11th Annual Nonprofit Public Policy Symposium

Featured Papers


Despite the distinctive features of the nonprofit sector, its workforce faces the same, longstanding challenges to equity in jobs and wages as exists in other sectors. Here, we identify not only the current barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and equitable human resource and workforce practices, but also the dynamic social processes that continually reproduce inequities over years and decades. We base this analysis and the identification of promising remedies on a framework proceeding from our transdisciplinary synthesis of research in management, psychology, social psychology, sociology, urban studies, and economics, a valuable body of research that has been insufficiently combined and applied to practice. Nonprofit organizations’ distinctive features, including shared mission, being values-driven, resource-scarce, and emphasizing member collaboration, favor these remedies.

Precarious Professionals: The Impact of Neoliberalism on the Workforce of the Nonprofit Human Services Sector – Cheryl Hyde, Temple University

This commentary will delineate the impact of neoliberal policies and regulations on the nonprofit human service professional workforce. It will be grounded in existing scholarship on sector developments, such as heightened privatization and managerialism, and will build on current research by the author in which 60 human service administrators, permanent direct service staff, and contingent direct service staff were interviewed regarding working conditions, addressing client needs, career trajectory, organizational climate, and other aspects of human service agency life. Particular attention will be paid to the rising precarity among professional labor, which signifies a shift in whom is affected by precarious work arrangements and settings. The commentary will conclude with recommendations for actions that could mitigate neoliberalism’s impact including worker organizing, agency-level policy changes, needed responses by professional associations, and legislative advocacy supporting the human service sector.

The Myth of Agency and Accompaniment as Policy – Carrie Oelberger, University of Minnesota

Many nonprofit organizations aim to serve people who are minoritized or marginalized along one or several dimensions. The “myth of agency” is the cultural idea that an individual can overcome undesirable conditions through strategic individual behaviors. Both formal and informal professional training prepare staff members in nonprofit organizations to adopt this myth. For example, social workers are trained to believe that they can help
clients to ameliorate their difficulties through hard work and perseverance. Likewise, medical doctors are expected to evade death when, in fact, their agency is circumscribed in myriad ways. This paper explains how the myth of agency—and widespread beliefs about power held by nonprofit frontline staff—become damaging for themselves and their clients. Furthermore, I outline how we need to overhaul human resource development for nonprofit staff to prepare a more effective and sustainable workforce.

**What Millennials Want from Their Nonprofit Workplaces** – Samantha Plotner, PhD Student, University of Illinois Chicago & Associate Director, Managed Organizations, Arabella Advisors

This paper focuses on how nonprofits can recruit and retain Millennials, the generation born between 1981 and 1996 by examining what they want in a nonprofit workplace. Millennials are the largest generation in the American workforce, so their workplace needs are critical for employers to understand. As this paper will explore, Millennials are advocating for the types of changes that benefit all workers, regardless of generation, such as living wages, comprehensive and affordable health coverage, schedule or location flexibility, and better management practices.

**The Recent College Graduate to Non-Profits Pipeline: Opportunities and Challenges** – Michael Ringenbach, Vice President of Development, Whitaker Center for Science and the Arts & PhD Student, Pennsylvania State University

Studies have shown that recent college graduates, the younger Generation Z, are more intensely concerned with global challenges. A more socially conscious Gen Z would suggest that nonprofit organizations, which serve as a vital means of delivering health and impact services in the United States, might be attractive for recent college and university graduates. However, the nonprofit sector is mired by challenges that impact the experience and sustainability of younger employees. This includes low pay, employee burnout, and lack of promotion opportunities. This practitioner commentary will highlight the trends that impact the young employees of the nonprofit workforce, discuss policy solutions for making the nonprofit workforce more attractive for young people, and offer practitioner tips for individuals who manage nonprofit organizations to retain and build top talent.

**“Beyond Psychic Income”: An Exploration of Public Policy Interventions to Address Work-Life Balance, Burnout, and Precarity in Contemporary Nonprofit Work** – Robbie Robichau, Texas A&M University, Billie Sandberg, Portland State University & Andrew Russo, PhD Student, Portland State University

Nonprofit scholars and practitioners alike adhere to a long-held assumption that nonprofit work is, and will remain, inherently meaningful work. The long-term marketization of the nonprofit sector coupled with the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic has undercut this narrative. Our research on meaningful nonprofit work indicates that while many nonprofit workers do find their work meaningful, pay, flexibility, and work/life balance are increasingly important to them. This suggests that nonprofit leaders can no longer presume that workers motivated by prosocial values will seek out and stay with nonprofit work, satisfied with the “psychic income” that comes from doing good work. Nonprofits must be managed and led differently such that they center workers’ contemporary needs and desires. Organizational and public policy initiatives around pay equity and flexible work can support such a transition for the nonprofit sector.