

# Research Trends in Nonprofit Graduate Studies: A Growing Interdisciplinary Field

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## Abstract

This study examines the growth of the academic study of the formal nonprofit sector by focusing on dissertations and theses written between 1986 through 2010. Using a keyword search, we find and examine 3,790 abstracts available in the *ProQuest Dissertation and Theses* database. There has been a growing number of theses and dissertations since 1986; the majority (80.2%) were completed at schools in the United States. Thematic analysis found five main themes: (a) Resources (human and financial); (b) Organizational effectiveness and performance; (c) Organization development (context, processes, and culture); (d) Intra-organizational context (leadership, structure, etc.); and (e) Interaction and collaboration (with other organizations, government, etc.). Findings demonstrate an emerging interdisciplinary field in the study of the formal nonprofit sector. Trends across the 25-year time span relating to country of origin, theme, and subject are explored and discussed.

## Keywords

literature review, theses, dissertations, nonprofits, voluntary, civil society, organizations

## Introduction

This study examines the evolution of the nonprofit studies field by focusing on dissertations and theses since 1986. Theses were included as they primarily consist of entry-level research that reflects a general interest among students in graduate programs around a particular subject area. Dissertations, whose criterion is to

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make “original contribution to knowledge,” provide a unique data set that offers a clear indication of the state of knowledge in the field, where a discipline is evolving, and reflecting the academic and intellectual culture (Isaac, Quinlan, & Walker, 1992, p. 242). Unlike journal articles, each individual only writes one dissertation, thus the data are not skewed in the direction of subfields in which prolific authors publish high rates of articles, and which may result in the overrepresentation of some subfields over others (Ni & Sugimoto, 2012).

This study examines the evolution of the field within graduate-level education, demarcates the trends, and documents the areas of nonprofit studies that dominate in universities. This is an important consideration going forward as educators wrestle with how to create a well-rounded field that explores the spectrum of nuances and facets of nonprofit organizations and the sector more generally. Furthermore, as nonprofit organizations and the sector have become more formalized (and continue to do so), they have emerged as a dominant institutional organizational form throughout the world. This organizational form requires understanding and thus scholarly attention, and a starting point for this is graduate-level education. To determine the extent to which graduate-level education has been able to respond to the need for further investigation into nonprofit organizations, we ask the following research questions: To what extent have doctoral dissertations and master’s theses between 1986 and 2010 been responsive to the need for more research in the field of nonprofit studies? Second, and of these dissertations and theses, to what extent is their focus of inquiry inclusive of multi-country contexts and perspectives? Third, what is the range of subject disciplines and thematic categories?

## Literature Review

The interdisciplinary study of nonprofit organizations began receiving popular attention within the academy in the late 1970s to the late 1980s. This earlier scholarly focus was influenced by what was happening in the public domain. In 1973, the U.S. government set up a “Commission on Private Philanthropy and Public Needs” (also called the Filer Commission) to study philanthropy and the role of the private sector in American society, and then to recommend measures to increase voluntary giving. In 2 years, more than 86 research projects were commissioned on philanthropy and the role of the nonprofit sector in the United States. These studies raised the national consciousness of the nonprofit sector and gave scholars in academe access to data and research generated by the commission (Filer, 1975).

Indeed, 1975 has been referred to as the watershed year when the commission published its influential report *Giving in America: Toward a Stronger Voluntary Sector* (Atkinson, 1989). Later in 1977, the commission published its research reports, followed by the results of two commissioned National Surveys of Philanthropic Activity. Together these findings provided, for the first time, a baseline knowledge of the scope and operations of the formal nonprofit sector (Powell, 1987). Not surprisingly, academic research flourished, as seen by the formation of scholarly journals and associations devoted to the study of nonprofits emerging in the 1970s (Langton, 1981).

It was expected that there would be an increasing focus on nonprofit organizations due to these key shifts within the academy in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These include the establishment of scholarly associations like ARNOVA ([www.arnova.org](http://www.arnova.org)) in 1971 and the first interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal, the *Journal of Voluntary Action Research*—now known as *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (NVSQ). However, there has been concomitant growth of nonprofit organizations, grounding nonprofit research in the real world context. According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (2013), there are now more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations in the United States, which account for approximately 9% of all wages and salaries paid in the country, and represent approximately 5.5% of the total United States GDP. But these organizations do not just have economic implications for a country; they also have political, social, and cultural ramifications. For example, volunteer involvement with nonprofit organizations enhances citizen engagement and participation in society. Volunteering is now a ubiquitous phenomenon, with more than 25% of the U.S. population reporting that they volunteered in organizations in 2012 (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2013).

Thus, economists, political scientists, historians, social workers, and sociologists have been actively involved in questioning and researching “the why, the what, and the how” of this changing institutional landscape in the United States. This inquiry has begun an interdisciplinary dialogue on the organizations and related issues within the formal nonprofit sector. We therefore hypothesize that the scope of dissertations and theses written will come from a variety of disciplines, indicating a greater interdisciplinary interest in nonprofit organizations.

Moreover, the growth of nonprofit organizations has been not only confined to the United States. In fact, nonprofit organizations are of equal importance in many other countries throughout the world. For instance, in Canada, there are approximately 165,000 nonprofit organizations, which is approximately 1 organization per 210 people. The nonprofit sector in Canada provides employment to 11.1% of the actively employed population and represents approximately 7.1% of the country's GDP (Imagine Canada, 2013). Likewise, in India, according to one government report, there are an estimated 3.3 million nonprofit organizations (Government of India, 2009), and based on current population estimates, this represents 1 organization for every 400 people in the country. And in emerging nonprofit markets, the significance of these types of organizations continues to grow. For example, in the Republic of South Africa—where a legal framework of nonprofit, charitable organizations did not exist until 1997—there was a 14% increase in the number of nonprofit organizations in that country in the fiscal year 2010 to 2011 (Department of Social Development, Republic of South Africa, 2011). Likewise in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia, and many other developing and developed countries, there is a burgeoning growth in the nonprofit sector, and in many cases governments are turning to nonprofit organizations to partner with them in the provision of many collective goods and services (i.e., those goods and services that aim to benefit the general populace; Salamon et al., 1999). As a result, we hypothesize that dissertations and theses about nonprofit organizations will increasingly focus (from the mid 1980s through to the present) on national contexts outside the United States.

## Method

In 2011/2012, the authors conducted a database search of *ProQuest Dissertation and Theses* (ProQuest, 2012) with the aid of the ProQuest search tool (<http://search.proquest.com>). This database was selected for two reasons. The first is because the database carries the document type that was of interest in this study (i.e., master's degree-level theses and doctoral-level dissertations). Second, this database is the most extensive international database containing records of dissertations and theses throughout the world. For instance, the database has records of more than 3 million dissertations and theses completed at more than 700 academic institutions (ProQuest, 2012).

The search terms *volunt\**, *nonprofit*, *non-profit*, *civil society*, *third sector*, *NGO*, and *nongovernmental* were used as keywords to search the abstracts of the database and locate dissertations and theses about nonprofit organizations and the formal nonprofit sector more generally. These search terms were chosen because they represent the general terms used to refer to this categorization of organization type in the interdisciplinary and international literature related to formal nonprofit organizations. An asterisk was included in the search term *volunt\** to identify all abstracts that had a term containing the root text *volunt* to identify theses and dissertations about, volunteering, volunteers, or the voluntary sector. There were no restrictions placed on document type (i.e., both dissertations and theses were included) or language. For the most part, the abstracts in the document are reported in English, often regardless of the language in which the dissertation was written.

A total of 33,822 dissertations and theses emerged from this search. The abstracts for the dissertations and theses were carefully reviewed to remove those that did not meet the study's inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria for the study required that the focus of the dissertation or thesis be related to the study of nonprofit organizations and the nonprofit sector. However, as a result of the search terms utilized, the primary emphasis within the abstracts meeting the inclusion criteria was on formal nonprofit organizations and citizen engagement (through volunteering and donating) with this dominant nonprofit institutional form. Not included in the scope of the current research are the important topics of the informal aspects of civil society and the voluntary sector—such as social movements, informal associations, or acts of reciprocity; clearly an endeavor for future research.

A trained research assistant aided the research team in eliminating citations that did not meet the inclusion criteria. Examples of citations that were not included were those that had the search terms within them but in a different context. For instance, searching the term *civil society* included abstracts that had both words in them but in different contexts of what is understood to be “civil society.” Also, many abstracts, for example in the fields of medicine or psychology, often stated that participants were recruited on a “voluntary” basis or were “volunteers” to the study. However, these abstracts did not have anything to do with volunteering per se, the voluntary sector, or nonprofit organizations. After this process of elimination, 3,790 remained and were included in this analysis.

Content analysis was utilized to examine patterns and themes within the 3,790 abstracts. The first stage involved a single coder who read each abstract to identify

**Table 1.** Emergent Themes and General Analytical Categories.

Human/financial resources	Effectiveness/performance	Organization development	Intra-organization context	Inter-organization context
Resource dependence	Organization effectiveness	Creating organizations	Board governance Management	Inter-organization relationships
Philanthropy/donating	Org. efficiency	Role of organizations	Finance	Organization networks
Market response	Accountability	Responses to external environment	Marketing	Collaboration
Volunteer development	Performance	Legal context	Contracting	Government relationships
Volunteer motivation	Quality	Policy context	Program development	Civil society function/role
Volunteer perceptions		Organization behavior	Program implementation	Social justice function/role
Recruitment			Decision making	
Staff development			Organization culture	
Personnel behavior			Leadership	
Volunteer behavior				

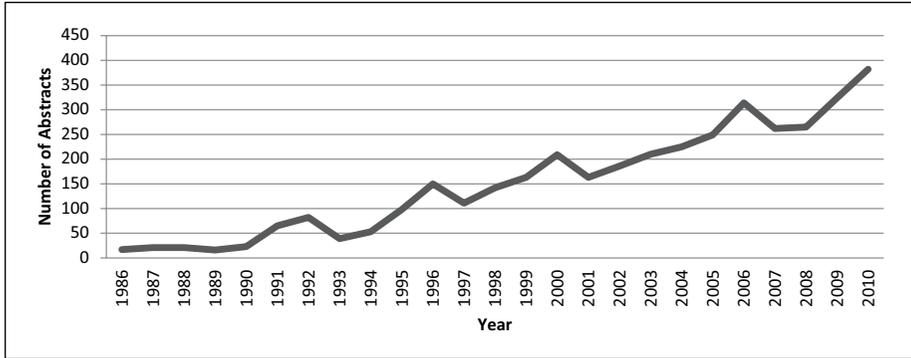
major themes in dissertations and theses until no new themes emerged and there was a saturation of findings. A list was compiled of the emergent themes in relation to the document's general focus on nonprofit studies. Some emergent themes included organizational culture, marketing, organizational networks, volunteer perceptions, or organizational performance. In total, there were 39 emergent themes. Saturation of findings was achieved after coding approximately 110 abstracts. With the resulting 39 emergent themes, the coder then downloaded each full-text publication of the first 110 abstracts to confirm congruence between the coded themes of the abstract with the full-text publication. This was done to enhance the reliability of the coding process.

For the second stage, the primary coder reviewed the 39 themes with another member of the research team to develop concise analytical categories. Five analytical categories emerged. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the emergent themes that defined each analytical category.

These more general analytical categories were refined until all instances of contradictions, similarities, and differences within these first 110 abstracts were explained, thus increasing the dependability and consistency of the findings.

At the third stage, the coder re-read the initial 110 abstracts and coded them into one of the five categories while cross-checking them with the other abstracts assigned to the category to do an internal reliability check. Both authors worked on this stage of the research in instances of contradiction to also enhance the dependability and consistency of the findings.

Following this, the fourth stage involved the coder reading each of the remaining 3,680 abstracts and assigning each to one of the five analytical categories. Members of the research team discussed all discrepancies that emerged throughout this process to adequately assign abstracts to a particular general analytic category. This was particularly important in instances where the central focus of the document could have been



**Figure 1.** Number of dissertations and theses on nonprofit organizations and voluntary action produced between 1986 and 2010.

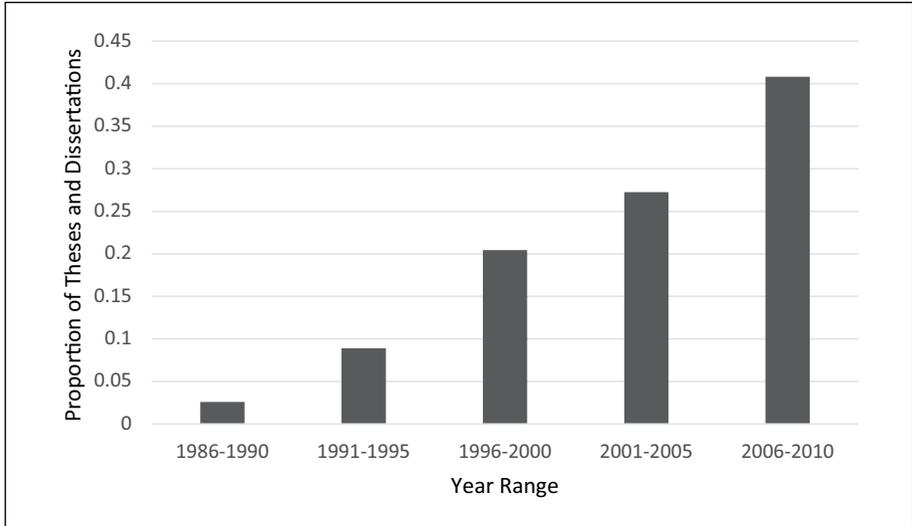
assigned to more than one analytical category. In those instances, the full abstract was carefully reviewed, and the primary focus of the thesis or dissertation determined which analytic category it fit within. This analytic process yielded five categories that were fairly encompassing and robust. They are as follows:

1. Human and financial resources of nonprofit organizations,
2. The effectiveness and/or performance of nonprofit organizations,
3. Organizational development—including the processes of development,
4. Internal organizational environment of the nonprofit organization,
5. The relationship between nonprofit organizations and their external environment.

## Findings

### *Number of Publications*

During the 25-year period under study, (1986-2010), there has been a steady increase in the number of dissertations and theses published that focus on nonprofit organizations and the formal nonprofit sector (see Figure 1). Data were collected beginning in 1984 to act as a baseline for the period under study (i.e., 1986 through 2010). In 1984, there were 18 dissertations and theses that met the inclusion criteria of the study, and 25 in 1985. Of the 1,757,598 theses and dissertations completed during this time frame in the database, we found 3,790 theses and dissertations focused on nonprofit organizations. In comparison with the total number of theses and dissertations completed during this time period, it is apparent that the increase highlighted in Figure 1 is not simply a consequence of an increasing number of all theses and dissertations being completed. For instance, the proportion of this total was less than 0.1% in 1986;



**Figure 2.** Proportion of theses and dissertations relating to nonprofit organizations and voluntary action of the total number of dissertations and theses produced in these topic areas in each 5-year interval from 1986 to 2010.

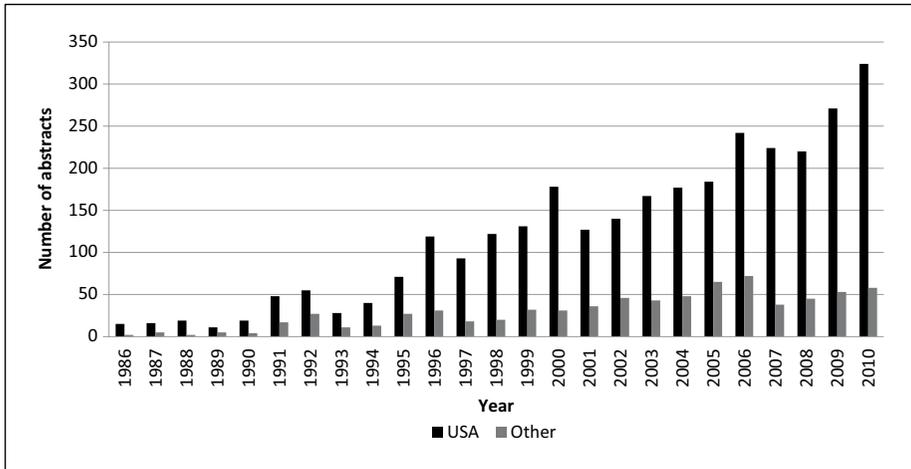
however, by 2010 the proportion of the total number of theses and dissertations in this database about nonprofit organizations increased to 0.5%; a fivefold increase.

Figure 2 shows that of the 3,790 dissertations and theses published between 1986 and 2010 that focus on nonprofit organizations, 2.6% were published between 1986 and 1990, 8.9% between 1991 and 1995, 20.4% between 1996 and 2000, 27.2% between 2001 and 2005, and 40.8% between 2006 and 2010. In addition, there were 98 theses and dissertations completed between 1986 and 1990; 337 between 1991 and 1995; 775 between 1996 and 2000; 1,033 between 2001 and 2005; and 1,547 between 2006 and 2010.

In total, there was nearly a 1500% increase in the number of theses and dissertations completed between the initial and final periods of study. These figures undoubtedly show an increasing interest in graduate schools on aspects of the nonprofit sector, with a trend line indicating further growth.

### *Country of Graduate School*

Figure 3 presents data on the number of theses and dissertations completed in the United States and elsewhere in the world. The figure shows that there has been increasing numbers of theses and dissertations completed over the 25-year period of study. We note that the growth in the United States is just over 1200% in the 25-year period, significantly greater than outside of the United States, where the growth is about 200%, albeit a nontrivial amount. The United States has certainly been the epicenter of



**Figure 3.** Number of dissertations and theses on nonprofit organizations and voluntary action produced in United States compared with elsewhere, 1986-2010.

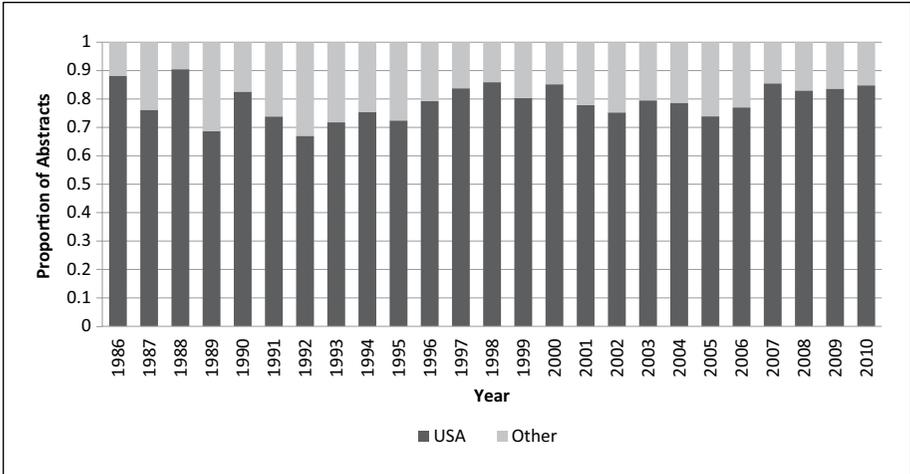
an increasing emphasis on the study of nonprofit organizations in graduate-level research. This is not surprising, as the nonprofit sector looms large and is flourishing in the United States (Roeger, Blackwood, & Pettijohn, 2012), and the Filer commission provided a catalyst for the research. Furthermore, there has been an increase in the number of graduate and undergraduate nonprofit programs in the United States (Dolch, Ernst, McClusky, Mirabella, & Sadow, 2007; Mirabella & McDonald, 2012; Mirabella & Young, 2012).

This point is further elaborated in Figure 4, which presents the proportion of theses and dissertations completed in each year beginning in 1986 through 2010. The proportion of dissertations and theses completed in non-U.S. universities ranges from approximately 9.5% in 1988 to 32.5% in 1992. Based on 5-year averages, this proportion ranges from 17.1% between 2006 and 2010 to 28.2% between 1991 and 1995.

Theses and dissertations completed outside the United States were predominantly completed at universities in Canada (which also demonstrates the strong North American focus of the database). However, it is not clear whether the context of the research in the dissertation or thesis was the same as the country where the student's university was located. In other words, it is likely that the subject matter is related to nonprofits outside North America, but that the research that was undertaken was completed in the United States.

### Subject Area

Within the citation record of the theses and dissertations is an indication of the discipline in which the work was grounded. In some cases, multiple disciplines are listed for a particular publication. Nearly always, we found that the first subject discipline listed in the subjects line of the citation generally represented the primary discipline in



**Figure 4.** Proportion of dissertations and theses on nonprofit organizations and voluntary action produced in USA compared with elsewhere, 1986-2010.

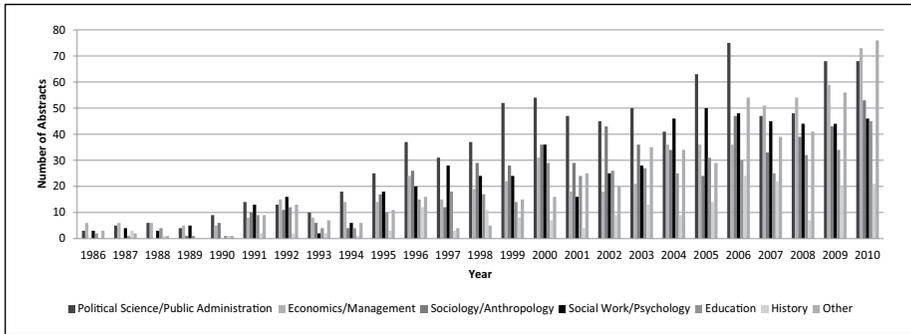
which the research was grounded. However, it is important to note that in many cases, the researchers were writing from an interdisciplinary perspective. Seven categories were created to represent the disciplinary focus of the research. These included (a) political science, international relations, public policy, and public administration; (b) economics, finance, and management; (c) sociology and anthropology; (d) social work, social psychology, and psychology; (e) education; (f) history; and (g) other. The “other” category included disciplines such as law, urban studies, nursing, and religious studies, and cases in which no clear discipline was listed or could be determined in the subject line of the citation or by reading the abstract.

Figure 5 presents data on the number of theses and dissertations in each subject category for each of the years of study. Dominating throughout the years 1986 through 2010 is the discipline of political science and its subsidiary subject areas. Nevertheless, the disciplines of economics/management, sociology/anthropology, and social work/psychology also appear in large proportions.

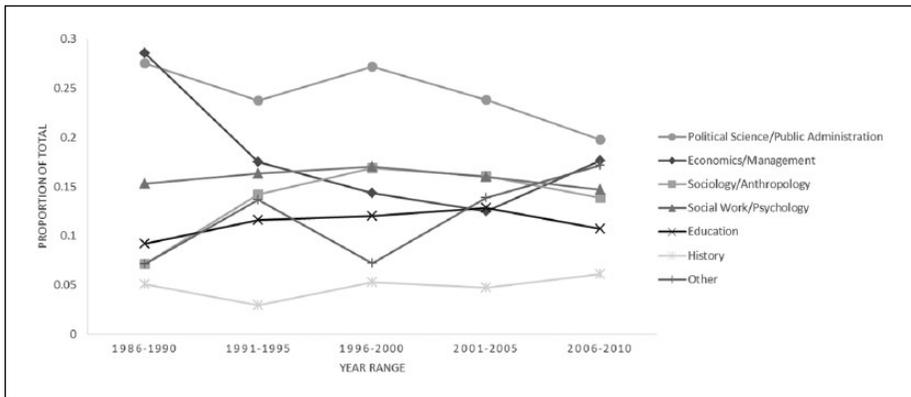
Figure 6 provides some evidence of the increasing interdisciplinary nature of theses and dissertations on the subject of nonprofit organizations. The figure illustrates trends in 5-year periods between 1986 through 2010; and what is evident is that there is increasing convergence in proportions of theses and dissertations among the seven subject categories in the last 10 years of the study period.

### *Thematic Focus*

The thematic content of the 3,790 abstracts included in this analysis focused on five major analytical categories. The first relates to the human and financial resources as inputs to nonprofits. The second focused on the level and effectiveness of the performance of nonprofits in their communities. The third inquired how and why nonprofit



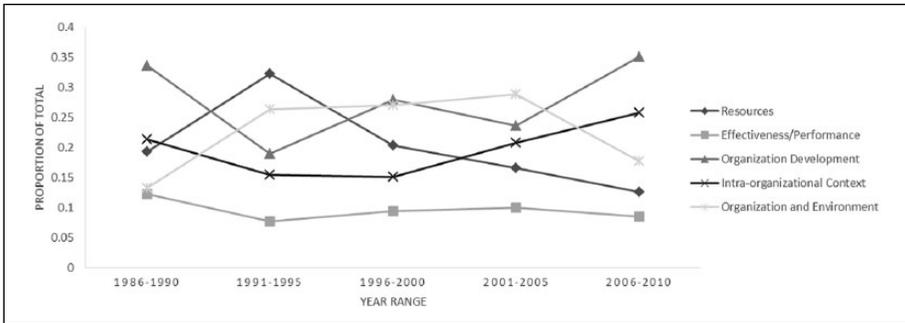
**Figure 5.** Number of dissertations and theses on nonprofit organizations and voluntary action by subject, 1986-2010.



**Figure 6.** Proportion of dissertations and theses on nonprofit organizations and voluntary action by subject in 5-year intervals between 1986 and 2010.

organizations developed, and focused on context, processes, and culture of that development. The fourth analytical category examined the intra-organizational context (with regard to leadership, organizational culture, management structure, etc.). The final analytical category included research on the intersection between nonprofit organizations and their environment (including collaboration, government relationships, etc.). Each analytical category is discussed in further detail below.

Although these analytical categories are presented here as distinct, they were not always mutually exclusive. For example, research conducted about the context of organization development could also have been about the intra-organizational context—and leadership style within the organization in particular. These analytical categories are presented here only as a general overview of the *primary* focus of the thesis



**Figure 7.** Proportion of dissertations and theses on nonprofit organizations and voluntary action by analytic category in 5-year intervals between 1986 and 2010.

or dissertation. Further research is needed to investigate the interrelationship and overlap of these 39 multiple themes within and across coded analytical categories with a smaller random sample of abstracts.

Figure 7 provides the trends in analytical categories within the 5-year intervals between 1986 through 2010. There appears to be trends for three of the analytical categories. First, interest in the resource needs of organizations has been on a steady decline since the mid-1990s. Second, research focusing on the effectiveness and performance of nonprofit organizations has remained relatively consistent throughout the 25-year period beginning in 1986. Third, there has been a greater focus on research pertaining to the intra-organizational context of nonprofit organizations beginning in the early 2000s. With regard to the other two analytical categories no clear trends are evident, it appears that interest in these analytical categories has fluctuated in the past and continues to do so.

In the following sections, we describe the specific analytical categories in greater detail. Throughout these sections, dissertations and theses from 2010 are cited to exemplify the particular themes that we included in each analytical category.

**Resources.** The financial and human resource needs of organizations are important areas of study. Within this analytical category, the majority of theses and dissertations have focused on the human resource needs of nonprofit organizations, both paid and unpaid labor. Several sub-themes pertaining to this analytical category emerged within the data, such as the role of volunteers within organizations. These studies have focused on volunteer development, perceptions, behavior, motivations, and roles within nonprofits (e.g., Chen, 2010; Dunick, 2010; Kuskova, 2010; Prigge, 2010). Other (and to a lesser extent) research has focused on paid labor: The development of staff along with their behaviors and satisfaction with respect to their organizations (e.g., Bradley, 2010; Summers, 2010).

Less attention over the 25-year study period has been paid to issues related to the financial resources of nonprofits. The general area of focus in this category are topics of fund-raising, donations, and donors (e.g., Jacques, 2010).

*Effectiveness and performance.* Within this analytical category, studies have investigated program effectiveness and the conditions in which nonprofits were effective. Common themes arising pertain to efficiencies within organization programs and operations, organizational performance, and overall quality of services offered by the organization (e.g., Rhoades, 2010). Similarly, some studies focused on the implications for organizations in being effective or ineffective (e.g., Shiva, 2010), whereas others assessed existing programs in nonprofits (e.g., Buehlmann, 2010).

*Organization development.* Within this analytical category, theses and dissertations focused on the processes, culture, and context in which nonprofit organizations emerged and developed. Themes encompassed different types of networks that develop in emergent voluntary action in organizations (e.g., Antico-Majkowski, 2010; Harvey, 2010). Others focused on the emerging need within local communities and the subsequent responses resulting in nonprofits or informal voluntary arrangements (e.g., Domingo, 2010). Many studies used case studies of specific organizations and the context (such as the political, legal, or economic conditions) in which these nonprofits emerged (e.g., Celik Wiltse, 2010; Phelps, 2010).

Interestingly, it is in this category we see a larger number of non-North American national contexts (e.g., Brass, 2010; Dini, 2010; Ryerson, 2010), as compared with other categories where the dominant focus was on the formal nonprofit sector in North America. For instance, many studies were interested in theorizing about the emergent roles of nonprofit organizations within post-Soviet nations or the emergence of the nonprofit sector within China (e.g., Dawuni, 2010).

*Intra-organizational context.* Understanding the internal dynamics within nonprofit organizations has become an important area of scholarship. Within this analytical category, theses and dissertations focused on management, leadership, and boards. Emphasis was also found on issues related to program development and interpersonal dynamics, such as organizational hierarchy and supervision. For example, some studies were particularly interested in the implications of leadership styles and the day-to-day management of organizations (Courtright, 2010), or just the qualities that define a particular leadership style (e.g., Wilson, 2010), or how effective a particular leadership style is in meeting management-related goals (e.g., Hudman, 2010). Others focused on organizational-level processes, such as strategic planning (e.g., Masilamony, 2010) and fiscal responsibility (e.g., Ramsundarsingh, 2010). Organizational culture was the focus of many other dissertations and theses (e.g., Frison, 2010), which included issues of cultural competency (e.g., Clark, 2010) and other aspects of interaction with service users and members (e.g., Zaidalkilani, 2010).

*Organization and the environment.* The final analytical category is the dynamic relationship between the nonprofit organization and its external environment. Within this category, theses and dissertations focused on organizational networks and issues related to the collaboration between nonprofits and their relationship with their funders (e.g., Irshab, 2010; Valenzuela, 2010). Specifically, many focused on the relationship between nonprofit organizations and the government, a major funder in many cases

(e.g., Vyas, 2010). Theses and dissertations in this analytical category also described changing environmental conditions—such as emerging social, cultural, economic, or technological changes—and their subsequent implications for nonprofits in defining or achieving their goals or mission mandates (e.g., Chrastil, 2010; McDonald, 2010).

Although most research focuses on how the environment affects organizations, some of the research in this category also described how the nonprofit organization affected the environment—whether it was through a study on the functional role of nonprofit organizations in promoting participation (e.g., Majic, 2010), a study on how organizational practices have influenced public policy or local economic conditions (Miller-Stevens, 2010), or a study of the emerging role of nonprofit organizations in achieving social justice for a segment of the population (e.g., Niedzwiecki, 2010).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this analysis clearly show the significant growth and maturity in the field of nonprofit studies. The number of theses and dissertations in this area has increased throughout the 25-year study period. More significantly, we find this increase even when we look at the proportion of all dissertations and theses written during this time period. This is an important finding because it demonstrates the increasing emphasis placed on graduate-level research in nonprofit studies across all disciplines in which we categorized the study findings, in particular political science, sociology, history, education, and economics.

However, we should also ask: to what extent are these subject areas actually covered in coursework and training within graduate-level programs, or is the study of nonprofits by these graduate students a case to which scholars apply their disciplinary tools? Mirabella (2007) provided a review of coursework that is generally being offered in graduate-level nonprofit education programs. In many regards, the emphasis from graduate students found within their theses and dissertations during the 25-year study period of this analysis fits within the framework of differing course types in these nonprofit studies programs outlined by Mirabella (2007). For instance, there is growing emphasis on ideas about the intra-organizational context of the nonprofits—focusing on topics such as leadership, management, and organizational culture. However, we do find in our analysis that there is also an emerging emphasis on aspects of organizational development and a focus on the interrelationship between an organization and its external environment. These two topic areas do not seem to be covered as fully in graduate programs on nonprofit management and leadership following the characterization and findings from the review conducted by Mirabella (2007).

Although there is increased interest among graduate students on nonprofits, further research could explore the reasons why students choose to focus on this particular area. It is likely that there are more opportunities to find employment in academe as graduate programs on nonprofit management and leadership flourish and grow (Mirabella, 2007). It is also likely that students who graduate and find jobs in academe will continue their research in this area, and train their own PhD and post-doctoral students in similar areas of study.

Not all areas of nonprofits are researched equally, and that is not surprising. There are trends that appear and these respond to individual interests and opportunities and constraints facing them as they choose their topic of research. For example, research questions relating to the resource needs of nonprofits and evaluation studies of nonprofit organizations are not receiving as much attention within graduate research projects when compared with the other three analytical categories. Such a trend may simply reflect the general interest among nonprofit scholars, or may be indicative of a systemic bias, and this requires further investigation.

With regard to our second research question, we found through the content analysis that the overwhelming majority of theses and dissertations were completed at academic institutions in the United States. And throughout the 25-year period studied, the proportion of theses and dissertations completed in countries outside the United States remained relatively consistent. These results are difficult to interpret. It could reflect the dominance of U.S. educational institutions in doctoral education, or because the database itself is primarily made up of academic institutions in North America. However, the thematic analysis did find that there is emphasis, within theses and dissertations completed in the United States, on varied international contexts. For instance, in the year 1986 two (or 12.5%) of the dissertations completed at U.S. graduate schools were completed about nonprofit organizations in non-U.S. national contexts. And in 2010, 24.6% of the theses and dissertation included in the analysis that were completed in U.S.-based graduate schools focused on non-U.S. contexts.

An issue that emerges in this case is whether or not the perspective or frame of reference within that graduate-level research comes from within the nation-state context of study or if it is an outsider perspective. In other words, are students coming to study in the United States from China and then returning to study the nonprofit sector in China, or are North American students turning their research focus to China? This issue draws attention to the necessity of developing a culturally competent frame of reference in the study of nonprofit organizations. For instance, when training students to work in cultural contexts distinct from their own, they must receive training to better understand the context in which they intend to practice or research (Papadopoulos, 2006). This involves processes of reflective practice and cultural awareness (Papadopoulos, 2006). A further research question that emerges is to what extent are graduate-education programs training students in these cultural competency processes? It is important to be aware of the cultural context in which the data were collected.

With regard to our third research question, we find that there appears to be convergence over time in the total proportions (and frequencies) of dissertations and theses completed across the social science disciplines, along with the discipline of history. Earlier in the time period of analysis, there were large differences in the proportions completed in each subject area. But throughout the 25-year period of study, more dissertations and theses were completed in later years, leading to more aligned proportions across disciplines. This convergence in proportions of the total number of dissertations and theses signifies that multiple disciplinary perspectives are routinely being applied to the study of the nonprofit sector.

The study also found that the thematic focus of the dissertations and theses has lately favored aspects of organizational development and the intra-organizational context. Receiving less attention are the analytical categories of resources and organizational effectiveness and performance. These findings indicate understudied areas that may be of interest to those looking for a research niche. However, these findings also have implications for educators in nonprofit studies suggesting areas that need attention to engage in inquiry and debate. For example, although there is increasing recognition of the important role nonprofit organizations play in society with many theses and dissertations focused on the internal and external contexts of these organizations, there is little emphasis on their evaluation. Notwithstanding that topics generally eschewed are likely either difficult or controversial, the furthering of the corpus of knowledge requires that future scholars engage in these issues.

Given the scope of our research questions and availability of data, there are limitations of our findings that must be noted. Although we tried to be inclusive of all dissertations and theses reporting on research about nonprofit organizations, our search terms place limitations on those we found. For instance, excluded from our analysis would be the research that referred to nonprofit organizations as community-based organizations, advocacy organizations or social service organizations, or simply organizations. Furthermore, we did not include generic search terms such as “association” and “foundation.” Therefore, abstracts about these specific nonprofit organization types may not have appeared in the analysis unless they also incorporated one of the other designated search terms.

By excluding these (and possibly other) search terms, there are abstracts that may not have appeared for analysis. However, the search terms we used did include more than 3,700 dissertations and theses, a substantial sample size. And, there is no clear indication that this sample may not be representative of dissertations and theses written on the subjects of nonprofit organizations. In addition, the time frame used for our analysis should not suggest that prior to 1986 there were no dissertations or theses being written in this area. However, given the important theoretical work and its dissemination as well as the growth of the nonprofit sector around the early 1980s, 1986 was a suitable starting point.

Although we present data here to demonstrate how the field of nonprofit studies is evolving based on trends within graduate-level research, there are mixed interpretations of what these evolutionary trends mean. For instance, one interpretation is that the field is growing based on the increasing interest by graduate students, and the evolving trends highlighted here are reflective of the emerging trend in universities to promote interdisciplinary education (Rhoten, 2004). A second interpretation might be that the findings also suggest that the field of nonprofit studies, albeit evolving, is perhaps becoming more narrowly defined. With an increasing emphasis placed on certain subject areas (such as the intra-organizational context, and management practices in particular) within graduate research, there is a narrowing of the general topic areas within the study of nonprofits. Essentially, the field of nonprofit studies is simply following a path similar to that described by Thomas Kuhn (1962) in his classic text

on scientific revolutions. As dominant theoretical ways of thinking emerge in a field, emphasis gets placed on developing greater and greater specificity.

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