

2026 Student of the Year Competition

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Utah Chapter is sponsoring the 20th annual Utah PR Student of the Year Competition. The objective of the program is to provide students statewide with the opportunity to apply public relations fundamentals (learned as part of coursework) to a real client and scenario, which will better prepare them for a career in public relations.

Prizes

The winner will receive \$1,000, bragging rights as the Utah PR Student of the Year for 2026 and an option for a public relations internship with a leading Utah public relations team (to be determined). A Silver and Bronze award will also be presented along with \$500 and \$250 to the first and second runners-up during the Golden Spike Awards, and each finalist will receive complimentary admission to the event. (You do not need to be present at the event to accept your award.)

Eligibility

The competition is open to undergraduate students who are studying a communication-related major and are enrolled during spring or fall semester 2026 at any accredited university or college in Utah or at Brigham Young University Idaho (which falls under the jurisdiction of the Utah PRSA Chapter). Each student can only enter once per year and there is no cost to enter.

How to Enter

Develop a public relations campaign for the scenario provided in the accompanying materials. The entries will be judged by the client and a group of local PR professionals. One finalist from each school will be selected (provided a minimum of four entries are received from their institution) to compete in a live intercollegiate competition. At-large finalist(s) (or “wild card(s)”) may be selected from schools with less than four entries, as well as from runners-up entries at schools with four or more entries.

Please do not include supporting or additional materials in the initial entry. These materials can be used in the second phase (live competition) should you be selected as one of the finalists.

Incomplete entries may not be accepted – please include the following information:

Name

School

Year

Major

Expected Graduation Date

Address

Cell Phone Number

E-mail Address

Adviser's Name

Live Competition

The finalists will be invited to present their campaign to the judges on Friday, October 30, 2026, as well as to demonstrate additional “real-life” PR skills including pitching a journalist, participating in a timed writing exercise and responding to a crisis situation. The judging panel will include leaders in the public relations industry and representatives from the non-profit organization. After the finalists are named, they will receive additional instructions for the live competition.

Entry Deadline

Entries must be emailed, delivered or sent first-class mail and received no later than Friday, October 9 at 5 p.m. The following is a timeline for the competition:

- Call for Entries Issued: Monday, August 25
- **Informational Call w/Students, Client & Judges: Friday, Sept. 11, 2-3 p.m.**
- Deadline to Commit for Mentoring: Tuesday, September 15
- Mentors Assigned: Friday, September 18
- **Entry Deadline: Friday, October 9, 5 p.m.**
- Finalists Announced: Wednesday, October 14
- Finalist Info Call: Friday, October 16 at 2 p.m.
- **Live Competition: Friday, October 30 from 12-5 p.m.** (Location is TBD)
- **Winners Honored— Golden Spike Awards, Thursday, November 12, 6-9 p.m.**

Please submit your entry or any questions via e-mail to jason.carlton@imail.org by the deadline.

Mentors

PRSA will assign a professional mentor to all students who confirm interest (in the competition and mentoring) by Tuesday, September 15. Mentors will provide guidance with the competition, serve as a sounding board and help students become active, self-directed problem solvers.

Additionally, you will have the opportunity to glean insights from your mentor on a variety of areas outside of the competition, such as personal development, academic direction, internship and volunteer opportunities, etc. Please note that, while it is helpful, it is not necessary to have a mentor to enter the competition. To be assigned a mentor, please email Jason Carlton, APR, at jason.carlton@imail.org, by the September 15 deadline.

Competition Scenario

The following is a real scenario created for the purpose of the competition as well as to provide new ideas and public relations assistance to a deserving statewide nonprofit organization, Children’s Service Society of Utah

About Children’s Service Society of Utah

Founded in 1884, **Children’s Service Society of Utah (CSS Utah)** is the oldest nonprofit organization in Utah dedicated to the safety and well-being of children. For more than 140 years, CSS Utah has empowered families, caregivers, and professionals through programs that support children and strengthen families. Its services include adoption, kinship and GRANDfamilies support, childcare

resource and referral services, and early childhood education. The organization's vision is simple but powerful: ensuring every child has a safe, loving home.

While CSS Utah has a long history of service and meaningful impact across the state, one of its current challenges is public awareness. During discussions with organization leaders, they noted that many Utahns are unfamiliar with CSS Utah, the services it provides, and the role it plays in supporting children and families. The organization is seeking fresh public relations and communications strategies that will increase awareness and strengthen trust in the nonprofit's mission, highlight its ethical and family-centered approach, and help community members better understand when and how CSS Utah can serve as a resource. Additional consideration can be given to public relations and communications efforts that solidify the agency's position in front of donors and funders, as a thoughtful partner and expert in the field. The winning campaign should help position CSS Utah as a trusted partner for children, families, caregivers, donors, and community advocates throughout Utah.

Campaign Objectives *(Examples may include social media growth, number of media stories, growth in website visits, etc. – Here are some sample campaign objectives, but you can pursue different ones that measure the success of your campaign):*

1. *Social media: Increase combined Facebook and Instagram followers by at least 15% and average engagement by at least 20%, measured through likes, comments, shares, and clicks.*
2. *Website: Increase website visits by at least 20% and clicks on priority pages, links, and calls to action by at least 20%.*
3. *Email: Increase Constant Contact email open rates and click-through rates by at least 15%.*

A baseline will be established at the beginning of the project, with final results measured at the conclusion of the competition.

The goal of the year-long (2026) campaign is to bring more awareness to Children's Service Society of Utah and what it offers to communities.

As a nonprofit organization, Children's Service Society of Utah has little to no budget for public relations outreach. Additionally, the organization also has very limited staff and resources, which limits their bandwidth for communication efforts. It is important to note that there is a budget for advertising and marketing, however these efforts are being developed and executed independent of the public relations team.

The Assignment

Develop a year-long campaign (2026) that will build more awareness about Children's Service Society of Utah across the state. This campaign should include conducting research on target audiences and channels, developing relevant messaging and recommending strategies and tactics. The campaign should launch in January 2027 (students should make the recommendation on the launch date of the campaign) and run for 12 months, incorporating observances and/or earned and social media opportunities surrounding the services offered to the community by CSS Utah.

Students are encouraged to identify and determine strategic value in other events, observances or vehicles that will help accomplish the campaign objectives listed above.

The entry must include the following:

1. Cover Letter (please also acknowledge you have read and agree to the rules)
2. Executive Summary (no longer than one page)
3. Public Relations Plan (1-3 pages) that includes the following:
 1. Situation Analysis
 2. Research Summary
 3. Goal
 4. Objectives
 5. Target Audiences
 6. Messaging
 7. Strategies
 8. Tactics (including media relations, community relations, social media, events, etc.)
4. Campaign Timeline (no longer than one page)
5. Press Release about one of the events/efforts from your communication plan (no longer than two pages)

Entries should be typed in a font size no smaller than 12 point with one-inch margins.

Non-Profit Contact

More information about Children's Service Society of Utah is available at <https://cssutah.org/>

Informational Conference Call

An informational conference call to gain insights from the client and competition judges will be held on Friday, Sept. 11, 2-3 p.m. This will last approximately 60 minutes and will provide students with unique insights regarding the organization and competition as well as the opportunity to ask questions. To participate in the informational meeting, please RSVP to Jason Carlton, APR, jason.carlton@imail.org, no later than Thursday, Sept 10, by 5 p.m. He will provide you with call-in information and details when confirming your RSVP on the morning of September 11.

Official Rules

The Utah PR Student of the Year competition is open to undergraduate students who are studying communications and are enrolled during spring or fall semester 2026 at any accredited university or college in Utah or at Brigham Young University Idaho (which falls under the jurisdiction of the PRSA Utah Chapter). There is no cost to enter; each student can only enter once.

Entries must be submitted no later than Friday, October 9 at 5 p.m. Incomplete entries may be disqualified. Finalists must be available to participate during the entire live competition on Friday, October 30 from approximately 12 p.m. to 5 p.m. All finalists will be responsible for their own transportation to and from the live competition in Salt Lake City as well as any accommodations or any out-of-pocket expenses. The PRSA Utah Chapter reserves the right to limit the number of

participants and to change any or all of the rules, requirements or dates. PRSA also reserves the right to disqualify any participant. The final outcome of the competition is at the sole discretion of the judges and PRSA. All materials submitted become the property of the client. As such, entrant agrees that the client may use any strategies, tactics, and concepts without credit or remuneration.