A FEASIBILITY STUDY OF UNO'S MPA PROGRAM AS A PIPELINE FOR NONPROFIT BOARD MEMBERS

Del Bharath, Doctoral Student
School of Public Administration, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Abstract

Many believe universities have a role to play in civically engaging their students. One way to achieve this is by connecting students to professional opportunities in the community, where students can practically use the knowledge gained in the classroom to address community needs. UNO's MPA program gives students administrative skills that are relevant in the nonprofit sector; however, these students may lack opportunity to develop governance skills. Omaha nonprofits often have difficulty in connecting with diverse, knowledgeable recruits to serve on their boards. Therefore, this feasibility study looks at whether UNO should act as a pipeline to connect MPA students to nonprofit board service opportunities, and address the needs of both populations. Additionally, the study looked at the programmatic considerations and the feasibility of these if the proposed program is implemented. The study finds that there is interest in all sectors for this type of opportunity but there are barriers to implementation that need to be addressed.

Introduction

Citizens can engage in their communities by serving on boards of nonprofits (Land, 2009); therefore, **board member service can be a way to promote civic engagement**. Universities, especially those with public administration programs, have the potential to address concerns of identifying engaged and knowledgeable recruits and connecting potential recruits to service opportunities.

Tschirhart et al. (2009) note that **there is no consensus on who should be recruited as a board member**. Academic literature does not comprehensively address the specific question of using universities as a pipeline for nonprofits to recruit board members. **Boards look for recruits that have leadership and analytical and strategic skills, all of which are provided in graduate degrees**. "Boards may look for members who have general knowledge about management and specific insight about a particular industry or constituency [and] nonprofit executive directors value board members with understanding of their nonprofit's task, competitive, and collaborative environments" (p. 1,078). **These are skills that are often developed in MPA students and as such, these students can be potential recruits for board service**.

Millennials, who comprise a large amount of the UNO MPA program are **prevented from entrance into nonprofit roles due to "bottlenecking" that arises from baby boomers not exiting the market** and Generation Xers waiting for those roles. **Board service can provide an entrance to the sector as well as provide practical experience while also allowing students to apply lessons from the classroom**. Flyvbjerg (2006) suggests that students in professional degree programs can benefit from real practical experience, such as placements, internships, and summer jobs. Studies such as Purdy and Lawless (2012) show the impact on the community of connecting business students with for-profit board experience.
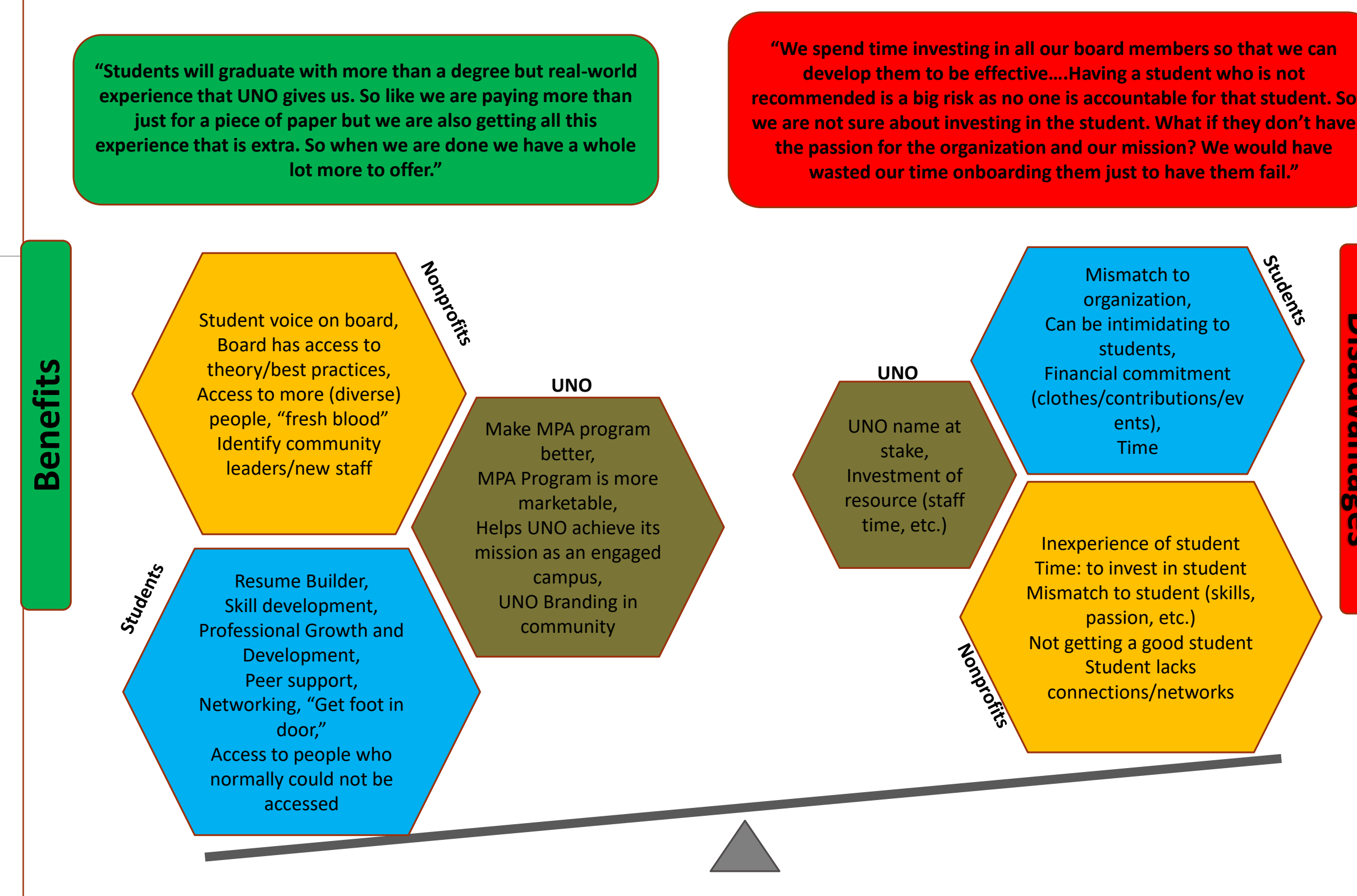

UNO MPA Students — UNO? — Nonprofit Boards
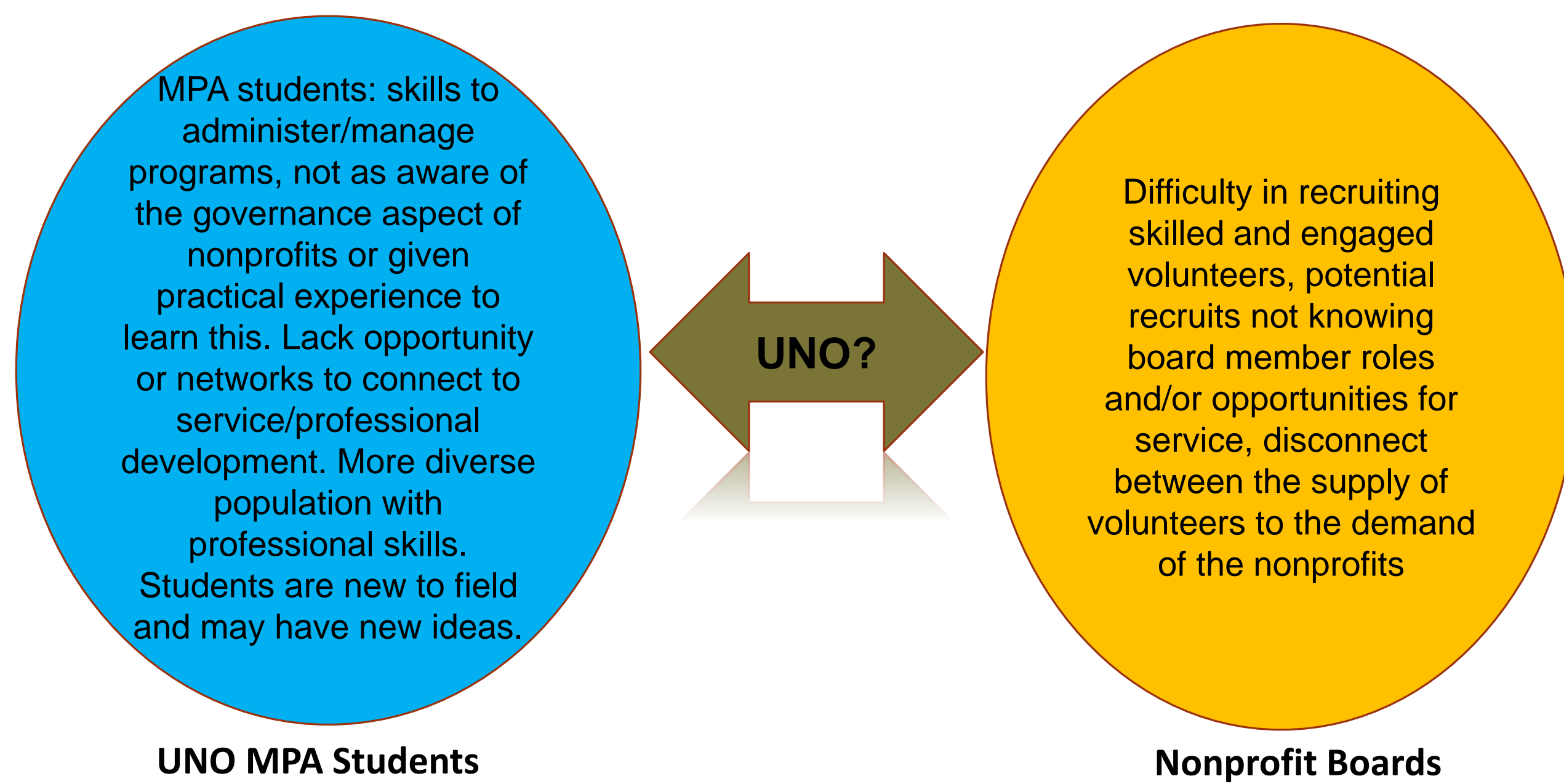
Methods

Focus groups with students (2) Groups had diverse compositions, including participants with a variety of ages, races, genders, nonprofit experiences, board service experiences, etc. to allow for comprehensive answers and viewpoints to the research question.

Interviews were conducted with two faculty/staff members, two board members and two executive directors of nonprofits for a total of six interviews. Interviews were semi-structured with questions geared toward determining the benefits and disadvantages of having students serve as board members, the challenges of board recruitment in the field and the ways, if any, that UNO can play a role in alleviating those challenges.
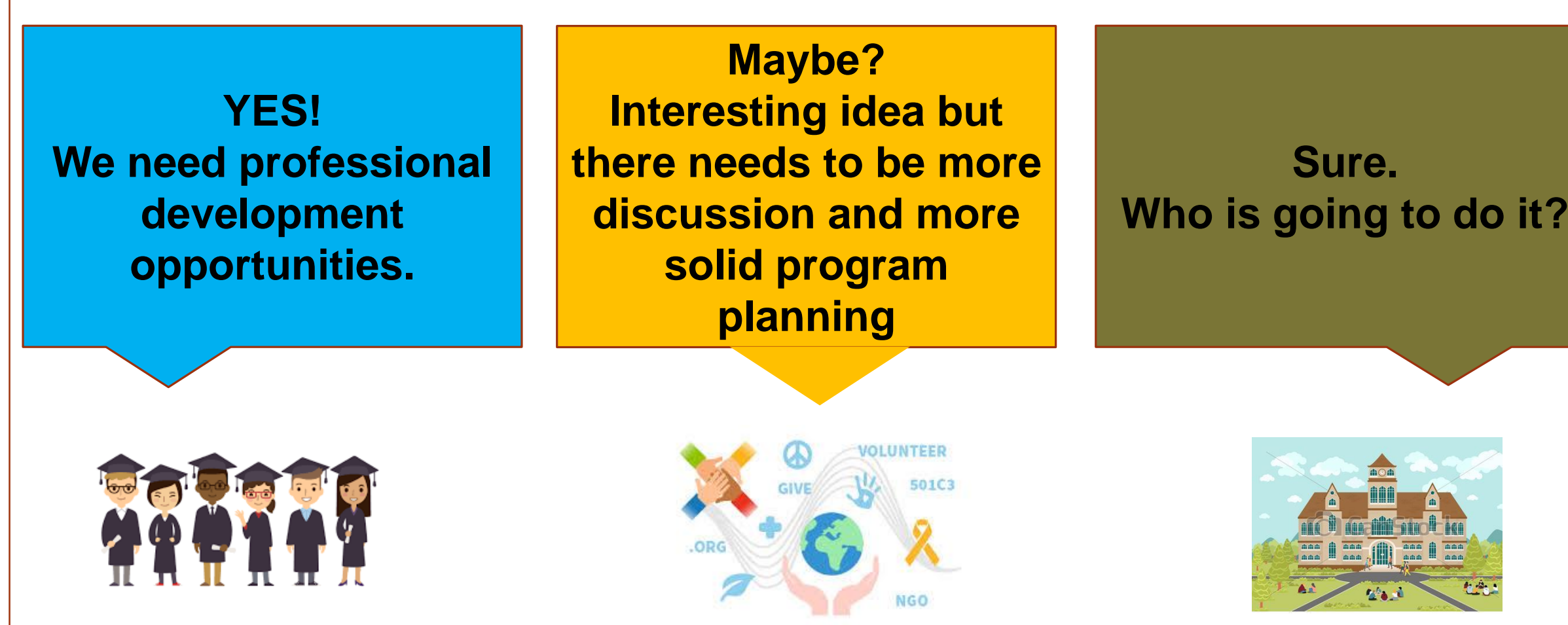
Results

Research Question 1: What are the benefits and disadvantages of having Masters level public administration students at UNO serve as nonprofit board members?

"Students will graduate with more than a degree but real-world experience that UNO gives us. So like we are paying more than just for a piece of paper but we are also getting all this experience that is extra. So when we are done we have a whole lot more to offer."

"We spend time investing in all our board members so that we can develop them to be effective… Having a student who is not recommended is a big risk as no one is accountable for that student. So we are not sure about investing in the student. What if they don't have the passion for the organization and our mission? We would have wasted our time onboarding them just to have them fail."

Research Question 2: Does UNO have a role to play in practically developing nonprofit board members outside of the classroom?

Participants stated that UNO should have a role in providing civic engagement opportunities to students as the institution "espouses civic engagement." Participants support the idea that UNO should produce well-rounded graduates that are ready to enter the workforce by providing professional growth and development opportunities, as well as real-life experience.

The question remains: where at UNO should these opportunities be provided? The School of Public Administration or the Community Engagement Center, etc.?

Research Question 3: Is there interest within the student body and the Omaha-area nonprofit sector in UNO implementing such a program? Why or why not?

YES! We need professional development opportunities.

Maybe? Interesting idea but there needs to be more discussion and more solid program planning

Sure. Who is going to do it?

Research Question 4: What is the feasibility of the UNO MPA program being a pipeline for board member service to Omaha area nonprofits?

In order to successfully implement a program, disadvantages and barriers to implementation need to be addressed.

Stigma of Students
Students are considered "green" and "inexperienced" and potentially "flaky." However, participants in all roles noted that students are not that different from first-time board members who may not have the skills that MPA students have.

Recruiting Nonprofits
Program is interesting, but a "tough sale" to nonprofits. How to show the value of students as board members to nonprofits?

Program Design
No "one size fits all" program. Needs flexibility in program design as organizations and student differs. Things to consider:
- different types of boards (fundraising, governance, founder) and depending on the board, the skills needed would be different
- size, budget, capacity, age, service area, board culture of the organization etc. could impact the program design.

Results continued

Alternative Options
- *SPA Board member certificate program*
- *Board member mentoring opportunity*
- *UNO as advertising agent for board positions*
- *Service on advisory groups or committees*
- *Alumni involvement*
- *General mentoring opportunities*
- *Service-learning opportunities*
  - Infrastructure building for nonprofits
  - Having a class attend a board meeting

Discussion

The findings support the need for a program that provides professional development opportunities to students. While board service opportunities are highly valued among the students surveyed, there are barriers to implementation that must be addressed for a successful program. In addition, there needs to be increased buy-in from the school as well as a decision on where professional development service opportunities need to be housed. Is this a function of the specific school (e.g. SPA) or the CEC?

The data shows that the program can be a way to address students' engagement needs as well as further advance UNO's goal of being an engaged campus. The literature on service opportunities that link academic coursework to practical experience note that **these experiences have deeper learning outcomes and are a way to engage students in the community** (Marin et al. 2009; Tschirhart et al. 2009; Purdy & Lawless, 2012) Additionally, research shows that MPA students may be well-suited for this type of engagement, as board service opportunities specifically link MPA students to their future professional sector (Tschirhart et al. 2009; Purdy & Lawless, 2012). **While there is initial interest, a study on a larger population may need to be conducted for more conclusive results.**

Conclusions

The data show that there are benefits to all stakeholders, although **students have the most to benefit from the program.** By developing students as effective board members, UNO ensures they have additional skills to benefit the sector when they graduate. Graduates also get exposure through networking to the sector and this could lead to increased job placement for students. UNO SPA can prepare students for the real world, create networks and ultimately strengthen the sector. There are also **challenges to implementation** such as *stigma of students, recruiting nonprofits, and appropriate program design*. These disadvantages can be overcome by proper program planning and implementation, and more specifically, ensuring that there is proper match between organization and student and that prepared students are representing the school. **While there is interest in the program, institutionally there needs to be focus on how to use structures or systems that are already in place for sustainable implementation.** The proper home for the program needs to be found with a department who would take responsibility for implementing the program. **The feasibility study shows that there is interest in such a program but the program needs start-up work to be implemented.** The concern becomes whether the work needed to implement the program is worth the potential value to students? This is something that needs to be decided before more work can be done.

Acknowledgements

Contact

Del Bharath, MPA
University of Nebraska at Omaha – School of Public Administration
Email: dbharath@unomaha.edu

References

1. Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2011). Qualitative research methods for the social sciences (8th ed.). Pearson.
2. Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12, 2, 219-245.*
3. Land, S. (2009). *The idealist.org handbook to building a better world: How to turn your good intentions into actions that make a difference.* New York: Penguin Group.
4. Marin, D. A., Soro, G., Biancetti, A., & Zanotta, T. (2009). Serving others and gaining experience: A study of university students' participation in service learning. *Higher Education Quarterly, 63,* 1, 46-63.
5. Maxwell, J. A. (2012). Qualitative research design: An interactive approach (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
6. Purdy, J., & Lawless, J. (2012). Learning about governance through nonprofit board service. *Journal of Management Education, 36,* 1, 33-65.
7. Stahl, R. M. (2013). Talent philanthropy: Investing in nonprofit people to advance nonprofit performance. *The Foundation Review, 5,* 3, 35-49
8. Tschirhart, M., Reed, K., Freeman, S., & Anker, A. (2009). Who Serves? *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 38,* 6, 1076-1085.