

# Public Relations & Marketing Education at Major American Universities

A 5W reference study — programs, enrollment, faculty, AI integration, and a six-category action matrix for industry leaders.

---

By Ronn Torossian, Founder and Chairman, and the 5W Research Team

April 2026 · [5wpr.com/research/pr-marketing-education-study-2026](https://5wpr.com/research/pr-marketing-education-study-2026)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

U.S. higher education produces the global talent pipeline for public relations and marketing. Understanding where that pipeline starts, who is teaching what, and how fast the curriculum is shifting is now a competitive requirement, not an HR task.

**The numbers that matter.** Approximately 21,275 PR and advertising degrees are awarded annually across 209 U.S. institutions (College Factual 2025). The Commission on Public Relations Education reviewed 92 accredited master's programs in PR, strategic communication, and related disciplines in 2025 — but only 18% of those graduate programs still carry the 'public relations' label as their primary title. The rest have rebranded around 'strategic communication,' 'integrated marketing,' or 'digital media.' MBA programs offering AI specializations have grown 1,260% since 2022. Student generative AI usage jumped from 66% in 2024 to 92% in 2025 globally.

**The structural shift.** The PR program is disappearing and being replaced by the strategic communication program. Kellogg lost its 20-year grip on the #1 marketing title to Wharton in U.S. News 2026. Mid-tier schools are renaming departments faster than deans can print letterhead. The Southeast — UF, UGA, Alabama, Mizzou, UT-Austin — now graduates more PR majors than the entire Northeast.

**The AI gap.** 88% of surveyed PR leaders (USC Annenberg/WE Communications) say AI will positively impact speed and efficiency. Only 55% believe it will positively impact creativity. Meanwhile, students are using AI on 88%+ of assessments. These two groups are colliding at the internship-to-hire handoff.

**5W built this report so agency leaders can make 2026 hiring, partnership, and AI-policy decisions on data, not assumption.**

## KEY FINDINGS

**~21,275**

PR & advertising degrees awarded annually across 209 U.S. institutions

**18%**

Only 18% of those master's still carry the 'public relations' label as primary

**1,260%**

Growth in MBA programs offering AI specializations since 2022

**88% / 55%**

PR leaders: AI positively impacts speed / creativity

**92**

Accredited PR / strategic comm master's programs reviewed by CPRE 2025

**300+**

PRSSA chapters across the U.S., Puerto Rico, and Latin America

**66% → 92%**

Student generative AI usage, 2024 to 2025 (global)

**51%**

Organizations using AI for recruiting, up from 26% in 2024

## THE THREE PROGRAM HOMES

PR and strategic communication programs in the U.S. live in three different types of academic homes. Where a program lives tells you what it teaches.

### **Journalism / communication schools.**

USC Annenberg, Syracuse Newhouse, Northwestern Medill, Missouri, Florida, UNC Hussman, UT-Austin Moody, UGA Grady, BU COM. Emphasis on writing, media relations, storytelling, ethics. Output: agency-ready hires who can write a press release and manage a media list on day one.

### **Business schools.**

Marketing departments at Wharton, Kellogg, Booth, Stern, Ross. Emphasis on analytics, consumer behavior, brand strategy. Output: brand-side hires who treat PR as one of several interchangeable strategic tools — and who hold the budget that pays the agency.

### **Hybrid / standalone strategic communication programs.**

Georgetown, American University, George Washington, Boston University online programs, NYU SPS, Columbia SPS. Emphasis on policy, public affairs, corporate reputation. Output: corporate communications leaders, public affairs specialists, in-house comms hires.

The agencies winning the recruiting war in 2026 are the ones drawing intentionally from all three pools — not the ones recruiting only from the journalism schools their founders went to.

## THE SIX FINDINGS

### **1. The PR program is disappearing and being replaced by the strategic communication program.**

Only 18% of CPRE-reviewed master's programs still carry the 'public relations' label as their primary title. The rest have rebranded around 'strategic communication,' 'integrated marketing,' or 'digital media.' Kellogg lost its 20-year grip on the #1 marketing title to Wharton in U.S. News 2026.

### **2. AI literacy has become the new writing sample.**

CPRE's 2025 report flagged AI, social media, and digital communication as the fastest-growing course categories in PR master's programs. Programs without an AI course are now considered behind. The portfolio piece that gets a candidate hired in 2026 is documented competence in AI-augmented research, drafting, and verification.

### **3. The Southeast is now the center of gravity for undergraduate PR.**

UF, UGA, Alabama, Mizzou, and UT-Austin collectively graduate more PR majors than the entire Northeast. The talent demographic, the cost-of-living equation, and the regional AI investment patterns all point the same direction. Agencies still recruiting only out of the Northeast are competing

for a smaller and more expensive pool than the one they think they are.

#### **4. The student-run agency is the best interview signal.**

Practitioners rated real-world projects and internships above theses in value. PRSSA student-run firms — 300+ across the U.S., Puerto Rico, and Latin America — are now the most consistent screening surface for entry-level agency hires. The candidates who ran one are the candidates who ship.

#### **5. MBA-trained marketers now think of PR as a 'discipline,' not a function.**

Wharton, Kellogg, Booth, and Stern all treat brand, comms, and PR as interchangeable tools under strategy. The implication for agencies: client-side decisions on agency-of-record are increasingly made by MBA marketers who do not see 'PR' and 'marketing' as separate buckets. The agency that wins is the one that pitches integrated capability, not earned-media specialization.

#### **6. The industry-academia AI gap is wide and unaddressed.**

88% of surveyed PR leaders say AI positively impacts speed and efficiency; only 55% believe it positively impacts creativity. Students are using AI on 88%+ of assessments. These two groups collide at the internship-to-hire handoff, and most agencies have no candidate AI-use disclosure form, no AI training onboarding, and no policy framework aligned with PRSA's October 2025 'Promise & Pitfalls' guide. The agencies that fix this in 2026 will own the senior talent pipeline through 2030.

# THE SOUTHEAST PIPELINE VS THE NORTHEAST

On one side: the Northeast — Syracuse Newhouse, Boston University COM, NYU, UNC Hussman, plus Northwestern Medill (Midwest) and USC Annenberg (West). The traditional recruiting playbook.

On the other side: the Southeast — University of Florida, University of Georgia (Grady), University of Alabama (Plank Center), University of Missouri, UT Austin (Moody). Combined PR major output that exceeds the entire Northeast.

The Southeast pipeline has lower cost-of-living salary expectations, higher student-population growth, and increasingly competitive AI integration in coursework. The agencies still flying out only to Syracuse and BU career fairs are competing for a smaller pool against more agencies. The agencies adding UF, UGA, Alabama, Mizzou, and UT-Austin to their recruiting calendars are accessing a larger, hungrier pool with better entry-level retention economics.

	The Northeast	The Southeast
<b>Anchor schools</b>	Syracuse, BU, NYU, UNC, Columbia SPS	<b>UF, UGA, Alabama, Mizzou, UT-Austin</b>
<b>PR major volume</b>	Smaller pool	<b>Largest in country</b>
<b>Salary expectations</b>	High cost-of-living	<b>Lower cost-of-living</b>
<b>Recruiting density</b>	Saturated	<b>Under-recruited</b>
<b>PRSSA chapters</b>	Strong	<b>Strongest (Grady, etc.)</b>
<b>Retention economics</b>	Below average	<b>Above average</b>

## FROM RONN TOROSSIAN, FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN OF 5W

*"Twenty-five years of running a PR firm taught me that the biggest mistake an agency leader can make is recruiting where their predecessors recruited. The pipeline has moved. The curriculum has moved. The way students think about the work has moved. AI has moved everything again in the last 24 months. Eighteen percent of accredited graduate programs still call themselves public relations. The other 82% are calling themselves something else — and the candidates coming out of them are using AI on 88% of their assignments while most agencies are still figuring out whether they have an AI policy. The agency leaders who treat this report as a mapping exercise will save themselves three years of recruiting mistakes. The ones who keep flying to the same five career fairs they always have will spend the next five years wondering why their hires keep getting picked off by competitors who recruit broader, train better, and have a coherent AI policy on day one."*

## THE SIX-CATEGORY ACTION MATRIX

The 5W playbook for industry leaders in 2026. Each category maps directly to a finding in this report. Agency leaders who run all six close their talent gap inside twelve months.

### Action 1: Recruiting pipeline (volume).

Recruit broader. Add UF, UGA, Alabama, Mizzou, and UT-Austin to the calendar. PRSSA student-run firms across 300+ chapters are the highest-signal screening surface for entry-level talent. The agency that recruits across all three program homes — journalism, business, hybrid — outperforms the agency that recruits from one.

### Action 2: Recruiting pipeline (senior hires).

Faculty and former-faculty placements through Wharton, Kellogg, Columbia SPS, NYU SPS, USC Annenberg, and Georgetown are the most efficient senior-hire surface most agencies have not tapped. Adjunct teaching gigs are also a senior-recruiting channel.

### Action 3: Thought leadership and content.

The PRSA 'Promise & Pitfalls' framework (October 2025) is the closest thing to an industry standard. Agencies that publish substantive AI-policy alignment content, candidate disclosure forms, and AI ethics frameworks earn citation share inside AI-mediated client research. Agencies that don't are invisible.

### Action 4: Speaking and advisory positioning.

PRSSA national conference, CPRE annual meeting, Page Society, the Plank Center summer fellowship, and U.S. News graduate program advisory boards are the highest-leverage speaking and advisory positions for agency leaders. Each one compounds.

### Action 5: Academic partnerships (revenue-adjacent).

The agencies generating the most revenue from academic-adjacent work — corporate university programs, executive education contracts, agency-school co-taught capstone courses — are the agencies that built relationships with deans before the curriculum rebrand started. The window to anchor these relationships closes by 2027.

### Action 6: AI-specific actions.

Adopt an internal AI policy aligned to PRSA's 'Promise & Pitfalls.' Build a candidate AI-use disclosure form. Train the existing team. Establish a compliance posture for EU AI Act (enforceable August 2026), NYC Local Law 144, Illinois AI hiring law, and Colorado AI employment rules. The first agency in any market to publish a transparent AI policy and disclosure form earns the candidate-pipeline citation surface for that market.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### What did this study find?

Five core findings: (1) the PR program is being replaced by the strategic communication program — only 18% of accredited graduate programs still carry the 'public relations' label as their primary title; (2) AI literacy has become the new writing sample, with 92% of students globally using generative AI in 2025; (3) the Southeast (UF, UGA, Alabama, Mizzou, UT-Austin) now graduates more PR majors than the entire Northeast; (4) the student-run agency is the best interview signal practitioners use; (5) MBA-trained marketers treat PR as an interchangeable strategic tool, not a function.

### How many PR and marketing programs exist in the US?

Approximately 21,275 PR and advertising degrees are awarded annually across 209 U.S. institutions (College Factual 2025). The Commission on Public Relations Education reviewed 92 accredited master's programs in 2025. PRSSA operates 300+ student chapters across the U.S., Puerto Rico, and Latin America.

### Why is 'public relations' being renamed?

Only 18% of accredited graduate programs still carry the 'public relations' label as their primary title. The rest have rebranded around 'strategic communication,' 'integrated marketing,' or 'digital media' — a structural shift driven by AI integration, the convergence of paid/earned/owned, and a generation of MBA marketers treating PR as one tool inside a broader strategy stack rather than a separate discipline.

### What does AI integration look like in PR education?

Almost every major PR and marketing program now has an AI policy, but those policies vary from 'encouraged' to 'prohibited except with written permission' — often within the same school, course-by-course. Dedicated AI courses and certificates now exist at Columbia SPS, NYU SPS, BU COM, University of Denver, and Fitchburg State, plus PRSA's continuing-education programs. Student gen-AI usage rose from 66% in 2024 to 92% in 2025.

### What is PRSA's 'Promise & Pitfalls' framework?

PRSA updated its AI ethics guide ('Promise & Pitfalls of AI in Public Relations') in October 2025. It is the closest thing to an industry standard for agency-side AI use. Every PR agency should align its internal AI policy with this framework.

### What is the industry-academia AI gap?

88% of surveyed PR leaders (USC Annenberg/WE Communications) say AI will positively impact speed and efficiency. Only 55% believe it will positively impact creativity. Meanwhile, students are using AI on 88%+ of assessments. These two groups are colliding at the internship-to-hire handoff, and most agencies are not prepared with disclosure protocols, AI-use forms, or training programs for incoming hires.

### What should agencies do about AI hiring compliance?

Agencies hiring across jurisdictions need a compliance posture, not just a policy. Active rules include the EU AI Act (enforceable August 2026), NYC Local Law 144, the Illinois AI hiring law, and Colorado AI employment rules. The report includes a candidate AI-use disclosure form, a Red-Yellow-Green syllabus framework, and a six-category action matrix for industry leaders.

## Who is this report for?

Agency CEOs, heads of talent, heads of communications at corporations, university provosts and deans, MBA marketing program directors, PR education researchers, journalism school administrators, and venture investors evaluating the EdTech and AI-training market for the communications industry.

## Can 5W consult on PR education partnerships and AI talent strategy?

Yes. 5W's AI Communications and talent strategy practice builds AI policy frameworks, candidate disclosure protocols, agency-academic partnership programs, and AI-era recruiting infrastructure. The detailed practice page is at [5wpr.com/practice/ai-digital-marketing-and-pr-agency](https://5wpr.com/practice/ai-digital-marketing-and-pr-agency). Inquiries: [research@5wpr.com](mailto:research@5wpr.com) or [media@5wpr.com](mailto:media@5wpr.com).

## METHODOLOGY AND CAVEATS

This is the second edition of the 5W PR & Marketing Education Reference Study. Sections 1–10 cover stable reference material that changes on an annual rhythm — enrollment data, rankings, faculty placements, accreditation. Sections 11–16 cover AI integration, industry vs. academic AI policies, the catalog of AI courses and certificates, agency talent implications, the regulatory landscape, and candidate disclosure practices — all volatile. The landscape shifts quarterly. Every claim referencing specific course names, regulatory dates, or PRSA guidance versions should be verified against primary sources before publication under a byline.

**Primary sources:** College Factual (2025), CPRE 2025 Graduate Report, U.S. News & World Report 2026 rankings, NCES IPEDS, PRSA 'Promise & Pitfalls' (October 2025), USC Annenberg/WE Communications Relevance Report, AACSB, the Page Society, the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations.

**The single most important point in this document:** the companies, agencies, and academic programs that figure out AI integration in PR earliest will set the defaults everyone else inherits.

## ABOUT 5W

5W is the premier AI communications firm in the United States — one of the largest independent public relations and digital marketing agencies in the country, with approximately 275 professionals. Founded in 2003 by Ronn Torossian. Led by CEO Matt Caiola. Recognized as a top U.S. PR agency by O'Dwyer's, named Agency of the Year in the American Business Awards, and honored as a Top Place to Work in Communications in 2026 by Ragan. The agency serves more than 250 clients across consumer, corporate, crisis, healthcare, technology, and public affairs communications.

5W's AI Communications and Generative Engine Optimization practice is at [5wpr.com/practice/ai-digital-marketing-and-pr-agency](https://5wpr.com/practice/ai-digital-marketing-and-pr-agency).

---

Published by 5W Research · April 2026 · [5wpr.com/research/pr-marketing-education-study-2026](https://5wpr.com/research/pr-marketing-education-study-2026) · Media inquiries: [media@5wpr.com](mailto:media@5wpr.com) ·  
Research licensing: [research@5wpr.com](mailto:research@5wpr.com)