



“How Do Employers Weigh a Candidate’s Degree in Nonprofit Management When Hiring?”

by the editors

THIS IS THE THIRD YEAR THAT THE *Nonprofit Quarterly* has run a special supplement that lists the more than 250 degree programs available in nonprofit management. In past articles we have suggested that prospective students search carefully for the right program to get the type of education they believe they need. Overall, student feedback about these programs has been very good, particularly when the programs emphasize the coupling of academic with hands-on experience.

But what happens when these students graduate and hit the work force (if they are not already in it)? In December 2006 we conducted

an informal poll of our readers, many of whom are potential employers. We received a flood of responses. Among those who responded as potential employers the replies, for the most part, landed somewhere along a fairly short continuum from “I don’t look at that type of credential at all” to “it is (or may be) a benefit on top of relevant experience.”

The slight to marked resistance that we picked up from some readers to looking specifically for this kind of degree is probably not surprising considering the evolution of the sector and education in the sector. Until recently, education in the nonprofit sector has come not from formal degree programs, but rather from hard

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experience in the field. So, formal nonprofit management education, if it is seen as divorced from practice, meets up with some natural skepticism in the sector.

"We hire people who have the skills to run a gallery, or an art school or write grants . . . As the executive director I have worked in the nonprofit art field for 30 years and learned on the hoof."

Many of today's nonprofits have been started within the past 40 years with tight budgets and managers who had to learn their skills on the job. The founders of these organizations didn't go into the work with a burning passion for comp-time policies or strategic planning—they came to improve abandoned children's lives or to cure AIDS or to save a lighthouse. That sense of mission is what has kept things going when funding was tight or nonexistent. The idea that someone may expect to move into management without paying "their dues" at lower levels doesn't sit well with many seasoned managers.

Jim Work at the Des Moines "I Have a Dream Foundation" puts it this way. *"You have to hire someone who cares about the mission more than their career or their ego . . . education does not give anyone that."*

Aligned with this were comments from readers that confirmed many nonprofits hire from within their own field of practice, and often from the ranks of program staff who have taken on certain management tasks gradually in the course of their work. This practice may have some limitations on its surface, if the staff's understanding of management has some gaps, but the benefit is that such staff know the field they work in. They have the relationships and some influence and know the lay of the land.

This orientation toward recognizing experience in the field over academic learning had some emotional content. *"My experience tells me that I'd rather have a smart high school dropout than someone equipped with an MBA and no street saavy,"* said one reader. *"Give me a 50-year-old who knows how to work the phones and comes with a built-in supply of solid community contacts, over a 26-year-old with a master's degree and a pile of fresh ideas."*

"I look for people who can readily separate the theoretical from the practical," CEO Michael Hatzenbeler says. *"I want those who have learned to value the contributions of others,*

who respect the history and experience of a pre-existing team, and those who are ready to jump in and take on responsibility at whatever level they are asked."

A few readers mentioned that the availability of non-degree oriented education for people who had come up through the ranks—through workshops or even through individual courses provided by academic centers—has made it more possible for non-degreed people to pick up the useful skills and knowledge they may lack to manage today's more complex organizations.

Others suggested that they had found real gaps or misapprehensions in critical areas like board development and financial management among degreed hires.

While many of the respondents stated that a strong nonprofit management degree could be a bonus and even a deciding factor in a hire, particularly if the candidate presented strong experience, the first priority, for nearly all of the respondents, was finding and hiring people with "smarts" and on-the-ground experience who could adapt, take "no" for an answer, and still find ways to accomplish their work. *"Always on the top of my list is: 'must be smart.' Smart people figure out how to learn the skills, solve problems, and adapt as the work changes,"* says Kate Barr at the Nonprofits Assistance Fund.

Several readers, however, voiced enthusiasm for nonprofit management degrees citing a candidate's willingness to go through such a program as a demonstration of motivation and commitment. *"I would find hiring to be far more reliable if I knew that the prospective employee had a nonprofit degree,"* says Gayle Carlson of the YWCA. *"Of course, program credibility would come into play, but just knowing that the employee has the basic techniques would help reduce the training time for mid-management and higher positions."*

Dennis Morrow, who runs a small nonprofit and teaches a degree program, sums the situation up this way: *"The issue isn't 'to degree or not to degree' but rather how to pair professional management training with experienced workers—it will be a melding of the two that morphs into the nonprofit leader/manager of tomorrow (but of course as in all things, we need them today)."*

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