
Bridging the Theory–Practice Gap in a Nonprofit and Philanthropic Studies Master’s Degree Program

*Robert Donmoyer, Pat Libby,
Mary McDonald, Laura Deitrick*

University of San Diego

The gap between universities and the knowledge they generate and teach, on the one hand, and practitioners and the problems they confront, on the other, has been discussed by scholars in a number of applied fields. This article considers how those who design and run nonprofit academic programs might minimize the theory–practice gap problem. It presents a case study of one master of arts degree program focused on nonprofit leadership and management and discusses program development, the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council’s curricular guidelines, applied learning, and practitioner instructors and quality instruction.

Keywords: *leadership development, nonprofit leadership, case study, teaching, nonprofit sector*

DURING A PLENARY SESSION at the 2006 BenchMark 3 meeting in Tempe, Arizona, Kayla Stroop, who at the time headed what then was called American Humanics, observed that there normally is an inverse relationship between the status of a field of study within the academic community and the field’s relevance and responsiveness to practitioners. The observation was not challenged during the session at which it was made, nor was it disputed during other BenchMark 3 plenary sessions (Donmoyer,

Correspondence to: Robert Donmoyer, University of San Diego, 275F Hill Hall, 5988 Alcala Park, San Diego, CA 92110. E-mail: donmoyer@sandiego.edu

2009). The lack of counterargument is hardly surprising, because a significant gap between universities and the knowledge they generate and teach, on the one hand, and practitioners and the problems they confront, on the other, has long been discussed by scholars in many applied fields (see, for example, Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Schön, 1983).

The recent growth in graduate programs in the nonprofit and philanthropic studies field, as well as the substantial increase in faculty positions in such programs that have been advertised and filled even during this era of shrinking university budgets, suggests that the status of the field within the academy is indeed improving. This improvement, in turn, suggests the need to ask how our field can avoid—or at least minimize—the theory–practice gap problem that exists within other applied fields.

The article takes the form of a case study of the master of arts degree program in which we work. To be sure, this sort of “backyard” type of scholarship (Glesne, 2005) is potentially problematic. Among the problems is the possibility that backyard research will deteriorate into little more than marketing and self-promotion. That is certainly not our intent here. In fact, we do not claim that the program we describe is exemplary. The only thing that might be considered exemplary is that we are consciously struggling—in quite concrete ways—with the theory–practice issue, and we have used data and hard-headed critique to figure out what is working and what needs to be improved.

Our purpose is to review what we have done so that it might have heuristic value for others involved in similar sorts of program development and delivery efforts in the nonprofit and philanthropic studies field. We describe our initial foray into graduate-level nonprofit and philanthropic studies program development, which was focused on the development of a master of arts degree program in nonprofit leadership and management. Before doing this, however, we say a bit about the context—especially the institutional and intellectual context—in which our program development work occurred.

The Institutional and Intellectual Context

The program development work that we describe here occurred within a department of leadership studies. Programs in leadership studies have been offered by our institution for more than thirty years. The intellectual roots of the field can be traced back to the publication of James Macgregor Burns's (1978) Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Leadership* and the distinction made in the book between transforming or transformational leadership, on the one hand, and transactional leadership, on the other. (Burns himself

used the term *transforming leadership*. Others, such as Bass and Riggio, 2006, used the term *transformational leadership* to refer to the view of leadership articulated by Burns). Historically, business schools have emphasized management (that is, transactional leadership), and leadership studies programs have tilted toward more transformative or transformational views of leadership. The wisest members of the leadership studies field, including Burns (1978), however, never discounted the importance of management. (See also Rost's [1993] somewhat different take on the leadership/management distinction.) One other way of distinguishing leadership studies programs from the sorts of programs one normally finds in business schools is the fact that leadership studies programs tend to be intellectually grounded as much in the humanities as the social sciences.

The leadership studies programs in which we work are built around the assumption that leadership-related issues need to be examined from diverse perspectives and, consequently, that leadership programs need to be interdisciplinary. To bring coherence to a program that introduces students to diverse and, even at times, contradictory theoretical perspectives, the program also emphasizes using a process of practical reasoning—a process that considers both values and facts, as well as the influence of values on our perception of the facts—in real-world decision making (see Donmoyer, 2009). In short, much as law schools often attempt to teach their students to “think like a lawyer” in addition to exposing them to legal principles and relevant legal cases, our leadership programs are as concerned about developing students’ analysis and problem-solving abilities as it is in exposing them to new theoretical perspectives. Operationally, this commitment to developing problem-solving ability translates into a commitment to using various forms of experiential education. All of this is quite consistent with what we attempted to do in the development of our master’s degree program in nonprofit leadership and management.

The leadership studies programs in which we work are built around the assumption that leadership-related issues need to be examined from diverse perspectives and, consequently, that leadership programs need to be interdisciplinary.

Designing the Program, Part 1: Conducting a Needs Assessment

The person who was hired to develop what was initially envisioned as a nonprofit specialization consisting of a small number of courses embedded within the existing leadership studies master of arts program approached the program development process the same way she had previously approached developing a number of nonprofit organizations: by conducting an extensive needs assessment with potential clients—in this case, leaders of and practitioners in nonprofit organizations that presumably would hire program graduates. This needs assessment process included

The recurring concerns of survey and focus group participants were that (1) the program content be “practical,” (2) the program be offered during hours that were accessible to working professionals, and (3) the tuition be affordable to nonprofit practitioners.

sixty-five key informant interviews with senior-level charity and foundation directors, focus group interviews with more than 175 practitioners organized by nonprofit subsector, and a mailed survey to all identified nonprofits in the surrounding county (865) with annual budgets of \$125,000 or more (a dollar amount determined by a simple calculus; that is, a \$125,000 budget would allow an organization to have paid staff—a proxy for organizational infrastructure).

During the key informant and focus group interviews, participants were asked, “Do you think there is a need for a graduate program in nonprofit management, and, if so, what do you think students should be taught?” We suspected there would be a perceived need for such a program based on the existence of similar programs in other parts of the country. This process not only confirmed that hypothesis, it also helped shape the curricular framework for the program. That framework later was refined by an ad hoc committee of academics and practitioners and subsequently vetted through a market survey.

During the interviewing and survey process, practitioners also were asked whether it mattered if a nonprofit program were housed within a leadership studies department, as opposed to, say, a business school (which our institution also has). They were asked whether our university—which is sometimes referred to as “the school on the hill” not only because of its physical location but also because of its perceived elitism—was an appropriate institution in which to house the program.

The results of our interviewing and surveying processes suggested that there was, indeed, a market for the sort of program we were beginning to envision. More than two-thirds of survey respondents (71 percent), for example, indicated that they believed there was a need for such a program. The recurring concerns of survey and focus group participants were that (1) the program content be “practical.” (2) the program be offered during hours that were accessible to working professionals, and (3) the tuition be affordable to nonprofit practitioners. The elitism issue turned out not to be an issue except in the area of cost. The within-university location of the program also did not matter to the majority of those queried, although nearly one-quarter expressed a preference for housing the program in the university’s business school.

The concern about whether employees of nonprofit organizations could afford private school tuition was quickly resolved by convincing the university to reduce tuition by half for anyone employed by a 501(c)(3) organization. In addition, since the program’s inception a dedicated scholarship fund provides 501(c)(3) practitioner students a generous yearly scholarship. Both measures combine to make our program no more expensive than graduate programs offered by state-supported universities.

Designing the Program, Part 2: Creating the Curriculum

The needs assessment informed the curriculum development process and helped determine early on that there was a need for a stand-alone master of arts program, because it was clear that the proposed curricular elements far exceeded the limits of what could be allowed within a specialization. In fact, the initial program curriculum exceeded the total number of course hours provided through the leadership studies master's degree.

Information obtained through the needs assessment—along with information gathered through interviews with other nonprofit graduate programs around the country—was used by a working group of tenure-line faculty and practitioners who decided on course offerings and the objectives for each course. The course syllabi were designed by the initial instructors for each course. An advisory board of individuals representing philanthropic, nonprofit, governmental, and business organizations was also assembled and played a key role in vetting the program's curriculum and overall design, marketing the program, and raising scholarship funds. (As is noted in a subsequent section, the advisory board remains active today, though most of the members have changed as a result of the adoption of a term-limit policy.)

We note that the general mapping of the program's curriculum was done before the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC) (2007) released its curriculum guidelines for nonprofit programs. When the guidelines did come out, they closely resembled what we had developed through the extended needs assessment process that was used to develop our curriculum.

In retrospect, we are pleased with the results of the needs assessment process as a precursor to the curriculum design process, and if we were to start the program development process again today, we are fairly certain that we would still use our needs assessment choreography before consulting the NACC curricular guidelines for quality assurance purposes. We say this for three reasons.

First, the needs assessment process netted the sort of context-specific understanding that broad national (and international) guidelines could not possibly provide. The standards, for example, say nothing about where to house a nonprofit program or what to charge for a program. In our case, needs assessment-generated data about the cost issue turned out to be important in convincing university officials to lower tuition to make the program viable.

Second, guidelines from professional associations normally provide an extensive smorgasbord of possibilities. Even a stand-alone nonprofit master of arts program such as ours (see the later discussion of the program structure) could not cover all sixteen categories of content specified in the NACC 2007 curriculum guidelines.

Choices had to be made, and the information generated by the needs assessment process helped us make these choices.

Third, the needs assessment process functioned as a way of marketing the program and generating support for it before there even was a program. For the most part, potential students or their supervisors already knew about the program long before the recruitment of students began. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that those in charge of admissions could select from a relatively large applicant pool even in the program's first year.

The Program Approval Process: A Study in Meeting the Letter (Though Not Necessarily the Spirit) of the "Law"

After a program is developed but before it can be delivered, it normally must be approved by both the university bureaucracy and an accrediting agency. We opted to circumvent this dual approval process by treating the new program simply as a variation of the existing master's program in leadership studies. This decision, of course, required that students in the nonprofit program had to take the core courses that had been approved for the generic master's program: Leadership Theory and Practice, Organizational Theory and Change, Leadership and Ethics, and Research Methods. With the exception of the Leadership Theory and Practice course, however, nonprofit students were enrolled in special sections of the core courses that were explicitly focused on nonprofit organizations and included case material from the third sector. In addition, the nonprofit leadership and management master's program quickly developed its own admissions process, a different culminating assignment, mostly distinct content, and a separate identity from the more generic leadership master's program. Furthermore, students enrolled in the program today receive a diploma that reads "Master of Arts in Nonprofit Leadership and Management."

Explicit and Ongoing Efforts to Keep the Program Tethered to Practice

From its inception, a concern for keeping the program tethered to practice has been uppermost in the minds and actions of those responsible for developing and delivering the program. This section highlights three mechanisms that have been used to do this.

Applied Projects

From the start, we required that virtually all courses in the program engage students in what the initial curriculum development

team characterized as “applied projects.” An applied project involves a team of two to six students creating a course-related artifact for a nonprofit organization to help build the capacity of that organization.

For example, depending on the class they are taking, students might write (or rewrite) governance documents such as by-laws, create volunteer policy manuals, design financial control systems, devise board recruitment plans, create research-based program and evaluation designs, or construct marketing or fundraising plans for specific organizations. Team members normally interact regularly with their nonprofit “clients” to produce a product that is tailored to the particular needs of the organization. These meetings add an opportunity for students to develop their capacities for creating change within organizations as well as to apply the knowledge they received in a course in a real-world context.

As a graduation requirement, each student submits a portfolio that contains a comprehensive list of the applied projects that he or she has helped create in the program, as well as three completed projects. The portfolio also contains a reflective analysis of what was learned in the course of doing the projects, including a discussion of the theories employed, the problems that arose, and the methods that were used to resolve issues. Each portfolio is evaluated by a faculty member and an external nonprofit sector expert.

Practitioners as Instructors

From the program’s inception, the program faculty has been a mixture of tenure-line faculty and nonprofit practitioners. In fact, half of all required courses are taught by practitioners, most of whom hold senior-level positions in nonprofit organizations. (A few are consultants.) Nearly half of the practitioners who serve as our faculty members hold terminal degrees.

We know that the use of adjunct faculty to deliver academic programs is frequently criticized, especially by accrediting agencies. We argue, however, that using practitioners is an important way to keep a nonprofit program tethered to practice. For example, our fund-raising course is taught by a director of development who has raised millions of dollars for nonprofit organizations. Our roster of practitioner faculty also includes a former legislator, the CEO of a nonprofit organization with more than eight hundred employees, a program director at a community clinic, the CEO of a community foundation, and the CFO of a well-respected domestic violence organization.

Furthermore, an infrastructure has been created to ensure that practitioner faculty members are excellent teachers familiar with—and able to incorporate in the courses they teach—theoretical as well as craft knowledge. The infrastructure includes selecting practitioner faculty members through a competitive process and, after someone

has been selected, working closely with the program director to ensure that the faculty member's course design incorporates multiple theoretical models frameworks as well as information and strategies related to close-to-the-ground practice concerns. New faculty members also are evaluated in the classroom by the program director as well as by students at the end of the semester through the department's course evaluation process. And practitioner faculty members meet regularly to discuss teaching and program policy issues and teaching-related concerns.

An Active Advisory Board

The program's advisory board—a board that is made up of key stakeholders including representatives of private foundations, major charities, government, corporations, students, and alumni—also plays a major role in keeping the program tethered to practice. Through a series of working committees, advisory board members have input into decisions to modify the curriculum subject to department approval; they also review the results of ongoing program and exit evaluations. In addition, certain board members design continuing education programs, raise funds, and market the program. All play a major role in developing the strategic direction of the program.

Through their reading of students' portfolios, advisory board members gain a keen understanding of the program's weaknesses as well as its strengths. Knowledge of apparent weaknesses has, on occasion, led to board members being proactive in suggesting programmatic changes that they believed were needed.

Evaluation Efforts Stay Linked to Practice

From the start, we have been committed to evaluating our master of arts program in general, and, in particular, our attempts to bridge the gulf that often separates the world of academia and the world of practice. Evaluation efforts have been both formal and informal.

Formal Assessments

From the very start of the program, those who developed it were committed to formally evaluating what they had created. During the first three years of the program, for example, an external evaluator was hired to survey students and conduct focus group interviews. All totaled, the external evaluator gathered data from three cohorts of students. The results of this evaluation effort were reassuring. The major findings were that students were exceedingly satisfied with the program and believed that the program had a direct impact on the way they did their jobs. Students frequently commented positively on the applied projects component of the

program and indicated that this component had been instrumental in linking coursework with the world of practice.

Findings also indicated that members of the first three cohorts felt positioned to apply for higher-level jobs as a result of participating in the program, including, at times, jobs in larger nonprofit organizations. This formative evaluation also surfaced complaints about the program, but, in nearly all cases, they were relatively minor and easy to correct. The one finding that was somewhat surprising involved students viewing the program not only as a vehicle for adding to their professional skill sets but also as an impetus for personal development. (For a detailed discussion of evaluation results, see Libby and Larsen, 2006.)

More recently, two additional formal assessments have been conducted, both of which focused on the hundreds of applied projects that were produced by the students since the program began in 2001. The focus of both of these formal assessments was on whether the projects were used by the nonprofit organizations for which they were designed. The goal was to determine whether students had been engaged in real—and practical—work or whether the applied project work was merely an academic exercise that would, at best, benefit only them.

The first of these studies involved interviews with representatives of nonprofit organizations for which applied projects were developed. Maximum variation sampling was used to identify a sample of organizations that were diverse in a number of ways. Interviews were conducted with a sample of nonprofit organizations. All the organizations interviewed indicated that they used the student-created product in some way (Carpenter and Krist, 2010). Even when the products that were produced had not been used, interviewees normally suggested that their organizations benefited from the recommendations that students made in the documents they provided to the organization and frequently could cite specific (and seemingly credible) examples of the benefits provided.

The second formal assessment of the applied project impact was conducted in the fall of 2010. This was a survey study with a larger sample. The results indicate that most of the nonprofit organizations were “highly satisfied with the projects and the majority of the organizations were able to implement and benefit from the projects” (Carpenter and Hoffman, 2011, p. 15). Unfortunately, because of the survey nature of this study’s design, it is difficult to determine the degree of use or to probe for examples that would indicate that positive responses were grounded in concrete actions rather than ungrounded assumptions about the utility of the students’ work.

In short, collectively, the applied projects studies suggest that the applied projects are probably more than academic exercises. In some sites, however, the products produced are less useful than we had hoped they would be. We continue to explore how to structure applied project assignments to maximize their real-world utility.

From the very start of the program, those who developed it were committed to formally evaluating what they had created.

Informal Assessments

Arguably the most valuable information in terms of our ongoing program redesign efforts has come from more informal assessments that occur in a number of ways and in a variety of venues. One venue is the monthly breakfast or dinner meetings that the program director and other faculty have with students. Attendance at these meetings is voluntary, but close to 75 percent of a cohort attend at least one such meeting in the course of an academic year.

At these meetings, students talk freely about their experiences in the program, and the information they provide is helpful in getting a sense of students' perspectives of what is working in the program and what is problematic. For example, these meetings often provide valuable qualitative information about the perceived effectiveness of particular instructors. When this informally gathered qualitative information is triangulated with the quantitative course and teacher evaluation data, reasonably well-grounded decisions can be made about which faculty to invite back to teach subsequent cohorts.

Sometimes even tenure-line faculty members are not invited back for a return engagement due to triangulated qualitative and quantitative feedback. This has happened, for example, with a number of tenured faculty members from the business school whose courses were viewed by students as being overly theoretical. Either little or no attempt was made to link theory to practice, or, when an attempt was made, the instructor's examples evidenced a lack of knowledge about nonprofit organizations. (Our experiences with business school faculty should not necessarily be surprising. See, for example, Bennis and O'Toole, 2005.) Similar things have happened with certain practitioner faculty, though in these cases the problem normally was the reverse: too much reliance on war stories and too little intellectual heft or theory.

Conclusion

We have told the story of the master of arts program in nonprofit leadership and management at our institution. Our focus was on how we have wrestled with and, in most cases, resolved issues related to the theory–practice gap problem.

A case study is always a bit of a Rorschach test; readers take from a case the things that are most relevant to them. We hope that our discussions of such issues as the use of the NACC curricular guidelines, the potential contribution of practitioner faculty members (as well as the sort of infrastructure that helps insure that the potential is realized), and the use of applied projects to keep a master's program tethered to practice will have heuristic value for readers.

At [the monthly breakfast or dinner] meetings, students talk freely about their experiences in the program, and the information they provide is helpful in getting a sense of students' perspectives of what is working in the program and what is problematic.

References

- Bass, B., and Riggio, R. *Transformational Leadership*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006.
- Bennis, W., and O’Toole, J. “How Business Schools Lost Their Way.” *Harvard Business Review*, May 2005, 83(5), 96–104.
- Burns, J. M. *Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row, 1978.
- Carpenter, H., and Hoffman, H. “Applied Project Organizational Impact Report for the Nonprofit Leadership and Management Graduate Program.” University of San Diego, 2011. Retrieved April 26, 2012, from http://www.sandiego.edu/soles/documents/AppliedProjectsReport_final.pdf.
- Carpenter, H., and Krist, P. “Practice Makes Perfect: A Study of the Impact and Use of Nonprofit Masters Students’ Applied Projects on Nonprofit Organizations in the San Diego Region.” *Journal of Nonprofit Management Education*, 2010, 1(2), n.p.
- Donmoyer, R. “Theories About the Role of Theory in Nonprofit and Philanthropic Studies.” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 2009, 38(4), 710–713.
- Glesne, C. *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*. New York: Allyn and Bacon, 2005.
- Libby, P., and Larsen, R. S. “Keeping a Nonprofit Master’s Program Tethered to Practice: Results of an Action Research Approach to Program Development.” Presented at the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) Conference, Chicago, November 2006.
- Nonprofit Academic Centers Council. *Curricular Guidelines for Graduate Study in Nonprofit Leadership, the Nonprofit Sector, and Philanthropy*. Cleveland, Ohio: Nonprofit Academic Centers Council, 2007. Retrieved October 1, 2011, from <http://www.naccouncil.org/pdf/GradCG07.pdf>.
- Rost, J. *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993.
- Schön, D. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. London: Temple Smith, 1983.

ROBERT DONMOYER was a founding co-director of the University of San Diego’s Caster Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research and currently coordinates the university’s Ph.D. specialization in nonprofit and philanthropic leadership and management.

PAT LIBBY is the founder and director of the Institute for Nonprofit Education and Research, the umbrella organization for nonprofit graduate programs and research at the University of San Diego.

MARY McDONALD is an assistant professor of leadership studies at the University of San Diego.

LAURA DETRICK is director of the Caster Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research, part of the Institute for Nonprofit Education and Research at the University of San Diego.