

Providing a Meaningful Education: the Challenges for Academe

The Chronicle asked numerous charity leaders, scholars, recruiters, students, and other experts to outline the key challenges facing academic programs that train college and graduate-school students to take jobs at nonprofit organizations, and to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of academic programs. Following are excerpts from their observations:

The problem with these programs is that their evaluation focuses almost entirely on internal aspects: Who's getting jobs? Are nonprofits hiring our graduates? Are grads finding the training relevant?

Those questions avoid the larger issue: What's all this doing to American civic life?

The inevitable side effect of these kinds of programs is the devaluing of the American citizen in civil society. They are transforming the sector into just another professional, bureaucratized sector for which you have to have certain credentials before you can practice. It changes the character of the nonprofit sector, serving to shut down the opportunity for "amateurs" to step forward and run their own lives; for neighborhoods to form themselves and tackle problems in their own way; for grass-roots efforts, no matter how messy and clumsy, to evolve.

I'd hate to see us get to the point where money flows only to those organizations that are run by people with certain credentials — where foundations say, "This is an interesting proposal, but who in your organization has the proper academic training?"

We all somehow seem to think that so-called capacity building is the solution to the sector's problems (where did we get the idea that wringing 5 percent more organizational efficiency out of the sector was its most pressing concern?) and that management training accomplishes that, but I don't know that anyone is paying attention to the price we're paying for it.

WILLIAM A. SCHAMBRA

Director

Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal

Hudson Institute

Washington

There are a variety of types of programs around the country, and many are doing great work. There may be room to grow, but the supply side is largely OK.

Where we are still short is on the demand side. Not all nonprofits value and embrace the need for this kind of education programming. For all the right reasons, they don't want to deflect time, energy, and money away from their missions, from delivering on whatever need it is they set out to meet.

But in their mission-driven zeal, they don't recognize that they might be able to do their jobs better with more effectively trained and educated leaders and managers — and not just from the traditional academic sense with degrees and credentials, but just more education and training in general through all these kinds of programs and offerings.

Nonprofits don't yet sufficiently take advantage of all the opportunity. There is much more room for greater attention from the demand side — not to overshift away from mission, but for more organizations to recognize there can be a balance, and that these educational programs can play an important role in strengthening the organizational capacity of the sector.

ROBERT LONG

Vice President for Programs
W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Battle Creek, Mich.

The demands on the curriculum of nonprofit-management programs have never been greater. The schools have a broad mix of students — some who intend to go into government; a few with aspirations to go into the private sector; and a growing and highly focused number who want to go into the nonprofit sector. And the students are very intentional about where they are going and what they want to get them there. They want to drill down and take very skill-specific courses to train themselves for the particular destination they have chosen.

The problem for our students is that no matter what they say, studies show they are likely to change jobs and sectors within the first five to 10 years after graduate school. So the schools have a balancing act. They need to provide a combination of electives and requirements so that students don't become so highly specialized that they can't make the jump. They need to teach students about spanning boundaries without creating tension with students who think they know exactly where they will stay for a career.

PAUL C. LIGHT

Professor of Public Service
Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service
New York University
New York

Just as colleges and universities were encouraged years ago to pay attention to attracting people of color into the pipeline for students, faculty, and deans, the nonprofit sector needs to focus on its pipeline for leadership in a more high-profile and concerted way.

And one way to address the pipeline issue is through the colleges and universities that have nonprofit-management programs. These programs have an obligation to make sure they have programs that are diverse, that are appealing to people of color, and that work around retention, too.

If not, the nonprofit sector is going to inadvertently build a leadership group that doesn't look like the diverse populations they serve. Advocacy groups will remain the dominant employers of people of color, while the big, national service groups don't have the same diversity. Colleges and universities should have the goal of creating a pool of leaders where it is just as likely for a person of color to run the YMCA of the USA or the American Red Cross as it is for that person to run [the National Council of] La Raza or the [National] Urban League.

KALA M. STROUP

President

American Humanics, which offers a curriculum used on more than 70 campuses to train undergraduates in nonprofit leadership
Kansas City, Mo.

With the number of leaders the field is going to need in the coming decades, nonprofit academic programs can't be the only strategy for finding and training leaders. And a degree or certificate program isn't the right path for everybody.

From a grant maker's perspective, the academic institutions and all kinds of nonprofit leadership and management centers make the best contribution when they are able to offer multiple options for learners — not just a degree or certificate program, but executive education, peer-learning opportunities, one-time seminars, etc.

Programs that reach larger numbers of people and use multiple learning strategies are more attractive to funders and do a better job of creating a pipeline for future leaders.

RICHARD L. MOYERS

Program Officer

Nonprofit Sector Advancement Fund
Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation
Washington

There's not a coherent pipeline-development process for midcareer, high-potential people.

The American Council on Education, the American Symphony Orchestra League — these groups might all have their fellowship programs or whatever, but what happens after? It's not enough.

There needs to be a mechanism to keep the momentum going. The advanced-degree programs need to make sure they are reaching out to people who are in the middle of their careers and who are at a point where they aspire to be in top administration or the executive level of institutional decision making. These are the people that academic programs can benefit the most. There's a maturation they have gone through; they've dealt with solving problems at the ground level.

If someone goes from an undergraduate degree right into a specialized advanced degree without working in the sector, they won't have the proper experience that will help them understand theory and policy and where they intersect. Midcareer professionals who have these degrees are the most seasoned, the best prepared, the most desirable, and able to have the biggest impact on the sector.

KRISTINE A. MORRIS

Co-Founder

*Morris & Berger, a company that recruits senior executives for nonprofit organizations
Glendale, Calif.*

One of the things the programs should continue to do and embrace is networking, bringing in as many professionals from the field as possible and letting them share best practices and how they handle everyday challenges.

Many of my classmates are working full time or part time, and networking is key to making contacts, not just for the purposes of getting a job in the future, but for sharing information, learning from people directly, knowledge networking.

It's important to have an academic teaching theory, say in public policy, but the learning experience is enhanced by bringing in a nonprofit professional who is dealing with local and state government, actually facing public-policy issues. That's the mix we need.

MICHAEL GEWIRTZ

*Candidate for a master's degree in public administration
Seton Hall University
South Orange, N.J.*

These academic centers and programs downplay what is most needed in the public sector and in government — good, effective, ethical leaders. They are not geared to produce leaders with vision and courage, steeped in ethics, and with an ear for politics and coalition building.

One of the reasons so many of these schools don't inspire kids to higher ethical standards, to change the way this country does business, is that there are so few practitioners on staff either as full-time faculty or adjuncts.

It's the practitioners who have an eye for societal change, who are working to produce the results, that are going to motivate students. It's the dearth of these types of people that has weakened the academic centers. The dyed-in-the-wool academics may know their subjects very well, but they have not been out in the world.

The research being done by these academics is, by and large, pretty poor, very pedestrian. That's not to say there's no good research coming out, but it's not nearly as good as it ought to be. The researchers rarely touch the controversial issues. Where's the research on advocacy and organizing; the impact of public policy on society; the rise of the mega-foundations, like the Gates Foundation; analysis of class representation on foundation and nonprofit boards; the impact of social entrepreneurship on the ethics and operations of nonprofits?

There's little risk and thus lack of real relevance in the research being done.

PABLO EISENBERG
Senior Fellow
Public Policy Institute
Georgetown University
Washington
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As the field of study grows, it will become more important to reach out to other parts of the nonprofit sector.

Right now, the schools and programs are serving only maybe 20 percent of the field — people mostly in social services, a few in environmental organizations, arts, and culture. But we're basically not paying attention to 80 percent of the employment base of the nonprofit sector.

People planning to run hospitals or trade associations are not coming to us. We need to be reaching out to potential clients, students in, for instance, leadership roles at religious organizations. There should be marketing efforts, focused and intentional and over time, to recruit outside our traditional constituency.

We have a base that works well, and a steady stream of applicants, but we'd be serving the sector better if we broadened our reach. We have to be more creative in thinking about ways to market to a larger proportion of the nonprofit world.

MICHAEL O'NEILL

Founder

Institute for Nonprofit Organization Management
University of San Francisco

We have to think broadly and ask, "Whom do we hope to educate?"

We can't assume that all of our students are current or future managers and leaders of nonprofit organizations. There are many other potential students who could benefit from learning more about philanthropy and the nonprofit sector.

Within our M.B.A. programs, many students who will earn a living in the private sector will hopefully serve as board members of our nonprofit organizations. Within our M.P.A. programs, the students who are planning on government careers increasingly are realizing that the sectors are blurring and that they will be contracting with nonprofit organizations very often.

Also, the most current research shows that our students are career switchers. Most of them spend some of their years of employment in two or three of the sectors, for example, switching from the for-profit to the nonprofit or the nonprofit to the public sector, etc.

NAOMI BAILIN WISH

Director

Center for Public Service
Seton Hall University
South Orange, N.J.

Going forward, one of the biggest challenges is to make sure these programs are supported inside the institutions in which they are housed.

Many are supported on their own tuition fees and with money from outside — from grants, running workshops — not from the base of support that other, more established programs at academic institutions traditionally are. I see my colleagues' programs not considered as a permanent part of the institution, but in existence based upon current enrollment and current interest. They are left to find their own resources.

The more solidly these programs can be funded from inside the institutions, from regular, line-item budgets, the better off we will all be, the better the field can grow.

It is up to all of us that work in the field to show colleges and universities how relevant we are to fulfilling their mission and the work that they do. They see as part of their mission providing leadership in the business sector, law, medicine. We have to be vigilant and interpret and articulate the value of our programs to help institutions understand the scope of the nonprofit sector, its role in society, and the role of higher education to provide leadership in the sector. We have to make sure that our programs, which are housed at colleges and universities, find a real home there.

EUGENE R. TEMPEL
Executive Director
Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University
Indianapolis

The best people for the jobs are people who have very good business skills and, at the same time, a sensitivity to the nonprofit sector. That's why it makes sense to house nonprofit- management programs in business schools. The training is rigorous and technical when it comes to finance, marketing, accounting, and at the same time there's a sensitivity to the nonprofit sector, where you need to know how to translate mission and vision into strategy and planning.

As the field grows, there will likely be more specialized short-term programs developing. People are always demonstrating the desire for self-improvement, intellectual curiosity, advanced learning, so schools will want to adapt to serve those people, maybe with more certificate programs, mini-M.B.A.'s, summer concentrations. As long as the students are dedicated, the faculty is well-trained, and there remains a two-part focus on business skills and nonprofit sensitivities, these could be the programs for the future.

JAMES ABRUZZO *Co-Director*
Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Leadership Rutgers Business School
Newark, N.J.

Mr. Abruzzo is also executive vice president and managing director of the nonprofit practice at DHR International, an executive recruiter.

What is our mission? Training socially responsible global leaders. When a school embraces the integration of these concepts — social, global, leadership — that is significant.

It can't narrowly be about not-for-profit leaders. It's the coming together, not training people in separate buckets, separate categories that makes the difference. Majoring in not-for-profit management

is the third most popular major in our business school [behind marketing and finance], and everybody is trained in the same integrated way, across sectors, across missions.

Programs in not-for-profit management are too often isolated, they're orphans, and they don't celebrate their faculty. Other schools will come at this through their own culture, their own structure, their own schools, their own deans, but the goal should be to train people ready to lead across sectors.

DONALD HAIDER

Director

Center for Nonprofit Management

Kellogg School of Management

Northwestern University

Evanston, Ill.

This is a relatively new and nontraditional academic area, and it takes a lot of commitment and dedication to go to the effort of studying this field, especially when many people think you can simply transfer skills from any field to the nonprofit world.

One of the skills learned that you don't just pick up elsewhere is fund raising. In any nonprofit leadership job, the fund-raising component may be at least 50 percent of what you do. You also learn to understand the nonprofit sector, its interrelatedness with the corporate and government sectors, and what unique aspects make it different from the corporate world.

For young people, [the programs] should give them credentials and experiences, through practicums and internships, that put them on a faster and more effective career track, so that they are better suited for taking responsible positions than if they took a step-by-step approach through other jobs where the experiences might add up, but the training might be lacking. For people who want to change from another field to the nonprofit sector, the programs can equip them to be more marketable at a level that is more suited to their seasoned experience. A degree would give them credibility as well as a network to get the right job.

LILYA WAGNER

Vice President for Philanthropy

Counterpart International

Washington

Ms. Wagner was associate director for public service at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University until 2005.

If we see someone with a master's in nonprofit management, but they don't have the pertinent experience, unfortunately, based on the needs of the jobs here, that person would not get in the door. What happens is that people can go to college and grad school and think they are learning great, practical things, but then, when they get into the work force, they say, Wow, I didn't know it was going to be like this. They are unprepared or unhappy.

I'd like to see, and I think it may be a growing trend, for the degree programs to have more practical experience built into them, something that goes beyond book learning and classroom training, like internships, practical and realistic case studies, and nonprofit leaders invited to lead specific discussions around nonprofit management. We're looking for people to have had experience with putting their knowledge to work, using analytical skills, judgment, problem-solving skills.

The more these programs can arrange ways for students to get practical learning to go with the breadth of knowledge they are getting, the better a candidate will be when they walk in the door.

NELL FIELDEN
Senior Vice President for Human Resources
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Atlanta

It makes a difference to see that type of degree or course work on a candidate's résumé. It shows they have a passion for nonprofits and this kind of human-services-type career, which requires a more passionate person. It shows focus and dedication.

A person with this background comes in with a working level of nonprofit management and knowledge of how nonprofit structures work. They can read financials, but they also have leadership skills and ideas that serve them well, and the organization, too.

In a human-services organization, volunteers are everything. People with this education have much stronger leadership skills when it comes to working with volunteers, and a much deeper understanding of the critical components of working with volunteers. They understand the nonprofit environment better and are able to identify resources they need a lot more quickly. They are also more-effective fund raisers from the start because they have a much better understanding of philanthropy than people who are not exposed to these types of courses, theories, and skills.

CAROLYN CUMMINGS ALTEMUS
National Director of Diversity
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I had no previous experience that would directly prepare me for the job I am in. I had been a board member of a counseling-services-type organization for six years. That's it. The courses I took for my certificate were vital to my ability to handle this organization that was in difficult straits. The operational capability needed to be rebuilt from scratch; funds needed to be raised; its profile needed to be raised; and the board-administration relationship needed to be reconfigured.

Without my course work, I would not have known how to proceed with fund development. I could not have had the knowledge about management controls. I would have been floundering when it came to dealing with the board and staffing issues.

CHRIS FORD
Executive Director
Centro Legal
Milwaukee

Mr. Ford received a certificate of nonprofit administration in 2004 from the Helen Bader Institute for Nonprofit Management at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.