

# Reality Check: Does the MPA Deliver?

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## Introduction

Kennesaw State University started its Master of Public Administration (MPA) program Fall, 1993. As the degree title indicates, the specializations usually focus on various areas of governmental administration. And we do that. But in addition we began the program with what was then still quite a novel specialization — nonprofit management. Next to governments themselves, nonprofit organizations have, after all, long been the other chief channel for the delivery of public and social services, as aptly documented in *Partners in Public Service* by Lester Salamon, a leading scholar in the field. Indeed, in an era of devolution, as exemplified by welfare reform, these ties are likely to become even stronger. It therefore behooves managers in nonprofits as well as in government to understand better how the other sector operates. To put it in the simplest self- but also public-serving terms, nonprofits need to know about government in order to get the most from it for their constituents while governments need to know about these nonprofits to ensure that the larger public's needs are met most effectively and efficiently.

Accordingly, we believed that practicing and prospective nonprofit managers would benefit from an MPA core curriculum as well. During the course of the academic year, 1995-96, the nonprofit specialization courses were taught for the first time. Since such coursework was so new that relatively little was known about what real utility it had and how well it fit with the actual needs of practicing nonprofit managers, and since its connection with an MPA core was likewise going to be new to them, we thought it useful to survey such executives in our service area. To see how they thought the two curricula — MPA core and nonprofit concentration — might meet the needs of their prospective employees and future executives, we let our investigation be guided by the following questions:

- A. Do nonprofit executives value the knowledge and skills represented in the MPA core curriculum? Are these the skills and knowledge they look for in prospective employees? What other knowledge, skills, abilities, and traits do they look for in prospective employees? Do they find enough employees with these qualities?
- B. What can and should we do to make our curricula meet their perceived needs better? How can we better "market" both our program and its graduates to nonprofit employers? How can we mediate between their perceptions and our offerings?

This last question emerged from our study, which showed that it's not just a question of finding out what they need and adapting our offerings accordingly. It turns out also to be a question of "educating" them as to what we can

actually offer them. Part of the reason for this is that there have not long been any systematic educational programs for nonprofit managers.

## Methodology

To get answers to the earlier questions about our curricula we used the most obvious method. First, we listed slightly condensed descriptions of the MPA core courses and the nonprofit concentration courses (cf. *KSU Graduate Catalog*) and asked respondents to indicate the level of importance they attributed to the course on a Likert scale, ranging from "not at all" to "essential." Second, we listed the types of knowledge and skills that are actually conveyed in those courses and asked for the same rating. This gave us a cross-check on the value of the course contents.

Using the United Way's *HELP Book*, a guide to human/social service organizations in the greater Atlanta area, and the *FAST Book*, a similar guide for Cobb County, we targeted 235 nonprofit executives and received 74 completed questionnaires back for an acceptable response rate of 31 percent. Responses represented a wide array of organizations, both in services and in size. The respondents themselves were, for the most part, the chief executives (44 out of 74) or directors, deputy directors, or coordinators (23) of the agencies.

## Results

The following table sums up, in rank order what percentage of respondents deemed MPA core courses and nonprofit concentration courses to be "very useful" and "essential" (combined) to successful nonprofit management, which we will term "ratings."

Core course	Rating
Budgeting .....	91
Analysis and Evaluation.....	84
Organization Theory .....	82
Public Administration.....	75
Ethics .....	70
Government Relations .....	66
Research and Computers .....	56
Concentration	Rating
Leadership.....	89
Managing Staff and Volunteers.....	86
Fundraising and Development .....	86
Finance .....	74
Philanthropy .....	50
Contemporary Issues .....	48

These results indicate a preference for that which is practical and of immediate day-to-day use. In the nonprofit concentration, People Skills get the highest rating, with Leadership

at 89 percent and Managing Staff and Volunteers at 86. Fundraising and Development is likewise viewed as a people skill, as opposed to the technical skill implied by Finance. On the other hand, Budgeting gets the highest rating of any course. We suspect this is the case because respondents view budgeting as immediate and general, managing all their resources, as opposed to the arcane finance.

Philanthropy and Contemporary Issues receive low ratings either because, as in the above, respondents do not see them as related to day-to-day operations or, because they believe they know enough about them from their own work. We would extend that argument to the response to Ethics. There is a certain assumption that people in this field are particularly ethical (a point to which we will return).

While the ratings of the courses qua courses are thus somewhat ambiguous, the ratings of the skills actually taught in them are much more clear-cut.

Skill/Knowledge	Rating
Managing staff.....	98
Leadership.....	97
Managing change.....	94
Team-building.....	93
Community relations.....	92
Planning objectives.....	89
Writing.....	89
Budgeting.....	88
Ethics.....	87
Boards.....	86
Program evaluation.....	86
Strategic planning.....	86
Analysis.....	84
Development.....	84
Finance.....	83
Fundraising.....	83
Public speaking.....	83
Managing volunteers.....	82
Marketing.....	82
Organizational behavior.....	79
Personnel.....	78
Volunteer recruitment.....	74
Computer skills.....	70
Grant sourcing.....	69
Government policy.....	56
Government contracts.....	51
Accounting.....	50
Tax issues.....	46

Here, too, the "A-rated" skills (90+ percent) are the people skills. But it's important to observe how, once the courses are disaggregated into skills, ratings rise. Although only 74 percent thought a course in Finance important, quite a few more (83 percent) deemed it important to have skills in finance. To us that meant our courses are really teaching what nonprofit

managers need, and it becomes an issue of marketing.

On the other hand, the discrepancy between the ratings of ethics on the two sets of questions illustrates another basic issue. The fact that respondents rate ethics, as such, very highly (87 percent), but don't consider a course on it nearly so important (70 percent), suggests to us that they don't feel they need the course because they consider themselves ethical. But it also indicates that we need to teach the course to those who plan to go into nonprofit management. And that goes for the ratings of things like volunteer recruitment (74 percent), grant sourcing (69 percent), and government contracts (56 percent). Practicing managers already have those things under control, but clearly prospective ones need to learn them. A repeated lesson for us is, thus, that we need to market what we actually deliver in these courses more explicitly, and to educate nonprofit executives about what we do. We get a chance to do such marketing and educating when area nonprofits call us to do, say, a program evaluation so that they can demonstrate their success and be awarded further funding. It is at this point that they discover that if they hired our graduates they would have such skills in-house.

When we asked respondents to identify other skills or traits flexibility and problem-solving were the most frequently cited. We address both of these throughout the program by continually throwing students into new situations, with new "co-workers" and new problems to solve, through our strong emphasis on using the case method. This also enables students to develop leadership skills along with team-work ones. Our emphasis on teaching critical thinking likewise addresses this need, and it opens the way to the creativity and conceptual thinking many other respondents called for. Patience was another quality called for, and we try to teach this by precept and example, stressing appreciation of difference as well as of ambiguity, and practicing patience as listeners and teachers.

Two-thirds of the respondents had difficulty finding sufficient numbers of suitable staff, citing problems such as lack of commitment, and too many "8:00 to 5:00" or "it's not in my job description" attitudes. Those failings may be irremediable, but other equally important failings they mentioned, such as lack of leadership or people skills, flexibility and adaptability, creativity or conceptual thinking, and (written and particularly oral) communication skills all seem remediable and are indeed addressed persistently throughout our program.

The best way we've found, so far, to succeed in the necessary marketing and education is by example: The students we've sent out into the nonprofit working world have gotten outstanding reviews from their employers. And these employers are calling us to provide interns and full-time staff, because they and their organizations have discovered that we do indeed provide the knowledge and skills appropriate to success in the nonprofit sector.