

# **Building Capacity in the Not-for-Profit Sector: Executive Leadership Education**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter describes the development, delivery, and evolution of an Executive Leadership certificate program and proposes a set of promising practices based on this experience. It traces the origins of this program in the university's commitment to lifelong learning and the connections of this commitment to continuing education and community capacity building. It considers issues such as relevance, immediacy, and quality of instruction. Several innovative features of the program including the use of follow-up mentorship and seminars in specific topic areas such as social media are examined. The chapter also explores the significance and value of corporate sponsorship in the context of continuing education for the not-for-profit sector and speculates about the ongoing relationship of graduates and the university.

## **Continuing Education: Why Bother?**

Many universities regard Continuing Education as an academically inferior, low margin sideline. More recently in Canada, universities have experimented with turning Continuing Education departments into travel agencies offering trips to the far reaches of the globe mixed with a range of structured learning experiences. Some universities have also seen Continuing Education as a way to engage seniors in learning often with emeritus professors providing the teaching. This is not to suggest that these and other experiments are without merit, but that this more limited view overlooks the power and vitality of Continuing Education in engaging alumni, enhancing the university's profile in the community and building capacity in various communities of practice, all of which are elements in the Executive Leadership program. A vibrant School of Continuing Education

and Community Engagement can also assist universities in rethinking who and what they are.

### **Engaging Alumni**

In previous eras and with universities at which residency was a major feature of the student experience, alumni programs focused on the kind of loyalty that was related to the memories of youth, nostalgia, and the lasting connections resulting from sharing those formative years. Increasingly, and especially for institutions with a history of low or no residency requirements and student populations of adult learners, these emotional factors are less influential. CityU and similar institutions specializing in adult learning historically paid little or no attention to alumni. However, shifts in the complexity and rate of change in society, and the associated demands for lifelong learning open up a new set of possibilities for universities.

The possibilities foreseen at CityU in Canada entail continued engagement with alumni in the service of lifelong learning. For example, the graduates of our unique practitioner-focused and practitioner/scholar-instructed counseling programs are very successful in obtaining employment and advancing as professionals. Many become program directors and, ultimately, executive directors and board members. Though they have little formal preparation for responsibilities as administrators, managers, and leaders, they quickly become aware of what they need to know. This is a juncture at which education in administration, management, and leadership can be most helpful (Mintzberg, 2004).

### **Enhancing the University's Profile**

Universities in the private, as opposed to public, sector often depend heavily on enrollments for revenue, and CityU in Canada is no exception. Private universities that are nonprofit as is the case with CityU are frequently under-resourced in the areas of marketing and advertising, and therefore have difficulty competing with both private, well-capitalized-for-profit institutions and government-subsidized public institutions. On

this tightrope recognition, reputation and word of mouth are critical success factors and community engagement crucial. Our evolving Executive Leadership program has currently engaged over fifty leaders from the nonprofit sector. Many of their organizations hire or could hire graduates of the degree-based programs. Continuing Education provides a means of introducing participants to the values, ethos, and pedagogical approach of CityU in Canada.

### **Building Capacity in Communities of Practice**

The vision, mission, and values of City University of Seattle as a whole and the Canadian programs in particular are consistent with the university's critical role in building the capacity of specific communities of practice. In Canada to date the focus to this point has been on the education of practitioners in Education and Counseling at the master's degree level, though our aspirations include the establishment of a School of Business and Management. Through its intellectual resources, experience in teaching, and practice of applied research, the university plays an important part in the currency and vitality of communities of practice. It introduces and reintroduces practitioners to the ongoing conversations and research of academics and programs in different places and cultures. Because of its greater capacity to be detached, the university serves a safe environment for debate and dialogue, as well as a reminder of integrity. At its best the university infuses communities of practice with a willingness to confront the most challenging and pressing issues faced by society.

### **Rethinking Universities**

In some ways, because of its freedom from the academic constraints imposed by degree-granting status, Continuing Education provides educators with the opportunity to ask again what the university's role in society is. What is the public trust bestowed on us by society when it permits us to operate as "universities."

It is certainly the case that there are different kinds of universities. This has been broadly recognized by legislated distinctions between research, teaching, and technical

universities. In our particular situation, the closest familiar approximation is probably to the “professional schools” that educate professions such as law and medicine.

The leading edge of our thinking has taken us to the proximal zone in which theory meets practice, and the creative tension and learning that is possible when neither is excessively privileged and each informs the other. Our thinking has also returned us to one of the originating sites of western education, the *agora*, or marketplace. We see the marketplace as alive and vibrant rather than crass and commercial, a vital meeting ground and a site at which educators should hawk their wares. Our aspiration as an “engaged university” is to create a robust intellectual commons for the professions and shape this commons in a way that consciously serves the community.

In re-visioning the role of the university along community development lines, curriculum becomes a contract between the university and a professional community; situated and project-based learning find natural homes; scholar/practitioners are supplied with a venue; and students truly become colleagues.

The increasing rate of change and escalating complexity create a growing need for lifelong learning and a continuing education home for the professions. There is also a growing need for dialogical forums in which theory and practice can be considered and ethical issues debated. New ideas and practices need to be circulated and evaluated, and thorny ethical issues wrestled with. Small urban, podlike communities of learning and applied research are ideal forms to achieve these ends. These communities of learning need to be embedded in the urban centers that are increasingly the vortex of change. They need to be flexible enough and on a small enough scale to be responsive to their changing environments. This is not the stuff of large institutions, layered bureaucracy, and procedural decision making. The CityU Canada vision is to create responsive, loosely affiliated centers of learning in urban environments. The purpose of affiliation is to realize economies of scale in intellectual resources and social capital and to provide a medium of exchange for the cultivation of ideas and practices. Think globally; act locally.

### **Rhizomatic Development of a Continuing Ed. Executive Leadership Program**

The university historically offered a range of supplementary workshops mostly in the area of counseling, our largest program. Some workshops brought world-class presenters with whom members of the faculty were connected through the university while they were in Vancouver offering training in public workshops; others brought local experts in particular specialties. Some workshops were freestanding; others were incorporated in ongoing courses. Some involved a charge to participants; most were free of charge, particularly to CityU students, alumni, and faculty. This is an integral part of what universities do.

Over time a more systematic approach to developing Continuing Education was warranted to both extend the range of our offerings and make them more economically viable.

### **Employing Networks and Rhizomes**

Over the past two decades sociologists, economists, and other social scientists have been interested in human society's propensity to organize itself in networks. Topographically these networks can in turn be understood to comprise interconnected clusters (Watts, 2004). The equivalent in the natural world is plants that employ an underground, interconnected root system to grow, regenerate, and persist, known as rhizomes. Bamboo is an example of a plant that employs such a root system, as are blackberries and Aspen trees. More recently, rhizomatic structuring has been seen as a useful analogy for the evolutions of communities (Kinman, 2014; Deleuze & Parnet, 1987).

From the perspective of organizations and communities and, in particular, the task of building capacity in the institutional world, understanding rhizomatic structure is very useful, and in our situation the application of an understanding of rhizomatic structure was consistent with our values and a primary means by which we developed an Executive Leadership program for the nonprofit sector.

To further clarify what is meant by rhizomatic structure, visualize for a moment the set of family, social, and collegial relationships in which you live your life, some with your family, some with colleagues, some with friends, some with various kinds of service providers; some influential, some transient; some formal, others informal. These relationships are integral in the unfolding of our individual lives, but they also affect the shape institutions take and influence the organization of society as a whole. This relational network is the nervous system of the social world. For example, information travels like wildfire across the synapses of this ever-changing set of human connections—trends emerge, new ideas spread, and epidemics rage.

### **Conversations Over Breakfast**

The CityU in Canada Executive Leadership program emerged from a rhizomatic structure and, in turn, consciously made use of it in its development. But, how did it all begin? As conversations between two veterans of the nonprofit sector who had previously worked together in a number of contexts, one of whom is now a university administrator. One of the themes of these conversations was the changing landscape of the nonprofit sector and the challenges faced by the next generation of leaders in that sector. A second theme that had not changed—the degree to which leadership in that sector is often provided by graduates in social work, counseling, and community development who often have little previous education and training in administration, management, and leadership.

My breakfast colleague, now Director of Continuing Education and Community Engagement at CityU in Canada, is a gifted leader, with knowledge and skills highly evolved through a lifetime of rich experience, learning, and self-reflection. On my end as the university administrator conversationalist, I wanted our graduates, particularly those who are now assuming leadership positions to benefit from my colleague's formidable knowledge and impassioned approach. After several years of breakfast meetings, I prevailed. A new shoot emerged from the rhizome. The program structure then began to emerge in the context of further conversations between additional

already-connected prominent practitioners and by asking the question, “What does the next generation of nonprofit leaders need to know?” The modus operandi is following the connections of a preexisting network of relationships in search of answers to this fundamental question while simultaneously evoking a willingness to contribute among prominent practitioners. Each module of this six-module certificate program reflects an outgrowth of the rhizome or social network and a visible manifestation of the invisible, that is a manifestation of relationships in which knowledge and skills are embedded, but have not previously been expressed in an educational context.

The effect of this approach is to create an educational program that emerges from a community of practice addressing the educational needs of that community, making use of the university’s particular resources and expertise in delivering educational programs. Through the good offices of the university, a community, in this case the nonprofit sector in a large city, informs, inspires, and regenerates itself. At the same time, the academic and scholarly environment of the university is enriched by the presence of the proximal zone in which theory and practice meet. One of the many advantages of the “rhizomatic method” is that it takes the guesswork out of determining the educational needs of a particular community of practice. Rather than imposed from outside, education is experienced as emergent from inside.

### **Six Modules**

The design of the certificate program Executive Leadership: Developing Sustainable Nonprofit Organizations in the 21st Century includes six half-day modules, offered from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., including lunch. The first iteration included the following thematic workshops:

1. Urban Development, Sustainability, and Government Relations
2. Leading with Integrity
3. Fund Development and Building Strong Corporate/Nonprofit Relationships
4. Strategic Planning and Financial Management
5. Corporate Relations and Social Enterprise

## 6. Professional Development and Succession Planning

The second and third iterations substituted the following for Workshop #1: Communications and Media in the Nonprofit Sector.

### **Sponsorship**

One of the ongoing challenges in delivering cost-effective Continuing Education programs, especially to the nonprofit sector, is the balance of financial viability and quality. Accordingly, one of the key strategies in implementing the CityU Executive Leadership program in Vancouver is the attraction of corporate sponsorship with the goal of offering the program at an affordable price.

Social Venture Partners Vancouver stepped up to sponsor the Executive Leadership program over the past one and a half years. Social Venture Partners is an international network of engaged philanthropists who invest time, money, and professional expertise in local nonprofits. Their mission is to build the capacity of local nonprofit organizations and strengthen their impact in creating sustainable outcomes and positive social change. Similar to the rhizomatic development of the modules and the engagement of presenters, SVP Vancouver sponsorship emerged from an initial discussion with a board member, followed by negotiations with the Executive Director and, finally, formal submissions for funding. SVP Vancouver sponsored an initial pilot and, subsequently, three iterations over the 2013/14 year.

### **Promising Practices and Lessons Learned**

Though rhizomatic development contributes to thematic consistency across the program, modules having a convener present at all sessions provide further assurance. The convener hosts and facilitates all modules with a focus on building relationships with the participants and coaching faculty. The Executive Leadership program convener is the Director of Continuing Education and Community Engagement, who also is the presenter of one of the modules. The following two stories illustrate the value of this approach:

*The second iteration of the program included an executive who had substantially more experience than most of the other participants. Her random assignment to team exercises during the first two modules that included several participants who were less experienced highlighted this imbalance and left her dissatisfied with the quality of the learning experience. She e-mailed the convener as she had been encouraged to do at the outset. His immediate follow-up and adjustment of the composition of team exercises and communication of her concerns to the presenters of subsequent modules resulted in her enthusiastic continuing engagement and positive evaluation at the end of the program.*

*One of the presenters in the first iteration used a very didactic PowerPoint-dominated approach that resulted in subpar evaluations by the participants. Again, the convener intervened, providing two extended coaching sessions that resulted in a much more interactive and learner-friendly version of the module next time out that was much more highly rated by participants.*

### **Follow-Up Support**

In addition to the six modules, the program provides one free-of-charge follow-up mentoring session delivered by module presenters and/or program convener. This has been a very attractive and well-used feature of the program. The following two accounts illustrate the significance of this feature:

*One of the program participants is the inaugural Executive Director of a professional association. One of the challenges that he faced was the development of a first Board of Directors. Having used the mentoring feature for follow-up discussion about this challenge, he subsequently retained the services of one of the presenters to provide an orientation for the board.*

*The initial Professional Development and Succession module incorporated completion and interpretation of a 360 evaluation for participants. One of the participants found the results of her 360 quite shocking and used the mentorship feature to meet with the presenter to further examine the results. This*

*conversation resulted in her deeper understanding of how she was being seen by others but eventually led to further dialogue about the viability of her position in her organization.*

### **Immediate, Objectives-Driven Feedback to Presenters**

Educational research has consistently demonstrated that the more immediate and specific the performance-related feedback, the more useful it is to the recipient (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The Executive Leadership program design required that each module have specific objectives. For example, the objectives of the Professional Development and Succession Planning module are:

1. Explore the ways in which leaders learn to lead and the key factors in the development of successful leaders.
2. Map out ways in which leadership knowledge and skills can be consciously enhanced by leaders.
3. Identify organization strategies to recruit, educate, empower, and retain leaders.
4. Examine succession practices and develop a professional development and succession plan.

The participant evaluation form for this module is then framed in terms of the extent to which participants feel that each objective is addressed (results from the most recent iteration):

*Table 1. Module-Specific Outcomes*

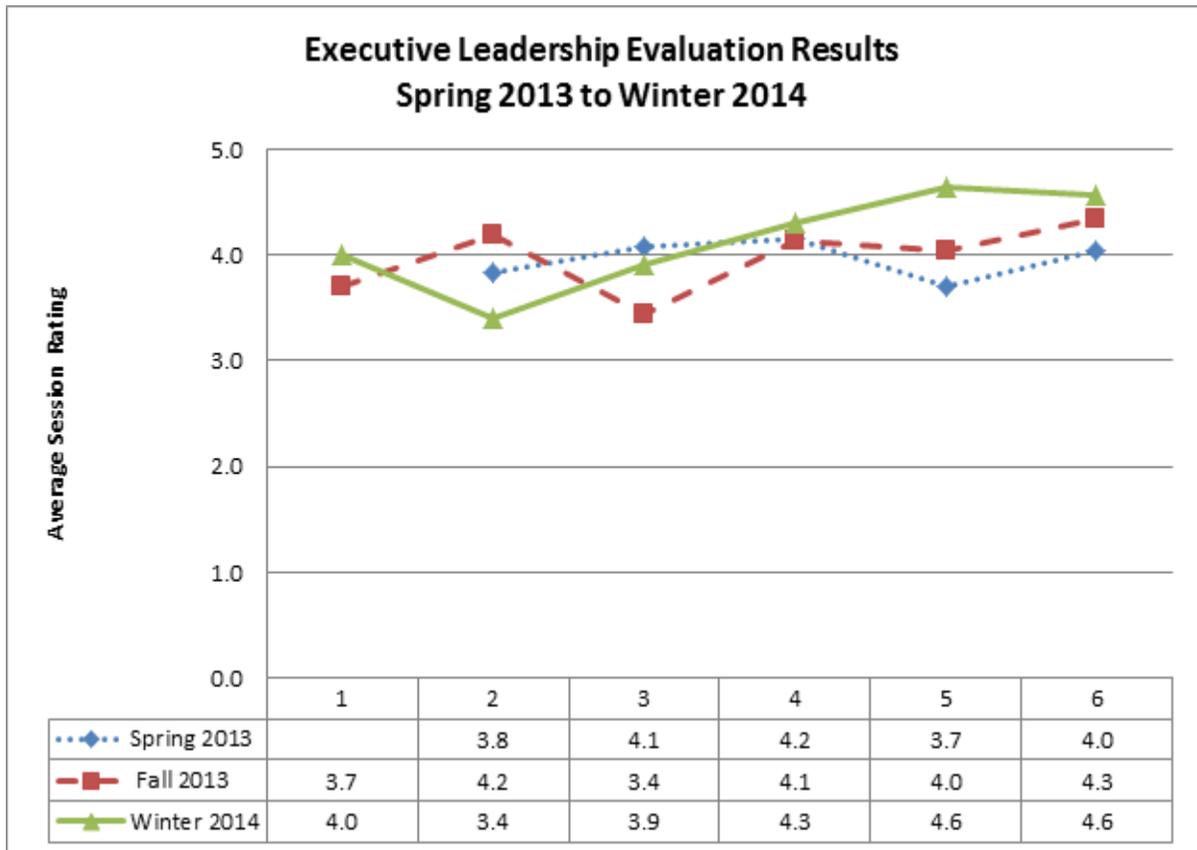
Module-Specific Outcomes:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	Average
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<p>1. To what extent did this module provide you with an opportunity to explore the ways in which leaders learn to lead and the key factors in the development of successful leaders?</p>	5	5	5	5	4.5	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	4.5
<p>2. To what extent did this module map out ways in which leadership knowledge and skills can be consciously enhanced by leaders?</p>	5	5	5	4	4.5	4	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	4.3
<p>3. To what extent did this module identify organization strategies to educate, empower, and retain leaders?</p>	4	4	5	4	4.5	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4.0
<p>4. To what extent did this module assist you in</p>	4	5	5	5	4.5	4	4	4	4	5	5	4	5	4.5



The following table summarizes the evaluation results over the first three iterations of the program:

Table 2. Executive Leadership Evaluation Results Summarized



The delivery of this program continues to be refined. A continual question is the timing of delivery considering the extremely busy schedules of the participants. Our current format features biweekly module delivery from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., with a working lunch. It is still the case that we often lose a participant at the lunch break. Currently under consideration is 8:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m. delivery, with lunch at noon sharp.

Through the comment section of the evaluations participants have the opportunity to share more narrative feedback with the presenters and also speak to the conditions

they encountered in the environment in which the module was delivered. Milk instead of powdered milk; all these details matter.

### **Theory**

With exception of the sixth module, Professional Development and Succession Planning, the Executive Leadership program does not explicitly espouse a theory of leadership. However, several themes of a theoretical nature are woven throughout the program and explicitly addressed in the sixth module:

- Leadership serves the organization in articulating its vision and mission and achieving its goals and objectives (Henley, 2011, pp. 46–51).
- Leadership is fundamentally relational; it entails building relationships and ongoing collaboration with others (Hornstrup et al., 2012; Zipursky, 2014).
- Organizations work best when they are *leaderful*, i.e., many leaders are empowered or, alternatively, all members of the organization are empowered to be leaders to the extent of their capacities and the scope of their positions (Realin, 2003).
- Leadership can be learned, and organizations can establish environments that intentionally attract and enhance leadership (Senge, 1990).
- Creating leading organizations, delegating and empowering, and intentional planning are the conditions that assure continuity of leadership or succession (Jackson, 2013).

### **The Participants Speak**

The following are the comments of all participants at the conclusion of the third iteration:

- *Excellent information! Relevant on so very many fronts. Would highly recommend to others.*
- *Very valuable. Group size was perfect. Many ideas will be implemented in our organization.*

- *I really enjoyed the great discussions!*
- *Extremely valuable—I look forward to continuing the relationships and applying the lessons.*
- *What a fantastic series—practical, thought provoking—enjoyed the interaction with presenters and peers. Such value and insight! Thank you for the information and support. Please send this week and last week's PowerPoints. Please send the peer contact sheet. Thank you so very much!*
- *Really enjoyed it. Great to take the time to examine all sectors we covered and to meet like-minded individuals and organizations doing great work! Very professional!*
- *Overall very good. I learnt a lot and this workshop series has really helped me to stimulate my thinking and become enthusiastic and engaged in improving my skills and the strength of my organization.*
- *Very insightful and great materials. Hope not to put it on a shelf but implement it . . . thanks!*
- *Really appreciated Gerry's focus on relationship building throughout.*

### **Conclusion**

Additional discussions with participants have emphasized the extent to which they experience the CityU Executive Leadership program as different and preferable to similar programs taken from other universities and private training organizations. The differences center on two key issues:

1. The relevance and immediacy of the material because of its presentation by actively engaged prominent practitioners.
2. The felt sense of being invited by the university into a reflective community of leadership practitioners.

The intention is to further engage with the participants in the aims of serving their learning needs as leadership practitioners and learning from them more about how to

serve the community of practice of nonprofit leadership as a whole. The theme is always one of developing ongoing community and never one of providing a “one-off” program.

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