

COMMENTARY

## Engaging graduate students in nonprofit consulting experiences

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We answer the call from Tippins et al. (2023) to suggest roles for Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) and other industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology organizations to promote volunteer activities in I-O by highlighting the potential for involving I-O graduate students in volunteer and nonprofit consulting experiences within their academic programs. In this commentary, we draw from our own course-based, nonprofit consulting experience to provide insights and recommendations from the perspectives of I-O student trainees, graduate faculty, and nonprofit organization leadership regarding the reciprocal benefits obtained when nonprofit organizations serve as clients in I-O graduate coursework.

First, we briefly describe our own volunteer activity experience. Then we explain how such academic experiences afford I-O graduate students with the opportunity to apply course content to real-world challenges, develop relevant I-O career competencies with real clients, and build a foundation of the type of volunteer work described in the focal article. We follow this by discussing how nonprofit organizations that serve as clients in I-O courses are provided with professional consulting services and evidence-based solutions overseen by I-O faculty without a financial burden. As we conclude with strategies for implementation, our aim is to encourage the I-O academic and graduate training community to consider ways to develop similar partnerships that support both the development of future I-O psychologists' competencies and the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations and the important work they do.

### Our nonprofit consulting experience in the I-O graduate classroom

Our experience with course-based nonprofit organization consulting occurred in the context of a graduate course focused on the science and practice of leadership. The faculty member teaching the course leveraged an existing partnership with a local nonprofit organization to create a course assignment involving student consulting groups tasked with developing targeted solutions for challenges identified in conversation with the nonprofit organization. Members from the nonprofit leadership team presented a series of challenges that they face, and students were encouraged to ask questions to further elicit information that would help them to understand their needs and constraints.

Following this presentation, the main consulting work began. The students were given time during class to work together in their consulting teams: They debriefed on the client's presentation of needs, discussed I-O concepts from the course that could be used to describe the particular challenges faced, brainstormed solutions grounded in I-O literature, worked to achieve consensus and distribute tasks within their teams, and communicated with the nonprofit to further refine ideas into solutions. The end of semester client deliverable included a 10-min presentation and solution portfolio given to the nonprofit client during class time, where the client was able to ask

questions and test implementation ideas. The client was inclined to adopt recommendations offered by one of the student teams (members of which are represented on this authorship team), leading to a collaboration lasting beyond the duration of the semester. Based on this experience, we provide insights on the benefits to the I-O students as well as the nonprofit organization below.

## **How graduate students can help nonprofit organizations**

### ***Expertise without financial burden***

Nonprofit organizations often face challenges in accessing professional services due to cost constraints. However, I-O graduate students represent a valuable resource to support organizational effectiveness as they can offer high quality consulting services without imposing a financial burden. According to the SIOP Graduate Training Guidelines (SIOP, 2016), there are 26 areas of competence (e.g., research methods, performance, leadership, organizational development, teams, motivation) involved in I-O psychology graduate training from which nonprofit organizations could benefit. When completing coursework involving real problems faced by nonprofits, graduate students can apply their knowledge and integrate their learning to provide support and generate solutions. This arrangement allows organizations to benefit from the expertise of I-O trainees without formal consulting costs.

### ***Access to faculty consultation***

I-O graduate students have a unique advantage when providing consulting services to nonprofit organizations: easy access to faculty consultation. Their proximity to professors, especially within the scope of a course project, provides opportunities for guidance and mentorship in addition to mastery over the academic literature. When working on course projects with nonprofit clients, I-O trainees can consult their instructor when reviewing organizational needs, analyzing potential solutions, and delivering reports. This access to faculty consultation enhances the value that graduate students bring to nonprofit organizations, as nonprofit partners benefit from not only the graduate students directly supporting them but also the faculty members supervising the projects.

### ***Introducing I-O perspectives to the organization***

By creating course-based project partnerships between graduate students and nonprofit organizations, I-O institutions can help to introduce nonprofits to the field of I-O psychology specifically, and to a scientific perspective more broadly, in a setting focused on learning and curiosity. This may allow for a more accessible introduction to concepts and approaches that nonprofits may not have realized were available or possible. Whereas nonprofits approached by consulting firms or other professional groups may worry about price tags or the motivations of outsiders, educational partnerships are often very familiar territory. By leveraging scientifically grounded approaches, nonprofit organizations can improve their overall effectiveness in carrying out their missions. As a result of this enhanced performance, stakeholders are likely to be inspired to increase their contributions, as they directly observe the positive impact and improved outcomes that arise from their investments. I-O graduate trainees can be expected to approach problem solving and provide recommendations grounded in scientific principles, prioritizing the validity and reliability of their methods. By engaging with graduate students who are mentored by experienced professors, nonprofits can leverage this scientific and I-O perspective to address the challenges they encounter in innovative ways. This application of I-O perspectives to benefit nonprofit operations and development also supports the stakeholders served by said nonprofit organizations, enhancing the broader impact of I-O psychology concepts, theories, and methods to society.

## How nonprofit organizations can support students

### ***Development of practical skills***

Course-based partnerships with nonprofit organizations serve as valuable platforms for I-O graduate students to hone practical skills necessary for success in their prospective careers. In these settings, students engage with stakeholders who articulate organizational challenges in their own words. Students must actively listen, comprehend the nuances of the situation, translate issues into scientific parlance, and devise potential solutions. It is not enough to have gained course-related knowledge; what students learn must also be applied. Subsequently, I-O student consultants must communicate their scientific work in a manner that is comprehensible and acceptable to the organization, accounting for constraints that may make it necessary to not only adapt I-O best practices but also know how to justify such choices. This process not only enhances their scientific acumen but also fosters the development of critical soft skills, including effective stakeholder communication and relationship management.

Nonprofit organizations frequently encounter an array of challenges, thereby affording students unique opportunities to grapple with complex issues and cultivate adaptive problem-solving abilities that can influence their future performance in I-O positions. Pierce and Gardner (2004) assert that an individual's self-esteem, shaped by their work and organizational experiences, exerts a significant influence on intrinsic motivation, work-related attitudes, and job satisfaction. As I-O students engage in meaningful work with nonprofit organization clients, their experiences not only contribute to the organizations' goals but also have the potential to positively impact their confidence in applying I-O concepts.

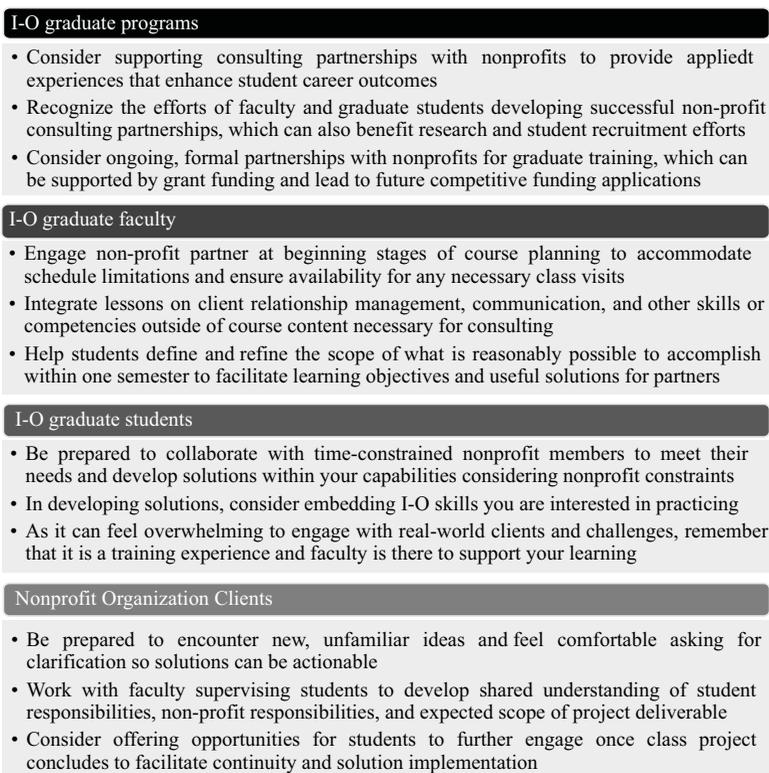
### ***Networking and career advancement***

Across organizational contexts, whether voluntary or corporate, establishing connections and cultivating professional networks with diverse organization stakeholders are pivotal endeavors. Such engagements augment students' communication skills and broaden their professional networks. By participating in nonprofit consulting experiences, students gain opportunities to interact with professionals in other fields, learn and practice communication strategies, and expand their network. I-O graduate students who develop strong solutions for their course project may be asked by the nonprofit organization to assist in implementing their ideas through internships, grant development, or volunteer positions within the organization.

In addition, many students who commence their graduate studies immediately after completing their undergraduate degrees lack relevant work experiences. As their knowledge deepens in the field, coursework that facilitates collaborations with nonprofit organizations can provide an auspicious foundation for accruing practical experiences applicable to future I-O roles. Engaging in projects with nonprofits enables I-O students to amass the types of experiences that are attractive to future employers. These experiences serve as tangible evidence of their ability to apply I-O knowledge and skills in real-world settings, serving as competitive content for resumes, work samples, and job interviews.

### ***Developing a foundation for future I-O volunteer work***

The focal article addresses the benefits to I-O professionals of contributing pro-bono work to nonprofit organizations. The partnerships we describe here entail I-O student experiences embedded within assigned coursework and therefore would not constitute voluntary work in the same way. However, by embedding such experiences in I-O graduate training, I-O programs can help students develop a foundation of familiarity with and expertise in the type of voluntary work as described in the focal article. As a result, I-O professionals who received training that included nonprofit consulting experiences may be better equipped to conduct I-O work that supports



**Figure 1.** Recommendations for I-O Graduate Training Partnerships with Nonprofit Organizations.

beneficial societal outcomes. Nevertheless, course-based nonprofit work can provide a similar experience to volunteer work that enhances I-O graduate trainee professional growth and facilitates tangible employment outcomes like enhancing career prospects or acquiring new skills (Giancaspro & Manuti, 2021). Just as engaging in volunteering provides individuals with a valuable opportunity to enhance their social and transferable skills, participate in informal and nonformal learning, and boost their employability (Kameråde & Ellis Paine, 2014; Otero et al., 2007), so too can these experiences within graduate training benefit I-O students.

### **Implementation strategies for I-O graduate training and nonprofit partnerships**

Although collaborations between nonprofit organizations and I-O students offer several benefits, planning and preparation will be necessary to implement such partnerships successfully. We acknowledge that the implementation of student consulting projects within I-O graduate courses in partnership with nonprofit organizations may pose challenges, such as the need for busy nonprofit leaders or representatives to communicate with student teams. Given that nonprofit leaders have limited time and attention, graduate faculty will need to support students with the tools necessary to develop actionable solutions that offer a return on the nonprofit's investment in I-O graduate training. Therefore, we propose the following suggestions for I-O graduate training and nonprofit organization partnerships based on our own experience conducting such work and provide implementation recommendations in Figure 1.

**Graduate program involvement**

I-O graduate programs can play a crucial role in facilitating graduate training and nonprofit organization partnerships. By leveraging their networks and connections, graduate program administrators and faculty can actively engage organizations in class projects. Graduate programs can also showcase the consulting work completed by I-O students in support of nonprofit organizations during graduate coursework. In future iterations, graduate programs may consider ongoing partnerships with nonprofit organizations that more formally integrate such collaborations into the curriculum.

**Student initiative**

Students with a genuine interest in collaborating with nonprofit organizations and leveraging nonprofit consulting experiences in their coursework should take proactive steps to engage meaningfully in such opportunities. When graduate programs and faculty provide opportunities to engage in consulting experiences with nonprofit organizations, students who are willing to invest time into developing a trusting relationship with the client and genuinely addressing the client's needs will be more likely to have rewarding experiences that reveal additional opportunities. For instance, our own partnership has led to projects with I-O graduate students contributing to the distribution, analysis, and reporting of nonprofit membership surveys and leadership strategic planning initiatives.

**Nonprofit organization outreach**

Nonprofit organizations can actively seek the assistance of I-O graduate students by introducing their organization and the potential opportunities available. By reaching out to I-O graduate programs and faculty, nonprofit leadership can connect with motivated students who are seeking hands-on experiences and are eager to contribute to meaningful projects. Leaders or other representatives from nonprofit organizations will need to be prepared to commit time and energy to supporting the project so that students can access the information they need to develop meaningful solutions. Nonprofit organizations that offer subject matter experts for students to speak to, provide opportunities for students to gain additional familiarity with the organization's mission and operations, and otherwise create a pathway for student engagement with the organization will be providing graduate trainees with mechanisms to generate helpful solutions that reflect the true needs and constraints of the organization.

**Conclusion**

This commentary has shed light on the valuable contributions that I-O psychology graduate students can make to nonprofit organizations and the stakeholders they serve while also highlighting the advantages I-O trainees can gain from engaging in meaningful work with real-world challenges. Although nonprofit organizations are faced with financial constraints that normally limit their ability to benefit from the types of services that I-O psychologists can provide, this hurdle can be overcome through partnerships with I-O graduate trainees. This work is important for I-Os, too. Nonprofit organizations represent a significant proportion of the employment sector (Gee et al., 2022) and are established with the purpose of serving the community and society at large, and they are required to deliver public benefits (Salamon, 2012). Therefore, these organizations represent a form of critical social infrastructure for society. As a result, I-O graduate students who work with nonprofit organizations toward their charitable missions can meaningfully contribute to societal well-being and resilience in a way that elevates.

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