

# Practicing Philanthropy in American Higher Education: Cultivating Engaged Citizens and Nonprofit Sector Professionals

David A. Campbell

*College of Community and Public Affairs at Binghamton University*

## ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship has documented a growing interest in teaching philanthropy at the undergraduate and graduate level. This study is an overview of the nature and extent of one approach, experiential philanthropy, in which students learn philanthropy by making grants to nonprofit organizations. The study reviewed syllabi and support material for 88 experiential philanthropy courses. The analysis identified four course models offered in a variety of academic settings. These findings suggest a broader range of course options for advancing civic engagement goals that instructors might typically consider. Faculty who teach these courses pursue multiple goals, including preparing students for citizenship and for professional work in the nonprofit sector. The findings indicate that experiential philanthropy is a pedagogical strategy for both civic engagement and nonprofit management education. They deepen our understanding of how instructors use experiential philanthropy and shape how we assess its efficacy as a pedagogic strategy.

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## KEYWORDS

student philanthropy, experiential learning, civic engagement, nonprofit management education

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In recent years, scholars have documented a growing interest in teaching philanthropy as part of undergraduate and graduate education. Researchers have described increases in both courses that address philanthropy in general (Mirabella, 2007) as well as those that involve experiential philanthropy, classes that provide students with the chance to act as philanthropists by making grants to nonprofit organizations (Millisor & Olberding, 2009; Olberding, Nekirk, & Ng, 2010). Research on experiential philanthropy has focused on case studies of individual courses (Irvin, 2005; Sigler, 2006) and Northern Kentucky University's adoption of experiential philanthropy as a pedagogical

strategy across its curriculum (Ahmed & Olberding, 2007/2008; Holland & Votruba, 2002, Olberding, 2009, 2012; Olberding et al., 2010; Sigler, 2006).

Experiential philanthropy has generated more attention for two reasons. First, the publications by Northern Kentucky University researchers have raised awareness of its extensive program of courses; and second, several prominent institutional funders have underwritten courses at colleges and universities across the United States. Northern Kentucky scholars (led by Julie Olberding) have addressed some important questions about experiential philanthropy through an

assessment of that university's experience, but we lack systematic knowledge of key aspects of this development, such as the extensiveness of courses, their role within curricula, or whether they dominate in undergraduate or professional graduate education. In addition, researchers have not addressed either how instructors perceive the goals of these courses or the relationship of these courses to goals associated with service learning or experiential education, such as civic engagement or students' preparation for careers as professionals.

This paper provides an overview of the nature and extent of experiential philanthropy courses as a pedagogical strategy in American higher education. Increased knowledge of this phenomenon would be valuable for several reasons. First, it would clarify the goals instructors seek to accomplish through experiential philanthropy. Second, it would expand our understanding of the relationship of experiential philanthropy to two dimensions of higher education we associate it with: civic engagement and nonprofit management education. Third, increased knowledge of the goals and structure of experiential philanthropy courses would also provide a foundation for future research about how thoroughly courses achieve those goals.

### **EXPERIENTIAL PHILANTHROPY AND ITS FUNDING SOURCES**

For purposes of this study, *experiential philanthropy* is defined as a course in which undergraduate or graduate students, as part of their assigned work, function as grantmakers, distributing funds to nonprofit organizations. In these courses, instructors make available to students a set amount of money to distribute to nonprofit organizations. Instructors organize the course to facilitate student decision making regarding how to distribute the funds. Students make grant decisions at the end of the semester as a culminating activity, to reflect key lessons they have learned from the course. The approach instructors and their students take in determining how to distribute these funds varies. In some cases, students solicit grant applications; in others, students research and assess local organizations without soliciting a formal proposal.

Student grants also vary; they may provide operating support or designate their funds for an individual program or capital item.

### **FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR EXPERIENTIAL PHILANTHROPY**

Nearly all experiential philanthropy programs have depended exclusively on external sources of funds for their courses, though a few have used funding provided by the college or university or raised by student groups. Three institutional funders have provided most of the financial support for experiential philanthropy courses and contributed to its growth in American higher education: the Learning by Giving Foundation, formerly a program of the Sunshine Lady Foundation,<sup>1</sup> the national office of Campus Compact, and a consortium of three Campus Compact state chapters that include Ohio, Kentucky, and Michigan. One other institutional funder, the Mayerson Foundation—the primary source of support in establishing the program at Northern Kentucky University—has played a leadership role in the development of experiential philanthropy as a pedagogical strategy.

The Learning by Giving Foundation funds experiential philanthropy courses at colleges and universities throughout the United States. Faculty supported by the foundation receive \$10,000 per year to offer an experiential philanthropy course in which students distribute that money in grants to nonprofit organizations. The foundation requires participating institutions to provide their experiential philanthropy courses at the undergraduate level (Learning by Giving Foundation, n.d.). The foundation has gradually increased its commitment to experiential philanthropy programs, and as of 2013 it supported 32 such programs on an ongoing basis in the United States and Canada.

Campus Compact, both the national organization and a coalition of its state chapters, are the other major initiators of experiential philanthropy programs. In 2007, the national organization created the Students4Giving project, which provided college and university faculty with grantmaking funds through a

giving account sponsored by and housed at the Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund. The program continued through 2010. Faculty funded by Campus Compact received between \$5,000 and \$15,000 for their courses, with the expectation that they would identify and develop mechanisms for sustaining them (Campus Compact, n.d.).<sup>2</sup> Finally, beginning in 2010 (and continuing at the time this paper is published), three Campus Compact state chapters (Kentucky, Michigan, and Ohio) received funding from the Corporation for National and Community Service for another experiential philanthropy program, the Pay it Forward initiative. Through this program, colleges and universities that are members of Campus Compact organizations in those three states received funding to offer as many as four experiential philanthropy courses through which their students distribute up to \$4,500 to local nonprofit organizations (Ohio Campus Compact, 2010). As of 2013, the consortium reports that its members have offered 144 experiential philanthropy courses at 34 colleges and universities.

### **SERVICE LEARNING AND NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION**

Experiential philanthropy draws together two themes in higher education literature: the use of experiential education and active learning strategies to encourage student civic engagement (generally through service learning) and the preparation of students for public service careers, specifically through nonprofit management education. Because nonprofit sector work by definition involves civic engagement (either as a professional or a volunteer), literature about service learning and nonprofit management education sometimes overlap. To understand experiential philanthropy as a higher education phenomenon requires us to understand key concepts both about the role of civic engagement—and ultimately, pedagogical approaches—in higher education, as well as the emergence of nonprofit management as a field of study.

Over the past 25 years, two high-profile publications have generated a debate about the role of civic engagement in American higher

education. The Boyer (1987) report, which examined undergraduate education in the United States, and the *Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education* (Campus Compact, 1999), by the college and university presidents who lead Campus Compact, made the case that undergraduate education plays a critical role in “educating students for citizenship.” Those who share this view suggest that preparing students to play active roles in community life is as central to higher education as career preparation (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003). Without this emphasis, they argue, higher education cultivates excessive individualism, preparing students for personal success without attention to their responsibilities to the communities where they live. An engaged citizenry is an essential ingredient in the enduring vibrancy of American democracy, and higher education plays a central role in educating students about democracy’s dependence on their participation (Colby et al., 2003).

American colleges and universities use a wide range of pedagogical strategies to cultivate habits of civic participation in students. In general, these strategies focus on providing students with “real-world” experiences that allow them direct engagement with course material, in essence creating a connection between theoretical concepts about civic engagement and the application of those ideas in practice, in assorted public service settings. These strategies have their roots in two related approaches to teaching advocated by education researchers: experiential education and active learning. The former refers to activities that “have in common an element of first-hand experience in a setting somehow related to the issues and concepts studied in the classroom” (Moore, 2000, p. 124). Experiential education emphasizes the learning potential in experiences that allow students to apply and assess concepts introduced through traditional delivery methods such as lectures and course reading. Active learning, defined as “instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. iii), is a broader concept that describes a more general approach

to teaching. It emphasizes that students learn more through activities that directly engage them with course material.

Proponents of experiential education and active learning contrast it with more traditional approaches to teaching, particularly lecture formats. They argue that engagement with course material through experiences and other activities plays a critical role in the learning process and is more effective than traditional lecture formats. This kind of engagement with course material enables students to use direct experience to observe, reflect on, and ultimately test the abstract concepts being introduced in their course reading and lectures (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Ethridge & Branscomb, 2009, Kolb, 1984). Researchers have found that students prefer this approach to teaching and that it enhances student learning. These findings have held in a wide range of academic settings including nursing (Everly, 2013), chemical engineering (El-Naas, 2011), and pharmacology (Hidayat, Patel, & Veltri, 2012), among others.

Experiential philanthropy as a pedagogical strategy reflects the approaches to teaching defined by experiential education and active learning, as well as the emphasis on civic engagement inherent in service learning. Experiential philanthropy provides students with a hands-on experience, grantmaking, and provides opportunities for active engagement with core concepts about philanthropy. It also draws on key elements of service learning, notably providing students with experiences in community settings, organized to enhance student learning as well as encourage habits of civic engagement (Colby et al., 2003; Jacoby & Associates, 1996; Simons & Cleary, 2006). Experiential philanthropy differs from service learning, because the hands-on activity associated with experiential philanthropy is grantmaking, coordinated in the classroom and not through direct service to a community organization.

We can also view the development of experiential philanthropy programs as an

indicator that nonprofit management education is emerging as a field of study that gives students opportunities to learn more about professional work in philanthropy and nonprofit organizations. Several researchers, most notably Roseanne Mirabella, have chronicled the growth of nonprofit management education in the United States (see, for example, Ashcraft, 2002; Dolch, Ernst, McCluskey, Mirabella, & Sadow, 2007; Mirabella, 2007; Mirabella & Wish, 2000, 2001; Mirabella & Young, 2012). They have identified a variety of reasons for this growth, including the long-established role of professional education, particularly in management; the importance of knowledge about management outside the for-profit business world; the recognition of nonprofit-specific training needs (such as governance and fundraising); the growth of the nonprofit sector over the past 50 years; and the need to create management capacity in nonprofit organizations involved in increasingly complex activities and funding relationships (Ashcraft, 2002; Mirabella & Wish, 2000, 2001; Mirabella & Young, 2012; O'Neill, 2005).

Scholars have documented the growth in nonprofit management education by identifying the number of institutions offering either degree programs or individual courses at the undergraduate or graduate level. The total number of degree programs grew markedly between 1996 and 2006, from 284 to 426, and the number of institutions offering those programs increased from 179 to 238. The number of nonprofit management courses offered at the undergraduate and graduate levels also grew significantly (Mirabella, 2007, p. 13S). Leaders of these institutions distribute nonprofit management education programs across several divisions. Among undergraduate institutions with a nonprofit management education program, arts and sciences and public affairs dominate; however, many programs are interdisciplinary and do not fall into traditional academic categories (Dolch et al., 2007, p. 30S). Graduate nonprofit management education programs show a similar distribution across institutional units. Arts and sciences and public affairs again have the largest share of

programs; social work, business, business and public administration (combined), and generic graduate or professional schools have a smaller but roughly equal share of the remainder (Mirabella, 2007, p. 15S).

Between 1996 and 2006, philanthropy courses grew in number by 206% and represent 13% of all nonprofit management education coursework (Mirabella, 2007, p. 18S). The growth in nonprofit management education in general and philanthropy courses in particular is consistent with the emergence of experiential philanthropy in undergraduate and graduate education. Researchers have noted that higher education courses in philanthropy serve both a civic engagement and a professional preparation role (Ashcraft, 2002). Those writing about experiential philanthropy courses have emphasized both roles, though they place greater importance on civic engagement (Ahmed & Olberding, 2007/2008; Holland & Votruba, 2002; Irvin, 2005; Olberding, 2009; Olberding et al., 2010).

Researchers at Northern Kentucky University are responsible for most of the scholarship about experiential philanthropy. They have conducted empirical research and reflected deeply on the institution's integration of experiential philanthropy across its curriculum, as an element in its commitment to "building a new generation of leaders and supporters of civic action" (Holland & Votruba, 2002, p. 231). Scholars there have conducted two streams of research, one focused on how the institution's faculty and leadership have approached experiential philanthropy and the other on the outcomes of that work. In terms of approach, Northern Kentucky researchers describe their effort as student philanthropy. Its definition, as "an experiential learning approach that provides students with the opportunity to study social problems and nonprofit organizations and then make decisions about investing in them" (Olberding, 2009, p. 463), reflects a focus on civic engagement. The stated purpose of the university's Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project, to "advanc[e] the development of com-

petent student-citizens" (Sigler, 2006, p. 194), also emphasizes student civic engagement.

Northern Kentucky researchers have identified two distinct ways that instructors organize student philanthropy: a direct approach, in which students distribute grant money as part of their coursework, and an indirect model, in which students make funding recommendations to institutional grantmakers (Millisor & Olberding, 2009; Olberding et al., 2010). An initial survey of the experiential philanthropy landscape identified 43 institutions offering such courses. Although the survey had a limited number of respondents, it indicated that Northern Kentucky University had offered experiential philanthropy courses for the longest time (since 2000) and that most respondents had begun their courses in 2007 or later (Millisor & Olberding, 2009).

Northern Kentucky researchers have published three studies that assess the results of the student philanthropy program. One addresses short-term impact; another assesses long-term changes in behavior; a third compares outcomes for students enrolled in different sections of the same course, one with a student philanthropy component, the other without. The first study analyzed survey responses from 986 students who participated in experiential philanthropy courses between 1999 and 2005 and found that respondents perceived the courses helped to accomplish the university's vision of civically engaged alumni. More than 80% indicated the experiential philanthropy course increased their likelihood of doing volunteer work, positively affected their beliefs about helping others, and increased their awareness of social problems and the role of nonprofit organizations in addressing those issues (Ahmed & Olberding, 2007/2008). These findings did not hold up for graduate public administration students. They already had well-formed ideas about public service, as evidenced by their enrollment in a degree program designed to prepare them for careers in public service. This finding suggests that experiential philanthropy courses play different roles for undergraduate and graduate students.

The second study surveyed 127 Northern Kentucky alumni to assess the long-term impact of student philanthropy courses in four areas: awareness, learning, beliefs, and intention. The study found that student philanthropy alumni scored higher than the general population on key aspects of engagement with the nonprofit sector, including level of charitable giving, volunteering, and board participation (Olberding, 2012). The third study, comparing students in different sections of the same course, found greater increases in awareness of community social problems and local nonprofit organizations among students enrolled in the section with a philanthropy component (McDonald & Olberding, 2012).

The research conducted by scholars at Northern Kentucky University demonstrates that its leaders have pursued serious reflection on the student philanthropy program, both its structure and outcomes. Northern Kentucky's approach to experiential philanthropy is distinct from other colleges and universities because it is an institution-wide initiative. It is unclear how this approach compares to courses provided elsewhere. The current study enables us to assess the nature and extent of experiential philanthropy courses across American higher education and provides the opportunity to identify similarities and differences with the experience at Northern Kentucky. In this way, the study offers insight into the boundaries of our current knowledge of this teaching strategy.

### RESEARCH METHODS

To learn about the nature and extent of experiential philanthropy courses in higher education in the United States, I sought first to develop a list of courses. After identifying courses, I requested relevant information (such as course descriptions and syllabi). To generate findings, I conducted a content analysis of the available descriptive information. A content analysis is useful because categorizing and counting key aspects of experiential philanthropy courses addresses the study's primary concerns: the nature and extent of experiential philanthropy courses.

I primarily examined two parts of each syllabus to address the research questions. Goal statements provided information about the purpose of individual courses; course topics and weekly readings addressed the knowledge and skills focus of the course. In some cases, other parts of the syllabus (such as course descriptions, special sections about experiential philanthropy, etc.) provided information that addressed goals, knowledge, or skills. Data that addressed the research questions were then categorized thematically to generate findings. A list of experiential philanthropy courses was developed in three ways. First, I contacted representatives of the two primary program funders, the Learning by Giving Foundation and Campus Compact (for both the Students4Giving and Pay it Forward programs), and requested a list of colleges and universities with funded courses. Those lists included current and previously funded courses that are no longer in operation. In addition, I conducted outreach through two list-servs to identify programs first through Campus Compact, which uses its list to connect with service-learning staff at its state chapters, and faculty who conduct research on service learning or use it as a pedagogical tool in their teaching. Courses were also identified through the list-serv of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA), the professional association for faculty and researchers involved with the nonprofit sector. Finally, a Google search was conducted using search terms such as *student philanthropy* and *student grantmaking*, among others, to identify any additional courses. Although this scan may not have identified all recent, current, or anticipated experiential philanthropy courses, each of the data sources operates independently of the others. This approach suggests the sample of courses is comprehensive.

These efforts generated a list of 88 experiential philanthropy courses in 53 institutions that were operating in 2010 or had operated in the three years prior. The number of courses identified is considerably higher than those included

in earlier studies (Millisor & Olberding, 2009; Olberding et al., 2010). For each course, syllabi and other relevant written material were requested. The primary institutional funders, Campus Compact (both its national and relevant state chapters) and the Learning by Giving Foundation, endorsed the study and made syllabi available for the courses they fund. In other cases, I contacted instructors of individual courses. In total, I received 86 syllabi. In lieu of a syllabus, I also received a funding application in support of one course, and descriptive information from one other. The syllabi and support documents were analyzed thematically by coding program information first into categories focused on course goals, content, and structure and then within categories using concepts taken from service-learning and nonprofit management education literature. That analysis generated the findings discussed next.

### **EXPERIENTIAL PHILANTHROPY COURSES**

Experiential philanthropy courses vary by funding source, academic level (undergraduate or graduate), and institutional setting. Of the 88 courses analyzed for this study, 80 were undergraduate level and eight were graduate level. Funders for the courses included 13 through the Learning by Giving Foundation; 15 from the national Campus Compact organization; 51 through the Ohio, Michigan, and Kentucky Campus Compact Pay it Forward program; and 9 through individual or institutional philanthropists associated with particular colleges or universities. All but one of the courses used the direct giving approach, in which students controlled the philanthropic resources and made grants directly to eligible nonprofit organizations.

Institutions of higher education offer experiential education courses in a wide variety of departments and organizational units. The choices about where faculty offer these classes tell us a great deal about how those institutions perceive experiential philanthropy and its role in higher education. Table 1 summarizes the

settings for experiential philanthropy courses. Undergraduate pre-professional departments were the most common setting (a total of 46 courses), including business/management (17) and human services (8); 21 courses fell into a wide range of other pre-professional units, such as marketing, communications, criminal justice, public administration, and departments preparing students for health careers. The predominance of courses in pre-professional departments suggests that the institutions view experiential philanthropy coursework as part of a student's preparation for a specific type of career. The Pay it Forward program was the source of funding for 35 of the 46 pre-professional courses. Undergraduate liberal arts, notably social sciences (16) and humanities (8), were also common settings; sociology (9) was the most popular departmental home for those courses; no other social science or humanities department was the setting for more than four courses. Professional programs dominated graduate courses, including public administration/policy (4), social work, a medical school, and business and arts administration (1 each).

Several other program settings are notable. Two institutions offer experiential philanthropy courses to undergraduates enrolled in an "honors" program, which limits participation to students preselected by the college or university. One other course, categorized for this study as a business, pre-professional course, also described itself as part of an honors program. Three institutions integrated experiential philanthropy into courses designed for new students under the popular heading "first-year experience," traditionally offered as a means of acclimating students to college life. Six institutions placed experiential philanthropy programs in departments or units dedicated to civic engagement. Northern Kentucky University, as noted earlier, integrates experiential philanthropy across its curriculum (at the undergraduate and graduate levels), reflecting its emphasis on educating students for citizenship.

**TABLE 1.**  
**Settings for Experiential Philanthropy Programs**

Disciplinary Category	Discipline	Number
Undergraduate Pre-professional (46)	• Business/Management	17
	• Human Services	8
	• Others	21
Undergraduate Social Sciences (15)	• Sociology	9
	• Economics	2
	• Political Science	2
	• Psychology	1
	• Anthropology	1
Undergraduate Humanities (8)	• English	4
	• Art	3
	• History	1
Undergraduate Special Program (5)	• Honors	2
	• First-Year Experience	3
Undergraduate Civic Engagement Unit (6)	n/a	6
Graduate Professional (8)	• Public Administration/Policy	4
	• Others	4
Total Courses		88

Note. Numbers in parentheses reflect number of courses in that disciplinary category.

### **Civic Engagement and Experiential Philanthropy**

Course descriptions and goal statements provide a picture of how faculty approach experiential philanthropy as a pedagogical strategy. Analysis of those documents indicates that slightly more than half (46) of the courses include civic engagement as a goal. Syllabi varied in terms of how directly they emphasized the civic engagement role. Some syllabi provided explicit assertions of how the course content would shape students' understanding of and commitment to civic engagement. For example, one syllabus listed as a goal "students will apply their understandings of the course readings to their own approaches to civic responsibilities, philanthropy, and opportunities for engagement." Another indicated a course goal was to help students "define...their own philosophies of service and their...responsibilities...as productive citizens;" a third emphasized teaching "values of active citizen-

ship." Other references were more oblique; one syllabus stated that "students will experience both the hard work involved in due diligence and the joy of philanthropy, preparing them for a lifetime of charitable giving," and another said that "discussions...will improve your understanding about civic engagement and social responsibility." Ten of the syllabi that addressed civic engagement did so in terms of a course focus on service learning or as part of learning about community needs. For example, one course described the goals of a service-learning assignment as "[students] will learn how to be engaged citizens and to understand the role philanthropy plays in the health of our local communities." Another framed engagement goals in terms of learning about community needs: "The goal of this course is to create an awareness in the student of community needs as related to dental health, and the personal and professional responsibilities of dental hygienists to assist in meeting these needs."



The course settings that emphasized civic engagement the most were courses that fell under civic engagement institutional units (4 of 6), First-Year Experience Courses (3 of 3) and pre-professional, business courses (11 of 17). Civic engagement goals were less prevalent in other settings, notably in graduate degree programs (3 of 8). The emphasis on civic engagement is not surprising in institutional units organized to encourage civic engagement. The role of civic engagement in first-year experience courses suggests that some student affairs professionals view teaching students about civic engagement as a key dimension of preparing students for college life. In a similar way, the data suggest that business and management faculty use experiential philanthropy to convey that teaching students about involvement in philanthropy and civic affairs is an essential aspect of preparing students for careers in business.

### Experiential Philanthropy Course Models

Course syllabi and descriptions suggest four distinct experiential philanthropy course models. The two dominant models are disciplinary specific (47) and nonprofit management education (35). Two other approaches are distinct, but less common: civic engagement (3) and first-year experience (3). Within these models, 69 courses (78%)—including all courses that fall under the nonprofit management education model—offer some skills or knowledge content about nonprofit management, including topics such as grantmaking, management, philanthropy, the nonprofit sector, and the nature and work of individual organizations. Some discipline-specific courses approach nonprofit management content in ways that apply explicitly to the discipline-specific content in those courses (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2.**  
Experiential Philanthropy Course Models and Curriculum Elements

Course Elements	Course Models				
	Disciplinary Specific	Nonprofit Management Education	Civic Engagement	First-Year Experience	All Courses
Grantmaking skills	12 (26%)	18 (51%)	1 (33%)		31 (35%)
Managing nonprofit organizations	4 (9%)	9 (26%)	2 (67%)		15 (17%)
Managing nonprofit organizations applied to discipline	6 (13%)		1 (33%)		7 (8%)
Philanthropy	6 (13%)	14 (40%)			20 (23%)
Philanthropy applied to discipline	3 (6%)				3 (3%)
Philanthropy and managing nonprofit organizations	1 (2%)	14 (40%)			15 (17%)
Nonprofit organizations	2 (4%)				2 (2%)
Nonprofit sector	1 (2%)	2 (6%)			1 (1%)
Number of courses (% of all courses)	47 (53%)	35 (40%)	3 (3%)	3 (3%)	88

As noted, the largest number of courses fell under the disciplinary-focused category (47). In these courses, the instructor organized the course to cover specific disciplinary content; philanthropy was not the primary focus of the course. Instructors used experiential philanthropy in two ways: to apply and deepen students' understanding of discipline-specific content and to reinforce ideas about civic engagement. Nearly all of the pre-professional business courses (14/17) and humanities courses (7/8), as well as most of the generic pre-professional (12/21) and social science (9/15) courses, fell into this category. Representative course names from this group include Leadership and Motivation, Special Topics in Psychology: Diversity and Health, and Legal Issues in Health Care. These titles reflected disciplinary context and content as well as that philanthropy was not the primary course focus.

Of the courses falling into the disciplinary-specific category, the syllabi in 29 (62%) included some nonprofit management knowledge and skills content. The most common content was grantmaking skills, which includes topics such as defining grantmaking goals, assessing community needs, designing a request for proposal, and developing criteria for evaluating proposals. Twelve discipline-specific courses had this feature. Other courses included content on philanthropy (9), both in general (3) and as applied to the course discipline (6); managing nonprofit organizations, again both in general (4) and applied to the course discipline (6); a mix of philanthropy and management (1); an introduction to local nonprofit organizations (2); and an introduction to the nonprofit sector (1).

Nearly 40% (35/88) of the experiential philanthropy courses fell under the category of nonprofit management education. In these courses, experiential philanthropy either was the defining feature of the class or was used to provide students with a practical way to apply nonprofit management education course content. Courses resembled those typically found in a graduate or undergraduate nonprofit

management education program. More than half of the courses in graduate level (5/8), pre-professional human services (5/8), and civic engagement units (4/6) fell into this category, as did both honors courses. This distribution reflects the professional public service orientation of the graduate courses as well as the pre-professional human service courses (in contrast to the pre-professional business and management courses). The courses in civic engagement units indicate how extensively those units associate training in nonprofit management with civic engagement. Representative course names in this group category include Leadership and Management of Nonprofit Organizations, Philanthropy and Grantmaking, and Philanthropy and Social Change.

By definition, all of these courses included nonprofit management education content, but the topics they covered varied. Two courses focused on the nonprofit sector in political and economic terms, deemphasizing management knowledge and skills. All the other courses emphasized philanthropy (14), general management issues (9), or a combination of the two (10). In addition, slightly more than half of the nonprofit management education courses (18) included content related to grantmaking skills. The mix of nonprofit management education topics suggests that the instructors leading these courses approached experiential philanthropy as a flexible pedagogical tool for teaching a wide range of nonprofit management education topics.

The final two categories included few courses. The three civic engagement courses focused exclusively on teaching students about civic responsibility, using experiential philanthropy as a mechanism for a hands-on experience in engagement. For example, one course description emphasized, "This course explores the meaning of engagement for a citizen, and this journey examines all facets of our lives. . . . The question to be wrestled with is: *What is an engaged citizen?*" [emphasis in original]. These courses are similar to those in the disciplinary-specific category because they adopt an applied pedagogical strategy; however,

their exclusive focus on civic engagement distinguishes them from the disciplinary-specific category. Two civic engagement courses included content related to managing nonprofit organizations; the third included philanthropy content. The three first-year experience courses primarily addressed acclimating students to college life. The courses introduced civic engagement as a topic but provided limited nonprofit management knowledge and skills.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature and extent of experiential philanthropy courses in higher education. The findings build on the studies Northern Kentucky University researchers have completed about their student philanthropy program, and they provide us with a greater understanding of how faculty approach experiential philanthropy as a pedagogical strategy. The results deepen our understanding of the relationship between experiential philanthropy courses and both nonprofit management education and the cultivation of student civic engagement. Finally, the study suggests additional ways to assess the effectiveness of experiential philanthropy courses in advancing key goals. I discuss these issues here.

This study found that instructors who develop and teach experiential philanthropy courses do so in a wide variety of settings. Instructors incorporated experiential philanthropy into courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and in liberal arts, pre-professional, and other specialty areas (such as first-year experience and civic engagement programs), settings more diverse than reported in earlier research (Millisor & Olberding, 2009). The diversity of settings is important for two reasons. First, the findings are consistent with research chronicling the growth of nonprofit management education as a field of study (Mirabella, 2007; Mirabella & Wish, 2001) and the distribution of nonprofit management education across institutional units (Dolch et al., 2007). In particular, these findings indicate that experiential philanthropy courses that fall into the nonprofit management education

category are a pedagogical innovation in an evolving field of study. These types of courses are relatively new, increasing in number and consistent with the growth of nonprofit management education as a field.

Second, the diversity of settings indicates that instructors view experiential philanthropy as adaptable to a wide range of disciplines as a way to teach course content and apply theoretical concepts. The goals associated with experiential philanthropy have salience across institutions of higher education. Instructors in departments as diverse as communications, anthropology, economics, marketing, dental hygiene, and criminal justice incorporated experiential philanthropy into courses. The courses categorized as disciplinary specific were the most diverse in core content, and many included explicit references to civic engagement as a goal, even though neither civic engagement nor the nonprofit sector were the primary course subject.

Instructors use experiential philanthropy to accomplish multiple goals. The analysis noted that just over half of all courses included civic engagement goals. In addition, course models largely fell into two broad categories, nonprofit management education and as a mechanism for applying discipline-specific content to practice. In seeking to understand the nature and extent of experiential philanthropy courses, this finding is important because it tells us that instructors use these courses in different ways. Although this study organizes these courses under the heading “experiential philanthropy,” the courses varied considerably in their emphasis on philanthropy and experiential education. With respect to the latter, this finding is consistent with research chronicling the adoption of experiential education and active learning approaches, particularly at the undergraduate level, as a way to increase student engagement in learning. Across all courses, experiential philanthropy was a clear and defined course component (providing students with a grantmaking budget to distribute to local nonprofit organizations), but its role in individual courses varied.

In addition, the data indicate that instructors perceive civic engagement as an important goal across the curriculum. The large number of pre-professional experiential philanthropy courses identified in this study suggests that instructors view civic engagement and knowledge about nonprofit management and philanthropy as essential to preparing students for careers as professionals. The largest category of pre-professional courses was in business and management, and 11 out of 17 of those courses incorporated civic engagement goals. This finding reflects a commitment among instructors in that field to prepare students interested in business careers for engagement with the nonprofit sector through philanthropy or other activities. Although this finding is consistent with the principle that preparing students for citizenship is a goal of higher education (Boyer, 1987; Campus Compact, 1999), the emphasis on such preparation in pre-professional programs (and not exclusively in the liberal arts) is noteworthy and broadens our understanding of the kinds of knowledge and skills professional school leaders perceive as necessary for preparing students for work in professions.

At the same time, experiential philanthropy courses offered as part of graduate professional programs largely did not include civic engagement goals. In two of the three courses that did, the syllabi described civic engagement in terms of professional norms or values. This finding is consistent with earlier research indicating that graduate students in professional degree programs had well-formed ideas about civic engagement and public service when they entered graduate school and that cultivating those interests was a less important goal of graduate education (Ahmed & Olberding, 2007/2008). For graduate education, experiential philanthropy courses represent a way to teach nonprofit management.

Experiential philanthropy courses have disparate goals, but certain common features stand out, notably a focus on civic engagement and preparing students for careers or other forms of involvement with philanthropy and the non-

profit sector. In fact, 71 of the 88 courses, slightly more than 80%, fall into the nonprofit management education category and/or include civic engagement as a goal. These findings reinforce the idea that instructors use experiential philanthropy components in courses to advance common themes, such as the importance of community involvement, the role of individual and institutional philanthropy in meeting community needs, and the role of nonprofit organizations in community life. The courses differ in terms of emphasis and specific goals under these general headings. The clear implication is that evaluating the efficacy of experiential philanthropy as a pedagogical strategy depends on assessing courses individually, or at best, comparing those with common features (such as by using the categorization developed in this study).

Future research should build on the foundational knowledge that this study and earlier work provide. Research on the program of courses at Northern Kentucky University surveyed students who had participated in courses using several different approaches and showed positive changes in key variables across the board, but that study did not compare across course models. It is unclear whether or how course model affects student behavior on key variables.

Future research may consider whether student learning varies across the four models identified in this study or across courses with comparable goals. For example, it would be useful to study whether some approaches to experiential philanthropy are more likely to contribute to increases in civic participation or to different goals prioritized by other researchers (McDonald & Olberding, 2012; Olberding, 2012).

### **Implications for Practice**

This study offers several implications for faculty interested in developing experiential philanthropy courses. First, the study indicates that faculty offer experiential philanthropy courses in a wide range of disciplines and settings. This diversity suggests that experiential

philanthropy courses may be a reasonable option for many faculty members. Second, a successful experiential philanthropy course would require clarity about specific goals of the course. For example, this study identified civic engagement as a goal in many, but not all courses. Third, in a related way, the study identified four experiential course models. Instructors may want to choose one of these models as a way to clarify the particular purpose for the course. For example, the nonprofit management education model emphasizes content that prepares students for engagement with the nonprofit sector, while the disciplinary-specific model emphasizes using experiential philanthropy as a way to teach content specific to the field in which the instructor offers the course. This last approach, though it has civic engagement benefits, may focus more on experiential and active learning approaches to teaching that contribute to more effective delivery of discipline-specific content.

Two limitations deserve mention. First, syllabi and course descriptions are rich sources of data, but they may not sufficiently capture all course activities. Instructors do not use the same format in preparing syllabi, and by limiting data to syllabi and course descriptions, they might leave out important information. Interviews or survey data would deepen our understanding of experiential philanthropy. This study is also time-bound. It reflects courses taught through 2010. The leaders of the Pay it Forward program have incorporated new learning and approaches as the program has progressed. In addition, the Learning by Giving Foundation has increased the number of schools in which it sponsors experiential philanthropy courses. Some of the new courses may approach experiential philanthropy differently from those established earlier. This study does not reflect new learning or approaches from either funder.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study considered the nature and extent of experiential philanthropy programs in American higher education. In areas such as academic discipline and education level, it

identifies important variations in the form. In addition, the study found four models of experiential philanthropy, each with differences in goals and course content. Knowledge of the nature and extent of experiential philanthropy is valuable in providing a basis for evaluating the effectiveness of such programs as a pedagogical strategy. The results of this analysis raise questions regarding the implications of different program models for evaluating success, specifically regarding the role and definition of civic engagement and responsible stewardship of philanthropic resources.

First, the variety of institutional settings in which instructors offer experiential philanthropy courses, particularly those that fall under the nonprofit management education heading, is consistent with earlier research about the settings of nonprofit management education across institutions (Dolch et al., 2007; Mirabella & Wish, 2001). Further, the wide range of departments offering experiential philanthropy courses, particularly in the discipline-specific category, suggests more course options for advancing civic engagement goals than instructors might typically consider. Second, the study indicates that instructors who teach experiential philanthropy courses pursue multiple goals. Two purposes are dominant: preparing students for citizenship and preparing students for professional work in the nonprofit sector. This finding indicates that experiential philanthropy is a pedagogic strategy for both civic engagement and nonprofit management education. These findings matter because they deepen our understanding of how instructors use experiential philanthropy and, subsequently, because they shape how we assess the efficacy of experiential philanthropy as a pedagogical strategy.

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## NOTES

- 1 In 2011, The Sunshine Lady Foundation created the Learning by Giving Foundation to continue the work in experiential philanthropy begun by the Sunshine Lady Foundation. To avoid confusion, all subsequent references will use the current organization name, the Learning by Giving Foundation. The foundation continues to operate and support experiential philanthropy courses. The website for the foundation is at <http://www.learningbygivingfoundation.org>.
- 2 The Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund chose not to continue to support the Students4Giving program beginning with the 2010–2011 school year; however, the Learning by Giving Foundation has provided replacement funding for many of the Students4Giving projects, and the leaders of most Students4Giving funded programs have secured resources to sustain the projects.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David A. Campbell** is associate professor of Public Administration in the College of Community and Public Affairs at Binghamton University. He established the Philanthropy Incubator at Binghamton University and has taught experiential philanthropy courses there since 2009.

