



# The Evolution of Nonprofit Management Programs

by Judith Millesen

**T**ODAY, STUDENTS WHO WANT A NONPROFIT management education face a dizzying array of approaches, programs, and degrees from which to choose. What's a student to do? To provide a sense of the array and level of changes in the field, we asked educators from various programs across the country about student interests, current trends, unique programmatic elements, curricular changes, the challenges of delivering quality programs, and their predictions for the future of nonprofit management education. While little consensus emerged from the three teleconferences we conducted with 13 interviewees, it was clear that the field remains as dynamic as has been reported previously in *Nonprofit Quarterly* articles, and the situation will likely continue for

some time. Here are four highlights that emerged from these discussions:

- Undergraduate students are increasingly sophisticated in their knowledge of and experience in the nonprofit field.
- Both students and faculty seek ways to link the discipline's theory with practice.
- Nonprofit management education continues to face formidable challenges, including how to accommodate student demand given constrained resources and the need for technological innovation.
- In the the future, nonprofit management education is likely to be shaped by continued advances in innovative delivery of course content, an ongoing interest in organizational sustainability, and a need for better under-

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standing of the sector's role in community engagement.

### Growing Demand

Identifying the proper academic “home” for nonprofit management education remains an unresolved issue with two underlying questions. First, is nonprofit management a true academic discipline, or is it a professional program like law school? And second, are students better served if nonprofit management education is offered through, for example, business schools, schools of public administration, or social-work programs? Students say their principal concern is not where classes are offered, they simply want course options that focus specifically on the nonprofit sector. According to one university administrator, “Undergraduates in the business school staged a revolt and basically demanded that an undergraduate major be developed and offered in the business school.”

It was also clear that students have become more comfortable in pursuing a graduate degree specifically designed for nonprofit management rather than choosing a traditional degree program such as an MBA or a master of public administration (MPA). The dean at a school that offers a master in management of nonprofit administration (MMNA) explained it this way:

Students are now questioning, “Well, do I want an MBA with some class work in the electives for nonprofit [education], or do I want to take the degree [MMNA] that was set up for nonprofits with some MBA classes? . . . I’ve seen a change over the past four years. . . . Students are more likely to risk now than maybe they were in the beginning. . . . Maybe the MBA has a bit more cachet, but I think people are realizing that you really do need to get a degree that has the kind of content that is specialized for nonprofits.

### Sophisticated Undergraduates

Just 15 years ago, few academic programs offered classes in nonprofit management. Not surprisingly, few students had knowledge about the sector or how to develop a career in nonprofit administration. But that landscape has begun to shift. Today many undergraduate students enter college with some knowledge about nonprofits—they may have experience in the sector because

of a service-learning project in high school, a secular or faith-based volunteer experience, or because of their work for a nonprofit—and this is particularly true for international students enrolling in nonprofit management classes. Consider this anecdote:

We were going around and doing the obligatory introductions [on the first night of class]. . . [and] one young man said something to the effect of ‘Forgive me for the time lag, but I am just back from Africa, where my international NGO [nongovernmental organization] received a land contribution for a sustainable school.’ He was 18.

The faculty we spoke with said that nonprofit management education provides students with a way to harness their passion for service, to bring structure to the desire to help, and to get a job doing something they love. An interviewee involved in primarily undergraduate education at her university, for example, explained that students in the school’s nonprofit management program have transferred from other disciplines, including psychology, sociology, nursing, and education. A faculty member at another college described the influx of art students into nonprofit management classes. “Students are trying to think ahead to their career, and they are seeing a match between those interests they have as potential artists and the career opportunities that the nonprofit sector provides.”

### Linking Theory with Practice

Graduate students report several reasons for seeking graduate degrees. Some are fresh out of undergraduate study and want to learn more about a field in which they have a strong interest. They want to “change the world,” and view forming a nonprofit as the first step. Others are interested in nonprofit management education to expand their knowledge (as illustrated by the interviewee comment “I’ve been flying by the seat of my pants for the last 20 years. . . . So now tell me, what is the right way of doing it?”). Still others seek career advancement by pursuing a program in nonprofit administration to demonstrate greater content knowledge. “Credentialing is a very important consideration to a number of students we have enrolled in our programs, particularly our executive programs, which are tar-

geted to mid-career professionals.” But despite these varied reasons for attending graduate school, a common thread is the strong desire to develop “applied skills.” As one interviewee remarked, “Students want practical skills, they want to understand the theory, and they want to understand how really to bridge between theory and practice. They want a tangible outcome when they leave. They want to be able to say, ‘I am able to do the following’ so they can actually go ahead and further the organizations they work with.”

This focus on outcomes means that in addition to providing relevant academic knowledge, nonprofit management educators are expected to effectively link theory and practice. Bridging the gap can be done in several ways: through case studies, service learning, experiential assignments (such as attending a board meeting), or a semester-long student experience with a nonprofit. Not surprisingly, each of these integrating assignments has implications for faculty roles and expectations. As one interviewee noted, “I think this conversation really highlights a few important parts of trying to teach in this way that [are] about deeper engagement to enrich the learning of your students; there is an awful lot of faculty time that plays into developing the relationships, managing the relationships, and I think it is hard.”

So how do faculty manage these additional responsibilities? Some just take on additional work because they see real value in applied education. Others coordinate applied-learning programs through a nonprofit institute or center on campus that helps to facilitate community-based placements. Still others assemble advisory committees that identify learning sites for students, provide information about the kinds of skills and abilities most desired in the workplace, and recommend adjunct faculty with the talent to supplement the core curriculum with classes that are responsive to student interests. Incidentally, all interviewees involved in higher-education programs worked with a mix of permanent (i.e., “tenure track”) faculty and qualified practitioners. In fact, some programs had far more adjuncts than full-time faculty, “Most of our faculty are practitioner-faculty. . . . We are really looking for people on our faculty who walk the walk every day, and that is important for us.”

## Challenges

As with other disciplines, nonprofit management programs do not exist in isolation. They are part of a larger constellation of individuals, institutions, and other stakeholders who have particular—sometimes competing—expectations for performance that pose challenges for faculty teaching in these programs.

Formed in 1991 to share information and develop common standards, the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC) is a membership association made up of academic centers or programs at colleges and universities. The focus is the study of nonprofit organizations, voluntarism, and philanthropy. One of NACC’s major activities is the development of curricular guidelines for both graduate and, as of 2007, undergraduate programs to assist in the design of nonprofit courses, programs, certificates, and degrees.

In one *NPQ* teleconference, an attendee asked, “What impact will the new NACC undergraduate guidelines have on nonprofit management education?” The response was varied. For some schools, the accreditation process offers program credibility. As one interviewee put it, “We’re not just doing some vocational program. There is an accreditation process similar to business and that we can point to national standards that I think just gives our program a lot more credibility.” For others, the guidelines have had no impact on curricular content, because programs are too new or too small and embedded within a larger academic home that has limited resources for expansion. For more resource-constrained programs, the standards create a tradeoff: “Which ball would you like me to drop to pick up something in the NACC curriculum in depth that needs more coverage?” explained one interviewee. And others were quite pleased that they had “successfully begged and pleaded to have faculty teaching required courses in an established degree-granting program [like an MPA or MBA] include readings, topics, and issues related to the nonprofit sector” in their curriculum. These differences also highlighted the variation in the level of institutional commitment to nonprofit management education.

A few spoke proudly about the resources that have been allocated to build a nonprofit curriculum or how institutional requirements had

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shifted in ways that support and encourage nonprofit applied learning. "When I came in as junior faculty, it was made clear that I was expected not only to teach but also to get involved with the community in order to keep this practical. . . . Is this worth my time if it doesn't count for tenure? The answer in our department is yes, and it counts big-time."

Yet regardless of whether nonprofit management education is seen as "integral to a social-justice mission" with institutional supports and resources or a growing field of interest in an established academic discipline, a common challenge for all these programs is that "there aren't enough hours to offer everything that needs to be offered." As one person noted, "the demand for resources weighs heavily on the side of 'how to' and 'teach me the latest fad/fashion' yet faculty need to balance what might be considered trendy elective courses with critical thinking about the field." Many faculty members have responded by offering "topics" classes that periodically change to reflect student demand. "We have done topics courses on social entrepreneurship over the last three years and had a huge enrollment; yet last year we enrolled only five students. . . . We haven't offered it this year." Others established working relationships with academic units across campus to identify and cross-list classes of potential interest to students interested in nonprofit management. As simple as cross-listing might seem, one interviewee was quick to note that these efforts sometimes meet resistance because of the "fear of competition from other programs [whose faculty members] believe a focus on nonprofit management dilutes their programs."

Faculty also discussed challenges related to keeping pace with technological innovation. They explained that students have surpassed faculty in terms of technological savvy. "Well, we use Blackboard and streaming video from PBS, but this is an area where educators are not as cutting edge as the students." Not only do educators have less technological savoir-faire, but some are downright resistant to integrating technology into the curriculum, particularly in the area of online education. Some programs had substantial online components, others offered hybrid programs that combine online education with classroom-based instruction,

others have "mov[ed] in that direction," and still others had no Web-based course content. "You know, I have to admit: personally I am trying to open my mind, but I am a little resistant to the online stuff. And I think about it all the time and I struggle with it, and we have long discussions about it at faculty meetings, but I am just not there in my mind yet." One instructor speculated that resistance might be attributable to educators' sentiment that "it is not quite as much fun to teach online," as one interviewee put it. "Faculty enjoy being up in front of a class. So that is our challenge: to make sure the faculty are well trained."

Regardless of whether faculty are "there yet," the response from students involved in online education has been positive. "We have no complaints, and actually students are excited about it," says one educator. "It gives them more opportunities to connect with each other via email than they would otherwise if they just had time to meet in class." Moreover, from an academic perspective, online education has delivered. "We have found that academically, in terms of student learning, they learn as well or better than the students who are perhaps half asleep in the back of the class and not involved in the discussion in a face-to-face setting. Online, you can require students to participate; no one can sit in the back of the room and say nothing. So in terms of academic success, we have found it to be very positive."

A final challenge involves integrating theory and practice for undergraduate students whose idealistic commitment to save the world must be tempered with practical realities. As one instructor reported, "I have a lot of students who come to my class and say, 'Well, I am taking this nonprofit class because I want to start a nonprofit organization.' While it is certainly laudable that young people are recognizing unmet needs in their communities and that they understand the nonprofit sector can play a major role in addressing those needs as educators, we have a responsibility to provide core-content knowledge in ways that do not squash the dreams of the young people in our classes yet at the same time prepare them for the realities of a job in the sector." Another educator agrees:

One challenge that I see from the perspective of students who have not worked before in the

nonprofit sector is that they are very idealistic about life. They just assume that if they are going to go work in the nonprofit sector, it is enough just to have the desire to change the world. And when it comes down to getting their skills, sometimes they say, "So I really have to know how to do budgets?" . . . In order to overcome this challenge, we ask them to do service-learning projects. In each class, we have applied-learning projects; they have to go to work with an organization in the community—kind of to give them a sense of reality. And it is really working quite well.

## Looking Forward

Webinars, online classes, distance learning, video streaming, hybrid classes, and other new forms of educational delivery illustrate changes in the way information is transmitted between and among faculty and students. Our interviewees were quite thoughtful about the future of this area of education. Most agreed that course content delivery would continue to evolve and that technology would play a large role in the transition.

But technological innovation has developed at different rates in programs across the country. As one interviewee noted, "The thought was that it would develop equally across all regions, and that has just not been the case. We offer a hybrid class: a little bit online linked with a little bit of what we call 'residencies.' That seems to be exactly what the students here want. And then I go to other places and hear people say, 'Oh no. You can get rid of that residency stuff, because that is really not what they want.'" Another interviewee reinforced this opposing view. "No one sign[ed] up for [mixed-mode courses]. We found that people are either in the online mode of, 'I want to do this when I want to do this' kind of thing, or they are the kind of person who does like a classroom setting. The mixed mode—at least for us—was problematic . . . Right now the online component is only about 20 percent of our activity, but I expect that in the next five years that will double." And as a third interviewee explained, "We are still bringing people in . . . We have people driving three or four hours, once a month, over a nine-month commitment. . . . The market isn't doing what people predicted five or 10 years ago."

A second change interviewees foresaw was an

increasing focus on financial aspects of nonprofits and organizational sustainability. "I think that raising revenues or raising resources by nontraditional means for nonprofits is going to become more and more important. . . . There will be pressure for nonprofits to be more entrepreneurial and to try to develop ways they can raise revenues in ways they are not used to."

And finally, the external environment and public policies in which nonprofits work pose important considerations for nonprofit management. "I believe that the complexities with relationships with government are going to provide lots of need for training and lots of interesting case studies to bring into the classroom. . . . The complex ways that nonprofits interact with government is, for me, the most important trend." Another interviewee's comments reinforced this idea:

Government relations of course is essential, yet the glasses that I wear connect volunteerism and community engagement as well as national service. And I see a growing demand in that area, especially as more nonprofits are challenged to do more with less. Even though most pay lip service to volunteers, most of them would prefer to hire permanent staff. Yet more and more, I am called upon to 'Give us more suggestions. Help us out.' We need research to update our engagement [with] the community that reflects the changes in technology and workforce composition. And I do see, as funding becomes more stiff and as funders anticipate or expect nonprofits to work with volunteers, that even if they don't want to, they are finding they have to become more sophisticated in that area.

Although nonprofit management education may still be a relatively young discipline, it has undergone impressive change in a resource-scarce environment. In the face of tremendous environmental shocks, perhaps the sector's resilience—by being responsive to constituent expectations and by exploiting asset-based and self-development strategies—is another core element of successful nonprofit management education programs. Many had established elaborate networks of individuals and institutions capable of providing or taking advantage of resources to enrich student learning. Those we

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interviewed were creative, innovative, and committed to delivering quality educational experiences in a way that reflects student needs and interests.

And while nonprofit educational credentials may not be a current requirement in the sector, interviewees like this one expect that, over the next decade, evolution of the discipline and evolving standards will change that picture.

I hope that the people hiring in the nonprofit sector will be demanding or be interested in a big way in master's degrees in the nonprofit field. I don't want to prognosticate that that will actually happen, but I think that for the whole thing to grow, you need the demand from the hiring side of it—just similar to MBAs as requirements for people in the business setting—to have equivalency in the nonprofit world. But that is going to take people hiring people when they have that credential, and I don't see that quite yet, but hopefully within 10 years that will ramp up, and then the educational component will fit easier into the whole plan.

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Angela Eikenberry, University of Nebraska at Omaha; Roland Kushner, Muhlenberg College; Pat Libby, University of San Diego; Wesley Lindahl, North Park University; Claudia Petrescu, Eastern Michigan University; Sarah Jane Rehnberg, University of Texas at Austin; Theresa Ricke-Kiely, University of South Carolina Upstate; Jodi Sandfort, University of Minnesota; Robert Shick, Rutgers University; and SueAnn Strom, American Humanics.

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