

# Context-based Instruction: What Traditional Social Science Disciplines Offer to Nonprofit Management Education

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## ABSTRACT

What can traditional social science disciplines offer to contemporary nonprofit management education? We argue that the focus on *context* provided by traditional disciplines contrasts with operations-oriented approaches common to management education. Drawing on a sample of 110 courses from 22 programs, we illustrate the operations-oriented focus of current nonprofit management programs and discuss the likely rationales behind that tendency. We argue that nonprofit management education would benefit from greater emphasis on context-based approaches and suggest how traditional social science disciplinary approaches can be used to create distinctive nonprofit management courses. We suggest ways to integrate such courses into nonprofit management programs and consider what it would take to move the field of nonprofit management instruction toward a more integrated model.

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## KEYWORDS

nonprofit management, social science, higher education, context

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For at least three decades, scholars and administrators have been working to develop courses and curricula designed to prepare individuals to manage nonprofit organizations. Today, these courses are housed throughout universities, yet they, like all management and organization studies, share a common ancestry in traditional social science disciplines—sociology, political science, economics and anthropology. This paper examines whether there remains a place for traditional social science disciplinary approaches in the teaching of nonprofit management, and if so, what such a place might look like.

Before schools of management existed, the study of organizations was headquartered in the social sciences, and before the specialization and fragmentation of social sciences over the course of the 19th and 20th century, we were all scientists of society. The fathers of organization theory—figures like Max Weber, Henri Fayol, Frederick Taylor, Elton Mayo, Chester Barnard, and Herbert Simon—tended to self-identify as scientists of society rather than by the disciplinary markers we know today. For example, Simon is often recognized as an economist, while his doctorate was in political science, and his chaired position at

Carnegie Mellon was in psychology and computer science; he often emphasized the interdisciplinary, social science nature of his work (Lindbeck, 1992).

Over time, the traditional social sciences, management, and organization studies grew more distinct and more specialized as disciplines became codified, and schools and departments were formed. Studies of society became specialized along political, cultural, and economic lines, creating the first academic departments of political science in 1880 (<http://polisci.columbia.edu/>), sociology in 1892 (<http://sociology.uchicago.edu/department/history.shtml>), anthropology in 1896 (<http://anthropology.columbia.edu/department-history>), and economics around 1900 (the exact date is unclear, since most schools used the term *political economy* between 1870 and 1900; Parrish, 1967). Scholars of private firms, their behaviors, and management spun away from general studies of economics to form business schools in 1881 (<http://www.wharton.upenn.edu/about/wharton-history.cfm>). Somewhat later, in the post-World War II period, public administration became largely separate from political science, its parent discipline (Martin, 1952), though scholars continued to debate its role as a field long afterward (Kettl, 2000; McCurdy & Cleary, 1984). Specialized programs in nonprofit management arose a few decades later, in many cases spanning these epistemic communities (Mirabella, 2007).

Yet at the same time that fields of scholarship and teaching have specialized, there remains substantial and fruitful (if not complete) cross-pollination in theory and research between all these fields (e.g. Nesbit et al., 2011). Indeed, in the United States, the National Science Foundation recently pledged to increase support for interdisciplinary, collaborative research in the social, behavioral, and economic sciences in its “Rebuilding the Mosaic” report, which aimed to provide a vision for the direction of research in these fields in the 2010s (Banerji & Baruah, 2006). Since the report’s publication, NSF has initiated the CREATIV grants stream,

providing funding for transformative interdisciplinary ventures.

In the spirit of this new educational interdisciplinarity, we note that nonprofit management programs sit not only in schools of public affairs but also in business schools and colleges of liberal arts, giving these programs a unique ability to absorb interdisciplinary research and teaching. As faculty in such a multidisciplinary program, but each with traditional social science training, we self-consciously ask: What can traditional social science disciplinary approaches offer to nonprofit management programs and students?

To address this question, we begin by briefly describing traditional social science disciplinary education and its complementary relationship to management instruction. In so doing, we draw attention to the focus on *context* provided by the traditional disciplines, contrasting this with more operations-oriented approaches. Next, we examine the extent to which nonprofit management programs currently draw upon context- or operations-based approaches, drawing on a sample of 110 courses from 22 programs, and we discuss the rationale behind the current operations-oriented tendencies across programs. We argue that nonprofit management education would benefit from greater emphasis on context-based approaches as complements to their operations-oriented focus, and we suggest how traditional social science approaches can be used to create distinctive nonprofit management courses. We discuss how such courses could best be integrated into nonprofit management programs, suggesting how differing course designs can complement and reinforce key lessons. Finally, we consider what it would take to move the field of nonprofit management instruction toward this integrated model.

#### **TRADITIONAL SOCIAL SCIENCES AND MANAGEMENT: COMPLEMENTARY APPROACHES**

Acknowledging our membership in this epistemic community of scholars, we argue that the approaches of the traditional social science disciplines—sociology, political science, econo-

mics, and anthropology—offer distinct educational value for nonprofit management students. In general, these disciplines offer training in the broadly applicable skills associated with liberal arts education, including logic and criticality of thought, intellectual curiosity, breadth of interest, effectiveness of oral argument and presentation, synthesis, and clarity of writing and editing (Bellah et al. 1991; Nussbaum, 2010; Roche, 2010).

Beyond general skills, however, nonprofit management students can benefit from the particular content of the traditional social sciences and their common intellectual point of departure: the role of context. Both general skills and understanding of context are top priorities for students' future employers (Association of American Colleges and Universities & Hart Research Associates, 2013; Chronicle of Higher Education & Marketplace, 2012; Nonprofit Leadership Alliance, 2011). Here we focus on the distinctive substantive contribution of the social sciences and the ways they complement common forms of management education.

The social sciences offer a distinctive, substantive contribution to education: They take *understanding context* as their point of educational departure. Like scholars trained in public or nonprofit management, many traditional disciplinary social scientists are interested in organizations and institutions. Although each discipline has developed its own particular brands of "institutionalism" (P. A. Hall & Taylor, 1996), sociology, political science, economics, and anthropology have all developed subfields or research streams that focus on the activities of individuals within organizations, the actions of organizations within fields, and the interactions between organizations and fields within larger national and world systems. When scholars teach from these perspectives, the focus is on getting students to understand how organizations behave within a particular context—and more specifically, how that context shapes organizational form, size, structure, and behavior.

For example, political science teaches students about the interactions of state actors with each other, non-state actors with each other, and state actors with non-state actors under various formal and informal governance regimes. It draws attention to variation in outcomes depending on dynamics of power, types of regimes, and geopolitical levels of analysis. Economics, likewise, teaches students to consider the availability and exchange of resources that organizations depend upon and may produce. Sociology teaches students to focus on the role of networks of individuals and organizations in the transfer of information and furtherance of goals. Anthropology draws students' attention to the role of cultures—both within and outside of organizations—in fundamentally shaping the daily operations of organizations. And each discipline has, of course, borrowed from the others, creating an overlapping collection of insights into the general processes of organizational and institutional behavior, which are passed on to the student. Thus, scholars from the traditional social sciences teach students to adopt a bird's-eye view relative to organizations, situating them within political, social, economic, and cultural systems.

Understanding these contextual systems, while interesting in its own right, has intrinsic value for students of nonprofit management. As decorated organization theorist and sociologist W. Richard Scott (2003) highlighted, organizations are in constant interaction with the world around them; what happens *outside* an organization (sometimes very far outside) distinctly shapes what happens *inside*. This fact is often taken for granted, but future nonprofit managers can benefit by learning it explicitly because the implications of context are often less obvious and therefore less likely to be taken into account in organizational decisions. Budding nonprofit managers focused on the "hard skills" of benefit-cost analysis, fundraising, or human resource management as well as those concerned with social value and ethical mission therefore need to be taught to deliberately consider context, whether political, economic or social. Knowing the position of

their organization relative to others, and the way that position affects and is affected by other actors in its context, allows managers to maximize the benefits stemming from context—identifying potential partnerships, for example—while reducing downsides like resource competition or service provision redundancy. Deliberately acknowledging their individual and organizational context helps nonprofit leaders make better decisions.

We are not saying that instructors trained outside the traditional social science disciplines never consider context; they certainly do, as we show in the next section of this paper. Nor are we saying that traditional social science courses never address operational specifics; they do as well. We specifically emphasize that traditional disciplinary social scientists take context, rather than operational specifics, as their intellectual point of departure.

For clarity on this point, it may be worth considering two ideal types of courses, one social science and the other management. The prototypical social science course launches its educational efforts from the point of a social system (be it economic, political, cultural, or interactional). Broad theories explaining patterns of organizational or individual behavior as they relate to the system are presented. Students are promised that, upon completion, they will be able to paint a picture of the world, and causality in it, using the broad brushstrokes of social context. The archetypical management course, on the other hand, departs from the immediate needs and tools of the future manager. Specific skills are imparted for things like creating budgets, navigating legal regulations, hiring individuals, or fostering community relations. Students are promised that, upon completing their studies, they will be able to run an organization effectively.

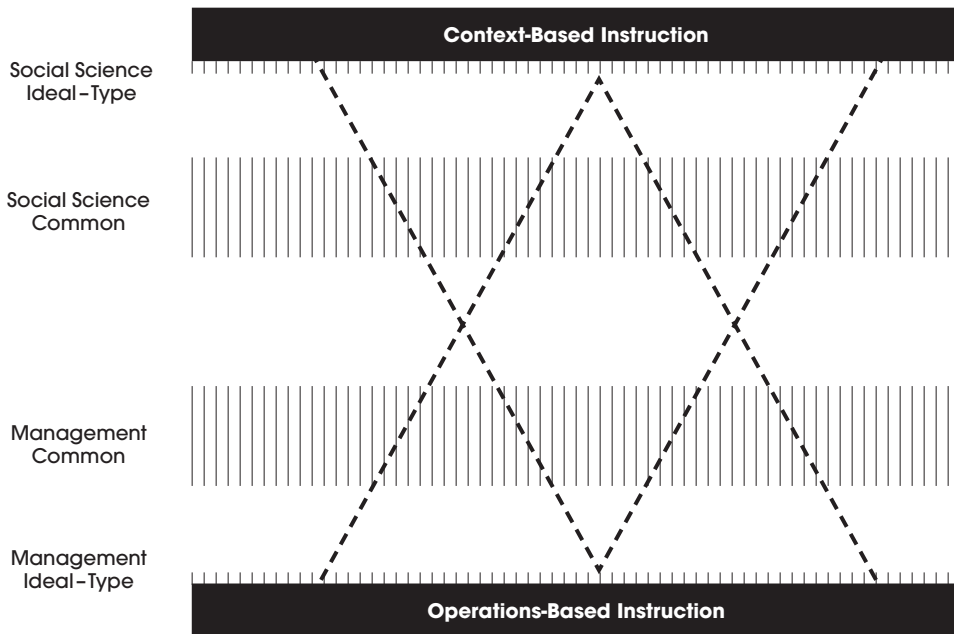
These ideal types, of course, rarely appear “in nature.” The reality is that courses taught from a traditional social science background at times depart from a concern with broad context and include discussion about details of practice. Similarly, management courses might take

operational skill development as their point of departure, and then demonstrate how the application of skills occurs within the constraints and opportunities of wider contexts. Figure 1 graphically depicts this educational terrain. The ideal-type classes reside at the boundaries of this conceptual space, but common approaches to courses departing from either pole end up covering material connected to both.

It might be concluded from this mapping of the educational terrain that there is, in effect, little difference between a course taught from a social science disciplinary perspective and one taught from a “management skills” operations approach. Both cover a mix of practical specifics and broader contexts. There is some truth to this interpretation, but two important distinctions remain. First, although some courses from either perspective occupy the space directly at the center of the diagram (indicating roughly equal parts specifics and contexts), most courses will favor either context or operations. More important, however, is the conceptual reference point for the instructor and for the student. Courses from a traditional social science approach will have context as their intellectual anchor. Even lessons that delve into operational specifics will return to the idea of context as the orienting frame (see online Appendix II for sample descriptions of context-oriented nonprofit management courses). Courses taught from a management perspective, even when dealing substantially with issues of context, will eventually return to their operational applicability.

We suspect that, even if the instructor does not overtly make these connections, a student’s perspective about the base from which a course is departing will inevitably shape how they think about and interpret the lessons taught in each session. Though the ideal-type course is rarely enacted, the concept lingers in the background of every session, drawing interpretation back to it. In this way, a course introduced and delivered from one perspective can result in the transmission of different ideas than a course approached from the other.

**FIGURE 1.**  
Educational Bases and Course Design



### HOW MUCH CONTEXT IS TAUGHT? SOME SUGGESTIVE EVIDENCE

With this map of course types in mind, we measured current levels of context- and operations-oriented instruction, which we present in this section. We collected data on a sample of 22 nonprofit management programs, drawn from Roseanne Mirabella's census of 196 programs (see <http://academic.shu.edu/npo/>; accessed January 2013; the 22 schools are listed in online Appendix I). To create this sample, we alphabetized Mirabella's list by institution name (as spelled in the listing), chose a random starting point, and selected every ninth school from the list, or approximately 10% of the population of programs. We then collected publicly available online information on the programs at each school and syllabi from courses within the program. If a school did not have both forms of information available, we removed the school from the data set and replaced it with the next one on the population list.

The final 22 programs sampled are not systematically different from other schools on recognizable dimensions. They vary substantially by size, type (public, private, religious), location (urban/rural, U.S. region), format (residential, commuter, online), and degrees offered (MPA, MBA, other). Even though we conduct no inferential statistical analyses using this data, it is important to acknowledge the possible implications of using a nonrandom sample. Specifically, institutions that post program information and syllabi online may differ systematically from those that do not, and our initial description of the field could be biased. We suspect, however, that the availability of program information and syllabi online has more to do with administrative and technical idiosyncrasies of schools and departments than it does with systematic differences relevant to a context- or operations-based orientation within the curriculum.

To understand the orientation of nonprofit management courses, we archived all available syllabi for both required and elective courses (as of January 2013)—a total of 110 unique course syllabi across the programs. Both authors of this paper separately read and coded all 110 syllabi, placing each course into one of the following five categories:

**Exclusively context:** Essentially a traditional social science course. Readings are focused on traditional disciplinary approaches to describing and explaining the world. Written work and other evaluations are geared toward understanding or synthesizing these descriptions and explanations.

**Mostly context:** Readings look like a traditional social science course, although some more practically oriented sources or case studies are used. There is evidence that class discussions, exercises, and written work are used in a way that helps students connect theoretical and empirical findings to more concrete situations. The course description may use terms like context and emphasizes broad explanatory trends.

**Roughly even:** The course includes a mix of readings, assessments, and instructional tools that speak to broad theoretical context and specific operational activity. It does not seem to focus more than 60% of time, effort, or assignments in either direction. The instructor may explicitly say that the course seeks a balance of approaches.

**Mostly operations:** The course is primarily focused on teaching students to do something specific, although at least some time is spent couching that specific skill, technique, or capacity development within broader trends, patterns, or contexts. If context is mentioned at all on the syllabus (even if the readings and assignments do not look like they are context-focused), the course is included here.

**Exclusively operations:** The course is clearly articulated as a setting for teaching students a specific practical skill. Readings, even when they are academic articles or book excerpts, are operational guides.

Assessments are typically practice versions of these skills or techniques, and students are evaluated on how well they do it. There is no evidence of connections to broader contextual thinking or analysis.

As independent coders, we agreed on most categorizations in the initial coding. Those that differed were almost always matters of degree in one direction or the other. For all conflicted cases, the authors reviewed the original data, discussed the discrepancy, and came to resolution on the appropriate categorization.

Syllabi, of course, are imperfect representations of courses. Although most syllabi contained quite detailed descriptions of readings, assignments, and instructor rationales, a written document cannot transmit what takes place in classrooms. We acknowledge this limitation and hope that as the field of nonprofit management education evolves, additional detailed observational research might eventually be undertaken. We argue, however, that there is likely a strong correspondence between the context or operations orientation found in a syllabus and in the related classroom.

In addition to our primary coding effort, we collected basic data on the characteristics of programs and courses. Specifically, we coded the disciplinary background and title of each course instructor using data in the syllabi, on the program websites, or from the instructors' posted curriculum vitae. We also coded the institutional home of the program in public affairs, business, or another type of school, whether a course was required or elective, and the substantive focus of each course. These data allow us to make initial examinations of variation across the five content categories we identified earlier.

### Overall Distribution

Based on this data, how much context-oriented instruction is currently taking place? The top panel of Table 1 shows the distribution of course types in our sample of 110 syllabi. At this general level, the story is straightforward: Operations-oriented courses dominate our sample. More than three-quarters of courses are

exclusively or mostly operations focused. Fourteen percent of courses have a roughly even mix of operations and content. Less than one-tenth of courses in our sample are exclusively or mostly context focused. It seems that nonprofit management students currently have limited exposure to courses where context and operations are thoroughly integrated throughout the course, and they have very few opportunities to take primarily context-oriented courses. Given this small number of cases that focus mostly or exclusively on context, we encourage the reader to see the counts in the lower two panels of Table 1 as suggestive patterns worthy of further investigation.

### **Instructor Characteristics**

In what settings do we see any substantial focus on context? Are courses that focus mostly or exclusively on context the creations of certain kinds of instructors? Some evidence in our data suggests that this is the case. The “Disciplinary Training” section of Table 1 shows that relatively few instructors in our sample are trained in traditional social science disciplines. Of the instructors whose training we could identify, 10 were trained in traditional social science disciplines, while 83 received training in other disciplines. Although we hesitate to over-interpret the distribution of course types among only 10 traditional social science instructors, the ratio of context-oriented instruction is considerably higher than in the sample as a whole. The data suggests a tendency toward broad-based courses that included both context and operations content; only 10% do not include context in some form, versus 36% among instructors with other training.

The large majority of instructors come from other disciplinary backgrounds. Here the pattern is clearer. Instructors without a traditional social science background are most likely to develop courses that are mostly or exclusively operations focused—although we note that several instructors without traditional social science backgrounds have developed mostly or exclusively context-based courses.

The rows in the “Instructor Characteristics” section of Table 1 show the distribution of

course types across instructors with different official relationships to the schools they teach for, expressed through their title: adjunct, clinical, lecturer, and tenure-track instructors. Operations-oriented courses are quite common across all four statuses, but tenure-track instructors in our sample are less likely than others to teach exclusively operations-oriented courses. Context-based instruction is unlikely among instructors with clinical or lecturer status. Balanced courses and courses that give more attention to context are more prevalent among adjunct and tenure-track instructors.

Our data are not conclusive on the role of instructor characteristics. When it comes to instructors, it appears that discipline is not destiny; instructors with different disciplinary backgrounds are bringing context into their instruction. Those trained in traditional social sciences, however, do appear more likely to include context than those from other educational backgrounds. Professional experience prior to full-time academic appointment may also play a role in shaping an instructor’s approach. Clinical instructors, typically hired explicitly for their exemplary performance in applied settings, seem more likely to adopt operations-oriented approaches; this trend may also be at play for instructors with lecturer status. Interestingly, adjunct instructors fall in the middle: Although 80% of their courses are heavily operations oriented, the remaining 20% are balanced or context oriented—a higher rate than full-time clinical or lecturer faculty. Further research is needed to understand the reason for these differences. Encouragingly, instructors with many different backgrounds do, at times, adopt a context-oriented approach to courses.

### **Program Characteristics**

What effect do program-level characteristics have on the likelihood of context-oriented curricula? Are courses in certain types of degree programs more likely to be context or operations focused? And is a course’s role within a nonprofit management curriculum related to its focus? On these dimensions, presented in the “Program Characteristics” section of Table 1, we find fairly clear patterns.

**TABLE 1.**  
Distributions of Nonprofit Management Course Types

Course Category		Exclusively Operations	Mostly Operations	Roughly Even	Mostly Context	Exclusively Context	Total
<b>FULL SAMPLE</b>							
	Count	37	48	15	7	3	110
	Percent	33.6	43.6	13.6	6.4	2.7	100
<b>BY INSTRUCTOR CHARACTERISTICS</b>							
Disciplinary Training	Social Science	1	3	2	3	1	10
	Other Discipline	28	37	12	4	2	83
	Unknown	8	8	1	0	0	17
Institutional Position	Adjunct	11	14	3	2	1	31
	Clinical	2	3	1	0	1	7
	Lecturer	12	8	2	1	0	23
	Tenure Track	5	19	8	4	1	37
	Unknown	7	4	1	0	0	12
<b>BY PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS</b>							
Degree Type	MBA	7	5	0	0	0	12
	MPA	20	27	11	6	2	66
	Other	10	16	4	1	1	32
Course Type	Elective	18	26	9	5	1	59
	Required	19	20	6	2	2	49
	Unknown	0	2	0	0	0	2
Substantive Focus	Ethics	0	1	1	3	0	5
	Finance	15	12	1	0	0	28
	General Management	16	22	9	1	1	49
	Sector Overview	0	6	4	2	2	14
	Other	6	7	0	1	0	14

*Note.* The Finance focus includes Financial Development, Fund-raising, and Financial Management courses.

*Source.* Authors' coding of syllabi and program information posted on school websites. All numbers are raw counts unless otherwise noted.

For example, all courses in our sample identified as part of MBA programs were either mostly or exclusively operations focused; no MBA courses were context oriented or balanced in their content. MPA programs mostly offered operations-oriented courses, but they included substantially more context-oriented course options. Other types of degree programs—primarily MA programs housed in a range of schools—also included some context-oriented content.

Courses also vary in important ways. Some are required of nonprofit management students; others are offered as electives. In this dichotomy, there appears to be a modest tendency for context-oriented courses to be electives. Courses also vary among broad substantive categories. In our sample, most course offerings were general management or finance courses. Courses under the broad umbrella of “finance” (including financial development, fund-raising,



and financial management) were almost always exclusively or mostly operations focused. A few management courses adopted mixed or context-oriented approaches, but most focused primarily on operations. Context-oriented courses were more common in two substantive areas. First, in nonprofit ethics, courses tend to blend broad instruction in moral philosophy and approaches to ethical decision making with a focus on applied ethical decision making. Second, nonprofit and voluntary sector overview courses were likely to adopt a context-oriented approach. To the extent that courses were offered in other areas, they were operations oriented.

Although the patterns here are more suggestive than conclusive, some themes emerge. Nonprofit management programs in our sample seem to be designed with operations-based instruction in mind. They offer large numbers of courses in management and finance, and they focus attention within those courses on a “how to” approach. These core topics are supplemented by other operations-based courses. In MBA programs, these may be the only options. In MPA and other degree programs, some context-based courses are offered. They are more likely to be electives than required for the degree, and they are most likely to be courses offering either an overview of the nonprofit sector or an introduction to ethics.

#### WHY DO WE SEE THESE PATTERNS?

The patterns just presented are not definitive, but we suspect that additional data would bear out these initial findings—due largely to the way nonprofit management instruction has developed. For more than 25 years, instructors have been refining an understanding of the essential components of a curriculum in nonprofit management.

By the mid-1980s, the basic trends were visible and elucidated in *Educating Managers of Nonprofit Organizations* (O’Neill & Young, 1988), a collection of essays based on the first-ever national nonprofit management education conference. Although some assessments of the nonprofit field noted the substantial variation in skill needs within it (DiMaggio, 1988), program basics coalesced around managerial

skills common to nearly all organizations, like finance, budgeting, marketing, accounting, and organizational planning (Cyert, 1988) as well as nonprofit-specific “professional competencies” including fund-raising, brokering, nonprofit ethics (Keane & Merget, 1988), policy formulation, nonprofit legal and tax issues, and advocacy (Leduc & McAdam, 1988). Ten years later, a second conference was held and a similar volume published, updating and refining our understanding of the nonprofit curriculum (O’Neill & Fletcher, 1998) while largely confirming the perceived importance of this operations-oriented core (Tschirhart, 1998).

This curricular focus is reflected in the various guidelines and standards for nonprofit management education developed over the latter half of this period by NASPAA and the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC), the organization that coordinates academic programs on nonprofits. We reviewed NACC’s curricular guidelines originally released in 2004 and revised in 2007 (NACC 2004, 2007), NASPAA’s guidelines originally released in 1998 (see Tschirhart, 2006) and revised in 2006 (NASPAA, 2006) and NASPAA’s list of required competencies appearing in the recently adopted (NASPAA, 2011) accreditation standards. Three broad categories of course topics appear.

First are primarily operations-oriented topics, which form the bulk of topics in the guidelines. Across all five documents, recommendations exist for coursework on revenue, budgeting, assessment, internal governance, law, quantitative analysis, and technology. Human resources and volunteer management are not included in the oldest documents, but they appear in the first formal revisions of each and remain from then on. Marketing and policy making appear in most documents, although are not directly addressed in the new NASPAA standards.

Second are topics that focus primarily on the nonprofit sector as distinct from other phenomena. Of long-standing importance has been the history of the nonprofit sector as well as discussions of values, ethics, or philosophies unique to the sector. A more recent focus introduced in the revised NACC guidelines is

knowledge of the scope and significance of the nonprofit sector. Earlier guidelines called for coursework on organizational theories uniquely applied to the nonprofit sector.

Third are explicitly context-oriented topics, where the relationship of the organization to its legal, policy, or economic context is the focus. Two of the documents, for example, include major headings addressing inter-organizational and inter-sectoral relationships, and three of them focus on international contexts and comparative perspectives.

Acknowledging that guideline topics offer only a broad categorization of how the field frames nonprofit management education, we see a consistent emphasis on operations and a trend toward specificity in the progression of standards. Within the operations-oriented topics, the focus on internal organizational operations has remained strong across this period. Topics on external operations (organizational engagement with the environment) appear to have become less prominent over time. Understanding the context of the nonprofit sector remains important, but connecting understanding of the nonprofit sector to broader theories may now be less of a focus. Context-oriented training has had a relatively small footprint overall and makes almost no direct appearance in the most recent document, the 2011 NASPAA accreditation standards.

It is important to recognize the substantial amount of instructional variation that can exist within the broad wordings of these guidelines. At least four features of nonprofit management programs are likely to influence a school's implementation of the guidelines in practice.

First, nonprofit management programs are located in a variety of institutional contexts. They are most commonly found in schools of public affairs and public administration but also reside in schools of business/management, social work, and other interdisciplinary programs (P. D. Hall et al., 2001; Mirabella & Wish, 2000). Disciplinary norms, program demands, and faculty expertise vary across these settings, creating distinct contexts for the creation of courses.

Second, regardless of location, there are also various forms of program outcomes. Courses are now offered at undergraduate, master's, and PhD levels and students may be enrolled for noncredit coursework, course credit, a certificate, or a degree (Dolch et al., 2007; Mirabella, 2007; Mirabella & Wish, 2001; Wish & Mirabella, 1998). As of 2009, over 290 colleges and universities offered courses in nonprofit management, but only about 60% of these offered enough courses for a certificate program at the graduate level. About an equal proportion offered courses at the undergraduate level (Mirabella, 2011). Courses at PhD levels may be framed more as nonprofit applications of broader social science theories while courses aimed at mid-career master's students or advanced undergraduates may focus more on operations.

Third, faculty members providing instruction in these programs vary widely in their educational and professional backgrounds. As Irvin (2003) demonstrates, depending on the setting, substantial proportions of nonprofit management courses are being taught by adjunct faculty who are either practicing nonprofit managers or consultants working with nonprofits. Among the primary appeals of these instructors is their real-world experience and practical mind-set, as reflected in our data, in which 80% of adjunct-taught courses are exclusively or mostly operations oriented.

The fourth factor driving the move toward operations and away from context is student demand. At a general level, students in recent generations have been shifting their academic pursuits toward "professional" degrees and "practical" majors. At the undergraduate level, for example, increases of more than 10% have been observed in vocational, technical, and community college degree attainment while dozens of liberal arts colleges have closed (Reuteman, 2011). Humanities majors in fields like classics, language studies, and philosophy have declined while business and management have become the most popular undergraduate focus (Kanter, 2010). Although a majority of students still hold a different view, many students feel that a college education provides a certification of preparation to employers rather

than an opportunity for deeper learning (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2004, p. 6). As a result, many colleges and universities have shifted toward more practical skills training.

More specifically, nonprofit management students are demanding more operations-based training. Based on surveys of nonprofit management students, Tschirhart (1998) as well as Larson, Wilson, and Chung (2003) find that students consider courses that focus specifically on the internal operations of nonprofit organizations as most important—and they desire even more focus on such themes. More general topics or attention to issues that reach beyond a particular organization are considered important if their immediately applicable focus is clear (e.g., general budgeting and accounting; nonprofit strategic planning). Courses focusing on broader patterns and concepts that help put particular organizations into context (e.g., economic and market issues, history of the nonprofit sector, international organizations and issues) are seen as less important and are in lower demand.

Analyses of course offerings in nonprofit management programs demonstrate similar operations-oriented trends. Wish and Mirabella (1998) found that at least 90% of courses offered across programs were focused on what we would consider operational topics; 10% fall into the somewhat broader domain of “philanthropy” (although the courses they describe appear to have a relatively narrowly defined conceptual focus on individual giving behaviors). By 2006, the total number of courses offered nationally had increased dramatically as programs opened and expanded, but the distribution of courses across categories remained virtually unchanged—approximately 10% of courses remained what we might possibly consider “broader perspective” ones (Mirabella, 2007).

What do these patterns in the educational literature, program guidelines, and course offerings tell us? Instructors in the field have spent a good deal of time and energy developing an extensive understanding of what operations-based knowledge and skills are needed to suc-

cessfully run a nonprofit organization within the bounds of the nonprofit sector. Students are also approaching programs demanding these kinds of operations-oriented courses. Course offerings in nonprofit management programs reflect these trends, as illustrated in our original data as well. Although relatively little context-oriented instruction appears to be taking place, the guidelines for nonprofit management programs seem to offer some intellectual space and encouragement for programs to provide more traditional social-science-inspired course offerings. The challenge will be for programs to find ways to more systematically incorporate context-based instruction in their curricula.

### INTEGRATING CONTEXT INTO NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS

How can we integrate greater attention to context into nonprofit management programs? In this section we make proposals, informed by our data and the published empirical work surveyed earlier in this article, for what integrated programs could look like, which benefits they would offer, and how their implementation could be approached.

We envision programs that strike more of a balance between context- and operations-based training than currently tends to be the case. Achieving this balance could be approached by explicitly designing and offering a mix of courses that are mostly context- or operations-based within a program and ensuring that students take a balanced selection of each (i.e., balance *across* courses). Balance could also be reached by taking current operations- or context-based courses and revising them so they capture both operations and context internally (i.e., balance *within* courses). For across-course or within-course efforts to be truly effective (separately or in combination), students would also need to be directly, regularly, and self-consciously informed about what these approaches are, when they are encountering them, and why the integration of both is important for their professional success and for the future of the nonprofit sector.

We acknowledge that some of the changes suggested would be considerably easier than

others to implement: An environment committed to such change and a leader to mobilize faculty learning would be crucial for the most ambitious elements of this section. Conversations and syllabi sharing that leads to syllabi tweaking among nonprofit management faculty would be sufficient for others.

Perhaps the most straightforward way to integrate context-based content into nonprofit management programs would be to develop new required context-based courses and add them to existing curricula, creating balance across courses. The mostly or exclusively context-oriented class that we encountered most often within programs in our sample was a course surveying “the nonprofit and voluntary sector.” These courses often offer initial introductions to a wide range of contextual approaches from across the traditional social sciences. Yet this type of interdisciplinary course only begins the process—a week or two learning each of several social science paradigms is likely insufficient to prepare students to think systematically about contextual concerns. Students need more depth of understanding of a set of theories and more practice thinking within them to be able to use them.

Several courses that are more consistently disciplinary and that build from the two-week introduction received in the survey course, therefore, would give students a better opportunity to become proficient in several types of contextual thinking. Our data on disciplinary background imply that one way to facilitate the addition of such courses to a program would be to incorporate more instructors trained in traditional social science disciplines, as these individuals are more likely to develop mostly or exclusively context-oriented courses than their colleagues from other disciplines. Our data on instructor status suggest that such faculty could be incorporated into a program either in tenure-track positions or as adjunct instructors, as both groups appeared more inclined to create context-oriented courses than do others.

Adding context to programs by focusing on within-course balance is likely a more challenging proposition than across-course alternatives,

specifically because of the way that disciplinary training shapes how instructors see their subject matter. Still, with a little encouragement and forethought, instructors basing their courses in either context or operations approaches could adjust their syllabi and lesson plans to move closer to the middle of the territory illustrated in Figure 1.

Instructors could introduce macro-theoretical concepts from the traditional social sciences and then, in the same class session, engage students in simulated organizational decision-making activities that force them to apply such concepts. For example, a course on nongovernmental organization (NGO) management could spend several weeks discussing the core (and conflicting) theories of international development from economics and political science. To connect these theories of the macro context to operational actions, students could be asked to imagine themselves working in an education NGO in a developing country of their choice. In each class session where a new theory is introduced, the students could be asked to sketch out what they could (and could not) do in their imagined organization in their chosen country if that session’s development theory accurately described the national and international context.

Telling students that a broader perspective matters is important, but getting them to practice using contextual theories on a regular basis makes the lessons more useful and appealing to many students. Asking students to apply broad perspectives to their specific experiences as early as possible—within the first week of class—and returning regularly to this theme is essential for connecting the two approaches.

How could an instructor who has not been trained in a context- or operations-oriented discipline gain the expertise necessary to effectively teach material of the other type? One approach would be the strategic use of guest lecturers (from other courses) and speakers (from outside the program). Ideally, the guest would work with the primary instructor in advance to develop a multisession segment of the course. The guest might attend class as a

guest instructor only once or twice, but a sequence of several class sessions could be designed with the particular contextual theory in mind.

For example, an operations-oriented instructor teaching Introduction to Nonprofit Management could coordinate with a guest faculty lecturer whose background is in anthropology. Together, the primary instructor and the anthropologist could decide on the key contextual concept to be communicated to students—such as the taken-for-granted elements of culture that can substantially influence decision making without the awareness of the decision makers.

The primary instructor could begin a section of the course on nonprofit board development and management, introducing key operational techniques and best practices. In the next session, an executive director from a local nonprofit could be invited to discuss her strategies for board management. Following that class, the anthropologist would present a guest lecture, teaching students to analyze what they heard from the executive director and how to identify the elements of cultural “taken-for-grantedness” implicit in the guests’ presentation and how those appeared to shape the organizational strategies adopted. A second session with the anthropologist could then extend into broader theoretical territory, which the primary instructor could build on going forward. A more ambitious (and perhaps more fruitful) step in this direction would be truly team-taught classes where two (or more) faculty with different disciplinary training and background would work together to develop and deliver a course that fully blended the operations- and context-based approaches.

When collaborative teaching is not an option, instructors could seek guidance from each other when preparing courses and class sessions. Members of instructional faculty groups could coach each other before individual instructors head into the classroom to teach their students. When venturing away from their anchoring discipline and moving toward the home territory of the other, instructors could make

that movement explicit. If they had an understanding of what students have learned from faculty in other courses, they could encourage students to take the opportunity to discuss topics, ideas, and examples from these courses. In so doing, the students would become active participants in their own learning, presenting contextual lessons learned in one course and applying them to the operational concerns in another (or vice versa). This would help cement the lessons learned while explicitly tying both perspectives together. A game-theory-focused economist teaching a course on museum management, for example, might focus on the decision models that inform a budgeting or accounting process; she could then encourage students who have taken a financial management or accounting course to explicitly make the connections between the skills learned in these operations-oriented courses and the context-based content of her own course.

Ensuring more across-course balance and providing more within-course balance would be helpful, but we expect their impact would be greater if efforts were also made to fully integrate both context and operations perspectives throughout the program. Faculty who teach in nonprofit management programs, and the directors who shepherd such programs, could make a collaborative effort to identify the operational skills and contextual knowledge students in the program should develop before they earn their credential. With those goals in mind, instructors would then work together to ensure that all those operations- and context-based lessons are introduced somewhere in the curriculum and then reinforced in multiple settings.

Context cannot be effectively learned in isolation from operations, and vice versa. Adding courses like Economics for Nonprofit Managers or Nonprofits and Systems of Inequality to programs would begin to add balance to courses in fund-raising, program evaluation, marketing, or grant writing. But a truly integrated program would see students in the fund-raising course considering how certain approaches to fund-raising rely on, reinforce, or undercut systems of social inequality while students in the eco-

nomics course develop marketing plans appropriate to different macroeconomic circumstances and behavioral-economic models.

To achieve this degree of program-level integration, courses could not be developed by faculty members in seclusion. Faculties would have to act as teams to develop truly integrated curricula. Leaders within the programs would need to champion such developments.

With this team-based curricular development in mind, programs, departments, and schools would need to make future hiring decisions with an eye toward the disciplinary mix of faculty within an educational program. Hiring committees might begin recruiting candidates who could bring needed disciplinary background to the team. Candidates might also be evaluated on their ability to both champion the essential elements of their home discipline and be open-minded and flexible enough to provide integrated, interdisciplinary instruction as demanded in the interdisciplinary program.

As programs move toward more thoroughly integrated approaches to context and operations training, this integration could be regularly communicated and prominently advertised. Schools offering degrees in nonprofit management could make the case for “broader perspective” courses through the language used to describe them. Marketing materials describing the program could designate the courses whose base is in the traditional social science context-based approach as fundamental tools for developing the essential skills of contextual assessment. Explaining the goal of these courses would prepare students well in advance of their first day of class for the unique way the courses would be approached. Reencountering these ideas in classic operations-oriented courses (as discussed earlier) would continue to reinforce the importance of this integration.

What would a program like this offer to students that they are not necessarily getting now? For starters, it would overtly emphasize systems perspective and conceptual thinking

as meaningful managerial skills. Instructors in the context-oriented courses—and in courses across the curriculum—would suggest to students that this approach offers one of the few opportunities they might have in their professional lives to step back from the daily operational challenges inherent in running a nonprofit organization, consider the bigger picture as a whole, and see how the many elements of a system interact.

This chance to think and discuss systems-level theories, concepts, and issues—in the presence of others who share their concerns—is one of the most distinct advantages of an in-residence professional degree program. It is crucial for dealing with some of the more entrenched problems faced by nonprofit managers. Students who approach the material with this mind-set would be less likely to be confused by the lack of an “obvious skill” that they are learning and instead could begin thinking more critically about how they and their organizations fit within the patterns presented. Not only does this approach provide a more well-rounded education for nonprofit managers, but it also more accurately represents the truly interdisciplinary nature of the field.

## CONCLUSION

As we have demonstrated, nonprofit management programs currently provide limited context-oriented instruction of the type common to traditional social science disciplines. By developing programs that explicitly carve out a place for context-oriented courses, educators would be moving in a positive direction; programs that fully integrate both approaches throughout the curricula would be exceptional. Working toward a program that trains from both bases, highlighting the practicality of context as well as of operations and unambiguously drawing connections between the two, would produce graduates with a more useful set of skills than those developed in a setting with only one emphasis.

Given the current state of nonprofit management education, what potential exists for

change in the direction we suggest? Several avenues are open. We see one opportunity in the growing emphasis on international components to education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels throughout the United States. As Mirabella (2007) notes, recently developed courses with an international and comparative dimension often explicitly focus on broader understandings of the role of NGOs in civil society and in development. Because they often take a comparative, cross-country approach, whether implicitly or explicitly, these courses by their nature must address variation in political, economic, and cultural contexts faced by nonprofits around the world. Should the focus on international education continue—and we suspect it will—we expect to see greater numbers of courses drawing examples and comparisons from different contexts around the world, even in courses focused primarily on one country, such as the United States.

A second opportunity lies in the recent targeted calls by prominent scholars to reintegrate all of the liberal arts into nonprofit management education. To date, these calls tend to critique perceived drifts in nonprofit management programs (Curris, 2007) toward a value-neutral management education model (Burlingame, 2009; Nussbaum, 2010) and call for students to develop a moral worldview through engagement with the humanities. For commentators in this vein, a purely managerial approach creates analytically competent students but fails to “integrate learning within a cultural and moral context” (Burlingame, 2009, p. 63). At the extreme, some go so far as to call the rise to dominance of narrow technical training in education driven by a for-profit ethic a “crisis of massive proportion and grave global significance” and call for the integration of humanistic integrity (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 1). Others add the loss of personal passion in the pursuit of organizational missions, social purposes, and societal justice to the list of critiques of nonprofit management education as it currently exists (Salamon, 1998, p. 138; Yzaguirre, 2007).

In parallel to these scholars, we assert that by developing rational, effective organizational managers, nonprofit management programs may produce a field of more efficient nonprofit organizations, but that these organizations might orient themselves toward overly narrow or under-ambitious ends. As others call for educational programs that engage the emotions and passions of nonprofit managers by drawing on the value- and narrative-rich traditions of the humanities, we call on programs to increase their context orientation in the tradition of the social sciences. What we suggest, therefore, is a different form of broadening. Rather than encouraging moral expansion, we seek instruction in broader social patterns, and in being able to situate each organization within its social, cultural, political, and economic reality.

Another avenue of opportunity for implementing our suggestions lies in the recent expansion of programs or schools specifically focused on nonprofits, philanthropy or “third-sector studies.” These nascent centers and schools could deliberately create integrated curricula, drawing together faculty from traditional social science disciplines and those from other relevant backgrounds. Such attempts would need to be implemented slowly and deliberately, as stand-alone programs run the risk of “reinforce[ing] the misleading myths of voluntarism and splendid isolation that have kept us from understanding the true position of the nonprofit sector in modern society,” and from creating solutions to public problems (Salamon, 1998, p. 143). Rather than drawing on instruction based on broad, sector-spanning theories, an approach that focuses on the nonprofit sector as a stand-alone component of society could potentially reduce engagement with traditional social science approaches. The actual impact of such stand-alone programs—and whether they will follow our integrated suggestions—remains to be seen.

Some countercurrents already exist that may thwart our call for integrating context-based social science approaches. As we briefly men-

tioned earlier, for example, the recently released NASPAA standards for nonprofit management programs include a substantially narrower range of necessary topics than the other program guidelines we discussed. As a set of accreditation standards, and not a richer set of guidelines for program development, this narrower range is perhaps to be expected. Still, as schools and programs engage in the self-study demanded of accreditation and reaccreditation processes, a focus on developing a program that meets—but does not creatively exceed—the published standards could lead to a narrowing of educational goals and the inadvertent overlooking of the context-based approaches we recommend.

In the end, our argument provides additional specificity to Salamon's (1998) now classic call for nonprofit management programs to train "professional citizens" by giving students formal training in how nonprofit organizations operate, how public management works, and how institutions interact. Implicit in his approach was the notion that students would come to understand the broader individual, institutional, national, and international patterns of governance and public problem solving.

We suggest making this implicit understanding explicit through the self-conscious integration of traditional social science style theories, themes, and courses into a truly integrated, interdisciplinary nonprofit management education program. For the education of nonprofit managers to be complete—and for their future actions to be as effective as possible—it is important for them to understand the broader systems within which their organizations are situated.

Our recommendations are hardly the last word on this topic. We hope these thoughts will begin a conversation among instructors presenting nonprofit management courses from traditional social science disciplinary perspectives, as well as with instructors trained in management and administration and those coming from practical careers in the nonprofit, public, and private sectors. The results of such

discussions should be more effective programs of nonprofit management instruction and more thoroughly prepared nonprofit managers.

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## NOTE

Appendices to this article appear online at <http://www.naspaa.org/initiatives/jpae/jpae.asp> where articles for Volume 20, Issue 4 are located.

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