

CONVERSATIONS

A publication for College of Communication alumni

DEPAUL
UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION



Senior Conrad Bielic traveled to Hungary to participate in the Budapest Forum, the final round of the Global Debate and Public Policy Challenge, an international scholarship competition for undergraduates. Read more on page 7.

Winter 2014

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Students gain public relations experience in summer apprenticeship program

Alex Munoz, a sophomore at Holy Trinity High School, aspires to become a professional soccer player or a pediatrician, but as a backup plan, he's considering the public relations field. Six months ago, Munoz didn't even know public relations existed as a term, much less a possible career path, so his interest in the industry speaks volumes about the Midtown Center for Boys College Orientation Program in Public Relations/Communications. The nonprofit organization partnered with DePaul to secure a \$25,000 grant from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Foundation in support of its summer program, and recent graduate Aaron Westbrook (CMN MA '14) served as lead instructor.

Notwithstanding their stellar academic records, the 13 young men enrolled in the competitive program represent a demographic that doesn't typically enter the public relations profession. "Midtown's students come from low-income families and economically distressed neighborhoods," says Ron Culp, instructor and professional director of the Public Relations and Advertising (PRAD) MA program, who co-wrote the grant proposal with Bob Kornecki, adjunct lecturer. "Per the PRSA Foundation's own mandate, there's a need to increase the recruitment, retention and advancement of underrepresented groups in PR, and we saw this partnership as a step in the right direction." While the communications aspect of the program wasn't new—this is the sixth consecutive year that participants produced a weekly newspaper for the Midtown community—the PRSA funding facilitated the addition of compelling



public relations components, including site visits and guest speakers.

Westbrook, one of two recipients of the highly prestigious Ketchum Excellence in Public Relations Research Award, actually postponed the award's 10-week internship at Ketchum's New York City office in order to teach the Midtown program. "The opportunity to impact students both academically and personally was too inspiring and motivating to give up," he says. "Since most of the students had never heard of public relations or its function, the biggest challenge was educating them about PR and sustaining that engagement throughout the course." To achieve this goal, Westbrook's syllabus featured weekly themes, such as building essential skills, entertainment PR and ethics training.

Halfway through the 7-week program, the students visited two public relations agencies, Edelman and the San Jose Group, and the field trips truly brought the industry to life. "I knew that PR had to do with writing and reading, but what I learned is that you have to build a relationship with your audience," shares

15-year-old Baltazar Aguirre. "At Edelman, they were talking about social media and how you can find out in minutes, instead of weeks or days, what people think about your products." A devoted Twitter user, Aguirre quickly grasped the implications of using social media tools for public relations purposes.

His classmate Olajuwon Osinaike admires the industry's complexity. "It involves a lot more than I thought," he says. "You have to recruit people, make and revise a plan, and find your story." Osinaike focused especially on this latter

piece. "At first, it was hard to come up with ideas, but now I can find something interesting and fun to say even if I don't like the topic," he notes. Westbrook provided plenty of opportunities for students to develop their skills as PR practitioners. Classroom and take-home activities included impromptu speech-writing exercises, team brainstorming and breakout sessions, case study analyses and various other communication assignments.

For project ideas, Westbrook looked to his DePaul courses. "I continuously referred to notes, PowerPoint presentations and handouts from my professors," Westbrook says. "The content was graduate-level material, but I adapted the themes for a high school audience—and there's no question that teaching has enhanced my own knowledge and understanding of PR." While Aguirre, Munoz and Osinaike agree that they drew inspiration from Westbrook's dedication to the craft, their admiration went deeper than that. "I'm just glad he spent his free time on us," Munoz says. "I've learned a lot of material that will be useful for the future."