

Public Relations 4017

“Public Relations Ethics”

Fall Session, 2006

dev'il's ad'vocate

1. a person who advocates an opposing or unpopular cause for the sake of argument or to expose it to a thorough examination.
2. Also called **promoter of the faith**. *Rom. Cath. Ch.* an official appointed to present arguments against a proposed beatification or canonization of a beatus

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Course Overview

Public Relations 4017 is a senior-level, required course for all students registered in the Bachelor of Public Relations degree. It is designed to provide an overview of ethical theories and principles that are useful for the development of a framework for ethical decision-making in the professional practice of Public Relations. This is an opportunity for students to examine their own personal value systems and compare these with the value system inherent in the ethical practice of public relations and public communication.

The underlying ethical principles are brought into sharp focus by the application of these to actual issues that are common in the field of practice.

Students are required to demonstrate a high degree of critical analysis when examining actual cases and scenarios and in the application of their new knowledge to the solutions of ethical dilemmas in the field.

Course Philosophy

"It is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin, barefoot, irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known, but to question it."

-Jacob Chanowski

Pre-Requisite

Students are required to have completed PBRL 2014 and should be taking PBRL 3014 concurrently.

Course Objectives

On successful completion of PBRL 4017, the students will be able to:

- 1) Discuss the historical developments in the field of public relations that have led to a tarnished reputation in some segments of the practice.
- 2) Discuss theoretical bases for ethical decision-making.
- 3) Identify the "pillars of public relations ethics."
- 4) Examine their own ethical backgrounds and assess their level of ethical functioning both in their personal and professional lives.
- 5) Identify the basic principles upon which the ethical practice of public relations is based.
- 6) Develop rationales for making defensible ethical decisions.
- 7) Identify and discuss important current issues resulting in ethical dilemmas in the practice of professional public relations.
- 8) Evaluate the effectiveness of codes of ethics in professional disciplines.
- 9) Discuss the relationship between the profession's code(s) of ethics and the ideology of professionalism.
- 10) Differentiate between organizational ethics programs and the ethical practice of public relations and discuss PR's role in the organizational program.

- 11) Evaluate the academic and trade literature on ethics topics related to public relations and public communication.
- 12) Demonstrate thoughtful reflection on ethics issues inherent in the everyday practice of public relations.
- 13) Demonstrate a belief in the social value of public relations.

Student Responsibilities

Each individual student is responsible for the following:

- Show up, pay attention, be honest, don't be attached to the outcomes, don't take anything at face value and do more than the minimum.
- All assignments have strict **deadlines** to which we will adhere unless you are in a coma. Assignments are due at the beginning of the class on the scheduled date. Late assignments will lose 20% per day starting on the day that they are late. For example, a paper passed in at 5 pm on a day when it is due at 1 pm will lose 20% that day. If it is passed in the next day, it loses another 20% and so on. If you are going to have difficulty meeting a deadline, discuss it with me **in advance** and it may be possible for us to make other fair arrangements if I am convinced of the validity and seriousness of your problem. At the very least, I expect honesty – this is an ethics course, after all.
- All assignments must be **laser printed** and look professional. Specific presentation instructions for academic papers are attached.
- “University regulations on Plagiarism and Cheating will be strictly enforced. These regulations are posted on boards and are found in the university calendar.” I am well aware of the Web paper mills and I will seek out the source of any paper that looks fishy to me. This is an ethics course and the least you can do is be ethical for the duration of this course.
- “Correct use of language is one of the criteria included in the evaluation of written assignments.” MSVU Calendar
- As you all know, we use the guidelines of the American Psychological Association in this department for an academic style sheet. The complete APA guide is always on reserve in the library or you can refer to the précis on my web site. In addition, there are lots of other web sites that provide excellent explanations of the details of APA style. I don't want to see any foot-noted citations or numbered reference lists etc.
- Please! During class, no caps with peaks and no gum chewing! I will afford you the same courtesy. And please be on time. Latecomers disrupt discussion.

Department of Public Relations Writing Competence Requirement

BASIC WRITING COMPETENCE IS A NECESSARY CONDITION FOR PASSING THIS COURSE

Because writing is an important part of our field's professional practice, the Department of Public Relations cannot allow its students to graduate or intern if they do not have the ability to write correct English. Consequently, writing competence is a requirement in all department courses, and it must be demonstrated in all classes. This means that students who fail more than one assignment in this course due to a lack of writing competence will not pass, regardless the accumulation of points they achieve through team work, class participation, and the like.

The department plays a significant role in developing student writing; however, it does not offer instruction in basic writing skills because these skills are beneath the academic level at which PR courses occur. The faculty presumes that every student's general education included twelve years of writing-skills training, and therefore expects an English language competence in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and semantics. The responsibility to achieve that minimal standard lies with the student.

The professor will not suspend this requirement by virtue of a student's willingness to obtain remedial writing instruction. The public relations profession is writing intensive, and employers expect PR students to excel as writers, in comparison with the general public. Consequently the department requires the actual existence of writing skills, rather than the hope or the promise of these skills, as a condition for advancing students.

Textbook

No readings are ever required in my courses. However, to learn something (and pass the course) you should take responsibility for doing the reading assignments.

Parsons, Patricia J. (2004). *Ethics in Public Relations: A Guide to Best Practice*. London: Kogan Page.

Books for Enrichment

Cohen, Randy. (2002). *The good, the bad and the difference: How to tell right from wrong in everyday situations*. New York: Broadway Books.

Frankfurt, Harry. (2005). *On bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Irwin, William (ed.). (2000). *Seinfeld and philosophy: A book about everything and nothing*. Chicago: Open Court.

Nash, Laura. (1995). *Good intentions aside: A manager's guide to resolving ethical problems*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

Nelson, Joyce. (1989). *The Sultans of sleaze: Public relations and the media*. Toronto: Between the Lines Press.

O'Hara, Kieron. (2004). *Trust: From Socrates to spin*. Cambridge (UK): Icon Books Ltd.

Penny, Laura. (2005). *Your call is important to us: The truth about bullshit*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd.

Rampton, Sheldon and John Stauber. (2001). *Trust us, we're experts! How industry manipulates science and gambles with your future*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Putnam.

Marking Scheme

Assignment	Due Date Section 1	Due Date Section 3	Worth...
Personal Code of Ethics	October 16	October 4	20%
Open for Debate	Topics as scheduled on course syllabus	Topics as scheduled on course syllabus	20%
Reflections on Ethics Insights	December 6	December 1	25%
Term Paper Or Special Assignment Or Final Examination	December 4 Exam: scheduled by registrar	November 29 Exam: scheduled by registrar	35%

All assignments will be assigned a number grade marked out of the percentage of the total that it is worth. (For example, the code of ethics will be marked out of 20). All number grades will be added together and a letter grade assigned at the end of the term.

Assignment Descriptions

Personal Code of Ethics

Worth 20% of your grade for PBRL 4017, this assignment requires you to think about ethics as it applies to you both personally and professionally. Further, you must put this thinking into words by the creation for yourself of a personal code of ethics that reflects what you believe to be important (your values) and how these can find manifestation in action. The code itself should have two components: a personal code, as well as a professional code that elucidates your values related to your chosen discipline. In

addition to the code, an explanatory paper indicating the thought process in which you engaged to develop these codes must accompany them. Maximum 6 pages (12 pt roman font; 1 inch margins).

Open for Debate

In the course schedule there is a column titled "Open for Debate." In this column, scattered throughout the semester are topics that generate considerable controversy. This assignment, worth 20% of your final grade for PBRL 4017, requires you to work in pairs to debate a specific issue. Most of the topics are based loosely on the assigned reading. All of the topics require further research if you are to take a position of any kind on the subject.

Here are the instructions:

- Review the cases for debate and decide which one you would like to debate.
- Select a partner and sign up.
- Together select the reading that you would like the students to do in advance of your presentation. Make it available to them a week before so that they can be prepared to discuss the issues.
- Each partner chooses one of the two positions indicated in the case.
- Each partner prepares his or her argument by doing background research on both the topic and underlying ethical principles. You should use class notes, assigned reading, library research (industry publications and academic journals), and appropriate, credible sources on the World Wide Web.
- You may share resources. You must coordinate your presentations.
- On the day of the debate, each presenter has ten minutes to present his or her side. After this, the floor opens for discussion. Class members are encouraged to make notes during the two presentations and question each debater. The debaters are required to facilitate and control the discussion.
- We will vote on which side is most compelling.

You will be graded on your knowledge and comprehension of the topic and relevant theoretical and practical background issues, your ability to persuasively and articulately present your side of the debate, and your ability to control the discussion. I reserve the right to grade each debater separately if necessary based on performance during the discussion.

Reflections on Ethics Insights

This assignment is worth 25% of your final grade for PBRL 4017. This assignment resembles a journal. Some time later, after each class is over (I suggest you not wait too long – that night, perhaps), you will write out your reactions to the content, readings and discussions in class with some sense of what you personally have learned. I suggest that before handing this material in for grading, that you copy-edit it.

You will be graded on the thoughtfulness of your reflections, your ability to connect the ideas discussed in class and of course style issues will play a part. If you miss a class, you must indicate this including your reason for missing the class. You are invited to contribute reflections on missed classes based on your readings etc, but you are subject to losing marks, particularly if you miss any student-led discussions.

The final submission should be typed, double spaced with each entry dated. The pages must be bound in a cover (may be duotang) but please do not use a three-ring binder.

Exam OR Term Paper OR Special Assignment

The purpose of this capstone assignment is three-fold: First, it will allow you to review a variety of ethical principles and issues and get an idea of what you might have learned; second, you are required to make and keep a contract (an important aspect of integrity); finally, this is an opportunity to examine your own decision-making capacity early on in the course so that you have more self-knowledge upon which to base your understanding of ethical decision-making when we get to that topic.

This final major assignment is worth 35% of your final grade. However, not all students learn in the same way. Therefore, you are permitted to select how you wish to be evaluated on your overall grasp of professional ethics as presented in PBRL 4017.

That said, please note that you must make a decision on how you wish to be evaluated on the first day of class. Here's how you will do this: each student will select one of the following major evaluation methods. Then you will sign a contract indicating your commitment to do this. The contract must be submitted before you leave class on the first day. Once a method is selected, there will be no changes permitted. **None whatsoever!**

Selection #1: Term Paper

This is an academic discussion of public relations ethics topic of interest to you. Your thesis must be made clear in the introduction and the paper must show evidence of solid research in both the academic and the trade literature, your understanding of that research as it applies both theoretically and practically and a logical, defensible analysis of the thesis.

Use APA style, laser print it on white paper in 12 pt roman font and make sure it's between 2000 and 2200 words. This is a brief academic analysis not a dissertation. You will lose marks if it does not comply with these instructions.

Along with the completed paper, you are required to **submit complete copies of all your cited sources** (including appropriate chapters of books used).

OR

Selection #2: Final Examination

If you choose to write a final examination, it will be distributed during the final class of the semester. It is a take-home exam based on the objectives of the course, and will rely heavily on your ability to apply information and ideas from readings, class lectures, films, and discussions. The time-frame for completion of the exam will be provided on the day it is handed out. It will be a minimum of three days. It must be typed, laser printed and include an attached list of all resources consulted.

OR

Selection #3: Special Assignment

This special assignment calls upon a whole host of public relations and PR ethics knowledge and skills. You are required to plan, write, edit and produce an ethics handbook for students in the public relations degree program here at MSVU.

It must include the following elements:

- Evidence of solid research.
- Consideration of the specifics of ethics as applied to public relations in general and to student life in particular.
- It must be written in a persuasive and compelling way that would make students understand the reasons behind the elements and follow the guidelines.
- It must be esthetically pleasing while at the same time functional. It must be cleanly copy-edited and ready for production. That is, it should be camera-ready. It should include considerations of readability in its lay-out.
- It must include a resource list for the students as well as a page that identifies sources used in the production of the material.

Typing Instructions for Term Papers & Take-Home Examinations

1. Laser printed on 20 lb **WHITE** bond paper.
2. Double space using an indent to begin paragraphs, *not* a double-double space between paragraphs.
3. Cover page including the following information centered: a title (not just the topic – choose a descriptive title), by you & your student number, “submitted to Professor P. Parsons in partial fulfillment of the requirements for PBRL 4017,” date, word count.
4. Use a 12 point roman font
 - ✓ 12 pt. Roman font
 - Not roman font
 - Not roman font
 - Not roman font*
5. Use a ragged right margin **ALWAYS** and include a flush right footer in 10 point type that includes your name.
6. Put the page number in the upper right hand corner of each page except the first where it should be centered on the bottom.
7. Use sub-heads to improve the organization of the paper.
8. Double-double space before a sub-head and one double space below.
9. If a sub-head falls near the bottom of a page ensure that there are at least two lines of copy following it or put it on a new page.
10. Either staple the pages together (no paper clips) or put it in a flat cover of some kind (no three-ring binders).
11. Read your paper out loud to your self, listening to how it sounds and do a thorough copy edit before submitting it.
12. It should look impeccable.