

## **TITLE**

Should I stay or should I go? Investigating nonprofit sector commitment among nonprofit education alumni

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## **ABSTRACT**

Graduates of nonprofit education programs have seemingly opted in to the nonprofit sector by means of their field of education, but prior research on worker sorting depicts a complex rationale for sector selection. This research study uses a sample of 153 alumni of nonprofit education programs to sort among factors influencing sector commitment. Given that these alumni have seemingly indicated a sector commitment by way of their education field, this analysis investigates factors that may disrupt sector commitment, and finds that individuals who view their work as a calling or have a nonprofit identity were associated with a commitment to working in the nonprofit sector. This study adds to the growing body of sectoral differences literature and helps inform human resource management and leadership about employee characteristics that should be prioritized for development and promotion.

### **Keywords**

Nonprofit education, sector commitment, nonprofit identity, career paths

## **INTRODUCTION**

Worker self-sorting between the public, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors has been studied to identify individual skill variations and preferences to understand motivations, as well as training and education preparations appropriate to explaining sectoral differences. From an individual-level perspective, we know that those with higher wage expectations self-select into work in the for-profit sector whereas individuals who emphasize non-monetary aspects of their work, such as having an impact, are more likely to select into nonprofit work (Tschirhart, Reed, Freeman, & Anker, 2008). The extant literature has documented other fundamental differences

about employee motivations with those in the for-profit sector more motivated extrinsically and nonprofit employees motivated intrinsically and relationally (e.g., De Cooman, De Gieter, Pepermans, & Jegers, 2011). Yet, recent research has called some of this prior evidence into question, depicting a complex picture of worker motivation spurred on by demographic differences and blurred sector boundaries (Johnson & Ng 2016; Mirabella & Wish, 1999, 2000; Ng & McGinnis Johnson, 2015). Collectively this stream of research depicts the complex and individualized rationale of sector selection, as well as the utility in sorting among these factors.

With the nonprofit sector facing a leadership and leadership development deficit, attention has focused on cultivating professionals ready for promotion and higher position responsibilities (Tierney, 2006; Landles-Cobb, Kramer, & Smith Milway, 2015). Isolating factors that are influential in this path to promotion poses an opportunity to foster higher levels of sector allegiance and, in turn, may inform human resource management and leadership about characteristics that should be prioritized for development or even promotion. The explosive growth of nonprofit education programs across the United States poses one such opportunity (Mirabella, 2007; Mirabella, Hoffman, Teo, & McDonald, 2019). Whereas the “usefulness of management degrees for parts of the nonprofit sector as well as the need for generic nonprofit management skills and knowledge about fundraising, board development, and volunteer management” (O’Neill, 2005, p.12) has been shown, less is known about the individuals having pursued these degrees and their relationship to the nonprofit sector. In selecting a nonprofit graduate degree, many professionals self-select into the nonprofit sector by way of their field of education (Author, 2018), but we do not know if other personal or professional factors disrupt

this apparent sector commitment. Thus, the research question this study investigates is: Aside from the degree type, what other factors contribute to nonprofit sector commitment?

This study uses data from alumni of three schools offering graduate degrees in nonprofit studies (e.g., nonprofit management and philanthropic studies). Our findings contribute to theory and practice in multiple ways. First, we focus on sector commitment – the decision to continue a career within a specific sector of employment—a construct that has received much less research attention as compared to sector choice (Tschirhart et al., 2008; Johnson & Ng, 2016). As such, this paper contributes to the scant literature on sector commitment and investigates the factors leading nonprofit education alumni to stay employed within the nonprofit sector. Given the impending leadership crisis, this paper also makes important practical contributions by providing managers with specific recommendations regarding the retention of nonprofit education alumni.

## **FACTORS INFLUENCING NONPROFIT SECTOR COMMITMENT**

Weisbrod's (1988) theory of managerial sorting hypothesizes that professionals will align themselves with the sector that fits their objectives, and by extension, assumptions are made about differences between managers who work in the nonprofit, public, or for-profit sectors (LeRoux & Feeney, 2013). Yet the blurring of sector boundaries along with changing workforce dynamics have challenged these assumptions (Tschirhart et al., 2008). Evidence from the extant literature documents factors that influence sector preferences, indicating sector as a complex choice motivated by intangible and tangible factors (for example, see: LeRoux & Feeney, 2013; Mirvis & Hackett, 1983). This literature has incorporated factors originating from both the individual worker (such as demographics, personality characteristics, compensation, education

level) and from the employment sector (such as policies, promotion opportunities, work environment), and has considered single sectors as well as combinations. A summary of selected sector difference literature (see in table 1) indicates the depth and breadth of this stream of research, and an observation of this prior research is the lack of conceptual clarity and construct definition: allegiance, commitment, disruptor, loyalty, persistence, preferences, and sorting are among terms used to describe similar, if not the same, construct (Meyer & Allen, 1991). To this point, we identify in table 1 the terminology used by these studies, acknowledging these terms have been used interchangeably to gauge if individuals and by extension their careers are defined by sectors.

[Table 1 Here]

Higher education degrees are positioned as a means of cultivating a labor supply for a given field (Tomlinson, 2008). In effect, students selecting a graduate degree express interest in that field of study as field for future employment. Accordingly, scholars, based on independent interest as well as spurred by professional association interests, have sought to understand if alumni of specific graduate programs build careers in those fields (for examples, see: Bright, 2016; Chetkovich, 2003; Tschirhart et al., 2008). This research stream investigates if graduate degrees are an effective pipeline into the given field, while considering what might detract from a career in a field of study (Bright, 2016, 2018; Bright & Graham, 2015). These studies understand degree programs as fertile ground for leadership development (Infeld, Adams, Qi, & Rosnah, 2010) and have sought to isolate characteristics of the alumni themselves, the field of employment, or the degree program that may contribute to or detract from a career in the field of study. This current study joins prior research by investigating if alumni who have completed a

nonprofit degree maintain this sector commitment, and if other factors encourage or disrupt their commitment to the nonprofit sector.

### **Aligning Work Expectations with Employment**

An assumption of “managerial sorting” is that nonprofit employees are differently motivated and drawn to the sector for the expression of values that the work inherently entails (Weisbrod, 1988). Accordingly, employment choices are defined by factors that extend beyond tangible objectives of compensation and benefits, akin to what has been described as the “public service motivation” (PSM) of public and nonprofit sector employees (Christensen & Wright, 2011; Mann, 2006). Intrinsic motivations and specifically PSM have been investigated as explanatory factors of employment choices, including the sector selection of alumni of public administration degree programs, where nonprofit degree programs are often housed (for example, see: Bright, 2016; Infeld, et al., 2010; Piatak, 2016; Rose, 2013). Motivations are an expression of what individuals desire to be fulfilled in their workplace. Remarkable on an emerging phenomenon over 40 years ago, Rawls, Ullrich, and Nelson (1975) describe that “individuals do indeed select jobs and organizations on the basis of a position’s potential to meet personal needs, and they appear to be doing so in increasing numbers” (p. 621). We draw on the construct of work expectations to illustrate that professionals seek to align personal needs through their paid employment

Work expectations are defined as the preconceived notions of job searchers regarding their specific roles, responsibilities, and tasks in the context of work and the nature of the work environment (Major, Kozlowski, Chao, & Gardner, 1995). Work expectations form as a result of

an individual's education and social experiences; the expectations can potentially change over time due to outside influences from societal stereotypes, professional training, availability of information, and selection processes (Garavan & Morley, 1997). Generally, work expectations consist of extrinsic and intrinsic aspects (Author, 2013).

Intrinsic work expectations consist of individuals' values and development expectations on the job (Author, 2013). Helping others through work has been found to predict nonprofit and public sector choice, whereas it shows a negative relationship with for-profit sector choice (Tschirhart et al., 2008). Similarly, individuals who work in the nonprofit sector have a stronger nonmonetary orientation and value the altruistic nature of their work more than public and for-profit sector employees (Mirvis & Hackett, 1983; Mirvis, 1992). Additionally, employees in the public and nonprofit sectors generally place more interest on work that contributes to society (Lyons, Duxbury, & Higgins 2006; De Cooman et al., 2011). An additional aspect of intrinsic work expectations is having the possibility for professional development. For instance, when looking at the opportunity to learn and develop new skills, Lyons, Duxbury, and Higgins (2006) found significant differences between the sectors. Therefore, given the expectations of managerial sorting established in the literature, the nonprofit sector is expected to attract and retain professionals who value intrinsic work expectations.

Extrinsic work expectations refer to tangible rewards that individuals expect to receive when employed, such as pay and benefits (Author, 2013). These expectations have long been incorporated into research on sector choice due to the existing wage differentials between employment sectors. For instance, when looking at sector choice among university graduates,

Tschirhart et al. (2008) find a positive relationship between payment and the desire to work in the for-profit sector as well as a negative relationship to work in the nonprofit sector. When looking at extrinsic work values (i.e., job security, payment levels, and availability of benefits), Lyons, Duxbury, and Higgins (2006) found only marginal significant differences between the sectors, although having benefits and a good salary was still more important for for-profit sector employees. Based on this review, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 1a: Nonprofit education alumni with high intrinsic work expectations are more likely to be committed to a nonprofit career than nonprofit education alumni with low intrinsic work expectations.*

*Hypothesis 1b: Nonprofit education alumni with high extrinsic work expectations are less likely to be committed to a nonprofit career than nonprofit education alumni with low extrinsic work expectations.*

### **Following a Calling Through Work**

Seeking to bridge public administration literature on worker motivations to the general management literature, Thompson and Christensen (2018) connected public service motivation to the concept of “work as a calling.” They described that both PSM and calling elicit human resource management strategies for recruitment and retention, but differ in that PSM is referring to a “disposition” of the profession to “do good,” and calling refers to an “individual orientation” “which includes a belief that work is meaningful and that one is uniquely suited, and perhaps even destined, to do it” (Thompson & Christensen, 2018, p. 444-445). Aside from calling, people can have other individual orientations towards work, namely they can see their work as a job or career. Each of these three individual orientations towards work makes gradient distinctions describing time spent at work as one focused on financial rewards (job), advancement (career),



or fulfillment (calling) (Wrzensniewski et al., 1997). For those seeing work as a calling, their personal and professional lives are “inseparable” and the terminology itself emerges from a religious context that conceives of professionals seeking a higher level attainment that transcends day-to-day dissatisfactions, such as pay and conditions (Wrzensniewski et al., 1997). Whereas public service motivation identifies the context of a professional’s work in the public (or nonprofit) sector, professionals who view work as a calling may select among the sectors but the calling is not sector-defined but about “meaningful work” wherever that may be fulfilled (Thompson & Christensen, 2018). Yet, the expectation could follow that professionals who view work as a calling *and* pursued a nonprofit related degree to follow that call would now be pursuing work in the nonprofit sector to help fulfill their calling as employed professionals. Thus, alumni perceiving of work as a calling are more likely to remain committed as they follow that calling from the classroom into the workplace.

*Hypothesis 2: Nonprofit education alumni expressing greater sentiments of work as a calling will be more likely to be committed to a nonprofit career than nonprofit education alumni who express lesser sentiments of work as a calling.*

### **Fostering a Nonprofit Identity**

The professionalization of the nonprofit sector has received due attention by scholars and practitioners alike, but primarily to understand its antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes from the sector or organizational level. King (2017) pointed to a gap in our understanding of professionalization among the people working in the sector, describing that “there are limited empirical accounts which explain how individual practitioners learn to see themselves as professionals” (p. 243). This concept of professional identity refers to “an individual’s self-definition as a member of a profession and is associated with the enactment of a professional

role” (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007, p. 1515). The professionalization of the sector and the acknowledgement of a skill set unique to the nonprofit sector have given rise to the identity of a *nonprofit professional*, a reference inextricably linking the employment setting to the professional worker (Mulhare, 1999). Yet, the revolving doors of employment and blurred lines differentiating sectors imply that not all who work in nonprofit organizations identify as a nonprofit professional. It may even be that not all who are committed to the nonprofit sector actually work in the sector at all times given the prevalence of sector switching behavior (Piatak, 2017; Su & Bozeman, 2009) as well as the need to satisfy more immediate needs than sector commitment such as paying pack student debt (Wright & Christensen, 2010). It therefore becomes critical to understand what factors help foster an identity for nonprofit professionals.

A professional identity is formed through socialization, described by Bright and Graham (2015, p. 576) as a “process by which people learn the values, norms, and appropriate behavior that make them effective members of their society.” Socialization has a temporal element; meaning immersion over time in a particular environment has a compounding (i.e., socializing) effect. Education is a means of socialization, providing an introduction to a professional field, and is often the place where a professional identity is first forged (Thomas-Gregory, 2014; Walton, 2018). As graduates leave a field of study and engage in employment, they seek to find a “perception of fit,” what Bright (2018, p. 67) described as alignment between what they learned in the classroom and what they are doing in the workplace. Alumni finding this alignment will develop a sense of “sector competence” (Tschirhart et al., 2008), confirming in the workplace the identity first forged in the classroom. As Tschirhart and colleagues (2008) described referring to Hall (2002), “perception of one’s competence in a career area (e.g., accounting), enhanced

through prior work experience and formal education, has been linked to commitment to remain in that area” (p. 670). Thus, a nonprofit identity is expected to be forged by means of the student’s choice to pursue a nonprofit degree, and then reinforced by the nonprofit sector as place of employment.

*Hypothesis 3: Nonprofit alumni who are working in the nonprofit sector will be more likely to be committed to a nonprofit career than those alumni working in other sectors.*

### **Seeking Tangible Benefits along with Intangible Benefits**

The nonprofit sector has professionalized and is widely staffed now by paid workers. Prior research on sector sorting has documented that workers in the nonprofit sector value non-monetary rewards over monetary ones (Tschirhart et al., 2008; Author, 2013), and these preferences have been used to explain the acceptance of lower pay. According to the donative labor hypothesis, nonprofit employees derive job satisfaction from intrinsic rewards associated with their work sufficient to offset lower compensation levels (Hansmann, 1980). Yet, the relationship between monetary and non-monetary rewards, such as mission attachment, are not as clear-cut as this hypothesis depicts. Although some have described a crowding out relationship between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations (i.e., higher compensation contributes to lower mission attachment) (e.g., Lanfranchi & Narcy, 2006; Lanfranchi, Narcy, & Larguem, 2010), others find the motivations of nonprofit professionals to be more complex than a dichotomous trade-off (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003; Kim & Lee, 2007). For example, Brown and Yoshioka (2003) along with Kim and Lee (2007) found that mission and other intrinsic rewards may be necessary to attract nonprofit employees, but not sufficient to retain them, particularly when faced with poor compensation.

Further, career choices are made considerate of what lies ahead on a career path as well as what has already proceeded and not just meaning the professional positions held and experience accrued that has prepared a professional for the fork in the road. Chetkovich (2003) investigated the career plans and sector preferences of public policy students and found that debt, specifically student debt, may have bearing on employment choices. Johnson and Ng (2016) found that nonprofit managers with bachelor degrees or higher were more likely to remain with nonprofit work when they received higher compensation. While this may be due to some type of attainment drive of the alumni – seeking both the goal of a degree as well as that of a higher position – debt alleviation from the higher compensation that often accompanies higher positions is also plausible (Johnson & Ng, 2016). Thus, the relationship of sector commitment and tangible benefits is worthwhile to sort through, particularly for nonprofit degree programs that are preparing students for a sector notorious for its lower compensation. Understanding if compensation helps secure sector loyalty among nonprofit alumni may help explain the swing of nonprofit professionals’ motivations between extrinsic and intrinsic sources.

*Hypothesis 4: Nonprofit education alumni who have higher compensation will be more likely to be committed to a nonprofit career than alumni who have lower compensation.*

## **METHODS**

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the factors that contribute to sector commitment among alumni of nonprofit graduate degree programs.

### **Sample Description**

The convenience sample consists of alumni of three nonprofit graduate degree programs (i.e., nonprofit management and philanthropic studies). These programs are located within public

universities in the southeastern and midwestern United States. The programs enroll less than 25 students, 50-75 students, and 75-100 students. One program is accredited by the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), another is accredited by NASPAA and a member of the Nonprofit Academics Center Council (NACC), and the final is a member of NACC only. The programs were invited to include their alumni from the past five years in the study (N=700), and for their participation, they were provided reports summarizing their alumni's responses.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected using online surveys tailored to each of the three graduate programs with the names and logos of the university and program. Two of the programs distributed the survey directly and the research team distributed the survey to alumni using an email list received from the graduate program. All three alumni groups received identical email invitations and two reminders. A raffle for gift cards (1\*\$100, 2\*\$50, 4\*\$25) was offered to increase the response rate. After approximately 30 days, the survey closed and 184 responses were received for a 26.3% response rate. We excluded observations from the analysis that contained mostly missing data (>30%) resulting in a sample size of 153 respondents.

### **Variables**

The variables used in this study are briefly described below. A full list of survey items can be found in the Appendix.

*Dependent Variable.* Nonprofit career commitment was assessed using a question developed by Johnson and Ng (2016). Participants were asked, “How do you currently feel about building a career in the nonprofit sector?” and were provided with four options: (1) “I am 100% committed to building a career in the nonprofit sector” (47.06%), (2) “I will only leave the nonprofit sector for the right professional opportunity” (32.68%), (3) “I will be looking for the best job regardless of sector” (16.34%), and (4) “I do not plan to build a career in the sector” (3.92%). Option 1 was indicative of a full commitment to a career in nonprofit sector, option 2 was indicative of being opportunistic and rather conditionally committed with regards to work sectors, and options 3 and 4 were indicative of respondents who were agnostic towards the sector. Therefore, responses were recoded as 1 = fully committed to a career in the nonprofit sector, 2 = conditionally committed to a career in the nonprofit sector, and 3= agnostic with regards to work sector. The breakdown between the categories roughly reflects earlier findings (Johnson & Ng, 2016), where 32.7% fell into the first, 45.1% fell into the second, 20.4% fell into the third, and 2% fell into the fourth category.

*Independent Variables.* Work expectations were assessed using an instrument capturing intrinsic and extrinsic work expectations (Author, 2013). Intrinsic work expectations were measured using 6 items (e.g., Having the opportunity to do something worthwhile for society is...;  $\alpha=.73$ ) and extrinsic work expectations were measured using 11 items (e.g., Making a lot of money is...;  $\alpha=.74$ ). Respondents were asked to rate the items on a 5-point scale ranging from 5 = extremely important to 1 = not at all important. Calling was assessed using 6 items (e.g., My work makes the world a better place.,  $\alpha=.88$ ; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Respondents were asked to rate the items on a 5-point scale ranging from 5=strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree.

Participants were also asked about their employment status (1=full time paid (35 hours or more), 2=part time paid (fewer than 35 hours), 3=unemployed or looking for work, 4=in school full time, 5=caring for family full time, 6=retired, 7=other) recoded to 1=employed and 0=not employed. Those nonprofit alumni currently employed were also asked about their current salary (1=less than \$25,000, 2=\$25,000 – \$34,999, 3=\$35,000-\$49,999, 4=\$50,000 – \$64,999, 5=\$65,000 – \$79,999, 6=\$80,000 – \$94,999, 7=\$95,000 and above) recoded to 1 = high current salary if salary is \$50,000 and greater, 0=low current salary if salary is \$49,999 and lower, ~~and~~ current employment sector (1=public-federal/state/local government, 2=for-profit, 3=nonprofit) recoded into 1=employment in the nonprofit sector and 0=employment in other sectors.

*Control Variables.* We included demographic controls of age (in years), marital status (1=single (never married), 2=married or domestic partner, 3=divorced/separated, 4=widowed, 5=other) recoded to 1=single and 0=other, race (1=American Indian or Alaska Native, 2=Asian (including Indian subcontinent), 3=Black of African American, 4=Hispanic or Latino, 5=Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 6=White, and 7=other) recoded to 1=white and 0=other, gender (1=male, 2=female, 3=other) recoded to 1=female and 0=male as none of the respondents fell into the category 3=other, and children in the household (total number) recoded to 1=children in the household and 0=no children in the household.

### **Data Analysis**

The first set of hypotheses (1a, 1b, and 2) was tested using the full sample of nonprofit education alumni. Since our dependent variable is categorical and not ordered, we used multinomial logistic regression analysis. The remaining hypotheses (3, 4a, 4b, ~~4c and 4d~~) were

tested using the sub-sample of those who were employed using bivariate analyses since the subsample is relatively small. The subsample is relatively small since there was a mistake in the setup of skip logic of the survey instrument during data collection. Particularly, 65 individuals were not prompted to question of current salary, tenure, work sector, and intentions to quit<sup>1</sup>.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The sample was largely female (76%), white (83%) with an average age of almost 39 years. Thirty-three percent were single, a similar share had children (33%), whereas only 2% of the sample were single while having children. The nonprofit education alumni showed relatively high overall scores for extrinsic (M=4.19, SD=.44) and intrinsic (M=4.53, SD=.46) work expectations as well as calling (M=4.01, SD=.91). About half of the sample (47.06%) were fully committed to a career in the nonprofit sector, while about a third (32.68%) was conditionally committed to a career in the nonprofit sector and the remaining twenty percent were sector agnostic (see table 2).

[Table 2 Here]

### **Multivariate Analysis**

Multinomial regression analysis was conducted to test what factors differentiate been those alumni who are fully committed to a nonprofit career, those who are conditionally committed and those who are agnostic. Findings (as presented in table 3) show that different factors differentiate between the three groups. Specifically, confirming hypothesis 2, nonprofit alumni who are agnostic are less likely to be calling-oriented when compared to those who are fully committed to a career in the nonprofit sector ( $\beta=-.71, p=.014$ ). When comparing the



conditionally committed group with the fully committed group, contrary to hypothesis 1b, we find those with extrinsic work expectations are less likely to be in the conditionally committed group as compared to the fully committed group ( $\beta = -1.32, p = .027$ ), when other factors are held constant. Similarly to before, nonprofit alumni who are conditionally committed to a career in the nonprofit sector tend to be less calling-oriented when compared to the fully committed group; although this coefficient is only marginally statistically significant ( $p = .066$ ). We were unable to confirm hypothesis 1a; intrinsic work expectations did not differentiate between those nonprofit alumni who are agnostic, conditionally committed, and fully committed to a career in the nonprofit sector.

As some of the variables were moderately correlated, we tested for multicollinearity using the variance inflation factor (VIF). The VIF was low ( $VIF < 1.60$ ) and below the suggested cut off (Hair et al., 2006) and, thus, multicollinearity is not a concern in our model (analysis upon request). We also tested an additional model including School as control variable. School was not a significant predictor for sector commitment. This model was not significantly different from the model we present in table 3 (analysis upon request).

[Table 3 Here]

### **Bivariate Analysis**

Bivariate analysis on the subsample of employed nonprofit alumni for who we had data was used to test hypotheses 3 and (see table 4). We utilize all employed alumni to test hypothesis 3 and the subsample of nonprofit alumni employed in the nonprofit sector to test hypotheses 4. We find significant differences between the three groups, when comparing nonprofit alumni working in the nonprofit sector to those working in the for-profit and public sectors and, thus,

can support hypothesis 3. Hypothesis 4 is (marginally) supported; those nonprofit alumni who report higher salaries, on average, are likely to be fully committed to a career in the nonprofit sector as compared to the agnostic and conditionally committed groups ( $p=.059$ ).

[Table 4 Here]

## **DISCUSSION**

Our study set out to investigate factors that, aside from having a nonprofit education graduate degree, contribute to nonprofit sector commitment. Sector commitment extends beyond the initial choice of employment sector, and refers to a professional's decision to stay within one sector over a career trajectory. Using data from alumni who had seemingly chosen the nonprofit sector vis a vis their completion of a nonprofit graduate degree, findings indicate three distinguishable groups: those who were fully committed to the nonprofit sector, those who were only open to another sector if it was the right professional opportunity (what we call conditionally committed), and those who would pursue a professional opportunity irrespective of sector (what we call agnostic).

We examined if work expectations as a reflection of a professional's values would predict their nonprofit sector commitment. First our findings indicate that those nonprofit alumni who are fully committed to a career in the nonprofit sector compared to those who are conditionally committed are more likely to express higher extrinsic work expectations. The directionality of this finding was opposite of our hypothesis and is to some extent surprising given prior research (Tschirhart, et al., 2008; Lyons et al., 2006). Whereas Tschirhart et al. (2008) find that for-profit employees express higher extrinsic work expectations than nonprofit

professionals, our findings hint that these extrinsic values are also influential among nonprofit professionals and should not be neglected in terms of their role in sector, even organizational, retention. Further, we found no conclusive relations between intrinsic work expectations and nonprofit sector commitment, further demonstrating that the work expectations of nonprofit alumni may be more complex than the stereotype of intrinsic over extrinsic work expectations for nonprofit employees. Our findings do not describe that nonprofit professionals are not intrinsically motivated, just that these motivations may not be a driver of nonprofit sector commitment as previous findings suggest.

Next, our findings indicate that calling orientation serves as distinguishing factor between fully committed nonprofit alumni and those who are agnostic or only conditionally committed. Even though having a calling is not sector defined (Thompson & Christensen, 2018), indicating that individuals can have a calling in any line of work (Wrzensniewski et al., 1997), it seems that calling helps to sustain a career trajectory in the nonprofit sector for the fully committed group.

Echoing Johnson and Ng (2016), we found a positive relation between compensation and nonprofit sector commitment. When coupled with extrinsic work expectations, the donative labor hypothesis may need to be revisited amidst this fresh evidence that nonprofit alumni appear to have consideration and expectation for the salary associated with their nonprofit-related work. Whereas this hypothesis and even perceptions of the nonprofit sector suppose it to be rife with lower pay than its for-profit or public peers, these findings may prompt reconsideration about the role of compensation and nonprofit sector commitment, particularly given the blurring boundaries and opportunity to express a service commitment across the three sectors. For

instance, the rise of B-corporations and public-serving positions in government mean that the nonprofit sector is not the only place to express a service orientation professionally. Those responsible for nonprofit human resources management may want to consider the role of compensation or other extrinsic rewards in recruitment and retention given these findings. Echoing earlier findings (Author, 2013), we note the juxtaposition, not necessarily conflict, that nonprofit alumni may be following a calling but also want to be compensated adequately for their work. Said differently, this finding hints that even amidst doing meaningful work, nonprofit professionals still have bills to pay, and higher levels of compensation or other extrinsic rewards will not detract and may even attract. Further, professionals may have different expectations about what is adequate compensation in the nonprofit sector as compared to the for-profit sector, but are still expecting to be compensating fairly within the sector. We also encourage that future research inquire about the role of education-related debt and nonprofit sector commitment. Whereas education in a particular field is seen as a pipeline to a given sector, nonprofit alumni leaving with their diploma in hand may also be heavy laden with debt. With the average graduate student leaving with nearly \$58,000 in debt (Delisle, Phillips, & van der Linde, 2014), gainful employment regardless of sector may be a pressing priority for these nonprofit alumni.

The findings also point to the role of a nonprofit identity in fostering sector commitment among nonprofit alumni. We tested whether work experience and accruing competence in the sector relates to the sector commitment of the alumni. Our findings indicate that nonprofit alumni who work in the sector express stronger commitment. These findings help elucidate that nonprofit related degrees help cultivate a labor supply for the nonprofit sector, and compared to previous findings documenting the declining commitment to public service among public

administration alumni (Bright, 2016, 2018; Bright & Graham, 2015), Further reflecting Tschirhart et al.'s (2008, p. 685) remark that the “supply side of labor markets is constrained by sector,” the choice to work in the nonprofit sector initiates a confirmatory loop for nonprofit alumni where accruing work experience affirms sector selection and sustains sector commitment. Still, our findings also indicate that not all nonprofit alumni who stated they were conditionally or fully committed to the nonprofit sector actually work in the nonprofit sector. This finding is interesting in various ways. Building on Wright & Christensen (2010), we speculate whether or not student debt contributes to the mismatch between sector commitment and work sector – it may be that students have to fulfill more immediate needs of paying back student loans and, thus, sacrifice their sector commitment while working in the for-profit or public sector. Mirroring the suggestions above, student debt may be a valuable aspect to study in future research and could potentially help to explain the prevalence of sector switching behavior (Piatak, 2017; Su & Bozeman, 2009).

As with any study, ours is not without limitations. We generated our results relying upon cross-sectional data. Given this, we recognize that common source bias may impact our study. To mitigate the interaction effects between measures, we made sure to spatially separate related concepts within the survey instrument and included questions unrelated to the research question of this article (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Future research could embark on a longitudinal design asking students at the beginning of their graduate degree about their nonprofit sector commitment, and then following up at graduation from their degree or even after post-graduate work experience. A longitudinal design will likely shed light on the relationship between sector commitment and sector switching behavior over time.

In addition to the limitations of cross-sectional data, we also recognize other limitations. First, an error in skip logic in our survey tool resulted in a smaller, limited sample. With our limited sample of respondents currently being employed, we had to rely upon bivariate analysis to test a portion of our hypotheses, which does not control for other factors. Future research should collect data for the above variables among a larger sample of employed nonprofit education alumni where controls can be applied and more robust sub-group analyses can be conducted. Related, our study inquired to the alumni of three graduate programs and with over 400 related programs (Mirabella, 2007), future research could make use of a wider sample of nonprofit alumni, similar to the approach scholars have taken in exploring commitment to the public sector (Bright 2016, 2018; Bright &Graham, 2015). Further, while it was our intent to focus solely on those within nonprofit graduate programs, we recognize that future comparative studies between individuals who completed graduate programs in other fields such as social work or business may add additional depth to our understanding of sector commitment. Finally, our measure of career commitment relies on a single question, which tends to be less reliable than a multiple item scale. We therefore encourage researchers to develop a nonprofit-specific sector career commitment scale, and to also consider using qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to inquire in more depth about the complex concept of sector commitment for nonprofit alumni.

## **CONCLUSION**

Nonprofit graduate programs are presumed to be an employment funnel into the nonprofit sector, and this study examined factors that may sustain or disrupt the commitment of nonprofit

alumni to the nonprofit sector. Nearly half of the alumni in this study expressed their full commitment to a career in the nonprofit sector, and our findings show extrinsic work expectation; if work is perceived as a calling; and nonprofit employment as important contributors to this commitment. These findings hold both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, the analysis provides insights about employee work expectations and career intentions, offering conclusions that eluded prior research given everyone in the sample holds a similar educational background. More practically, these findings are instructive about how a career pipeline can be formulated to create stability in the sector's future workforce. Taken together, these findings contribute to our understanding of the professionalization of the nonprofit sector and how nonprofit-specific education helps cultivate sector commitment among its graduates.

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## NOTES

Those impacted by the error in skip logic are not significantly different from those answering the questions with regards to gender ( $\chi^2(1)=2.90$ ,  $p=.09$ ), marital status ( $\chi^2(1)=0.17$ ,  $p=.67$ ), race ( $\chi^2(1)=.01$ ,  $p=.94$ ), children ( $\chi^2(1)=.33$ ,  $p=.57$ ) and age ( $F(134)=.47$ ,  $p=.49$ ). Of those being affected by the skip logic error 55% were from school 2, 44% from school 3 and 1% from school 1. School 1 was not as affected since the survey to this sample went out a few days after the surveys for school 1 and 2.

Table 1: Select Literature on Sector Differences, organized by terminology

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Terminology</b>	<b>Subsectors</b>	<b>Variables of Interest</b>
Chetkovich, 2003	Public policy graduate students	Career attitudes	Public, for-profit	Enter first year with a particular issue of concern; salary expectations; importance of salary; confident of ability to "make a difference"
Bright, 2016	Public affairs/administration graduate students	Career interests	Public, nonprofit	Public service motivation; Gender (female)
Bright and Graham, 2015	Public affairs/administration graduate students	Career interests	Public	Gender, work experience, interaction with professionals, involvement in a professional association
Rose, 2012	University students	Career interests	Public, nonprofit	Attraction to policy-making; commitment to public-interest, compassion, self-sacrifice
Lee and Wilkins, 2011	NASP-II	Career motivations	Public, nonprofit	Family friendly policies, benefits, salary, opportunities for promotion/increased responsibility, opportunity to serve the public
Bright, 2018	Public affairs/administration graduate students	Career preferences	Public	Degree orientation of public administration program
LeRoux and Feeney, 2013	General Social Survey	Managerial sorting	Public, for-profit, nonprofit	Work environment differences (discretion, work schedule, opportunities for pay increases)

Willems, 2014	General Social Survey	Managerial sorting	Public, for-profit, nonprofit	Job satisfaction, job flexibility, job clarity
Suh, 2018	Nonprofit employees that were previously employed by for-profit or public sectors	Sector shift	Public, for-profit, nonprofit	Intrinsic motivations, job reputation, education-job match
Tschirhart, Reed, Freeman, Anker, 2008	Masters of Business Administration and Masters of Public Administration alumni	Sector shift	Public, for-profit, nonprofit	Perceived competence in the sector, career values
Rawls, Ullrich, Nelson, 1975	Management graduate students	Sector preferences	For-profit, nonprofit	Personality features (dominance, flexibility); capacity for status; wealth preferences
Johnson and Ng, 2016	2011 Young Nonprofit Professionals Network	Sector switching intentions	Nonprofit	Managers, Advanced degrees, compensation
DeCooman, De Gieter, Pepermans, and Jeger, 2011	Knowledge workers in nonprofit or for-profit firms	Worker differences	For-profit, nonprofit	Gender, age, seniority, contract type, task characteristics, values, person-organization fit, personal motivations
Lanfranchi and Narcy, 2006	French Labor Force Survey	Worker differences	For-profit, nonprofit	Intrinsic motivations, salary
Lanfranchi, Narcy, and Larguem, 2010	Salaried professionals between 18-65 in 6 European countries	Worker motivation	For-profit, nonprofit	Intrinsic motivations, salary

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Table 2: Demographic Characteristics

Variable	N	Range	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1) Career Commitment	153	1-3	2.27 (.78)										
2) Ext. Work Exp.	151	1-5	4.19 (.44)	.06									
3) Int. Work Exp	151	1-5	4.53 (.46)	.05	.49****								
4) Calling	149	1-5	4.01 (.91)	.26**	.03								
5) Empl. NPO Sector	69	0-1	.70 (.46)	.41***	-.12	.15							
6) Current Salary	70	0-1	61.43 (.49)	.32**	.05	.12	.41***	.12					
7) White	151	0-1	.83 (.37)	-.05	-.11	-.09	-.02	.28*	.10				
8) Female	151	0-1	.76 (.43)	-.04	.23**	.03	.07	.13	-.12	-.08			
9) Single	151	0-1	.33 (.47)	-.16*	-.02	.00	-.20*	-.24*	.47****	-.14+	.06		
10) Age	149	23-69	38.83 (10.86)	.16*	-.04	.05	.21*	.25*	.48***	.07	.01	.45****	
11) Children	150	0-1	.33 (.47)	.12	.06	-.07	.10	.10	.11	-.10	-.07	.41****	.08

Note: +<.10, \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001, \*\*\*\*p<.0001. Only those who were employed were asked questions with regards to sector of employment, tenure, current salary, and intentions to quit. Sector commitment and employment level treated as continuous variables.

Table 3. Multinomial Logistic Regression

	Agnostic vs. fully committed		Conditionally committed vs. fully committed	
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Extrinsic Work Exp.	-.12	.75	-1.32*	.60
Intrinsic Work Exp.	.25	.67	.72	.52
Calling	-.71*	.29	-.51+	.28
Age	-.04	.03	-.04	.02
Female	.02	.59	.60	.50
White	.52	.69	1.25+	.71
Single	.56	.64	-.35	.54
Children	.30	.64	-.21	.48
Employed	-1.49+	.88	.31	.93
Constant	3.53	3.43	3.70	2.74

LR  $\chi^2$  (18) = 33.45

Prob >  $\chi^2$  = .01

Pseudo R<sup>2</sup> = .1131

Note: N= 143; coefficients rounded to two decimals; +p $\leq$ .10, \*p $\leq$ .05, \*\*p $\leq$ .01, \*\*\*p $\leq$ .001, \*\*\*\*p $\leq$ .0001.

Table 4. Comparison between nonprofit career commitment groups

Variable	<i>Agnostic</i> ( $n_{all}=14,$ $n_{npo}=3$ )	<i>Conditionally</i> <i>Committed</i> ( $n_{all}=17,$ $n_{npo}15$ )	<i>Fully</i> <i>Committed</i> ( $n_{all}=39,$ $n_{npo}27$ )	<i>Test Statistic</i>
Employment Sector				$\chi^2(2)=19.70, p<.0001;$ <i>Fisher's exact = 0.000</i>
<i>Nonprofit Sector</i>	3 (6.25%)	15 (31.25%)	30 (62.50%)	
<i>For-profit or public sector</i>	11 (52.38%)	2 (9.52%)	8 (38.10%)	
Current Salary				$\chi^2(2)=5.66, p=.059,$ <i>Fisher's exact=.052</i>
<i>High</i>	1 (3.12%)	7 (21.88%)	24 (75%)	
<i>Low</i>	2 (11.76%)	8 (47.06%)	7 (41.18%)	

Note: For  $\chi^2$  tests, entries are number of nonprofit alumni and numbers in parentheses column percentages. For F-tests, entries are means and standard deviations in parentheses. Significant differences in italics.

## Appendix A

Table A. Variable Names and Questionnaire Items

Variable Name	Questionnaire Items
<b>Dependent Variable</b>	
Nonprofit Career Commitment	How do you currently feel about building a career in the nonprofit sector? (1 = I am 100% committed to building a career in the nonprofit sector, 2 = I will only leave the nonprofit sector for the right professional opportunity, 3 = I will be looking for the best job regardless of sector, 4 = I do not plan to build a career in the sector) [Recoded: 1 = fully committed to a career in the nonprofit sector, 2 = conditionally committed to a career in the nonprofit sector, 3 = agnostic with regards to work sector)
<b>Independent Variables</b>	
Intrinsic Work Expectations ( $\alpha=.73$ )	5 = extremely important to 1 = not at all important  Making the world a better place is...  Having the opportunity to do something worthwhile for society is...  Helping people in need is...  Making use of my own knowledge in my work is...  Learning new things in my work is...  Having opportunities for career advancement is...
Extrinsic Work Expectations ( $\alpha=.74$ )	5 = extremely important to 1 = not at all important  Being able to afford a good standard of living is...  The work environment is...  Making a lot of money is...  Work that offers appropriate pay is...

	Benefits (e.g., health care) are...
	Being successful in my work...
	The location of the organization I work for is...
	The reputation of the organization I work for is...
	Having a work-life balance is...
	The recognition of my work through my supervisor is...
	Having a good relationship with my colleagues is...
Calling ( $\alpha=.88$ )	5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree
	I find my work rewarding.
	My work makes the world a better place.
	I would choose my current work/profession again, if I had the opportunity.
	I enjoy talking about my work to others.
	If I was financially secure, I would continue with my current line of work even if I was no longer paid.
	My work is one of the most important things in my life.
Employment Status	What is your current employment status? (1= Full-time paid [35 hours or more], 2 = Part-time paid [fewer than 35 hours per week], 3 = Unemployed or looking for work, 4 = In school full time, 5 = Caring for family full time, 6 = Retired, 7 = Other [Please describe]) [Recoded: 1 = employed, 0 = not employed]
Current Salary	What is your current salary? (1=less than \$25,000, 2=\$25,000 – \$34,999, 3=\$35,000-\$49,999, 4=\$50,000 – \$64,999, 5=\$65,000 – \$79,999, 6=\$80,000 – \$94,999, 7=\$95000 and above) [Recoded to 1 = high current salary if salary is \$50,000 and greater, 0=low current salary if salary is \$49,999 and lower]
Current Employment Sector	Referring the organization where you are employed, what best describes the sector it is in?

