

Building Bridges Initiative Cluster Evaluation: Nonprofit Management Alumni Survey Report

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Executive Summary

This report builds on our findings presented in the Survey of Nonprofit Management Students¹. We surveyed alumni from six nonprofit management graduate and certificate programs affiliated with the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI). All of these alumni had participated in the earlier student survey. We received 160 surveys for a 70 percent response rate.

Respondents to the alumni survey closely mirror the socio-demographic profile of all respondents to the student survey. Alumni respondents were likely to be white/Caucasian women who were employed full time (most likely in a nonprofit organization) and who had just finished (or were about to finish) their nonprofit academic program.

Three research questions, developed from the goals and guiding principles of the Building Bridges Initiative, guided this inquiry.

Question 1: Did program content, as expressed by course topics, match the needs and interests of those being served?

Alumni most value courses that emphasize the core internal, day-to-day management practices of nonprofit organizations – a pattern that we also found in the study survey report. Courses on fundraising and development *and* governance (e.g., board responsibilities) were viewed as the two most important topics. Nearly half of the alumni wanted to see more emphasis placed on these two topic areas. Nearly half (48%) of alumni also wanted more emphasis on proposal writing.

Less important are technical courses – such as management information systems and quantitative analysis – and course topics focused on the external environment or conceptual domains – economics, history, diversity, and international issues. These courses tend to become less important when as students become alumni.

Taken together, these findings suggest that alumni want (and need) to develop skills closely aligned with the pragmatic, day-to-day management and leading of an organization.

¹ Available online at www.CenterPointInstitute.org/Bridges/Papers&Reports/Papers.htm.

Question 2: How well do academic programs connect with the world of community practice?

When alumni were students, they were looking for a program from a reputable institution that focused on nonprofits and connected university knowledge with practice knowledge. Alumni are satisfied with their decisions, and nearly all would make the same decision again. However, the active connections between the university program and the field of practice – connections such as collaborative opportunities for nonprofit leaders and students, networking opportunities for students and alumni, links between the program and nonprofit organizations, and connections between research and practice – are areas in need of more attention. Admittedly, these are difficult connections to make and maintain. It may take several more years before programs can engage in this type of outreach.

Question 3: How have the management capacities of alumni improved as a result of their educational program?

Perhaps the most important finding in this study is the ample evidence that alumni have garnered new skills and are thinking and acting different because of these skills. Alumni are better able to contribute to their organizations, are more confident in their management abilities, and are better able to apply theory to practice. Alumni tended to talk about new or improved skills in strategic planning, human resources, and several financial domains (fundraising, budgeting, proposal writing). And alumni use these skills frequently – nearly half apply them on a daily basis and about one-quarter do so once or twice a week. Finally, alumni are thinking anew about their career options and most like what they see. It is quite likely that programs such as those supported by the BBI are an important means to curtail the movement of talented individuals out of the nonprofit sector. That is, these programs may be a retention intervention – helping the nonprofit sector to develop and keep bright and motivated leaders.

Introduction

The Building Bridges Initiative aims to improve the quality of life in communities through the better management and leadership of the nonprofit organizations that serve our communities. Nonprofit management education is a fundamental vehicle to enhance management and leadership skills. While nonprofit management program development is of increasing analytical interest, a valuable contribution of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's Building Bridges Initiative and its cluster evaluation is a focus on the "users" or the demand side of nonprofit management education programs.

As stated last year in our report, Survey of Nonprofit Management Students, research and evaluations of nonprofit management programs focus primarily on the supply side of academia – the number of courses being offered (Wish and Mirabella, 1998a, 1998b; Mirabella and Wish, 2000) and the organization and management of the centers or programs that offer these courses (i.e., Larson and Long, 1998, 2000; O'Neill, Young, and McAdam, 1988; O'Neill and Fletcher, 1998). "Users" or students in nonprofit management programs have much to tell us about desired outcomes associated with the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI). For example, students can provide information about the relevance of curricular offerings, the accessibility of programs, and the ways that programs bridge theory and practice in- and out-of the classroom. In the student survey, we reported that:

- The characteristic that distinguished student respondents was their employment status – they were working students and most were employed full-time and most were employed in the nonprofit sector.
- Students were "place-bound" with most, 71 percent, seeking a program within a one-hour drive of their homes and workplaces.
- Students' race and ethnicity (80% white/Caucasian, 16% students of color) closely matched the employment composition of the nonprofit sector.
- Students continued their education primarily for personal development and skill acquisition and less so to increase their income.
- Of the students employed while attending classes, 50 percent received some type of financial support from their employer and 44 percent received time-off for educational purposes.
- Students chose their programs because of the program's nonprofit focus and the program's reputation. Students were also attracted to the linkages of the program with the nonprofit sector.
- Course topics that focused on internal operations unique to the nonprofit sector, such as fundraising and development, strategic planning for nonprofits, and governance, were viewed as being most important for managing and leading nonprofit organizations.
- Most students were satisfied with their educational programs, though there

was room for improvement, especially in the development and strengthening of linkages of the program with the nonprofit sector.

The Nonprofit Management Alumni Survey Report builds on our findings from the student survey.

The questions guiding the alumni study were developed from the following Goals and Guiding Principles of the Building Bridges Initiative:

Goals

- Deepen the impact of education programs on improving nonprofit-management education.
- Continue the commitment to improvement in higher education. This will be done by supporting stronger relationships between the needs of the community and the contributions of higher education institutions.

Guiding Principles

- Respond to the field and grow out of the needs and desires of those who are being served.
- Intentionally address issues of diversity and inclusion.
- Build bridges, partnership, and collaborative efforts in support of educational programming.

The three research questions that address these goals and guiding principles are:

1. Did program content, as expressed by course topics, match the needs and interests of those being served?
2. How well do academic programs connect with the world of practice?
3. How have the management capacities of alumni improved as a result of their educational program?

THE ALUMNI SURVEY REPORT

The BBI Survey of Nonprofit Management Alumni

For the nonprofit management student survey, we studied students enrolled in six nonprofit management graduate and certificate programs at these BBI grantee institutions: Case Western Reserve University, George Mason University, Indiana University (IUPUI), Portland State University, SUNY-Albany, and Western Michigan University. Students enrolled in Spring/Fall 1999 and/or Spring 2000 nonprofit management courses at the six institutions were invited to complete the survey.

The student survey was conducted during February-May 2000 so that most respondents had at least one academic semester exposure to nonprofit management programs. We mailed 520 surveys, ten were undeliverable, and 256 useable surveys were returned to us for a response rate of 50 percent.

At the close of each survey, we asked students for their mailing address. Of the 256 respondents, 238 listed their address. In May 2001 we mailed each of these 238 student survey respondents a copy of the alumni survey. Ten of the surveys were undeliverable. Of the 228 surveys delivered to alumni, 160 useable alumni surveys were returned for a response rate of 70 percent.

Each student survey respondent was given a unique identifier code. This code was used on the alumni surveys to identify participants who responded to both the student and alumni surveys. Aside from comparing socio-demographic characteristics of alumni survey respondents to all student survey respondents, **when comparing responses between the student and alumni surveys, we only include those participants who responded to both surveys.** The student survey is considered the Time 1 response and the alumni survey the Time 2 response.

About half (47%) of the respondents were alumni – they had completed or graduated from their program. Another quarter (24%) of the respondents were in the final term of their program. Sixteen percent were halfway through their program, nine percent were taking time off from their program but planned to continue it, and only four percent chose not to complete their program. In this paper, then, *alumni* refers to respondents to the alumni survey, most of who had, or were about to, complete their academic program.

The remainder of this section presents the findings from the alumni survey.

Profile of Alumni Survey Respondents

We begin our discussion of alumni survey findings with a description of the respondents and a comparison of alumni respondents with *all* respondents (n=256) to the student survey.

As noted in the student survey report, little demographic data of nonprofit management students – or alumni – is aggregated across multiple institutions. The data gathered from the alumni survey are not representative of all nonprofit management alumni or nonprofit management academic programs and, therefore, should not be generalized beyond this study. This profile does, however, present a snapshot of nonprofit management alumni not available elsewhere.

We asked alumni their sex, age, race, educational background, about their current and past employment, and about their program. Our findings show:

- **Sex:** Most of the alumni survey respondents were female (81%). This split is very similar to that of the student survey (n=256) where 80 percent of respondents were female.
- **Age:** Alumni ages were distributed somewhat equally across three age categories: early career students (36% between 18-29), mid-career students (32% between 30-39 years of age), and later-career students (32% age 40 and older). Alumni age distribution closely mirrored student age distribution.
- **Race/Ethnic Group:** Alumni respondents were predominantly white/Caucasian (85%) followed by African-American (6%); Asian Pacific Islanders (2%); Hispanic (2%); Chicano-Mexican American (2%); Other (2%) and Native American (1%). For analytical purposes, we combined all minority respondents in an “alumni of color” category. Thus, in this report we will look for differences between white/Caucasian (85%) alumni and alumni of color (15%). Race/ethnicity of student survey respondents was nearly identical to these proportions.
- **Education:** As stated earlier, about half (47%) of the alumni respondents had graduated from their program, another 24 percent would complete their degree within one term, and 16 percent were halfway through their program. Nine percent were not currently enrolled but planned to finish their degree and only four percent had chosen not to complete their program. One-third of the alumni respondents (34%) had been or were enrolled in a nonprofit or philanthropy program (MNO), 42 percent had been or were enrolled in a graduate degree (e.g., MBA, MPA, MSW) with a concentration in nonprofit management, 24 percent were or had been enrolled in a certificate program,

and six percent had been or were in other types of programs. These latter proportions are similar to those of the student survey findings.

- **Employment:** Nearly all alumni (99%) had been employed prior to enrolling in their academic program and most had been employed full-time (84%). At the time they completed the alumni survey, only eight respondents (5%) were not employed, and only two of the eight unemployed respondents indicated they were seeking employment. Most alumni respondents were employed in the nonprofit sector (64%), with far fewer being employed by a government agency (13%) or a for-profit organization (7%). Nine percent of the alumni respondents were students or interns and three percent were self-employed. Overall, alumni had similar employment patterns to student survey respondents though a smaller percentage of alumni respondents were associated with for-profit organizations.

Respondents to the alumni survey closely mirror the socio-demographic profile of all respondents to the student survey. Alumni respondents are likely to be white/Caucasian women who were employed full time (most likely in a nonprofit organization) and who had just completed (or were about to complete) their nonprofit affiliated academic program.

Alumni Assessment of Course Topics' Importance

Central to the BBI cluster evaluation is assessing the extent to which nonprofit courses reflect the interests and needs of the practitioner. In the student survey, we developed a comprehensive listing of course topics utilizing the research of Mirabella and Wish (that described nonprofit courses as having an internal vs. external focus) and the *Guidelines* by NACC and NASPAA (that identified courses as unique to nonprofits or general). Just as we asked the respondents in the student survey, in the alumni survey we asked respondents to first assess the importance of each course topic for managing or leading a nonprofit organization. We then asked them to indicate if, in retrospect, each course topic should receive more, the same, or less emphasis in an academic program.

Table 1 presents alumni ratings of the importance of course topics commonly included in nonprofit management programs. On the rating scale, "1" is considered very important and "5" is not important. Thus, the lower the mean score (M), the more important students perceive the topic. This table also includes the percentage of alumni indicating that the course should have had more, the same, or less emphasis in their program.

Alumni rated fundraising and development (M=1.5), governance (M=1.5), strategic planning for nonprofits (M=1.6), budgeting and accounting (M=1.6), legal structure (M=1.6), and ethics and values (M=1.7) as the topics most important for managing and leading a nonprofit organization. Other important topics included evaluation and accountability (M=1.9), proposal writing (M=1.9), policy making (M=2.1), and marketing (M=2.1). Topics seen as less important include: diversity (culture, ethnicity) issues (M=2.5), information systems for nonprofits (M=2.5), history of the nonprofit sector (M=2.5), economics and market issues (M=2.6), quantitative analysis (M=2.8), and international organizations and issues (M=3.1).

Table 1. Alumni Assessment of Nonprofit Management Course Topics

Course Topics	Mean	Emphasis:		
		More	Same	Less
Fundraising and development	1.5	51%	46%	3%
Governance (e.g., board responsibilities)	1.5	46%	52%	3%
Strategic planning for nonprofits	1.6	37%	61%	2%
Budgeting and accounting	1.6	32%	65%	3%
Legal structure (e.g., incorporation, tax law)	1.6	39%	61%	1%
Ethics and values in philanthropy	1.7	26%	72%	2%
Evaluation and accountability	1.9	39%	54%	7%
Proposal writing	1.9	48%	52%	1%
Marketing	2.1	44%	52%	5%
Human resources	2.1	27%	72%	1%
Policy making processes	2.1	30%	65%	5%
Volunteer management	2.2	36%	59%	5%
Organizational theory and behavior	2.3	16%	70%	14%
Advocacy in public policy	2.4	34%	60%	7%
Government-nonprofit relations	2.4	26%	62%	13%
Diversity (culture, ethnicity) issues	2.5	32%	60%	8%
Information systems for nonprofits	2.5	28%	64%	8%
History of the nonprofit sector	2.5	7%	78%	15%
Economic and market issues	2.6	15%	73%	12%
Quantitative analysis	2.8	18%	66%	17%
International organizations and issues	3.1	24%	64%	12%

Course topics that rated highest in importance were also likely to be those that alumni wanted emphasized more in their program. **Most alumni wanted to see more emphasis placed on funding and development (51%), governance (46%), and proposal writing (51%).** Other course topics that at least one-third of alumni indicate should be more emphasized include marketing (44%), legal structure (39%), evaluation and accountability (39%), strategic planning (37%),

and volunteer management (36%). Between ten-twenty percent of respondents said that organizational theory, government-nonprofit relations, history of the sector, economic and market issues, quantitative analysis, and international issues should be less emphasized.

Comparing the responses of alumni at Time 1, the student survey, Time 2, the alumni survey, there is little movement in the relative ranking of courses (see Table 2). The same five to six courses ranked highest or lowest at Time 1 were also ranked highest or lowest at Time 2. In fact, of the 21 courses, only five changed more than two positions from Time 1 to Time 2. Strategic planning, ranked first in mean score in the student survey, fell to the fourth place in the alumni survey. The importance of policy making dropped from ninth to twelfth and advocacy dropped from eleventh to fourteenth. In contrast, human resources moved from twelfth to ninth and organizational theory moved from sixteenth to thirteenth.

Table 2: Time 1 and Time 2 Mean Score Ranking of Course Topics

Course	Time 1 Rank	Time 2 Rank
Fundraising and development	2	1
Governance (e.g., board responsibilities)	4	2*
Budgeting and accounting	3	3
Strategic planning for nonprofits	1	4
Legal structure (e.g., incorporation, tax law)	6	5
Ethics and values in philanthropy	5	6
Proposal writing	8	7
Evaluation and accountability	7	8
Human resources	12	9
Marketing	10	10
Volunteer management	13	11
Policy making processes	9	12*
Organizational theory and behavior	16	13
Advocacy in public policy	11	14*
Government-nonprofit relations	15	15
Diversity (culture, ethnicity) issues	14	16*
History of the nonprofit sector	19	17
Information systems for nonprofits	17	18*
Economic and market issues	18	19*
Quantitative analysis	20	20*
International organizations and issues	21	21*

Note: “*” indicates a mean score change was statistically significant at $\alpha \leq .05$

Ranking courses by mean scores alone can, however, veil significant changes in mean scores from Time 1 to Time 2. That is, a single course may have the same or similar ranking at both time points but its mean score may have changed significantly. Indeed, this is the case for several courses identified with an asterisk (*) in Table 2. For example, the course topic of “governance” is rated as more important when respondents are alumni compared to when they were students. What is important here is the general tendency for courses rated as having lower importance at Time 1 to receive an even lower score at Time 2. Course topics on diversity issues, information systems for nonprofits, economic and market issues, quantitative analysis, and international organizations and issues were rated low at Time 1 and even lower at Time 2.

We found few differences among alumni respondents when we compared them based on socio-demographic information. One trend we noticed is that full-time students tended, overall, to rate course topics as more important than did part-time students. That is, the mean score for each individual course topic tended to reflect a higher rating by full-time students than part-time students. In particular, full-time students ranked several courses as statistically more important than did part-time students: Government and nonprofit relations, management information systems in nonprofits, quantitative methods, evaluation and accountability, diversity, and advocacy in the public policy arena. What might account for this trend? It is reasonable to assume that full-time students spend more time in classrooms and may be more singly focused on academic work than part time students. Thus, academic work may be more important to full-time students and so they tend to feel stronger about the importance of courses in general. It is also likely that part-time students, nearly all of who are also working, are judging the importance of topics as applied to their day-to-day organizational sensemaking. Thus, part-time students may be more critical of the importance of course topics.

An analysis of course importance by type of alumni degree – nonprofit/philanthropy master’s, graduate degree with a concentration in nonprofit management, or certificate – found very few differences. In fact, the only differences that emerged were (1) alumni with nonprofit specific degree programs rate the history of the nonprofit sector as more important than alumni from other types of programs and (2) alumni from graduate degrees with a concentration in nonprofits (i.e., MPAs, MBAs) rate course on government-nonprofit relations as more important than alumni from other types of programs.

Simply put, **alumni – regardless of their degree type, the university they attended, their age, or how long they have worked – tend to value the same course topics and these topics typically focus on the internal day-to-day management of nonprofit organizations.**

Did program content, as expressed by course topics, match the needs and interests of those being served?

Alumni most valued courses that emphasized core internal management practices that are fairly unique to the nonprofit sector. This is the same pattern we noted in the student survey report. Most of the graduate programs affiliated with the Building Bridges Initiative offer courses on these topics and, thus, are likely meeting the academic interests and needs of nonprofit practitioners.

Seen as less important by alumni are courses that emphasize technical skills such as management information systems and quantitative analysis. Alumni also gave lower scores to course topics that focus on the issues shaping the nonprofit context – courses such as economics, history, diversity, and international issues. Most academicians and nonprofit leaders would likely support the continued focus on external or theoretical/historical courses because they encourage practitioners to look beyond the management needs of today to better position organizations for tomorrow. Perhaps the value of what could be considered less-applied courses will be more valued by alumni in future years. Nonetheless, faculty may need to show, through examples, the importance and practicality of externally and theoretically focused courses.

Connecting Practice and Knowledge

A goal of the Building Bridges Initiative was to develop better and more bridges between practice and knowledge in nonprofit management education. Perhaps the most important set of connections that can be made are among the university programs, the nonprofit communities (from which many of students come), and the students (many of whom are nonprofit practitioners).

In this survey, and in the student survey, we identified eight ways that university programs can connect with the community. We call this set of activities *linking characteristics*. This list was drawn from practices associated with many of the BBI programs:

- Connecting coursework to practice
- Involving practitioners in the program
- Collaboration opportunities for nonprofit leaders and students
- Networking opportunities for students and alumni
- Links between the program and nonprofit organizations
- Connecting research to practice
- Placement services for students and alumni

We also identified a set of *traditional characteristics* that can be used to assess the quality of any graduate academic experience. These traditional characteristics are:

- Currency of course content
- Instructional quality
- Scheduling of class times
- Relationships with other students
- Relationships with faculty
- Academic rigor of the program
- Quality of research experiences
- Faculty mentoring of students

We asked alumni to assess how satisfied they were with the linkage characteristics and traditional characteristics of their program. Table 3 presents the mean score for each characteristic. We used a 5-point scale ranging from very satisfied (1) to very dissatisfied (5). Thus, the lower the mean (M) for any single item, the more satisfied students are with that element. The table also includes the percent of alumni who were satisfied (1 or 2) and not satisfied (4 or 5) with each characteristic.

Alumni indicated that, overall, they were satisfied with their programs (M=2.1). Half of the alumni (52%) said they were *satisfied* and one-quarter (24%) indicated they were *very satisfied*. Only 6 percent of alumni respondents indicated they were dissatisfied with the program overall.

Alumni assessed the eight characteristics associated with the *linkages* between the academic program and the world of practice. Each of these linking characteristics was rated lower than alumni overall satisfaction with the program. The linking characteristics perceived as most favorable were the connection of coursework to practice (M=2.2/67% satisfied) and the involvement of practitioners in the program (M=2.3/59% satisfied). Alumni seem less satisfied with collaboration opportunities for nonprofit leaders and students (M=2.6/44% satisfied), networking opportunities for students and alumni (M=2.6/48% satisfied), and links between the program and nonprofit organizations (M=2.7/48% satisfied). Less than half of the respondents (42%) were satisfied with the connection of research to practice (M=2.7). Alumni also indicated relatively low satisfaction with placement services (M=3.0/24% satisfied).

Alumni were somewhat more satisfied with the *traditional* academic characteristics of the program. Alumni were most satisfied by the currency of course content (M=1.9/82% satisfied), scheduling of class time (M=2.1/74% satisfied), instructional quality (M=2.1/74% satisfied), their relationships with other students (M=2.1/68% satisfied), and their relationships with faculty (M=2.2/70% satisfied). Alumni were somewhat less satisfied with the academic

rigor of the program (M=2.4/60% satisfied), faculty mentoring (M=2.8/ 45%), and the quality of their research experiences (M=2.6/43% satisfied).

Over one-third of alumni were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (responded with a “3” on the 5 point-scale) with the following characteristics: placement services, quality of research experiences, and the connection of research to practice. Perhaps alumni have had little exposure to these characteristics. That is, alumni may not typically access placement services, may not have had research experiences, and may not have had an opportunity to connect research to practice. What we may be measuring, then, is not a lack of satisfaction with an experience, but the lack of an experience.

Alumni responses to the linkage and traditional characteristics changed little from their student survey responses. The rank ordering of these characteristics were stable: Characteristics respondents were satisfied with as alumni were those they also favored as students.

Table 3. Alumni Satisfaction with Nonprofit Management Programs

Factors	Mean	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Overall Satisfaction with Program	2.1	76%	6%
<u>Linkage Characteristics</u>			
Connection of coursework to practice	2.2	64%	13%
Involving practitioners in the program	2.3	59%	16%
Collaboration opportunities for nonprofit leaders and students	2.6	44%	20%
Networking opportunities for students and alumni	2.6	48%	24%
Links between the program and nonprofit organizations.	2.7	47%	28%
Connection of research to practice	2.7	42%	21%
Placement services for students and alumni	3.0	24%	33%
<u>Traditional Characteristics</u>			
Currency of course content	1.9	82%	5%
Instructional quality	2.1	74%	8%
Scheduling of class times	2.1	74%	10%
Relationships with other students	2.1	68%	8%
Relationships with faculty	2.2	70%	9%
Academic rigor of the program	2.4	60%	13%
Quality of research experiences	2.6	45%	16%
Faculty mentoring of students	2.8	43%	29%

In the student survey report, we found that when students evaluate potential academic programs, they value programs linked to the community, either directly or through courses or research. It seems, however, that these highly valued linkages need to be improved.

In the student survey report, we suggested that the linkage dimension is a recent and less conventional form of education and that faculty may be uncomfortable or unsure of how to operationalize linkages and, furthermore, that academic institutions may not highly value these linkages. We also suggested that students might be unfamiliar with these linkages and how to rate or value them. These rationales seem valid here, too. Nonetheless, alumni and student responses point to a performance gap: Academic staff need to improve the bridge between practice and research – between the university and the community.

An analysis of alumni satisfaction to the linkage questions found few significant differences and no trends among responses based on age, sex, race, type of program, full- vs. part-time students, or work experience.

How well do academic programs connect with the world of practice?

While there is room for improvement, alumni are satisfied with their academic experiences. Alumni found course content current, instructional quality high, and coursework connected to practice. It is reasonable to assume that alumni respond positively to these specific characteristics because they perceive and/or experience a bridge between academic activities and practice. More active or involved programmatic linkages between practice and knowledge – such as collaborations between students and alumni, linkages between the program and nonprofit organizations, and connecting research to practice – could, according to alumni responses, be strengthened or improved.

One of the most reflective measures of an academic program's quality is to ask alumni if, in retrospect, they would attend the same college, enroll in the same program, and study the same topic. When we asked alumni these very questions, we found that the vast majority of alumni would attend the same college (87%), would enroll in the same degree (80%), and would study the same topic area (88%). This finding further bolsters our perception that students are satisfied with their programs, especially with the college and the topic of study – nonprofits.

The Benefits of Nonprofit Management Education

In the student survey, we asked respondents why they were continuing their education. Students told us that the most important reasons for continuing their education were personal development, skill acquisition, and new employment opportunities. Students said they were pursuing their educational program to develop the “skills and knowledge to do my job well,” for a “desire to learn theory after years of practice,” out of a “general desire at mid-career to ‘re-engage’ academically,” “to put sound theoretical and research backgrounds together with pragmatic skills,” and because they “need new skills and ideas and enthusiasm.”

As a follow-up to this question, we asked alumni to indicate how their management skills changed as a result of attending their nonprofit management program:

- Over three-quarters (79%) of alumni respondents said they were able to make a greater contribution to their organizations,
- 76 percent had more confidence in their management abilities, and
- 64 percent are now better able to apply theory to practice.

Alumni gave many examples of how they use their new management skills. Many of their responses refer to improved strategic planning and human resource skills, but they include a full range of management activities – from financial management to writing to fund raising to being a more effective board member. A few of their responses illustrate the type of management and client service improvements they associate with their academic experience:

The management, human resources, and ethics courses have provided me with managerial knowledge and leadership skills (e.g. knowing the language, rules, and ethics of issues) to become an accountable leader.

I have used my skills to redefine my previous job and I received a promotion and raise. Additionally, I have reached more clients and helped them more effectively than before.

I have been able to advise our management team on legal issues surrounding board activities and 501(c)3 tax exempt status that they were not aware of.

I am now on the Board of Directors of an NPO and have used fundraising and budgeting information to educate other board members.

In the budget process for the upcoming fiscal year, I am now called upon to set budget goals and fundraising goals because of my coursework.

It is not a “management” skill per se, but my greater understanding of the goals of the nonprofit sector and the motivators behind philanthropy has given me greater depth and strength of purpose to my “management” decisions.

Alumni frequently use their new management skills on-the-job. Nearly half (46%) said they apply their new knowledge and skills on a daily basis and 27 percent indicate they do so once or twice a week.

Another type of management skills is networking – connecting with other leaders in the nonprofit world. Class cohorts can become a network, particularly if the students or alumni remain in the same geographic region. About half (47%) of alumni survey respondents indicated that they saw their classmates as a new cohort of nonprofit professionals that they could contact with management and leadership questions. Alumni may also see the university as part of their extended network with 43 percent saying that were now better able to access university resources and personnel.

With the development of new skills and a greater sense of efficacy, alumni may begin to consider, or re-consider, their career plans. Table 4 identifies the types of career changes alumni have experienced or anticipate as a result of attending a nonprofit management academic program.

Table 4: Alumni Career Changes

How have your career plans changed as a result of attending a nonprofit management academic program?

I am aware of new career options.	55%
I am more likely to receive, or have already received, an increase in my income.	52%
I am clearer about my career direction.	51%
I am more likely to assume, or have already assumed, a leadership role in a nonprofit organization.	51%
I am more likely to be, or have already been, promoted within my organization.	33%
I have changed careers.	13%

When asked to give an example of how their academic programs affected their career plans nearly 80 percent of the alumni gave an example. Most of their comments reflect new opportunities – they are moving-up in their organizations, are aware of new careers and areas of work, and have moved to new organizations or agencies. Several of the over 100 comments exemplify the enthusiasm apparent in so many of the responses:

Attending this program has launched my career.

I moved from executive assistant to researching charities – a more professional job.

The proposal writing class got me interested in grant writing.... It has opened up new opportunities for my career.

The director position of my organization may become available and I would be a logical person to assume the role because of my education.

The program has helped me to establish contacts for potential job change opportunities in the nonprofit sector.

If anything, my education has made career planning very unclear, which I experience as a very positive opportunity to think and stretch “beyond the box”.

I now expect to work in management rather than direct service in the nonprofit sector. My program has provided me with the skills to be confident about assuming a management position.

The program has opened new possibilities – perhaps in policy research.

I now have a clear idea of my career direction in the nonprofit sector and know my next career steps.

I have considered returning to academia to more perfectly bridge the chasm between theory and practice in philanthropic/non-profit studies.

An unintended consequence of an increase in management skills and efficacy may be alumni dissatisfaction with their current work. Only 36 percent of alumni said that as a result of attending their program they found their work more

satisfying. Perhaps alumni would like more opportunities to apply their skills. This possibility seems reasonable given that about one-quarter (27%) of the alumni applied their new skills only monthly or less. It is possible that alumni who do not find their work more satisfying may feel less challenged – their new skills may be underutilized. It is also possible that the majority of alumni respondents were satisfied with their jobs prior to enrolling in the program and that additional education did not increase or decrease an already high level of satisfaction.

How have the management capacities of alumni improved as a result of their educational program?

Alumni have gained new management skills in a range of areas including strategic planning, human resource skills, financial management, and fund raising. Alumni apply these skills in their workplaces on a regular basis. Underlying these new skills – and new professional networks with cohorts – is a greater sense of efficacy. Alumni are more confident in their management skills, see themselves as making a greater contribution to their organizations, and are better able to apply theory to practice.

Simply put, alumni have improved their management skills and are able to link what they learn in the classroom with the work they perform in their organizations.

Conclusion

This paper represents the second phase of a two-phase project. The project started with a survey completed by students enrolled in nonprofit management programs affiliated with the Building Bridges Initiative. The purpose of that survey was to help us identify why students choose to continue their education, why and how they chose nonprofit programs, and how satisfied they are with various dimensions of their academic programs. This paper reports on the findings from the second part of this project. It followed a subset of students twelve-to-eighteen months later to assess their opinions of programs but this time as alumni. This paper also focuses on skills alumni have gained and how their professional lives have changed as a result of their education.

The relative importance of course topics remained somewhat constant from the student survey to the alumni survey. Some courses may be more important when one is an alum – such as fundraising and development, governance, and human resources. Courses rating low in the student survey in importance for managing and leading a nonprofit – advocacy, information systems, economic

and market issues, quantitative analysis, and international issues – were rated even lower in the alumni survey. Taken together, these findings suggest that alumni want (and need) to develop skills closely aligned with the pragmatic, day-to-day management and leading of an organization.

When alumni were looking for an academic program, they were looking for a program from a reputable institution that focused on nonprofits and connected university knowledge with practice knowledge. Alumni are satisfied with their decisions, and nearly all would make the same decision again. However, the active connections between the university program and the field of practice – connections such as collaborative opportunities for nonprofit leaders and students, networking opportunities for students and alumni, links between the program and nonprofit organizations, and connections between research and practice – are areas in need of more attention. Admittedly, these are difficult connections to make and maintain. It may take several more years before programs can engage in this type of outreach.

Perhaps the most important finding in this study is the ample evidence that alumni have garnered new skills and are thinking and acting differently because of these skills. Alumni are better able to contribute to their organizations, are more confident in their management abilities, and are better able to apply theory to practice. Alumni tended to talk about new or improved skills in strategic planning, human resources, and several financial domains (fundraising, budgeting, proposal writing). And alumni use these skills frequently – nearly half apply them on a daily basis and about one-quarter do so once or twice a week. Finally, alumni are thinking anew about their career options and most like what they see. It is quite likely that programs such as those supported by the BBI are an important means to curtail the movement of talented individuals out of the nonprofit sector. That is, these programs may be a retention intervention – helping the nonprofit sector to develop and keep bright and motivated leaders.

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