COURSE SYLLABUS

Leading in the Nonprofit Sector

Course Description

This course introduces students to a broad range of nonprofit leadership issues. The first part of the course focuses on some of the major challenges leaders face within nonprofit organizations, including setting direction and inspiring and aligning others. Part Two then looks at external leadership issues: How do nonprofit staff lead in communities? What are some of the major issues facing nonprofit leaders in the Washington region? The next segment of the course considers nonprofit subsectors (e.g., health, education, human services, arts). Most of the life of a nonprofit leader is spent within a subsector. What are the major challenges facing leaders in different subsectors? The final, most extensive part of the course then explores critical national nonprofit issues. Those who aspire to leadership in the nonprofit sector should be informed and have opinions about major sectoral issues, such as the argument that more philanthropy should be devoted to helping the poor or that there are now too many nonprofit organizations. This course will give students the opportunity to do just that – to deepen their understanding of and form opinions about the major sector issues of the day. Class format will vary, with presentations by the professor, instructor and student-led discussions, analyses of case studies, and guest speakers. Beginning in mid-semester, students will have significant responsibility for designing and leading class sessions. Overall, much of this class will feature a workshop-like format with high levels of student participation.

Learning Objectives

Through this course, students will:

- Deepen their understanding of good leadership practices within nonprofit organizations and within communities (through readings, class sessions, case studies, papers).
- Increase their knowledge about critical issues facing nonprofit subsectors and the nonprofit sector as a whole (readings, class sessions, papers).
- Improve their intra-organizational and community leadership skills (readings, class sessions, case studies, papers, presentations).
- Enhance their oral and written communications skills (memos, presentations).
Course Requirements
There are three major types of requirements for the course:

1. Active Engagement: Students are expected to engage actively in the course in the following and related ways:
   - **Regular Attendance**: Students are expected to attend all class sessions and to arrive in class on time. **Attendance will be noted**. If at all possible, students should email the instructor beforehand when they expect to miss class because of illness or another reason.
   - **Completion of Reading**: Students are expected to complete all assigned reading before class. It is especially important that case studies receive a close reading. In fact, if at all possible, cases should be re-read just before class.
   - **Active Participation**: Students are expected to participate actively in all class sessions. In addition to contributing to regular class discussions, students may be asked to make a presentation or lead a discussion on a relevant issue. The instructor will occasionally cold call on students. **In online sessions, students should have their video turned on so they are visible to the instructor and their classmates in order to facilitate communication and engagement.**

Student engagement will count for 20% of the course grade.

2. Written Assignments, Presentations, and Exam: Students are expected to complete the following:
   - **Assignment #1: Short, Reaction Papers**: To enhance learning of important material and prepare for class discussions, students will complete a series of short (1-2 pages, 12-point font, double-spaced) papers. Reaction paper assignments will generally be given one week before they are due. For example, in session #1, students will receive the assignment due at session #2. Strong papers will connect (multiple) course readings to the issue being addressed. If a reaction paper focuses on an analysis of a particular case study, a good paper will reference some of the readings for the week. Reaction papers must be submitted on BlackBoard before class on the day they are due, and will generally not be accepted late. Students who miss class for any reason have the option of handing in these papers before the class session for which they are assigned. The two lowest reaction paper grades will be dropped, and students are excused from writing a reaction paper for the session when they complete assignment #3. The reaction papers will count for 25% of the course grade.

   - **Assignment #2: Leadership Challenge within a Nonprofit**: Students will analyze one leadership challenge facing a nonprofit organization of the student’s choosing. The paper should provide some background on the organization; describe the leadership challenge; identify several options for addressing the challenge; and discuss the preferred option, including both pro’s and con’s. The paper should anticipate possible
problems in implementing the preferred solution and address how these problems could be handled. Students are welcome – and even encouraged – to write about nonprofits with which they are personally familiar (e.g., nonprofits where they have worked or volunteered). The instructor will treat all papers as confidential. This paper (approximately 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) is due on September 28 and will count 15% of the grade. Papers should be submitted on BlackBoard. Students will give short presentations on their papers on September 28.

- **Assignment #3: Subsector Leadership:** Students will also write a paper on important issues facing one of the major nonprofit subsectors covered in the Salamon, *State of Nonprofit America* book. Students should imagine they have just been named to head an association representing nonprofits in a particular subfield (e.g., Association of Nonprofit Hospitals, Association of Nonprofit Theaters, Association of Nonprofit Universities). In their papers, students should discuss how they would address three major challenges currently facing the subfield. Papers should be approximately 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font. The analysis should draw on material in the *State of Nonprofit America* and any other sources students want to consult. Subsector papers are due on October 19 and will count 15% of the grade. Students will give short presentations on their papers in class on October 19.

- **Assignment #4: Sector Issues: Design and Implementation of Class Session and Paper:** Students will sign up at the beginning of the semester to help the instructor design and implement one class session – or actually about half of a class session (i.e., approximately 75 minutes, either 4:30-5:45 pm or 5:55-7:10 pm) on an important local or national nonprofit sector issue (see sessions #6B, 7, and 9-14 below). Students who want to develop a session on a topic other than the ones described in the syllabus are welcome to discuss this option with the instructor.

For the topics they choose, students will: 1) develop an initial proposal for the session, describing how the session will be conducted and specifying a reading assignment and a reaction paper question for the students to complete. In designing their sessions students may want to consider using case studies, outside speakers, debates, role plays, small group discussions, or other even more creative options; 2) receive feedback from the instructor on the proposal; 3) submit a revised design; 4) finalize the design through emails or in a phone call with the instructor; 5) inform the class of the design for the session; 6) lead the actual class session; and 7) write a paper (approximately 5-7 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) on the session topic.

Due dates are as follows: 1) the initial proposal is due four weeks before the class session; 2) feedback from the instructor will be given three weeks before the class; 3) the revised design should be submitted two weeks before the class; 4) the student and instructor will email or talk sometime between two weeks and one week before the class to finalize the design; 5) the final design – including especially homework
assignments for the rest of the class (e.g., reaction paper question, background reading) – will be emailed to the class one week before the session; and 6) the 5-7 page paper is due on the day of the class, and should be submitted on BlackBoard. Students are responsible for emailing the instructor to schedule the phone call if needed. A couple of qualifications/suggestions: 1) Please get approval from the professor before formally inviting speakers; 2) Only one outside speaker per week works best; 3) Please try to avoid material that might be covered in weeks other than your own; 4) Consider using a chapter from the State of Nonprofit America as background reading if there is a chapter that is related to your topic; 5) Please follow the timetable or your grade will be reduced. The class design and paper will count 25% of the grade.

All papers should be submitted on BlackBoard. Grades will be reduced for assignments handed in late without prior approval of instructor.

Grades:
All assignments will receive numerical grades from 0-100. For final grades, numerical grades will be converted to letter grades without rounding as follows:

- A+ 97-100
- A  93-96.99
- B+ 87-89.99
- B  83-86.99
- B- 80-82.99
- C+ 77-79.99
- C  73-76.99
- C- 70-72.99
- D+ 67-69.99
- F  0-64.99

Contacting the Instructor
Please feel free to set up an appointment to talk with the instructor either in-person or on the phone. Dr. Abramson can be reached at the following:

- Preferred as of 7/26/20:
  - Office e-mail: abramso@gmu.edu
  - Cell phone: 202-262-5204

- Other:
  - Office Address: George Mason University - Arlington Campus, Van Metre Hall, 3351 Fairfax Drive, Room 608, Mail Stop 3B1, Arlington, VA 22201
  - Work phone: 703-993-8189

Readings
Course readings are available through Blackboard or the GMU Library, are on-line, or are in the following books that are available for purchase through the GMU bookstore at the Arlington campus:


Additional Background Information on the Nonprofit Sector
Students are encouraged to consult the background material on the nonprofit sector listed in Appendix A of this syllabus and to use information on nonprofit management available through the GMU Library at:  http://infoguides.gmu.edu/nonprofit

Academic Integrity
GMU is an Honor Code university; please see the University Catalog for a full description of the code and the honor committee process. The principle of academic integrity is taken very seriously and violations are treated gravely. What does academic integrity mean in this course? Essentially this: when you are responsible for a task, you will perform that task. When you rely on someone else’s work in an aspect of the performance of that task, you will give full credit in the proper, accepted form. Another aspect of academic integrity is the free play of ideas. Vigorous discussion and debate are encouraged in this course, with the firm expectation that all aspects of the class will be conducted with civility and respect for differing ideas, perspectives, and traditions. When in doubt of any kind, please ask for guidance and clarification.

Please note that the university honor code requires students to pledge not to plagiarize, and that this requirement includes the provision that students not self-plagiarize. In this class, this means that students should seek the instructor’s permission before using work that has been or is being submitted for credit in other classes as a new submission.

GMU Email Accounts
Students must activate their GMU email accounts to receive important university information, including messages related to this class.

Disability Services
Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first visit https://ds.gmu.edu/ for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with the instructor. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500; email: ods@gmu.edu; phone: (703) 993-2474.

Diversity and Inclusion
The Schar School’s MPA program is committed to creating a learning environment that reflects the diversity of the modern workplace and the communities that are served by public service organizations. We welcome, value, and foster respect for all individuals and their differences, including differences of race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, sex, sexuality, gender expression and identity, national origin, first language, religion, ideology, age, and ability. We encourage all members of the learning environment to engage with the material personally, but also to be open to exploring and learning from experiences different than their own.
Other Useful Campus Resources

- Writing Center: [http://writingcenter.gmu.edu](http://writingcenter.gmu.edu)
- University Libraries “Ask a Librarian”: [http://library.gmu.edu/mudge/IM/IMRef.html](http://library.gmu.edu/mudge/IM/IMRef.html)
- Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS): (703) 993-2380; [http://caps.gmu.edu](http://caps.gmu.edu)

University Policies

The University Catalog, [http://catalog.gmu.edu](http://catalog.gmu.edu), is the central resource for university policies affecting student, faculty, and staff conduct in university affairs.

Course Outline and Reading Assignments

Please note that additional readings and case study material will be added during the course of the semester. Please be sure to look for emails from the instructor and your classmates that contain course-relevant information.

1. AUGUST 24: Introduction to the Course and Overview of the U.S. Nonprofit Sector

Suggested:

PART ONE: LEADING WITHIN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

2. AUGUST 31: Introduction to Organizational Leadership

--SIGN UP TO LEAD CLASS SESSION (see assignment #4)


SEPTEMBER 7: No class, Labor Day
3. SEPTEMBER 14: Setting Direction and Motivating: Drawing on Personal and Shared Values to Develop a Compelling Organizational Vision and Inspire Others


Suggested:

4. SEPTEMBER 21: Aligning: Communicating to Keep Others on Track


5. SEPTEMBER 28: New Models of Leadership

ASSIGNMENT #2: MEMO ON LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE DUE

--Brafman and Beckstrom, *Starfish and the Spider*.

PART TWO: NONPROFITS LEADING IN COMMUNITIES

6. OCTOBER 5: Leading Beyond the Walls

   A. Introduction to nonprofit advocacy, lobbying, and election-related activity (Instructor-led discussion)


   B. Should nonprofit advocacy, lobbying, and election-related activity be increased?: How involved are nonprofits currently in advocacy, lobbying, and election-related activity? Should this kind of activity be increased? What are the potential costs and benefits to nonprofits and to society of increasing nonprofit – and foundation – engagement in policy? What are important organizational and legal barriers to increasing nonprofit policy work? How can these barriers be overcome? Should nonprofits be allowed to be more engaged in elections? Should churches and other religious organizations, in particular, be permitted to expand their election-related activity? How are nonprofits affected by the increasing tendency of individuals to engage in collective action through “swarms” of loose networks rather than through established organizations?
7. OCTOBER 13 (TUESDAY): Leading Nonprofits in Communities

A. Collaboration among local nonprofits: Many observers feel that there is a lack of collaboration among nonprofits in many communities and that this significantly limits nonprofits’ impact. What are some of the obstacles to nonprofits collaborating with one another? How can these obstacles be overcome? What are some examples or models of nonprofit collaboration?

B. Leading the nonprofit sector in the Washington, DC metro area: What is the size and scope of the local nonprofit sector? What roles do nonprofits play in the Washington region? How important are they in the local economy? What organizations “represent” or serve the local nonprofit sector? Are nonprofits at the “table” with government and business when important regional economic and policy decisions are being made? How can the nonprofit sector get appropriate recognition for the roles it plays? What are the major, broad, “sector-wide” issues currently facing local nonprofits?

PART THREE: LEADING ON NONPROFIT SUBSECTOR ISSUES

8. OCTOBER 19: Subsector Issues

ASSIGNMENT #3: MEMO ON NONPROFIT SUBSECTOR DUE

--Salamon, ed. Nonprofit America. Read three chapters out of chs. 2-10.

PART FOUR: LEADING ON NATIONAL “SECTOR” ISSUES

9. OCTOBER 26: National Sector Issues I

A. Nonprofits and philanthropy in the time of the coronavirus pandemic: What role are nonprofits and philanthropy playing during the pandemic? How are nonprofits and philanthropy being affected by the pandemic? Are different organizations being affected differently? What steps are nonprofit and philanthropic leaders taking to address new challenges that have arisen? What additional actions might these leaders take to strengthen the sector during these difficult times? What public policy actions have assisted nonprofits during the pandemic? Are more policy initiatives needed?

B. Strengthening the overall nonprofit sector: To what extent do individual nonprofit organizations think of themselves as part of a single, unified nonprofit sector rather than as belonging to different subsectors, like health, education, human services, and the arts? How did “sector” consciousness develop? What are the “infrastructure” or support organizations that represent the nonprofit sector as a whole and seek to improve the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations? What are the most important steps that should be taken to strengthen the overall nonprofit sector?
10. NOVEMBER 2: National Sector Issues II

A. Are there too many nonprofit organizations?: Should there be tougher requirements to establish a nonprofit to avoid duplication of effort by nonprofits? Should some nonprofits be forced to go out of business when they are ineffective or are too similar to other nonprofits? What is the “right” number of nonprofits for our society? Is it possible we have too few rather than too many nonprofits?

B. Sector workforce and talent, including generational issues: Are compensation and working conditions for nonprofit staff sufficient to attract and retain high-quality workers? How are different generations in the nonprofit workforce relating to one another? Is the nonprofit sector prepared for the increasing retirement of baby-boom era executives? How can nonprofits be better prepared for successful leadership transitions? Do we need new approaches to address nonprofit staff and leadership challenges?

11. NOVEMBER 9: National Sector Issues III

A. Diversity and inclusion: Currently, how diverse on a variety of dimensions (e.g., race, ethnicity, income class, beliefs, etc.) are the senior and junior staffs and boards of nonprofits and foundations? How inclusive are nonprofit practices? Should nonprofits seek to become more diverse in the makeup of their staffs and boards and adopt more inclusive cultures? What benefits and costs are associated with increased diversity and a stronger culture of inclusion? If a nonprofit wanted to enhance the diversity of its staff and board and establish a more inclusive culture, what are some “good practices” it might adopt to accomplish these goals?

B. Declines in giving and volunteering: Many are concerned with the recent declines in giving and volunteering by middle and low-income households. What might explain these trends, and what are the consequences of these declines – for individuals, nonprofits, communities, and our country, including for our democracy? What policies and other initiatives might reverse these trends? Are traditional forms of giving and volunteering being replaced by new forms of these activities or by other kinds of civic engagement?

12. NOVEMBER 16: National Sector Issues IV

A. Philanthropy, nonprofits, the poor, and increasing inequality: Is an appropriate amount of philanthropic and nonprofit activity benefiting the poor, people of color, and other underserved populations? Should there be an additional subsidy for philanthropy and nonprofits that serve these populations, or a reduced subsidy for philanthropy and nonprofits that do not? As economic inequality has increased in the U.S. in recent
decades, some critics—including Giridharadas, Reich, Villanueva, and others—have faulted philanthropy, in particular, for failing to work toward significant advances in economic and social justice. Are these critiques warranted? What role can nonprofits and philanthropy play in addressing problems related to increasing disparities in income and wealth?

B. **Performance and accountability**: How is nonprofit performance currently being tracked, both by nonprofits themselves and by funders and other agencies, including some “rating” agencies? Are nonprofits sufficiently efficient and effective? Do nonprofits actually use performance measures they develop to improve their performance? If not, how can nonprofit performance be improved? What is the role of nonprofit boards in improving nonprofit performance? Is there a downside to too much emphasis on performance measurement and evaluation? What kind of trouble do nonprofits get themselves into? Are nonprofits that are acting inappropriately getting caught? What should be done about the “bad apples” within the nonprofit sector? What role is currently played by government (federal, state, and local), the media, and the nonprofit sector itself in ensuring nonprofits follow the law and act ethically? Should any of these institutions take on an expanded or reduced role in monitoring and enforcing appropriate nonprofit behavior?

13. **NOVEMBER 23: National Sector Issues V**

A. **Nonprofits and government**: What is working well, and what are some of the major current challenges in the relationship between nonprofits and government? How are nonprofits being affected by government spending and tax policies? What should nonprofits’ policy agenda be going forward? What should government’s stance toward nonprofits be?

B. **Nonprofits and business**: What are the advantages and disadvantages of nonprofits becoming more like for-profit entities by, for example, charging for their services and adopting other business-like practices? Should nonprofits be required to provide a minimum amount of “community benefit” in exchange for their tax-exempt status? Should nonprofits that receive significant fee income (e.g., hospitals and universities) be in a different legal category than nonprofits with philanthropic support? Should a new legal designation for a “Fourth Sector” be established to encompass hybrid, double-bottom-line organizations that seek both to “do good” and “make money”? What is the impact on nonprofits of businesses operating in the same field and competing with nonprofits for funding and clients?
14. NOVEMBER 30: National Sector Issues VI

A. Nonprofits and technology: How is technology transforming the work of nonprofits? What major benefits are nonprofits enjoying from new technologies, and what major challenges are they experiencing?

B. The nonprofit sector in twenty-five years: What will the nonprofit sector look like twenty-five years from now? How will current trends affecting the nonprofit sector play out? What new forces may affect the nonprofit sector in the years to come? What form should the nonprofit sector take going forward?

DECEMBER 7: Hold for possible make-up session
Appendix A: Resource Guide for the Nonprofit Sector (Selected Resources)

Newspapers/Journals – Practitioner-Oriented
• *Chronicle of Philanthropy*
• *Nonprofit Quarterly*
• *Nonprofit Times*
• *Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR)*

Journals – Research-Oriented
• *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly (NVSQ)*
• *Nonprofit Management and Leadership (NML)*
• *Nonprofit Policy Forum (NPF)*
• *Voluntas*

E-Newsletters - National
• *Blue Avocado*
• *The Digest: Today's News About the Charitable Sector* (Independent Sector)
• *Voices for Good: The Latest Policy and Advocacy News* (Independent Sector)
• *NPQ* (Nonprofit Quarterly)
• *PND (Philanthropy News Digest)* (Candid/Foundation Center)
• *Philanthropy Today – Daily Update from the Chronicle of Philanthropy*

E-Newsletters – Local
• *The Weekly WRAG* (Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers)

National Organizations
• Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA)
• Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP)
• BoardSource
• Council on Foundations
• *Candid – formed through a recent merger of Foundation Center and GuideStar*
• Independent Sector
• International Society for Third-Sector Research (ISTR)
• National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy
• National Council of Nonprofits
• Nonprofit Finance Fund
• Philanthropy Roundtable
• United Philanthropy Forum
• United Way Worldwide
**Local Organizations**

- Center for Nonprofit Advancement (CNA)
- Community Foundation for Northern Virginia
- **Foundation Center Library – Washington, DC**
- Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation
- Northern Virginia Idea Exchange (NoVIE)
- Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP)
- Washington Grantmakers
- **Young Nonprofit Professionals Network – DC (YNPNdc)**

**Statistics on the Nonprofit Sector**

- **Candid (Foundation Center and GuideStar)**
- **Giving USA**
- Nonprofit Works and Listening Post Project at Johns Hopkins University, Center for Civil Society Studies
- **Nonprofit Sector in Brief** and **Nonprofit Almanac** – National Center for Charitable Statistics at the Urban Institute

**Job Openings**

- **PND Job Alerts**
- Schar School Career Office
- **Chronicle of Philanthropy**
- Idealist.org
- **Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers – Job Board**
- YNPNdc
- Indeed.com

**Indexes to Nonprofit Research**

- **Catalog of Nonprofit Literature** (Foundation Center):
- **Philanthropic Studies Index** (Indiana University Center on Philanthropy)

**Blogs**

- **Beth’s Blog** – Beth Kanter
- **Nonprofit AF** – Vu Le
- **#501Social Blog** – Julia Campbell
- **Huffington Post** – contributions on nonprofits and philanthropy
- **Philanthropy 2173** – Lucy Bernholz
- **Nonprofit Law Blog** – NEO Law Group (Gene Takagi)