

# University Intervention into Community Issues as Dialogic Public Relations: A Case Study

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines a study of the wastewater collection and treatment issues of Little Rock and North Little Rock, Arkansas by University of Arkansas at Little Rock personnel and how it constitutes dialogic public relations. The paper defines dialogic public relations using Kent and Taylor's work and then uses their criteria to describe how this study constituted dialogic public relations. The paper also examines strengths and weaknesses of this approach and makes suggestions for future study.*

For the past several decades, the field of public relations has been undergoing a paradigm shift that focuses more on the relationship management dimensions than on the technician role practitioners play in the field. In the mid-1980s, scholars such as Ferguson were arguing that the central unit of study in public relations should be the relationships between an organization and its key publics. Ledingham and Bruning state that “the term ‘public relations’ also implies that the research and practice of the discipline should focus on an organization’s relationships with its key publics, concern itself with the dimensions upon which that relationship is built, and determine the impact that the organization-public relationship has on the organization and its key publics” (1998, 56).

American institutions of higher education are no strangers to the need for effective public relations efforts. In this era of higher unemployment, a struggling economy, increasing competition from technical schools and other alternative forms of education, and decreasing support from state legislatures, it is more important than ever that colleges and universities are viewed positively by their publics. The application of the relationship model of public relations is especially well-suited to higher education, particularly given the current emphasis being placed on service learning and community engagement. This paper makes the argument that community issue intervention work conducted by University faculty and staff is dialogic public relations because it successfully used dialogic communication techniques to build stronger relationships with University publics for the benefit of all involved. It focuses on the study that was conducted in 2005-2006 on wastewater issues in Little Rock and North Little Rock, Arkansas.

# **Background on the Little Rock/North Little Rock Wastewater Study**

In a letter to UALR Chancellor Joel Anderson in 2004, Little Rock Mayor Jim Dailey, North Little Rock Mayor Patrick Henry Hays, Little Rock Sanitary Sewer Committee Chair Dale Wintroath, and North Little Rock Sewer Committee Chair Edward Nelson requested that the university analyze the potential for collaboration between the two utilities, including a consideration of whether merging the two utilities would allow for a continued high quality of service to wastewater customers and at the same time enhance economic growth in the central Arkansas region. The chancellor accepted the request and established a Wastewater Task Force to conduct the study and report to him, the mayors, and the sewer committee chairs (Goldner et al. 2006). The task force was chaired by the Dean of the Bowen School of Law and had membership consisting of seven faculty and staff with expertise in law, writing, economic development and public policy, geology, wastewater permitting and regulation, and communication. “While several Task Force members had expertise in the technical and environmental aspects of wastewater, none had direct involvement with wastewater utilities (other than as customers), and consequently were able to approach the task without preconceptions....Task Force members found a new understanding and reached ever-evolving preliminary conclusions with each new piece of information gathered” (Goldner et al. 2006, 8).

For nine months beginning in January 2005, the task force members collected information and data from stakeholders, participants, and experts in the operation of wastewater utilities in central Arkansas. More than forty-five people representing various constituencies were interviewed including the mayors of Little Rock, North Little Rock and Sherwood; the county judge of Pulaski County; the CEO engineers and staff from both cities’ wastewater utilities; the Commissioners of the Little Rock Sanitary Sewer Committee and the North Little Rock Sewer Commission; the chief and staff from the Water Division at the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality; consulting engineers involved in wastewater treatment; the director of Metroplan (a regional planning authority); and local business leaders (Goldner et al. 2006). In addition, members of the general public were invited to two open hearings, one in Little Rock and one in North Little Rock. Members of the task force visited utility treatment plants in both Little Rock and North Little Rock, attended hearings about where to site a new plant for west Little Rock, researched trends in utility mergers and regional utilities across the country, and studied national trends in regulations controlling water quality (Goldner et al. 2006).

Early in the study, the task force members set forth a set of principles that would be used to guide their work. These principles included: (1) continued quality of service to wastewater customers in North Little Rock and Little Rock; (2) financial fairness to all parties; (3) importance of economic growth to the central Arkansas region; (4) importance of benefits from efficiencies associated with any potentially larger entity that may result from the study; (5) importance of the environmental responsibility of

any proposed solution; (6) importance of achieving the maximum benefits of regionalism; (7) importance of considering long-, intermediate- and short-term needs; (8) importance of seeking a wide range of input; and (9) consideration of related issues, that, while they may not be strictly within the scope of the study, may impact the study's outcome. All possible recommendations from the task force were tested against these principles.

Once initial conclusions were drawn, the group members went back to the mayors and wastewater utility heads for feedback and various rounds of "shuttle diplomacy."

The final report was organized into eleven chapters that covered the background on the issue and the research process used by the task force, the history of wastewater collection and treatment in the two cities, and the past and current relationship between the two wastewater utilities. The chapters also covered regionalism, the operations and infrastructure of the two utilities, and the perceptions of various groups with respect to the current quality of operations of the wastewater utilities and of the ongoing relationship between the two utilities. The final two chapters covered the analysis of the data and recommendations of the task force.

The task force recommended that the two utilities develop formal structures for working together at the senior management and governing bodies' level. "Creating an ongoing structure that involves the governing bodies and senior management in discussion of both mid-term and long-term planning and needs of their respective utilities will provide both the opportunity to identify opportunities for collaboration far enough in advance so that they can be fully explored and developed, and the context and working relationship will make more effective communication and understanding possible" (Goldner et al., 2006, 98). The result of the study will hopefully bring about more communication between the wastewater utilities leading to even more collaborative activity involving the two cities and their utilities. Subsequently, true to the nature of dialogic public relations, both the University and its publics in Little Rock and North Little Rock will benefit. Those benefits will be discussed later in this paper.

## **Metropolitan University Mission and Community Study Groups**

The wastewater study was a good fit with the nature of UALR. The University of Arkansas at Little Rock is Arkansas' only metropolitan institution. "Metropolitan universities are characterized by more than their location in a metropolitan area. It takes a willingness to serve as an intellectual resource for society. It takes a direct involvement in addressing the challenges whose resolution will benefit society" (University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2004). Part of the mission of the institution focuses on community outreach. According to the *2005-2006 Undergraduate Catalog*, the University's mission is to "develop the intellect of students; to discover and disseminate knowledge; to serve and strengthen society by enhancing awareness in scientific, technical, and cultural arenas; and to promote humane sensitivities and

understanding of interdependence.” One of the University’s six mission objectives deals with service to society: “The University has a responsibility to serve society through the application of knowledge and research skills. This responsibility includes applying the University’s resources to local, state, national and international needs in order to improve the human condition” (University of Arkansas at Little Rock 2005, 4).

UALR has a strong tradition of service to the community. In 1996-1997, a group of University faculty conducted a study on the Little Rock School District titled “Plain Talk: The Future Of Little Rock’s Public Schools.” In 2000, another group did a successful study on the water situation in central Arkansas (“Water for Our Future: Overcoming Regional Paralysis”) resulting in the formation of Central Arkansas Water. In 2002, the University was asked to help with the issue of drinking water in neighboring Saline County, resulting in the report “Water for Saline County: A Tale of Two Futures.” In 2003, yet another group conducted a study on mass transit in Pulaski County (“A Call for Regional Leadership: Public Transit in Central Arkansas”). In each case, the report issued by the study group has resulted in a change in the community. These changes range from the formation of new utilities and new formal partnerships seeking solutions to common problems, to agreements for greater collaboration and cooperation between entities. The University’s assistance is sought by local communities because of the excellent reputation it has for being a neutral convener of studies and dialogues on a wide range of community issues.

## **Literature Review on Dialogic Public Relations**

Dialogic public relations can be defined as that which focuses on the relationships between an organization and its publics, and the use of dialogue to establish and maintain that relationship. There has been much scholarship in recent years to address the notion of the primacy of the organization-public relationship and the factors that affect it. Ledingham and Bruning define the ideal organization-public relationship as “the state that exists between an organization and its key publics that provides economic, social, political, and/or cultural benefits to all parties involved, and is characterized by mutual positive regard” (1998, 62). They also write that the view of public relations as relationship management represents a conceptual change:

In place of the traditional view of public relations primarily as a communications activity, relationship management is conceptualized as a management function that utilizes communication strategically. Moreover, public relations traditionally has been described by what it does. The notion of relationship management is an attempt to define the field in terms of what it is (1998, 56).

The emphasis is upon the relationships as opposed to activities that are conducted to enhance organizational image. This orientation to public relations has scholars integrating work from several other disciplines including business and interpersonal communication.

Heath uses concepts from speech communication to shape his notion of the value of dialogic public relations. His perspective of the rhetorical nature of the field necessitates the use of dialogue:

A rhetorical perspective assumes that matters of importance—thoughts, opinions, and actions—are in a flux that is subject to constant change and reinterpretation. The effort and incentive of the dialogue are toward continual improvement, even if it falls short of that goal. The heritage of rhetoric assumes that decisions are better if people who are interested in them can communicate openly and assertively about them. Sharing information is vital to this process, but data must be interpreted, and value decisions are required to form marketplace and public policy decisions. . . Forging agreement is the essence of the rhetorical process, part of the heritage of public relations. Public relations is part of each society's rhetorical processes (2000, 71).

Heath continues that a rhetorical perspective for public relations can offer a rationale as to how public relations adds value to society. He notes that “rhetoric, as conceived by ancient Greeks and Romans, can underpin the values of public relations as being those of the good organization communicating well.” Heath also speaks to the importance of public relations' ability to add value to the marketplace and public policy arena. His postulate is: “Public relations adds value to the marketplace and public policy arena because open dialogue gives people an opportunity to participate in as well as witness discussions by which customers and publics have the opportunity to examine facts, values, policies, identifications and narratives leading to wiser purchases as well as more sound public policies” (2000, 70).

James Grunig contributed his symmetric two-way notion of public relations or the balanced effects model of public relations in the 1980s as some of the more groundbreaking work on this notion. In that work, he proposes four models of public relations practice to describe the history of the field (press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric) (Grunig and Hunt 1984, 21-43). In that work, he speaks of the importance of dialogue as opposed to feedback. He notes that feedback, while often used as a synonym for two-way communication, is mostly communication that helps a source control a receiver's behavior. “The two-way symmetric model, in contrast, consists more of dialogue than a monologue. If persuasion occurs, the public should be just as likely to persuade the organization's management to change attitudes or behavior as the organization is likely to change the publics' attitudes or behavior.” He also notes, however, that opinion or attitude change is not necessarily a pre-requisite for the public relations effort to be considered successful: “The public relations staff brings the two groups together, and, as long as both communicate well enough to understand the position of the other, the public relations effort will have been successful.” Grunig and Hunt cite Finn's 1972 *Public Relations Quarterly* article, as noting that the successful public relations person “will try to create the circumstances in which responsible people with different opinions can put their heads together in a serious effort to find a solution that takes all relevant factors into consideration” (1984, 23). Grunig later revised his work to focus more on the development and maintenance of relationships as the central goal of public

relations. In his 2000 work, Grunig looked at four dimensions that he thinks underlie the models he developed earlier. Those dimensions are (a) symmetrical and asymmetrical, (b) one-way and two-way, (c) mediated and interpersonal, and (d) ethical and unethical public relations strategies (1984, 34).

## **How the Little Rock/North Little Rock Wastewater Study Constitutes Dialogic Public Relations**

Dialogic public relations provides a useful framework from which to view the activities of the Little Rock/North Little Rock Wastewater Task Force. The citizens of the two cities constitute important publics for UALR for the reasons outlined previously in this paper—in brief, they are important to the accomplishment of the University’s mission.

Mallory and Thomas list several characteristics of effective dialogue. These are: (1) values inquiry; (2) sustained conversations; (3) discussions guided by trained, neutral facilitators; (4) a progression that starts with personal perspectives; (5) a progression that includes identifying common language; (6) a progression that includes studying the facts and issues; and (7) a progression that moves from dialogue to action (2003, 15-16). The description of the study outlined in the previous section of this paper demonstrates effective examples of all of these characteristics.

The criteria set forth by Kent and Taylor in their article “Toward a Dialogic Theory of Public Relations” provides an excellent framework of features which further operationalize this theory:

Dialogue as an orientation includes five features: mutuality, or the recognition of organization-public relationships; propinquity, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; empathy, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; risk, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and finally, commitment, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interaction with publics (2002, 24-25).

This section of the paper will use those features of dialogic communication to examine the Little Rock/North Little Rock Wastewater Study. Kent and Taylor use the term “mutuality” to refer to the acknowledgement that organizations and their publics are inextricably tied together (2002, 25). Mutuality does exist where the wastewater study is concerned. The University realizes that its welfare is tied to that of Little Rock and North Little Rock. First, those cities provide the most UALR students—UALR is located in Little Rock. Second, Little Rock and North Little Rock are home to businesses and industries that are either current or potential supporters of the university. Third, the cities are home to legislators and a Board of Visitors member that could have an impact upon the future of the University. The people of Little Rock and North Little Rock and their mayors realize the importance of UALR to both cities. The University provides an educated workforce to Little Rock and North Little Rock

business and industry. The people of both cities also know that the University is a resource of considerable expertise on various topics. UALR's record of success with similar public policy studies is what initially prompted Mayors Dailey and Hayes to ask the University for assistance with this project.

Kent and Taylor list collaboration as an element of mutuality. Both the members of the UALR wastewater study team and the various city commission and utility heads with which they worked demonstrated collaboration. The team members collaborated among themselves to bring their various disciplinary perspectives to bear upon the project and to work out a recommendation on the issue. The team members collaborated with the various wastewater utilities and other principal players in the issue as they worked back and forth testing various ideas and obtaining feedback, and ultimately, the wastewater utilities themselves will need to collaborate with each other and continue to take the recommendations on the wastewater issues to their next evolution.

A spirit of mutual equality is another element of mutuality, according to Kent and Taylor. "Although the partners in exchanges are often of differing status, discussants should consciously avoid the dynamics and trappings of power to manipulate or otherwise control the flow or direction of the conversation" (2002, 25). In all of its dealings with the wastewater utilities and citizens of Little Rock and North Little Rock, members of the UALR team were very careful not to portray themselves as "the experts." Rather, team members positioned themselves as partners willing to work with the citizens to find the best recommendations on the issue for all involved. Despite the differences in the two utilities, all were treated equally regardless of how many meters they served, and all citizens were treated equally as well, from the Mayor of Little Rock to the environmentalist concerned for the welfare of his neighborhood who spoke out at a public hearing. The sense of equality was conveyed by the team's willingness to provide input to all citizens and to hear everyone's point of view.

Proximity is the second tenet of dialogue, according to Kent and Taylor. "Dialogic proximity means that publics are consulted in matters that influence them, and for publics, it means that they are willing and able to articulate their demands to organizations." Kent and Taylor outline three features of proximity: immediacy of presence, temporal flow, and engagement. "Immediacy of presence suggests that parties involved are communicating in the present about issues, rather than after decisions have been made" (2002, 26). This was the case in the wastewater study. All major stakeholders in the issue were interviewed individually at the outset of the study and again at various points throughout. The wastewater utility and commission heads were interviewed in the process of the study, and citizens of Little Rock and North Little Rock were given the opportunity to have input into the process at two public hearings. Toward the end of the process, another meeting was held with mayors and utility heads to test the proposed recommendations.

In terms of temporal flow, Kent and Taylor write that "it involves an understanding of the past and the present and has an eye toward future relationships. Dialogue is not

rooted only in the present; rather, its focus is on a continued and shared future for all participants” (2002, 26). The cities of Little Rock and North Little Rock share a long and not always harmonious history. Everyone involved in the study, from the UALR team members to the stakeholders and citizens interviewed, was well aware of the past. They were well aware of past successful and failed attempts at collaboration. They were also well aware of why the timing was right to find the solution in the present. The study report cited several factors for the desirability of the timing, including missed opportunities at possible collaboration in the past that could have saved both utilities time and money, as well as pressing issues in the future (like storm water management) that may be best addressed by the partnering of the two utilities. This future orientation of the stakeholders will contribute greatly to the success (or lack thereof) of the study recommendations.

Engagement is the final of the three elements of propinquity. Kent and Taylor noted that “when an organization is fully engaged in its community (local or global) it will have broader contexts and wider perspectives to draw upon in its decision-making. Engagement benefits all parties involved because decisions serve multiple publics” (2002, 26). The UALR team members and the stakeholders interviewed were engaged in the process and were willing to investigate several views of the issue: merger, or at least increased cooperation, between two wastewater utilities; merger of all water utilities for the two cities; merger of the cities of Little Rock and North Little Rock, leaving the status quo intact; merging wastewater for cities in the county north of the river; and even a possible regional merger or collaboration. Laying out these various options for those interviewed encouraged them to expand their thinking on the issue and was the first time that some study participants had considered various options, further engaging them in the process.

Empathy is another dimension of dialogic communication outlined by Kent and Taylor. “It refers to the atmosphere of support and trust that must exist if a dialogue is to succeed.” They list supportiveness, communal orientation and confirmation as dimensions of empathy. They write that “dialogue involves creating a climate in which others are not only encouraged to participate but their participation is facilitated. That is, meetings are open to all interested participants, conversations are held in easily accessible locations, materials are made available to all, and efforts are made to facilitate mutual understanding” (2002, 27). The Wastewater Task Force worked to create a very supportive atmosphere. First, most meetings were held to make it easy for interviewees to attend. Some meetings were held at the Bowen Law School because of its ample parking and close proximity to downtown, and some meetings with others elsewhere were held at their locations as opposed to the team’s location. The public hearings were held in both Little Rock and North Little Rock not only to make it easier for citizens to attend, but also to help citizens feel more comfortable speaking out. Study materials were shared with stakeholders at various points throughout the study as team members sought feedback from various groups and individuals.



The communal orientation that Kent and Taylor speak of is that based on Kruckeberg and Stark's notion of public relations as a community-building function. "Stark and Kruckeberg argue that public relations communication can create, rebuild, and change local and global communities" (2002, 27). This type of communal orientation is easily visible in the Little Rock/North Little Rock study. The work of the study group encouraged the people of the two cities to think beyond their boundaries in terms of handling their wastewater. Many of the early interviews reflected the notion that the people of either city were not at all amenable to what they perceived to be "interference" from anyone outside their city. The result of the dialogue initiated in the study is that the expanded horizons of some participants have them considering the possible outcomes of options beyond the status quo or merger.

Confirmation is the final dimension of empathy that Kent and Taylor mention. "The practice of confirmation refers to acknowledging the voice of the other in spite of one's ability to ignore it. Confirmation is a necessary precondition of dialogue if discussants are to build trust with others." This was a central concern of the wastewater study team, given the sometimes-tumultuous history between Little Rock and North Little Rock. It was a task of the study team to work to build trust between various stakeholders in the two cities. Task force members helped to accomplish that by agreeing that, while all views would be represented, considered and discussed, confidentiality regarding who made the comments would be honored. By agreeing to be part of the study, the participants gradually learned to at least hear each other, if not agree with each other. Also, Kent and Taylor write that "publics who feel ignored by an organization are less willing to engage in any further relationship with such an organization." The wastewater study group went to great lengths to interview all stakeholders and then ask those stakeholders who else should be included in the interviews. It was the intent of the study group to leave no one out. This strategy, in addition to strengthening the study, also strengthened the relationships between the University study group members and the members of the communities involved. Kent and Taylor note that "the reasoning behind organization-sponsored childcare, partner benefits, and corporate philanthropy, acknowledges the organization's role in local, regional, national, and international communities" (2002, 28). The same could be said for UALR's involvement in this study and the other community issue/public policy studies that the University has conducted.

Any dialogic relationship has potential risks as well, as Kent and Taylor point out. The most obvious risks for the stakeholders in Little Rock and North Little Rock were possibly damaging the relationship between the two cities and their utilities and failing to have a course of action that would lead to greater efficiency and hopefully lower costs for the utilities. The risks to the UALR study group included not being able to help the participants to find consensus and/or a course of action after all, running the risk of alienating citizens of the cities that provide many UALR students, and tarnishing the reputation of the University in the county. Kent and Taylor write that dialogic public relations "has the potential to produce unpredictable and dangerous outcomes" (2002, 28). They also acknowledge, however, that it can also produce great rewards.

Kent and Taylor say that the previous tenets of dialogic encounters lead to the fifth and final one – commitment. They define commitment as genuineness, commitment to the conversation and commitment to interpretation. Genuineness has to do with people being honest enough to express their feelings, regardless of whatever consequences that might have. The study group worked to create a safe environment for participants to express their feelings by keeping statements made by interviewees anonymous, and by employing empathetic listening skills. It was important for the study group to hear the true feelings of those being interviewed. “Organizations and publics that deal truthfully with one another are much more able to come to mutually beneficial solutions” (Kent and Taylor 2002, 29). The varied perceptions of stakeholders were included in the UALR team’s final report in a “Perceptions” chapter in an attempt to recognize and bring points of difference to the table for further discussion.

Regarding commitment to conversation, it needs to be understood by participants that the conversations are being held for the benefit of all those involved and not to defeat the other or exploit their weaknesses. The study group worked to get this message across to study participants, to create a safe environment, and to elicit their true feelings. Also, the commitment to conversation that was made by the participants in the wastewater study was a long-term relational one. The University will continue to be a major employer and educator of the citizens of Little Rock and North Little Rock. The wastewater utilities in Little Rock and North Little Rock will continue to exist in some form with greater or lesser levels of cooperation. Commitment to interpretation “necessitates that all participants are willing to work at dialogue to understand often-diverse positions” (Kent and Taylor 2002, 29). Throughout the study, the study group worked to help participants understand others’ opinions, even if they did not agree with them. Likewise, the members of the study group tried to keep open minds about various points of view to fairly evaluate all options as possible recommendations.

## **Value of the Dialogic Approach and Limits to It**

Kent and Taylor suggest that, while dialogue involves work and risk, it “can also lead to greater organizational rewards in the form of increased public support, enhanced image and reputation, and decreased governmental interference. For the public, dialogue can mean increased organizational accountability, a greater say in organizational operations, and increased public satisfaction.” Through its involvement in the wastewater study project, UALR gained an enhanced image and reputation. The mayors of Little Rock and North Little Rock and wastewater utility and commission heads have been generous in their praise of the UALR group. The press conference announcing the study recommendations has not been held yet, but if the wastewater study press conference is like that for the release of other studies the University has conducted, the University will receive positive press due to the study. Since UALR is located in the state capital, the state legislators are more likely to see or hear the positive press coverage of the university. The members of the UALR team made many positive impressions for the University during their work and made many new friends for the University in the process. The irony at work in this study is that most of the UALR study members were not experts on wastewater. Instead, the majority of them

were experts in other subject areas, including organizational communication and community building. That is where the real issue lies—it wasn't as much of a wastewater issue as it was a people issue. Kent and Taylor write that those doing dialogic communication need a necessary skills set including "listening; empathy; being able to contextualize issues within local, national and international frameworks; being able to identify common ground between parties; thinking about long-term rather than short-term objectives; seeking out groups/individuals with opposing viewpoints; and soliciting a variety of internal and external opinions on policy issues" (2002, 30-31). The Wastewater Task Force members possessed these skills. Team members noted early on that oftentimes stakeholders were not nearly as far apart on the issue as they perceived they were – they just weren't listening to each other. Wastewater collection and treatment is a long-term problem with long-term implications. The stakeholders and others involved in the study had a definite impact on the study's recommendations. Through the work of the water study team, they also learned that UALR was accountable to the community it serves—in other words, the faculty and staff on the team demonstrated to the citizens of Little Rock and North Little Rock that they were ethical people who had substantial expertise in problem solving. They saw their tax dollars at work, and to their benefit. Universities are sometimes criticized for being "ivory tower" institutions not in touch with what is going on around them. Mallory and Thomas cite Ernest Boyer's opinion: "What I find most disturbing is a growing feeling in this country that higher education is, in fact, part of the problem rather than the solution. Going still further, that it's become a private benefit, not a public good. Increasingly, the campus is being viewed as a place where students get credentialed and faculty get tenured, while the overall work of the academy does not seem particularly relevant to the nation's most pressing civic, social, economic, and moral problems" (2003, 12).

One possible criticism of this paper could be that, while the wastewater study effort is being termed dialogic public relations, the people undertaking the study weren't associated with the University's public relations function. This view is based on a very narrow view of public relations. Theoretically, every person at the University is involved in public relations for the institution to some extent; it is not confined to those in the University communications office. Christine Hodgson takes a similar view. She writes that "we are all involved with external relations, whatever our role in the institution...Every student and every member of staff setting foot outside the campus is an ambassador for the university, wittingly or, most often, unwittingly. And nowadays everyone you meet, of any age, could be a potential customer" (1999, 80).

## **Suggestions for Future Study**

It is difficult to tell at this point if student numbers or donor dollars from Little Rock and North Little Rock have risen, and even if they have, it would be difficult to determine that any increase was due to positive impressions made through the work of the wastewater study team. It may be interesting to look at the numbers, however, as they become available. The caution that arises here is that much of the literature argues that dialogic public relations is desirable because it is ethical and dialogue is one of the

tenets of our democratic society. It also helps organizations and publics to better understand each other. That philosophy doesn't necessarily lend itself well to the more bottom-line orientation of counting heads and dollars. Critics would argue that it is, possibly, more realistic in an era when management wants to see quantifiable results for its time and money.

Scholars studying dialogic public relations have called for additional research in re-shaping current models of public relations to include the relationship dimension, and also for work in the pre-cursors and implications of that dimension (Ledingham and Bruning 1998, 63). They also cite the need to examine organization-public relationships over time. In other words, what was the relationship like before the dialogue began, what happened during the dialogue period, and what has happened since? There is a need for that longitudinal approach, but it could be complicated because a dialogic approach may well be one where there is no finite end, but more a cycle of communication and relationship building once the dialogue has begun.

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