in general, each year, while 12.4% agreed (the corresponding percentages in the US study were 48.9% and 9.2%).

Strong agreement exists within the surveyed membership of CPRS that the variety (73.4%) and complexity (46.8%) of the writing tasks given to entry-level practitioners is increasing.

Table 5. Regression of capability scores for various types of writing on respondents' judgments of recent hires' skills regarding writing mechanics, organization, and style for US and Canada respondents

Writing Capability Score	Proper Grammar		Spelling and Punctuation		Ability to Organize Ideas		Use of AP/Guides		Const
	b	Beta	b	Beta	b	Beta	b	Beta	
US Respondents									
Website content	0.066	0.073	0.064	0.074	0.276***	0.282	0.155***	0.181	1.81
Business Letters/ Internal Memo	0.143***	0.161	0.091*	0.106	0.275***	0.283	0.122***	0.144	1.39
Newsletters/ Annual Reports	0.132**	0.143	0.104*	0.117	0.254***	0.251	0.131***	0.149	1.38
Fundraising Appeals/ Proposals	0.103*	0.121	0.045	0.055	0.222***	0.237	0.132***	0.162	1.33
Blogging/ Other Social Media	0.138**	0.144	-0.001	-0.001	0.189***	0.182	0.140***	0.155	2.32
Conversational Email	0.174	0.178	0.106	0.106	0.251***	0.235	0.014	0.015	2.11
Press Releases/ Backgrounders	0.133**	0.138	0.083	0.083	0.227***	0.217	0.210***	0.229	1.52
Canada Respondents									
Website content	0.063	0.069	0.186	0.226	0.163	0.280	0.080	0.109	1.94
Business Letters/ Internal Memo	0.259	0.218	0.218	0.204	0.441***	0.376	0.056	0.058	0.67
Newsletters/ Annual Reports	0.127	0.112	0.297*	0.292	0.395***	0.360	0.025	0.028	0.97
Fundraising Appeals/ Proposals	-0.087	-0.075	0.337*	0.328	0.455***	0.391	0.146	0.154	0.80
Blogging/ Other Social Media	0.058	0.056	0.045	0.048	0.131	0.128	0.071	0.085	2.61
Conversational Email	0.245	0.224	0.164	0.167	0.213	0.197	-0.121	-0.136	2.18
Press Releases/ Backgrounders	0.279	0.241	0.097	0.093	0.390***	0.341	0.139	0.149	0.89

*p(t)<.05; ** p(t)<.01; *** p(t)<.001

As in the American study, of significant interest is the degree to which practitioners appear to be expressing their frustration with what they perceive as declining writing skills among entry-level practitioners by reducing their expectations of good writing. More than half of the respondents (53.7%) expressed agreement that they are reducing expectations of the overall writing skills of entry-level practitioners, while only 22.3% disagreed with that statement (the corresponding percentages in the US study were 47.2% and 27.1%).

Table 6: Percentage distribution of responses and mean response to opinion questions about entry-level practitioners: US and Canadian respondents.

Questions		1	2	3	4	5	n	\bar{x}
US	Are good writers	11.2	30.0	45.1	12.3	1.4	832	2.63
	Variety of writing tasks is increasing	1.8	5.1	16.5	43.1	33.5	836	4.01
	Complexity of writing tasks increasing	4.2	14.7	25.2	39.1	16.8	834	3.50
	Entry-level professionals are better prepared each yr	14.2	34.7	41.9	8.2	1.0	825	2.47
	Reducing my expectations of writing skills	10.2	16.9	25.7	31.3	15.9	836	3.26
Can	Are good writers	7.5	34.6	39.3	16.8	1.9	107	2.71
	Variety of writing tasks is increasing	2.8	9.2	14.7	47.7	25.7	109	3.84
	Complexity of writing tasks increasing	5.5	12.8	34.9	34.9	11.9	109	3.35
	Entry-level professionals are better prepared each yr	15.2	33.3	39.0	10.5	1.9	105	2.50
	Reducing my expectations of writing skills	9.3	13.0	24.1	29.6	24.1	108	3.46

Results (RQ5)

One surprise in the data comes from questions about internships and writing exams, the only area where there is a significant difference in responses among Canadian and American practitioners.

A series of five questions (questions 8-12 in our survey) make up the basis of RQ5. They are:

8. How valuable is an internship during college or university in preparing graduates for entry-level positions? (Likert-type scale ranging from a score of one, for the lowest level, to five, for the highest)

9. Does the organization for which you work typically give job preference to recent graduates who have had one or more public relations internships? (Yes, no, not sure)

10. Does the organization for which you work typically give a greater job preference to recent graduates who have had an internship within your organization than those who have had an internship in a different organization? (Yes, no, not sure)

11. Does the organization for which you work formally test the writing skills of candidates for entry-level public relations-related jobs? (Yes, no, not sure)

12. Does the organization for which you work exclude candidates for employment if they do not successfully pass a writing test you provide? (Yes, no, not sure)

The majority of Canadian practitioners, like their US counterparts, find internships to be of value. Nearly 75% of US practitioners surveyed (628) said internships are very valuable during college or university in preparing graduates for entry-level positions. In Canada, 68% (or 74 of the 109 surveyed) agreed. When further segmented to supervisors only, these numbers remain consistent with 74% of US supervisors (474) reporting that internships are very valuable while a slightly lower 69% of Canadian supervisors say the same (56).

When asked if the organization for which they work gives preference to recent graduates who have had one or more internships, the numbers start to vary even more. A strong majority (76%) of American supervisors surveyed (483) said yes. When asked the same question, a much smaller percentage – 57% – of Canadian supervisors said yes (46).

In examining the response to the next question, we identified an obvious tendency for PR companies to use internships as trial employment. When US PR supervisors were asked if their organization gives preference to graduates who have completed PR internships in their organizations, 64% of those supervisors who were certain said yes. While in Canada, an even larger percentage – 69% – agreed. These data show that PR jobs in both countries are being earned on the basis of a successful trial employment period known broadly as an internship.

When asked about using writing tests as a mechanism to gauge entry-level candidates, 63% of American supervisors (401) said their organization uses writing tests, 33% said no (210) and 4% were unsure (27). In Canada, 70% of those supervisors (56) surveyed said their organization uses a writing test as a means of assessing candidates for entry-level positions, 4% said no (3) and surprisingly, 26% of the supervisors surveyed said they were unsure (21). When the data is further focused by excluding the “not sure” responses, a clearer picture is painted.

In the US, 66% of PR supervisors (401) said they use a writing test for screening employees and 34% said they did not (210). In Canada, however, an astounding 95% of organizational supervisors said they use writing tests for screening purposes (56) and only 5% (3) said no.

While US practitioners are less likely than their (mostly) northern counterparts in Canada to use a writing test, when a writing test is used, it appears to be used in the same way in Canada as in the US as indicated by Table 7.

Table 7: Percentage of US and Canada supervisors who said Yes or No to excluding candidates based on a failed writing test

	US	Canada
Yes	89% (330)	94% (47)
No	11% (40)	6% (3)
Total	100% (370)	100% (50)

**Excludes those who answered "not sure." Chi-square = 1.11, df = 1, N.S.*

Table 8: Percentage of US and Canada respondents who reported using internships, writing test to screen prospective hires*

	US	Canada
Use Both	54.8% (360)	60.0% (39)
Use Internship, Not Writing Test	29.2% (192)	6.2% (4)
Use Writing Test, Not Internship	8.7% (57)	27.7% (18)
Use Neither	7.3% (48)	6.2% (4)
Total % (n)	100% (657)	100% (65)

**Includes supervisors and non supervisors, excludes those who said "not sure" to any of the questions (235 or 24.6% of the total sample). Chi-square = 32.59, df = 3, p < .001*

Table 9: Percentage of US and Canada supervisors who reported using internships, writing test to screen prospective hires*

	US	Canada
Both	58.1% (319)	70.0% (35)
Internships, not writing tests	27.0% (148)	2.0% (1)
Writing tests, not internships	8.6% (47)	24.0% (12)
Neither	6.4% (35)	4.0% (2)
Total % (n)	100% (549)	100% (50)

**Excludes those who said "not sure" to any of the questions. Chi-square = 24.08, df = 3, p < .001*

Tables 8 and 9 suggest a slightly different strategy between US and Canadian enterprises when selecting entry-level employees. Table 9 in particular indicates that 70% of Canadian supervisors reported that their organizations tend to use both internships and writing exams as a means of screening employees, but, among those not using both, writing tests are much more commonly used than internships (24% vs. 2%). On the other hand, only 58% of US supervisors reported also using both internships and writing exams. Among US supervisors who do not use both, internships are much more commonly used than are

writing tests (27% vs. 9%) to screen and select new employees.

When exploring this issue by the type of community, market size, region of the country and type of organization represented by the PR practitioners, there were no statistically significant differences between US and Canadian practitioners, except regarding the type of organization in which respondents are employed, as detailed in Table 10 below.

Table 10: % of US/Canada supervisors reporting use of internships, writing tests to screen prospective hires, by organization type.*

Organization	Nat.	% of Supervisors Used				n	Chi-Sq
		B	I/WT	WT/I	NT		
Communications Related Agency	US	75.2	17.0	3.9	3.9	153	2.28, df=3, N.S.
	Can	100	0	0	0	7	
Communications Related Department	US	52.3	33.6	8.9	5.3	304	3.95, df=3, N.S.
	Can	69.2	7.7	15.4	7.7	13	
Communications Related Gov Agency	US	50.8	18.0	13.1	18	61	13.23, df=3, p < .001
	Can	56.0	0	40.0	4.0	25	
Sole Practitioner	US	48.3	24.1	20.7	6.9	29	3.79, df=3, N.S.
	Can	100	0	0	0	4	

*B=both; I/WT=Internship, not written test; WT/I=written test, not internship; NT=neither; n=number of responses

Table 10 indicates that only in the Government Agency type of organization is there a sufficiently large Canadian sample size for meaningful comparisons. Nevertheless, among respondents in this type of organization, Canadian supervisors were much more likely than their US counterparts to report using writing tests to screen prospective entry-level PR employees (40% vs. 13%). By contrast, the US supervisors were much more likely than their Canadian counterparts to use internships for this purpose (18% vs. 0%). Interestingly, 18% of US supervisors in government said they used neither, compared to only 4% in Canada.

Discussion

The results of the Canadian study were very similar to the US findings except in the area of internships versus writing tests. There is general agreement among public relations scholars and professionals about the importance of a college or university internship. In fact, many schools in the US have built internships into their curriculum, as suggested by the PRSA (Professional Bond,

2006). In Canada, the two English universities offering full four-year degrees in public relations – Mount Saint Vincent and Mount Royal University – both use internships (sometimes called directed field studies or work experience) as part of their curriculum. Given the similarities on the writing-specific questions and the general agreement by scholars and practitioners on the value of internships, the differences seen in the data regarding the use of internships are noteworthy.

It is no secret that, broadly speaking, Canada is heavily influenced by the US; the same can be said when speaking specifically about public relations education. In their section on education in the *Global Public Relations Handbook*, Grunig and Grunig state: “Five years ago, Books in Print listed more than 600 titles on public relations – most of them published in the United States. This literature establishes a firm – if not rock-solid – basis upon which to teach” (2009, p. 642). Most major academic journals covering public relations are also US-based, including the *Journal of Public Relations* and the *Public Relations Review* (Grunig & Grunig, 2009). North America’s main PR trade publications, *The Public Relations Strategist*, *Tactics*, and *Communication World* are also US-based. Fraser Likely states Canada’s PR education predicament best: “English Canada studies from American texts: French Canada has the choice of many homegrown publications” (Likely, 2009, p. 660). As a result, English-speaking Canadian classrooms rely heavily on US texts and other teaching materials, possibly a contributing factor in the similarities among entry-level practitioner writing.

The US, through the work of the PRSA, has also set the stage for curriculum development in North America. Since as early as 1956 the PRSA has been studying PR educational issues, but it wasn’t until 1975 that the first Commission on Public Relations Education was established (Port of Entry, 1999). The most recent PRSA report was issued in 2006, but many of the most substantial and influential findings date back to the Port of Entry report from 1999. The Commission report makes dozens of recommendations on undergraduate and graduate public relations education, outlining necessary knowledge, integral skills, ideal undergraduate major courses, and the importance of internships (1999).

The Commission’s reports have heavily influenced English PR education in Canada, as work on a similar scale has not been done there. As noted by Likely, CPRS attempted such a feat in the late 70s but could not sustain any national momentum; the project was resurrected in 2007 with the Task Force on Public Relations Education (Likely, 2009). In the 2006 Professional Bond report, the authors clearly state that they are not prescribing remedies for PR education worldwide, just North America. At that time, there were at least two Canadian nationals on the board (Professional Bond, Members, 2006). However, prior to that 2006 study, including the 1999 Port of Entry report, it appears no Canadi-

ans or Canadian organizations were involved in creating education standards for North American PR (Port of Entry, Members, 1999).

It is worth noting that the degradation of writing is not specific to public relations (Kosse & ButleRitchie, 2003; Laycock, 1990; Kovac & Sherwood, 1999) nor is it specific to Canada and the US (Anderson, Allan & Finucane, 2001). Concern about declining skills of college graduates is both interdisciplinary and international. It is also worth noting that similarities in public relations teaching and practice can be found worldwide, not just in Canada and the US, as shown in the *Global Handbook of Public Relations* (2009) and in the 15-year Excellence Study, which examined excellent public relations in Canada, the US and the United Kingdom (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995, 2002). The similarities of the perceived level of writing by entry-level PR practitioners in Canada and the US are not surprising. The depth and breadth of disappointment across North America is. Educators and professional practitioners will no doubt use these data for future studies and to possibly improve writing in college and university programs.

When it comes to internships, the difference may reflect the difference, cited earlier, in the type of organization represented in the Canadian and US samples: a preponderance of the Canadian PR practitioners who answered the survey work in government-related jobs as opposed to the US practitioners where the majority of survey respondents work in the private sector. However, given that we are comparing government to government responses in Table 10 and not the entire sample, the difference is effectively ruled. Perhaps some of this difference between Canadian and American practitioners reflects differences in local or provincial testing requirements that do not exist in similar order or magnitude in the US.

Another factor in the differing results may be the use of the word "internship" in the survey. In Canada terms like co-operative education, directed field studies, work experience, and work-terms may also be used to describe a similar experience to that of an internship. However, the same can be said for the US with the difference that the same terms have come to describe different experiences – credit versus non-credit, one work-term versus many - are but two examples. The current use of such terms can be quite confusing, so much so that the University of Kentucky advises "that not all employers use these terms consistently or with consistent meanings, and some use the term co-op interchangeably with internships" (n.d.). Selecting the perfect umbrella term for the survey proved to be a challenge and the difficulty in defining what is and is not an internship is an issue for both Americans and Canadians alike. Like public relations education, cooperative education started in the US before Canada. The first US program was founded at the University of Cincinnati in 1906; Canada's first program was adopted at the University of Waterloo in 1957 ("A guide to planning," 2005). No matter the name, these models of "ex-

periential learning” (Kolb, 1984) are common in both countries, making the differences between the use of writing tests and internships for assessing entry-level PR practitioners all the more thought provoking.

Internships are common in college and university PR programs in both countries, yet the number of programs related to PR differs significantly from the US to Canada. This comparative study examining US and Canadian PR writing practices and quality, as well as issues related to employment screening practices, presents numerous opportunities for further research, particularly with respect to international differences between the use of writing tests and internships. Further research could reveal why such differences exist and whether or not they are, in fact, the result of variations in government policy, industry, or academic preferences. This study is also limited by the fact it does not venture into the merits of paid internships versus unpaid, nor does it look at the involvement of faculty in internships and whether or not an internship is more effective if a grading mechanism and credits are attached. This study simply identifies differences in the use of internships and writing tests in Canada and the US and begins to hypothesize reasons behind the differences.

Conclusion

In concluding the US study, the authors observed “Modern public relations education faces a conundrum implied – if not explicitly described – in the findings in the 2006 Commission on Public Relations Education’s report, *Public Relations Education for the 21st Century*. Educators, practitioners, and students engaged in its development identified writing skills as first on a list of five core competencies for public relations undergraduates” (Cole, et al., 2009).

As stated in the Cole et al. report, despite the absence of ambiguity in these findings, there remains much room for speculation as to the major cause of the obvious dissatisfaction with the writing skills of entry-level PR practitioners. For example, because of the migration of university-based public relations programs out of journalism schools and departments, the emphasis college-level public relations instructors place on writing training for public relations students may be on the wane. Flowing from that observation, the educational needs of an increasingly complex and professional PR community has created significant new competition for academic resources within the public relations curricula. Some of these resources could be directed toward the development of student writing skills (Cole, et al., 2009).

This comparative descriptive study confirms the largely negative and nearly identical impressions of Canadian and US public relations supervisors of their perception of the writing competency of their junior level colleagues. These negative impressions should be cause for alarm to both the North American

public relations industry and to the academic institutions that are being increasingly relied upon to supply trained practitioners.

We made no attempt, in this descriptive study, to reveal and explore the root causes of this negative impression of a significant majority of seasoned PR professionals. Speculation about this condition in reaction to the initial release of the US-only data ranged from the notion that as PR is becoming increasingly sophisticated, fewer journalists are making the transition into the practice. This fact, by definition, would dilute the percentage of seasoned professional writers in the lower ranks of the field. Further speculation surrounds the notion that as a greater number of the seasoned professionals in the PR business are, in fact, former journalists, new graduates of broad-based PR programs simply are not capable of meeting the expected professional journalist standards, and perhaps should not be expected to. These are issues that call for further research.

Another notion requiring further study, and also noted in the American study, suggests that the current generation of entry-level PR practitioners have been raised in an environment in which television and video games have been substituted for reading. Then there is texting — with its emoticons substituting for penciled notes, and the fact that style and grammar and spell-checking software are replacing seminal works like Strunk and White (1979). The opportunity for more research abounds.

Another set of questions analyzes the significance of the disparity within the field between the expressed perceptions of supervisors and their junior colleagues regarding writing quality. Supervisors emphasize, for example, the increasing complexity and variety of writing jobs upon which they are depending for clean copy from their junior colleagues. Perhaps the increased complexity and variety of writing tasks is making the entry-level writing position that much harder. Given the perception gap between the junior writers and their bosses, supervisors are saying, in strong numbers, that rather than attempting to remediate the noted writing deficiencies, many are simply reducing their expectation for good writing performance. This issue requires a closer examination than such a descriptive study as ours can provide.

One final point seems to signal as much gravity for this international comparative study as it did with the original US version. Should this international study stimulate a renewed interest in teaching basic business and news-related writing for PR at the college and university level, the single question remains: which of the many subject areas that are currently considered essential components of a well-rounded PR curriculum will have to give way to make room for this renewed interest in teaching good writing?

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