

## Invited Article

# Are We There Yet?

*Evaluating Nonprofit Management as a Profession for Program Accreditation*

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## Abstract

Educators in the field of nonprofit management are debating the value of academic program accreditation. To evaluate the argument objectively, they must ask, “Is nonprofit management a unique profession?” This essay examines the field of nonprofit management using the six characteristics presented by Pugh (1989) to distinguish public administration as a unique profession. Authors believe that nonprofit management firmly meets the first five criteria. The sixth criteria, a hall of fame, is questionable. However, a case for the YMCA as the father of nonprofit management was made. If educators accept that the YMCA meets the criteria for a hall of fame, all six criteria are met to consider nonprofit management a profession unto itself. Scholars and practitioners will need to determine what implications this uniqueness has for the sector. Some guiding questions are offered for consideration in moving the accreditation conversation forward.

**Keywords:** *nonprofit sector; profession; programs; accreditation*

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Educators in the field of nonprofit management are debating the value of academic program accreditation. To evaluate the argument for accreditation of training programs objectively, they must first ask, “Is nonprofit management a unique profession?” If it is, then it could be deserving of accreditation, as are other professions. In the later 1970s and 1980s, public administration (PA) was in a similar situation. Some maintained that PA was a unique profession (Gulick & Urwick, 2004; Mosher, 1982; F. Taylor, 1914; Wilson, 1887) and others disputed this (Bowman, 1983; Dahl, 1947; Waldo, 1974; Willbern, 1954).

Pugh (1989) contended that public administration was a profession by evaluating it through the six characteristics that connote a profession.

... At least six overlapping traits deserve mention: (1) a case of mind (i.e., a self awareness); (2) a corpus of theory and knowledge; (3) a social ideal; (4) ethical standards; (5) formal organizations to promote its interests; and (6) a “hall of fame” to recognize outstanding leaders. (p. 1)

This essay will examine the field of nonprofit management using the six characteristics presented by Pugh to distinguish PA. The purpose is to evaluate nonprofit management through the same lens to determine if it is a distinct profession or simply a subset of a broader field.

### **Criteria 1: Do Those Within the Nonprofit Sector Have a “Case of Mind”?**

The first trait that denotes a profession is a case of mind (Pugh, 1989). This is a particular self-conscious mind-set among academics and practitioners demonstrating that those within the field recognize it as unique. From a legal position, in the United States, the nonprofit sector is distinguished as a separate sector, by law and by practice, from business and government (Anheier, Carlson, & Kendall, 2012; Brandsen, Van de Donk, & Putters, 2005; Defourny, 2001). Therefore, those within are aware of the differences owing to different regulations and requirements. However, if the question is not one of legal and federal recognition of distinction but the mind-set of individuals within the field, then Worth (2012), a nonprofit scholar, argued, “Nonprofit Management is unique because nonprofit organizations are different from businesses and governmental entities – often reliant on the support of donors and the world of volunteers, pursuing missions derived from values and principles . . .” (p. 7). Anheier (2005), another nonprofit scholar, stated, “. . . Therefore, the structure of nonprofit organizations may require a multi-faceted, flexible approach to management and not the use of singular, ready-made models carried over from the business world or from public monument” (p. 245). There is mounting evidence and “a growing consensus that nonprofit management is distinct in a variety of ways that requires separate attention in university programs of education and research” (Young, 1999, p. 13). This distinctiveness has been affirmed by many nonprofit researchers (Andreasen & Kotler, 2008; Chenoweth, 2003; Damanpour, 1991; Devos & Bouckenooghe, 2006; Herman & Heimovics, 1994; Hull & Lio, 2006; Young, Hollister, & Hodgkinson, 1993).

## **Criteria 2: Do Those Within the Nonprofit Sector Have a Corpus of Theory and Knowledge?**

The second requirement for a profession is a corpus of theory and knowledge. Pugh (1989) argued that this requirement had been met for PA in 1926 when Leonard D. White was able to create the first PA textbook. The field of nonprofit management surpasses this benchmark with multiple textbooks (Anheier, 2014; Bell, Masaoka, & Zimmerman, 2010; Drucker, 1995; Heyman, 2011; Salamon, 2003, 2012; Wolf, 1990; Worth, 2012) and dedicated journals, such as *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, *Voluntas*, and *Nonprofit Education and Leadership*. These journals develop and expand theory and practice.

Further, theory within the nonprofit sector distinguishes nonprofits from other sectors. For example, gap theory states that nonprofits arise because of failures in governments (Hansmann, 1987; Young, 1998b) and business (Corbin, 1999; Young, 1998a), thus showing that nonprofits are different from government and business. Furthermore, theory suggests that the origination of specific nonprofits may owe to their cause. Evidence suggests that health and public benefit organizations arise because of need, thus supporting demand side or gap theories. Other nonprofits such as education, environment, and arts arise from supply side, supporting nonprofit theories of altruism (Evans, Evans, & Mayo, 2016). Therefore, the nonprofit sector has a corpus of theory and knowledge that is evidenced in texts, journals, and multiple other publications.

## **Criteria 3: Do Those Within the Nonprofit Sector Share a Social Ideal?**

Social identity is the third criteria. It is “the development of a social ideal to unify those within an occupation” (Pugh, 1989, p. 2). To better understand the social ideal of nonprofit practitioners, educators must simply look at the vast body of research regarding motivational theory and nonprofit employees. The intrinsic motivation of nonprofit employees is well documented (Crewson, 1997; Hartman & Arnold, 1980; Moore, 2000; Rainey, 2009; Rotolo & Wilson, 2006; Vernis, Iglesias, Sanz, & Saz-Carranza, 2006). Leete (2000) argued that compared to for-profit employees, nonprofit workers were disproportionately reliant upon intrinsic motivation, resulting in their willingness to accept wage inequality in the nonprofit sector. Lee and Wilkins (2011) found similar results. Benz (2005) also studied nonprofit employee motivation and found that nonprofit workers were generally more satisfied with their jobs owing to substantial satisfaction in the kind of work they do. Word and Carpenter (2013), using a modified version of the Perry’s Public Service Motivation (PSM) scale, found that nonprofit employees were attracted to their jobs owing to intrinsic rewards and the mission of the organization. J. Taylor (2010) also used the PSM and found that nonprofit employees differed from public service employees in all tested variables with the exception of the importance of citizens’ rights. Miller-Stevens, Taylor, and Morris (2014) also spoke to motivational differences between public and nonprofit employees when they found that nonprofit employees’ perceived level of importance of altruism, generosity, and individualism had statistically significant differences from their public counterpart. These motivational differences between nonprofit employees and their public and

for-profit counterparts have been corroborated by others (Crewson, 1997; Houston, 2000; Kim, 2005; Jurkiewicz, Massey, & Brown, 1998).

#### **Criteria 4: Do Those Within the Nonprofit Sector Have Ethical Standards?**

Although there is no one specific code of ethics or certification process for nonprofit professionals, the field has binding ethical standards through a variety of processes. In the last few decades, more national and local associations and groups of NPOs have formulated specific codes of ethics to guide staff, boards, and other stakeholders. Groups such as state and regional associations and the National Council of Nonprofits have codes of ethics, developed through their memberships, that are binding for members. Another key component of ethical standardization of the sector includes accreditation for specific subsectors. For example, Certified Fund Raising Executives (CFRE International, 2014), Certified Grant Writers (American Grant Writers' Association, 2015), and Certified Animal Welfare Administrators (Society for Animal Welfare Administrators, 2015) are required to pass a multistep process, including a board examination and a pledge to the profession's ethical code. Therefore, an ethical standard is present at many levels within the nonprofit field.

#### **Criteria 5: Do Those Within the Nonprofit Sector Have Formal Organizations to Promote Interests?**

The field of nonprofit management benefits from several prominent organizations that fill this requirement. Many of these organizations help promote the interests of the sector through dedicated nonprofit conferences, membership, and publications. For the nonprofit researcher, the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA), founded in 1971, is a member-based organization that fills this requirement. "ARNOVA is the US-based, national and international association that connects scholars, teachers, and practice leaders interested in research on nonprofit organizations, voluntary action, philanthropy and civil society" (ARNOVA, 2015, para. 1). Additionally, nonprofit scholars with an international interest may benefit from the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR). ISTR was founded in 1992 and "promotes the study of civil society, philanthropy and the nonprofit sector" (ISTR, 2015, para. 1). Another key organization that actively promotes academic development and research for the sector is the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC). Established in 1991, the NACC is "an international membership association comprised of academic centers or programs at accredited colleges and universities that focus on the study of nonprofit/nongovernmental organizations, volunteerism, and/or philanthropy" (NACC, 2015). Apart from sponsoring the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*, the NACC has more importantly developed curriculum guidelines for nonprofit programs at graduate and undergraduate levels. It also hosts an international honor society, Nu Lambda Mu, dedicated to promoting professionalism in the third sector.

Nonprofit practitioners are not without their own membership organizations. Many of these organizations are regional in nature. Examples include the Association

of Fundraising Professionals and nonprofit management associations in which practitioners network, improve skills, and advocate for their profession.

### **Criteria 6: Does the Nonprofit Sector Have a Hall of Fame?**

Last, the sixth requirement, having a hall of fame, must be considered. Wilhelm Wundt is often considered the father of psychology, Florence Nightingale is the mother of nursing, and Marie Curie is the mother of nuclear science. Woodrow Wilson is recognized as the father of PA; however, there is no claimed father or mother of nonprofit management.

De Tocqueville (1835/1945) is often credited with being the first to discuss nonprofits in his writings when he described the American spirit of bonding together and working to create a common good and betterment for community. Though de Tocqueville simply observed and recorded, he did not provide understanding or a study of the sector.

To be considered a pioneer in a field, a person must see a weakness in a field and establish a new way of thinking or doing. Consider that perhaps the father/mother of nonprofit management was not an individual but an organization, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). "The YMCA is to nonprofit management history what the railroads were to business administration" (Lee, 2010 p. 279). Lee supported his claim by referencing Chandler, who demonstrated that "U.S. railroads were the pioneering institutions that separated ownership from management, operated on a very large scale (in terms of budgets, staffing, and geography), and required the professionalization of management" (Lee, 2010 p. 279). Similarly, the YMCA of the 1800s separated ownership (the community) from management (nonprofit staff), operated on very large scale (in terms of budgets, staffing, and geography), and required professionalization of management.

The YMCA was established in the United Kingdom in 1844 and the United States in 1851. By the 1980s, it had chapters in all major U.S. cities. Like the railroad institutions, the YMCA gained support from key finance backers, and this allowed the organization to operate at a scale shadowing virtually all other peer nonprofits. This scale predictably identified managerial needs.

Some of the [YMCA] association leaders quickly realized that managing a local YMCA was a profession, possibly encompassing one's entire career. Despite the strong Protestant and missionary roots of the organization, religious education and zeal were viewed as incomplete professional preparation for a competent local secretary and the many subordinates employed at each Y (Ames, 1926, 1929). (Lee, 2010 p. 279)

Consequently, individuals from within the YMCA created the School for Christian workers in 1885, and the curriculum included training for running a successful YMCA-Nonprofit. Formal education for nonprofit leadership evolved from the Chicago YMCA in 1911 through the offering of an accredited bachelor's in association sciences. The degree ended in 1933, although the YMCA continued to work in the field and produced the first nonprofit textbook for distribution in 1935 (Lee, 2010).

It is clear that those within the YMCA saw a weakness in professionalism of YMCA-nonprofit administrators and understood that traditional training was not enough for their purposes. YMCA leaders took action to develop and educate associa-

tion leaders by establishing a school with curriculum designed for their (nonprofit) special needs. By this standard, the YMCA could be considered the father of nonprofit management.

## Conclusion

The goal of this essay was to evaluate nonprofit management through the six characteristics that connote a profession as advanced by Pugh (1989). (1) A case of mind was clearly illustrated by demonstrating that practitioners and scholars within the field identify themselves as belonging to a unique profession. (2) Multiple textbooks and peer-reviewed journals dedicated to the nonprofit sector were cited as examples of having met the criteria for a corpus of theory and knowledge. (3) The intrinsic motivation of nonprofit employees was provided as a case for a social ideal. (4) Ethical standards were evaluated and found to be sufficient. (5) The fifth criteria for a profession is formal organizations to promote its interests. Examples of nonprofit scholarship organizations (international and domestic) and state-based membership organizations for practitioners were advanced for evidence of having met the fifth criteria. (6) Last, the sixth criteria is a hall of fame. It was acknowledged that nonprofit management does not have a recognized founding father or mother as do other fields. However, a case for recognizing the YMCA as the father or mother of nonprofit management was made.

## Now What?

If the YMCA meets the criteria for a hall of fame, then all six criteria are met to consider nonprofit management a profession unto itself. Scholars and practitioners will need to determine what implications this uniqueness has for the sector. For example, accrediting nonprofit education programs within universities may help to standardize programs and ensure verifiable quality. Pugh (1989), referring to PA, argued, "If certification were to become an accepted reality, both the performance and the status of career public managers might be enhanced" (p. 6). This has happened in the last few decades with professional recognition of public administrators and the corresponding accreditation of educational programs through the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA). Nonprofit scholars and practitioners need to determine whether such an organization is necessary for the purpose of supporting and promoting the nonprofit profession, beginning with standardization of curriculum and the accreditation of programs meeting these standards.

As expressed by Jones (as cited in Pugh, 1989), public managers must be credentialed because "the cost of amateurs [is] too high" (p. 6). This applies to nonprofit professionals as well. Nonprofits permeate society in many facets, from the hospitals where people are born, to the museums that preserve cultures, to the homeless shelters that care for the marginalized in society. The cost of amateurs in nonprofits is too high. Formal academic program accreditation may be the next logical step in developing the profession just as it was for PA.

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