

# Progressing toward Diversity Goals in the Public Relations Industry

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The year 2015 may turn out to be viewed as a watershed in the public relations industry for taking stock of its shortcomings of achieving a diverse, multicultural workforce.

Over the past few months, a number of formal studies conducted by academic researchers throughout the country and funded by the PRSA Foundation and the Arthur W. Page Society, are yielding new insights into the obstacles to and opportunities for achieving diversity in the PR profession.

Earlier this year, Professor Dean Mundy, Ph.D. from the University of Oregon, published his study, [“From Principle to Policy to Practice? Diversity as a Driver of Multicultural, Stakeholder Engagement in Public Relations” in PR Journal \(Vol. 9, No. 1\)](#). (The research was funded by the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication at Penn State University.)

[In an August 31, 2015 blog post at the Institute for PR site](#), Professor Mundy commented on his study, asserting that PR organizations continue to assert the benefits of diversity in the workforce. But he also learned “despite this sentiment . . . PR has not taken a lead role in championing diversity. In fact, when asked how the PR function has addressed diversity, almost one third of the [study] respondents replied, ‘not applicable.’ Finally, I learned most practitioners feel their organizations do a solid job providing benefits for diverse

groups, but few are able to indicate readily what those benefits actually are.”

Professor Mundy’s research set the stage for the panel discussion on Monday morning, November 9, 2015, at the PRSA International Conference in Atlanta, [“Tiptoeing the Talk: Is PR as Inclusive as We Like to Think?”](#) that presented early public discussion of three additional new studies, all funded by the PRSA Foundation.

One study, “Improving the Shades of Diversity in Public Relations: Engaging Under-represented Practitioners in the Workplace by Exploring their Concerns involving Career Satisfaction, Workplace Inclusion, and Work-Life Balance,” was conducted by Professor Richard D. Waters, Ph.D. at the University of San Francisco, looked at a wide variety of under-represented demographic categories, including African-Americans, Hispanics, Asia-American/Pacific Islanders, and LGBT PR practitioners.

A second study, conducted by Professor Hua Jiang, Ph.D. at Syracuse University explored the perceptions of elite corporate and agency PR practitioners through in-depth interviews and a survey of members of the Arthur W. Page Society (primarily CCOs of Fortune 500 corporations, CEOs of leading PR agencies, and senior academics from top-tier communications and business schools).

The third study is more narrowly focused. This study was jointly conducted by Professor Lynn Appelbaum at City College of New York and by myself, and investigated the specific PR career obstacles and opportunities faced by African-American and Hispanic young professionals, who graduated from college from 2008 – 2014, “An Examination of Factors Affecting the Success of Under-represented Groups in the Public Relations Profession.”

All three of these research projects will be available in

published and PRSA Foundation-distribution formats. The full text of the Appelbaum-Walton study is currently online at [www.prdiversitystudy.com](http://www.prdiversitystudy.com).

Since all the reports of these studies are just now being published and distributed, we look forward, over the next few months, to formulating insights and understanding implications as the various data sets are compared. However, a few immediate observations are worth preliminary attention:

Public “commitment” to diversity by corporate communications departments and PR agencies is solid, but vague. Diversity definition, even within individual organizations, is not well defined. Management accountability is not linked to diversity metrics. Intentions are perceived to be correct (by all samples and perspectives); implementation, not so much.

Efforts to recruit under-represented groups into PR departments and agencies are fairly well rated with a number of organizations having ramped up their outreach efforts to some success.

However, retention of under-represented groups in PR departments and agencies is clearly a major challenge for the immediate future. Once “in” the organization, the multicultural practitioner often reports being “outside” the normal patterns of work assignments, assigned roles, mentor relationships, preferment structures, and social-cultural dynamics.

Employees with specific “identities” (African-American, Hispanic, Asian, male, female, LGBT) report varying experiences, but cumulatively, they seem to report still experiencing that they are on the margins of the PR establishment.

More cross-study insights will emerge, but one is striking on just first review. The Jiang survey of Arthur W. Page Society members (CCOs of Fortune 500 corporations and CEOs of PR

agencies) present some striking dissimilarities to the findings of the Appelbaum-Walton study (African-American and Hispanic PR practitioners who graduated college since 2008):

One area of discrepancy is the perception of workplace bias for advancement.

- Only 12.7% of the Page Society members survey respondents believe that PR professionals from under-represented groups have to be “more qualified” than Caucasians for the same position.
- This contrasts with the Appelbaum/Walton study that found 30.4% of the Hispanics and 56.3% of the African-American PR professionals who graduated since 2008 report that they have to be more qualified than a Caucasian professional for the same position.

A second area of discrepancy is in workplace relations.

- 93,5% of the Page Society members say that racial/ethnic minorities are treated with genuine respect by their colleagues in the PR profession. This presents a different perception compared with
- 69.6% of the Hispanics and 50% of the African-American PR professionals who graduated since 2008 and report feeling that they are treated with genuine respect in the workplace.

While acknowledging that these comparisons are drawn from different data sets, the scale of this kind of disagreement on core issues, at least, should raise a “red flag” for the PR industry. As more detailed and thoughtful review of all these studies is conducted, the PR industry associations and major players will find focus for additional action.

Here is the good news. On first review of all these studies – all samples of PR practitioners from the CCOs to the young professionals – reveals a strong support and commitment to the PR profession. Where perceptions of shortcomings emerge, those

perceptions emerge in the context of “disappointment,” not of anger or rejection.

The good work of PRSA Foundation and other industry leaders in funding the research and insights from these studies presents the U.S. PR sector with an enormous opportunity to act with new knowledge and vigor – knowing that the young, under-represented professionals in the PR profession are eager and willing to assist the profession to adapt to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Having taken stock of the PR sector’s diversity challenge in 2015, we can look forward to a year of action and initiatives in 2016.