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## **They *Pay* People to Work Here? The Role of Volunteering on Nonprofit Career Awareness and Interest**

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Individuals have several possible points of introduction into the nonprofit sector including parental socialization, volunteering, and academic engagement. However, little is known in regard to how individuals learn about the nonprofit sector as a place of employment and become interested in nonprofit careers. Individuals are often exposed to nonprofit “work” for the first time as a volunteer. This research examines the particular experiences nonprofit employees had prior to their entry into the sector that may have influenced their selection of a nonprofit career. Results of this mixed-methods inquiry indicate that volunteering is an important conduit, as it allows people to see that paid employment exists in the nonprofit sector and allows them to better understand the various career options and career trajectories available to them. Finally, this paper discusses the practical implications for nonprofit practitioners and academic advisors, and their roles in connecting service to career.

Keywords: Nonprofit Careers, Volunteering, Happenstance Learning Theory

### **Introduction**

#### *A Changing Nonprofit Workforce*

Research has provided a considerable amount of data about the nonprofit workforce, both globally as well as at the individual level. In 2003, the nonprofit workforce in the United States included 12.7 million people. By 2013, the sector employed more than 14.4 million people, comprising over 10.6% of the total workforce in the United States. The nonprofit sector workforce grew by 14% growth between 2003 and 2013. Nonprofit employees earned a total of \$634 billion in wages during that time, making the nonprofit sector the nation’s third-largest employer (McKeever, Dietz, & Fyffe, 2016; Salamon, Sokolowski, & Geller, 2012). The sector’s growth outpaced that of the private sector, even when accounting for the impacts of the 2008 recession. Unpaid volunteer labor also contributes substantially to the nonprofit workforce, with over 62.8 million individuals (or 25.3% of the population) over the age of 16, volunteering for nonprofits. Collectively, the work of these volunteers was worth \$179.24 billion in 2014 (McKeever, 2015).

Alongside overall growth of the nonprofit workforce, general workforce demographics are changing. The Baby Boomer generation is the largest generation in the history of the United States, consisting of approximately 80 million Americans. With the youngest members of that generation hovering around the age of 55 in 2015, a wave of retirements is upon us and some are calling this the “silver tsunami” because of its impact on all facets of the economy. This is reflected in the nonprofit workforce as well. Nearly 73% of current nonprofit leaders belong to the Boomer generation, with 55% over the age of 50 (Hull Teegarden, 2004). Research shows that this generation will transition out of the sector in two waves, with one wave beginning in 2010 (although the researchers at that time could not have been aware of the impending economic crisis) and another peaking in 2020 as the last half of the Boomers reach traditional retirement age (Hull Teegarden, 2004).

At the individual level, researchers have found nonprofit employees to be more intrinsically motivated than their peers in the public and for-profit sectors. Nonprofit employees particularly enjoy the contribution their work makes to their communities (Benz, 2005; Leete, 2006; Light, 2002; Lyons, Duxbury, & Higgins, 2006; Mirvis & Hackett, 1983; Onyx & Maclean, 1996; Preston, 1990). Nonprofit employees also volunteer more than their for-profit and public sector peers (Hansen, Huggins, & Ban, 2003; Lee, 2012; Lee & Wilkins, 2011; Light, 2002; Park & Word, 2009; Rotolo & Wilson, 2006; Wuthnow, 1994). These data show that those working in the nonprofit sector not only demonstrate a commitment to service in their professional lives, they do so in their personal lives as well.

#### *Implications of Sector Growth on the Workforce*

The growth of the nonprofit sector, combined with the impending retirement of the Boomer generation, will create the need for better (and more deliberate) recruiting strategies. Significant workforce shortages will occur in the nonprofit sector and staff will be needed to cover the retirement of the Baby Boomers, the increase in capacity due to changes in policy, as well as the overall increase in the number of nonprofits that are formed each year (Casner-Lotto, 2007; Kunreuther & Corvington, 2007; Tierney, 2006).

Although the shortages Tierney (2006) and colleagues (Kunreuther & Corvington, 2007) discuss reflect the impacts on executive-level staff, and not those occurring at the entry level, it is reasonable to assume that at least a portion of future nonprofit managers will be promoted either internally or from other nonprofit organizations, thus creating a chain of vacancies. Internal promotions could create an upward cascade opening positions at the entry level. This is the case when positions are filled internally *or* externally, as the chain of vacancies is created in another organization by an employee leaving his or her position (White, 1970). Further, it is remiss to assume that older employees work only in the executive function. The need for qualified staff will be felt in all organizations, at all levels.

Although we know a fair bit about the nonprofit workforce in terms of demographics and motivation, there is still much to learn. In particular, little is known about how individuals initially become aware of careers in the nonprofit sector, especially when the idea of a nonprofit career is not necessarily something that is well known or understood. After all, most children do not typically say that they want to be a development officer when they grow up. Unplanned events that expose individuals to the work of the sector are a common point of introduction to nonprofit careers (Flanigan, 2010; Nelson, 2017; Schlosser, McPhee, & Forsyth, 2017). Understanding specifically which events have more, or less, influence on this awareness will allow nonprofits to better target potential populations of individuals in their recruitment efforts. This should ensure that an adequate number of nonprofit professionals are being hired and trained to fill future

positions of leadership. Thus, this research explores the role of volunteering as a chance event that introduces individuals to the work of the nonprofit sector.

## **Literature Review**

### *Nonprofit Career Awareness*

With a looming employment shortage, scholars of nonprofit studies have begun to take notice of entry and employment into the nonprofit workforce. Previous research has shown several mechanisms and patterns that serve as a general introduction to the nonprofit sector for individuals. These include volunteerism, service-learning, and socialization (Aronson, 1999; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Bekkers, 2004; Bekkers, 2007; Erikson, 1968; Flanigan, 2010; Hackett, Esposito, & O'Halloran, 1989; Janoski, Musick, & Wilson, 1998; Janoski & Wilson, 1995; Jones & Abes, 2004; Kelman, 1961; Nemenoff, 2013; Onyx & Maclean, 1996; Stritch & Christensen, 2016). Each of these mechanisms also has the ability to create awareness of, and interest in, careers in the nonprofit sector. This research connects those mechanisms through the overarching framework of happenstance learning theory (HLT), which suggests that career development and selection are often the products of learning from chance events. Specifically, this literature review examines the role of volunteering as a chance event that leads to nonprofit career awareness. The literature review also examines volunteering as a “socializer” to the work of the nonprofit sector.

These lines of inquiry are independently developed since there has been no research that has analyzed the interconnectedness and effects of these experiences on nonprofit career awareness or career decision-making. Additionally, literature about career decision-making has yet to focus on the nonprofit sector, specifically. Thus, there is a lack of scholarship that identifies the impact of early-life experiences on awareness of, and interest in, paid employment in the nonprofit sector.

### *Volunteering and the Nonprofit Workforce*

There are ideological similarities between nonprofit employees and those who volunteer on a regular basis. These similarities may create a natural talent pool from which to hire. Both nonprofit employees and volunteers are motivated by their values and beliefs and both claim that service is an integral part of their identity as an adult (Bekkers, 2004; Finkelstein, Penner, & Brannick, 2005; Rose-Ackerman, 1996; Selznik, 1992). The importance of community engagement and volunteering extends beyond giving and continued engagement as individuals age; these experiences not only give people hands-on experience, but also provides them with insight into the working world of nonprofit organizations.

The benefits of volunteering can be mutual: for the nonprofit, volunteers help carry out key tasks of programming, fundraising, and administration and they have the opportunity to “pre-screen” potential job candidates (Edwards, Mooney, & Heald, 2001). For the volunteer, he or she can learn on-the-job training, gain a widened professional network, and learn more about a particular organization (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Lubove, 1965; Musick & Wilson, 2008). Volunteers are also able to see how their skill sets and knowledge can contribute to a nonprofit’s service delivery. Research has confirmed that some volunteers do seek employment in the nonprofit sector after meaningful and successful volunteer experiences (Houston, 2006; Lee, 2009). However, if volunteers are to see their experience as an introduction to employment opportunities in the sector their assignments must be relevant and meaningful, and they must allow volunteers to contribute to the overall organizational mission in some capacity. The next section discusses the influence that volunteering can have on nonprofit career development.

*HLT and Volunteering*

Several psychological theories point to the importance of socialization on eventual career decisions. Social learning theory asserts that individual action is explained by the interaction of personal and environmental determinants (Bandura, 1977). Happenstance learning theory, a derivative of social learning theory, suggests that human behavior and eventual career selection is the result of learning experiences that are created in both planned and unplanned situations (Krumboltz, 2009, p. 135). Moreover, career selection is not a product of one of these influences at one point in time but is instead the result of accumulated environmental and learning experiences and influences that shape preferences over time. In essence, the propositions of HLT include an inherent assumption that people are subject to unpredictable environmental events that shape not only their available opportunities but also the way they perceive and react to situations (Krumboltz, 2009; Krumboltz & Levin, 2010; Mitchell, Jones, & Krumboltz, 1979). This is particularly salient for paid careers in the nonprofit sector, as they tend to be a relatively unknown entity and are often the result of chance events—not intentional choices (Flanigan, 2010; Nelson, 2017; Schlosser, McPhee, & Forsyth, 2017). The sections below examine the theoretical relationship between volunteering and career development through the lens of HLT.

*Genetic Endowment.* Genetic endowment describes how qualities like gender, age or generation, and race or ethnicity may limit or enhance an individual's occupational aspirations and choices (Betz, 1986; Betz & Hackett, 1981; Datti, 2009; Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976). People are inclined or disinclined to enter particular career fields because of attractive options available to them. Women, for example, might be more likely to seek or obtain employment in certain fields because they feel more successful in that work (Betz, 1986; Betz & Hackett, 1981). In contrast, a female high school student might be interested in engineering, but might not be encouraged to learn more about that line of work or accepted in that classroom environment by other students or teachers. As a result, the student may not pursue additional coursework due to the socialized perception of barriers to entry and/or the negative experiences in the classroom. Access to careers can also be defined by age or generation. For example, someone from the Silent Generation would have been unlikely to seek a career in nanotechnology when he or she was younger, and someone from younger generations probably would not find a career as a lamplighter today, simply because these jobs would not exist when these individuals were entering the workforce.

*Environmental Influences.* Young people are initially socialized into volunteering either through their family or other influential individuals within their environment (Bekkers, 2007; Finkelstein, Penner, & Brannick, 2005; Hustinx, Cnaan, & Handy, 2010; Janoski et al., 1998; Rosenthal, Feiring, & Lewis, 1998; Sundeen & Raskoff, 1994; Wilson & Musick, 1999; Wuthnow, 1995; Yates & Youniss, 1998; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999). Happenstance learning theory suggests the same is true for careers. A family's values communicate a certain set of preferences to a child, which then present a set of career options based on those preferences (Aronson, 1999; Erikson, 1968; Hackett et al., 1989; Kelman, 1961). Heavy parental engagement in the local community should communicate a desire to help others and participate in the betterment of society. Biggerstaff (2000) found that those entering the field of social work did so, in part, because of personal and family experiences. Those exposed to the profession early in life expressed values closely aligned with a career in the field.

Community, defined broadly, plays an important role in one's career choices as well. Community provides both opportunity and restrictions in terms of career selection. For example, if a community has an active and thriving nonprofit sector, there will likely be more opportunity to volunteer or interact with nonprofits. However, if a community is less focused on service or has few opportunities to engage, young people may have less of a connection to the work of the

nonprofit sector. Further, a community's schools may provide opportunities for service via service-learning, required service hours, or even in-class modules on service and helping others. Each of these community contexts determines a person's exposure to, and interaction with, the nonprofit sector and the concept of nonprofit work.

*Learning Experiences.* Individuals learn to value volunteering and service (or not) based on positive or negative feedback from those around them. Similarly, instrumental and associative learning experiences can also help connect volunteering to the concept of a nonprofit career (Krumboltz et al., 1976). For example, a volunteer is able to apply professional expertise while working on a task and is recognized for a job well done or feels a sense of pride or accomplishment for helping his/her community. Instrumental learning indicates that the volunteer will likely continue volunteering, given the positive reinforcement and feeling of competency and accomplishment. In contrast, a volunteer may be assigned a menial task e.g., filing or cleaning up after an event, and form a distaste for that particular organization or for service in general. Another possible outcome could be the inability to make a connection between paid employment and a specific nonprofit organization because volunteer tasks are not clearly linked to the work of a paid professional in the organization.

Associative learning gives credence to the idea that external sources will lead to positive or negative attitudes about occupations (Palladino Schultheiss, Palma, & Manzi, 2005). If a volunteer works closely with nonprofit staff on mission-congruent work, not only may he or she be introduced to the concept of paid work in the nonprofit sector, associative learning will allow that volunteer to be able to make judgments about whether that particular career is one that might be of interest to him or her (Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976; Mitchell, Jones, & Krumboltz, 1979). The converse can also be true: complaints about the work, or a distrust of the nonprofit sector, can yield negative associations (Taylor, Harris, & Taylor, 2004).

The final component of the model is a composite of the first three components, which shows that as individuals process these learning experiences from chance events, he or she is able to make generalizations about how to perform tasks in comparison with others (Krumboltz et al., 1976; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002). Individuals form predictions about future work based on self-observation and the world around them and then acquire skills or engage in activities that lead toward career entry. In other words, individuals select careers that match what they believe are areas of personal achievement and reflective of their personal values and experiences (Krumboltz et al., 1976; Tschirhart, Reed, Freeman, & Anker, 2008).

*Chance Events.* It is unlikely that the majority of young people enter into volunteer experiences with the goal of obtaining a job in the nonprofit sector. Rather, they learn about the organization and the opportunities available within that organization by chance, which plays a role in influencing major life changes and decisions (Bandura, 1982; Betsworth & Hanson, 1996; Bright, Pryor, & Harpham, 2005a; Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, & Earl, 2005b; Guindon & Hanna, 2002; Hirschi, 2010; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Krumboltz, 1998; Krumboltz, 2009; Krumboltz & Levin, 2010; Miller, 1983; Roe & Baruch, 1967). Happenstance learning theory (Krumboltz, 2009; Krumboltz & Levin, 2010) can provide insights into relationship between volunteers and nonprofit career awareness. In particular, volunteers may suddenly see that paid employment in the nonprofit sector is a viable career opportunity, as indicated in the examples above. Others might choose nonprofit careers because of an inability to find work elsewhere. As a result, they may stay in the nonprofit sector because they discovered that the work was enjoyable (Flanigan, 2010). It is by chance, not intentional decision-making that these individuals learned about the nonprofit workforce. This paper explores the relationship between volunteering and careers in the nonprofit sector.

## **Methods**

This exploratory study utilized a mixed-methods approach via cross-sectional survey that includes both qualitative and quantitative measures. The instrument incorporated three previously validated surveys into the current iteration (Biggerstaff, 2000; Clary & Miller, 1986; Fenzel & Peyrot, 2005). The purpose of the study is to assess the relationships between early-life and pre-career experiences (volunteering specifically) and nonprofit career awareness and interest among a sample of members of a national nonprofit association. The questions posed are:

- *How do people become interested in nonprofit careers?*
- *In what ways does volunteering provide a connection to nonprofit careers?*

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants in this research were members of four randomly selected chapters of the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network (YNPN). Members were invited to participate in an online survey via email. The email solicitation included a link to the online survey and was sent from a member of each chapter's leadership team: either the board chair or someone responsible for chapter communications. A total of 4,085 members were contacted with an initial solicitation and two reminder emails. This resulted in 337 useable responses and an overall response rate of 8.24%. Although the response rate is low, research conducted among this specific population has historically seen low response rates, ranging from 3.60% to 16.57% (Dobin & Tchume, 2011; Schwartz, Weinberg, Hagenbuch, & Scott, 2011; Solomon & Sandahl, 2007).

YNPN was selected as the ideal respondent pool, as it is a membership organization with 42 chapters and over 30,000 young professionals working in the nonprofit sector in a variety of capacities (volunteer coordination, development, programmatic, executive, etc.). The diversity represented within YNPN, both in terms of demographics and in terms of organization type, makes this an ideal population to involve in this research.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the respondents by chapter. Over one-third (39.2%) come from the San Diego YNPN chapter, which has the largest membership of the chapters represented in the sample. Although the San Diego chapter comprises one-third of the respondents in this study, there is no significant relationship between chapter and the key variables [ $X^2_{\text{interest}}(21, n=289)=20.30, p>0.05, X^2_{\text{volunteer}}(28, n=204)=23.43, p>0.05$ ].

The members of these chapters tend to be highly educated, with nearly all respondents (94.8%,  $n=199$ ) holding at least a bachelor's degree, and over one-third (35.7%,  $n=116$ ) holding graduate degrees. The respondent pool is predominantly female (86.6%,  $n=292$ ), and Caucasian (78.9%,  $n=266$ ), which are similar to demographics found in the nonprofit workforce (Light, 2003) as well as the membership of YNPN (Dobin & Tchume, 2011; Solomon & Sandahl, 2007). Of note, there is no significant relationship between gender and the coded qualitative responses for the two key variables [ $X^2_{\text{interest}}(80, n=323)=94.15, p>0.05, X^2_{\text{volunteer}}(7, n=190)=9.05, p>0.05$ ]. In addition, the respondents are on average younger professionals ( $M=30.77, SD=5.71$ ). Because YNPN caters to young nonprofit professionals, this is not surprising.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of YNPN Members by Chapter Membership

	San Diego (n=132)	Denver (n=76)	Kansas City (n=39)	Research Triangle (n=40)	Other (n=50)	Total (n=337)
<i>Highest Level of Education (%)</i>						
Ph.D. or Equivalent	0.0	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5
Medical Degree	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6
Law Degree	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
Master's Degree	31.1	38.2	33.3	45.0	28.0	34.4
Bachelor's Degree	61.4	56.6	64.1	45.5	68.0	59.1
Associates Degree	0.7	1.3	0.0	5.0	4.0	2.1
Vocational School	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5
High School Diploma/GED	3.0	1.3	2.6	5.0	0.0	2.4
<i>Gender (%)</i>						
Male	12.9	9.2	15.4	12.5	22.0	13.4
Female	87.1	90.8	84.6	87.5	78.0	86.6
<i>Generation (%)</i>						
Gen X or Older	22.0	27.6	30.8	17.5	24.0	24.3
Gen Y	78.0	72.4	69.2	82.5	76.0	75.7
<i>Ethnicity</i>						
African American	1.5	0.0	2.6	5.0	0.0	1.5
AIAN	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.0	1.2
Asian	10.6	1.3	2.6	0.0	20.0	6.5
Caucasian	72.7	88.2	89.7	90.0	56.0	78.9
Hispanic	6.0	6.6	0.0	0.0	14.0	5.9
NHPI	1.5	11.3	0.0	0.0	4.0	1.5
Multi-Ethnic	6.8	2.6	5.1	5.0	0.0	4.5

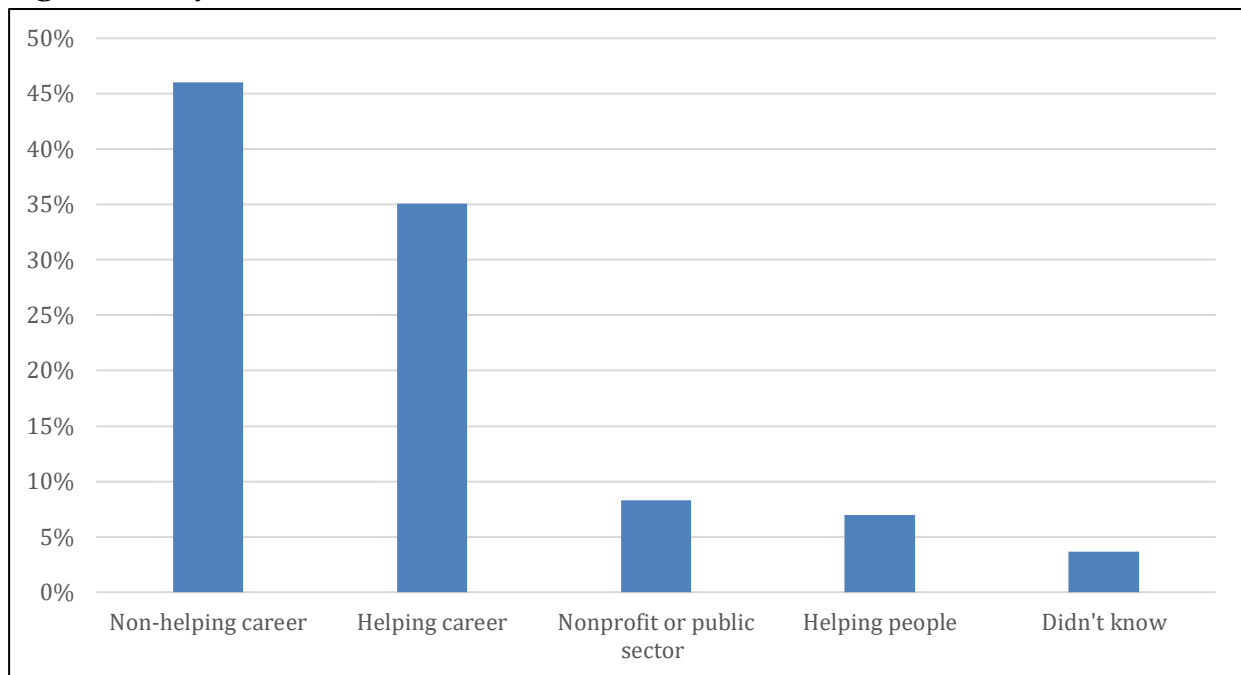
Note: AIAN is American Indian/Alaskan Native. NHPI is Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

This paper uses both qualitative and quantitative data gathered from responses to a series of open- and closed-ended survey questions. The questions asked respondents to reflect on their early-life career interests, the impact of socialization on their career choice, and the impact of volunteering on their awareness of nonprofit sector careers. Qualitative data were grouped into major themes and coded independently by three researchers. Coded data were then compared, and areas of disagreement were resolved.

#### *Nonprofit Career Interest*

Using an open-ended question, respondents were asked about their career aspirations were when they were younger. Responses were coded into five categories: a “non-helping career” (e.g., actor or interior designer), a “helping career” (e.g., teacher or counselor), a “nonprofit or public service career” specifically, a career that simply involved “helping people” (this term was frequently used without an associated occupation), and “I didn’t know.” Figure 1 shows the various percentages of career aspirations. Approximately 46% ( $n=139$ ) specified a non-helping career, while 35.1%

**Figure 1.** Early Life Career Interests



Note: This figure shows qualitative responses that describe respondent’s career interests when younger.

( $n=106$ ) specified a helping career. Only 25 respondents (8.3%) specified a career in the public or nonprofit sector, and 7% stated that they were interested in simply helping people or doing good ( $n=21$ ). Finally, 5.5% ( $n=11$ ) reported that they weren’t sure what their career aspirations were when they were younger.

As Figure 1 shows, a majority of the respondents (51%) noted that they were interested in a helping career, helping people, or a career in the public or nonprofit sectors specifically. However, the participants did not typically specify nonprofit careers, which could suggest a disconnect between “helping” and “career.”

To support the qualitative findings, respondents were also asked questions about their general interest in and awareness of nonprofit careers using items on a 5-point Likert scale measuring levels of agreement to various statements. The vast majority of participants indicated that they *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they had envisioned a career helping people when they were younger (82.5%,  $n=278$ ). However, nearly half of the respondents indicated that they did not know that nonprofit careers were an option when they were younger (49.3%,  $n=166$ ).

*Socialization to Service.* Theory suggests that individuals are likely socialized to service or volunteering, which may lead them to embody values congruent with service and helping (Bekkers, 2004; Finklestein et al., 2005; Selznik, 1992). Further, volunteering at a young age may lead to an awareness of nonprofit careers. Parental socialization was measured with 11 items on a 5-point Likert scale that asked about parental volunteering and donative behaviors as well as parental encouragement to do the same. Reliability analysis found the socialization scale to be a consistent measure ( $\alpha=0.87$ ). Therefore, these items were added together to create a composite socialization variable. As Table 2 shows, parent-modeled and parent-encouraged voluntary behavior has an inverse correlation with the age an individual begins to volunteer  $r(335)=-0.40, p<0.01$ . When parents modeled and encouraged service, respondents would typically begin volunteering at a



**Table 2.** Correlation: Parental Socialization & NP Career Awareness

Measure	1	2	3
Helping	--	-0.15**	0.16**
AgeVol		--	-0.34**
SocComp			--

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

younger age. This is consistent with prior research showing the relationship between socialization and service (Bekkers, 2007; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Janoski et al., 1998). In addition, parent-modeled and parent-encouraged behavior also have significant relationships with a desire for helping careers  $r(335)=0.16$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

These results are similar to Biggerstaff's (2000), in that respondents who were exposed to service through socialization were also interested in a helping career from a young age. Although these relationships are significant the coefficients are relatively small, indicating somewhat less meaningful results. Both qualitative and quantitative results show that respondents may have been socialized to service, enough so that they had an interest in pursuing a career where they were able to help people as a profession—however, the connection between their service and nonprofit career was still reportedly small. In fact, nearly 50% of respondents (49.3%,  $n=166$ ) reported a general lack of awareness of nonprofit careers when they were younger. The next section examines what, then, led to an interest in these young people selecting a nonprofit career.

*Initial Interest in Nonprofit Careers.* Using an open-ended question, respondents were asked to briefly describe how they first became interested in a nonprofit career. Responses to this question were coded into nine broad thematic categories, as shown in Figure 2. Because there is a substantial drop in frequency between categories three and four (i.e., between the categories “wanted helping career/to help others” and “socialization”), only the three most frequently appearing response categories will be discussed in greater detail below.

As shown in Figure 2, respondents most frequently indicated that volunteering in some capacity sparked their interest in nonprofit careers (29.8%,  $n=91$ ). This response category encompasses volunteer experiences generally, but also included experiences like service immersion trips and participation in student organizations while in high school and college. For example, one respondent was working in the private sector and, through work, volunteered for a nonprofit organization: “I was volunteering in an organization and was surprised to find out that they employed people too!” Similarly, another participant noted that she realized she enjoyed raising awareness and funds for nonprofit organizations because she volunteered to coordinate her sorority's annual philanthropy events. In these instances, chance events like volunteering allowed individuals to see that paid work existed in the nonprofit sector, while others learned that specific functions of nonprofit work were appealing.

Collegiate academic experiences (coded separately from collegiate service activities) appeared second most frequently among the qualitative responses (17.7%,  $n=54$ ). These responses indicated that activities like service-learning experiences, internships, interactions with college career centers, and general college coursework led to an interest in nonprofit careers. One respondent mentioned that studying evolution sparked an interest in conservation. Another noted that his college career counselor told him that if he was interested in the work of nonprofits as a volunteer, he could seek paid employment in the sector rather than just volunteer. Others ascribed their initial interest in a nonprofit career to an internship in the sector:

**Figure 2.** Developed Initial Interest in Nonprofit Careers



Note: This figure shows coded qualitative responses that describe how respondents initially became interested in nonprofit careers.

I interned at a PR agency in college and I realized I only enjoyed working with the clients that were nonprofits. That's when I refocused the direction of my job search out of college. It took me several years, but I eventually worked for a nonprofit.

Another respondent said that she interned for the CEO of a national nonprofit organization: "She taught me nonprofit 101, board governance, and youth development. She inspired me to go into nonprofit work and gave me confidence that I would be great at it." Not only are these individuals working in the nonprofit sector, but they are also engaging in instrumental learning by finding work that they feel passionate about, competent in, and that they subsequently pursue.

The third most frequently identified theme among the qualitative responses referenced a desire to help others (14.1%,  $n=43$ ). These individuals indicated a general interest in a helping career. Some indicated that they "always knew" that they wanted to help people. Others had an epiphany of sorts in realizing that they wanted a career shift where they could pursue a career with more personal meaning: "I was working at a private art gallery and realized that I wanted to be doing something that was directly helping people in some way." In these instances, there was no specific experience that led to an interest in a nonprofit career; rather, it was the internalization of a need to help that led to their desire for a career in the nonprofit sector. This is consistent with the results reported earlier, where individuals who were socialized into service tended to volunteer from an early age.

Respondents to this question developed an initial interest in nonprofit careers after various learning experiences, typically following chance events. In fact, a small portion of respondents literally claimed they "fell into" nonprofit work and formed an interest after employment. Although qualitative responses were spread across several categories, the most frequent point of

initial interest was through volunteer experiences with nonprofits. These qualitative data speak to the first research question, which asks how people become interested in nonprofit careers.

The majority of respondents were not aware of nonprofit careers when they were younger. However, chance events like volunteering and collegiate experiences as well as a general desire to help others, led to an awareness of and interest in paid employment in the nonprofit sector. Supporting the chance nature of these events, many respondents indicated that their nonprofit career interest was not an intentional pursuit but rather a result of an unplanned interaction with the nonprofit sector in some way. Says one respondent, “I didn’t know one could be paid to work in a nonprofit until I volunteered with a friend. That was mind blowing to me!” The next section examines the relationship between volunteering and nonprofit career interest, specifically.

### *Connecting Volunteering to Nonprofit Careers*

The second research question expands on the first and asks how volunteering provides a connection to nonprofit careers. This was examined through a series of open- and closed-ended survey questions. Nearly 65% of respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that volunteering facilitated the connection between their volunteer experience and their nonprofit career awareness (64.7%,  $n=218$ ). Respondents replying in the affirmative were then asked to specify *how* volunteering had helped them to think about the nonprofit sector as a career option. As shown in Figure 3, a total of 170 qualitative responses were coded into six broad categories based on emergent themes.

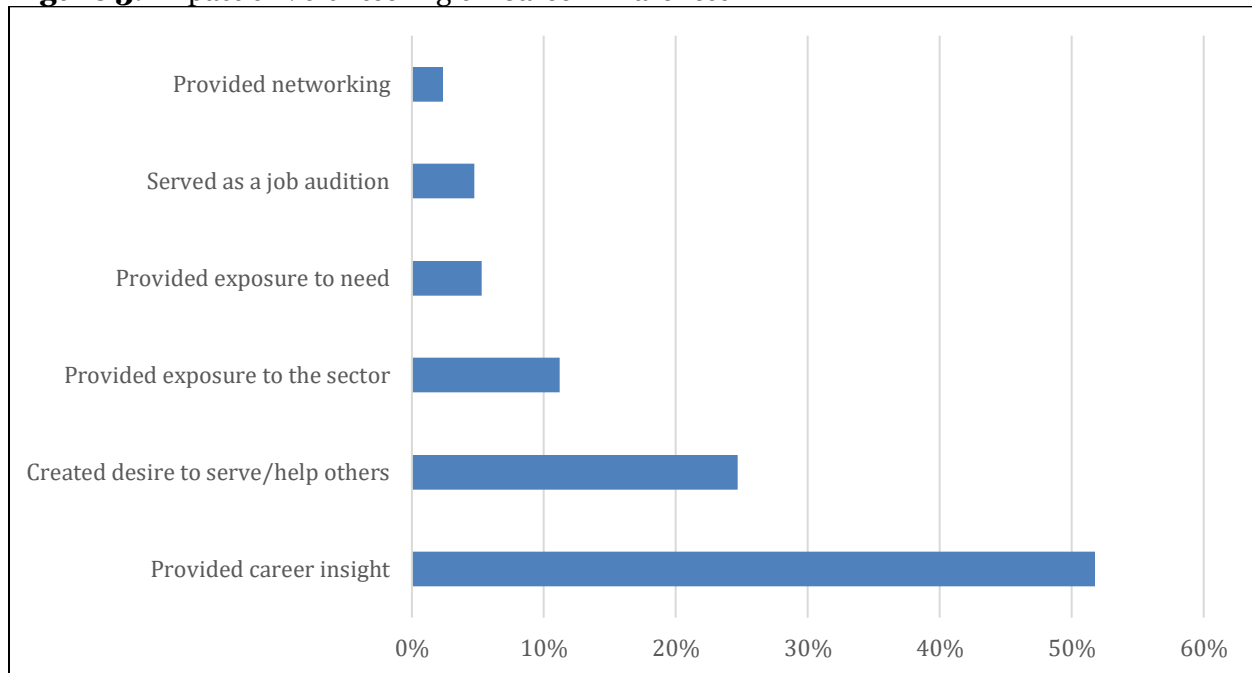
The three most prominent categories of connection were that volunteering provided career insight, created a desire to serve or help others, and provided general exposure to the nonprofit sector. These categories reinforce many of the responses discussed above, where initial interest in nonprofit careers came through volunteer experiences. For this group of respondents, volunteering provided insight into the various job functions within the nonprofit workforce as well as realization that nonprofits were a place of paid employment. These points of exposure led to an interest in careers in the nonprofit sector.

*Career Insight.* Over half of the qualitative responses referenced volunteering as a means of providing insight into careers in the nonprofit sector. These responses occurred over twice as frequently as the next response category (51.8%,  $n=88$ ). For these respondents, “career insight” occurred in different ways, ranging from general awareness of paid employment in the nonprofit sector to allowing individuals to see the various job functions that are available to pursue. One respondent summarized the various themes within this particular response category succinctly:

The nonprofit world can be ambiguous (at least it was to me growing up). Volunteering allowed me to learn that folks are able to make a living by working for nonprofits. It also gave me a sense of the different types of nonprofits and different career paths within nonprofits.

Volunteering, then, can allow individuals to understand that there is paid employment available in the nonprofit sector. As one participant stated, “Volunteering introduced me to individuals who had made a career in the nonprofit sector when I didn’t know careers were truly available.” Another wrote, “(Volunteering) created an understanding that I could get paid to do what I was willing to do for free.” In the simplest of terms, these respondents did not know that paid employment existed in the nonprofit sector until working with paid staff while volunteering.

**Figure 3.** Impact of Volunteering on Career Awareness



Note: This figure illustrates the various ways in which respondents' volunteer experiences helped them understand nonprofit careers as a vocational option.

Volunteering also provided individuals with a broad scan of the nonprofit sector and allowed them the opportunity to learn about, interact with, and connect to a variety of mission types. For some respondents, this helped them to choose which mission category to pursue as a career. One participant responded that, "Doing volunteer work for the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt in Washington, DC made me decide to pursue working on HIV/AIDS and youth issues." Another notes that volunteering in general "Gave me a chance to see the types of organizations out there and what types of jobs and causes existed." In one case, volunteering sparked a passion for a specific mission, while in the other, volunteering allowed the person to see the breadth of nonprofit work.

For others, and by far the most prevalent theme regarding career insight, was the opportunity for individuals to see (and "test drive") the various job functions within a nonprofit organization. Says one respondent:

Volunteering led me to figure out what I would and would not enjoy doing as a career. It also led me to understand and deepen my passion for helping others. It led me to a career path in volunteer coordination—something that I did not know was a career when I was a teenager.

Another explained that, "Volunteering allowed me to practice different work functions to better gauge if I enjoy each activity or not." In these cases, respondents noted that their volunteer experiences allowed them to discover specific career paths within the nonprofit sector—not just the work of the sector in general.

*Desire for a Helping Career.* Some respondents noted that their volunteer experiences created a general desire to serve or help others as a profession (24.7%,  $n=42$ ). Those who indicated that volunteering sparked an interest in nonprofit work referred to “feeling good,” i.e., having a sense of joy and accomplishment that resulted from their experience and feeling a desire to translate that joy into a vocation. As one respondent noted: “I enjoyed the chance to serve others and felt energized from my volunteer work. Why not work for the good of others as a full-time job?” In these instances, participants experienced a chance event in which they learned more about a particular sector of work. Through instrumental learning, respondents realized new career possibilities—that is, they engaged in an activity and recognized that it provided a level of satisfaction and/or fulfillment that they wished to further pursue. These respondents indicated a sense of accomplishment through giving back, a sense of pride in bettering their communities, and a sense of satisfaction in bringing their existing skills to a new context or setting. In doing so, they learned about new career paths that they would feel particularly interested in pursuing. The values respondents expressed as volunteers are similar to those found in the nonprofit workforce.

*Initial Exposure to Nonprofits.* The third most frequent response category indicates that respondents felt that volunteering exposed them to the nonprofit sector broadly (11.18%,  $n=19$ ). Rather than learning about a particular job function or mission category, these individuals simply learned that nonprofits existed. “(Volunteering) opened my eyes to nonprofit organizations and how many out there exist to fill needs that other companies/organizations can’t fill.” Another respondent explained that “(Volunteering) introduced me to the sector. It wasn’t really on my radar before.” These types of responses indicate that volunteering introduced individuals to the concept of a nonprofit organization as well as to the services these organizations provide.

These results suggest that respondents typically were not aware of careers in the nonprofit sector when they were younger, regardless of their socialization to (and participation in) service activities. In fact, less than half of the respondents were aware of nonprofit careers when younger, and less than 10% of respondents specified that they were interested in a public or nonprofit career as a teen. While these respondents indicated that they were interested in a helping career or helping people, across multiple measures, there is an apparent disconnect among young people between the idea of a “helping career” and a “nonprofit career,” even among those who actually found employment in the nonprofit workforce. Participants were asked to discuss how they first became interested in nonprofit careers, and the most frequently coded response category was volunteering. Respondents indicated that volunteering provided insight into the working world of the nonprofit sector including general insight into the fact that the nonprofit sector exists, and that there is paid employment in the sector. Volunteering also provided context into the actual job functions and missions available to pursue as a profession. Further, volunteer experiences solidified the idea that respondents wanted to serve or help others as a profession.

## **Discussion**

This exploratory study examined initial awareness of, and interest in, nonprofit careers as well as the connection between volunteering and career selection. The results are both theoretically and practically applicable. Theoretically, scholars can begin examining career selection in the nonprofit sector through the lens of happenstance learning theory as chance events seem to be a frequent precursor to nonprofit careers—in this case, volunteering was the chance event. As individuals engage with nonprofits in a volunteer capacity, they learn that the nonprofit sector does offer paid employment. They also learn that careers in the sector offer a level of fulfillment that they were unable to attain in other sectors.

As the nonprofit sector continues to grow and the Boomer generation retires out of the nonprofit workforce, more intentional recruitment efforts will be essential to maintain necessary levels of staffing. This research then can provide nonprofit leaders with practical information to help guide their staff recruitment efforts as well as their volunteer management practices. Volunteers might be seen as a possible recruitment pool for the next generation of the nonprofit workforce, which implies that both quality volunteer management and quality volunteer experiences are crucial in serving as an introduction to the professional work of the nonprofit sector. Understanding the connections between volunteering and nonprofit career interest, as well as leveraging that knowledge, can help nonprofit leaders more intentionally channel well-suited individuals into the nonprofit workforce.

The research questions in this study were examined using a mixed-methods cross-sectional survey of a national membership association. Respondents were asked to discuss elements that influenced their nonprofit career awareness and career decision-making in a series of open- and closed-ended questions. Results from this research indicate that there is a relationship between volunteering and nonprofit career awareness and interest. Specifically, not only does volunteering provide an initial point of introduction to nonprofits generally, but it also provides an entry point into the professional world of the nonprofit sector; and, it does so in interesting ways as discussed below.

First, volunteering provides an introduction to the nonprofit sector in general. Several respondents indicated that they were unaware of the nonprofit sector until they began volunteering. Once they interacted with an agency as a volunteer, they became aware of the sector and of the variety of missions and organization types. In these instances, volunteering led to an awareness of, and interest in, nonprofits. Second, many respondents indicated that volunteering created an interest in their pursuit of a helping career or a career serving others. In these instances, respondents engaged with nonprofits in a meaningful way and learned that they derived personal satisfaction from helping others. This led them to an interest in nonprofit careers.

Finally, volunteering provided those in this study with insight into nonprofit careers. This was done in two ways: first, some learned that paid employment could be obtained in the nonprofit sector. For this subset, they did not know that the “voluntary sector” was also an employer—one of the major employers at that—in the United States. Second, respondents indicated that volunteering exposed them to various mission types and job functions, which led to an interest in a specific nonprofit career. This subset was able to see their interests, talents, and passions combine into a viable career option.

The results of this study support and expand existing research in a number of ways. Specifically, some respondents indicated that parents and role models helped socialize them to volunteering and helping behaviors, which is consistent with prior research (e.g., Bekkers, 2007; Wilson & Musick, 1999; Youniss et al., 1999). Indeed, individuals whose parents encouraged them to volunteer started volunteering at a younger age than those whose parents did not. In addition, prior research has also shown that socialization to service leads to an internalization of helping behaviors and values, which are similar to values found among the nonprofit workforce (Rose-Ackerman, 1996). The results also show a small, yet significant, relationship between being encouraged to volunteer and awareness of nonprofit sector careers when younger. This suggests that individuals are socialized to helping behaviors but are not necessarily making a connection between service and nonprofit careers while young. Instead, the result of socialization likely creates a pattern of service or a desire to help others. Knowledge of nonprofit careers likely occurs at a later point in life.

These results provide evidence of the role of chance events in selecting a nonprofit career. HLT suggests careers are the product of environmental conditions and learning via chance events (Krumboltz, 2009; Krumboltz & Levin, 2010). A large portion of the respondent pool, who were predominantly employed in the nonprofit sector, noted that their career goals as a young person were not in nonprofit service or even in helping professions. Only a small portion of respondents indicated a desire for a career specifically in the public or nonprofit sectors. This, combined with the data presented and discussed above, shows a general lack of awareness of (much less interest in) nonprofit sector careers among young people. Instead, respondents indicated that a chance event, in many cases volunteering, provided instrumental and associative learning experiences that led to their interest in a career in the nonprofit sector.

### **Limitations**

The contributions of this research come with limitations. The cross-sectional design does not account for how motivations can change over time, and the retrospective nature of this study asks respondents to recall motivations and preferences from prior years. However, Huber and Power (1985) note that recall is fairly stable over time, particularly with more important decisions. One could argue that a career decision is one of the more important decisions that a person makes. Regardless, a longitudinal design that follows a cohort through the process of career decision-making would yield more robust results. The sample size was also lower than desirable, which could lead to questions about sampling bias. However, the respondent pool was pulled from a national sample, and demographics of the sample are similar to those found in other studies on the nonprofit workforce as well as the YNPN membership, which suggests representativeness.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

Individuals learn about and select careers based on accumulated learning experiences (Krumboltz, 2009; Krumboltz & Levin, 2010). These results show that volunteering provides insight into nonprofit careers. This insight is both in terms of the existence of the careers and in terms of specific functional areas. Indeed, volunteering can spur a desire to pursue a career helping people and can provide a general introduction to the work of the nonprofit sector. Volunteer managers and organizational leaders play an important role in nonprofit career decision-making, and can look to young volunteers as a potential means for addressing the impending leadership deficit. Younger individuals may be interested in helping careers, but may not necessarily be aware of the nonprofit sector and the opportunities it provides. Because individuals choose careers based on accumulated learning experiences, organizational leaders can help younger volunteers make intentional connections between volunteer tasks and supporting the work of paid staff, so that nonprofit work is seen as a viable career option. Volunteer managers and nonprofit leaders can facilitate this process by determining what the volunteer's skills and interests are, both in terms of service and career, and create volunteer assignments that are related to particular functional areas within the organization. This helps the volunteer determine what may or may not be interesting as a career and also helps the organization cull from that pool of "road-tested" volunteer talent as they recruit staff into their paid ranks.

Clerkin and Cogburn (2012) suggest that a primary function of human resource managers is finding staff that fit the organization, both through affinity and through skill. Core volunteers will have a pre-existing passion for service or the organization's mission that may not necessarily be articulated among a stack of résumés. Further, well-managed volunteers may already be acquainted with the organization and its organizational culture; and, if the volunteer assignment is related to the individual's career interest, he or she is likely to already be familiar with

components of that particular job function. This aligns with Tschirhart et al. (2008), who suggest providing growth opportunities for nonprofit employees (in this case unpaid volunteer staff) as a means of reinforcing fit and increased feelings of competence on the job. Individuals learn about the sector as well as particular job functions that they might enjoy through volunteer experiences. Providing opportunities for growth will not only increase affinity for the organization, the instrumental learning attained through volunteering will also allow an individual to determine whether a particular nonprofit career might be of interest.

Educational institutions also play a potential role in helping develop a talent pipeline for nonprofit organizations. Students learn about the nonprofit sector and its career opportunities through volunteer service (including co-curricular student activities), service-learning coursework, and internship experiences. Those tasked with monitoring and matching interns and student volunteers can encourage meaningful connections as curricular and co-curricular experiences and as career development. Rather than simply suggesting that a student intern or volunteer at a nonprofit organization because it helps the agency, conversations with students can be reframed to allow them to view nonprofits as a potential employer, much like they would during for-profit internships. This reframing can be in the form of placements that connect career aspirations and related positions in nonprofit organizations and by encouraging students to treat their service as both an expression of values as well as a professional networking opportunity. The student can then begin to see how their particular career interests and skills are able to be applied beyond the private sector, and can also begin to connect careers with an expression of their personal values. Making a clear connection between volunteering or service-learning and résumé-building will allow students to see the connection between service and career as well as provide potential employers in the nonprofit sector with information that demonstrates an understanding of nonprofit work.

Because nonprofit career decision-making hasn't been fully examined as a line of inquiry, there are many areas for development that can build on this exploratory work. For example, these respondents report that volunteering influenced their awareness of and choice of a nonprofit career. It would be beneficial to nonprofit leaders and academics alike, though, to better understand the influence of other potential points of entry like service-learning coursework, internships, and year-of-service programs (such as AmeriCorps or the Jewish Volunteer Corps) on eventual career decisions. Did career choices change after exposure to the nonprofit sector and careers within it? Did service-learning or an internship allow individuals to see their academic interests and possible career choice in a new (nonprofit) setting? Finally, it would be useful to know what types of volunteer experiences (both in terms of task and mission type) lend themselves more or less frequently to the choice of a nonprofit career and especially to a career transition from another sector into the nonprofit sector. The literature in regard to nonprofit career decision-making is still relatively scarce, so research that provides a better understanding of how and when individuals decide to pursue careers in the nonprofit sector will allow current leaders to better prepare for future workforce deficits.

## **Note**

1. Data about respondents' current employer are not presented, as their current employer may not be the initial organization that introduced them to nonprofit work. Also, qualitative responses did not cluster by National Taxonomy of Exempt Entity (NTEE) code, thus providing no additional information about pathways into the nonprofit workforce.



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