

Advancing Nonprofit Careers
By Holly Hall

When Elizabeth W. Gerner began running the Simmons Family Foundation, a \$20-million fund created by her grandparents, she felt at a disadvantage. She was just 23 and knew nothing about grant making. What's more, some nonprofit veterans assumed she had been hired simply because of her close ties to her grandparents.

"My family asked me if I'd like to run the foundation, and I did it without knowing anything," she recalls. "I realized I needed to learn more."

To get the training she needed, Ms. Gerner, who is now 31, turned to the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy where, in 2003, she earned dual master's degrees in philanthropic studies and nonprofit administration while continuing to work part time at the foundation, in Farmington, Utah. The degrees, she says, "legitimize me in the eyes of grant seekers and grant-making colleagues."

Her education has also made her a better philanthropist, Ms. Gerner says. As an example, she points to an organization that the foundation decided to stop supporting after she and several family members learned that it did not have an effective program to recruit volunteers or anyone to manage them.

"Knowing how valuable volunteer coordination is from my education really pointed up how this was not working," she says. That charity, she notes, has since hired a volunteer coordinator, and the foundation has resumed supporting it.

Expanded Offerings

Educational programs like the one Ms. Gerner pursued have grown increasingly common over the last decade, with more than 250 colleges and universities offering certificates and master's and even doctoral-level degrees in nonprofit management, fund raising, and related topics. (A national list of such programs is available online.)

While executive recruiters and nonprofit employers are quick to say that they value experience over education when they recruit charity leaders, more and more advertisements for senior nonprofit positions stipulate that an advanced degree is required or preferred.

While some graduates of the nonprofit-degree programs point to areas where the educational offerings could be improved, most give high marks to the training they receive, whether they start their studies at the beginning of their career or after many years on the job. Many students say they are doing a better job of helping their organization improve because of what they learned through graduate study.

"I am more confident and assured in speaking with the budget director because of the accounting courses I took and also with the technology people because of the course on emerging technologies," says George Calderaro, a communications officer at Columbia University who earned a master's degree in nonprofit management last year from the New School, in New York.

To meet the requirements for obtaining a nonprofit degree, Corrie Maki-Knudson, a fund raiser, revamped the way Loyola University Medical Center

interacts with donors who make large gifts, including those who give money to endowed fellowships. That project qualified for credits she needed to obtain her master of management in nonprofit administration from North Park University, in Chicago.

Now, instead of providing information to donors sporadically, the medical center automatically gives them an individually tailored report each year to describe how it used their gifts.

"Donors are very happy, and we've received repeat gifts," says Ms. Maki-Knudson. "One donor we hadn't heard anything from in years gave me a check for \$25,000 after getting his first endowment report" about what the center did with a gift from his family.

To earn her master's degree from the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Case Western Reserve University, in Cleveland, Yvonne M. Brake, director of development at Haven of Rest Ministries, an Akron, Ohio, homeless shelter, helped her organization complete a rigorous, 10-month strategic-planning project that examined the organization and its role in the region. That project, Ms. Brake says, made shelter officials recognize the necessity and benefits of gaining support from local groups. It formed a speaker's bureau that began making presentations to civic groups, churches, and schools and engaging them in volunteering at the shelter and other projects.

Moving Up

In many cases, graduates say that nonprofit degrees help them advance in their careers much faster than they would otherwise. Robert Grimm received a master's degree in philanthropic studies while obtaining a Ph.D. in history from Indiana University.

In 2002, after completing the master's degree, Mr. Grimm was hired by the Corporation for National and Community Service, and, three years ago, at age 30, he was promoted to director of research and policy development, a senior position in the federal agency that oversees AmeriCorps and other programs to encourage volunteering.

"Having the graduate degree was a reason for getting my first job here," Mr. Grimm says. "And having that education allowed me to move up quickly."

Some graduate students move right from the classroom into jobs at top-tier nonprofit institutions in their region. One example is Caroline Altman Smith of the Lumina Foundation for Education, in Indianapolis, the second largest grant-making institution in Indiana with assets of \$1.3-billion.

Ms. Smith was earning a master's degree at Indiana University Center on Philanthropy when she landed an internship position at Lumina as a part-time graduate assistant.

After working at the Lumina fund 20 hours a week, Ms. Smith was offered a job as an associate program officer there when she graduated in 2004. And last year, she was promoted to a program officer's position. With the graduate studies and internship, Ms. Smith says, "I was able to jump into my professional life a lot more smoothly than I would have without the training."

From Corporations to Charities

Graduate degrees in nonprofit studies can be particularly useful to seasoned professionals seeking to leave a corporate career for a charitable one, according to executive recruiters who help nonprofit organizations find and hire senior-level employees.

"A lot of people in the for-profit arena contact my firm and say they are interested in a nonprofit job," says Kate Hartnick Elliott, president of Hartnick Consulting, a New York firm that conducts about 10 searches each month for charities. For people in the business world, she says, "a degree can serve as proof of their interest" to employers who might otherwise question their qualifications for charity work.

After 20 years in the insurance industry, Beth Leuck credits her master's degree in public-service management from DePaul University, in Chicago, with helping her land a nonprofit job seven years ago as executive director of the United Way of the Hinsdale Area.

And in 2003, she accepted her current position as executive director of the La Grange Memorial Hospital Foundation, in Illinois. "It helped me get the United Way job and helped me get this job," Ms. Leuck says of her degree. "It was a great combination of the practical business information you need, plus the theory behind it. It's like an M.B.A. for nonprofits."

But not every student is as happy as Ms. Leuck with nonprofit graduate-studies programs. Some people who have pursued degrees think that the course work should be expanded to better meet the needs of differing careers in the nonprofit world or that recruitment efforts be widened so that a more diverse group of students attends.

Kathleen Odne, executive director of the Dean & Margaret Leshner Foundation, in Walnut Creek, Calif., obtained a master's degree from the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy and recalls that "most of the people in my program were fund raisers."

She says she wishes more students had come from the foundation world. "This is important for us because we make so many decisions around resource allocation," says Ms. Odne.

"Out of 12 to 14 people, there were three foundation people," she recalls. "The three of us encouraged the center to reach out to foundations and program officers, but I don't know what happened."

Indiana University officials say that they have since made efforts to appeal to students interested in foundation work by adding material to existing courses and introducing a new three-day workshop on grant making that begins in September.

Other students in nonprofit continuing-education programs find that university officials have done little to ensure that instructors are teaching complementary topics that add up to a well-rounded course of study.

Nicole Camboni, a 26-year-old assistant in Northwestern University's development office, is now enrolled in the third and final course of Northwestern's Philanthropy and Nonprofit Fundraising, a certification program that her boss encouraged her to complete.

"The classes have been repetitive," she says. "I think the instructors should talk to each other about what they are presenting, but I don't think they do."

In every course, she adds, "we have gone over the fact that individuals give the most, we go over the Giving USA statistics in detail. This is something I am really tired of seeing."

Several alumni of academic programs for nonprofit officials say that colleges and universities should pay more attention to what happens after people complete their certificates and degrees.

Most institutions offering such credentials "do not have any formal career-counseling programs," says Heather Carpenter, 28, who holds a master's degree in nonprofit administration from North Park University.

Ms. Carpenter, assistant director of Aspiration, a San Francisco group that helps charities with technology needs, writes a blog about nonprofit issues where she recently described an informal survey she did to find out whether 164 universities with nonprofit master's degrees offer career counseling specifically geared to the nonprofit-career goals of graduates in those programs.

More than half did not respond, and fewer than 50 said that some or all career counseling for their students is provided by faculty members or others with nonprofit expertise.

Ms. Carpenter, however, is quick to say that she is pleased with the career advice she got at North Park University, where the instructors urged her to start her own management-consulting business for charities, which she now operates on nights and weekends.

And like many graduates of such programs, she cites another big career benefit from her course work: a collegial group of fellow students, most of whom are already working at nonprofit organizations. In many cases, they provide as much, if not more, information about the nonprofit world as the instructors.

"My cohort was from 14 states and three countries," says Michael Morsberger, a senior development officer at Duke University who earned a master's degree in philanthropy and development from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. "We had a guy from a soup kitchen in Alaska, a philanthropist from Chicago, and someone from the Coca-Cola Foundation," he recalls. "With such a diverse group, the discussions were great."

Fellow students often provide a supportive group of peers who are available to graduates long after they complete their nonprofit studies.

"We still keep in touch, primarily through e-mail," says Jon Gossett of the students he met while earning his Saint Mary's master's degree nearly a decade ago.

"From time to time I contact a great planned-giving professional who was in the program and seek out his advice," says Mr. Gossett, now the chief fund raiser for Minnesota Public Radio. "And if you just want to vent, it's nice to have people out of your day-to-day universe."

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CONTINUING-EDUCATION GUIDE

Does Continuing Education Matter? What Headhunters Think

By Holly Hall

Executive recruiters who help charities hire chief executives, fund raisers, and other key employees have differing views about the certificate and graduate-degree programs for nonprofit leaders being offered by a growing number of colleges and universities nationwide. At issue are questions about the quality of the educational programs, whether they help students advance in their careers, how they are viewed by prospective employers, and whether they are helping the nonprofit world as a whole.

The Chronicle spoke with five executive recruiters for their views. Here are excerpts from the conversations:

Richard Murray

Paschal Murray, Indio, Calif.

"A lot of local universities have an extension course on philanthropy or a specialty within a master's program, and they bring in local fund raisers and nonprofit officials to be their instructors. The teaching often isn't up to par. We see people teaching who couldn't get a job and know nothing about education. I have seen the ones they hire; so often they are just not experts."

"These degrees help – it sets a person apart and shows an interest in the field. We would prefer candidates with a course of study in fund raising and philanthropy, and I do think employers look at this. But the bottom line is the chemistry that you generate with the search committee. Getting to that interview is the important part, and if you have those skills on paper, it helps you get in the door. Nobody ever hires anyone just because you have a degree. There is more to it than that."

Susan Egmont

Egmont Associates, Boston

"Graduate school is particularly valuable for people in nonprofit-leadership roles. Courses on volunteer management, fund-raising management, and board management are so important, especially board management. Board management is the reason that nonprofit CEO's fail and the reason they succeed. It is the key thing that nonprofit executives need to know. So a program with a strong board-management course is critical, along with fund-raising management and volunteer management, because you will not get these with an M.B.A. I have an M.B.A., and I know."

"These degree programs are seen as a plus by the boards I work with. These board members are not nonprofit-management specialists, and they are thrilled to find a candidate who is. It is a dynamite combination if you have both experience and the management degree. Candidates who have a degree in

nonprofit management offer a high degree of commitment and professionalism. Before these programs, people thought that anyone could be a nonprofit manager, and many people kind of fell into nonprofit management. People with these degrees are not here by accident. They are here by choice."

Kate Hartnick Elliott

Hartnick Consulting, New York

"Nobody has ever asked me to put in the job requirements that someone have a nonprofit certificate or degree. But because we are in a succession crisis and the industry is going through changes where you need more accountability, transparency, and board oversight, the skills taught in these programs are becoming more important."

Lynda McKay

Campbell & Company, Chicago

"Credentials can be helpful in terms of getting people's attention, but wisdom and the ability and a track record of execution will always trump credentials. When I interview, I want someone who has faced challenge and addressed it. Yes, knowledge helps you do that, but it's the ability to take that knowledge and do something with it that makes people successful. These graduate degrees in nonprofit management will get my attention if we have a lot of interested individuals, particularly if the person is from a known, high-quality institution. That person will get moved to the top of the list. But whether or not they get presented to our client will be based on their ability to demonstrate success."

"Some individuals don't see their career going anywhere, and it is not because of lack of knowledge, it is because of a lack of ability to accomplish results. Sometimes those individuals think that another degree will help. That is not what they need. What they really need is the ability to face challenges and see them not as a brick wall, but as a challenge in which they ask, 'How do I get around this and become successful regardless?' Maybe you have a lousy relationship with the boss and the resources are not adequate. Well, that is just part of the game – you have to figure out how to be successful in spite of those challenges. When people are hiring CEO's or even a direct report to the CEO, they are really looking for this type of track record, not a degree."

Henry Maly

Maly Executive Search, Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.

"Our clients are not enamored of these programs. However, what we've found is that when people are graduates, they are well trained and their mind-set is stronger relative to best practices. They are more aware of what's happening in the industry. Graduates of these programs are on the fast track. These programs are speeding up their on-the-job learning curve. They are better prepared and better professionals. I am all for these programs because they put a better group of trained professionals in our industry."

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