
Noncredit Certificates in Nonprofit Management: An Exploratory Study

Mordecai Lee
Department of Governmental Affairs
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Abstract

In US colleges and universities that provide education in nonprofit management, the central focus is invariably on credit-based degrees, certificates and courses. Less frequently, some institutions also offer nonprofit management education in a noncredit context. The latter is often offered through a separate campus entity dedicated to continuing education, outreach, extension and professional development that tends to exist in the shadow of credit-based education. While credits measure educational attainment, continuing education units (CEUs) are used to measure professional development. However, little comprehensive information is known about this parallel universe of CEU-based certificates in nonprofit management.

This article provides the results of an exploratory survey of noncredit certificates in nonprofit management at US colleges and universities. It identified 33 colleges and universities offering 36 certificates. The survey found a wide disparity in the nomenclature, curriculum, requirements, finances, duration and management of these programs. The results of the survey indicate the absence of a pedagogic consensus regarding what a noncredit certificate in nonprofit management should be. The survey data suggest a need for development of basic professional standards and curriculum to enhance the value and credibility of noncredit certificates nonprofit management that are issued by colleges and universities.

INTRODUCTION

Generally, noncredit and continuing education exists in a separate and parallel world at US institutions of higher education. One reason for this distinction is that most university education is performance based, measured through grades assigned by faculty to students in credit-based courses. Grades are based on performance in tests, term papers and other gradable assignments. On the other hand, continuing education generally lacks any performance-based measures. Rather, it is attendance-based. The Continuing Education Unit (CEU) is a professional development measure that reflects the number of hours a student is in a classroom (1 CEU = 10 classroom hours) (*IACET, 2002*). Due to this distinction, noncredit training is usually offered through a separate campus entity that is dedicated to continuing education, outreach, extension and professional development.

Little is known about continuing education in nonprofit management. There is a substantial body of research-based literature on nonprofit management education (*Dolan, 2002; Mirabella and Wish, 2001a; Young, 1999; O'Neill and Fletcher, 1998; Milofsky, 1996; Heimovics and Herman, 1989; O'Neill and Young, 1988*). However, most of the research has focused on degrees, majors and credit-based certificates (*Mirabella and Wish, 1999a; Stevenson and Mirabella, 1999; Haas and Robinson, 1998; Wish and Mirabella, 1998*). An issue of high interest to researchers is the 'best place' for nonprofit studies in a university (*Mirabella and Wish, 2000; Smith, 2000; Lee and Percy, 2000*). Even though "there has been tremendous growth in the number of universities with noncredit outreach programs since 1996" (*Mirabella and Wish, 2001b, p.36*), researchers have not demonstrated an equal interest in noncredit education in nonprofit management (*Ashcraft, 1999, 5, 8-9; Lewis and Burnham, 1999; Burnham, Dolch and Gibson, 1998*). For example, the O'Neill and Fletcher (1998) index does not contain any entries for 'continuing education,' 'professional development' or 'noncredit education.' Similarly, the contributors to O'Neill and Fletcher (1998) refer to certificates in nonprofit management 27 times, always to credit-based ones.

The lack of research-based information about noncredit education in nonprofit management is contrasted by a modicum of research in continuing

public administration education. Public administration has often been the spawning ground for nonprofit management education and continues to be closely linked to it (*Mirabella and Wish, 2000, 221; Young, 1988, 36*). The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, which accredits master degree programs in public administration, public affairs and public policy, has also issued curriculum guidelines for nonprofit management education (*NASPAA, 1998*). Many graduating MPAs accept positions in nonprofit education, either immediately upon graduation or later in their careers (*Light, 1999*).

Regarding noncredit public administration education, Van Wart, Holzer and Kovacova (*1999*) provided a comprehensive quantitative summary of continuing education in public administration at US colleges and universities. The nationally accredited Certified Public Manager program has been surveyed, analyzed and contrasted to the MPA degree (*Vogelsang-Coombs, 1999; Hays and Duke, 1996; Conant, 1995; Conant and Housel, 1995*). LeSage reviewed continuing public administration education in Canada (*1989*). Vogelsang-Coombs has written about noncredit training programs for local elected officials whose decisions involve managerial impacts (*1997; Vogelsang-Coombs and Miller, 1999*). Other writers have focused on state and local government training (*Paddock, 1996; Hayes, 1989; Fisher, 1971; Graves, 1957*), federal training (*Werth, 1999; Butterworth and Metzger, 1998; Sims, 1996*), public administration continuing education in Eastern Europe (*Nolan, 1997*), certification issues (*Golembiewski, 1983*), practitioner perspectives (*Conant, 1996*), executive education (*Fry and Carter, 1999*) and benchmarks (*Paddock, 1997*). Similarly, the proceedings of two conferences about continuing education for public administrators in state and local government have been published (*Preston, 1980; Institute of Governmental Studies, 1965*).

Nonetheless, this body of literature does not necessarily indicate that public administration has devoted adequate attention to continuing education. In the 1970's, the National Academy of Public Administration had identified continuing education as one of the five most glaring deficiencies in public administration education (*Chapman and Cleaveland, 1973, pp. 53-4*). Yet, nearly two decades later, a practitioner still identified continuing education as one of the six most critical areas for management development (*Hedrick, 1990*).

The purpose of this research project is to explore basic information about noncredit certificates in nonprofit management offered at US colleges and universities.

METHODOLOGY

In mid-2000, the author conducted a mailed survey of all US institutions of higher education that offer noncredit and/or continuing education programs in nonprofit management. The inquiry asked if they currently offered a noncredit certificate and, if so, requested additional information about their certificate programs. The mailing list for the survey was based on the comprehensive database on nonprofit management education maintained by Mirabella and Wish (1999b; 1999c). At that time, the database had been updated through July 14, 1999.

The survey was sent to all institutions listed on their database as offering programming in the categories of noncredit or continuing education. In some cases, a college or university appeared on both lists. The final tally of institutions appearing on at least one of the two lists was 62. Of the 62 surveys mailed out, 24 institutions responded. Of those responses, 12 institutions confirmed that they currently offer one or more noncredit certificates in nonprofit management and enclosed written materials and brochures about their program.

The other 12 respondents did not qualify for several reasons. In some cases, they offered a certificate in nonprofit management that was credit based, at the graduate level and/or for undergraduate students. These certificates appear to be quite widespread and common. In other cases, a college or university offered a wide variety and extensive continuing education programs in various topics related to nonprofit management, but did not offer a certificate.

The low response rate to the original mail survey called for additional horizon-scanning methodologies. First, Donna Pope, Director of the Nonprofit Management Institute at Arizona State University, maintained a separate database of counterpart programs (Pope, 2000 and 2001). From her list, five more universities were identified. Second, from web searches,

colleagues and other information sources, the author located several other higher education institutions offering noncredit certificates in nonprofit management. Third, Mirabella and Wish updated their listing of institutions of higher education offering noncredit and continuing education in nonprofit management through February 15, 2001 (*2001c; 2001d*). The author examined the websites of all colleges and universities that either had not been on the 2000 version of the lists or were among the 38 that hadn't responded to the 2000 survey. In some cases, the author then contacted the institution to obtain additional information about its certificate program. Finally, following a conference presentation in late 2001, several other locations were brought to the attention of the author.

In some cases, institutions of higher education had just recently cancelled or suspended their noncredit certificate. Notwithstanding the availability of information about those certificates, they were excluded from the aggregate information emerging from this research since they were not operating during the time of the study. In another case, a university announced that it would be discontinuing its certificate as of winter, 2002. Since it was still in operation at the time of this survey, it was included in the survey results. In other cases, institutions offered noncredit certificates in sub-fields of nonprofit management, but did not provide noncredit certificates in general nonprofit management. In these cases, the specialized certificates were not included in the aggregate results.

A few other judgments were required. To avoid duplicate counting of the same program, a distance education certificate that was offered at several colleges and universities was counted as one program. In another case, a university offered a certificate titled "Administration." This certificate would presumably be for generic administration and not oriented for managers in a specific sector. However, a review of the curriculum indicated that notwithstanding its generic title, the certificate was nonprofit oriented, with such traditional nonprofit class topics as gifts and endowments, grant writing and board development. Therefore, that certificate was included.

As needed, the author followed-up with phone calls or emails requesting additional specific information or seeking clarification of unclear details. Nonetheless, some of the information obtained from individual institutions was still difficult to categorize into comparative data. The

author attempted to maximize the application of the information obtained from the available material. However, in some cases, information for some of the specific categories of information could not be identified. Therefore, the total number of institutions included in each category varies slightly.

SURVEY RESULTS

The results of the research identified a total of 33 institutions of higher education in the United States that offered noncredit certificates in nonprofit management. One of those institutions offered two certificates in general management and another offered three certificates at different managerial levels, for a total of 36 certificates.

There was a large variety in the titles of these noncredit certificates in nonprofit management (see Table 1).

Table 1
Titles of Certificates (N=36)

<i>Title of Certificate</i>	<i>Number of Schools Using Title</i>
Nonprofit Management	15
Nonprofit Leadership	3
Nonprofit Administration	2
Administration	1 (each)
Advanced Nonprofit Management	
Effective Management of Nonprofit Organizations	
Excellence in Nonprofit Leadership and Management	
Executive Level Program	
Leadership Development Program	
Management of Nonprofit Organizations	
Middle Management Program	
Mini-MBA ® for Nonprofit Organizations	
Nonprofit Leadership and Management	
Nonprofit Management and Leadership	
Nonprofit Management Excellence	
Nonprofit Management Executive	
Nonprofit Organization Management	
Nonprofit Studies	
Philanthropic and Fundraising Administration	

There was also a great variation in the number of classroom hours required to earn the certificate, from a low of 10 to a high of about 240 (see Table 2).

Table 2
Classroom Hours to Obtain Certificate (N = 31)

<i>Classroom Hours</i>	<i>Institutions</i>
1-50 hours	11
51-100 hours	11
101-150 hours	5
151-200 hours	4
201-250 hours	1

Regarding the ratio of required core classes and elective classes, the range was as broad as mathematically possible, with some certificates requiring no core classes and others consisting of core classes only. However, almost half the certificates did not permit any electives (see Table 3).

Figure 3
Ratio of Required to Elective Classes (N=35)

<i>Required Classes</i>	<i>Elective Classes</i>	<i>Institutions</i>
100%	0%	16
75-99%	1-25%	9
50-740%	26-50%	5
50%	50%	1
25-49%	51-75%	2
1-25%	76-99%	0
0%	100%	2

For the certificates that required core classes, there was – again – great variation in the subject matter of the required classes. (In some cases, the title of a required class included more than one distinct subject matter. In those cases, it is listed below in all the relevant topics.) However, for about half the programs, there were some basic and common curricular topics. They were (from most frequent to less frequent) financial management, fundraising, strategic planning, boards of directors, marketing and communications, personnel and human resources, and program evaluation (see Table 4).

Table 4
Topics of Required Classes (N=29)

Note: Topics are listed in alphabetical order in case of a tie.

<i>Curricular Topic</i>	<i>Institutions Requiring This Topic</i>
1. Financial Management	24
2. Fundraising	22
3. Strategic Planning	17
4. Board of Directors	16
5. Marketing and Communications	14
-. Personnel and Human Resources	14
-. Program Evaluation	14
8. Leadership	10
9. Volunteer Management	8
10. Legal Issues	7
-. Nonprofit Management	7
-. Public Relations	7
13. Introduction to the Nonprofit Sector	6
14. Proposal Writing	4
15. Advocacy	3
-. Ethics	3
-. Technology	3
18. Annual Giving	2
-. Advanced Financial Management	2
-. Social Entrepreneurship	2
21. Building Effective Organizations, Capital Campaign, Diversity, Effective Meetings, Financial Planning, Advanced Fundraising, High Performing Nonprofits, Interpersonal Communication, Mission-based Management, Operations Management, Partnering for Results, Planned Giving, Presentation Skills, Program Development, Risk Management, Social Marketing, Strategic Alliances, Strategic Communications, Supervision, Values-based Management	1

Regarding the process for obtaining the certificate, about 2/3's of the programs (21) permitted individual progress through the program, while about 1/3 were organized in cohorts (11). One program offered both options.

Tuition costs, reflecting the previous broad range of variation, were consistent with previous results. As would be expected, the programs requiring fewer hours to earn a certificate were generally the less expensive ones. About 2/3's of all certificates cost up to \$2,000. The most popular price range, covering a quarter of all certificates, was between \$500 and \$999 (see Table 5). (In some cases, it was difficult to calculate the total tuition, due to varying fees for different workshops within the same certificate program. Therefore, results may reflect approximate, rather than precise, costs. Some institutions offered discounts for group enrollments. The calculations below are based on the cost to an individual, whether registering singly or in the smallest size group permitted.)

Table 5
Cost of Certificate (N=35)

Note: Categories up to \$3,000 are in \$500 increments; above \$3,000 are in \$1,000 increments

<i>Cost of Certificate</i>	<i>Institutions</i>
\$1-499	5
\$500-999	8
\$1,000-1,499	6
\$1,500-1,999	4
\$2,000-2,499	2
\$2,500-2,999	2
\$3,000-3,999	4
\$4,000-4,999	1
\$5,000-5,999	1
\$6,000-6,999	1
\$7,000-7,999	1

Given the significant amount of attention that researchers have dedicated to the 'best place' question, it is important to categorize

certificates according to their academic 'home' (*Mirabella and Renz, 2001, pp. 24-5*). About 2/3's of all programs (23) were based in continuing education, outreach and extension units. Eight programs were in discipline-based administrative units, including schools of business (3), public affairs (4) and education amalgamated with other disciplines (2). One program did not appear to be affiliated with any other campus administrative unit.

To strengthen their connection with the 'real world,' eight programs listed having advisory committees. As would be expected, practitioners were the predominant membership category in these committees. Faculty were the second most prominent group. Other categories included university staff and faculty not affiliated with the institution offering the certificate.

The field of noncredit education in nonprofit management consists of more than the certificates in general management reviewed here. For example, some universities did not offer a general noncredit certificate in nonprofit management and, therefore, are not included in this survey, but did offer specialized ones, such as in fundraising. Conversely, 16 of the institutions offering general management certificates also offered specialized certificates, such as fundraising, executive director, grantsmanship and volunteer management. Again, such specialized certificates were not included in this exploratory study of noncredit certificates in nonprofit management generally.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This survey identified 33 institutions of higher education offering noncredit certificates in nonprofit management. The results showed a very large range and variation of titles, duration, costs, ratio of core to elective classes and contents of the required curriculum. Certificates varied from 10 to 175 hours, from all core classes to all electives and from \$339 to \$7,500.

About 2/3's of the certificates were based on individualized progress through the program, with about 1/3 based on a cohort approach. The same approximate ratio was reflected in the academic home of the certificate, with about 2/3's in continuing education units and about 1/3 in discipline-based units. Of the eight programs not associated with continuing education schools or colleges, three were in business schools, two in schools of public

affairs and the rest in either schools covering multiple categories or were non-categorizeable.

There was no significant pattern regarding the nature of the institutions offering certificates, with 19 of them public and 14 private.

About a quarter of the programs had advisory committees, all of which were dominated by nonprofit practitioners. The advice of practitioners is vital in assuring the relevance of professional development programs. However, the predominance of practitioners on advisory committees raises the issue of the faculty's role in educational decisions about these certificates. Traditionally, it is the role of the faculty to make academic decisions. This usually means that faculty members have sole purview over curriculum and other related educational issues. The dominance of practitioners on advisory committees raises the question, or at least creates a perception, that noncredit certificates are designed to be relevant to practitioners, but may lack traditional academically oriented structure and content. The instructor cadre at one institution further highlighted the role of the resident and permanent faculty. Besides having an advisory committee with no members from the school's faculty, a listing of the 'faculty' of the certificate program consisted of 41 practitioners who served as ad hoc instructors. No faculty members were listed as teaching any of the classes for the certificate.

A few certificates had unusual features, given continuing education's traditional template of no grading, no papers and use of CEUs. Regarding grading, at three schools the instructors assigned grades (A, B, C, or D) to noncredit participants. A student had to achieve at least a 2.0 overall cumulative grade average (equivalent to a C) in order to earn the certificate. Three other colleges required a written term paper for successful completion of the certificate program. An institution offering three noncredit certificates in general management of nonprofit agencies awarded them based solely on attendance, but no CEUs were issued.

One certificate program permitted the student to designate a specialization, akin to a major in an undergraduate degree. The participant could receive the general certificate in nonprofit management with a specialization in one of four areas, fundraising, public relations, historic preservation or meeting planning. Another unusual feature for continuing

education programs was that three institutions charged an application fee, ranging between \$25 and \$50. One school had a requirement that the certificate must be earned in four years, a deadline not found at any other institutions. Another school had a prerequisite of a bachelor's degree and work experience in the nonprofit sector for admission to the certificate program.

These results highlight a seemingly laissez faire approach to noncredit certificates in nonprofit administration at American institutions of higher education. It is highly decentralized and autonomous. Nonetheless, credulity is strained by the broad variances in measures such as number of hours required for a certificate. Surely, a certificate requiring 10 hours of training is not comparable, in substance, to one requiring 175. While accrediting agencies have slowly accomplished some accepted ranges in many academic programs and degrees, it is clear that this is largely absent in continuing education.

Nonprofit continuing education can be an attractive and important product to offer current and potential practitioners. However, one central tenet of continuing education embodies both its strength and weakness. Continuing education does not award credits. Rather, it awards Continuing Education Units that are based exclusively on attendance. Therefore, the context of the continuing education pedagogy is significantly different from for-credit higher education. Continuing education has no admission requirements, lower costs compared to credit courses, no homework, no grading and no prerequisites of previous educational attainment.

This survey identified a few examples of the financial precariousness of some noncredit certificate programs caused by lower levels of non-tuition funding. The program at one college was cancelled "due to a lack of institutional support" from the parent institution (*Marabella, 2000*). Another was suspended "until we receive the results on a marketing research study done by the Pittsburgh Foundation – our largest funder of the program" (*Trapani, 2001*). One certificate director suggested that any institution considering starting a new certificate should not begin offering classes before a permanent funding to subsidize the program is in place (*Wilder, 2000*).

OBSERVATIONS

This difference between credit-based and CEU-based higher education can prompt several major concerns by traditional faculty about the value of continuing education offered by institutions of higher education.

First, faculty sometimes views negatively on noncredit teaching since it lacks the academic rigor and traditional features of higher education, such as accreditation, grading, testing and written assignments. The very factors that can make continuing education attractive to nontraditional students are those that diminish the value of the program in the eyes of faculty.

Second, continuing education has lower prestige in university culture than for-credit education, sometimes viewed as akin to vocational education, seemingly not quite appropriate for in an institution of higher education. While credit-based education is measured by performance, this key factor is missing from continuing education.

Third, the financial paradigm of higher education at public institutions can work against continuing education. It is usually not assigned the same level of financial support as is budgeted for degree-based education. For-credit education is normally subsidized by tax revenues at a higher rate than noncredit education. The premise regarding the financing of continuing education is sometimes that it should be self-supporting or nearly so. For example, the California-Riverside unit that offers the nonprofit management certificate (along with many other certificates) describes itself on its website as the campus's "nonprofit division." The brochure for the certificate program includes the statement, "Not printed at state expense." It has to be totally self-supporting financially. While the rest of the campus benefits from funding from state tax dollars, it does not share in that public subsidy.

Fourth, nonprofit continuing education is affected by the internal structure of most universities and colleges. Typically, a school, college, or department -- usually under the rubric of public administration, business administration or management -- offers for-credit education in nonprofit management. Their offerings might include an undergraduate major, an undergraduate certificate (e.g. American Humanics), a graduate certificate

and a graduate degree. Graduate certificates can usually be applied towards a degree. In addition, elements of nonprofit management education can often be found simultaneously at some of the professional schools and colleges, such as social work, criminal justice, arts, etc.

Yet, based on this study, the majority of noncredit training programs in nonprofit management were not in these campus units. Rather, 2/3's are housed in the campus unit that provides all noncredit training, usually with titles such as continuing education, extension or outreach. This has the effect of isolating noncredit education from its academic roots, since the primary affiliation is with generic professional development programs rather than with a discipline based one.

The seeming minor status of noncredit certificates is partly demonstrated by the paucity of published research about it. Should an effort be initiated to strengthen noncredit education in nonprofit management, then several criteria would need to be attained:

- Curriculum is academically sound and research-based
- Faculty view it as an academically valid product of higher education
- The program is financially sustainable
- Instructors are a mix of faculty and practitioners
- Instruction is based on the adult education model
- Participants feel the product is relevant in their daily work
- Senior practitioners are aware of the program, recognize its value and recommend it to lower- and middle-level managers.

CONCLUSIONS

Noncredit certificates in general management of nonprofit agencies are a discernable and discreet activity in American institutions of higher education. An exploratory survey identified 33 colleges and universities offering 36 certificates. However, more needs to be learned about noncredit and certificate-based nonprofit higher education. A parallel study could compile aggregate information about credit-based certificates offered at US colleges and universities. That would permit comparisons between

noncredit and credit certificates. Extended investigation of noncredit education could look more deeply at two areas glancingly mentioned here. First, additional information could be compiled and analyzed about specialized noncredit certificates in such fields as development and fundraising. Second, little is known about noncredit nonprofit management education that is not structured to culminate in a certificate. As mentioned in the methodology section, the research for this survey identified several such programs.

By bringing noncredit education in nonprofit management out of the educational shadows, its value can be analyzed. The field may need take steps to enhance its educational worth, promote curriculum guidelines and other educational standards, acknowledge the beneficial role of continuing education as a component of our educational offerings and strengthen the importance of professional development in nonprofit management.

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Biographical Sketch

Mordecai Lee is Associate Professor of Governmental Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee WI 53203-2602. He helped design and now directs the noncredit Professional Certificate in Nonprofit Management, which was launched by his institution in fall 2002. Before joining the academy, he had served as executive director of a nonprofit agency for seven years.

Contact Information

Snail mail:

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Suite 6000
161 West Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee WI 53203-2602

Email: mordecai@uwm.edu

Business phone: 414-227-3282

Fax: 414-227-3330

Home phone: 414-962-0270