GIVING by DEGREES

Practitioners look at academic programs in philanthropy

By Daniel P. Smith

Philanthropy is an emerging field on campus. There are now hundreds of classes, many minors and majors, and some graduate degrees. Some emphasize fundraising, others take the perspective of donors, a few focus on broad research about voluntary action in America. They are housed in business schools, within law faculties, in public-administration departments, under social-work umbrellas, or in a few cases in dedicated philanthropy centers. Even The Fund for American Studies has built a service and citizenship track into its existing curriculum for interns. Below, we hear from faculty, graduates, donors to, and observers of these college programs.

Amir Pasic, Dean, Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy
Before becoming Lilly’s dean in 2015, Pasic served at the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, and at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

On an MBA or MPA track, philanthropy will be at most a piece of your training. Our program at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy is not about the march of commerce or effective government, but voluntary human action. We’re rooted in the liberal arts. We’re covering ethics and economics and politics. We teach the fundamentals of research and grantmaking. We teach the intellectual aspects of philanthropy. We provide context.

The rigorous and systematic testing of ideas will help philanthropy pursue new opportunities.

David Campbell, Professor, Binghamton University
For the last eight years, David Campbell has been teaching a grantmaking class that gives undergraduates $10,000 (supplied by the Learning by Giving Foundation founded by Doris Buffett) to award to local nonprofits.

The first third of the course provides students a sense of their obligation as community members, and trains them how to think about doing good well. The middle third examines strategies to evaluate nonprofits and community needs. Over the course’s final weeks, students make site visits, interview finalist organizations, and deliberate on how to direct their gift. The course simulates resource-allocation challenges and underscores the essential role philanthropy plays in shaping community life, while also providing a fresh infusion of cash to local nonprofits.

If we want to prepare students for a life of active citizenship, then it’s important to understand the role private money plays in creating public good. I want students to have an appreciation for how complicated giving decisions are.

Monica Craven, Director, Habitat For Humanity of Mahoning Valley
After earning an undergrad degree from Michigan State, Craven began working for Habitat for Humanity, then enrolled in the Nonprofit Masters program at Case Western Reserve. She now runs a Habitat branch in Ohio.

When I was working for Habitat right out of college, I fell in love with its mission and dreamed of leading the local chapter. But I was 24 at the time and knew no one would take me seriously. I thought long and hard about getting an MBA, but the nonprofit world is so different from business. That’s why I pursued an MNO at Case Western. I was fortunate to receive a full scholarship, because it can be prohibitive to spend money on an advanced degree and then make $40,000.

Some of my classmates got into more lucrative positions with museums, universities, and foundations. I didn’t see as many going into real social work like the food bank or women’s shelter. For me, I knew I wanted to be with Habitat.

When I applied for an executive-director position, I was the only
Larry Kramer, President, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

The Hewlett Foundation has long supported philanthropy-focused university programs, including creation of an endowment for Stanford’s Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society.

Philanthropy is a complicated trade and a field that can benefit from intelligent research, just like law, medicine, and other professions. At Hewlett, we have an Effective Philanthropy Group that supports centers and publications producing research on philanthropy.

The graduate students at the Lilly School impress the heck out of me. They’re working on interesting topics—from measures of effectiveness, to legal regimes. They’re developing actual research skills and analyzing crucial issues.

It’s possible to become a journalist without going to journalism school. But journalism school is one good way to learn that craft. It’s the same for these programs. You can learn on the job. But if you’re taught well, this is another good way to learn.

The universities help provide a critical eye on what others in the field are doing. This is especially important given that large amounts of philanthropic research today are performed by paid consultants, who have an incentive to deliver what the funder wants.

This is a young field still finding its way. The capacity to give good training and produce useful research should grow over time.

Contributing editor Daniel P. Smith is a writer in Chicago.
Steve Wilson, Former President, Frey Foundation

Frey and other Michigan foundations helped launch the Dorothy Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids.

The Johnson Center’s Community Research Institute allowed [the Frey Foundation] to look at neighborhood data on a block-by-block basis. There are about 30 different measures ranging from third-grade reading scores to school attendance. CRI served as an incredible tool to help the Frey Foundation get money to very local places with the greatest need. The data and analysis brought by CRI were sometimes counterintuitive—and thus extremely valuable.

The Johnson Center also helped connect [the Frey Foundation] to a multitude of voices. We wanted to borrow ideas from other parts of the philanthropic sector, from commerce, from government. Academic partners helped us discover ideas we might not be familiar with.

Lois Savage, President, Lodestar Foundation

In 2007, Lodestar Foundation made a $5 million gift to Arizona State University to enhance innovative philanthropic and nonprofit education.

Students who’ve gone through the Arizona State program are adding a nice boost to the field. They’re getting relevant, appropriate training in a multibillion-dollar industry. There are important things to learn about financials, dealing with boards, strategy, and the like.

Some of the research coming out of ASU and other academic centers is reinforcing the work we do at the Lodestar Foundation to help charitable organizations work together. It’s heartening to see post-graduate students studying collaborations among nonprofits.

Nick Deychakiwsky, Civil Society Program, Charles Mott Foundation

The Mott Foundation has funded the Lilly School, Stanford’s philanthropy center, and the Johnson Center at Grand Valley State.

At Lilly we support the Global Philanthropy Environment Index, a measure of how easy or difficult giving is in countries around the world. At Grand Valley, we have supported Learn Philanthropy, an online toolbox for grantmakers. This is the kind of work that can have a significant impact on policy. While both initiatives originated at other organizations, we like that they’ve landed at universities.

As for the students, they’re gaining valuable skills which will prepare them for their work in philanthropy, but nevertheless is not equivalent to years of experience. What I hope we avoid is falling into a trap of thinking that you can’t work in philanthropy without an advanced degree from one of these programs. There are plenty of people in this field doing wonderful work without any degree in philanthropic studies. The years of on-the-job training are certainly valuable as well. I’d hate to see university academic programs in philanthropy become disconnected from the day-to-day realities of grantmakers, who themselves are challenged to remain connected with nonprofits and communities. I want to see them continuing to be linked with practice in the field.

Paul Brest, Former President, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Now co-director of the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, Brest served as president of the Hewlett Foundation from 2000-2012.

There are a lot of academic courses. The question for me has always been, how good are they?

When I was at the Hewlett Foundation, we had an initiative to find intermediaries who could help improve philanthropy, and that naturally led us to explore universities. We found a mixed bag—some great programs and some nominal ones. Because this is such a new field, it doesn’t yet have the standards of quality of established fields like law or medicine. It’s great that a thousand flowers are blooming, though it will inevitably turn out that some bloom more than others.

I’m against credential-creep—foundations insisting on degrees during their hiring process. But I don’t see that happening right now.

Lt. Colonel Ward Matthews, Salvation Army USA

In 2015, the Salvation Army teamed up with the Lilly School to launch the Human Needs Index. Updated every quarter, the HNI tracks demand in more than 7,500 communities across the U.S. for seven types of Salvation Army services: meals, groceries, clothing, housing, furniture, medical assistance, and energy-bill assistance.

From the number of people who needed help with their gas bills in Fort Wayne, Indiana, to the number of food baskets delivered in Pocatello, Idaho, we have that information. Compared
to government reports on poverty, unemployment, or food assistance that lag a year or two behind actual behavior, the HNI is much more current—nearly real-time—and it drills down to the very local neighborhood level.

This data can be a goldmine for informing and energizing philanthropic giving where it’s needed most. People can look at trends immediately and better understand the impact of natural disasters, community economic shifts, and long-term poverty.

Doug White, Philanthropic Adviser and Author

White is the former director of Columbia University’s Master of Science in Fundraising Management, and of New York University’s Heyman Program for Philanthropy.

I’m particularly interested in what motivates donors. We need more professional research to know how philanthropists react to appeals or problems they see in the world. We have a lot of stories, but we don’t have a lot of hard-nosed research.

And on the charities side, they need help quantifying what they are doing to meet donors’ expectations. Fundraisers need specific instruction in planned giving, capital-campaign structure, grantwriting, and so on.

We should want society to see philanthropy as something that is taught and executed professionally. These academic programs can help keep philanthropy vigorous, and constantly evaluating itself, so money will be used to make a difference.

Patricia Lewis, Lodestar Center for Philanthropy at Arizona State

A past president of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, Lewis previously taught nonprofit work at Arizona State University and George Mason University.

There are different philosophies underlying business, government, and nonprofit work. Our students begin to understand the forces of philanthropy and how the field has grown. We teach that it is the greater good that matters, and provide grounding in the why of the sector, not just what it is.

We teach how to tell your story, how to use research and data, and what accountability means. Our students know they have to validate their work.

Michael Hughes, CEO, A New Leaf

Hughes’s Arizona social-service agency has worked with the ASU Lodestar Center frequently, including to train its staff.

As we’ve grown exponentially over the last decade, expanding our mission and taking new agencies under our wing, we had problems with staff turnover. We turned to Arizona State to help us retain and develop employees with leadership training. ASU tailor-made the program to fit our needs, and we enrolled 26 staff directors. It was a strong curriculum with classes on finance, fundraising, governance, effective supervision, and more.

Our staff became more invested, because they saw we were investing in them. Most of those staff remain with us. Another two dozen or so have gone through the program since.

William Schambra, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

A former foundation executive and then philanthropy researcher at the Hudson Institute, Schambra is skeptical that professionalizing “nonprofit management” will strengthen America’s invaluable voluntary sector.

Alexis de Tocqueville thought civil society was so important because that is where people learn citizenship. If that meant some amateurish affairs, so be it. To approach philanthropy and charities only as service-delivery vehicles—putting a premium on efficiency, management expertise, and business techniques—is to lose this vital aspect of philanthropy, the giving process as part of democracy in action.

Ask any donor what he wants to see, and he’ll tell you a well-run, efficient organization. But at the same time he’ll complain about the disappearance of mass participation in civil society. That’s a real problem.

If we insist on some formal training as a prerequisite for becoming a leader in voluntary activity, average Americans will be squeezed out. There are places in life where professionalization and efficiency aren’t really what is needed most. Think of the Cajun Navy, and the community outpourings that are often much more effective than official efforts when there are disasters.

When foundations get behind a national model and insist that it be replicated in a scientifically analyzed and structured way, that can end up driving out or distorting local innovations. That tells volunteers and donors and workers that they need to go to these brand names. This creates a narrow self-reinforcing cycle and snuffs out fresh problem-solving approaches customized for particular places and circumstances.

If you look at the requirements that foundations are imposing on grantees today, they’re making them plan, and hire, and focus almost entirely on efficiency and managerial expertise. Are management training and statistical measurement really the keys to solving our deepest social problems? Will those things teach people how to be good neighbors?