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Educational Impact of Graduate Nonprofit Degree Programs
Perspectives of Multiple Stakeholders

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OVER a decade ago the first conference on the topic of university-based programs in nonprofit management education was convened in San Francisco. The conference produced some general areas of agreement among the fifty invited participants, who were academics, funders, technical assistance providers, and others who had been involved in the development of university-based programs for nonprofit managers. O'Neill and Young (1988) have summarized the areas of agreement that pointed to a strong interest and demand for these programs. Among these areas were the distinctiveness of nonprofit organizations from business and government organizations and the need to develop educational programs responsive to local needs. Participants also expressed a commitment to following the experience of other professional education programs in the country by combining research and practice and using full-time faculty and practitioners to deliver programs.

In his discussion of alternative approaches to nonprofit management education, Reynold Levy (1988) asked conference participants to reflect on this observation:

> A critical ingredient for the success of almost any such endeavor [that is, nonprofit management curriculum] must be the capacity to connect meaningfully with nonprofit institutions and to satisfy concerns articulated by their leadership. For it is they that are the sources of employment for graduating students, the living laboratories for student learning and, given their training needs and expertise, an important market to tap both for tuition subsidy and part-time faculty. The success of many business schools

in offering MBAs and executive education programs is attributable in no small measure to their strong linkages with the local, regional, or national corporate community. Nothing less is needed for a set of authentic, mutually advantageous interactions with third sector organizations.

Will the university-based nonprofit management program be blessed with a staff and faculty possessed of the background and drive, and provided with the resources and incentives to cultivate such relationships? No small challenge. No mean task [p. 19].

In the years that have elapsed since the initial conference, what progress has been made in achieving this result? Have the curricula in these programs provided meaningful connections to nonprofit organizations and the major management issues as articulated by nonprofit leaders? How successful have these programs been in developing strong linkages with the nonprofit community through their faculty and alumni? What impact have these university-based graduate degree programs had on the nonprofit community?

In 1995, with the generous support of the Kellogg Foundation, we undertook a major research project to examine the impact of nonprofit management education programs on the nonprofit community. The first phase of the project was the subject of an earlier report in this journal (Wish and Mirabella, 1998) and a follow-up to previous studies conducted by Wish (1991, 1993). A snapshot of the current universe of graduate programs that focus on the management of nonprofit organizations, it found over seventy colleges and universities with degree programs. In the second phase of the study, which began in autumn 1996, we examined how these programs affect the nonprofit sector. We made site visits to ten of these nonprofit management education programs and conducted focus groups with major stakeholders. These focus groups were an initial attempt to gather data on the impact of nonprofit management programs. What is the indirect effect of nonprofit management education programs on the nonprofit sector? How do alumni of these programs influence the nonprofit organizations that employ them? This article is a progress report on the initial findings of this research.

Literature Review

Scholars have devoted very little attention to the answers to these questions over the past ten years. There has been some work in the development of competencies for nonprofit management education programs (Rubin, Adamski, and Block, 1989; Heimovics and Herman, 1989; Hall, 1994). These efforts focused on the determination

of *target competencies:* the skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary for effective nonprofit administration. These target competencies were developed and refined based on literature reviews, committee work, questionnaires, and discussions with academics and practitioners. Although the competencies developed by Hall were used to recommend the field's first competency-based curriculum, at Seattle University, the competency movement did not progress to the next phase, the evaluation of learning outcomes.

Information on the outcomes and impact of university-based graduate nonprofit degree programs has been sparse. The first report by INDEPENDENT SECTOR (Hodgkinson, 1988) on the development of these programs sought "to determine the potential strengths and weaknesses of progress to date" (p. 2). Because the field was still in its infancy, this report necessarily focused not on outputs and impacts but on program inputs, such as academic activities, number of faculty, types of appointments, governance styles, financial assistance for students, and sources of revenue among the nineteen programs in existence at that time. Several years later a second report focused on the continued progress of these centers—now forty strong—as measured by both program inputs and outputs (Crowder and Hodgkinson, 1991). Among the questions examined were: What are the main functions of these programs? What resources are devoted to these functions? What are the major disciplines of the centers? What courses are offered on the nonprofit sector? Where are the programs located? Do they offer a degree or certificate? How are the programs staffed? How are staff and students recruited? And how is research and information shared with the nonprofit community? In this same vein, drawing on his experience in the development of the degree program at the Mandel Center at Case Western Reserve University, Young (1991) identified the keys to development of a successful degree program and the factors reinforcing its prospects for success. Again, due to the infancy of the program at Case Western, the focus was on inputs rather than impact.

It was not until 1992 that the first attempt was made to gauge the success of the nonprofit management degree programs that had developed. Crowder and Hodgkinson (1992) reported the results of a survey of program faculty and directors that showed the respondents were optimistic about the success of their programs. Indicators identified as measures of this success were "the understanding and appreciation for nonprofits gained by students; the greater awareness of students of the sector's critical role in society; the involvement of professionals from the nonprofit sector in these programs; continued success and growth in enrollment; growth in number of classes, students, and projects; a stronger and more involved group of students to advocate for nonprofit causes; increased acceptance of nonprofit issues as legitimate questions of public good, service delivery, and so

on by the department, the college, and areas of state and local government (p. 227)." These results clearly pointed to the excitement generated by the development of these programs but, again, did not address the question of impact.

Then, in 1996, a flurry of research and information was generated when the University of San Francisco convened a second conference on nonprofit management education. Among the papers presented were several that focused on the design of nonprofit management programs through an analysis of stakeholder views (Tschirhart, 1998; Renz, 1996). Renz examined the educational and training needs of early-career professionals—as identified by practicing nonprofit executives—with an eye toward identifying areas for partnerships between universities and community-based organizations. Drawing on the perspectives of nonprofit managers, faculty, and students in one community, Tschirhart recommended linking the design of graduate degree programs in nonprofit management to community variation. And a survey of nonprofit organization managers in Utah showed that nonprofit executives desire educational programs that deemphasize credentialing and emphasize practical skills immediately transferable to the workplace. These papers, then, represented another take on the competencies issue, seeking to answer the question, What should be taught in nonprofit management degree programs? They made little, if any, information available concerning the impact of what is taught on the nonprofit community.

Methodology

We held focus groups of stakeholders at ten program sites to measure these programs' indirect impact—that is, the effect that occurs when alumni and current students of these degree programs are employed by nonprofit organizations and bring their knowledge and skills to those organizations. Focus groups were held with the following stakeholder groups: alumni, faculty, employers, and funders. The number of sites selected to represent each degree was in direct proportion to the number of programs included in phase one of our research, to ensure that campuses were equally represented by degree type, that is, MBA, MPA, MSW, or other master's degree, including the master's degree in nonprofit management. As program alumni constitute a critical stakeholder group in our model, only those programs with a critical mass of alumni (ten or more) were eligible for inclusion in the sample. The sample selected using this strategy is summarized in Table 1.

As the impact of nonprofit management education programs on the nonprofit sector is a relatively new area of research, a major advantage of the focus group methodology is the ability of these groups to explore topics and generate hypotheses (Morgan, 1988, p. 21). Additionally, Bogue and Saunders (1992) point out the economic advantages of having simultaneous access to the ideas of a

Table 1. Sites Selected for Phase Two by Degree Type

Degree Type	Sample Size	College or University
MBA	2	University of California at Berkeley University of St. Thomas
MPA	4	Indiana University Long Island University Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville University of Missouri at Kansas City
MSW	1	Spertus College (at Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, Chicago)
Other master's degrees	4	Case Western Reserve University New School for Social Research Regis University University of San Francisco

number of respondents—in the allotted time the researcher can gather information from several stakeholders, not just one. We both felt that the most effective qualitative method would be these open-ended interviews conducted with each group of stakeholders.

We developed different questions for each stakeholder focus group based on the perspectives we expected group members to bring to the discussion. For example, we asked faculty members and administrators about the goals of the degree program and the process by which they developed these goals. We asked employers about the knowledge and skills needed to manage nonprofit organizations effectively and how much of this knowledge their alumni employees possessed. The questions uncovered differences and similarities among the stakeholder groups, particularly regarding the critical knowledge and skills to be acquired through the degree programs.

The data we gathered from our focus groups are suggestive but not generalizable for two primary reasons. First, because of financial constraints, we were able to visit only ten of the seventy-six campuses offering programs in nonprofit management. Second, the attendance at focus groups was uneven: alumni and faculty members attended far more frequently than funders and employers. We met with funders on four campuses. On some campuses only a very few employers were able to attend the focus group discussions. Yet, because program impact data are so scarce, the results should not be taken lightly. They point clearly to major questions.

Results

We asked the various stakeholders to comment on four major questions: (1) What are the goals of the degree program? (2) What knowledge, skills, and values should be taught in these programs? (3) What has been the outcome and impact of the program on the

nonprofit community? and (4) How would you measure the effectiveness of nonprofit management programs? Their answers can be divided into three categories by beneficiary: the students, the university, and the nonprofit community.

Goals

The perceived goals for nonprofit management education programs varied by stakeholder group and by degree program. Both employers and business school faculty felt that one goal of the MBA program was to expose students to the field of nonprofit management. These stakeholders also discussed the relationship between the public and the nonprofit sectors and the goal of bridging the gap between the sectors. Finally, employers articulated the goal of bringing MBA skills to nonprofit management. Thus, in regard to MBA programs, employers and business school faculty agreed with the business model: their nonprofit management needs are satisfied by courses taught in an MBA program.

Stakeholders participating in master of public administration (MPA) and master of nonprofit organizations (MNO) focus groups emphasized somewhat different goals from those expressed by stakeholders in business schools. Both the MPA and MNO stakeholders stated the goal of preparing students for management positions in nonprofit organizations. A graduate of one program commented that "the goal is to graduate executive directors and people capable of management . . . on a program level or development level." In addition, said the group members, students should come away from these programs with the practical knowledge and skills necessary to be effective nonprofit administrators. The MPA focus groups also discussed goals that would benefit academia, including such intellectual aims as conducting research, training scholars for academic careers, and preparing analysts for senior policy positions.

In the discussion of goals benefiting the nonprofit community, the MPA and MNO groups identified such objectives as providing networking opportunities for nonprofit leaders and retaining the values of the nonprofit sector during these times of change.

Skills and Competencies

We asked each stakeholder group to identify the most important skills and competencies necessary for managing or leading a nonprofit organization. Across the board, they emphasized the importance of skills and competencies for managing the internal environment of a nonprofit organization. Boundary-spanning skills and competencies were also specified by all groups of stakeholders across academic settings, although less frequently. Stakeholders from business schools emphasized internal management skills far more often than skills and knowledge associated with an organization's external environment. Stakeholders in public administration programs and degree programs specific to nonprofit management

more frequently identified skills and knowledge related to an organization's external environment, including abilities in collaboration and advocacy and knowledge of the history of the nonprofit sector. Finally, a few funders and employers commented that although practical knowledge and skills are important, students must learn that they are accountable to the nonprofit community, to its values and goals.

Impact

We asked each stakeholder group to comment on the impact of the degree program. For example, employers were asked whether program graduates were able to use knowledge gained from the program to help the employers' nonprofit organizations. We asked faculty members whether the typical student had an impact on the organization in which he or she was employed. Similarly, alumni commented on their perceived effect on the nonprofit community.

Alumni, employers, and faculty members in all academic settings observed the positive effects of graduates on the nonprofit community because of the management tools they had acquired. It was noted that these tools helped them understand more clearly how nonprofit organizations function; this knowledge translated into more effective management. The acquisition of useful management tools was also seen to supply graduating students with the skills they needed to perform their jobs, and to enhance their opportunities for promotion. Other positive degree program outcomes identified by the focus groups, primarily in business schools, were consulting positions, networking opportunities, and mentoring for alumni. Particularly in business schools, these outcomes were seen as essential to the graduating student's success.

Stakeholders in schools offering the MPA degree mentioned that the nonprofit community benefits from the increased opportunities for networking and collaboration. These stakeholders believed that program alumni and interns provided a vital connection between the nonprofit community and the university, bringing their skills and knowledge to bear on the problems of the sector. As a result, commented one stakeholder, the sector and the organizations within it were strengthened.

Several stakeholders discussed factors that affected students unfavorably, especially the scarcity of high-paying positions in the nonprofit sector. Some individuals expressed significant frustration because of the limited employment opportunities. One disappointed graduate commented on the need "to tell students that you aren't going to get rich here." Another remarked that a master's degree in nonprofit management actually overqualified an applicant for some positions.

Alumni also expressed disappointment with employers who were unwilling to implement projects the alumni had developed as part of their coursework. Although they realized that lack of resources was

partly to blame, alumni also said that sometimes projects were not implemented because a nonprofit executive was not willing to try something slightly different or "on the edge."

Employers were not the only group to draw the fire of alumni. A few alumni also mentioned the ill effects of faculty members who lacked involvement in the community. They perceived that networking, internships, and placements suffered when the faculty had no attachments to the community served by the program. Finally, in one program, relocation of alumni after graduation was viewed as harming the regional nonprofit community: if the students are not drawn from the local area, the program will not benefit the surrounding community because these students are not likely to remain in the area after graduation.

Suggestions for Measuring Effectiveness

We asked stakeholders how they would measure the effectiveness of nonprofit management degree programs. Clear differences between academic settings emerged in response to this question, particularly regarding the benefits to academia and to the nonprofit community.

MBA program alumni cited many measures of effectiveness. Some of these measures were student related, asking whether students and alumni possessed the requisite skills to perform tasks, were increasing their involvement in nonprofit organizations, and had secured management positions or advanced in these positions. Alumni in MPA and nonprofit management programs measured effectiveness in similar ways; they regarded graduates' networking opportunities, ability to secure management positions, and advancement in organizations as indicators of the effectiveness of degree programs. In addition, one person commented that graduates' ability to make the transition from one sector to another, to retool, is a measure of effectiveness for a management program.

Another group of indicators identified by alumni pertained to the nonprofit community. Graduates were concerned that employers often did not understand the graduates' projects. They cited the successful bridging of theory and practice as a measure of effectiveness for nonprofit degree programs. In other words, a few graduates felt that effective administration would result from a curriculum that offered knowledge and skills with immediate relevance to the sector. Likewise, the employers of MPA graduates measured effectiveness by the ability to bridge theory and practice, in the belief that the translation of theory into practice is critical for effective administration.

Public administration faculty members cited the relationship between the university and the nonprofit community as an area in which to measure effectiveness. Does the nonprofit program provide applied research for the nonprofit community? Does the university provide a forum for discussion of the nonprofit sector? Is the

university committed to that sector (for example, are faculty members evaluated according to service criteria)? Is the program able to change as the environment changes? Does it generate and encourage collaboration and innovation on campus?

In addition to the student-based measures outlined earlier, stakeholders in nonprofit management schools also articulated a *vision* of effectiveness for nonprofit degree programs, identifying the importance of mission, quality of instruction, and the balancing of stakeholder inputs. One faculty member cited working for a just society as a part of a program's mission and spoke of the difficulty of measuring this influence on the sector. Effectiveness in management degree programs was described eloquently by one faculty member as follows: "Your program is successful if it enables people who are graduates of the program to manage the organizations more effectively than they otherwise would. People who graduate from this program [should be able to] lead their organizations into the twenty-first century. These are people who should be much more aware of the history of the sector and forces that shape the sector now, [who know] where the sector is going and how they can get their organization into the next century. Those seem to be the things that need to come out of the program."

Conclusion

These are the preliminary results of our project evaluating the impact of university and college programs in nonprofit management education on the nonprofit sector itself. As we stated earlier, this research is a first step toward understanding stakeholders' perceptions. We have found that these perceptions vary by identification of program goals as well as by program beneficiaries. We will not attempt to make any broad claims based on these findings. However, these findings are suggestive of the various perspectives that stakeholders bring to the table and clearly point to the need for follow-up studies in several areas.

First, graduate nonprofit management degree programs should systematically evaluate their impact on the local community. Are alumni employed by local nonprofit organizations? Are the skills and competencies taught in the program consonant with those desired by employers? Are the nonprofit organizations that employ alumni of the program better managed than other nonprofit organizations? How satisfied are alumni and employers with the graduate degree program? Over time, aggregate information should be assembled across campuses to examine the impact of these programs by region and by program type.

A second area for further examination is the relationship between the skills and competencies currently taught on campuses across the country and the skills and competencies actually needed to be an

effective nonprofit manager. Our research found that coursework in these programs tends to focus on skills and competencies related to the internal environment of a nonprofit organization. But who are the most effective nonprofit managers, and are internal management skills the key to their effectiveness? If not, what are the skills and competencies that effective nonprofit managers possess? Is there a better mix of coursework that should be available to students seeking careers as managers in the nonprofit sector? A good starting point for this research would be the findings amassed by Herman and Heimovics (1994) in their ongoing examination of executive leadership.

In our research we found that many colleges and universities provide technical assistance and educational support to the nonprofit community in addition to offering a degree program. The relationship between the university and the nonprofit community it serves is a third area that merits further examination by researchers. How effective are these support services in enhancing the management of nonprofit organizations? Do collaboration and innovation in university-based programs result in more effective delivery of services by nonprofit organizations? Are there differences between degree programs that offer these additional services and those that do not?

The information collected from this and future studies will be useful to college and university administrators and faculty as they develop and refine nonprofit management programs. The issues examined here—goals, knowledge, skills and values, impact, and effectiveness—were understood differently by stakeholders, according to program type and community. Program administrators would be well advised to take stock of the preferences of the employer and student communities in their geographical area. We found that employers and graduates alike expressed a desire to have coursework and skills development that bridge the gap between theory and practice. In addition, there was a clear preference for programs that discuss the relationship among the three sectors—for-profit, public, and nonprofit—with the goal of bridging the gaps between them. It is our belief, based on our research, that the nonprofit management education programs that survive into the twenty-first century will be those that successfully prepare students to work in the turbulent environment of the nonprofit sector, in partnership with managers in business and government organizations.

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