Book Review


Ruth Hoogland DeHoog
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

This book is designed primarily for undergraduate courses in the nonprofit sector, but it also may be useful to readers seeking an overview of the sector in the U.S. without the usual material on management found in other books on this topic. As the title indicates, the focus is on the U.S., with attention given to the sector’s political, economic, and social environment and impacts. The book includes relevant research and theories, short case study examples, charts and graphs of various aspects of the sector, and helpful teaching materials. If I had seen this book a year earlier, I would have assigned it for my new undergraduate course on the nonprofit sector and governance.

While it does not address service learning in much detail, this book provides the necessary nonprofit sector context for faculty and students who engage in service learning and wish to be more effective in civic engagement. Though eager to make a difference, undergraduates and faculty are often not aware of the broader political, economic, and social environment that community agencies operate within. LeRoux and Feeney are well-known scholars in the field of nonprofits and public administration. However, they are not only reputable scholars and teachers; they also have experienced service learning and applied research projects in various communities that provide the basis for some of the book’s cases. Consequently, they are able to construct an excellent book that is accessible, interesting, and well-designed for this unique market niche.

This book provides rich material to understand the sector from several theoretical approaches, as well as prepare students for lives of public service and civic engagement.

The book is divided into four sections: Introduction to the Nonprofit Sector and Civil Society; The Nonprofit Sector in Civil Society; Political, Social, & Economic Aspects of the Nonprofit Sector; and Nonprofit Sector Challenges & Opportunities. The preface clearly lays out the authors’ motivations for writing the book, provides some detail on how the book might be used in undergraduate and graduate courses, and then lays out the content of each section and chapter. Instructors who are scanning books for adoption will find this preface very useful. Each chapter begins with learning objectives and a current story that illustrates key points and “hooks” students into the content. Short cases and controversies are presented in highlighted boxes throughout most of the chapters. Each chapter closes with discussion questions and several additional sources to use in class or to recommend for further study, such as websites, video clips, and readings. These valuable resources can be used...
in the classroom, in small group exercises, or for class assignments.

The introductory section lays the groundwork for understanding the nonprofit sector and civil society. Chapter 1 begins by defining the confusing terms used in describing the sector (p. 10) and then introduces the cross-cutting themes of the book, including the impact of technology, collaboration and partnerships, and the blurred boundaries among the sectors. Chapter 2 provides the historical and legal background of the unique American nonprofit sector, with a clear explanation of the overlapping purposes among the nonprofit, public and for-profit sectors. In Chapter 3 the authors outline theories of the nonprofit sector, with particular emphasis on the various explanations for the existence of the sector. This is a particularly rich, yet accessible, section that lays out the economic, political, and social connections that are further developed in subsequent chapters. It is here that the importance of partnerships between the sectors is explained and illustrated.

Section II continues with the exploration of several additional key concepts—social capital, civil society, volunteerism, and philanthropy. The authors detail not only the concepts but also the importance of each to American society with relevant research and trends on these subjects. For example, they define the various motivations for giving, include appropriate examples, and then discuss the impact of technology on giving.

Section III ties together the relationships between the nonprofit sector and various political, social, and economic impacts. Chapter 7 focuses on the roles of nonprofits in policy and elections, with specific attention to advocacy, lobbying, and grassroots campaigns. Chapter 8 addresses the role of nonprofits in social movements with examples from civil rights in the 1960s to contemporary examples in the U.S. and other countries. Chapter 9 details the impact of the sector on the American economy generally, and then more specifically, on local economic development. Finally, Section IV lays out the trends, challenges, and opportunities of the nonprofit sector today. The chapter provides reasons for both optimism and concern about how the nonprofit sector will manage in its rapidly changing environment.

This volume will prove to be a very effective introduction to the sector for undergraduate and even graduate students who are either interested in or currently involved in nonprofit agencies. The sections on advocacy, civic engagement, and volunteerism will provide students extensive suggestions for being more effective and knowledgeable about their passions. While useful for any undergraduates, this book may appeal particularly to those majoring in political science, sociology, social work, economics, or history. The authors introduce and then tie together the themes, research and concepts in a logical process that will enrich students’ understanding of their own disciplines. Graduate students in public administration, public policy, and nonprofit management programs will also find this book informative as an introduction to the nonprofit sector as well as a critical assessment of some of the current issues in the field and practice. For both sets of students, the book provides plenty of material for discussion and reflection.

Faculty who teach versions of the nonprofit sector course will benefit greatly from this new book as an assigned text for their courses. As the authors clearly state, this book is intended to provide an introduction to the sector and not to management
practices. In doing so, they have produced a more interesting read. Additionally, the preface, learning objectives, and discussion questions in each chapter offer faculty many options to use or go beyond the materials. I found the book’s layout to be very clear, consistent, and easy to navigate. The only other book close to this is a policy-oriented book by Shannon Vaughan and Shelly Arsneault, Managing Nonprofit Organizations in a Policy World, CQ Press, 2014. It provides an excellent coverage of both the policy roles of nonprofits as well as the management knowledge that students must have to be successful in nonprofit organizations.

In reviewing the content with my own course and students in mind, I found this book to be a useful and engaging textbook. It does more than lay out terms, research, and findings. It offers critical insights, useful comparisons, and balanced approaches to its topics. The readable and interesting case and issue boxes offer students much to engage and debate. My only concern was that two areas that my undergraduates seem most interested in were not well developed, though mentioned—social entrepreneurship and social enterprises, and international NGOs. The authors clearly point out that the book is about the U.S. nonprofit sector, but I would have liked to read more about comparisons to other countries’ nonprofit sectors and political systems, as well as how international nonprofit organizations have developed partnerships to address global problems and crises. Today many large American nonprofit organizations have international equivalents or global connections. These are attracting philanthropists and volunteers in large numbers, often using new technologies and strategies. If an instructor wishes to highlight these trends, it might be useful to assign another book or set of cases for students.

In sum, I highly recommend this book for an audience of students, practitioners, and even scholars who are beginning to learn about the impact and issues of the nonprofit sector in the United States. I plan to assign the book for my undergraduate class and recommend it to other faculty.