

HWS 2025
MAN 675: Selected Challenges in Nonprofit Management
Focus Topic: Democratic Governance
(Last update: August 2025)

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1 Course Description

In recent years, nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have garnered growing interest not only for their role in addressing societal and environmental challenges but also for their internal governance and structure. Unlike for-profit firms, NPOs are not primarily driven by profit maximization. This opens up space for alternative forms of organizing that challenge conventional hierarchical structures and provide room for participatory and democratic governance. But how do such organizational forms work in practice? And what are their potentials and limitations?

This seminar investigates democratic organizational forms within the nonprofit sector. We begin by exploring broader concepts of governance and organizational design, with a particular focus on how they manifest in nonprofit contexts. We then dive deeper into democratic governance practices such as member participation, inclusive decision-making, and distributed leadership, drawing on recent empirical studies published in leading nonprofit and organizational journals.

Throughout the course, students will examine a range of nonprofit organizations that experiment with democratic principles in their structures and processes. By engaging critically with theoretical perspectives and case-based research, students will gain insights into the organizational implications of democratization efforts and their capacity to foster accountability, legitimacy, and organizational resilience.

This seminar does not aim to prescribe one “ideal” form of organizing but rather to expose students to ongoing debates about power, participation, and purpose in organizations. Through both academic readings and practical examples, students will be encouraged to reflect on how democratic governance can shape not only internal organizational life but also the broader role of nonprofits in society.

2 Learning and Qualification Outcome

The course has objectives in three domains: organizational design, strategic planning, and critical thinking. By the end of the module, students will have acquired competencies in all three domains:

In the organizational design domain, students will be able to:

- (1) explain the framework conditions and theoretical foundations of power structures within organizations, particularly in the nonprofit sector;
- (2) describe the characteristics and theoretical underpinnings of democratic and participatory organizational forms in nonprofits;
- (3) critically reflect on the strengths and challenges of democratic organizational forms and governance models;

In the strategic planning domain, students will be able to:

- (4) analyze situations from the point of view of multiple stakeholders;
- (5) analyze how these diverse stakeholders shape organizational processes and decision-making in democratically organized nonprofits;
- (6) evaluate alternative courses of action considering multiple criteria such as legitimacy, participation, efficiency, and social impact;

- (7) develop creative and context-sensitive implementation approaches to strengthen democratic governance in nonprofit organizations;

In the critical thinking domain, students will be able to:

- (8) analyze and understand divergent views arising from different stakeholder values and interests;
- (9) identify common ground and compromises in ambiguous, complex, and controversial problems.

Additionally, students will develop key competencies such as presentation skills, teamwork, working with academic literature, and the ability to analyze and communicate practical management challenges systematically.

3 Organizational Information

The time frame of the seminar: 03rd of September 2025 until 03rd of December 2025

Deadlines: See timetable page 7 for details

Form of assessment: Presentation (group work; 40 %),
Learning diary (individual work, 10%),
Essay (individual work; 50 %)

Registration: Central registration through Portal2 (seats: 24)
Note: After the first session, a binding examination registration is mandatory until Monday, 08th of September 2025, noon via ILIAS.

Course materials: ILIAS

Credits: 6 ECTS (= 180 working hours: attendance of seminar (about 25)
+ preparation for sessions (about 30)
+ preparation and presentation of case study (about 45)
+ preparation of learning diary (about 20)
+ writing seminar paper (about 60))

Contact Details

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Office hours: Upon appointment (usually Thursday morning)

4 Course Details

The seminar starts on Thursday, 03rd of September 2025. The seminar consists of two parts.

First, we will engage in input sessions that combine theoretical and practical perspectives. These sessions are designed to develop a shared understanding of key concepts such as power, governance, democracy, and organizational design in the nonprofit context. We will critically examine selected scientific articles to explore the theoretical foundations of governance and organizing in nonprofit organizations. To complement this theoretical foundation, we will engage in interactive simulations that allow us to experience first-hand how organizational culture, power dynamics, and stakeholder structures influence decision-making in purpose-driven organizations. The input sessions will be structured as facilitated discussions.

Second, the seminar will include case-based class sessions that center around real-world consulting scenarios. In these sessions, student teams will present their recommendations based on a consulting case, acting as external advisors proposing how a nonprofit can enable more democratic governance structures. The remaining students will take on the roles of organizational decision-makers or other relevant stakeholders. This interactive format encourages critical engagement with the complexities of governance reform in nonprofit organizations. Unlike traditional case-based courses, we do not use these cases merely to illustrate a previously introduced theory. Rather, the cases present complex, ambiguous, and often contested real-world situations in which students must draw on both theoretical insights and practical reasoning to develop viable solutions. In doing so, the course aims to foster strategic thinking and critical reflection under conditions of uncertainty.

The seminar's timetable with a detailed outline of the course details can be found on page 7.

4.1 General Requirements of the Students

The contents of the seminar will be largely based on current scientific literature as well as case studies. Reading scientific articles, their critical discussion, and interactive elements are essential parts of this seminar. The case study presentations and preparation for these sessions are also, core to the seminar. Consequently, thorough preparation, good time management, and self-discipline are mandatory for the satisfactory completion of the module. The course language is English. Also, the current scientific literature we will discuss in class is in English. Therefore, mastery of the English language is a basic requirement for participation in the course.

The prerequisite for a successful completion of the seminar is regular attendance. Excused absence during seminar sessions is allowed for a maximum of 180 minutes, except in sessions where students must present.

4.2 Proof of Performance and Requirements for the Examination Portfolio

The proof of performance consists of the presentation of a case study (40 %), the creation of a learning diary (10 %), and a written essay (50 %). The exact requirements for the individual components of the examination portfolio are presented in the following sections.

Table 1 gives you an overview of the examination portfolio.

Table 1. Examination Portfolio MAN 675, Fall Term 2025.

What	Medium	Scope	Modus	Share	Deadline (for all)
Case study presentation	Presentation	max. 25 min.	Group work	40%	Monday, 27.10.2025, noon
Learning diary	Text	max. 0.5 to 0.75 pages per session	Individual work	10%	Weekly Friday at noon, starting on 12.09.2025
Essay	Text	2,000 words	Individual work	50%	Monday, 12.01.2026, noon
Total				100%	

4.2.1 Requirements for the Learning Diary

The goal of the learning diary is to reflect on the seminar's content. Students will have to hand in a written reflection of roughly 0.5 to 0.75 pages per session, following the guidelines of the chair (found on ILIAS & chair website). The learning diary aims to enhance the learning atmosphere by offering students the opportunity to reflect on the contents of the seminar and to further develop the seminar through feedback. Guiding questions that could aid in reflecting on the sessions are:

- (1) What is the most relevant insight you have gained today?
- (2) What came as a surprise to you?
- (3) Which further questions do you have at the end of this session?
- (4) What should be done, maintained, or changed so that we can learn well and successfully in the future?

These questions build a possible foundation for the learning diary and can be replaced. Also, not all of them must be answered every session. Students will have to hand in their learning diary document via ILIAS on the Friday after a session (i.e., for the first session, the learning diary must be handed in on Friday, the 12th of September, for the second session, the 19th of September, and so on; see timetable on page 7 for more detail).

4.2.2 Requirements for the Presentation of a Case Study

The students present a consultant case in which they are tasked to develop a concept for integrating democratic structures in a nonprofit case. They should show that they understood the challenges that the management team is confronted with (potential problems, challenges & opportunities; *U*). The students should present an introduction to the case and the core problem at hand followed by an outline of what the organization should do to address this issue (potential solutions; *S*), an evaluation of these solutions (choice; *C*), and a course of conduct (implementation plan; *T*) on how the organizational transformation could be established based on the input from the theory sessions.

While working on the case, students should follow the Marshall School of Business's "USC-CT" framework¹ for critical thinking, as the problems at hand are typically deeply ambiguous and cannot be solved by some kind of simple calculation. The framework comprises the following contents:

- U: Uncover the various potential problems, challenges & opportunities vis-à-vis organizational goals.
- S: Select the most critical problem(s), challenge(s), and/or opportunity(ies). Prioritize.
- C: Create a multitude of potential solutions.
- C: Choose the solution(s) that have the potential to be the most effective.
- T: Translate your solution(s) into an effective implementation plan.

The case study presentation should be a PowerPoint presentation and should not exceed 25 minutes and must be in English. It should be clear which students contributed what part to the presentation. Understanding of the case study, critical discussion, persuasiveness of the recommended solution, and clarity of the presentation will be evaluated. What is expected of you for the case presentation will be further explicated in the kick-off session.

The lecturer will allocate the cases and groups according to content preferences submitted with the "Form for seminar registration and theme preferences" until Monday, 08.09.2025, noon via ILIAS, and will communicate the final allocations via ILIAS.

4.2.3 Requirements for the Written Seminar Essay

Following their in-class presentation, students are required to submit an individual written case report (max. 2,000 words, excluding references). The report should build on their presentation and incorporate class feedback. The analysis must apply relevant theoretical frameworks of democratic organizing and nonprofit governance drawn from scientific articles and follow the USC-CT problem-solving model: Uncover, Select, Create, Choose, Translate. A strong case report demonstrates critical engagement with the literature (min. 4 academic sources), a sound understanding of the organization and its context, and a systematic, well-reasoned proposal for governance transformation.

Assessment criteria are the content, particularly the critical discussion of a real-life challenge, considering suitable theoretical concepts, a systematic approach, scientific language, and formal aspects of the thesis. The seminar work must follow the guidelines provided by the chair (found on ILIAS & chair website). The detailed outline and guiding questions for the seminar will be uploaded during the semester to ILIAS.

¹ <https://students.marshall.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2020-01/5-Step-USC-CT-Problem-Solving-Process.pdf>

5 Literature

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640221111011>

6 Timetable

Last update: August 2025, changes may occur throughout the semester

Date	Time	Place	Session	Content	Readings
Wed, 03.09.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Kick-off session	Administration, introduction	-
Mon, 09.09.2023	noon	on ILIAS	Deadline signing up for seminar		
Wed, 10.09.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Theory session 1	Foundations	Mandatory Ghoshal (2005) Optional Jensen & Meckling (1976)
Fri, 12.09.2025	noon	on ILIAS	Upload learning diary entry theory session 1		
Wed, 17.09.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Theory session 2	The power of organizations	Mandatory Amis, Mair & Munir (2020) Optional Chapter 1 & 2 of Haveman (2022)
Fri, 19.09.2025	noon	on ILIAS	Upload learning diary entry theory session 2		
Wed, 24.09.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Simulation 1	Power simulation	Mandatory Preparation of instructions
Fri, 26.09.2025	noon	on ILIAS	Upload learning diary entry simulation 1		
Wed, 01.10.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Theory session 3	Democratic governance in NPOs I	Mandatory Guo et al. (2014) AND Renz et al. (2023) Optional Battilana et al. (2025)
Fri, 09.10.2025	noon	on ILIAS	Upload learning diary entry theory session 3		
Wed, 08.10.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	No session	-	-
Tue, 14.10.2025	Ind. slots	EO 250	Presentation consultation	-	-
Wed, 15.10.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Theory session 4	Democratic governance in NPOs II	Mandatory King & Griffin (2024) AND Dekker (2019) Optional Hohensinn et al. (2024)
Fri, 17.10.2025	noon	on ILIAS	Upload learning diary entry theory session 4		
Wed, 22.10.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Reflection & Simulation 2	-	Mandatory Reading of case material
Fri, 24.10.2025	noon	on ILIAS	Upload learning diary entry simulation 2		
Mon, 27.10.2025	noon	on ILIAS	Deadline group project: Presentation		
Wed, 29.10.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Case session 1	Case presentations	Mandatory Reading of case material (uploaded on ILIAS)
Fri, 31.10.2025	noon	on ILIAS	Upload learning diary entry case session 1		
Wed, 05.11.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Case session 2	Case presentations	Mandatory Reading of case material (uploaded on ILIAS)
Fri, 07.11.2025	noon	on ILIAS	Upload learning diary entry case session 2		

Wed, 12.11.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Case session 3	Case presentations	Mandatory Reading of case material (uploaded on ILIAS)
<i>Fri, 14.11.2025</i>	<i>noon</i>	<i>on ILIAS</i>	<i>Upload learning diary entry case session 3</i>		
Thur, 19.11.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Case session 4	Case presentations	Mandatory Reading of case material (uploaded on ILIAS)
<i>Fri, 21.11.2025</i>	<i>noon</i>	<i>on ILIAS</i>	<i>Upload learning diary entry case session 4</i>		
Wed, 26.11.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Practitioner talk	Tba.	-
Wed, 03.12.2025	10:30 – 11:45	EO 256	Wrap-up session	Summary seminar, Q&A for seminar paper	-
<i>Mon, 12.01.2026</i>	<i>noon</i>	<i>on ILIAS</i>	<i>Deadline individual work: Essay</i>		