

# Teaching Administrative Ethics in Nonprofit Management: Recommendations to Improve Degrees, Certificates, and Concentration Programs

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## ABSTRACT

The first protection against ethical lapses in the nonprofit sector presumably is to provide a sound foundation in ethical training at institutions of higher learning. To understand what we hypothesized as the fragmented state of ethics pedagogy in the nonprofit management field, we surveyed educational programs that offer graduate degrees, certificates or concentration programs in the management or study of nonprofit organizations. We found that two-thirds of the respondents offered an ethics course, but fewer than 40 percent required completion of an ethics course. Moreover, the nature and content of ethics courses varied widely in scope, methods, and emphases. To improve the overall state of ethics pedagogy, we recommend instruction programs that equip students with the tools to master three steps in administrative ethics: (a) identifying the scope of an ethical administrator's work; (b) defining the content of the appropriate ethical standards; and (c) developing a deliberative process so that an administrator can appropriately assess ethical questions and chart a satisfactory course for resolving salient issues.

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As nonprofit organizations become increasingly prominent, more is expected of them in regard to management, outcomes, and performance. All organizations, regardless of sector (e.g., public, for-profit, or nonprofit), are

under pressure to produce greater results with fewer resources — to operate, by using what management literature parlance calls “lean” tools, principles, and processes. With this emphasis on increased efficiency, the crush to deliver services that meet the bottom line presents a potential danger — that the ethical dimension responsible for launching nonprofit enterprise will be slighted or, worse yet, overlooked (Rhode & Packel, 2009, p. 31). Well-publicized scandals involving Goodwill Industries, the United Way of America, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) offer vivid reminders of the ever-present temptation to cut corners and compromise on seemingly inviolable principles. It also emphasizes ethics as a crucial concept for all organization, nonprofit included (Moxley & Bueche, 2002; O’Neill, 2001, pp. 623-628).

To encourage the practice of “better ethics,” education is the most effective way for personnel to learn what constitutes “right” conduct in the nonprofit field, although the mere knowledge of appropriate behavior does not necessarily mean that people will behave accordingly. Nonetheless, understanding ethics is an important step in encouraging proper conduct. Knowledge of the appropriate standards and expectations of behavior, along with an introduction to general ethics literature — particularly nonprofit ethics — in theory goes a long way toward encouraging ethical behavior.

Or does it? Does instruction in ethics truly matter? And if it does, what is the best way to teach it? Many theories, standards, and pedagogical approaches exist, but none stands out as a leading example. This article does not attempt to resolve these perennial problems (assuming it were possible or desirable to do so). It instead explores ethics coverage in the curricula of academic programs, based on a survey of educational institutions with master’s degrees, certificates or concentrations in nonprofit administration. Given its present popularity, we anticipated that ethics instruction in the field of nonprofit administration and management is highly fragmented, a finding borne out in our analysis of the survey responses. After elaborating on survey methodology and presenting the findings, we conclude by proposing a set of recommendations for developing a focused approach to ethics education in the nonprofit sector.

#### ETHICS IN THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

Research on ethics in the nonprofit sector generally has focused on the relationship between service-providers and their clients. Because doctors, nurses, teachers, religious professionals, social workers, and counselors often work with vulnerable populations — where there is a higher potential for abuse or fraud — the need is especially pronounced for the non-profit sector to have a well-developed sense of ethics (Koziol, 1998). Health-care providers, religious leaders, and counselors may be guided by the ethical standards of their respective positions, but they must never view their duties through the prism of their

professions, rather than first seeing themselves as responsible to the populations they serve (Chisholm & Young, 1988; O’Neil, 2001, pp. 623-624).

Of the research that focused on ethics for nonprofit managers and members of nonprofit boards of directors, only a few studies attempted to explore the measures of proper conduct in the nonprofit field (Rhode & Packel, 2009). Nonprofit boards of directors bring a new level of analytical complexity to the table, because they depend on volunteers, which remains an almost-unheard-of practice among their for-profit counterparts in the business world. Moreover, nonprofit boards donate labor, and willingly undertake fiscal, legal, and social tasks that potentially could impact broader society. When carrying out board activities, board members are supposed to honor their ethical obligations to themselves as a body of directors — over and above any obligations to their firms — but identifying these duties might be anything but straightforward or clear (Agarwal & Malloy, 1999; Bell, Bell, & Elkins, 2005; Bouckaert & Vandenhove, 1998; Jurkiewicz & Massey, 1998; O’Neill, 2001, p. 623; Rosen, 2005; Van Wart, 1996).

Because they differ from for-profit organizations in several key respects, nonprofit organizations present a special dilemma for ethics. A for-profit business exists, first and foremost, to earn money for its owners or shareholders, while a nonprofit organization is created to provide services that might not otherwise exist (Richards, Gilbert & Harris, 2002). In the words of a noted commentator, “One generates the money in order to do the job. The other does the job in order to generate the money” (Mason, 1984, p. 88). The drastic difference in value (and mind) sets explains why the management tools that motivate or discipline employees of for-profit firms (e.g., adjusting compensation to reflect job performance) are either unavailable, in limited supply, or totally lack relevance to the nonprofit business model. Nonprofits often are value-driven, which means they were created to promote a service that was not coming from a government agency and that was either nonexistent or barely surviving in the for-profit marketplace (Rhode & Packel, 2009). “Every organization has some value dimension,” O’Neill (2001, p.625) observed, “but values are not the dominant purpose of business or government, whereas they *are* the dominant purpose of many nonprofit organizations, including religious entities, private schools and colleges, and advocacy groups.” Ethical issues undoubtedly are crucial to defining the purpose and role of a nonprofit organization (Berman & West, 1998; Koziol, 1998).

Notions of responsibility and accountability also distinguish nonprofit organizations from traditional businesses. The latter are accountable to shareholders, and their successes or failures reflect trends in the firm’s balance sheet (Oddo, 1997). By contrast, judging the performance of leaders in the nonprofit sector is more problematic, because it is difficult to measure performance and the effective use of administrative discretion. Nonprofits

may be driven by a commitment to certain values, but identifying those values and the appropriate means for advancing them is exceedingly challenging. Nonprofit organizations emphasize the importance of accomplishing their goals by engaging in “right conduct” that is consistent with the organization’s values (Malloy & Agarwal, 2003; Agarwal & Malloy, 1999; Bouckaert & Vandenhove, 1998; Koziol, 1998).

#### CHALLENGES IN TEACHING PUBLIC-SECTOR ETHICS

Recognizing the difficulty of incorporating abstract ethical values into a concrete field of endeavor, in 1991, the American Society for Public Administration’s (ASPA’s) Section on Public Administration Research and the Public Administration Ethics Network sponsored the National Conference on Government Ethics Research. The conference enabled scholars of philosophical ethics to meet and exchange ideas with scholars who were devoted to empirical research. Although attending scholars were divided on many issues, they concurred on the importance of ethics education (Frederickson & Walling, 2001, pp. 37-38).

A basic protection against ethical lapses is to provide a sound foundation in ethical training at institutions of higher learning, even though the nature and extent of that training differs from place to place. As William D. Richardson noted, “Historically, one usually finds considerable disagreement as to what a proper education should be for the people who would govern in any regime.” Most researchers have agreed that educational programs should “seek to hone rationality at the same time that they channel the passions and interests of the individual toward higher ends” (Richardson, 1997, p. 67). An appropriate course of study for educating public servants on “higher ends” must be sufficiently narrowed from its broad goal. In 1989, the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) presented a revised curriculum standard, which indicated that the curriculum “shall enhance the student’s values, knowledge, and skills to act ethically and effectively” (quoted in Yoder & Denhardt, 2001, p. 61).

During the 1990s, programs in public administration and public affairs offered more required and elective administrative ethics courses. Some courses concentrated on what might be called “practical ethics,” which emphasizes case studies and “real world” exercises. Other courses introduced students to the “Great Thinkers” of the western intellect tradition — such as Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, the English Utilitarians, etc. — with little or no regard for practical applications. Still other courses provided a mix of various approaches and materials. Courses also differed on whether to highlight normative issues, empirical issues, or a combination of both (Cooper, 2004; Yoder & Denhardt, 2001).

This variety of approaches and course offerings relates to different goals of ethics education. Some programs focus on developing analytical skills, so

that students learn to recognize potential ethical problems and can chart an appropriate course of action. Other programs emphasize philosophical issues, “rather than operating as if ethics were a mere matter of technique” (Farmer, 1998, p. 34).

In the meantime, individual researchers have suggested various methods of seeking ethical guidance. Thus, John Rohr has argued that public administrators need to understand “regime values” by considering decisions that are promulgated by authoritative governmental entities, such as the courts (Rohr, 1989). Terry L. Cooper has emphasized the need to develop an “operational ethic” through effective decision-making (Cooper 1990, p. 5). In *The Ethics of Public Service*, Kathryn G. Denhardt argued for “a better-developed theoretical framework ... more grounded in philosophy, and ... ultimately more practical in that it considers and accommodates the exigencies of the environment in which public administrators must practice — the modern public organization” (Denhardt, 1988, p. ix). Patrick J. Sheeran, in *Ethics in Public Administration: A Philosophical Approach*, rejected “legalistic” approaches, and contended that a grounding in philosophy would ensure that public servants gain a sense of not only the values underlying decisions with public impact, but also, perhaps more importantly, the reasoning behind those values (Sheeran, 1993).

Regardless of which approach was adopted, we questioned whether ethics were taught as a stand-alone course, or as integrated into other courses. Each approach has strengths and weaknesses. Stand-alone courses enable students to examine ethical issues in-depth, while integrated courses place ethics into a broader framework that relates to substantive public administration issues.

Research by Donald C. Menzel in the mid-1990s found that 40 percent of the schools of public administration and public affairs integrated ethics across their curricula, and that 60 percent offered some type of ethics course. According to Menzel, the top-five teaching techniques used in these programs were small-group discussions, case studies, decision-making scenarios, research papers, and lectures. Other methods included role-playing, self-assessment, videos/movies, guest speakers, simulations, fiction, biographies, field studies, and computer-generated multimedia material (Menzel, 1997b). As a follow-up to Menzel’s work, in this study we apply his criteria for understanding formal ethics instruction in public administration to ethics education in nonprofit administration.

#### SURVEYING NONPROFIT ETHICS EDUCATION

Research conducted since the 1970s has yielded much new information on the state of ethics education in public administration. Much less is known about ethics education in the nonprofit field, however (Chisholm & Young, 1988; O’Neil, 2001, pp. 623-624). In order to examine the state of teaching ethics in nonprofit administration and management, we developed and administered

a survey for institutions of higher learning that offer graduate programs in nonprofit management education. We were interested in knowing to what extent these programs covered ethics, as well as the breadth and diversity of this coverage. To yield more in-depth information, we also requested syllabi from institutions with courses in ethics for the nonprofit sector.

The survey was designed to provide insight into a variety of course offerings and pedagogical approaches to teaching ethics in nonprofit academic programs. Although we were unable to probe for correlation between the form/content of ethics courses and proper conduct among the students taking them (such a research project was far beyond the scope of our efforts), we wanted to know how often students were exposed to ethics in the nonprofit curriculum, as well as in any applicable, predominant approaches.

We developed a survey instrument designed for academic institutions with degrees, certificates, or concentration programs in a nonprofit field (i.e., nonprofit management, leadership, administration, and/or studies). A copy of the survey is in the Appendix. Because the U.S. has relatively few nonprofit degrees, certificates, or concentration programs, we surveyed the population (rather than taking a sample) of institutions offering these programs. For this purpose we used a comprehensive listing of nonprofit management degrees, certificates, and concentration programs that was developed and periodically updated by Seton Hall University. The university hosts an authoritative Web site on nonprofit academic programs (<http://tlc.shu.edu/npo/index.php>).<sup>1</sup>

Our survey sought to determine how many nonprofit management degrees, certificates and concentration programs also offered ethics education, either as a stand-alone course or as a component of another course. We believed it was important to garner information on the characteristics of these degrees, certificates, or concentration programs. Accordingly, the survey began with basic questions about the number of hours required to graduate from the program, and the number and percentage of students who completed an ethics course. We also asked for information on ethics instructors, and the number of times per year an ethics course was offered in the program. This information would have enabled us to examine similarities and differences among and between the various degrees, certificates and concentration programs. Unfortunately, because few responded to these questions, the missing data precluded analyses.

The survey and results addressed three principal research questions:

1. What percentage of nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs offer ethics courses? Are they required or elective courses?
2. How are those courses taught (i.e., with what breadth and diversity)?
3. What are the approaches/materials (e.g., case method, Great Thinkers, etc.)?

The first question was designed to elicit information on the extent of ethics

pedagogy. Some universities offered multiple nonprofit management degrees, certificates and concentration programs, but hardly any of them scheduled ethics courses or required their completion. The dearth of offerings suggests that ethics is not a priority in nonprofit education. Though, a cautionary note is in order: There were nonprofit management degrees, certificates, and concentration programs that offered ethics instruction, but the number of offerings cannot indicate the importance or quality of those courses, especially if they were not required for a degree or certificate. For example, some courses were listed in a university catalog or offered periodically, but they had uneven quality, or they may have been regarded by students as “fluff” courses that provided respite from other, more rigorous fare. Nonetheless, knowing the percentage of programs that offer ethics courses still is valuable as a rudimentary, albeit imperfect, indicator of how many institutions believe it is important to do so.

The second and third research questions, about the breadth, diversity, and approaches to ethics education, were harder to evaluate by only using a survey. For this reason we requested that respondents send us the syllabi from ethics courses, in order to provide detailed information on what specifically gets covered. Indeed, some respondents provided excessively vague or cryptic comments. Others thought they were being helpful by entirely omitting selected items and survey responses (described further below).

We might have gathered information on ethics courses by consulting college and university catalogs and/or visiting departmental Web sites. However, we also wanted more detailed information on the types of courses offered, approaches and resources used, and whether the ethics course was stand-alone or part of other substantive courses. It was instructive to see how participants framed their responses, especially in instances where their answers could be compared with syllabi and/or other written material supplied by the respondents.

#### THE SURVEY

We initiated our research in early 2006, when on January 27 we sent via first class mail a cover letter, questionnaire, and self-addressed, stamped envelope to all institutions offering nonprofit management degrees, certificates or concentration programs. We mailed a follow-up cover letter, the survey, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope to non-respondents on March 6, 2006. A third and final follow-up was e-mailed via Survey Monkey on October 23, 2006.

In all, we received 80 responses, representing about one-third (33.5%) of the population of nonprofit programs listed on the Seton Hall Web site in 2006. In evaluating the responses, we were cognizant of potential non-response bias. Accordingly, we compared the characteristics of the 80 responding programs to those of the 238 institutions offering nonprofit management degrees, certificates, and concentration programs as of the survey. The sample distribution of responding U.S. institutions was 26 in the Northeast (32.5%), 26 in the

Midwest (32.5%), 16 in the South (20%), and 11 in the West (13.8%). By comparison, according to the Seton Hall site, approximately 34 percent of all nonprofit management degrees, certificates, and concentration programs are located in the Northeast, with 31 percent in the Midwest, 17 percent in the South, and 18 percent in the West. Thus, the distribution of responding institutions reasonably matched the population by region.

To further assess the representativeness of our sample, versus the larger population of academic institutions with degrees, certificates, and concentration programs in nonprofit sector studies, we relied on data available and widely used at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/index.asp?key=790>). The Carnegie Foundation classifies institutions of higher learning by size and setting (for example, large, four-year, primarily residential colleges; very large, two-year colleges; etc.) as well as by other auspices (public versus private).<sup>2</sup> We coded each institution in the Seton Hall database as a program or concentration in nonprofit sector studies according to these variables. We also performed statistical analysis, which enabled us to evaluate whether the institutions responding to our survey differed from non-respondents.

The results showed that the sub-samples of responding and non-responding institutions did not differ statistically, and were highly similar for size and setting of the institution (chi-square  $p < 0.504$ ). For the variables labeled “by average size” and “student enrollment,” the two groups were indistinguishable (ANOVA F-test  $p < 0.546$ ). Finally, the two groups did not differ in public versus private auspices (chi square  $p < 0.134$ ; Fisher’s exact test  $< 0.169$ ). In sum, the responding and non-responding institutions were quite comparable with respect to basic background characteristics. We found no evidence of non-response bias and are confident in making generalizations from our sample findings.

## FINDINGS

As shown in Table 1, one-third of the total population of institutions responded to our survey. In 14 cases, however, the respondents indicated that either their institutions did not offer nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs, or they recently had discontinued nonprofit management coursework. Of those who responded to our questions on the type(s) of nonprofit education offered (i.e., master’s degrees, certificates, or concentration programs), 14 schools indicated that they carried a nonprofit master’s degree, 23 offered a nonprofit concentration, and 17 offered a nonprofit certificate/professional education degree. It proved more difficult than anticipated to compile this information, because some respondents did not identify the type(s) of nonprofit education they offered, apart from generally indicating that such a program or programs existed at the institution, and, in seven instances, respondents outlined how the status of their nonprofit program



had evolved over time. As one might expect, the number of hours, students enrolled, and faculty members at virtually all the institutions varied widely across the responding academic institutions. [See *Table 1*]

Table 1.

*Summary Statistics for a Survey of U.S. Academic Programs That Offer Master's Degrees, Certificates, or Concentrations in Nonprofit Administration, Management, and Leadership Studies*

<b>Number of Responding Institutions (Percent of Population)</b>	<b>Responding Institutions That Offer a NP Program (Sample)</b>	<b>Responding Institutions That Offer Either a Stand-Alone or a Component Ethics Course</b>	<b>Responding Institutions That Require Either a Stand-Alone or a Component Ethics Course</b>
80 (33.5%)	66 (100%)	43 (65.2%)	26 (39.4%)

Among the 66 institutions in the sample that offered nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs, almost two-thirds (65.2%) offered at least one ethics course as part of the program (or, at the very least, they offered a course with ethics as part of the substantive readings and discussions). Despite this relatively high percentage of ethics course offerings, fewer than 40 percent of the responding institutions (39.4%) actually required them. Thus, many institutions in the sample with nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs (n=43) offered formal ethics instruction in their curricula, presumably because it was important; yet, 17 of the 43 did not require students to complete an ethics course. Although survey responses lacked the details needed to explain this fall-off from elective courses to requirements, literature on this subject suggests that many academic institutions with degrees, certificates, or concentration programs in nonprofit management already may have so many required core courses that adding new ones would be burdensome for students (Menzel 1997a, 1997b; Mirabella & Wish, 2001).

Survey results sometimes were difficult to interpret, because not all respondents answered all questions. In some instances, respondents failed to provide detailed answers, or their responses were ambiguous. For example, one respondent scribbled this cryptic comment on the margin of the survey

response form: “All our NP courses include an ethics component.” Several other respondents wrote similar notes. These comments did not enable us to know whether the respondent meant that formal ethics instruction was provided in each and every course offered — at best a dubious proposition — but they do suggest that the respondent believes a strong sense of ethics underlies every subject in the curriculum. Unfortunately, extraneous comments do not help us draw conclusions about the status of ethics education; after all, who but the most jaded respondent would contend that a program is *not* infused with ethics? Assuming that these respondents were telling the truth by saying “all of our courses and programs are by their very nature ethical,” we did not count these responses under Responding Institutions That Offer an Ethics Course in Table 1. We counted responses to survey items only if they clearly indicated that formal ethics instruction was provided.

Programs that offer ethics instruction — as either a stand-alone course, or a component of another course — share a goal of inculcating ethical values in their students, albeit the methods and strategies for achieving this goal vary substantially. All respondents indicated that their courses were devoted to nonprofit ethics, but the syllabi generally did not distinguish between administrative ethics generally, and nonprofit ethics specifically. Following is quoted information from syllabi (the quoted information does not include citation because we agreed to preserve the anonymity of the schools).

A syllabus at a Midwestern university, for example, stated that the purpose of a course titled “Ethics in Administration” was “to assist students as they seek to develop frameworks for making and evaluating ethical decisions. The course centered on the concept of integrity, what it meant to live an integrated life, and what that concept meant within the context of our daily lives, both personally and professionally.” At one university in the South, “Nonprofit Law, Governance, and Ethics” was designed as a course “on the board of trustees and their fiduciary responsibilities established by law and by the moral imperatives stemming from their actions on behalf of the public interest.” In New England, a course titled “Ethics & Social Responsibility” explores “the role and responsibilities of managers as ethical thought leaders as they attempt to guide contemporary organizations in a turbulent environment. An overview of ethical theories will be provided to inform socially responsible decision-making in a rapidly changing, diverse, global, and information-based world.”

Respondents indicated that instructors used multiple sources when teaching ethics, and added that even those at the same institutions took different approaches to the subject matter. Table 2 enumerates the approaches to teaching ethics and their frequency of occurrence among survey respondents. Although variation was substantial, the most common approaches were the following: case studies and professional codes of ethics, followed by guest speakers, “Great Thinkers,” secondary sources, and “other.” Respondents who specified “other”

referred to the use of real-world examples such as current newspaper articles, video documentaries about the Watergate scandal, the 1970s Abscam FBI operation, the 1980s Iran Contra imbroglio, and similar, well-known instances of public malfeasance. [See Table 2]

Table 2.

*Approaches to Teaching Ethics and Their Frequency of Occurrence in a Survey of Academic Programs That Offer Master's Degrees, Certificates, and/or Concentrations in Nonprofit Administration, Nonprofit Management, and/or Leadership Studies\**

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<b>Approach</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Case Studies	32
Professional Codes of Ethics	30
Guest Speakers	22
Great Thinkers	19
Well-Known Secondary Sources	17
“Other”	9

*Note.* \*Multiple responses possible.

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Based on the responses, no clear trend emerged in the approaches to teaching ethics — many different curricula and materials exist. Some schools emphasized practical exercises, case studies, and real-world applications from business, politics, and the media. Others highlighted the works of Great Thinkers in the Western intellectual tradition. In many cases, the courses provided a mixture of the practical and the philosophical. For example, a course titled “Ethics and Morality in Public Service” at a Southern university featured a variety of readings, and included journal articles; George Washington’s Farewell Address; excerpts from the works of Martin Luther King, Jr.; and major religious texts such as the Bible, the Torah, and the Koran.

The survey highlighted a tendency for disparity in ethics education, which spanned a wide variety of teaching styles across U.S. institutions that offer nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs. Based on our review of ethics instruction, we expected this result. Goals and objectives varied among respondents who taught ethics education; the approaches and

emphases they employed were widespread and diverse. As a result, there is no way to know whether one approach is preferable to another, at least not based on the outcome of our survey.

Determining the relative effectiveness of the various methods and sources used for teaching ethics in nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs was beyond the scope of this research, but clearly more work needs to be done. Are case studies more effective at communicating ethical precepts than is, for example, focusing on the works of Great Thinkers such as Plato and Immanuel Kant? More fundamentally, what should be the goals and objectives of formal ethics instruction in nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs? Determining the effectiveness of methods and sources will depend on the goals and objectives of nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs.

#### ETHICS EDUCATION: DOES IT MATTER?

The institutions that responded to our survey indicated, either explicitly or implicitly, that the paramount objective of ethics coursework was to emphasize the centrality of personal responsibility and instill in students a sense of the duties they will face when working in a nonprofit organization, so that they will know how to behave ethically and, presumably, act in accordance with their new-found knowledge. This is a noble aspiration, but emphasizing the centrality of personal responsibility is vague; it is not obvious how this goal will be achieved. Even if common goals and objectives are developed, and even if agreed-upon standards and measurement criteria are established, the crucial issue is whether ethics education matters. In light of the personal, private nature of ethics as a blueprint for acting in ways that ultimately rely on one's conscience, it is difficult to know whether teaching courses on the subject — regardless of the method used — affects the behavior of students who complete them. In other words, the salient query is whether ethics can be taught and, if so, to what end. Do we expect students to modify their behavior after studying ethics, or is it enough that they merely possess the knowledge and tools to act ethically, even if they choose to do otherwise? If teaching ethics does not matter (either because the courses seldom alter students' behavior, or because they have little pedagogical value), then it can be argued that ethics has no place in a nonprofit (or public administration) curriculum. If ethics education does matter, then the question arises as to whether it can be improved via superior teaching methods or approaches (Jurkiewicz & Nichols, 2002; Lampe, 1997; Penn, 1990; Shareef, 2008).

In 1997, Menzel raised a key question in "Teaching Ethics and Values in Public Administration: Are We Making a Difference?" (Menzel, 1997a). He concluded that ethics education was valuable in schools of public affairs and administration, but noted that instruction methods needed improvement. "Is ethics instruction finding a niche in PA/A schools?" he asked rhetorically.

“Unquestionably. Are we making a difference? Yes, so it appears. Are we making a large enough difference? Probably not” (p. 229). In Menzel’s view, the wide variation in techniques and the inconsistent approaches of ethics education made it difficult to assess its effect, or to compare one form of instruction to another. As Menzel concluded, “There is probably no one best way to acquire ethics. Still, there is much to learn about both the teaching and learning (or acquiring) of ethics and values in public administration” (Menzel 1997a, pp. 229-230).

A similar assessment can be applied to institutions that offer nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs. Virtually everyone agreed that, to the extent possible, “right conduct” should be encouraged. A large percentage of people who believed that right conduct is a crucial question also believed that ethics instruction in the context of degrees, certificates, or concentration programs is a reasonable means of encouraging such behavior. How these courses should be structured and taught, and whether they are sufficiently valuable, are questions that remain open to discussion and debate.

Formal training and instruction in a subject can, and often does, lead to an improved understanding, and sometimes it leads to an impressive intellectual mastery. Courses that introduce students to the central theories and Great Thinkers in ethics can enrich and enliven their academic experiences, assuming they are well-taught and that students engage the material. If the goal is to ensure an understanding of ethics, then multiple courses and multiple approaches can achieve the desired effect.

The goal of ethics education, however, extends beyond understanding, although mastery of basic ideas and concepts is a necessary first step. Presumably, the purpose of introducing students to administrative ethics is to ensure that they do more than merely understand ethics as an academic subject. Students are expected to act on their new-found knowledge by incorporating ethical precepts and practices into their academic and professional lives. This laudable goal can be traced back to the Greeks, for whom ethics was not merely a subject of academic inquiry; it was a time-tested way of life. The cornerstone of ethics was the notion of character — the qualities and attributes that comprise the personality of an individual. A person exhibited good character when he or she acted in ways that reflected virtue (excellence), that is, the individual tried to become a fully actualized human being by engaging in right conduct, in accordance with absolute, recognizable standards (Martinez & Richardson, 2008, pp. 18-22; Wallace, 1978, p. 10; Wilson, 1985).

Knowledge of ethical concepts could be imparted in many ways, but a multitude of approaches might raise as many questions as they would answer. As Cooper noted in a 2004 *Public Administration Review* article, “Big Questions in Administrative Ethics: A Need for Focused, Collaborative Effort,” the “interesting but highly disparate” literature on administrative ethics lacks “anything like a focused effort by groups of scholars to study specific sets

of significant research questions in a sustained and systematic fashion.” He attributed the absence of a systematic approach to ethics as a consequence of the failure to build consensus on “specific theoretical perspectives, sets of related problems, or significant issues” (Cooper, 2004, p. 395). Cooper was correct in saying that a theoretical grounding must precede the development of any systematic approach to administrative ethics. To date, consensus regarding that grounding has been absent, although some scholars have attempted to provide a theoretical grounding (Goodsell, 1990; Schubert, 1957; Stewart, 1991). Despite these efforts, public sector ethics, including in the nonprofit field, do not have an agreed-upon, more-or-less-uncontested series of propositions or theories that are taught to members of the profession, in much the same way as analogous courses in engineering, law, and medicine are taught. Scholars argue that it is valuable to teach administrative ethics in schools of public administration, policy, and management, but consensus breaks down when there are attempts to go beyond a basic agreement on that broad conclusion (Hejka-Ekins, 1988; Katz, 1968; Lee & Paddock, 1992; Rohr, 1976).

Consider the legal profession, for example. Graduates of American Bar Association-accredited law schools must pass a state-administered bar examination in order to be admitted to the profession. Typically, a state supreme court or state bar association serves as a gatekeeper for bar admissions, in addition to disciplining errant lawyers who violate clearly stated rules of conduct. For lawyers, then, the notion of legal ethics is not a set of philosophical principles that lack specificity and enforceability. “Legal ethics” — as the concept is understood by practicing attorneys — refers to a set of more-or-less black-letter rules that must be obeyed if the practitioner hopes to avoid sanctions (Martinez, 1998).

Contrast this sense of ethics with public-sector ethics as they would apply outside of a recognized profession with a gate-keeping function. Public-sector ethics vary widely because the “public sector” is such a broad, amorphous term — one that carries different meanings depending on the part or aspect of the public sector being referenced. “Nonprofit” ethics confront the same issues, and are exacerbated by an even weaker understanding of what constitutes the “sector.”

As for nonprofit ethics instruction — based on the wide array of courses and approaches available in nonprofit curricula — ethics and the teaching of ethics represent many different things to many different people. If scholars so far have failed to establish a systematic approach to researching and teaching ethics, then it is little wonder that institutions with nonprofit master’s degrees, certificates, concentration programs, or professional education degrees have pursued multiple approaches and curricula with no clear consensus on a preferred path (Bahm, 1982).

Survey results suggested that treatment of case studies and examination of professional codes of ethics seemed to be popular teaching techniques, perhaps because they provide relatively straightforward, positivist approaches to an expansive, highly diverse subject. Broader philosophical works and well-known

secondary sources — although valuable additions to the literature on ethics — can be extremely challenging to work with, and may not yield the “real-world” insights that scholars and students find useful, in terms of practical applications.

If a workable model of administrative ethics existed, presumably the teaching of administrative ethics in the nonprofit sector — as well as in the broader field of public administration — would be improved. This type of model must confront problems that are generalized to an entire sector(s) (Adams, 2001, pp. 291-308; Hejka-Ekins, 1988; Katz, 1968; Martinez, 1998; Rosenbloom, 1989, p. 483). Until this ambitious goal is achieved, we offer a three-step approach to teaching ethical decision-making skills.

#### CONCLUSION: THREE STEPS FOR EFFECTIVELY TEACHING ETHICS

Our survey highlighted the diversity in coursework that focused on the subject of nonprofit ethics. On the one hand, this diversity could be seen as a weakness because the quality and quantity of offerings varies greatly among institutions, which could undermine a common understanding of ethical behavior in the field of nonprofit management. On the other hand, the diversity of offerings may lead to richness in the literature and understanding of nonprofit ethics. Just as different universities display different strengths and weaknesses in certain academic fields, different management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs also display different approaches and strengths for teaching ethics.

As mentioned previously, the question of personal responsibility lies at the heart of all ethical questions, and the institutions that responded to our survey have endorsed this position through their coursework. If an administrator exercises little or no autonomy or administrative discretion, he or she might argue against the assumption of personal responsibility for work-place decisions. Given the central role of personal responsibility in decision making, it is important to understand its limits. Administrators, whether in the public or nonprofit sector, must understand their roles and how they can be shaped or influenced by ethics (Denhardt, 1988, pp. 99-107; Gortner, 1991, pp. 7-15; Wakefield, 1976). A common thread among the courses and curricula we surveyed was an emphasis on the individual's role as an autonomous actor inside an organization. Different approaches emphasize different aspects of personal responsibility, but every approach concludes that the individual cannot escape his or her duty by deflecting his obligations to superiors.

Despite the difficulty of determining which pedagogical approach is superior to the others, we can recommend general features that are necessary to any course offering — regardless of its approach or content (Martinez, 2009). As suggested by the results shown in Table 2, there are multiple approaches to teaching ethics. Rather than engaging in fruitless debate over the advantages of one approach or another, we propose a decision-making model of the ethical

administrator that requires three steps. In our view, using these three steps — regardless of the chosen approach to instruction — should be communicated to students of administrative ethics.

**The first step** is to identify the scope of an ethical administrator's work. To a large extent, administrators' worlds are shaped by their places in various organizations. Obviously, formal procedural rules and statutory requirements play a major role in determining how the organization conducts its daily business. An equally important but less obvious point is that an organization's culture affects virtually all aspects of its performance, including how groups interact within the organization (Balk, 1978; Emanuele & Higgins, 2000; Jennings, 2004, pp. 17-18; Malloy & Agarwal, 2003; Martinez & Richardson, 2008, pp. 111-136; Nielsen & Dufresne, 2005; Van Wart, 1996).

Understanding an administrator's scope of duties also highlights the inherent difficulty of moving away from an individual notion of ethics, toward a broader emphasis on institutions. It is easy to understand how ethical precepts apply to private individuals when they are acting in a private capacity, because their accountability is straightforward. And unless adults are affected by extreme duress, mental illness, or a diminished mind capacity, they are held accountable for their actions. By contrast, an individual who is acting as an employee must consider a variety of factors — aside from personal preferences — when making choices. The potential conflict between one's desires and one's duties to the agency, the community, or the public can raise ethical problems, and the nature of such a conflict complicates administrative ethics (Denhardt, 1988, pp. 99-130; Gortner, 1991, pp. 24-33; Graham, 1974; Whitbeck, 1996).

Any course of study that stresses the importance of the administrator's role in nonprofit organizations will do much to advance ethics education in nonprofit programs. Hence, courses emphasizing ethics as philosophy without a more practical application need to be modified to highlight the role of the nonprofit manager. Adjustments need not be major, but they will be crucial in order to ensure that broad, philosophical principles of ethics are translated explicitly to a nonprofit context.

**In the second step**, appropriate ethical standards must be defined. The content of these acceptable standards may derive from several sources. Individuals develop their own internal ethical "codes" based on families, social ties, education, experience, religious beliefs, etc. They must rely on a moral compass to make decisions and must determine — in certain instances — whether that moral compass is at odds with the requirements of the larger organization. To some extent, an administrator must separate personal feelings from professional responsibility, when and if a conflict occurs. Although an individual may not enjoy divorcing individual feelings from the role of a public servant, society benefits from this division of duties. Social institutions within a democratic regime are designed so that individuals who interact with



these institutions help promote social values. If an individual working in an institutional setting puts personal values above the institution's values, then this action circumvents the democratic processes that created those social values (Bailey, 1965; Fletcher, 1958; Foster, 1981; Gortner, 1991, pp. 13-15; Richardson, 1997, pp. 109-120).

A particular organization may have its own code of ethics, in order to outline expectations for employee behavior and performance. Professional associations or societies such as the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) have ethical codes, and their materials should be made available to new (and experienced) administrators. Moreover, one or more organizations such as NASPAA, or some other nonprofit association, might productively offer sessions on ethics for nonprofit organizations. This provides a means of disseminating knowledge about ethical codes and behavior, as well as a means of encouraging formal curriculum development or research agendas for nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs.<sup>3</sup>

**The third and final step** is creating a deliberative process that enables an administrator to appropriately assess ethical questions and chart a satisfactory plan for resolving issues. Any course that highlights the steps of creating such a deliberative process would be valuable to nonprofit management students. The course(s) also must emphasize that an administrator faced with a decision should be able to look to past textbook examples and resolve matters the way they did in similar past scenarios. When past examples either don't exist, or they conflict with the reality at hand, an administrator can seek guidance from more experienced employees and from the organization's published codes, guidelines, and/or procedures. Although such processes should address the great majority of the cases confronted, instances still can arise where no existing code, guideline, or procedure provides a clear resolution (Bozeman, 2007, pp. 123-129; Martinez, 1998; Van Wart, 1996).

In this situation, the administrator must recognize that the case is not covered by pre-existing rules and standards. When faced with an unusual situation, the administrator must evaluate the situation and analogize it to cases that reflect the underlying values of the organization. In addition, after an administrator recognizes the issue and decides to act in accordance with the organization's underlying values, he or she must have the fortitude to move forward — even in the face of opposition or indifference from others. Of the three steps in the model, evaluating the ethical requirements and acting on them is the most crucial, and the most difficult (Bozeman, 2007, pp. 175-186; Martinez, 1998; Moxley & Bueche, 2002; Nielsen & Dufresne, 2005). Any course that helps students grapple with these issues would be a welcome addition to nonprofit management curriculum.

Our survey suggested that more research is needed to establish the nature and extent of the link between ethics instruction and ethical behavior, although

several existing studies have concluded that teaching ethics courses can and frequently does make a difference in behavior (Jurkiewicz & Nichols, 2002; Richards, Gilbert & Harris, 2002; Shareef, 2008; Weber, 1990). Typically, a study involves a before-and-after scenario, where a group of students entering a class is introduced to a series of case studies and asked to assess the ethical implications. Several months later, after the students have learned about ethics and ethical decision-making, they are asked to examine the original case studies and reassess the ethical dilemmas. The students invariably comment that they are able to employ more decision-making tools and processes than they had before (O’Leary, 2009; Peppas & Diskin, 2001). Although such results are encouraging, students who recently completed a course that contained intellectual tools for assessing ethical dilemmas are likely to feel as if they are better prepared to assess hypothetical scenarios. The crucial change in behavior, however, will occur years later, when those students become practitioners. Literature addressing whether changes in behavior result in improved public sector management performances is unclear (Hoaglund, 1984; Menzel, 1997a). In the meantime, we assume *arguendo* that a linkage exists, yet is poorly understood. If a linkage did not exist, ethics instruction would add little practical value to the curriculum of nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs.

In the absence of an agreed-upon universal model(s) of nonprofit or public sector ethics, we recommend that schools offering ethics education consider instructing students in these three steps. Some schools will decide that stand-alone courses effectively introduce these steps; others will choose to incorporate ethics instruction into the content of coursework. Some schools will use case studies and examine codes of ethics, while still others will focus on Great Thinkers, well-known secondary sources, or other approaches to instruction. Perhaps, as Aristotle once intimated, it is the process of wrestling with ethical issues, not the actual content of ethical instruction, which leads to what he deemed “practical wisdom” (Aristotle, 1980, p. 157).

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### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Seton Hall University Web site is regularly maintained and updated (Mirabella & Wish, 2000, 2001; Wilson & Larson, 2002). At the time we conducted our survey, 238 schools offered degrees, certificates, and concentration programs in nonprofit management, according to the Seton Hall Web site.
- <sup>2</sup> We rely on the Carnegie classification system, by virtue of its longstanding, authoritative stature. Since 1970, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education has classified colleges and universities to assist in research and policy analysis. The classification originally was published in 1973, and updated in 1976, 1987, 1994, 2000, and 2005. The Carnegie Classification has become the leading framework for classifying institutions of higher education in the United States. It has been widely used to represent and control for institutional differences, and to ensure adequate representation of sampled institutions, students, and faculty. For more information, see the Carnegie Foundation website (<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/>).
- <sup>3</sup> Formalized codes of ethics such as the ASPA Code of Ethics and Guidelines, the International City Management Code of Ethics with Guidelines, the National Contract Management Association Code of Ethics, the United States Code of Ethics of 1980, or any of the state codes of ethics also are readily available (Gortner, 1991, pp. 135-138; Martinez, 1998, pp. 714-718; Van Wart, 1996).

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APPENDIX

*Survey*

Your Name and Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

This information will be used in a study of ethics courses offered in nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs. Individual results will be kept confidential unless we obtain specific permission from you to identify your program.

1. Name of your educational institution (for example: Niagara Community College; the University of Georgia):
  
2. In the chart below, please provide information about each nonprofit management degree, certificate, or concentration program offered by your educational institution. If your institution does not offer a program listed in the chart, please write "N/A," for "not applicable."

**Characteristics of Nonprofit Management Degrees, Certificates, or Concentration Programs at Your School**

Characteristics of Nonprofit Management Degrees, Certificates, or Concentration Programs at Your School	Nonprofit Education Programs Offered at Your School		
	NP Master's Degree	NP Concentration	NP Certificate/ Professional Education Degree
Number of credit hours required to graduate from this program			
Percentage of students completing an ethics course in the program			
Number of students completing an ethics course in the program			
Total number of tenure-track faculty members teaching ethics courses in this program			
Total number of adjunct faculty members teaching ethics courses in this program			
Number of times per year ethics course is offered in this program			



3. Please list the title and course number of each ethics course offered in the nonprofit management degrees, certificates or concentration programs identified above.

Course Title                      Last Taught (Semester/Quarter & Year)                      Credit Hours

4. Are other courses containing an ethics component offered in your nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs, even if the course is not devoted to ethics?

No     Yes    →    Names of Courses:

5. What is the role of ethics courses in the nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs offered at your institution? Please check “yes” with an “X” to describe any ethics courses your school offers. Please check “yes” for all that apply.

Role of Ethics Courses in Each of Your Nonprofit Management Degrees, Certificates or Concentration Programs	Nonprofit Education Programs Offered at Your School		
	NP Master’s Degree	NP Concentration	NP Certificate/ Professional Education Degree
Ethics course is <i>required</i> for this program			
Ethics course is <i>recommended</i> for this program			
Ethics course is an <i>elective</i> for this program			
Ethics course is <i>not offered</i> for this program			

6. If they are available, please provide copies of the syllabus/syllabi for all ethics courses in your nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs, including courses containing an ethics component, even if the course is not specifically devoted to ethics.
7. What books are used in teaching ethics courses in your nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs? Please indicate whether each book is required or recommended.

Author      Book Title      Required?      Recommended?

8. What kinds of issues and approaches are covered in the ethics courses offered by your nonprofit management degrees, certificates, or concentration programs? Please check all that apply.

- Great Thinkers (For example, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, etc.)
- Well-known secondary sources (For example, John Rohr, William Frankena, Alasdair MacIntyre, William Bennett, etc.)
- Professional Codes of Ethics (For example, codes of ethics for doctors, lawyers, and other professionals)
- Case studies
- Guest speakers with expertise in the area of the course
- Other (Please specify):

**Thank you for participating!**  
**Please return the surveys in the enclosed envelope by**  
**Wednesday, March 22, 2006**