Doing homework in the wee hours is not unusual for jugglers

By Mark Hryniv and Donald McNamara

There was nary a credential called a “nonprofit management degree” when Peggy Outon started out in nonprofits. She learned valuable lessons through more informal learning communities. Today, Outon has noticed some of her students completing assignments for online courses at 3 a.m.

The world of nonprofits is far different today than even just five years ago. Nowhere might that be more clear than in academia. Not only do hundreds of colleges and universities now offer varying degrees and certificates in nonprofit management and fundraising, many are purging courses online.

Outon is the executive director of the Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management at Robert Morris University (RMU), outside Pittsburgh, Pa. Two years ago, Robert Morris launched an online format for its master’s of nonprofit management to serve a broader market and provide greater flexibility for students, she said. Almost all students in the program are employed full time, often raising children and needing to do class work at odd hours.

The students at Robert Morris typically have an advanced degree and need some particular new knowledge, said Outon, because they have a new job, need affirmation, or a new regulation affects their duties. At an average small nonprofit, she said there’s usually a lack of colleagues either because no one has the same job or there are only a few people who work there, making time to manage better in short supply.

Harvard Kennedy School of Government (HKS) at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., has offered online courses in its executive education program for the past five years. “We were trying to think strategically about it. Our faculty was thinking really deliberately about how we wanted to approach online programming. We were trying to think about who were the people who we wanted to reach, who we could reach better online,” said Jane Latcham, senior director for strategic market planning and program development in executive education at HKS.

It turned out that nonprofit managers were people they should reach. “For one thing, they (nonprofits) have small training budgets. Most nonprofits think more about direct services that they’re providing than about training budgets,” she said. Charities also have more constraints around training budgets and travel expenses. “So depending on the size of an organization, if it’s small, we thought those are people we might not be reaching, and our reach to those people has increased,” Latcham said.

The idea initially was to reach people around the globe through the online offerings. “People from all over the world can reach us in ways we couldn’t before,” said Latcham, adding that they’ve also found a big interest domestically.

HKS’s executive education courses are not credit-bearing but often are immediately applicable to their professional context,” Morriss-Olson said. “Our programs in nonprofit management and strategic fundraising are structured so that students are learning new theory and skill sets one week and applying them in their work situation in the next week. And many of our students have reported that the degree they earned in the process really made a difference for their own professional development.”

Morriss-Olson is unsure whether the free, online courses like those offered through edX or Coursera will meet students’ needs. “At the same time, this will certainly change the competitive landscape in ways that we cannot yet fully anticipate,” she said.

Another factor that could come into play is the willingness of teachers to make courses available online. This was emphasized by Stuart C. Mendel, Ph.D., assistant dean, director of The Urban Center and co-director of the Center for
Nonprofit Policy & Practice of the Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University. Cleveland State offers bachelor’s degrees and master’s degrees, as well as certificates, with both online and in-classroom courses.

"First, there is definitely a relationship between the number and diversity of distance-education-delivered courses and the number of faculty willing to teach them," Mendel said. "Second, there also is a relationship between the academic discipline and the likelihood that courses in that field will be offered via remote learning," he said. "This trend for no-tuition, technology-delivered instruction is stimulated by an institution or a faculty person’s desire to brand their institution or themselves on a larger stage than traditional education might ordinarily allow."

Distance learning is not new to academia -- although it is new to nonprofit education -- largely because formal nonprofit education itself is of recent vintage. The emergence of nonprofit education on the academic scene has another element that will be felt, Mendel said.

“Nonprofit education isn’t the same as getting a traditional degree in academia, so you’re not going to have a big core of faculty with nonprofit-type degrees,” he said. “They are going to come from a lot of disciplines,” he said. That means there will be a lot of diversity about how courses are delivered. “Because nonprofit faculty don’t come from the same traditional academic background as standard faculty, we’re likely to see more risk-taking and experimentation,” Mendel added. “And I think these courses lend themselves to that.”

He said that experimentation could also depend on each institution.

Dwight Burlingame, Ph.D., director of academic programs and associate executive director at the Center on Philanthropy (CoP) at Indiana University, has witnessed a major increase in the number of online offerings in general as well as at his own school. A certificate in nonprofit management can be earned upon completion of five courses -- in person or online. The school also recently approved a certificate in philanthropic studies.

Online courses are filling up as fast -- and in some cases even faster -- than in-classroom courses, said Burlingame, indicating a demand for people to continue their education at a distance while maintaining their jobs.

The plan is to increase the number of online courses available through the new School of Philanthropic Studies, according to Burlingame. Indiana University’s School of Philanthropic Studies, expected to open as early as next summer, will combine under one umbrella academic and research on the philanthropic sector. IU was the first university to offer degrees in philanthropic studies, including a Master of Arts in 1993, a Ph.D. in 2003 and a Bachelor of Arts in 2010.

At Indiana, class size is limited to 35 online, and 40 in the physical classroom. “It’s really a significant amount of work that the individual instructor needs to do to maintain discussion groups in an online format, managing all that on an individual basis, rather than having a discussion with an entire classroom. We’ve found it’s at least better to keep a lower number,” Burlingame said.

CoP’s The Fund Raising School is experimenting with limits on class enrollments. “I don’t think we’ve reached it,” said Tim Seiler, Ph.D., director of public service and The Fund Raising School at CoP. The principles and techniques courses in the classroom run about 35 to 40 students while the largest number online was about 26, sometimes averaging in the teens, he said. The maximum for a good online experience, he suggested, is between 25 and 30.

Indiana has seen enrollment double during the seven or eight years that it’s offered the nonprofit management cert.
CERTIFICATE ONLINE, SAID BURLINGAME. HE DOESN’T EXPECT TO MATCH THAT GROWTH IN COMING YEARS DUE TO THE GROWTH AND PREVALENCE OF MORE INSTITUTIONS GETTING INTO THE MARKET OF NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION IN GENERAL AND ONLINE. “WE’LL STAY THE COURSE, BASED ON REGISTRANTS AND INCREASED AVAILABILITY,” HE SAID.

THE FUND RAISING SCHOOL STARTED OFFERING COURSES ONLINE A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO. TODAY, THERE ARE FOUR ONLINE COURSES WITH TWO MORE PLANNED THIS YEAR, ACCORDING TO SEILER. PARTICIPANTS WILL HAVE A CORE GROUP OF COURSES THAT THEY CAN TAKE ONLINE TO EARN A CERTIFICATE IN FUNDRAISING MANAGEMENT. PRIOR TO THIS YEAR, THERE WAS ONLY ONE COURSE ONLINE THAT LED TO A CERTIFICATE, HE SAID.

FEEDBACK TO ONLINE COURSES IS PREDICTABLY MIXED, BOTH FROM FACULTY AND STUDENTS, SAID SEILER. “LEARNING STYLES ARE SUCH THAT ONLINE CAN BE A LITTLE MORE CHALLENGING THAN IN-PERSON. ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES THAT CAN OCCUR WITH NON-CREDIT CLASSES ANNUALLY. ‘WE HAVE FOUND PEOPLE STILL PREFER IN-PERSON SESSIONS TO WEBINARS OR OTHER DISTANCE LEARNING TECHNIQUES. THERE IS POWER IN WORKING IN COHORTS AND PEER LEARNING IS KEPT TO OUR CLASSES,’” SAID OUTON. BURLINGAME EXPECTS TO SEE MORE OF THAT, WITH DEMAND EVEN AT THE DOCTORAL LEVEL, “CERTAINLY INCREASED REQUESTS TO...

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“I DON’T SEE A STRONG INDICATION THAT THAT’S GOING TO CHANGE SOON,” SEILER SAID.

THE CLASSROOM HAS JUST BEEN A PREFERRED LEARNING STYLE, SAID SEILER, AND THE “EASE OF TECHNOLOGY SOMETIMES DOES NOT COMPENSATE FOR THE IN-PERSON EXPERIENCE AND NETWORKING YOU GET WHEN YOU’RE WITH A GROUP OF PEOPLE.” TECHNICAL PROBLEMS THAT CAN SOMETIMES ARISE WITH ONLINE COURSES CAN TEST A STUDENT’S PATIENCE.

SEILER ESTIMATED ABOUT 1,800 STUDENTS ARE ON TRACK TO EARN THEIR CERTIFICATE, AND TO DATE, MORE THAN 2,000 HAVE BEEN AWARDED SINCE THE PROGRAM’S INCEPTION SOME 15 YEARS AGO.

IN GENERAL, PARTICIPANTS AT THE FUND RAISING SCHOOL ARE GETTING STARTED IN FUNDRAISING AND WANT TO LEARN THE FUNDAMENTALS, FRAMEWORK, PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES. If they’re already in fundraising, Seiler said, they often come to get affirmation of what they’re doing or learn new things that they can start doing. “EXPERIENCED PEOPLE TAKE OUR COURSES TO GET A FRAMEWORK AROUND WHAT THEY’RE DOING – THEORY TO BACK UP PRACTICE,” SEILER SAID.

HYBRIDS/BEST MODELS/THE FUTURE

Even online courses are pretty different than just a few years ago due to changes in technology. “WE CAN FILM OUR OWN CONVERSATIONS AND HAVE IT LOADED TO THE NETWORK WITHIN A HALF-HOUR. THAT KIND OF CAPABILITY JUST DIDN’T EXIST” A FEW YEARS AGO, BURLINGAME SAID.

TODAY’S ONLINE EXPERIENCE IS MUCH MORE EFFICIENT AND MORE PLEASING ENVIRONMENT FOR THE STUDENT, HE SAID. “IT STILL DOESN’T TOTALLY REPLACE THE IN-CLASSROOM DISCUSSION. SOME STUDENTS PERFORM BETTER IN CLASSE THAN ONLINE,” BURLINGAME SAID, WHILE OTHERS MIGHT WORK BETTER IN ONLINE COURSES.

ACADEMICS DON’T FORESEE ONLINE COURSES REPLACING THE CLASSROOM ENTIRELY, BUT COMPLEMENTING ONE ANOTHER. BURLINGAME TALKED OF A HYBRID THAT MIGHT BUILD COHESION WITHIN A GROUP OF STUDENTS WHO MIGHT MEET ON OCCASION IN PERSON, BUT SPEND THE REST OF THE INSTRUCTION TIME ON THE INTERNET. OR FORM SUB-GROUPS IN A REGION AND HAVE ACTIVE...

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It’s imperative for institutions of higher education to provide online programs if they want to meet market demand, Burlingame said, and particularly in continuing education or graduate level. The average student at Indiana already has been in the field five to 10 years, he said.

“We’ve come into this very deliberately, very carefully,” said Latcham. “When we built the online suite, we put one online, learned from that” and launched the next course. The programs focus on financial stewardship, mobilizing boards, organizing communities to make change, strategic frameworks, and impacting through alliances.

“We were really interested in more nonprofit leaders coming to our programs. That’s where we started in online programing in executive education,” said Latcham. The first program was launched in 2008, with subsequent courses started in the following years. Kennedy School’s suite of leadership programs for nonprofits is aimed at people who are or aspire to be in leadership positions in the nonprofit sector. “It’s really about career advancement, that’s our focus, it’s about leadership roles,” she said.

And it’s a wide range of folks. “We’ve had senior vice presidents from big nonprofits or foundations. On the other hand, we’ve had someone who might fit the profile of an emerging leader, someone looking to move into a leadership position in a small organization. It’s all over the map. That’s one of the things that online programs enable,” said Latcham.

All five programs have been online for the past two years and average about 50 to 60 students each. “We’re not looking to convene enormous groups of people. We’re high touch,” said Latcham, estimating 250 to 300 students in the online program annually.

At HKS, class sizes are roughly the same whether online or on campus. Courses run eight to 14 weeks, built in two-week modules. Live sessions with faculty are every few weeks, in addition to regular office hours. “The big thing for us is workbook exercises that each course has, where participants get faculty feedback; it’s one of the reasons why we limit class sizes,” said Latcham. Enrollment has been growing slowly and consistently at HKS — “that’s intentional for us” — and they’re beginning to see faster growth.

There’s an increasing interest in small cohorts of people from the same organization, a particular network of organizations, or a particular community, who want to build the same skills or work on similar problems together. As an example, Latcham pointed to one group from a large national NGO that decided that a priority within its organizations around the world was to better leverage the power of their boards.

Organizing and leading an action brings together grassroots community leaders who want to work on a specific cause or problem together, according to Latcham, which tends to attract small cohorts of four to six people. Sometimes grantmakers who see a need for further development of a specific skill will bring a small group of grantees to an online program. “It works out terrific because they can be all over geographically,” she said.

Online courses provide the advantages of working with people over an extended period of time, at a lower cost to participants. They also can manipulate it into their schedules, participating live with others or working asynchronously.

“The main thing is they can work with us over the eight to 14 weeks and have the opportunity to apply the learning,” said HKS’s Latcham.

Online also offers a chance to work with a small group of colleagues on one project, as opposed to working alone. Latcham often sees nonprofits with multiple participants working in a course, in addition to individuals who are on their own.

“It’s not just convening large numbers of people online, it’s what’s the learning we can achieve online,” Latcham said. “Certainly, reaching more people is a good thing,” she said. “We don’t think online learning is a replacement for an on-campus program. We’re lucky here, people want to come to Boston, and still have interest in coming to our campus. We think of it as quite complementary; we try to think of our online growth in ways that will complement on-campus programming. We’re not thinking of online as a replacement for on-campus.”