



**Bonner Curriculum**  
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# Exploring Nonprofit Careers: Debunking the Myths

## Overview:

When considering a possible career within the nonprofit sector, many individuals may be plagued with certain myths attached to the sector, like lack of funding and instability. While these concerns certainly exist in the nonprofit sector, they also exist within other sectors as well. This workshop will guide participants through countering some common myths related to nonprofit careers. This workshop introduces participants to examples of successful nonprofit leaders and the career choices they have made create and maintain roles within the sector.

## Category:

Career and Professional Skills

## Level:

Introductory

## Recommended

**Bonner Sequence:** This training is recommended for Bonner students during the sophomore or junior year, in conjunction with a focus on exposing students to career paths and the notion of vocation. If not done then, it is also appropriate for senior year.

expectation	explore	experience	example	expertise

VALUES: civic engagement,  
others as pertaining to career paths in the nonprofit sector

## Type:

Training for use during retreat or regular meeting

## Focus or Goals of this Guide:

- To guide participants through exploring common myths about the nonprofit sector

- To expose participants to realities of the nonprofit sector, such as nonprofit leaders and possible career choices

### **Materials:**

- Flipchart paper
- Markers
- Copies of attached handouts

### **How to Prepare:**

Review and become familiar with the entire workshop and activities. Prepare necessary materials. If possible, engage a local nonprofit leader in sharing his or her own story and career path, or prepare to do so yourself, if applicable.

If you would like additional support with facilitation, review facilitation workshop guides from the Civic Engagement Curriculum.

### **How to Do/Brief Outline:**

This 1.5 to 2.5-hour outline has the following parts:

- |                                 |                              |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1) Introduction                 | suggested time 10 minutes    |
| 2) Nonprofit Myth Brainstorm    | suggested time 20 minutes    |
| 3) Top Ten Myths Discussion     | suggested time 20 minutes    |
| 4) More Myths                   | suggested time 15 minutes    |
| 5) Career Jumble Path           | suggested time 15-30 minutes |
| 6) Real Stories (Guest Sharing) | suggested time 10-20 minutes |
| 7) Closing                      | suggested time 5-10 minutes  |

### **Part 1) Introduction**

Suggested time: 10 minutes

Open the workshop by introducing yourself (including your role within the nonprofit sector if applicable.)

Explain that the purpose of this workshop is to provide an environment where participants can discuss perceptions of nonprofits and what it can be like to work within the sector.

Next, instruct the participants to introduce themselves, making sure to include their names, year, majors, and career goals. Also have them answer the following statement while introducing themselves: *What is one concern or fear about working within the nonprofit sector?*

Be sure to record each participant's response on flipchart paper. After the last introduction, give the group a few seconds to suggest other fears or concerns that might now already be represented.

## Part 2) Nonprofit Myths

Suggested time: 40 minutes

Begin this section of the workshop by asking this question:

*What are your perceptions of nonprofit organizations from personal experience and things you have heard?*

Next, divide participants into small groups ranging from 2- 4 people (if the group is too small to work in smaller groups, have each participant work independently).

Instruct the groups to spend the next 10 minutes brainstorming responses to the questions and developing a group list to be presented to the entire group. Have them appoint a note taker and presenter.

After 10 minutes, have each group read its list. Make sure to write ideas on flipchart paper. You don't need to duplicate ideas on the flipchart; just use a check mark for duplicate ideas. Aim to develop a master list with as many ideas as have been generated.

To transition to the next section, try (if possible) to group each perception into categories (i.e. financial, lack of competition, too liberal, etc.) Categorizing perceptions will help in discussing the "Top Ten Myths about Working for Nonprofit Organizations" handout. The goal is to address these same perceptions through discussion of the myths.

## Part 3) Top Ten Myths Discussion

Suggested time: 20 minutes

Next, pass out the handout "Top Ten Myths about Working for Nonprofit Organizations." Spend the next 20 minutes discussing each myth. Follow the discussion guide that follows:

### Top Ten Myths about Working for Nonprofit Organizations

- I. **"Only rich kids need apply"** *No one makes any money in the nonprofit sector.*
  - The term "nonprofit" refers to the 501(c) tax code in the United States. Non-governmental organization, or NGO, and "charity" are the common terms used outside the US. Revenues generated by nonprofit organizations go back into programs that serve the organizations' mission. There are no stockholders receiving annual financial dividends, and employees do not receive a bonus at the end of a good year. According to Independent Sector, \$670 billion are earned by nonprofit organizations annually, and one in twelve Americans work in the nonprofit sector.

Notes for discussion:

This myth is one of the biggest issues facing those considering entering the nonprofit sector

- You can make a living doing this work (starting salaries range from \$20-30,000 depending on location, type of work, which is not that much different from starting salaries in most other jobs besides investment banking and consulting. Executives at large nonprofits will make six figure salaries, an Executive Director at a smaller nonprofit will make between \$50-70,000. Fundraisers tend to earn more.)
- 

**2. “Business rejects apply”** *The nonprofit sector is for people who could not make it in the business world.*

- Nonprofit organizations are full of intelligent people with a passion for their work (many with graduate degrees and years of experience in the sector). Many people switch between the nonprofit, government, and private sectors during their careers. Each line of work presents its own set of challenges, but there are many talented people in all three sectors. Business people are often surprised to learn how difficult it is to make the transition into the nonprofit sector, which has different, often rigorous standards of success.

**Notes for discussion:**

- All skill-sets can apply to nonprofits
- Not so easy to make the transition from the business to the nonprofit sector
- Business oriented positions (CFO) exist in the nonprofit sector

**3. “No upward mobility”** *Working for a nonprofit is not really a career path.*

- Working in the nonprofit sector sometimes is considered taking a break from the “real world,” with the implied assumption that it is not an option to spend a lifetime doing this work. In reality, the nonprofit sector provides many people with a lifetime of exciting work. Nonprofits also tend to offer young people more leadership opportunities than other sectors.

**Notes for discussion:**

- Career paths do exist, though perhaps not as defined as in private sector and government
  - Nonprofit sector often offers more leadership in early career young people
  - Youth leadership is often a function of organization size or specialty
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**4. “Smiles all the time”** *Everyone that works in the nonprofit sector is nice.*

- Most people who work in the nonprofit sector generally do care about making the world a better place, but so do plenty of people that work in the private sector. Do not be surprised when you encounter difficult personalities, big egos, and office politics, which exist in a professional environment. Perhaps there are a higher percentage of kind-hearted people in the nonprofit sector, but there is no way to measure this, and there are plenty of exceptions.

**Notes for discussion:**

- *People are people everywhere you go*
  - *Don't expect the work to be easy and pleasant*
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**5. “Collaboration all around”** *The nonprofit sector is not competitive.*

- In a world of limited resources, nonprofit organizations compete intensely for media attention, recognition, funding and other resources. In some cases, competition among organizations with similar missions may be detrimental to the pursuit of this shared mission, but competition also can be healthy, and a catalyst to adopt more effective programs. Organizations collaborate often and talk about working together even more. But some organizations provide a similar service and compete to be the most effective provider of that service. In other situations, organizations work on different solutions to a similar problem. On certain issues, organizations may have missions that are in direct opposition to one another (abortion, environmental reform, gun control, etc.).

**Notes for discussion:**

- Like any other sector, there is competition for limited resources within the nonprofit sector

**6. “Wasting time and money”** *Nonprofit organizations are inefficient.*

- Nonprofit organizations do not have clear bottom lines or profit margins; serving a human or environmental need makes success and efficiency much more difficult to measure. Add to that the reality of limited resources and an emphasis on serving clients (often at the cost of organizational maintenance), and it becomes clear why the sector is often perceived as inefficient. There are certainly some inefficient and disorganized nonprofit organizations, just as we see plenty of dysfunctional organizations in the private sector. In both cases, this is not necessarily a reflection on the sector as a whole.

**Notes for discussion:**

- Inefficient organizations in all sectors
- Limited resources and emphasis on service delivery can have an impact on organizational operations

**7. “I can't deal with people”** *Nonprofits only do direct service work.*

- The most visible nonprofits are often soup kitchens, mentoring programs, and other organizations that involve people working directly with other people who need some form of assistance. But many people who work for nonprofits are accountants, computer programmers, sales people, human resources professionals, managers, fundraisers, and executives. Many more are researchers and advocates for certain issues or supporting the work of direct service organizations.

**Notes for discussion:**

- Again, all skill sets can be applied in a nonprofit setting
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**8. “Poor and poorly dressed”** *Nonprofits lack resources and are informal.*

- Universities, some hospitals, and many other large institutions with multi-million dollar annual budgets are nonprofit organizations. Cultures within nonprofits vary, but business attire is the norm at many large and small nonprofits.

**Notes for discussion:**

- There is diversity within the nonprofit sector
  - Different cultures within different organizations
  - Shows importance of being professional in your work
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**9. “Only for liberals”** *All nonprofits support left-wing causes.*

- The nonprofit sector itself does not have a political agenda, and many organizations exist to provide services and promote interests that the government does not. The organizations within the sector lean left, right, and everywhere in between.

**Notes for discussion:**

- Again, there is diversity in the sector and place for all people to find their role
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**10. “I love volunteering, so why not?”** *Working for a nonprofit is just like volunteering.*

- Nonprofits rely on volunteers to do their work, especially in direct services. Volunteers, however, are often shielded from the organizational, financial, and other challenges with which the actual employees of an organization must contend, to say nothing of the burnout issues faced by many who have spent more time working in the field.

**Notes for discussion:**

- Very different to actually be on staff
- Volunteers are sheltered in many ways

## **Part 4) More Myths**

Suggested time: 15 minutes

After discussing the top ten myths, open the session up for any other questions and comments. Following, are further perceptions/ myths that could be used for more discussion.

**If I want to make a difference, I have to work for a nonprofit**

- *People can do good work in government and business, some of which have more power to bring about positive social change than nonprofits do. Nonprofits are not the only sector where people can do good things for the world. However, nonprofits usually exist to address issues that business and government cannot or will not address, or to take new approaches to issues that business and government already tackle. For example, serving the homeless. Most businesses could not make a profit meeting these needs. Likewise, human services are often the ones first cut when government needs to cut back.*

### **Nonprofits are only in major cities**

- *Nonprofits are everywhere. Organizations outside of major cities may be organized differently, smaller and harder to find, but they exist. Give concrete examples: Domestic violence shelters, animal welfare agencies, family services, mental health, issue coalitions working to change laws, churches and other communities of faith, schools and universities, etc.*

### **The nonprofit sector seems to allow for an easier transition from small organizations to larger ones.**

- *Less name conscious than the business world in terms of who you have worked for in the past*
- *More about skills*

### **It's easy to get a job with a nonprofit in the third world**

- *International nonprofit work requires perhaps more experience than finding work domestically. Speaking a foreign language is obviously desired, but a graduate degree is also a virtual necessity to do substantive work and get paid*

### **A full-time job is the only way to get a start with nonprofits**

- *Most nonprofits hire from their volunteers and interns, so that is often the best way to land a full-time job with a nonprofit. This also allows you to explore your options before making a major commitment to one field/organization.*

## **Part 5) Career Jumble Path**

Suggested time: 30 minutes

Begin this section by distributing the handout *Career Path Jumble*. Ask each participant to:

1. Read over the profiles
2. Think about how their own interests match some of the profiles
3. Try to identify characteristics of each profile that makes it unique

Next, ask each participant to take 5 minutes and try to match the names with their profiles.

After 5 minutes, divide participants into small groups to compare answers for the next 10 minutes. Instruct each member to discuss:

1. How useful were individual's majors in predicting their present career?
2. What information helped in deciding answers?

After 10 minutes, reconvene the entire group to debrief. Read the correct answers.

profile #1- **Julian Bond, Chair of the NAACP**

profile #2- **Linda Fuller, Founder of Habitat for Humanity**

profile #3- **Gayathri Arumugan, Dir. of Opers., imentor**

profile #4- **Carol Bellamy, Exec. Dir. of Unicef**

profile #5, **Mia Herndon, Outreach Coordinator, Third Wave Foundation**

profile #6- **Anthony Romero, Exec. Dir. of ACLU**

profile #7- **John C. Echhawk Exec. Dir., Native American Rights Fund**

Finally, lead a discussion based on the activity with the following 3 questions:

1. What surprised you the most about people's career paths?
2. What did you learn?
3. Can you envision your own career path in the nonprofit sector?

### **Part 6) Real Stories: Sharing by Nonprofit Professional(s)**

Suggested time: 10-20 minutes

If possible, here you can have a nonprofit professional (including yourself, if you are one) share one's own story about working in the nonprofit sector.

To guide that, you might have the person (or you) address the following questions:

1. What brought you into the nonprofit sector? Share elements of your story
2. What has kept you in the sector?
3. What skills have you most learned?
4. What has been your biggest surprise (e.g., myth exploding, changed expectations, etc.) working in the sector?
5. Share some of your own most poignant, interesting or funny experiences working in the sector.

### **Part 6) Closing**

Suggested time: 5-10 minutes

In review, have each participant share one thing new s/he has learned during the workshop. Also, you can close with some sharing about how this workshop has shaped participants perceptions and/or desires for exploring a career in the nonprofit sector.

Close with an evaluation and next steps (if relevant).

# Top Ten Myths about Working for Nonprofit Organizations

1. **“Only rich kids need apply”** *No one makes any money in the nonprofit sector.*
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  - You can make a living doing this work (starting salaries range from \$20-30,000 depending on location, type of work, which is not that much different from starting salaries in most other jobs besides investment banking and consulting. Executives at large nonprofits will make six figure salaries, an Executive Director at a smaller nonprofit will make between \$50-70,000. Fundraisers tend to earn more.)
2. **“Business rejects apply”** *The nonprofit sector is for people who could not make it in the business world.*
  - Nonprofit organizations are full of intelligent people with a passion for their work (many with graduate degrees and years of experience in the sector). Many people switch between the nonprofit, government, and private sectors during their careers. Each line of work presents its own set of challenges, but there are many talented people in all three sectors. Business people are often surprised to learn how difficult it is to make the transition into the nonprofit sector, which has different, often rigorous standards of success.
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- The most visible nonprofits are often soup kitchens, mentoring programs, and other organizations that involve people working directly with other people who need some form of assistance. But many people who work for nonprofits are accountants, computer programmers, sales people, human resources professionals, managers, fundraisers, and executives. Many more are researchers and advocates for certain issues or supporting the work of direct service organizations.
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which the actual employees of an organization must contend, to say nothing of the burnout issues faced by many who have spent more time working in the field.

## Other Myths:

### **If I want to make a difference, I have to work for a nonprofit**

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- Nonprofits are everywhere. Organizations outside of major cities may be organized differently, smaller and harder to find, but they exist. Give concrete examples: Domestic violence shelters, animal welfare agencies, family services, mental health, issue coalitions working to change laws, churches and other communities of faith, schools and universities, etc.

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## Career Path Jumble Names

- \_\_\_ **Gayathri Arumughan, Director of Operations, imentor**
  - \_\_\_ **Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of Unicef**
  - \_\_\_ **Julian Bond, Chair of the NAACP**
  - \_\_\_ **John C. Echohawk, Executive Director, Native American Rights Fund**
  - \_\_\_ **Linda Fuller, Founder of Habitat for Humanity**
  - \_\_\_ **Mia Herndon, Outreach Coordinator, Third Wave Foundation**
  - \_\_\_ **Forsan Hussein, Communications Associate, The Abraham Fund**
  - \_\_\_ **Jim Nevell, Director and Co-founder, Lifeschool**
  - \_\_\_ **Erin O'Toole, Development Coordinator, Art Start**
  - \_\_\_ **Anthony Romero, Executive Director, ACLU**
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### Profile #1:

1. S/he was a founder of the Atlanta student sit-in and anti-segregation organization.
2. As SNCC's Communications Director, s/he was active in protests and registration campaigns throughout the South.
3. Elected in 1965 to the Georgia House of Representatives, s/he was prevented from taking his/her seat by members who objected to s/he opposition to the Vietnam War.
4. In the Georgia Senate, s/he became the first black chair of the Fulton County Delegation, and chair of the Consumer Affairs Committee.
5. S/he has narrated numerous documentaries, including the Academy Award winning "A Time For Justice" and the prize-winning and critically acclaimed series "Eyes On The Prize."

### Profile #2

1. While s/he was earning his/her degree in elementary education at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Ala., began a marketing firm with his/her partner.
2. Became a millionaire in his/her 20s. But as the business prospered, their marriage suffered.
3. He/she went to Koinonia Farm, a Christian community located near Americus, Ga., where people were looking for practical ways to apply Christ's teachings.
4. S/he initiated several partnership enterprises, including a ministry in housing.
5. S/he moved to Africa with his/her partner their four children and worked in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The housing project was a success and became a working reality in that developing nation.
6. Upon their return to the U.S., s/he met with members of the Koinonia community and several people from across the United States and decided to create a new, independent organization.

### Profile #3

1. S/he holds a B.A. from the University of Michigan and an M.P.A. from the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at NYU.

2. During college, s/he founded and implemented a tutoring program at the Washtenaw County Juvenile Detention Center and taught GED classes at the County Jail.
3. S/he coordinated HIV/AIDS policy research at the YRG Center for Aids Research and Education in Madras, India.
4. S/he also worked as a bilingual educator at the Asian-Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS (APICHA) in New York City.
5. Has an extensive background in development, strategic planning, marketing, staff development, financial management, and external relations.
6. Facilitated the launch of the LIC Community Technology Center (CTC) at Jacob Riis Settlement House, a non-profit serving the largest public housing project in America.

#### **Profile #4**

1. S/he graduated from Gettysburg College in 1963, and earned his/her law degree from New York University in 1968.
2. S/he has had a distinguished career in the private sector- S/he was a Managing Director of Bear Stearns & Co. from 1990 to 1993, and a Principal at Morgan Stanley and Co. from 1986 to 1990. Between 1968 and 1971 s/he was an associate at Cravath, Swaine and Moore.
3. S/he was Director of the United States Peace Corps. Having served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala from 1963 to 1965, s/he was the first former volunteer to run the organization.
4. S/he was born and raised in the New York area. S/he is a Mets fan.
5. S/he has visited more than 100 countries, advocating for children and women with heads of state, cultural icons, corporate leaders, rebel commanders, and many others.
6. S/he also spent 13 years as an elected public official, including five years in the New York State Senate (1973-1977).

#### **Profile # 5**

1. A recent graduate at Columbia University
2. S/he joins the organization as a meaningful commitment to the global women and human rights movement.
3. She is a 24-year-old woman of African-and Native American descent
4. S/he is also an active member of La Abeja Obrera, the No More Youth Jails Campaign, and the ROOTS taskforce of the War Resisters League.
5. His/her areas of interest and activism unite to ensure a broad yet thorough method of dealing with issues that range from the prison industrial complex, HIV/AIDS, the war on drugs, and progressive community development
6. Born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia.

#### **Profile #6**

1. The first Latino/a and openly out person to head the this organization
2. S/he joined the Ford Foundation in 1992 as a program officer in the Rights and Social Justice Program and, after less than four years, was promoted to become the one of the youngest Directors in Ford's history.
3. Born in the Bronx of immigrant Puerto Rican parents, s/he is fluent in Spanish.
4. S/he graduated from Stanford Law School and Princeton University.

5. For the organization's future, sees that issues such as religious liberty, reproductive freedom and women's rights, racial justice, immigrants' rights and lesbian and gay equality -- will also require increased attention and resources.
6. A native New Yorker, s/he lives in Manhattan.

### **Profile #7**

1. A Pawnee Native American.
2. S/he was the first graduate of the University of New Mexico's special program to train Indian lawyers, and was a founding member of the American Indian Law Students Association while in law school.
3. S/he has worked for the organization since its inception.
4. S/he has been recognized as one of the 100 most influential lawyers in America by the National Law Journal since 1988.
5. B.A., University of New Mexico (1967); J.D., University of New Mexico (1970).
6. S/he serves on the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, Natural Resources Defense Council, and many other boards.

### **Profile #8**

1. Graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a double BA in English and History
2. S/he has worked as activist, paralegal, writer, editor and fundraiser within New York and Wisconsin's non-profit sectors.
3. Priorities include: bringing needed social services and educational resources to underserved communities throughout New York State and the mid-West; civil rights, gay rights, women's rights, the rights of those infected with HIV/AIDS; as well as for the arts within New York City's communities and schools.
4. S/he has worked for Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund and the Cambridge University Press.
5. His/her poetry was published in the Canvas literary magazine and attends the New School University for creative writing
6. S/he began as a freelance grant writer for the organization and now works part-time, dedicating his/her efforts to all of the organization's fundraising activist

### **Profile # 9**

1. His/her first related experience was at 15 as a 4H summer camp counselor on Long Island
2. S/he graduated with honors from University of Dayton in 1995 with a BA in Psychology.
3. S/he traveled west and was a childcare counselor / teacher naturalist with CYO Caritas Creek / Camp Armstrong in Occidental, CA.
4. S/he taught natural science and a personal development program while using the Redwood Forest as a natural classroom.
5. In 1997 s/he was appointed director of Caritas Creek Environmental
6. Education Program- s/he conducted visits to elementary and middle schools throughout the Bay Area where s/he created the curriculum, constructed wilderness programs, designed safety procedures, wrote training manuals and tended to the many details of administration.

7. S/he An avid surfer and outdoor enthusiast who has backpacked in wilderness areas from Alaska to Baja, California

### **Profile # 10**

1. While in Israel, worked in construction.
2. S/e had been granted the Slifka Coexistence Scholarship to study at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass.
3. Designed his/her own major, which s/he called "Peace Building."
4. Nevertheless, s/he planned for a career in investment banking.
5. Lobbied for a job with the organization, the same one which provided his/her scholarship.
6. S/he spends most days promoting peaceful relations between Arab and Jews in Israeli society.