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2008 Career Guide: Student roundtable

[Keith O'Brien](#)

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PRWeek editor-in-chief Keith O'Brien held a virtual roundtable with six current students or recent graduates as part of the 2008 Career Guide. The students discussed mentors, their goals for employment, new media, and diversity in the classroom.

Keith O'Brien (PRWeek): So - what is the most important lesson or thing you've learned from your PR education?

Nick Lucido (Michigan State University): To be honest, the majority of it occurs outside the classroom. While I'm getting the fundamentals in my classes, the industry is changing so quickly, especially with the impact of Web 2.0, that the best way to keep up is with real experience.

Kate Scozzaro (University of Rhode Island): The most important lesson I have learned is to always establish relationships. You will not gain the trust of the media, your clients, whoever you are pitching to if they don't believe you and know what you're about

Marsha Dawes (Indiana University): I'd definitely agree with that Nick. There's so much to learn outside the classroom. Internships are a necessity in this field.

Joe Burke (University of Northern Iowa): I agree with Nick. There is so much about the industry that has to be learned from seasoned professionals and hands on experience.

Heather Papsun (Boston University): To add onto what Nick said, the most important lesson I've learned is that you cannot learn everything in the classroom, and that you need to have real-world experience before entering the PR profession.

O'Brien: So - much of the learning process is real-life experience. How do you accomplish that besides internships?

Erika Gonzalez (University of Texas at Austin): I agree with Nick and Kate. Relationships are key and it's important to develop and foster those relationships.

Papsun: It's also important to learn what will distinguish you as a leader both in the classroom and in a professional environment.

Gonzalez: Mentors! So much of my experience and advice has come from mentors. My mentors were also the ones that helped me land my internships.

Papsun: I think you should look at every meeting, interview, class, etc. as a learning opportunity. Learn what publications you should be reading, and who is writing the articles you're interested in.

Burke: I would also say that there is a good deal of personal networking and research you have to do yourself. One of the most beneficial things I have done has been to set up informational interviews with professionals and HR people. They can tell you what is important and what you need to make it in PR.

Lucido: Besides internships, working on your public relations skills, such as writing and strong communication, can be practiced in everything from papers, e-mails, and student organizations.

Papsun: I agree with Joe 100%. As students, we do have a certain advantage in that people seem more willing to help us. Students should never be afraid to reach out and ask. If you never ask, you'll never get anything!

Burke: Absolutely, Heather. I'm sure we can all agree that in the PR industry, there are always professionals willing to do whatever they can to help students who seek them out.

Dawes: Exactly. So much of my education has come from asking professors, professionals, and other students about public relations.

Lucido: Especially PRSSA alumni- they love reaching out to students.

Gonzalez: I also gained experience by volunteering. Some students are hesitant to work or intern for free but doing so can help you land those paid internships!

Papsun: You can be a straight-A student and not really know what PR is all about.

Scozzaro: It's that little extra you do outside of class, and the people you talk to and interact with that makes the difference

Burke: Many of the professionals I've talked to not only expect their applicants to have had an internship, but prefer two to three to be competitive

Gonzalez: To add on to Nick's comment, alumni at your university will definitely help out as well! You just have to research and read bios of PR professionals. Learn their background and don't be afraid to outreach to them.

Dawes: I've found that doing that extra is what sets you apart from other applicants for jobs. The things I never thought would matter (my religious studies degree) actually helped me get my first job.

Papsun: Agreed! PRSSA is a great opportunity. Too many students join just to put it on their resume. The student who goes the extra mile to do everything in their power to learn (such as what everyone here has suggested) will succeed.

Burke: Reaching out to professionals for advice also sets you up for internship and career opportunities as well as added contacts. The internship I am at right now resulted from an informational interview.

O'Brien: So - how open are fellow students to working on projects outside of the classroom? Are there any local projects students take on, without the mentoring of professors?

Gonzalez: It's also important to stay in contact with people you have had an internship. Drop a line and stay in contact.

Scozzaro: The classroom is often limited with guidelines; I think working outside of the classroom alongside others that have your same interests will give you that "real-world" experience

Papsun: From my experiences, some PRSSA chapters have great student-run agencies. Those that join and stick with it are usually very dedicated. There is also the [Bateman Competition](#), which my school has not been very involved with since it requires a tremendous amount of time outside the classroom for us.

Dawes: Local projects are really common in my area. Many students will get involved with small nonprofit organizations to get the experience. Often times these students learn a tremendous amount because they end up being the only PR person there.

Gonzalez: Our PRSSA chapter has [its] own student-run agencies that give great experience to students. I feel that joining organizations with the same interests as your peers is a great way to work on a project(s).

Burke: In regards to the question, Heather makes a good point. There are quite a few PR students who are not active members in PRSSA. On the other end, there usually seems to be a core group in chapters that really go after outside work. My school has a student-run firm which provides excellent opportunities for those members.

Papsun: I think no matter where you are, there are opportunities if you look for them. You can definitely make the most of what you have.

Dawes: Also, several of my classes have focused on service learning projects. In these courses I've created communications plans, press releases, media events, etc. for a local nonprofit organization. Many times I've had to pitch to these "clients" as well.

Lucido: Along with Heather's comment, that's what separates applicants for jobs.

O'Brien: Do you think student-run firms are more common these days?

Gonzalez: Definitely agree with Heather. Opportunities are out there. It's very rare that people turn away free work!

Papsun: I would definitely say that yes, student-run firms are more common. The PR industry really seems to be booming, and students know that.

Lucido: Student-run firms are definitely more common, even in the past couple of years more and more schools are making the commitment.

Papsun: it's becoming more and more competitive. I've met a ton of students who are also just so eager to get their feet wet.

Burke: I've heard of them more and more. But like Erika said, you can take the initiative no matter where you live and make your own opportunities.

Gonzalez: Not only are student-run firms common, but I feel that more students are starting to be open and develop[ing] an interest in PR.

Lucido: In Michigan, there used to only be one student-run firm; many of the PRSSA Chapters that I have kept in contact with in Michigan are planning to launch one this year.

Scozzaro: And to go off what Heather said, students know that it's what you do outside of just the classroom that really matters. Like we all said before, having real experience is what will get you ahead, so yes. Student-run firms are more common.

Burke: I would like to think that student firm expansion is due to the incredible leadership in PRSSA. Their energy and dedication is top notch.

O'Brien: Onto a question about diversity – do classes feature a diverse group of students? Or is

that still a major issue?

Burke: I think that depends on the school. I know the majority of my peers are white females, which seems to be the main demographic in the industry right now.

Gonzalez: I hardly had any guys in my class! It was all girls with maybe a handful of guys. Also, I was generally one of the very few Hispanics in my classes.

Papsun: I think BU is making more and more of an effort to attract a diverse group of students, but it still seems to be an issue. It's definitely something I would like to see expand a lot more. The more we can all learn from each other, the better! It seems that this is also an issue in the profession in general.

Dawes: This is possibly because I'm from a small town in Indiana but I feel like there is still a lack of diversity. However, that depends on your definition of diversity.

Lucido: PRSSA defines diversity as not only differences in ethnicity, but also in your major, your gender, your interests, your background, etc.

O'Brien: For Joe and Nick - do you have any ideas why there are so few males getting PR degrees?

Scozzaro: I can only speak for what I see at U. of Rhode Island, and that would be a lack of diversity, yet I'm happy to see more and more men join my classes and our student-run PR firm.

Papsun: I agree with Joe and Erika- whenever I would see a male at PRSSA, I would actually be surprised. And yet, aren't the most senior-level positions dominated by males? What's the deal?

Lucido: I'll be honest, when I talk to people who aren't studying public relations; they think I'm going to plan events. I feel like public relations is something that many people find out about later in their career, not necessarily something that you start off in.

Dawes: Do any of you think that the lack of men in the PR classes is from the way the media portrays the profession? Samantha Jones, etc.

Papsun: Exactly. Or turn into Samantha Jones from *Sex and the City*.

Scozzaro: Absolutely, it's that "high-class, lots of money, martini drinking" stereotype.

Papsun: I agree with Nick, which circles back to why you need to have real work experience.

Burke: I don't think PR is immune to the gender issues in other businesses like the glass ceiling or male management. Although I think that it is less than the average.

Gonzalez: I definitely have gotten that comment from my friends who have a degree completely different from communications! (Samantha Jones) A lot of people I have come into contact with have a very confused idea of what is PR.

O'Brien: Is PR as a career choice well known in high school?

Scozzaro: No, but it is becoming more popular.

Burke: Even if it was, most people, even inexperienced PR majors, have a hard time defining it. "Is that like marketing, or what?"

Papsun: The reason I considered PR in high school is that I knew I wanted to work with the media, and that I was a "people person." Now I know a little bit better... I find even journalist students don't know anything about PR. Some at my school say we're on "the dark side," which really frustrates me.

Burke: People think you're Nick Naylor from *Thank You for Smoking*.

Gonzalez: I agree with Joe. I get the marketing assumption. Along with "so you want to be agent?" or "you want to be a politician?" I had a good idea of what PR was when entering college but definitely learned a lot more once I started taking my classes. We devoted a whole week in a class to the differences between advertising and PR.

Dawes: That's a good point, Joe. I've had many friends and family members ask me why I'm going into PR. They don't understand that PR is not spinning.

O'Brien: So – do your friends outside of the discipline have a difficult time understanding what you're studying and what you're going to do after graduation?

Papsun: I agree with Marsha, but I think that the perception of PR is moving in a positive direction, especially because more and more CEOs and executives are realizing how valuable PR folks really are. Yes, no one understands what PR is, or even what PRSSA is. After a long explanation, I had someone say, "Oh, so you're basically in Sales."

Gonzalez: YES! I constantly have to explain the PR industry. Friends and family always ask what it is, what I do and what I can do with a PR degree.

Lucido: I'm living with engineering majors- all they know is that I stay pretty busy and that I occasionally have to write things. That's about it.

Burke: Nearly everyone I know needs to have PR explained to them when I tell them what my major is. It can be difficult to explain even if you know yourself. There is a lot to the job...

Gonzalez: I always get "So, it's like advertising right?"

Papsun: That sounds like a pretty even playing field- I have no idea what engineers really do!

Scozzaro: When I tell people my major I often get the response of "Why?" like it's a bad thing

Gonzalez: Definitely agree with Joe. I think that it's hard to explain PR fully because there is so much you can do. Once I do try to explain it they usually have a confused look on their face. So I try to keep it simple.

Papsun: I'm almost ashamed to admit it, but the easiest way to describe PR is to compare it to advertising, in that advertising pays for media placements and PR doesn't. That usually satisfies people.

Burke: I like to explain that PR, marketing, publicity, advertising, etc are all "close cousins" and often overlap. Of course, then you have to explain the differences.

Dawes: I've had the same issues. For a couple years in college I was a server at a local restaurant. Customers asked me my major and would say, 'so, you're no better than a lawyer.'

Papsun: Yikes. That's pretty ridiculous.

Lucido: nbsp; It sounds like the PR industry needs a little bit of PR for itself!

Burke: I also explain that marketing sells a product, while PR sells ideas, goodwill, concepts, etc.

Dawes: Yes, I agree. The old stereotype of PR practitioners as spinsters really hurts the profession.

Papsun: How do your schools organize marketing vs. PR in the classroom? As PR students in my school, we're not allowed to take any marketing classes unless we take a business core class which involves accounting, etc. It's frustrating, and I think it needs to change. How have your experiences been?

Lucido: The PR specialization is in the Communication School and the Marketing major is in the Business College. As we don't have public relations major, we take 4 PR classes and 1-2 seminar classes.

Gonzalez: At my university we are required to take a certain amount of business courses allowing us to take marketing.

Dawes: Well, my program was actually a journalism program. I could take PR courses but I do not have a B.A. in PR I have a B.A. in journalism. As for marketing, there were no marketing classes in the journalism program. They were located in the business school.

Burke: Same here, heather. My minor is in marketing and the required accounting course was the dread of my summer. We have our PR in our comms department and Marketing in Business. I don't believe accounting is required for PR though. I could be wrong.

Gonzalez: Thankfully my university offered a PR major under the advertising department. Our classes consisted of mixes between PR majors and journalism majors. We also had classes that mixed with PR and advertising students.

Scozzaro: At my school, the PR program and the marketing program are completely different but the PR students are encouraged to take marketing and business classes, as well as journalism and even public speaking.

Papsun: Thanks, everyone! I see. I wonder if schools will soon bridge the curriculum gap between marketing and PR.

Dawes: Business and journalism have a tough relationship because they seem to be competing. There were classes available in PR through the business program but entry business classes were required (accounting, etc.).

Burke: My minor only requires 3 classes beyond my PR class.

Papsun: I see. It just doesn't seem to make a lot of sense that marketing classes aren't easily accessible to PR students.

Scozzaro: Well it has a lot to do with the changing face of PR. Now we're incorporating all topics like marketing, journalism, communications... as compared to before where these subjects strictly did not mix.

Burke: Personally, I think the line between marketing and PR at school is fine where it is. The goals of marketing and PR can be very different from each other, with more business emphasis on marketing.

Papsun: That's a good point about the changing face of PR. I'm not sure if it's that they didn't mix, or if it's that the field was not getting the recognition it deserved.

Papsun: That's true, but if you plan on working in-house, don't you think it's necessary to know about marketing? Even if you work agency, it's good to have an idea of how the marketing team works and what their fundamentals are.

Burke: Oh, absolutely. I'm speaking very generally. I think its good that PR is communications driven and marketing is business driven. It seems to suit their purposes. But yeah, in many ways they are the same and having a background in both is hugely beneficial.

Lucido: Ultimately, companies hire PR agencies to make money. I think having a business background is essential to working with clients.

Gonzalez: Good point Heather. That's why we are required to take an introductory course in marketing to help us understand the fundamentals. Bouncing back to Joe's comment, I also agree. Marketing is more associated to the business aspect and is fine being separate. But understanding the basics and foundation of marketing is essential.

Papsun: Good points. I appreciate everyone's feedback!

O'Brien: Final question - do you guys feel you have a good handle of digital comms, new media,

etc.?

Papsun: No worries! I feel that I have a pretty good handle on digital comms. I think PR people in general know more about digital comms than the general public, mostly because we need to know the ins and outs to reach the public and interact with them. My school has been pretty proactive with new media, as we now have a New Media PR class. Again, the best way to familiarize yourself with it is to simply use it.

Lucido: I think the older PR generation expects us to know how to use Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc. But I think as much as my generation knows to use it for ourselves, we don't have the knowledge on how to use it within a PR campaign or as a tactic.

Gonzalez: I think understanding and keeping up with digital communication has a lot of to do with how much research you do outside of class. Classes are offered that deal with new media mainly for journalism majors and not many PR majors take the class. I think it's up to PR students to keep up with trends since the industry and communication in general is constantly evolving.

Scozzaro: I agree; I feel I have a pretty solid background, besides digital comms being a useful tool for PR I just enjoy it.

Burke: I wish I could say I do. Even though our generation is supposed to have a handle on digital comms, things are changing so quickly it's hard to keep up. I might be good on Facebook, but what about twitter, etc? I think in the next 5 years, everyone will have switched to iPhone/Blackberry type devices. Once everyone is carrying around a computer with internet access, I think the game is going to change dramatically.

Papsun: I agree with everyone, and I think that the younger PR pros have an advantage in the professional world. We may not have the experience with PR tactics or strategies, but we know the reality of a situation with new media. For example, is using Facebook really the best way to reach your audience? If we're trusted, we can combine our knowledge with PR pros to reach a good conclusion.

Gonzalez: Adding on to Nick's comment, being that our generation is digital I feel that I have a good grasp of new media. Yet as PR students and practitioners we need to focus more heavily on these changes. A lot of my friends have Facebook, MySpace, etc but don't really realize the impact of these social networks. As a PR practitioner in training it's important to look further into new media than the general public.

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