

Too Few Undergrad Nonprofit Degrees: Why Should You Care?

How does the shortage of nonprofit courses affect you, and what can you do about it?

By Jennifer Mullen



Only 67 higher-education programs in the nation have three or more courses in nonprofit leadership.¹ Think about it. Almost every college or university has a business degree to prepare students for careers in the for-profit sector and a political science or public administration degree to prepare them for government careers.

So, how should we interpret the fact that only a few institutions offer undergraduate nonprofit degrees, when nonprofits represent an entire economic sector in society?

Colleges and universities want to provide degrees that are relevant, marketable, and attractive to students. It's possible that more nonprofit degrees would enhance the value and relevance of the sector and produce more young people interested in nonprofit careers.

This issue is greater than whether having such a degree is the best way to prepare for a nonprofit career. This is about a sector that continues to struggle for academic integrity worthy of study at the undergrad level.

Why does it matter? Because until higher education leaders believe that a nonprofit degree is as significant as a business or political science degree, the sector is being undervalued.

What Does Research Show about Nonprofit Degrees?

Yes, undergrad nonprofit courses are being taught. Over 292 colleges and universities offer courses in nonprofit management that range from no credit to certification, and 132 of those schools offer at least one course for undergraduate credit. Most of those offering undergrad credit do so through the American Humanities program, a nonprofit certification program that focuses on human-service nonprofits. Although course offerings are increasing, our sector will never be fully legitimate until undergrad nonprofit degrees are as common as business and political science degrees.

Why Have an Undergrad Degree in Nonprofit Curriculum?

A dearth of nonprofit degrees results in people being hired into the sector who don't understand it. The nonprofit management model is entirely different from business and government. When problems arise in nonprofit organizations, the cause is often lack of knowledge about how nonprofits function.

Most people would agree that a person needs certification to be a realtor or accountant, but many be-

lieve that anyone can work in the nonprofit sector—that anyone can direct volunteers, raise money, and deliver nonprofit programs. Some think that working in nonprofits is the fallback option if one doesn't get employed in the for-profit or government sectors.

When students have a chance to study the sector, more of them will want nonprofit careers. Many students aren't aware of nonprofit career opportunities until exposed to the sector through an undergraduate course.

Nonprofits will benefit with better prepared entry-level professionals. Hiring employees who have learned about the nonprofit sector means they understand the culture from their first day on the job.

Even if a degree isn't offered, any nonprofit curriculum should be celebrated, from non-credit courses to continuing education, certification, and degree-oriented programs. The smallest gains are worthwhile.

What Might the Curriculum Look Like?

A model of a nonprofit curriculum is provided by Lindenwood University.² To complete a major in nonprofit administration, students must complete 28 credits in the core curriculum, which covers the basic

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functional areas of nonprofits, as well as 12 credits of electives. The final requirement is 18-21 credits in an “emphasis area,” including fine arts, education, social services, communication, Christian ministry, and recreation management. This blend of a basic nonprofit curriculum integrated with different types of missions can be meaningful to students who may already have some idea of the type of nonprofit they want to work in.

What Can You Do?

In many colleges and universities, classes are offered for a semester on a trial basis before adding them to the roster. As a nonprofit leader, you can teach such courses as an adjunct instructor. You can talk to university administrators about creating nonprofit courses and work with faculty to identify funding for applied nonprofit academic research.

You can also work with students on assigned projects, mentoring and teaching them about the sector. If you aren't contacted by faculty, you can make the first contact by offering internships to students. The needs are endless, the opportunities meaningful, and the results for the students potentially life-changing. ■

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Footnotes

¹Data in this article come from research by Professor Roseanne Mirabella of Seton Hall University, who has studied nonprofit curriculum in higher education since 1996.

²This private college in St. Charles, Missouri, was highlighted in “The Nature of Undergraduate Nonprofit Education: Models of Curriculum” in the October 2007 edition of *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*.

Many students aren't aware of nonprofit career opportunities.



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