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Accredited vs. non-accredited: How accreditation impacts perceptions and readiness to provide ethics counsel

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ABSTRACT

Scholars and industry trade public relations have suggested that public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel and debated the degree to which practitioners accept the role of an ethical conscience. Through survey research with more than 400 educators and practitioners, this study provides evidence that the majority of practitioners and educators believe this is public relations' responsibility. In addition, the results reveal that accredited public relations practitioners are more likely to say they feel prepared to do so, and are more likely to offer ethics counsel than practitioners who are not accredited. The study also provides insights into some of the ethical issues that practitioners are most likely to face, what types of ethics training they have received, and their roles in promoting an ethical workplace.

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1. Introduction

Public relations scholars and industry leaders have called for practitioners to provide ethical leadership in their organizations for many decades (e.g., [Bivins, 1992](#); [Bowen, 2008, 2009](#); [Fitzpatrick & Gauthier 2001](#); [Fitzpatrick, 1996](#); [Paluszek, 1989](#); [Ryan & Martinson, 1983](#)). However, qualitative research has found what ranges from a “state of neglect” among public relations professionals “in a plethora of areas related to ethical understanding, ethics counsel, and the ability to enact the role of ethical counsel” ([Bowen, 2008, p. 271–272](#)) to senior practitioners who embraced the role of organizational conscience with perceptions of “a fervent duty to the public interest” ([Neill & Drumwright, 2012, p. 220](#)).

More recently, trade publications have questioned the ethics of public relations practitioners asking “are all publicists liars?” ([Willens, 2015](#)) and suggesting that they are “professional manipulators” ([Bowen, 2015](#)). Both of the articles were referencing a qualitative study conducted in South Africa as presented at the International Public Relations Research Symposium, referred to as BledCom, in Slovenia in July of 2015, which included interviews with public relations practitioners who admitted to lying.

Based on these divergent findings, the following questions arise: do public relations practitioners perceive a personal responsibility to provide ethics counsel, how prepared do they perceive they are to provide ethics counsel on public relations issues, how likely are they to provide ethics counsel, and what are the most common issues they are facing? Furthermore, do public relations educators embrace the role of ethical conscience and do they believe recent graduates are prepared to provide ethics counsel? This study addresses these issues through survey research with a national sample of practitioners

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who are members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and educators who are members of PRSA and the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

Ethical decision making “involves making rational choices between what is good and bad, between what is morally justifiable action and what is not” (Patterson & Wilkins, 2005, p. 4), and is often based on values, which are “enduring notions of goodness and badness that guide behavior in a variety of contexts,” and are usually resistant to change (Burgoon, 1989, p. 132). Public relations practitioners should consider ethical principles based on fundamental values to help them “judge the rightness of decisions” and to reconcile conflicting duties to the public and their audiences (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001; p. 201). These principles and values can be based on personal upbringing as well as industry and employer’s codes of ethics (Fitzpatrick, 2002; Halff, 2010; Lee & Cheng, 2011; Wright, 1993).

Scholars have previously identified communication about values and ethics as a core responsibility of employers, because “if people do not hear about ethics and values from the top, it is not clear to employees that ethics and values are important” (Trevino, Hartman, & Brown 2000, p. 135). Consistent with this perspective, ethical leadership is defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relations, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making” (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120). Due to their strong communication skills, public relations practitioners may contribute to ethical leadership in the workplace by promoting internal ethics programs and resources such as the code of conduct, employee training, reward systems and ethics hotlines (McDonald & Nijhof, 1999). Fitzpatrick (1996) suggested that public relations should play a role in ethical leadership and referred to the profession as an “untapped resource in ethics programs” (p. 249). However, following their survey of PRSA members, Lee and Cheng (2012) found what they described as a “lackluster picture of formal, systematic and goal-directed development of activities for improving ethical decision making” (p. 92). In contrast, a recent qualitative study found evidence that public relations practitioners specializing in internal communication contributed to an ethical workplace by creating strategic communication plans and disseminating key messages about ethics and the organization’s core values; some even provided specific examples of times when they provided ethics counsel (Neill, 2016).

Previous research in this domain has examined the characteristics of ethical leaders and how they transfer ethical knowledge (Lee & Cheng, 2011), knowledge about ethics and training among public relations practitioners (Lee & Cheng, 2012), public relations practitioners’ perceptions about providing ethics counsel (Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Bowen, 2008), and public relations’ role in organizational value setting (Sison, 2010). Much of the research regarding public relations’ roles in ethical conscience and ethical leadership has been based on qualitative data such as focus groups or interviews. Through survey research, this study provides additional insights regarding whether or not there is widespread or limited acceptance of ethical leadership in public relations, as well as what factors are most associated with those who embrace this role. For example, Bowen (2008) suggested that age and experience were associated with the role of ethical conscience and recommended that quantitative research be conducted to further examine these factors. Based on the gaps in the literature, the purpose of this study is to examine public relations practitioners’ attitudes toward ethics counsel, their preparedness to offer ethics counsel and how likely they are to do so. Likewise, the study also explores the perceptions of public relations educators toward ethics counsel, and their perceived preparedness of recent graduates to assume this role.

2. Literature review

As a theoretical foundation for this study, previous literature related to public relations’ roles as an ethical conscience and boundary spanner were examined as well as social identity theory in the context of professionalism. Next, previous research regarding ethical leadership in internal communication is reviewed. Finally, an overview of previous findings related to ethics education and professional development programs provided by employers and professional associations are discussed.

2.1. Public relations as ethical conscience

An ethical or organizational conscience has been defined as “a professional who raises concerns when his or her organization’s actions might bring about potential ethical problems leading to troubling consequences for various parties, who may be individuals, groups, organizations. . . both within and outside the organization” (Neill & Drumwright, 2012, p. 221). A conscience involves “a lack of impulsiveness, care in mapping out alternatives and consequences. . . and awareness of and concern for the effects of one’s decision and policies on others” (Goodpaster & Matthews, 1982, p.134). In support of this role, Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) suggested that public relations practitioners’ greatest loyalty is to their clients, but practitioners should ensure that their employers hear and consider stakeholders’ interests and make efforts to minimize harm. When they do so, public relations practitioners serve as boundary spanners (Aldrich & Herker, 1977) by raising the concerns of key stakeholders when making strategic decisions (Moss, Warnaby, & Newman, 2000). As boundary spanners, public relations practitioners gather information through environmental scanning, and then filter that information by choosing to act on some information, to store other information, or to summarize and interpret the data in communication with senior management (Aldrich & Herker, 1977). The public relations practitioners who do this are providing a crucial service by filtering information, keeping others up to date on opportunities, and warning them of potential crises (Burt, 1992), a form of issues management.

Scholars have examined the role of public relations in providing ethics counsel through both quantitative and qualitative research. Berger and Reber (2006) found that rational persuasion was the most common influence technique (30.98%)

reportedly used by public relations professionals to raise concerns, followed by coalitions (26.76%) and pressure was third, (13.61%), which involves persistence and being assertive. They suggested coalitions can be either a hard or soft influence tactic depending on whether it is employed in a straightforward and open environment or characterized by “clandestine work behind the scenes to quietly gather the support of others” (Berger & Reber, 2006, p. 116). Through qualitative research with senior public relations practitioners, Neill and Drumwright (2012) found that “to avoid the ‘kill the messenger’ predicament, the informants perceived that they had to provide ethics counsel in ways that did not seem judgmental, preachy or scolding (p. 227).” This resulted in creative approaches such as the headline test, which involved asking senior management “to envision newspaper headlines that could result from ethically problematic behavior”; a mock news conference; writing two versions of the same speech; providing ethical alternatives; or playing the role of the devil’s advocate by raising the concerns from the perspective of a key stakeholder (Neill & Drumwright, 2012, p. 227).

There is evidence of mixed acceptance among public relations practitioners and scholars regarding the role of ethical conscience. Some practitioners have suggested ethics are better left to the legal department, that they lack the access to provide ethics counsel, or they said that the role was beyond their “professional responsibilities, abilities or trainings” (Bowen, 2008, p. 284). In addition, using case studies St. John III and Pearson (2016) rejected the role of ethical conscience claiming it was “problematic” and “of negligible use” in the context of crisis communication (p. 18), and instead recommended that public relations practitioners assume a more modest role of encouraging ethical deliberation among multiple leaders in a company or organization. Likewise, Parsons (2008) questioned the readiness of public relations practitioners to provide ethics counseling due to their lack of ethics training, and whether or not they have the access to the leaders that make policies in order to provide such counsel. In support of Parson’s concern about ethics training, Lee and Cheng (2012) found through survey research that more than half (52%) of public relations practitioners reported that their organizations did not provide ethics training, and nearly half of the respondents (45.6%) did not receive ethics instruction in college.

In contrast to these studies that question whether or not ethics counsel is public relations’ responsibility, some practitioners perceived that ethics and reputation management were connected and a natural part of their jobs (Bowen, 2008). Neill and Drumwright (2012) found evidence of an awareness of public relations’ boundary spanning role as senior executives described being the middle person between their organization and key stakeholders in the context of serving as an ethical conscience. More recently, research has provided evidence of senior public relations executives and practitioners specializing in internal communication serving as an ethical conscience (Neill, 2016). While scholars have expressed concern about the need for organizational-wide deliberation regarding ethics (St. John III & Pearson, 2016), previous research has found evidence of collaboration between public relations practitioners and other colleagues such as forming allies and coalitions, particularly in situations where they may lack the necessary power or influence (Neill, 2014).

Sison (2010) suggested that the characteristics associated with an organizational conscience include the ability to influence top management, a good relationship with the CEO, and willingness to “promote, debate, [and] critique” ideas (p. 331). Some constraints that could prevent public relations managers from fulfilling their role as the ethical conscience include lack of access to management, limiting the collection of information through budget constraints or lack of authority, and providing barriers to dissemination of timely, accurate information (Ryan, 1987).

2.2. Social identity theory & professionalism

Social identity refers to the tendency for people to classify themselves and others into social categories such as members of organizations or religious affiliations (Ashford & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Identification involves a “perception of oneness with or belongingness to a group, involving direct or vicarious experiences of its successes and failures” (Ashford & Mael, 1989, p. 34). Professions can be a source of social identity through membership in professional associations such as PRSA, which promote values and guiding principles through a code of ethics. In addition, professionals are encouraged to “maintain professional standards of excellence” (Peluchette & Jeanquart, 2000), which can refer to a commitment to continuing education, ethical practices and concern for the public interest. Social identification is distinct from the concept of internalization of an organization’s values and principles (Ashford & Mael, 1989). It is possible for someone to compartmentalize his or her various identities to avoid a conflict in values (Ashford & Mael, 1989), such as a willingness to compromise personal values to keep a job.

To build social identity, newcomers to an organization, such as new employees, have to learn about policies, role expectations and behavioral norms, a process called organizational socialization (Ashford & Mael, 1989).

2.3. Ethical leadership in internal communication

Socialization on ethics may occur in the workplace through ethics training as part of new employee orientation or annually for all employees through online training modules, workshops or guest speakers (Neill, 2016; Bowen, 2004; Lee & Cheng, 2012). Other ways that employers can promote an ethical workplace include sharing employee testimonials that reinforce their values, and tying annual awards programs and performance reviews to ethics and their core values (Neill, 2016).

When top managers were asked to list their goals for effective internal communication, among the top seven were increasing employee understanding of the company’s ethics and culture (Argenti, 1998).

Some employers have adopted codes of ethics and core values to cultivate an ethical workplace, which are then promoted through internal communication programs. Lencioni (2002) defined core values as “deeply ingrained principles that guide

all of a company's actions" and serve as "cultural cornerstones" (p. 6). In a previous study, [Sison \(2010\)](#) found that the CEO, often along with the executive team, develops the core values as part of a strategic planning effort and then refines them, sometimes with the assistance of communication professionals ([Sison, 2010](#)). The two phases when public relations practitioners have the most involvement are creating communication strategies and programs to promote those core values, and then distributing those messages through company events and newsletters ([Neill, 2016](#); [Sison, 2010](#)). Through qualitative research, [Neill \(2016\)](#) found evidence that public relations practitioners were less likely to be involved "in employee recruitment and orientation, the stages at which employees are first introduced to the company/organization's core values and ethics policies," with those activities being led by human resources (p. 17). Survey research can provide greater insight into the breadth of public relations' involvement in promoting an ethical workplace.

2.4. Ethics education & professional development

Several studies have examined the state of ethics education in public relations. The [Commission on Public Relations Education \(2006\)](#) has recommended that public relations undergraduate programs include at least one course in law and ethics, and that ethics be integrated throughout the curriculum. The CPRE sponsored a national survey with 312 public relations practitioners and educators in 2006 and found both groups ranked credibility and ethics/codes of practice among the five most essential areas of curriculum ([DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009](#)). However, a global study that involved a content analysis of curricula descriptions on 218 college and university websites in 39 countries found that most programs (63%) do not have a separate ethics course ([Austin & Toth, 2011](#)). In another study focused on ethics education in the U.S., [Erzikova \(2010\)](#) found that the majority of public relations professors (70%) supported incorporating ethics throughout the curriculum and the most common pedagogy approaches included lectures, case studies and group discussion.

Scholars have provided evidence of benefits associated with ethics education. Through survey research, [Gale and Bunton \(2005\)](#) found that recent graduates who had taken a media ethics course were more aware of ethical issues and more likely to have discussed ethical concerns with colleagues than those who had not taken an ethics course. The researchers also identified common ethical issues the practitioners were facing such as targeting minors, truthfulness in communication, challenges to professional integrity, altering of research data, billing practices, working for questionable clients, and workplace practices such as office politics, competitive bidding and billing practices ([Gale & Bunton, 2005](#)). Many of these issues have been classified and studied as micro-level issues, which focus on the ethical decisions and behaviors of individual practitioners ([Drumwright, 2007](#)). However, [Drumwright \(2007\)](#) cautioned that it is important to consider issues at different levels such as the meso-level (organizational) and macro-level (society) as "they raise different problems and prompt us to ask different research questions" (p. 402). In addition, scholars have found the three levels "interact, interrelate, and reinforce one another," so there is an advantage to studying the issues simultaneously ([Drumwright & Kamal, 2015, p. 25](#)).

Members of a professional association also may be socialized regarding ethical standards through participation in professional development programs such as conferences and chapter meetings. Professional associations such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) provide continuing education and resources on ethics including accreditation, a code of ethics, ethical standards advisories, webinars, conferences and blog posts. Previous research found 52% of PRSA members are mostly familiar with the code and 18.6% were extremely familiar ([Lee & Cheng, 2012](#)). In addition, the majority of PRSA members (52.8%) also agreed that the code was useful for preventing ethical lapses ([Lee & Cheng, 2012](#)). This finding is evidence of progress following PRSA's revision of their code of ethics in 2000, as a survey prior to the revision found that only 46% said they would turn to PRSA for guidance when faced with unethical situations ([Fitzpatrick, 2002](#)). Some of the deficiencies practitioners attributed to the previous code included being "outdated, incomplete. . .operational rather than aspirational" ([Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 113](#)).

PRSA and several association partners who comprise the Universal Accreditation Board also sponsor the APR (Accredited in Public Relations) certification, and ethics and law represent 13% of the content for the computer-based examination. Preparation for the exam may very well improve practitioners' awareness of the code of ethics and confidence to provide ethics counsel. Through survey research, [Sha \(2011b\)](#) found that APRs were more likely to engage in public relations ethics and legal issues in a typical week when compared to non-APRs. The author cautioned that the study did not provide evidence of causality such as being an APR causes someone to be more engaged in public relations ethical discussions, but recommended additional research using "more complex measurements and statistical models" ([Sha, 2011b, p. 126](#)). The APR + M certification for military public affairs officers was launched in 2010 and was not included in that study. PRSA also sponsors the College of Fellows program, which recognizes senior practitioners who are not only accredited, but also have at least 20 years of experience in public relations and are considered role models. No known research to date has explored the connection between ethics counsel and the APR + M and PRSA College of Fellows programs.

The review of the literature leads to the following research questions and hypotheses:

- RQ1: Are public relations practitioners receiving ethics training? And if so, how frequently and in what format?
- RQ2: Are public relations practitioners actively playing a role in promoting an ethical workplace? If so, what activities are they most likely to support?
- RQ3: What do practitioners and educators perceive as the most challenging ethical issues in public relations today?

- H1. Public relations practitioners who have completed an ethics course in college will be more likely to say they feel prepared to provide counsel in public relations ethics than those who did not take an ethics course.
- H2a. Public relations practitioners who are accredited (APR, APR + M, PRSA Fellows) will be more likely to say they personally feel prepared to provide counsel in public relations ethics than those who are not accredited.
- H2b. Public relations practitioners who are accredited (APR, APR + M, PRSA Fellows) will be more likely to say that public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel than those who are not accredited.
- H2c. Public relations practitioners who are accredited (APR, APR + M, PRSA Fellows) are more likely to report that they are personally likely to provide ethics counsel than those who are not accredited.
- H3a. Public relations educators who are accredited (APR, APR + M, PRSA Fellows) will be more likely to say their program's recent graduates are prepared to provide counsel in public relations ethics than those who are not accredited.
- H3b. Public relations educators who are accredited (APR, APR + M, PRSA Fellows) will be more likely to say that public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel than those who are not accredited.
- H3c. Public relations educators who are accredited (APR, APR + M, PRSA Fellows) are more likely to report that public relations practitioners in general are likely to provide ethics counsel than those who are not accredited.

3. Method

Consistent with previous research on ethics in public relations (Gale & Bunton, 2005; Lee & Cheng, 2012), this study utilized an online survey of practitioners and educators. The survey was distributed via an email invitation from PRSA to a random sample of 7404 practitioners and to 690 educators using the AEJMC Public Relations Division and PRSSA faculty advisers email lists during the month of September 2015 in recognition of ethics month. A reminder email also was distributed as a means to increase response rates. The survey was conducted through Qualtrics to ensure anonymity. As an incentive for participation, respondents were given the option to contact the researcher by email to be entered in a drawing for six \$50 gift cards. The response rate was 4.6% for practitioners ($n = 340$) and 15% for educators ($n = 106$). Incomplete surveys were excluded from data analysis resulting in 401 respondents (303 practitioners and 96 educators).

3.1. Survey constructs

Questions addressed issues such as types of ethics training practitioners have completed, perceptions regarding preparedness to provide counsel related to ethics in public relations, attitudes toward providing ethics counsel, likelihood to distribute information related to internal ethics programs, perceptions regarding the importance of various ethical issues, and what issues they are most likely to face in their jobs. The questions "Did you receive ethics instruction in college?" and "How prepared do you feel you are to provide counsel on ethical issues related to public relations in your organization?" are related to H1. Questions addressing perceived preparedness to provide ethics counsel, likelihood to provide counsel on ethical issues, attitudes toward providing ethics counsel, likelihood to promote internal ethics programs and to face specific ethical issues were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale with 1 representing very unfamiliar/unprepared/unlikely/strongly disagree and 5 very familiar/prepared/likely/strongly agree.

The items related to internal ethics programs and attitudes toward providing ethics counsel were based on previous qualitative research (Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Bowen, 2008), and the ethical issues listed were based on multiple studies on public relations and advertising ethics (Schauster & Neill (In press); Bowen, 2013; Drumwright & Murphy, 2009; Gale & Bunton, 2005; Ryan, 1987). The ethical issues included micro, meso and macro-level concerns (Drumwright, 2007).

Demographic information related to age, years of experience in public relations, and accreditation status also were collected based on previous research that found some of these factors were associated with providing ethics counsel (Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Bowen, 2008; Sha, 2011a). These questions relate to H2a–H2c, H3a–H3c.

3.2. Demographic profile

The practitioner sample included 214 women (71.3%) and 86 men (28.7%), and 5 participants did not specify gender. The average age of the sample was 47 ranging from 22 to 88. The average years of experience in public relations was 21 ranging from 0 to 50. A total of 114 practitioners had received the APR credential, two the APR + M credential, and 26 were accredited and members of the PRSA College of Fellows.

The educator sample included 60 women (63.2%) and 35 men (36.8%) and 1 participant did not specify gender. The average age of the participants was 49, ranging from 25 to 89. The average years of experience in public relations was 19.93, and the average years of experience in teaching was 13.56. A total of 26 educators had received the APR credential, one the APR + M credential, and 12 were accredited and members of the PRSA College of Fellows.

4. Findings

Research question one asked are public relations practitioners receiving ethics training, and if so, how frequently and in what format? Descriptive statistics were consulted to answer this question. The majority of the respondents said their employers are not offering ethics training ($n = 189, 63.4%$), and 109 practitioners said yes (36.6%) their employers do provide

Table 1
 Role in Promoting an Ethical Workplace.

How likely are you to create/distribute information to employees in your organization related to the following: (1 very unlikely to 5 very likely)						
	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
Ethics policies	79	53	62	50	50	2.79
Ethics training/workshops	109	59	54	38	35	2.43
Testimonials regarding ethical behavior of employees	102	57	69	38	30	2.45
Company values	40	21	38	90	108	3.69
Awards programs tied to core values	89	43	59	46	61	2.82
Create Q & A/talking points for supervisors related to core values	53	42	51	74	75	3.26

Table 2
 Ranking of Ethical Issues from 1 (most challenging) to 6 (least challenging).

Issue	Ranking for Practitioners	Ranking for Educators
Messaging, such as how much information to disclose and when	1	1
Transparency in sponsored content, such as native advertising and paid endorsers/bloggers	2	2
Lack of access to leadership or information	3	3
Blurring of personal/professional speech online	4	5
Personal ethics, such as representing clients whose products may be unhealthy, unneeded, or conflict with faith/religion	5	4
Business issues, such as overbilling and financial transparency	6	6

training. Among those whose employers do provide ethics training 77 (25%) said it was offered annually, 18 (5.9%) said the training was part of new employee orientation, and 5 (1.6%) said it was optional. The most popular formats for the training were electronic learning modules ($n = 40$), employee handbooks ($n = 35$), and policy manuals ($n = 28$). Webinars, videos and internal speakers were each selected by 26 respondents. Some participants ($n = 103$, 33.8%) reported that they had participated in ethics professional development programming provided by PRSA. Among those who had taken advantage of these programs, the most common examples included accreditation ($n = 75$, 24.6%), chapter meetings ($n = 74$, 24.3%) and webinars ($n = 45$, 14.8%).

Research question two asked are public relations practitioners actively playing a role in promoting an ethical workplace and if so, what activities are they most likely to support? Using a checklist, the top four groups that were identified as having a role in promoting internal ethics resources were senior leadership ($n = 200$, 72%), human resources ($n = 173$, 56.7%), legal ($n = 152$, 49.8%), and public relations ($n = 145$, 47.5%). However, practitioners only ranked two activities (Table 1) with an average score above neutral (3) to indicate their likely involvement, which were creating and distributing information related to the company’s core values ($M = 3.69$), and preparing talking points for supervisors related to those core values ($M = 3.26$).

Research question three asked what do practitioners and educators perceive as the most challenging ethical issues in public relations today? Practitioners ranked messaging and transparency in sponsored content as the most challenging issues they are facing (Table 2). Educators agreed with practitioners regarding the top three issues, but ranked personal ethics higher than blurring of personal/professional speech online. The issues practitioners said they were most likely to face in their careers were messaging ($M = 4.43$), blurring of personal and professional speech online ($M = 3.35$) and lack of access to leadership and information ($M = 3.06$). The issues the practitioners reported personally facing in their careers based on a checklist were messaging ($n = 276$), lack of access to leadership and information ($n = 201$), blurring of personal and professional speech online ($n = 179$) and personal ethics ($n = 151$).

4.1. Ethics training and preparedness

A majority of practitioners ($n = 199$, 67%) reported that they had completed an ethics course as an undergraduate and/or as a graduate student compared to 97 practitioners who had not. H1 posited that public relations practitioners who had completed an ethics course in college will be more likely to say they feel prepared to provide counsel in public relations ethics than those who did not take an ethics course. In order to test this hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. The test revealed that practitioners who had completed an ethics course were significantly more likely to report that they felt prepared to offer ethics counsel ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.964$) compared to those who had not taken an ethics course ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.125$), $t(294) = 2.365$, $p = 0.019$. H1 was confirmed.

4.2. Accreditation and preparedness

H2a posited that public relations practitioners who are accredited (APR, APR + M, PRSA Fellows) will be more likely to say they feel prepared to provide counsel in public relations ethics than those who are not accredited. In order to test this hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. The test revealed that practitioners who are accredited were

Table 3
 Attitudes Toward Ethics Counsel (1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree) Practitioners/Educators.

Statements	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
Ethics counsel should only be provided by attorneys or ethics officers.	174/72	75/18	33/2	11/4	6/0	1.66/1.35
Public relations practitioners do not have adequate training to provide ethics counsel.	50/7	67/25	114/26	51/27	15/11	2.71/3.10
Public relations practitioners do not have the necessary power/influence to provide ethics counsel.	98/7	79/26	78/27	37/32	6/4	2.24/3.00
Providing ethics counsel is beyond the scope of public relations' job responsibilities.	195/72	67/18	23/4	8/2	5/0	1.53/1.33
Ethics counsel is a natural fit with public relations' reputation management role.	6/1	9/2	23/4	91/23	170/66	4.37/4.57
Public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel.	3/1	6/0	38/3	78/23	173/69	4.38/4.66
Public relations practitioners who do not provide ethics counsel could damage their personal credibility.	17/1	38/9	56/15	78/27	110/44	3.76/4.08
Public relations practitioners have an obligation to represent the ethical concerns of key stakeholders.	3/1	3/0	19/3	57/18	217/74	4.61/4.71

significantly more likely to report that they felt prepared to offer ethics counsel ($M = 4.42, SD = 0.705$) compared to those who are not accredited ($M = 3.61, SD = 1.070$), $t(295) = 7.153, p = 0.000$. H2a was confirmed.

4.3. Accreditation and attitudes toward ethics counsel

H2b posited that public relations practitioners who are accredited (APR, APR + M, PRSA Fellows) will be more likely to say that public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel than those who are not accredited. This question was examined by looking at the degree of agreement with the statement “public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel” as well as overall responses to a list of eight statements questioning whether or not this is public relations’ responsibility (Table 3). A principle components analysis using varimax rotation was used to reduce the data. The analysis yielded a two-factor solution – views toward ethics counsel, and lack of training and power. For all factor loadings, please see the Appendix A. An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare accredited and non-accredited practitioners’ perceptions of ethics counsel in public relations. The test revealed that practitioners who are accredited were more likely to report that public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel ($M = 4.64, SD = 0.638$) compared to those who are not accredited ($M = 4.22, SD = 0.935$), $t(296) = 4.284, p = 0.000$. When evaluating responses to the statements, accredited practitioners reacted more strongly to the negative statements ($M = 1.365, SD = 0.599$) compared to non-accredited practitioners ($M = 1.74, SD = 0.852$), and more strongly to the positive statements ($M = 4.44, SD = 0.642$ accredited; $M = 4.18, SD = 0.735$ non-accredited), $t(297) = -4.237, p = 0.000$ negative statements; $t(296) = 3.158, p = 0.002$ positive statements. H2b was confirmed. Independent samples *t*-test also were conducted using the two items related to lack of training and power. The distributions were not statistically significant meaning there was no significant difference between accredited ($M = 2.36, SD = 0.926$), and non-accredited practitioners ($M = 2.53, SD = 0.886$).

4.4. Accreditation and likelihood to provide ethics counsel

H2c posited that public relations practitioners who are accredited (APR, APR + M, PRSA Fellows) are more likely to report that they are likely to provide ethics counsel than those who are not accredited. In order to test this hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. The test revealed that practitioners who are accredited were significantly more likely to report that they were personally likely to provide ethics counsel ($M = 3.96, SD = 1.150$) compared to those who are not accredited ($M = 3.39, SD = 1.163$), $t(297) = 4.145, p = 0.000$. H2c was confirmed.

4.5. Accredited educators’ perceptions of graduates’ preparedness

H3a posited that public relations educators who are accredited (APR, APR + M, PRSA Fellows) will be more likely to say their program’s recent graduates are prepared to provide counsel in public relations ethics than those who are not accredited. In order to test this hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. The test was not significant. Results revealed that educators who are accredited were just as likely to report that they slightly agreed that recent graduates are prepared to offer ethics counsel ($M = 3.41, SD = 0.888$) as educators who are not accredited ($M = 3.29, SD = 0.774$), $t(93) = 0.617, p = 0.539$. H3a was not supported.

4.6. Accredited educators' attitudes toward ethics counsel

H3b posited that public relations educators who are accredited (APR, APR + M, PRSA Fellows) will be more likely to say that public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel than those who are not accredited. In order to test this hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. Results were not significant. The test revealed that educators who are accredited were just as likely to agree that practitioners should provide ethics counsel ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.819$) as educators who are not accredited ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 0.567$), $t(94) = 0.216$, $p = 0.829$. H3b was not supported. Educators' responses were neutral regarding whether public relations practitioners have the adequate training to provide ethics counsel ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.138$) and whether they have the necessary power and influence ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.036$).

4.7. Accredited educators' perceptions of practitioners' likelihood to provide ethics counsel

H3c posited that public relations educators who are accredited (APR, APR + M, PRSA Fellows) are more likely to report that public relations practitioners in general are likely to provide ethics counsel than those who are not accredited. In order to test this hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. Results were not significant. The test revealed that educators who are accredited were just as likely to slightly agree that practitioners are likely to provide ethics counsel ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.162$) as educators who are not accredited ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.871$), $t(94) = 0.216$, $p = 0.649$. H3c was not supported.

5. Discussion

Consistent with previous research (Sha, 2011a, 2011b), this study found evidence of significant differences among public relations practitioners who are accredited compared to those who are not. Accredited practitioners were more likely to say they personally felt prepared to provide ethics counsel, to believe that practitioners should provide this type of counsel and to report that they personally were likely to provide ethics counsel. These findings are consistent with previous research that found that accredited practitioners were more likely to engage in public relations ethics competencies when compared to non-accredited practitioners (Sha, 2011b). These findings offer further support for the value of accreditation.

The study also provided evidence of practitioners and educators' support for ethics counsel based on public relations' role as boundary spanners (Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Neill, 2014; Moss et al., 2000). The statement that "public relations practitioners have an obligation to represent the ethical concerns of key stakeholders" received the strongest agreement from practitioners ($M = 4.61$) and educators ($M = 4.71$) among four statements in a scale supporting ethics counsel. This finding suggests that despite some skepticism, the role of ethics counsel is widely accepted by members of PRSA and educators (St. John III & Pearson, 2016).

At the same time, accredited and non-accredited practitioners and educators all appeared to be concerned about the issues of the readiness of practitioners as well as the necessary power and influence to provide ethics counsel. The responses to both statements received neutral responses from educators and slight disagreement to neutral responses from practitioners when suggesting that practitioners do not have adequate training. While the majority of practitioners (70%) perceived themselves as prepared, they may question the readiness of younger practitioners or those who are not members of PRSA. The perceptions of personal preparedness may be due to the demographics of the sample with an average age of 47, 21 years of experience in public relations and 37% of the practitioners were accredited. As further evidence of concern, both educators and practitioners ranked lack of access to leadership and information as the third most challenging issue facing public relations practitioners today. These issues can be considered meso-level and macro-level obstacles, which are "notoriously difficult to change" (Drumwright & Kamal, 2015, p. 27). In previous studies, public relations practitioners "reached out to people with more senior positions in the hierarchy as allies or formed coalitions with influential company leaders from a variety of departments" as a means of increasing their influence when their formal power was limited (Neill, 2014, p. 602). This reality suggests that a core skill in serving as an ethical conscience "involves political astuteness in being able to identify who are the key influencers for a given decision" (Neill, 2014, p. 602). In addition, serving as an ethical conscience requires persuasive skills to convince the influencers to adopt ethical alternatives. Ethics training offered by professional associations should discuss how to recruit allies and form coalitions as a means to influence more senior executives as well as provide examples of persuasive techniques that can be used to raise ethical concerns.

The top two issues ranked in priority by practitioners and educators can be classified as micro-level issues: messaging and transparency in communication. These issues have been identified in previous studies (Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Drumwright & Murphy, 2009; Gale & Bunton, 2005) and continue to be a challenge for practitioners on a daily basis. Due to their high ranking, these topics would be a good focus area for training offered by professional associations, educators and employers. As micro-level issues, these are the areas where the practitioners have the most power to influence ethical decision making.

The results present a less encouraging picture regarding the availability of ethics training in the workplace. A previous study in 2010 with a comparable sample size of PRSA members found 52% of the respondents reported that their employers did not provide ethics training (Lee & Cheng, 2012), and 63.4% of the respondents in this study also said the training is not provided. While practitioners reported that ethics training is not provided at most workplaces, they also reported that accreditation was the most common form of professional development related to ethics that PRSA members are taking advantage of through the professional association. There is some evidence that more practitioners are receiving ethics

instruction in college: 67% of the respondents in this study said they had completed an ethics course compared to 52.3% in a previous study with PRSA members (Lee & Cheng, 2012). Parsons (2008) is right in questioning public relations' readiness to provide ethics counsel if practitioners lack ethics training. Pursuing accreditation may be a viable option for those who do not receive ethics training through their employers.

This study also examined what role, if any, public relations is fulfilling related to promoting an ethical workplace. While 47.5% of the respondents listed public relations as likely to be involved in promoting a company/organization's ethics resources, only two out of six activities received favorable responses regarding the respondent's likelihood to be involved. The two activities were creating and distributing information related to the company's core values, and preparing talking points for supervisors related to those core values. Based on the wording of the question, it is possible that other public relations practitioners in their department could be involved in the other activities listed or that those activities are assumed by another department such as human resources.

The study also examined educators' perceptions regarding the preparedness of their program's graduates to provide ethics counsel, their attitudes toward providing ethics counsel and their perceptions regarding the likelihood of public relations practitioners to provide ethics counsel. No significant differences were found when comparing the responses of educators who are accredited and those who are not. The similarities in responses may be due to the age and experience of the sample. The average age was 49, and the educators averaged almost 20 years of experience in public relations and 13.5 years of experience in teaching.

5.1. *Limitations and direction for future research*

While the practitioner survey was distributed to a random sample of PRSA members, PRSA also posted the link online among a list of ethics month activities, so it is possible that some of the participants voluntarily completed the survey rather than being selected at random, which may limit the ability to generalize the findings.

Another limitation pointed out by some of the participants who contacted the researcher upon completion of the survey was that some of the questions did not fully apply to solo practitioners. Researchers should consider the range of sectors and industries that employ public relations practitioners when designing future studies.

Future research should examine the impact of accreditation and ethics by studying other professional associations such as the International Association of Business Communicators or the Canadian Public Relations Society. Another area that merits attention is public relations' involvement in promoting ethics internally. While the checklist items in this study were developed based on a recent qualitative study with public relations practitioners who specialize in internal communication (Neill, 2016), only two of the items were selected as applying to the majority of the practitioners in this study. Additional research would provide insights into what other roles public relations practitioners play in fostering an ethical workplace.

6. **Conclusion**

This study provides evidence that public relations practitioners believe that they should provide ethics counsel and that they feel prepared to do so. However, practitioners may need additional training as new ethical issues emerge with changes in technology. While practitioners appear to accept the role of ethics counselor, they may lack the necessary power, influence and information to do so. Practitioners should pursue accreditation, which can provide ethics training and improve their confidence in their ability to provide ethics counsel. Further, accredited professionals are more likely to report that they are likely to provide ethics counsel and put that training into practice.

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Table A1
Principle components loadings using varimax rotation.

Questionnaire Items	Factor Loadings (practitioner/educator)
Factor 1 Views Regarding Public Relations Ethics Counsel (40.529%/43.013% of Variance) M = 25.94/27.33, SD = 3.955/3.277, $\alpha = 0.794/.814$	
Ethics counsel should only be provided by attorneys or ethics officers.	−0.602/−0.744
Providing ethics counsel is beyond the scope of public relations' job responsibilities.	−0.691/−0.645
Ethics counsel is a natural fit with public relations' reputation management role.	0.774/0.815
Public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel.	0.839/0.873
Public relations practitioners who do not provide ethics counsel could damage their personal credibility.	0.663/0.533
Public relations practitioners have an obligation to represent the ethical concerns of key stakeholders.	0.663/0.809
Factor 2 Lack of Training & Power (16.227%/16.783% of Variance) M = 4.96/6.10, SD = 1.801/3.252, $\alpha = 0.515/.544$	
Public relations practitioners do not have adequate training to provide ethics counsel.	0.796/0.848
Public relations practitioners do not have the necessary power/influence to provide ethics counsel.	0.789/0.785

Appendix A.

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