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2013 Applied Projects Evaluation Organizational Impact Report

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Applied Projects Evaluation: Organizational Impact Report

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I. Executive Summary

University of San Diego's Nonprofit Leadership and Management (NLM) master's degree program places a special focus on experiential learning, requiring students to complete multiple applied projects as part of the program's curriculum. Applied projects give students various opportunities to work in teams to provide real-world consulting services to nonprofit and philanthropic organizations. In developing this curriculum, the NLM program serves both the students who are given these real-world consulting opportunities, as well as the client organizations who benefit from the services provided by the students.

In Fall 2010, the University of San Diego's NLM program initiated an Applied Projects Evaluation to better understand and continuously track the effectiveness of these applied student projects, as perceived by the nonprofit and philanthropic client organizations. Thus, the Applied Projects Evaluation serves as a client-feedback mechanism for monitoring how well the client organizations feel the applied projects program is functioning overall. This ongoing evaluation study is designed and managed by The Caster Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research at the University of San Diego.

This Organizational Impact Report summarizes the results of the past five semesters (Spring 2011 to Spring 2013), in which 131 applied projects were completed. Online surveys were sent to the client representative from each of the 131 participating organizations approximately four to six months following the completion of the applied project. A cumulative total of 82 organizations responded, representing a cumulative response rate of 63%.

The findings from the 82 respondents (mostly Executive Directors) revealed that participating organizations represented a cross-section of nonprofit and philanthropic subsectors, with most representing the Human Services subsector, followed by Arts/Culture/Humanities, Education, Environment or Animals, and Public/Societal Benefit. The size of the organizations varied from one to 850 employees (average=114 employees and median=21 employees), and the median annual revenue was approximately $1.5 million.

The types of projects completed encompassed various organizational fields, such as governance structures, administration and programs, financial advancement and fundraising, and human resources. Approximately one-half of the projects focused on manuals or policies, and another one-third focused on some type of plan (e.g., fundraising, marketing, board development, etc.). Other types of projects included assessments or feasibility studies.

The usability and utility of the projects were noteworthy, given that three-quarters of the projects had been fully or partially implemented, and six out of ten respondents who hadn't fully implemented the project yet said they did intend to implement the project in the future. More

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than eight out of ten respondents reported that the project improved their organization's capacity in the areas of management, leadership, governance, communications, and community outreach. Furthermore, nine out of ten respondents reported that the project improved their organizations' programs and services, and three-quarters indicated that the project created community value.

Furthermore, client organizations were very satisfied with the projects. Eight out of ten respondents reported being satisfied with the project overall, as well as with various aspects of the project, such as professionalism of the student, professionalism of the project, applicability, and interactions and communications with the student. More than nine out of ten respondents contended that the students understood the organization's mission, and listened to and understood the organization's needs.

In sum, this Applied Projects Evaluation demonstrates that the NLM program continues to provide a valuable service to the community, typically at no cost to client organizations. Thus, not only does the NLM program develop students' skills and knowledge, it also continues to advance the nonprofit and philanthropic sector in constructive and meaningful ways.

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II.   Background

The University of San Diego's (USD) Nonprofit Leadership and Management (NLM) master's degree program was launched in 2002 and was designed to help students integrate leadership and management theories and strategy with practice. The NLM program focuses on developing effective nonprofit and philanthropic leaders, as well as enhancing the communities in which they serve. A unique focus of the NLM Program is that students are required to complete applied projects as part of the program's curriculum. This applied projects component gives students the opportunity to work in teams and provide real-world consulting services to nonprofit and philanthropic organizations. More specifically, these applied projects provide experiential learning for students by giving them the opportunity to apply theories and concepts from their courses to real life situations, practice career-related skills, and think critically about how to solve organizational problems they might encounter in their profession.

Students are required to complete applied projects for nonprofit and philanthropic organizations in several courses, and they present the completed projects to the organizations at the end of the course. Examples of projects include board manuals, fundraising plans, program or financial assessments, performance audits, and feasibility studies. Each student completes at least eight applied projects during the degree period. Approximately 30% of these projects are included in students' final portfolios, along with a letter from the client organization verifying that it was used by the organization. As of Spring 2013, there were almost 800 applied projects that have been completed by students in the NLM program.

Traditionally, impact studies of universities that offer a graduate concentration in nonprofit management focus on student satisfaction and measures of specific student learning outcomes (Wilson & Larson, 2002; Fletcher, 2005; Herman & Renz, 2007). However, little research has focused on studying the impact of nonprofit-focused graduate degree programs on the nonprofit and philanthropic organizations themselves, or the overall impact on their communities.

Given the importance of this missing piece of outcomes evidence, USD's NLM program initiated the Applied Projects Evaluation in Fall 2010. The overall objective was to better understand and continuously track the effectiveness of these applied student projects, as perceived by the nonprofit and philanthropic organizations. A complete literature review and project methodology is provided online in the 2011 Applied Projects Organizational Impact Report.[1]

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[1] Carpenter, H., & Hoffman, H. (2011*). Applied Projects Organizational Impact Report.* The Caster Family Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research at the University of San Diego. Retrieved from http://www.sandiego.edu/npresearch

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III.   Methodology

Online surveys were sent to the client representative from each of the participating organizations approximately four to six months following the completion of the applied project. As can be seen in Table 1, there were 131 applied projects completed since Spring 2011. Of the 131 surveys that were distributed, a total of 82 organizations responded, representing a cumulative response rate of 63 percent. The findings from these 82 completed surveys are summarized in this report.

Table 1 | Survey Distribution and Response Rates

Semester	Surveys Distributed	Number of Respondents	Response Rate
Spring 2011	32	20	63%
Fall 2011	17	7	41%
Spring 2012	29	21	72%
Fall 2012	35	22	63%
Spring 2013	18	12	67%
TOTAL	**131**	**82**	**63%**

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IV.   Research Findings

A.   Profile of Participating Organizations

1.   Nonprofit Subsector

Figure 1 shows the nonprofit subsectors that were represented by respondent organizations in San Diego, nationwide and international.[2] Approximately three out of ten (29%) were Human Services organizations and roughly one out of ten were from the Arts (13%), Education (13%), Public/Societal Benefit (12%) or Environment/Animals (13%) organizations.

Figure 1 | Participating Organizations by Subsector
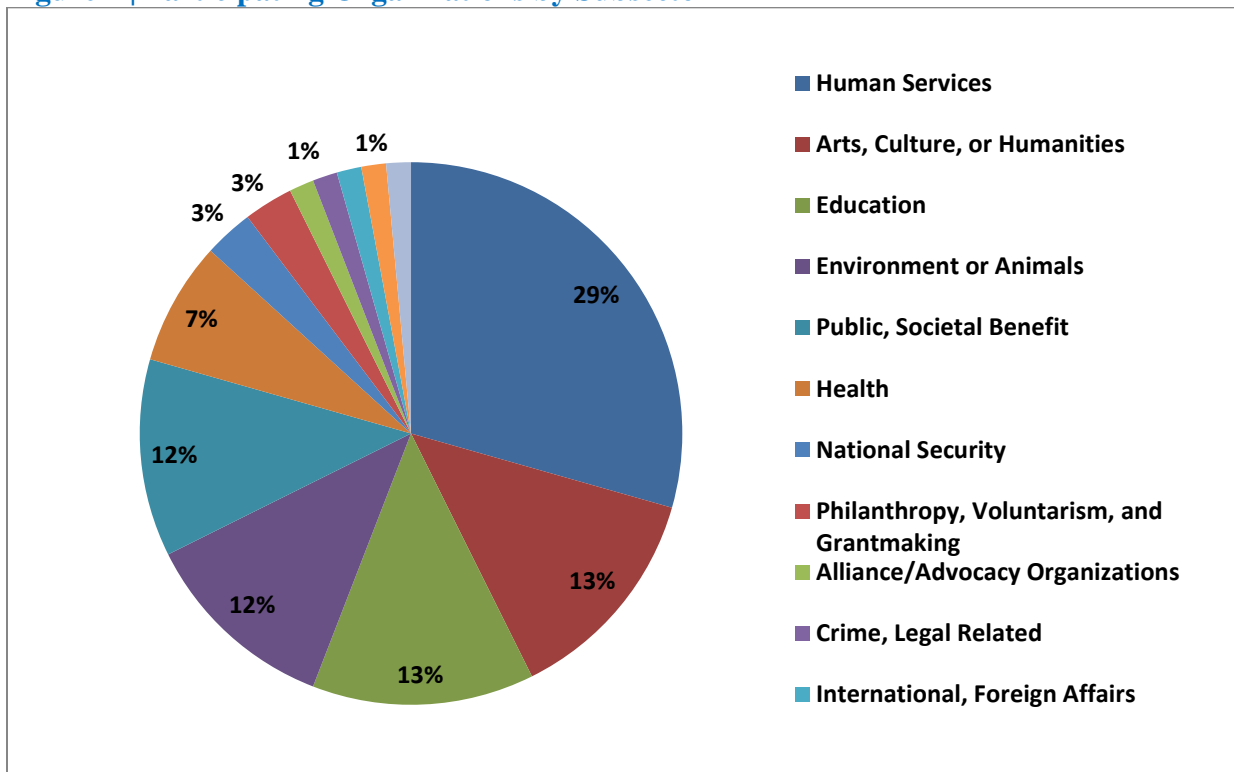
2.   Age, Size and Annual Revenues

Organizations founding dates varied from 1919 to 2009. Of the 39 organizations that responded, roughly one-quarter (23%) of the organizations were founded after 1999.

The number of staff in the organization ranged from one to 850. The average number of staff was 114 and the median was 21 staff members. Collectively, participating organizations

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[2] Organizations were primarily in San Diego, but there were a few national and international organizations.

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employed 3,654 individuals. When reflecting on these numbers, note that three-quarters (74%) of San Diego nonprofit organizations have fewer than 20 staff members.[3]

Of the 40 organizations that provided information on their annual revenues, the median annual revenue was $1,431,492. After removing the lowest and highest outliers ($0 and $193,000,000, respectively), the average annual revenue for the remaining 38 organizations was $8,853,041, which is notably higher than the reported average annual revenue for San Diego nonprofits ($3,556,339).[4] The cumulative annual revenue for the 40 responding organizations was more than half a billion dollars ($529,415,567). As a comparison, San Diego's nonprofit sector overall boasts approximately $12.5 billion in annual revenue.[5]

B.   Position and Role of Respondent

Figure 2 shows that seven out of ten (69%) respondents were Executive Directors, while others were senior staff (12%), program staff (6%), support staff (2%) or other (11%).

Figure 2 | Respondent Position in Organization
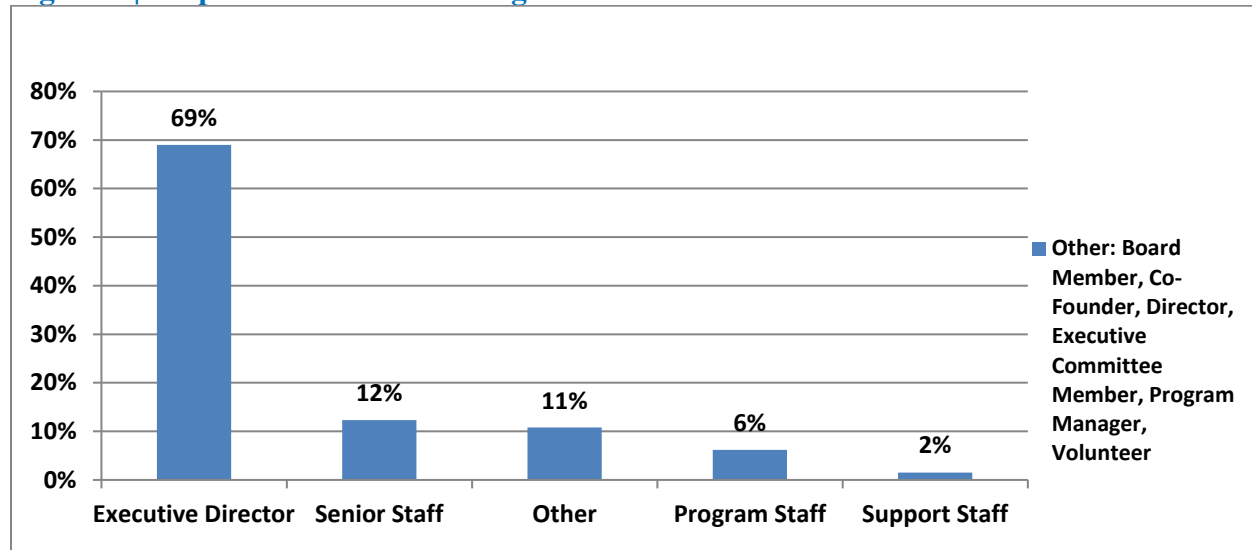
Two-thirds (66%) of the respondents reported being the primary liaison to the student team conducting the project and 13% worked with the team during the project year, but were not the primary liaison to the student team.

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[3] Deitrick, L., et al. (2013). *Annual report: State of nonprofits 2013.* The Caster Family Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research at the University of San Diego. Retrieved from http://www.sandiego.edu/npresearch
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

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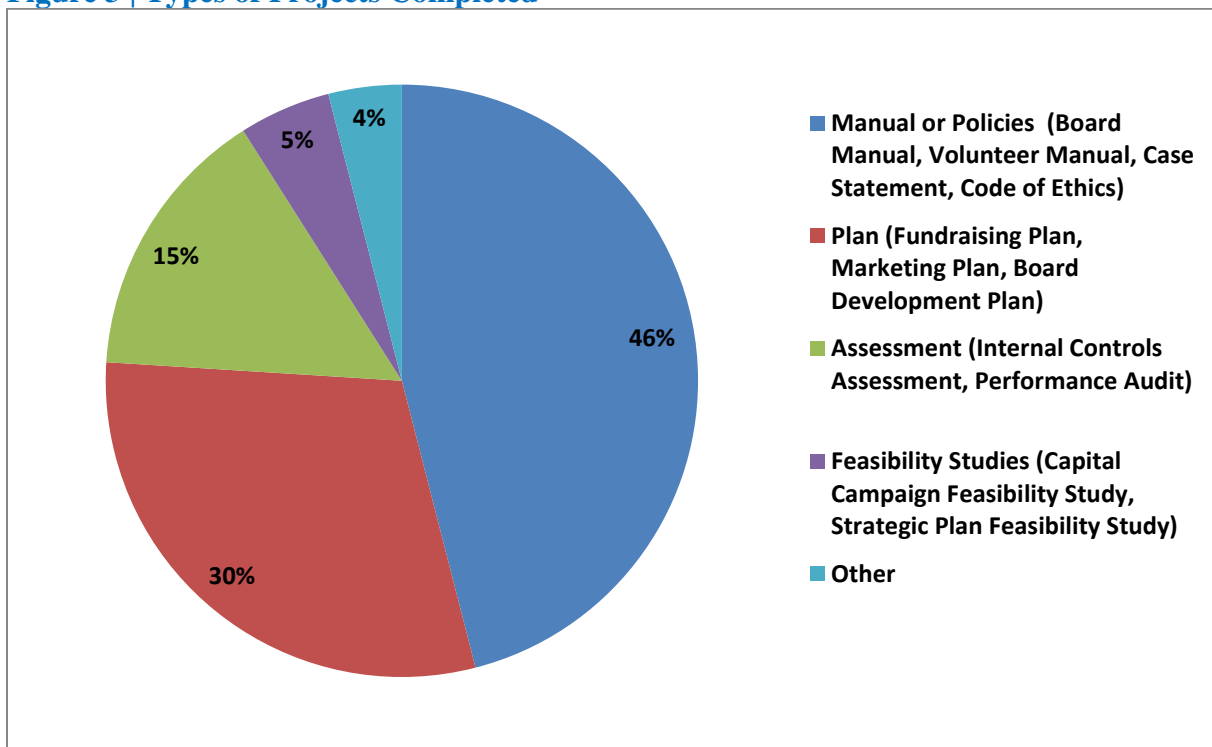*www.sandiego.edu/npresearch*

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C.   Payment for the Project

Almost all organizations (95%) received the student consulting services free of charge, and only three organizations said they incurred some costs to complete the project. This demonstrates that the NLM program continues to make professional services available to nonprofit and philanthropic organizations at no cost. The specific value and benefits of these services are discussed later in this report.

D.   Types of Projects Completed

As Figure 3 shows, almost one-half (46%) of the completed projects were manuals or policies, including board manuals, volunteer manuals, codes of ethics, and case statements. Another 30% of the projects assisted the organization's planning processes by creating various documents, such as fundraising plans, marketing plans, and board development plans. Fifteen percent (15%) of projects constituted assessment tools, such as an internal controls assessment or a performance audit. Finally, feasibility studies for capital campaigns and strategic plans constituted 5% of all projects.

Figure 3 | Types of Projects Completed

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E.   Internal Stakeholders

When asked what the applied project was designed to accomplish, roughly one-half (52%) of respondents indicated it was designed to improve the governance structure of their organization, as shown in Figure 4. Approximately four out of ten respondents reported that their project focused on administration (44%) and programs (43%), while fewer indicated financial advancement (29%), fundraising (27%), or human resources (23%).[6]

Figure 4 | Internal Stakeholders
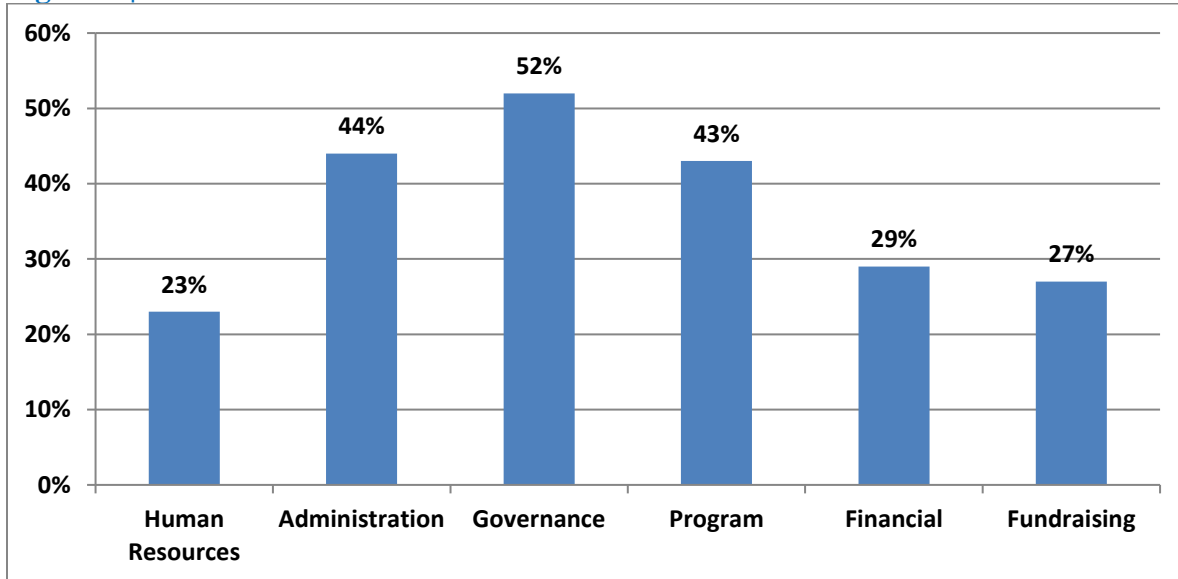
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[6] Note that respondents could check all options that applied to their particular project; thus, these percentages exceed 100%.

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F. External Stakeholders

Figure 5 shows that one-third (33%) of respondents indicated that the project made an impact on community members. Two out of ten reported the project made an impact on their organization's clients (21%) or donors (20%). Approximately one-third (35%) of respondents indicated that the project did not apply to any stakeholders outside of their organization.[7]

Figure 5 | External Stakeholders

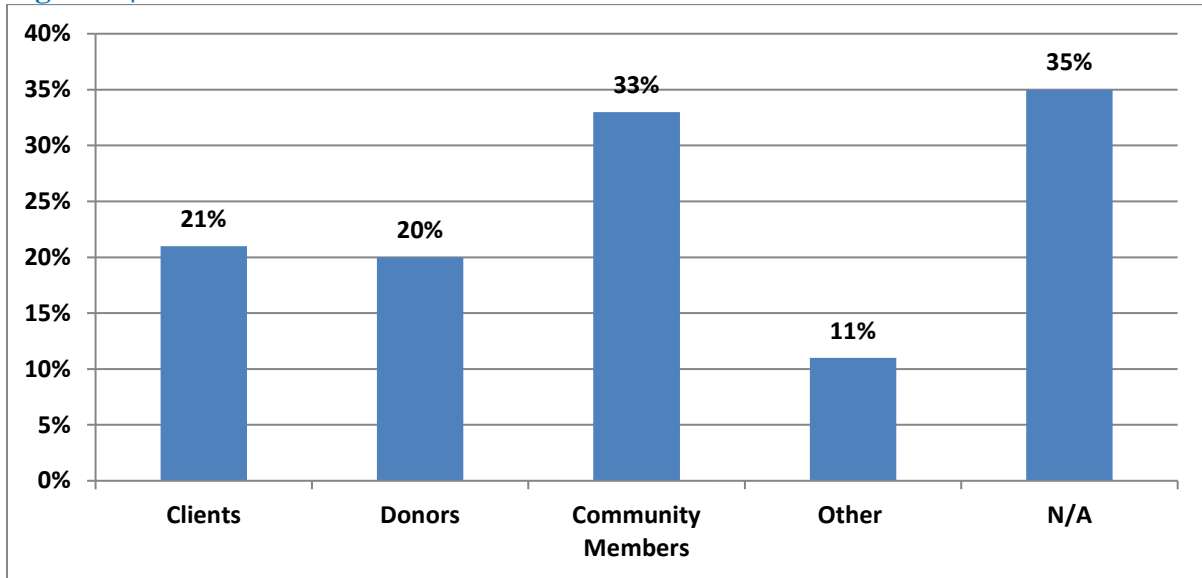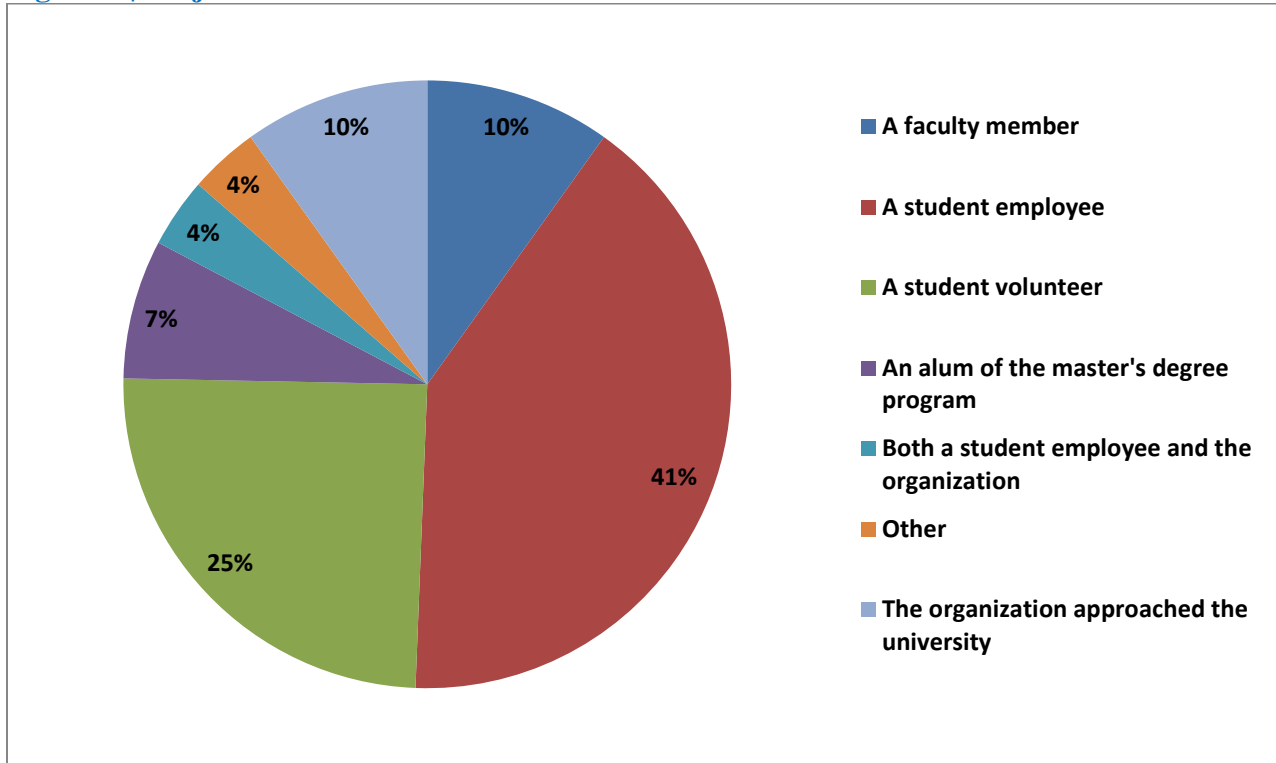[7] Note that respondents could check all options that applied to their particular project; thus, these percentages exceed 100%.

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G.   Project Initiation

As can be seen in Figure 6, most (41%) of the projects were initiated by a student employee of the organization, or by the organization's student volunteer (25%).

Figure 6 | Project Initiator

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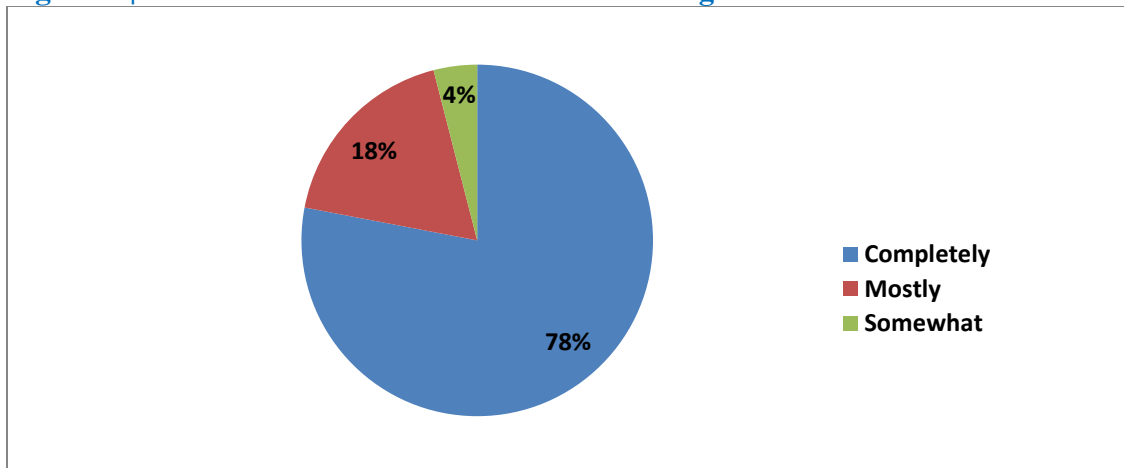## H.   Understanding Organization's Mission and Needs

As shown in Figure 7, the majority (83%) of respondents indicated that the students "completely" understood their organization's mission. Another 12% reported that the students "mostly" understood their mission, and 5% percent believed that the students "somewhat" understood it.

Figure 7 | Students Understanding of Mission
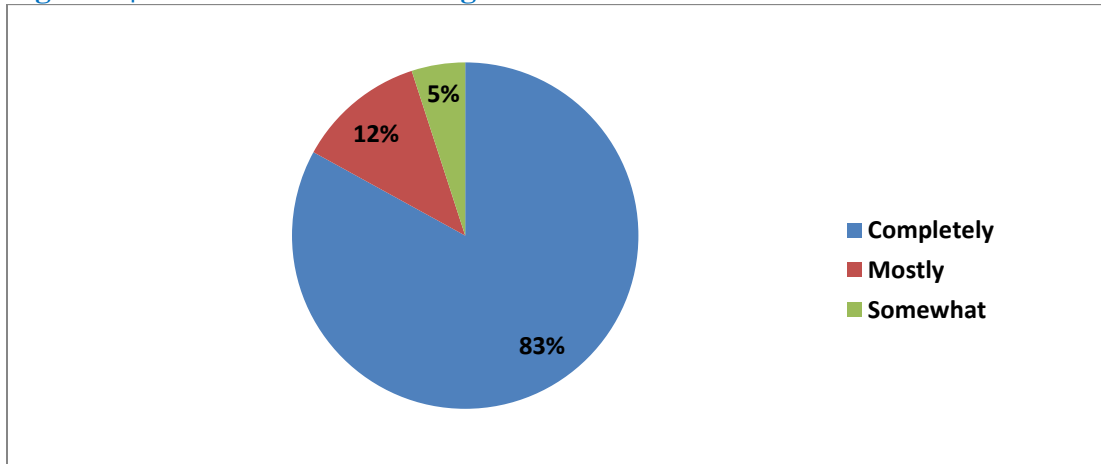
Similarly, Figure 8 illustrates that more than three-quarters (78%) of respondents believed that the students listened to and "completely" understood their organization's needs. The remaining respondents reported that the students "mostly" (12%) or "somewhat" (4%) understood their organization's needs.

Figure 8 | Students Listened to and Understood Organization's Needs

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I.   Project Implementation

1.   Implementation Status

Figure 9 shows that approximately one-quarter (28%) of respondents reported that their organization had fully implemented the project (either with or without modifications) and another one-half (47%) of respondents indicated partial project implementation (either with or without modifications). One-quarter (25%) of participants had not yet implemented the project.

Figure 9 | Implementation Status
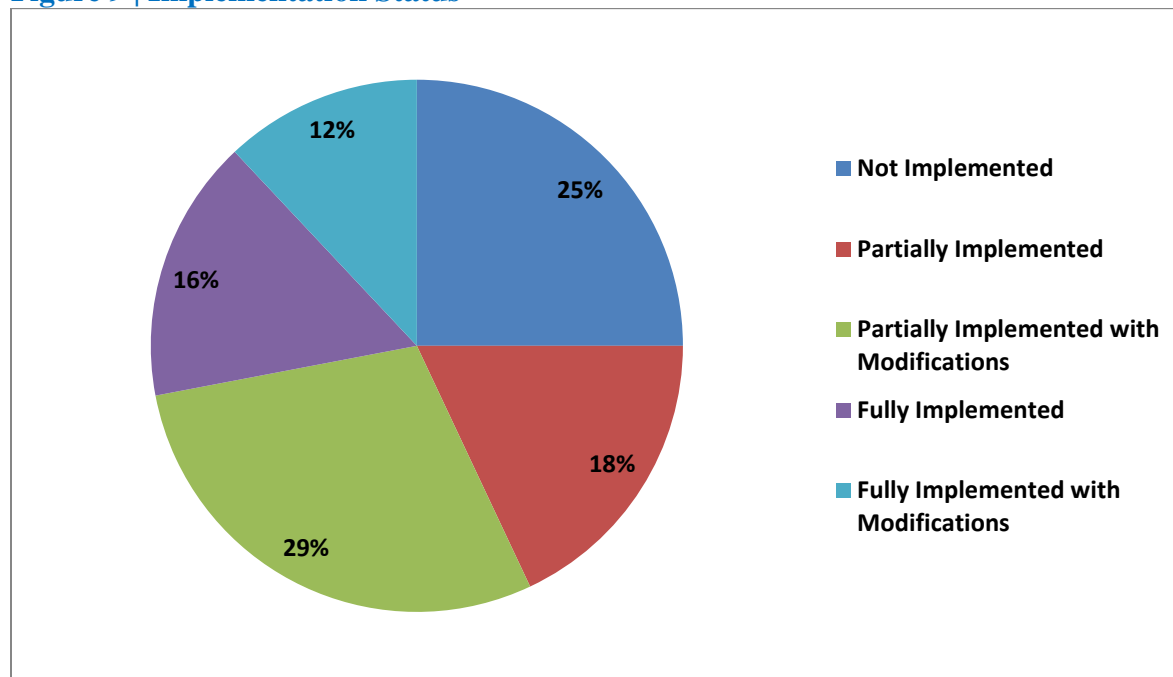
2.   Reasons for Not Implementing the Project

Over one-half (57%) of respondents who had not yet implemented the project indicated that they were still planning to use the project.[8] The remaining respondents provided the following reasons for not implementing the project: 1) the project required additional resources (e.g., staffing or funding) that were not currently available to the organization; 2) there were individuals within the organization who did not want to use the project; and 3) the project would not be useful to the organization.

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[8] This suggests that the timing of the survey being distributed only four to six months following the project may be too soon. Evaluators will consider modifying the survey timing in the future.

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3. Reasons for Partial Implementation

Similarly, over one-half (60%) of respondents who had partially implemented the project contended that they were still planning to use the project in the future. Reasons given for only partially implementing the project were that the project required additional resources (e.g., staffing or funding) that were currently not available to the organization, and that only parts of the project were appropriate to their needs.

4. Individuals Leading Project Implementation

As shown in Figure 10, roughly one-half (53%) of respondents indicated that the organization's Executive Director was the designated leader for implementing the project's work product, followed by Program Managers (19%), the Board of Directors (13%), or someone else in the organization (15%).

Figure 10 | Individuals Leading Project Implementation
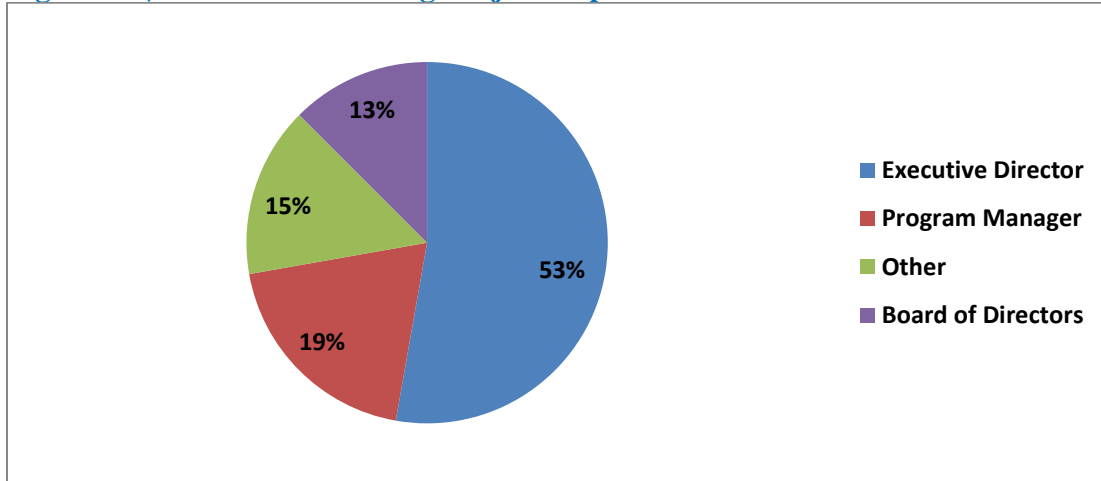
## 5. Use of Internal and External Resources

More than four out of ten (45%) respondents reported that they used internal staff in the implementation process, while two out of ten (21%) said they used external resources such as independent consultants.

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J.   Project Impact and Benefits

1.   Impact of the Project

As Figure 11 shows, respondents reported that the projects provided the following benefits to their organizations: improved community reputation/relationships (27%); a new or strengthened partnership with the University of San Diego (26%); potential new donors (16%); future employees or volunteers (12%); and new funding (8%). One out of ten (11%) respondents said the project made no impact on their organization.

Figure 11 | Project's Impact Areas
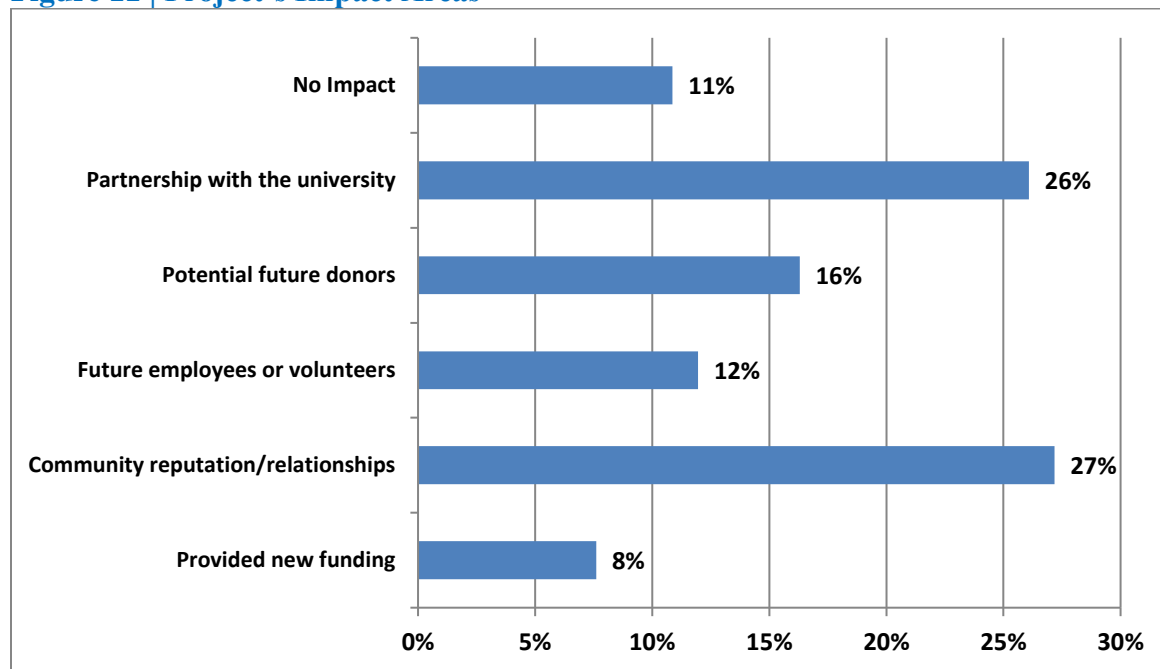
Below are some verbatim comments from respondents that represent key themes of how the projects impacted their organizations.

> *"Gave board sense of urgency that we need to shift focus on fundraising to individual donations/memberships."*
>
> *"Helped us address some internal maintenance that we weren't able to accomplish on our own."*
>
> *"Created needed dialogue and will strengthen effectiveness processes."*
>
> *"It gave us a set of core values that we now have printed and mounted on our wall. We believe that everyone working for us or volunteering with us should hold these core values."*

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2.   Enhanced Organizational Capacity

The majority of respondents indicated that the applied project had made "considerable" or "some" improvements in the following organizational capacities: management (88%), leadership (84%), governance (80%), communications (87%), community outreach (81%), development (79%), fundraising (74%), and human resources (71%).

3.   Programs and Services Improved

Similarly, the majority (90%) of respondents reported that their programs and services have improved as a result of the project, with one-third (33%) indicating "considerable" improvement and more than one-half (56%) indicating "some" improvement. One out of ten (10%) had not experienced any improvement in program and services following completion of the project.

4.   Project Benefits

Respondents also evaluated four other benefits of the project, which are summarized in Table 2. Three-quarters (75%) of respondents stated that the project provided value to the community, with 43% reporting a "high" value. Roughly two-thirds (68%) of respondents said the project provided savings in time. Less than one-half (45%) of respondents contended that the project provided cost savings. However, the majority of organizations did not pay for the project and, therefore, were not likely to associate it with a cost. Approximately one-third (35%) of respondents said the program provided access to new funders, which isn't surprising given that very few projects were specifically designed for this purpose.

Table 2 | Project Benefits

	High	**Moderate**	**Low**	**None**
Community Value	43%	32%	8%	17%
Time Savings	41%	27%	7%	25%
Cost Savings	20%	25%	9%	45%
Access to New Funders	7%	28%	20%	45%

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K.   Client Organization Satisfaction

Figure 12 shows that approximately eight out of ten (79%) respondents expressed being satisfied ("satisfied" or "very satisfied") with the project overall, in addition to the following aspects of the project: professionalism of the students (86%), professionalism of the project (84%); applicability of the project to their organization (83%); interactions with the student team or individual (83%); and communication with the students (82%). Two-thirds (66%) of respondents reported being satisfied with their connection to the University of San Diego's NLM master's program.

Figure 12 | Satisfaction with Various Aspects of the Project
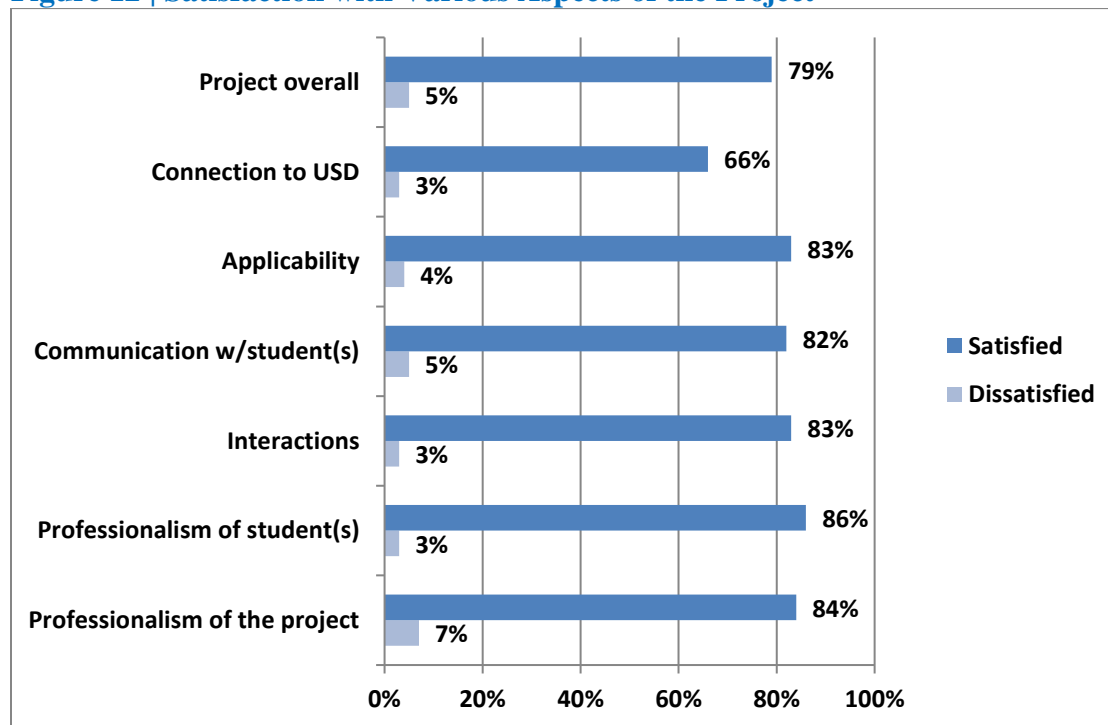
Below are some verbatim comments from respondents that elaborate on their satisfaction ratings.

> *"The USD team did a wonderful job for us! They were very professional and approached the project with much enthusiasm. Through their well-planned approach, they were able to determine what we stand for as an organization and craft a code of ethics that embodied our culture."*

> *"The students did an excellent job designing a program based on evidence-based research."*

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"This team was so incredibly professional and thorough that I can't think of any way of improving their performance."

"We are very thankful to have had this student prepare this for our school, the professionalism, enthusiasm and quality of work was outstanding!"

"The applied projects process is fantastic and they should be more widely publicized throughout the community."

"We look forward to working on more partnerships projects in the future."

"The options presented were to either apply for a grant or create a funding strategy. Neither of these were direct fits with our organization."

"Do a dry run of the presentation with a subset of stakeholders, receive feedback, and then revise."

"Students should meet with organization more. There was an initial meeting and a feedback meeting. We needed to have a review of draft before final project was completed."

"If the students had more time, they probably could have made a more significant impact."

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V.   Conclusions

Overall, the applied projects program has been well received by the benefitting nonprofit and philanthropic organizations over the past two years, with the majority of organizations being satisfied with the work completed by students in the University of San Diego NLM master's degree program. Students have had a strong understanding of the client organizations' mission, and they have listened to and understood the organizations' needs. Furthermore, the majority of student projects were implemented (or plan to be implemented).

These findings highlight that the applied projects program continues to help improve programs, services, and governance at nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, generally at no cost to client organizations. Thus, the NLM program develops students' knowledge and skills, while simultaneously advancing the nonprofit and philanthropic sector - and the communities they serve -- in constructive and meaningful ways.

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VI.   References

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