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Anca C. Micu Sacred Heart University, micua@sacredheart.edu

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After Ten Years: Tracing the 1997 Vatican Statements Regarding Ethics in Advertising in today's Advertising Textbooks

By

Anca Cristina Micu, PhD Assistant Professor of Marketing Sacred Heart University

Abstract

One responsibility of all educators, especially those in marketing and advertising, is to provide students with a proper perspective regarding professional ethics. In other words, it is to guide future managers in developing an ethical conscience as they perfect their decision-making competence.

Today, the 1997 Pontifical Council's statements on ethics in advertising are the top result of a Google search for "ethics and advertising." The amount of scriptural reference contained in the statements is considerably less than that found in most Papal social encyclicals (i.e., social writings of the Catholic Church). This approach made the document more accessible to thoughtful laypersons. Hence, the statements were scrutinized by academics and practitioners alike.

In helping carry out an education that develops students' ethical conscience, marketing academics in particular, and the advertising establishment in general, welcomed the commentary offered in the Vatican's essay on advertising. The morally sensitive perspective was injected into the ongoing debate regarding what the appropriate and understood social obligations of advertising practitioners should be. Echoes of the debate are present in today's advertising textbooks and lectures. This manuscript assesses how the statements affected advertising textbooks' chapters on ethics after ten years have passed since they were made public.

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After Ten Years: Tracing the 1997 Vatican Statements Regarding Ethics in Advertising in today's Advertising Textbooks

Despite some academic and popular discussion of ethics in advertising, ranging from its broad social consequences to consumers' perceptions of potentially objectionable ads, we know little about what is being taught about ethical issues in advertising courses. This paper is an attempt to address this relatively neglected area. The focus is to examine how advertising textbooks present ethical issues. Cunningham (1999, p. 500) defined advertising ethics as "what is right or good in the conduct of the advertising function. It is concerned with questions of what ought to be done, not just with what legally must be done." Although ethics is considered a mainstream topic in the advertising literature (Hyman, Tansley, and Clark 1994), the amount of academic research on it has not been commensurate with its importance.

Advertising Ethics in Higher Education

There are more than 1,000 institutions that teach advertising courses. Of those, 145 indicate organized advertising and/or joint advertising/public relations programs. "Where Shall I Go to Study Advertising and Public Relations?" Is a report compiled to help prospective students select a college or university where a program in advertising or public relations education is offered. In many schools, advertising and public relations are offered as a combined program; other schools may have separate advertising and public relations programs. It is not the intent of the directory to evaluate the schools listed; rather, it is to list, state-by-state, the schools which propose to offer some sort of advertising or public relations education, and to present some of the pertinent data about these programs which might be of value to you in making your decision about which to attend.

In most instances, these are schools which provide a liberal professional advertising and public relations education (liberal implying a general education in arts, sciences and humanities,

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and professional adding certain specialized knowledge and skills necessary to the practice of advertising and public relations). These programs are found in two major areas of universities: journalism/mass communications (or possibly speech or English), and business (more specifically, marketing). Some universities listed have programs in both areas. Where the program is in journalism/mass communications, emphasis is usually placed on creative, writing, or media, and the education will provide the student with additional knowledge and skills in writing and editing. In many instances, where the program is in journalism/mass communications, students are encouraged to take additional work in marketing, and vice-versa.

Where the program is found in business or marketing, the emphasis will largely be on planning and management and the student will be taking additional work in courses involving general business practices. For a full listing of universities offering a specialized advertising education please see Appendix 1.

The author found one survey that aimed to find answers to questions being asked by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC) about the teaching of ethics. Back in 1983, a questionnaire was mailed to the 90 advertising programs listed in the 1983 edition of "Where Shall I Go to College to Study Advertising?" to determine where ethics was taught and whether the subject was covered specifically in a separate course or generally in several courses. Responses indicated that the accredited programs preferred teaching ethics in all courses, while departments of advertising tended toward offering a separate course. The consensus was that the "highly ethics related" areas in advertising courses centered around topics concerned with clients, effects on consumers (especially children), laws and regulations, and creative strategy, in terms of how benefits/claims were stated and products and services shown. The overall impression was that ethics was considered to be an important subject that

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was covered seriously by the majority of responding programs. How they covered ethics and how much time was devoted to the subject seemed to be where the differences occurred. Most respondents seemed to prefer to teach ethics as the subject became appropriate for the topic being discussed. Many respondents felt that ethics was a way of life that touched every part of advertising and that teaching it separately would make the course redundant. Others felt that control in teaching the subject was of primary importance and that teaching ethics should not be limited to the classroom.

With over 12,000 students graduating with a specialization in advertising every year (see actual numbers for 1998 through 2004 in Appendix 2) and presumably finding jobs in the advertising arena, it is imperative to research whether ethical principles are being taught in today's advertising courses.

This article describes how advertising textbooks define and present ethics. It provides a summary of the 1997 Vatican essay on advertising ethics, examines the theoretical foundations of moral development in relation to teaching advertising ethics, and traces the presence and discussion of three moral principles from the Vatican essay in the advertising textbooks.

A Summary of the Vatican Report

The report by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications (1997) is divided into five sections: introduction, benefits of advertising, harm done by advertising, ethical and moral principles, and conclusions. These sections build on one another and overlap in significant ways. A description of each follows, using quotes from the document whenever possible. The introduction opens with the conclusion that "advertising has a profound impact on how people understand life, the world and themselves, especially in regard to their values and their ways of choosing and behaving" (p. 7). The media are described as "gifts from God" that can be

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employed to accomplish "his providential design, bringing people together and [to] help them to cooperate with his plan for their salvation" (p. 6). However, the council also "calls attention to moral principles and norms relevant to social communications" (p. 6) that should shape the content, target, and influence of advertising.

Advertising benefits

The next section, on advertising benefits, is divided into four segments. In the first segment, the council studies the economic benefits of advertising and notes that "advertising can be a useful tool for sustaining honest and ethically responsible competition that contributes to economic growth in the service of authentic human development" (p. 11). These benefits are accomplished in a variety of ways, including "by informing people about the availability of rationally desirable new products and services and improvements in existing ones" (pp. 11-12). The council examines the benefits of political advertising in the second segment and comes to a similar conclusion. The primary benefit is educational, "informing people about the ideas and policy proposals of parties and candidates, including new candidates not previously known to the public" (p. 13). In the third segment, the council discusses the cultural benefits of advertising, which comprise "a positive influence on decisions about media content" as well as "motivating [people] to act in ways that benefit themselves and others" (p. 13).

The popular culture influence also is recognized as positive because "advertising can brighten lives simply by being witty, tasteful and entertaining" (p. 13). In the fourth and final segment, the council explores the moral and religious benefits of advertising, noting that advertising can deliver "messages of faith, of patriotism, of tolerance, compassion and neighborly service" (pp. 13-14), as well as others. From this perspective, advertising is viewed as essential to effective moral suasion and "a necessary part of a comprehensive pastoral strategy" (p. 14).

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Advertising harms

Section Three is titled "The Harm Done by Advertising," and it is divided into the same four segments as the previous section. Among the economic harms of advertising, the council includes deceptive advertising, the improper use of influence on media editorial content by advertisers, and the implicit promotion of a lifestyle built on unbridled consumption. It also argues against "brand-related advertising" that drives "people to act on the basis of irrational motives ('brand loyalty,' status, fashion, 'sex appeal,' etc.) instead of presenting differences in product quality and price as bases for rational choice" (p. 16). Furthermore, advertisers are indicted for causing "people to feel and act upon cravings for items and services they do not need" (p. 17).

With regard to the harms of political advertising, the council is concerned that "the costs of advertising limit political competition to wealthy political candidates or groups, or require that office-seekers compromise their integrity and independence by over-dependence on special interests for funds" (p. 18). In addition, political advertising is an "obstruction of the democratic process" when it "seeks to distort the views and records of opponents" or "appeals more to people's emotions and base instincts" (p. 19).

According to the council, the cultural harms of advertising are multifaceted and include "cultural injury done to those nations and their peoples by advertising whose content and methods, reflecting those prevalent in the first world, are at war with sound traditional values in indigenous cultures"

(p. 19). Advertisers also are blamed for pressure on the media to "ignore the educational and social needs of certain [market] segments" in favor of editorial content that "attracts ever larger audiences" through the delivery of editorial content that "lapses into superficiality, tawdriness

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and moral squalor" (p. 20). Furthermore, advertising is blamed for "invidious stereotyping of particular groups that places them at a disadvantage in relation to others," especially the "exploitation of women," which often ignores "the specific gifts of feminine insight, compassion, and understanding"

(pp. 20-21).

Finally, the moral and religious harms of advertising include "appeals to such motives as envy, status seeking and lust," or those that "seek to shock and titillate by exploiting content of a morbid, perverse, pornographic nature" (p. 21).

The council also finds advertising unacceptable "when it involves exploiting religion or treating it flippantly," or it "is used to promote products and inculcate attitudes and forms of behavior contrary to moral norms," "for instance, with the advertising of contraceptives and products harmful to health" (p. 22).

Advertising ethical and moral principles

The fourth section identifies "moral principles that are particularly relevant to advertising" (p. 25), and three in particular are discussed: truthfulness, the dignity of the human person, and social responsibility. The principle of truthfulness in advertising lobbies against advertisements that are "simply and deliberately untrue" or "distort the truth by implying things that are not so or withholding relevant facts" (p. 25). The principle of the dignity of the human person condemns advertisements that violate our right "to make a responsible choice" or "exploit man's lower inclinations" (e.g., "lust, vanity, envy and greed") (pp. 26-27). This principle is particularly relevant for vulnerable groups such as "children and young people, the elderly, the poor, the culturally disadvantaged" (p. 27). Finally, the principle of advertising and social

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responsibility criticizes "advertising that fosters a lavish life style which wastes resources[,] despoils the environment[, and] offends against important ecological concerns" (p. 28). The fifth and final section is the conclusion. Much of this section is consumed with who is responsible for ensuring that advertising is "ethically correct." According to the council, the "indispensable guarantors" of such behavior are advertising professionals who "may be called upon to make significant personal sacrifices to correct [unethical practices]" (p. 34). The council recommends "voluntary ethical codes" before turning to government intervention, and these codes should be updated regularly by the industry, with feedback from "ethicists and church people, as well as representatives of consumer groups" (p. 31).

When all else fails, the government should intervene, especially in areas such as the "quantity" and "content of advertising directed at groups particularly vulnerable to exploitation, such as children and old people. Political advertising also seems an appropriate area for regulation: how much may be spent, how and from whom may money for advertising be raised" (p. 32). Furthermore, "besides avoiding abuses, advertisers also should undertake to repair the harm sometimes done by advertising, insofar as that is possible: for example, by publishing corrective notices, compensating injured parties, increasing the quantity of public service advertising, and the like" (pp. 33-34).

Three Principles of Moral Development in Relation to Advertising Ethics

The most substantive portion of the document involves the postulation of the three principles that should be used to adjudicate the ethics of advertising. According to the Vatican essay, these are the following:

- A principle of *truthfulness*. It states that, "advertising may not deliberately seek to deceive, whether it does that by what it says, by what it implies, or what it fails to say" (Section 15).
- 2. A principle of *human dignity*. "There is an imperative requirement that advertising "respect the human person, his right/duty to make a responsible choice, his interior freedom; all these goods would be violated if a man's lower inclinations were to be exploited, or his capacity to reflect and decide compromised" (Section 16). In the explication of this principle, promotions that appeal to lust, vanity, envy, and greed are referenced specifically. In addition, advertising that is directed exploitatively at vulnerable groups, such as children, the elderly, and the poor, is mentioned as particularly troubling.
- 3. A principle of *social responsibility*. "Advertising that reduces human progress to acquiring material and cultivating a lavish lifestyle expresses a false, destructive vision of the human person harmful to individuals and society alike" (Section 17). Specifically noted in this principle, by way of explanation, are advertisements that encourage lifestyles that contribute to the waste of resources or the despoiling of the natural environment.

Taken together, these principles are worthy in that they cover important and needed ground. They remind advertisers of their proactive duties to avoid deception and respect persons, particularly those who are vulnerable. The principles serve as noteworthy moral commentary in the long-running debate about how advertising is moderated best from a social and public policy standpoint (Federal Trade Commission 1980; Preston 1994, 1996; Prosser I994; Stern and Eovaldi 1984). However, it is also fair to note that most of the issues addressed by these principles have been brought previously to the attention of the advertising community. The sentiment of nondeception covered in the first principle, at least in its basic form (i.e., "do not intentionally deceive"), is included in most existing professional codes of advertising ethics, as well as in the law.

The Three Ethical Principles in Advertising Textbooks

After visiting the websites of each of the 197 universities listed on the "Where Shall I Go to Study Advertising and Public Relations?", 47 advertising syllabi were found posted online. With 2 exceptions, they each required one of the following textbooks with varying editions for each:

- William F. Arens, "Contemporary Advertising-10th ed." McGraw-Hill, 2006 (1982)
- Thomas C. O'Guinn, Chris T. Allen and Richard J. Semenik. Advertising and Integrated Brand Promotion, 5th Edition, Thomson-Southwestern, 2008
- Sandra Moriarty, Nancy Mitchell, William D. WellsAdvertising: Principles and Practice 8th Edition Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009
- Terence A. Shimp Advertising Promotion: And Other Aspects of IMC (7th Edition), Thomson/Southwestern, 2007.
- Tom Duncan Principles of Advertising & IMC, McGraw-Hill 2005, 2nd edition.
- George E. Belch and Michael A. Belch Advertising and Promotion, 6th Ed. McGraw Hill, 2004

The six textbooks were deemed the fundamental ones used for teaching advertising at the nation's universities. Next, the textbooks were scrutinized whether they included chapters on ethics. Once the topic of ethics was encountered, we checked for the presence of the three ethical principles from the Vatican essay.

Arens		O'Guinn	Moriarty	 Shimp	Duncan	Belch
Economic, Social and Regulatory Aspects of Advertising		Social, ethical, and regulatory aspects of advertising	Advertising and society	Ethical, Regulatory, and Enivronmental Issues in marketing communications	Social, ethical and	Evaluating the social, ethical and economic aspects of advertising and promotion
advertising should not deceive		within the chapter just on truth in	presented as an ethical issue in addition to a legal requirement	presented		advertising should not be deceptive
social responsibility means doing what society views as best for the welfare of people		separate section on	similar to the harms listed in the Vatican essay, the chapter lists a set of guidelines for "ethical advertising", a Not DO list	4		
social responsibility is not ethics	the advertiser and the advertiser's peers	pro's and con's of advertising presented similar to the presentation in	there is social, professional and	separate ethical issues presented for advertising, public relations and targeting		

Conclusion

Educators should expose and sensitize students to ethical questions and dilemmas that they are likely to encounter as practitioners. After all, to be forewarned is to be forearmed. Forethought as to how one might deal with a situation before it occurs often leads to better decisions at the time of dilemma or crisis. This is a cardinal rule in business generally—indeed, in many of life's activities—and yet for some reason, educators shy away from this fundamental teaching goal when it comes to ethical situations. What constitutes the ethical thing to do is sometimes debatable, but it does not follow that we should therefore ignore the fact that one should be the best prepared to wrestle with it when it occurs. What constitutes the "right" action plan for a business may also be debatable, but there often is a set of helpful principles or concepts. Likewise, there are principles and concepts that can be helpful in ethical decision making (Drumwright and Murphy, 2004). Regarding the Vatican's stance on ethics in advertising Archbishop John P. Foley, President, Pontifical Council for Social Communication states: "Our point is that ethics in advertising serves the truth, the authentic development of the human person, and the healthy progress of society. If that sounds idealistic, so be it; if the Catholic Church cannot articulate an ideal, who can? What is encouraging to me is that so many seem to be hungry to hear such ideals articulated and, as advertising executives might say, in promoting our document, we are meeting a felt need. In this, we are not claiming a monopoly on truth; we are merely trying to articulate a consensus—and I hope that, in large measure, we have succeeded." (Archbishop John P. Foley, 1998)

In today's environment, academics appropriately have increased their scrutiny of advertising practices and the roles these play in society. One responsibility of all educators, especially those in marketing and advertising is to provide students with a proper perspective regarding professional ethics. In other words, it is to guide future managers in developing an ethical conscience as they perfect their decision-making competence (Laczniak, 1998). A morally-sensitive perspective like the offered in the Vatican's statement's principles appears to have been injected in today's advertising textbooks. In a second part of this study, advertising educators will be surveyed with the intent of assessing whether /how the chapters on ethics are presented in advertising lectures across universities.

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Appendix 1

Where shall I go to study advertising and public relations? 2005 Results

ANE AN BUAN WILL	INTERSTORUTER
Alabama State Univ	Central Missouri State Univ
Samford Univ (AL)	Culver Stockton College (MO)
Univ of Alabama	Missouri Southern State Univ
Univ of Alabama/Birmingham	Southeast Missouri State Univ
AN FATZIONAKA	Southwest Missouri State Univ
Arizona State Univ	Univ of Missouri
Northern Arizona Univ	Webster Univ (MO)
AN FAR VAN AL SY AG	NT=)=1=2/-V=3/K -
Arkansas State Univ	Creighton Univ (NE)
Harding Univ (AR)	Hastings College (NE)
Univ of Arkansas	Midland Lutheran College (NE)
Univ of Arkansas/Little Rock	Univ of Nebraska/Lincoln
(CANLIF O) RAMIA	Univ of Nebraska/Kearney
California State Univ/Fresno	Univ of Nebraska/Omaha
California State Univ/Fullerton	NEV/ND)A
California State Univ/Long Beach	Univ of Nevada/Reno
Humboldt State Univ (CA)	INIEWY JIERSSIEW
San Diego State Univ (CA)	Rowan Univ (NJ)
San Jose State Univ (CA)	NEW MEXICO
Univ of the Pacific (CA)	Univ of New Mexico
Univ of Southern California	New Mexico State Univ
(C)OL(O)RV/NB)O)	NEXX/YAO) RAK
Colorado State Univ	Baruch College-CUNY (NY)
Univ of Denver (CO)	Buffalo State Coll (SUNY/Buffalo) (NY)
Univ of Northern Colorado	College of New Rochelle (NY)
CONNECTIVE	Ithaca College (NY)
Univ of Bridgeport (CT)	Long Island Univ (NY)
Univ of Hartford (CT)	Marist College (NY)
DISTRICTION COLUMBIA	St. Bonaventure Univ (NY)
Howard Univ (DC)	Syracuse Univ (NY)
FLOX RIDYA	Utica College of Syracuse Univ (NY)
Florida A&M Univ	INFOURTHHI (CYANRYO) LINVA
Florida Gulf Coast Univ	Appalachian State Univ (NC)
Florida International Univ	Campbell Univ (NC)
Florida Southern College	Elon Univ (NC)
Florida State Univ	Univ of North Carolina/Chapel Hill
Univ of Central Florida	Univ of North Carolina/Pembroke
Univ of Florida	(0)#[(i)
Univ of Miami (FL)	Bowling Green State Univ (OH)

Univ of North Florida Univ of South Florida Univ of West Florida

entoratel

<u>Berry College (GA)</u> <u>Brenau Univ (GA)</u> <u>Georgia Southern Univ</u> <u>Univ of Georgia</u>

G VAWAWAY

Hawai & i Pacific Univ

Univ of Idaho

ILLUNIONS

Bradley Univ (IL) DePaul Univ (IL) Columbia College Chicago (IL) Northwestern Univ (IL) Roosevelt Univ (IL) Southern Illinois Univ Univ of Illinois Western Illinois Univ INDWARMANA Ball State Univ (IN) Butler Univ (IN) Purdue Univ (IN) Purdue Univ/Calumet (IN) Univ of Evansville (IN) Univ of Southern Indiana Valparaiso Univ (IN) 1101411/1 Drake Univ (IA) Iowa State Univ Morningside College (IA) Univ of Northern Iowa 1XANNISVAS Fort Hays State University (KS) Kansas State Univ Pittsburg State Univ (KS) Univ of Kansas Washburn Univ (KS) Wichita State Univ (KS) IN ENTITURIST Asbury College (KY) Eastern Kentucky Univ

Miami Univ (OH) Ohio Northern Univ Ohio Univ Otterbein College (OH) Univ of Akron (OH) Univ of Dayton (OH) Xavier Univ (OH) Youngstown State Univ (OH)

CALC CALL CALL

Oklahoma City Univ Oklahoma State Univ Southeastern Oklahoma State Univ Univ of Central Oklahoma Univ of Oklahoma

Bloomsburg Univ (PA) Duquesne Univ (PA) Elizabethtown College (PA) Indiana Univ (PA) La Salle Univ (PA) Lock Haven Univ of Pennsylvania Pennsylvania State Univ Point Park College (PA) Susquehanna Univ (PA) Temple Univ (PA) Westminister College (PA) York College (PA) RHODE KALAND) **Rhode Island College** SOUTH CANEXOT LINA Univ of South Carolina SOUTH HIDVAVKOTIA South Dakota State Univ Univ of South Dakota TENNESSEE East Tennessee State Univ Middle Tennessee State Univ Univ of Memphis (TN) Univ of Tennessee Univ of Tennessee/Chattanooga Univ of Tennessee/Martin

Murray State Univ (KY) Univ of Kentucky Western Kentucky Univ LOUISIVANNA Grambling State Univ (LA) Louisiana State Univ Loyola Univ New Orleans (LA) Nicholls State Univ (LA) Univ of Louisiana/Monroe Hood College (MD) Loyola College (MD) Univ of Maryland MANSS/AVCHIUNSE Boston Univ (MA) Emerson College (MA) Suffolk Univ (MA) Westfield State College (MA) MICHICHNE **Central Michigan Univ** Eastern Michigan Univ Ferris State Univ (MI) Grand Valley State Univ (MI) Michigan State Univ Northern Michigan Univ Oakland Univ (MI) Wayne State Univ (MI) Western Michigan Univ MININE SOTTA Bemidji State Univ (MN) Saint Mary s Univ (MN) Saint Cloud State Univ (MN) Univ of Minnesota Univ of St. Thomas (MN) MIGSISSIPPI Mississippi State Univ Mississippi Valley State Univ Univ of Southern Mississippi

Abilene Christian Univ Midwestern State Univ (TX) Southern Methodist Univ (TX) **Texas State Univ Texas Christian Univ** Texas Tech Univ Texas Wesleyan Univ Univ of Houston Univ of North Texas Univ of Texas/Arlington Univ of Texas/Austin Univ of Texas/El Paso Univ of Texas/Pan American West Texas A&M Univ NHI /AVHI Brigham Young Univ WIRICHNIKA Liberty Univ (VA) Radford Univ (VA) Virginia Commonwealth Univ WWWWSHIRK CHIORAL **Central Washington Univ** Washington State Univ WHENSTE WIR CORINA Bethany College (WV) Marshall Univ (WV) West Virginia Univ MAN RECORDERIN Marguette Univ (WI) Univ of Wisconsin Univ of Wisconsin/LaCrosse Univ of Wisconsin/Oshkosh Univ of Wisconsin/Stevens Point Univ of Wisconsin/Whitewater

Year	Graduates	ADV	ADV/PR	PR	TOTAL
1998	Bachelor	4,486	2,103	4,513	11102
	Master	355	268	322	945
	Doctorate	15	00	06	21
	Total	4,856	2,371	4,841	12068
1999	Bachelor	4,486	2,047	4,622	11155
	Master	423	206	368	997
	Doctorate	36	1	16	53
	Total	4,945	2,254	5,006	12205
2000	Bachelor	4,623	2,013	4,863	11499
	Master	396	147	307	850
	Doctorate	32	1	8	41
	Total	5,051	2,161	5,178	12390
2001	missing				
2002-03	Bachelor	4,811	2,351	5,191	12353
	Master	414	186	248	848
	Doctorate	26	1	7	34
	Total	5,251	2,538	5,446	13235
2003-04	Bachelor	5,213	3,161	5,960	14334
	Master	406	244	282	932
	Doctorate	22	9	7	38
	Total	5,641	3,414	6,249	15304

Appendix 2 1998-2004 Number of students graduating with either an Advertising or Public Relations specialized degree