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Analyzing Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function at SEC Universities

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Executive Summary

A changing higher education landscape – rising costs, competition and skepticism – coupled with a changing media and communications landscape – a 24/7 news cycle with fewer local journalists, new technology and the expectation of instant and constant communication – have pushed universities to try to become more effective and efficient in telling their institutional stories to multiple stakeholder groups. Institutional leaders are concerned about how higher education and their institutions present public value and communicate their impact on both the students they graduate and their communities. But how are they using public relations and communications to deliver solutions for this? Are universities employing public relations as a strategic management function to deal with these issues, or are they simply using public relations as a reactive messaging function?

To better understand, I first set out to define how a higher education public relations or communications office could be defined as a strategic management function with nine indicators. These include:

1. The university's public relations (PR) office conducts or has conducted research to assess existing stakeholder group perceptions and relationships
2. PR office has formed measurable objectives that support the university's vision, business goals, and challenges
3. PR office creates and curates content that contributes directly to those objectives
4. PR office regularly measures communications outputs and outcomes of its work
5. PR office evaluates and reflects on what has worked well and what could be done differently

6. The communications function is part of the university's executive leadership team
7. The structure of office has moved away from the press agentry or public information model
8. PR office or CCO uses some type of management tool to set strategy
9. PR office has a budget allocated specifically for its team that includes resources, training/professional development, salaries, etc. separate from the marketing budget

I conducted interviews with chief communications officers or the equivalent at seven of the 14 Southeastern Conference schools. My main question was, "Is there a pattern among SEC schools to employ public relations as a strategic management function?" I found that there is a pattern among the schools interviewed to employ public relations in this way with three universities appearing to employ public relations as a strategic management function; three universities appearing on track and actively working to do so; and only one appearing to not be on track. My second question was, "What leads a university to employing public relations as a strategic management function?" I was somewhat surprised to find that the interviews did not overwhelmingly point to my predictions of environmental scans, changes in business goals, or shocks to the institutions such as crises. Instead, although not a clear winner, the reasoning mentioned most often was the university president's or chancellor's view of communications – what they viewed as a priority and the importance they placed on the function. Without revealing specific universities, this analysis compares seven SEC universities to each other in how they manage public relations and communications and identifies an overall pattern of the institutions working to become more strategic.

Introduction

Competition is growing among institutions of higher education to attract students and first-class faculty. The base of applicants (high school graduates) overall is decreasing, meaning institutions must either target applicants in new ways or target new types of applicants. Just as schools compete for students and faculty, they also are competing aggressively for resources. Over the past 10 years, state appropriations for the University of Kentucky have decreased by nearly $60 million, according to data from UK's Budget Office. At the same time, rising costs and levels of debt for students are a concern, leaving UK and other schools with a funding gap to be filled, in part by philanthropy and grants. Additionally, skepticism about higher education from the public and legislators is growing. One recent study found that many Americans – 58% of Republicans and "Republican-leaning" independents – think that higher education institutions have a negative impact on the country (with 55% of the overall population viewing higher education positively) (Pew Research Center 2017). Another study revealed similar insights, finding that only 44% of Americans have a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in universities and colleges (Gallup 2017).

These factors – increased competition for students, faculty and resources and mounting skepticism about the value of higher education – present a multifaceted challenge for institutions, not only in business models, but in public relations strategies and methodologies. Today, public relations activities are scrutinized as the public relations staff works to support students, assure nervous parents, convince legislators, inform faculty and staff, energize alumni, and persuade donors in an oversaturated communications environment within the larger context of a shifting higher education landscape. How do public relations operations at institutions similar to UK position themselves to work more proactively and have a measurable impact on their institution's goals? How do these institutions structure their public relations/communications offices to support business goals such as graduation rates, increased research funding or capital campaigns?

More information could be shared across the higher education communications industry in the form of best practices, emerging trends, methodologies, organizational structures, and the like to answer the aforementioned questions in the current state of higher education. As UK and other universities undergo changes in financial models, enrollment efforts, branding strategy, public relations and marketing office structure, and more, it would be instructive to analyze benchmarks and report on the extent to which communications teams are helping universities achieve institutional goals as effectively and efficiently as possible. Furthermore, when many institutions face financial threats, communications departments are often one of the first to be affected. In this environment, university communicators must deliver results and demonstrate their impact, quantitatively and qualitatively.

To that end, this analysis of SEC universities uses interviews to discern that impact or the perception of impact from chief communications officers. This analysis compares seven SEC universities, delivering new insights in management strategies and methods and identifying patterns across institutions.

Literature Review

James E. Grunig, a leading public relations scholar, has spent decades theorizing public relations and communications – not only methodologies and strategies, but also the profession in the context of successful organizations. However, before reviewing theory, it is helpful to understand what is meant by "public relations." Many outside the field understandably think of public relations and marketing as synonymous. It is true that functions between the two overlap and often collaborate, but public relations practitioners perform specific functions separate from that of their marketing colleagues. Grunig provides the following description.

> Public relations professionals manage the movement of messages into the organization, for example, when conducting research on the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of publics and then using the information to counsel managers on how to make the organization's policies or actions acceptable to publics. They manage the movement out of the organization when they help management decide how to explain a policy or action to a public and then write a news story or fact sheet to explain it. (Grunig, Public Relations Management in Government and Business 1997)

Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function

Grunig first conceptualized public relations as a strategic management function, as opposed to a messaging function, for organizations in the 1980s with his "Excellence study," a study he conducted for the Foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators to analyze communication affecting the achievement of organization objectives. With the Excellence theory, Grunig and his colleagues posit that "public relations is a unique management function that helps an organization interact with the social and political components of its environment" (Grunig, The Excellence Theory 1997). In follow-up interviews with CEOs of organizations Grunig identified as having excellent public relations functions, he learned that a significant contribution public relations made to organizations was bringing external perspectives to the decision making process after conducting environmental scanning – which could save time, money and political capital in the future (Grunig, Furnishing the Edifice: Ongoing Research on Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function 2006).

Ruck draws on Grunig and other authors to summarize public relations as a strategic management function with the following five facets (Ruck 2018).

- Formative research to understand an organization’s current situation including assessments of existing stakeholder group perceptions and the quality of relationships.
- Formulation of measurable communication and relationship objectives that support the corporate business vision, strategy and purpose.
- Content creation, content curation, storytelling and organizational listening that contributes directly to communication and relationship objectives.
- Regular measurement of outputs, out-takes and outcomes of communication and relationship building.
- Evaluation of communication and relationship building, reflecting on what’s worked well and what could be done differently.

But Yi found that many in the field do not practice public relations as a strategic management function. Instead, many view its role as a "buffering activity - messaging to create images and reputations that justify the organization as it is" (Yi 2005). Another way to consider the issue is through Grunig and Hunt's four models of public relations.

1. Press agentry/publicity – one-way communication to influence audiences through positive media coverage. No formal research or strategic planning used to guide tactics.
2. Public information – one-way communication to distribute information. "In house journalists." No formal research or strategic planning used to guide tactics.
3. Two-way asymmetrical – two-way communication to persuade audiences. Formal research and audience feedback used in forming tactics.
4. Two-way symmetrical – two-way communication to negotiate with the public and build relationships. Uses formal research, planning and audience feedback in forming tactics (Grunig and Hunt, Managing Public Relations 1984).

In this view, the two-way symmetrical model is most in line with employing public relations as a strategic management function.

Public Relations in a Shifting Higher Education Landscape

Within the overarching field of public relations, each industry faces its own unique challenges that demonstrates the need for public relations as a function of strategic management. In higher education, particularly public universities, the need to prove public value and employ public relations as a strategic management function remains paramount as universities deal with fewer resources, increasing costs, skeptical stakeholders and a smaller applicant pool.

Swanger writes that fiscal challenges alone – namely reduced public funding and increased tuition costs – lead to other issues, like skepticism from parents and legislators about a college degree's return on investment (Swanger 2018). Some institutions try to offset increased tuition costs with new financial models that rely more heavily on private fundraising and public-private partnerships. Changing demographics and a slow growth rate of potential applicants also put stress on universities. The projected growth rate potential applicants between 2011 and 2022 was drastically lower at 14% than the previous four years at 45% (Hassar and Bailey 2014). The projected growth rate of the population of older, non-traditional students is much higher than that of the traditional 18-24-year-old population that typically paid for 12 hours or more a semester and on-campus housing (Hassar and Bailey 2014). Other changing demographics also indicate a need for changing support and resource models, affecting not only fiscal resources and staffing, but also strategies in a range of departments on campuses.

The paradigm shift goes beyond fiscal challenges though. Swanger notes that the current political climate is greatly affecting higher education and as such, higher education has "become a political punching bag and fundamental divide," leading to a growing debate about whether a college education is a public good or a private benefit. He describes the divide below.

> Those who are less educated feel that people with higher education degrees are elitists who do not understand how the "real world" works. They are also wary of "experts" telling them what to do. Conversely, those who are more educated worry that increasingly the fate of the country is being decided by people who do not truly understand the issues facing the world and take little time to research the facts. (Swanger 2018)

And still more challenges exist: employment needs in a changing global economy; aging faculty population; and a generation of students who interact with information, institutions and even their parents in new ways. All of these confounding issues encourage institutions to not only change the way they operate, but to improve perceptions from different stakeholder groups in each of these areas. An Inside Higher Ed survey found that many college and university presidents feel that the purposes of higher education and of their respective institutions are misunderstood and that many misconceptions exist, fueled by politics and the news media focus on student debt, campus amenities and protests (Lederman 2018). Campus leaders are clearly concerned about how higher education and their respective institutions present public value, but how are universities employing public relations to deliver solutions for this?

In higher education, the institutional public relations office is often responsible for telling the university's story through multiple means of communications to diverse audiences, as well as offering public relations counsel to administration and departments across the institution. Typical tasks of the public relations staff include writing news releases and executive speeches; hosting press conferences; working with journalists; communicating via social media, email and other digital channels; training representatives of the university for media interviews; responding during crises; and more. Today, these activities are further scrutinized as the public relations staff works to support students, assure nervous parents, persuade legislators, inform faculty and staff, energize alumni, and persuade donors in an oversaturated communications environment within the larger context of a shifting higher education landscape.

Wilson's 2009 study of four public research universities in Texas found that each institution used various features of Grunig and Hunt's four public relations models, but each of the vice presidents for public relations served on the executive management team and viewed their roles as a management function (Wilson 2009). He also found that public relations operated in a couple of different ways across the universities, namely either the public relations agency mode or the traditional news and information bureau mode. At least one university was transitioning from the news and information bureau to a new structure and strategy. Each of the vice presidents for public relations at these universities stressed different ways to communicate their respective institution's impact on the public good, or how it provides public value.

However, little was mentioned on how they conduct and use research for guidance, strategically plan, set measurable objectives, measure those outputs and outcomes, and evaluate their efforts. In the context of a shifting higher education paradigm and presidents' concerns about public perception, there is an opportunity to study to what extent public relations is being employed as a strategic management function.

Research Design

Research Questions

Two main research questions are the foundation of this analysis. The first research question is, “Is there a pattern among SEC schools to employ public relations as a strategic management function?” The author’s prediction is that that there is a pattern toward these universities using public relations in this way. The second research question is, “What leads universities to employ public relations as a strategic management function?” The prediction here is that environmental scans, a change in university business goals, or shocks to the institutions (crises) led to universities employing public relations as a strategic management function.

Research Instrument

This analysis utilizes results from standardized interviews with chief communications officers or the equivalent at Southeastern Conference universities, including the University of Kentucky as a pilot. The Southeastern Conference includes:

- University of Alabama
- University of Arkansas
- Auburn University
- University of Florida
- University of Georgia
- Louisiana State University
- University of Mississippi

- Mississippi State University
- University of Missouri
- University of South Carolina
- University of Tennessee
- Texas A & M University
- Vanderbilt University
- University of Kentucky

These universities compete in athletics, of course, but also compete and collaborate in academics and healthcare. Nearly all are either public flagship or land grant institutions for their respective states, with Vanderbilt being the exception, and thus may be facing similar challenges or aiming to achieve similar goals.

The interviews were conducted with each individual via phone, except for the pilot interview conducted with UK's CCO, which was conducted in person on campus. A standardized interview format was chosen because an interview allows the use of open-ended questions and standardized explanations/probes of those questions when needed. A better response rate was also expected with interviews, especially when considering the interviewees, all of whom are familiar with participating in media interviews. Interviews were recorded via tape recorder and transcribed after given permission. Responses were scored on a scoring matrix with a points system: two points for "yes"/meeting a certain indicator; one point for "on track"/working toward meeting a certain indicator; and negative one point for "no"/not working toward meeting an indicator. This was done for each indicator, with the "amount of content contributing directly to strategic objectives" and Grunig's models indicators differing slightly. A response to the content indicator earned two points if participants answered, “a great deal”; one point if they answered, “a moderate amount”; and negative one if they said, “a small amount.” Similarly, an institution earned two points for the Grunig’s models question if they answered the third or fourth choices (persuasion and relationship building) and one point if they answered the first or second choices (press agentry and public information).

Responses were given two points if one of the following took place: If the question was a yes or no question and participants answered with “yes”; if one or some of the question’s potential responses were pre-identified as being in line with a strategic management function and the participant responded with that choice; or if the question was open-ended and the participant answered all parts of the question and clearly identified ways in which the institution was meeting the criteria in the question. Responses were given one point if the question was a yes or no question and participants did not clearly answer either “yes” or “no,” but instead explained how the institution was improving that area/indicator, but still had considerable work to do; if one or some of the question’s potential responses were pre-identified as being less in line with a strategic management function and the participant responded with that choice; or if the question was open-ended and the participant answered only some parts of the question and did not clearly identify ways in which the institution was meeting the criteria in the question. Finally, responses were given negative one point if the question was a yes or no question and participants answer “no,”; if one or some of the question’s potential responses were pre-identified as being not at all in line with a strategic management function and the participant responded with that choice; or if the question was open-ended and the participant answered with some version of “we are not doing that,” “not yet,” etc.

Total scores were then tallied with more than 15 total points denoting an institution that seemed to be employing public relations a strategic management function; 10 to 15 points denoting an institution was on track to employing public relations as a strategic management function; and less than 10 points denoting an institution was not on track to employing public relations as a strategic management function.

Responses to questions for the second research question were analyzed to detect any commonalities and themes of why a university might begin employing public relations as a strategic management function.

Indicators of Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function

Before forming the interview design, I identified nine indicators of public relations being used as a strategic management function. These were based on the literature reviewed by Grunig, Ruck and Wilson, as well as the perspective of the author who works in the University of Kentucky’s public relations office:

1. The university’s public relations (PR) office conducts or has conducted research to assess existing stakeholder group perceptions and relationships
2. PR office has formed measurable objectives that support the university’s vision, business goals, and challenges
3. PR office creates and curates content that contributes directly to those objectives
4. PR office regularly measures communications outputs and outcomes of its work

5. PR office evaluates and reflects on what has worked well and what could be done differently
6. The communications function is part of the university's executive leadership team
7. The structure of office has moved away from Grunig's press agentry or public information model
8. PR office or CCO uses some type of management tool to set strategy
9. PR office has a budget allocated specifically for its team that includes resources, training/professional development, salaries, etc. separate from the marketing budget

In addition to asking questions based on these indicators, I also inquired about if and when the public relations offices switched from a basic messaging function to a strategic management function, at least from the CCO's perspective, and, if they did shift, why they believe that change occurred.

Interview Outline

The interview outline is as follows, with nine main topics and several probing questions.

1. First, I'd just like you to tell me a little about your role.
    - What is your official job title?
    - How long have you worked in this position?
    - What is the title of the person to whom you report?
2. Can you describe your office's structure?

- In general, what is its hierarchy with teams and roles, and how many members are part of your team?
- Which of the following activities would you say your office focuses on the most?
    i. Securing positive media coverage
    ii. Disseminating information to the public
    iii. Using research and audience feedback to then persuade audiences to perceive the university in certain ways
    iv. Using research, planning and audience feedback to build relationships with the public

3. What kinds of objectives is the PR team working toward?
    - Can you describe how these support the university's vision, business goals, and challenges, if at all?
    - Do you measure progress on the objectives the PR team is working toward? If so, how is it measured?
    - From your perspective, how much of the content created and curated by your team contributes directly to those objectives?
        i. A small amount
        ii. Moderate amount
        iii. A great deal
4. Has the PR team – separate from the marketing function - ever conducted audience or stakeholder research to better understand those relationships and perceptions?

i. Yes

ii. No

- If so, when was that last conducted?
- If another team, such as marketing, has conducted audience or stakeholder analysis, has the PR team utilized those results to better understand relationships and perceptions?

5. How often do you measure outputs of your office's work? An example of an output measure would be clicks or click thru rate.

   i. Daily

   ii. Weekly

   iii. Monthly

   iv. Per semester

   v. Never

6. How often do you measure outcomes of your office's work? An example of an outcome measure would be a change in attitude or change in behavior taken.

   i. Daily

   ii. Weekly

   iii. Monthly

   iv. Per semester

   v. Never

   vi. Other

- If other, please explain.

7. Beyond measuring, how do you or other team members reflect on how well tactics and strategies have worked?
8. Do you use any type of management tool to set strategy, such as balanced scorecards, environmental scans, SWOT analyses or other?
    - If other, please describe.
9. Does the PR office have a budget separate from the university's marketing office?
        i. Yes
        ii. No
    - What is included in that budget?
10. Does the PR office have a strategic plan, a university communications plan or content strategy?
11. At your university, do you think public relations is being employed as a strategic management function, regarded on par with other strategic management functions such as human resources, finance, and legal counsel?
        1. Yes
        2. No
    - If yes, do you think that was always the case?
    - If it was not always the case, at what point do you think that change occurred?
    - Why do you think that change occurred?

Analysis and Findings

Attempts were made to interview communications leaders from all 14 SEC institutions, but seven institutions, from both the east and west divisions, including UK, participated. Official job titles varied slightly, from assistant vice chancellor for strategic communications to chief marketing and communications officer, and the amount of time they had been in the position varied considerably, from eight months to 12 years. But all participants led a team or teams of communicators and were well versed in the communications and public relations operations at their respective institutions.

Three participants reported their communications/public relations teams (excluding marketing and brand strategy) had between 20-30 people on staff, while three other participants reported their entire division, often including marketing or other teams, had between 20-30 on staff. As far as structure, full-time positions or teams dedicated specifically to media relations and social media were common, however, two of the participants reported that social media was directed under the marketing function.

Other interesting attributes to note include two of the universities having roles for issues management separate from that of other media relations roles, as well as one public relations team overseeing the open records process, as opposed to legal counsel. One communications office also oversees its own video team, while most participants described videography, photography and other creative services as being part of the marketing function. Finally, one division of marketing and communications has its own strategy and analytics team to support the communications, creative and other teams. One other participant mentioned having a staff person dedicated full-time to analytics and another mentioned having someone take on that duty in addition to their other responsibilities, suggesting a growing focus on performance and reporting results.

Research Question I: "Is there a pattern among SEC schools to employ public relations as a strategic management function?"

Based on the nine indicators identified on page 15 through the framework of a scoring matrix (Appendix I), three universities appear to employ public relations as a strategic management function; three universities appear on track and actively working to do so; and only one appears to not currently be on track to do so. As such, there does appear to be a pattern among SEC universities to employ public relations as a strategic management function.

Table I: Scoring Matrix Points Designation

	Strategic Management Function	**On Track**	**Not on Track**
Score by pts	>15	10-15	<10

Table II: Results of Scoring Matrix

	Using Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function?		
	Yes	**On Track**	**No**
University I	X (score = 16)		
University II	X (score = 18)		
University III		X (score = 10)	

University IV			X (score = 5)
University V	X (score = 16)		
University VI		X (score = 10)	
University VII		X (score = 13)	

Indicator Findings

Stakeholder/Audience Research		
Yes	On Track	No
4	2	1

Four of the participants interviewed reported that their public relations teams had conducted some type of stakeholder or audience research to better understand those relationships and perceptions and inform their work. The types of research ranged. For instance, one university, which does not have a separate marketing department, conducted stakeholder research internally before building out a new messaging strategy. This university’s research included a survey, focus groups and in-depth interviews with more than a dozen stakeholder groups. “With all that, we tried to figure out a messaging strategy that would be authentic and help us close some of the identity gaps between who we believe we really are and who people think we are,” the interview participant said. Another university used a third party to conduct research on prospective students, current students, alumni, donors, as well as benchmarking research on other universities, and, interestingly, organizations outside of higher education – “organizations that have strong marketing and communications, be it academia or corporate organizations. And then we look at how they’re structured so we can conduct PR and content curation in more effective way and be organized to do that.” Two other universities are preparing for a new round of research and expect that to inform how they communicate their messages to audiences – “not only what’s reaching people, but why and in what format and based on what approach.” One university reported only conducting research for the marketing function: surveys in markets in which the university spends the most resources.

Measurable Objectives Supporting Institutional Goals		
Yes	On Track	No
5	2	0

A majority of the universities’ public relations functions had measurable objectives that supported institutional goals, with five describing objectives that clearly connected to the university’s vision, business goals, and challenges, such as creating and measuring content around a university’s three strategic pillars of transformational learning, discovery and innovation, and impact. Another participant spoke of their office’s role in the university’s larger duty as a public institution to demonstrate to taxpayers “that what we’re doing is worth our time and their money. Showing why what we’re doing is important not only for the people we educate, but for the research we conduct, through service we provide to the state.” Two appeared to be “on track” as they described their objectives but did not clearly connect them to their respective university's larger vision, business goals and challenges.

Amount of Content Contributing Directly to Objectives		
A great deal	A moderate amount	A small amount
5	1	1

A majority also reported that a great deal of the content curated and created by their teams contributes directly to strategic objectives. Four of those five specifically described between 75-90% of their content contributing directly to those objectives. One university reported a moderate amount. Another reported a small amount – saying only 25% of their content is proactive, strategic public relations efforts. However, this same participant also described, from their perspective, how even the "nuts and bolts" efforts making up 75% of their content can be strategic.

Regular Measurement of Outputs, Outcomes		
Yes	On Track	No
2	4	1

Measurement seemed to be an activity many of the communications leaders were focused on but still grappling with. Four of them appeared to be "on track" to regularly measure both outputs and outcomes: most are measuring outputs (such as clicks on a story or social media post) of their office's work consistently but reported measuring outcomes (change in attitude or behavior) more inconsistently. Three reported regular measurement of both outcomes and outputs.

For outputs, weekly and monthly measurement were the most common responses, with several explaining that the frequency depended on what was being measured. One participant said their office measured headlines and social media daily and looked at monthly and annual analytics (such as top performing stories for the year) for trends and insights. After saying their output measurement is a "little erratic," another participant alluded to the challenge of having an abundance of analytics, but few resources to devote to the cause: "It's never been easier to measure a lot of that, but who's taking the time to pull up Google Analytics or YouTube analytics or our own analytics?" One participant had a three-pronged measurement standard to know if their content had achieved success or not: exceeding average social media engagement, earning at least two media pickups and exceeding average website pageviews. Although they measure outputs on a monthly basis, another participant described the challenge of driving decisions based on measurements, saying they are not sure their team is operationalizing what they are seeing in the analytics to change content.

In regard to outcomes, two participants who regularly measures these do so annually and one reported measuring them monthly. Several others noted the difficulty in measuring how they are "moving the needle" and some seemed unsure of exactly how often their office measures outcomes. One participant said it is a project by project basis, focusing especially on "topical issues in news that are political in nature," but that they do not measure outcomes significantly and intend to do so in the future. Other participants spoke of measuring one outcome – perception. Two reported currently doing this annually (with surveys, interviews or focus groups) and one reported hoping to begin a yearly check in with surveys or focus groups after developing a baseline this year.

Reflect on Successes and Failures		
Yes	On Track	No
4	3	0

Reflecting on how well strategies and tactics have worked seemed to be slightly more common than regularly measuring outcomes and outputs, with four participants describing specific ways in which they reflect on strategies and tactics. One participant described how their office sets key performance indicators (KPI) project by project, looking especially at "message throughput," which they described as their intended messaging "reflected in the stories, by other people, a third party." Then they report out how they fared on those KPIs to stakeholders. They described doing this around 60% of the time. Another participant described a similar process after events and campaigns, assessing lessons learned, what the team would do differently, the original budget, and the resources actually used on the project. One participant described reflecting weekly at staff meetings on what has done well recently and why it has done well. And another described an after-action meeting on large efforts reviewing results, how tactics performed, and resources communicators wish they had for the effort, but didn't. "Watching the data to help you make your decisions, then evaluating your overall performance and talking about how to do things different is super critical," that same participant said.

Three participants seemed to be "on track" in this area as they noted reflecting after big projects or attempting to gather qualitative feedback, but were vague in their efforts and admitted to not reflecting as much as or as systematically as they should.

Communications is Part of Executive Leadership Team		
Yes	On Track	No
6	0	1

The communications function at six out of the seven universities are part of the executive leadership team, with the chief communications officers either reporting directly to the president or chancellor, or their boss as vice president or vice chancellor of communications reporting directly to the president or chancellor. At one university, the communications function is structured under the advancement leadership, with no communications leader reporting directly to the president or chancellor.

Grunig's Models			
Press Agentry	Public Information	2-way asymmetrical (persuasion)	2-way symmetrical (relationship building)

1	4	2	0

In regard to the models of each office, many still seem to be practicing Grunig's first two models of press agentry and public information. Four participants reported their offices being most focused on disseminating information to the public (public information model), while one said they were most focused on securing positive media average (press agentry model). However, several indicated they are slowly inching toward the two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical models. One participant said, "I think we're doing more of all the rest more than ever before, but I think number two (disseminating information to the public) is still our primary function." Two participants chose "using research and audience feedback to then persuade audiences to perceive the university in certain ways" (two-way asymmetrical). None of the participants interviewed chose "using research, planning and audience feedback to build relationships with the public" as their primary focus.

Management Tool to Set Strategy		
Yes	On Track	No
4	1	2

On the question on using management tools, four participants said they do use some type of management tool to set strategy. Three of those participants mentioned benchmarking, or surveying the landscape and seeing what other institutions are doing, as a tool they frequently use. Some other tools mentioned include SWOT analyses, strategic planning sessions, message houses, regular evaluation/analysis done by a staff member, and working groups dedicated to digging into specific issues. One participant said they do not currently use anything but have messaging maps forthcoming, while another participant fairly new to the position said they are not currently using any management tools to set strategy and are just trying to “build capacity first.”

Separate Budgets		
Yes	On Track	No
4	2	1

Four of the seven participants reported that their public relations/communications teams do have budgets that are separate from the marketing team and specific to the needs of the public relations function. One participant said their office is currently working toward this structure and expects it to be in place by spring of next year. Another participant reported that while each team had their own operational budget, most of the budget is allocated to the marketing team for prospective student and parent marketing. Finally, one participant said they have one budget that supports both the public relations and marketing functions.

Research Question II: “What leads universities to employ public relations as a strategic management function?”

To attempt to answer this research question, I first asked participants, “At your university, do you think public relations is being employed as a strategic management function, regarded on par with other strategic management functions such as human resources, finance, and legal counsel?” All said yes with the exception of one participant who said, “yes and no,” adding, “Traditionally at the university, strategic thinkers will think of what to do and then will tell the communicators to communicate it, versus thinking of communications as a strategic function. But its changing.”

My prediction with this question was that environmental scans, a change in university business goals, or shocks to the institutions (crises) lead universities to employing public relations as a strategic management function. While no silver bullet emerged from interviews to answer this, five out of the seven participants pointed to the president’s/chancellor’s priorities and importance they placed on communications as being the main determinant, with two participants who had not been in their positions as long not able to speculate what it was like before they arrived. A participant who said they currently feel like public relations is being employed as a strategic management function at their university, but that it typically ebbs and flows, said it “really comes down to who is the leader of institution and what does that person think is a strategic priority. I don’t know how a university president could do their job without treating communications as a strategic priority, but I think there are some who do.”

Two participants also pointed to crises, which was consistent with my expectation. One described their leadership's realization of potential crisis situations "around every corner." Another participant said their leadership recognized the changing media and communications landscape, with the speed of news being lightning fast and rumors going awry on social media. This participant also spoke about the "need to present the school, certainly as a land grant with a commitment to the state, but also as a global university… and doing that was going to require a new tact."

Leadership's interest in an "integrated approach" with marketing, communications, and media relations was also given as a reason to why public relations became more of a strategic management function at one university. And only one participant spoke about a change in business goals – raising money through a capital campaign to offset rising costs and reduced state appropriations – as the catalyst for the university becoming more centralized and consistent with messaging and communications functions. "In a world where we have fewer state dollars, I don't think it's surprising to see a little more of a corporate orientation for communications management and those kinds of things because you've got to try to find ways to be more efficient and consistent," that participant said.

Conclusion

A majority of universities interviewed are either currently employing public relations as a strategic management function or are on track to do so by making progress related to the nine indicators identified previously. Three universities seem to be operating in this way already; three more are working towards that; and one appears to not be on track. While two of these public relations offices appear to be practicing Grunig's two-way asymmetrical model – two-way communication to persuade audiences; using formal research and audience feedback in forming tactics – the other five seem to still be most focused on one-way communication to influence or inform, Grunig's press agentry or public information models.

A majority of participants spoke of measurable objectives that support institutional goals, believed a great deal of their content contributes directly to strategic objectives, and were part of the executive leadership team (either themselves or their boss as a communications leader at the vice president level). Regular measurement of outputs and outcomes was an indicator that was more split than most, with many regularly measuring outputs but not outcomes.

While almost all participants said unequivocally that public relations is employed as a strategic management function at their university, several pointed to this being a somewhat recent phenomenon or something that it is continuing to improve, suggesting that while the pattern exists, there is still progress to be made.

Recommendations

To deal with the challenges brought by the paradigm shift in higher education – particularly differentiating themselves among increased competition for students, faculty, and resources, and proving impact with mounting skepticism about the value of higher education – institutions should support public relations and communications offices in realizing their full potential as a strategic management function. Through direct access to the institution's leadership; stakeholder research; objectives and tactics connected to institutional goals; regular evaluation of failures and successes through measurement and reflection; management tools to help define and stay on strategy; its own budget that includes resources, tools, and professional development; and practicing Grunig's two-way communications models; public relations offices can become more effective and efficient. Specifically, if accepting the strategic management approach to public relations, PR offices at SEC schools should not sell themselves short as merely a news function. They should work toward moving away from the press agentry and public information models and focus more on persuasion and relationship building. The two participants that said they focused the most on persuading audiences (2-way asymmetrical) scored 15-18 points, indicating those practicing the more strategic model, compared to press agentry or public information, are more likely to be engaged in the other activities. SEC schools should also find ways to regularly measure outcomes and use analytics and reflection on successes/failures to drive decisions. At least one school should change its structure to have a communications leader as part of the university's executive leadership team, an indicator that several participants were adamant about. It is interesting that while a majority of participants said public relations was indeed being employed as a strategic management function at their university, only three scored as such. It could be helpful to conduct further research to validate these responses, such as analyzing how other people at these universities perceive the public relations function..

By taking these steps and becoming proactive – not only delivering the news to audiences but bringing feedback and public perception into the board room as part of the leadership's decision-making process – higher education public relations leaders can become more than the spokesperson dealing with institution’s misstep and could instead help the institution avoid the misstep altogether. Public relations and communications can build a foundation of trust with stakeholders that allows the institution to better deal with the challenges that come their way.

Limitations

While 50% of the intended population – SEC universities – participated in the study, a small sample size of seven universities prevents these findings from being applicable to higher education institutions across the board. Additional interviews are needed with chief communications officers from all types of institutions – other conferences, public/private, research/liberal arts, land-grants, etc. – to see if any differences emerge between the types of institutions and the approach they take to public relations and communications.

Further analysis such as similarities and differences depending on attributes of the universities, such as size, type of institution, length of leadership’s tenure, location, and other attributes was not conducted to maintain anonymity of the seven universities and participants. This could be helpful and could account for some of the differences noted between the schools’ management of public relations and communications.

Finally, interviewer bias is often a limitation with in-depth interviews. The interviewer acknowledges her own professional experiences and understandings of public relations and communications in higher education played a role in her interpretation of the issue at hand and responses collected. But she considers this expertise to be helpful in establishing credibility and improving her ability to understand responses.

Appendices

Appendix I: Scoring Matrices

Indicator	Stakeholder research		
University	Yes	On Track	No
University I		1	
University II	2		
University III	2		
University IV	2		
University V		1	
University VI			-1
University VII	2		
Total # Universities	4	2	1

Indicator	Measurable objectives supporting institutional goals		
University	Yes	On Track	No
University I	2		
University II	2		
University III		1	
University IV		1	
University V	2		
University VI	2		

University VII	2		
Total # Universities	5	2	0

Indicator	Amount of content contributes directly to those objectives		
University	A great deal	A moderate amount	A small amount
University I	2		
University II	2		
University III		1	
University IV			-1
University V	2		
University VI	2		
University VII	2		
Total # Universities	5	1	1

Indicator	Regular measurements of outputs, outcomes		
University	Yes	On Track	No
University I		1	
University II	2		
University III		1	
University IV		1	
University V	2		

University VI	2		
University VII		1	
Total # Universities	3	4	0

Indicator	Reflects on successes, failures		
University	Yes	On Track	No
University I	2		
University II	2		
University III		1	
University IV		1	
University V	2		
University VI	2		
University VII		1	
Total # Universities	4	3	0

Indicator	CCO or equivalent is part of executive leadership team		
University	Yes	On Track	No
University I	2		
University II	2		
University III	2		
University IV			-1

University V	2		
University VI	2		
University VII	2		
Total # Universities	6	0	1

Indicator	Grunig's models			
University	Press agentry	Public information	2-way asymmetrical (persuasion)	2-way symmetrical (relationship building)
University I			2	
University II			2	
University III		1		
University IV		1		
University V	1			
University VI		1		
University VII		1		
Total # Universities	1	4	2	0

Indicator	Management tool to set strategy		
University	Yes	On Track	No
University I	2		
University II	2		

University III	2		
University IV			-1
University V	2		
University VI			-1
University VII		1	
Total # Universities	4	1	2

Indicator	Separate budgets		
University	Yes	On Track	No
University I	2		
University II	2		
University III			-1
University IV	2		
University V	2		
University VI		1	
University VII		1	
Total # Universities	4	2	1

Appendix II: Scoring Matrix Points Designation

	Strategic Management Function	**On Track**	**Not on Track**
Score by pts	>15	10-15	<10

Appendix III: Results of Scoring Matrix

	Using Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function?		
	Yes	**On Track**	**No**
University I	X (score = 16)		
University II	X (score = 18)		
University III		X (score = 10)	
University IV			X (score = 5)
University V	X (score = 16)		
University VI		X (score = 10)	
University VII		X (score = 13)	

Appendix IV: Additional Insights

Attributes	# of Universities
CMO and CCO combined into one role	3
Communications team responsible for social media	3
Social is dual report to communications and marketing	I
Marketing function responsible for social media	2

Tools

Media Relations	**Professional Development**	**Operations**	**Content/Strategy**	**Evaluation**	**Issues Mgmt./Crisis Comms**
Cision	LinkedIn Learning	TeamWork	Message house templates	After Action Reports	Brandwatch
Critical Mention	Weekly award to story that attracted most social views	Asana	SWOT Analysis	3-pronged metric standard	
TrendKite			Benchmarking		
Meltwater			Freelancers		
VideoLink			Message maps		
Comms Consultants			CORE: Create Once, Use Everywhere		
Weekly tip sheet to editors/ producers			Regular work groups with campus communicators		
			Weekly meetings with campus communicators		
			Workgroups on specific issues within office		

Appendix V: Recruitment Emails

Initial recruitment email:

Hi (first name),
My name is Whitney Harder and I am a graduate student researcher at the University of Kentucky. I am conducting a research study analyzing public relations as a strategic management function at SEC universities by interviewing chief communications officers or the equivalent. I am emailing to ask if you would like to take about 30 minutes to complete a phone interview for this research project. Participation is completely voluntary and your answers will be anonymous.

More information is provided in the attached cover letter. I am hoping to conduct interviews during [time period dependent on IRB approval].

If you are interested, please respond to this email by [date dependent on IRB approval] indicating you agree to participate and share the best phone number to reach you on for the interview. We can then set up a time based on your availability for the interview. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at whitney.harder@uky.edu or 859-323-2396.

Thanks so much,
Whitney Harder
Graduate Student Researcher
Martin School of Public Policy and Administration
University of Kentucky

Follow up email:

Hi (first name),

As a graduate student studying public administration at the University of Kentucky, I am conducting research to better understand public relations as a strategic management function at SEC universities. Earlier this week an email with attached cover letter was sent to you inviting you to participate in a phone interview for the study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to respond if you would like to participate and have not already done so. The deadline for participation is [Date dependent on IRB approval].

The cover letter is attached again for your review. I am hoping to conduct interviews during [time period dependent on IRB approval].

If you are interested, please respond to this email by [date dependent on IRB approval] indicating you agree to participate and share the best phone number to reach you on for the interview. We can then set up a time based on your availability for the interview. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at whitney.harder@uky.edu or 859-323-2396.

Thanks so much,
Whitney Harder
Graduate Student Researcher
Martin School of Public Policy and Administration
University of Kentucky

Appendix VI: Cover Letter

To XXXXX:

A graduate student researcher at the University of Kentucky, with guidance from a faculty member, is inviting you to take part in a phone interview about public relations as a strategic management function. You are receiving this invitation because you have been identified as a chief communications officer or equivalent at a university in the Southeastern Conference. This project, “Analyzing public relations as a strategic management function at SEC universities,” aims to identify if there is trend among SEC universities to employ public relations as a strategic management function, based on several indicators, and factors that may lead to this, such as a change institutional goals or a crisis. This project is being conducted as part of a master’s capstone project by a graduate student studying public administration and working in the public relations and marketing profession.

Although you may not get personal benefit from taking part in this research study, your responses may help me understand more about the function public relations serves at universities in a time of change in higher education. Some volunteers experience satisfaction from knowing they have contributed to research that may possibly benefit others in the future. You will also receive a copy of the finished study.

The interview will take about 30 minutes to complete.

There are no known risks to participate in this study.

Your response to the interview questionnaire will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. When I write about the study you will not be identified. Your information collected for this study will NOT be used or shared for future research studies, even if I remove the identifiable information like your name.

I hope to receive completed questionnaires from about 14 people, so your answers are important to me. Of course, you have a choice about whether or not to complete the questionnaire, but if you do participate, you are free to skip any questions or discontinue at any time.

I hope to record the interview with a tape recorder and transcribe by hand with your permission. If you prefer not to be recorded, I will be happy to take notes by hand instead.

If you have questions about the study, please feel free to ask; my contact information is given below. If you have complaints, suggestions, or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the University of Kentucky Office of Research Integrity at 859-257-9428 or toll-free at 1-866-400-9428.

Thank you in advance for your assistance with this important project. If you are interested, please respond to my email indicating you agree to participate and share the best phone number to reach you on for the interview. We can then set up a time based on your availability for the interview. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at whitney.harder@uky.edu or 859-323-2396.

Sincerely,
Whitney Harder
Martin School of Public Policy and Administration, University of Kentucky
PHONE: 859-323-2396
E-MAIL: whitney.harder@uky.edu

Appendix VII: Interview Script

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today.

The purpose of this interview is to learn how public relations is employed at your university. Specifically, I want to understand the role of public relations and communications at your university and if it is being employed as a strategic management function based on several indicators. I want to understand how it is managed at SEC universities in the context of a changing higher education landscape.

The interview should last no longer than 30 minutes.

There are no known risks to participate in this study.
Your response to the interview questionnaire will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. When I write about the study you will not be identified. Your information collected for this study will NOT be used or shared for future research studies, even if I remove the identifiable information like your name.
You are free to skip any questions or discontinue at any time.

Have you read the cover letter attached in my previous email(s)? If not, I will take a few seconds to read it aloud. If you have, would you like to take a few seconds to review again?

Do you give permission for me to record this interview with a tape recorder? If you prefer not to be recorded, I will be happy to take notes by hand instead.

Do you have any questions for us before we begin?

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