

Building a Nonprofit Resilience Model

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At the time of writing, co-authors were students at the Harvard University Extension School. Adrienne Cerra Simeon, who was not a student in the course described here, served as a faculty aide to conduct research with the instructor. The principal author, John R. Whitman, Ph.D., was the course instructor. Please direct comments and questions to John R. Whitman, johnrwhitman@mac.com.

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Abstract

This paper describes a graduate-level course offered in the spring of 2022 that engaged students in developing prototype models of nonprofit preparedness to build organizational resilience in the event of future threats like COVID-19. The aim of the course was to provide students the opportunity to learn about nonprofit preparedness by co-creating a useful planning tool for nonprofit leaders, learning in the co-creation process a variety of ways to promote innovation. The aim of this paper, co-authored by the students, is to recount the course as a case study illustrating how the application of classroom and experiential learning methods, including

new product development as a catalyzing modality, resulted in developing new contributions to the field of professional nonprofit management, with specific student deliverables being a model of nonprofit preparedness and a set of policy recommendations for nonprofit preparedness. The paper contributes to the literature on professional nonprofit pedagogy by illustrating how to speed the process of transmitting knowledge from creation to utilization using experiential education and includes considerations for nonprofit pedagogical practice and policy.

A resilient society is able to react to and respond after a shock. Resilience even opens new doors to enhanced growth and sustainability.

— Markus K. Brunnermeier, *The Resilient Society* (2021, p. 13)

1. Introduction

To determine educational interest in preparing nonprofit leaders for future shocks, a new, 30-hour master's level course was designed and offered through the Harvard Extension School during the spring of 2022. The course, Innovations in Nonprofit Management, attracted 18 students enrolled in a Master of Liberal Arts degree or a Certification in Nonprofit Management program.

The massive impact of COVID-19 on nonprofit organizations in the United States presents a unique opportunity for graduate students to develop new tools that can help nonprofit leaders prepare for future shocks such as pandemics. A new approach for developing such tools is needed, for existing risk and crisis management programs typically are not oriented toward nationwide, systemic shocks like that created by COVID-19. Prior research on how organizations can respond to threats calls for the development of a theory of organizational resilience: "Such a theory of organizational resilience would provide insight into how organizations and the individuals and units of which they are comprised continue to achieve desirable outcomes amidst adversity, strain, and significant barriers to adoption or development" (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 3418). While the proposed student effort might not develop a theory of organizational

resilience, they could more practically develop a propositional model of organizational preparedness as a contribution to advancing our understanding of organizational resilience.

Moreover, such student engagement can take the form of experiential education, for developing new tools for this purpose goes beyond information currently available in the literature and requires a direct understanding of what nonprofit practitioners need. Experiential education can allow students to co-create new materials grounded on their direct experience with nonprofits in the community and through focused reflection with practicing nonprofit professionals as well as with the instructor, resulting in prototype models of preparedness that can be tested by nonprofit leaders in the field.

This paper describes a graduate-level course offered in the spring of 2022 that engaged students in developing prototype models of nonprofit preparedness to build organizational resilience in the event of future threats like COVID-19. The aim of the course was to provide students the opportunity to learn about nonprofit preparedness by co-creating a useful planning tool for nonprofit leaders, learning in the co-creation process a variety of ways to promote innovation. The aim of this paper is to describe the course as a case study illustrating how the application of classroom and experiential learning methods, including new product development as a catalyzing modality, resulted in developing new contributions to the field of professional nonprofit management, with specific student deliverables being a model of nonprofit preparedness and a set of policy recommendations for nonprofit preparedness. The salient characteristics of this account as a qualified research case study (Yin, 2018, p. 15) are that: a) it empirically describes the process of creating a new, pragmatic planning tool by using experiential learning in an academic teaching environment and b) it draws from various theoretical propositions (e.g., scenario planning, design planning, appreciative inquiry, nonprofit

innovation theory, and new product development) to converge on an approach to developing new management tools that can inform future academic efforts to engage students in collaborative efforts to create useful knowledge. The case here is “qualified” in that it diverges from the strict formal definition as cited in that this case account is self-referential to describe and explain the work undertaken by the co-authors and thus is not objective in a research sense, and there is no triangulation of multiple sources of data, based as it is on an autobiographical account without external sources of confirmation. These factors could understandably provide the basis for objecting to the validity of the case and its explanatory claims. Nevertheless, we offer the case with good will as a systematic and faithful description of our experience.

With more than a million deaths in the United States, the social devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, eclipsing the loss of American lives from prior wars and diseases, cannot be overstated. Beyond the human toll, the pandemic beginning in 2019 created an economic shock comparable to the Great Recession of 2007-2009 primarily due to social distancing that prevented face-to-face interactions and assemblies of groups of people. Award-winning books had been written about such a threat long prior (Garrett, 1994, 2000) and one declared, “Those responsible for foreign policy and national security, the world over, cannot afford to ignore the warning” (Garrett, 2005, p. 23). A major policy journal signaled in 2005, “The arrival of a pandemic influenza would trigger a reaction that would change the world overnight. ... A pandemic is coming” (Osterholm, 2005, pp. 26, 36). Yet the evidence from its immediate impact indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic was practically unforeseen by many, if not most nonprofit leaders whose organizations were largely unprepared for such a shock. Community organizations that depended on close interaction with clients were especially hard hit, particularly nonprofits serving economically poor communities and those with inadequate

reserves. Many organizations, both for-profit and nonprofit, ceased operations while others continued by drawing on reserves, soliciting new donations, and adapting or pivoting their business models and operations (Mirabella et al., 2020; Whitman et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 shock provided an opportunity to reflect on how nonprofits might be better prepared to face future threats, not only from disease, but also from climate change, technology failure, utility disruption, cybercrime, cyberwarfare, civil disruption, and other plausible and anticipated but unpredictable, system-wide, and short-term or enduring hazards. A number of such threats and impacts are listed in the table below.

Table 1
Checklist of plausible future threats and impacts

- Pandemic limits human contact
- Natural disaster or fire destroys needed resources
- Extreme heat/cold curtails operating efficiency
- Loss of power disrupts operations
- Loss of transportation impedes access to services
- Loss of technical infrastructure (internet, cloud) disrupts operations
- Loss of funding threatens operations
- Loss of labor threatens operations
- Social unrest (anti-abortion, anti-vaccine, anti-immigrant, intolerance of vulnerable populations, political agitation) threatens operations
- Sudden demographic change increases or decreases demand for services
- Demographic change decreases supply of volunteers
- Cyberattack disrupts operations

- Loss of suppliers/sources and disruption of supply chain threatens operations
- Loss of management leadership disrupts operations
- Technological innovation (e.g., artificial intelligence) forces change in business model
- Sudden policy/regulatory change forces change in business model
- War mobilization diverts and/or limits needed resources
- Other threats and impacts?

This paper begins with a literature review followed by an overview of the course, a discussion of course outcomes, including a model of nonprofit resilience and policy recommendations. A sidebar note on institutional support for experiential education is then provided followed by implications for pedagogical practice and policy and student comments on the course. The paper ends with a concluding comment on national preparedness for shocks like COVID-19 and a request for reader suggestions for future course development.

2. Literature Review

The literature review was initially focused on finding accounts of how nonprofit leaders could prepare for major, systemic shocks like COVID-19 and extended to explore readings suitable for the course. As noted by Mirabella et al. (2020, p. 3), “There are many best practices for crisis management and actions that nonprofits can take during a crisis. ... [But] interestingly, ... the plans didn’t account for a system-wide pandemic. Even those crisis management plans that planned for a pandemic didn’t plan for a countrywide shutdown of epic magnitude, which disrupted how organizations could continue their services in meaningful ways.” In addition to crisis management and risk management is the body of organizational planning and strategic planning literature; however, this literature as well is not particularly suited to disaster planning.

Selected works in the fields of scenario planning and building organizational resilience are indeed relevant and reviewed below. As found by Mirabella et al. (2020, p. 3), “This crisis called for nonprofits to rethink how they operated from the leadership, human, financial, fund-raising, and programmatic perspective.” These authors themselves prepared the cited book in response to student questions and to encourage critical thinking about just such impacts (p. vii). The case studies they offer could well have been used in this course had the instructor been aware of their book in advance. Just as these authors found, this instructor as well had to rethink how to assemble a literature that would inspire and inform students tasked with the challenge of innovating a new, pragmatic model of nonprofit resilience to prepare for future shocks.

To set the stage for thinking about nonprofits, two readings on the *history of nonprofits* provided a common orientation for students from different educational and experiential backgrounds: “Altruism and the Origins of Nonprofit Philanthropy,” by Jonathan Levy (2016) and “Nonprofit Organizations in American History,” by David C. Hammack (2002). Also, “Life Cycles of Nonprofit Organizations” by Mark A. Hager introduced students to a conceptual framework of the stages of organizational change, from conception to expiration (2016).

To address nonprofit organizations in their *institutional environment*, two sources provided first, a description of institutional theory, in which societies and social change can be understood in terms of social institutions, organizations, and the entrepreneurs who create or run such organizations (North, 1990/2005), and second, social change, in which codified rules and unwritten norms of behavior account for institutional “rules of the game” and provide the loci of attention for entrepreneurs who wish to effect socioeconomic change (North, 2005). Changing the rules of the game can represent a form of innovation at the institutional, organizational, and individual levels.

Among relatively few papers on *nonprofit innovation* (particularly compared to the literature on commercial innovation), “Management innovation in nonprofit organizations: An explorative study of the antecedents,” by Marouane Khallouk et al. provided a useful literature review (2016). “Beyond Food Distribution: the Context of Food Bank Innovation in Alabama,” by Kathryn Strickland and John R. Whitman (2019), provided a case study of innovation in food banks, drawing on the conceptual framework of innovation presented in Steven Johnson’s book (2010) further noted below.

The course aimed to engage students in *innovation* as it applied to strengthening a nonprofit organization’s preparedness for threats and to co-create a model for nonprofit preparedness. Several sources of innovation methodologies (including appreciative inquiry, scenario thinking and planning, design thinking and ethnographic research, nonprofit innovation, and conditions favoring idea-generation, which are described further below) were reviewed that could inform both the conduct of the course and possible elements of a model for preparedness. First, to create an academic environment of creativity and openness without the competitive impulse to disparage ideas raised by others, the approach of *appreciative inquiry* was adopted (Stavros et al., 2016). Second, to raise student awareness of how to develop conditions conducive to creativity, Steven Johnson’s book, *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation*, was selected as the only required book (2010).

Third, to provide students with hands-on *scenario thinking and planning* experience, *Scenario Thinking: Preparing Your Organization for the Future in an Unpredictable World*, by George Cairns and George Wright provided the basis for a six-step exercise (2018/2011). This approach to considering scenarios was selected based on a review of several such approaches (Bradfield et al., 2005). An additional, abbreviated approach to scenario planning offered by The

Bridgespan Group was included as an optional reading (Waldron et al., 2020) and the book, *Scenario Planning: The link between future and strategy* was also recommended (Lindgren & Bandhold, 2003/2009). Fourth, to engage students in taking an inductive, ethnographic approach to studying a particular nonprofit and the work of its staff, introductory readings in *ethnography* (Fetterman, 2020) and *design thinking* (Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011) were assigned. Fifth, to assess the characteristics of a nonprofit organization that indicated either the need to strengthen and leverage its core business model or to invest resources in undertaking innovation, *Innovation and Scaling for Impact*, by Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair (2017) provided a conceptual framework, supplemented by additional articles on the subject by the same authors (Seelos, 2014; Seelos & Mair, 2012, 2016).

Turning to the literature on *models*, some 24 terms are listed as synonyms for *model* in a history of models of innovation, including conceptual construct, conceptual framework, paradigm, and scheme (Godin, 2017). Such conceptualizations typically include a graphic figure that illustrates the construct, usually combined with a descriptive narrative. Two examples that describe models of innovation were of particular interest. First, “A Model of Creativity and Innovation in Organizations,” by Teresa M. Amabile reports her research to construct a model of individual creativity, which she then combines in an organizational context to provide a model of organizational innovation (Amabile, 1988). She includes a list of environmental qualities that promote and inhibit creativity. Second, Christian Seelos, in “Theorizing and strategizing with models: generative models of social enterprises,” describes the constitutive elements of a model that provides analytical, theoretical, and ontological support, combined with a detailed example of such a model of a particular social enterprise (Seelos, 2014).

Preparing an organization for threats requires an understanding of its *mission* and *business model*. Peter F. Drucker's article on "The Theory of the Business" offers a concise description of the theory of the business (generalizable to nonprofits), consisting of its mission, operating environment, and core competencies (Drucker, 1994). "Business Models, Business Strategy and Innovation," by David J. Teece, provides a more comprehensive framework for thinking about a business model and creating new such models (Teece, 2010).

Because building resilience in an organization is a function of its capacity, several works on *organizational capacity* were reviewed. Elizabeth Boris provides an overview of capacity building for nonprofits in her chapter, "Next Steps for Building Capacity in Nonprofit Organizations" (Boris, 2001). "Transformational Capacity Building," by Nishimura et al., draws crucial attention to the needs of small nonprofits working at the grassroots level, particularly in communities of color, without significant financial or staff resources and in need of non-conventional approaches to assistance in ways that build trusting relationships and develop other critical strengths (Nishimura et al., 2020).

Finally, a definitive theory of *organizational resilience* itself was not found in the literature. However, the work of Timothy J. Vogus and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe provides important considerations for such a model in their paper, "Organizational Resilience: Towards a Theory and Research Agenda" (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007), which, in turn, draws on their prior work, "Organizing for Resilience" (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). As noted above, the works of these authors provided the clearest call for why developing a model of nonprofit resilience is needed, for indeed with such a model organizations should be better prepared for the inevitable shocks to come.

In summary, a wide-ranging and eclectic selection of works was reviewed in preparation for and use in the course.

3. Course Overview

This course was designed to be different in the sense that students would be expected to go beyond learning the course material, and would also be engaged in producing something of value to the nonprofit community. The course design challenge was: How to achieve this outcome? Or, perhaps formulated as research questions: 1) *How* can a course be designed to go beyond the teaching and learning of material to produce a potentially useful contribution to nonprofit practitioners? And, 2) *Why* would such a course succeed in the production of new knowledge? A theory of change was needed to explain how to shift from a standard course of learning academic material to one in which students would apply their learning to create a useful product in the real world. Here the instructor drew from his professional experience as a former software company entrepreneur and his academic experience teaching new product development at the graduate business school level. The causal design element in the theory of change to achieve its aim was to organize students into learning teams that would also be competitive product development teams. Each team was tasked with producing a prototype product, the nonprofit preparedness model. Teams would work independently until a stage in the course when they could share their respective models for plenary discussion. At that stage, they would learn from the others' approaches prior to finalizing their capstone report for the course.

The teams were challenged with a twofold assumption: First, operating a nonprofit organization according to business as usual would likely leave the organization dangerously vulnerable to future shocks that would challenge the organization's business model and possibly threaten its viability. Second, building organizational resilience to survive and even thrive

requires creativity and innovation to reimagine not only the organization’s business model, but also the institutional environment in which it operates—the rules and resources at the federal, state, and local level that facilitate or impede achieving the organization’s mission to serve people’s needs, particularly in times of crisis.

These assumptions led to three pedagogical challenges: First, that students would need a conceptual framework to envision the organization situated in its institutional context. This was addressed by introducing students to institutional theory. Second, that students would benefit from exposure to various methods to promote innovation, methods that could inform their approach to new product development. This was addressed by examining five selected methodologies for innovation. Third, that students working in teams would learn experientially from constructing a prototype model for building nonprofit resilience by drawing on course readings, deliberating with outside speakers, studying nonprofits in the field as part of course requirements, and applying their own professional experiential and tacit knowledge.

The capstone project engaged three teams of six students each to create a prototype model of nonprofit preparedness for threats that could be used by the nonprofit community. Beyond the course requirements, a number of students opted to co-author this paper as a further contribution to the nonprofit community and to compile a set of policy recommendations (listed below) submitted to the National Council of Nonprofits to explore how they could be disseminated to the nonprofit community and to relevant policy makers.

The main course deliverable was the capstone Model of Nonprofit Preparedness. Our use of the term “model” is based on the following definition from *An Introduction to Models in the Social Sciences* (Lave & March, 1993, p. 3):

A model is a simplified picture of a part of the real world. It has some of the characteristics of the real world, but not all of them. It is a set of interrelated guesses about the world. Like all pictures, a model is simpler than the phenomena it is supposed to represent or explain.

The prototype models developed in the course are a graphical representation of key elements and the interrelationships among them, that can strengthen a nonprofit organization's ability to prepare for unforeseen shocks. Drawing from the characteristics and dimensions of various models comparatively examined in *Models of Innovation* (Godin, 2017), the proposed model was intended to be:

- *functional* for use by nonprofit management;
- a *systems* model with dynamic relationships between elements;
- *explanatory and causal* in that the relationship among the elements will theoretically produce the intended outcomes;
- *general* in the sense that it can be generalized for use by a wide range of types of nonprofit organizations; and, adding to features not mentioned in this source,
- *normative* in that the model offers recommended action (but is not descriptive of any one organization).

a) Sample: Class profile

The sample of participating students was self-selected. Eighteen graduate students registered for the course: twelve were enrolled in a nonprofit management certificate program, five in master's degree programs, and one was a Harvard instructor of Chinese language (one student withdrew shortly before completion).

Thirteen (72%) students were women. All but two students were located in the United States (AZ, CA, DC, IN, MA, PA, SC, VT, WA); one was in Australia (Newcastle) and another in Singapore. Of those in the U.S., one was originally from China, one from Mexico, one from the Philippines. The international experience among students was wide-ranging, representing time spent in Argentina, Aruba, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Canada, Chile, China, Croatia, Egypt, El Salvador, Estonia, Germany, India, Iraq, Japan, Philippines, Spain, and the U.K.

Eleven (61%) worked in charitable nonprofits; the others in university, philanthropic, government, or a for-profit organization (Amazon).

The nonprofit areas of employment included: arts and printmaking; senior advocacy and services (AARP); skilled nursing facility; Outward Bound leadership; community services; Native American business development; educational consulting; culinary (chocolate) education; violin education for minorities; a philanthropic foundation focused on government innovation, public health, education, the environment, and the arts; international peace, development, conflict resolution; and university-foundation relations at a law school.

b) The value proposition

The course itself was influenced by design thinking. For example, the first reading in the course presented a value proposition for enrolling in the course. This reading provided a scenario that embodied two tools drawn from design thinking: creating a persona and telling a story.

According to Liedtka and Ogilvie, authors of *Designing for Growth* (2011, p. 56):

Personas are fictional characters, created out of the insights from your exploratory research, that can exemplify certain attributes. Because they make the potentially abstract concept of “customer” very personal and human, personas enhance your

ability to build the empathetic understanding of customers that is at the heart of design thinking.

Concerning stories, the authors write (Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011, p. 58):

Storytelling accelerates your ability to sell design thinking by helping you make your ideas feel real to sponsors, customers, partners, and funders. ... Like visual images, stories allow you to access emotion and emphasize experiences. They make ideas concrete, tangible, and personal. They add the richness of context and allow you to “sell” a problem as well as a solution to those who must give the green light. They build identification and empathy with their characters and help managers develop a personal investment in their welfare. With any luck, they keep their audience awake.

Thus, the sense of foreboding caused by the initial state of emergency is evoked in the sidebar, “Opening Story,” which presents the value proposition of the course in a hypothetical but reality-based scene featuring the predicament of the fictional Ann Desmond, who signifies the persona of the nonprofit leader (and by implication, the student) in need of what the course promises to deliver.

Opening Story: When the status quo is extremely dangerous

It's Friday the 13th of March, 2020, and Ann Desmond has been executive director of the nonprofit Central Food Bank for the past four years.¹ Her organization distributes 15 million pounds of food annually to some 200 food pantries across 12 counties in this southern state, serving 200,000 children, elderly, unemployed, single parents, veterans, and/or sick or disabled people. Day in and day out, Ann and her team make sure that those in need survive another day without going hungry.

Today, the national COVID-19 pandemic emergency is announced. Because social distancing is mandated, the food bank's entire business model for distributing emergency food face-to-face is utterly disrupted. Staff and volunteers can no longer serve those in need. Volunteers have stopped showing up for fear of getting COVID-19. Massive numbers of small businesses are closing, and the number of people needing food assistance is about to explode.

Ann never saw it coming. With a shortage of help and limited funds, she is at the edge of a cliff. And she isn't alone.

This course, Innovations in Nonprofit Management, is for all the nonprofit leaders out there who, like Ann, would rather be prepared than compromised when the world turns upside down. Ann is the person for whom this course is designed. But because a course like this has never, to my knowledge, been offered, and because there is no one-size-fits-all type of preparedness, together we are going to use this course as a way to learn from and build on known innovation theories and tools including design thinking, scenario thinking, and appreciative inquiry to co-create new approaches to help prepare Ann and leaders like her for unpredictable, existential shocks in the future.

Based on what we develop, we can start a nationwide movement to build nonprofit resilience and strength, for more such threats are surely coming. By participating in this course and co-creating useful tools, you will join a cause to empower nonprofits throughout the country. All of you should be better prepared to lead nonprofits, and some of you may want to be leaders in the cause.

Let's get started!

c) Innovation methodologies

To expose students to methodologies of innovation, five such approaches were selected for the course. These methodologies are briefly noted below (sources are also cited in the literature review).

1. Appreciative inquiry

The first class session engaged students in an exercise in appreciative inquiry (Reed, 2007; Stavros et al., 2016), a mode of discourse in which everyone feels their contribution is valued. This sets a non-threatening tone of engagement that facilitates questioning, curiosity, and innovation.

2. Scenario thinking and planning

Students learned about scenario thinking (Cairns & Wright, 2018/2011) and planning (Lindgren & Bandhold, 2003/2009; Waldron et al., 2020) as a systematic way to generate plausible story lines for conditions a nonprofit might face five years from the present time. An

¹ Fictitious name and story, but based on real events.

exercise, noted below, primed students to apply scenario thinking about the future and to envision plausible events that could threaten organizations.

3. Design thinking and ethnographic research

Readings in design thinking (Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011) and ethnography (Fetterman, 2020), which is central to the approach to design thinking, prepared students for their own analysis of a nonprofit organization's ability to innovate, resulting in their recommendations for how the organization could apply innovative methodologies to prepare for future threats. Empathetically and inductively understanding the world from the points of view of those affected, including individuals served by a nonprofit organization, is key to envisioning new ways to be effective and resilient.

4. Nonprofit innovation

Drawing from research on innovation (Amabile, 1988) and particularly in nonprofit organizations (Seelos, 2014; Seelos & Mair, 2012, 2016, 2017), students learned the importance of determining an organization's sustainable capacity to achieve its mission prior to committing scarce resources to undertake unproven innovations. In other words, to prepare for future shocks, an organization must first have a sustainable and effective business model to recognize the need for further capacity development and to plan accordingly.

5. Conditions favoring idea-generation

Finally, students were exposed to a range of conditions that are known to inspire creative thought. The required book for the course, *Where Good Ideas Come From* (Johnson, 2010), provided an insightful review of how various environmental conditions are conducive to

inspiring innovative ideas. The book was selected to stimulate innovative thinking during and after the course.

d) Scenario thinking exercise

Based on the scenario thinking methodology provided by Cairns and Wright (2018/2011), groups of students undertook a sequence of six exercises to prepare plausible scenarios for a real or fictitious nonprofit five years from the present. These exercises gave students a hands-on, experiential exposure to the challenges of scenario planning.

e) Invited experts

Nine experts were invited to the class to present their COVID-19-related work and thoughts for how nonprofit organizations could prepare for future threats and to interact with students, contributing to student experiential learning. Course speakers are listed in order of their appearance: Dr. George Cairns, co-creator of Scenario Thinking, described the scenario thinking and planning process and how it has been applied, 8 February 2022. Dr. Nishesh Chalise, Director for Community Based Policy and Analysis, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, detailed how the Fed collected data on how nonprofits responded to and were affected by the COVID-19 shock, 22 February. Ms. Donna Murray-Brown, Vice President of Strategy and Development at the National Council of Nonprofits and former President and CEO of Michigan Nonprofit Association, presented how she used principles of scenario planning to respond to COVID-19 in Michigan and established a fund to advocate for and support the continuous operation of nonprofits, 22 March. Ms. Joy O’Neal, President and Executive Director, The Red Barn, Leeds, Alabama, recounted how her equestrian nonprofit responded to COVID-19, 5 April. Mrs. Leslie Gordon, President and CEO of Food Bank For New York City, explained how her organization

formed a media team to tell compelling stories about the vital services provided to the people of New York City, 12 April. Dr. Melissa L. Boydston, Senior Vice President, Community Development and Engagement, Valley of the Sun United Way, Phoenix, AZ, with Mr. Rob Podlogar, laid out their organization’s response to the pandemic and how they revised arrangements to have an immediate and effective impact, 19 April. Mr. David L. Thompson, Vice President of Public Policy, National Council of Nonprofits, discussed the policy response to COVID-19, particularly in facilitating aid to nonprofits through the Paycheck Protection program, the Universal Charitable Deduction, the Employee Retention Tax Credit, Unemployment Insurance, and the American Rescue Plan Act, and the needs for policy innovation going forward, 26 April. Finally, Mr. Scott Cotenoff, Partner, La Piana, addressed the strategic value of developing nonprofit partnerships that can add resilience during challenging times and how a nonprofit could suspend operations or close its operations in response to a shock like COVID-19, 3 May.

f) Nonprofits studied

Getting out of the classroom to study a nonprofit in the community was an essential feature in the experiential approach of the course. Such engagement is also key to design thinking, ethnography, and new product development, the last exemplified in *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, which exhorts entrepreneurs to “get out of the building” in order to understand customer problems and possible solutions (Blank & Dorf, 2012). Each student studied and wrote a paper on nonprofit preparedness at a specific nonprofit organization of interest to them. These organizations included:

- AARP, Washington, DC
- DT Institute, Washington, DC
- East Cooper Community Outreach, Charleston, SC

- Evangelical Free Church of America
- Indy Book Project, Zionsville, IN
- Key to Change, Seattle, WA
- Love City Strong, St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands
- Mary's Place, Seattle, WA
- Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA
- Outward Bound California, San Francisco
- Perkins School for the Blind, Watertown, MA
- Print Council of Australia, Victoria
- Providence Mount St. Vincent Skilled Nursing Facility, Seattle, WA
- Teach for China
- The Fine Cacao and Chocolate Institute, Cambridge, MA
- Thye Hua Kwan Moral Charities, Singapore

g) Model building

Drawing on selected course readings on innovation and model development (particularly Amabile, 1988; Seelos, 2014), students divided into three teams of six students each, and each team developed prototype models of nonprofit preparedness for threats. Their models are summarized below (graphic portion only) and are presented in detail as exhibits in the paper, “A Prototype Model of Nonprofit Resilience” (Whitman et al., 2022b).

4. The Nonprofit Resilience Model

Each team developed a prototype model of nonprofit preparedness as their capstone project. Students worked as new product development teams, charged with creating a new “product” model, with little guidance in order to allow for greater innovation. This created tension among some students who would have preferred clearer specifications from the instructor; however, more detailed constraints might have diminished the creative and divergent design potential among the groups and resulted in isomorphic, if not identical model designs.

In the process of co-creation, the models prepared by the student teams informed the creation of a prototype nonprofit resilience model summarized in graphic form below and described in detail in the paper “A Prototype Model of Nonprofit Resilience” (Whitman et al., 2022b). Included as exhibits in that paper, the student models serve as examples for nonprofit leaders to construct their own models tailored to their respective organizations.

a) A generic model of nonprofit resilience

The course instructor developed a generic Model of Nonprofit Resilience designed to be useful to different types of nonprofit organizations, while the models of nonprofit preparedness created by the student teams provide examples of how the generic model can be operationalized in a specific context (the full paper describing these models cited above is available upon request). The generic model and student examples pertain principally to larger organizations; however, leaders of smaller nonprofits may be able to modify actions scaled to the size of their organizations. The purpose of the resilience model is twofold and reflects the twin virtues of resilience noted in the Brunnermeier quotation that opens the paper:

- To increase organizational resilience to prepare for future threats and continue to achieve its mission; and
- To increase effectiveness and sustainability of the organization even during normal operations.

The following diagram shows the model's principal elements in a sequence with a feedback loop indicating the iterative nature of the process. Each of the elements involves component activities discussed below.

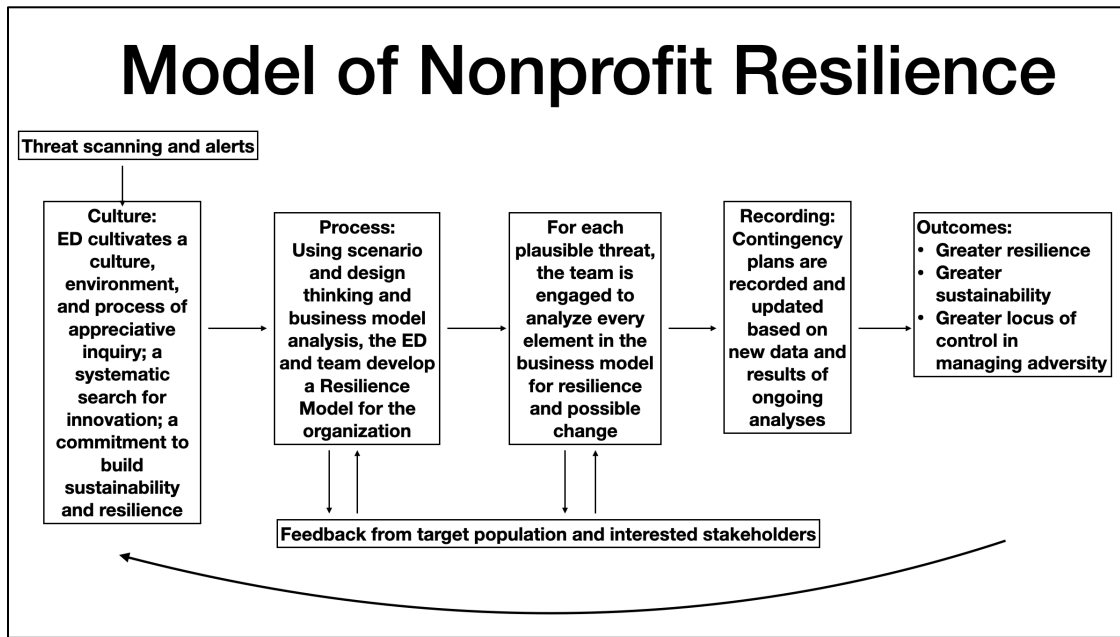


Figure 1: A prototype model of nonprofit resilience (Whitman et al., 2022b)

In the resilience model, the nonprofit leader (Executive Director or CEO) cultivates a culture, environment, and process of appreciative inquiry to set the tone for innovation in the planning process. Then, the leader engages the leadership team in a systematic search for innovative ways to re-envision how the organization’s functions and structure could be modified to achieve greater resilience in times of stress.

The prototype models created by student teams provide examples of how to operationalize the generic Model of Nonprofit Resilience into models of nonprofit preparedness. Graphic representations of each of the student models appear below (the full text descriptions of each are available upon request).

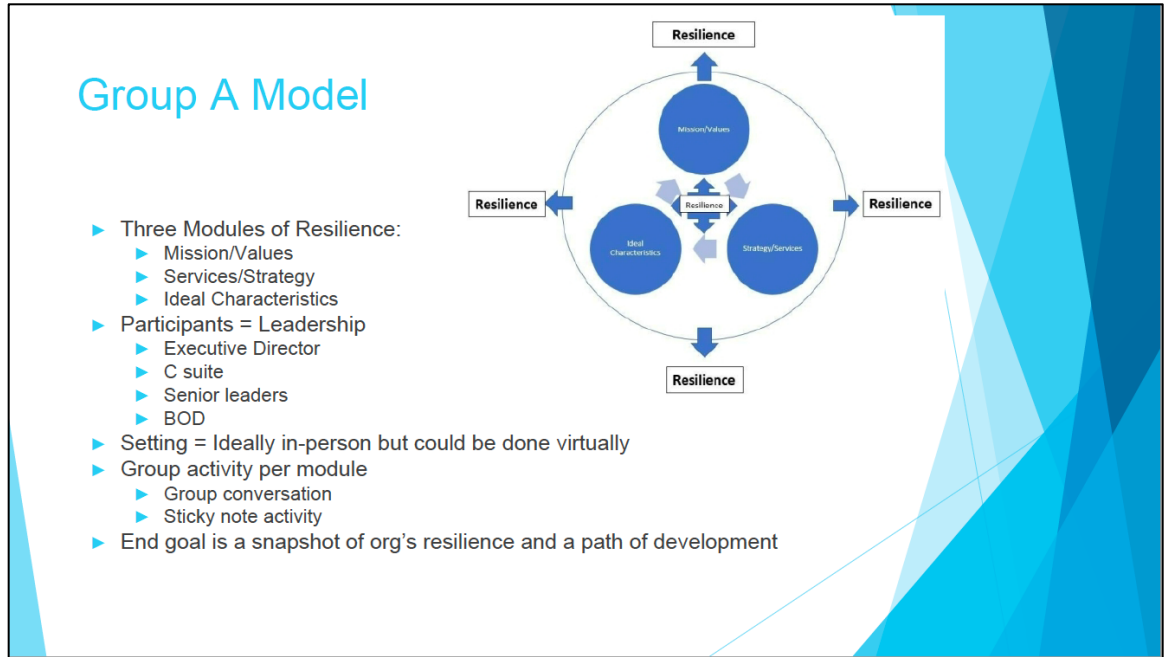


Figure 2: Team A Prototype Model of Nonprofit Preparedness

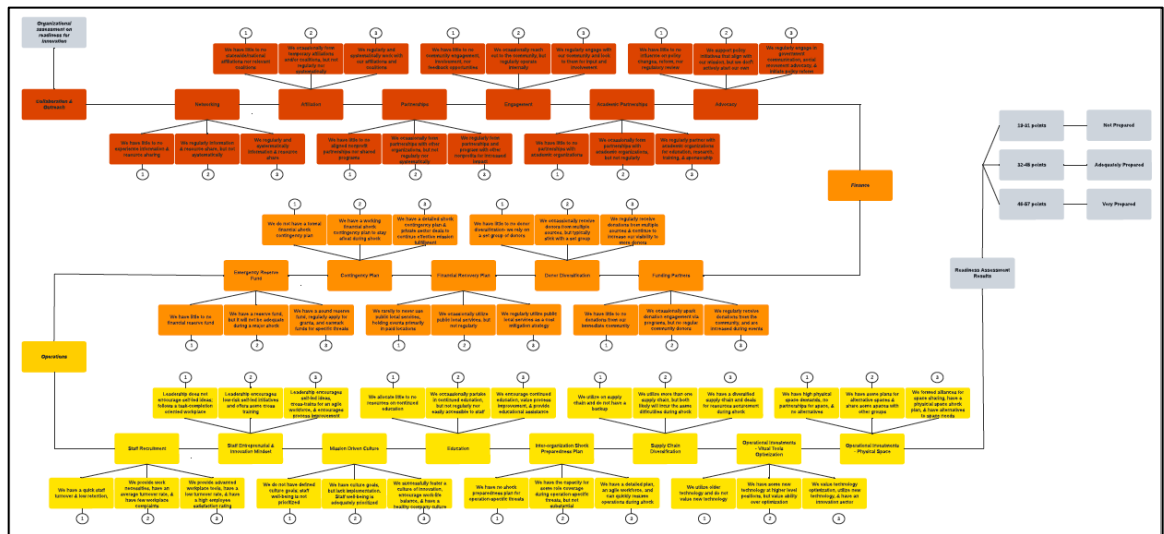


Figure 3: Team B Prototype Model of Nonprofit Preparedness

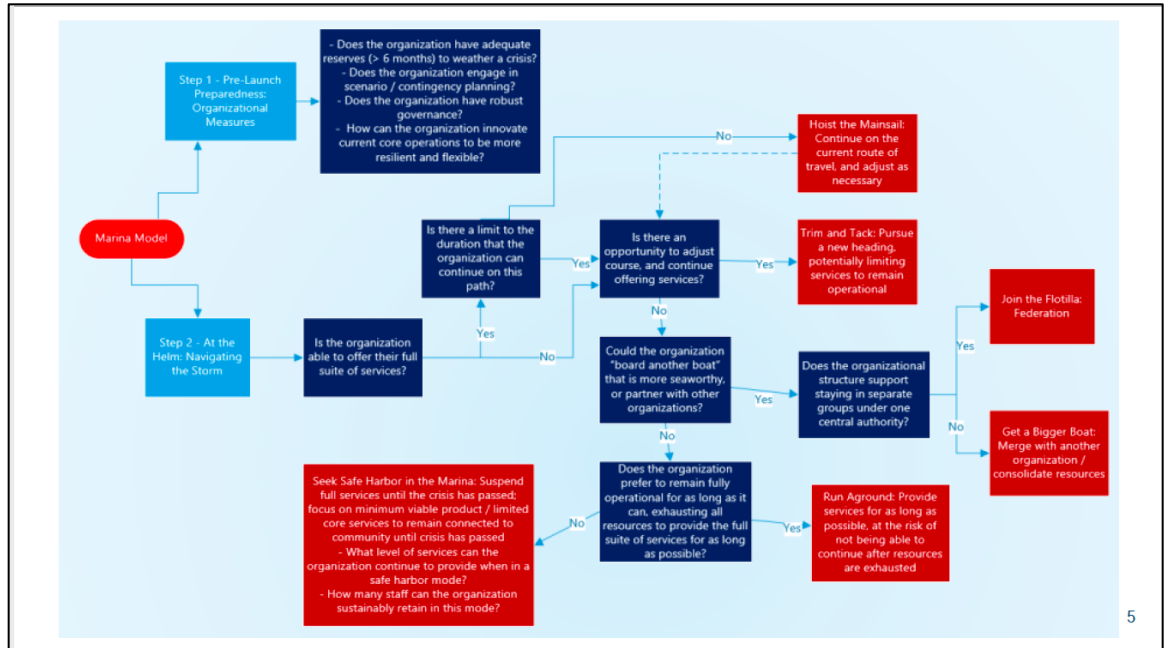


Figure 4: Team C Prototype Model of Nonprofit Preparedness

b) Model discussion

It is important to recall that prior to the course, there was no known extant model of nonprofit preparedness or resilience that could be used to teach nonprofit leaders how to prepare for future shocks like COVID-19. Indeed, the aim of the course was to engage students in co-creating such a model. As noted, much to the chagrin of some students, little guidance was provided to describe any expectations for such a model in advance in order not to impede their creativity. The result, as displayed above, was three different models that could not easily be consolidated into a single model, but could be seen as examples of how the generic, prototype model of nonprofit resilience might be operationalized for preparedness.

The resolution to integrating these disparate examples was for the instructor to create a generic model and for the student team models to serve as examples of how the generic model might be applied, expressing the different concerns and modalities

preferred by each team. This is a reasonable approach in real life, as well, for while a generic model provides overall guidance for relevant model-building considerations and steps, each nonprofit organization would be advised to construct a unique model suited to their respective needs, operations, and resources.

5. Policy Recommendations

Drawing on Douglass North's text on institutional theory (North, 1990/2005), the class addressed the "big picture" institutional environment in which nonprofit organizations emerge and operate. Students prepared a paper on a comparative analysis of the institutional characteristics of two different states or countries to appreciate the different operating opportunities and challenges created by contrasting social, economic, legal, and other institutional constraints, including different social values preferences and policy regimes (Wolpert, 1993).

This analysis set the table for considering possible policy initiatives that could be more favorable to nonprofit organizations and their efforts to provide services. The policy recommendations that emerged (compiled in the paper, "Nonprofit Resilience Policy Recommendations" (Whitman et al., 2022a), available upon request) are to:

1. Expand the Social Contract

Cataclysmic historical events have resulted in sweeping changes to the social contract between government and its citizens. For example, following the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt declared in his State of the Union Address of 1935 that, "We find our population suffering from old inequities, little changed by past sporadic remedies. In spite of our efforts and in spite of our talk we have not weeded out the overprivileged and we have not effectively lifted up the underprivileged. Both of

these manifestations of injustice have retarded happiness. ... I place the security of the men, women, and children of the Nation first ... [to achieve] the security against the major hazards and vicissitudes of life” (Roosevelt, 1935, p. 2). New legislation followed that introduced several forms of welfare during the time of the New Deal including creation of the Social Security Administration in 1935. Amendments to the Social Security Act in 1965 created Medicare and Medicaid.

The attacks of 11 September 2001 were followed by the enactment of legislation establishing the Department of Homeland Security in 2002. The COVID-19 pandemic, having vastly exceeded even the Civil War in deaths to Americans, exposed the existential threat to nonprofit organizations that deliver vital services throughout the nation and may be seen as a cataclysmic challenge to the status quo. It also represents a unique opportunity to again expand the social contract to strengthen our ability to secure the general welfare.

Specifically, the National Council of Nonprofits should convene a conference to explore creating a new Federal Government Corporation (Kosar, 2011) or working through the Corporation for National and Community Service to contract with selected nonprofit organizations that deliver crucial services in health, homelessness, hunger, and transportation so that they can continually operate reliably, and not only in times of future shock, as a form of third-party government (Salamon, 1987). This approach should be federally funded by mandate. Such an expansion of the social contract was anticipated by President Franklin Roosevelt in his State of the Union address of 1944, in which he called for the establishment of an American standard of living higher than ever in history, declaring that, “We cannot be content, no matter how high that general standard of living

may be, if some fraction of our people—whether it be one-third or one-fifth or one-tenth—is ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and insecure” (Roosevelt, 1944).

Services including healthcare, housing security, food assistance, job training, and childcare have been cited, among others, as eligible for recovery funds provided through the U.S. Department of Treasury (Treasury, 2022, p. 18). Establishing mandated federal funds to support delivery of such services on a continual basis and not only in times of crisis would add crucial resilience to the nation’s welfare infrastructure and likely result in an increase in the standard of living for many more Americans.

2. Launch a National Movement to Secure Sustained Nonprofit Funding

The National Council of Nonprofits should call for building a coalition with philanthropic foundations, public welfare advocacy groups, nonprofit organizations, and the public to advocate for permanent government funding to support nonprofits that deliver critical services as indicated in Recommendation 1 above.

3. Establish an Early Warning System

The federal government should establish a permanent inter-agency group to aggregate information on threats known to federal agencies that could cause shocks, and begin a system to alert organizations of potential threat impacts at the municipal level throughout the United States.

4. Expand Resource Information Dissemination

The federal government should create a permanent, publicly-funded position within public libraries nationwide that would focus on collecting threat-related data as well as sources of related funding and technical assistance, for dissemination to the

public, as also recommended by the National Council of Nonprofits (National Council of Nonprofits, 2022, p. 14). This position would also serve as a resource for community members on public services and supports by establishing an ongoing partnership between public libraries and municipal governments to collect and share critical information on threats that could be useful for preparing for such threats at the community level. Relevant information should also be provided in the primary language spoken in ethnic communities.

5. Offer Nonprofit Preparedness Education

The National Council of Nonprofits should support the design of a short course, offered online, for nonprofit leaders to prepare them to implement the Model for Nonprofit Resilience. This would encourage nonprofit executive directors and board members to undergo a short training course on preparedness for potential shocks.

6. Promote Cross-Sector Collaboration

Through an analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic and other disaster response efforts, the National Council of Nonprofits should provide a report with recommendations to the philanthropic and private sectors on practical ways cross-sector partners can strengthen financial and capacity resilience among nonprofit organizations, especially those that provide critical human services in times of shock.

7. Provide Full Cost Compensation

Federal Medicare and Medicaid funds should fully compensate actual costs to provide care by critical health care facilities, as indicated by the National Council of Nonprofits (National Council of Nonprofits, 2021, pp. 12, 14).

8. Mandate and Fund Threat Preparedness

Private philanthropic, corporate, and government funders should mandate preparation for threats at supported nonprofit organizations and provide the funding for capacity development to build resilience.

9. Require Accountability for Threat Preparedness

Nonprofit organization leadership must build resilience and preparation for threats into all strategic planning and operational procedures. Nonprofit board members should require accountability from the nonprofit organization's executive director/management team for such preparedness.

10. Identify Nonprofits Serving Predominantly Racial/Ethnic Minority Communities

There is no current system for identifying the race/ethnicity characteristics of community organizations. The IRS, the Census Bureau, and other government agencies and the Federal Reserve Bank and other researchers who study community well-being should code or otherwise identify nonprofit organizations that specifically serve racial/ethnic minority communities. Law professor Atinuke O. Adediran has called for the IRS to “establish a threshold for what a minority-led or serving nonprofit organization is and require that nonprofits disclose the race and ethnicity of those who run their organizations” (Adediran, 2022). The same may apply to organizations serving the needs of people with disabilities. Underserved communities were hit particularly hard by the pandemic. Organizations serving racial and ethnic minority populations as well as people with disabilities may have special needs that are not visible in current surveys and other research efforts. Identifying such needs is crucial to building resilience and preparing for future threats.

11. Provide Technological and Internet Service for Nonprofits and their Communities

As technological innovation continues to rapidly expand, government entities at the federal, state, and local levels should support the integration of communication technologies into nonprofits in need of improved communication infrastructure with adequate internet bandwidth and speed. Likewise, underserved populations should have government-subsidized technological support.

The shock of COVID-19 revealed, among other insufficiencies, the inaccessibility of adequate communications technology for nonprofit organizations and the communities they serve. Existing technologies such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and others became the standard for operations in public and private sectors when in-person convergence became dangerous. This has changed the way organizations operate and communicate, with many adopting remote or hybrid work models. It follows that future shocks may likewise disrupt communication or mobility among organizations and the communities they serve; therefore, there is a need for adequate and accessible communications technologies and supporting devices for these organizations and populations as well as adequate internet bandwidth and speeds.

6. Implications for Pedagogical Practice and Policy

The course experience described here, which expanded the concept of experiential education to include a deliberative process of new product development, may have timely implications for nonprofit pedagogical practice and policy. In an age of extremely rapid change, it can be crucial to quickly transmit new knowledge from where it is created to where it can be utilized because such knowledge may make an existential difference to potential beneficiaries. A sudden and unexpected event represents such an opportunity for

transmitting new knowledge, in this case, concerning how to prepare for and survive the COVID-19 shock. The traditional path for knowledge-creation to knowledge-utilization may be described, for example, as: research, analysis, documentation, publication, dissemination, utilization. Students in this course combined research, analysis, and documentation working together in teams and then collaborated to prepare papers that, upon completion of the course, were submitted directly to a professional apex organization for possible dissemination to those who could utilize the results. By engaging students in the production of new knowledge and direct submission of results to the professional community for use speeds up the process of knowledge utilization and the testing of prototype solutions to problems. It also enables them to learn about the process of preparing and submitting research and policy papers, which was not an explicit requirement for the course itself. Educators and those engaged in educational policy may consider these implications for future practice. While not all students may wish to opt in to this extra level of engagement, the majority in this case did want to share what they learned with the nonprofit community at large, including nonprofit leaders and the consultants who serve them.

An additional consideration concerns institutional support for experiential education such as that provided through this course. In her review of experiential education in nonprofit-focused graduate degree programs, Carpenter notes that among 12 programs studied based on interviews, there was limited programmatic support for experiential education (Carpenter, 2014). With reference to the course described here, the Career and Academic Resource Center at Harvard University provided limited funding to support a “faculty aide” for research purposes. Eligible faculty aides are students enrolled

at the school who show an interest in the proposed research project. The instructor proposed to study whether and how nonprofit organizations serving particularly vulnerable communities were learning from the pandemic in order to prepare for future threats. The final candidates represented, respectively, Native American tribal communities in the Pacific Northwest and the Hispanic/Latinx communities in the metropolitan area of Miami, Florida. The research period was from 2 March to 13 May, and faculty aide support was limited to a maximum of 50 hours. The sidebar provides an overview of this supplementary research initiative connected to the course.

Supplementary field research: The impact of COVID-19 in the Hispanic/Latinx community in Miami

Harvard Extension School student Adrienne Cerra Simeon was selected to help study nonprofits serving Hispanic/Latinx communities in the Miami area and whether they were, or were interested in, preparing for future shocks in response to lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. She contacted numerous organizations serving the Hispanic/Latinx communities in the area as well as the Florida Nonprofit Alliance (FNA), which provided the results of a study to determine the effects of COVID-19 and the CARES Act on nonprofits in Florida (Florida Nonprofit Alliance, 2021).

Cerra Simeon's research revealed that there is no known current capacity to classify nonprofit organizations in Florida according to racial or ethnic communities served, impeding the ability to identify and contact such organizations. Among those found, there were no such plans to prepare for future threats. As indicated in the policy recommendations above, this suggests a vulnerability affecting underserved populations that should be addressed for future national preparedness.

Additionally, the data, reports, and accounts collected revealed a common theme regarding the technology needs among many nonprofit organizations. Among numerous other impacts, work model and communications changes were often cited as major disruptors resulting from the COVID-19 shock—that is, remote and hybrid work models were necessarily adopted by most nonprofits. Most, if not all, nonprofit operations increasingly rely on technological innovation for internal and external communications, fundraising, development, and delivery of services. This is especially true in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it underscores a pressing need

for policy to improve the communication infrastructure for nonprofits and the communities they serve, especially when those communities are historically marginalized, a need that is also included in the policy recommendations.

Finally, Cerra Simeon's ability to communicate in Spanish greatly facilitated her effectiveness in studying the Hispanic/Latinx community in Miami and indicates the need to provide preparedness materials for that community in the Spanish language, noted in the policy recommendations.

A further consideration for pedagogical practice and policy concerns grading for a course like this, in which students co-create new material with each other and with the instructor. While the academic institution concerned about grade inflation may quite appropriately expect to see a distribution of grades in a course, the instructor felt that a different grading contract was needed in this case. In a typical course, established material, or in the lexicon of intellectual property, prior art, is presented to students to learn. The grading arrangement is intended to reflect how well each student has performed in the learning task. However, in this case, there was no prior art, per se, to provide the content of the course; the students themselves were tasked with creating novel models for nonprofit preparedness. While an instructor could grade them according to how well they performed this task, for indeed performance did vary across students, this instructor felt it would be churlish and could be perceived as punitive by some to grade students differently, while all contributed in varying abilities but in good faith to create their team's model. Nevertheless, grading notwithstanding, the instructor gave extensive and substantive feedback to each student throughout the course and was always

available for consultation. In retrospect, the course might well have been offered on a pass-fail basis. However, that might have changed the composition and dynamics of the self-selected class. (A quick poll of the co-authors indicated that five of seven authors who responded would not have taken the course on a pass-fail basis, noting that such grading would not count toward their degree requirements.) This is a matter that might be further deliberated by both faculty and administrators interested in engaging students in collaborative knowledge production while maintaining high academic standards and providing substantive feedback on student learning.

As a final consideration, we share some comments made by students at the completion of the course. To be sure, not all students were delighted; some felt the pressure to be overwhelming and at least one felt exploited. Nevertheless, the comments below speak for themselves:

The teachings of this course were incredibly impactful, particularly in the area of organizational growth and fostering a culture of innovation. I found this course to be the most impactful and educational during my entire Master's Degree at Harvard Extension School. I'm very happy with my final course.

Interestingly, I have already begun using the teachings of this course in my career-life. For the past year, I had been applying to hundreds of jobs at my top choice nonprofit hospital. While I had several interviews, I had no offer. However, I received another interview toward the end of this course. During the interview ... I placed emphasis on innovative

methodologies I would incorporate if I were hired. After I got the offer of employment, the physician I had interviewed with told me my innovation and preparedness mentality is what made me stand out compared to other candidates. He noted that I was thinking about preparedness in a more systematic way, which made him feel I was better prepared for the position. Without this class, who knows, I may not have ever received an offer at my dream nonprofit hospital.

This class helped push me to look at other aspects of nonprofits like culture, cross-department communications, employee size, and physical location and realize how intertwined each is not only with success but [also with] resilience and innovation.

Innovations in Nonprofit Management was a spectacularly interesting class. The readings were valuable in establishing a framework of thought and analysis that would probably not have been possible through simple discussion and lecture. This class offered a foundation of theories that can be applied to my overall understanding of nonprofits. Until this class, I had never put any thought into the physical location of a nonprofit, or how it could affect its mission, resilience, or success. I will continue to consider the learnings and readings of this class as I move forward in my career—I have a new idea of what a “healthy” nonprofit looks like, and

what kind of issues to avoid. I believe what I got out of this class was more of a new way of thinking.

The information I was introduced to during this class will be extremely helpful in my career. It's already helped me to understand organizational structures and situations that I find myself in daily. I am proud to say that I have achieved a level of senior management at my current employer, and this class has changed the way I look at the organization. Innovation needs to be taught en masse. I'm so glad I got to put [innovation] under the microscope. I cannot remember a single strategic meeting where it has not been discussed or argued over. I'm in a much better position to take an active role in the pivotal conversations that will shape the future of [my employer].

I wanted to end with a note of appreciation for your time and teaching. It has been a wonderful experience to be in this class, which joins two others of 14 in my Master's program that I will continue to utilize avidly after graduation.

Innovations in Nonprofit Management has been, by far, the course that has made the most difference in my ability to lead a nonprofit organization.

7. Conclusion

To return to our research questions, we offer these succinctly conclusive observations: First, developing a course to produce the intended outcomes required assembling a set of readings and activities that could impart to students both a sufficient basis of knowledge and the opportunity to exercise and apply that knowledge to produce the expected product. Second, the course as designed appeared to be successful not only because of the adequacy of its constitutive materials and activities, but also because students were deliberately challenged to work in teams to apply their competitive drive to produce something that reflected their ability to utilize what they learned to create a prototype product that would actually be shared with the nonprofit community.

To situate this case in its larger context, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a wakeup call, putting the nonprofit community on notice that future pandemics and other threats could very likely create similar shocks vastly disrupting the provision of critical social services. The “Prototype Model of Nonprofit Resilience” (Whitman et al., 2022b) now offers a tool for nonprofit leaders to test in anticipation and preparation for such future exigencies, and may also contribute to advancing a theory of organizational resilience as called for by Vogus and Sutcliffe (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Yet, further research and action is required to formulate a robust theory of organizational resilience and to build effective resilience among nonprofit organizations serving communities in need. An even more expansive and proactive analysis might examine opportunities for systemic change to eliminate poverty and other root causes of conditions that necessitate the work of many nonprofit organizations. An

expanded conception of the welfare state in the United States might result in policies to ensure the well-being of all citizens as a right of citizenship or as a human right, rather than subject to temporary alleviation contingent on demonstrated individual need (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Titmuss, 1974).

Unless nonprofit organizations critical to providing services in times of shock are fully, reliably, and consistently funded, they will continue to be vulnerable to shocks that threaten their ability to provide assistance in times of heightened need. Still, they can take action to prepare for such contingencies. The Nonprofit Resilience Model provides one tool to assist in such capacity building.

Michael Osterholm, former Director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy and Association Director of the Department of Homeland Security's National Center for Food Protection and Defense, wrote in 2005, "Someday, after the next pandemic has come and gone, a commission much like the 9/11 Commission will be charged with determining how well government, business, and public health leaders prepared the world for the catastrophe when they had clear warning. What will be the verdict?" (Osterholm, 2005, p. 37). More recently, in his book about the incoherent national response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Michael Lewis notes, "As the legendary football coach Bill Parcells once said, 'You are what your record says you are'" (Lewis, 2021, p. xv).

We hope our contributions will improve the record going forward. Those with suggestions for a future version of the course are encouraged to contact the lead author.

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