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

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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. 1078). These skills are often developed in MPA students and as such, these students can be potential recruits for board service.

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?

Benefits
● Student voice on board
● Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 45(4), 1209-1220.
● Tschirhart et al. (2009); Purdy & Lawless, 2012)

Disadvantages
● Recruiting board roles are non-transferable to students
● MPA Program is more administrative
● UNO MPA students are typically interested in practical work

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 build 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.

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