

NONPROFITS



Jay Westcott/Examiner

Shahab Ibrahim, left, talks with Kim Richmond on Friday about an upcoming class on the campus of the University of the District of Columbia in Washington. American Humanics, a nonprofit certification program available nationwide, is offered to students at UDC and at Howard University.

Recruitment through education

Program trains students for nonprofit work

BY DUSTIN WEAVER

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When Alaina Epperson first joined American Humanics in November 2003, she encountered an eclectic collection of academic disciplines. Students majoring in public administration, Spanish, psychology, political science and even archaeology had made their way into the program, united by one common drive.

"Everyone was passionate about something," said Epperson.

American Humanics is a nonprofit certification program offered at more than 70 colleges and universities across the nation. Locally, the program is offered at the University of the District of Columbia and at Howard University.

"In some respects we feel like one of the best-kept secrets in the city," said Sylvia Benatti, campus executive director of the American Humanics program at the University of the District of Columbia. "I'll go and speak to business executives and they will say, 'Wow! I had no idea this program was here,' and they get really ex-

QUICK FACTS

- Founded in 1948 and headquartered in Kansas City
- Requires a 300-hour internship with a nonprofit
- Has certified more than 3,000 students nationwide

cited about it."

Tools of the trade

The American Humanics curriculum is designed to prepare students for a career in the nonprofit sector, covering real-world topics like board development, volunteer management and fundraising.

Bill Bentley, executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Points of Light Foundation and a member of American Humanics board of directors, says graduates of the program are of immense value to nonprofit employers.

"They are more prepared to step in and take on responsibilities; you have less of a learning curve. They understand conceptually what nonprofits are all about," Bentley said.

One of the biggest challenges for the program is convincing students that the nonprofit sector offers real opportunity.

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"[You tell students], it's not just that you go to nonprofits because the right corporate job wasn't there. You can make a decent wage, you can serve mankind and you can do something that is fulfilling." — Sylvia Benatti, campus executive director of American Humanics at UDC

you can serve mankind and you can do something that is fulfilling," Benatti said.

Richard Potter, vice president of development and communications at American Humanics, said the program's nonprofit partners alone have 11,000 new entry-level positions to fill every year.

"There is great demand in the sector, and right now the positions are being filled by default instead of by intention. We're trying to change that," Potter said.

"The nonprofit sector is facing the same baby-boomer turnover as the rest of America," Benatti said. "We are in need of a whole new generation to lead the nonprofit sector and lead it well."

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KENT ALLEN
Capital charity



What's in a name?

The word "nonprofit" conjures up favorable themes — charity, help and kindheartedness.

But just because an organization calls itself — or even receives official designation as — a nonprofit does not confer on it a halo for all time.

Case in point. In recent years, the IRS has had in its sights dozens of credit-counseling firms that advertise themselves as "nonprofit" but don't necessarily follow the spirit of traditional charities. The federal tax agency says that either the firms in question are too closely allied with associated for-profit companies or that the nonprofits' principals benefit handsomely from the fees imposed on clients.

Dating from the 1960s, the first credit-counseling firms were affiliated with national organizations that set standards and practices. Such reputable groups, which include education of the client as a major part of their missions, still exist.

But in the past decade or so, according to the National Consumer Law Center, many new firms have largely abandoned the counseling and education part of the equation and focused aggressively on debt management plans that charge upfront fees for services, a rarity in the counseling industry's infancy.

With so many nonprofit counselors under the gun, the Maryland legislature this year took up bills that would have, among other overhaul measures, allowed for-profit firms to set up shop. Fee limitations and increased state oversight were included in final passage, but the

for-profit language was stripped. Consumer groups helped lead the charge against allowing for-profits because, they claimed, the very organizations that are under scrutiny would simply go the for-profit route.

Yet now there is worry that counseling help will be less available because of the tighter provisions placed on nonprofits. This is particularly significant with the approach of October, when a more stringent federal personal bankruptcy law takes effect. Among the requirements is that those filing for bankruptcy must retain the services of a credit counselor.

According to the Maryland Consumer Rights Coalition, the state's attorney general and commissioner of financial regulation are to study the effects of for-profit status and report back next year.

Virginia allows for-profit counseling, though it has coupled that with tougher regulation. Supporters say the state, through its Corporation Commission, can provide effective oversight as for-profit firms are allowed into the industry.

The District of Columbia does not allow for-profit counseling.

The Consumer Federation of America is troubled by the trend toward for-profit status.

"Nonprofit organizations are required to provide counseling and education services under detailed IRS rules," it says. "For-profit firms do not have to meet these federal requirements."

Got a tip or other newsworthy item about local charity? Send it to allendnkk@rcn.com.

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