

An Interview with Michael O'Neill

by Jeanne Bell

JEANNE BELL: PROFESSOR O'NEILL, YOU are one of the pioneers in the establishment of nonprofit management programs in academia, so I was hoping that you might share with the readers of Nonprofit Quarterly your thoughts about the state of that field.

Michael O'Neill: According to Rosanne Mirabella of Seton Hall University, there are about 180 colleges and universities in the United States that offer a master's degree that includes at least a serious concentration in nonprofit management work. When, in 1983, we started the master's degree program at the University of San Francisco—the first in the country—I never would have imagined that rate of growth. There are also nonprofit management programs on the undergraduate and doctoral levels, as well as university-based certificate programs, but just on the master's level alone, going from 0 to 180 since 1983 is amazing. As to research, there has been great growth in both quantity and quality, as indicated by the number of articles in scholarly journals and other publications; the number of books from academic, professional, and general publishers; and papers not only at dedicated conferences like ARNOVA [Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action] and ISTR [International Society

for Third-Sector Research] but also at mainline conferences like those of the American Sociological Association, the American Political Science Association, and the American Historical Association.

Those are dramatic indicators of the growth in quantity and quality of research. On a personal level, I can say that the articles, books, and papers that I see these days are, on the whole, significantly better than the ones I saw in the mid-1980s. There are other indicators of the growth of the field, including the number of faculty positions that have been approved in the last twenty-five years. Faculty lines are the coin of the realm in academia. When deans and provosts allocate faculty lines to a discipline or field, that's highly significant, because it means that those institutions are committing long-term support and resources.

JB: *Why do you think that such rapid growth has occurred?*

O'Neill: In 2005 I wrote an article for *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, in which I discussed why the movement had taken place at this time and why it had grown. By way of analogy, I looked at the beginnings of business management education and government management education. Business education started in the 1880s at the University of Pennsylvania's

Wharton School, and public administration programs started in the 1920s at Syracuse University's Maxwell School and the University of Southern California. These programs arose after great growth in the business and government sectors. What happened in the nonprofit field is, I think, very analogous. The last half of the twentieth century saw tremendous growth in the nonprofit sector, as measured by number of organizations, number of employees, employment rate relative to overall employment, revenue and expenses, assets—all these grew at an amazing rate. That nonprofit sector growth produced a climate of opportunity to which universities responded, with a lot of help from their friends.

Specifically, in the 1980s and 1990s a number of people around the country recognized that there was the potential and need for nonprofit management education programs. Nonprofit training agencies like CompassPoint helped pave the way. Some university professors and administrators—academic entrepreneurs—started programs. Several foundations funded this development, most notably the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. National professional associations serving the nonprofit and public sectors, like Independent Sector, provided support.

The other important ingredient was the students. No matter how good the

basic idea, if people out there hadn't been willing to take the risk and put their bodies, money, and time on the line. . . if they hadn't believed in the idea right from the beginning, nothing would have happened. The development of the field was due to all those factors: the growth of the sector creating a climate of opportunity and the people who capitalized on that opportunity, including academic entrepreneurs, funders, student-consumers, and other supporters. It all worked together to create an academic presence that supports the sector.

JB: *Obviously you can't know all of the 180 programs intimately, but when you scan the field of graduate education, are there tiers of excellence? Has the field matured to a level where there's a way that we talk about the great programs and the decent programs?*

O'Neill: I'm skeptical about comparative evaluations like those in *U.S. News and World Report*. When *U.S. News* started listing "the best programs in nonprofit management education," the lists always included Yale. But Yale didn't even have a program. It had a first-rate research center, but no nonprofit management education program. One of the things that happens in these comparative evaluations is that deans of business or management schools are asked, "What are the best programs in finance, marketing, strategy?"—about which they typically know something. Then they're asked, "What are the best programs in nonprofit management?" and the dean remembers vaguely that Yale is doing something in that area, and of course Yale is a fine university, so the dean puts down "Yale." There's no national ranking of nonprofit management programs that I would give you five bucks for.

Certainly there are degree programs that people point to as "lighthouse"

programs. USF [University of San Francisco] has had a role like that, as has Case Western Reserve, Indiana, the New School, and others. There are also many longstanding public administration programs that now have a concentration in nonprofit management, beginning with the University of Missouri at Kansas City, one of the pioneers. Arizona State's program has grown a lot. North Park University in Chicago now has a school of business and nonprofit management; to my knowledge, this is the only university in the country where a school includes the name "nonprofit."

JB: *Has the student profile changed at all over the years?*

O'Neill: My impression is that students tend to be younger now (maybe I'm just getting older!). In some programs, there are higher percentages of people of color than formerly. Most of the students in the master's level programs are people who are already committed to working in the nonprofit sector, and most of them already have positions in nonprofit organizations. Partly, that's a function of their age and work experience. For a long time, the typical entering MBA student was twenty-three to twenty-five years old—just out of college and without any clear longtime career focus. Because the USF program began within a college focused exclusively on adult working students, our median entering age has been in the early to mid-thirties, and those are folks who have typically made commitments to a nonprofit career. But some other programs around the country have younger students, more in their twenties than in their thirties or forties.

JB: *We consistently find that in organizations with a budget of under \$10 million, two-thirds of the executive directors are women. Is that gender*

split reflected in nonprofit management degree programs?

O'Neill: Absolutely. We've never had a cohort group that was 50 percent or more male—not even close. It's always been two-thirds to three-fourths female, and my impression is that the situation nationally is pretty much the same.

JB: *Is there a connection between academic research and quality in the practicalities of management?*

O'Neill: Any good graduate professional program—law, medicine, education, architecture, accounting—will combine and balance theory and research, on the one hand, and practice, on the other. Getting too theoretical and too research oriented, not paying enough attention to practical applications, is a mistake; and getting too nuts-and-boltsy, too immersed in practical applications, and not paying enough attention to research and theory is also a mistake. The history of professional education contains many examples of both errors. I think every theory should have some potential connection with practice, and every major practitioner issue should generate some questions about theory and research.

That said, my personal experience over forty-plus years in various professional fields is that social science research rarely produces clear, definitive answers about practical questions. For example, it's hard to think of anything more "practical" than the nature of leadership. There have been literally thousands of empirical studies about leadership, and the bottom line is that we don't know very much about what leadership is, how it works, how to develop it, or what works and what doesn't. David Petraeus is a powerful, effective leader and has properly been identified as such, but that wasn't done on the basis of social

science research on leadership, although the military has done a lot of that.

Such research has great value, in more ways than we can explore here, but it generally doesn't result in simple "Do this" or "Don't do that" lessons. After forty years of practicing, observing, and reading, writing, and teaching about leadership and management, I don't expect theory and research to generate many clear, simple directives. I'm just thankful for any connection between theory and practice.

I'm also convinced that there are other ways of knowing that are just as important, just as powerful—like elementary school teachers' knowledge that small classes are better, which has never been demonstrated by empirical research.

JB: *What do you think has been the impact on the nonprofit sector of the growth of graduate-level education and research?*

O'Neill: I can't answer that question in any rigorous, scientific sense. My guess is that it has improved the quality of practice, but that's only a guess. What I can say on the basis of hard evidence is that the consumers of this type of education generally feel that it has made a real difference in their work, knowledge, self-confidence, skills, and so forth—this on the basis of surveys of alums that have been done at USF and other places, and a few published studies.

JB: *I'm going to sort of look forward now. What do you see happening in the field? What are the trends that you and your colleagues are talking about? What excites you? What worries you about the field, if anything?*

O'Neill: Let me separate my answer into theory and research on the one hand and nonprofit education on the other. For theory and research, I see continued

and steady growth—not explosive, as has been the case since the Filer Commission report in the mid-1970s, but significant. I say this because nonprofit and philanthropic studies have been accepted within the academy. Scholars and university administrators are realizing that nonprofits and philanthropy are worth studying in disciplines like history, sociology, psychology, political science, economics, and management, and in interdisciplinary fields like urban studies, women's studies, and ethnic studies. In class, the other day, we were talking about what's going on in the Middle East and Northern Africa. One thing that's happened over the last few decades is that scholars, diplomats, aid workers, and even presidents of nations are more likely to talk about "civil society" organizations as related to the progress of democracy, the strength of the middle class, and the stability of governments. People didn't talk that way fifty years ago. I'm very confident that we will continue to see a growth of scholarship and theory relative to nonprofits and philanthropy.

With regard to education, all recent indicators lead me to believe that the field will continue to grow, although not at the meteoric rate of the last twenty-five years. This will mean not only growth in the number of programs and students but also in the multiplicity of connections between nonprofit management programs and management education in business, public administration, social work, education, arts and culture, religion, and so forth. There has always been a close connection between nonprofit and public administration programs. Consistently, about half the nonprofit management programs in the country have been concentrations within MPA or MPP degrees. I think there will be more connections in the future between nonprofit education and business education. For example, our dean here at USF talks about the "three-legged stool" of a

school of management that serves the business sector, the government sector, and the nonprofit sector.

Trends include the globalization of nonprofit management education—more emphasis on what's happening internationally—and the interpenetration of business, government, and nonprofit effort. While there's a lot of talk about "blurring of the sectors," the three sectors have been commingled in many ways for a long time; "commercialization" may or may not be increasing in nonprofits; and "social enterprise" may be a passing fad or something more substantial. But what is quite clear is that the nonprofit sector is now a major player in people's lives and in the national and world economies, and that therefore there will inevitably be many important connections between nonprofits, government, and business, and nonprofit education and research must respond to that interconnectivity creatively and insightfully.

JB: *I think people get confused between needing management training specific to a sector and the application of appropriate concepts that may work in all three sectors.*

O'Neill: There are common elements in all management programs, but there are also elements that are primarily or exclusively specific to a particular sector or field. For example, fundraising is very important to the nonprofit sector but not to the business or government sectors. If somebody wanted to work in the nonprofit or government sectors for the next ten to twenty years, I'm not sure an MBA would be the best degree. For such a person, an MNA or MPA degree would probably make more sense—not only for the curriculum but also the expertise of the instructors, the connections with other students and alums, and the "socialization" that goes on in

every professional education program. All those things make a real difference.

JB: *Do you think that MNA programs have taken their place securely beside the graduate management programs for business and government?*

O'Neill: Well, you know, there's a pecking order in academia: economists look down on sociologists, physicists look down on biologists, and so forth. Many years ago I stopped taking stuff like that seriously—when, as a doctoral student at Harvard, I realized to my astonishment that some arts and sciences faculty looked down not only on Education, Public Health, and Divinity but even the Harvard Business School, the Harvard Law School, and the Harvard Medical School. Any new field in academia is disrespected for a while. When Wharton started, some faculty at the University of Pennsylvania were shocked and said that a university

shouldn't have anything to do with business or moneymaking. When Harvard started its business school, one faculty

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member said there was nothing a young man needed to know about managing a business that he couldn't learn from a

good philosophy course. Recent and very important new fields like women's studies have been sneered at by some within the academy. This is just par for the course. The real question, the important question, is whether a new discipline or field has serious content and important applicability. I think that with respect to nonprofit management and philanthropic studies, the answer is already clear, and it's an unequivocal "Yes."

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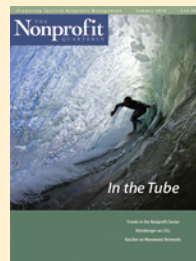
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