USING PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY:

PR PROFESSIONALS' COMPLEMENTARY ROLE IN SUCCESSFUL CSR PROGRAMS

by

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(Under the Direction of Bryan H. Reber)

ABSTRACT

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has increased significantly in academic research and professional practice since the 1970s, expanding from the business realm to the public relations field. Nevertheless, the perceptions of PR professionals and their relationship with CSR programs remain largely unstudied. Through in-depth interviews with 11 communications professionals in nine diverse companies with active corporate responsibility programs, this study examines the role of public relations in successful CSR programs. Overwhelmingly, interviewed professionals expressed positive perceptions of CSR initiatives but adamantly opposed public relations' ownership of the programs. Rather, these practitioners advocated a cross-functional approach with public relations in a supportive or complementary function. The results closely align with trade and mainstream literature. Accordance with academic literature is mixed. Result implications, study limitations, and future research areas are also discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Thesis; Corporate Social Responsibility; Public Relations; PR Roles; Public Relations Practitioners; Interviews

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPENDICES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

"Responsibility" in businesses has traditionally implied ethical practices toward the interests of major investors and shareholders. A corporation's only role in society was economic – to produce profit, provide jobs, and ignite economic growth and prosperity (Friedman, 1970). But along came literary icons such as Thoreau and Emerson who celebrated the beauty of nature and environmentalists, including those at the Sierra Club and the Environmental Protection Agency, who fought to reduce environmental destruction (Grillo, 2012). And corporate executives began to reconsider operation priorities and business models. Corporate responsibility expanded beyond early environmental concerns to include health and safety, education, human rights, women's rights, innovation, and volunteerism. The modern business era began.

Producing high-quality goods or services is no longer enough to fully succeed in today's corporate environment. Corporations are increasingly expected to act ethically in a manner that benefits all stakeholders in the surrounding community. As an intermediary between corporations and stakeholders, public relations is often involved in realizing these societal pressures. Despite these rising expectations and the proliferation of academic research on the topic, confusion and uncertainty continue to surround the popular concept of corporate social responsibility and its relationship to public relations. This thesis is designed to explore the PR-CSR connection through an extensive literature review and interviews. Research on corporate responsibility and the role of public relations is particularly relevant as CSR increases in popularity and continues to permeate the public relations field.

The concept of corporate social responsibility is maturing and solidifying in public relations and throughout the business community. Although the idea of corporate philanthropy or good citizenship has existed in the business literature for more than 30 years, it has only recently appeared in public relations literature. In the current business environment in which consumers have access to substantial information, corporations are held to a higher standard and expected to not only benefit shareholders, but to consider all stakeholders in daily operations (Grillo, 2012; Haque, 2011). Milton Friedman's (1970) theory of corporate profit maximization may no longer succeed as a business model. Instead, the concept of corporate social responsibility or corporate citizenship is an increasingly popular business strategy (Haque, 2011). Umair Haque, the director of Havas Media Labs and blogger for the Harvard Business Review, described this shift in expectations in his book, *Betterness: Economics for Humans* (2011):

> Responsibility is strongly associated with greater profitability, equity and asset returns, and shareholder value creation. But that's no longer good enough. Today, the bar is being raised; success is itself changing. Those are yesterday's definitions of success, and more importantly, arcing toward betterness lets companies begin outperforming on tomorrow's measures of success, which are going to hinge on the creation of real wealth. (Haque, 2011, Kindle ed., Loc 500)

This is not to say that businesses should ignore the traditional commitment to profitability. The corporate environment remains a crucial factor in the economic development and success of the country. A business must be profitable to survive and continue its "betterness" strategies in society. A recent article in *Georgia Trend* highlights the top-performing businesses in the state of Georgia on the basis of responsible and sustainable actions (Grillo, 2012). According to research conducted by Ernst & Young and GreenBiz Group, 74 percent of the 272 survey respondents cited cost reduction as the primary reason for their company's sustainability efforts, followed by stakeholder expectations, managing risk, and generating revenue (Grillo, 2012). This profitability

agenda is often criticized by observers; however, in interviews included in this article, corporate

executives defend CSR programs with this motivation (Grillo, 2012). "Sustainability has to have the

profitability angle. If you're not profitable, you're not sustainable," says Jenny Cross, global

sustainability director for Mohawk Industries, ranked No. 3 for responsibility efforts among

companies located in the state of Georgia (Grillo, 2012, p. 45).

In addition to cost reduction, research increasingly demonstrates that an organization's

perceived corporate social responsibility factors into consumers' regard for the organization

(Barens, van Riel & van Rekom, 2007). Barens et al. (2007) explored the relationship between

consumers' evaluation of corporate responsibility versus corporate ability and concluded that CSR

indicators significantly impact the evaluation of a firm when the judgment is not directly related to

a product. Corporate ability continues to dominate assessments of goods and services, particularly

when the products are viewed as personally relevant to the consumer (Barens, van Riel & van

Rekom, 2007). Positive corporate ability was able to compensate for lower perceptions of corporate

responsibility performance; the reverse is also true except when corporate ability personally affects

the individual (Barens, van Riel & van Rekom, 2007). This research indicates the growing

importance of corporate social responsibility as a factor in the perceptions of a corporation.

Consumer evaluations of corporations are particularly relevant as Americans and citizens

around the globe quickly lose faith in their respective political systems. Ariel Schwartz, senior

editor at Co.Exist, an innovation-focused news outlet, explores this trend and the corresponding

shift to power through consumer choices. According to her discussion of a study by international

communication group Havas Worldwide, individuals are filling the void left by the loss of

confidence in governments with an increasing respect for good corporate citizenship and socially-

minded actions (Schwartz, 2012). Consumers are increasingly expecting businesses to behave

ethically and responsibly. Schwartz (2012) claims that these expectations are transitioning into

consumer influence and a new definition of "good citizenship." According to the study, 80 percent of

prosumers, or early-adopters who influence global markets, and 65 percent of conventional consumers indicated that they hold businesses as responsible as governments for encouraging positive social change (Schwartz, 2012). Consequently, citizens are attempting to exercise civic power through consumer purchases from responsible businesses rather than depending solely on traditional political elections.

The conception of the "responsible corporation model" as a potential political-economic system is also discussed in the literature of the political science and comparative politics fields (Crouch, 2008). For example, Colin Crouch (2008) suggests that governments will increasingly rely on corporations to achieve policy goals previously fulfilled by government and contracted agencies. Though it is not within the scope of this study to explore the literature in these fields, it is nevertheless important to note the expansion of the corporate responsibility concept, the significance of CSR in the political arena, and the value of a successful public relations role in the programs.

As consumers become increasingly aware of corporate responsibility programs, they demand more than window-dressing programs. According to the 2012 Cone Communication Corporate Social Return Tracker, 84 percent of Americans hold companies accountable for producing and communicating the results of sustainability programs ("Consumers demand more," 2012). Executive Vice President of Cone Communications, Jonathan Yohannan, emphasizes the important implications for responsible businesses: "Purpose is no longer enough, and successful campaigns must demonstrate return for businesses, brand and society. 'Proving purpose' is the new mantra for effective CSR" ("Consumers demand more," 2012). Moreover, the Cone study also indicated that consumers were more likely to trust and purchase products from a responsible company ("Consumers demand more," 2012). These increasing expectations indicate the significance of corporate responsibility programs and suggest a possible relationship with public relations in communicating the proof of positive results.

Despite the growing consumer pressures and number of corporate responsibility efforts, disunity and criticism challenge further development. In March 2012, the Corporate Responsibility Officers Association (CROA) and the Business Civic Leadership Center published the results of a multifaceted research and development program about the current state of the CSR profession. The Corporate Responsibility Officers Association is the largest independent community of professionals designed to promote and advance the practice of CSR, improve the role of businesses in society, and embed corporate citizenship behavior in corporations ("Corporate Responsibility Officer Association"). Through interviews with professionals and academics and an electronic survey of CSR professionals, CROA determined that the corporate responsibility field is still a young profession without a deliberate career path or defined leaders ("The state of," 2012). CSR professionals hold a variety of titles and responsibilities and many business leaders lack a clear concept of the CSR department. The research also reported that many CSR professionals are ambivalent about their jobs, "disturbingly apathetic," and pessimistic about the future of the disparate field, illustrating the negative impact of disorganization in the professional practice and implementation of corporate responsibility initiatives ("The state of," 2012). This fragmentation and lack of consensus extends beyond professional practice and it particularly evident in the academic literature, discussed more below.

Pressures from citizens combined with a lack of consensus and skepticism within the field contributes to unsuccessful development and implementation of CSR programs, as suggested by the CROA results and evidenced in both academic and trade literature. Consequently, corporate social responsibility programs often fail to achieve the desired results and crumble beneath public scrutiny and skepticism regarding the corporation's motives. In a volatile economic environment, the potential of corporate social responsibility to produce a sizeable impact on the surrounding communities is, in part, what drives the interest and persistent promotion of the concept. Although ambiguity of corporate social responsibility is required to allow each corporation to adapt CSR

programs and policies to specific conditions, a degree of continuity and uniformity within the concept is required for future success and advancement. Conceptually defining the general relationship between CSR and PR will advance and organize the scholarship, reduce the level of cynicism surrounding CSR and, ultimately, increase the development and efficient execution of beneficial programs.

It is the objective of this study to clarify the fragmented corporate social responsibility research by examining its professional application to produce a concise illustration of the relationship between CSR and public relations. With this relationship revealed, public relations practitioners can better understand corporate social responsibility programs, their importance and the opportunities offered. By interviewing professionals in companies with the most successful corporate social responsibility programs, the results of this study will identify "best practices" and serve as a blueprint for organizations seeking to develop and execute vibrant responsibility programs. This research will add to the current academic perspectives and theories through the incorporation of practical experiences and applicable CSR strategies.

CHAPTER 2

THEORY

Many theories attempt to define CSR, the motivations to pursue responsibility programs, mechanisms of proper execution, and measurement possibilities. Garriga and Mele (2004) divide these theories into integrative theories, political theories, instrumental theories, and ethical theories. Lance Moir's (2001) research identifies stakeholder theory, social contracts theory and legitimacy theory as the most-referenced theories in CSR literature.

Stakeholder theory is classified as an ethical theory which focuses on the goal to achieve good in society, according to Garriga and Mele's (2004) typology. In the management literature, Freeman (1984) discusses the logic of a stakeholder approach to strategic management. He promotes using the stakeholder relationship to analyze strategy, rather than the traditional approach of development, implementation and execution (Freeman, 1984). This stakeholder perspective requires consideration of the effects of behaviors on all stakeholders, including shareholders, and an understanding of stakeholder values, backgrounds and interests (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholder theory posits that businesses implement CSR programs to meet the needs of all stakeholders, not solely corporate shareholders (Moir, 2001). Because of public relations' boundary-spanning position between the organization and its stakeholders, this theory emphasizes the complementary nature of PR and CSR.

Though Freeman (1984) suggests that stakeholder theory renders CSR superfluous, in a later work (Freeman, 1994) he uses the stakeholder concept to combine and analyze business and ethical considerations at all levels. Jones (1995), as quoted in McWilliams, Siegel and Wright (2006), builds on stakeholder theory to suggest that an organization will have a long-term incentive

to act ethically toward stakeholders. This ethical behavior will benefit the firm through repeated interactions with stakeholders on the basis of trust. Though stakeholder theory is widely-cited and adequately explains the growing trend of corporate social responsibility, a divide exists in the approach whether this perspective should be considered a coherent, normative theory or a grouping of descriptive, explanatory theories (Moir, 2001). Moir (2001) also highlights the questions among scholars whether stakeholder considerations serve as a primary driver for corporate social responsibility, and, if so, which stakeholders.

According to social contracts theory, businesses act in a socially responsible manner because it is expected by the public, as dictated by socially constructed contracts between members of society. Garriga and Mele (2004) classify social contracts theory as a political theory which emphasizes a responsible use of business power within the political and societal arena. Management scholars Donaldson and Dunfee (1994) propose an integrated social contracts theory which combines (1) a normative, hypothetical contract among economic and societal members, and (2) an implicit contract among specific community members. Donaldson and Dunfee's (1994) approach provides a way for managers to consider decisions in the complex ethical framework and accounts for culture- and industry-specific expectations. Moir (2001) and Donaldson and Dunfee (1994) suggest that corporate social responsibility programs are implemented not for commercial or business interests, as promoted by stakeholder theory, but to fulfill community expectations or "contracts."

Finally, according to legitimacy theory, CSR policies are viewed as a tool to obtain legitimacy and publicity within the organization's surrounding community (Moir, 2001). Lindblom, as cited in Moir (2001), suggests that organizations may employ strategies to educate stakeholders, change the perceptions of the organization, alter external expectations, or draw attention away from negative issues. Campbell (2002) links corporate social reporting to legitimacy theory, suggesting that an organization publishes CSR reports to justify its actions and augment its authenticity. In a

study of CSR reporting by Portuguese banks, Branco and Rodrigues (2006) support Campbell's

(2002) argument and conclude that social responsibility disclosure may be used to strengthen

legitimacy. However, Guthrie and Parker's (2012) historical analysis of the social disclosure reports

from an Australian manufacturing corporation challenges the explanatory link between corporate

social reporting and legitimacy theory. As the public representation of an organization, it is often

the responsibility of public relations professionals to obtain and foster corporate legitimacy, further

reinforcing the PR-CSR relationship.

In short, stakeholder theory emphasizes public relations' role of boundary-spanning to

facilitate the integration of stakeholder interests into business decisions. Social contracts theory

suggests that corporate responsibility programs are implemented to fulfill public expectations. In

this perspective, public relations can be viewed as an intermediary to identify external expectations

and communicate programs. Finally, according to legitimacy theory, CSR programs increase the

legitimacy and validity of corporations. Public relations professionals serve a communications

function, developing and publishing the transparent reports which often facilitate an increase in

legitimacy.

Despite the evident relationship to public relations, these three unique theoretical

perceptions of corporate social responsibility exemplify the diverging nature of CSR scholarship.

This study of the PR-CSR association will advance these theories and offer guidance to public

relations professionals charged with the responsibility of developing, conducting and defending

CSR programs.

The literature review served dual purposes in this research: (1) to inform the context of

corporate social responsibility literature and (2) to provide a scholarly perspective with which

professionals' views can be compared. The extensive review of literature appears in the analysis of

results but generated the following research questions.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research study aims to provide a broad overview of the relationship between corporate social responsibility and the practice of public relations in the United States, highlighting the prevailing trends and conceptualizations of CSR in order to serve as a foundation for future research. The first research objective (RQ1) which addresses the PR-CSR link is accompanied by two, secondary research questions (RQ1.a and RQ1.b). These questions analyze more specific research areas and are intended to capture any trends which may emerge through the research process. The second research question (RQ2) is designed to address contradictory previous research which suggests that public relations professionals control CSR programs but that practitioners alone are not adequately equipped to guide comprehensive corporate social responsibility programs. The supplementary questions to RQ2 identify the role of public relations and place corporate social responsibility within the broader organizational framework.

RQ1: What are PR professionals' opinions and perceptions of corporate social responsibility and its relationship with public relations practice?

> **RQ1.a:** Are CSR programs primarily used to accomplish a specific function of public relations (i.e., crisis prevention, reputation management, etc.)?
>
> **RQ1.b:** How are the characterizations of corporate social responsibility different between scholars and professionals?

RQ2: Are public relations professionals the appropriate group to handle the development and implementation of corporate social responsibility programs?

      RQ2.a: What role should PR play in CSR programs?

      RQ2.b: What department should control CSR programs?

      These research questions seek to determine the successful PR-CSR relationship models used by organizations praised for their responsibility programs. By comparing the professionals' comments to academic literature, the results can contribute to current scholarship by identifying the most professionally-applicable areas of study. The research questions were analyzed using in-depth interviews and an extensive review of academic and trade literature. A discussion of this methodology appears next, followed by an analysis of results, implications for academia and professional practice, limitations, and potential areas of future study.

CHAPTER 4

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The methodology for this project consisted of a broad survey of relevant literature followed by in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners involved in corporate responsibility programs. Research began with an extensive review of the corporate social responsibility scholarship to identify the current CSR trends and perceptions. Literature selection includes academic research and mainstream media articles about the purpose of corporate responsibility programs and their relationship to the public relations function of an organization. Academic literature was primarily drawn from communication and public relations journals; however, management journals which addressed the role of communication were also included. Mainstream media included a selection of news articles targeted to the broader public and trade-related blog posts. The extensive analysis of literature informed the development of interview guides and provided the academic perspective for comparison in with interview comments.

Interviews with 11 public relations professionals in nine corporations provided a detailed and more practical perspective of CSR opinions and practices. In-depth interviews were used to obtain the deeper information and understandings which come from talking to individuals about their experiences and insights. Interviews also allowed follow-up questions and clarifications to better understand the information and reveal insights missed by surveys. As eloquently expressed in Hermanowicz's (2002) guide to successful interviewing, this method is "among the most basic and fundamental of methods, and one which, if executed well, brings us arguably closer than many other methods to an intimate understanding of people and their social worlds" (p. 480). These interviews included discussions with a select group of public relations professionals actively involved in successful CSR programs.

Participating professionals worked in corporations across the business spectrum, including consumer goods, industrial manufacturing, technology innovation, and business-to-business. The 11 professionals were predominately women, with only three male participants. Seven of those interviewed were located in their corporate communications or media relations departments; the remaining four worked in the CSR department or handled only CSR communications. All of these professionals boasted many years of communication and corporate responsibility experience at their current organization, and many spoke of prior experiences at corporations with or without CSR programs. This extensive and diversified experience facilitated comparisons between their current and previous positions. Participants were based in companies across the United States from New York to Texas, Chicago to California. Individual descriptions of the participants have been omitted to preserve the confidentiality necessary to ensure candid and truthful conversations. The interviews revealed practical and professional application of corporate social responsibility in the public relations field.

Each year many organizations attempt to evaluate and rank the most socially responsible companies in the United States and across the globe. According to *Corporate Responsibility Magazine* executives, these rankings increasingly influence company stakeholders, from investors to consumers, by offering an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of corporate responsibility programs ("CR magazine corporate").

Professionals were selected from available responsibility rankings due to their expertise and experience in the planning, development and execution of corporate social responsibility programs, both domestically and internationally. The corporate responsibility lists used included *Corporate Responsibility Magazine's* 100 Best Corporate Citizens 2010, Boston College Carroll School of Management's Most Socially Responsible Companies 2010, the 2012 Global 100 List, and Forbes' Companies with the Best CSR Reputation (CR's 100 best; *The 2010 corporate*; *2012 global 100*; Smith, 2012). These lists are independently researched and evaluated based on disclosure

policy and performance. Seven categories of CSR were used for the assessments including governance, environment, climate change, human rights, employee-relations, philanthropy and finance (CR's 100 best; *The 2010 corporate*). Recruited companies were listed on at least one of the aforementioned rankings and were all United States-based corporations. Limiting selection to only successful companies introduces a degree of selection bias into this research. However, this population was necessary for the purpose of this study to determine the "best practices" of PR's role in CSR programs. Nevertheless, this selection bias prevents broad, definitive conclusions.

Companies included on more than one list were recruited initially. All companies with websites that discouraged interviews or strongly promoted pages containing information for student projects were discarded from the list. Professionals were contacted via email addresses located on corporate websites or through referrals from personal contacts (see recruitment email in Appendix A). Companies with specific public relations or media contact information on websites were contacted first; customer service contact forms were used only if necessary and with limited success. In total, interview requests were sent to sixty-five unique companies.

Telephone interviews were conducted for the convenience and practicality of this method in spanning large geographic distances. Although an interview guide (see Appendix B) was used as a reference point, each interview was semi-structured and informal, guided by the flow of the conversation and the comments of each professional. The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed the flexibility to discuss unexpected but relevant topics. Many of the interesting and revealing comments resulted from unplanned conversations. Nevertheless, the majority of the interview guide questions were covered in some form during each interview to achieve consistency.

The interviews began with a verbal informed consent (included in the introduction to the interview guide in Appendix B) and broad questions about the organizations' CSR programs. Each conversation lasted approximately 30 minutes. Questions explored personal experiences and perceptions about the PR-CSR relationship. Each interview was recorded with permission from the

interviewed professionals. The interview sample size was small, but produced consistent results. Interviews were conducted until a saturation of information was achieved, as evidenced by consistency and repetition between professionals' answers. These accounts of informed opinions supplemented and provided a human-interest element to the literature review. Presentation of these results appears next, followed by analysis and discussion.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH

The in-depth interviews revealed a strong consensus among participants regarding their support for corporate responsibility and the role of public relations. The results are interrelated and depict a similar model of the PR-CSR relationship used by many of the highly-praised corporate responsibility programs. The results are organized according to the research questions.

Professionals' Opinions and Perceptions

(RQ1: What are PR professionals' opinions and perceptions of corporate social responsibility and its relationship with public relations practice?)

The interviewed public relations professionals shared a strong, positive perception of their organization's corporate responsibility programs. According to the interviewees, the support for corporate responsibility programs extends through all levels of their organizations, from the executives to the independent contractors. Many noted a shift in the conceptualization and approach to responsibility programs, corresponding to the growing support for CSR initiatives:

> In the old days, corporate responsibility programs meant writing a check, walking away and hoping for the best. We have helped pioneer what I think is now a trend to provide pro bono services that are skilled in nature, not just serving food in a soup kitchen, which is important work, but just about anyone can do that... what we do is harness the expertise of our employees to help cities. ("Interview 1," 2013)

Companies are moving toward more active responsibility programs, leveraging company capabilities and employees' skills to produce the greatest positive impact on surrounding communities and the broader society. These active programs illustrate the strong support for

corporate responsibility within the company through extensive volunteerism. Nearly all of the

interviewed professionals indicated reliance on employees' expertise for program development and

promotion of volunteer hours; one corporation developed a "global volunteer day" to encourage

employees' activities ("Interview 9," 2013). Several mentioned the cost-effective benefits of

employee volunteerism. Not only is it an inexpensive way to make a substantial impact in the

community, but it also humanizes the company. One professional involved in CSR planning,

execution and communication explained, "When you have employees engaged in the community,

we're not that big faceless corporation that might take up a city block… We're not the plant down

the street behind the gate. We're your neighbors… we're part of the community" ("Interview 2,"

2013). This trend of greater involvement extends across companies, business sectors, private and

government-regulated firms, and even national borders. With most of the interviewed firms

boasting international reach, this trend of active corporate responsibility is evident in each of their

offices.

Linked to the strong positive perceptions of corporate responsibility, the professionals also

indicated that CSR programs are not intended to serve solely public relations goals. The following

section discusses the association between CSR programs, PR goals and business strategies.

Using CSR for PR Goals

(RQ1.a: Are CSR programs primarily used to accomplish a specific function of public relations (i.e.,
crisis prevention, reputation management, etc.)?)

Professionals indicated that public relations goals are viewed not as the driver of the CSR

programs but as a secondary consideration. Nevertheless, professionals conceded several PR

objectives, including reputation-building, mitigating risk and increasing shareholder value, were

met by well-managed corporate social responsibility programs. With each mention of PR goals,

professionals were quick to qualify the statement and stress that achievement of these goals is not

the primary motivation, lest their programs be viewed as illegitimate. One practitioner discussed

CSR's role in developing a reputation and benevolence: "I think it creates a certain amount of goodwill, except that isn't why you do it" ("Interview 2," 2013). Another took the perspective of managing risk and preventing criticism: "It helps us mitigate risk, as well. So we want to make sure that we're being good stewards so that others don't feel like they need to attack us. We want to be doing it anyway... doing the right thing" ("Interview 4," 2013). Another emphasized that responsibility programs can "increase shareholder value and increase investment within the company through the social responsibility work as well as reputation" ("Interview 6," 2013).

Despite the links to PR goals, many of these professionals appeared uncomfortable directly linking corporate responsibility programs to traditional public relations goals. Rather, they preferred to highlight the altruistic nature of the programs: "Our primary concern is the community" ("Interview 1," 2013). Another professional noted the media-friendly nature of responsibility programs as a convenient and positive byproduct: "We don't do things just because it makes for good press. We do it regardless; it just so happens that much of what we do is media friendly" ("Interview 1," 2013). Most conveyed broad, philanthropic motivations: "We like for the communities we serve to be better off because we were there" ("Interview 3," 2013). Another extended the altruism around the world: "I would see a long-term vision being that our impact on the world, the people, the community, the natural resources around us... the only impacts that we have are positive" ("Interview 4," 2013). Professionals indicated that these multinational corporations attempt to fulfill the sweeping goals through the integration of corporate responsibility throughout the company, domestically and abroad, emphasizing the necessity of culturally embedding at all levels.

While emphasizing the integrated nature of corporate responsibility, interviewed professionals emphasized that corporate responsibility programs are tied to business goals rather than public relations goals. One professional identified three broad strategies: (1) inspire our employees, (2) discover ways to improve the community, and (3) impact business ("Interview 5,"

2013). Most viewed CSR as a long-term investment in the growth and development of the business and society ("Interview 1," 2013; "Interview 2," 2013; "Interview 7," 2013): "It is complementary to our business goals of serving cities and we're also doing something on the CSR side that is helping businesses as well" ("Interview 1," 2013). Another professional linked CSR initiatives to corporate beliefs: "I think they all eventually meet business goals because we are building stronger communities, we are engaged in our community and we are meeting one of our core values which is to improve the communities in which we serve" ("Interview 2," 2013). Still another emphasized shared benefits between the business and society at large: "Someone who builds new innovation, builds new technology, not only benefits a business but the world" ("Interview 7," 2013).

More specifically, responsibility programs often enhance a skilled workforce ("Interview 1," 2013; "Interview 2," 2013; "Interview 7," 2013), aid in recruiting dedicated and socially responsible new employees ("Interview 1," 2013; "Interview 2," 2013; "Interview 7," 2013), contribute to leadership and development of current employees ("Interview 7," 2013), and augment employee satisfaction ("Interview 2," 2013). However, the strongest repetition existed in the concept of fostering a strong community to breed a strong business: "We know that to have sustainable business, our communities also have to be sustainable" ("Interview 4," 2013). "We can't have a strong, vibrant [company] if the communities in which we are located aren't strong themselves" ("Interview 2," 2013). Finally, another phrased it in economic terms: "We want to build the economy that we go into because if it grows then we grow, and if it is healthy, environmentally good, stable environments in our city or state, then that's great for us" ("Interview 3," 2013).

The common thread through all of the conversations was that corporate social responsibility serves business goals and, subsequently, public relations goals. Public relations goals are also intended serve the business, consequently, the public relations and corporate responsibility goals simultaneously promote the growth, development and success of business strategies. This perspective was reflected in trade publications but absent in much of the academic

literature, discussed below. The next section compares academic and trade literature with professionals' comments.

Comparing Academic and Trade Literature

(RQ1.b: How are the characterizations of corporate social responsibility different between scholars and professionals?)

The academic and mainstream literatures seemingly differ in the perception of corporate social responsibility and the role of public relations. As an emerging field, particularly in public relations academia, multiple and contrasting perspectives are evident in the academic literature, creating a cumbersome collection without a strong consensus. Since CSR's transition from business to communication literature, public relations academic scholarship more closely links corporate responsibility initiatives and public relations. Much of the mainstream and trade media, however, promote a more integrated approach in which public relations maintains a role in CSR programs but has less authority than is suggested by academic research. A slightly stronger consensus exists in the professional field and is reflected in the trade literature.

CSR and Public Relations in Academic Literature

The academic literature reviewed in this study exemplified disunity and fragmentation of corporate social responsibility research in public relations publications. The agreement between this literature and the results from professional interviews is mixed. Scholars and professionals both identify the skepticism toward corporate social responsibility and similar public relations goals which can be served by CSR programs, but professionals were more optimistic and confident in the current success of many programs.

Though a collection of corporate social responsibility research has emerged in the public relations literature, this research is divided among the many different subfields of public relations, and the responsibilities of communicators remain unclear. As Ruiz (2006) explains in his study of social responsibility and corporate identity attractiveness, CSR conceptualizations differ among

scholars, and perhaps more importantly, among companies: "CSR has emerged in recent years as both an important academic construct and a pressing corporate agenda item, although it reveals itself among large companies not as a uniform concept but as a variety of conceptions" (Ruiz, 2006). Many recent publications illustrate the fragmented character of the CSR concept.

Lance Moir (2001), a British CSR scholar, poses several questions at the beginning of his exploration of CSR theories and measurement perspectives: "But what is meant by Corporate Social Responsibility? Responsibility for what and to whom and who is calling for firms to be socially responsible?" (Moir, 2001, p. 1). These simple questions illustrate the current confusion in corporate social responsibility research and practice within the public relations field, and serve as the foundation for this research.

Lee, Mak and Pang (2012) illustrate a more concrete example of this debate in their study of corporate responsibility efforts among small- and medium-sized enterprises in Singapore through in-depth interviews and an online survey. The researchers found that though public relations practitioners indicated a moderate level of awareness of the notion of corporate responsibility, they simultaneously exemplified a low comprehension of the concept. Corporate responsibility public engagement focused on immediate stakeholders, and programs were primarily driven by individual executive values, stakeholder relationships and governmental influences (Lee, Mak & Pang, 2012). Despite the growing economic position of the small- and medium-sized firms and the growing popularity of corporate social responsibility, these findings, along with Moir (2001), indicate a lack of full comprehension by public relations practitioners.

Where awareness and comprehension exists, fragmentation dominates. Attempts to define CSR by Carroll (1999) and Dahlsrud (2006) demonstrate the divergence of corporate responsibility concepts. In his 1999 publication in *Business & Society*, Archie Carroll explores the evolution of corporate social responsibility in search of an accepted definition. Through his discussion, Carroll reviews countless explanations of CSR ranging from a managerial outlook to a socio-cultural

system. The conceptualization of corporate responsibility emerged as early as the 1920s but began to solidify in the 1950s with the materialization of the "modern era" and Howard Bowen's (1953) book, *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*. Definitions of CSR began to flourish and become more specific in the 1970s as the alternative concepts of corporate social responsiveness and corporate social performance emerged. The 1980s produced attempts to measure and research corporate social responsibility actions. In the 1990s, corporate social responsibility transitioned and expanded to include stakeholder theory, business ethics theory and corporate citizenship (Carroll, 1999).

In 1979 and again in 1999, Carroll proposed a four-part definition of corporate social responsibility which still holds as the most cited definition of the field: "The social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time" (Carroll, 1979, p. 500). This definition exemplifies the breadth of corporate responsibility and presents a challenge to the consolidation of CSR approaches. As illustrated by Carroll (1999), CSR has endured several stages of development and continues to transition as the business environment alters. The proliferation of definitions addressed in Carroll's (1999) discussion further illustrates the diversity which continues to exist in the field.

Alexander Dahlsrud (2006) emphasizes the lack of unity within the study of corporate social responsibility through the content analysis of 37 commonly cited definitions. Dahlsrud (2006) identified five "dimensions" of CSR prevalent in most of the definitions: environmental, social, business and society relationship, economic, and stakeholder dimensions. Despite these similarities, many commonly cited definitions highlight particular features of CSR practice in differing social contexts, creating confusion and clutter within the field. Dahlsrud (2006) concludes, "the problem is rather that there is an abundance of definitions which are… often biased toward specific interests and thus prevent the development and implementations of the concept" (p. 1). Of

the definitions analyzed, none offered a description of optimal performance; instead, each suggested that performance is determined by the specific business, allowing businesses to personalize measurements, thus preventing standardization. Dahlsrud (2006) notes that these definitions characterize CSR as a broader phenomenon, not as a business process.

To summarize, since its transition into public relations literature, CSR has become an extremely popular topic of discussion; however, a distinctive subfield has yet to emerge. An official or widely accepted definition does not exist within the CSR research and many professionals lack adequate understanding of what the concept encompasses. These debates regarding conceptualizations were absent in the professionals' comments.

Interviews with professionals diverged from this literature in the practitioners' strong grasp on the concept, demonstrated knowledge of corporate responsibility, and confidence in many companies' successful programs. Although none explicitly defined "corporate social responsibility," all seemed to exhibit a common understanding of the concept. Unlike the academic literature, professionals seem to struggle less to present a unified image of CSR initiatives, as exemplified by the consistency among the interviews. It should be noted that a degree of this consensus and definition of CSR can be attributed to the limited selection to successful CSR professionals.

In addition to fragmentation in the scholarship, extensive skepticism and criticism of corporate social responsibility are also evident. Despite the proliferation of research, many believe that corporate social responsibility is simply an invention of public relations. Peter Frankental (2001), a UK-based scholar, exposes the intrinsic paradoxes in the concept of corporate social responsibility. He asserts that corporate social responsibility policies contradict the competitive advantage goals and shareholder-centric view of businesses, identifying the critique of profitability with responsibility (Frankental, 2001; Grillo, 2012). According to Frankental (2001), CSR should have a commonly-understood definition, a universal set of measurement standards, internal and external verification requirements, and a centralized location within the business structure to be

considered anything but a creation of PR practitioners. The author highlights the denial of wrongdoings, excessive promotion of successes, and disregard for human rights by many businesses as proof of the shallowness of responsibility programs. He concludes that CSR will remain an invention and tool of public relations until all stakeholders (not solely company shareholders) are acknowledged, company governance conforms to CSR principles, a definition is accepted by the majority of scholars, and CSR programs are verified and rewarded by external publics (Frankental, 2001).

The degree of skepticism toward corporate responsibility and PR-centered programs identified in Frankental (2001) varies worldwide. A University of Michigan sociology study notes that often corporations in the developed world offer shallower CSR promises and fewer reporting efforts than comparable companies in the developing world (Tsutsui & Lim, 2011). The researchers attempt to explain this disparity by suggesting that companies in the developed world adopt CSR programs to appease citizens but lack true commitment to initiatives (Tsutsui & Lim, 2011). This 'appeasement of consumers' explanation corresponds with assertions in trade and mainstream media that citizens are demanding more from companies (Schwartz, 2012; "Consumers demand more," 2012). The lack of transparency, goals of appeasement, and disparity between programs breeds criticism of corporate responsibility programs in developed and developing countries alike.

The potential for CSR programs to achieve public relations objectives is also evident in both academic thought and professional interviews. Public relations is situated in an intermediary position between an organization and its publics. Sharpe (1986) notes, "Standards for the performance of public relations must be stated in terms of the overall public interest and welfare, but at the same time must protect the right of the organization, individual or special-interest group to seek public understanding and support" (p. 17). Public relations professionals must balance organizational interests with those of the broader public sphere – both of which are addressed through corporate social responsibility initiatives.

Kim and Reber's (2006) study of corporate social responsibility and PR professionalism surveyed 289 PRSA members. Their results indicated that professionals held a "slightly positive" perception of corporate responsibility programs (Kim & Reber 2006, p. 65). In contrast, the professionals interviewed in this study indicated very positive and supportive perspectives of corporate responsibility. Furthermore, Kim and Reber (2006) also concluded that professionals disagreed with the statement that "presenting all sides of an issue and providing an objective appraisal of conflicting opinions is not only the job of news media, but also public relations" (Kim & Reber 2006, p. 66). This finding suggests hesitancy toward transparency. Although the specific wording included in the Kim and Reber (2006) survey was not replicated in this study, professionals generally indicated positive perceptions toward transparency when possible, often citing Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards. These discrepancies could be attributed to the growth in CSR efforts since 2006 or the different samples – one from the broad PRSA membership, another from corporations with successful CSR programs.

Like the scholars, interviewed public relations professionals identified the suspicion and criticism toward corporate social responsibility programs and their role as communicators, particularly in discussions about greenwashing. Moreover, many noted the challenge posed by lingering negative reputation of public relations to increased PR involvement or ownership of responsibility efforts. However, the interviews revealed techniques used to actively counter public criticism through transparent reporting of results and a culture-based approach to CSR. This optimism for the future growth and acceptance of corporate social responsibility was lacking in academic scholarship.

In many of the academic articles, emphasis is primarily on the public relations objectives that can be achieved by CSR. According to the literature, several areas of categorization emerge including reputation management (Sohn & Lariscy, forthcoming), crisis prevention (Toyne, 2004),

and the conscience of an organization (Ruiz, 2006; Carroll & Shabana, 2011). This direct association of CSR and PR goals contributes to the criticism evident in the academic literature.

Corporate responsibility programs are linked to corporate reputation because of the positive corporate image portrayed to stakeholders impacted by CSR programs. Sohn and Lariscy's (forthcoming) study of crises demonstrated the severe negative impact of a CSR crisis on stakeholder trust, indicating a strong link between the two concepts. The authors summarize their findings linking corporate responsibility to the public relations' objective of trust-building: "by demonstrating the severe impact of a CSR crisis on trust, this study provides empirical evidence of the link between CSR activities and trust" (Sohn & Lariscy, forthcoming, p. 12). As stewards of corporate trust, public relations professionals may use CSR programs to foster and maintain stakeholder confidence. Related, Toyne (2004) praises CSR's role in risk management and crisis prevention. Organizations can reduce the negative publicity in crisis situations by generating a positive image in normal times (Toyne, 2004). In this way, organizations create a buffer of goodwill and trust to reduce criticism when a crisis occurs.

Social responsibility is also associated with PR's role as the conscience of the organization since the consideration of broader stakeholders can promote ethical, mutually-beneficial actions (Ruiz, 2006; Carroll & Shabana). Other research links corporate responsibility influence in the corporate decision-making process to the strategic planning and competitive advantage functions of public relations (McWilliams, Siegel & Wright, 2006; Falck & Heblich, 2007; Carroll & Shabana, 2011). As public relations develops long-term strategic plans, professionals may consider the benefits of corporate social responsibility programs and factor CSR communication efforts into PR strategies.

Though public relations professionals identified similar goals advanced by CSR programs, the PR professionals had a more comprehensive perspective of their corporate responsibility programs, emphasizing the business and societal goals served and relegating PR goals to a

secondary position. As discussed in the previous section, practitioners linked CSR programs to community development and long-term business investments; public relations goals are a secondary benefit but not a motivating factor. More recent academic study suggests a trend away from PR-focused work, toward a more comprehensive approach.

Clark (2000) explores the relationship between corporate social responsibility and public relations through a comparison of what she views as two separate fields. Clark (2000) concludes that, though the connection between corporate PR and CSR is not fully developed, both disciplines promote the similar objective to better the quality of the relationship between an organization and key stakeholders. She emphasizes the ability of PR professionals to scan the political, social and historical environment and the role of communication in building stakeholder relationships through public relations tactics and corporate social responsibility (Clark, 2000). These arguments correspond closely to the opinions of the public relations professionals who also argued that corporate responsibility should not be subsumed under the PR department but the benefits of CSR in fostering connections with the surrounding community. However, Clark (2000) also suggested that corporate social responsibility professionals failed to recognize the importance of communication in their work, a finding at odds with professionals interviewed. This discrepancy could be attributed to a difference between CSR professionals and communication professionals, or the substantial development in the field since 2000. Nevertheless, similar to many scholars, Clark lacks the integrated approach evident in the professionals' interviews. Interviewed practitioners highlighted PR's communication role in CSR programs and emphasized the cooperation between the two departments to increase awareness of initiatives.

Patricia Zurita (2006) questions public relations' role in corporate responsibility programs, echoing Clark's (2000) conclusions. In her analysis of framing, Zurita asserts that, as a corporate management function, public relations has the responsibility to communicate and promote CSR programs (Zurita, 2006). Her findings are similar to the conclusion in Grillo (2012) that public

relations must explain the interconnectivity of profit and sustainability programs. Zurita (2006) also emphasizes that CSR is not the same as public relations. Rather, corporate responsibility programs should be a collective effort of public relations, management and employees.

Similar to Zurita, a graduate student at London's University of Westminster promotes an integrated approach to corporate responsibility: "CSR is, or at least in order to be effective should be, core of the business strategy. CSR is the way a company manages and communicates (PR's job) its impact on society" (A., 2011, Web log message). She tracks the evolution of corporate responsibility from its beginnings in philanthropic donations to current trends of embedding initiatives in the business and links sustainability initiatives to corporate reputations, awards and profitability (A., 2011). This academic shift toward a more embedded approach closely aligns with professionals' perceptions of corporate responsibility integrated at all levels of the business.

In summary, much of the academic literature reflects fragmentation, suggests a heightened role for public relations goals in CSR efforts, and emphasizes the contradictions between responsibility and profit goals. The perspective of the academic literature and focus on public relations goals could be a result of the segmented nature of academic departments and fields of study. The authors of the literature specifically focus on corporate social responsibility and public relations whereas the professionals in the field take a broader approach and highlight the integrated nature of business, CSR and public relations.

Professional Application of Theory

With regard to theories, much of the academic thought closely corresponds to ideas mentioned by public relations professionals active in corporate responsibility programs. Stakeholder theory, which proposes that corporate responsibility programs are implemented with consideration of all stakeholders, is evidenced by the professionals' sentiments that initiatives are meant primarily to do good for the community. As quoted previously, one professional active in CSR efforts, and echoed by others, described programs to benefit the community: "some of them we do

the program just because it's the right thing to do. It makes the community stronger" ("Interview 7," 2013). Similarly, other practitioners described consideration of stakeholder expectations in planning, executing, and communication CSR efforts ("Interview 5," 2013).

Social contracts theory was evidenced in professionals' discussions of stakeholder and community expectations of responsible actions. In particular, one practitioner noted the objective to earn their "social license to operate" through CSR efforts ("Interview 4," 2013). Another suggested a future increase in this social contract. She noted a growing challenge to organizations to develop unique programs and communications strategies in order to remain relevant in the competitive corporate responsibility environment ("Interview 9," 2013). According to this practitioner, as corporate responsibility increases in popularity, societal expectations or social contracts increase and force companies to be innovative in their programs.

Legitimacy theory was least apparent in the professionals' comments but was reflected in practitioners' use of transparent reporting to highlight the successes and failures of the CSR programs and fulfillment of the community's expectations. Reporting both goal achievements and shortcomings increases the legitimacy and validity of the responsibility efforts. Finally, according to some professionals, transparency and corporate responsibility can augment the legitimacy of the organization as a whole by becoming more than "just the plant down the road behind the gate" ("Interview 5," 2013). These three theories exemplified the closest alignment with professionals' comments. Though the participants did not mention the theories by name, all were discussed during the interviews.

CSR and Public Relations in Mainstream and Trade Literature

Trade and mainstream media mirrored professionals' positive opinions and support of corporate social responsibility. In his book addressing the trends which cause businesses to engage in CSR, Umair Haque (2011) discusses the importance and significance of what he terms "betterness." Haque (2011) cites three decades of research indicating that corporate social

performance increases equity returns, asset returns and profitability. According to an extensive review of this research, Harvard's Joshua Daniel Margolis and the University of Michigan's James P. Walsh report that corporate social performance is shown to have a positive relationship to financial performance in 53 percent, or 42 studies, as opposed to a negative relationship in only 5 percent of studies (Haque, 2011). The financial benefit of CSR programs increases the popularity and importance of CSR concept development. Through his research and argument, Haque (2011) asserts that corporate social responsibility has gained, and will continue to gain, significance in the current business environment:

> Rather, I'm suggesting that in a resource-constrained, hungry, transparent, winner-take-all world, what we're used to calling 'responsibility' and seeing as a luxury will be akin to table stakes in tomorrow's game, a competence necessary to enter the arena of human exchange. If you can't demonstrate that at the very least and at the barest minimum, you're not harming people, nature, communities, society, or tomorrow's generations, forget about vanquishing your rivals; you probably won't have a seat at the table. (Haque, 2011, Kindle ed., Loc 483)

However, like the academic scholarship, trade and mainstream media also recognized the fragmentation and skepticism which plagues corporate social responsibility programs. Perhaps this fragmentation is most evident in the results from the Corporate Responsibility Officers Association, discussed previously, indicating the lack of organization within the field and the displeasure of CSR professionals ("The state of," 2012). The diversity of titles and responsibility, and apathy and dissatisfaction exhibited by CSR professionals caused by disunity and criticism hinders further development and implementation of programs.

Similarly, the headline of an article in *The Economic Times* screams the skepticism often projected toward responsibility programs; it reads, "CSR: A cloak for crooks" (Aiyar, 2012). Aiyar defines CSR as an "ethical attitude, a determination to observe the highest standards" then

contrasts this definition with actual examples of companies (Aiyar, 2012). Two conclusions emerge from this opinion piece: (1) a company that swindles stakeholders can appear as the epitome of corporate ethics, and (2) CSR uses corporate spending on programs to hide severe misgovernance (Aiyar, 2012). Though this article studied Indian corporations, it nevertheless portrays the pervasive cynicism and demonstrates the challenges for responsible corporations.

Though trade literature recognizes the cleavages and distrust of corporate social responsibility, many authors, like the interviewed professionals, continued their support of CSR programs and expressed optimism in future development. A special report by *The Economist* (2008) argues that, despite growing popularity of CSR and increasing responsibility efforts, few companies have managed to develop comprehensive, cohesive corporate responsibility programs. This article attributes CSR's popularity to recent business scandals which tarnished reputations, consumer expectations, government regulations, and employee demand ("Just good business," 2008). The author is critical of these programs and contends that many efforts remain unfocused and only partially connected to business strategies ("Just good business," 2008). Yet these companies continue to shift from philanthropic giving to active volunteer-based programs across a broad range of activities, viewing programs as an opportunity to create value ("Just good business," 2008). Despite the continuing shortcomings, the introduction to this special report notes the sharp increase of CSR on executives' priorities and concludes that, when done well, CSR is not a façade but "just good business" ("Just good business," 2008).

In contrast to the themes which emerged through much of the academic literature review, professionals involved in corporate responsibility programs emphasized the integrated nature of successful initiatives and the supportive role of public relations. Although some recent academic literature, including Zurita's (2006) study of CSR framing, suggests an integrated and cross-functional approach to CSR, this theme is particularly present in the trade literature and mainstream media.

In another *Forbes*' piece, Klein (October 2012) blames a lack of integration as the reason for stalled CSR initiatives. In his interview with Aron Cramer, President and CEO of Business for Social Responsibility, Cramer suggests that CSR should be integrated into the core of business with strong accountability mechanisms, embedded into markets to promote long-term plans, and capitalize on empowered consumers to communicate and develop successful programs (Klein, October 2012). Klein (November 2012) emphasizes the impact of CSR programs on responsible hiring and employment of a skilled and productive workforce, benefits echoed by the professionals.

Continuing the trend of linking CSR to business goals, Aman Singh Das (2010), the corporate responsibility editor for the career information website Vault.com, discusses Edelman PR firm's approach to CSR. Das (2010) highlights the return on investment of CSR programs, citing indications of higher profits, and demands from shareholders, employees and clients. Moreover, Das (2010) points to a top-down approach in which CSR is linked to business strategy, not cause marketing and philanthropy. Das (2010) quotes Edelman's Executive Vice President for CSR, Michael Holland: "The problem is that the marketplace believes that CSR is cause marketing and philanthropy. Our task is to overrule that and teach them that it's about business strategy" (Das 2011, Web Log message). Like the interviewed professionals, both Klein (November 2012) and Das (2010) closely link corporate responsible to traditional business goals.

In his blog post promoting continued PR interest in CSR, Craig Pearce (2012), a freelance strategic communicator, claims that public relations is "CSR central" but also offers qualifications that may exclude public relations from the CSR process (Pearce, 2012). He accentuates the importance of integrated, culture-driven corporate responsibility programs to be effective and legitimate (Pearce, 2012). Pearce (2012) asserts that "CSR will never be effective if it is bolt-on and not built-in, which is possibly why PR has become sidelined in its evolution" (Web Log message). Sustainability initiatives cannot be a "promotion" with a "high profile media campaign" executed by public relations and marketing (Pearce, 2012, Web Log message). Rather, PR should be a "culture-

centered discipline" and, consequently, guide the organizational culture to a sustainability focus (Pearce, 2012). He continues to suggest that CSR can be used by public relations to improve consumers' perceptions of the organization. This blog post illustrates the conflicting levels of public relations participation in corporate responsibility efforts and continued confusion of PR's role in the growing sector of businesses.

In his blog post, Daniel Baylis (2012), Director of Content for a marketing and communications agency, repeated the integration method but takes the opposite approach by criticizing the isolation of CSR in a single public relations department: "The problem with CSR is that is often ghettoizes good endeavors into a single department. Rather than addressing core environmental or social issues, companies allocate and donate and offset themselves in hopes of winning a favorable public profile" (Baylis, 2012, Web Log message).

Professionals involved in CSR programs echoed these sentiments of entrenched CSR programs. Interviewed practitioners recognized the important role of public relations and the positive, though secondary, influence corporate responsibility can have on traditional PR goals. This complex approach more closely aligns with the professional and trade literature included in the review. Both professionals and trade articles were cautious in using CSR for public relations purposes.

Just as the professionals emphasized the supportive communication role of public relations, trade and mainstream media also recognized the importance of this function. Paul Klein (2013), contributor to *Forbes*' "CSR Blog," expands on the communication techniques for corporate social responsibility programs. Through comparisons of two companies' advertisements for CSR initiatives, Klein (2013) compiles four key components of CSR publicity: (1) focus on the issue, (2) use only credible examples, (3) remember that efforts should be program-based and substantive, and (4) only include credible partners without conflicts of interests. He refers to his approach as the "CSR Marketing 'Ps'": purpose, people, programs and partners (Klein, 2013). His editorial piece

argues that PR's role is in communicating responsibility but emphasizes the truthfulness and tactics are vital to prevent public skepticism and distrust.

In short, interview results illustrated mixed links to academic literature and close connection to trade literature. While academic literature and professionals identify the skepticism toward CSR programs and the many PR goals served by successful responsibility initiatives, the academic studies tended to disregard the integrated nature of successful CSR programs. However, three major academic theories, stakeholder theory, social contracts theory and legitimacy theory, were all reflected in professionals' comments. In contrast, trade publications, like the interviewed professionals, emphasized embedded nature of responsibility initiatives throughout the business and focused on serving the community and business goals. This similarity to the trade press is not surprising given that authors of trade articles are often practicing PR professionals, thereby portraying the broad, integrated approach evident in the interviews. This paper attempts to clarify the perspectives of scholars and professionals, a necessary trend as responsibility becomes a greater focus in the professional realm and continues to shift into academic research. The following section explores the role of public relations in CSR programs and the placement of corporate responsibility within the corporate organization.

PR is not the appropriate "owner" of CSR

(RQ2: Are public relations professionals the appropriate group to handle the development and implementation of corporate social responsibility programs?)

In contrast to expectations which may suppose that public relations practitioners would cling to CSR leadership, many professionals were adamantly opposed to PR ownership of responsibility initiatives. Rather, each professional highlighted the importance of multiple voices involved in planning and developing corporate responsibility programs. One practitioner, in particular, emphasized the danger of greenwashing when public relations has sole accountability for these initiatives. The Greenwashing Index, an anti-greenwashing organization promoted in part

by the University of Oregon, defines the concept as "when a company or organization spends more time and money claiming to be 'green' through advertising and marketing than actually implementing business practices that minimize environmental impact" ("About Greenwashing," 2013). The professional continued his warning: "Those are aspects of the core business and those are aspects that need to be run by executives… the skills, balances and abilities to do those things… and those are all part of a good corporate citizen. You know, communications just comes in helping them tell that story, how you communicate with various stakeholders, why we're doing it or why aren't we doing something" ("Interview 7," 2013).

Interviewed professionals discussed and advocated an "integrated" or "embedded" approach in which the communications function served a supporting role to autonomous corporate social responsibility programs. Nearly half of those interviewed specifically used "integrated" or "embedded" to describe the position of their responsibility team; the remaining professionals described a similar situation using synonymous phrases. Professionals described corporate responsibility as "baked into the operations of our company," "embedded into everything that we do," and "embedded across the company and it is just a way of life in the company" ("Interview 3," 2013; "Interview 4," 2013; "Interview 6," 2013). One professional put it this way: "Now the trend is to really integrate corporate responsibility into business goals" ("Interview 1," 2013).

Another public relations professional emphasized the shared liability for corporate responsibility within the company: "It's really incorporated into the very fabric of our work…. CSR and being involved in the community is very much everyone's responsibility" ("Interview 2," 2013). Still another professional discussed the corporate programs in terms of the company's "social license to operate" ("Interview 4," 2013). She said, "We believe that we have to earn our social license to operate every day. People make the choice as to whether or not they are going to purchase [our product], whether or not they're going to support our company and we have to be good corporate citizens in order for them to continue to support us" ("Interview 4," 2013). Others

described CSR in cultural terms: "It really goes back to the days of our founders…. It is something we actively work to continue to nurture as a company as we encourage employees to volunteer in the community, opportunities we give them to get involved in the community even during work hours" ("Interview 5," 2013). The cultural approach to corporate responsibility further supports efforts to develop programs using employee and company expertise to have the biggest possible impact on the surrounding community.

PR's Role in CSR Programs

(RQ2.a: What role should PR play in CSR programs?)

Just as integrating CSR makes responsibility initiatives a cooperative effort, professionals described public relations as a contributing position in corporate social responsibility programs during their discussion of PR's role. According to these professionals, though PR goals are subordinate to business and community goals, practitioners' expertise and skills serve a crucial supportive function. In one interview, this relationship was characterized as complementary: "PR supports the business, CSR supports the business, but both CSR and PR work in tandem with one another" ("Interview 1," 2013). The complementary nature includes the PR function as an advisor, a coordinator and a communicator, and continued through all interviews.

According to many of the professionals, public relations assists in developing strategy and informing programs by offering external perspectives. In this way, public relations fulfills the "bridging" function of an intermediary between an organization and its constituents. One professional described this advisory role and suggested many of the questions posed: "We are there to say, 'well have you thought about this? What will this community think if we give this grant here? Are there any stakeholders we've worked with for a long time?'… We help people understand how programs might be perceived or need to be perceived" ("Interview 5," 2013). Another practitioner juxtaposed financial and reputational considerations: "I think they (PR professionals) should always have a seat at the table. And then be involved in a consulting role: what would the potential

impacts of making a decision that would be maybe good financially but reputationally damaging?" ("Interview 7," 2013).

In the participating companies, the communications department also plays a coordination role, internally and externally. PR professionals organize cross-functional groups within the company and arrange participation of external partners, including nonprofit organizations and governmental actors, in program implementation ("Interview 4," 2013). In this role, public relations professionals use public affairs, nonprofit and government relations skills to develop the appropriate partners and teams to most effectively accomplish CSR initiatives.

Overwhelmingly, however, the phrases used to describe PR's role in responsibility initiatives were "supportive," ("Interview 2," 2013; "Interview 3," 2013; "Interview 9," 2013) "output," ("Interview 3," 2013) and "aggregator" ("Interview 3," 2013; "Interview 5," 2013; "Interview 6," 2013). Nonetheless, this is not to diminish the importance of such a role; one practitioner described it as a "major role… a critical role" ("Interview 4," 2013). One professional suggested that the aggregator role, in particular could be used to create a CSR culture and tradition in an organization by compiling and publicizing the independent volunteer work done by employees. Nevertheless, according to these interviews, the primary function of public relations is to "help tell the stories" through sustainability reports, media pitching and publicity efforts, and program visibility internally and externally ("Interview 2," 2013; "Interview 3," 2013; "Interview 4," 2013). Professionals aggregate the sustainability information from various departments, facilities and programs to produce a comprehensive picture of the company's entire initiative.

Several techniques and contrasting approaches emerged as communication trends. Nearly all practitioners mentioned a high significance threshold that responsibility stories must meet before publication. One practitioner highlighted the overwhelming amount of news produced daily in his corporation and, consequently, only reports "valuable news" ("Interview 7," 2013). Another took a different approach to the news threshold by only promoting major accomplishments through

traditional outlets so as not to boast about programs. Social media, however, can be used as an outlet to express brief successes. He explained, "We tend not to beat our chest about those kinds of things because culturally we think it's bragging; but one area where I know we've done a little more is in social media" ("Interview 3," 2013). This view illustrates the role of corporate responsibility culture in determining program characteristics and reporting techniques. The conservative reporting approach also highlights the significant opportunities presented by social media for not only corporate communications but also publicity of responsibility efforts.

Some corporations emphasize the human interest element of corporate social responsibility, highlighting employee volunteerism, feature stories and testimonials. "We have a lot of metrics and measurements, of course, but to try to capture the essence of that is to really hear from people outside the company, to show that value" ("Interview 5," 2013). In contrast, other companies stress results and outcomes: "We only really talk about these programs when we have some results to share. The idea behind that is not only is this more valuable but beyond a communications standpoint, maybe others can learn from that knowledge sharing and multiply the impact" ("Interview 7," 2013). This rationale also warded off the threat of greenwashing. The practitioner argued, "Just slapping up a website and putting some window dressing on it, people see through that. But if it's done thoughtfully, with the company's core business in mind, it's a much easier sell" ("Interview 7," 2013). With results to show, the company can counter any greenwashing criticism. Still other companies combine the approaches into what one professional called "balanced reporting" in which the company uses stories and press releases surrounding the results-focused report to expand on successes, innovations, positives and negatives ("Interview 6," 2013). A practitioner described her strategy for balanced reporting in which she "humanizes" the information but supports it with statistics ("Interview 9," 2013).

Finally, one interviewed professional conducts behind-the-scene support as a key component of programs. In this method of communication, professionals promote an independent

program strongly supported by employees without an association with the corporation. The practitioner described the process: "We won't necessarily take credit or put our logo on it but we'll just help make sure it's successful because if it's successful in making our environment better then it makes us a strong society and it makes our company stronger" ("Interview 3," 2013). In this way, the corporation can focus on the program, and constituents can enjoy the beneficial results without potential skepticism and criticism of a corporate sponsor.

Ultimately, regardless of the communication tactics used, the emphasis should be on the positive impact of the programs rather than on the publicity, mirrored by Klein (2013) in the trade literature. One professional with extensive experience in CSR at various companies contrasted program-focused initiatives and report-focused efforts. Some companies focus CSR efforts on publicity efforts and developing a strong report whereas others are dedicated to the leadership strategy and conducting business in a sustainable manner ("Interview 8," 2013). In her opinion, as in the comments of all other interviewed professionals, the leadership- and program-focused initiatives are far superior.

One professional described public relations' role as a "campaign approach" in which multiple planned and unplanned communication elements combine to increase awareness of the responsibility programs. This strategy was reflected by the discussion of disaggregated communication in which the primary PR department provides a template which offices abroad use to pitch stories to local media ("Interview 9," 2013). Regardless of the approach, CSR is often viewed as "an opportunity to really tell a positive story and to benefit relationships with your communities and with your stakeholders" ("Interview 4," 2013).

Externally, practitioners use a combination of communication tactics to reach an audience, as is often done during a large campaign. Each company published an annual or biennial responsibility report aggregating all efforts and results from across the spectrum of programs.

Many follow the standards developed by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)[1] to guide these reports; however, each company reports at varied levels of completeness. Often, professionals balance GRI reporting standards with sensitive corporate information. When conflicts occurred, several noted that they would then explain why their report does not include a section with the specific information indicated by GRI.

In traditional media, many companies supplement the primary reports with updates throughout the year, informing constituents through press releases and various media coverage in mainstream media and CSR-specific media ("Interview 5," 2013; "Interview 6," 2013; "Interview 7," 2013; "Interview 9," 2013). Moreover, several professionals rely on face-to-face interaction with investor groups to provide additional information, including more sensitive corporate information with a confidentiality agreement.

Perhaps the most significant outlet for communicating CSR initiatives is online and social media. A professional noted the often-mentioned observation that "the internet has really changed the game" ("Interview 7," 2013). Each of the selected companies features responsibility efforts on its respective website. Typically, the annual or biennial reports are published on the websites along with descriptions of each initiative, goals for each program, and measurements of success. Several professionals indicated that the majority of the responsibility publicity is online, tying into environmental sustainability efforts at the companies. One practitioner uses online press releases and sending e-postcards to key constituents and stakeholders to announce the publication of a new report ("Interview 5," 2013).

Companies vary in their use of social media to promote corporate responsibility programs; nevertheless, several noted active use and others acknowledged efforts to increase incorporation into the communication strategy. One practitioner described the company's use of Facebook events

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[1] The Global Reporting Initiative is a nonprofit organization that promotes economic, environmental and social sustainability by providing a standardized and comprehensive reporting framework for companies' corporate responsibility programs ("About GRI"). The GRI guidelines are widely used worldwide.

and video capacity to promote the culminating event of an annual program. By capitalizing on the broad reach of Facebook, this company was able to drastically increase the exposure of the event beyond the already-large audience in attendance ("Interview 7," 2013). Moreover, companies can use the interactivity of social media to connect with community members, increase awareness, expand programs, and monitor the impact of their programs through social media interactions. For example, one practitioner maintained a Facebook page for volunteers, primarily employees but also nonprofit organizations, to organize and garner support for current efforts ("Interview 9," 2013).

Internally, many practitioners highlight employee's work so that others will "catch the bug" and get involved in programs ("Interview 3," 2013). During the interviews, professionals noted a variety of tactics used, including internal websites and news channels with unlimited space, posters and company magazines for vivid illustrations, and human interactions to spread the programs at the grassroots level. One organization holds town hall meetings in which the leadership discusses sustainability efforts ("Interview 6," 2013). Another practitioner captures the viral nature of the business through which an employee's passion and organization can spread to other corporate facilities ("Interview 3," 2013). Finally, several professionals share best practices between organization branches, regionally, domestically and internationally, to leverage knowledge learned to make efficient programs.

A crucial role of PR's internal communication, according to about half of the practitioners interviewed, relies on the conception of public relations as the conscience of an organization. In this role, professionals associated public relations with the responsibility to spread and embed the culture of sustainability throughout the corporation. One professional and her colleagues continue to work to incorporate the responsibility culture throughout the organization by capitalizing on the passions of those involved to "build internal alignment and support for it" ("Interview 8," 2013). According to this professional, "it may or may not be the passion of the CEO but it is still engrained in what the business does and how they conduct the business" ("Interview 8," 2013). This role is a

growth area for both CSR and PR as it allows corporate responsibility to continue regardless of executive support or transitions within the company, and provides an outlet for public relations to help develop and enhance initiatives.

Regardless of the tactics used, transparency is consistently an important factor in communication about corporate responsibility efforts. Not only do GRI standards require substantial transparency, but with the advent of the Internet, constituents and citizen journalists increasingly demand more. PR practitioners must balance the role of gatekeeper with that of information provider. Several practitioners noted the benefits to transparency, indicating that reporters and critics "give you more credit for giving up the information even if it doesn't cast the best light on you" ("Interview 3," 2013). Another professional expressed the apprehension often felt by many organizations regarding transparency:

Companies are afraid to put information out there because of how it could be potentially used. But what we are finding as a corporation is that as we are more and more transparent, we get less questions. And we tend to find we have advocates out there for us now. So, transparency has got to be not just all the good stuff going on but what are your opportunities for the corporation. ("Interview 6," 2013)

Transparency and CSR reporting must report the "good and not-so-good" strengths, weaknesses and opportunities, in order to be viewed as valid by the public ("Interview 6," 2013). This desire for transparency and openness will only increase, according to several interviewed professionals. One practitioner connected increased reporting and transparency to economic stability: "We're not required here by the FCC and others to do [required reporting] and we probably won't be until the economy gets better. But once the economy gets better and people aren't worried about jobs, we'll start to focus a little more on some of this" ("Interview 3," 2013).

Several practitioners pointed to the increasing transparency and reporting requirements as an opportunity for future growth in PR's role in corporate social responsibility efforts:

Sustainability reporting, CSR reporting will become integrated because there is so much

overlap as to what the stakeholders of those reports are wanting to see now… I think that

corporate communications groups are going to be playing a bigger role, and part of that too

is embedding sustainability in all of their communications. Sustainability is really a way of

how you do your business. It's not just a one-off separate program. ("Interview 6," 2013)

This integration of CSR stories into other communications function of public relations furthers the

embedding of corporate responsibility into the culture of the organization. The integration and

change extends to how public relations professionals execute corporate communications functions

as one professional noted the importance of displaying a "bigger understanding" of the company's

efforts ("Interview 5," 2013). According to this professional, PR practitioners cannot be experts

only in the communications field but also must recognize the integrated nature of responsibility in

all facets of the organization and communicate the broader meaning of the company.

CSR's Proper Placement in the Organization

(RQ2.b: What department should control CSR programs?)

Continuing the embedding of corporate social responsibility, most of these companies have

a designated corporate responsibility person in a leadership position near the executive level.

Moreover, in each of these companies, responsibility programs receive significant executive

support, often from the CEO. In one company which is actively growing and developing its

responsibility programs, though the CEO is supportive, the primary executive support originates

with the CFO. This practitioner stressed the need for executive support, regardless of the title, as

well as the importance of a responsibility culture throughout the organization, perhaps trumping

the importance of executive support ("Interview 8," 2013). She said, "Sometimes I think you see it

may or may not be the passion of the CEO but it is still engrained in what the business does and how

they conduct the way business is done" ("Interview 8," 2013). This culture allows CSR to withstand

corporate leadership transitions and varied levels of dedication from individuals, particularly as

CSR programs develop within the organization. Nevertheless, individuals at the executive level support each of these successful responsibility programs and often provide the long-term direction for initiatives. Practitioners described it as a "trickle-down effect" and a "top-to-bottom support" ("Interview 3," 2013; "Interview 4," 2013).

Typically in these companies, corporate responsibility is located in a separate department high in the organizational structure; however, alternative organizational structures also exist. One practitioner mentioned a community involvement team in each corporate facility to guide specific initiatives. In the organization expanding its programs, the control for responsibility programs is primarily located in the Environmental, Health and Safety department. In only one of the nine companies did corporate social responsibility report to the Senior Vice President of Marketing and Communications; however, within this department, the CSR function is viewed as a semi-independent function, not controlled by potential press coverage. The practitioner described the relationship: "CSR is not so much a part of marketing or promotional advertising sort of function. It's complementary.... Corporate responsibility does have autonomy. We don't do things because of media coverage. And our primary concern is the community" ("Interview 1," 2013).

This final comment from a corporate communication professional summarizes the findings of the interviews. In each of the companies, CSR programs are embedded but autonomous from public relations control and publicity goals. Public relations serves a vital but complementary and supportive function to promote corporate responsibility and business strategies simultaneously. Overwhelming positive opinions, broad conceptualizations of the concept, and corporate culture facilitates the further development and implementation of active, volunteer-based programs. Discussion of the findings and implications follows.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

The 11 public relations professionals, each involved in their respective corporate responsibility programs, demonstrated a strong consensus regarding the relationship between public relations and corporate social responsibility. The opinions expressed in the professionals' interviews closely linked to the trade literature on the topic. According to the study results, communicators view public relations and corporate social responsibility as interrelated but independent. This paradox exists as corporate responsibility efforts saturate the company and engage multiple departments. Though public relations professionals are involved in strategy and goal development, their primary responsibility is an output or supportive function in communication. One practitioner involved in these roles eloquently summarizes public relations' complementary role: "So I don't necessarily equate CSR as an aspect of PR. We aren't doing it for PR purposes but I am applying my PR skills to make sure that people know what we are doing in our community" ("Interview 1," 2013).

Another practitioner actively involved in both corporate and CSR communication activities emphasized the growing incorporation of the two activities: "It's really all interrelated and I can't be just out there doing my product PR thing without having a greater understanding of my company and what its stakeholders expect of it and the issues that are out there in the community…. You're no longer working in a vacuum" ("Interview 5," 2013). Corporate responsibility requires the public relations perspective in the development and communication of activities. Related, public relations can be more effective overall if the PR professional is actively engaged and knowledgeable about responsibility initiatives.

The practitioners' conclusions correspond to some of the academic literature and much of the trade and professional literature, particularly Zurita (2006), Pearce (2012), and Klein (2012 and 2013). In academia, Clark (2000) and Zurita (2006), like the interviewed professionals, note the cross-functional nature of corporate social responsibility programs, connecting management, engineers, employees, and communicators. In trade and mainstream press, Pearce (2012) calls public relations "CSR Central" and emphasizes an integrated, culture-driven approach (Web Log message). According to the professionals interviewed, as "CSR Central," public relations departments aggregate responsibility efforts across the company to tell the best story but, ultimately, PR departments do not "own" the corporate responsibility efforts. Rather, successful initiatives are embedded into the company at all levels. In his various writings, Klein promotes connecting CSR to business strategies (November 2012), integrating the programs with strong accountability measures (October 2012), and truthfully communicating the purpose, people, programs and partners (2013). CSR communicators suggested similar approaches to their role of telling the responsibility stories.

Similar to the academic literature, many of the professionals recognized the benefits that social responsibility programs contribute to traditional public relations goals, citing reputation building, development of goodwill, risk management, and successful press and community relations. However, in contrast to academic writings, individuals in the field were quick to emphasize the secondary nature of these benefits:

> Corporate responsibility can't be used as a panacea or as a way to take a corporation that's got real image problems and dress it up. If a corporation has image problems, it needs to address those. It needs to not rely on its involvement in CR programs to overcome that. If it goes about approaching CR issues or opportunities, it needs to do that... with a pure heart, purity of purpose. You need to be doing it with the right things in mind because if you're not

it will show and you'll come across appearing disingenuous and opportunistic. ("Interview

3," 2013)

This perspective, and similar opinions expressed during the interviews, highlights the importance

of the integrated and honest approach promoted by the interviewed public relations professionals

in companies with successful CSR programs. Separating the heart of the corporate responsibility

initiatives from the PR department and infusing the efforts with perspectives from all divisions of

the business guards against the skepticism and criticism evidenced in the academic literature.

In short, successful corporate social responsibility efforts permeate every aspect of the

company, from top management to the public relations department to the new recruits. As

evidenced by this study, public relations professionals' skills and expertise play a crucial role in the

successful development, execution and promotion of these programs, but their role is no greater

than other departments. Instead, thriving corporate responsibility initiatives are characterized by

cross-functional teams in which PR advises and supports the overall responsible business goals.

Traditional public relations goals such as goodwill, reputation and risk mitigation, while important,

also support business goals but are clearly secondary in CSR considerations. The transparent,

program-focused efforts outlined in the interviews defend against the criticism and skepticism

identified in academic writings and evident in public perceptions. Public relations and corporate

responsibility are complementary and mutually supportive, both serving the business, but not one-

in-the-same. The significance of public relations' supportive role should not be understated; to

repeat the description of one of the professionals, "it's a major role... a critical role" ("Interview 4,"

2013). Nevertheless, public relations cannot sustainably be the sole owner of the initiatives.

Although out of the scope of this research, the results of these interviews revealed relevant

information regarding the reputation of public relations as a profession. The interviewees were

transparent about the challenges that PR's negative reputation poses to the involvement of public

relations in successful CSR programs. Many noted the threat of greenwashing when CSR programs

are controlled by public relations departments. Lingering negative perceptions may prevent PR professionals from affecting CSR programs and positively impacting the community.

The interviewed professionals also noted the potential for CSR programs to improve PR's reputation, primarily through further integration of the two fields and increased transparency in reporting. As corporate responsibility continues to permeate all aspects of the organization, CSR will penetrate traditional public relations activities, increasing PR's expertise and extending the transparency requirements into the broader corporate communications function. One communications professional working solely with CSR programs described this transformation originating from stakeholder expectations and affecting the overall perspective of PR professionals:

> I think there will be a growing awareness among PR professionals of the expectations that stakeholders have of companies to be socially responsible… It's all interrelated… I think PR people traditionally have been a little short-sighted and don't always see the importance of keeping up with things outside of their own area. They become an expert in their own area but they need to have a bigger understanding of what it stands for. ("Interview 5," 2013)

This self-critical perspective of public relations suggests that CSR can improve the reputation of PR by expanding the perspective of PR professionals to think beyond traditional public relations goals, objectives and tactics. By incorporating CSR into corporate communication, the transparency expectations which exist in CSR communications will also extend to the public relations department. One professional explicitly described the positive potential transparency has for the prestige of the public relations industry and possible shift in the nature of public relations within organizations:

> A lot of people think that if you're in the PR world, you're a spin doctor but by the true essence of what corporate responsibility is, you don't color the information one way or another. If you didn't meet your goal, you didn't meet your goal. If you met it, you met it. But

it really is done sort of in a way that it may elevate the role of the PR practitioner to one of information provider and less of protector of the company brand. ("Interview 3," 2013)

In short, PR's reputation challenges its ability to "do good" through corporate social responsibility programs. Though successful, sustainable programs are embedded and integrated throughout the organization, several professionals noted PR's role in launching and maintaining the CSR culture within an organization. The ability of public relations to foster and promote CSR, internally and externally, may be hindered by poor reputation.

In reverse, CSR can have a positive impact on public relations through expanding PR's perspective and reinforcing dedication to transparency in all communications. Nevertheless, responsibility programs must be done with "purity of purpose," not to improve PR's reputation ("Interview 3," 2013). Like PR goals, the reputational benefits to public relations are viewed as a secondary benefit from CSR programs.

The Economist special report on corporate social responsibility summarizes the one of the issues addressed by these findings: "Corporate social responsibility, once a do-gooding sideshow, is now seen as mainstream. But as yet too few companies are doing it well" ("Just good business," 2008, p. 1). Nevertheless, many companies are demonstrating substantial success in their responsibility initiatives. Through these interviews and findings, less successful companies can learn from a selection of companies with hallmark responsibility programs to develop better programs of their own. The literature review and interviews included in this study offer insights into the strategies of these successful programs and provide important information to further the corporate social responsibility scholarship, improve responsibility programs, and solidify public relations' role in these initiatives. Key findings and lessons include the following:

- Public relations professionals' perceptions of corporate social responsibility programs were overwhelmingly positive.

- Corporate responsibility requires cross-functional collaboration from all relevant business sectors to develop the most effective programs. The most successful CSR initiatives integrate representatives and perspectives from many business sectors, including traditional public relations efforts.

- Public relations departments should not take sole responsibility for CSR programs. Rather, PR tends to play a vital supportive role, taking advantage of practitioners' skills and expertise. However, PR goals are secondary to business and community goals.

- Public relations' purpose in CSR programs is viewed as complementary function to CSR programs, particularly advising program development and communicating with internal and external stakeholders.

    o Professionals should recognize and utilize the importance of their position as a boundary-spanner and aggregator to inform and communicate CSR efforts.

    o PR practitioners can capitalize on the opportunities provided by social media to more broadly communicate responsibility programs and successes.

- According to practitioners, transparency and corporate responsibility are lasting phenomena which will only increase with an improved economic situation. Future growth will produce increased integration between the two disciplines.

- Professional implementation of corporate responsibility corresponds closely with trade literature which emphasizes the integrated nature of CSR programs.

- Comparison of academic literature and professionals' conceptualizations share mixed results. Though academic literature and the interviewed professionals identify the same public relations goals, much academic literature focuses on CSR serving these goals in contrast to the broader approach taken by professionals.

    o Academic research of corporate social responsibility should continue to take a cross-functional approach to understand the complexity of the programs.

These results indicate an interconnected relationship between public relations and corporate social responsibility programs as two distinct fields but both supporting the business and dedicated to improving organization-public relationships. The integration of CSR throughout the business and PR culture fosters successful and truthful programs, benefitting the business and society. These findings contribute to professional practice as a framework for developing programs and to academic scholarship by identifying the application of theory and indicating areas for future, professionally-relevant research.

CHAPTER 7

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

Despite the success of this research project and the significant results that it produced, the

project was limited particularly in its small scope and sample size. The scope of this study was

confined to the relationship between public relations and corporate responsibility, though many

other questions related to CSR have not yet been extensively addressed in research. The sample

size was especially limited by the unwillingness and unavailability of many companies to

participate in interviews. Many of the companies on the successful corporate responsibility lists are

large, multinational corporations which lack the capacity to fulfill all research requests.

Consequently, these companies have implemented a policy to automatically reject all interview

inquiries. Personal contacts and referrals are crucial to obtain interviews with these professionals.

Opportunities abound for future study in corporate social responsibility and public

relations. A communicator phrased it best when he concluded the interview with, "We don't have

all the answers either" ("Interview 7," 2013). Future studies should broaden the sample to include

additional companies on the CSR lists and perhaps expand to foreign corporations.

Several of the interviewed professionals mentioned the challenges associated with

measuring corporate social responsibility. Alexandra Pattee, Program Coordinator of Microfinance

at The MasterCard Foundation, (quoted in Klein, November 2012) questions the need for

measurement: If corporations "know the implicit social value of their work, why do they need to

spend money measuring it?" In contrast, one of the interviewed professionals noted the significance

of measurement, particularly in the current economic situation:

When you have corporate citizenship, CSR… everyone I think agrees that these are good

things to do but if you were to calculate a ROI or to calculate a value delivered, I think that's

very challenging. I think that's something this industry is looking at doing or thinking about

hard because in a tough economy and money is scarce, you need to justify the output that is

delivering some value. ("Interview 7," 2013)

Though beyond the scope of this study, several suggested the unique and contrasting

methods used for calculating the success of programs. Specifically, one professional discussed the

challenges associated with evaluating educational programs. For example, early childhood

education programs may be evaluated by following participants through their educational careers

and determining final success. However, this professional stressed the difficulty in attributing

success or failure to the original program because of the plethora of unrelated factors which

determine educational goals. The concern for corporate social responsibility measurement is

reflected in the academic literature, as well. Maltz, Thompson and Ringold (2011) reviewed the

challenge faced by corporations to "systematically assess" the value of responsibility initiatives. One

of their conclusions – that managers fail to think strategically about using scarce resources to

maximize the value produced – is challenged by the findings of this study. However, the researchers

also conclude that the existing measurement methods do not adequately consider the costs and

benefits of programs or account for strategic issues considered in program calculations (Maltz,

Thompson & Ringold 2011). Future research could explore this challenge, comparing the diverse

methods and the pros and cons to each.

Another communicator mentioned the challenge of finding the appropriate direction for a

corporation's responsibility efforts in the "granular" nature of advocacy in which every issue and

topic has a specific group ("Interview 3," 2013). Corporations must identify the issue or group

which makes the most sense for the business and can have the greatest impact on the community,

based on the company's competitive advantage. Future studies should explore the process and criteria by which corporations select their area of focus for responsibility programs.

Perhaps the most important area of future research is in the process companies follow to develop successful corporate responsibility programs. All of the professionals interviewed in this study work in large organizations praised for their thriving programs. Though suggested in several of the interviews, two of the professionals, in particular, discussed a process by which companies develop programs. One practitioner involved specifically in corporate responsibility admitted that her company continues to develop and improve CSR processes. She suggested that companies, including the one in which she works, may emphasize more tactical or "tangible" goals as the responsibility culture spreads throughout the company ("Interview 8," 2013). Their programs are primarily centered in the Environmental, Health and Safety department and emphasize easily-understandable sustainability goals. Similarly, a communicator in a company with highly successful programs drew on previous experiences and interactions to suggest that in the earliest stages, corporate responsibility may be born out of public affairs departments. In these situations, public relations practitioners identify the responsibility efforts already present in the business, whether with altruistic or profit-maximization motives, recognize the opportunity, and aggregate the disorganized initiatives ("Interview 4," 2013). However, this professional also noted that as the programs mature, corporate responsibility becomes embedded in the business in order to be sustainable ("Interview 4," 2013).

Regardless of the path of future research, this study illustrates that public relations plays a crucial role in corporate social responsibility as an advisor, communicator, aggregator and boundary-spanner. Public relations professionals offer a unique perspective on the effectiveness of programs, perspective of stakeholders, and impact on the business. Consequently, these practitioners should be active members of the cross-functional team charged with an organization's responsibility initiatives. However, public relations must remain as a complementary or supportive

role to CSR to develop the most successful responsibility programs and counteract the skepticism and criticism often levied against these efforts and evidenced in some of the academic literature. With continued research, corporate responsibility will evolve into a more cohesive, unified field of study informing corporate programs throughout sectors of society.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear [PARTICIPANT],

I hope this email finds you well. I am a graduate student in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia pursuing a Master's degree in public relations. My thesis research is studying public relations professionals' opinions and perceptions of corporate social responsibility. As an organization with successful CSR programs, I would like to discuss your practices and insights concerning CSR and public relations. The proposed interview will only take 30 minutes of your time. None of your comments will be linked to you or your organization.

Could you please direct me to the appropriate person to contact? Or, to schedule an interview, please let me know days or times that would be most convenient for you.

I would really appreciate your help in this project. I hope the results of these interviews will help advance the public relations field and increase the development of CSR programs.

Thank you for your time,

Holley Reeves
University of Georgia

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT AND INTERVIEW GUIDE

Using Public Relations for Corporate Social Responsibility

Hello, I am Holley Reeves and I am calling with regard to a research study about public relations and corporate social responsibility. I am a graduate student in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia pursuing a Master's degree in public relations. My thesis research is looking at public relations professionals' opinions and perceptions of corporate social responsibility. As a leading PR practitioner, I would like to discuss your practices and insights concerning CSR and public relations. This discussion should only take 30-45 minutes of your time.

None of the questions will ask you about personal matters and your answers will be kept confidential. None of your comments will be linked to you or your organization. Your participation will help us better understand how and for what purposes professionals integrate CSR programs into PR practices. No risks are involved, but answering these questions is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. If you have any questions, please contact my advising professor, Dr. Bryan Reber (reber@uga.edu), or the IRB department at the University of Georgia (irb@uga.edu or 706-542-3199).

Do you have any questions about this study or your participation?

May we begin? If so, I am starting to record this conversation now.

Opening/Professional Questions:

1. Please tell me your current job title and primary responsibilities.

2. How many years have you worked in professional public relations field? How long have you been involved in corporate social responsibility programs?

Organization-Specific Questions:

3. Please briefly tell me about your company's CSR programs. What are your primary initiatives?

4. How does CSR fit in your organization's structure?

   a. How is it perceived by top management?

b. Do you have a CSR professional in a leadership position? Describe their role in strategic selection and management of CSR activities.

5. Your organization has been very successful in implementing and publicizing CSR priorities. In your organization, which department handles CSR planning and execution?

   a. What role does the PR department plan in the development and execution of CSR goals and programs?

6. What is the annual process of executing and communicating your CSR activities?

7. What is the primary goal (or goals) of your CSR activities?

   a. Do you implement programs as part of certain PR initiatives? (i.e. crisis communication/prevention, brand development, community relations, etc.) Can you give an example?

   b. Many believe CSR programs are a tactic to ward off potential criticism when a crisis arises. Are you more likely to focus on CSR programs during a crisis? Why or why not?

8. Organizations justify CSR programs in many different ways – some focus on the financial ROI while others look more at the contribution to reputation or relationships. How are CSR initiatives related to your organization's ROI?

   a. *If financial:* how to you gauge the financial contribution of CSR programs? How do you assign a monetary value to these strategies?

   b. *If reputation/relationships:* how to you gauge or quantify the reputational contribution to your organization? How do you justify these contributions to management executives?

Broad CSR/PR Questions:

9. Although CSR literature has existed for more than 30 years, it has only has only recently become mainstream. Why do you think it took this long to appear in mainstream media and public relations trade literature?

10. Do you think this is a natural transition from business to PR trade journals?

    a. Why or why not?

11. How do you see corporate social responsibility related to the practice of public relations?

12. Research found that PR plays a role in communicating and promoting CSR programs. Do you believe this is an accurate depiction of the PR/CSR relationship?   Describe why you think this is or is not an accurate depiction of the relationship.

13. Are PR professionals the most appropriate group to handle the development and implementation of CSR programs? Why or why not? Who might be other professionals also suited to handling CSR initiatives?

14. Public Relations has many "subfields" – crisis management/prevention, corporate reputation, brand management, the idea of PR as the corporate conscience – do you think CSR is most closely related to any of these in particular? If so, which area of practice?

Debriefing Statement

Thank you for participating in my research project. I hope this study will contribute additional commentary on the practices, purposes and perceptions of corporate social responsibility to further expand the growing trend of CSR.