

## **Dispelling Some Accreditation Myths**

*By Sneh Seetal*

On October 24, 2000, a panel of accreditation graders and the former chief examiner for CPRS dispelled some common myths about accreditation. Elaine Dixson, Jim Osborne, Janice Robertson and Jim Wood provided practical advice, answered questions, and shared their views on what they look for in work samples, the written exam and in the oral exam.

### **Myth #1: They've toughened the standards of accreditation over the past five years.**

**Fact:** Accreditation standards are set high, however the standards for accreditation have not changed significantly. The marking process and grading has been standardized to ensure consistency.

### **Myth#2: Accreditation is one big test.**

**Fact:** There are three components to accreditation.

1. Work example – demonstrates your ability to plan, analyze and execute within the context of current public relations theory. The work example should be as current as possible, within two years prior to your application for eligibility.
2. Written exam – highlights what's driving the implementation - the strategic plan. A good exam would give an outline of the strategy, indicate what type of research, and identify the logical audiences. The written exam shows depth and breadth of your skills. Markers recognize and honor independent thinking; regurgitation is not rewarded.
3. Oral exam – supports both the work sample and the written exam. Here graders assess how well you present and articulate your ideas.

### **Myth #3: The work sample is marked as either a pass or fail.**

**Fact:** The assessment is not as simple as a pass or fail. Applicants are marked on an eight-point scale. Each point represents a certain skill level. Four is the minimal score for a good solid practitioner. It's the average. The grades go up or down the scale. For the work sample, you need to submit your work in triplicate since there are three graders. These graders have to explain why they have graded as they did when there is discrepancy and come to an agreement on the final mark.

### **Myth #4: Your work is shown to members of your chapter.**

**Fact:** Your work is marked by APRs from different chapters. Confidentiality is maintained and papers are shipped to other chapters. In fact, for the written exam, there is only a number to distinguish you from the rest.

### **Myth #5: Your work is shown to third graders**

**Fact:** That's three graders not third graders

### **Myth #6: Don't worry about a budget for your accreditation work sample**

**Fact:** This is one of the reasons people fail. A complete strategic communication plan takes budget into consideration. It doesn't *cut the mustard* to say the budget is confidential. The graders need to see how well you allocated the resources to support the strategy.

### **Myth #7: It's impossible to prepare for the written exam.**

**Fact:** Since timing is tight, it's a good idea to practice writing a few exams first. Get old exams and practice writing these. Time them and go back and see where you were missing parts. A word of caution, however, avoid looking at exams older than three or four years. You can also form study groups with other candidates and read, read, read! Talk to your local accreditation chair about other ways to prepare for the written exam.

**Myth #8: The written exam is open book – so it can't be that difficult.**

**Fact:** The written exam is long. Candidates rarely have time to open their books. It's important to manage your time. Make sure you *read* the question and figure out your approach before you start writing. An alarming number of candidates don't read the question – sometimes there are two parts to it. Figure out what has the most weighting and spend the bulk of your time on things that are important. This is where writing practice exams really comes in handy. Talk to any accredited member – they'll tell you!

**Myth #9: For project work to be eligible, you have to have completed all the elements yourself.**

**Fact:** As long as you clearly define your role within the project, then external support is not an issue. For example, if you hired an agency – or a contractor – indicate what their role was in the production and execution of the work sample. However, remember that overall you are responsible for the strategy.

**Myth #10: You are on your own.**

**Fact:** You're never on your own – unless you choose to be. You can form a study group with others and even get in touch with a mentor. In fact, there's a mentoring program being set up. Keep reading Maxim for more information and talk to your local accreditation chair.

**Myth #11: Once you get you're APR – you're home free.**

**Fact:** There is a mandatory maintenance component to the APR. Maintenance requires that over a five-year period practitioners earn 15 points through activities like professional development, volunteering or teaching.

**Myth #12: Spelling doesn't loose you marcs!**

**Fact:** Hmmm – enough said!