

How Student-Led Agencies Strengthen the Profession

By Amanda Lucey and Dr. Brad Yates

Every year, we see students seeking more value from their higher-education degrees as companies look for skilled candidates who can benefit their businesses. Experiential learning, in which students gain knowledge by having experiences related to their fields of study, helps achieve mutual success for students and for the organizations that hire them.



For students pursuing degrees in public relations, experiential learning can follow the traditional internship route. But another, increasingly valuable opportunity for students to learn through experience and build their résumés can be found at student-run PR agencies at universities. At The Partnership, Atlanta's longest-standing independent marketing, branding and PR agency, we chose to partner with a local student-run agency, bluestone at the University of West Georgia.

We believe that students who glean experience through a university PR agency will be more prepared and require less training as they begin their careers, a win for both graduates and employers.

A student-led, university PR agency provides a bridge between academic learning and professional experience. Such agencies typically operate as businesses managed by students and guided by faculty advisers. The work students perform includes pitching the media, managing projects and delivering services to clients.

The experience of working for a student-led PR agency exposes the next generation of communicators to the skills of critical thinking, writing, research, project management, strategic planning, program execution and fiscal management. With responsibilities that range from account executive to copywriter and creative director, students are immersed in learning their roles. They collaborate

with their teams and develop the interpersonal communication skills they need to begin working in client service. Students also learn the importance of paying attention to small details in the materials they will provide to clients.

University resources, agency insights

Since being established by University of West Georgia faculty in 2014, the student-led bluestone agency has provided service-learning projects to nonprofit, private and public-sector clients.

As part of a practicum course that gives students insights into the business side of the profession, the agency's projects include media relations, image and brand management, social/digital strategy development and strategic public relations campaigns.

"Since bluestone was founded, numerous students have supported a cross-section of clients, with an emphasis on nonprofits, to build community and leverage grassroots strategies that stretch the students' capabilities," said Dr. Hazel Cole, PR head and co-creator of bluestone at the University of West Georgia as well as the adviser of the school's PRSSA Chapter.

The agency's clients have included the National Center for Human and Civil Rights, the Southern Conservation Trust and the University of West Georgia's admissions office.

The Partnership has pledged \$50,000 to help transform bluestone. This year, students in the program will also receive firsthand mentorship from practicing PR professionals, through a new collaborative effort between The Partnership and the University of West Georgia's School of Communication, Film and Media. This merger of higher education and business leverages the university's resources while providing students with agency insights, experiential learning, case studies and industry best practices.

With The Partnership's financial support, students working in leadership positions at bluestone can earn a stipend. The financial pledge will also enhance bluestone's physical space on campus, so that it more closely emulates that of a professional PR agency. This approach attracts students who are competitive, eager to lead and interested in learning more



about the profession and client relations.

The initiative helps shape the future of public relations by equipping tomorrow's workforce. Moreover, The Partnership's involvement opens new opportunities for bluestone students by providing them with a diverse client mix, enriched professional work experience and a robust professional portfolio.

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Students will have opportunities to attend presentations and fireside chats where they can discuss trends in the communications industry. Future opportunities could include The Partnership's provision of insights on developing client portfolios, creating case studies and pitching, as well as connecting students to internship opportunities at The Partnership and other local agencies.

The Partnership has a long history of offering its resources and knowledge to the local community. University of West Georgia leadership believes that these collaborative partnerships build a legacy and augment education through relevant, skill-building experiences. Companies that invest in student learning can produce long-lasting benefits for everyone involved.

By guiding a learning lab that functions as a professional public relations agency, faculty members help students gain the marketable skills they'll need

when they apply for their first post-graduate positions. At the same time, PR agency professionals benefit by building a pipeline of top student talent for internships and entry-level positions.

Ways to support experiential learning

Higher education continues to adopt the student-led agency model for the practical learning opportunities it provides. Here are some other ways that companies can participate in experiential-learning initiatives with colleges and universities:

- Connect with your alma mater or local university and offer to support its student agency or other communications-specific initiatives
- Invest in student outcomes through fiscal opportunities and sponsorships
- Offer “shadow days” when students can observe professionals and learn about business practices and strategic communication efforts
- Provide local students with mentoring, networking and project-review opportunities
- Consider becoming a client of a student-run PR agency
- Seek collaborative opportunities to build the next generation of PR professionals

By partnering with colleges and universities and offering opportunities for experiential learning, you'll help students derive more value from their higher-education degrees, while also benefiting your business and the future of the PR profession. ❖

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Learn More

Starting or participating in a student-run firm is a great way to build your résumé and portfolio, apply what you've learned in class and gain hands-on experience. Whether your firm is well-established or just getting started, PRSSA offers many resources to help you succeed. Please visit PRSSA.org for more details.