

How Student run firms prepare PR students for success



Photo Illustration: BYU PR Intelligence Lab meeting about a client project. Photo credit: BYU PR Intelligence Lab.

Pushing through the door of the PR Intelligence Lab at Brigham Young University, the hum of conversation and the scratch of whiteboard markers fill the air. Students are gathered around computers, analyzing social media data and brainstorming strategies for clients. Experiences that are shaping the next generation of PR professionals to have application of skills before they graduate.

Located at Brigham Young University, the PR Intelligence Lab is a student-run firm where Public Relations students tackle real clients with communication problems. Each semester, students assist 8 to 15 clients with communication strategies, giving them hands-on experience that bridges the gap between classroom theory and professional practice.

The PR Intelligence Lab exemplifies the importance of student-run firms in PR education. These labs provide opportunities for students to gain practical experience, hone their hard and soft skills, while being prepared for success in the competitive job market.

What's it like in the lab

Working in the PR Intelligence Lab is a unique experience that varies depending on a student's role. Mallory Cleverly, a second-semester student in the program, describes the lab as a space for collaboration and skill-building. An environment where PR students face unfamiliar challenges, with no clear answers and no textbook to guide them. This is a new experience for most of the students.

Cleverly currently works with first-semester students on a project analyzing how different audiences consume YouTube content. The hands-on nature of the lab allows students like her to apply what they learn in real time.

For Emily Stenlund, the student firm director of the PR Intelligence Lab, the lab has provided leadership opportunities she never imagined and put her in positions that have given her practice of real world situations.

“You get to practice using social listening tools and analysis,” Stenlund said. “There are endless opportunities if you put yourself out there. I have managed two project teams and been invited to Lab Leadership. Learning to mess up, get back up, and be flexible has been key.”

Guided by faculty mentors, Stenlund has learned to navigate real-world PR challenges in a supportive environment. The lab fosters a space where students can experiment, grow, and gain confidence before entering the professional world.

Why work in a student-run firm

PR is a hands-on field that requires more than just textbook knowledge. While case studies and classroom discussions lay the foundation, real-world experience is where students truly refine their skills. That’s exactly what the PR Intelligence Lab provides.

“Classes are always beneficial, but the lab gives me something beyond case studies. It allows me to apply what I’ve learned with real clients,” said assistant firm director, Mady Current. “The sense of ownership I feel over various projects throughout the semester is unmatched.”

When students take ownership of projects, they become more invested in their work, pushing them to think critically and problem-solve in real time. The lab challenges students to not only develop PR strategies but also execute them. When students go into an interview, they have real experiences they can talk about. A competitive edge in the job market.

Each project manager working in the Lab are assigned to be a “skills master” of different software. For Stenlund, the hands-on nature of the lab has solidified the skills she will use in her PR career after graduation.

“A student-run firm teaches you both the soft and hard skills of PR,” Stenlund said. “Being certified in Muck Rack or Meltwater is great, but actually using those tools to solve client problems is what sets us apart from other graduates.”

A survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that the five most sought-after skills in all fields are leadership, teamwork, written communication, problem-solving, and verbal communication. These are skills that students working in university PR agencies develop every day through interactions with real-world clients.

Through the lab, students gain the confidence to apply industry-standard tools, develop strategic thinking, and work with clients in a professional setting.

Helping your future self

The PR Intelligence Lab isn't just about landing a first job; it's about building a foundation for long-term success. The skills students develop in the lab will continue to serve them well beyond their time at BYU.

Stenlund, who will graduate in April, sees her experience in the lab as a key factor in her future success.

"Five years from now, I know I will excel in any job because I've had hands-on experience solving real-world communication challenges," Stenlund said. "From audience research to branding strategies, the lab has prepared me to think critically and adapt to different PR environments."

The PR industry is constantly evolving, and adaptability is key. By working with real clients, students in the lab gain the ability to navigate challenges, adjust strategies, and find creative solutions—all skills that will serve them well in their careers.

Current believes that the lab pushes students to grow in ways they never expected.

"It forces you out of your comfort zone and helps you understand your strengths and weaknesses," Current said. "Personally, I've become more accepting of feedback, bolder in my decision-making, and excited for my future."

The lab doesn't just teach PR tactics. It builds confidence, resilience, and problem-solving abilities. For students looking to stand out in a competitive job market, gaining this kind of experience is invaluable.

The PR Intelligence Lab at BYU is more than just a student-run firm; it is a launchpad for future professionals. By working with real clients, using industry-standard tools, and developing critical problem-solving skills, students leave the lab prepared for the challenges of the PR world. Those who take advantage of these experiences today will thank themselves in the future.

The skills learned in the lab today are the strategies that will define success tomorrow.

About the Author

Brooklynn is a junior at Brigham Young University studying Public Relations with a minor in Information Systems. She has an interest in strategic communication and its application in companies. With hands-on experience in PR campaigns and digital engagement, Brooklynn enjoys exploring how real-world applications of PR principles shape the industry.