

# TROPMAN REPORT

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## STAYING AHEAD OF THE CURVE: *An Assessment of Executive Training Needs and Resources in Pittsburgh*

Nonprofit managers are challenged to perform multiple functions and roles as they guide their organizations through today's complex environment. They must be highly skilled not only in the technical aspects of their organization's mission, but also in management areas such as finance, human resources, information technology, strategic planning, program evaluation, resource development, board relations, and many other leadership responsibilities. Consequently, like their counterparts in the business world, nonprofit managers need to continuously seek out and utilize the latest methods and techniques of organizational management and leadership.

Fortunately, Pittsburgh has an abundant supply of education resources for nonprofit executives, program staff, trustees, and volunteers who are committed to continuously enhancing their knowledge and skills. Learning opportunities are offered by dozens of colleges and universities, professional associations, consulting firms, private corporations, and management support organizations in our region. A few of these education programs are "generic" management training seminars, but most of them are specialized programs designed explicitly and exclusively for nonprofit professionals and volunteers.

In recent years, there has been dramatic growth in the number of training opportunities available locally and nationally. In fact, some of these programs have struggled to secure sufficient enrollment leading some observers to suggest that we actually may have an *overabundance* of educational opportunities, with supply exceeding demand. Other questions arise:

- Are the region's educational resources valued by the nonprofit community?
- Are these resources addressing the needs of nonprofit professionals and volunteers?
- What are the strengths and the weaknesses of these resources?

### THE FORBES FUNDS

*Envisioning Pittsburgh's nonprofit sector as innovative, informed, and engaged, The Forbes Funds advance capacity-building within and among the region's nonprofit organizations.*

#### THE COPELAND FUND FOR NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

The mission of The Copeland Fund for Nonprofit Management is to strengthen the management and policymaking capacity of nonprofit human service organizations to serve better the needs of their communities.

- Management Enhancement Grants
- Emergency Grants
- Cohort (Professional Development) Grants

#### THE TROPMAN FUND FOR NONPROFIT RESEARCH

**The mission of The Tropman Fund for Nonprofit Research is to support applied research on strategic issues that are likely to have profound effects on nonprofit management and governance, especially among human service and community development organizations.**

- Applied Research Projects
- Annual Research Conference

#### THE WISHART FUND FOR NONPROFIT LEADERSHIP

The mission of The Wishart Fund for Nonprofit Leadership is to encourage pioneering nonprofit leadership by promoting public learning and discussion about issues critical to ethical and effective management, as well as by celebrating exemplary practices.

- Leadership Roundtables
- The Frieda Shapira Medal
- Alfred W. Wishart, Jr., Award for Excellence in Nonprofit Management

To read the full text of this study, log onto The Forbes Funds' web site at ([www.forbesfunds.org](http://www.forbesfunds.org)).

### **WHAT TYPES OF TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES ARE NEEDED IN OUR COMMUNITY?**

The Forbes Funds commissioned Tripp, Umbach & Associates to address these questions. The researchers conducted an e-mail survey of 142 nonprofit organizations of various sizes and with a wide variety of missions. Respondents were mostly mid- to top-level managers who have direct responsibility for the professional development of staff and volunteers. The selection of the research firm and design of the survey itself was a collaborative process involving the leading educational institutions in the region.

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### **PERCEPTIONS OF TRAINING RESOURCES IN THE PITTSBURGH AREA**

The survey respondents provided candid, and sometimes surprising, viewpoints on the current and desired state of nonprofit management training in our community. The following are some of the opinions expressed by the respondents:

- Executives appreciate the value of continuous training and professional development, but they lack the time, money, and energy to take full advantage of educational opportunities.
- They say they are sometimes overwhelmed and confused by the wide array of course offerings in the region.
- They perceive that many of these programs are redundant, and they lack the time to even read the many brochures and advertisements describing these programs.
- They believe the current offering of nonprofit courses in the region is uneven in quality and largely geared toward a general audience.
- Since many of the respondents to this survey described themselves as having specialized or advanced managerial skills, they believe that the courses offered frequently miss the mark because they seem to provide only basic or entry level information.
- Faced with many responsibilities and little excess time, nonprofit managers are struggling to gain the *advanced skills* they need to perform the numerous roles demanded by their organizations.
- Nonprofit executives seem to agree that the region has benefited from an extensive array of resources that support nonprofit organizations in our region.

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### **WHAT TYPE OF TRAINING IS NEEDED IN PITTSBURGH?**

The respondents expressed a desire for training covering a wide range of management topics such as planning, decision making, leadership and resource management. But their strongest views seemed to concern the *level* of the training, not the topics per se.

- Nonprofit managers say they need courses designed with a real-world focus that allow them to explore practical solutions to problems they face in their organization.
- Many respondents believe that the courses are designed around trendy topics or that they address the interests of the faculty, not the needs of the nonprofit community.
- They want to draw lessons from real world examples, including the "best practices" in the field.
- The respondents want a classroom environment that allows them to network and make new professional contacts with peers who will be beneficial to them or to their organization.
- They expressed a strong preference for training programs in which all participants have comparable levels of experience and share similar problems and priorities.
- The participants do not necessarily need to be from the same types of organizations, but they should be relatively equal in terms of position, seniority, and overall responsibilities.
- Those responding said that there are enough opportunities to learn basic skills, but relatively few opportunities to explore intermediate and advanced coursework on specific management topics such as fundraising, strategic planning and marketing.
- Respondents would welcome classes that include peer-to-peer discussion groups and even instructors who themselves are nonprofit managers.

Interestingly, respondents favor a traditional classroom setting with classmates from many different organizations. They have a mixed reaction to alternative delivery mechanisms like distance learning models. The vast majority are willing to pay a modest tuition for quality training, but cost continues to be an important consideration.

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## IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

With little time and money to devote to management training, but a deep desire to learn, nonprofit managers are looking for a greater return on their investment in management training. The major educational

institutions need to eliminate duplicative, entry-level training programs and develop advanced training opportunities for seasoned executives.

Several other studies conducted by The Forbes Funds uncovered similar needs for specialized course work, advanced training and opportunities to connect with and learn from colleagues.

Evidence from this study demonstrates a strong need to continue to support the nonprofit leaders in the region. To do that, the researchers suggest that regional education institutions work together to eliminate overlapping coursework and efforts. Specific recommendations from Tripp Umbach include:

- Creation of classes that address advanced nonprofit management skills
- Increased discussion of "best-case practices" and practical, real-life case studies that are relevant to the region and its nonprofit organizations
- Improved organization and collaboration of peer-to-peer networking and problem solving resource groups
- Streamlining of institutional efforts and coursework in a way that eliminates overlapping energy and information.

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## A NEW APPROACH

Toward these goals, The Forbes Funds has challenged local educational institutions to adopt a so-called "cohort approach" to their nonprofit training programs. This approach will recruit cohorts of nonprofit professionals and volunteers who have comparable levels of experience and who share similar interests and needs. The institutions have been encouraged to develop educational programs that are tailored to these cohorts, emphasizing peer-to-peer learning and focusing on practical skills. Also, the institutions have been encouraged to offer programs only on topics in which they have demonstrated expertise relative to others. In other words, they are being encouraged to play to their strengths, not their weaknesses. The Fund will no longer provide financial support for generic "off the shelf" training programs that do not address specific needs.

The Forbes Funds will, on a case-by-case basis, provide partial financial support for curriculum development and scholarships. For example, Duquesne University is collaborating with The Urban League to identify a cohort of young African Americans who are interested in serving on nonprofit boards of trustees. The Forbes Funds will provide scholarships to Duquesne's Nonprofit Leadership Institute, and will help find trustee positions for participants through Duquesne's new BoardLink program. Other cohort training programs are now underway or in the planning phase at the University of Pittsburgh and Robert Morris University.

The Forbes Funds continues its commitment to developing the management and leadership skills of nonprofit professionals and volunteers. Training programs will continue to be an integral component of our capacity building strategy in the nonprofit sector. But we are also committed to continuously evaluating the training programs and other professional development opportunities for the nonprofit sector to ensure that these products meet the needs of their consumers.

**This TROPMAN REPORT is one of a series of briefing papers generated by The Tropman Fund for Nonprofit Research. TROPMAN REPORTS in this 2002 series are:**

1. Capacity-building in the Nonprofit Sector: *A Comparison of Resources and Practices in Pittsburgh and Denver*
2. How Do Nonprofits Compare with For-profit Providers? *An Application of Customer Value Analysis*
3. Leveraging Human Capital: *How Nonprofits in Pittsburgh Recruit and Manage Volunteers*
4. New Economy Entrepreneurs: *Their Attitudes on Philanthropy*
5. Profit Making in Nonprofits: *An Assessment of Entrepreneurial Ventures in Nonprofit Organizations*
6. Recruitment and Retention of Managerial Talent: *Current Practices and Prospects for Nonprofits in Pittsburgh*
7. Social Services in Faith-Based Organizations: *Pittsburgh Congregations and the Services They Provide*
8. **Staying Ahead of the Curve: *An Assessment of Executive Training Needs and Resources in Pittsburgh***
9. Strategic Planning: *Positioning Identity, Values and Aspirations*

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