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## Nonprofit Management Education in MPA Programs: Lessons for Successful Track Building

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### ABSTRACT

As the American nonprofit sector continues to grow, so does interest in nonprofit management graduate education. MPA programs play a significant role in preparing students for work in the nonprofit field. This article examines nonprofit management as an area of graduate study, paying particular attention to how NASPAA-accredited MPA programs currently approach it from a curricular standpoint. The article provides lessons for successful nonprofit management track building gleaned from experience gained at two universities with accredited MPA programs. Specifically, the article illustrates the importance of stakeholder commitment, quality curricula, and the use of experiential-learning methods in preparing future and current nonprofit leaders. Challenges to building a nonprofit management track or increasing nonprofit course offerings are also discussed. The article concludes with commentary regarding the importance of MPA programs in advancing quality nonprofit management graduate education.

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Quality nonprofit management education in Master of Public Administration/Affairs (MPA) programs is arguably more vital than ever. The National Center for Charitable Statistics reports over 1.52 million nonprofit organizations currently operate in the United States, representing an increase of nearly 10% since 2002 (Urban Institute 2015). McKeever and Pettijohn (2014) state that over 25% of American adults volunteered in some manner for nonprofit organizations in 2013. The contribution of nonprofits to the U.S. economy hovers around \$900 billion annually, representing approximately 5.3% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2014 (Urban Institute 2015). The nonprofit sector is clearly one that plays a prominent role in American society in areas ranging from public policy to social services. The growth of the sector demands continued attention to the development of nonprofit education within MPA programs.

With this tremendous growth and our continual need of the nonprofit sector, quality nonprofit management education remains a necessity. While the study of nonprofit management education typically occurs in the field of public administration and affairs, the topic is of great importance to the study of political science education as well. Some 52 of 173 MPA programs accredited by the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) are housed in *political science* departments, with an additional eight programs housed in departments of government (NASPAA 2015). We continue to see nonprofit organizations partner with government entities and private firms

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to deliver goods and services to citizens that would otherwise be less attainable. These collaborations and the interconnectivity of politics, administration, and the nonprofit sector makes political science a vital field to the education of current and future nonprofit leaders.

The development of robust nonprofit management curricula is crucial to MPA programs as they seek to train current and future nonprofit professionals. While scholars have contributed to our understanding of this process in several ways, the study of nonprofit education in MPA programs should carry into the current decade and beyond. The purpose of this article is to aid in that pursuit. I begin by examining what we know about nonprofit education at the graduate level, paying particular attention to MPA programs. I then provide a snapshot of the current state of nonprofit education in NASPAA-accredited MPA programs. Next, I offer three lessons of nonprofit management track building within MPA programs tied to recent experience before concluding with a discussion of track-building challenges.

### **Nonprofit graduate education**

While the American nonprofit sector grows and changes rather quickly, the study of nonprofit education within graduate programs lags, with a large amount of research on the topic having been published in the 1990s and 2000s. Bies and Blackwood (2008) indicate that graduate-level programs in nonprofit management are making concerted efforts to keep up with the demands of the sector. Around the same time, Mirabella (2007) reported a sharp increase in nonprofit management programs since the 1990s. Such efforts may have been tied to increased interest in these programs by nonprofit employees and board members (Wimberly and Rubens 2002) and a positive overall perception of nonprofit graduate degrees in the early 2000s (Fletcher 2005). This positive perception continued into the late 2000s as the economic crisis struck the United States. Sandfort states, “Arguably, nonprofit organizations are more prominent in public policy and the delivery of public services than ever before, despite the current economic crisis” (2010, 637). As the case for nonprofit graduate education was strengthened, a discussion of the ideal setting within university program offerings ensued.

Wish and Mirabella (2000) spearheaded the ideal-fit discussion with an attempt to identify the “best place” for a graduate program for nonprofit managers. Mirabella and Wish (2001) note the changing nature of placements for nonprofit graduate programs within universities, indicating that 46% of programs were housed in university schools of professional studies or schools of social work at time of publication compared to only 38% in 1990. Mirabella (2007) reported an update six years later, stating that 240 colleges and universities across the United States offered courses in nonprofit management education at the time while the largest portion (47%) of nonprofit programs across the United States were housed within Colleges of Arts and Sciences or Schools of Public Affairs and Administration. O’Neil (2007) showed a rapid uptick in nonprofit management education in the United States since the early 1990s but expressed doubt that nonprofit management education would be standardized anytime soon. O’Neil (2007) went on to predict the dominant model would remain to house nonprofit offerings in public administration and policy programs, while attention to nonprofit management within business schools would be minimal.

Nonprofit graduate education seems to have found an ideal fit within MPA programs. Smith (2012) points to the rapid expansion of nonprofit offerings over the past 20 years and seems to prove O'Neil's (2007) prediction true by stating that much of this expansion has indeed occurred in schools of public administration and policy. Outside of the realm of strictly MPA study, Mottner and Wymer (2011) paid recent attention to nonprofit course offerings in accredited U.S. business schools, and Mirabella and Young (2012) examined models of nonprofit management education involving multiple disciplines. However, for this purposes of this article, I am mostly interested in the attention paid to nonprofit graduate education in MPA programs and the curricular challenges presented.

Horne and Paris (2010) acknowledge the cross-sector collaborative nature of nonprofit careers and the learning objectives that are necessary to meet such challenges. Smith's (2008) work illustrates the vital role MPA programs play in addressing these challenges. Given the evolving relationship between nonprofit graduate education and MPA programs, perhaps a recent snapshot of the nonprofit curricular climate among NASPAA-accredited MPA programs is helpful in understanding how the discipline is currently meeting the educational needs of the sector.

### Nonprofit management offerings among NASPAA-accredited MPA programs

For this article, data were collected on the track offerings and enrollments of NASPAA-accredited MPA programs. Most data were collected via the NASPAA Web site. However, to round out the data set, several program Web sites were visited and direct contact with program directors was made when necessary. In sum, data were collected for 161 NASPAA-accredited MPA programs.<sup>1</sup>

MPA enrollments<sup>2</sup> break down nicely into three groups of 50 followed by a group of 151+ students. Figure 1 illustrates that roughly 23% of NASPAA-accredited MPA programs have enrollments of 1–50 students, while 29% have 51–100 students, 20% have 101–150 students, and 28% enroll more than 150 students. The average enrollment of an

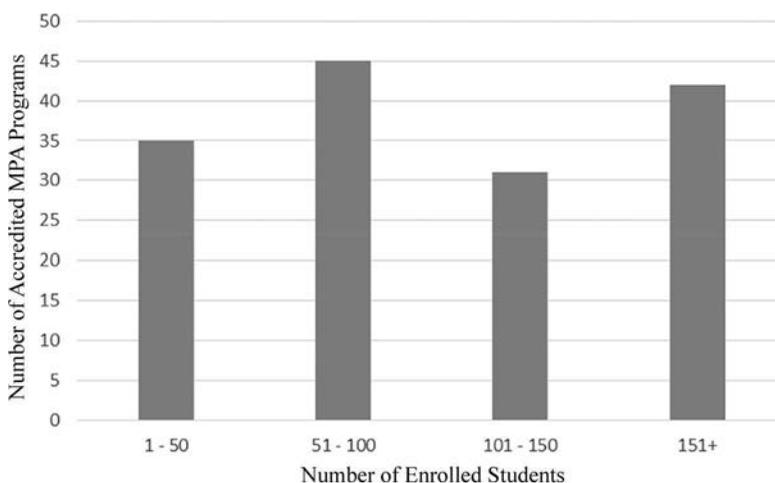


Figure 1. MPA enrollment by category.

NASPAA-accredited MPA program is 137 students, a number that is skewed by nine enrollment figures of 350+. The enrollment categories shown in [Figure 1](#) are used to discuss nonprofit management track and course offerings.

[Table 1](#) illustrates that 56% of all NASPAA-accredited MPA programs currently offer a nonprofit management track<sup>3</sup> option for their students. As one might expect, MPA programs with the largest enrollments are more likely to offer nonprofit management tracks with 69% of programs with enrollments of 150+ students doing so. [Table 1](#) also portrays the percentages of MPA programs that offer nonprofit management certificates, nonprofit management courses,<sup>4</sup> or no nonprofit offerings at all. While 60% of all MPA programs offer a nonprofit management certificate, 78% offer courses in nonprofit management. As [Table 1](#) illustrates, nonprofit management course offerings are high across enrollment categories, and only 7% of MPA programs with enrollments of 150+ students do not have any nonprofit offerings.

Another question of interest is *what* are MPA programs teaching with regard to nonprofit management? Based on a review of NASPAA-accredited MPA curricula in the United States, data were collected on the types of nonprofit courses offered among programs with some form of nonprofit management track (a dedicated track, concentration, or merely course offerings). This review of programs identified six preeminent nonprofit courses: (a) an overview course in nonprofit management, (b) an applied course (applying nonprofit management principles in the workplace), (c) nonprofit fundraising, (d) nonprofit grant writing, (e) nonprofit finance, and (f) a cross-sector partnerships course. [Table 2](#) illustrates the percentages of MPA programs offering each type of course by nonprofit management track offering.

Research has focused on the general discussion of MPA curricula and the challenges that exist in building an effective mix of offerings and requirements (Denhardt et al. 1997; Holzer and Lin 2007; Tompkins, Laslovich, and Greene 1996). Much of the impetus for examining MPA curricula stems from the challenges of an ever-changing service delivery mix (Smith 2008). In the same vein, an understanding of nonprofit course offerings is useful as nonprofit management education within MPA programs is improved and refined going forward. [Table 2](#) shows overview courses in nonprofit management to be most popular among MPA programs offering some type of nonprofit track with 91% available in programs offering dedicated nonprofit management tracks, 83% in programs offering a certificate, and 87% availability in programs merely offering nonprofit courses. Nonprofit fundraising, grant writing, and finance courses are also common across track offerings. Courses in applied nonprofit management and cross-sector partnerships are less common, with only 19% of all MPA programs offering an applied course while only 11% offer a cross-sector partnerships course. In studying [Table 2](#), one might surmise that in a dedicated nonprofit management track or certificate program that requires four nonprofit

**Table 1.** Nonprofit management (NM) track offerings by MPA program enrollment.

Enrollment	NM track	NM certificate	NM course Offerings	No NM offerings
1–50 ( <i>n</i> = 35)	43%	46%	69%	31%
51–100 ( <i>n</i> = 45)	56%	78%	84%	16%
101–150 ( <i>n</i> = 31)	52%	45%	65%	35%
150+ ( <i>n</i> = 42)	69%	64%	93%	7%
All MPA Programs ( <i>n</i> = 161)*	56%	60%	78%	22%

\*Though NM track offerings data was obtained for 161 NASPAA accredited MPA programs, enrollment data was only available for 153.

**Table 2.** Nonprofit management course offerings by nonprofit management track offering.

	Nonprofit Overview	Applied nonprofits	Nonprofit fundraising	Nonprofit grant writing	Nonprofit finance	Cross-sector partnerships
<b>NM Track</b> ( <i>n</i> = 87)	91%	29%	68%	54%	56%	21%
<b>NM Certificate</b> ( <i>n</i> = 95)	83%	31%	63%	48%	54%	12%
<b>NM Course Offerings</b> ( <i>n</i> = 126)	87%	24%	60%	48%	52%	14%
<b>All MPA Programs</b> ( <i>n</i> = 161)	68%	19%	47%	38%	40%	11%

electives, NASPAA-accredited MPA programs most often offer an overview course in nonprofit management, nonprofit fundraising, nonprofit finance, and nonprofit grant writing.

### Lessons for nonprofit management track building

Like most endeavors, learning by trial and error is undoubtedly common when building a nonprofit management track within an MPA program. However, it is helpful to gain from the successes and challenges of others. In that spirit, I share my experiences building a nonprofit management track within a NASPAA-accredited MPA program at a research-oriented university and, subsequently, helping boost nonprofit offerings within an accredited MPA program at a regional comprehensive university. Part of my motivation for doing so developed after reading the work of Brown and Behrman (2008), wherein the authors provide an excellent account of their experiences teaching an undergraduate capstone course in which the content is a service-learning project. Inspired by their story of accomplishment, I share the successes and challenges that arise in building a nonprofit management track and attempting to increase educational opportunities for nonprofit-focused MPA students in hope that others tackling similar endeavors will benefit from my experiences.

### Setting the stages

My initial experience improving a nonprofit management curriculum came in 2009 when I arrived on faculty at a research-oriented university in the Southwest. The MPA program is NASPAA accredited, is nearly 50 years old and is known for producing several successful city and county managers, policy analysts, budget managers, health care administrators, and various other public servants. The location of the university is rather isolated, and, though attracting quality students has never been a problem, MPA enrollment consistently hovers between 50 and 60 students. The MPA program had offered courses in nonprofit management for several years prior to 2009, mainly as electives in the public management track. However, a need was identified in 2009 for a standalone nonprofit management track within the MPA program. This decision was made for two main reasons. One, student interest in nonprofit management as a dedicated track had grown sharply. This is consistent with literature on the growth of nonprofit education at the graduate level (Bies and Blackwood 2008; Mirabella 2007; Wimberly and Rubens 2002). Two, the nonprofit sector in the area surrounding the university is a thriving one that continues to grow consistent with the National Center for Charitable Statistics indicators reported by the Urban Institute (2015). In response to these factors, I was asked to spearhead an effort to build a new nonprofit management track within the MPA program.

The program launched a dedicated nonprofit management track in the fall 2010 semester. This new track joined existing dedicated track offerings in public management, public finance, health care administration, and environmental policy with dual MPA degree programs attached to the School of Law (JD) and the Department of Environmental Toxicology (MS and PhD). Given the small enrollment of the MPA program, building a robust nonprofit management track would prove difficult but doable. At the time of my departure at the end of the fall 2012 semester, our faculty had grown the nonprofit management track to the second largest in terms of student enrollment (11) in the MPA program, behind only public management. In those initial 2.5 years, we graduated three nonprofit management students while placing several of our students in internships and full-time jobs in the area nonprofit community.

My second experience improving a nonprofit management curriculum came at a regional comprehensive university within another NASPAA-accredited MPA program.<sup>5</sup> Like the first, my current MPA program is well established and has an enrollment between 50 and 60 students. I began a faculty appointment at this university, located in the South, in the spring 2013 semester. The MPA program does not offer any dedicated tracks. Rather, students are able to build the degree around their interests through 15 hours of guided electives. Elective offerings include courses in environmental policy, conflict management, and public planning, among others. The MPA program is offered at a nearby satellite facility in a small city of approximately 85,000 residents with a county population of roughly 250,000. The nonprofit community in this area has grown consistent with the Urban Institute's (2015) reporting. The growth of the local nonprofit sector has driven demand for nonprofit graduate education. We continue to work to increase nonprofit management course offerings and have made progress in this regard since early 2013.

While our regional comprehensive MPA program does not offer a dedicated track or certificate in nonprofit management, we have boosted nonprofit course offerings in the past 2.5 years. In addition to consistently offering an overview course in nonprofit management, we have added an applied nonprofit management course, continue to offer a nonprofit grant writing course and are offering a course in nonprofit fundraising and development for the first time in summer 2015. Of the roughly 60 MPA students currently enrolled, 14 have interests in nonprofit management. Several of those 14 are currently interning or working in the nonprofit sector. We have graduated several MPA students with nonprofit interests over the past 2.5 years, many of whom have achieved jobs in the field.

Based on these two experiences, I identify three lessons for success in building a nonprofit management track or increasing nonprofit course offerings. I have encountered many similarities in doing so at a research-oriented university and a regional comprehensive university. However, I have encountered a few differences as well. I have also discovered a handful of challenges that are crucial to navigate.

### ***Keys to success***

As with most endeavors in higher education, some vital components must be present in order for success to be achieved. I identify three important keys to success in building a nonprofit management track and increasing nonprofit course offerings in NASPAA-accredited MPA programs. These key components are commitment, a quality curriculum, and experiential learning.

### Commitment

Commitment comes in many forms and is often necessary from multiple directions to achieve goals in higher education. This is no different in building nonprofit management offerings within MPA programs. The commitment of administration is absolutely crucial to the success of any nonprofit management education endeavor. Fortunately, I have encountered a tremendous amount of buy-in from deans, department chairs, and MPA directors at the two universities for which I have tackled nonprofit management curricula development. This commitment has included, but is not limited to, supplying resources, offering flexibility in course scheduling, aiding in the recruitment of quality students, recruiting highly qualified adjunct professors, and listening carefully and intentionally to faculty and students throughout the entire process. While this type of commitment is invaluable, the buy-in of MPA faculty, students, and the surrounding nonprofit community is as well.

Administrative buy-in comes in different forms and from different levels of administration. At the research-oriented university, we enjoyed more budgetary autonomy and abundance at the department level, thus eliminating our need to seek resources at the college level and above. There, our MPA program received competitive pay for any adjunct professors we hired on a course-by-course basis, and money was made available for marketing and recruitment in the forms of printed materials and funds for program open houses. I find similar support at the regional comprehensive university, though our program finds more support at the college level and through the Graduate School to hire adjunct professors and to market the MPA program, respectively. Both universities have responded to modest requests for adjunct professors (one or two per semester) with pay per course that exceeds the national average of \$2,700, as indicated by a 2012–2013 American Association of University Professors survey (McKenna 2015).

This financial buy-in aids greatly in the recruitment of quality adjunct professors and students. The ability to offer greater than the national pay-per-course average allows an MPA program to pursue top-notch experts to teach specialized courses. At the research-oriented university, we sought to hire an adjunct to teach an information-technology (IT) course, thus freeing a core faculty member to teach an additional nonprofit management course. The department chair authorized the hiring, and our MPA program was able to hire an IT expert *and* to expand nonprofit course offerings. I have known similar experiences at the regional comprehensive university. The dean of the College of Arts & Sciences funded the hiring of a nonprofit executive director to teach a course in nonprofit leadership. This expanded our MPA course offerings in nonprofit management, while allowing our students to learn from a respected and accomplished nonprofit professional. Financial buy-in from any administrative level that makes funding decisions related to adjunct hires is crucial, as additional core faculty lines are often unavailable.

While recruiting quality adjuncts is made easier with competitive pay, recruiting quality students also requires financial buy-in. At the research-oriented university, this came from our department chair and MPA director. Both viewed marketing the new nonprofit management track as crucial to reaching and attracting new prospective students. While part of this marketing was done via word-of-mouth communication, typically through faculty visits to undergraduate classrooms and local nonprofit community functions, the department and MPA program funded open houses on campus and print materials

advertising our new track offering. The department and program also assisted in advertising the nonprofit management track via their respective Web sites and social media outlets. I find similar support at the regional comprehensive university, though our Graduate School is more heavily involved in funding printed marketing materials, holding open houses, and reaching out to prospective MPA students through a full-time recruitment coordinator and other Graduate School staff. This, combined with similar marketing efforts at the department and program levels, reaches nonprofit-oriented prospects with regularity.

Another vital role of administration is ensuring that an MPA program's nonprofit course offerings can grow. This scheduling flexibility comes in different forms. First, administration at the appropriate level(s) must fund this growth. This typically means hiring adjunct professors to assist in increasing course offerings. A nonprofit management track cannot grow if the program can merely afford to offer a single nonprofit overview course. Adjunct professors have assisted at both universities with which I have experience by giving our MPA programs the flexibility to offer courses in nonprofit fundraising, grant writing, leadership, and collaborative management. Any MPA student interested in nonprofit management then has the ability to obtain a more comprehensive nonprofit graduate education. Second, department chairs and MPA directors must be willing to schedule additional courses in flexible manners. When offering an additional course, the questions of when and how to offer it must be addressed. Which semester will the new nonprofit course be offered? Opposite which core MPA course? Is there a space in the summer schedule for a new nonprofit course? In my experience, offering a nonprofit elective on an evening opposite an MPA core course that is typically taken early in a student's navigation of the program created the fewest student scheduling conflicts. This typically means scheduling a nonprofit elective opposite a public administration/affairs overview course. This creative scheduling allows a nonprofit-oriented student to take the MPA core course early, while maintaining room in a future schedule to take a new nonprofit elective. Finally, department chairs, MPA directors, and faculty must decide on mode of delivery for any additional nonprofit course offerings. While both universities with which I have experience offer predominantly face-to-face MPA programs, we offered a new nonprofit elective online during a summer session at the regional comprehensive university. That flexibility increased enrollment (16 students) beyond what could be expected of a face-to-face summer MPA offering. This allowed for easier navigation of the MPA program for those 16 students, as well as the ability to take a nonprofit elective that may have presented a scheduling problem during a typical semester.

The commitment of MPA faculty is a major factor in developing nonprofit offerings, especially a dedicated nonprofit management track. When an MPA faculty is small (close to the NASPAA-required five dedicated faculty members), their commitment becomes even more vital. MPA faculty generally have teaching responsibilities in core areas of public administration and affairs, with subfield responsibilities in their respective areas of expertise. These faculty members must be willing to acknowledge the interests of nonprofit students and to incorporate examples and discussions related to nonprofit affairs in core courses such as policy analysis, personnel management, budgeting, and even public management. Fortunately, this has been my experience at both universities. One difference has been the availability of faculty to teach certain courses related to nonprofit management education. For example, we desired to add a course in collaborative management, which

addressed how government, private sector, and nonprofit entities work together to supply services, at the research-oriented university. Due to 2/2 teaching loads among faculty members, finding the space for this course in a faculty member's schedule proved difficult. At a regional comprehensive university with 3/3 teaching loads, this may be easier. However, my current MPA colleagues also contribute to the undergraduate programs in political science and international relations. All of this leads to a need for faculty flexibility and a desire to see nonprofit management education become a strong part of the MPA program.

One commitment that may seem obvious is the buy-in of students. However, this commitment can be beyond the control of MPA faculty to a certain extent. Often, the commitment of MPA students depends on their level of interest in nonprofit studies. Fortunately, it appears interest in nonprofit management is at a very high level (Wimberly and Rubens 2002) and nonprofit graduate education is viewed very favorably on the job market (Fletcher 2005). While one hopes for the students who are intrinsically motivated to pursue education and careers in nonprofit management, some responsibility for the creation of commitment among students rests with faculty. MPA faculty must recruit quality students while providing a quality nonprofit education. In my experience, once the snowball effect takes hold, the absolute best contributor to student commitment is word-of-mouth advertising and success in internships, on the job market, or in other networking capacities.

Nonprofit management education in MPA programs is marked by community engagement. For this reason, the commitment of the local or regional nonprofit community is imperative to building a successful nonprofit management track or increased nonprofit course offerings. Relationships with the nonprofit community require time to build, and they are forged through networking opportunities with MPA students and faculty, invitations to local nonprofit professionals to serve as guest speakers in MPA courses, and through the provision of quality, well-trained nonprofit students working in service-learning projects and internships. I have heard many refer to building a pipeline from the MPA program to nonprofit employers. However, I like to think of it as a two-way street whereby the MPA program provides quality classroom education to nonprofit students who work or volunteer for local nonprofits in managerial or executive roles, while local nonprofits provide valuable experiential-learning opportunities for MPA students. This only strengthens the quality of nonprofit education that can be offered by MPA programs, and this relationship is possible at research-oriented and regional comprehensive universities.

Relationships with local and regional nonprofit communities require effort to cultivate and maintain. This can be achieved in three major ways. One, MPA faculty have the unique opportunity to work with public entities, and this is very important in building good relationships with nonprofit partners. Nonprofit-oriented faculty should serve on boards of directors, offer expertise in areas of need (typically fundraising and grant writing) and seek ways to incorporate the questions and challenges facing nonprofits into research. This builds trust and a working relationship between the MPA program and nonprofit organizations that is of great value to both parties. Two, MPA programs should never underestimate the value of consulting nonprofit professionals when building nonprofit management track offerings. Often, logical next steps in nonprofit elective offerings are clarified by the needs and experiences of nonprofit executive directors and development officers who seek specific skills of employees in the field. Third, solid working relationships with nonprofit partners can be forged and maintained through an MPA program's internship and/or service-learning requirements. When MPA students perform well in nonprofit

internships, service-learning projects, or capstone projects, nonprofit organizations are provided yet another glimpse at the value of the program's nonprofit management education component. This is discussed further in the context of experiential learning.

### ***A quality curriculum***

MPA faculty can learn from others in the way of nonprofit curriculum quality in several ways. Research has been devoted to better understanding MPA curricula in general (Denhardt et al. 1997; Mirabella and Young 2012; Reinagel and Gerlach 2015; Tompkins, Laslovich, and Greene 1996). We may also take a snapshot of what NASPAA-accredited MPA programs are doing with regard to nonprofit offerings, as discussed earlier. Another guide in building quality nonprofit management curricula within MPA programs is to learn from the experiences of others.

MPA faculty must work together to develop an appropriate curriculum for nonprofit management students. While the core curriculum of the MPA program is always maintained, the leeway available in determining what the nonprofit elective portion will look like can be challenging. It is helpful to first determine which new nonprofit course offerings will be most beneficial to students. If the ultimate desired outcomes are to make nonprofit-oriented MPA students competitive on the job market and successful in their careers, a great place to start building course offerings is by consulting with those currently hiring and working in the nonprofit field. These conversations and/or surveys can provide feedback on the type of skills nonprofit-oriented students need to achieve success in nonprofit management. Once a curricular direction is ironed out, nonprofit offerings can begin to be meshed into the overall curriculum of the MPA program. A wish list of nonprofit course offerings can also be prioritized as to allow for an order of importance that may guide adjunct professor hiring.

At the research-oriented university referenced, the in-class curriculum related to the MPA track in nonprofit management was fully developed over 3.5 academic years. The MPA program requires 42 total credit hours, 21 of which correspond to seven core courses. Students choose a dedicated track and are required to take an additional 12 hours of track-specific electives. Rounding out the 42-hour requirement for the MPA are six elective hours of the student's general choosing and a three-hour internship prior to passing a comprehensive examination. The bulk of the 3.5 years of nonprofit management curriculum development was dedicated to organizing a collection of track-required courses and an attractive list of general electives from which nonprofit-focused MPA students could choose. Our MPA faculty approved the following make-up of four track-required courses for nonprofit management students:

- Nonprofit Management (overview course);
- Nonprofit Grant Writing and Fundraising *or* Charitable Giving: Research and Marketing;
- Public Financial Management *or* Managerial Accounting;
- Collaborative Management (a cross-sector partnerships course) *or* Intro to Charitable Planning.

This set of required courses provides nonprofit management MPA students with classroom exposure to core nonprofit management concepts, fundraising and development, and finance and gives the option to pursue education in partnerships or planning.

At the regional comprehensive university, we offer a 42-hour MPA program that consists of 27 hours of core courses and 15 elective hours, including a three-hour internship

requirement for preservice students.<sup>6</sup> We have developed the following course offerings related to nonprofit management:

- The Nonprofit Sector (overview course);
- The Practice of Nonprofit Management (applied course);
- Grant Writing;
- Nonprofit Fundraising and Development.

It is the focus of the program to develop a partnerships course in the near future. Though the MPA program does not offer a dedicated nonprofit management track, these course offerings have coincided with, and likely contributed to, a growth in student interest in pursuing the MPA for use in building or maintaining nonprofit careers.

A major difference in my experiences on MPA faculty at both research-oriented and regional comprehensive universities is the availability of outside-the-department tenured or tenure-track faculty assistance in covering nonprofit courses. This may entirely be unique to these two MPA programs. However, we employed a multidisciplinary approach to nonprofit graduate education at the research-oriented university. For example, we were able to develop and implement additional course offerings through a partnership with the Department of Personal Financial Planning. We eventually offered our MPA nonprofit management track students the option of earning a Graduate Certificate in Charitable Financial Planning through a partnership with this department. Though I have not had a similar multidisciplinary experience within my current MPA program, we have made better use of adjunct professors, often practicing nonprofit professionals, at the regional comprehensive university. A major lesson learned through experience is that MPA programs must tread cautiously when forging any instructional relationships outside the core MPA faculty, but they can be extremely beneficial to increasing nonprofit course offerings.

Ultimately, each MPA program offering a track, certificate, or simply course offerings in nonprofit management must identify a curriculum that works for its unique situation. While [Table 2](#) suggests popular courses among NASPAA-accredited MPA programs, it does not take into account relationships and cross-listings with other departments, nor does it account for the specific demands of a particular local nonprofit community. The major goal is to develop a nonprofit management curriculum that works for your specific MPA program and its faculty and students and to work to always improve the quality of that curriculum.

### ***Experiential learning***

One way to improve the quality of any MPA curriculum is through the implementation of experiential-learning requirements and opportunities. Experiential learning most often occurs within MPA programs through either internship or service-learning requirements. The literature is rife with scholars arguing for the benefits of experiential learning as a means by which to supplement traditional classroom education (Brown and Behrman 2008; Kolb 1984; Mitchell and Poutiatine 2001; Schettler, 2002). Research specifically related to service learning in MPA programs also points to its benefits for public administration and affairs graduate students (Bushouse and Morrison 2001; Imperial, Perry, and Katula 2007; Whitaker 2004). Reinagel and Gerlach (2015) provide a comprehensive analysis of internship requirements in NASPAA-accredited MPA programs, pointing to their benefits in the areas of networking and job placement.

Experiential learning has been of utmost importance in the development of nonprofit management track and course offerings in the two examples I offer in this article. The

benefits are numerous. First, students learn by *doing*, which is a hallmark of public administration. Students are able to take core concepts learned in the MPA classroom and to apply them to real managerial or executive scenarios. In the internship, students do this on their own over a generally longer period of time than as part of a service-learning project. This often allows them more one-on-one time with an internship sponsor/mentor and a greater immersive learning experience. Service-learning projects are typically required within particular courses. The MPA programs with which I have been associated have required service-learning projects as part of nonprofit management overview and fundraising courses. In nonprofit management service-learning projects, students typically work as part of a small group for a local nonprofit organization and tackle such issues as incorporation, grant writing, fundraising, event planning, and even board development handbooks. Service learning allows students to learn from project sponsors/mentors, their professors, and each other while being currently enrolled in a course that reinforces core concepts in the classroom and vice versa.

A second benefit to experiential learning is that students often build bridges to jobs through these experiences. One might argue there is no better job interview than the ability to intern with a particular organization or to contribute to an organization's capacity as part of a service-learning group. At the research-oriented university referenced, two MPA students in the nonprofit management track turned internships into full-time jobs after graduation. The same has occurred at my current university. Service-learning students have been asked to serve on boards of directors and to come back as interns in both MPA programs as well. Experiential learning aids in the networking that is crucial to landing work in nonprofit management.

A third benefit to experiential learning is that it helps build relationships between the MPA program and local organizations. This is quite important as an MPA program seeks to build nonprofit management offerings. At the end of a student's MPA journey, he or she should be well equipped to work in public service. Experiential learning allows for additional relationships to be built between the MPA program and local nonprofits that not only benefit current students but future ones. Additionally, this may bring some favor to the MPA program by allowing it to be the vehicle for engaging the community and providing services to the public, which are often goals of research-oriented and regional comprehensive colleges and universities alike.

Commitment, quality curriculum, and experiential learning have contributed mightily to the efforts to build nonprofit management tracks and course offerings within the MPA programs I have served as a faculty member. Again, the recipe for success is surely different for MPA programs depending on various factors. However, these keys for success are proving true at two NASPAA-accredited MPA programs that are housed at universities with slightly different focuses. While learning from the experience of another involves examining what worked well, it is only fair to warn of some potential challenges along the way.

### ***Challenges to building nonprofit management offerings***

My colleagues and I encountered various challenges during our quest to build a nonprofit management track and to increase nonprofit course offerings. First, the nature of the MPA degree is grounded in public management. The MPA is not a nonprofit management

graduate degree in a standalone sense. Rather, MPA programs offer education in public administration and affairs, and core courses reflect this — a seminar in public administration/affairs, public budgeting, organization theory, public personnel management, research methods, etc. Nonprofit track or nonprofit-oriented MPA students are sometimes frustrated by this. One challenge of increasing nonprofit offerings is maintaining the integrity and focus of the MPA itself. While faculty may be tempted to adjust course approaches or even course names to be more attractive to students interested in nonprofit management, the MPA must be protected as a public service degree that can *also* provide excellent nonprofit management graduate education. It is important to present the program in an upfront manner to students interested in nonprofit management. This can be easily done by selling the vital importance of skills acquired from the core of an MPA program that easily cross sector lines. When coupled with nonprofit course offerings and potential experiential-learning opportunities, the MPA program is highly attractive to many students interested in beginning or continuing nonprofit management careers.

Second, as with any endeavor worth time and hard work, faculty must practice patience. Curriculum changes of any type often require several layers of approval, and those processes can take time. In some instances, these changes seem to take too much time. Building a nonprofit management track or boosting nonprofit course offerings is not a one-semester task. The process requires patience and the aforementioned commitment of several key stakeholders. An effective means of maintaining patience and focus is to celebrate milestones — a course being launched, a student landing a coveted nonprofit internship, a student earning a job in the sector, and other accomplishments that accompany progress. This patience fits nicely with the mindset that the track, nonprofit course offerings, and MPA program should always be evaluated and improved where possible.

A final challenge to nonprofit management track building is finding the time to build valuable relationships. In my experience, my MPA colleagues and myself must find (or make) time to recruit passionate, intelligent, hard-working students with nonprofit management interests. We have found they have a tendency to do wonderful things once enrolled in the MPA program, such as form student groups, organize professional development events and plan networking opportunities for students and alumni. Though some seek the program out on their own, recruiting high-quality students takes time and effort. This endeavor typically falls on the shoulders of the MPA director, and I have been fortunate to work with highly effective directors. The same time commitment is required to build relationships with nonprofit community leaders. As Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) define *implementation* in a manner that indicates public administration/affairs is a field of action, MPA faculty must develop and maintain relationships with professionals whose hands are in the work of the nonprofit sector. These relationships are beneficial to the program, its students, surrounding nonprofit organizations, and occasionally to the research efforts of faculty. Finding time to build relationships is a challenge to nonprofit management track building but is a necessary ingredient for success.

## Conclusion

As the nonprofit sector continues to be a formidable force in the U.S. economy and social consciousness, the need to effectively train nonprofit professionals is arguably more crucial than ever. This article illustrates the role that MPA programs currently play in nonprofit

management graduate education. Some 78% of NASPAA-accredited MPA programs offer nonprofit courses, with 56% and 60% offering nonprofit management tracks or certificates, respectively. The presence of nonprofit management education in MPA programs has been a focus of scholarly literature (Horne and Paris 2010; Mirabella and Wish 2001; O'Neil 2007). However, we benefit from the continued study of nonprofit management education in graduate programs across the country, particularly those related to public administration/affairs. As the U.S. nonprofit sector continues to grow and interest in nonprofit education is high within NASPAA-accredited MPA programs, continued study and learning from the successes and challenges of others will remain of utmost importance at every stage of educating current and future nonprofit professionals, particularly in times of track building and increasing nonprofit course offerings.

While a plethora of dos and don'ts likely exists, I found the three keys to success discussed in this article to be of great importance when building nonprofit management offerings. These endeavors require commitment and buy-in from various stakeholders, the development of quality classroom curricula, and an emphasis on experiential learning as a means by which to reinforce classroom concepts, to allow students to gain experience, and to build relationships with the surrounding nonprofit community. The process does not come without its challenges. Maintaining the core focus of the MPA degree, remaining patient, and finding time to build relationships are efforts that do not come easy. However, as demand continues to dictate that MPA programs explore and/or improve nonprofit management education, educators have a responsibility to do it right. As nonprofit management education continues to fit nicely into many NASPAA-accredited MPA curricula, the degree is only made stronger in a global job market that values versatility, a broad skill-set, and cross-sector collaboration. The emphasis of the MPA degree on public service makes nonprofit management education a natural track focus of many programs and likely will for years to come.

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## Notes

1. While 173 accredited programs are listed on the NASPAA Web site for the 2014–2015 academic year, 11 were removed due to not having “administration” or “affairs” in the program name. While the differences are subtle between an MPA and, for example, a Master of Public Policy (MPP) MPP program, they exist (Hur and Hackbart, 2009). Data were unavailable for two MPA programs.
2. *Enrollment* refers to total number of students, full-time, part-time, face-to-face, online, etc.
3. Tracks are sometimes called *concentrations* or *areas of emphasis*.
4. Note that most MPA programs offering nonprofit management tracks and/or certificates offer nonprofit management courses. However, not all programs offering nonprofit management courses offer tracks or certificates.
5. The program is accredited by NASPAA beginning with the 2014–2015 academic year.
6. In-service students are able to replace the three-hour internship requirement with a fifth elective course. Reinagel and Gerlach (2015) define preservice and in-service MPA students.

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