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Nonprofit Sector Needs Assessment Survey: A Report of Findings for the Richmond Metro Area

Abstract
This nonprofit needs assessment was initiated by a student from the Wilder School and was further developed in collaboration with Nonprofit Learning Point www.nonprofitlearningpoint.com and Division of Community Engagement www.community.vcu.edu. The purpose of this study was to broadly understand these issues from a nonprofit perspective as well as inform how universities can better meet current needs while proactively anticipating future needs of the nonprofit sector within the Richmond region.

Keywords
nonprofit, nonprofit sector, needs assessment, nongovernment organization

Disciplines
Higher Education

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Virginia Commonwealth University

Nonprofit Sector Needs Assessment Survey

A Report of Findings for the Richmond Metro Area

July 24, 2014

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Executive Summary

Increasingly, nonprofits are being asked to address complex social problems with fewer resources. In the face of multiple public crises, universities have been called upon to deeply engage with nonprofits and serve their local communities as part of their public mission (Harkavy & Alexroth-Hodges, 2012). These mutually beneficial community-university partnerships meet community-identified needs while providing students with high quality learning experiences (i.e., service-learning) and producing innovative research (Harkavy & Alexroth-Hodges, 2012). In addition to these broad and often interdisciplinary efforts, universities help prepare the nonprofit workforce of tomorrow while also building the capacity of today's professionals through continuing education courses for professional and leadership development (Dolan, 2002; Garvey, 2009).

However, it is no secret that 'change' appears to be the only constant in the nonprofit sector. The field has changed dramatically over the past several decades, largely due to broad societal factors such as a more conservative policy environment (Ahmed, 2005) and the recent economic downturn (Salamon, Sokolowski, & Geller, 2012). These changes have had fiscal, management, accountability, human resource, and technological implications for the nonprofit sector (Ahmed, 2005). Given the rapid changes in technology as well as the impending retirement of the baby boomer generation, what might be the nonprofit sector's needs be in the future? Further, how might universities prepare to meet these needs through community engagement and nonprofit workforce development?

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has a long history of partnering with the nonprofit sector to address local problems and has prioritized community engagement as a strategic initiative that promotes student success, innovative research and human health. Aligned with this mission, this study was driven by the desire to better understand the needs of nonprofits and their relationships with universities within the Richmond region.

Purpose

This nonprofit needs assessment was initiated by a student from the Wilder School and was further developed in collaboration with Nonprofit Learning Point www.nonprofitlearningpoint.com and Division of Community Engagement www.community.vcu.edu. The purpose of this study was to broadly understand these issues from a nonprofit perspective as well as inform how universities can better meet current needs while proactively anticipating future needs of the nonprofit sector within the Richmond region. Specifically, the study was guided by the following questions.

1. What are the current needs within the nonprofit sector? How have these needs changed over time and what are the expected future needs?
2. How do nonprofits partner with universities? What resources do they typically gain and how valuable are they?
3. How can universities help better prepare the nonprofit workforce?
4. How can universities better partner with nonprofits to meet their needs and the needs within the community?

Nonprofit sector stakeholders were identified and emailed a web-based survey through the Nonprofit Learning Point (NLP). NLP is sustained by the collaborative partnership between VCU and the Partnership for Nonprofit Excellence. NLP provides high quality, affordable professional and leadership development for the nonprofit community, mainly serving the Richmond region. The results below are based on a convenience sample with a 6% response rate (*n*=184), which limits the generalizability of the findings.

Key Results

- **Fiscal Challenges Affect Nonprofits' Capacity to Manage Fiscal Challenges.** Majority (68%) of respondents cited lacking stable and reliable funding as a major current challenge, followed by difficulties in recruiting and maintaining staff (20%) and the lack of strategic leadership among executive staff and boards (13%). These challenges were related. Nonprofits reported being unable to afford hire talented staff with the skills they needed to address current fiscal challenges (i.e., financial management skills, etc.) which in turn resulted in a lack of strategic leadership to plan for and generate alternative funding streams.
- **Multiple Resources Predicted to Become 'Essential' in Future.** In general, nonprofits predicted that all the resources they currently receive would become 'essential' 10 to 20 years in the future. Fundraising/grantwriting was predicted to become the most essential resource (27%), closely followed by board/committee members (26%), technology (25%), education/training (25%), and marketing (25%).
- **Common University Resources Are Not Always the Most Valuable.** Nonprofits typically received student interns (72%), education/training (45%), and volunteers (45%) from their university partners. However, the most valuable resources received from university partners were management consultation (71%), education/training (66%), and board/committee members (65%).
- **Nonprofits Are Ambivalent When It Comes to Nonprofit Training.** In general, nonprofits often preferred work experience and matching values over certifications when hiring. 52% did not seek staff with nonprofit training and only 55% "occasionally" preferred some degrees over others when hiring management. However, one of the primary suggestions for how universities can be more helpful was to provide more professional development for the nonprofit sector, suggesting that nonprofits value specific skills rather than specific degrees.

Recommendations

Given the limits of the sampling method, these results should be taken as tentative conclusions rather than as definitive statements. The following recommendations are drawn from the results of the survey.

1. Universities can improve the depth and breadth of their partnerships by being more accessible. Suggestions made by nonprofits were: (a) partner with private organizations, such as businesses, as well as nonprofits; (b) provide a menu of resources or some central mechanism from which nonprofits can select/request resources based on project needs (i.e., interns, evaluation, research, etc.); and (c) commit to longer-term projects (i.e. those that last more than one semester).

2. Universities should focus on increasing access to management consultation, technology and marketing resources. This can be done by increasing service-learning classes and internships that draw from the above

disciplines. Further, faculty and staff with these desired skills can be encouraged to volunteer as board members.

3. Universities should improve the professional development available to the nonprofit sector. One way this can be done is to integrate distance learning and other technology to increase not only availability, but affordability of these courses. In addition, courses should be developed that are grounded in the experience of executive directors to help meet the need for strategic leadership and board development.

Methodology

Nonprofit sector stakeholders within the Richmond region were identified using the Nonprofit Learning Point's email list containing all contacts who have registered for one or more of the classes they provide. A web-based questionnaire using Qualtrics (a secure survey application) was created that included 25 closed- and open-ended questions (see Appendix A). Information collected was anonymous and confidential. No identifying information was asked and data collected could not be traced back to a specific respondent (i.e., use of a public survey link rather than individualized survey links). VCU IRB approval was secured prior to data collection.

NLP sent an invitation email to potential participants (n=3255) that included the link to the online survey and two follow-up reminder emails. Data collection began in October, 2013 and ended in November, 2013. Based on the number of participants that actually received the email (i.e., emails were not bounced), the response rate was 6% (n=184 responded). However, if based on the number of individuals who opened the email (n=894), the response rate was 21%. Either way, the response rate to the survey was low, which is usual for web-based survey research compared to other modes of survey research. A recent review found that web-based surveys had an 11% lower response rate compared to mailed and telephone surveys (Manfreda, Bosnjak, Berzelak, Hass, & Vehovar, 2008). Response rates for web-based surveys have steadily declined over the years (61.5% average in 1986 vs. 24% average in 2000) largely due to email saturation (Sheehan, 2001). Given these trends, some scholars argue that low response rates are not necessarily indicative of poor quality results with some studies finding that response rates as low as 5% were only marginally less accurate compared to similar studies with higher response rates (see Morton, Bandara, Robinson, & Atatoa-Carr, 2012 for overview).

Nevertheless, these results are likely not representative of the nonprofit sector within the Richmond region due to potential differences between (a) those who opened and did not open the email invitations and (b) those who responded to the survey and did not respond to the survey. The potential differences between the above groups may introduce bias into the survey (i.e., respondents had a more positive view of NLP versus non-respondents or respondents simply had more time); however, it is unknown what those differences might be (if any exist).

Nine (9) additional individuals responded to the survey, but did not provide electronic consent. Their responses were not included in the results.

Closed-ended questions were analyzed using appropriate univariate statistics in SPSS 21. Not all participants provided complete data. Frequencies are based on those who responded to a specific question (i.e., valid percent) and not on the whole sample (n=184). Open-ended responses were analyzed by grouping responses into themes or categories. Frequencies for the general themes are provided with brief discussions included to contextualize the various dimensions of the main categories.

Demographics

Of the 184 respondents, only 94 indicated their affiliation with the nonprofit sector. The majority of participants were program staff (32%), executive directors (28%), and administrative staff (16%) followed by 'Other' (12%), board members (6%) and volunteers (5%). Examples of 'Other' include consultants, developmental staff, and executive staff. Approximately 80% of respondents (*n*=93) were between ages 30-59 (table 1).

Table 1. Demographics

Demographic Variable	N (%)
Nonprofit Affiliation[a]	
Executive director	26 (28%)
Program staff	30 (32%)
Administrative staff	15 (16%)
Volunteer	5 (5%)
Board member	6 (6%)
Other	12 (13%)
Age[b]	
18 – 19	1 (1%)
20 – 29	5 (5%)
30 – 39	27 (29%)
40 – 49	22 (24%)
50 – 59	24 (26%)
60 and above	14 (15%)

[a] *n*=94; [b] *n*=93

Participants were also asked to indicate the primary purpose of the nonprofit they were affiliated with (*n*=94).

The majority of nonprofits represented in the survey were engaged in human services (18%), health & wellness (17%), 'Other' (16%), housing & shelter (15%), and education (10%). Examples of 'Other' nonprofit focus areas were anti-violence, diversity & inclusion, and capacity building.

A few nonprofits focused on youth development (7%), arts & culture (5%), civic & community (4%), and faith-based (2%).

The remaining nonprofits focused on a variety of issues such as animals (1%), crime & legal aid (1%), employment (1%), hunger & nutrition (1%), and philanthropy/grantmaking (1%).

Current Nonprofit Sector Needs

In this section, nonprofits were asked about their current challenges, how those challenges have changed over time, and what resources have been the most helpful in meeting current needs.

Current Challenges

Nonprofit participants were asked the following open-ended question, *"What are the greatest challenges facing your organization today?"* Sixty-five percent (65%, *n*=120) of participants responded to this question. The challenges reported by participants are organized into the following two themes: lack of resources and adapting to changing contexts.

- **Lack of Resources**
  68% reported that funding was a major challenge within this category. Specifically, participants stated that traditional funding sources have dwindled (i.e., Medicare) and thus, they face more competition from other nonprofits for a smaller pool of dollars. In addition, the lack of funding – particularly long-term and stable funding – affected their organization's ability to address financial needs. For instance, hiring grant writers and/or shifting from a fundraising to a donor model were difficult without the financial reserves to staff these strategies.

  Lack of funding was also related to the other top two greatest concerns regarding lack of resources: staffing and leadership. Twenty percent (20%) of participants reported that recruiting and retaining qualified and talented staff was one of their greatest challenges, primarily due to the inability to pay for staffing and professional development. Thirteen percent (13%) of participants also reported that their executive and board leadership lacked skills in developing and implementing strategic plans that successfully address the lack of financial and human resources their organization faces.

- **Adapting to Changing Contexts**
  Participants also reported that adjusting to constant change in general, such as changes in health care policies, was difficult (11%), particularly given their resource constraints. Some sources of change beyond lack of resources were greater community needs (8%), advances in technology (8%), and decreased community participation (6%). These changes in turn have affected the need for nonprofits to increase or target their marketing (8%) to improve community awareness of services and to improve their volunteer management (5%) such that they effectively recruit reliable volunteers.

  Further, as community needs have increased, participants report that meeting the needs in a relevant way have become challenging, particularly for new nonprofits (2%). Establishing the financial resources and board development without burning out volunteers has become a "tricky dance". On the other hand, ensuring that nonprofits are not duplicating program efforts has also become problematic.

Changes in Current Challenges

Next, participants were asked, "*Have those challenges changed over the past 10 years?*" Sixty-four percent (64%, *n*=77) responded 'yes', while 36% (*n*=44) responded 'no'; 34% (*n*=63) did not answer this question.

If a participant selected 'yes', they were then asked the following open-ended question, "*In what ways?*" Ninety-six percent (96%, *n*=74) of participants responded to this question. A few participants discussed 'change' in general (8%) where some stated that while change has always been a constant, others claimed that the changes have become more rapid and more detrimental to the nonprofit sector. Remaining respondents discussed specific changes which are organized into the following four themes: 1) funding, 2) technological needs, 3) volunteer management, and 4) workforce issues.

- **Changes in Funding**
  Overall, most participants reported that traditional funding sources have decreased dramatically (43%) while community needs have increased (17%) due in large part to the 2008 economic recession. In addition to funding sources decreasing, participants report that funding mechanisms have changed as well affecting how services are provided. For instance, more nonprofits operate under a managed care model and fees for services which limits who they can serve. Participants also state that there is more interest in accountability and impact by their funders now; however, they have less financial resources to evaluate programs and 'accountability' often translates into more work with less staff.

  Lastly, participants argue that the decrease in resources has led to more competition among nonprofits (5%). In some cases, this competition seems to lead to an initial duplication of services while in other cases, there is an increased emphasis on partnerships and collaborations among nonprofits. While partnering may be positive, some state that managing differing goals and agendas among various stakeholders with little staff and not always strong leadership is challenging.

- **Changes in Technology**
  14% of participants noted that technology has changed rapidly over the past 10 years. Specifically, participants stated that staying "on top" of technology was difficult not only due to the initial expense, but also because the software and infrastructure would become obsolete within 3 to 5 years. In addition, most did not have IT staff to help navigate and make best use of technological advances for their operations.

- **Changes in Volunteering**
  9% of participants also noted how the recession and changing demographics has affected volunteering. For instance, some mentioned that they can no longer count on the older population to volunteer since less of them are able to retire. Middle-aged people continue to have less time to contribute and some suggest are less interest in "community" issues.

- **Changes in Workforce Issues**
  8% of participants discussed workforce changes. Consistent with previous remarks, some noted that it has become more difficult to recruit and maintain staff as workloads have increased. Perhaps relatedly, some mentioned that their organizations have expanded while hiring has not. Lastly, one participant stated that, "professionals are leaving higher education ill equipped to work in the complex business environment that drives the human service delivery system".

Most Helpful Non-Financial Resources

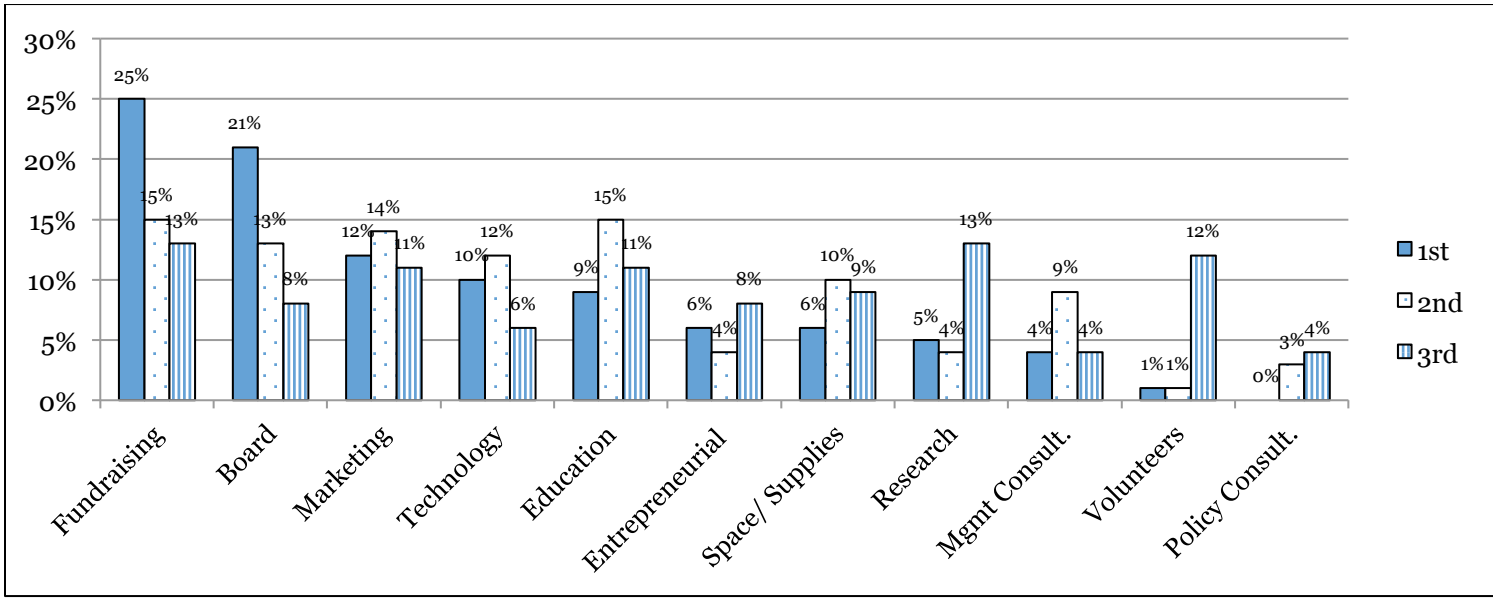
Participants were asked, *"If your organization could have any non-financial resources, what resources would be most helpful to address the most pressing challenges your organization currently faces?"* Participants were presented with 11 resources they could rank. In addition, participants were able to enter up to 3 resources not listed. Participant ranked these resources in order of importance from 1 to 11 (or 1 to 14 if they entered additional resources), with 1 being the most helpful non-financial resource for nonprofits to address challenges they face.

Table 2. Nonprofit Rankings of Most Helpful Resources to Meet Current Needs (*n*=109)

Resources	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th
Fundraising/Grantwriting	**25%**	**15%**	**13%**	10%	9%	6%	7%	6%	4%	4%	0%
Board/Committee members	21%	13%	8%	10%	8%	**12%**	6%	7%	3%	5%	7%
Marketing	12%	14%	11%	8%	**15%**	11%	14%	6%	5%	3%	1%
Technology	10%	12%	6%	6%	8%	5%	6%	3%	6%	5%	**31%**
Education/Training	9%	**15%**	11%	**17%**	11%	11%	9%	9%	4%	1%	3%
Entrepreneurial services	6%	4%	8%	10%	8%	11%	6%	10%	13%	10%	13%
Space/Supplies	6%	9%	9%	3%	1%	7%	6%	6%	6%	**23%**	21%
Research/Evaluation	5%	4%	**13%**	10%	11%	7%	7%	7%	13%	17%	6%
Management Consultation	4%	9%	4%	10%	9%	11%	**15%**	**18%**	12%	6%	3%
Interns/Volunteers	1%	1%	12%	9%	10%	8%	12%	15%	15%	14%	14%
Policy Consultation	0%	3%	4%	6%	8%	9%	13%	13%	**20%**	14%	10%

As shown in table 2 and figure1, fundraising and/or grantwriting assistance was consistently ranked as the most helpful non-financial resource by nonprofits, garnering the most 'votes' across the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place rankings (25%, 15%, and 13% respectively) followed closely by board and/or committee members (21%, 13%, and 8% respectively). Education/training, marketing and management consultation were other resources that were moderately desirable to nonprofits, ranking highly across the 4th, 5th, and 7th ranking places. Policy consultation, space/supplies, and technology were some of the least helpful resources, ranking highly for 9th – 11th place. Interestingly, while 31% ranked technology for 11th place, it was also ranked moderately high across the 1st through 3rd place rankings, suggesting that participants were divided in their technological needs (see table 2).

Figure 1. Nonprofits' Top 3 Rankings for Most Helpful Resources to Meet Current Needs (*n*=109)



In general, only a few participants entered their own 'Other' resources (*n*=18) before ranking these among the 11 provided. Examples of these 'Other' resources include financing assistance and alternative business models, partnership development, and succession planning. While nonprofits were able to enter these additional resources, the majority of these were ranked very low (91% in 12th place and 96% in 13th place).

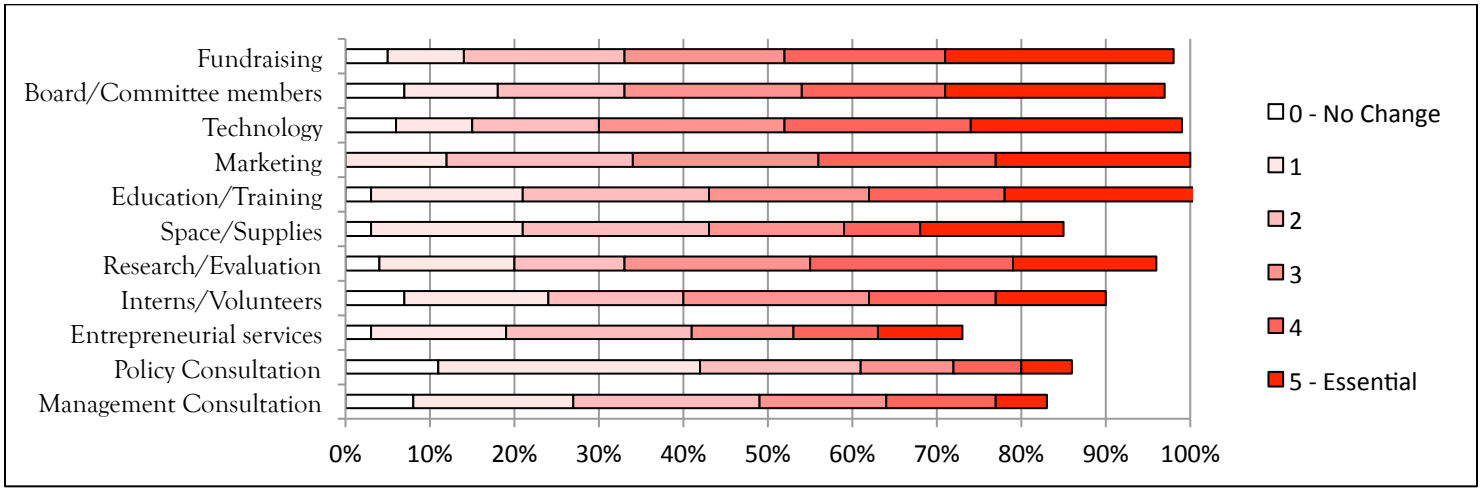
Future Nonprofit Sector Needs

In this section, participants were asked what they perceive their future needs to be and how the needs will change, if any, from their current needs.

Participants were asked, *"Looking 10 to 20 years ahead, how do you foresee your organization's non-financial resource needs changing compared to your current needs?"* Respondents could indicate that a resource would become non-essential (-5) to becoming essential (5). A zero (0) indicated that participants did not foresee a change in needing that particular resource. 'Other' resources entered by respondents in the previous question were carried forward in the list of resources, if applicable.

As illustrated in figure 2, participants generally predicted that all 11 resources would become more essential.

Figure 2. Nonprofits' Perception of Essential Future Resource Needs



27% of participants foresaw fundraising and/or grantwriting assistance becoming the most essential resource needs for the nonprofit sector (table 3).

Additional resources predicted to become 'essential' in the future were board/committee members (26%), technology (25%), education/training (23%), and marketing (23%).

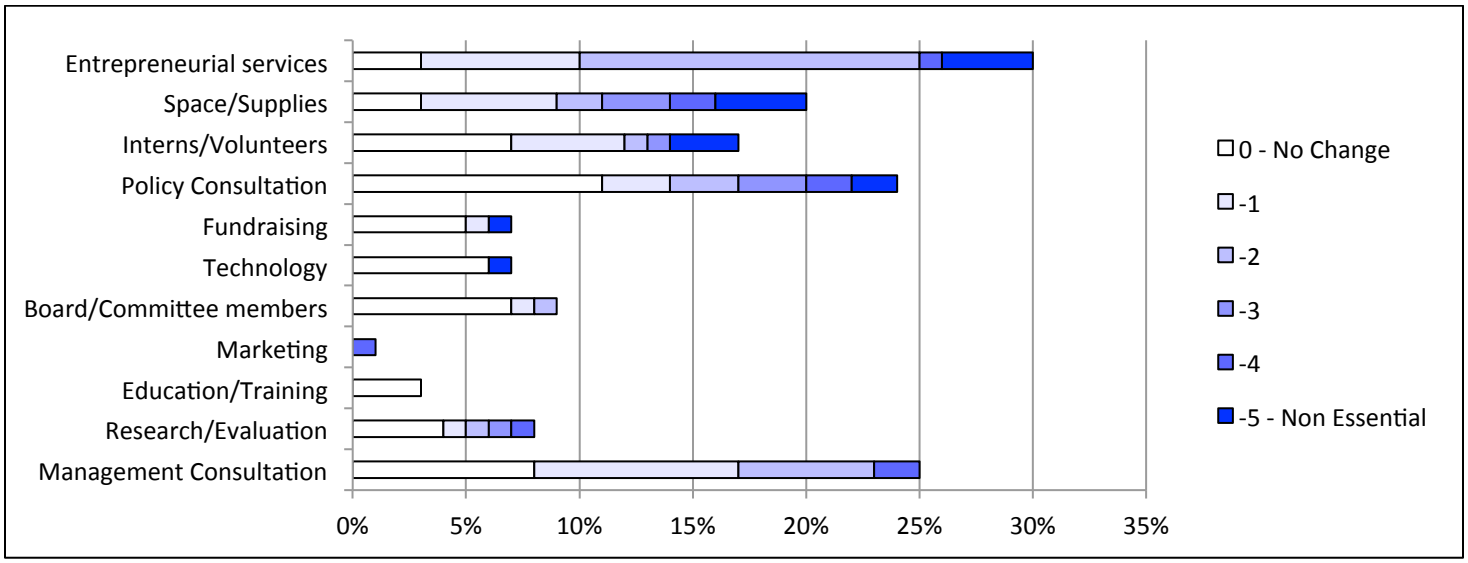
Table 3. Nonprofits' Perceptions of Future Essential Resources

Resources	No Change					Essential
	0	1	2	3	4	5
Fundraising	5%	9%	19%	19%	19%	**27%**
Board/Committee members	7%	11%	15%	21%	17%	**26%**
Technology	6%	9%	15%	22%	22%	**25%**
Education/Training	3%	18%	22%	19%	16%	**23%**
Marketing	0%	12%	22%	22%	21%	**23%**
Research/Evaluation	4%	16%	13%	22%	**24%**	17%
Space/Supplies	3%	18%	**22%**	16%	9%	17%
Interns/Volunteers	7%	17%	16%	**22%**	15%	13%
Entrepreneurial services	3%	16%	**22%**	12%	10%	10%
Management Consultation	8%	19%	**22%**	15%	13%	6%
Policy Consultation	**11%**	**31%**	19%	11%	8%	6%

Note: *N* varies for each resource item

As illustrated in figure 3, few resources were predicted by participants to become less essential in the future.

Figure 3. Nonprofits' Perception of Non-Essential Future Resource Needs



Entrepreneurial services and space/supplies were predicted by nonprofits to become the most non-essential resources for the sector in the future.

However, only 4% of nonprofits indicated this change (table 4).

Table 4. Nonprofits' Perceptions of Future Non-Essential Resources

Resources	Non-Essential					No Change
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0
Entrepreneurial services	4%	1%	0%	15%	7%	3%
Space/Supplies	4%	2%	3%	2%	6%	3%
Interns/Volunteers	3%	0%	1%	1%	5%	7%
Policy Consultation	2%	2%	3%	3%	3%	11%
Technology	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	6%
Fundraising	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	5%
Management Consultation	0%	2%	0%	6%	9%	8%
Research/Evaluation	0%	1%	1%	1%	1%	4%
Education/Training	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%
Marketing	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Board/Committee members	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%	7%

Note: *N* varies for each resource item

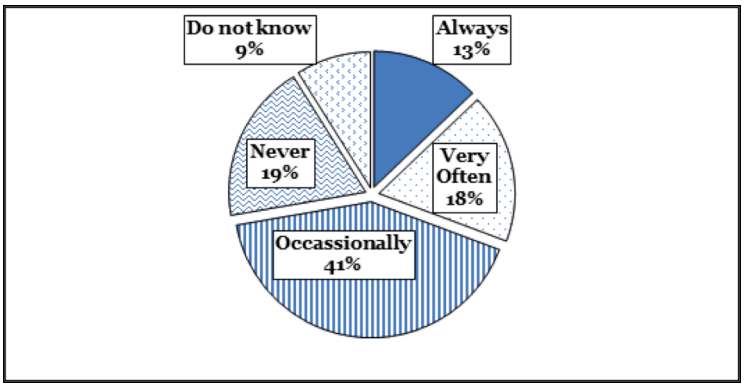
Managing Partnerships

In this section, nonprofits were asked about how they manage and evaluate their partnerships.

Use of Formal Agreements

Participants were asked, *"How often do you create a formal agreement to manage your partnerships or collaborations?"* 52% (n=96) of participants responded to this question. Thirteen percent (13%) 'always' and 18% 'very often' create formal agreements to manage their partnerships while 42% do so 'occasionally' and 19% 'never' create formal agreements. Nine percent (9%) did not know (figure 6).

Figure 6. Nonprofits' Use of Formal Partnership Agreements (n=96)



Evaluating Partnerships

Participants were then asked, *"Do you have a process to evaluate your partnerships or collaborations?"* 52% (n=96) of participants responded to this question. Twenty-one percent (21%) indicated that they had a process to evaluate their partnerships while 58% did not. Twenty-one percent (21%) did not know.

If participants indicated that they evaluated their partnerships, they were asked, *"How would you describe the evaluation process you use most often?"* Among the 20 respondents, 20% describe their evaluation process as 'formal' while 80% describe their process as 'informal'.

As a follow-up, partners were asked to, "*Please briefly describe how you formally or informally evaluate your partnerships or collaborations?*" Eighteen of the 21 relevant respondents (88%) answered this question.

- **Formal Processes**
  61% of participants discussed formal evaluation processes. These partnership evaluations were largely required due to being part of a grant and often the tools to assess the partnership were provided by grant funders. Evaluation processes included multiple data sources such as client surveys, retention rates, regular reports and meetings, assessing staff capacity to carry out tasks, and evaluating the partnership based on how goals and objects were being met.

- **Informal Processes**
  22% of participants elaborated on various informal evaluation processes that utilized meetings and conversations with partners to discuss the pros and cons to the partnerships as well as how goals and

objectives were being met. However, one participant reported that due to lack of time, they did not necessarily meet with their respective partner to assess the quality of the partnership. Instead, they decided to continue or not continue the partnership based on whether their own organization's needs were being met.

- **Mix of Informal & Formal Processes**
  17% of participants reported using regular conversations with partners that included reviewing formal action plans and specific strategies as well as survey information to inform next steps.

Community-University Partnerships

In this section, nonprofits were asked about their history with community-university partnerships, the resources they received from these partnerships and the value of the resources they received.

History of Community-University Partnerships

Nonprofit participants were asked, *"Have you ever partnered with a university?"* Approximately three-quarters (76%, *n*=75) reported partnering with universities before while 24% (*n*=24) had not; 46% (*n*=85) did not respond to this question. Nonprofit participants were then asked to indicate which universities or colleges (past and/or present) they had partnered with. Missing responses were not included in the following percentages.

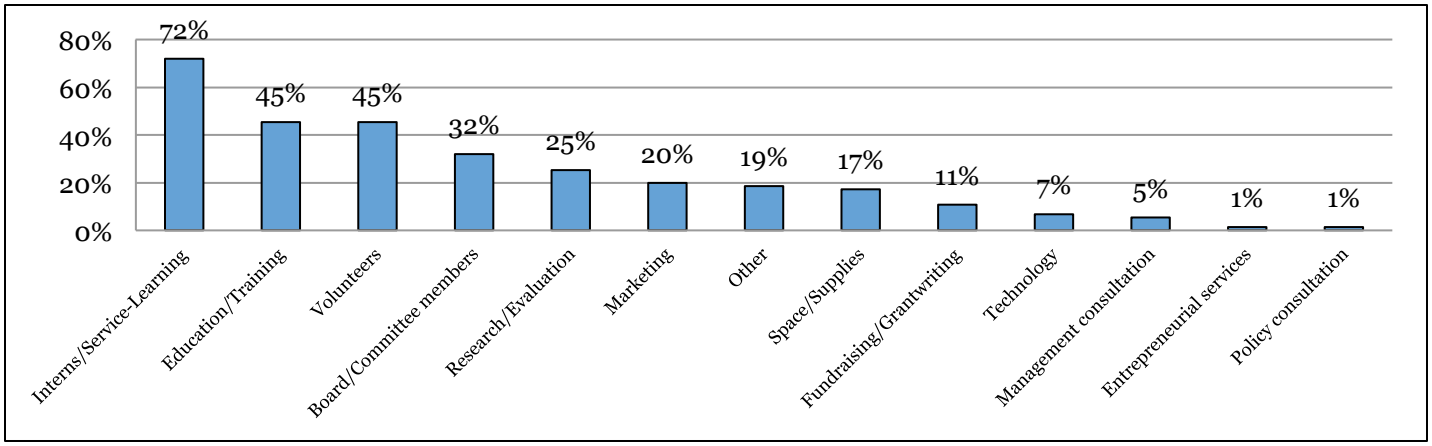
The top three partnering universities or colleges indicated by participants were: Virginia Commonwealth University (92%), University of Richmond (59%), and J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College (31%), followed by Virginia State University (24%), 'Other' (19%) and Virginia Union University (17%). Examples of 'Other' include George Mason University, James Madison University, and Virginia Tech University.

Resources Received

Nonprofit participants who indicated that they had partnered with a university or college before were asked questions about the resources they received from those community-university partnerships and the value of those resources. Participants (*n*=160) were asked, *"What resources did or do you commonly receive from your university partnerships (please select all that apply)?"* Missing responses were not included in the following percentages.

The most common resources received were: interns/service-learning students (72%), education/training (45%), volunteers (45%), and board/committee members (32%). The least common resources received were: technology (7%), management consultation (5%), entrepreneurial services (1%), and policy consultation (1%). Examples of 'Other' resources nonprofits received from their university-community partnerships include sponsorships of events, outreach, and regional collaboration (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Resources Received from Universities by Nonprofit Partners (*n*=75)



Value of Resources Received

Next, nonprofit participants were asked, *"How would you rate the value of the resources you received from university partners (past and/or present)?"* Participants were given the option to indicate that they could not 'value' the resource if it did not apply (i.e., they never received). The percentages for the value of a resource are based on respondents who had received that specific resource from a university partner. In other words, missing values and 'not applicable' responses are excluded from the calculations.

The most highly valued resources received from university-community partnerships were: management consultation (71%), education/training (66%), and board/committee members (65%). Resources ranked the lowest for 'extremely valuable' were entrepreneurial services (33%) and marketing (27%). (See table 5).

Table 5. Nonprofits' Perceptions of the Value of Resources Received from University Partners

Resource Received	Frequency of Resource Received	Not at all valuable	Slightly valuable	Moderately valuable	Extremely valuable
Interns/Service-Learning students	61	0%	7%	34%	**59%**
Education/Training	44	0%	2%	32%	**66%**
Volunteers	42	0%	2%	33%	**64%**
Board/Committee member	31	0%	10%	26%	**65%**
Research/Evaluation	19	0%	0%	42%	**58%**
Marketing	15	0%	20%	**53%**	27%
Space/Supplies	14	0%	7%	29%	**64%**
Fundraising/Grantwriting	12	0%	17%	25%	**58%**
Technology	9	0%	0%	44%	**56%**
Management consultation	7	0%	0%	29%	**71%**
Policy consultation	5	0%	20%	20%	**60%**
Entrepreneurial services	3	33%	33%	0%	33%

Other Valuable University Resources

Lastly, participants were asked to describe, *"What else could universities provide that would be more useful?"* Twenty-four percent (24%, *n*=45) of participants responded to this question. Their responses are organized into the following three themes: university-community partnerships, student internships, and professional development.

- **Community-University Partnerships**
  58% of participants referenced some aspect of building and strengthening community-university partnerships. In general, participants viewed universities as having multiple assets (i.e., students, evaluation and research assistance, marketing consultation, technology, etc.) that could assist nonprofits in their work. However, gaining access to these resources can be difficult. For instance, some stated that it was difficult to ascertain "who" in the university had a specific resource and little information regarding "how" to acquire these resources. In addition to access issues, nonprofits also mentioned that universities needed to learn how to build equal partnerships that would be mutually beneficial.

- **Student Internships**
  27% of participants specifically mentioned the use of student interns as a valuable resource. This appeared a natural fit, since nonprofits needed human resources particularly in the areas of marketing and technology and these students could obtain work experience; hence a mutually beneficial relationship. Similar to access in general, several nonprofits mentioned that it was difficult to obtain information regarding how to obtain student interns. In addition, some stated that there needed to be clearer internship guidelines and policies for both nonprofits and students.

- **Professional Development**
  18% of participants suggested that universities could provide more professional development workshops, such as ones offered through the Nonprofit Learning Point, at reduced cost for their staff. Specifically, some requested workshops on board development grounded in the experience of executive directors, to help meet the need for strategic leadership among volunteer board members.

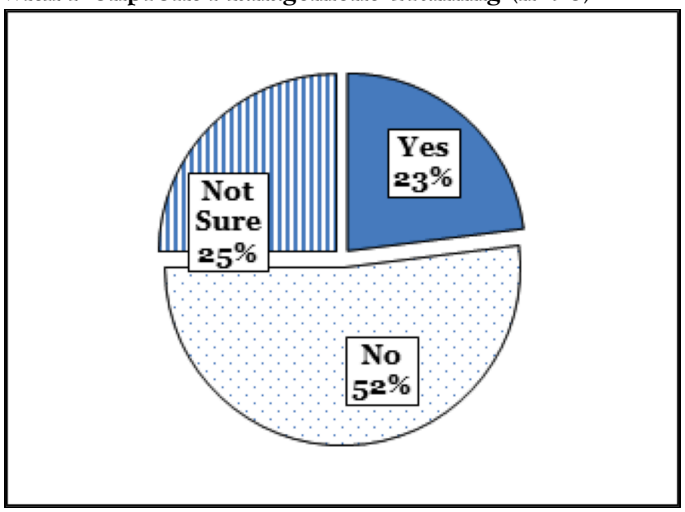
Nonprofit Hiring Preferences & Practices

In this section, participants were asked about their degree preferences and hiring practices.

Hiring Staff

Participants were asked, *"When you hire staff, do you prefer to hire someone with a nonprofit management certificate or degree?"* 52% (n=96) of participants responded to this question. Twenty-three percent (23%) stated they would prefer to hire someone with a nonprofit management certificate or degree, while 52% said they would not. A quarter (25%) of participants was unsure (figure 7).

Figure 7. Nonprofits' Preference in Hiring Staff with Nonprofit Management Training (n=96)



Participants were then asked, *"Do you advertise for a staff member trained in nonprofit management?"* 51% (n=94) of participants responded to this question. Fifteen percent (15%) indicated that they advertise for a staff member trained in nonprofit management, while 68% stated that they did not. Seventeen percent (17%) did not know.

As a follow-up, nonprofits who advertise (n=14) were asked, *"How often do you advertise for a staff member trained in nonprofit management?"* Seven percent (7%) 'always' and 7% 'very often' advertise for a staff member trained in nonprofit management, while 50% 'occasionally' and 38% 'very rarely' advertise.

Lastly, nonprofits were asked to discuss, *"Why or Why not"?"* they advertised for a staff member trained in nonprofit management. Only 36% (n=67) of participants responded to this question. The few that did advertise for staff with training in nonprofit management did so because they felt nonprofit knowledge and skills were critical to the work they did and they had little time to train staff themselves.

However, the majority of nonprofits did not advertise or only occasionally advertised for staff with nonprofit management training. Reasons for not are organized into the following five themes: 1) not necessary or required, 2) depends on the position, 3) prefer experience over degree, 4) funding or leadership constraints, and 5) limits potential candidates.

- **Not Necessary or Required**
  45% of participants reported that nonprofit management training was not necessary for their staff positions. In most cases, participants reported that they needed staff with specific skills such as health care skills or case management skills. These specific skills often took priority while nonprofit management training was viewed

as helpful, but not necessary. In addition, some participants mentioned that they often operate on volunteers who then become staff and "work their way up". Indeed, a few participants stated that find a match between a potential candidate's values and the organization's mission was the most important factor when hiring.

- **Depends on the Position**
  21% of participants stated that requiring nonprofit management training in staff would depend on the position available. Often, this background was viewed as necessary for management positions such as CEOs while staff did not necessarily need to have this skill set.

- **Prefer Experience**
  15% of participants stated that they preferred to hire an individual based on their work experience over their degrees or certifications. In some cases, participants mentioned that they were not sure how relevant classroom training would be to the "real world". For others, relying on work experience rather than degrees was a way to hire more from traditionally marginalized groups.

- **Funding or Leadership Constraints**
  10% of participants mentioned that they were unable to hire someone with nonprofit management training due to funding or leadership constraints. With regard to finances, participants mentioned they would prefer to hire someone with nonprofit management training, but they could not afford to pay staff at the level commensurate with a higher degree. In terms of leadership, some participants mentioned that there was no consensus among their leadership that this additional training was necessary for staff positions; thus, it was not required at this time.

- **Limits Potential Candidates**
  6% of participants mentioned that hiring only those with nonprofit management training was too limiting. On the one hand, participants stated that they preferred a variety of backgrounds to stimulate "thinking outside the box". Thus, hiring only within nonprofit management training would constrain the organization's creative abilities. On the other hand, some participants mentioned that there were not enough programs that offered this degree and thus fewer candidates who would have this background, which would limit their pool of potential candidates.

Hiring Management

Participants were asked, *"If you were hiring for a position requiring a management degree, would you prefer some degrees over others?"* 51% (*n*=93) of participants responded to this question. 10% indicated that they would 'always' prefer some degrees over others, while 55% said they 'occasionally' would and 26% said they would not. Twenty-six percent (26%) were unsure.

As a follow-up, nonprofits who stated that they 'always' or 'occasionally' prefer some degrees over others (*n*=60) were asked, *"If so, which management degree would you prefer?"* The majority of respondents (*n*=58) indicated that they would prefer a masters' level degree (81%) over a doctoral degree (5%) or a bachelor degree (2%). More

specifically, nonprofits preferred to hire those with: a Masters in Public Administration (31%), a Masters in Business Administration (22%), or a Masters in Social Work (15%). Participants also indicated a variety of degrees they would prefer based on their specific needs such as a Masters in Urban & Regional Planning, a Masters in Divinity, and a Masters in Library Science.

Lastly, participants were then asked, *"Why would you prefer that management degree?"* Ninety percent (90%, *n*=54) of the relevant 60 participants answered this question. In general, 91% of participants preferred a particular type of degree based on the skill set of that degree and the needs of the organization (see reasons below). In a few cases (4%), participants valued a particular degree because they themselves had that degree.

- **Masters in Business Administration (MBA)**
  Participants who preferred hiring an MBA did so because they viewed nonprofits operating more and more on a "business" model and thus valued the business knowledge such as financial management that an MBA could bring to the organization.

- **Masters in Public Administration (MPA)**
  Participants who preferred hiring an MPA did so because they viewed the degree as providing a well-rounded background in business and government. Participants reported that individuals with this background would be able to evaluate the "big picture" and assess the best means to develop and strengthen programs.

- **Masters in Public Policy (MPP)**
  Participants who preferred hiring an MPP did so because they either already do legislative advocacy or are looking to move in that direction.

- **Doctoral degree (PhD)**
  Participants who preferred hiring a doctoral degree did so because the advanced degree was suited for their environmental context. For instance, one nonprofit worked with specialized museum staff and stated that a PhD would be helpful to have.

Nonprofit Suggestions for Universities

Finally, participants were asked, *"Do you have any other ideas or suggestions that universities should consider when partnering with nonprofits?"* Only 20% (n=36) of participants responded to this question. Suggestions provided by participants are organized into the following five themes: 1) community-university partnerships, 2) student internships, 3) professional development, 4) research and evaluation, and 5) capacity building.

- **Community-University Partnerships**
  39% of participants discussed various aspects of the general partnership between universities and nonprofits. Some participants focused on the relationship aspect and suggested that more time should be spent on building trust, engaging nonprofits as partners early in the process (i.e., planning stage), and cautioned against "using" nonprofits solely for research purposes. Other participants focused on increasing access to university resources, commenting that it was often difficult for nonprofits to "find out where to go in a university to find resources", while some discussed the importance of having clear expectations and policies to structure the partnership and/or project.

  Participants offered the following concrete suggestions to increase the breadth and depth of community-university partnerships: (a) partner with private organizations that do not have 501c3 status as well, (b) provide a menu of resources that can be tailored to project needs (i.e., interns, research, etc.), and (c) commit to longer-term projects that last more than a semester.

- **Student Internships**
  17% of participants focused specifically on student interns as a resource. In general, participants viewed internships as mutually beneficial – students gain experience and nonprofits gain needed human resources. However, a few who had worked with interns before mentioned that "it seemed like interns were scarce" and suggested more students should be encouraged to intern because of the work experience they will gain.

- **Professional Development**
  17% of participants discussed how universities can help their nonprofit partners by providing professional development workshops at a reduced cost, similar to the ones provided by the Nonprofit Learning Point. Some workshop suggestions were enhancing the performance of a volunteer board, leadership training, and classes on finances and accounting.

- **Research & Evaluation**
  6% of participants discussed the role of universities in providing research and evaluation to their nonprofit partners. Similar to the comments regarding building trust in general, one participant stated that participatory and empowerment evaluations/research methods would be preferable.

- **Capacity Building**
  6% of participants focused on how universities can assist their nonprofit partners increase their capacity through organizational assessments and other management tools. Uniquely, one participant even suggested that universities can help "organize" the nonprofit sector to reduce duplicative efforts among nonprofits.

Summary and Next Steps

The purpose of this study was to broadly understand the current challenges nonprofits face as well as their prediction about their future challenges. A secondary objective of the study was to assess aspects of community-university partnerships and workforce development concerns to inform how VCU can be better partners and proactively address needs. Overall, the study's findings are consistent with the literature and national surveys. Nonprofits in the Richmond region report achieving long-term, stable funding as their primary challenge, similar to the Nonprofit Finance Fund national survey (2014), and that experience and matching values are important considerations when hiring (Ahmed, 2005). However, the literature also indicates that nonprofits also value skills and competencies in financial management, entrepreneurship, strategic planning, and leadership (Garvey, 2009; Henderson & Chetkovitch, 2014). Scholars argue that these skills should be embedded in nonprofit workforce development to better handle current challenges and position themselves for the future (Clark, 2012; Mottner & Wymer, 2011). The study at this time cannot address whether these skills are needed in the Richmond region (see study limitations) and should be further explored in future studies.

Key Results

- **Fiscal Challenges Affect Nonprofits' Capacity to Manage Fiscal Challenges.** Majority (68%) of respondents cited lacking stable and reliable funding as a major current challenge, followed by difficulties in recruiting and maintaining staff (20%) and the lack of strategic leadership among executive staff and boards (13%). These challenges were related. Nonprofits reported being unable to afford hire talented staff with the skills they needed to address current fiscal challenges (i.e., financial management skills, etc.) which in turn resulted in a lack of strategic leadership to plan for and generate alternative funding streams.
- **Multiple Resources Predicted to Become 'Essential' in Future.** In general, nonprofits predicted that all the resources they currently receive would become 'essential' 10 to 20 years in the future. Fundraising/grantwriting was predicted to become the most essential resource (27%), closely followed by board/committee members (26%), technology (25%), education/training (25%), and marketing (25%).
- **Common University Resources Are Not Always the Most Valuable.** Nonprofits typically received student interns (72%), education/training (45%), and volunteers (45%) from their university partners. However, the most valuable resources received from university partners were management consultation (71%), education/training (66%), and board/committee members (65%).
- **Nonprofits Are Ambivalent When It Comes to Nonprofit Training.** In general, nonprofits often preferred work experience and matching values over certifications when hiring. 52% did not seek staff with nonprofit training and only 55% "occasionally" preferred some degrees over others when hiring management. However, one of the primary suggestions for how universities can be more helpful was to provide more professional development for the nonprofit sector, suggesting that nonprofits value specific skills rather than specific degrees.

Recommendations

Given the limits of the sampling method, these results should be taken as tentative conclusions rather than as definitive statements. The following recommendations are drawn from the results of the survey.

1. Universities can improve the depth and breadth of their partnerships by being more accessible. Suggestions made by nonprofits were: (a) partner with private organizations, such as businesses, as well as nonprofits; (b) provide a menu of resources or some central mechanism from which nonprofits can select/request resources based on project needs (i.e., interns, evaluation, research, etc.); and (c) commit to longer-term projects (i.e. those that last more than one semester).

2. Universities should focus on increasing access to management consultation, technology and marketing resources. This can be done by increasing service-learning classes and internships that draw from the above disciplines. Further, faculty and staff with these desired skills can be encouraged to volunteer as board members.

3. Universities should improve the professional development available to the nonprofit sector. One way this can be done is to integrate distance learning and other technology to increase not only availability, but affordability of these courses. In addition, courses should be developed that are grounded in the experience of executive directors to help meet the need for strategic leadership and board development.

Study Limitations & Next Steps

This nonprofit needs assessment was initiated from a student project and was further developed in collaboration with the Wilder School and the Nonprofit Learning Point and supported by the Division of Community Engagement. Although all parties involved have closely aligned goals, not all of the initial study questions could be fully addressed while also respecting the time constraints that nonprofit stakeholders often face. Thus, there are ambiguities due to the limited survey questions as well as with the small sample size. For instance, it is unclear that entrepreneurial assistance and marketing are not valuable resources in themselves, or if they were ranked lower due to a poor experience in receiving these resources. A larger sample size would help clarify these distinctions.

It is also not clear that nonprofits are truly ambivalent when it comes to workforce development concerns. The nonprofit sector is a broad field and many disciplines are involved in promoting the general well-being and health of communities (Garvey, 2009). It may have been better to ask what skills are desired and needed within the nonprofit sector rather than ask about specific degrees that are preferred. The original intent was to proceed with focus groups to discuss and contextualize the findings. However, it may be more beneficial to develop a targeted survey to address these remaining issues first and include more demographic organizational variables to assess if these needs differ by size, years established, and operating budgets.

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Virginia Commonwealth University

Appendices

Appendix A: Nonprofit Sector Needs Assessment Survey

Thank you for your interest in the Nonprofit Sector Needs Assessment Survey.

The purpose of this survey is to:

- Assess the current and future needs of nonprofits,
- Discover how nonprofits partner with universities, and
- Determine how universities can better partner with nonprofits to meet their needs.

You are being asked to respond to the survey because you have participated in a course through Nonprofit Learning Point.

The survey will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes. Your input is essential to create an understanding of current and future needs and how universities can better partner with nonprofits to address those needs.

Your participation is this survey is completely voluntary. Responses to the survey are anonymous. No identifying information is collected. Your responses will be kept secured and only aggregate data will be reported.

Electronic Consent

By selecting "Yes" below, you acknowledge that:

- You are 18 years of age or older
- Your answers will be recorded
- Your anonymous data may be shared with other researchers at the university
- You understand and want to participate in the Nonprofit Sector Needs Assessment Survey

If at any time you change your mind, you can close the survey window and your answers will not be recorded.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Holly Brown at brownhc@vcu.edu

O Yes, I consent
O No, I do not consent

Organizational Needs

The following section asks questions about your organization's current and future needs.

1. What are the greatest challenges facing your organization today?

2. Have those challenges changed over the past 10 years?

   O Yes
   O No

3. *(If yes)* In what ways?

4. If your organization could have any **non-financial resources**, what resources would be most helpful to address the most pressing challenges your organization **currently** faces? *Rank the following resources in order of importance by dragging and dropping. Use the "Other" categories to create your own answers. These responses will be used for the next question.*

Board/Committee Members
Education/Training
Entrepreneurial Assistance
Fundraising/Grantwriting Assistance
Interns/Volunteers
Management Consultation
Marketing
Policy Consultation
Research/Evaluation
Space/Supplies
Technology
Other 1 _____
Other 2 _____
Other 3 _____

5. Looking 10 to 20 years ahead, how do you foresee your organization's **non-financial resource** needs changing compared to your current needs? *Indicate the level of change for needing the following resources, ranging from a resource becoming non-essential (-5) to becoming an essential resource (5). A zero (0) indicates that you do not foresee a change in needing that particular resource. Click on the box to the right if you are unsure. Ignore blank spaces if you have any.*

	Non-Essential ←					No Change			→ Essential			NA
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Board/Committee Members	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Education/Training	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Entrepreneurial Assistance	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Fundraising/Grantwriting Assistance	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Interns/Volunteers	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Management Consultation	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Marketing	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Policy Consultation	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Research/Evaluation	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Space/Supplies	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Technology	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Other 1	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Other 2	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Other 3	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

University Partnerships

The following section asks questions about the various partnerships your organization has or has had with universities.

6. Have you ever partnered with a university?

O Yes
O No

7. Which universities have you partnered with (past and/or present)? *Please select all that apply.*

- ☐ John Tyler Community College
- ☐ J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College
- ☐ Randolph Macon College
- ☐ University of Richmond
- ☐ University of Virginia
- ☐ Virginia Commonwealth University
- ☐ Virginia State University
- ☐ Virginia Union University
- ☐ William & Mary College
- ☐ Other _____

8. What resources did or do you commonly receive from your university partnerships? *Please select all that apply. Use "Other" categories to create your own answers. These responses will be used for the next question.*

- ☐ Board/ Committee Members
- ☐ Education/ Training
- ☐ Entrepreneurial Services
- ☐ Fundraising/ Grantwriting
- ☐ Interns/ Service-learning students
- ☐ Management Consultation
- ☐ Marketing
- ☐ Policy Consultation
- ☐ Research/ Evaluation
- ☐ Space/ Supplies
- ☐ Technology
- ☐ Volunteers
- ☐ Other 1 _____
- ☐ Other 2 _____
- ☐ Other 3 _____

9. How would you rate the value of the resources you received from university partnerships (past and/or present)? *Ignore blank spaces if you have any.*

	Not at all valuable	Slightly valuable	Moderatel y valuable	Extremely valuable	Did not receive
Board/Committee Members	O	O	O	O	O
Education/Training	O	O	O	O	O
Entrepreneurial Assistance	O	O	O	O	O
Fundraising/Grantwriting Assistance	O	O	O	O	O
Interns/Volunteers	O	O	O	O	O
Management Consultation	O	O	O	O	O
Marketing	O	O	O	O	O
Policy Consultation	O	O	O	O	O
Research/Evaluation	O	O	O	O	O
Space/Supplies	O	O	O	O	O
Technology	O	O	O	O	O
Other 1	O	O	O	O	O
Other 2	O	O	O	O	O
Other 3	O	O	O	O	O

10. What else could universities provide that would be more useful?

Partnerships

This section asks questions about how your organization manages partnerships and collaborations.

11. How often do you create a formal agreement to manage your partnerships or collaborations?

O Never
O Occasionally
O Very often
O Always
O I don't know

12. Do you have a process to evaluate your partnerships or collaborations?

O Yes
O No
O I don't know

13. How would you describe the evaluation process you use most often?

O Yes
O No

14. Please briefly describe how you formally or informally evaluate your partnerships or collaborations.

Nonprofit Hiring Practices

This section asks questions about your organization's hiring practices.

15. When you hire staff, do you prefer to hire someone with a nonprofit management certificate?

O Yes
O No
O I don't know

16. Do you advertise for a staff member trained in nonprofit management?

O Yes
O No
O I don't know

17. How often do you advertise for a staff member trained in nonprofit management?

O Rarely
O Occasionally
O Very often

O Always

18. Why or why not?

19. If you were hiring for a position requiring a management degree, would you prefer some degrees over others?

O Yes - Always
O Yes - Sometimes
O No
O I don't know

20. If so, which management degree would you prefer?

O Masters in Business Administration (MBA)
O Masters in Public Administration (MPA)
O Masters in Public Policy (MPA)
O Doctoral degree (PhD)
O Other _____

21. Why would you prefer that management degree?

Suggestions & Demographics

This section asks questions about further suggestions and demographic information.

22. What is your nonprofit organization's primary focus?

O Animals
O Arts & Culture
O Civic & Community
O Crime & Legal Aid
O Disaster Response
O Education
O Employment
O Environment
O Faith-Based
O Health & Wellness
O Housing & Shelter
O Hunger & Nutrition
O Human Services
O International Affairs
O Philanthropy & Grantmaking
O Youth Development
O Other _____

23. How would you describe your affiliation with the nonprofit sector?

O Executive Director
O Program Staff
O Administrative Staff
O Volunteer
O Board Member
O Other _____

24. How old are you?

O 18-19
O 20-29
O 30-39

O 40-49
O 50-59
O 60 and above

25. Do you have any other ideas or suggestions that universities should consider when partnering with nonprofits?

Thank you for participating in the Nonprofit Sector Needs Assessment Survey!

Please click on the "Next" button below to submit your responses.