

**The Impact of Receiving a Master's Degree in Nonprofit Management on
Graduates' Professional Lives: A Survey of Alumni of Three University Programs**
Summary of Results

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My doctoral dissertation in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco was designed to measure the impact of receiving a master's degree in nonprofit management on the professional lives of graduates of three university programs that offer such degrees. I first defined desired outcomes for nonprofit management education by reviewing literature in several areas: generic educational outcomes desired by educators in traditional professional schools, adult learning theory, the gap between theory and practice, impact studies of management education in other fields, and outcomes for nonprofit management education desired by nonprofit sector leaders. I then developed a survey to measure the outcomes as perceived by graduates.

The survey was mailed in early 2002 to 645 graduates of programs at three universities offering a specialized master's degree in nonprofit management. The population surveyed was the entire list of graduates of the three participating master's degree programs, as supplied by the three universities. The combined total returned from the three universities was 400, resulting in an overall response rate of 64.9%.

Description of the Respondents

Three quarters of the 400 respondents to the survey were female, and over 83% were of European American ancestry. The next largest racial or ethnic group was African American (7%), followed by Hispanic (4%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (2%). Over 70% of the graduates were under 40 years old when they enrolled in the program, and another 20% were in their 40s. The most popular undergraduate majors for the respondents were in the social sciences and liberal arts; fewer than 10 respondents in the total group indicated an undergraduate major in mathematics or the physical sciences.

Almost 90% of the respondents had been working in the nonprofit sector before enrolling in the master's degree program. Approximately 27% had been working in the sector less than three years, and another 25% had worked in the sector from four to six years. Almost 20% had worked in the sector for 11 or more years before enrolling. Therefore, these three master's degree programs served people who had a broad range of years of experience in the nonprofit sector before beginning their studies.

Approximately 75% of the respondents were working in the nonprofit sector at the time they submitted their questionnaire. Three questions were asked of those currently working in the nonprofit sector: field of service, type of nonprofit organization, and type of job. Regarding field of service, over 20% worked in education and another 20% in social services. Other fields of nonprofit service (arts/culture, environment,

grantmaking, health care, international, religion, social justice, community development) were each claimed by less than 10% of the graduates responding. Regarding type of organization, over 60% of the respondents worked in a nonprofit offering direct services and/or advocacy; 11% worked for a foundation and another 11% for a consulting firm. Regarding type of job, 32% indicated executive management, 26% indicated development, 14% program management, and 12% consulting. Financial management was indicated by only 5% of the respondents.

Less than 20% of the respondents had pursued further formal education beyond their master's degree in nonprofit management. Approximately 15% had published professional articles or books. When asked whether they read three professional journals in nonprofit management on a regular basis, only 13% indicated they read *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 4% indicated they read *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, and 1% indicated they read *Voluntas*. A greater percentage of respondents indicated that they read three popular practitioner publications: 54% indicated they read *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 27% read *Nonprofit Times*, and 11% read *Foundation News*.

Outcomes as Perceived by Respondents

The questionnaire included 47 outcome questions, each measuring the extent to which the respondent perceived that the outcome covered in the question was true for them. For all 47 outcomes measured by the questionnaire, favorable responses regarding the degree to which the outcome was true for the respondent (*somewhat, quite a bit, or a great deal*) combined to form approximately 80% of the total responses, indicating an overall positive perception of the outcomes of the program for graduates. Little relationship was found between the perceived outcomes and (a) how long it had been since respondents had graduated or (b) how many total years they had worked in the nonprofit sector. For respondents currently employed in the nonprofit sector, little relationship was found between the perceived outcomes and the field or service, type of nonprofit organization, or type of job in which they were currently working.

Seven subscales were created from the outcome questions in order to summarize the data and make the results more meaningful. These subscales were based on the following general goals of nonprofit management education and graduate professional education: (a) increase students' knowledge base regarding the nonprofit sector, (b) prepare students for a career in the nonprofit sector, (c) increase skills in general management, (d) increase skills in management areas particular to the nonprofit sector, (e) prepare students to integrate theory and practice, (f) positively impact students' careers, and (g) develop students' motivation for continued learning.

The table below shows the means of the seven subscales derived from the outcomes along with the midpoint of each. The mean is above the midpoint for all seven subscales, showing that respondents overall were more positive than negative about the effect of their nonprofit management degree on the items measured by the subscale. In order to compare the subscales, the means were standardized by dividing each mean by the number of items in its subscale. Results indicate that respondents rated the scales in

the following order, from most positive to least positive: Preparation for Career, Nonprofit Knowledge, Nonprofit Management, Theory/Practice, Motivation for Learning, Impact on Career, and General Management.

Number of Items, Range of Ratings, Midpoints, and Means of the Seven Subscales

Name of Subscale	N	No. of Items	Range of Ratings	Midpoint of Scale	Mean	SD	Standardized Mean
Prep. for NP Career	373	8	9-40	24	30.91	5.72	1.29
Nonprofit Knowledge	390	5	5-25	15	18.60	3.55	1.24
Nonprofit Management	384	6	6-30	18	21.23	4.52	1.18
Theory/ Practice	383	4	4-20	12	13.93	3.12	1.16
Motivation for Learning	391	3	3-15	9	10.43	2.50	1.16
Impact on Career	366	11	11-55	33	36.80	11.17	1.12
General Management	383	8	8-40	24	25.31	6.36	1.05

Respondents’ Overall Satisfaction with the Impact of the Master’s Program

The final question on the survey was an open-ended one: *Have you been satisfied with the effect the nonprofit management master’s degree program has had on your professional life? Why or why not?* A first analysis of the answers separated them into three groups regarding satisfaction: entirely positive (59%), mixed (29%), and entirely negative (12%). Through analysis of the content of the responses, three major themes were identified in the respondents’ answers: (a) quality of the program and coursework, (b) skills and knowledge gained from the program, and (c) impact of the degree on the graduates’ career progress.

The majority of comments related to the first theme—quality of the program and coursework—were negative in nature. Only eight graduates praised the quality of the program, but it is probable that more would have done so had the question asked directly about the issue of program quality. Instead, the question asked about the impact of the program on graduates’ careers. The way the question was worded would not have automatically elicited opinions on the quality of coursework or instruction. It may be, therefore, that people satisfied with the coursework did not think about addressing program quality at all in their answer. Perhaps only those with an “ax to grind” felt the need to say something about the quality of the coursework and instruction.

Below are some comments that exemplify the negative responses to the program and coursework:

The program itself was too elementary in my opinion; i.e., it was almost at an undergraduate level.

The adjunct teachers are for the most part ineffective teachers....[In] many classes I felt I contributed more than I learned.

While there was some useful learning, most of the information was not applicable to real world situations. [It] would have been more useful to have stressed practical skills: how to run a meeting, how to speak publicly, etc.

I would have liked a stronger preparation in financial management, human resource management, and development.

[The university] does little to bolster the academics of the program....This comes from the serious lack of support to assist students to publish their work, present at conferences, or recognize their success in their own fields.

While I liked many aspects of the program, I believe it has a better reputation than it deserves. It led me to expect more than I got.

In contrast to the first theme, the majority of comments that fell into the second theme—skills and knowledge gained from the program—were positive in nature. There were only nine negative comments about what the program had provided. Some of the positive comments were the following:

I knew little about the nonprofit sector before this degree program. Not only did I learn about the sector but I gained an understanding of the professional skills needed to make organizations work up to their potential.

It equipped me with solid grounding in theory at the same time that the case-study method and the practitioner-teachers provided me with real world, practical examples. I have found most of what I learned to be useful in my career.

I am satisfied with the practical management skills I acquired in the program. They have allowed me to participate in all aspects of management at my nonprofit organization.

While the program did not make me “an expert” in any one area, I do feel I am able to ask “good questions” about how our organization operates based on my studies in the program. This helps me to be a more effective manager and use resources in a better manner.

While I learned a lot of new information and skills, overall the program pulled it all together, affirmed what I had been doing, and gave me added credibility and confidence.

I regularly refer to my notes, handouts, and books to help with planning and management, especially executive management, human resources, and nonprofit law.

The impact of the nonprofit management program is subtle but regularly helpful to my work—I would not have always thought so. It seems to grow in usefulness over time.

Over half of the answers to the open-ended question directly addressed the impact of the degree on the respondents' professional lives. The majority of the answers were positive, but there were negative opinions as well. Among those included on the positive side were respondents indicating that the degree had (a) helped them obtain their current position, (b) led to advancement in their careers, (c) made them more competitive when seeking work, (d) provided them credibility and status, and (e) enabled them to be more effective in their current job. In addition, some respondents indicated that the skills they learned were applicable to positions outside the nonprofit sector. Comments illustrative of these responses include

I was able to be a top candidate for my current job—my degree contributed heavily.

I have been able to climb in program management/administration in large part thanks to the degree.

The degree gave me an advantage over others when I interviewed for executive director/CEO positions.

I feel that the knowledge I gained as well as the degree I earned increased my credibility as a management consultant working with nonprofit organizations.

The knowledge and skills learned in the master's degree program enabled me to be a very effective executive director of an organization. I tripled the size and financial picture...within four years.

And upon receiving my degree I was able to transfer my experience to the private sector, where I was able to command substantially more salary while giving back to the nonprofit sector in varied ways.

Even though I am not currently working in the nonprofit sector, the breadth of the information I learned in the master's degree program has been applicable in a wide variety of management situations.

Among those who gave negative responses to the question regarding their satisfaction with the impact of the degree on their professional lives were respondents indicating that (a) the degree had not enhanced their career position, (b) the degree was not attractive to employers, (c) the nonprofit community did not recognize the value of the degree, (d) any master's degree would have been just as helpful to their career growth, (e) they wished they had chosen a different degree, (f) the degree was not enough to get a job in the nonprofit sector, (g) it would have been better to pursue the nonprofit management master's degree after several years of work experience, and (h) their years of experience in the nonprofit sector were more important to their careers than the nonprofit management master's degree. The following responses illustrate those subthemes.

The degree helped not one whit with my professional career. The organizations I worked for didn't seem to have much respect for the degree or the university.

I still believe that the nonprofit community has no idea that a master's level program exists or that it is beneficial to hire people with these degrees.

The reason I am not satisfied is that any MA or MS would have served the same purpose. I wish I had chosen a school and a course that was less costly because now I have huge student loans to pay off on a mediocre salary.

Upon further reflection, I wish I would have pursued an MBA. It offers much more flexibility and is recognized by everyone.

I felt I would have been better served by an MPA degree, which has a higher degree of recognition. The nonprofit management credential isn't highly recognized.

After receiving my master's degree, I couldn't buy a job in the nonprofit sector. I was met with the usual "you don't have experience" or "with your degree your salary will be too high to fit in the organization's salary scale." So I updated my computer skills and I work for a local city government as a systems engineer and programmer!

I would *not* recommend the program for those without at least one year of professional nonprofit experience. I had *no* professional advantage upon leaving the program and seeking a job.

The fact that over 58% of the responses to the open-ended question regarding respondents' satisfaction with the impact of the program were entirely positive should be encouraging to nonprofit management educators at the three universities. The negative comments, however, suggest areas where they may want to direct their attention in the future.

Conclusions

Limitations of this study include the fact that (a) the survey was sent to graduates of only three nonprofit management master's degree programs and (b) the data are self-reported perceptions of respondents. Within these limitations, however, the following conclusions can be drawn from the data:

1. The majority of graduates of nonprofit management master's degree programs perceive that they have attained the outcomes included in the survey and are satisfied with the impact the degree has had on their professional lives. This positive result is true regardless of the length of time since graduates completed the degree, the number of years they have worked in the nonprofit sector, and the type of nonprofit employment in which they are currently engaged.
2. Nonprofit management master's degree graduates are predominantly female and of European American background, and the majority were in their 20s or 30s when pursuing their degree.
3. Nonprofit management master's degree graduates, for the most part, have not pursued further education or contributed to the field by publishing articles or books since receiving their degree, and few of them read research journals in the field of nonprofit management on a regular basis.
4. Nonprofit management master's degree programs may have a greater impact on students who have experience working in the nonprofit sector before enrolling. Furthermore, the degree alone, without work experience, does not guarantee employment in the nonprofit sector.
5. The knowledge and skills gained in the nonprofit management master's degree program can be relevant to work outside the nonprofit sector, although most of the graduates (approximate 75% in this study) continue working in the nonprofit sector after graduation.

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