



## White Paper: Accreditation in Public Relations

### Introduction

The Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) program celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2014. Like the public relations profession overall, the Accreditation program continues to earn recognition for its value and relevance to senior leaders in organizational management.

The APR credential has emerged as an industry standard and long-standing mark of excellence. However, the value of the credential continues to be questioned by some public relations practitioners. Many practitioners wonder how well the “outside world” knows what APR means. Furthermore, they question whether the business community and human resource professionals understand the value of Accreditation or have even heard of the credential. Professional public relations associations, including the Public Relations Society of America, continue to wrestle with these questions.

Since the consolidation of several public relations credentialing and certification programs under the APR program and Universal Accreditation Board (UAB) in 1998, several significant steps have been taken to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of the APR Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations and credentialing process. The idea always is to bring it further into alignment with best practices and actual job requirements so that organizations will want to require Accreditation as a condition of employment or advancement. There can be no question, however, that there is more work to be done.

As the credential turns 50, the Universal Accreditation Board and its participating organizations have made it a priority to enhance the profile and prestige of the APR credential.

### Historical Background

The modern practice of public relations originated in the United States in the early 1900s. At that time, the field was characterized by one-way dissemination of information and press agency, leading the public relations profession to be perceived as manipulative and self-serving. The “Fathers of Public Relations,” Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays, are frequently credited with being the first people to call public relations a profession. The field continued to evolve when President Woodrow Wilson established the Committee on Public Information. Led by journalist George Creel, the committee leveraged mass media to educate Americans about World War I.

In 1927, Arthur Page became vice president of public relations at AT&T. He is known as the first public relations practitioner to consider an organization’s reputation crucial to its success. Page insisted on gathering data on audience opinions before making public relations decisions, and he insisted on being truthful in communications to the public. Some scholars also cite Page as the first professional to consider two-way communication in public relations planning.

The World War II era represented another step in the evolution of public relations. In 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt established the Office of War Information, with Elmer Davis heading up the program to rally support for the war. The office focused on propaganda both domestically and abroad, relying extensively on mass media. Interestingly enough, the Office of War Information proved to be a training ground for hundreds of future public relations professionals. The decades following the war saw a significant increase in public relations practitioners and the birth of professional associations designed to support the growing

profession. By the middle of the century, many of these associations were discussing certification in public relations.

### **APR Evolves as the Public Relations Profession Matures**

Chartered in 1947, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is the world's largest organization of public relations professionals. The organization's purpose is to provide professional development, set standards of excellence in the industry and uphold the principles of ethics among its members. Not surprisingly, the Society also considered certification and licensure of public relations practitioners in discussions of professionalism. In 1961, PRSA merged with the American Public Relations Association and started developing its own accreditation program. The Accredited in Public Relations (APR) program was formally launched in 1964. The examination and Accreditation process would be periodically updated in the years that followed, reflecting the continuing maturation of the field. As the number of Accredited professionals grew, PRSA hired outside consulting firms to review the examination and scoring process, and ensure it reflected best practices in the field. The examination became more rigorous and precise, again reflecting the maturation of the field.

Meanwhile, dozens of other public relations and communication associations also emerged, and many of them developed their own credentials. Organizations competed with each other for candidates to participate in their credentialing programs. For both practitioners and prospective employers — especially those in the human resources community charged with recruiting employees and establishing standards for professional advancement — multiple credentialing programs proved confusing, and none of the public relations programs met standards for best practices associated with credibility for professional credentialing. Multiple, competing programs also diluted the value of each of them.

Recognizing the value of strength in numbers, PRSA joined with several other public relations organizations to evaluate the potential to unify the programs under one credential. Four professional associations thus formed the Universal Accreditation Board (UAB) in 1998 and agreed to unify all of the programs under the APR banner. This new entity became the administrator of the voluntary certification program, synergistically bringing the groups together with the common goal of Accreditation. Interestingly enough, the associations found most of them already shared the same values in their individual codes of ethics, and many of them used examination processes very similar to the original APR Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations.

Today the UAB is made up of 21 board members representing eight participating organizations that span the practice of public relations in the various economic sectors. The UAB's responsibility is to grant Accreditation to professionals, develop and update the Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations in consultation with third-party psychometricians, and oversee the Accreditation process. The UAB also is in charge of marketing and promoting the APR brand.

### **Grounding the APR Examination in KSAs of the Practice**

In 2001, the UAB undertook the arduous task of reengineering the APR Examination and Accreditation process to bring the program into alignment with best practices in credentialing programs, as well as to pave the way for the credential and examination process to have credibility and legitimacy as a requirement for hiring and advancement.

For organizational human resources and hiring managers, a critical barrier to recognition of the APR credential — as well as credentials offered through other public relations organizations — was that the original examination was based largely on an academic body of knowledge and not an analysis of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) needed and used by practitioners at the stage in their careers when they would seek Accreditation or certification. Without a formal basis in KSAs, the credential could not be used as a legitimate screening criterion for hiring or as a requirement for advancement.

The UAB commissioned a practice analysis so the examination would better reflect best practices in the field, and the APR process was changed to include a Readiness Review to replace the previous oral examination.

The current format of the Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations was released in 2003. Unlike its predecessor, the current Examination format tests KSAs in an objective, computer-based process. This was a critical shift in the Accreditation program because for the first time, hiring authorities could be assured the Examination reflected the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to be a professional public relations practitioner.

The Examination questions are reviewed and updated in an ongoing, rigorous and scientific process to keep the Examination relevant with changes in tools, tactics and the times, even though the enduring principles that undergird public relations practice continue to infuse the Examination. Every 12–18 months, technical review panels of six to eight Accredited professionals conference to discuss the questions and response options under the direction of an independent psychometrician. One-third of the questions on the Examination are beta questions, which are scored for validity and reviewed after 100 administrations of the Examination. Additionally, the UAB initiated a 10-year review of the 2000 Practice Analysis in 2010 by surveying 9,950 Accredited and non-Accredited members from UAB participating organizations to validate the importance and relevance of the KSAs.

In addition to the KSA analyses, the UAB took several other measures to move toward third-party validation of the APR Examination by what was then known as the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA). The current Examination was designed to meet higher psychometric standards, as required by the human resources community and third-party certification agencies. The UAB also added a board position for a non-participating organization, and attempted to build a relationship with the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

Despite those efforts, the UAB did not have sufficient financial resources or full-time staffing to complete the NOCA requirements, and third-party validation remains a critical need for the credential to achieve recognition within the human resources community.

### **Growing the APR Brand**

To provide the credential to military public affairs professionals — including both military and civilian practitioners for the armed services and defense-related industries — the UAB developed an enhanced certification for the defense community. In 2009, the UAB unveiled the APR+M credential, which includes all the requirements of APR plus additional emphases on public affairs competencies unique to the military. For the APR+M, the process maintained the integrity of the APR Examination, while adding military communication competencies to the Readiness Review process.

In 2013, the UAB beta-tested an examination to measure knowledge of public relations principles among university and college seniors near the time of their graduation. This effort was the culmination of five years of research and development, and led to the launch in 2014 of the Certificate in Principles of Public Relations. The Certificate was designed for graduating seniors to benchmark their knowledge of the field and enter the pipeline for pursuing the APR after attaining some years of professional experience. The Certificate Examination tests a subset of KSAs from the APR Examination and was developed using the same rigorous standards as the APR Examination itself, with the help of a third-party psychometrician. The Certificate process does not include a Readiness Review, and it does not lead to any initials or other such designations. Successful candidates in the Certificate process simply earn the Certificate, not the "APR."

Today, more than 5,000 professionals are Accredited and about 36 have earned the APR+M certification. APR remains the largest national postgraduate certification program for public relations professionals.

### **Becoming Accredited: The Process**

To become Accredited, public relations professionals go through what is known as the "Accreditation process."

Candidates enter the process by submitting an application to the UAB. In the past, five years of public relations experience was required before a person could take the Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations. Since 2003, this has been only a recommendation. Once they are accepted into the Accreditation process, candidates have one year to complete it.

The Accreditation process is structured in two parts — the Readiness Review and the computer-based Examination. The first part is the Readiness Review. A candidate completes a Readiness Review questionnaire, answering questions about their public relations experience and how they intend to prepare for the Accreditation process. This written submission is distributed among a group of Accredited professionals at least 10 days prior to the candidate presenting to his/her Readiness Review panel. At the Readiness Review presentation, the candidate and panelists discuss the candidate's answers in the written submission. The Readiness Review is an opportunity for the candidate to demonstrate competence in 16 specific areas of public relations knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), particularly those areas that cannot be effectively judged in the computer-based Examination. Candidates seeking to earn APR+M also have a military component added to the Readiness Review process. At the conclusion of the Readiness Review, candidates are coached on specific areas to study and prepare for the computer-based Examination. When a candidate is Advanced from the Readiness Review, he/she may proceed to the next part of the Accreditation process.

The second part of the Accreditation process is the computer-based Examination, made up of rigorous multiple-choice questions. The Examination tests candidates' understanding of the following areas of public relations: history and current issues in public relations, business literacy, ethics and law, communication models and theories, the public relations strategic planning process (research, planning, implementing and evaluation), management skills and issues, crisis communication management, the use of information technology, media relations, and advanced communication skills.

Upon completion of the computer-based Examination, candidates receive a raw score, and within four weeks, notification of their Accreditation status. An APR or APR+M after a candidate's name indicates success in the Accreditation process.

### **Accreditation: What Are the Benefits?**

Many people ask why they should go out of their way to earn Accreditation when it requires a significant investment of time and money. They wonder if Accreditation will help them make more money or help get them promoted. While these are legitimate concerns, a focus on these areas alone may not provide a full picture of the benefits of Accreditation. Maybe a better question to ask is what it means to be Accredited?

Accreditation can be particularly beneficial to employers during the hiring process. APR and APR+M are marks of distinction for public relations professionals who demonstrate their commitment to the profession and to its ethical practice, and who are selected based on broad knowledge, strategic perspective and sound professional judgment.

Accredited professionals have demonstrated — both subjectively to their professional peers and objectively on a statistically validated computer-based Examination — an understanding of senior-level strategy as well as skills and abilities necessary to succeed as a public relations executive or manager. Furthermore, professionals with the APR are required to maintain their Accreditation through continuing professional development and education. They have committed to enhancing the profession and they have demonstrated the desire to succeed.

The PRSA website says there are four primary reasons why practitioners would want to earn their APR: because it's a recognized standard, it promotes lifelong learning, it serves as a career enhancement, and it is positive for the field of public relations.

The “recognized standard” refers to the fact that APR has been around for 50 years. APR is a recognized designation among many public relations professionals. APR represents knowledge and ethical conduct.

The second reason to earn an APR is the “promotion of lifelong learning.” When most undergraduate students graduate from their university, they make their way into the business world and begin their journey into a lifelong career. Many never go back to further their education, get exposed to new ideas, attend seminars or update their knowledge on new programs and policies. This stagnation causes them to fall behind on the latest trends, and in turn hurts the individual and the organizations they represent. Public relations professionals enhance their job security and better serve their employers by staying knowledgeable in the public relations industry.

The APR designation also has proven valuable in enhancing the perception of public relations as a profession. Because of its beginnings, and current and inaccurate portrayals in popular media, public relations often is viewed negatively, and those negative attributes are reinforced by practitioners who do not embrace ethics or best practices. By obtaining Accreditation, practitioners showcase the public relations profession and set themselves — and the profession — up for future success through a commitment to ethics, professional standards, current and best practices, and ongoing learning and professional development.

### **APR Participation: Recent Trends**

In recent years, the number of professionals taking the APR Examination has fallen. While the UAB continues to survey APR candidates and participating organizations' membership, there is no clear answer as to why numbers have dropped. Some have speculated that because the reengineered process is not restricted to two test periods a year (like the previous examination), practitioners feel no deadline pressures and can thus put off taking the Examination. Others cite personal factors, like financial costs and time. A prolonged economic downturn also may continue to play a role. Another frequently stated reason is that practitioners don't see the APR being recognized among hiring authorities or the human resources community. Regardless of the possible reasons, there is concern among the UAB and its participating organizations that the credential is undervalued.

These concerns recently resulted in a study commissioned by PRSA to examine perceptions about the value of Accreditation. The OPG firm delivered its initial report on the state of the APR credential at the PRSA 2013 International Conference. The firm suggested improvements regarding the visibility and credibility of the APR designation if it was to survive into the next decade. The UAB and its participating organizations, led by PRSA, are developing a plan to address these needs based on three different courses of action recommended by OPG.

### **Conclusion**

The public relations profession is often a misunderstood one — a challenge that is sometimes reinforced by the manner in which it is practiced by some individuals. Although public relations is needed and valued by many senior executives in all kinds of organizations across a variety of business sectors, practitioners are often questioned about their work and the value it provides. In this ongoing struggle for professional recognition, the Accreditation process continues to be offered and undertaken by public relations professionals who understand that the field as a whole is as important as their personal careers, and who realize that Accreditation offers an avenue for self-improvement in the present and continuous learning in the future.

Just as the field of public relations has evolved and matured over the last century, the Accreditation process has also evolved and matured. The APR designation continues to offer public relations professionals opportunity to advance their own careers while enhancing the profession as a whole.