



# Why Nonprofit?

## University student perceptions of careers in the nonprofit sector

*June 2010*

This report is a companion to *Growing Younger: Tapping into the Talents of Early Career Employees*.

This report outlines key findings from a series of focus groups with third and fourth year university students that were conducted by EKOS Research Associates Inc. on behalf of the HR Council.

# HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector

The HR Council takes action on nonprofit labour force issues.

As a **catalyst**, the HR Council sparks awareness and action on labour force issues. As a **convenor**, we bring together people, information and ideas in the spirit of collaborative action. As a **research instigator** we are building knowledge and improving our understanding of the nonprofit labour force.

© 2010 HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector

Copyright is waived for charitable and nonprofit organizations for non-commercial use, with attribution. All other rights reserved.

*Aussi disponible en français.*

ISBN: 978-1-926754-04-8

201-291 Dalhousie Street | Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7E5  
t: 613.244.8332 | tf: 866.594.8332 | f: 613.241.2252  
www:hrcouncil.ca | Twitter: @HR\_Council



The HR Council is funded by the Government of Canada's Sector Council Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

Canada

# Contents

---

Introduction	1
Detailed findings	3
Conclusions	12
Appendix	14

# 1 Introduction

---

Nonprofit organizations realize that the long-term viability of the sector is dependent upon the ability to attract and retain workers of all ages, particularly early career workers.

## Background and objectives

During 2008 – 2009, the HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector undertook research to improve the nonprofit sector’s understanding of the characteristics and motivating factors of prospective “early career” employees. The Canadian labour force is aging at a rapid rate stimulating concern in all sectors about future productivity, skills shortages and sources of replacement workers. Nonprofit organizations realize that the long-term viability of the sector is dependent upon the ability to attract and retain workers of all ages, particularly early career workers.

The HR Council’s research project, *Tapping into the Talents of Early Career Employees*, included a **literature review** and subscription to a national survey of Canadian students, *From Learning to Work™*, conducted by DECODE and Brainstorm Consulting. The HR Council commissioned EKOS Research Associates Inc. to conduct five online focus groups with third and fourth year university students to explore:

- Their knowledge and awareness of jobs and careers in the nonprofit sector
- Their perceptions and expectations of job satisfaction in the nonprofit sector
- Positive and negative factors that would influence a decision to work in the sector

This report outlines key findings from the focus groups, which explored students’ views on the following topics:

- The type of job or career they would like to pursue following graduation
- Strategies they would use to find their first “real” job following graduation
- Key “first job” qualities
- Their support of nonprofit organizations through donations and/or volunteering
- Whether they had considered paid employment in the nonprofit sector
- Perceived advantages and disadvantages of employment in the nonprofit sector
- Knowledge and awareness of jobs and careers in the nonprofit sector
- Reactions to specific marketing and communications materials
- Attitudes towards community service-learning

## Methodology

Five online discussion groups were conducted with 36 randomly selected third or fourth year undergraduate university students in Canada who were between the ages of 20 and 29 years. Two discussions were held with students whose studies had included community service-learning,<sup>1</sup> and three groups were held with students who had not had this type of learning experience. All discussions were conducted in English.

The discussions lasted approximately one hour and 45 minutes and included the participation of between five to 10 students from across Canada. In addition to the core recruitment criteria identified above, the following criteria was ensured:

- Participant areas of study were diverse
- A good mix of males and females (one-third male and two-thirds female)
- Regional representation (i.e., participants from across Canada)

The Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning assisted in recruiting students who had participated in community service-learning. All other participants were recruited through EKOS Research's Probit Panel™. Research participants received a \$75 cash incentive.

The online sessions were conducted on five separate days during the last two weeks of October 2009. Two moderator guides were used: one for students with community service-learning and another for use with students without community service-learning experience. Overall, the guides were very similar. The guide was also informed by a review of literature provided by the HR Council, findings from the *From Learning to Work*™ survey, as well as the input of the HR Council's Early Career Advisory Committee.

## A note on qualitative research

It should be kept in mind when reading this report that these findings are drawn exclusively from qualitative research. While every effort is made to balance various demographic characteristics when recruiting participants, these groups (and therefore the findings drawn from them) may not be said to be representative of the larger population as a whole. While groups generally indicate appropriate directionality, they do not serve as a proxy for a fully representative quantitative methodology. For the reader's ease, these findings are depicted to some extent as definitive and "projectable". This is, however, true only for the universe represented by these participants.

---

1. Community service-learning (CSL), sometimes known as service learning, combines volunteer service with academic work. CSL provides students with opportunities to become engaged in their community and to undertake work that benefits the community. A key part of CSL is that students reflect on their work in a formal way, through activities such as journal writing, group discussions, presentations, research projects and written reports. This process of reflection is what distinguishes CSL from volunteering.

# 2 Detailed Findings

---

Most participants stated that despite having given a great deal of consideration to their future plans, they were still uncertain as to the type of career they would like to pursue upon graduating.

Overall, the research participants were very engaged in the discussion. Collectively, they attended universities from across Canada and were studying a wide range of fields, mostly social sciences, arts and humanities, business, and applied sciences. There were also a few students enrolled in professional programs, such as law, accounting, and engineering.

## Finding that first job

### General thoughts on careers

“I will be [graduating] in December and, at this point I’m not sure what I will be doing in January.”

Most participants stated that despite having given a great deal of consideration to their future plans, they were still uncertain as to the type of career they would like to pursue upon graduating: “Things are pretty wide open.” Most students indicated that they would like to find a position related to their field of study (e.g., education, psychology, sexual health) and a number of others expressed interest in graduate studies.

There were a small number of students who said they had decided on a career path, mostly those enrolled in professional programs (such as law and accounting), but almost no one had a specific organization in mind.

### Key job qualities

“A solid work environment can make or break a job experience.”

Participants were asked to create a list of qualities that they would look for in a job at the start of their career. Responses indicate that a high salary was not a top priority for students. Instead, participants felt that factors such as work environment and opportunities for advancement were far more important.

Organizational culture and work environment were important to almost all students. Many participants indicated that they would like to work for an organization that shares similar values and provides a friendly, flexible work environment: “I don’t want to set myself up for a long-term career in something I don’t find rewarding, especially if I don’t stand for the organization’s values or something in the work environment is disrupting my performance or frustrating me on a personal level.” Participants, particularly those with community service-learning experience, also emphasized the importance of having a direct impact on the lives of others: “[Helping others is] very important. It’s my main motivation for choosing my career path.”

Many students hoped that their first job would provide a path to advancement and/or an opportunity to expand their skills and add to their experience: “I know that graduating out of university does not guarantee me a good job and so looking for an opportunity in which I can move up is key.”

When asked about the importance of fully utilizing their knowledge and skills, participants agreed that this factor was very important: “I wouldn’t want to have a load of education under my belt just to be filing papers and answering phones.” There was, however, scepticism as to whether finding such a position was realistic: “The majority of my friends/family members are not working in the field they have a degree in. [It is] not always possible in today’s job market.”

While a number of participants listed salary as an important quality, many students appeared to feel that accumulating work experience is far more important in the short run and view high salaries as more of a long term goal: “Pay is important, but I would be willing to sacrifice big pay in the short term to have quality experience in the long term.” Most were looking for a salary that would allow them to make ends meet, including student debt re-payments: “I think pay is definitely something to consider, especially since my debt load will be immense by the time I graduate.” In one session, the participants were asked what they considered to be an acceptable starting salary: \$40,000 was the consensus.

## The job market

“Networking is key.”

Participants were asked about the steps they would take in finding their first job after completing university. Students felt that networking is vital to finding a suitable career. Many students emphasized the need for forming connections within the industry and most students said that they would speak with friends, family, professors, and past employers (co-op, as well as others) in an effort to get leads.

Participants also felt that volunteering is a useful way of gaining experience and “getting their foot in the door”, as well as making contacts. Most students stated that they would be willing to volunteer or work for free and a number stated that they had already done so: “Volunteer work is gold on a resume.” A few students, however, would not consider working without pay, stating that they already had enough experience in their field, there would likely be a lack of volunteer opportunities in their field, or they could simply not afford to do so. It is noteworthy that participants did not seem to envisage working “for free” on a trial basis for a private sector employer. Rather, this strategy was almost exclusively associated with the nonprofit sector.

As could be expected, everyone identified the internet (and its various sites devoted to employment opportunities) as a key source of information on potential careers and specific job possibilities. However, participants appeared to believe that social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.) were overrated and were not a useful tool in searching for a job: “I don’t think of social networking sites as very professional. They are more for socializing, not for serious job searching.”

Here, as elsewhere in the discussion, participants emphasized the extent to which the university campus would play an important role in their approach to employment, including on-campus job fairs, using campus career counselling services and seeking advice from fellow students and faculty.

In short, the campus and the internet appear to be the key sources of employment information for graduating or soon-to-be graduating students.

## Perceptions and appeal of working in the nonprofit sector

### Support for charitable organizations

“[Helping others] makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.”

Most participants, particularly those with community service-learning experience, had contributed or were currently contributing time and/or money to a charitable organization. Contributions ranged from small, one-time donations to volunteering on a regular basis. Participants also contributed to a broad spectrum of organizations, from local charities to international organizations to political parties.

It was apparent that many students saw volunteering as a significant part of their lives, and in some cases, their identity. Volunteering was viewed as both a responsibility and a source of satisfaction: “I believe that we are incredibly blessed here in Canada and that because of that we have a responsibility to act in a just and compassionate way.” Participants also spoke about the positive feelings they received from “helping people” and of how their volunteer work helped them to “connect” with people in a manner that nurtured their humanity: “People are people first, anything used to define them comes second, whether that be addiction, lifestyle, gender... We all want the same things in life – food, shelter, caring.”

There was also general agreement that volunteering was an excellent way for young people to “build your resume” and to accumulate work experience and form connections: “My resume is filled with experience because I volunteered.” Helping people, feeling good about oneself/connecting to humanity, and gaining experience/building one’s CV: For many students, volunteering is a win-win proposition. The research also suggests that these students have a great deal of respect for nonprofit and charitable organizations; a respect, based on knowledge, that allows most to be open to the idea of working as a paid employee for a nonprofit organization.

Donations of money appeared to be motivated by a desire to help others or to see one’s community become a better place: “It feels rewarding to make a contribution to society and making a difference in the community.” Some participants also cited specific examples in their lives where a friend or relative was affected by a cause they currently support: “I had a family member die of cancer, so I recognize the need to contribute.”

The only significant barrier to supporting charitable organizations appeared to be associated with school. A small number of students stated that tuition fees, combined with the workload demands of their classes, had compromised their ability to contribute: “[I do not currently contribute to charities] – school tends to monopolize my time and money.”

### Perceptions of the nonprofit sector

“When I first heard about nonprofit work, I instantly thought about ‘soup kitchen’ type work.”

Participants were asked about their perceptions of the nonprofit sector. Overall, basic knowledge and awareness of nonprofit organizations was high, particularly among those with community service-learning experience. There was agreement that the two defining characteristics of a nonprofit organization were 1) the organization does not generate a profit and 2) the organization must provide services that are of public benefit: “It’s an organization that works to help people and doesn’t make profits.”

Many participants perceived nonprofit organizations as charities and a number of participants believed that these organizations necessarily depend on donations and volunteer work: “A nonprofit is an organization, like a charity, which offers assistance or contributes to a cause working only with donations and volunteers.” When asked to provide examples of nonprofit organizations, almost all participants named charitable organizations. Common examples included the Red Cross and the Canadian Cancer Society. A small number of participants also mentioned summer camps and lobbying groups.

There was also a common perception that nonprofit organizations, much like the people they help, often struggle to survive and that working for such an organization means having to share in this struggle: “They have almost no money to pay people, and when they do, it’s not usually there for a long time.” “I found a lot of people would be there even if they weren’t getting paid anymore because they care about what they are doing and who they’re helping.”

### Appeal of the nonprofit sector

“I think a lot of students simply don’t know what’s out there for them.”

Participants were asked if they had ever considered working as a paid employee for a nonprofit organization. Students who had participated in community service-learning were keen on this idea. Every one of these students replied that they had indeed considered this type of work and some intended to pursue a career specifically within the nonprofit sector. Most students who had not participated in community service-learning had not considered the nonprofit sector as a post-graduation employment option but were open to the idea: “I’ve never thought of it before...but sure, why not?”

Some students expressed concerns about wages and job security (e.g., the precarious nature of short-term contract work). A very small number of participants said that they would not consider a position within the nonprofit sector due to a lack of demand for their skills: “There is not a nonprofit organization [to] my knowledge which would offer me the opportunity to do what I want to do as a career.”

### Advantages & disadvantages of working in the nonprofit sector

“My only concern is that I would be underpaid considering I would have at least a Master’s degree.”

Participants were asked about what they considered to be the main advantages and disadvantages of working in the nonprofit sector (compared to the

private sector, government, or self-employment). Essentially, students viewed this fundamental question in terms of a trade-off between fulfillment and money. Positions in the nonprofit sector were perceived as more meaningful and more rewarding, while positions within the private sector were seen as having better pay and benefits, as well as a greater level of stability and security.

While students were positive about the sector, their views were balanced. As indicated earlier, many students had had the opportunity to observe one or more nonprofit organizations through volunteer work or community service-learning experience and were able to identify pros and cons to work in the sector.

Students saw the nonprofit sector as more rewarding for four reasons. First, they believed that their work would reflect the sector’s goal of fostering the public good, as opposed to maximizing profits: “I can choose to work for a cause that is important to me or that helps people, instead of using all of my talents to help a corporation make profit.” “I would like the fact that the organization I’m working for has a purpose other than making money.... Feeling like [my] work is meaningful and making a positive difference.”

Students who were attracted to mission-driven work described wanting to “make a difference,” “help people and communities,” “contribute to something positive” and “be part of the change.”

Second, both perception and direct experience suggested that a job in the nonprofit sector would allow them to take on more responsibility, provide more input into decisions, and experience lots of opportunities to develop their skills: “I think because the nonprofit sector has less hierarchy than most other institutions and organizations, it provides opportunity for creativity and ingenuity.”

Third, students felt that the nonprofit sector would provide a friendlier and more relaxed work environment than the “cut-throat” nature of the private sector that was suggested by some: “I think you’ll work in a better culture of happier people.” “I find that people who work for nonprofits are very compassionate individuals and the work environment is very rewarding.”

Fourth, students who were attracted to front-line work with people believed that the nonprofit sector would provide “hands-on” opportunities that would allow them to see the impact of their work, rather than working from “behind a desk”: “I would like to be given a position ‘in the field’, i.e. not sitting at a desk. I want to be actively part of programs to help communities and people.”

With regards to the disadvantages of working for a nonprofit organization, there was a consensus that compensation in the nonprofit sector would be lower than or, at best, on par with that in a private organization: “Pay would be worse... it’s not what they are about.” Some students also expressed concerns about job security and limited opportunities for advancement.

A small number of participants also believed that a nonprofit organization would be more disorganized than a private organization and that their work would be hampered by excessive regulations and unnecessary paperwork: “[Sometimes, there can] be too much red tape.”

A few students, mainly those enrolled in professional programs (such as law and accounting), saw no significant differences between working in the nonprofit sector and working in the private sector: “Providing accounting services to someone is the same whether it’s nonprofit or not.”

Despite largely positive perceptions of the nonprofit sector, many students either did not believe the advantages outweigh the disadvantages or they felt that they lacked the necessary information to make an informed choice: “I would have to weigh that on a situation by situation basis.”

Participants often reiterated the need to look at an organization, regardless of the sector, on its individual merits, noting that issues of fulfillment, money, organization values, etc. really depended on the individual organization, not the sector: “I think you can make a positive difference wherever you work, regardless of the sector.” “I think in many ways the sector that you work in doesn’t make a lot of difference. The individual company/organization plays a much greater role in shaping the benefits of the job.”

As could be expected, students with community service-learning experience were more able to

identify both benefits and disadvantages to working in the sector. They also showed a stronger interest in considering nonprofit employment.

Lastly, participants were asked to list the key questions they had regarding the nonprofit sector. Students were highly curious about compensation (i.e., salary and benefits), particularly entry-level salaries, and how these compared to the private sector and government. Participants also raised questions regarding job security and opportunities for advancement. Students who had participated in community service-learning were able to generate a broader range of questions than other students. In particular, they were concerned about the potentially precarious nature of employment in the nonprofit sector: “I wonder how they secure funding to pay for their employees?” “What is the job security like? Are there only short-term contracts?” “How will changes in funding affect my contract?”

## Knowledge and awareness of nonprofit jobs/careers

“I think that one of the best things about nonprofit organizations is the amount of different things you have to do in your position simply because of the skeleton crew thing.”

Participants were asked if they believed that there would be many positions in the nonprofit sector that matched their interests, talents, education, and experience. Students expressed interest in a range of areas including environmental protection, animal rights, international development, community development, policy evaluation, curriculum development, project management, community services, counselling, fundraising and event management. However, many students did not appear to be aware of the full range of positions available.

When asked if they would use internet job posting sites that are specific to the nonprofit sector in their search for a job, most students stated that the thought had not occurred to them and that they

were unaware of such websites. Most participants did, however, seem open to the idea: “Yes, if I knew of any [job posting sites that are specific to the nonprofit sector], I’d use them.”

Next, participants were asked if there are additional steps that they would take in finding a job within the nonprofit sector (compared to the private sector or government). While a significant number of participants said that there is little they would do differently, most appeared to believe that volunteer experience was far more important in the nonprofit sector than in the private sector: “Some nonprofit organizations won’t even look at you unless you have volunteer experience, and if your experience is with them, then you are practically in.” In a similar vein, a number of students expressed strong interest in internships within the nonprofit sector.

A few participants also felt that networking played a more significant role in the nonprofit sector. These students believed that nonprofit organizations would invest less in advertising available positions and that as a result finding a position would rely more heavily on personal connections: “I feel like a lot of nonprofit organizations don’t have the same budget to headhunt that larger, profit-driven companies might.”

Participants who had volunteered in the past were asked if their volunteer experience has affected their perceptions of working or having a career in the nonprofit sector. There was a wide variety of responses, though most students seemed to feel that volunteering for a nonprofit organization had given them a better sense of the type of work available. A significant number of students also felt that their experience had given them a taste for helping people. Many stated that they were more likely to seek a career in the nonprofit sector and a few of them felt that salary had become less of a priority as a result of volunteering: “It certainly makes the salary less important.”

Students who had participated in community service-learning felt that their experience had a particularly positive impact on their perceptions of a career in the nonprofit sector and most of them stated that they were more likely to seek such a position in the future. A few of these students,

however, stated that they had become pessimistic regarding salary and job security in the nonprofit sector: “I am going to try and stay in the sector but I am much more aware of the lack of job security and that can be very scary.”

## Marketing and communications

“It doesn’t just say you’ll be making a difference, but tells you how.”

The last segment of the focus groups was devoted to obtaining the reactions of participants to a range of communication and marketing approaches and ideas. These included a discussion of the terms used to describe nonprofit organizations; rating 10 statements aimed at generating awareness and interest in nonprofit sector career opportunities; views on the nonprofit sector page of a website that provides an overview of careers in many sectors; and reactions to two approaches used by a publication to promote and describe nonprofit careers.

### Labels: nonprofit, not-for-profit, voluntary, or community?

Responses indicate that the language used to refer to the nonprofit sector is very important. Many students suggested that inaccurate terms can affect the manner in which graduates perceive nonprofit organizations: “[The name] matters, because it affects how people perceive [nonprofit organizations] and perceptions influence actions.” Students voted on their preferred term, as follows:

- Not-for-profit :15
- Community: 12
- Nonprofit: 7
- Voluntary: 1

Responses indicate that the majority of students preferred the terms “not-for-profit” and “nonprofit”. These terms were viewed as more common and more self-explanatory than the other terms: “[Not-

for-profit] is most common and people know what it means.” Many participants felt that these terms were also more accurate than the others: “Not-for-profit is the most accurate. Voluntary or community creates a connotation that I feel is unfair to for-profit corporations. I don’t believe in the big bad corporation stereotype.”

Many participants did not see a significant difference between the terms “nonprofit” and “not-for-profit” and a number of them stated that they were indifferent between the two. A few students did, however, suggest that “not-for-profit” carried a more professional tone while “nonprofit” was more recognizable/colloquial and easier to say: “I would say not-for-profit [because] it seems more prestigious than the others.” “Nonprofit – it’s familiar and easier to say.”

The term “community sector” received positive reactions from a significant number of students. Many participants felt that this term had a “nice ring to it” and that it was more appropriate, since it “describes who is being helped by the organization.” A few participants also felt that this statement was best since it focused on the type of work in which the organization is involved, and not its source of funding: “Community sector. They serve the community. That is their main goal. It seems to me that all the other terms refer to funding for the organization in some capacity.” While a few participants described this term as “unclear”, there did not appear to be any strong opposition to it.

The term, “voluntary” was the least popular. Only one participant selected this term, stating that it emphasized the opportunity for volunteer experience: “There are a lot of people [who] are looking for volunteer experience and that could communicate an opportunity for them.” Most participants appeared to feel that this term could re-enforce the stereotype that the nonprofit sector relies almost entirely on volunteer work: “If you say ‘voluntary’, people might think they have to work for free.”

### Resonance of potential messages

Participants were presented with a list of ten statements developed by the project’s advisory committee (see Appendix A) that could be used by

the nonprofit sector to communicate to university students about employment and careers. They were asked to select the statement they preferred and then to rate each one on a scale of 0 to 100. While there was a wide range of responses (in fact, every statement was selected as a favourite at least once), there were a couple of clear winners among the 10 possibilities.

Today I helped house a homeless family,  
finished a strategic plan,  
met with community leaders,  
launched an ad campaign...  
all in a day’s work

It speaks to the rewarding and fulfilling nature of employment in the sector, while also providing a sense of the work that people do; and

Find work, find your passion, find balance.  
Find yourself in a nonprofit career

The notion of passion has appeal to young people and is consistent with their perceptions of a career in the nonprofit sector. For complete results of the message testing, see Appendix A.

### Gateway to Careers

Participants were invited to view and comment on a single web page that summarizes essential information about the nonprofit sector, found on the [Gateway to Careers](#) website. The point of the exercise was not to obtain feedback for improving the Gateway site, but rather to identify the elements that young job seekers would want in a site of this kind.

Participants had generally very positive reactions to the nonprofit sector web page, suggesting that this approach to providing information is effective. As with many sites, however, the key is to raise awareness of the website’s existence.

With very few exceptions, participants found this web page to be concise and highly informative: “I thought it was interesting and very informative.

I didn't know all this stuff about the nonprofit sector." Participants felt that it gave them a better sense of what is meant by a "nonprofit organization" and that it addressed many of their preconceptions regarding the nature of the work: "I think it's a good summary, especially if you had no idea what was meant by 'nonprofit sector'... very clear/easy to read."

Participants also appeared to like the layout: "Really nice graphics, appealing website." The margin on the right side of the page was particularly popular: "I like the margin on the right hand side with the condensed information/bullet points, helpful to get attention. The overview info is informative."

When asked if they would "click" into such a website to learn about careers in the nonprofit sector, participants overwhelmingly stated that they would do so. (Note: The website only provides a single page of information about nonprofit sector careers.) Students generally agreed that the page "sparked" their interest and encouraged them to learn more about prospective career opportunities within the nonprofit sector: "It makes me want to learn more about working for the nonprofit sector."

While the webpage was met with highly positive feedback, many participants provided suggestions as to how the page could be improved. The most common suggestion was the inclusion of wage statistics. Many participants were curious as to how wages in the nonprofit sector compared to those in the private sector and found that the aggregated figure of \$22 billion (total annual salaries of paid employees in the sector) was not particularly useful: "I found the statistic of \$22 billion unhelpful. That doesn't say how much the average individual is making."

Another recurring suggestion was the inclusion of a broader range of career opportunities. Some students feel that the examples included on the page focus too heavily on areas such as marketing and management and that it did not reflect the diversity in the qualifications of today's graduates: "The career options on the side really don't appeal to me - they're mostly management based." "I'd like to see what careers are available for people with science credentials."

## Careers in the Nonprofit Sector – First page

Participants were invited to view and comment on two pages from the booklet [Careers in the Nonprofit Sector](#), developed by the Institute for Nonprofit Studies, Mount Royal College (2008). The first page is a brief vignette of a person who works in the sector, while the second page gives a profile of a job in the sector. The intent was to gather feedback about the types of career information students found useful.

Participants believed that the use of personal narratives was an effective tool to motivate and inspire students to pursue a career in the nonprofit sector: "I found it interesting. It is always helpful to see how others have achieved their dream job." There was a consensus, however, that this particular story was not very useful because it focused on an individual (in the communications field) with a very unique set of skills that did not reflect the majority of participants: "I think it's interesting, but it's not really helpful. It's like reading a biography, neat but doesn't really help me make my choices." A number of participants agreed that a booklet with 10-25 profiles covering individuals with a wide variety of educational backgrounds would be very helpful.

A few participants also complained about the layout. These students did not find the "textbook" style of the page to be visually appealing, which they felt undermined its effectiveness: "[This page is] outdated visually and thus makes me automatically assume that its contents are not as relevant."

## Careers in the Nonprofit Sector – Second page

This page, focused on the position of Marketing Manager, was met with almost universally positive feedback. The description of duties was particularly popular, as it gave students a sense of what the work environment would be like: "I like the side panel regarding what your average day on the job would be like - gives you a better picture of what you are required to do." Participants also appreciated the layout and the clear and concise manner in which the page was written: "[The page is] easy to scan, not overwhelming."

In terms of suggestions for improvement, most participants felt that the salary range was too wide and that there should have been an explanation as to how wage is determined: “The salary range is way too broad. It makes me wonder if they really know who they’re looking for. Somebody who is worth 18k [and somebody who is worth 135k] are two very different people with very different experience and education.”

### Recommended approach to recruiting university students

“Make the same kind of active effort to recruit students the same way that a lot of companies on campus do and show them how a career [in the nonprofit sector] is just as competitive and rewarding.”

Participants offered a wide range of suggestions as to how the nonprofit sector could encourage more university students to think about a career in the sector. The most common recommendation was the use of a more aggressive advertising campaign towards university students, particularly on campus: “I think presentations are great – at career fairs, or just information sessions.” A number of participants stated that they had never seen any form of on-campus promotions for a nonprofit organization: “I have never been addressed by someone sharing information about the nonprofit sector.” The absence of nonprofit organizations from campus career fairs might serve to reinforce the perception that there are not many opportunities for paid employment in the sector, and that nonprofit organizations are too cash strapped to participate.

Students also recommended coordinating efforts with universities with co-op programs and advertising positions on the co-op websites.

Another common suggestion was that marketing should focus on addressing the concerns that many students have with regards to a career in the nonprofit sector, namely low wages and lack of job security: “Breaking the stereotype that nonprofit means less money, no benefits, etc., and putting that information out there would be helpful.” A number of participants also recommended focusing on the rewarding and meaningful nature of a career in the nonprofit sector, as many saw it as the sector’s biggest strength.

## Community service-learning

“A good way of getting experience while in school.”

Students without community service-learning experience were asked if they had heard of university students taking part in community service-learning. The majority of students had not even heard of the term. Of those that had, only a few appeared to know what it was: “[I’ve heard of community service-learning], but I know nothing of it.”

When presented with a description of community service-learning, however, participants immediately began to show interest. Students came to view community service-learning as a valuable opportunity to gain experience in their field and seemed interested in taking part in such a program. Indeed, almost all participants stated that they would be interested or, at least, willing to learn more about it.

# 3 Conclusions

---

There is significant interest, even desire, on the part of some students to work in the nonprofit sector.

The focus group findings are consistent with previous research commissioned by the HR Council, particularly with respect to key qualities in a first post-graduation job. The conclusions flowing from this research are as follows:

## Perceptions of employment in the nonprofit sector

- Relatively few students have a specific job or a particular employer in mind to pursue following graduation, though almost everyone had given some serious thought to the issue.
- Volunteering and community service-learning appear to be linked with increased awareness and knowledge of the nonprofit sector, positive perceptions of the sector, and more specifically, the willingness to consider working for a nonprofit organization.
- There is significant interest, even desire, on the part of some students to work in the nonprofit sector, particularly among those with community service-learning experience. Most other students are open to the possibility but feel they need more information or would want to assess the merits of a particular job.
- Participants exhibited realistic and pragmatic views and expectations of the labour market. No one expects to have an ideal job, much less an ideal first (“real”) job. Rather, they anticipate having to make trade offs among a number of factors: money, fulfillment, stability, variety, advancement opportunities, input into decision-making, etc. Money (i.e., salary and benefits) is on everyone’s mind, but the vast majority is willing to trade it off in a first job as long as they can “survive” financially; for many this means the basics, plus student loan repayments, or put another way: \$40,000 per year. Overall, the key first job criteria are (in no particular order):
  - Working in one's field of study
  - Advancement opportunities
  - Decent wages/benefits
  - The opportunity to learn and develop skills
  - A good work environment (people and organizational values)
  - Flexibility (e.g., hours)
  - Doing good/contributing to society

- People who work in the nonprofit sector are generally perceived as having traded-off salary/benefits, job security, and, possibly opportunities for advancement in exchange for greater fulfillment in the form of contributing to society, learning and developing skills, and having a positive work environment. Those who have been involved in the nonprofit sector as paid employees, through community service-learning or as volunteers, are more likely to be comfortable making such a trade-off, in large part it seems, because they have experienced the intrinsic rewards.
- The key questions that students have about working in the nonprofit sector pertain to compensation and job security (e.g., term vs. permanent employment). They would also want to know a significant amount about the work and mandate of a prospective nonprofit employer. If recent graduates are trading-off certain elements (e.g., salary) for the type of fulfillment and reward that can come from working for a nonprofit organization, they want to ensure that there is a good match between their personal values and interests and those of the organization.
- Students employ all of the usual techniques to find employment (e.g., internet job sites, networking, etc.). It is, however, noteworthy that much of their focus seems to be on-campus, including career counselling services and job fairs, and that they are unaware of web sites specializing in nonprofit jobs.

## Communications

- Overall the communications material was well received. Students, including those with significant volunteer experience, are curious about working as paid employees in the nonprofit sector. The most resonant messages are:

*Today I helped house a homeless family, finished a strategic plan, met with community leaders, launched an ad campaign... all in a day's work: it speaks to the rewarding and fulfilling nature of employment in the sector, while also providing a sense of the work that people do.*

*Find work, find your passion, find balance. Find yourself in a nonprofit career.* The notion of passion has appeal to young people and is consistent with their perceptions of a career in the nonprofit sector.

- The internet is a key source of information on careers and employment opportunities. The research suggests, however, that few students realize that there are sites specifically devoted to jobs in the nonprofit sector. The positive reaction of students to the Gateway to Careers site suggests that existing sites should be more widely promoted to university students.
- Both personal narratives and factual descriptions of careers in the nonprofit sector were thought by students to be interesting and useful and should be incorporated into websites about jobs and careers in the sector.

# Appendix

---

## Test messages

1. Did you know that there are 69,000 organizations and 1.2 million paid employees in the nonprofit sector across Canada? Where do you fit in?
2. Today I helped house a homeless family, finished a strategic plan, met with community leaders, launched an ad campaign... all in a day's work.
3. Every day is different when you are making a difference.
4. Learn, innovate and gain experience fast – Nonprofit careers keep up with you!
5. Find work, find your passion, find balance. Find yourself in a nonprofit career.
6. Never boring, always engaging – a career in the nonprofit sector.
7. Do what you love. Do work that matters. Your path starts here.
8. Flexibility, challenge and the opportunity to learn – think about a career in the nonprofit sector.
9. Finally, a job you'll want to talk about at parties!
10. Accounting, marketing, IT, research, communications: more than you expected [OR where do you belong] in the nonprofit sector.

Note: These test messages were developed by the advisory committee for the HR Council's *Tapping in to the Talents of Early Career Employees* project.

Statement	First Choice	Average Rating
<i>Today I helped house a homeless family, finished a strategic plan, met with community leaders, launched an ad campaign... all in a day's work.</i>	10	74
<p>This statement was the most popular. Participants felt that it successfully brought together a wide range of elements. First, it had a strong appeal to those who seek to make a difference in the lives of others. Second, it was specific and cited examples of activities that may take place on a daily basis: "It doesn't just say you'll be making a difference, but tells you how." This statement also advertised a challenging and fast-paced environment: "Number 2 really shows a sense of lifestyle, challenge, and fast paced/engaging and meaningful work." In contrast, a very small number of students felt this statement was exaggerated and "sounds like a MasterCard commercial."</p>		
<i>Find work, find your passion, find balance. Find yourself in a nonprofit career.</i>	9	76
<p>This statement received higher ratings than any other. Many participants felt that "it appeals to exactly what people are looking for in a job" and that it conveyed the image of a rewarding career: "It sounds like I can find the right job to match my ideals and values... not another boring desk job." This statement also mentioned balance, which was an important factor to many: "[This statement] gets at the idea of balance, which is key."</p>		
<i>Did you know that there are 69,000 organizations and 1.2 million paid employees in the nonprofit sector across Canada? Where do you fit in?</i>	5	66
<p>This statement had a particular appeal to the participants who had cited salary and benefits as key job qualities. They felt that this statement was both "informative" and "specific" and that it reminded the reader that there are career opportunities within the nonprofit sector: "I like it because it reminds people that you can have a paying career in the nonprofit sector." A few students, however, felt that this statement was too long: "I lose interest half way through."</p>		
<i>Accounting, marketing, IT, research, communications: more than you expected [OR where do you belong] in the nonprofit sector.</i>	4	53
<p>This statement was perhaps the most polarizing on the list. It had a particular appeal to participants who were enrolled in "business-oriented" programs (such as commerce, business, law, marketing, etc.). These students felt this statement emphasized that the nonprofit sector offered a range of employment opportunities and that there were, in fact, a high demand for professional services: "[This statement] eliminates some of the misconceptions about the type of work you do in a nonprofit position, like serving soup to homeless people or something." Students enrolled in the arts and social sciences, however, did not appear particularly fond of this statement and described it as "vague" and "incoherent."</p>		

<i>Do what you love. Do work that matters. Your path starts here.</i>	3	69
<p>This statement was generally well-received by participants: “Resonates most with me, but then I’m the crazy musician who will do what I love whether I get paid or not.” A very small number of participants felt that this statement “persuasively uses guilt” and implies that careers in the private sector “don’t matter.” This sentiment, however, did not appear to be shared by the rest of the group.</p>		
<i>Learn, innovate and gain experience fast – Nonprofit careers keep up with you!</i>	3	56
<p>While this statement was not seen as particularly motivating, it addresses the issue of experience, which is a major concern for many graduating students. One participant suggested that it “would be good to put on campus in the career centre.”</p>		
<i>Flexibility, challenge and the opportunity to learn – think about a career in the non-profit sector.</i>	2	68
<p>While this statement was relatively unpopular, some participants were keen on the idea of a constantly changing work environment: “Love it! But I am a bit biased. I want an ever-changing career – not just some stagnant work hole.” Those who did not like this statement described it as “vague” and felt that it “sounds like any other job opportunity.”</p>		
<i>Never boring, always engaging – a career in the nonprofit sector.</i>	1	56
<p>Participants generally found this statement to be vague and felt that it did little to captivate the reader: “This statement is boring.”</p>		
<i>Every day is different when you are making a difference</i>	1	55
<p>While most participants did not rate this statement very high (some described it as “too ambiguous”), a few participants found that it appealed to their need for excitement: “It appeals to the fact that I don’t like monotonous jobs; I like excitement, change.”</p>		
<i>Finally, a job you’ll want to talk about at parties!</i>	1	33
<p>This statement was the least popular. Many participants felt that this statement didn’t related to concerns associated with searching for a job and that it did little to address their primary concerns with regards to a career in the nonprofit sector: “You’re not exactly looking for a job so that you can talk about it at parties.” Despite low ratings, some participants did appreciate the humour and felt that this statement was “not as cliché” as some of the other statements.</p>		

HR Council  
for the Nonprofit Sector