

Education vs. certification: An overview of professional and academic credentials in Canadian public relations

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ABSTRACT

More Canadian practitioners have matriculated from applied public relations graduate programs in 15 years than those who have earned professional credentials from the IABC and CPRS since 1968. Using an extensive mixed-methods research design, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the history and current state of professional and academic credentials in Canadian public relations. Applied graduate credentials provide increased credibility with clients and executives and are contributing to an empirical and theoretical body of knowledge which professional credentials lacked. The CPRS and IABC are implementing changes to the structure and accessibility of their credentialing programs. However, their success depends upon collaboration, not competition, with graduate credentials.

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Practitioners ignore them, job postings do not request them, employers do not value them, and educators do not support them: professional credentials in public relations and communications have garnered limited recognition and acceptance in Canada. As of 2016, less than 1.5% of practitioners in Canada possess an Accredited in Public Relations (APR), Accredited Business Communicator (ABC), or Communications Management Professional (CMP) credential (CPRS 2016; IABC Canada, 2009; IABC 2016). For over 40 years, both the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) and International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) have invested substantial resources into their credential programs to establish them as benchmarks of competency, professionalism, and ethical conduct. However,

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these claims remain unsubstantiated, given the lack of data comparing accredited and non-accredited practitioners on these variables. The CPRS and IABC are renewing their efforts to establish the relevance of their credentials, though they face a number of significant challenges, such as rising competition from graduate programs tailored towards working practitioners.

The limited success of public relations credentials is not unique to Canada. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) has accredited 40% fewer practitioners in 2003-2012 than 1993-2012 (PRSA, 2016), and the IABC formally closed its ABC program in 2013 (IABC, 2016a). However, the limited success of professional credentials has not hindered the growth of the practice. In Canada, employment in public relations and communications has nearly doubled, growing from 23,780 to 54,703 practitioners between 1991 and 2011. This “significant rising trend in employment” (Statistics Canada, 2013) is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. Public relations has also grown as an academic discipline in the past two decades, with the founding of 13 university-level programs since 1996.

For 35 years, the APR and ABC credentials were the only professional credentials available to practitioners until 1999, when Royal Roads University introduced an MBA in Public Relations and Communications Management. Before then, community colleges and institutes of technology taught public relations in Canada for over 60 years, and Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) offered Canada’s only undergraduate public relations program for nearly 20 years. However, these academic programs focus on introductory education and are not substitutes for the mid-career and senior standards of the APR and ABC credentials. The introduction of graduate programs targeting mid-career and senior practitioners has presented the CPRS and IABC with the only competition they have had outside each other, and they are not faring well. Graduate programs offered by universities such as Royal Roads, Mount Saint Vincent, and McMaster are cornering the market and threatening the continued relevance of the CPRS’s and IABC’s credentials.

Using a mixed methodology research design, this study provides an extensive overview of the historical and current state of professional and academic credentials in Canada and their impact on reputation of the Canadian public relations industry. The IABC and CPRS are piloting new initiatives to increase the relevance and recognition of the APR and CMP credentials, yet preference for graduate degrees continues to grow amongst practitioners and hiring managers. This study posits that the future of professional accreditation and its influence on the industry should not be in competition with graduate credentials, but collaborating with them.

Literature review

Professional credentials in Canada

There are two types of professions in Canada: regulated and non-regulated. A regulated profession possesses the following characteristics: “professional association, cognitive base, institutionalized training, licensing, work autonomy, colleague control... [and a] code of ethics” (Larson, 1977 p. 208). Since public relations does not require practitioners to register with a regulatory body, sign into a code of ethics, and become licenced to practice it is a non-regulated profession.

In order to legally practice in a regulated profession an individual must possess a licence or certificate and be registered with their respective regulatory body (CICIC, 2016). In Ontario, Canada’s largest province, there are 27 regulated professions in healthcare and 19 regulated non-health professions (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2016). Regulated professionals, such physicians and lawyers, may have their licence revoked, removing their ability to legally practice in the province or country if they fail to meet the requirements outlined in the bylaws, regulations, or binding code of ethics of their regulatory body (Canadian Professional Accountants of Ontario, 2014). For a list of regulated professions, please see Table 1 below:

Table 1: Regulated professions in Canada (Ontario)

Health Professions	Non-Health Professions
Acupuncturist	Certified General Accountant
Audiologist	Certified Management Accountant
Chiropodist	Chartered Accountant
Chiropractor	Agrologist
Dental Hygienist	Architect
Dental Technologist	Engineer
Dentist	Engineering Technician
Denturist	Early Childhood Educator
Dietician	Forester
Kinesiologist	Geoscientist
Massage Therapist	Human Resources Professional

Medical Laboratory Technologist	Insurance Broker
Medical Radiation Technologist	Land Surveyor
Midwife	Lawyer
Naturopath	Paralegal
Nurse	Real Estate Agent
Occupational Therapist	Social Worker
Optician	Teacher (Elementary or Secondary)
Optometrist	Translator
Pharmacist	
Pharmacy Technician	
Physician and Surgeon (Doctor)	
Physiotherapist	
Psychologist	
Psychotherapy	
Respiratory Therapist	
Veterinarian	
Certified Management Accountant	
Charted Accountant	
Agrologist	
Architect	
Engineer	
Engineering Technician	
Early Childhood Educator	
Forester	
Geoscientist	
Human Resources Professional	
Insurance Broker	
Land Surveyor	
Lawyer	
Paralegal	
Real Estate Agent	
Social Worker	
Teacher (Elementary or Secondary)	
Translator	

Practitioners in a non-regulated profession are not legally required to be licenced, certified, or registered within a regulatory body in order to practice. Voluntary certification is available for non-regulated professions, such as public relations and project management, through professional bodies like the CPRS and the Canadian Association of Management Consultants (CMC). As these are voluntary certifications, professional bodies can only deliver normative sanctions: loss of credential and/or expulsion from the professional body. Disciplinary decisions and enforcement actions regarding CPRS and IABC members are not published on websites or newsletters as they are for professions like medicine, law, and engineering (Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists, 2015). A CPRS or IABC member who is stripped of their credential can still practice public relations anywhere in Canada.

The two major associations in Canada that offer voluntary credential programs in public relations and communications are the CPRS (est. 1953) and the IABC (est. 1970). The CPRS adopted the APR credential in 1968, with certain modifications from the PRSA, which established it in 1964. As of 2016, the CPRS has 1,800 members, 462 of whom are accredited (a decrease of 15 since 2014) (CPRS, 2016). IABC Canada began offering the ABC credential in 1973 and currently has over 4,500 members, 306 of whom are accredited (IABC Ottawa, 2014). The APR and ABC credentials are also available for practitioners in several countries throughout the world. The Institute of Communication Agencies (ICA), established in 1905, offers the Communications and Advertising Accredited Professional (CAAP) credential. However, a search for literature and information on the CAAP's recognition membership in the Canada yielded minimal results.

While the CPRS and IABC refer to the APR and ABC as accreditations, they are more accurately recognized as certifications. Accreditation and certification are not synonymous despite often being used interchangeably. Certification is the process of ensuring that an individual possesses the adequate skills and knowledge to practice in a discipline (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2013; CICIC, 2016). For example, if an APR candidate demonstrates the necessary skills and knowledge by passing the examination, they are awarded the APR credential. Accreditation is the process of verifying that an organization complies with the standards established by a regulatory body (NIST, 2013; CICIC, 2016). For further information on the differences between certification, accreditation, and licensure please see below for Table 2.

Table 2: Differences between certification, licensure, and accreditation

Credential	Recipient	Credentialing Body	Participation
Certification	Individual	Association/ Agency	Voluntary
Licensure	Individual	Government Agency	Involuntary/Re- quired
Accreditation	Institution or Pro- gram	Association/ Agency	Voluntary

The CPRS offers an accreditation for post-secondary programs via the Pathways Seal of Recognition if they incorporate recommendations from the “Pathways to the Profession” document into their public relations curricula (CPRS, 2011, p.20). In 2015, the CPRS successfully lobbied the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities to implement the “Pathways to the Profession” frameworks into the curricula of diploma, advanced diploma, and graduate certificate public relations programs (CPRS, 2015).

APR and ABC credentials

As of May 2016, the APR and CMP are the only significant professional credentials available for public relations and communication practitioners in Canada. However, the most prevalent professional credentials amongst Canadians are the APR and ABC, as the CMP was launched in 2015.

To eligible for the APR and ABC examinations, practitioners are required to be members in good standing of either the CPRS or IABC and have a minimum number of years of experience. If a practitioner meets these requirements, they may take the three-part examinations. The eligibility, examination, and retention frameworks of both the APR and ABC programs are similar in structure.

Table 3: Comparison of APR, ABC, and CMP Examinations

	APR	ABC	CMP
Eligibility			
<i>Experience</i>	5 years' managerial experience	5-10 years (degree + experience)	8 years' experience OR 6 years' experience with 2 years' education
<i>Other</i>	N/A	N/A	40 hours of approved PD
<i>Membership</i>	CPRS member	IABC member	Open to all practitioners
<i>Cost</i>	CA\$400	US\$275	US\$600 (members) US\$900 (non-members)
Examination			
<i>Work Sample</i>	Value: 20% • One sample (>two years)	Value: 25% • Two samples (<i>campaign work, academic curriculum design, academic research project</i>)	N/A
<i>Written Exam</i>	Value: 45% Time: 3.5 hours • <i>PR Knowledge and Practice</i> • <i>Professionalism</i> • <i>Communications Planning</i>	Value: 58% Time: 4 hours • <i>General Knowledge</i> (40%) • <i>Case Study</i> (40%) • <i>Ethics</i> (20%)	Multiple choice Time: 3 hours • <i>Ethics</i> (6%) • <i>Research and Analysis</i> (24%) • <i>Strategy and Engagement</i> (34%) • <i>Consistency and Strategic Implementation</i> (17%) • <i>Measurement</i> (19%)
<i>Oral Exam</i>	Value: 35% Time: 45-60 minutes	Value: 17% Time: 30 minutes	N/A

(CPRS, 2012, p. 18-23; IABC Chicago, 2010; Global Communication Certification Council, 2015)

The CMP exam's eligibility and structure is markedly different from that of the APR and ABC. Instead of being limited to IABC members, as was the case with the ABC, the CMP is open to all practitioners. Non-members are required to pay higher application fees as well as annual certification fees. The CMP exam content is 100% multiple-choice. There is no work sample or oral examination. Applicants are required to complete 40 hours of approved professional development before taking the exam, which will be verified by up to two references (GCCC, 2015).

The IABC and CPRS state that their credentials signify that a practitioner has high levels of skill, professionalism, credibility, and ethical conduct (CPRS, 2013; Working, 2013; IABC, 2016a). However, there are few empirical studies that support these claims, especially for the CMP which was introduced in 2015. Instead, it appears that the APR and ABC credentials provide little "beyond a sense of personal accomplishment and commitment to the field" of public relations (Sha, 2011, p. 2). Some studies have reported that accredited practitioners are more effective in categories such as account management, strategic planning, project management, and issues/crisis management (Sha, 2011, p.10). However, it is important to note that many studies attempting to demonstrate the value of APR or ABC are conducted or funded by accrediting organizations or their board members, as is the case with Sha's (2011) study. Additional third-party studies need to be conducted to determine if there is an empirical difference in competencies between accredited and non-accredited practitioners.

Extensive empirical studies were recently completed demonstrating the lack of recognition and value professional credentials have amongst hiring managers Canada. A CPRF/McMaster University study found that 9 in 10 job postings (91%) made no mention of accreditation; only 4% of postings referenced the ABC and 3% the APR (Flynn, Savage, & Sevigny, 2014, p. 24). As a research assistant on this study, I helped develop and conduct the content analysis on 273 job postings. With permission from Flynn, I expanded upon the McMaster coding manual and performed content analysis upon an additional 600 job postings. A similar study was conducted by Thurlow, Kushniryk, Yue, and Blotnick (2014) at MSVU. However, there is no focus on accreditation. These are the most extensive published studies conducted in Canadian public relations since Piekos and Einsidel (1990).

IABC's Global Communication Certification Council

From 1973 to 2013, the IABC offered the ABC credential to Canadian practitioners. As of 2016, there are 1,001 practitioners across the world with the ABC credential, 306 of whom are Canadian (IABC Ottawa, 2014). There is scarce primary literature outlining the reasons for the closure of the ABC credential program; some reasons include financial issues of the IABC, the ABC program being financially unsustainable, the ABC's high failure rate (60-80%), enhancing the program rigour and value, and changing the post-nominal "alphabet soup" of the credential (Working, 2013).

In 2012 the IABC established the Global Communication Certification Council (GCC®) to develop its new credentialing scheme. The GCC developed the "Six Principles of the Communications Profession" document as a theoretical foundation, identifying the following six principles are core benchmarks of communication professionals: ethics, consistency, context, analysis, engagement, and strategy (IABC, 2015). These six principles inform the four career stages—foundation, generalist/specialist, strategic adviser, business leader—the IABC is developing certifications for.

Table 4: IABC career stages and credentials

Career Stage	Description	Credential
Foundation	Entry level to the communication profession.	TBA
Generalist/ Specialist	Mid-level professionals who are competent in strategic communication management and can apply skills across a wide range of specialty areas.	CMP (2015)
Strategic Advisor	Senior-level professionals who are ready to manage complex, multi-faceted programs and relationships and provide counsel and advice to senior executives.	TBA 2017
Business Leader	Trail blazers who use their communication-based strategic expertise to lead organizations and clients through multiple business and communication challenges.	TBA

(IABC, 2016b)

The IABC is developing their new credentials to align with the ISO/IEC 17024:2012 assessment, but they are not planning to achieve accreditation for their credentialing process until after 2017 (IOS, 2012; IABC, 2016c). The IABC positions its new credential schemes and “Six Principles of the Communications Profession” as a potential global body of knowledge, writing:

Certification of professional services is not new. Sponsoring associations representing accountants, project managers, HR professionals and others have achieved globally recognized certification that provides hiring managers with confidence that the professionals they hire will meet an international standard of competency defined by the profession. If accountants, podiatrists, pathologists, financial planners, construction managers, auditors, business managers, and others can be certified to an international standard, why not communication professionals? [sic] (IABC, 2014)

A number of the professions that the IABC listed – accountants, podiatrists, pathologists – are regulated professions (see Table 1).

In addition to the IABC’s GCCC, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management (GA) is also working to establish a global body of knowledge (GBOK) for the profession. I am a research assistant for this project, and I will be presenting the findings at the 2016 World Public Relations Forum in Toronto. The GBOK project examined 31 credential schemes (including the GCCC’s “Six Principles”), post-secondary education frameworks, and scholarly work in order to “lay the foundations for professional recognition of public relations and communications management across the world” through a globally recognized benchmark that is common across all credentials (GA, 2014; 2016).

Even though they are both attempting to establish a globally accepted benchmark, the IABC’s GCCC and the GA’s GBOK are not in competition with each other. The IABC’s global body applies to its own international credential schemes, while the Global Alliance’s GBOK is a broader body of knowledge which will establish a common benchmark across global credential schemes including the CPRS, IABC, PRSA, and IPR.

“Pathways to the Profession” and the PRK

In an attempt to bolster student and instructor recognition and engagement in the APR credential, the CPRS published the “Pathways to the Profes-

sion” document in 2011. The document provides post-secondary public relations and communication program curricula with guidelines reflecting the current state of the practice. These guidelines provide a framework for preparing students for the workforce through the following streams: technical, career, management, leadership, and scholar (CPRS, 2011, p. 223).

In 2015, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities adopted the “Pathways to the Profession’s” recommendations for college-level public relations programs. The framework will shape the curricula for diploma, advanced diploma, and graduate certificate public relations programs. The recommendations remain voluntary for undergraduate and graduate-level programs. However, programs that incorporate the guidelines are eligible for the CPRS Pathways Seal of Recognition and faculty resources (CPRS, 2011, p. 241).

Graduate-level programs like McMaster’s Master of Communications Management are collaborating with the CPRS to encourage graduates to earn the APR credential. Students from Pathways-recognized programs are able to substitute a term paper or capstone project for the work sample portion of the APR (A. Sévigny, personal communication. 2016). This may also increase the number of APR applicants from practitioners previously unable to submit work examples due to confidentiality.

Following the “Pathways to the Profession” document, the CPRS introduced the Public Relations Knowledge (PRK) exam in 2013. The PRK is an equivalency exam which evaluates a novice practitioner’s “workplace readiness and strategic analysis,” as well as their grasp of “public relations history, theory and concepts, and the fundamentals of practice” (CPRS, 2013) and workplace ethics. The PRK exam was developed in response to “research [showing] that executives identify a gap between the competencies required by their organizations and the skill set available within their team” (CPRS, 2013).

The PRK examination web page likely refers to the “US-Canada study of PR writing by entry-level practitioners” (Berry, Cole, & Hembroff, 2011). While this study did conclude that the writing skills of novice practitioners are not meeting employer expectations, it did emphasize that this finding is “not specific to public relations” but can be observed in the interdisciplinary writing abilities of college graduates across the world (Berry et al., 2011, p. 73).

Unlike the APR credential, membership in the CPRS is not a condition for registration in the PRK exam. Individuals who pass the PRK exam are not awarded with a post-nominal credential but with a certificate they can add to their resume or provide to potential employers (CPRS, 2013). A study by Fly-

nn et al. (2014), conducted shortly after the PRK launch, found that only 44% of intermediate/seasoned practitioners and 36% of novice practitioners were aware of the PRK exam. None of the 58 students surveyed had completed the PRK exam and only 14% of those who knew about it were planning to write it (p. 37). Recognition of the PRK exam appears to have grown, as 93 individuals have taken it, 60 of whom have passed as of September 2015 (K. Dalton, personal communication, 2016).

Post-secondary public relations programs in Canada

Technical education in public relations has been delivered by colleges in Canada for over 60 years, yet only recently has there been a shift towards undergraduate and graduate education. The majority of college diploma and post-graduate certificate programs emphasized technical skills while omitting traditional liberal-arts education in order to meet the demands of the industry (Flynn & Sévigny, 2009, p. 7). This attitude has changed, and employers are expecting graduates of public relations programs to have a strong foundation in both technical skills and communication theory (Flynn & Sévigny, 2009, p. 7).

Canada's first public relations degree program was a Bachelor of Public Relations (BPR) established at MSVU in 1977 (MSVU, 2013). The BPR program stemmed from a need recognized by MSVU and the CPRS that "university-educated [public relations] professionals would be in high demand in the latter half of the 20th century" (MSVU, 2013). As of May 2016, there are 10 undergraduate and four graduate public relations and professional communication programs in Canada.

A list of Canadian post-secondary institutions with specialized public relations and communication degrees can be found in Table 5.

Table 5: Public relations and professional communication programs in Canada

Institution	Program	Year
MSVU	Bachelor of Public Relations	1977
	Master of Public Relations	2006
UQAM	Baccalauréat en communication (relations publiques)	1996
	Baccalauréat en communication marketing	2013

Institution	Program	Year
Royal Roads	Bachelor of Arts in Professional Communication (formerly Applied Communication)	2004
	Master of Business Administration in Public Relations and Communication Management	1999- 2006
	Master of Arts in Professional Communication (formerly Applied Communication)	2004
McMaster	Master of Communications Management	2007
Mount Royal	Bachelor of Communication in Public Relations	2008
Ottawa-Algonquin	Bachelor of Public Relations	2010
Ryerson	Bachelor of Arts in Professional Communication	2013
	Master of Professional Communication	2010
Conestoga College	Bachelor of Public Relations	2011
Humber College	Bachelor of Public Relations	2011
Centennial College	Bachelor of Public Relations Management	2014

Methodology

This study used a mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) cross-sectional research design to identify current trends and attitudes towards professional credentials in Canadian public relations. The methods include:

1. Semi-structured interviews with 22 seasoned Canadian practitioners and academics.
2. Online bilingual (French and English) survey completed by 231 Canadian practitioners.
3. Content analysis of 600 job postings from 2009-2013.

Semi-structured interviews

I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews, each averaging 35 minutes, with seasoned public relations practitioners and scholars. Nineteen interviews were conducted in-person across four provinces (Vancouver, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec) and 8 cities; three interviews were conducted over telephone or Skype. Each participant signed a consent form allowing the sessions to be recorded and the data to be used in

this study; 19 allowed their names to be used. I transcribed each interview.

Participants were initially contacted through email using a snowball sample of personal contacts as well as those from faculty at Royal Roads University, McMaster University, and the CPRS. Participants included 12 practitioners and 10 academics, each with at least 15 years of experience. 15 of the participants were male, and seven were female. A variety of public relations and communication backgrounds were represented, including university administration, government (federal and provincial), policing, consulting, journalism, and market research.

Table 6: List of interview participants

Interviewee	Job Title (at interview date)	Date
Joe Couto	Director of Government Relations <i>Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police</i>	2013/09/11
Barry Waite	Program Coordinator and Professor <i>Centennial College</i>	2013/09/17
Ginny Jones	President <i>CPRS Hamilton and Acuity Options</i>	2013/09/18
Heather Pullen	Manager of Public Relations <i>Hamilton Health Sciences</i>	2013/09/18
Catherine Schryer	Professor and Chair <i>Ryerson University</i>	2013/09/19
Patricia Parsons	Professor <i>Mount Saint Vincent University</i>	2013/09/23
Matthew Anderson	Wildfire Information Officer <i>Government of Alberta</i>	2013/09/27
Anonymous	Professor	2013/10/02
Atul Sharma	Vice President and Deputy Group Leader <i>Hill+Knowlton Strategies</i>	2013/10/03
Anonymous	<i>Government of Canada (federal)</i>	2013/10/04
Daniel Tisch	President and CEO <i>Argyle Communications</i>	2013/10/07
Bernard Motulsky	Professor and Chair of Public Relations <i>Université du Québec à Montréal</i>	2013/10/15
Jean Valin	Director-General (retired) <i>Government of Canada</i>	2013/11/06
Andrew Laing	President <i>Cormex Research</i>	2013/11/06

Interviewee	Job Title (at interview date)	Date
Josh Greenberg	Associate Director and Professor <i>Carleton University</i>	2013/11/07
Tom Workman	Associate Faculty <i>Royal Roads University</i>	2013/11/26
Melanie Houley	Senior Communications Officer <i>CBC Edmonton</i>	2013/11/28
Anonymous	Professor	2013/11/28
Judy Gombita	Co-content editor <i>PR Conversations</i>	2013/12/13
Alex Sévigny	Director of Professional Communication programs <i>McMaster University</i>	2014/01/07
Ira Basen	Senior Producer; Instructor <i>CBC Toronto; McMaster University</i>	2014/01/14
Linda Andross	President; Immediate Past President <i>APEX PR; IABC Toronto</i>	2014/02/06

Online survey

An online survey was completed by 231 Canadian public relations and communication practitioners. The survey was created using LimeSurvey software and hosted on Royal Roads University's website. Participants were recruited via email using a token system, ensuring only the intended recipient could access the survey and complete it once. The survey was available in both English and French to accommodate all practitioners across Canada.

The survey had a total response rate of 14.7%; the total survey response rate was 20.9%, but 94 of the surveys were incomplete and therefore not used. A public survey was made available and promoted through social media but only received 12 complete responses. Each respondent completed a consent form in order to participate in the survey. 92 of the participants were male, and 134 were female. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 85, with an average age of 50.

Job postings

A content analysis was performed upon 600 job postings from 2009 to 2013 to determine the extent to which employers value professional and academic credentials amongst mid and senior-level practitioners. A coding manual originally created by the author and Philip Savage (McMaster) for a study funded by the Communications + Public Relations Foundation (CPRF) and led by Terry Flynn (McMaster) was modified to provide further insights for this study.

Summary of findings

Interviews

During each of the 22 interviews, respondents were asked a number of questions relating to professional and academic credentials in public relations and communications, in addition to broader questions to get a deeper sense of the industry in Canada. A summary of key questions is available below in Table 7.

Table 7: Summary of interview findings

Q1: Is there a difference between public relations and communications?	Q2: What is the purpose of public relations?	Q3: What competencies do novice and mid-career practitioners need?
<p>Twelve of the 22 respondents believe there is no difference in function between public relations and communications.</p> <p>While they were separate functions at one point, the lines have become blurred with the advent of social media and web 2.0. The convergence of public relations, advertising, journalism, and marketing is blurring these lines further.</p> <p>The 10 respondents who state the functions are different recognize the blurring of lines as well. However, they view communications as a broad term of which public relations is a subset.</p> <p>They state public relations (or public affairs in government) is an action, building awareness and relationships, while communications is the process.</p>	<p>All respondents gave a similar response for the organizational purpose and role of public relations and communications.</p> <p>Public relations is a strategic management role that builds and fosters mutually beneficial relationships with publics and stakeholders. Practitioners act as the eyes and ears of an organization, safeguarding their reputation.</p> <p>These responses echo the CPRS's official definition of public relations:</p> <p>"Public relations is the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest." (Flynn, Gregory, & Valin, 2008).</p>	<p>Respondents identified the key competencies as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>writing</i> • <i>graphic/web design</i> • <i>research and measurement</i> • <i>strategic thinking</i> • <i>business acumen</i> • <i>social media</i> <p>When asked if the core skillset has changed since 1995, most practitioners say it has not.</p> <p>There have been additions to the core competencies, including strong business acumen, social media, and graphic design/editing skills.</p> <p>Social media is the biggest change to public relations, which has caused a "shortening of time." Practitioners must always be monitoring and prepared.</p>

Q4: Reasons for rise in undergraduate education	Q5: Reasons for rise in graduate education	Q6: Reasons for earning APR or ABC credential
<p>Nearly all respondents indicated that organizations expect new practitioners to have specialized training in public relations theory and technical skills. Students can no longer enter the workforce with a general BA, as was the case 10 years ago.</p> <p>One of the reasons is that organizations do not invest in training people anymore and expect universities to do so.</p> <p>The public relations industry in Canada is growing, and universities are responding to this lucrative demand. Liberal Arts faculties across Canada are broke, and these applied programs allow them to attract more students and revenue.</p>	<p>Seven of the respondents were either enrolled in or had completed a specialized graduate program.</p> <p>The standards of the public relations industry are changing, and more mid-career and senior practitioners are earning graduate credentials. The credentials help practitioners earn credibility at the executive level.</p> <p>Graduate programs offer people outside the profession a way to enter. It also allows practitioners an opportunity to branch out into education or research.</p> <p>The growth of applied master's programs in PR is in response to industry demands and financial opportunities. However, it is difficult to get students into PhD programs, which remain rooted in liberal arts and communication studies.</p>	<p>Nine respondents had earned accreditation (eight APRs, one ABC). All were pursued for personal reasons.</p> <p>Practitioners earned accreditation for professional validation and to refresh their knowledge. Academics earned accreditation to demonstrate their professional capacity to their students.</p> <p>Practitioners without accreditation had no intention of pursuing it. They feel the credentials do not hold professional clout. Those with graduate degrees feel they do not need the credentials.</p>

Q7: Is accreditation valued by the industry?	Q8: Ethics in public relations	Q9: Public Relations Knowledge (PRK) Exam
<p>No respondent was ever asked for accreditation by employers or clients throughout their careers.</p> <p>The credentials are virtually unknown outside the public relations industry and not well recognized within.</p> <p>Respondents feel that accreditation is a summary of previous work, while graduate education is a learning experience.</p>	<p>The public, media, and government have a negative view of public relations. Governments use term “public affairs” because public relations is a pejorative term.</p> <p>Few public relations curricula have stand-alone ethics courses.</p> <p>IABC and CPRS have members sign into a code of ethics. Pathways and GCCC are stressing ethical value credentials represents.</p>	<p>The majority of academic respondents said they and their students were offended by the introduction of the PRK as an equivalency exam.</p> <p>They believe students who complete a specialized four-year degree should not be expected to write an equivalency exam.</p> <p>Of the hiring managers interviewed, none were currently using the PRK exam as part of the hiring process.</p>

Online survey

With 231 unique responses, this study contains one of the largest collections of survey data in recent Canadian public relations research, alongside recent studies by Flynn et al. (2014, p. 34) and Thurlow et al. (2014, p. 1). This study also represents data from 92 (19%) of the 487 Canadian practitioners with the APR credential. Key findings from this survey are available below:

Table 8: Key findings from survey of 231 Canadian practitioners

Gender	Province	Years of Experience	Sector
Female: 59% Male: 41%	Ontario: 33% British Columbia: 23% Alberta: 16% Quebec: 12%	Novice (0-2): 1% Intermediate (3-5): 5% Seasoned (6-9): 20% Executive (10+): 74%	Public: 41% Private: 30% Non-Profit: 14% Multiple: 11%
Average Salary	Industry	Highest Education	Accreditation
\$100,000-\$109,999	Agency/Consult: 30% Education: 18% Government: 17%	High School: 3% College: 12% Bachelor: 43% Post-Grad Cert: 13% Master: 26% Doctorate: 9%	APR: 40% ABC: 5% Other: 3% None: 52%

The average salary of a public relations practitioner is in the range of \$100,000-\$109,000 according to data from 212 respondents. Controlling for education and experience levels, practitioners with APR and ABC credentials earn approximately \$20,000 more than those without. Practitioners with an APR or ABC credential earn an average of \$110,000-\$119,000, while non-accredited practitioners earn \$90,000-\$99,999. Interestingly, 73% of accredited participants stated that accreditation did not lead to a salary differential.

Practitioners with specialized education in public relations (e.g., BPR, BPC, MPR, MCM) earn higher salaries than those with traditional academic degrees. An analysis of the financial relationship between academic and professional credentials is available below:

Table 9: Practitioner salaries by education level

Education level	Salary range	Average salary
High school (N=8)	\$90,000	\$99,999
College diploma (N=27)	\$90,000	\$99,999
Undergraduate (N=66)	\$100,00	\$109,999
PR undergraduate (N=33)	\$100,000	\$109,999
Post-graduate certificate (N=29)	\$90,000	\$99,999
Master's (N=29)	\$100,000	\$109,999
PR Master's (N=19)	\$100,000	\$109,999
		\$108,800

Education level	Salary range		Average salary
MBA (N=13)	\$110,000	\$119,999	\$113,000
Doctorate (N=7)	\$160,000	\$169,999	\$163,300

Table 10: Practitioner salaries by professional credentials

Professional credential	Salary range		Average salary
APR (N=81)	\$110,000	\$119,999	\$118,000
ABC (N=10)	\$110,000	\$119,999	\$117,000
Other (N=5)	\$110,000	\$119,999	\$112,000
Not Accredited (N=115)	\$90,000	\$99,999	\$90,170

Table 11: Practitioner salaries by experience and education frequencies

Experience level	Education	Average salary range		Average salary
Novice (1-2 years; N=5)	Undergraduate (N=2)	\$50,000	\$59,999	\$52,000
	Certificate (N=1)			
	Master's (N=2)			
Intermediate (3-5 years; N=10)	College (N=3)	\$60,000	\$69,999	\$61,000
	Undergraduate (N=2)			
	Certificate (N=3)			
	Master's (N=3)			
Seasoned (6-9 years; N=42)	High School (N=1)	\$70,000	\$79,999	\$76,200
	College Diploma (N=6)			
	Undergraduate (N=19)			
	Certificate (N=5)			
	Master's (N=14)			
	MBA (N=1)			

Experience level	Education	Average salary range		Average salary
Executive (10+ years; N=155)	High School (N=7)	\$111,000	\$111,999	\$114,800
	College Diploma (N=18)			
	Undergraduate (N=76)			
	Certificate (N=20)			
	Master's (N=29)			
	MBA (N=12)			
	Doctorate (N=7)			

Job postings

Employers and organizations are not actively requesting professional credentials. Furthermore, there is no indication of any growth in demand for professional credentials according to an analysis of 600 job postings during 2009-2013.

- APR and ABC credentials were requested or preferred by 79 (13% of) postings.
- Other credentials (e.g., CAAP, CCP, PMP) were required by 12 (2% of) postings.
- Undergraduate degrees were the minimum requirement for 459 (77% of) postings.

Alumni of undergraduate and graduate programs

More practitioners are completing specialized graduate education than those who are earning professional credentials. There are 794 Canadian practitioners with active professional credentials. It is important to note that this does not capture all practitioners who have ever earned a professional credential, as privileges can be lost for reasons including sanctions and not paying membership dues. As of May 2016, there are 1,044 practitioners who have completed an applied graduate degree in public relations and communications. Ryerson University's MPC program targets students recently out of un-

dergrad as opposed to working practitioners, and this is reflected in Table 8.

Royal Roads University's MBA in Public Relations and Communications Management was Canada's first applied communication graduate program designed for practitioners looking to acquire a graduate degree without having to leave their jobs. The hybrid and correspondence models used by the MAPC, MCM, and MPR programs allow practitioners complete their degrees online, while some programs require the student to be on campus several weeks throughout the year. Each program focuses on the applied practice of public relations and communications and requires students to complete an independent capstone, major research project, or thesis for graduation.

Table 12: Practitioners with graduate and professional credentials in public relations as of May 2016

Program	Year	Institution	Number of Alumni
Master of Business Administration in Public Relations and Communications Management (MBA)	1999-2006	Royal Roads University	127
Master of Arts in Professional Communication (formerly Applied Communication)	2004	Royal Roads University	710
Master of Public Relations (MPR)	2006	Mount Saint Vincent University	69
Master of Communications Management (MCM)	2007	McMaster University	48
Master of Professional Communication (MPC)	2010	Ryerson University	90 (as of 2014)
		Total	1,044
		Total (targeting working practitioners)	954

Professional Credentials	Year	Organization	Number of Practitioners
Accredited in Public Relations (ABC)	1968	CPRS	462
Accredited Business Communicator (ABC)	1973-2013	IABC	306
Communications Management Professional (CMP)	2015	IABC	26
Total			794

Undergraduate education in Canadian public relations has grown significantly since 2010. MSVU has led undergraduate education in English-speaking Canada, while the Université du Québec à Montréal Public has led education in Quebec. Public relations education has been taught at the college level for approximately 60 years, and undergraduate education appears to be staying with colleges. Six programs founded since 2010 are delivered by colleges or university-college partnerships.

Table 13: Alumni of undergraduate public relations programs as of May 2016

Program		Institution	Number of Alumni
Bachelor of Public Relations (BPR)	1977	MSVU	1,673
Baccalauréat en communication (relations publiques)	1996	UQAM	2,953
Bachelor of Arts in Professional Communication (formerly applied communication)	2003	Royal Roads University	768
Bachelor of Communications in Public Relations	2008	Mount Royal University	423
Bachelor of Public Relations (BPR)	2010	University of Ottawa-Algonquin College	N/A
Bachelor of Public Relations	2011	Conestoga College	35
Bachelor of Public Relations	2011	Humber College	69
Bachelor of Arts in Professional Communication	2013	Ryerson University	N/A

Program		Institution	Number of Alumni
Baccalauréat en communication marketing	2013	UQAM	407
Bachelor of Public Relations Management	2014	Centennial College	N/A
Total:			5,921

Discussion

Professional credentials in Canada

There are a number of reasons contributing the limited success of professional credentials in public relations, the largest being a lack of recognition and endorsement from hiring managers and practitioners. The credentials are “virtually unknown outside the [public relations] industry” (D. Tisch, personal communication, 2013) and met with ambivalence within the industry. Throughout their professional careers, not one of the interview respondents has ever had a prospective employer or client ask for an APR or ABC credential.

This may be partially attributed to public relations being regarded by organizations – as recently as the 1980s – as a qualitative subset of marketing relying on “hunches, guesswork, and ‘gut feelings’” instead of using objective and empirical data to contribute to the bottom line (Piekos & Einsiedel, 1991, p. 95; Grunig, 1983). Public relations was not widely regarded as a necessary management function contributing to the bottom line, so there was little incentive for organizations to encourage employees to pursue professional credentials. As a result, the primary incentive for practitioners to pursue professional credentials was – and arguably remains – professional development and personal validation.

The 21st century has seen organizations place more value within the public relations function but not professional credentials. Public relations is gaining recognition as a “necessary and effective strategic management function,” and practitioners are gradually being given more executive-level roles (Waddington, 2015, p. 275). However, the industry is still maturing, and there remains “little general knowledge and acceptance of the role, responsibilities,

skills, and competencies required to function at the various levels of the profession" (Pieters, 2007). This is particularly true for senior-level roles, as reflected by the continuing lack of recognition for professional credentials.

Are professional credentials differentiators?

There is a paucity of empirical literature benchmarking the skills, knowledge, and abilities signified by professional credentials. The majority available research finds that professional credentials can be substituted by age, experience, and higher education (Berger, Rebar, & Heyman, 2005; Likely, 2009). Only one recent study finds that, controlling for age and experience, practitioners with professional credentials demonstrate higher levels of competency than their non-accredited peers (Sha, 2011). While few of the interviewees have experience collaborating with accredited practitioners, those that did mentioned they were quite competent. However, other interviewees state that the rigour of the credential exams is so low that anybody unable to pass them should not practice public relations.

For many hiring managers, including those interviewed, the only quantifiable benchmark of an APR or ABC is that a practitioner has at least five years of experience. While accreditation is "a wonderful way to recognize somebody's achievement as a communicator," there is still "a long way to go before these sorts of credentials can be real differentiators" (D. Tisch, personal communication, 2013). One of these issues is that it is difficult for clients and hiring managers to differentiate between the APR and ABC credentials.

Most of the available empirical literature on professional credentials either conflate the APR and ABC credentials or acknowledge a strong structural similarity (Sha, 2011, p.2; Berger et al., 2005; Likely, 2009; Killingsworth, 2011, pp. 44-45). Even the CPRS acknowledges the similarity between the two credentials (CPRS Calgary, 2016). Both credentials shared a similar examination process (see Table 1), and there is insufficient empirical literature examining the APR and ABC credentials independent of each other. When the credentials were first introduced, public relations and communications were recognizably different functions. However, with the advent of social media and web 2.0, the lines between public relations and communications are blurring.

The IABC's CMP credential is a departure from the structure of the APR and ABC. While still a voluntary certificate – on the same tier as the APR and ABC – the CMP is introducing a range of credentials for practitioners to

pursue based on their experience level and area of practice (IABC, 2016b). This graded credentialing system is in use within a number of professions, including the Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA, 2016). While their success among practitioners and hiring managers remains to be seen, the graded IABC credentials may represent the new format of professional credentialing schemes in Canada.

Financial benefits of professional credentials

Financial return on investment is a significant motivator for practitioners in any field to earn professional or academic credentials. Yet in public relations there is no conclusive empirical evidence that earning an APR, ABC, or CMP credential results in either a job promotion or salary increase. In fact, this is the only recent study of Canadian public relations examining the correlation between professional credentials and salaries (Flynn et. al, 2014; Thurlow et. al, 2014; Killingsworth, 2011).

That being said, this study finds that, controlling for experience and education levels, practitioners with professional credentials (i.e., APR, ABC) earn an average salary range of \$20,000 more than their non-accredited peers and \$10,000 more than those with master's level education (excluding MBA). This is in contrast to the self-report survey data, where 73% of accredited respondents indicated that the credentials did not lead to a salary differential. This study only represents salary information for 18% of APRs and 4% of ABCs in Canada, so these findings require further corroboration. Additionally, since 95% of accredited respondents have 10-plus years of experience, it is likely their higher salaries are more attributed to their experience than their credentials.

A renewed focus on entry-level credentials

While the recognition of mid-career and senior level professional credentials remains low in Canada, the industry expects specialized undergraduate or post-graduate credentials from essentially all entry-level and novice practitioners. Public relations education has primarily been handled by community and technical colleges; until 2003, only two universities – one in English and one in French – were offering specialized undergraduate programs. Since 2010, six undergraduate public relations programs have been established.

Only having technical education in public relations is no longer sufficient. Organizations are recognizing public relations as a necessary strategic management function and are expecting new hires to enter the practice with a strong foundation in both technical skills and strategy (Flynn & Sévigny, 2009, p. 7).

The growth of university and post-graduate certificate education in public relations is partially attributed to the significant shift in the skills and competencies required for practice. As Joe Couto, Director of Government Relations for the OACP mentioned during an interview, the social media has introduced a “shortening of time” in public relations (personal communication, 2013). Items that were given days for planning and assessment are now expected in hours. Everything is expected in the now and that requires a specific skillset.

The growing demand for novice credentials is increasing the professionalization of public relations by raising the standards to enter the practice. As Daniel Tisch, CEO of Argyle Public Relationships notes, when he was starting in the industry almost nobody who entered a public relations agency had professional education in the field. Today, “virtually 100% of the people we hire at the entry-level have professional education in public relations” at the undergraduate or post-graduate certificate level (D. Tisch, personal communication, 2013). A general undergraduate degree is no longer sufficient to enter the practice. As a result, many prospective practitioners with general undergraduate degrees pursue a post-graduate certificate or take the PRK exam.

While the increase of undergraduate credentials is of benefit to the practice, universities are primarily responding to market demand. It is an open secret that universities have held a negative perception of public relations as an academic discipline. For example, Ryerson University previously rejected the establishment of an academic chair in public relations after “objections had been raised by its journalism faculty and students” (I. Basen, personal communication, 2014). Employment in public relations and communications has doubled in the past 25 years (Statistics Canada, 2013), providing Liberal Arts departments across Canada with new revenue opportunities.

Growth of graduate credentials

Graduate degrees in public relations and communications management are experiencing more success and recognition than professional credentials. Since first conferred in 2001, 1,044 Canadians have earned public relations

graduate credentials; significantly more in comparison to the 794 practitioners with active APR, ABC, and CMP credentials since 1968. The number of public relations graduate programs and overall matriculation rates are expected to rise, while professional credentials have been in decline (CPRS, 2013; CPRS, 2016). There are a number of reasons for this, one being that accredited graduate degrees signify an international benchmark of knowledge and competency, while APR, ABC, and CMP credentials currently do not.

In comparison to traditional communication studies programs, applied graduate degrees are tailored towards mid-career and senior practitioners. To accommodate those unable to leave the workforce, the MAPC, MCM, and MPR programs are delivered through hybrid and/or correspondence models and taught by scholar/practitioners. However, one of the most appealing aspects of these programs for practitioners and hiring managers is their emphasis on the business aspect of public relations.

All interviewees believe that in order for public relations to earn a seat at the executive table practitioners need to understand business terminology and demonstrate value through metrics. Most recent literature on the competencies and qualifications of public relations also arrives at this conclusion (CPRS, 2011; Flynn et al., 2014; GA, 2016). One interviewee who earned their MCM says the credential provided them with credibility at the executive table and improved their ability to collaborate with marketing and finance departments. While public relations still has a long way to go in increasing the number of executive-level communication positions, these professional graduate degrees are providing practitioners with the credentials and knowledge to narrow the gap.

While public relations graduate education is becoming increasingly valuable as a differentiator in the marketplace, experience remains the most important qualification for hiring managers. Only 6% of job postings analyzed in 2009-2013 required public relations graduate education. Furthermore, only 26% of the survey respondents had graduate education - 13% in public relations. While interviewees note that the industry is becoming more aware of the relatively new graduate-level education, "public relations is not at the point where they value master's degree preparation over a certain number of years of experience" (P. Parsons, personal communication, 2013). However, all interviewees agree that graduate degrees will become a requirement for the increasing number of managerial and executive roles in public relations. In the meantime, graduate degrees are an effective way to "fast-track somebody who has all sorts of great skills and aptitudes in other ways for a management or leadership role" (D. Tisch, personal communication, 2013).

Graduate vs. professional credentials

There is an inverse relationship between professional credentials and higher levels of education. The survey data shows that practitioners with lower levels of academic credentials (e.g., diploma, undergraduate) are more likely to have APR or ABC credentials; conversely, practitioners with graduate credentials are less likely to have professional credentials. These findings are not surprising, as the APR and ABC were the only specialized mid-senior level credentials available to practitioners until 1999. Furthermore, interviewees with graduate-level education in public relations or business administration believe their programs cover or exceed the benchmarks of the APR, ABC or CMP credentials. For them, graduate degrees have greater significance because they are a learning experience, while professional credentials are a summary of knowledge and experience.

The relatively large success graduate credentials have experienced compared to professional credentials is noteworthy, given that currently neither are significant differentiators in the hiring process. Graduate credentials require significantly larger investments of time and money than the APR, ABC, or CMP programs. Each specialized degree program is two years in length, with costs ranging from the mid \$20,000s (Royal Roads MAPC) to the mid \$40,000s (McMaster MCM). This is significantly higher than the cost of traditional graduate degrees and professional credentials.

Graduate degrees provide practitioners with opportunities to fast-track into management positions or transition into higher education. A number of interviewees who were enrolled in graduate programs stated that they were pursuing the degrees to transition into teaching at the college or university level. Interestingly, a number of professors mentioned that they earned their APR or ABC to demonstrate their expertise in both public relations theory and practice to their students. However, post-secondary institutions do not recognize the APR, ABC, or CMP as teaching credentials, requiring instructors instead to have a master's or doctoral degree.

Graduate credentials are currently more effective than professional credentials in demonstrating professional commitment, increasing opportunities for career advancement, and signifying a benchmark of knowledge and proficiency. However, the most important role of graduate education is the ability to contribute to the development of an empirical and theoretical body of knowledge for public relations and communications management. This is necessary to further public relations as a profession and provide a recognized body of knowledge that will serve to reinforce the need for professional cre-

dentials.

Conclusion

Over the past four decades, the professional certification of public relations and communications through the CPRS and IABC has been unsuccessful in gaining recognition and acceptance from employers, hiring managers, and practitioners. The primary reasons for this are 1) public relations not being widely recognized as a strategic management function; 2) the lack of a global body of knowledge on which to build professional credentials; and 3) the growth of graduate programs tailored towards public relations and communications management practitioners.

Public relations has matured significantly, and credentials will be part of its future, whether they be academic or professional. To enter the practice today, all novice practitioners require formal undergraduate or post-graduate certificate education in public relations. In the coming years, it is expected that formal graduate education will become either a requirement or significant differentiator for mid-career and senior-level positions.

The CPRS and IABC need to adapt their professional credentials to the changing nature of the industry to maintain relevance. This will involve opening their credentials to all practitioners, meeting a defined benchmark of skills and competencies, and collaborating with graduate-level credentials. Both professional organizations have already taken some of these steps, but it is too early to judge whether the initiatives will be successful.

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