Introduction

Nonprofit organizations—broadly described—operate to achieve missions that serve the common good. Graduate study in the field of nonprofit management focuses on the development of leadership skills for nonprofit managers and provides education in areas such as general operations, human resources, strategies, and fund development.

Students of nonprofit management also develop proficiency in other matters such as nonprofit legal issues, organizational development, donor relations, financial management and fundraising, volunteer and human resource management, and program evaluation, to name a few competencies. Many nonprofit management programs have a theoretical component, and most programs also rely on experiential learning as a vital element of a graduate student’s education.

Why a graduate degree in nonprofit management?

With a plethora of graduate disciplines available to you—business administration with a nonprofit management specialization, public administration/affairs, even international affairs if you want to work internationally—you may be wondering, why should I go for a specialized degree in nonprofit management?

When you enroll in a specialized degree in nonprofit management you gain the skills and knowledge specific to and necessary for leadership in this growing and dynamic sector. The sheer diversity of nonprofit organizations and the issues they work on means that nonprofits require leaders with a thorough understanding of the complex nonprofit landscape.

Furthermore, your classmates will be very likely to share your interest in and knowledge of nonprofits. Your studies will em-
phasize nonprofit concerns as a default (whereas most business administration programs emphasize for-profit business, and public administration programs emphasize government administration).

As Rebecca Zirm, Director of Recruitment for Case Western Reserve University’s Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations, shares, “Unlike an MBA with a concentration in nonprofit management, every course you take in our program deals with nonprofit theory and practice and all of the work that the students do, whether papers, projects, or the strategic plan that is developed in our year-long strategic planning course, involve nonprofit organizations.

“In addition, there are some very real differences between what someone needs to know as an [executive director or CEO] of a nonprofit organization and what someone heading up a for-profit entity needs to know. The tax laws being the most obvious, but also, fundraising, financial accounting and management, governance, human resources (staff and volunteers), etc. Understanding the culture of nonprofit work is also crucial and much easier to understand once you have been through a nonprofit management program. Lastly, the types of students you meet in the two programs would be very different. The bottom line is that if you know that you are a ‘nonprofit’ person, a nonprofit program is the best fit. If you aren’t sure, then an MBA with a concentration might be useful.”

If you work in a nonprofit organization during grad school, the specialized education you receive may be directly applicable to your day-to-day work. In contrast, another degree in a field such as public administration or business administration may provide a broader skill set that could be applied to the public or for-profit sectors. With breadth comes more flexibility in career options but perhaps not as much opportunity to dig into the depths of the nonprofit world. Having a nonprofit management graduate degree demonstrates a professional commitment and the training to become a leader in the field.

**People who look at this degree also consider**

- Public administration/affairs
- Business administration
- International affairs
- Get these overviews at [www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/overviews.htm](http://www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/overviews.htm)

**Other names for a degree in this area**

Whereas more established fields of study usually have standardized degree titles, e.g., Masters in Social Work, Masters of Fine Arts, there are several titles for degrees conferred in the nascent field of nonprofit management. Below is a sampling of titles conferred by a variety of graduate schools.

- Master of Science in Nonprofit Management (Spertus College and Milano The New School)
- Master of Nonprofit Organizations (Case Western Reserve University)
- Master of Nonprofit Leadership (Seattle University)
- Master of Nonprofit Administration (University of San Francisco)
- Master of Science in Nonprofit Management and Leadership (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee)
- Master of Arts in Nonprofit Leadership and Management (University of San Diego)

Whatever the name of the degree, do your research into the program to determine if it is a good fit for your personal and professional goals and needs.

**Skills you can gain**

In addition to a strong foundation in the history and theory of nonprofit organizations, a nonprofit management program will provide you with tools to lead an organization. Some skills that are taught:

- Critical thinking and strategic planning about decisions and issues facing nonprofits
- Community needs assessment
- Project/program development, management, and evaluation
- Relationship and consensus building, engaging diverse stakeholders
- Grantwriting and fundraising
- Public speaking and presentation
- Statistics and data analysis
- Nonprofit governance including management of staff, volunteers, and board members
- Resource development
- Marketing
- Financial accounting and management

**What about a certificate?**

A certificate in nonprofit management is one valuable alterna-
Degree Overview: Nonprofit Management

A certificate may be a fit for you if you are a mid-career nonprofit professional and:
- want to enhance your professional skill set and academic training
- have limited time and/or financial resources to commit to a degree program
- are interested in career advancement within the nonprofit sector
- want an introduction to or better understanding of the theory behind the practice of nonprofit management
- are interested in networking with other nonprofit professionals
- would like to test out coursework before committing to a degree program

Additionally, a certificate can help if you are not a nonprofit professional and:
- want to transition into the nonprofit sector without committing to a degree program
- already have an advanced degree and do not want to commit to another degree program
- want an introduction to and better understanding of the field as a volunteer, board member, community member, or current graduate student pursuing another degree with the option to specialize

You may also get a certificate in nonprofit management as part of another degree in a field such as public administration, business administration, or social work.

What can you expect to find in a program?

Students who want to study nonprofit management at an advanced level may choose from a great variety of program designs and offerings.

Several universities offer a specialized graduate degree in nonprofit management, each with its own unique title (as explained earlier in the discussion called “Other names for a degree in this area”), and most of which are master level courses. Because of the relative newness of this field, there are very few dedicated doctoral level programs. There are also concentrations in nonprofit management offered under other umbrella masters degree programs such as the Master of Business Administration or Master in Public Administration. Several universities that offer graduate degrees also offer certificate programs.

General structure of programs

In addition to a variety of program concentrations, universities vary greatly in the formats and timelines for education.

Programs at the University of San Diego, University of San Francisco, and others are almost entirely populated with students who pursue their studies part-time while working full-time in nonprofit organizations. Thus these programs hold their classes in the evenings and weekends to accommodate their professional students and usually operate on a cohort model, where students are grouped together for the duration of the program. More traditional full-time graduate programs are offered at a variety of universities as well.

» Read “Going to grad school part-time” to learn more about some pros and cons of part-time study www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/goingparttime.html

Accreditation

According to Dr. Roseanne Mirabella’s website of her research on nonprofit management education (another good resource at http://tltc.shu.edu/npo/), “Though there is no accrediting body specifically focused on nonprofit management education programs, many of the colleges and universities are accredited by outside bodies and undergo a rigorous voluntary peer review process to achieve accreditation. When inquiring about specific programs, ask if the college or university is accredited and if the specific nonprofit management program is accredited. For example, the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) has a Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation that is authorized to accredit masters degree programs in public affairs and administration. Though not specifically focused on nonprofit management education, its accreditation process does include these concentrations and certificate programs in its review.”

Usual coursework and concentrations

Nonprofit management graduate degree programs place a strong emphasis on connecting the theoretical with the practical. Experiential learning is usually accomplished through work with real clients in the community for courses or through internships.
Students of executive or part-time nonprofit management programs who are full- or part-time working professionals can, as Nicole McGovern, alumna of the Case Western Reserve University Masters of Nonprofit Organizations, says, “keep my head and foot in the work world in order to apply and learn from my graduate program every day.”

Susan B. Macek, an alumna of the Seattle University Master of Nonprofit Leadership program says, “I worked full-time while attending school and was able to apply my education in my organization through class projects.”

Many nonprofit management programs offer their students a lot of flexibility to explore and cultivate intellectual and professional interests within the degree. Students may develop individual concentrations within the degree through elective coursework. If the program is part of a larger grad school, students can often fulfill electives in other departments or schools for an interdisciplinary curriculum.

You may also consider obtaining a dual or joint degree (www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/jointdegrees.html). Some common dual degree options include law and a specialty field such as social work or public health.

Typical core curriculum offerings include courses that give you a foundation in:
- History and theory of nonprofit organizations and their management
- Nonprofit finance including accounting, budgeting, reporting, and tax laws
- Laws and regulations that govern nonprofit organizations
- Researching, designing, and evaluating programs
- Fundraising and campaign planning
- Leadership and ethics
- Strategic planning and organizational development
- Decision making

Additionally, depending on your interests and focus, you may be able to take elective courses offered by the program or other degree programs at the university that cover specific skill sets or specialized areas:
- Marketing, communications, and information technology
- Advocacy skills and strategies
- Shaping public policy
- Social entrepreneurship and earned income strategies
- Business development
- Arts management
- Health care management
- Housing and community development
- Issues facing international organizations

Most graduate education programs post their course offerings online for prospective students to view. Studying the curriculum for the program in which you are interested will give you a clearer sense of how your graduate education will be structured and what you will be learning. Comparing the curricula will also help you determine which graduate program may be a better fit for your interests. Here are a few curricula from a few schools to give you an idea of what other nonprofit management graduate programs may be like:

- University of Indiana-Purdue Master of Arts in Philanthropic Studies
  www.philanthropy.iupui.edu/Education/ma.aspx#curriculum
- University of Wisconsin Master of Science in Nonprofit Management and Leadership
  www4.uwm.edu/milwaukeeidea/hbi/education/curriculum.html
- The University of San Francisco Institute for Nonprofit Management has a teaching resource center where anyone can search for course syllabi that has been submitted by nonprofit management programs. Search for syllabi at www.inom-trc.org/TRC/courses

In order to complete your degree, nonprofit management graduate degree students may be required to complete a capstone project or thesis. A capstone project is an opportunity for you to apply the education you’ve received throughout the program by addressing a real issue and need in the community. It usually culminates in a written report and presentation. A thesis, on the other hand, is a written paper based on research that you have conducted on a topic relevant to nonprofit management and your area of interest.

- The Nonprofit Academic Centers Council has created a recommended core curriculum for nonprofit management studies; view the PDF at www.naccouncil.org/pdf/GradCG07.pdf
- The same organization offers a report on indicators of quality as a PDF at www.naccouncil.org/pdf/NACCpursuitExcellence%20-%20Final.pdf

Students and faculty

Programs may differ with regards to the students that matriculate. Your classmates may be relatively new to or transitioning into the field, with some experience volunteering, working with
a nonprofit, or participating in a national service program. The majority, hopefully, will have at least a few years of work experience, whether in the private, public, or nonprofit sectors, and bring varied perspectives and skills to the classroom.

Your faculty will have extensive knowledge of and experience in nonprofits and a variety of issue areas with individual areas of expertise and research interests. Many will also be very active in nonprofit organizations as consultants to, board members of, or even current staff.

**Who gets this degree and what do they go on to do?**

**Prior experience**

Most graduate schools in nonprofit management strongly recommend, and some require, at least two years of management, professional work, or significant volunteer experience in nonprofits before applying to their graduate program. “A graduate program will be more meaningful with work experience, particularly if cases or projects involving actual management situations are used in coursework,” according to Michael Bisesi, Seattle University’s Director of the Center for Nonprofit and Social Enterprise Management.

If you have not worked professionally in nonprofits, some ways to gain significant experience and insight into issues unique to nonprofits include:

- Participating in a national service program such as AmeriCorps*VISTA or Public Allies, or taking a Peace Corps assignment in a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in a developing country. Full-time service is a good way to develop professional skills while gaining experience in nonprofits.
- Sitting on the board of a nonprofit is an opportunity for professionals from the private or public sector to share their expertise with an organization and gain management skills in a nonprofit organization.
- Volunteering your skills for special projects is another way to explore nonprofit work, e.g., helping to write a grant if you are a good writer or maintaining a website and its content for a nonprofit.

**Career paths**

Most students of nonprofit management intend to stay within the nonprofit sector, using their degree to prepare for and transition into leadership positions at organizations of all sizes as staff or board members, and perhaps even founding their own nonprofits. Some typical job titles that graduates may qualify for include:

- Executive Director
- Assistant Director of Programs
- Chief Executive Officer
- Director, Marketing and Communications
- Vice President Finance and Administration
- Senior Business Development Officer
- Development Director

Others find that their education qualifies them for philanthropic work in the private sector or as consultants to nonprofits. The diversity of career opportunities is limited only by your own goals and interests.

Most executive nonprofit positions indicate a preference, if not a requirement, for a “masters in a related field” and/or equivalent experience. Here are a few sample job postings for management positions at nonprofits found at Idealist.org. A nonprofit management graduate degree would help prepare you for the following responsibilities and duties (italics added for emphasis):

**Executive Director**

**For a leading child welfare agency**

- Bachelors degree and preferably a Masters degree from a major college or university and will most likely have at least 15 years of increasingly responsible experience in an applicable setting
- Overseeing the organization, staffing, and operation and management of programs
- Developing and administering programs to achieve its missions and responsibilities
- Serving as the chief spokesperson for the organization

» Learn more about volunteering [www.idealist.org/volunteer](http://www.idealist.org/volunteer)
» Find volunteer opportunities [www.idealist.org/it/as/vol](http://www.idealist.org/it/as/vol)
» Learn more about volunteering as a board member [www.idealist.org/it/i/en/faqcat/3-1](http://www.idealist.org/it/i/en/faqcat/3-1)
• Hiring and supervising all staff, and fostering and offering opportunities for career growth, as well as for the training and development of staff
• Developing and/or recommending detailed financial operating plans on a program-by-program basis and on an overall organizational basis for ultimate approval by the Board of Directors

Director of Organizational Development, Administration, and Support

For a national legal agency for low-income and at-risk immigrants
• Graduate degree in a management or business field preferred, undergraduate degree and related experience acceptable
• Provide overall administrative management of the organization
• Direct the finance, planning, administrative support, and communication/marketing functions
• At least eight years of experience managing the functions inherent to the position, including proven ability and experience to strategically plan; systems knowledge of office technologies; familiarity with human resource practices; and familiarity with effective approaches to promoting organizations
• Excellent leadership, interpersonal, problem solving, communication, and organizational skills.

Managing Director

For a national nonprofit organization creating new education leaders
• Graduate degree required with five or more years of relevant professional experience; may include program management and implementation, development, marketing, launching of new initiatives, direct management of teams
• Provide strategic leadership to ensure local site vitality for the Los Angeles area team
• Create and lead a targeted development strategy and effectively pursue local funding opportunities to ensure that the Los Angeles area has adequate financial resources
• Manage and develop an exceptional local team including the Program Director, and Program Associate, and ensure the team’s growth and success in meeting local goals.
• Develop and leverage a local advisory board to support fundraising initiatives, guide strategic planning, enhance local networks of supporters, and contribute to overall public relations for the site
• Seek out and create opportunities to engage with the local education community to share the organization’s national and local vision and serve as the primary spokesperson for the organization within the local community in formal and informal settings including networking opportunities, conferences, panels, individual meetings with education stakeholders, etc.
• Lead efforts to identify and build a portfolio of local Partner organizations, maintain strong relationships with current Partners and develop new relationships with local education organizations
• Effectively utilize and manage the local site budget to implement the Program and sustain the local site-based team

What should I know about admissions?

Applying

Admissions staff recommend that prospective graduate students have a distinct vision of career goals before applying to a nonprofit management program. Applications require a personal statement or essay to describe these goals precisely. It is crucial that an applicant prepare essays and application materials meticulously, proving to the review committees that they can follow instructions and express their motivations to attend graduate school. Each program has its own requirements—many of the programs designed for working professionals do not require a graduate admissions test score if the minimum undergraduate GPA and years of work experience are met. More traditional programs for full-time students require either the GMAT or GRE.

Certificate program admissions are usually (but not always) less stringent than for the degree program, and often do not require a graduate admissions test score. Be sure to check with the programs you are interested in for specific instructions.

Financial aid

Admissions staff also recommend that prospective students pursue many avenues of financial aid early in their graduate school research. Since many students of nonprofit management also work for nonprofit organizations, Nadia Whiteside, M.A.,
Asst. Director of Recruitment & Alumni Affairs for Spertus College, says, “It is always advisable to determine if an employer (or organization with which one volunteers) is willing to support graduate studies, whether through flexible scheduling, tuition reimbursement, or additional responsibilities (leading projects, etc.).”

Universities themselves often offer scholarships and graduate assistantships that help cover the cost of tuition, fees, and expenses.

- A preliminary list of nonprofit management scholarships offered by different universities can be found at collegescholarships.org/scholarships/business/non-profit.htm
- Learn more about funding your graduate education www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/financing.html
- Learn about working while going to graduate school www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/studyoptions.html

**Conclusion and further resources**

A degree in nonprofit management can help prepare you for leadership positions within the nonprofit sector by providing you with a theoretical foundation in and practical skills for running a nonprofit. It can also provide you with opportunities to gain experience and connections within the field.

Its focus on the nonprofit setting makes the degree unique when compared with other degrees that have the option for a nonprofit concentration such as an MBA or MPA. Therefore nonprofit management programs tend to bring together students who are committed to a career in the nonprofit sector more than others.

On the value of her graduate education, Kate Church Shilvock, an alumna of the University of San Francisco Masters in Nonprofit Administration program, says, “I do believe I have already received a significant return, through the promotions I have received to date and the opportunities provided at work and in my community. Throughout the program, my employer knew of my involvement with the program, and gave me every opportunity to apply what I was learning to my daily work, which resulted in rapid career growth. My few years of nonprofit experience are augmented by my degree, placing me in the running for positions that could easily be viewed as beyond my level of experience. The most important thing that I believe my masters will bring me is showing potential future employers, in whatever field, that I pursued higher education. It shows them that I place a high value on personal growth and pursued an academic pursuit as far as I could go!”

**Nonprofit management quick links**

These links provide useful further reading on this degree area.

- Idealist Nonprofit FAQ
  www.idealist.org/npofaq
- Idealist Guide to Nonprofit Careers. Choose your preferred version and read Chapter One (“What exactly is a nonprofit?”)
  www.idealist.org/careerguide
- Seton Hall University Census and Report on Nonprofit Management Education
  http://tltc.shu.edu/npo/
- Nonprofit Academic Centers Council
  www.naccouncil.org

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- Public administration/affairs
- Business administration
- International affairs
- Get these overviews at www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/overviews.html