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## In the Spotlight with Ed Downes, Ph.D., MPA, associate professor, Boston University

By Maria Pantages

*Ed Downes has been an associate professor in the Department of Mass Communication, Advertising and Public Relations in the College of Communication at Boston University since 1997. Prior to this appointment, he worked for 10 years for communication programs throughout metropolitan Washington, D.C.*



**Publicity Club (PC):** How did you get started in public relations? **Ed Downes (ED):** After college I was selected as a Lyndon Baines Johnson Intern for a Congressman. While there I worked on my first PR assignment with the Congressman's press secretary. And I liked that. After leaving Capitol Hill I worked on the Children's presidential campaign, as a marketing representative, and as an on-site producer and performer for a D.C.-based special events firm. Eventually I was hired as a fund-raiser for an international trade association and--thanks to a tremendous mentor Anne Day (who had worked on the Chunky Soup campaign at Ketchum PR and was now finishing her PR career)--began to learn from her, more and more about PR. She let me manage special events, design promotional materials, work the booth at trade shows, build relationships with reporters from the trade press, put together campaigns, etc.

**PC:** What is your greatest professional achievement?

**ED:** Other than having the privilege to teach quality, hard-working students, the biggest achievement was getting my Ph.D. While going through Syracuse University's doctoral program, I worked with a cohort of about eight doctoral students who--frankly--were probably much smarter than I. I learned a lot from them, as well as from some outstanding scholars who were my professors. To keep up I had to do double-time. Since I knew it was a privilege and opportunity to pursue the dream of doing a Ph.D., I was highly motivated. That motivation pulled me through. I often took a deep breath and worked and worked and worked and some years people were calling me "doctor." It was surreal. I also had 10 years in industry to draw from and those experiences helped me to better understand and appreciate what the academy offered to our field.

**PC:** You just completed your 10th year at Boston University. What are your thoughts on this milestone?

**ED:** You know, it's a joy to go to work. When you are happy with your work then the rest of your life is more enjoyable. I am so glad to be a professor. It enhances my whole life.

**PC:** You now teach only graduate students - why?

**ED:** The graduate students are ready to go into the world as soon as 15-18 months after they start Boston University's master's program. Their studies are very fast and very focused. Working with them offers me an immediate opportunity to educate and train, to teach them theory and put it into practice. There's no time to waste. My relationships with them are intense and highly focused. By the finish of the first semester I have the privilege of knowing many of their concerns, goals, opportunities, constraints, and career aspirations--and can address each quickly. Thus, we quickly connect. I love that. For a number of years I taught undergraduates and that experience too had its own rewards but, for now, the challenges of working with the graduates are particularly satisfying.

**PC:** What have you learned from your students?

**ED:** So very much. First, that I have an obligation to give them my best; they're giving up a lot of time, energy, and money to attend my classes and to have me be available to them. Second, that they are good people. Really: I probably get more respect than I deserve! Third, that if I don't perform well I can really feel it as I teach. And fourth, that if I put the bar high and demand a lot, they will jump over it--and, I hope, as they pursue their careers, they'll be glad they did.

**PC:** What advice do you have for PR practitioners?

**ED:** There are three important things:

1. Explore your personal and work ethics to discover the synergy between the two.
2. Have internal satisfaction, whether it be monetary satisfaction, altruistic satisfaction, or something else. Life can be short and uncertain. So find meaning in your work.
3. Realize the power you have. The skill sets PR people have are both dangerous and wonderful. Remember that.
4. Keep in mind the opportunity our skills give us to serve others

**PC:** Give us 5 tips for success in this field: