

Preparing MPA Students to Succeed in Government-Nonprofit Collaboration: Lessons from the Field

Christopher S. Horne
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Tommi V. Paris
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

ABSTRACT

Most graduates of MPA programs will lead cross-sector collaborative efforts during their careers, and they will find that this task requires a skill set distinctive from that required by management within a single organization or within a single sector. Based on a grounded analysis of in-depth interviews with 30 experienced public and nonprofit managers, this paper distills their lessons learned into a collaboration model and a set of learning objectives and activities to help prepare students to lead successful cross-sector collaboration. These practitioners' experiences teach that students must understand the interplay between formal and informal aspects of collaborative relationships and how these affect collaboration outcomes, organizational learning, and learning throughout the collaborative system.

Cross-sector collaboration is the “new normal” that characterizes the work awaiting today’s MPA students. For at least two decades, public administration educators have asked how they may better prepare students to lead collaboration, particularly the forms of cross-sector collaboration that have grown in popularity with the rise of “third-party government” (Salamon, 1987). Meanwhile, the public administration profession has had at least two decades to accumulate practical wisdom to guide cross-sector collaboration. This paper focuses specifically on government-nonprofit collaboration in providing social services, and describes the lessons learned by experienced public and nonprofit managers; lessons were identified through a grounded analysis of 30 in-depth interviews. These lessons are formalized in a model of the government-nonprofit

collaborative relationship, a set of learning objectives, and accompanying learning activities we propose as helpful for passing them along to students.

The motivation for this and earlier studies is the recognition that management in collaborative organizational networks requires different skills than management in individual hierarchical organizations or within a single sector (Brown & Potoski, 2003; McGuire, 2006; Smith, 2008; Stoker, 2006; Van Slyke, 2002; Young, 1999). Recently, Smith (2008) called attention to the “collaborative relationships among partners that require a new skill set to manage and sustain” (p. 120). He argued that MPA programs must go beyond the addition into the core MPA curriculum of isolated nonprofit management courses to true integration of content related to managing cross-sector relationships. Similarly, Bies and Blackwood (2007/2008) documented the need for integration of content addressing nonprofit organizations’ roles in contemporary governance into nonprofit management programs and concentrations.

We favor a broad definition of *collaboration* to include any arrangement in which multiple organizations work together to accomplish goals that cannot be easily accomplished by an organization acting alone (McGuire, 2006). While fruitful collaborative arrangements may be informal (Gazley, 2008), our focus is on the proliferation of formal collaborative arrangements, such as contracts, grants, vouchers, co-location, and joint programming, that are the hallmarks of third-party government. As will become clear, though, practitioners understand these formal arrangements to be situated in broader, more complex government-nonprofit relationships, including informal aspects of those relationships, that powerfully affect collaboration outcomes and learning within collaborative networks.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We began our research guided by three questions:

1. What factors do practitioners say most strongly affect cross-sector collaboration outcomes?
2. What tacit knowledge have practitioners developed through experience leading cross-sector collaboration?
3. How can these lessons help us strengthen the MPA curriculum?

Our research followed a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to develop a model representing the lessons articulated—explicitly and implicitly—by expert public and nonprofit managers. In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 practitioners—15 from government agencies and 15 from nonprofit organizations. A purposive, network sampling strategy was followed to focus the study on lessons learned by practitioners judged to have developed expertise in managing formal government-nonprofit

collaborations through direct experience. Respondents were selected based on the authors' personal knowledge of the managers' expertise, their recommendations, and the recommendations of trusted, knowledgeable colleagues.

All participants had in common extensive experience managing one form of collaboration, government-nonprofit contracts. This commonality permitted easier comparison across interviews and provided a starting point for discussing additional forms of collaboration. The scope of the sample was further narrowed by focusing only on collaboration in social services—a field with a long history of and now dominated by government-nonprofit collaboration (Austin, 2003; Smith & Lipsky, 1995). The first wave of 20 interviews was conducted in the same mid-sized southern U.S. city. By first concentrating on one city and its government-nonprofit social services contracting regime, the initial findings that would emerge reflected the views of a network of government and nonprofit managers on both “sides” of multiple government-nonprofit contracts. During the course of this first wave of interviews, data gathered during earlier interviews were used to develop questions and probes for later interviews that “made sense” in the same implementation context and, often, with reference to the same contract relationships.

The second wave of 10 interviews was conducted with participants from throughout the U.S. As data collection proceeded, the interviews shifted from exploratory to confirmatory. The final 10 interviews yielded findings very similar to the first 10, attesting to the robustness of the lessons learned and strengthening confidence in their generalizability beyond the original geographic area. Additional research will be necessary to test for the generalizability of the findings to other important types of cross-sector collaboration beyond this study's focus on government-nonprofit social services contracting.

The interviews followed two main lines of questioning. Following questions about their background and their organizations, participants were asked to describe examples of particularly successful and particularly *unsuccessful* government-nonprofit collaboration. The managers were prompted to explain why they selected their examples, how they defined success, and, most important to this study, what factors contributed to or detracted from successful outcomes. These questions elicited the managers' tacit theories—those theories of practice developed through experience but rarely formally articulated—used to explain positive and negative outcomes in government-nonprofit collaboration. (To encourage frank descriptions of both good and bad collaboration experiences, respondents were assured that their participation would be kept confidential.) Next, the managers were asked to address the research question more directly by describing what they wished more administrators in the “other” sector (public or nonprofit) better understood about their own sector, how their own formal educations prepared them to manage collaboration, and what they believed MPA students ought to learn in preparation for collaboration.

The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were analyzed with the assistance of WeftQDA qualitative data analysis software. The first 15 interviews were open coded, with these codes then organized into hierarchical axial codes. Employing the grounded theory practice of “constant comparison,” axial codes were modified as needed to accommodate additional themes emerging from the remaining transcripts, and the final set of axial codes was applied across the entire dataset. This final set of codes, with further validation drawn from previous research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 48 – 55), form the basis of the key findings presented in the next section.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDED LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The public and nonprofit managers provided rich accounts of successful and unsuccessful social services collaborative experiences, and they offered ample advice for what MPA students should be taught in preparation for leadership in government-nonprofit collaboration. The lessons conveyed by these practitioners are summarized below, organized by five learning objectives for MPA students that are suggested by the findings.

Learning Objective 1: Students will be familiar with the basic formal structures and processes of government agencies and nonprofit organizations.

Practitioners’ experiences underscore the importance of understanding the basic organizational structures, roles, and decision-making processes of public agencies and nonprofit organizations. This theme emerged from across the interviews, but particularly when participants were asked what they wished their counterparts on the other side of contracts better understood. Public managers’ responses reflect classic tensions between politics and administration. On the one hand, public managers said that nonprofit managers need to better understand the limits on public administrators’ discretion—that, ultimately, their decisions are made within the confines of statute and the directives of elected officials. On the other hand, public managers also wished for more recognition of the political nature of seemingly apolitical, technical contracting decisions. In making decisions about allocation of funds, public managers are pressured to accomplish political objectives, such as roughly equal distribution of funds across legislative districts and alignment with elected officials’ policy platforms, in addition to the more technical objectives that occupy most of the nonprofit managers’ attention, such as allocating funds based on demonstrated performance and organizational capacity. And while public managers sympathized with nonprofit managers’ frustrations over the perceived slowness of government decision-making and financial transactions, they believed these frustrations would be assuaged by a better understanding of how this slowness stems from policies and procedures in place to protect due process, accountability to elected officials, and

accountability to the public.

Somewhat parallel to the public managers' concerns, nonprofit managers held that public managers should have a better understanding of nonprofit organizations' internal structures and processes, including the role of boards of trustees, allocation of human resources across functional areas, limited capacity for data collection and processing, and the necessity of general operating expenses to support program delivery. From both perspectives, the practitioners believed a better shared understanding of their organizational *basics* would lay a stronger foundation for crafting collaborations that are sustainable over the long term and accomplish desired outcomes for clients.

Learning Objective 2: Students will understand the particular strengths of government and nonprofit organizational forms and their implications for structuring collaborations.

Scholars of government-nonprofit collaboration have long recognized that cross-sector collaboration can succeed only to the extent that it builds on each sector's distinctive strengths (for example, Salamon, 1987), and both public and nonprofit managers told stories of social service collaboration that either succeeded because they built on the strengths of each party or failed because they did not. The strengths of public and nonprofit organizations described by the participants resound with conventional wisdom, particularly about nonprofit organizations, which repeatedly were described as "good to work with" and "valuable" because of their innovation, flexibility, passion, close ties to their communities, and ability to leverage assets to stretch the contract dollar. Likewise, public agencies were appreciated for their ability to legitimize social service interventions, to identify and provide access to a broad range of targeted populations, and, by almost all of the study participants, to provide necessary funding for social services. A nonprofit manager succinctly summarized the opinions of many participants, both public and nonprofit:

I don't want to be too simple, but we're on the streets.
They're not. They have the resources. We don't. It's kind
of a marriage made in heaven, if you think about it.¹

The specific stories about successful and unsuccessful collaborations describe public agencies and nonprofit organizations that do not inevitably exhibit these desirable characteristics, but, rather, are *enabled* to exhibit these characteristics by the specific structure of the collaboration. Performance-based contracts, for example, were featured in stories of both positive and negative contracting experiences. Some performance-based contracts were structured to reward nonprofits for client outcomes aligned with the organizations' missions, while giving the nonprofits significant latitude to tailor their services to individual clients

and to engage in experimentation in how services were delivered. These contracts enabled the nonprofit organizations to realize their potential strengths, such as innovation and personalized service. As one nonprofit manager described it,

... they are not breathing down our necks about how we do it. We're getting paid based on results. That's the best.

Other performance-based contracts, though, stifled innovation by specifying and reimbursing for a narrow range of service delivery methods—a noted pitfall in performance-based contracting (Behn & Kant, 1999). One nonprofit manager offered a poignant example of performance measures working against program goals:

So, if you can move more kids into adoption quicker, you get a little financial reward ... kids get moved too fast ... there's lawsuits pending ... because the kids got moved too early and they were abused further The commissioner of [the state] wants to reduce the number of kids in care, in state custody. We want to keep kids safe. It sounds like the same thing. It's not.

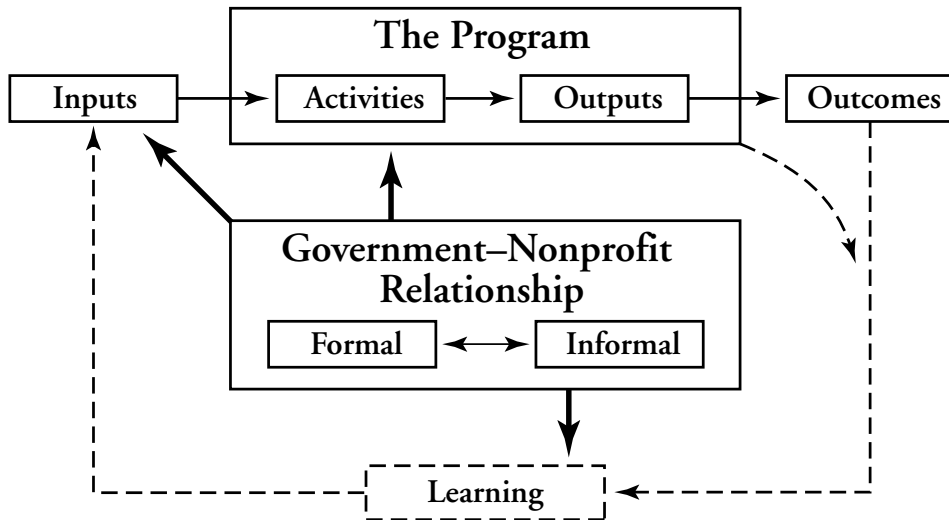
Ironically, the government agencies responsible for crafting these restrictive performance-based contracts espouse the usual litany of nonprofit organizations' strengths as contracted social service providers. The structure of the contracts, however, prevented the nonprofit organizations from exercising these strengths and prevented the government agencies—and the programs' clients—from benefiting from them.

Teaching about the effects of the formal structure of government-nonprofit relationships on contracted social service programs' delivery and outcomes provides a useful, fairly uncomplicated starting point for preparing students to lead in cross-sector collaboration. These effects were also a useful starting point for developing a teaching model of the government-nonprofit collaborative relationship grounded in our data, presented in Figure 1.

The upper portion of the figure depicts a standard logic model to represent the contracted social service program using the inputs → activities → outputs → outcomes sequence familiar to most social service practitioners. (This particular formulation of a program logic model has been popularized by United Way.) While we believe that all MPA students should be able to describe programs in these terms, both because logic modeling is a useful tool for designing and evaluating programs and because funders will expect them to, the key contribution of our model is in placing the standard program logic model in the context of the larger government-nonprofit relationship, depicted by the

Figure 1.

A Model for Teaching About Government-Nonprofit Collaboration



remainder of the model.

This second learning objective focuses students' attention on the model's arrows leading from the government-nonprofit relationship—particularly its formal components (as suggested by the placement of the arrows)—to program inputs, activities, and outputs. Put simply, the written contract itself (obviously) strongly influences available inputs, the range of permissible activities and outputs, and, in turn, program outcomes, and it may do so in a way that capitalizes on both parties' strengths or not. The effects of a government-nonprofit relationship, though, are hardly confined to the effects of contracts. The broader aspects of the formal government-nonprofit relationship and its informal aspects also affect the program and its outcomes (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006; Stoker, 2006), and the government-nonprofit relationship, more broadly conceived, mediates learning within the organizations and the social service delivery system as a whole. These more complex and, perhaps, less intuitive components of the model form the basis of the three remaining learning objectives.

Learning Objective 3: Students will be able to identify the effects of the formal government-nonprofit relationship on collaboration outcomes.

Many managers introduced the topic of program evaluation when discussing examples of successful and unsuccessful government-nonprofit collaboration. In

explaining successes and, especially, failures, nonprofit managers were adamant that their contracted programs be viewed in light of the formal structures established both in their contracts and through the broader contracting process. Three nonprofit managers' examples convey typical frustrations:

... because of structural changes in the way we get referrals from the state, we went through about a year-and-a-half of not getting any referrals, and ... we were supposed to be serving people referred by the state. ... They were blaming us for not getting enough referrals ... but you guys are the ones that are supposed to give us the referrals. What more can we do?

[Government agencies] keep adding on these little tidbits of things that just make it more difficult to do your job when your purpose is supposed to be helping clients.

[Government funding] has continued to get worse, to decrease and decrease and decrease over time, every year ... You can only do that for so long without quality being affected.

These examples illustrate a common theme from the interviews: Explaining program outcomes only as the end of a chain of events confined to the program itself—as intimated by the conventional logic model—misses the powerful effects of aspects of the government-nonprofit relationship outside the program. This finding echoes Ansell and Gash (2007), who also model program outcomes as a function of the entire collaborative process. Students, then, must learn to conceptualize the formal government-nonprofit relationship broadly to include not only the program model, but also the larger set of official, planned, intentionally developed aspects of the collaborative arrangement. Examples of such aspects in our interviews include changes in characteristics of clients referred by government to nonprofit service providers, data collection requirements introduced in the course of contract monitoring, stagnant funding levels in multi-year contracts, staff training requirements, shifting client eligibility rules, and requirements to “innovate.”

Typical program evaluation designs attempt to trace the effects of program activities and outputs on outcomes. Clearly, this task is appropriately central to program evaluation. However, to the extent that outcomes are influenced by extra-programmatic structures of the government-nonprofit relationship, such evaluations produce distorted findings, limiting their usefulness for program

improvement—or, more to the point, improvement of the government-nonprofit service delivery system. Furthermore, evaluation of a contracted program limited to the confines of the program itself accomplishes its accountability purposes incompletely, serving to promote accountability of the contracted nonprofit organization to the government agency, but neglecting to promote accountability of the government-nonprofit service delivery system to the public.

Learning Objective 4: Students will appreciate the importance of informal relationships characterized by trust and open communication for facilitating organizational and systemic learning.

Extensive focus on the mechanical details of contracts and other forms of collaboration is notably lacking from the managers' explanations of why collaboration succeeds or fails and from their advice for future managers. Instead, much of their explanation and advice alludes to the importance of positive informal relationships between government and nonprofit managers. We use the phrase *informal relationships* to describe patterns of interpersonal interactions governed by unwritten rules and unofficial roles that arise during the operation of the formal government-nonprofit collaboration. Respondents commonly describe and assess their informal relationships in terms of trust and open communication. When describing the origins of successful collaboration experiences, participants frequently traced histories of interactions with individuals over time, developing shared personal histories, mutual regard, and trust. Many participants were very explicit about the importance of these informal relationships:

Collaboration is about relationship building. It's being open, transparent and communicative in appropriate ways, constantly, continually I ultimately rely on my relationship building to really get through.

When we sought to uncover *why* informal relationships figure so significantly in participants' stories and advice, a strong theme emerged: Organizational and systemic learning are facilitated by, hindered by, and filtered through the informal aspects of government-nonprofit relationships. Many definitions have been offered for *organizational learning*; we appreciate the simple definition offered by Fiol and Lyles (1985, p. 803): "The process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding." To this, we append the concept of *systemic learning* to describe the type of learning that requires sharing of information throughout the collaborative system—here, between the government agency and nonprofit organization—and has the potential to improve the overall collaboration, beyond improvements isolated to a single organization. Based on participants' examples, we conceptualize organizational and systemic learning as following reflection on the experience of engaging in program activities and producing program outputs and upon observing

programs' outcomes (hence the two starting points for the learning feedback loop in Figure 1).

Instances of organizational and systemic learning that led to improvements in the structure of the government-nonprofit relationship invariably occurred in the context of informal relationships characterized by trust and open communication. One nonprofit manager described the learning that takes place in an informal setting hosted by a government agency:

... they have a luncheon, and they invite this kind of ever-growing group together to share ideas and information and say "hey, we've been doing this," and "hey, here's this training opportunity."

Another nonprofit manager described how having a positive informal relationship with her government counterparts "makes all the difference," again, providing the context for (at least a small bit of) systemic learning:

We had a question about a grant that we are working on right now, and the executive director picked up and dialed the cell phone number for the lady at the state level. And our other programs? There's no way we would have picked up and dialed a cell phone!

Most examples, however, explained the lack of—or even distortion of—organizational and systemic learning as due to distrust and the lack of regular, informal communication. The instances of distrust hindering learning mostly follow the pattern predicted by principal-agent theory, with the agent—here, the nonprofit manager—distorting or withholding information from the principal—the public manager (Van Slyke, 2006). Two nonprofit managers told similar stories:

We are really, really careful of our relationships with our state contractors. They are, you know, they're our bread and butter. There's a lot of things that we don't talk to them about, such as, do you realize this program ain't doing what it's supposed to be doing? We don't want to say that to them. For one thing ... for some of them, it's a very personal thing. We don't have the kind of relationship that would allow us to be that frank

I don't know if we feel empowered to go to [the state agency] and say ... what we're doing here is not working, it's not the best program for the population we

are trying to serve, we need to look at something else.
But ... it's not in our best interest to rattle that cage,
because we have people, good employees, that have been
working with us for many years ...

In these and in several other examples, the nonprofit managers indicated their distrust of their government counterparts and, frequently, they described their communication with them as limited, strictly formal, or sporadic. In some instances, the only communication occurred through written performance reports and annual contract renewal processes. Perhaps the public managers in these cases assume that the “invisible hand” of competitive market forces obviates the need for ongoing communication and learning (Behn & Kant, 1999). In any case, students should be aware of the importance of cultivating positive informal relationships to collaboration success.

Learning Objective 5: Students will be able to design formal collaborative structures that support the emergence of facilitative informal relationships.

The previous learning objective, which asks students only to “appreciate” the importance of informal relationships, begs the question, “Then what?” Appreciating the importance of informal relationships is an important first step, and something that we suspect many students do not fully grasp, but appreciation alone does not improve students’ abilities to lead in government-nonprofit relationships. At the same time, we do not mean to imply that all MPA students should become equipped to run group therapy sessions for all parties involved in government-nonprofit collaboration. MPA students (and their instructors) may draw more practical application from another theme recurrent throughout the interviews: Positive informal relationships—those that facilitate consequential organizational and systemic learning—between government and nonprofit managers usually emerge from formal structures of the government-nonprofit relationship outside the contract itself. In describing the value of monthly meetings with the contracting government agency, a nonprofit manager provided quite an explicit example of this theme:

Well, the structure just allows us to kind of get to meet once a month in an informal setting and bring different issues to the table ... so we actually have a relationship ... with different people representing the government. I would say that's an important factor.

Other public and nonprofit managers described relationships, often in very amiable terms, that developed in task forces, board meetings, technical assistance seminars, and learning circles. These positive informal relationships,

then, did not develop spontaneously in informal settings, but in the context of formal structures built around (or, in some cases, without any reference to) the actual contract. These formal structures provide the time and space necessary for informal relationships to emerge. In turn, emergent, positive informal relationships provide the trust and open communication necessary to identify and address problems with formal collaborative arrangements (as suggested by the double arrows between “formal” and “informal” in Figure 1). Similarly, Ansell and Gash (2007) found opportunities for “face-to-face dialogue” to be necessary preconditions for successful collaboration, stressing their value for “breaking down stereotypes and other barriers to communication” (p. 558). Ring and Van de Ven (1994) and Van Slyke (2006) add that the structured interactions that provide opportunities for building trust must be sustained for the duration of the collaborative arrangement. In view of these lessons, students can be taught to develop lasting, formal structures around the government-nonprofit contract to encourage the emergence of sustained positive informal relationships across sectors.

SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Two additional findings address pedagogy directly. First, practitioners strongly endorsed experiential learning integrated throughout the curriculum. When the participants could identify elements of their own formal education that helped prepare them for leading government-nonprofit collaboration, they most often recalled internships and other field-based learning experiences. These practitioners stressed the value of witnessing firsthand the importance of navigating both technical details and diverse personalities in cross-sector relationship building. Some participants went further to specify the value of field-based experiences included toward the beginning of their programs, explaining that this provided context for the classroom-based learning that followed. This finding supports the consensus among public administration educators on the value of field-based education, but also suggests that we consider including such experiences throughout the curriculum in addition to the standard last-semester internship and that we intentionally develop field-based experiences that expose students to management of cross-sector relationships.

The second finding that speaks directly to pedagogy is somewhat of a mirror image to the first: Practitioners are pessimistic about the value of classroom-based education for preparing students to lead in government-nonprofit collaboration. When asked what instructors should be doing in the classroom, their near-universal response was along the lines of “I don’t think there’s much you *can* do in a classroom.”

Their pessimism aside, we believe that the learning objectives implied by these practitioners’ accounts of collaboration successes and failures and their

advice for aspiring sector-spanning leaders can be pursued through the MPA curriculum. Suggested learning activities and their alignment with the learning objectives drawn from our data are summarized in Table 1.

In the classroom, study of the structures, decision-making processes, and distinctive strengths and weaknesses of government agencies and nonprofit organizations certainly can be pursued through conventional textbook-and-lecture pedagogy. We have found the model presented in Figure 1 to provide a helpful sense-making device for students attempting to grasp the complexity of government-nonprofit collaboration and a useful point of reference for organizing the lessons gleaned from across lectures and reading assignments.

Reading and analyzing case studies, another staple of classroom-based learning in MPA programs, gives students the opportunity to learn vicariously from managers' experiences in a broader range of government-nonprofit collaborative arrangements than they could possibly experience directly (Helms & Biggs, 2007/2008; Lynn, 1999; Sandfort & Stone, 2008). Case studies of various forms of government-nonprofit collaboration can be found in popular case collections, including the Case Program of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University (www.ksgcase.harvard.edu) and the Electronic Hallway (www.hallway.org).

Instructors can develop discussion guides to help students analyze cases through the lenses of the model presented in Figure 1 and of other models of government-nonprofit collaboration (such as Ansell & Gash, 2007; and Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006). Using our collaboration model, we have developed discussion guides for case study analysis that follow a common pattern. First, students are instructed to describe the collaborative effort in terms of a conventional logic model, identifying inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. This is a valuable exercise in itself, but once this step is completed, students are asked to identify the shortcomings of this approach: What factors that affect collaboration outcomes are *not* captured by the conventional logic model? How does the formal structure of the government-nonprofit collaboration affect outcomes? How do informal relationships facilitate or hinder organizational and systemic learning? How do formal collaborative arrangements support or deter the emergence of positive informal relationships? What steps can be taken to improve collaboration outcomes? In this manner, students are trained to avoid oversimplified and unfruitful understandings of cross-sector collaboration by using (or perhaps even attempting to use but ultimately departing from) the vocabulary, concepts, and proposed relationships among those concepts provided by the collaboration model.

We also suggest bringing artifacts of actual government-nonprofit collaboration into the classroom. Students can learn much by reading and analyzing contracts, memorandums of understanding, requests for proposals, technical assistance documents, and so on. As with case studies, guided

Table 1.
Suggested Learning Objectives and Activities

Suggested learning objectives: Students will...	...be familiar with the basic formal structures and processes of government agencies and nonprofit organizations.	...understand the particular strengths of government and nonprofit organizational forms and their implications for structuring collaborations.	...be able to identify the effects of the formal government-nonprofit relationship on collaboration outcomes.	...appreciate the importance of informal relationships, as characterized by trust and open communication, for facilitating organizational and systemic learning.	...be able to design formal collaborative structures that support the emergence of facilitative, informal relationships	Examples of aligned learning activities:	Comparative study of governance and structure across sectors	Case studies of cross-sector collaboration, class discussions that raise awareness, surface assumptions	Study the philosophy and strategies of strength-based collaboration	Study the interdependence of formal and informal relationships	Using experiential cross-sector learning throughout the curriculum
							✓	✓	✓	✓	
							✓	✓	✓	✓	
							✓	✓	✓	✓	
							✓	✓	✓	✓	
							✓	✓	✓	✓	

discussions help students understand the technical content of such artifacts and consider their probable effects on the informal government-nonprofit relationship, organizational and systemic learning, and collaboration outcomes.

Like the practitioners we interviewed, we also attest to the value of field-based learning for preparing students to lead government-nonprofit collaboration. The ubiquity of government-nonprofit collaboration affords instructors myriad opportunities to design service-learning projects (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001), client-based courses (Mason, 2008; Waldner & Hunter, 2008), short-term practicums, and more extensive internships that give students firsthand experience developing, sustaining, and evaluating government-nonprofit collaboration. In our experience, internships and other field experiences readily foster the development of cross-sector collaboration leadership skills, but achieving this goal requires intentional design of the field experiences and ongoing reflective dialog with and among students.

For example, one of our students, completing her MPA internship with a local government unit, recently participated in and later led a series of meetings with a broad range of stakeholders to develop a communitywide energy conservation plan. Another intern was placed with a local health department and helped convene an infant mortality summit, where she facilitated discussions among public, for-profit, and nonprofit healthcare providers culminating in joint recommendations to improve the service delivery system for at-risk pregnant women. By design, these students' internship responsibilities took them outside the relatively simple bureaucracies of their host agencies into a complex network of public, for-profit, and nonprofit organizations. In ongoing discussions with their faculty advisor and other interns, and in reflective writing assignments, the students made mutually reinforcing connections between classroom content and firsthand cross-sector collaboration experiences. Their field experiences gave life and urgency to the models of collaboration discussed in the classroom, and the classroom content enabled them to better understand and manage their cross-sector projects.

CONCLUSION

Much of what we learned about collaboration from inductive analysis of the interview data comports well with the existing literature on cross-sector collaboration. It is noteworthy, however, that most of this knowledge is held only tacitly by the practitioners interviewed. The responses to interview questions that directly asked what we should teach MPA students are relatively thin. The practitioners' stories about successful and unsuccessful collaboration, however, reveal a deep, intuitive knowledge—that is, wisdom—about what it takes to lead successful collaboration across sectoral boundaries. Perhaps it is because this wisdom was derived from experience that the practitioners so strongly endorsed experiential learning and so roundly questioned the value of classroom-based

learning (even while talking to a professor!).

Our students have the advantage of entering the field when cross-sector collaboration is commonplace and decades of trial-and-error, experimentation, study, and reflection have imprinted valuable, insightful, practical lessons on the collective memory of the profession. They need not wait to learn, or at least to be introduced to, these lessons through experience. Helping our students make these “lessons learned” their own will place them ahead of the curve, enable them to contribute more adeptly to organizational and systemic learning within the profession, and equip them to achieve better collaboration outcomes for the public they, and we, serve.

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FOOTNOTE

- ¹ All quotations are from confidential personal communications with the authors. Interviews were conducted between September 18, 2008 and April 2, 2009.

AUTHORS' NOTE

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Christopher Horne is an assistant professor of public administration at University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where his research focuses on government-nonprofit relations, cross-sector comparisons of organizational performance, and information use in nonprofit organizations. His work has been published in *Administration and Society*, the *International Journal of Public Administration*, and in *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*. He may be reached at Christopher-Horne@utc.edu.

Tommi Paris is a graduate of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga MPA program and works as an internal communications specialist for a multinational company. She may be reached at Tommi-Paris@utc.edu.