

Promising Pathways: Investigating Personal Factors Promoting Nonprofit Executives

Kerry Kuenzi – University of Wisconsin-Green Bay

Amanda J. Stewart – North Carolina State University

The nonprofit sector has been critiqued for failing to systematically develop leadership to meet the sector's professionalizing needs. The personal profile of who sits in the nonprofit executive position can be insightful about what experience and training have been deemed appropriate for nonprofit leadership and may reveal career pathways to the executive position. In this paper, the career backgrounds of 185 nonprofit association executives are reported upon, investigating if the credentials and experience held by these executives helped expedite their career pathway to the top position. The findings indicate that nonprofit sector experience was a significant predictor of time to the executive position, but that other career variables, such as education, credentials, and other previous experiences did not significantly impact the time to the position. This study adds to what we know about the professionalization of the nonprofit sector and raises questions about what signals readiness for the sector's executive position.

Keywords: Nonprofit Careers, Credentials, Sector Experience, Executive Experience

The executive position in nonprofits is rife with pressure and described as central to the nonprofit's operations (Heimovics et al., 1993). Predictions of turnover due to natural attrition in the position and baby boomer retirements give cause for concern about who will next carry the mantle of nonprofit leadership though (Tierney, 2006). A rallying cry for 'leadership development' has emerged as a means of addressing this wave of anticipated executive turnover, but even with good intentions, systematic leadership development in the nonprofit sector has been lacking (Landles-Cobb et al., 2015).

These calls for leadership development are rooted in the assumption that human capital capacity equips organizational capacity (Austin et al., 2011; Day, 2000). To date, efforts by funders and nonprofits to answer this call have had success in fostering potential among their cohorts. Yet these initiatives are limited by specific training curricula only accessible by their chosen participants or have constrained reach due to eligibility requirements or funding limitations. Yet with over 1.5 million nonprofits in the United States (McKeever, 2019), leadership development for the sector should be broadly conceived with accessible knowledge of what leadership qualities entail and how to develop leadership for the nonprofit sector at a sufficient scale. To this end, this study reconstructs career paths and investigates personal factors that helped pave the way for those who currently hold association executive positions. Documentation of executive credentials could help inform those who recruit for the nonprofit

executive position on what qualities to look for, those who are in position to invest in and design leadership development programs on qualities to groom, and those who seek to fill that role on the qualities they should develop.

This study on nonprofit executive careers is informed by a few assumptions. First, in considering a nonprofit career, individuals are moving along a career path or a ladder of successive positions either in the same organization or between different organizations. Whereas, a nonprofit founder creates their own executive position, nonprofit professionals appointed to an existing organization's executive position would be responding to a job ad or recruited to the position. Second, as the top position in a nonprofit, executives are selected by volunteer boards of directors who oversee the human resource responsibilities over the executive position. Hence, a board authors the executive's job description, and this profile is a statement of the board's preferences (Santora & Sarros, 2001; Zajac & Westphal, 1996). Third, since they were successful in achieving the position, the profile of current executives represents the characteristics of what was deemed qualified for the executive position. Finally, executive career paths point to the same outcome—achieving an executive position. Without the counterfactual of who applied and was not selected, the outcome is held constant and instead factors that paved the route to the top most expeditiously are considered. These factors are seen as facilitating a quicker rise to the top and hold insights about the qualities that are preferred for a nonprofit's top position.

This research study's setting is among nonprofit membership associations, which make up one-third of the US-nonprofit sector according to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (Tschirhart, 2006). Nonprofits have a public serving or member serving purpose (Salamon, 2003), and associations “vary in the balance of their service to individual members, the member collectivity, and an external community made up primarily of nonmembers” (Tschirhart, 2006, p. 524). Association leadership bridges two worlds as they carry out the traditional executive functions, while also being accountable to association members, who have rights and responsibilities (Tschirhart, 2006). Understanding who ascends to the position and what prepares them holds insights to those who work in and study associations, as well as those concerned with the leadership of any nonprofit. This paper proceeds with a review of the literature that informs the study's hypotheses. The method is then presented along with findings from the analysis before closing with discussion of the findings and the study's limitations.

Nonprofit Careers

In 1996, Onyx and MacLean described that “that concept of career is often seen as problematic for people working in the nonprofit sector,” elaborating that “people who work for nonprofit organizations are often seen as having no careers” (pp. 332, 331). Whereas this article went on to examine third sector career patterns, practitioner wisdom and research emerging in the years since this article first appeared confirm as well that there are careers to be had in the nonprofit sector (for an overview of nonprofit-related career studies, refer to Jäger et al., 2013). For starters, nonprofits are increasingly professionalized and staffed by paid professionals (Maier et al., 2016). Research on worker motivations and preferences also documented that some professionals choose to work in the nonprofit sector over the public or for-profit sector (For examples, see De Cooman et al., 2011; Tschirhart et al., 2008). As nonprofit careers take shape, research by Suarez (2010) and Norris-Tirrell et al. (2018) documented its pattern as unique to the sector, emphasizing “substantive expertise and nonprofit experience” (Suarez, 2010, p. 710). Carman et al. (2010), Kunreuther (2003), and McGinnis (2011) also raised generational factors that may prompt rising nonprofit professionals' careers to look differently than more seasoned nonprofit workers. Thus, a nonprofit career is a confirmed but evolving phenomenon, and factors explaining nonprofit

careers may look different than what explains careers in other sectors given the sector's mission-orientation.

Human capital theory as outlined by Bartlett in Blair (2011) posits a relationship between investments in education and training as reaping dividends in terms of compensation and promotion. This economic perspective explains in simple terms the complex dynamics of both labor forces and individual career paths, and an expectation of this input-output relationship is that with greater levels of inputs, greater outputs in terms of advancement might be achieved. Jäger et al. (2013, p. 1028) applied concept of "career capital" to a sample of nonprofit executives to appreciate the temporal elements of an executive's career that accumulate from "past experiences, present actions, and future expectations." A study by Stewart and Kuenzi (2018) documented these 'past experiences' that comprised a sample of health and human service executives' career paths, making note of their credentials and experience. Yet, insufficient evidence still exists about what factors matter in this input-output relationship towards promotion to the top. Thus, this study investigates two factors that commonly mark a nonprofit professional's past experiences, the credentials they have secured and their professional experience.

Credentials

Career credentials, such as degrees and certifications, are recognizable labels individuals either opt into voluntarily or are forced into based on their chosen career field (Lester & Dwyer, 2012). Credentials entail a "signaling function" (Bartlett, 2012, p. 1) of both "expertise and readiness" (Bartlett, 2004, p. 1) as well as "potential for future learning and skills acquisition" (Ridoutt et al., 2005, p. 41). From a principal-agent perspective, boards, acting in their monitoring role over their agent (i.e., the executive), might gain confidence in an executive candidate when they hold obvious credentials that signal their qualifications. Higher education, as a credentialing source, has been documented as an explanatory factor of career advancement (Becker, 2009). Yet, the widespread prevalence of undergraduate education among nonprofit professionals (Norris-Tirrell et al., 2018; Stewart & Kuenzi, 2018; Suarez, 2010) indicates an undergraduate degree alone may no longer be sufficient.

In a crowded field of nonprofit professionals, advanced degrees may signal and help job candidates stand out since they are not as widely held as undergraduate degrees. Lee and Suh (2016, p. 2) described that a "great extent of managerial knowledge and capacity can be developed through training," and advanced degrees, such as a masters-level degree, credential skill development for specific vocations, and employment fields (Tomlinson, 2008). Advanced degrees signal specialized skills, which may prompt career advancement and/or assignment of greater responsibilities. Related, nonprofit boards may seek to promote executives who have management related advanced degrees, viewing the specialized management training as a credential critical to overseeing their nonprofits' operations.

Hypothesis 1a: Professionals holding advanced degrees will ascend to the nonprofit executive position more quickly than professionals not holding advanced degrees.

Hypothesis 1b: Professionals holding management-related advanced degrees will ascend to the nonprofit executive position more quickly than professionals holding other types of advanced degrees.

Professional credentials legitimize workers as being qualified for a field of work and have been documented as a means of career advancement for their inherent signal and assurances (Crompton & Sanderson, 1986). Professional credentials include certifications founded and fostered by professional entities, such as a Certified Association Executive (American Society of Association Executives), Licensed Clinical Social Worker (National Association of Social

Workers), Certified Fundraising Professional (Association of Fundraising Professionals), or state legal bar licensure, etc. Certification processes entail rigor, including pre-qualifications, standardized testing, and peer review. Professionals are screened and qualified as meeting accepted standards, and the certifications are held in esteem internal to the field as well as to those external, who may not fully understand the requirements of the certification process but accept it as a valid indicator. Evidence from national studies of board leadership describe performance as uneven (BoardSource, 2017; Lacker et al., 2015), and a possible implication is that limited preparation for their function and expertise for their nonprofit's mission will prompt them to rely on the signal of certifications. For example, the American Society for Association Executives documented that between 2010 and 2012 their job board postings "that preferred or required an association professional who possessed the CAE credential tripled (ASAE, 2014, as cited in Petrillo, 2015, p. 33). Thus, those who hold such credentials are expected to advance in their career path more quickly than those who do not hold such credentials. Further, certifications require motivation and commitment from those who voluntarily pursue them, and professionals holding credentials may have career motivations that propel them along their career path more readily than those not credentialed.

Hypothesis 2: Professionals holding a professional credential related to their mission field will ascend to the executive position more quickly than professionals not holding a professional credential.

Experience

Executive-Related Experience

From a *Harvard Business Review* 'Classic,' Katz (1985) sorted proficiency requirements for executives among technical, human, and conceptual skills, and Kearns et al. (2015) used this framework to investigate the skills used by nonprofit executives. Their findings revealed that while some skills used in the executive position may be taught, others may only be learned from experience (Kearns et al., 2015). Accruing experience over a career helps socialize and prepare individuals to assume greater responsibilities (Abbott, 1988; Smith & Martinez-Moyano, 2015). In the path to the top position, professionals must effectively demonstrate their capacity for greater responsibility as well as take on a leadership mindset, which has been described as moving from a responsibility for one's self to a collective responsibility (Charan et al., 2006). Austin et al. (2013) observed the transition of direct service practitioners to human service managers and pointed to a shift from a specialist to a generalist perspective that helped formulate a managerial identity.

Previous experience in executive-level positions may give nonprofit boards confidence that job candidates have the capacity to perform in their top position. The nonprofit executive position was once thought to be a terminal career position, but prior research by Stewart (2017, p. 8) described smaller nonprofits as "stepping stones" for executives who are promoted to larger organizations with presumptive larger spans of control and responsibility. Executives with career ambition may hold the position more than once, and when presented with the experienced executive versus a first-timer, boards may prefer to appoint a seasoned executive. Thus, in the context of this study of association executive careers, prior nonprofit executive experience may be reason for promotion to the association executive position.

Hypothesis 3: Professionals who have held the nonprofit executive position previously will ascend to the association executive position more quickly than professionals not holding the nonprofit executive position previously.

The nonprofit sector has collectively under invested in leadership development, and nonprofit boards acknowledge the importance of succession planning but participate at concerningly

low rates (Froelich et al., 2011; Stewart, 2016). Succession planning includes identifying a means by which to appoint a successor, even grooming an internal candidate (Bozer et al., 2015), but many nonprofits do not have this luxury of bench strength for reasons including financial underinvestment in managerial capacity (Gregory & Howard, 2009). Limited attention has been given to the c-suite in nonprofits (i.e., chief financial officer, chief operating officer, etc.) since the financial capacity needed to retain such human capital capacity is out of reach for many nonprofits, and even when such internal capacity exists, these executive-level staff are not always looked to as heirs to the executive position (Santora & Sorros, 2001). Yet even when internal promotion paths do not transpire, this second-in-command type experience is fertile ground for proving and signaling leadership mettle for an organization's top position (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014; Oakley, 2000). Therefore, upper management experience is expected to contribute to a nonprofit executive's promotion even if it is an external promotion.

Hypothesis 4: Professionals who have held second-in-command positions previously will ascend to the executive position more quickly than professionals not holding these positions previously.

Mission focus has been an explanatory factor of nonprofit career development (Norris-Tirrell, 2018; Suarez, 2010), and is akin to competencies that drive "boundaryless careers" from the for-profit sector (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994, p. 308). This mission expertise helps propel a career in a given field as the professional moves between different organizations. Work in general and in particular settings socialize professionals to norms and customary procedures, and thus, someone with accrued experience in a setting or field similar to where they are seeking employment may signal to the hiring agent that they have insider knowledge that will equip them for assigned duties. In the context of membership associations, prior professional experience in an association will signal that the professional understands the context, including the skills and knowledge unique to member-serving aspects of association employment.

Hypothesis 5: Professionals who have held a position in the mission field previously will ascend to an executive position of that mission field more quickly than professionals not holding a position in the mission field.

Nonprofit Sector Experience

The nonprofit context poses different leadership challenges than the for-profit or public sectors, and among these challenges are the sector's reason for existence that pit it in relationship to the for-profit and public sector, its volunteer labor force, its complex and sometimes intangible products, the shared leadership structure with volunteer governance, and complex measures for nonprofit mission effectiveness (Fortenbaugh, 2017; Leete, 2006; Suarez, 2010). A "nonprofit ethic" may be most readily derived from time spent in the sector as compared to training and orientation from leadership development activities (Suarez, 2010, p. 696). Coined by Suarez (2010, p. 707), a "nonprofit lifer" spends their entire careers in the sector, because their employment is a vocational calling with no alternative to nonprofit employment considered. Although research documents nonprofit executives holding experience across the public, for-profit, and nonprofit sectors (Norris-Tirrell et al., 2018; Stewart & Kuenzi, 2018; Suarez, 2010), limiting work experience to the nonprofit-sector only may signal to a board that the candidate has a unique ability to navigate the complexities of nonprofit leadership.

Hypothesis 6: Professionals who spend their entire professional careers in the nonprofit sector will ascend to the executive position more quickly than professionals holding experience in combination of the nonprofit, public, and for-profit sectors.

Method

This research study investigates personal factors that help expedite the ascension of nonprofit professionals to the executive position. The following describes the method employed in this study, including the sample selection, the data collection, a data description, and the analysis approach.

Sample Selection

To develop the 295 membership association sample, the following process was employed. First, using a 2013 listing from the National Center for Charitable Statistics Core file, which includes the tax filings from all organizations that had filed form 990 (n=348,910), organizations were sorted by the National Taxonomy of Exempt Organizations code. We extracted the listings of all organizations with the classification 'A03' which represents professional societies and associations (n=11,184). Organizations were then dropped whose annual revenues did not exceed \$100,000 since associations falling below this threshold were not assumed to have sufficient revenues to employ a paid executive (n=7,217). Following, the listing was randomly sorted and used as the base for inclusion into the final sample. In order, the contact information was identified for each association by the research team using internet research as well as confirmation that each was in fact a membership association. Organizations were also checked against a listing of member organizations for the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE)¹ given that leadership development programs were variables of interest for this study. The first 100 ASAE members and 195 non-members whose contact information was available and who were able to be verified as current membership associations made up the final sample.

Data Collection

Data collection compiled elements of the nonprofit executive's career paths, including the position type, employment sector(s), educational degrees, and professional affiliations. To compile this information, the data collection was two-fold following Smith and Martinez-Moyano (2015) and Stewart and Kuenzi (2018).

First a survey method, following Dillman (2011), was implemented using a mixed mode survey delivery to maximize response rate. The survey was announced using a pre-notification postcard, and approximately three business days later, a survey mailing was sent to all survey sample participants. This mailing included a handwritten mailing label, a personalized cover letter, the informed consent form, a paper survey tool, a \$5 coffee gift card incentive, and a stamped return envelope. Approximately three business days following the survey mailing, an email invitation was sent to all survey sample participants that had an identified email, and the invitation included a link to a Qualtrics-formatted survey that mirrored the paper survey tool. The survey asked respondents to document their career according to the positions held (employer name, position type, years held), academic degrees (type, awarding institution, and year of degree), professional memberships and certifications, civic and community involvements, military service, and demographic information (gender, age, race/ethnicity, household structure). Follow up included phone and email outreach, and the survey remained open for one month from the survey mailing date. At the survey close, 120 had been returned for a response rate of 40.7%. Among the two delivery modes, 69 or 57.5% were returned via postal mail and 51 or 42.5% were returned electronically.

Second, for those not returning a survey, secondary data were collected using internet research. Career information for each association executive was identified wherever possible, including their organization's website, their LinkedIn profiles, and other internet sources where the executive's identity could be matched to the information provided, such as news and other media reports. Due to incomplete secondary data, not all variables prompted by the

survey tool were able to be collected via this internet research. For example, demographic variables of gender and race/ethnicity were visibly assessed or included according to pronouns used in internet posts. Thus, with the primary and secondary data collection, career factors were collected on 62.7%, or 185 of the 295 nonprofit association executives in the sample.

Variables for Analysis

To test the hypotheses, the following variables were constructed from the sample's responses. The dependent variable, *Years to Association Executive Position* refers to the number of years it took to get to the association executive position from the start of the professional's career. The start of the professional's career was identified as the first year they had indicated on either the survey response, their resume, or other publicly available career information, such as positions listed under their LinkedIn profile's 'Experience' section. Since all professionals in the sample are currently association executives, a counterfactual of those who tried but were unsuccessful for the executive position was unavailable. Instead, this variable measures the speed in which a professional attains that highest paid position in an association, encapsulating what qualities of candidates are preferred earlier in their career for the executive position. Rather than being concerned with effectiveness (i.e., did the professional become an executive), this variable is focused on efficiency (i.e., how quickly did the professional become an executive). The variable is measured in years, and although individuals may stay on portions of a year, this measurement created consistency across respondents and eased recall issues that might arise in recounting positions from the past.

Explanatory variables include the educational background, indicating if they hold a *Graduate* degree or higher, and/or a *Management Degree*. These are all included as binary (0/1) variables, and the latter refers to management-related degrees, including business administration, public administration, and association management. If the nonprofit executive is a Certified Association Executive, *Credential* is indicated as a binary (0/1) variable. The nonprofit executive's prior experience in the *Executive* position is indicated by a binary (0/1) variable. *Second in Command* is a binary variable (0/1), reflecting if the association executive held a senior-level position. *Sector experience* was created by coding all organizations an association executive worked in prior to their current position as either public, private, or nonprofit and then by identifying the following sector experiences: (1) nonprofit only; (2) private only; (3) public only; (4) nonprofit and public; (5) nonprofit and private; (6) public and private; or (7) experience in all sectors. A dummy variable was created to represent each category for the analysis. *More Than One Association* reflects whether the respondent had any previous professional experiences in associations (other than executive level positions).

Controls included in the analysis are the executive's *Gender* (binary, with 1 representing male) and *Age* (ratio variable), and if the executive's ethnicity is *White* (binary, with 1 representing White, and 0 for all other ethnicities). This final variable was constructed as a binary variable due to the limited diversity of the sample. These three variables were included given the significant historical evidence demonstrating women and racial/ethnic minorities' exclusion from workplace promotions and appointment into executive positions (Nahavandi et al., 2015). Further, while we recognize that age discrimination can and does take place in organizations, the inclusion of age as a control was also logically necessary as one can assume a strong correlation between experience (years of career) and advancement.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable Name	Summary Statistic	n
Career Length	29.33 (mean)	185
Years to Association Executive Position	20.84 (mean)	185
Graduate Degree	78 (42.2%)	185
Management Degree	55 (29.7%)	185
Credential	78 (42.2%)	185
Executive Position Experience	56 (30.3%)	185
Second in Command	113 (61.1%)	185
More Than One Association	77 (41.6%)	185
Gender (Male)	89 (52.4%)	170
White	142 (90.4%)	157
Age	55.56 (mean)	85

Findings

Descriptive Statistics

Summary descriptive statistics of all variables, as well as additional career characteristics, are found in Table 1. The sample was overwhelmingly White (90.4%) with just over half of the associations led by male executives (52.4%). They had a mean career length of 29.77 years, with 20.84 mean career years before their current association executive position. Less than half had graduate degrees (42.2%) and less than a third had a management degree (29.7%), while 42.2% had a professional credential. 30.3% had previous experience in the executive position. 41.6% had professional experiences in more than one association or member organization and 61.1 percent had held a second in command position.

The sector experience of association executives prior to their current position is found in Table 2. The most common experience was nonprofit only (26.5%), followed by experiences in both the nonprofit and public sectors (20.0%), in the nonprofit and private sectors (18.9%), experience in all three sectors (11.4%), experience in the private sector only (9.7%), experience in the public sector only (9.2%), and finally experience in the public and private sectors (4.3%).

Multivariate Analysis

Two regression analyses were run to test the study's hypotheses. While we recognize that including all variables in a single analysis would be ideal given potential underlying relationships among independent variables, we had concerns regarding the power of the model and over-fitting it given the sample size. Therefore, additional analyses were run including a single model containing all variables, a series of bivariate and ANOVA analyses, to ensure the included analysis best reflects trends in the data. The results of these tests along with concerns regarding over-fitting informed our decision to report separate analyses. Therefore, we explored for significant differences among the variables included in Model 1 by select career and demographic variables and sector experience type in Model 2.

First, variables related to Hypotheses 1-5 and control variables were included in an ordinary least squares regression with the results found in Table 3. While the model itself was significantly better at predicting the *Years to Association Executive Position* (adjusted $R^2 = 0.127$, $F=2.283$, $p=0.027$) than the mean, no explanatory variables were found to be statistically significant. *Age* (control) was found to be a positive and statistically significant predictor of *Years to Association Executive Position* ($\beta=0.436$, $p=0.000$).

Table 2. Sector Experience Summary

Sector	Frequency	Mean Years to Association Executive Position
Nonprofit Only	49 (26.5%)	15.14
Private Only	18 (9.7%)	22.89
Public Only	17 (9.2%)	22.24
Nonprofit and Public	37 (20.0%)	23.11
Nonprofit and Private	35 (18.9%)	21.91
Public and Private	8 (4.3%)	28.50
Experience in all sectors	21 (11.4%)	22.52

A second ordinary least squares model that tested Hypothesis 6 was also run. The results are found in Table 4. Overall, the model was significantly better than the mean at predicting *Years to Association Executive Position*, explaining 8.7% (adjusted R²) of the variability ($F = 3.915$, $p = 0.001$). The category (comparison group) left out of the model was Nonprofit Only experience. In this instance, the mean of *Years to Association Executive Position* is statistically different between nonprofit only experience and all other sector combinations, such as for-profit and public sector work experience along with nonprofit sector work experience. The analysis found no support for Hypotheses 1-5, while Hypothesis 6 is supported.

The results show that the large differences in mean time to the executive position (summarized in Table 2) are statistically significant. In particular, individuals with experience in the nonprofit sector only reached the executive positions sooner than those with experience in two sectors combined. Hypothesis 6 is supported with these findings. In the following section, these results are discussed along with the limitations and suggestions for future research.

Discussion

With attention drawn to leadership development in the nonprofit sector, this study investigates if the credentials and experience nonprofit executives hold helped expedite their ascension to the position. Prior research from both within and beyond the nonprofit sector has shown that nonprofit executive career paths are marked by such factors, but no evidence has accrued if these factors actually contribute to nonprofit career advancement. This study examined personal factors, such as credentials and experience, that may help expedite promotion to the executive position, and contrary to expectations formed by practice and prior research, significant findings were limited. Education background and prior professional experience, aside from experience in the nonprofit sector, did not have significant relationships with expediency to the executive position. These null findings may at their face value be disappointing but, given the conjecture of what contributes to a nonprofit career path, this lack of findings proves insightful. Knowing what matters, as well as what does not appear to have bearing, helps inform leadership development initiatives about what factors should be tended to. In the following, we discuss the complexity of nonprofit career pathways and call for other research to focus on factors beyond the credentials and experience explored here.

The personal factors included in this analysis reflected the expectations of human capital theory, which predicts that inputs into human capital can produce outcomes, such as promotion. Yet with the limited contribution of these factors in pathways to the executive position, alternative explanations of what contributes to the advancement of executives should be considered. Perhaps with the expectations laden onto the executive position, some of the factors included in this analysis are treated as givens rather than as explanatory expeditors. Alternatively, some types of experience could be weighted more heavily in consideration of qualifications over others or in combination, thus mitigating the expected contributions of study variables themselves. Future research could disentangle these relationships further by

Table 3. Results of OLS Regression Analysis, Model 1

H1-H5 Predictors	β (sig.)
Graduate Degree	.699 (.221)
Management Degree	.019 (.994)
Credential	.124 (.959)
Executive Position Experience	1.587 (.522)
Second in Command	1.235 (.613)
More Than One Association	1.062 (.653)
Gender (Male)	-.763 (.736)
White	-5.732 (.218)
Age	.436 (.000)
Adjusted R ²	.128 (.027)

treating study variables used in this current analysis as interactions or as controls rather than explanatory, independent variables.

Nonprofits also are mission driven, relying on an expressive logic defined by values and service ideals (Frumkin, 2009). Therefore, it is possible mission and value alignment, which transcend any of the factors tested among these hypotheses, takes center stage in board deliberations about who to promote to the nonprofit executive position. Credentials and experience are signals to the hiring board, but boards might be responding to other signals in their hiring decision. For example, prior research by Stewart (2017) remarked on how boards leaned on their networks to help identify the executives they appointed, implying that personal connections were important signals of a candidate’s capacity. To that end, we also examined relational variables in our analysis, including the role of a mentor or membership in a professional association, but neither had a significant relationship on years to the executive position. Yet, the relational variables hinted at in Stewart’s research might be more intangible than this research could account for, the informal relationships that spring up in people’s personal and professional lives. Additional research by Stewart et al. (2020) shed light on the various skills sets boards prioritize in their executive selection decisions, including fundraising and financial management. This study examined career factors that are viewed on a resume or responded to in a survey’s checkbox, but some relational and skill signals are intangible and not easily captured in quantitative data. Future research should uncover through interviewing boards or executives precisely the factors contributing to an executive’s selection, investigating if there are intangible factors or factors only known in the boardrooms where executive selections take place that matter more than the observable characteristics examined in this research study.

Literature informing this study’s hypotheses is derived from research on careers and the general nonprofit sector. This research study’s context of associations is particularly understudied among the diverse mission sub-sectors of the nonprofit sector, and association executives have dual responsibilities to their nonprofit’s operations and their association’s membership (Tschirhart 2006). This duality is not reflected in the career variables identified in the current nonprofit literature and may outweigh the importance of credentials and experience in a net calculation of qualifications made by boards. Similarly, much like the broader nonprofit sector, associations are themselves diverse. In some instances, association executives may be selected through an election process, or alternating among members or constituencies of the association. Service to the association may also be valued, which is not easily portrayed on a resume or LinkedIn profile. Finally, some associations are run by a professional association manager, a consultant managing a portfolio of associations. Association management has been recognized as a unique field with its own credentialing, certificate programs, and national association, the American Society of Association Executives.

Table 4. Results of OLS Regression Analysis, Model 2

H6 Predictors	β (sig.)
Private Only	7.746 (.007)
Public Only	7.092 (.015)
Nonprofit and Public	7.965 (.000)
Nonprofit and Private	6.771 (.003)
Public and Private	13.357 (.001)
Experience in all sectors	7.381 (.006)
Adjusted R ²	.087 (.001)

Hence, these findings point out that career factors may matter differently according to the nonprofit's context and mission area. Further, prior research by Suarez (2010) identified different career types, such as a career centered on mission expertise referred to as the 'substantive expert,' and future research should investigate if different mission sub-sectors prefer different career types for promotion to executive positions. Moreover, specific sub-sectors have created their own leadership development initiatives, such as the Diversity Education Leadership Program from the American Society of Association Executives or the Schusterman Fellowship hosted by the Schusterman Family Foundation and focused on leadership development for Jewish nonprofits. Research could look both internal to a program as well as across programs using a longitudinal design to understand the dividends these programs yield for leadership development as well as how the various selection criteria contribute to the development outcomes.

Finally, the relationships among study variables may not be linear or may be more complex than hypothesized. An assumption of the current analysis is that the presence of any study variables should decrease the amount of time to the executive position. Yet focusing on the null hypotheses still allows for conclusions to be drawn regarding the characteristics and experiences of nonprofit executives. Board preferences are complex: candidates may 'check all the boxes' of qualifications and still not be a good fit for an organization. Boards are able to test the qualifications of the candidate in the inter-personal context of the interview, and what matters on paper may look different in the light of an in-person interaction. Future research should endeavor to understand the rationale and logics of boards engaging the decision of executive selection, distinguishing the factors specific to that moment in time for the organization versus what is insightful about the executive profile and those prepared to assume the position. Related, the composite profile of an executive is more complex qualifications and background experience treated as singular variables as tested here—experience is layered along with personal demographic characteristics and experiences and mixed with the sequencing of prior career and education choices. We pose if there is opportunity for predictive machine learning or qualitative comparative analysis that could be useful to predicting the outcome of executive selection, which could inform how leadership development initiatives might be targeted to cultivate future leadership needs.

In contrast to Hypotheses 1-5, nonprofit lifers had significantly shorter paths to the association executive position (Hypothesis 6). Professionals spending their entire careers in the nonprofit sector, i.e., nonprofit lifers (Suarez, 2010), secure executive positions approximately seven years earlier than all other combinations of sector experiences on average. This finding does not elucidate the causal mechanism behind it, but perhaps the commitment of nonprofit mission-driven organizations signals they have a servant leadership style. Servant leadership, a contemporary leadership theory developed by Greenleaf (1970), focuses on an executive's ability to serve their followers and encourage personal growth, which in turn encourages organizational commitment and engagement. Given that associations may be particularly susceptible to collective action problems and the voluntary nature of participation and membership within the organization, servant leadership may be more successful than other

leadership styles. Therefore, future research should investigate the type of signaling that sector experience, particularly nonprofit-only experience, sends to boards.

The findings also did not reveal significant relations of gender or ethnicity. Although this analysis has no alternative group who did not rise to the executive position, our non-findings here implies though that the rapidity with which an executive is promoted does not appear to favor gender or racial groups. This non-finding might be seen as encouragement about inclusion in the sector, but our study's sample shows a bias to White male executives. This bias even prompted us to make race a binary variable rather than a categorical variable since representation from other racial groups was limited among our sample of executives. Thus, we do not know if this lack of observed difference reported in our findings is due to equality in promotion opportunities, or instead a reflection of individual or institutional barriers preventing the promotion of leaders of color and women that this study did not illuminate. Hence, this study joins both researchers and practitioners who precede this analysis in calling for intentional efforts for equity and inclusion, focusing on barriers that we know exist in the career pipeline as well as taking a critical perspective to understand why unrepresented groups among nonprofit leadership do not rise to the top position even when all other factors are equal with those who do. For example, future research might look at the diversity of boards themselves to understand if more diverse boards have a higher propensity to promote leaders of color or female leadership.

This study is not without limitations, including lacking a counterfactual. While commonalities or shared characteristics of nonprofit executives were identified, individuals who sought executive office but were ultimately unsuccessful were not compared. Time to the executive position was used as a proxy, and this variable is insightful about professional qualities that are preferred for promotion, signaling to those who develop leadership qualities and those who select among executive candidates about qualities to emphasize. We acknowledge that an analysis of career path efficiencies (i.e., time to the executive position) by different career characteristics is an imperfect proxy for understanding the value of these different characteristics in building an executive profile as it assumes that differences in efficiencies are meaningful. A more direct comparison of those who were successful to those who were not (i.e., effectiveness) might enable comparison between certain experiences and qualifications as they relate to career pathways. Yet, we also recognize that significant differences in career efficiency exist and argue that exploring these differences gives us a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of nonprofit executive career paths.

This study's dual data collection methods mitigated the issue of differences between respondents and non-respondents, but all potential confounding variables were not controlled for given that publicly available information was relied upon for non-respondents to the survey. Internet sources were incomplete for all variables used in the analysis, and thus some variables necessary for analysis of this study's research questions were missing. Further, visible assessments of gender or race/ethnicity may be inaccurate to how the person self-identifies. The data collection techniques utilized also limited our ability to include organizational or other contextual control variables. While individual-level characteristics were the focus of our analysis, we recognize that factors such as organizational size or age, sub-sector, organizational structure, and other factors likely contribute to pathways available to individuals within those organizations to the executive position. Therefore, we caution interpretation of the findings and encourage future research in this area to consider the larger organizational context in which individuals are embedded.

Finally, given that the sample consists of nonprofit association executives, rather than nonprofit executives more generally, generalizability may be limited. Despite this, the conclusions hold value, particularly about the credentials and experience deemed necessary for nonprofit executives. Also, this limitation is mitigated to a degree since previous experience in an association was not found to expedite the path to the association executive office while

nonprofit sector experience itself did. Here future research should investigate differences in management experience among different subtypes of nonprofits including associations, but also by major group (mission area) and organizational size. Although this study focuses on personal factors of credentials and experience that pave the way, we also pose that other factors, external to the person and residing at the organizational or even environmental levels, may smooth or disrupt a professional's promotion to the top and should be investigated in a study of nonprofit career promotion.

Conclusion

This study joins a body of literature that encourages nonprofit leadership development. The findings indicate the relationship of credentials and experience is complex with factors beyond a resume's listing mattering more than perhaps what credentials and experience entail. With the sector's values and contemporary calls to develop future leaders to address leadership deficits, this study's preliminary evidence of how these credentials and experience do not matter as much as a resume's contents and LinkedIn profiles would lead us to believe they do in how quickly the executive got to their position. The null findings related to education and professional experience helped rule out factors that do not contribute as much to a career pathway to the executive position, and in doing so, help point to factors and rationales for the selection of executives that future research should consider. Interestingly, nonprofit sector experience appears to signal that professionals are uniquely prepared to lead associations compared to professionals with experiences from other sectors. Future research should attempt to disentangle sector experience from other types of experience and validate precisely what experience gives nonprofit boards confidence in selecting among executive candidates. This study offers empirical evidence even in its non-findings about what contributes to an executive's promotion, and with renewed attention to the diversity of the sector's leadership, these findings help inform how systematic leadership development must attend to both tangible and intangible factors that comprise a nonprofit worker's career and background.

Notes

1. This research was supported by a grant from the ASAE Foundation to study association executives and their pathways to executive office. The sample size was chosen in consideration of the funding available for survey incentives, the cost of physically collecting data from the sample, and the workload required for secondary data collection.

Disclosure Statement

The author(s) declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Author Biographies

Kerry Kuenzi is an Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. She researches and publishes on public and nonprofit management topics including nonprofit executive careers, public and nonprofit education, and collaboration and networks.

Amanda J. Stewart is an Associate Professor at North Carolina State University in the School of Public and International Affairs, Department of Public Administration. Her research centers on nonprofit organizations, including leadership continuity, career development, and organizational capacity.