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Ideas for Professional Development in the Nonprofit Sector

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Ideas for Professional Development in the Nonprofit Sector

Cover Page Footnote

The Academy for Nonprofit Development and Leadership is facilitated by partnership between Murray State University's Nonprofit Resource Center, Continuing Adult and Regional Education office, and the regional campuses of Murray State University.

Thought Paper

Ideas for Professional Development in the Nonprofit Sector

TITLE

Ideas for Professional Development in the Nonprofit Sector

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Ideas for Professional Development in the Nonprofit Sector

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Abstract

Nonprofit organizations are frequently born out of need, passion, or personal experience. Although that can be sufficient to birth an organization, the requisite skills required to manage, administrate, and lead the organization long-term are sometimes lacking. Because both financial and human resources are stretched within the nonprofit sector, ideas that promote human resource development without overtaxing organizations financially are worth consideration. Maximizing the value of community partners and inter-sector collaboration serves to open opportunities for whole communities to improve their nonprofit sector's performance and capacity. This article presents a suggested format for a professional development program for nonprofit staff and volunteers that was conceived in rural, West Kentucky, and has been successfully executed and replicated in communities across the region.

The vast majority of nonprofit organizations are founded through the passionate labor of a small group of highly motivated and activated individuals. Their fervent desire to pursue their mission drives them into a cause that develops and grows until the nonprofit organization is formed. For many of those individuals, the cause that motivates them is the catalyst and the fact that they have not been trained to run an organization matters little in their eagerness to make a difference or affect change. Many nonprofit organizations are born in this manner. Need drives creation and the mission serves as inspiration (Backer, Bleeg, and Groves, 2004).

The passion that drives the ambition to make an impact in our individual areas of concern can birth an organization and can even help it grow at the beginning, but along the way, these inspired leaders often struggle far more than necessary because the passion that drove them to start the organization did not bring with it the requisite skills to run the organization. The initial energy that motivated them will eventually diminish as inspired leaders become exhausted in their labor, and without a stable organizational foundation, the organization might flounder, or even fail

(Carman and Nesbit, 2013). This is, too often, the case in the nonprofit sector.

The nonprofit and nongovernmental sector serves the critical role of filling in the gaps in service and opportunity that are unfulfilled by the public sector and either unfulfilled or unobtainable through the private sector. Community arts organizations are a wonderful example of this dynamic in action. The government often provides minimal arts access, and that is primarily offered through public school systems. Those who live in geographic areas of convenience, or with money to spend on arts enrichment might be able to pay for private arts education and enrichment opportunities. Nonprofit community arts organizations are able to fill the gap in service by thriving in rural or lower income spaces, providing opportunities to those who otherwise might not be able to experience that access. Within our space of service and mission, we can meet needs in a way uniquely our own, if only we have the tools and knowledge necessary to do so.

This thought paper presents one option for a professional development program for nonprofit professionals working in rural communities. This program serves to facilitate the training of nonprofit employees and volunteers in critical leadership and management education. The Academy of Nonprofit Development and Leadership (ANDL) was formed through partnerships with the Nonprofit Resource Center and Center for Adult and Regional Education at Murray State University in Murray, Kentucky, U.S. The curriculum was developed by Nonprofit Leadership faculty, local nonprofit leaders, and professional leadership consultants.

Through this educational opportunity, nonprofit leaders, board members, and aspiring nonprofit directors come together in a cohort of peers to learn both foundational and advanced theories, strategies, and direct applications that can improve their organizations. Leadership, fundraising, marketing, collaboration, volunteer management, and programming are just a sample of the topics covered in the program. ANDL equips nonprofits to be successful and

sustainable and fully engaged with their service populations, and broader community.

Participants in the inaugural program in Hopkinsville, Kentucky expressed great appreciation for the value of the program and its potential to improve their organizations. Other communities across the Western portion of the state expressed interest in bringing ANDL to their own towns and it has since been replicated in different communities every academic year. As of spring 2024 ANDL had also been hosted in Madisonville, Paducah, and Murray. The 2024/25 program returns to Hopkinsville and Paducah for a second cohort. Each community has experienced higher enrollment than the one before, offering an indication that the program's value is being shared across the network of nonprofit organizations in the region. As of this writing, over 100 nonprofit organizations have participated in the program.

The framework for this program model is a potentially useful resource for those considering avenues for nonprofit practitioner training in their own communities. As this model has been successfully replicated in diverse communities across the West Kentucky region, it is reasonable to consider it might be worth exploring for those in other regions. Particularly in rural communities with limited access to higher education, programs like this can be uniquely valuable.

Walters (2020) identified a series of problems confronting rural America, including but not limited to poverty, rising crime, poor health networks, and poorly funded education. The nonprofit sector is critical in rural communities, providing services or access to services unmet by the public and private sectors. Walters explored whether the current capacity of these organizations enables them to continue meeting the needs of their constituencies. The study concluded that knowledge in rural organizations is limited with regard to "knowledge of and engagement in strategic planning, succession planning, human resources processes, staff

training, legal compliance and monitoring, program evaluation, and internal and external communications processes with stakeholders" (p. 85). Research around the current realities and challenges facing rural communities supports Walters' conclusions (Kieffer and Socolof, 2024; Clinger, Handley, and Eaton, 2023).

One identified means of increasing the capacity of nonprofit organizations is training (Backer, Bleeg, and Groves, 2004). However, often the organizations most in need of training are also the least able to financially support their managers' pursuit of the necessary education (Kapucu, Healy, and Arslan, 2011). Rural nonprofits often face challenges when trying to hire qualified employees, so programs that train existing employees are worth pursuing. Insufficient staffing, training, and technology are all identified as particular challenges for rural organizations (Arneal, 2015).

Kieffer (2020) concluded that many nonprofit arts organizations are operated by people with specialized training in various art forms but lacking administrative or managerial experience or education. This phenomenon occurs across the nonprofit sector, not merely within the arts and culture. (Remember the passionate spark first mentioned). To confront this experiential deficit, Kieffer suggested the advancement of professional development opportunities for on-the-job nonprofit leaders to acquire the specific administrative knowledge required to successfully lead their organizations. Because of the important gaps filled by rural nonprofits, the program described below was designed to strengthen the infrastructure of organizations serving one particular community in Western Kentucky.

The Program

In addition to the Nonprofit Leadership Studies program for undergraduate and graduate students, Murray State University also houses a Nonprofit Resource Center (NRC). The NRC was created specifically to bring the theories and research of NLS professors and instructors into practice out in the community. The NRC serves as a repository of information, guidance, and other professional development services to regional nonprofit organizations. The connection between

these two entities was designed to train future nonprofit leaders, while simultaneously supporting the current sector with knowledgeable technical assistance. The NRC strives to strengthen both the university and the surrounding community nonprofit sector by serving as a sort of conduit for symbiosis.

As in many other locales, in the Western Kentucky region nonprofit leaders play a vital role. Despite their communities reliance on program offerings, nonprofit executives often face the challenges of inadequate funding, lack of volunteers, and limited professional development opportunities. ANDL was designed to provide a practical solution to this dilemma. The eight seminars focused on critical issues for nonprofit leaders, including program development, financial management, support resources, communications, marketing, and more. At the conclusion of the year, participants received a Certificate in Nonprofit Leadership and Continuing Education credits (CEU's).

Replication

The program's first iteration in Hopkinsville (HANDL) prompted directors of other Murray State regional campuses to bring the program into their communities, as well. In each community there is required buy-in at the community, organizational, and individual level. Local community is required to commit to the underwriting costs that primarily support payments for instructors and educational supplies for participants. This can be done through one large donation or many smaller gifts, but the intention is that the local community recognizes the value of professional development for their nonprofit sector and supports them through financial investment in the program.

At the organizational level, a nominal tuition fee is required. This fee can be paid by the individual, and a few scholarships are made available, but the purpose of the fee is to ensure organizational support of their employee-participant in the program for the year-long commitment. Finally, the individual participant is required to pay a small registration fee. This is specifically intended to ensure that each participant is personally invested in the program and committed to its completion. Through these methods, there is strategic commitment to the ANDL program from

community, organization, and individual. In the three communities where this program has concluded, these methods have been successful and well-received.

Curriculum

The ANDL curriculum follows priorities set by the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council and was informed by nonprofit management educators, practitioners, and consultants.

Seminar 1 – “Your Nonprofit Organization.”

This session clarifies purpose, mission, and goals. Participants establish a clear understanding of their organization's unique place within their community. The content of the session focused on effective leadership strategies in nonprofit organizational development, and creative methods for strengthening the impact on the organization's mission. It set the stage for upcoming sessions that examined structure, governance, and strategic planning.

Seminar 2 – “Strategic Leadership: Beyond Business as Usual.”

This session emphasized organizational strategy as a mission-critical necessity to achieve organizational success. It taught participants how to strategically lead in order to successfully bring together diverse stakeholder groups, capable of developing and implementing robust strategies that are equal to the magnitude of the problems they are trying to solve. In this session, students learned leadership characteristics, along with personal and organizational tactics and tools to inspire progress, engage collaborators, adapt to changes, and advance their nonprofit's vision.

Seminar 3 – “Funding and Financial Sustainability.”

This session emphasized the creative and leading role that funding plays in organizational effectiveness and served to build a working appreciation for financial management functions, and establish an interconnected and collaborative strategy for fund development, financial management, and long-term sustainability. The content of the session included the fundamentals of financial management and development, including quality practices and proven strategies for fundraising and financial sustainability.

Seminar 4 - "Engaging the Nonprofit Sector Support Resources and Infrastructure."

This session explored the nonprofit sector's support resources, specifically highlighting those available to the current cohort of students. They identified those that most align with organizational needs and challenges and were equipped to continue this independently following the completion of the session. Students mapped their local nonprofit sector infrastructure and support systems, built a plan of action and schedule for engaging support resources and infrastructure. Participants were guided on distributing responsibility to key stakeholders for exploring and connecting with available opportunities. This session's content focused on understanding the organization's potential place in the larger system and strategies for engaging and capitalizing on available resources.

Seminar 5 - "Communications, Marketing, and Branding."

In this session students developed a quality understanding of the key elements of effective communication. They examined the different framing and applications of communication, explored examples of effective and ineffective applications, designed a customized marketing strategy for their organizations, considered the role of branding in their organization's work, and developed a plan of work for integrating those lessons into the organization's ongoing strategic plan. The content of the session served to improve understanding of the range of effective communication methods, the basis for the selection of most appropriate methods, and strategies for accomplishing information goals. The session demonstrated the need for an integrated set of communications activities that help improve public understanding and appreciation, engage participants, demonstrate results, and garner support.

Seminar 6 - "Broadening Your Circle of Support and Capacity."

This session worked participants through mapping the people and organizations that support the organization's constituents and are dedicated to their mission. Participants developed strategies to build or strengthen relationships and formal connections across their maps. They were exposed to the value of creating of a formal network of kindred spirits to promote collaboration and support for their mission. They were enabled to identify starting points for

cooperative efforts that might enhance the mission of their organizations. The content of the session focused on claiming the public space, being valued as a community resource, and owning the right to be engaged in leadership roles across the community on activities that relate to their organization's mission.

Seminar 7 - "Strengthening and Motivating Volunteers and Staff."

Students broadened their understanding of quality practice in nonprofit volunteer and staff development. They explored the emerging commitment to "peer-owned and led" human resource engagement, practiced a range of team building methods, and established a set of next steps to take toward stronger engagement and commitment with staff and volunteers. Finally, participants identified methods of assessing their progress. The content of the session included needs analysis practices and the development of human resource structures, effective strategies for management and supervision, and the roles of leadership in organizational, board, and individual performance assessment.

Seminar 8 - "Effective Organization and Program Delivery."

In this session, students studied quality practices of organizational and program evaluation. They created a customized logic model to guide evaluation and assessment, increased understanding of comprehensive organizational development strategies, established a plan of action for implementing a strategic planning process customized to the organization, and practiced the art of identifying priorities and articulating goals that align with the mission. Students were invited to commit to the application of the lessons learned throughout the certification sessions. The content of the final session included basic program development approaches that ensure collective alignment with organizational mission and strategies. The focus was on the identification of guiding principles and impact indicators that advance the mission and upon which programs are developed and evaluated (HANDL, 2021).

Participant Feedback

Participants of the program in each of the communities provided feedback on individual sessions, as well as on the program as a whole. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive.

"This program provided an extended foundation to many non-profit principles that I already knew and gave me insight in how to grow the organization."

In addition to the curricular knowledge that is built into the program, the networking that inevitably results from participating in a 9-month program has proven to be one of the greatest values for participating organizations. "I appreciated the opportunity to build relationships with other nonprofit practitioners in our community. . . The comradery among students--the partnerships--the bonds we developed. They are all so valuable to me."

As the program continues, organizations return but with different individual participants. This can be interpreted as an endorsement of the quality of the offering and the perceived value it brings. One participant succinctly said, "This program is an asset."

Conclusion

There is much about the nonprofit sector that is not all that dissimilar from any other business. We need to be able to balance our budgets, work with people, feed our resource engine, things any other business manager would have to do. What makes us unique, and what must absolutely define every choice, every conversation, every interaction, is our mission.

It is the final recommendation that this program be replicated and repeated in other communities. The ANDL program succeeds because it relies on partnerships between the university, the community, and the regional community foundation. The facilitators of this specific program successfully replicate it in communities across Western Kentucky every academic year. The request from our region has been that the program continue in each community on a rotation. By seeking such partnerships, this program could provide necessary training to nonprofit leaders in other communities and regions, further increasing the capacity of the nonprofit sector in those communities.

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