

Building Nonprofit Management Education in the US: The Role of Centers in Supporting New Academic Disciplines

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Nonprofit and philanthropic studies (NPS) is a visible presence at American universities and has achieved academic credibility. This study analyzes the role of academic centers devoted to the nonprofit sector in institutionalizing NPS as a distinctive academic field. It relies on a survey and selected case studies to map nonprofit academic centers and assess their field-building efforts. We find 55 US-based nonprofit academic centers that vary in size, revenue streams, and institutional location. Centers offer a broad range of services that span academia and practice supporting the local and regional nonprofit communities. Both endogenous and exogenous factors supported the founding of these centers, whose sustainability relies on interdisciplinarity, internal and external funding, and institutional support. We propose an evolutionary explanation for NPS's institutionalization.

Keywords: Nonprofit Management, Academic Centers, Institutionalization, Academic Disciplines, Socio-Scientific Movements

Introduction

Academic centers devoted to the nonprofit sector, philanthropy, and civil society (hereafter, nonprofit academic centers) were instrumental in developing nonprofit management education (NME) and more broadly nonprofit and philanthropic studies (NPS).¹ As a field of knowledge, NPS originated at the intersection of multiple disciplines, struggling to clearly differentiate itself from disciplinary homes and traditions (disciplinary silos). Organizationally, academic centers allowed the emerging field to move beyond established disciplines and achieve a degree of autonomy within higher education. Further, the field's practical relevance, as a response to the needs of the nonprofit sector, favored organizational forms like centers facilitating outreach. Not surprisingly then, in its early years, a high number of academic centers in proportion to programs characterized NPS, as the history and membership trajectory of Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC; a membership organization of academic units devoted to the nonprofit sector and philanthropy) shows. As Hambrick and Chen (2008) note, however, new academic fields depend on their ability to differentiate themselves from adjacent fields, mobilize resources, and legitimize themselves within higher education. This study then investigates nonprofit academic centers in the context of NPS's emergence, mobilization, and legitimation.

Despite nonprofit academic centers' centrality in the history of NPS, most studies fail to clearly distinguish between academic centers and academic programs (Weber & Brunt, 2021). Here we focus exclusively on academic centers, which we differentiate from degree-granting academic programs and non-degree granting academic programs. We define nonprofit academic centers as academic units outside faculty governance involved in a combination of research, outreach, and teaching activities (Weber & Brunt, 2021). By contrast, academic programs are based in departments and can be either degree granting programs (masters programs at the graduate level, or undergraduate majors awarding a BA or BS) or non-degree granting programs (a combination of courses, typically at least three, forming a graduate or undergraduate certificate, specialization, concentration, or—at the undergraduate level—academic minor). The focus on academic centers is relevant to scholars of NPS and current directors of academic centers, as centers differ significantly from academic programs in terms of governance, structures, and activities, with specific managerial tasks and responsibilities for center directors as compared to academic program directors and department chairs.

Relying on a survey and case studies, the study has a three-fold purpose. First, it maps the size and scope of nonprofit academic centers. In the first systematic national mapping effort beyond the membership of the NACC, we find 55 nonprofit academic centers serving both the nonprofit community and traditional university students. Second, we assess the centers' contributions to NPS. Survey responses and case studies indicate how interdisciplinarity, internal and external funding, and institutional support interact against the broader background of a nationwide field-building momentum. Lastly, we show that nonprofit academic centers enhance NPS's academic credibility by maintaining active connections with the field of practice.

Drawing on the theoretical framework of socio-intellectual movements (SIMs) (Frickel & Gross, 2005; Hambrick & Chen, 2008), we argue that nonprofit academic centers support NPS institutionalization. New SIMs emerge when scholars and/or practitioners are dissatisfied with practices or expectations in a field or set of fields, structural conditions ensure access to key resources (employment, intellectual prestige, and organizational resources) and to micro-mobilization contexts (conferences, research retreats, and academic departments), and there is a developing intellectual identity (Frickel & Gross, 2005). Against the background of macro and micro trends, nonprofit academic centers aid the field's differentiation and mobilization of resources as units outside traditional academic structures. We distinguish between academic credibility and broader disciplinary legitimization whereby the incorporation of nonprofit academic centers into traditional academic structures highlights NPS's growing academic credibility while potentially signaling a loss of institutional autonomy.

Accordingly, the article is structured as follows. First, we apply the evolutionary theory of socio-intellectual movements to NPS, further distinguishing between legitimization and academic credibility. It contextualizes the emergence of NPS in macro and micro trends, pointing to nonprofit academic centers' roles in these processes. Next, the study's methodology is detailed. The lack of a comprehensive list of US nonprofit academic centers complicates sample identification. Combining survey research and case studies we broaden the analysis beyond existing centers to incorporate organizations that either changed institutional form or faltered. In describing nonprofit academic centers, the study explores factors contributing to center growth, and proposes an evolutionary explanation of NPS.

Literature Review

An Evolutionary Theory of Academic Institutionalization

We rely on the theoretical framework of socio-intellectual movements (SIMs), as developed by Frickel and Gross (2005) and Hambrick and Chen (2008) to map the development of NPS.

New scientific fields emerge when informal communities of scholars become established within higher education and formalize new academic disciplines. SIMs are “collective efforts to pursue research programs or projects for thought in the face of resistance from others in the scientific or intellectual community” (Frickel & Gross, 2005, p. 206). New academic fields evolve and gain institutional stability through the three interrelated stages of differentiation, mobilization, and legitimization (Hambrick & Chen, 2008).

- *Differentiation*. New fields often must overcome resistance from adjacent fields with overlapping areas of inquiry that compete over the same pool of resources. A new field not only needs to differentiate itself but also avoid being perceived as a threat, positioning itself instead at the intersection of multiple adjacent fields (Hambrick & Chen, 2008, pp. 35–36). This process points to the slowness of academic innovations, with new disciplines struggling to create an independent identity, separate from related fields employing similar conceptual frameworks.
- *Mobilization*. The long-term success of new disciplines also depends on the effective mobilization of resources. Political opportunity, shared interests, and social infrastructure determine the effectiveness of mobilization (Hambrick & Chen, 2008, pp. 36–37).
- *Legitimacy*. New fields’ legitimacy reflects both practical relevance and external forces (cultural, environmental, and political). New disciplines rely on either persuasion or emulation to legitimize themselves to potential members, allies, and resource providers (Hambrick & Chen, 2008, pp. 37–38). Practical relevance in meeting social needs contributes to field legitimacy (Hambrick & Chen, 2008).

Differentiation

NPS evolved in the context of broader trends in higher education in the USA. O’Neill (2005) and Young (1999) embed NPS within American higher education trends toward management education, carving out a space for specialized ‘nonprofit’ management next to the more traditional management programs focusing on private and public organizations. This development occurred ‘against the larger background of US universities increasingly offering professional education (O’Neill, 2005). Management education and business schools responded to the practical needs of large corporations and industrial conglomerates in the late nineteenth century (Engwall & Zamagni, 1998; Wren & Van Fleet, 1983). Likewise, in the mid-twentieth century, as a field of study, public administration responded to the need for more and better government interventions in the wake of industrialization, urbanization, and population growth (Ingraham & Zuck, 1996; Raadschelders, 2011). Both business education and public administration reacted to practical needs, striving to build disciplinary autonomy within the broader focus on management and administrative sciences.

Tensions over disciplinary boundaries and autonomy characterized the development of business, public administration, and NPS. Public administration’s trajectory foreshadows the identity questions facing NPS. While the growing administrative needs of the rapidly expanding federal government in 1920s and 1930s legitimized public administration as separate from both general business/management education and political sciences, lack of program identity moved PA to a subfield of political sciences in the 1940s and 1950s, a status that being located in departments of political science reenforced (Bowman & Thompson, 2013; Ingraham & Zuck, 1996; Raadschelders, 2011). In the 1950s, particularly in business schools, the founding of the *Administrative Science Quarterly* supported the notion that all administration was administration with no need to distinguish between private, public, and nonprofit administration (Bowman & Thompson, 2013; Henry, 1975). Beginning in the 1970s, public administration institutionalized with an intellectual focus on organization theory, management science, and the public interest, establishing separate schools of public affairs and separate departments of public administration (Ingraham & Zuck, 1996). Concurrently, NPS emerged against the background of these disciplinary debates in administrative science and a rapidly transforming nonprofit sector.

NPS differentiated at the intersection of public, nonprofit, and business management. Most nonprofit courses are offered in Colleges of Arts and Sciences and Schools of Public and Environment Affairs, with 17% based at business schools or schools of business and public administration (Mirabella et al., 2019). Institutional location influences curricular choices as, for instance, the balance between outside and inside function and boundary spanning courses varies across degrees (Mirabella & Wish, 2000). Next to public administration and business, liberal arts and social work are common institutional locations for nonprofit studies, reflecting the interdisciplinarity and multipolarity of the field (Mirabella et al., 2019). More foundationally, however, NPS's location influences the field's identity, as the study of NPOs is subordinated to the specific field of the hosting academic structure (Young, 2001).

In the early and mid-1980s, both academics and practitioners greeted the first NPS programs with some skepticism, questioning the distinctiveness of "nonprofit" management (Hall, 1992, p. 417), thus spurring discussion on whether NPS should be placed in business schools, public affairs/administration schools, or independent academic structures (Young, 1999). More recently, the deregulation of government in social services increased nonprofit management's relevance to public affairs curricula, supporting the integration of nonprofit studies content into public administration programs (Saidel & Smith, 2015), and challenging the autonomy of NPS while signaling its acceptance as a subject of study.

Mobilization

Responding to the nonprofit sector's structural transformations and policy challenges, NPS emerged with a strong practical relevance. Since the 1960s, with the Great Society and War on Poverty programs, federal and state governments rely on nonprofit organizations to deliver basic social welfare services, and the nonprofit sector depends on grants and contracts as major revenue sources (Grønbjerg, 2001; Salamon, 1987). Welfare spending shifts in the 1980s under the Reagan Administration changed the relationship between government and nonprofit sector, forcing the latter to seek alternative funding sources, increase efficiency, and emphasize professional management (Salamon, 1993). Pressures for both effectiveness and accountability accompanying government grants and contracts pushed for increased professionalization of nonprofit management (Smith & Lipsky, 1993) as efficiency forced nonprofits to do more with less due to funding declines under the Reagan Administration (Young & Salamon, 2002). The emergence of NPS responded to the call for better managed nonprofit organizations, as professionalization became increasingly relevant for procuring government grants and contracts (Suárez, 2011).

The nonprofit sector's transformation and the general trends toward management education within higher education strengthened the mobilization of an interdisciplinary community of scholars. While professional education for managers of youth agencies can be traced back to trainings by the YMCA in the 1910s and the founding of the American Humanics in 1948 (Ashcraft, 2001; Lee, 2010), the creation of the Independent Sector and the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars (AVAS; the predecessor of ARNOVA) in the 1970s provided a common ground for scholars broadly interested in voluntary action, philanthropy, and nonprofit sector (Hall, 1992; Smith, 2003). The field's infrastructure grew rapidly over the following three decades with the growth of professional associations, conferences, and symposia providing micro socializing opportunities, academic journals and books contributing to the knowledge infrastructure, and academic opportunities for faculty as tenure track positions, endowed chairs, and teaching (Hall, 1993; O'Neill, 2005; Smith, 2013). As a result, universities adopted an incremental approach to developing academic majors in the field (Weber & Brunt, 2020).

During the 1980s, the environment within which nonprofit organizations operated changed significantly, requiring new nonprofit management and leadership competencies. In response, academia, nonprofit sector, and philanthropy worked together to increase the nonprofit

sector's capacity (Backer, 2001). Foundations identified key actors able to influence systemic changes, including philanthropy-focused organizations, nonprofit-focused organizations and associations, and multi-sector infrastructure organizations (Foundation Center, 2018). Various foundation initiatives identified academic programs and centers as strategic nodes to create a more professional, effective, and diverse social sector (Poscio, 2003). In pursuing this overarching goal, foundations supported the professionalization of practice and (academic) knowledge production through the creation of academic centers.

Legitimization and Academic Credibility

NPS is a very diverse field, populated by in-house trainings, nonprofit management organizations, consulting, and academic programs. Academic programs are important, however, because they drive the formalization and professionalization of the field of study (Young, 1999). The Nonprofit Management Education project at Seton Hall University maps course offerings, institutional and geographical location, and curriculum content. According to the most recent data, between 1996 and 2016, universities offering graduate nonprofit courses increased by 95% and undergraduate nonprofit courses increased by 127%, with now 651 programs offering courses in NPS at 339 academic institutions (Mirabella et al., 2019). This growth signals NPS's increasing recognition within US higher education as a field of study and object of scientific research.

Nonprofit programs' increased presence signals the field's acceptance within traditional academic disciplines. The new accreditation systems testify to the search for legitimacy for the emergent field. NACC developed an accreditation system for standalone nonprofit programs, accrediting a first cohort of programs in the summer of 2019. Likewise, the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) developed accreditation standards in nonprofit for schools in its network. However, these efforts are not without criticism. While NACC's accreditation process aims to signal the value and quality of stand-alone nonprofit education programs in a context of proliferation of courses on nonprofits and philanthropy in name only (Hale & Irvin, 2017), this push for common standards risks limiting a field that made diversity and innovativeness one of its strongest assets (Mirabella & Eikenberry, 2017).

While NPS's legitimacy is strongly rooted in the field's practical relevance, recent studies evaluating NPS scholarship and dissertation describe a narrowing of the field. NPS addressed—like earlier business management and public administration—practical needs, yet its practical orientation undermined its legitimacy within higher education from the perspective of traditional and established disciplines. The evolution of nonprofit studies scholarship and the adoption of a terminology of performance and measurement reflects a search of legitimacy of the field within institutions of higher education (Marberg et al., 2019; Shier & Handy, 2014, p. 826). Paradoxically, the search for academic legitimacy (or credibility) influenced a widening of the scholar-practitioner gap, reinforcing the perception of a superiority of academia over practice (Taylor et al., 2018).

In the institutionalization process, we differentiate between legitimization as separate academic discipline and academic credibility. Academic credibility refers to the ability of a field of enquiry to meet the expectations of faculty and adjacent disciplines (Larson & Long, 2000). The case of NPS exemplifies this distinction as scholars-advocates emphasize notions of 'nonprofit first,' advocating for an independent and separate discipline with its own institutional structures (Mendel, 2017; Young, 1999). Alternative approaches recognize nonprofit organizations, philanthropy, and volunteerism as legitimate topics of scientific enquiry but view the integration of nonprofit management content into public administration programs as an ideal outcome (Salamon, 1998). The parallel accreditation processes by NACC and NASPAA reflect the distinction between legitimization and academic credibility.

A conceptual broadening paralleled the process of institutionalization, reflecting both the field's diverse origins and its increased legitimacy. In the phases of differentiation and mobilization, nonprofit management emerged at the intersection of business management and public administration, responding to the need for a better managed nonprofit sector (a clear focus of funding initiatives of US philanthropic foundations in the 1980s and 1990s). Many of the early academic programs were at the graduate level with a clear focus on, as the W. K. Kellogg Foundation framed it, "building bridges" between practice and academia. At the same time, however, a broader framing of the field, beyond management, emerged, often at the undergraduate level with a focus on forming a civically engaged citizenry rather than nonprofit managers. These programs can in most cases be traced back to the network of American Humanics (later Nonprofit Leadership Alliance, NLA) (Dolch et al., 2007). Burlingame (2009) most clearly articulates this broader approach, positioning nonprofit and philanthropic studies in the liberal arts emphasizing the multiplicity of perspectives needed to fully understand philanthropic dynamics. The parallel and at times overlapping use of nonprofit management education and nonprofit studies (or nonprofit and philanthropic studies) reflects the multiple origins of the field. The trajectory of nonprofit academic centers is emblematic, as the incorporation of centers in traditional academic structures (schools, colleges, and departments) reflects a loss of independence and an institutionalization process (Mirabella et al., 2019; Young, 1998).

Academic Centers and Institutes

The tension between isomorphic tendencies and change characterizes higher education. Higher education recognizes universities as "broadly accessible, socially useful, and organizationally flexible" institutions (Meyer et al., 2007, p. 35) that hold societal responsibilities to utilize their flexibility to provide a variety of programming (Gumport, 2000). In this context of both isomorphism and change emerges a distinct role for academic centers. In the second half of the twentieth century, academic centers broke the rigidity of disciplinary departments allowing academic institutions to partner with outside funders and focus on more germane knowledge (Geiger, 1990; Sá, 2008). For these same reasons, they became ideal units to support new scientific fields facing resistance from established academic structures (Clausen et al., 2012, pp. 1249–1250). As nonprofit studies education grew, and academia retained a research focus, centers provided a venue through which to address community needs through service-learning projects and program-community partnerships (Weber & Brunt, 2021).

We define academic centers in terms of governance, structure, and activities. In terms of governance, centers are typically located outside departmental structures, with direct reporting lines to deans or provost, and are therefore positioned outside faculty governance structures. As a result, they are more hierarchical than the typical horizontal governance structure of departments emphasizing faculty collegiality. In terms of structure, centers vary, but except for so-called 'shadow centers' (Mallon, 2004), they have physical space and some administrative support facilitating collaborative and interdisciplinary research and outreach. In terms of activities, the independence at the levels of governance frees centers from the departmental constraints often imposed by disciplinary silos, favoring a responsiveness to outside stakeholders (industry partners, funders, etc.) and both a willingness and ability to explore new research areas. Consistent with the literature, we use institute and center interchangeably to facilitate both analysis and discussion of findings.

In the wake of the 1986 San Francisco Nonprofit Management Education Conference, two reports published by Independent Sector identified 19 nonprofit academic centers in 1988 and 24 in 1991 (Crowder & Hodgkinson, 1991; Hodgkinson, 1988). As Mirabella and Renz (2001) note, the development of these centers paralleled and overlapped a growing understanding in US academia of the concept of service to their communities at a time of government deregulation and changes in higher education.

The growing number of nonprofit academic centers served as an input for informal gatherings of nonprofit academic centers directors, convened by Michael O’Neil and Dennis Young, in the context of Independent Sector’s annual conferences (Rooney & Burlingame, 2020). The Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC) emerged from these informal gatherings in 1991, thereby capturing the field-building impetus of this generation of academic entrepreneurs (Ashcraft, 2015; Mendel, 2015; Rooney & Burlingame, 2020). Data on NACC membership shows a growth from 43 in June 2006 (Young & Chapman, 2006) to 54 as of June 2019. This data, however, hides a change in composition, as a growing number of NACC members are academic programs rather than centers, with 21 out of 54 identifying as center or institute in 2019 against the 34 out of 43 in 2006 (Weber & Brunt, 2021). Indeed, much of the available research on NACC members fails to distinguish between academic programs and academic centers (as the most recent example, see Lough, 2021). These two very different organizational forms pose different managerial challenges to the leaders of these units, and research on academic centers emphasizes questions of sustainability while research including academic programs is more oriented toward academic programs and mission, curriculum, student recruitment, etc. (this difference emerges in the articles published under the Program Administration and Development section of the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*, which includes both essays focused on academic programs and academic centers).

Research on nonprofit academic centers typically explores financial sustainability and activities, without fully focusing on centers’ roles in institutionalizing NPS. Scholars and practitioners engaged in the building of NPS described the diversity of centers (Young & Chapman, 2006) and analyzed factors supporting the long-term success of the field’s infrastructure organizations, pointing to the crucial intersection of financial sustainability and academic credibility (Larson & Long, 2000; Rooney & Burlingame, 2020; Weber & Brunt, 2021). While initially disconnected from the more practice-oriented management support organizations providing technical assistance to the nonprofit sector (Smith, 1997), centers today successfully bridge the practice-academia divide, true to their nature of boundary spanning institutions (Prentice & Brudney, 2018), although still maintaining strong and diverse research foci (Sommerfeld & Austin, 2014). In this growing literature, only Weber and Brunt (2021) explicitly address the institutionalization question, concluding that institutional location and disciplinary orientation suggest a greater legitimacy and differentiation of the field. Here, we build on this work to expand the analysis beyond NACC members to map the size and scope of nonprofit academic centers and their contribution in NPS’s institutionalization.

Methods

This study contributes to the literature on NPS. First, it maps the size and scope of nonprofit academic centers. Second, it evaluates NPS’s institutionalization. The study relies on a survey of centers and case studies of centers that either faltered or changed institutional form. As discussed in the literature review, the study focuses on academic centers as organizational units that are clearly distinguished from today’s more common academic programs. As a result, we purposefully exclude some of the largest nonprofit management programs such as Indiana University’s School of Public and Environmental Affairs and Syracuse University’s Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

We developed a list of US-based nonprofit academic centers. We included organizations that self-identify as centers or institutes, are explicitly devoted to the nonprofit sector (the inclusion of ‘nonprofit,’ ‘philanthropy,’ or ‘giving’ in the organization’s name typically signals this programmatic orientation), are based in the United States, and were active in 2019 (that is, offered some sort of programing as reported on their website). The list of academic centers was built in three steps:

1. We identified nonprofit academic centers from the institutional members of NACC, ARNOVA, the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR), and NASPAA. Most centers at this stage were found among the 54 NACC members (as of 2019), with 21 respondents identifying as a center or institute. Most institutional members of NASPAA, ARNOVA, and ISTR are academic programs, and the few exceptions were either NACC members (so already in our list) or not-US based centers (so outside our scope).
2. We expanded the initial list in consultation with well-known scholars in the field. Informants identified organizations that had a narrower focus, serving particular communities or specializing in subfields. We identified 51 nonprofit academic centers through steps 1 and 2.
3. The survey included a question (question 22) asking respondents to identify comparable organizations. We added four organizations to our initial sample through this snowball approach.

The output of this process is the first comprehensive list of nonprofit centers. As there are no comparable lists (except for NACC membership files), we are unable to fully verify if we failed to include additional centers.

The survey was completed between January 27, 2020, and March 17, 2020. We surveyed 55 nonprofit academic centers of which 25 currently are NACC members (see Appendix A),² and received 31 responses, for a response rate of 56.3%. The survey collected information on the size and scope of nonprofit academic centers, as well as on factors supporting or challenging their development. The survey asked 22 questions in a combination of open-ended questions, yes/no questions, and ranking statements. We adapted the survey questions from Clausen et al. (2012) and Young and Chapman (2006).³ We ended the survey in March 2020 once the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on nonprofit organizations and academic centers became clear as we did not want to burden center directors with follow up emails while they were transitioning their programming online amid a global health crisis.

The survey captured organizational information of currently active academic centers, therefore not addressing why some centers changed institutional form or faltered. We interviewed six current and former leaders of prominent centers to supplement information gathered through the survey. The interviews focused on centers' founding, development, and programming, uncovering factors leading to the assimilation of centers into traditional academic structures or the closing of center. Four interviews were conducted via phone and ranged from one to two hours, whereas two were conducted in writing. In addition to the information gathered through interviews, the case studies rely on webpages, published material, and other documents (such as annual reports, NACC archives).

We purposefully selected the cases as the most appropriate for the case studies, as they represent diverse and influential cases (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). These three cases are extreme cases and allow us to gain deeper knowledge about factors affecting changes in organizational form, institutionalization, and integration in regular academic structures (on extreme cases, see Stinchcombe, 2005, pp. 39–41). The Center on Philanthropy (CoP)⁴ at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) and the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Case Western Reserve University were chosen for their role in pioneering the field. However, while the Center on Philanthropy (CoP) became the first School of Philanthropy in the USA in 2012, the Mandel Center shut its doors in the same year. By contrast, the Department of Public and Nonprofit Studies at Georgia Southern University, illustrates the shift of an academic center to a department.

Table 1. Overview of Case Studies by Institutional Stages

	CoP at IUPUI	Mandel Center at CWRU	Department of Public and Nonprofit Studies at Georgia Southern University
Differentiation	Recognizing the need for professionalization in nonprofit practice, entrepreneurial faculty and administrators led the CoP’s development around the clear niche identity of philanthropic studies, rooted in the liberal arts, to differentiate from the common NME.	The impetus of the center came from an outside donor, Morton Mandel, and the initiative of university administrators to take advantage of an external funding opportunity. The newly formed center and its academic programs formed around the broader concept of “nonprofit studies” to differentiate from “management,” claimed by the business school.	The evolution of the MPA program from a program within a department to institute and then to stand-alone department was guided by the lead faculty member, seeking to carve out a space of autonomy and secure resources for the public and nonprofit affairs program within the broader department of political science.
Mobilization	The CoP brought together a multidisciplinary faculty group investigating philanthropy from a variety of disciplinary angles. The Lilly Endowment, Inc. supported the CoP with \$87 million in its first 20 years of existence, and CoP leadership pursued an endowment-building strategy to isolate the CoP from leadership and administrative changes at the university level.	The center was interdisciplinary in nature being placed under the control of three and later four schools. While this interdisciplinarity allowed to leverage the support and participation of a multidisciplinary faculty, conflicts over control and funding among the participating colleges undermined the center’s sustainability. The Mandel Foundation supported the center through regular, annual grants, but the Mandel Foundation’s centrality crowded out other supporters (Cleveland Foundation, Gund Foundation, and Sohio Corporation).	The original MPA program struggled to gain program resources within a multi-disciplinary department dominated by Political Science. Challenges facing the MPA program included building a strong faculty nucleus and program governance, and accessing program resources. With limited support from university administrators and the department to allow for greater autonomy, the MPA program began efforts to move the program and create a new Institute within the college.
Legitimization	CoP leadership viewed the legitimizing of a new field within academia and overcoming faculty’s resistance to new fields as a key challenge. In 2012, the Center on Philanthropy became the first School of Philanthropy (SoP) in the United States. CoP leadership viewed the establishment of the school as a statement, testifying to the importance of the emerging field. IU’s SoP support by significant endowments provided strong symbolic power and leverage in university settings.	The Mandel Center’s initial growth and success is linked to its ability to place itself amid the field’s growth, playing a leadership role in field-building efforts. Lack of engagement on the part of the university throughout its history explains its unwillingness to continue supporting the center when foundation funding in the form of annual contributions stopped. Over the years, CWRU never made major investments in the Mandel Center, besides Mandel’s funds and standard items such as faculty time.	A university-wide restructuring following the consolidation of Georgia Southern University with Armstrong State University in January 2018 created a favorable environment for a new institutional evolution. The successful NASPAA accreditation following the review in 2016/17 also contributed to the department’s success as it provided peer-recognition of its graduate program.

Results

Case Studies Overview

Table 1 summarizes the three case studies complementing the survey. Two cases analyze nonprofit academic centers, the Center on Philanthropy (CoP) at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) and the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Case Western Reserve University, that played a crucial role in the development of the NME field. By contrast, the Department of Public and Nonprofit Studies at Georgia Southern University, serves as a study of how an academic center evolved into a department. The case studies identify similar issues captured in the survey, focusing on the role of academic entrepreneurs in center founding, range of activities, funding sources, and organizational challenges in development. The information gathered through interviews and review of published material and websites are organized around the three themes identified in the theoretical framework.

The table highlights three major trends in the case studies. First, the demand for professionalization of nonprofit organizations motivated entrepreneurial forces to establish these centers (internal in the case of CoP and Georgia Southern University; external in the case of the Mandel Center). Interdisciplinarity and niche identities were crucial in the early phases in helping the new centers to distinguish themselves either within the discipline (philanthropic studies) or from adjacent disciplines (from management for the Mandel Center and from political science for Georgia Southern University). Second, external funding proved instrumental to centers both in terms of providing legitimacy and essential resources. Endowments created prestige and leverage (CoP), while annual contributions through grants and fees (Mandel Center) did not. Third, field-building aspirations drove the successes and supported the broad legitimacy of centers (CoP and Mandel Center), which could be further supported by external bodies and processes such as accreditation (Georgia Southern University).

Basic Characteristics of Academic Centers

The survey includes questions that capture nonprofit academic centers' basic characteristics. This information describes centers' scientific profile (referring to institutional location, faculty educational background, and disciplinary orientation) and support structure (referring to financial resources), indicating the sponsorship received from host universities.

Scientific Profile. Institutional location, staff's educational background, and disciplinary orientation indicate academic centers' diverse scientific profile.

As Table 2 shows, schools of public affairs/policy, of liberal arts/humanities, and of business/management house over half of surveyed centers, with public affairs/policy emerging as the most common institutional location (30%), this rate increases to 36% after manually checking all 55 centers in our list (including those not responding to the survey). Of note, the three institutional locations identified as schools of philanthropy are subunits of the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy (LFSOP). Comparing survey results with NACC membership data in 2019 and 2007 shows a decline of centers located in business schools and a clear centrality of public affairs schools, although NACC members appear more homogeneous than non-NACC members in terms of institutional location. Data on the educational background of center staff (survey question 4) confirms this scientific profile, with respondents identifying philanthropy/nonprofit (mean=2.83), public administration (mean=1.47), and business/management (mean=1.19) as the most common background.

While institutional location and educational background show a certain homogeneity, the field's diversity emerges in the centers' stated substantive focus.

Table 2. Institutional Location

College/School	Our survey ³	NACC Center 2019	2007 NACC Summary Report ^{1,2}
Policy/PA/Government	9 (30%)	7 (44%)	25 (54%)
Liberal Arts/Humanities	6 (20%)	5 (31%)	3 (6%)
Business/Management	4 (13%)	2 (12.5%)	15 (33%)
Philanthropy	3 (10%)	/	/
Professional/Continuing Education	3 (10%)	/	/
Human Sciences/Ecology	2 (7%)	/	/
Other ⁴	3 (10%)	2 (12.5%)	
Law	/	/	2 (4%)
Multidisciplinary	/	/	7 (15%)
No affiliation	/	/	3 (6%)

Source: (Weber & Brunt, 2021)

Notes: 1. Some centers fall under various categories, so the percentages do not add up to 100%. 2. NACC membership does not distinguish between centers and programs. 3. One respondent did not complete this survey question. 4. The ‘Other’ category includes social work, urban affairs, and leadership and education studies.

Table 3. Substantive Focus

Discipline	Academic Centers
Fundraising and Philanthropy	8 (26%)
Finance and Management Development	3 (10%)
Civil Society	2 (6%)
Public Policy and Advocacy	2 (6%)
Governance Matters	1 (3%)
International	1 (3%)
Other	14 (45%)

Table 3 shows the broad range of substantive foci, with fundraising and philanthropy emerging as a common focus (26%). However, subunits of the LFSOP again drive the centrality of philanthropy. Noteworthy is that almost half of respondents selected the ‘Other’ category (45%), which includes a focused interest on gender, diversity, and inclusion in philanthropy. The remaining responses were quite evenly distributed. The table highlights the heterogeneity and the search for disciplinary niches within the broader focus of nonprofit studies. Responses to the open-ended prompt “Please describe what features distinguish your centers from others” (survey question 21) confirm these results. Respondents place centers’ operations in the broader field of nonprofit management, identifying various distinguishing features, highlighting the comprehensive focus on research, teaching, and outreach, university structures (e.g., interdisciplinarity and community college), target audience (e.g., women philanthropy, African American giving, and international NGOs), or disciplinary focus (e.g., wealth management and finance).

Interdisciplinarity proves to be a double-edged sword for our case centers. The Mandel Center experienced tensions over access to faculty, disciplinary perspectives (who owns management), and senior faculty (to avoid tenure problems). Likewise, the precursor to the Department of Public and Nonprofit Studies was limited in its ability to acquire scarce resources in a multidisciplinary department and the CoP faced tenure related issues.

Support Structure

A few factors describe the level of support centers receive from universities. Financial resources and funding indicate the center’s size, and thus, university’s overall support.

Table 4. Budget Size

Budget Size (in USD)	Academic centers
<100,000	9 (30%)
100–500,000	11 (37%)
500,000 to 1 million	6 (20%)
>1 million	4 (13%)

Note: N=30; One academic center did not share budget information.

Table 5. Funding Sources

Funding Sources	Mean	# Times Ranked	Percentage Ranking
Foundation Grants	2.25	20	65%
University’s General Operating Budget	2.25	18	58%
Fees for Service	2.12	17	55%
Student Tuition and Fees	0.74	6	19%
Government (State or federal) Grants or Contracts	0.39	6	19%
Corporations and Banks	0.37	7	23%
Membership Fees	0.34	4	13%
Other	1.73	11	35%

Table 6. Governance and Reporting Lines

Institutional Governance	Academic centers
School Dean	20 (65%)
Department Chair	3 (9.7%)
Provost	1 (3%)
Other	7 (23%)

Surveyed centers vary in size, as measured by budget. Most centers fall in two budget categories: <100,000 and 100–500,000 USD (Table 4). Funding sources are varied (Table 5). The survey asked respondents to distribute 10 points among seven different options or to an unspecified ‘Other’ category. Overall, the main revenue streams for academic centers are university’s operating budget (58%), foundation grants (65%), and fees for services (55%). Concrete examples in the ‘Other’ category (mean=1.73) include endowments and individual gifts. The cases corroborate survey findings, demonstrating that external funding is instrumental both in terms of legitimizing programs and providing necessary financial resources. Endowments in particular proved to be a source of both legitimacy and stability as shown in the case of the CoP, which interviewees from the Mandel Center pointed to as an ideal model to annual grants.

Lastly, institutional governance (Table 6) points to academic centers’ centrality within university structures (survey question 11). Two-thirds of respondents (65%) report to a school/college dean, 10% to a department chair, and 3% to a provost. Respondents listed an Associate Dean and a College Dean under ‘Other’ (23%), confirming the centrality of the school/college in the governance structure.

Activities

The survey includes questions capturing academic centers’ activities, including target markets, and educational programs. Academic centers serve different geographic target markets, ranging from local to international, and a broad range of stakeholders. We ask respondents to

Table 7. Primary Stakeholders

Stakeholders	Mean	# Times Ranked	Percentage Ranking
NPOs	2.37	24	77%
Students	1.80	21	68%
Faculty	1.11	19	61%
Community Partners	1.03	19	61%
External Funders	0.98	16	52%
Alumni	0.61	15	48%
University Administration	0.66	13	42%
Government	0.51	10	32%

Table 8. Activities

Activities	Mean	# Times Ranked	Percentage Ranking
Organizational/Program Evaluation and Effectiveness	2.39	20	65%
Research on Problems Defined by Faculty	1.95	16	52%
Research on Externally Defined/Negotiated/Funded Problems	1.56	16	52%
Consultancy	1.47	18	58%
Policy Advice	0.27	7	23%
Other	2.78	8	26%

Note: N=31 for academic centers.

Table 9. Involvement in Educational Programs

Educational Program	% Offers Today
Practitioner-Oriented Trainings	76
Research Services to External Clients	55
Courses at Master’s Level	41
Technical Services to External Clients	39
Courses at Bachelor Level	36
Own Master’s Degree	22
Courses at PhD Level	22
Own Post-Doc Program	17
Own Bachelor’s Degree	12
Own PhD Degree/Program	12
Formal Program for Visiting Students	8
Formal Program for Researchers/Professors	8

Note: N=31 for academic centers.

distribute 10 points across five options. Overall, centers focus primarily on the local and regional markets.

Respondents identify primary stakeholders by distributing 10 points among eight options. Not surprisingly, Table 7 shows that centers consider nonprofit organizations (mean=2.37) and students (mean=1.8) as primary stakeholders. While they differ in terms of internal and external stakeholders, both are considered beneficiaries of the centers’ services, rather than part of an upward accountability (as, for example, university administration and external funders). The survey also includes the open-ended prompt, “Please describe the typical student of all your educational programs” (survey question 17), better informing our understanding of the relationships between the two primary stakeholders that respondents identify. Respondents often describe the typical student as nonprofit professionals with

experience in the field, although—when differentiating between undergraduate and graduate students—they note that undergraduate courses attract students from across disciplines.

Academic centers offer a quite diverse range of activities, combining research, education, and outreach, as shown in Tables 8 and 9.

Overall, respondents rank “program evaluation and effectiveness” as the most common activity (65%) when asked to distribute 10 points across six activity categories of program evaluation and effectiveness, research defined by faculty, research on externally defined problems, consultancy, policy advice and other (Table 8). The Other category (mean=2.78) captures includes leadership development, conferences and events, funding community briefings, and training programs among others. Respondents identify educational programs using a 3-point scale of “offers today,” “used to offer in the past,” and “never offered” (Table 9). Seventeen centers offer academic programming (at the undergraduate, graduate, or PhD level). However, in most cases, these centers offer courses rather than formal, degree-awarding programs, with 10 centers offering undergraduate courses (but only 3 formal programs), 12 centers offering master-level courses (but only 6 offering a formal program) and 6 centers offering PhD courses (but only 3 with a formal program). While educational offerings primarily target external clients through practice-oriented trainings (76%), research services (55%) and technical services (39%), responses show that centers also provide traditional academic courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level (although they frequently offer full degree programs).

Establishment and Challenges

A range of factors contribute to the establishment of academic centers. We ask respondents to rank eight factors, as listed in Table 10, driving the establishment of academic centers using a 3-point scale of “not important,” “moderately important,” and “very important.”

Overall, respondents identify academic entrepreneurs as driving forces in centers’ development: 87% of academic centers rank this as “very important.” Community also plays a significant role in center development with 54% of academic centers identifying external stakeholders as significant motivators of center development. It is noteworthy that a third of respondents identify the need for new academic knowledge and external funders as important for developing academic centers. When asked to “identify individuals that may have led to development of academic/nonacademic centers” (question 6), respondents identify both internal and external individuals, including donors, community leaders, faculty, and administrators. Our cases highlight the centrality of leadership and entrepreneurial initiative, whether of academic entrepreneurs (the leadership team of the CoP and LFSOF showed stability in its continuity) or donors (Morton Mandel in the case of the Mandel Center).

Academic centers require support from various stakeholders. Table 11 highlights factors that supported (or hindered) centers’ establishment and development.

Table 11 presents respondents’ perspectives on factors influencing centers’ development using a 3-point scale of “disagree,” “neutral,” and “agree.” The results suggest that the support of university leadership (84%) and external funding (81%) is crucial. We also ask participants about current challenges, using a 5-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Ninety percent of respondents view securing long-term funding as a key challenge. Securing unrestricted funding and work (67%), gaining university leadership support (37%), and solving internal communication/collaboration problems (36%) also emerge as key priorities.

Table 10. Key Reasons for the Establishment of the Academic Center

Factor	Very Important	Mean	N
Initiative of One or Few Key Individuals	87%	2.83	30
Initiative/Demand from Community and/or Local Nonprofit Sector	54%	2.36	28
Need for New Academic Knowledge	34%	2.17	29
Initiative/Demand from External Funders	34%	1.97	29
Initiative/Demand from Students	29%	1.89	28
Creation of New Academic Teaching Program	29%	1.82	28
Need for Cross-Disciplinary Work	24%	2.00	29
Initiative/Demand from Policy Makers	11%	1.36	28

Table 11. Barriers and Support

Statement	Percentage	Mean	N
Support from the University Leadership	84%	2.77	31
Our Unit Would Not Have Developed Without Support from External Funders	81%	2.68	31
Other Research Units at the Same University Have Been Supportive	32%	2.06	31
We Have Been Met with Strong Skepticism from Many Disciplinary Academic Departments	13%	1.58	31
It Has Been Difficult For Us to Find Partners	0%	1.13	31

Discussion: An Evolutionary Explanation

The survey and interviews contribute to our understanding of nonprofit academic centers’ role in institutionalizing NPS. The findings shed light on the factors contributing to or hindering the development of nonprofit academic centers and NPS’s institutionalization. Drawing on the above results and interviews, we emphasize centers’ roles in facilitating NPS’s evolution through the stages of differentiation, mobilization, and legitimization.

Differentiation

We find two dimensions in the process of differentiations, the founding of academic centers and the search for niches. Our study identifies both endogenous and exogenous factors in the founding of nonprofit academic centers. Both the findings and our interviews point to faculty entrepreneurs’ role in establishing nonprofit academic centers, shifting the focus to endogenous dynamics that complement studies linking academic change to external dynamics (O’Neill, 2005; Weber & Witkowski, 2016). Scholarship shows that academic entrepreneurs respond to needs, mobilize resources (human and financial), and seize opportunities within and outside academia (Aldrich, 2012; Clausen et al., 2012; Larson & Barnes, 2001). However, the centrality of individuals in the founding of nonprofit academic centers reveals a fragility typical of new fields. Nonprofit academic centers are often identified with their founding directors, raising questions over center sustainability should faculty entrepreneurs leave. While our survey focuses on academic centers that are currently active, the interviews capture centers that either faltered or changed institutional form. These cases illustrate that a center’s long-term success depends on preserving continuity in experience, connections, and entrepreneurial drive.

The ability to act upon broader contextual factors reveals entrepreneurial spirit, particularly in the case of exogenous factors that create a favorable environment for entrepreneurs to act. The theoretical literature identifies practical relevance as a key factor for the emergence of new academic fields (Frickel & Gross, 2005; Hambrick & Chen, 2008). In the 1980s,

transformations within the sector and demands for a more professionalized nonprofit workforce combined as a legitimizing factor that encouraged academic entrepreneurs to establish a center. Survey data and interviews with leadership of the CoP and the Mandel Center find that community needs played both a reactive and a proactive role in establishing nonprofit academic centers. Originating in Cleveland's philanthropic community, the Mandel Center was philanthropist Morton Mandel's response to the need for a more professional nonprofit sector (D. Young, interview, March 27, 2020). Academia's response to demands from practice was to create academic centers, paralleling established theoretical models (Frickel & Gross, 2005; Hambrick & Chen, 2008).

We find an orientation toward specific niche identities, responding to a differentiation from both adjacent disciplines and within NPS itself. This process reflects the field's heterogeneity, innovation, and differentiation. Organizational identity here refers to what is distinctive about an organization and is built at the intersection between internal and external stakeholders (Gioia et al., 2013). Organizational identity defines how centers view themselves and how they are being seen. 'Optimal distinctiveness' is an identity that is both distinctive from, and similar to, that of peers (Brewer, 1991). In contrast to other centers, for instance, the CoP identified its niche in 'philanthropic studies' rather than 'nonprofit management,' emphasizing the interdisciplinary study of philanthropic practices in American society, and intertwining advocacy and applied research. Likewise, the 'Other' category shows the segmentation of philanthropic focus on gender, diversity and inclusion (Dale, 2016). This programmatic focus, while setting the CoP apart in a growing academic field, created challenges. Our analysis shows a shift from earlier efforts to differentiate NPS from adjacent disciplines such as public administration and management (see the "best place debate" in Mirabella & Wish, 2000), to later efforts to differentiate within NPS while maintaining an overall field distinctiveness. In part, institutional location influences this shift, giving greater freedom to programs housed in interdisciplinary colleges less dependent on disciplinary traditions and accreditation standards that might curb innovation. Comparing our data with NACC membership finds that centers/programs in the NACC orbit share similarities, giving credit to concerns with the isomorphic impact of guidelines and accreditation process (Mirabella & Eikenberry, 2017). The heterogeneity of substantive foci points to the effort of centers to carve out a space in an increasingly crowded field.

Academic centers' institutional location and substantive foci serve as proxies for this process of differentiation (see also Mirabella et al., 2019). As organizational forms, academic centers escape the disciplinary boundaries of traditional academic structures. While public administration remains a common institutional home, substantial foci points to greater diversification and a lesser centrality of business schools. In the case of the Mandel Center, disciplinary tensions emerged over the naming of the new nonprofit master's program, with the School of Management claiming ownership of the "management" label, resisting its use in the name of the new proposed master's degree which eventually was named Master in Nonprofit Organizations (D. Young, interview, March 27, 2020). The Mandel Center's decision to offer a Masters of Nonprofit Organizations rather than in nonprofit management points to a need to clarify NPS's disciplinary boundaries. The concept of 'optimal distinctiveness' (Brewer, 1991) captures NPS's efforts to differentiate itself while maintaining a common core focused on social practices and described by concepts such as philanthropy, nonprofit, and civil society.

Mobilization

Academic centers' greater autonomy, both in budgetary and governance terms, positions them to support resource mobilization. Survey responses point to centers' critical role in attracting external funding and building interdisciplinary faculty groups around a commonality of research interests and activities. With university support, centers assume positions within

academic structures that provide academic credibility to and spearhead the establishment of NPS within academia.

Findings show that centers rely on various funding sources, including internal funds (budgetary support from the university), external sources (grants), and fees for services that bridge external and internal dimensions. Our interviews substantiate the importance of external funding, in line with the earlier findings of Larson and Long (2000). Academic centers are particularly receptive to the interest of donors because they function outside the disciplinary agendas that drive research efforts in traditional academic departments (Geiger, 1990). Indeed, the emphasis on professional education and practical knowledge aligned the CoP with the programmatic initiatives of external funders, such as the Lilly Endowment, Inc. and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (Tempel, 2001, p. 28). The Mandel Foundation supported the Mandel Center through a small endowment (covering the salary of the executive director and two student scholarships) and regular, annual contributions ('evergreen grants') that covered most of the center's budget (D. Young, interview, March 27, 2020; J. Smith, interview, February 13, 2020). Centers must find a delicate equilibrium between internal funding from university budgets and external funding for institutionalization, raising questions of center autonomy. Young (1998) predicted that nonprofit academic centers would integrate in traditional academic structures, a development that Mirabella et al. (2019) view as a loss of disciplinary autonomy.

Interviews suggest that external funding legitimized centers, indicating both the interest of donors in an emerging discipline and strengthening the center's position within the university. Interestingly, however, interviews illustrate the differing impacts of funding types, clarifying the role of endowments included in the 'Others' category. Building an endowment was a central strategy in ensuring the CoP's long-term financial sustainability and in strengthening its position internally. In higher education's fluid context, a school with sizable endowments can weather changes driven by external forces, signaling a strong symbolic power in university settings (P. Rooney, interview, February 15, 2020).

Although the Mandel Center received generous philanthropic support over the course of its existence, these philanthropic relationships created various challenges (J. Smith, interview, February 13, 2020). The Mandel Foundation's annual grants covered most of the center's budget but lacked endowments' symbolic power which could provide greater leverage in the face of administrative challenges. Philanthropic entities such as the Cleveland Foundation and Gund Foundation limited their support to specific projects that aligned with their missions because of Mandel Foundation's dominant role in the establishment and development of the center (D. Young, interview, March 27, 2020). In addition, the prestige of philanthropic entities involved with the Mandel Center created tension with university administration that tried to control access to major external funders. Interviewees referred to endowment grants as crucial in creating prestige for centers in ways that were not possible through annual contributions.

University support in political and financial forms is a key theme emerging in survey responses and case study interviews. A closeness to higher levels of decision-making power indicates the centrality of the academic center's mission within the university (Larson & Long, 2000). Champions within university administration support the survival of the center competing with other academic units for resources. Centers typically report to the leadership of schools (deans or associate deans), providing centers with greater participation in university governance and autonomy from the more disciplinary focused departments. At Georgia Southern University for instance, the close connection with the outgoing provost favored a structural reorganization that strengthened the position of the Institute within institutional governance (T. Davis, personal correspondence, April 20, 2020).

Scholars typically consider NPS an interdisciplinary field as it synthesizes multiple disciplinary approaches to a specific social phenomena, actors, and practices into a flexible approach (e.g., Burlingame, 2009). This interdisciplinarity has organizational and institutional implications. Nonprofit academic centers' institutional location in-between discipline-centered departments and colleges encourages the formation of interdisciplinary faculty groups and, as in the case of the Mandel Center, development of an academic program without the constraints of existing academic frameworks. Organizationally, it provides a measure of autonomy, free from the limitations of disciplinary silos. This position in-between disciplinary-based governance structures, however, also challenges these centers leading to conflicts over the allocation of financial and human resources, as well as the development of academic reward systems (primarily tenure and promotion criteria).

Legitimization

The exponential growth of NPS at both the graduate and undergraduate level over the past three decades (e.g., Mirabella et al., 2019) and the incorporation of nonprofit content in public administration and management programs (Saidel & Smith, 2015; Worsham, 2012) points to the increasing acceptance within established academic disciplines of NPS as a legitimate field of scientific enquiry. These trends are reflected in survey responses focusing on institutional location, disciplinary orientation and center activities. Interviews add depth to survey findings.

The proliferation of NPS programs signals a greater legitimacy of the field (Larson & Long, 2000). At a minimum, this is considered an acceptance of nonprofit studies as a legitimate field of scientific inquiry (academic credibility) and, at most, the establishment of an independent academic discipline (legitimacy). Survey responses testify to the role of academic centers in offering educational offerings, targeting both internal audiences through traditional academic programs and external audiences through workshops and practitioner trainings. This duality in stakeholders and programs expresses the nature of academic centers, strategically positioned to connect academic communities with communities of practice (Prentice & Brudney, 2018). The rationale for academic centers lies in their ability to bridge the practice-academia divide better than discipline-bound departments. The centrality of academic centers in the history of NPS is thus not surprising as the field's legitimization lies in the need to carve out a space for specialized nonprofit management in reaction to the practical needs of nonprofit professionals. The evolution of the field, with a slow replacement of centers by academic programs, as for example seen in NACC membership trends (Weber & Brunt, 2021), testifies to the field's growing academic credibility. Legitimacy, however, derives from emulating established disciplines (Hambrick & Chen, 2008). The cases of IUPUI's CoP and the Mandel Center demonstrate the importance for academic entrepreneurs of positioning center development against the backdrop of an emerging scientific field.

Entrepreneurial efforts reflect field-building aspirations, which in turn prove mutually reinforcing and legitimizing their entrepreneurial activities. Interviewees consistently emphasize that aligning center initiatives with the broader academic field strengthens their positions within host universities. The CoP pursued clear field-building aspirations becoming a reference point and source of expertise for both academic centers and external funders. Likewise, both Dennis Young (interview, March 27, 2020) and John Palmer Smith (interview, February 13, 2020) link the Mandel Center's initial success to a broadening of the mission beyond professional education in the context of the emergence of a new academic field. NPS's emergence as a distinctive field and external funders' substantial investments provides both internal legitimacy and networking opportunities thereby countering inevitable skepticism about a new discipline that initially lacked academic credibility and supporting the development of new nonprofit academic centers (Larson & Long, 2000). The prestige from nation-wide networks supports academic entrepreneurs in seeking internal support, thus leveraging external recognition for a mobilization of internal resources.

Institutional location and disciplinary orientation are traditionally proxies in assessing NPS program identity. Indeed, institutional location informs course development, shaping curricula and highlighting the influence of adjacent disciplines (Mirabella & Wish, 2000; Young, 1999). Survey findings show that, while institutional location remains to a certain degree heterogeneous, most nonprofit academic centers are in schools of public affairs, which emerge as the dominant institutional location with the decline of business schools. This trend is consistent with developments at the level of academic programs (Mirabella et al., 2019). From an evolutionary perspective, emerging disciplines initially emphasize intersection with multiple adjacent disciplines to avoid being perceived as a threat and over time loosen these ties to establish independent, disciplinary autonomy (Hambrick & Chen, 2008). This development shows either a successful institutionalization, as advocated by some leading scholars in the field, or an incorporation of nonprofit courses in traditional academic structures, primarily in schools of public affairs.

The evolution of the CoP is the story of successful institutionalization, as integrating philanthropic studies into the regular academic structures signals the need to institutionalize the field and serve as a model for similar endeavors in other institutions of higher learning (P. Rooney, personal communication, February 15, 2020). By contrast, the case of public and nonprofit studies at Georgia Southern University exemplifies a different trajectory. Initially located in the interdisciplinary Department of Political Science and Criminal Justice within the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, the program evolved into the Institute for Public and Nonprofit Studies, an organizational form granting greater autonomy vis a vis the dominant political sciences, and eventually completed its evolution by becoming the Department of Public and Nonprofit Studies (T. Davis, personal correspondence, April 20, 2020). This process of institutionalization is centered on an integration of nonprofit studies into a traditional public affairs program in the context of the latter's search for autonomy from political sciences.

The pursuit of academic credibility, however, risks undermining the full institutionalization of NPS as a distinct academic discipline. While academic credibility relies on the integration of nonprofit content in established academic structures, NPS's disciplinary legitimacy is rooted in the broader relevance to practice, outside of institutional boundaries, that is, the need to develop a nonprofit management that is clearly distinctive from public and private management. Nonprofit academic centers contribute to this process by building bridges between academia and practice that foster external relationships, thereby signaling the field's legitimacy to stakeholders.

Conclusion

Drawing on a survey of current nonprofit academic centers and interviews, we find that nonprofit academic centers vary in size and activities, offering services to local and regional nonprofit communities. Endogenous and exogenous factors drove these centers' emergence, as academic entrepreneurs led academe's response to the need for a greater professionalization of nonprofit management, thereby carving out spaces for NPS as a distinct academic field, adjacent to public administration and business management. The interaction of interdisciplinarity, internal and external funding, and institutional support against the broader background of a nationwide momentum in field-building efforts supported the successful development of these centers.

We apply the theoretical framework of socio-scientific movements to understand nonprofit academic centers' role in NPS's evolution into a distinct academic field. Academic centers facilitate the differentiation and mobilization of NPS by leveraging resources and providing interdisciplinary faculty groups with spaces of micro-socialization outside the established fora of adjacent academic fields. In discussing centers' role in NPS's legitimization, we distinguish

between academic credibility and broader disciplinary legitimization as separate academic disciplines. Nonprofit academic centers' incorporation into traditional academic structures highlights NPS's growing academic credibility but also signals a loss of institutional autonomy.

We conclude with recommendations to strengthen academic centers' role in supporting NPS's full institutionalization as a distinctive academic field.

1. *Direct reporting lines to university decision-making authorities.* Academic centers' centrality in universities' governance structures guarantees the center's independence. Centers are typically positioned outside academic departments reporting to deans. In line with earlier studies (Larson & Long, 2000), the case studies suggest that a closeness to decision-making authority strengthens academic centers' position.
2. *Interdisciplinary academic centers as tenure homes.* As Larson and Barnes (2001) suggest, centers' academic credibility relates to the ability to meet faculty and disciplinary expectations. Faculty reward systems are crucial for the institutionalization of new field. The role of centers in this process appears to be limited by faculty tenured outside the center through processes that do not always reward interdisciplinary nonprofit research.
3. *Cultivation of new leadership.* The close identification between successful academic centers and founding directors raises the key issue of succession and guarantees of a successful leadership transition. Academic programs and professional organizations devote significant resources to cultivating new generations of scholars in NPS. As the founding generation of academic entrepreneurs retires, the importance of leadership transition is paramount for the growth of NPS.
4. *Strategic pursuit of endowment grants.* A strategic focus on multiple, differentiated funding sources can support centers' long-term sustainability. While leadership turnover is inevitable, both at the level of academic entrepreneurs and university leadership, endowments guarantee continuity across leadership change while providing significant internal prestige.

Nonprofit academic centers integrate NPS into traditional academic settings and, as this study has shown, highlight nonprofit academic centers' roles in differentiating, mobilizing, and legitimizing NPS in higher education. This study is a first step in assessing centers' contributions to NPS' institutionalization. Academic centers are sources of innovation in academic settings by facilitating emerging disciplines' disciplinary differentiation, resource mobilization, and academic legitimization. Nonprofit academic centers' long-term sustainability is crucial to full NPS's institutionalization in academia's ever-changing environment, where decreasing state allocations and career readiness debates open a receptive context for NPS to flourish.

Notes

1. The current terminology describing the diverse programs in this area is not fully satisfying. For simplicity and in alignment with the more recent publications in the specialized journals, we adopt NPS as a shorthand to capture the broad field, ranging from the more practical and applied training of current and prospective nonprofit managers to the broader study of history, ethics, tradition, and practice of philanthropy and nonprofit organizations. At times, we will opt for NME when the emphasis on managerial education and training more precisely describes stages in the evolution of these programs and centers.
2. Three of the 25 identified NACC members are subunits of the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy (LFSOP).
3. We decided to integrate the survey tools used in these two studies for two main reasons. First, Young and Chapman (2006) conduct a survey of NACC members at a time when most NACC members were academic centers. These questions are specific to nonprofit

academic centers and open opportunities for comparison between 2006 and 2021. Second, Clausen et al. (2012) used a survey to assess the role of academic centers in the institutionalization of innovation studies. In approach the study is therefore similar to ours, although in a different field of knowledge.

4. We reference to the Center for Philanthropy (CoP) at IUPUI when describing activities and aspirations characterizing the center before developing into the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy (LFSOP) in 2012.

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Carol Brunt is an Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and founder of UW-W's Institute of Nonprofit Management Studies, an interdisciplinary research institute, housed in the College of Business and Economics. Her multiple research interests focus on human resource management (HRM) policy and practice in nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations and its adoption as a strategic approach that impacts organizational performance, as well as program growth and development in nonprofit management education (NME) in the USA. Her academic research has been published in scholarly peer-reviewed journals including the *International Journal of Human Resource Management (IJHRM)* and the *European Journal for Development Research (EJDR)*.

Appendix A. Academic Institutes and Centers Devoted to the Nonprofit Sector, Philanthropy, and Civil Society

1. Axelson Center for Nonprofit Management (North Park University) (NACC)
2. Cary Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies (Auburn University) (NACC)
3. Center for Civil Society (Johns Hopkins University)
4. The Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies (University of Wisconsin – Madison)
5. Center for Community Research & Service (University of Delaware) (NACC)
6. Center for High Impact Philanthropy (University of Pennsylvania)
7. Center for Philanthropy (La Sierra University)
8. Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society (Stanford University)
9. Center for Nonprofit and NGO Studies (Northern Illinois University) (NACC)
10. Center for Nonprofit Leadership (Youngstown University)
11. Center for Nonprofit Management (University of St. Thomas) (NACC)
12. Center for Nonprofit Management, Philanthropy, and Policy (George Mason University) (NACC)
13. Center for Nonprofit Strategy and Management (Baruch College) (NACC)
14. Center for Nonprofits and Philanthropy (Texas A&M University) (NACC)
15. Center for Philanthropy & Nonprofit Leadership (Rice University)
16. Center for Public & Nonprofit Leadership (Georgetown University)
17. Center for Public and Nonprofit Management (Cleveland State University) (NACC)
18. Center for Strategic Philanthropy and Civil Society (Duke University)

19. Center for the Study of Philanthropy and Voluntarism (Duke University)
20. Center for Student Philanthropy (University of Kentucky)
21. Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society (City University of New York)
22. Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy (University of Southern California) (NACC)
23. Center on Wealth and Philanthropy (Boston College)
24. Do good Institute (University of Maryland) (NACC)
25. Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy (Grand Valley State University) (NACC)
26. Edyth Bush Institute for Philanthropy & Nonprofit Leadership (Rollins College)
27. Helen Bader Institute (HBI) for Nonprofit Management (University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee) (NACC)
28. Institute of Nonprofit Leadership and Community Development (University at Albany, State University of New York)
29. Institute for Nonprofits (North Carolina State University) (NACC)
30. Institute for Nonprofit Administration and Research (Louisiana State University at Shreveport) (NACC)
31. Institute for Nonprofit Education and Research (University of San Diego) (NACC)
32. Institute for Nonprofit Organizations (University of Georgia)
33. Institute for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership (University of Memphis) (NACC)
34. Institute on Philanthropy (University of Richmond) (NACC)
35. La Salle Nonprofit Center (La Salle University)
36. Lake Institute on Faith & Giving (IUPUI) (subunit of the LFSOF, which is a NACC member)
37. Larned A. Waterman Iowa Nonprofit Resource Center (University of Iowa)
38. Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation (Arizona State University) (NACC)
39. Mays Family Institute on Diverse Philanthropy (IUPUI) (subunit of the LFSOF, which is a NACC member)
40. Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership (University of Missouri-Kansas City) (NACC)
41. Nancy Bell Evans Center on Nonprofits & Philanthropy (University of Washington)
42. National Center on Philanthropy and the Law (New York University) (NACC)
43. Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (Texas A&M University)
44. Nonprofit Executive Leadership Institute (Bryn Mawr College)
45. Nonprofit Institute (College of Southern Maryland)
46. Nonprofit Sector Resource Institute (Seton Hall University) (NACC)
47. Public and Nonprofit Leadership Center (University of Minnesota)
48. RGK Center for Philanthropy & Community Service (University of Texas at Austin) (NACC)
49. Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy (Brandeis University)
50. The Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management (Robert Morris University)
51. The Center for Nonprofit Management (Stonehill College)
52. The Center for Nonprofit Management and Leadership (Midwestern State University)
53. The Nonprofit Institute (Portland State University)
54. Valdry Center for Community Philanthropy (Southern University)
55. Women's Philanthropy Institute (IUPUI) (subunit of the LFSOF, which is a NACC member)