Dilemmas in Academic Mission:
Building Research Capacity in Nonprofits or in Academia?

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This paper outlines a series of challenges and opportunities faced by universities in attempting to build capacities in nonprofit organizations (NPOs), and also their own capacities for research. These challenges are not simply operational, but are fundamental to organizational vision and mission. In particular, there is a tension between highly applied research designed to train and benefit nonprofit managers, and research that aims more deeply to examine the nonprofit sector of society.

The emphasis of this paper is on two questions: What is the role of nonprofit academic programs within the broader mission of their universities? What does this imply for the kinds of capacities we seek to build through research?

The Changing Context of Nonprofit Academic Programs

The emergence of nonprofit studies as a recognized field of enquiry and training in university settings is very recent. A number of observers have noted that the first nonprofit programs at U.S. universities emerged in the early 1980s, but grew to over 240 programs by the year 2000, and are projected potentially to double by 2005 (Heydemann 2004, O'Neill 2004, Mirabella and Wish 2001).[1]

The implications of this growth for the development of research on the third sector in the United States are far reaching. At least three trends are apparent. First, as noted by O'Neill (2004), this rapid development appears to be leading towards a formal "professionalization" of the field. It is plausible that graduate programs in nonprofit management and education will go the way of other professions such as business, architecture, urban planning, public administration, engineering, law, and medicine — in the sense of establishing accredited educational programs with attendant training requirements, professional societies, and codes of ethics. Perhaps the closest parallels lie with business, public administration, and urban planning, which typically offer two-year master degrees and professional certifications.[2]

The second trend involves turnover rates among executive directors of nonprofit organizations, and a growing demand for capable leaders. In the Pittsburgh area, for example, it is expected that leadership turnover will range from 15 to 35 percent in the next two years, and climbing steeply to 61 to 78 percent within the next five years. This is not an exception, with New York City expecting the retirement of 45 percent of its nonprofit directors within five years, and similar patterns apparent nationwide (Forbes Funds, 2004; Light 1999).

A third trend, as noted by Heydemann (2004), concerns the growth of academic "centers" or institutes of nonprofit management, rather than the development of the field within academic disciplines (such as sociology, economics, history, and political science). While the growth in centers is likely a partial result of market forces — such as the professionalization of the field and the lucrative training market this offers to universities — Heydemann's greatest concern is what this portends for research in the field. He sees a growing gap between nonprofit studies programs and the traditional disciplines which, "underscores the extent to which the field of

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[1] The papers by Heydemann (2004) and O'Neill (2004) were circulated as part of a recent conference on "Education for a Civil Society" held by The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University in Indianapolis, from October 31-November 2, 2004.

[2] See O'Neill (2004) for an overview of the emergence of a number of these professional fields.

nonprofit studies is becoming organized around the provision of technical expertise and the training of nonprofit managers rather than the development of discipline-based research programs designed to deepen our understanding of philanthropy and the nonprofit sector and the crucial role that each plays in American life" (2004: 3).

These three trends pose some fundamental questions for those of us in nonprofit programs in universities. For programs that aim to conduct research, the questions include:

- What is the mission of our program/center and how does this translate into research?
- What is the relationship of our research with the emerging profession and with traditional disciplines? Is it possible or desirable to manage the tension between professional training and disciplinary research?
- What do these tensions imply for the kinds of capacities that we seek to build through research? How do we plan to build those capacities?

The answers to these questions are likely to differ across universities, although collective discussions can guide individual organizational considerations. More fundamentally, however, these questions concern the very purpose of universities in creating fields of knowledge. The remainder of this paper begins to explore some of these questions for the case of an emerging nonprofit program at Virginia Tech.

The University Context

Land Grant universities, such as Virginia Tech, are characterized by a tripartite mission that involves a commitment to research, teaching, and community outreach. Land grant institutions were originally established through lands provided by the federal government in order to service rural communities particularly in fields of agricultural and mechanical (or "A&M") knowledge. While many such universities maintain agricultural extension stations and services to this day, these services have been among the first to go in recent state budgetary crises. As with many land grant institutions across the country, Virginia Tech's service mission has gradually given way to its research mission in priority for a number of reasons:

- Global economic shifts have made it less attractive for land grant institutions to remain focused on the vocational dimensions of agricultural and polytechnical fields. Instead, as centers of knowledge and learning, universities wish to be known for their cutting-edge research. Not surprisingly, this is driven in part by external grants provided for research, particularly in new technologies and industrial processes.

- Performance incentives to faculty (i.e., promotion and tenure) favor the production of research that is published in peer-reviewed journals. In and of itself, this is a system that works fairly well in producing quality research that is subject to a reasonably transparent process of critique and review. It is also a system that encourages the building of new knowledge. But this system is less encouraging of community-level research and capacity building that does not result in peer-reviewed publications or substantial research dollars.

- The reputation and authority of faculty, both among peers and students, rests on the "expert" knowledge that they are able to produce. Community research partnerships do

not easily lend themselves to an expert-trainee hierarchy, where faculty must admit that frequently we do not possess the experience or the understanding of challenges facing communities and nonprofits.

For the field of nonprofit studies, the growth in an emphasis on research in land grant universities has emerged concurrently with a rise in demand for professional training programs in nonprofit management. Masters degrees may be financially attractive for land grant universities, particularly in the fields of business administration, public administration, and nonprofit management. For faculty who teach in these programs, a central dilemma lies in reconciling the emphasis on research (and particularly research dollars) with the training of professionals. Part of the response appears to be a focus on applied research at the organizational level, along with fees-based contracts for management training provision or other services such as program evaluation for government agencies.[3] This contributes to the tension noted above — between applied research and training focused on management practices, and more theorized forms of disciplinary research. It is thus not uncommon to hear, among academics who attend conferences such as ARNOVA, two polarized refrains:

- "The field of nonprofit research is characterized by work that is heavily under-theorized or atheoretical;" or,
- "There is an urgent need to bridge the research-practice divide by working more closely with practitioners on applied issues that makes a difference in the lives of nonprofits."

The first refrain suggests that research quality can be enhanced by more actively engaging the disciplines in examining and theorizing the nonprofit sector, and linking scholars who identify primarily with their disciplines to those who identify primarily with the nonprofit field. This would provide both deeper disciplinary analyses of the nonprofit sector, while also nurturing cross disciplinary work. The field of business administration and management has had some success in this regard, especially in drawing on organizational sociology for its foundational research on firms. In contrast, the second refrain is buttressed by views from nonprofit organizations, community-based organizations, and even foundations that are strongly application based:

- With missions that prioritize social change, nonprofits are largely "doers" that have little patience and resources (of time and money) for research projects that have unclear benefits. NPOs are disinclined to engage with universities in research at all, unless a clear case can be made for its relevance to and impact on their own practice.

- When NPOs do engage in research, they want it to have immediate applications. They lose patience with conceptual models that don't seem to have direct relevance. It is difficult, and perhaps unrealistic, for NPOs to have that patience when resources of time and money are scarce.

- Funders of nonprofits are particularly interested in research that improves organizational effectiveness and performance. For example, research on "outcome management" and

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[3] This statement, among many in this section, is impressionistic and not based on empirical validation.

"high performance" can be useful, but direct the benefits or more conceptual and historical work are less apparent.

It is noteworthy that, in this climate, the Independent Sector has eliminated its research programs, and the Nonprofit Sector Research Fund of the Aspen Institute has moved from broad-based calls for proposals to highly specific requests (e.g., research on community foundations in 2003, and on the funding of nonprofit overhead in 2004). A central challenge for nonprofit scholars, be they based in disciplinary departments or academic centers, lies in examining their institutional missions and considering the role of the university in creating fields of knowledge. There appears to be general agreement that building research capacity in and on the nonprofit sector is central to our purpose, but the tensions lie in identifying the kinds of research capacity to be built.

Developing Nonprofit Research Capacity at Virginia Tech

The remainder of this paper outlines current efforts to build nonprofit research capacity at Virginia Tech. My representation of the process here is not intended to suggest unanimity among key players, but it does reflect an ethos of considered debate on the role and mission of a major land grant institution and of nonprofit scholars within that institutional context. This description is provided with the caveat that it reflects my imposition of order on what continues necessarily to be a messy an iterative process.

Virginia Tech currently offers a concentration in nonprofit organizations and management to its undergraduate and graduate students within the School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA). As part of a recent university re-organization, SPIA contains three main academic programs: Urban Affairs and Planning (UAP), The Center for Public Administration and Policy (CPAP), and Government and International Affairs (GIA). The first of these two programs, particularly at the graduate level, are largely professional in orientation with accredited masters degrees. Both also have thriving doctoral programs. The third, GIA, consists largely of faculty rooted in disciplines (especially political science and sociology) but offers a multidisciplinary masters and doctoral degree in Public and International Affairs.

In other words, the constitution of SPIA is both professional and disciplinary. This is also reflected in the recently created Institute for Governance and Accountabilities (IGA) which is responsible for the school's nonprofit studies programs. IGA conducts research in four key areas:

Accountability
Capacity Building
Social and Organizational Learning
Collaborative Governance Structures and Processes

Our research projects aim to bridge theory and practice – by developing theoretical insights that are grounded in and relevant to practice in nongovernmental organizations and governments in both the global North and South. For example, our research on "accountability" is not limited to an examination of oversight and disclosure requirements for nonprofits. Instead, we aim to understand social constructions of the concept and their implications for institutionalization in the sector. This work is both theoretical and applied. For the area of "capacity building," which has largely been the domain of practitioners, our aim is to create a body of grounded theory for

systematically analyzing, critiquing, and enhancing activities that build capacity in nonprofit organizations and in society more broadly.

<u>What We Mean by Capacity Building</u>

In the literature on nonprofit organizations in the United States, *capacity* is often defined as "the ability of nonprofit organizations to fulfill their missions in an effective manner" (McPhee and Bare, 2001: 1) or as "a set of attributes that help or enable an organization to fulfill its missions" (Eisinger, 2002: 117) *Capacity building*, as such, involves "strengthening nonprofits so they can achieve their mission," and typically involves two key steps: 1) an assessment of organizational needs and assets; and, 2) an intervention, often in the form of management consultation, training, or technical assistance, usually coupled with some form of financial support to the NPO (Backer, 2001: 31-33). Capacity building may thus be seen as integrated with organizational effectiveness, where effectiveness refers to mission achievement.[4]

It is significant, however, that most perspectives on capacity building focus on single organizations. This is an atomized view of capacity building, perhaps indicative of a lack of coherence in the nonprofit sector as a whole. A much broader perspective on capacity building is provided in the literature on NGOs in the global South. Table 1, taken from the work of Fowler (1997:188) demonstrates that capacity building can be targeted at three different levels: an organization, an institutional subsector, and broader civil society. The typology suggests that while capacity building efforts have tended to focus on the level of single organizations, it would make sense to consider their sectoral and societal implications and contexts in order to better understand and facilitate broader change. Smillie attributes the limited success of fifty years of capacity building in international development to its focus on the upper-left sector of the table (on means and single organizations). Arguably, many capacity building efforts among nonprofits in the United States and elsewhere retain in this emphasis today.

Table 1: Concepts of Capacity Building

Level of Intervention	Means	Process	Ends
Organization	Strengthens the organization's ability to perform specific functions	Builds coherence within internal operations; develops the possibility of continued learning and adaptation	Improves the organization's viability, sustainability, and impact in relation to its mission
Institutional sector or subsector	Strengthens ability of the sector or subsector to improve its overall impact	Develops mutually supporting relations and understandings within the sector	Achieves meaningful interaction with other sectors and social actors based on shared strategies and learning
Civil society	Improves abilities of primary stakeholders to identify and carry out activities to solve problems.	Enables and stimulates better interaction, communication, conflict resolution in society, enhancing social capital	Increases abilities of primary stakeholders to engage with and influence political and socioeconomic arenas.

Source: Adapted from Fowler (1997:188) and Smillie (2001: 11).

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[4] For two useful models of capacity building, see reports by the Urban Institute and McKinsey & Company (De Vita and Fleming, 2001; McKinsey & Company, 2001).

What does this very brief discussion of capacity building suggest for building *research* capacity? Even if one focuses at the organizational level, it may be worthwhile turning the gaze of capacity building onto ourselves.   How are we to strengthen our own abilities (within disciplines or academic centers) to achieve our missions?

The answers vary based on institutional missions, and their interpretations. At the Institute of Governance and Accountabilities, we are conscious of the tripartite mission of land grant institutions. As scholars, we value research that enables new theoretical developments and conceptual insights into the third sector. But as scholars within a land grant institution that also serves local communities, we see a potential for research to contribute to tangible social change. At a time of land grant retrenchment, in which universities are severely cutting their community outreach efforts in order to emphasize disciplinary research, we see nonprofit education programs as potentially providing an alternative model — of using research as a basis for building "analytical" and "adaptive" capacity in the nonprofit sector, in the students we educate, and in the Institute itself. I define these two terms as follows:

> *Analytical Capacity* is the ability to step back and reflect on one's reality; to identify structural factors and processes that shape the sector.

> *Adaptive Capacity* is the use of analytical capacity to change actions as circumstances change.[5]

Research is a vehicle for building both analytical and adaptive capacity. Implications for building capacity in the nonprofit sector, in our own institutions, and among the cadre of future nonprofit leaders and scholars we educate, are each examined below.

Building Capacity in the Institute for Governance and Accountabilities

Within our own university, and particularly within IGA, our key challenges for building analytical and adaptive capacity are twofold:

- Conducting research that adds depth to our understanding of the third sector. Such research should aim to build new theory and knowledge on the sector and its place in broader society. Such research must necessarily draw upon and integrate disciplinary knowledge and conceptualizations of the sector.
- Conducting research that is relevant to nonprofit communities, particularly in the state of Virginia, as part of the university's land grant mission. Such research should be applied, so that nonprofit organizations see tangible benefits emerging from it. But it should be informed by our deeper analytical research agenda.

These two challenges are not irreconcilable. Ideally, our research agenda will aim to use applied research as a basis for complementing and reflecting upon deeper issues and research on the

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[5] In the literature on organizational behavior, this definition is similar to that of organizational learning (e.g.,Fiol and Lyles, 1985: 803; Levitt and March, 1988: 320) except that it does not specify the organization as the unit of analysis. The notion of adaptive capacity is also discussed by Connolly and York (2003) in the context of management support organizations.

sector. Linkages between the two can be deliberately developed as part of an overall strategy for the Institute.

A current example involves our research on accountability in the sector. In building our own analytical capacity, we are examining different conceptual and disciplinary ways of framing the notion of accountability through scholarship that involves collaboration among faculty from different disciplines (e.g.,Ebrahim and Weisband, under review), as well as through an inter-university workshop on accountability jointly organized with the Center for Democracy and the Third Sector (CDATS) at Georgetown University. Our aim here is to challenge and stretch our own thinking about the concept of accountability by drawing upon scholars from other disciplines.

At the same time, we are conducting highly applied research — such as case studies of local nonprofit organizations in order to study how "evaluations" can be improved for purposes of organizational learning and accountability. We expect the NPOs to receive tangible benefits through an analysis of their evaluation and reporting systems. But we also plan to use the findings of the cases to inform a much larger study on understanding the socio-political consequences of accountability mechanisms on the evolution of the sector.

Our primary dilemma and challenge lies in this balancing act – of linking our applied research on issues of direct relevance to nonprofits to deeper work that involves cross disciplinary dialogue.

Building Capacity in the Nonprofit Sector

Capacity building efforts in nonprofit and community-based organizations have tended to emphasize technical training — ranging from strategic planning and financial management to technology transfer and performance assessment — under the assumption that this leads to improvements in organizational effectiveness. Recent evidence has challenged this assumption. In a study of 92 food pantries and soup kitchens in the Detroit region of the United States, Eisinger (2002) found that *many capacity attributes (involving technical assistance and strategic planning) had little or no correlation with organizational effectiveness*! He did find, however, that effectiveness was improved through better staffing, especially with the hiring of professional paid staff (rather than exclusive reliance on volunteers) who brought with them a range of administrative skills, training, and public relations experience. Blumenthal's (2001) work, based on interviews with over 50 leading consultants and grant makers in capacity building in the United States, documents a series of problems in linking capacity building with effectiveness. She identifies four key problems: few changes recommended by consultants are actually implemented by nonprofits; strategic planning is often particularly disappointing, given that much time and effort is spent on collecting data, analyzing trends, and reaching consensus on strategies and priorities, but with few resulting changes; consultants are often rebuffed when attempting to assist with implementation, either because clients only want assistance with planning or because funders support planning but not implementation; and, improved performance often does not follow from implemented organizational changes. This research challenges assumptions that technical and management training will improve organizational effectiveness, and suggests that it might be worthwhile to rethink capacity interventions.

What is the role of the university in building capacity within the nonprofit sector? While the answer likely varies with context, it certainly depends on the kinds of capacities we seek to enhance. We see our role at IGA primarily in terms of research that enhances our understanding

of the sector as a whole. We do not see ourselves as having a significant role as providers of technical capacity assistance. However, our research projects that involve nonprofit organizations have the potential to build the capacities of those organizations to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses (and hence build their analytical capacities). As noted above, one of our current projects involves case studies of how social service nonprofits use evaluations. Our mapping of organizational evaluation and reporting efforts in each of the cases, combined with workshops among peer organizations, are expected to enhance the abilities of nonprofit staff to critique and improve their own evaluation strategies. However, our broader interest lies in linking these findings to an analysis of the place of evaluation in the broader political economy of the sector. We also play a role in facilitating a sense of sectoral identity and cohesion, along with other Virginia universities. In 2003-2004, we worked with other state universities and nonprofits to create a state association known as the Virginia Network of Nonprofit Organizations (VaNNO), in which Virginia Commonwealth University is playing the lead role. In this sense, land grant institutions can play a facilitative or convening function in the sector.

More generally, the question for university nonprofit programs is: What is our mission as part of an institution of higher learning, and what does this imply for the kinds of capacity building in which we engage? At the IGA, we see our comparative advantage in contributing to analytical, rather than technical, capacity in the sector.

Building Capacity in Future Nonprofit Leaders and Scholars

Finally, we face the challenges of building the capacities of future nonprofit leaders and scholars through our curricular offerings. Should academic nonprofit programs emphasize professional and vocational preparation, or should they build capacities for deeper understandings of the sector? What does this imply for the kinds of courses and research projects in which we engage our students?

Demands for professional training are expected to grow considerably over the next decade, particularly as current executive directors of nonprofits begin to retire. Business schools are also stepping up to meet this challenge, with many MBA programs across the country now offering courses (and in some cases, specializations) in social entrepreneurship. Nonprofit management programs will likely face difficulty in competing with the quality of management training available in business schools.

To the extent that nonprofit management programs offer an advantage, it lies in the potential to lend insight into the particular historical, social, and cultural contours of the sector. In order for this to happen, we need disciplinary depth in our research and teaching about the sector. In other words, can we instill in our students an ability to analyze and reflect upon central challenges facing the third sector, not simply at the level of managerialism, but also in terms of its role in shaping the economy, influencing policy, and cultural values? More specifically, I see our challenges at Virginia Tech in terms of:

- Responding to the market demand for Masters-level professional skills (strategic management, financial management, etc),but without compromising on analytical capacities. In our Master of Public and International Affairs (MPIA) degree, which houses the nonprofit concentration, the core courses all build analytical skills rather technical ones — with classes on modes of collaborative governance, globalization processes and their local impacts, democracy and the economy, and international

politics. A further specialization in "governance and capacity building" includes courses in nonprofit organizations and management, as well as a global comparative course on NGOs in international development. We do offer courses in technical capacities, such as program evaluation, budgeting, strategic planning and management, but our aim is to frame them more broadly through the core. This curriculum is relatively new, so its impact is unknown.

- Building a cadre of Ph.D. students whose research is built on disciplinary literatures, and with multiple disciplinary representation on committees. Doctoral research should emphasize contributions to building new theory of relevance to the third sector more broadly.

- Providing Masters students with opportunities to engage in applied research that is linked to broader conceptual issues. For example, we have engaged students in "action research" projects with local nonprofits, as part of a course on NGOs in International Development. The aim is for students to use the applied research project as a vehicle for reflecting on key concepts discussed in the course, and to draw North-South comparisons of the third sector. Course assignments are designed to promote this reflection. To date, 13 students have undertaken such projects.

Conclusion

Is it possible for nonprofit academic programs to serve as professional educational programs while also adding conceptual depth and meaning to our understanding of the third sector in society? Are nonprofit academic programs going to become (or have become) builders of technical capacity at the expense of analytical capacity?

It is probably unrealistic to expect that this divide — between the profession and the disciplines, and between technical and analytical capacities — can be bridged in nonprofit programs that exist solely at the Masters level. Doctoral programs, however, serve as a vehicle for deeper research. Thus, to the extent that nonprofit academic programs remain focused at the Masters level, it is unlikely that we shall see path-breaking research on the sector. Doctoral programs that cross and integrate disciplines offer more potential for creating a sense of intellectual vibrancy and freshness in the field.

At the same time, it is necessary for nonprofit programs to examine their own missions within the broader context of the enterprise of institutions of higher learning. For land grant institutions like Virginia Tech, our dilemma remains in balancing and integrating our mission – through applied research of service to the sector, as well as deeper analysis that involves cross disciplinary efforts to build new knowledge on the sector.

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