
They Want to Be Global Citizens – Now What? : Implications of the NGO Career Arc for Students and Faculty Mentors¹

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Keywords: Careers, Global Citizenship, Nongovernmental Organization (NGO), Nonprofit, Students, Mentoring, Executive Director, Gender

ABSTRACT: Once faculty have inspired their students to want to become global citizens, many of these students will approach them for advice about careers that will enable them to live out their commitment to global justice. This article seeks to inform such discussions by providing students and their faculty mentors with information to help consider whether the NGO sector is a good fit for the student, how to prepare for it, and how to advance within it. It does so by providing a snapshot of the nonprofit/NGO career arc based upon analysis of 220 responses to a survey conducted in 2010 of staff of “NGOs that advance human rights” located in Ontario, Canada. Topics discussed include: the importance of when people take an interest in the sector; the relationship between campus clubs and volunteering and NGO careers; the importance of the BA versus the MA to employability; the typical career pattern; what recent entrants might learn from more established staff; types of specific occupation in the sector; how executive directors differ from other staff; and patterns related to gender within the sector.

Margaret Brigham (2011) has defined global citizenship as “an ability to act with a global mindset based on an application of values, ethics, identity, social justice perspective, intercultural skills, and sense of responsibility” (p. 29). This paper is not about the meaning of global citizenship. Rather it concerns something corollary to global citizenship education that should be of interest to the faculty members who teach it as well as their students. Many faculty members work hard to inspire students to care about global justice and to act upon a sense of responsibility; these same faculty members often find students respond by seeking to learn more by enrolling in more of their courses and majoring in their programs. Students also respond by asking for advice about career options that will allow them to put what they have learned into practice. For many faculty members this poses a difficulty either because most of their professional work experience is limited to academia or, if they have worked outside academia, it is unlikely to be in all the fields their students might be interested.

¹ The author would like to acknowledge the financial support of Wilfrid Laurier University for this project through internal research and educational development grants. He would also like to thank Oliver Masakure for advice developing the survey, Elizabeth Baisley for assistance conducting the research, and Stacey Wilson-Forsberg, Karen Williamson, Hamish Telford, and the audiences at the Canadian Political Science Association Annual Conference, 2012 and the Engaging Hearts and Minds Conference (Centennial College, 2013) for comments on earlier drafts of this article. Lastly, he would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their helpful suggestions.

I teach in a Human Rights program; others may teach in International Studies, Political Science, Sociology, International Development, Global Studies, Peace Studies, Women's Studies, Geography, or any of a number of other programs that open doors to conversations about global citizenship. Many of the students we inspire, just like a reported 23% of American liberal arts students who planned to enter the workforce upon completing their BA (Koc, 2010), are interested in working in the nonprofit sector, often for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). What many students may not know, however, and what many faculty members may lack the experience to teach them, is how to assess whether such a career would fit with their temperament and how to prepare for and advance through such careers. This article aims to assist faculty and students by sharing analysis of the results of a survey that helps map out key features of the NGO "career arc."

Two definitions of the word "arc" make it an apt metaphor for the career. One, the arc as "a continuous progression or line of development" (*Merriam-Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (11th ed.)), presents the career as having a beginning and extending out before the graduate through his or her adult working life. Another definition, the arc as "something arched or curved," reminds us that, much like standing on an arc, at any point along the career path it can be impossible to see what lies ahead over the "horizon." This inability to see over the horizon can make it difficult for students to assess whether a career started right out of college may still be attractive to them in ten or twenty years. It also makes it difficult for students and NGO staff in their early years of their careers to know how best to prepare to advance in their careers. When these present and former students approach professors, career counselors, and other mentors for guidance, many, especially those who have not worked in this sector, can find it challenging to provide informed advice.

At present, there is little literature that adopts the perspective of students and faculty mentors. In the nonprofit leadership and management literature, scholars have adopted theoretical perspectives to typologize career patterns, assess executive director competencies, and evaluate the "quality and sustainability" of employment in this sector (Ahmed, 2005; Almond & Kendall, 2000; Driver, 1980; Harrow & Mole, 2005; Suarez, 2010); they have also adopted managerial perspectives to better understand how to motivate, manage, and retain employees (Akingbola, 2006; Ban, Drahnak-Faller, & Towers, 2003; Kim & Lee, 2007; Kunreuther, 2003; Lee & Wilkins, 2011; Onyx & Maclean, 1996; Turner & Maher, 2009). Scholars in other disciplines have adopted a primarily curriculum-development perspective to assess the career relevance of, and to suggest improvements to, their degree programs (Breuning, Parker, & Ishiyama, 2001; Collins, Knotts, & Schiff, 2012; Dolan, 2002; Fletcher, 2005; Haas & Robinson, 1998; Herman & Renz, 2007; Kuh, 1995; McKinney, Saxe & Cobb, 1998; Peters & Beeson, 2010; Sagen, Dallam, & Laverty, 2000; Wilson & Larson, 2002; Robinson, 2013). Scholars have rarely explicitly drawn out the implications of their studies for students or early career employees, and these comments have usually been brief and were made only in passing (Haas & Robinson, 1998; Koc, 2010).

This article seeks to address this gap by adopting the perspective of students, their faculty mentors, and early career NGO staff. It does so by developing a partial snapshot of the NGO career arc based upon the results of an exploratory survey conducted in 2010 of staff working in the Canadian province of Ontario. The article reflects upon aspects of this career arc from pre-career experiences through workforce entry and, for some, the pinnacle of executive directorship in light of relevant literature. By providing a view over the horizon of this career arc, this article aims to help students, staff, and their mentors to make more informed decisions about whether this sector is a good fit for their abilities and personalities; to help students and staff determine how to prepare for the next stages in their careers; to add credibility to this advice by basing it upon the responses of people who actually work in the sector; and, in the process, to demonstrate the value of this line of research. It is hoped that the article finds its way into syllabi of undergraduate career preparation courses.

After describing the survey's method and limitations, the article discusses the findings in five sections that address pre-career experiences, career patterns, types of occupations, how executive directors are different, and the role of gender. Further references to the literature are made where relevant.

Survey Method and Limitations

This article draws upon selected results from an online survey of staff at Ontario-based NGOs that advance human rights that was conducted in 2010 using Survey Monkey. The survey was designed to achieve both practical pedagogical and scholarly research objectives. Its pedagogical purpose was to inform curriculum development in an interdisciplinary undergraduate program in human rights; its scholarly purpose was to solicit answers to questions that could inform the publication of research papers on three related, but distinct, topics: the workplace relevance of social science/liberal arts BAs (Robinson 2013); the focus and self-representation of Canadian NGOs that advance human rights; and, the purpose of this article, to inform the provision of credible insight to students considering careers in the NGO sector.

The questionnaire included 65 questions. This article draws upon responses to questions that addressed respondents' personal and educational backgrounds, the nature of their current positions, the skills they believed were required to be successful in their positions, and, where the respondent had experience, opinions related to hiring entry-level employees.

The survey was conducted using a two-step non-probabilistic snowball-type sampling method. First, research identified over 1000 organizations that were reduced to 126 after reviewing organization websites for fit with the study's parameters: the NGO must have staff physically located in Ontario and the NGO must "advance human rights." For this study, an organization was considered to "advance human rights" if one of the following applied to it: (i) it says that advancing human rights (or rights found in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms) is its core purpose or is part of its core purposes; (ii) it says it uses human rights to advance its core purposes; (iii) it justifies its core purposes, at least in part, in terms of human rights; (iv) it includes itself in CharityVillage.com's (a leading Canadian nonprofit website) directory under the heading, "Human Rights and Civil Liberties." In the second step, staff members were invited to participate either directly or, where contact information was not available online, by asking executive directors to forward invitations to staff. Whether contacted by email or through regular mail, respondents were provided with a unique identification code to ensure that only appropriate respondents completed the survey. Overall, 220 individuals, including 34 executive directors, responded and 201 surveys were completed in full.² SPSS was used to collate the responses and, where appropriate, analyze them using chi-square tests of cross-tabulated categories, analysis of variance, and the Mann-Whitney U test; findings that were statistically significant are noted as such in the text.

The study's objectives and its exploratory nature led to it being limited to Ontario-based NGOs that advance human rights. Thus, caution should be exercised in generalizing the nature of the NGO career arc beyond the geographical Ontario context and the subset of NGOs that advance human rights. While such caution is indeed warranted, there are good reasons to believe that the findings discussed here offer insight into NGO careers more broadly. For instance, considering the

² This sample size compares well with that of other published studies on the NGO sector (for instance, Onyx & Maclean had 162 usable responses (1996), Haas & Robinson 208 (1998) and Kim & Lee 198 (2007)).

geographic context, it is quite common in the literature to report on studies limited to federal states or provinces or even sub-regions within these (see for example, Haas & Robinson, 1998; Kim & Lee, 2007; Onyx & Maclean, 1996; Suarez, 2010). The jurisdiction in this study, the Canadian province of Ontario, is Canada’s largest province, has over 13 million inhabitants, and is home to Canada’s capital, Ottawa, and its largest city, Toronto. As such, it has much in common with other English-speaking industrialized democracies.

The study’s focus on NGOs that advance human rights is also not as limiting as it first may seem. Besides being an apt focus for a paper intended to provide career advice to students motivated by global citizenship education, this subset of NGOs actually includes a wide range of organizations. Reflecting the well-documented trend that has seen long-established NGOs adopt the normative language of human rights (Chong, 2009; Hopgood, 2009; Kindornay, Ron, & Carpenter, 2012; Nelson & Dorsey, 2008), when asked about the central focus of their current employer, survey respondents identified a broad range of concerns, including international development (23%), human rights and civil liberties (18%), poverty/social justice (13%), education (9%), health (7%), research and policy development (6%), children, youth and families (5%), disabilities (3%), and women (3%). The scope of their employers’ focus also varied, ranging from those that were purely local to those focused on provincial, national, and international levels. Finally, the organizations also varied in size with about one-third of respondents indicating they worked in organizations with 1-10, 11-50, and 51+ employees.

Still, while the findings discussed in this article are likely generalizable to a wide range of NGOs in English-speaking industrialized democracies, they are likely less applicable the more a particular subsector of NGO differs from NGOs that advance human rights. For example, their reliability is likely to decline: as the average size of NGOs in a sector increases; the more NGOs rely upon staff who hold specialized professional credentials rather than liberal arts and social sciences degrees; and the less an NGO’s main focus is similar to those listed above (for example, those concerned with the arts; culture and heritage; animal welfare; and sports and recreation).

Pre-Career Experiences

This section reviews responses concerning key aspects of pre-career experiences. The observations should be of particular interest to students considering career options, and faculty and other mentors offering advice.

Table 1: When respondent first took an interest in working for an organization like his or her present employer

| When respondent first seriously considered working for an NGO | |
|--|-----|
| In high school or earlier | 23% |
| During first degree or diploma | 25% |
| During post-graduate study | 12% |
| After entering the workforce | 36% |
| Don’t Remember/Other | 4% |

It is never too late to take an interest in the NGO sector.

Some undergraduates, when encountering other students who “have wanted to work for an NGO for as long as they can remember,” may be intimidated into thinking that it is just too late for them to even try. While one might think that the earlier a person took an interest in the sector, the more likely he or she would be to find employment and to be successful in it, the results suggest that this is not necessarily the case.

There does *not* appear to be a strong relationship between when a person took an interest in the sector and their subsequent employment. Respondents (N=220) were approximately evenly divided between early interest-takers (48%), defined as those who started seriously considering working for an organization like their present employer during high school or prior to completing their first post-secondary program, and late interest-takers (48%), who started later. In fact, 36% of respondents did not seriously consider the sector until after entering the workforce.

Of course, the fact that late interest-takers work in the sector does not necessarily mean that the sector is a good fit for them. One way this might be expressed is by their leaving the sector quickly after entering. To test this possibility, respondents were divided between those who have worked in the sector for five years or less (85) and those who have worked longer (132) (presumably sufficient time to determine whether the sector is a good fit); this revealed no statistically significant difference between early and later interest-takers. Finally, comparison using another proxy for fit – becoming an executive director – also failed to reveal a statistically significant difference between early and late interest-takers.

Thus, whatever causes people to become early or late interest-takers, it does not appear to be correlated with suitability for work in the NGO sector. Faculty and other mentors should feel confident when encouraging late interest-takers to explore this career option.

Participation in campus clubs and volunteering is correlated with careers in NGOs.

This claim finds support from a number of aspects of the survey. For instance, when asked to rate a number of pieces of advice for obtaining a good entry-level job in an organization like the one for which they work, 46% of respondents rated “Volunteer with Any NGO” as “Vital.” A relationship between participation in campus clubs and volunteering and NGO careers is also suggested by the fact that that 63% of survey respondents indicated they had participated in such organizations (even more may have been involved in volunteering in general, but the survey did not ask about that). This rate is similar to the percentages of nonprofit staff found to engage in volunteering in Australia (70%) (Onyx & Maclean, 1996, p. 339-40) and the United States (73%) (Lee & Wilkins, 2011, p. 51). The strength of the connection is also supported by Lee and Wilkins’ (2011) comparative study of public and nonprofit managers in which they found that “people who volunteered were more than 10 percent more likely to work in the nonprofit [than in the public] sector” (p. 53). Finally, this relationship finds support in respondents’ subjective perceptions of its value. When asked if they thought their experience in campus clubs and volunteering (which was specified as campus-based clubs, associations, campus chapters of nonprofits/NGOs, student government, etc.) helped them obtain their first post-graduation job, 44% said they thought it had impressed the organization that hired them; an additional 6% indicated that their first job was with an organization to which they had belonged as a student.

But, “just” belonging does not appear to help much.

The importance of active participation stands out when attention is limited to the 63% of respondents who participated in student clubs and volunteering. For instance, while 63% of those who had held executive positions believed their involvement helped them get their first job, this was only true of 27% of those who never served as an executive ($p < 0.01$). Even more striking, seven of the eight respondents who obtained their first job with an organization to which they had belonged as a student had served in an executive role. A similar pattern emerged when the number of organizations to which respondents reported belonging was considered: while only 27% of those

Table 2: Relationship Between Types of Participation In Student Clubs and Volunteering and Perception That Participation Helped Respondent Obtain First Job

| How Those Who Participated in Student Clubs and Volunteering Participated | % Expressing Belief That Participation Helped In Obtaining First Post-Education Employment | |
|--|---|-----|
| Served in Executive Role | 63% | |
| Never Served in an Executive Role | 27% | |
| Belonged to 1 Organization | | 27% |
| Belonged to 2-3 Organizations | | 51% |
| Belonged to 4+ Organizations | | 73% |

Table 3: Relationship between when respondent first seriously considered working for an NGO and whether respondent participated in campus clubs or volunteering

| When first seriously considered working for an NGO | Have you ever belonged to a community college or university student organization (e.g., campus-based clubs, associations, campus chapters of nonprofits/NGOs, student government, etc.) (N = 219) | |
|---|--|-----------|
| | Yes | No |
| In high school or earlier | 80% | 20% |
| During first degree or diploma | 69% | 31% |
| During post-graduate study | 67% | 33% |
| After entering the workforce | 45% | 55% |

p < 0.001.

who belonged to just one organization thought their participation helped them obtain their first job, this was true of 51% who belonged to 2 or 3 and 73% of those who belonged to 4 or more (p<.01). Students are often told that the real value of joining clubs and volunteering requires active and engaged participation; this advice can now be backed up with empirical evidence based on the experience of people who work in the sector.

*The value of community service learning courses.*³

When read in the light of what has been suggested to this point, Table 3 raises serious concerns about the possibility that there may be many students who could become late interest-takers and find rewarding careers in the NGO sector, but do not because they are never exposed to it. While the survey, by its very nature, did not gather data on those who never took an interest in the sector, comparison of late interest-takers to early interest-takers indicated that the later someone takes an interest in the sector, the less likely he or she is to engage in behaviours that correlate to subsequent employment in the NGO sector: early interest-takers were more likely to participate in campus clubs and volunteering (74% versus 51% for late interest-takers (p<0.01)), to have belonged to more than one organization (84% versus 70% (p<0.05)), and to have served in an executive position (71% versus 55% (p<0.05)). These findings suggest the following question: how many more late interest-takers might

³ The author has discussed the curricular implications of the findings of this survey elsewhere; see Robinson (2013).

have found rewarding careers in the NGO sector if they had been exposed to it as undergraduates? This question points to a potential value of placing community service learning courses (that require students to work with NGOs and, usually, to write reflection papers) in our programs. This is important because it might provide late interest-takers an opportunity to explore this viable career option which they may never have discovered on their own.

The BA is sufficient to secure entry-level positions.

I have often heard it suggested that students must possess an MA to pursue a career in this sector. It would appear to be supported by Haas and Robinson's (1998) finding that master's degrees were preferred by nonprofits for filling "middle or upper management positions" (p. 356). This study suggests that while this may be true for middle and upper managers, it is not the case for recent graduates seeking entry-level positions.

This claim finds support in responses to a number of questions. For instance, when asked directly, only 16% of respondents rated a master's degree as "Vital" for securing a good entry-level job. Similarly, when those who had experience hiring entry-level employees (N=155) were asked about the desirability of various credentials for entry-level positions, more rated the BA as "Highly Desired" (46%) than the MA (31%). The employability of the BA was reinforced by examining the highest educational credentials held by respondents in their twenties, those most likely to hold entry-level positions: BA (53%), BA plus post-graduate college diploma⁴ (14%), MA (24%), and college diploma (2%). Thus, students who want to gain practical experience after earning a BA, or who just want to take a break from their education, do not appear to be harming their chances to start a career in this sector.

A post-BA credential appears increasingly necessary to progress in the sector.

This claim is supported by a number of findings. First, when comparing the highest credential held by respondents aged 30 and over, most of whom should be beyond entry-level positions, the MA was more widely held (39%) than the BA (25%) ($p < 0.01$). In fact, 64% of those aged 30 and over held a post-BA credential (e.g., post-grad college diploma, MA, LLB, PhD). This is similar to the 70% Haas and Robinson found in Santa Clara County, California (1998, p. 357), and higher than the 53.1% Lee and Wilkins (2011) found among American nonprofit managers (p. 51).

Further analysis suggests that the perceived need to obtain additional credentials is increasing. For instance, when respondents were divided by age in decades, the average number of years between when they earned their two most recent credentials was shown to be declining: 30s: 5.5 years; 40s: 5.6; 50s: 10.5; 60s+: 13.8. The increasing pressure to earn a post-BA credential is also suggested by the generally increasing percentage of people who had earned their post-BA degree while they were in their twenties: 30s: 39%; 40s: 21%; 50s: 18%; 60s: 33%.⁵

While the BA appears to be sufficient for obtaining entry-level positions, students need to be advised that if they intend to pursue careers and advance in this sector, they will likely need to earn a post-BA credential. This also means that undergraduates who are hoping to enter this sector need

⁴ This is a condensed version of a community college program that is offered to students who already possess a university degree or college diploma.

⁵ Those holding PhDs were excluded from this calculation as their educational trajectory tends to differ markedly from those pursuing terminal MAs.

to be reminded of the importance of maintaining grades that will gain them admission to desirable MA, Law, or other relevant programs. As for when it is best to pursue a postgraduate credential – immediately upon completing the BA or after obtaining some work experience – the survey offered no insight. As for which credential to pursue, students might begin by consulting works by Ahmed (2005), Dolan (2002) and Haas and Robinson (1998).

Career Patterns

This section discusses features of NGO careers that apply to most staff regardless of their particular occupation: the typical career pattern and differences between recent entrants and those more established in the sector.

The typical career pattern is the spiral career.

While NGO and public sector careers are both likely to appeal to those who find intrinsic rewards in serving their community, each sector tends to support distinct career patterns that some individuals will find appealing and others unattractive. As Michael J. Driver (1980) has argued, “organizations and groups can...develop prevailing career concepts [which include] specific assumptions about reward systems, career paths, the role of development and training, and basic attitudes towards human beings” (p. 12). Driver has described four career concepts of which the linear concept is typically associated with the public sector and the spiral concept is typically associated with the nonprofit sector (see also Ban, et. al., 2003; Harrow & Mole, 2005; Kim & Lee, 2007). This study affirms the association between the NGO sector and spiral careers. The distinctions Driver drew between spiral and linear career concepts provide an excellent comparative framework for students and their mentors to evaluate the potential fit with temperaments and other aspirations.

Onyx and Maclean (1996), following Driver, suggested that career concepts can be distinguished by three key features: “extent and direction of job change, pattern of work values, and preferred organizational processes” (p. 332). Regarding the extent and direction of job change, the linear career “embodies the notion that a career is a series of upward moves within a field. There may be changes in organizations to avoid blocking but the key ingredient is steady upward movement” (Driver, 1980, p. 10). The spiral career, by contrast, “is seen as a cyclic process in which one changes field or major direction in cycles of about five to ten years. There may be upward movement within a cycle, but the shift between cycles is often lateral” (Driver, 1980, p. 10). Regarding values, linear careers appeal to “those who value prestige, management skills, high income, power and achievement”; spiral careers appeal to those who cherish work they consider “*both* socially worthwhile and personally rewarding,” and that provides “opportunities for self-development,” involves new challenges, requires creativity and multiskilling, and permits them to exercise of autonomy. Finally, regarding organizational settings, linear careers are usually pursued within large, hierarchical structures, spiral careers within “open system[s] with low structure” (Onyx & Maclean, 1996, p. 332, 341, emphasis in original).

Consistent with the cyclic nature of the spiral career, survey respondents reported patterns of fairly frequent changes in positions within and across organizations and sectors. Those respondents who had worked 10 years or more in the NGO sector since completing their most recent education (N = 104) reported holding an average of 2.5 positions (with the same or a different organization) per decade, about 4 years per position. This compares with Onyx and Maclean’s (1996) finding of an average of 3.6 positions over the last ten years, or 2.8 years per position (p. 336). While respondents’ careers appeared to become more settled as they aged – the average time they reported

spending in their most recent position increased steadily with age (20s: 2.3 years; 30s: 3.9; 40s: 4.5; 50s: 5.9; 60s+: 6.0) – the average was still consistent with Driver’s five to ten year cycles. Respondents also reported much movement between organizations: 68% reported having worked for more than one organization and, of those, 38% reported having worked for two organizations, 43% for three to five, and 10% for more than six. They also reported much movement between sectors: 30% had worked in one other sector, 6% in two, and 2% in three; among these 20% had experience working in government, 20% in the for-profit sector, and 8% for a union. Even the direction of movements between organizations resisted the linear pattern: only 15% report having moved exclusively between organizations like their present employer; only 35% worked exclusively with organizations like their present employer since entering the subsector; and fully 51% report having moved back-and-forth between organizations like their present employer and organizations with a different focus.

Table 4: Percentage Selecting Reasons for Choosing to Work in Nonprofit/NGO Sector

| Reason | % |
|--|----|
| Commitment to Social Change | 82 |
| Philosophical or Political Commitment | 53 |
| Volunteer Experience | 30 |
| Personal Life Experience (For Example, Former User) | 23 |
| By Chance/Through Networking | 23 |
| Religious Commitment | 12 |
| Influence of Family (e.g., Parents) | 11 |
| Other | 10 |
| Hours/Location Convenient for Family Commitment/Lifestyle | 9 |
| Study Placement | 8 |
| Only Job Available | 5 |

extend personal skills (86%), career opportunities (68%), change of pace (60%); access to decision-making (74%), influence policy development (72%), work independently (65%). Conversely, values associated with the linear career ranked consistently low: increased salary (42%), greater prestige (40%), more budget responsibility (32%). Finally, while one might suspect that insecurity of employment is the real reason for the cyclic pattern of respondents’ careers, this is not supported by the reasons they gave for entering the sector (“only job available” ranked last at 5%), or for finding their current position attractive: previous job ended (29%), job security (37%).

Respondents’ motivations and values were also consistent with the spiral career. When asked why they chose to work in the nonprofit/NGO sector (Table 4) the top reasons they cited reflected the desire for work that is *socially worthwhile*: commitment to social change (82%), and philosophical or political commitment (53%). No other reasons were chosen by more than a third of respondents. Similarly, when asked to rate each of 14 possible reasons for finding *their present position* attractive, the top reasons respondents rated as either “Attractive” or “Very Attractive” (Table 5) were consistent with spiral career motivations: work that is *socially worthwhile*: contribute to social change (97%), organizational philosophy (83%), work on human rights issues (86%); *challenges and opportunities for self-development*: interesting/challenging work (96%),

Table 5: Percentage Selecting Reasons for Finding Present Positions “Attractive” or “Very Attractive”

| Reason for Finding Present Position Attractive | % |
|---|----------|
| Contribute to Social Change | 97 |
| Interesting/Challenging Work | 96 |
| Good People to Work With | 87 |
| Extend Personal Skills | 86 |
| Work on Human Rights Issues | 86 |
| Organizational Philosophy | 83 |
| Network with Other Agencies | 75 |
| Access to Decision-Making | 74 |
| Influence Policy Development | 72 |
| Career Opportunities | 68 |
| Work Independently | 65 |
| Change of Pace | 60 |
| More Staff Responsibility | 56 |
| Good Management Structure | 52 |
| Convenient Location | 51 |
| Work with New Client Group | 51 |
| Training Opportunities | 49 |
| Create a New Service | 46 |
| Increased Salary | 42 |
| More Flexible Hours | 41 |
| Greater Prestige | 40 |
| Job Security | 37 |
| More Budget Responsibility | 32 |
| Previous Job Ended | 29 |
| Less Management Responsibility | 10 |

career. For example, are they more interested in status and promotions or in doing work that is socially worthwhile while exercising a fair degree of control over the nature of their job? Students should also be made aware that, while it is never good practice to accept and to leave jobs lightly, they should make decisions about pursuing new positions within the sector in view of the fact that relatively high rates of turnover are normal as they are rooted in the very nature of this sector: junior employees often return to school; spiral careerists tend to leave their positions to seek new challenges.

The results also provided indications that respondents worked in organizational settings with features typically associated with the spiral career: relatively small, flat/non-hierarchical, emphasizing multiskilling more than specialization, and facilitating “interpersonal closeness” (Driver, 1980, p. 14) or what Onyx and Maclean (1996) call a “social dimension” (p. 338). As for size, the majority of respondents (69%) reported working in organizations of less than 50 people: 1 to 10 employees (33%); 11 to 50 (36%); 51+ (31%). Low levels of specialization and an emphasis on multiskilling were suggested by the fact that, when asked to indicate the percentage of a typical week they devoted to each of 11 significant functions (e.g., budgeting & financial management, project management, providing service to clientele, etc.), respondents reported performing an average of 7.5 functions in an average week. That such multiskilling is a characteristic of the sector and not just of small organizations was suggested by the fact that the average number of tasks performed was almost identical for staff working for organizations with 50 or less employees (7.5) and those with more than 50 (7.4). Finally, the relevance of interpersonal closeness/a social dimension was suggested by the fact that 87% of respondents selected “good group of people to work with” as one of their reasons for finding their present position attractive (Table 5).

One lesson of this section is fairly clear: students considering careers in the NGO sector should be encouraged to seriously consider whether they would be happier pursuing a linear- or a spiral-patterned

More established staff members tend to work in smaller organizations and place greater emphasis on management and financial skills.

The survey facilitated comparisons between “recent entrants” (treated as those in their twenties) and more established staff (those aged 30 and above) that identified patterns that should be of interest to students, new staff, and their mentors.⁶

Comparison of employment data between recent entrants and established staff suggested a general pattern whereby staff often began their careers in larger organizations but tended to move to smaller organizations as they gained experience. This was suggested by the fact that recent entrants were disproportionately employed in larger organizations—they constituted 46% of respondents who reported working in organizations with 51+ employees, but only 19% of those in smaller organizations ($p < .001$)—and that the average age of staff in smaller organizations (43) was significantly higher than in larger organizations (38) ($p < .01$). Sadly, but not surprisingly, recent entrants’ connection to the workplace also appeared to be more tenuous: while they held a proportionate share of full-time jobs, they were overrepresented among those holding contract positions: they held 42% of contractual positions, but only 23% of ongoing positions ($p < .01$). The positions of recent entrants also appeared to be slightly, but significantly, more specialized as measured by the average number of types of tasks they perform in a typical week (7.1 versus 7.9 for those 30+ ($p < .05$)). Thus, recent entrants working in larger organizations would be well advised to network with more senior colleagues in smaller organizations to learn why they work in these organizations and, if the reasons prove desirable, how to prepare to obtain such positions.

Other comparisons suggested that people’s priorities may change as they become more established in this sector. For instance, when asked why they found their current position attractive, recent entrants placed greater emphasis than established staff on characteristics related to *becoming established in the workforce* (training opportunities ($p < .05$), career opportunities ($p < .001$), job security ($p < .05$)), *gaining status and broadening experience* (greater prestige ($p < .01$), more staff responsibility ($p < .05$), work with new client group ($p < .05$)), as well as change of pace ($p < .05$) and good people to work with ($p < .001$). When asked about the importance of various skills and competencies to success in their positions, more established staff placed greater emphasis than recent entrants on skills and competencies related to *management and finance*: ability to hold effective meetings ($p < .05$), negotiation skills ($p < .001$), accounting, budgeting, financial management ($p < .05$), grant writing ($p < .001$), understanding the government context ($p < .001$), and understanding of nonprofit law/legal issues ($p < .05$). This comparison provides an excellent example of the value of looking over the horizon of the career arc. As Ban et al. observe, it is often the case that “people in nonprofits have backgrounds in social work, theology or humanities that do not provide them with adequate management skills” (2005, p. 149). With knowledge of the priorities of more established staff, students and recent entrants may accelerate their careers by taking courses or seeking experiences to help develop them earlier.

⁶ Age was used as a proxy for being established staff rather than position in the organization because the generally flat structure of these organizations makes it very difficult to determine a person’s status from their job title.

There is No Such Thing as a “Job in an NGO”

Another important consideration for those contemplating careers in this sector is the actual types of occupations people fill. This section summarizes what the survey suggests about the range of occupations within the sector.

The sector maintains a variety of types of position.

The survey asked respondents for job titles (actual or descriptive) that indicate what they do in their present positions. These responses informed the creation of a typology of nine types of occupation in the sector (Table 6). Given the small numbers in some of the occupational groups, the percentages should only be treated as a general indicator of the relative size of the categories in the sector. If a distinction is made between core staff, whose occupations are closely related to the organization’s defining mission, and support staff, who perform functions that are vital to the life of the organization as an organization, but involve skills that are not closely related to its defining mission (Internal Operations and Administrator/Executive Assistant), then a first observation is that core staff positions make up the overwhelming majority of occupations in the sector. Within core staff, Program Management, at 42%, was by far the largest type of occupation. This included job titles related to creating, managing, delivering, and promoting the organizations’ programs. The next largest category was Executive Director (16%). While this proportion may seem large, it is less surprising once it is recalled that one third of respondents work for organizations with 1 to 10 employees. The Executive Director category was followed by Advocacy (11%) and a number of other core staff occupations clustered around 5-6%: Managing Youth, Volunteers, Campus Chapters, and/or Membership; Fundraising; Public Relations/ Communications; and Research.

Table 6: Top Three Functions Performed by Position Types

| Type of Position | 1st | 2nd | 3rd |
|---|--|---|---|
| Program Management/ Coordinating (42%) | Project Management | Providing Services to Clientele | Networking/ Liaising with Other NGOs |
| Executive Director (N=28) | Public Relations, Public Speaking, Public Advocacy | Project Management | Managing Employees |
| Advocacy/Outreach/ Public Engagement/ Education (11%) | Public Relations, Public Speaking, Public Advocacy | Networking/ Liaising with Other NGOs | Project Management |
| Management of Youth, Volunteers, Campus Chapters, or Membership (6%) | Project Management | Providing Services to Clients | Managing Volunteers/ Student or Local Chapters |
| Communications/ Media/Public Relations (6%) | Public Relations, Public Speaking, Public Advocacy | Project Management | Managing Volunteers/ Student or Local Chapters |
| Fundraising/ Development (6%) | Project Management | Fundraising (Other Than Grants) | Networking/ Liaising with Other NGOs |
| Research (5%) | Providing Services to Clients | Monitoring Human Rights Violations: Information Gathering, Research, and Documentation | Project Management |
| Internal Operations (4%) | Budgeting & Financial Management | Providing Services to Clients | Grant-Writing & Follow-Up |
| Administrator/ Executive Assistant (4%) | Providing Services to Clients | Budgeting & Financial Management | Fundraising (Other Than Grants) |

To gain a general sense of the mix of functions associated with each occupation, answers to the question concerning the percentage of a typical week respondents devote to each of 11 functions were compared to produce Table 6 which shows the top three functions associated with each position category. While the functions, and especially their ranking, represented in Table 6 should be treated as illustrative rather than definitive, the take away point for students and their mentors should be that there is no such thing as a “job in a NGO.” Rather, there are a wide range of specific occupations, each with its own mix of responsibilities and, thus, each suited to people with different temperaments, abilities, and skill sets. Students would be well advised to learn about these different positions and to avail themselves of low-risk opportunities to give them a trial run through student

clubs, volunteering, and internships. Students should also be aware that specialized courses and training programs exist to prepare them for many of these occupations, such as fundraising and development, event management, volunteer management.

Besides providing a very general basis for comparing NGO sector occupations, two other lessons can be drawn from Table 6. First, those considering careers in this sector would do well to seek opportunities to gain skills and experience in project management as this is the only function that is listed for all types of core staff. Second, students who presently lack skills related to management functions should not consider this an insurmountable barrier to entering the sector as these functions do not rank highly amongst the work performed by core staff. But, as noted in the comparison of recent entrants to more established staff, students should be advised to seek opportunities to develop such skills as soon as possible.

How Executive Directors Are Different

Students and recent entrants who hope to become executive directors will likely be interested to know what this survey indicated about executive directors. While NGO executive directors who responded to this survey (N=34) did not differ significantly from their colleagues with respect to the reasons they entered the sector, key differences did appear with respect to why they found their present positions attractive and the functions their positions require them to perform.

With respect to why they found their present positions attractive, the executive directors' responses differed from their colleagues' by placing significantly greater emphasis on "influence policy development" ($p < .01$), "access to decision making" ($p < .05$), and the more linear-career oriented characteristic, "more budget responsibility" ($p < .05$). Their colleagues, conversely, placed more emphasis on factors Driver (1980) has associated with the spiral career pattern: growth (training opportunities ($p < 0.05$), and career opportunities ($p < 0.05$)) and nurturance (good people to work with ($p < .05$), good management structure ($p < .05$)) as well as job security ($p < 0.01$). To clarify, the point is not that these motivations ranked especially high for executive directors or their colleagues, but they did differ and the differences were statistically significant.

Regarding the work their positions required them to perform, executive directors' responses suggested that they spent more time performing management functions than their colleagues. In particular, executive directors indicated they spent statistically significantly more time performing the following functions: budgeting and financial management ($p < .001$), managing employees ($p < .001$), public relations, public speaking, and public advocacy ($p < .05$), and, less clearly related to management, fundraising (other than grants) ($p < .001$). The emphasis on management is reinforced by the one function executive directors indicated that they spent statistically significantly less time performing than their colleagues: providing services to clientele ($p < .01$). The emphasis on management is also reflected in the skills that executive directors placed significantly greater emphasis on than their colleagues. These related to management (entrepreneurship ($p < .001$), ability to manage human resources ($p < .01$), accounting, budgeting, financial management ($p < .001$), understanding nonprofit legal issues ($p < .001$)), representing the organization (public relations ($p < .05$), networking (public-private-nonprofit) ($p < .05$)), and fundraising (grant writing ($p < .001$), fundraising (other than grants) ($p < .001$)). The recurrence of fundraising supports Dolan's finding that fundraising and grant writing were the top two training needs identified by nonprofit executive directors he surveyed (2002, p. 281).

While it is not likely to come as a surprise that executive directors spend more time than their colleagues performing management functions and that they place greater emphasis on management

skills, what may be surprising is how strikingly this sets them apart from their colleagues and the spiral career pattern. The differences between the nature and requirements of executive directors' work and that of most other positions in the NGO sector raise two questions. First, why would someone who was attracted to a sector dominated by the spiral career pattern want to take on such a position? The survey had nothing to offer in answer to this question, but it seems reasonable to advise students and staff contemplating becoming executive directors to consider these differences carefully in light of their own interests and inclinations. Second, how can prospective executive directors develop the skills the position requires when these skills do not appear to be required to perform successfully in other positions within these organizations? While the survey did not address this second question directly, it allows consideration of how present executive directors may have prepared.

Suarez found that only 56% of the nonprofit leaders in his sample “had any management experience before assuming their current position” (2010, p. 701). On reflection, this is not surprising given the few opportunities to develop management experience that are likely to be found in a sector characterized by generally flat, non-hierarchical organizations. How then did many of them develop the skills required of executive directors? One possibility, education, is supported by the fact executive directors in this study's sample tended to be more highly educated than their colleagues: 74% of the executive directors held a post-BA credential compared to 53% of their colleagues ($p < 0.05$). The breakdown by highest credentials held was: PhD: 12%; MA: 35%; MBA: 9%; Other MA-level management degree: 6%; and post-grad diploma: 12%. This is very similar to what Suarez (2010), who only tracked advanced university credentials (MA, MBA, PhD, etc.), found in the San Francisco Bay area (p. 702). It is also worth noting that, while it has been suggested that business credentials are becoming more valued in the nonprofit sector (Murray, 2008), the results of this survey supported Suarez's (2010) observation “that management credentials generally have not been necessary for attaining a leadership position in the nonprofit sector” (p.701; Haas & Robinson, 1998, p. 356).

Another possibility is that they may have developed skills through prior experiences. This seems to be borne out by the fact that executive directors tended to have been employed in the sector longer than other staff (an average of 17 versus 11 years ($p < 0.001$)). They may also have developed useful skills through experience they gained working in other sectors. Since completing their most recent degree or diploma, 47% of the executive directors reported having worked in another sector: 32% in the for-profit sector, 32% in government, and 6% in unions. It seems likely that, had they been asked this question with regard to their entire careers, the percentages would have been even higher.

Those contemplating becoming executive directors in the NGO sector should realize that this will require developing many skills that are not otherwise highly valued in the sector and that they will likely have to look elsewhere – returning to school or working for a time in another sector – to develop these skills.

The Role of Gender

This final section discusses three observations that the data suggested about the role of gender in the sector: increasing feminization; a disproportionate number of male executive directors; and a relative openness to women seeking leadership positions.

The workforce appears to be becoming increasingly feminized.

It is well known that workers in this sector are predominantly female: 71% of respondents to this survey were women; Almond and Kendall (2000) reported a figure of 67% for the United Kingdom (p. 216); Onyx and Maclean cited a 70% to 80% figure for the United States and reported 79% for their Australia sample (1996, p. 336). What may be surprising is that analysis of this study's data suggested that the proportion of women may be increasing: while 65% of those aged 30+ were women (a ratio of almost two-to-one), this was true of 86% of those in their twenties (a ratio of more than four-to-one) ($p < .01$). This finding suggests a need for more research, both to determine if the pattern suggested here holds up more broadly and, if it does, to determine why it is occurring since it is consistent with both the possibility that fewer young men are entering the sector than in the past and that women are leaving the sector at disproportionately higher rates than men as they age.

Women are proportionately underrepresented among executive directors.

For a sector whose workers are 70% to 80% female, women represent a surprisingly small percentage of those holding top executive positions: this study found they held 50% of the positions; Suarez (2010) reported figures of 66% for the United States nationally and 54% for his sample from the San Francisco Bay Area (p.700); and a recent report from the United Kingdom suggested that women hold only 25% of senior officer positions at the largest charitable organizations (Jarboe, 2012).⁷ Not only did this study find that 1 in 4 male respondents were executive directors compared to only 1 in 10 female respondents ($p < .01$), but analysis of the data also suggested that this situation does not appear to be improving: when executive directors aged 50 and over were compared to those under 50, males turned out to be more overrepresented among executive directors in the younger cohort (16% are executive directors compared to 5% of females) than amongst those aged 50+ (38% versus 22%). The word *appear* is used advisedly above since while this finding may reflect an increase in male overrepresentation, it is also consistent with what could be a static pattern of women moving into leadership roles later in their career than men.

While this finding requires further research, analysis of the present data suggested some avenues for further study. The overrepresentation of males among executive directors does not appear to be explained by differences in educational backgrounds: the survey revealed no statistically significant difference between males and females regarding post-BA credentials. Nor did the survey provide any support for the possibility that men are treated preferentially: there were no statistically significant differences between rates at which men and women were employed full-versus part-time or between those employed on an ongoing versus contractual basis. Differences between men and women's prior experience in other sectors appears more promising, but the difference found in this survey (44% of men had such experience compared to 34% of women) was not statistically significant. A final possibility is that, on average, the men and women who are attracted to work in the sector differ in their motivations and attitudes to the functions required by their work in ways that lead disproportionately more men to seek and retain executive director positions. Since the present study was not designed to explore this question, the meaning of the gender differences it reveals with respect to attitudinal questions is not obvious: while men placed greater emphasis than women on the opportunity to "influence policy development" as a reason for

⁷ The report's focus on the largest organizations likely underrepresents the percentage of women executive directors for the sector as a whole since Harrow and Mole (2005) found that the proportion of male executive directors increase as organization size increases (p. 86).

finding their present position attractive ($p < .05$) and on “entrepreneurship” as a skill they considered important to success in their position ($p < .05$), women placed greater emphasis than men on ability to work with a team ($p < .05$), interpersonal skills ($p < .05$), and ability to work with the unknown ($p < .05$) as important to success in their positions. Clearly there is more here to be learned and the approach taken in this survey suggests some useful ways to set about it.

Nevertheless, the NGO sector is a promising destination for women seeking leadership opportunities.

While the 50% representation of women among executive directors appears low when compared to their 71% representation among respondents, it actually compares favourably with other sectors. For instance, in Canada in 2012, the nonprofit organization Catalyst reported that women held only 18% of senior officer positions among the Financial Post 500 leading for-profit companies and only 27% of such positions in Crown corporations (Catalyst, 2013, p. 1). Recent statistics for the United Kingdom have suggested a similar comparison between large charitable and large for-profit organizations (25% versus 4%) (Jarboe, 2012). Thus, while the news is not all good, the study did suggest that for young women seeking opportunities to attain top leadership positions in their chosen careers, the nonprofit sector offers relatively better opportunities than the for-profit sector.

Conclusion

This article began by noting a problem faced by many faculty members involved in various forms of global citizenship education: once we have inspired students to care about global justice and to desire to act upon it, students often come to us seeking advice about career choices in sectors in which we have little or no personal experience. By discussing findings from a survey of staff working in one of the sectors many of our students are likely to work in – the nonprofit/NGO sector – this article has gone some distance toward addressing this problem and, one hopes, demonstrating the value of research that adopts the perspective of students and their mentors with the aim of helping them gain a view over the horizon of prospective career arcs.

As an attempt to respond to a perceived need, the snapshot of the NGO sector career arc that has been developed here should help facilitate better advice and more informed decision-making about career choices and career preparation. It has provided much for those contemplating careers in the sector to consider: the value of active participation in student clubs, volunteering and service learning courses; examples of what the spiral career pattern means in practice and why people enjoy it; evidence of the openness of the sector to late interest-takers, to those whose highest credential is a BA, to those presently lacking management skills, and to women seeking leadership opportunities, but also evidence of the need to obtain further educational credentials and to develop management and financial skills over time, especially if one hopes to become an executive director; examples of the various types of position that the sector offers and encouragement to gain knowledge of them early and to identify specific educational and other opportunities to prepare for them. In addition to this, for those who find themselves mentoring students, the article has provided evidence to back up their advice based on the experience of those who work in the sector.

As social science research, the study has both affirmed much that has been noted in the existing literature and added to it incrementally in several ways: by asking staff and executive directors about their pre-career experiences, directly soliciting opinions about the value of various educational credentials and extracurricular experiences; by providing a rudimentary typology of

positions in the NGO workplace; and by identifying key differences between executive directors and other staff. The study also raises questions, the answers to which would further enhance our ability to mentor students and staff. Some were noted above concerning trends related to gender. Focusing as it did on people currently employed in the sector, the survey also left unanswered other questions about the career arc, the answers to which would be of great interest to students and their mentors: why do people leave the sector?; what are the typical ages and stages at which they leave?; where do they go?

If part of what we do as professors and teachers is motivate students to want to be good global citizens, then we also take on an obligation to provide them with good answers when they ask what to do next. A career in the NGO sector is one of the most obvious choices for students seeking to put their concern for global justice and sense of responsibility into practice. This article, it is hoped, has gone some way toward helping the reader prepare to answer student questions. It has also shown that there is much more to be discovered, documented, and shared.

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