Self-Assessment Report
By
Steven H. Lowry

Introduction

Deciding to major in public relations was not something that was obvious, or came easily to me. Since I was a young child, I had spent most of my time focused on either sports or music. Since it had become apparent that I wasn’t going to make it to the big leagues in baseball, my next fall-back position must be that I would major in music. After all, I had the background for it. Throughout high school, I spent a lot of time singing in various choirs and as a soloist, performing in musicals and cultivating my skills as the front man for a Christian rock band. The question is: how does a person make a living once they graduate with a music degree? I am not interested in teaching and the thought of living in Manhattan and trying to make it on Broadway had absolutely zero appeal to me. “I’ll just make music my hobby,” I thought. So the question became, what is a good major for someone like me; someone who might want to use their education to somehow find, enhance or promote their career? What is the best major for someone who is a “communicator” but needs to develop a well-rounded and balanced approach to verbal, written, and audio/visual communication? I had never considered it until the summer before entering college, but the option of public relations as the choice for my major began to come clear. As I began to review the curriculum options with my parents, it appeared the requirements for this degree were an ideal fit for not only my strengths, but these PR degree requirements were also a great fit that would fill in the gaps of
my weaknesses. Finally, as we pieced together my first semester schedule, a path began to emerge and a plan began to jell.

**Part I: Personal Statement**

Comparing my overall knowledge of public relations and my general skill level when I entered college to where I am now is radically different and improved. Not only has the coursework aided me in developing in ways that I anticipated, but being a Slippery Rock University student has also pushed me to dig deeper and expand my understanding of public relations and communications in areas that never interested me before. This success resulted not just from rigorous coursework, but is also an experience where every person has the freedom to accept or reject opportunities to live, work, study, play and socialize in what I would call a “transitional” environment. This is a real, but partially controlled environment that allows students to experience a dose of both the good and the bad that life, and life-after-college offers.

**Degree Goals and Outcomes**

**Goal #1: Knowledge of the discipline specific theory, history, issues, and practices**

*Knowledge upon entering the program*

Entering the program, there was almost nothing that I knew about this first goal block. To be completely honest, I actually had only casually used the term “public relations” without ever considering the discipline behind it. I had no knowledge of the history or evolution of the field, and possessed only a limited practical knowledge of motivation, persuasion, and communication practices. I had no awareness and understood absolutely nothing of the theory behind any of these issues and practices. I
was also not aware of the contemporary issues that influence contemporary practice in this field. Anything I knew about public relations practices was whatever I picked up intuitively from the various media forums that I listened to, watched, or read, since I had never had a class or formally studied the profession.

**Knowledge upon exiting the program**

Although this may not be an especially exciting part of the curriculum requirement, it is an essential one. Classes like Communication Concepts, Mass Media and Society and Introduction to Public Relations all were challenging but necessary courses. In each of these classes (and others) I gained important knowledge that has helped me take my persuasive skills and motivation techniques to the required level of professionalism. Even though this is technically “theory,” I have been able to directly apply what history as well as what contemporary issues have taught us.

**Goal #2: Possess knowledge and demonstrate proficiency in communication skills**

**Knowledge upon entering the program**

Being proficient in writing is something that I have always considered to be one of my greater strengths, however; as my writing skills related to PR, I actually only had experience in a few limited categories such as business letter writing, brochure development, creating advertising copy and writing a very brief story for a web site. Each of these experiences resulted once again from promoting activities of our Christian rock band, *Third From First*. In order to generate interest and book performances for our band, I wrote a form business letter that we used as a cover letter to send to churches and other Christian-based organizations.
Along with the business cover letter, I would also incorporate a simple flyer that included a photo of our band along with a description of what we were about and the type of music we played. On one occasion, we created an advertisement that was integrated in a promotional marketing publication for one of our concerts. The purpose of this ad was to draw attention and build awareness that we were going to be performing at their special event. I also contributed to writing a short feature about our band that we used on our web page. It included information about how the band members got together, how we came up with our name, and a section about our general music interests and influences. Prior to entering the program at SRU, I did not have any experience in full-blown media kits which included press releases, feature stories, advisories, radio readers, pitch letters, special event proposals and photo press releases.

On the topic of oral communications, being the front man for our band provided me with many speaking opportunities and I did a tremendous amount of extemporaneous speaking. My impromptu speaking started out with a few sentences between songs and evolved to more in-depth speeches and longer messages. Being forced to hone my speaking skills early and at a relatively young age helped me build confidence and prepared me for entering college. Little did I know just how valuable this experience would be to me, and how much I would use this foundational know-how of oral communication throughout my college career – not only in the classroom, but in many aspects of my life.
Concerning presentational aides, other than the limited experience I obtained in high school, my primary source of skill development was, once again, my band. In addition to the creation of PowerPoint slides for song lyrics, I also created a short video presentation that we used for our CD release show. This forced me to consider not only the message that I was trying to communicate to our audience, but also to determine the best possible way to get our target message communicated in the most effective way.

Knowledge upon exiting the program

Like I mentioned, prior to entering the program, I did not have any experience in creating media kits and campaign proposals. In my Public Relations Writing class, I learned all of the critical components necessary for an entry level PR position. So, the raw abilities that I brought into the program were nurtured and developed through continuous writings in the forms of press releases, feature stories, media advisories, pitch letters, media advisories, and radio readers. I also did a lot of other PR work for our band, such as creating a newsletter and producing a video in my Video Production class. The music video was created for our original song Time, and has had thousands of YouTube plays. For many of our concerts, we kick off the event with a video that I either produce or select. I am especially pleased with the brochure (part of my media kit) that I created in Public Relations Writing for Champion Life Church, and I intend to produce a similar brochure for Third From First. I think what is exceptionally unique about my college experience is that I will not only utilize what I learned in my professional life, but also in my personal life.
Goal #3: Possess knowledge of the values that inform the professional practice

Knowledge upon entering the program

Being sensitive to intercultural and diversity issues has always been essential to me and I learned at a very young age to be respectful of people’s differences. I did not, however, have any understanding of things like legal considerations and constraints relative to the professional practice of public relations. Actually, my understanding was solely based on commonly accepted moral and ethical values – values like honesty and respect. I had no idea about organizations like the Public Relations Society of America, or their approach to public relations practices.

Knowledge upon exiting the program

Everything that I know about legal considerations and constraints of public relations I learned in the program. Communication Law is where I learned the laws of copyright and trademarks, and specific First Amendment cases and outcomes. Our copyright and trademark lesson was interesting to me since, during college, I obtained over a dozen songs that needed copyright protection. The knowledge that I gained in school helped me when I was going through this experience. Cases referring to the First Amendment helped me understand the limitations of communication through speech, media and writing. I also found out that issues in communication are not simply black and white; there is usually a lot of gray. Digging into specific cases helped me understand this truth.
Goal #4: Demonstrate proficiency in the application of visual, audio, and graphic design

Knowledge upon entering the program

This is one category of the public relations degree goals where I had had some legitimate experience heading into college. Being a member of Third From First (TFF) was one of the most beneficial activities that I participated in prior to attending Slippery Rock. As a member of TFF, I developed meaningful graphic design, audio and visual proficiencies. One of my first challenges was to create a logo that we could use to brand our CDs and use as a graphic on shirts that we would design and sell at our concerts.

The methods I used were by any standard archaic – I actually used Microsoft Paint and drew the TFF logo almost pixel by pixel! The fact is that the logo design was a huge commercial success as we’ve sold well over 2,000 shirts, and over 1,500 CDs. We’ve also had the logo trademarked along with copyrighting our music. Our band has professionally recorded two LPs and I was intimately involved with the mixing and mastering of the soundtracks.

Concerning video recording, my only experience was extremely basic. We would essentially just take a single camera with its built-in microphone and push play. I had no experience with multiple cameras or editing. As a result, any video production that we accomplished looked like somebody shot it with their cell phone camera. We never even considered it, and always just recorded our songs during live performances. This method was a good way to critique our performances, but it was not a very professional or effective way to create a marketable video product.
The only web based design that I had experience with as I entered college was MySpace.com. The band used this as a marketing tool and I held primary responsibility for keeping it fresh and current. Although by today’s standards, this web site had very limited flexibility, I did learn a lot about the kind of information users want to see. I also honed my desktop publishing skills when we would create promotional items such as flyers and postcards. But again, to accomplish producing these items, I only used Microsoft Word and Paint.

**Knowledge upon exiting the program**

This is an area of the program where I grew and gained the most knowledge.

Before college, I knew what a good flyer looked like and what a well-done video entailed, but I personally did not know how to create such detailed work. My Publication Production, Video Production, and Digital Imaging classes were key in taking my designing skills to the next level.

Once I knew how to edit images in Adobe Photoshop (Digital Imaging), I felt ready to take my design experience up a notch. I wanted to create something more than a nice-looking picture. So when it came to flyer, business card and brochure production, Publication Production was the class to take. I’ll never forget how much fun I had creating my SRU Baseball program cover and my Women’s Center brochure. Publication design became incredibly appealing to me because I finally knew the software and functions it took to create such useful promotional materials.

My Video Production class gave me the opportunity to learn Final Cut Pro, one of the top video editing software packages available. Learning the basics in this program
really gave me a taste of true, professional video editing. I was able to create a Third From First music video, as well as other short video clips. Since I’ve been using lower quality video editing software my whole life, the possibilities seem endless now that I know the fundamentals of Final Cut Pro.

Goal #5: Demonstrate proficiency in research and analysis relevant to effective message design

Knowledge upon entering the program

Targeting audiences through quantitative and qualitative data gathering is not something that I had ever contemplated prior to entering the SRU program. Message design to me was something that I performed based on “feel” or by just knowing my audience – it was all based on intuition, never based on research or analysis. Any messaging strategy that I utilized was ill planned and at best was informal. Also, when I wanted to try or consider something new for public relations for our band, the only focus group I ever used was my family and a couple of friends. The reality is that I never thought of them as a “focus group”, but actually in a limited way they were. The problem was that they did not represent a true cross section of my actual audience so I was only obtaining feedback from one very narrow perspective. Any message design that I accomplished was grounded more in the message that I wanted to deliver rather than the message that my audience wanted to hear. This sometimes works and sometimes does not work. As with most decision making processes, the more data inputs that you have, the more likely it is that you will achieve your targeted objectives, but I lacked knowledge and know-how in this critical public relations practice.
Knowledge upon exiting the program

Developing an effective communication strategy based on data gathering, surveys and focus groups provided a huge boost to my knowledge. In addition, being able to interpret and present research data provides me with a key tool that I can use to persuade others to understand the “why behind the what.” I learned that a misdirected campaign strategy (one without research data) is the same as having no strategy. And no strategy means success is at tremendous risk. In my Communication Research Methods projects and the real-life-client project in Public Relations Campaigns, I had to overcome the idea that my idea or direction was what the audience wanted, and instead recognize that by asking, testing and validating my message would be more crisp and better focused on the target audience that I was attempting to reach.

Goal #6: Demonstrate knowledge in interpersonal and small group communication skills

Knowledge upon entering the program

Listening, relationship building and team building in a small group environment are skills that I developed and have continued to improve upon since early childhood. I have attended various Bible studies and participated in many other Christian education opportunities where small groups were commonly used. The personal and “up close” nature of small group settings also helped me to develop my interpersonal skills, and caused me to be more aware of other important non-verbal forms of communication like body language, eye contact and facial expression. I never thought of the concept of relationship maintenance in such a sterile and scientific manner, but the fact is, regardless of what it’s called, you definitely need to pursue relationship maintenance when engaging, learning, discovering and interacting with other people on a regular
basis. Consensus building in a small group was a skill that I honed as our six member band worked through the process of “imagining” what we wanted to be as a group, what music we would play, and how we would brand our image to the public. The fact that we made it through those early days and quite honestly through some very rocky times, was a testament to the consensus and team building group relation skills we not only possessed, but practiced.

Knowledge upon exiting the program
There is no question that I will be exiting this program with even better interpersonal and small group skills. In my PR Campaigns class, we worked in a small group to develop a campaign for Conneaut Lake Park’s onsite campground, Camplerland. In this group, I held the role of project manager and had my first real experience as the group leader rather than just one of its contributing members. The most important thing I learned from this experience was that I had to trust my team and not try to do everything on my own. This paid off in huge dividends when during my internship experience at NewPointe Community Church. As with the small group I managed for the Conneaut Lake Park project, I had to lead and trust. If I didn’t, I would fail since it would be impossible for me to accomplish everything that needed to be done. In addition, I did not always possess all of the skills necessary to complete the assignment. This lesson will serve me well as I move on to a career in music ministry.
Goal #7: Demonstrate proficiency in career/job search skills

Knowledge upon entering the program

I actually never had searched for a job prior to entering the program. I had a job, but it was working at my uncle’s campground and was not a job that I had to search or apply for. I never considered what it meant to perform a self assessment or thought through a career development plan. These were skills that I envisioned to be very far into the future, and in fact had absolutely no idea of where I might be headed when it came to determining a professional career path. I had no portfolio, and no track that I was even remotely following. What is the career plan for someone who is an above average student, played on two state championship baseball teams, has good verbal and written communication skills, is a competent campground maintenance person, and can sing? My dad assured me, “You may have an unusual set of talents and capabilities, but you do have special gifts and abilities. Not everyone can say the same is true.”

Knowledge upon exiting the program

The practical knowledge that I gained in my Junior and Senior Seminar classes and the activities that were part of those course requirements are invaluable to me. In these classes, I learned what it takes to prepare, organize and present myself to a potential employer. After all, obtaining a job that is in line with your career objectives is the ultimate desired outcome upon graduation. If a student grows intellectually, but doesn’t have a clue regarding job search skills, the overall educational experience would, at best, be an expensive way to take four years to transition into just another job. Essential tools for marketing yourself include creating a sharp resume and portfolio. Creating a web site to promote my education, experience and capabilities has
taken this requirement to an entirely new level. I did not realize how much I would actually enjoy the creative side of this task, and have to admit that not only will this be a skill that I can use in the future in many ways, but it is something that I learned actually satisfies my craving toward artistic design.

The lessons learned and value of my summer internship at NewPointe Community Church helped to not only position me for success, but also helped me understand how much proficiency in public relations skills can help me in my role as a director of worship music once I graduate. It is probably not obvious to the average person what actually goes on behind the scenes when developing and preparing for a Sunday worship service week-to-week. The reality is that I have a significant advantage by having a Bachelor of Science in Communication – Public Relations. The work that I will be doing is all about people, and how well they connect with the message and the music that’s being delivered. During my internship, I learned how important everything from graphic design to persuasive writing to small group team building plays in success each Sunday morning. What happens “on stage” on Sundays is only 10% of the job. 90% of the work week (in a practical sense) occurs “back stage” and includes every single facet of the degree goals of public relations. I learned that the knowledge gained in the PR program should be used in my one-on-one interactions, small group and group planning situations, audio/visual presentation preparation, and when I’m up front on Sunday morning’s leading people in worship through music.
Part II: Statement of Competence/Summary

As a result of the education I received, the life experience I gained before entering college, and the valuable practical experience I gained in the program at Slippery Rock University, I am very much prepared to obtain an entry level job in the field of public relations. Academic rigor in communication classes such as Communication Law, and Organizational Communication combined with hands-on courses like Digital Imaging, Interactive Multimedia, and News Writing provides me with the tools I’ll need to compete in today’s tough job market. Not only that, but the broad array of courses allows the flexibility to pursue opportunities in jobs that may be of interest to me sometime down the road. The program at SRU has pushed me to learn communication theory, as well as demonstrate proficiency in message and graphic design. I have become knowledgeable in the best methods to influence and lead teams – something that enhances my interpersonal interactions as well as my professional relationships. Overall, my degree in public relations is a valuable asset that any employer will benefit from when they select me to be a member of their team.

Public Speaking: Advanced

Being in front of an audience and giving a presentation or speaking extemporaneously is a skill that I had before entering college. But between my classes and ongoing practical experience, my capabilities have improved to an advanced level. Courses such as Argumentation helped me to approach my communications in a much more analytical way, and Public Speaking forced me to put concepts, theory, and principals into practice. My internship and personal experience with my band caused me to read an audience and think on my feet.
All in all, public speaking is a skill that I have studied, practiced and continue to perfect. It is a skill that I am very comfortable with and have great confidence in carrying out.

**Teamwork: Advanced**

There is not an aspect of my personal or professional life where teamwork is not a critical skill. In PR Campaigns I had the opportunity to act as the project manager for our Conneaut Lake project. This was an invaluable experience to me, because I was not just a “doer,” but a manager and facilitator of every aspect of the project. This meant I had to deal with the interpersonal “people” issues so that we would move forward and make progress as a team. During my internship, I worked in various small groups to accomplish creative and planning workshops. These experiences along with many others have prepared me to participate in, and lead small groups.

**Communication Theory: Intermediate**

Communication Concepts, and Mass Media and Society courses teach the theory behind the practice of communication. Although I certainly appreciate this requirement, I did not particularly enjoy or directly apply its value during my time in the program. I would rate my level of competence average since my only exposure thus far has been in the classroom.

**Graphic Design: Intermediate**

Digital Imaging and Publication Production are classes where I learned how to use software like Photo Shop and InDesign. This was especially helpful during my internship and when designing advertising posters for *Third From First* events. I do not have advanced experience in a wide variety of programs, but I have used these graphic design tools extensively.
Critical Thinking and Problem Solving: *Intermediate*

Anyone who graduates from college and was engaged throughout the process should have developed their critical thinking and problem solving skills. Whether the course was Video Production, where I learned how to critically evaluate and story board, to Argumentation, where I was pressed to establish and validate a logical case, I had to grow and mature in my ability to think and solve in new and legitimate ways. Again, my internship at NewPointe Community Church was a valuable learning experience and I was faced with problem solving opportunities on almost a daily basis. When working with people in a creative environment like worship programming, there are a lot of ideas considered and most of them contained both large and small problems that we as a team had to address.

Message Design and Strategy: *Intermediate*

Establishing a purpose, and a desired outcome for every message created are critical skills that I learned and nurtured throughout my Communication coursework at Slippery Rock. From basic courses like College Writing, to more advanced classes like PR Campaigns and PR Case Studies, I learned to always make sure that I understood the purpose of my written or verbal communications while at the same time remembering to keep the desired outcome in the forefront of my mind. Message design and strategy are a key public relations skill, and I believe the PR program at Slippery Rock, along with my internship and work that I performed with my band prepared me to create relevant and fresh approaches to the messages that I convey.
Part III: Statement of Individual Goals and Objectives

Short-Term Goals

There are several job options that I’m considering for the near-term. NewPointe Church has made me an offer to join their staff which would require me to relocate to the New Philadelphia, Ohio area. Since this seems like a pretty serious commitment and would pretty much “lock” me into a long-term commitment there, I think that I will postpone going to NewPointe right out of school since a position there will still be on the table in the future. One of my goals has been to try to make it on the road with my band, Third From First. So my best possible short-term goal would be to spend the next 6-12 months traveling and playing music with the band. This would provide me with the opportunity to continue working on perfecting my PR skills by promoting the band during this trial period in my life.

Long Term-Goals

There is no question at this point in time that my long-term goal is to become a music director at a large church (like NewPointe.) In this type of role, I would be able to not only play and lead music, but it would also allow me the opportunity to utilize many of the skills and capabilities I learned in the Public Relations program such as graphic design, various written communication, and messaging strategy development. My goal is to ultimately develop and implement a strategic vision for music ministry that is purposeful, comprehensive and creative.