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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### NONPROFIT GRADUATE LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

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#### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to elevate the discussion about a nonprofit graduate leadership program competency and to address what nonprofit leadership students say about their nonprofit education experience. A quantitative analysis surveyed one hundred and three (103) nonprofit leadership graduate students to find out what leadership competencies were the most important to them. The scope and delimitation of this study focused on one seven-week leadership course. The post-course questionnaire asked the respondents nine questions related to the course. The respondents answered yes or no questions, ranking questions highest to lowest, and students provided suggestions in an open field format on leadership competencies that were missing, or that might have enhanced their leadership learning experience. A table was constructed using the Microsoft spreadsheet showing a listing of competencies that the students stated they would like to receive in the course. Although topics ranged from learning about leadership to understanding the 501(c) (3) process, students showed more interest in 5 of the 15 areas presented. Accurately, 15% of the students reported that they would like to receive more training in the area of budgeting, 12% reported training on board governance and leadership, and 9% reported more on grant writing and employee well-being. The study found that students seeking nonprofit leadership degrees were more focused on competencies related to budgets, governance, grant writing, and employee well-being. These topics are not readily available in nonprofit leadership courses.

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#### Introduction:-

Nonprofit leadership as a field of study is an essential topic in research over the last decade. A shift in thinking about nonprofit leadership has made it both an academic field and a viable investment with measurable outcomes and required expectations. This new approach to teaching nonprofit leadership principles comes with a distinct set of competencies. Today, many business and government management techniques are used by nonprofit administrators. Worth (2017) suggests that four views make nonprofit leadership different from the business and governmental sectors. First, in the nonprofit sector, there are many trade-offs between the mission, resources, and strategies. Secondly, a nonprofit leader must have the ability to negotiate and compromise, which entails a lot of ambiguity and risk-taking. Thirdly, the successes nonprofit leadership relate to the bottom-line. Finally, nonprofit managers have a difficult time addressing challenges. Some nonprofit leadership training centers use guidelines from workshops, non-credit courses, and certificate courses. However, the formal academic structure in nonprofit graduate programs has yet to standardize nonprofit leadership competencies across the board for new and current nonprofit leaders.

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Young (2018) suggests that the development of nonprofit management education programs in U.S. universities parallels wider societal concerns about the efficacy of management in contemporary nonprofit organizations. The first academic programs emerged in the United States in the early 1980s, and their number has grown exponentially since then. These programs have been established both as concentrations in existing schools, particularly public administration and business management, and as freestanding interdisciplinary programs that draw on a wide cross-section of disciplines. No dominant model of nonprofit management education has emerged, and it remains unclear how any single model could ultimately dominate. Young's study discusses four different scenarios for future development of the nonprofit management field: integration with business management or public administration, development of a freestanding field of study, and continued fragmentation. Although Young reaches no definitive conclusion, he offers reasons why the study of nonprofit management may ultimately cohere under a separate, unified model, appropriately bridged to business management and public administration (p. 13).

The field of nonprofit leadership in graduate programs is under the umbrella of public management. "Wish and Mirabella (2000) spearheaded the 'ideal-fit' discussion with an attempt to identify the best place for a graduate program for nonprofit managers" (Gerlach, 2016, pg. 472). The initial placement of the nonprofit management program in higher education suggests a model for the nonprofit management programs within Master of Public Administration programs, and that placement is supported by researchers. The nonprofit management programs in the United States are within the College of Arts and Sciences, School of Public Affairs, or the College of Public Administration. O'Neal (2007) claims that a high percentage of nonprofit management programs are housed in the public administration and public policy departments.

As a professor for eight years, a scholar, and a subject matter expert in nonprofit and public administration, having acted as the president and chief executive of a successful nonprofit organization for ten years, and with five years as a nonprofit consultant, this firsthand experience will bring invaluable information about the success of graduate nonprofit leadership courses. The purpose of this study is to elevate the discussion about nonprofit graduate leadership program competencies and to evaluate what nonprofit leadership students say about their nonprofit education experience.

## **Methodology:-**

### **Research Method:**

A survey was conducted at Louisiana State University of one hundred and three (103) nonprofit leadership graduate students to determine what leadership competencies were the most important to them. The scope and delimitation of the study focus on a seven-week graduate course.

There is no indefinable information regarding those students who completed the survey. The survey was not mandatory and was offered as optional at the end of the course. The research strategy sought respondents who were willing to provide input about the value of the overall course in preparing them for nonprofit leadership. The end of the course online survey tool asked the respondents to evaluate the relevance of the course competencies as they related to nonprofit leadership. The post-course questionnaire asked the respondents nine questions related to the course competencies.

There are several different types of respondent's questions; the nine types of questions are listed below. Question number eight asks students which leadership competencies were needed to most. It is important to evaluate the discussion about nonprofit leadership skills in higher education and what students are saying about the value of the courses offered.

### **Research Questions:**

1. Question 1: Are you currently serving as a nonprofit leader? 52% of the respondents answered yes and 48% answered no.
2. Question 2: Do you feel comfortable serving as a nonprofit leader after completion of the course? The respondents 89% yes, 11% no.
3. Question 3: On a scale of 1-5, the lowest one and the highest five, how would you rate the course information about nonprofit leadership? The response was, low= 2%, minimum=25%, high=73%
4. Question 4: Was the course information on motivational theories for employees helpful? Response 96% yes, 4% no.

5. Question 5: Would you like to learn more about how to develop community collaborations and partnerships? Response 96% yes, 4% no.
6. Question 6: Was the course helpful on the budget process? Response 76% yes, 24% no.
7. Question 7: Did the course pass all your expectations of how you view nonprofit leadership? Response 87% yes, 13% no.
8. Question 8: What three topics would you include if any that were not included in this course? The three most revealing topics that student wanted to include in the course are number one budgeting, two board governance, and three tied with grant writing and employee-well-being.
9. Question 9: Was the section about workday meetings helpful: Response 84% yes, 16% no.

### Results:-

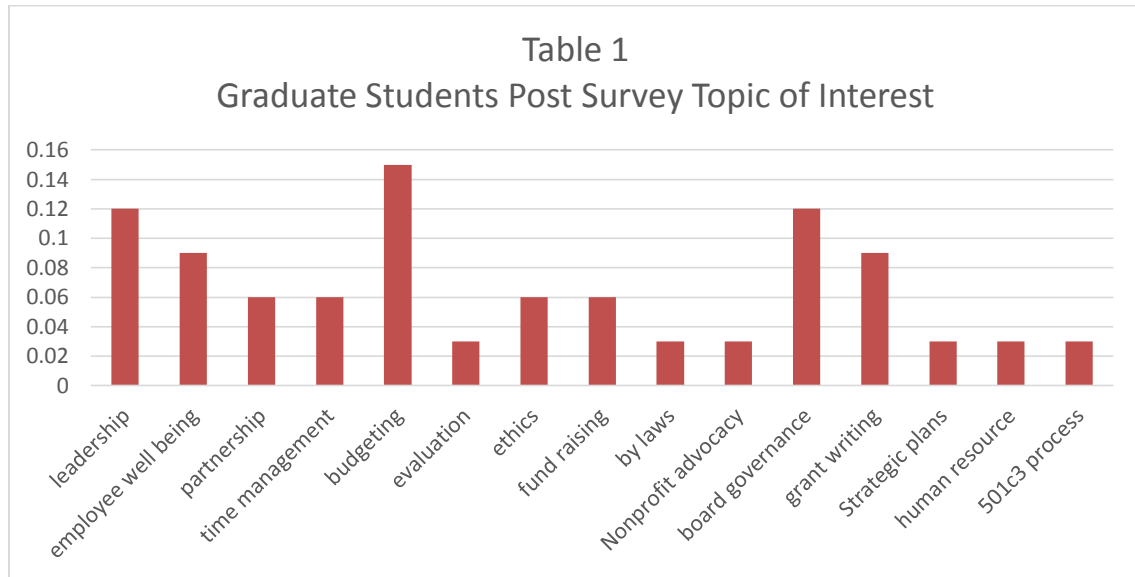


Table 1 provides results of 33 of 103 graduate students who responded to the post survey for the Nonprofit Administration Theory and Research course. The table shows a listing of topics that students reported they would like to receive in the course. Although topics range from learning about leadership to understanding the 501(c) (3) process, students showed the most interest in 5 areas. Specifically, 15% of the students reported that they would like to receive more training in the area of budgeting, 12% reported training on board governance and leadership, and 9% reported more on grant writing and employee well-being.

1. Finding #1: Analysis of the survey data reveals two competencies of the nonprofit leadership degree program that is important to most students.
2. Finding #2: Some of the other leadership competencies need to be changed to reflect the current context of nonprofit organizational leaders.
3. Finding #3: One of the most important aspects of the survey is that there were an equal number of non-nonprofit students and nonprofit leaders in the course.

### Discussion/Observations:-

The importance of higher education in nonprofit leadership is central to the growing nonprofit sector. Tirrell-Norris, Rinella and Pham (2018), in assessing nonprofit CEO experiences, find that more than two-thirds (69%) of executives indicated that their most recent positions were at nonprofits. During the careers of nonprofit executives, 82% of their profiles indicate an average of 11.5 years of employment at nonprofit organizations, and 50% have nonprofit experience exclusively. Interestingly, 18% of the profiled CEOs claim to have no previous nonprofit experience. Of these, two-thirds came to the nonprofit CEO position with for-profit sector experience (pg. 159).

Three key-findings in the LSU study suggests that more thought and time be devoted on how we educate our future nonprofit leaders. The first reveals that Ninety-eight (98) of the one hundred and three (103) respondents believed that motivational theories are essential, and 96% claimed that community collaboration and partnerships were essential. The other competencies were only considered moderately important.

Second, while some courses and training require interpretive understanding, the nonprofit sector is progressing at such a rate that accredited nonprofit degree programs and non-credit nonprofit training hubs may be lagging behind industry standards, in areas such as technological, financial, and human development. Seventy-six (76%) of the one hundred and three (103) respondents believed that the course competencies on budget development were helpful.

Third, fifty-two (52%) of the respondents were students who had served, or were serving, as nonprofit leaders, while forty-eight (48%) of them had no prior nonprofit leadership experience. Currently, most nonprofit training in leadership comes from actual on-the-job experience. Individuals with a passion for serving the greater good must acquire the skills and training necessary to overcome those issues and challenges they will face as leaders of nonprofit organizations. Workforce preparation and educational programs should provide practical experience and activities with an expressed urgency in the field of graduate-level nonprofit leadership education.

Students seeking graduate degree programs in nonprofit leadership anticipate having careers with foci and skillsets unique to the nonprofit sector. Although a great number of nonprofits are managed by both professionals and non-professionals, students who enroll in nonprofit degree programs do so for nonprofit specific training and education.

Research also shows that graduate level nonprofit leadership programs are based on criteria that often do not correlate with the competencies required of actual nonprofit leaders. Higher education continues to be tasked with the responsibility for leadership competencies that are important to nonprofit leadership.

While the academic discipline of nonprofit leadership is developing, its substance often fails to connect with actual nonprofit work, and it continues to lag behind real world changes. According to Worth (2019), "Students taking a course in nonprofit management today might reasonably assume that such courses have always existed. However, they are a relatively recent addition to the curriculum at many colleges and universities, and scholarly research in the field, while growing, still does not approach the volume of study devoted to public or business management" (pg. 8). Thus, graduate and undergraduate students in nonprofit leadership programs have difficulty with the major concepts of may not learn how to effectively lead nonprofit organizations.

### **Conclusion:-**

Graduate nonprofit leadership education programs must work with other institutes to focus on specific competencies that will advance nonprofit leadership practice and theory. Nonprofit organizations function at the highest level of accountability and sustainability. Unfortunately, nonprofit leadership competencies, whether in higher education or training conferences, have not yet reached its potential.

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