

Research Article

Holding the Founding Purpose Under Growth: A Public-Data Measure of Mission-Statement Drift Amid the Expansion of U.S. Nonprofit Organizations

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Abstract

Whether organizations stray from their founding purpose as they grow is a long-standing question in organizational research, yet most empirical work infers “mission drift” from financial ratios that can move for reasons unrelated to purpose. This study measures drift directly, from organizations’ own words. Using the publicly filed mission and program descriptions in U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Form 990 returns, drift is operationalized as the semantic change between each organization’s earliest and latest stated mission across a three-to-six-year window. On an analytic panel of 22,638 longitudinally observed full-990 filers, drawn from a random sample of 25,000 organizations within a measured population of 292,351, three independent text measures agree closely with one another (rank correlations 0.85–0.99) but are uncorrelated with a financial-efficiency comparison ($p \approx 0.02$), indicating that the measure captures stated-mission change rather than relabelled efficiency. Stability is the norm: 63.9% of organizations show effectively no change in their stated mission. Among the organizations that do change, pre-specified regressions show that faster revenue growth is associated with greater drift and that older organizations drift less, both net of size, sector, and funding mix; a hypothesized effect of shifting funding composition is not supported. Observable structure explains only a small share of the variation in drift, so most of it is idiosyncratic. The contribution is a transparent, reproducible, public-data instrument for studying mission fidelity over time, together with what is, to the authors’ knowledge, one of the first large-sample maps of which organizational characteristics accompany holding versus drifting from a stated purpose.

Keywords:

mission drift; nonprofit organizations; organizational growth; mission statements; text analysis; IRS Form 990

1. Introduction

The United States is home to roughly 1.9 million registered nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, a sector that contributed more than \$1.5 trillion to the economy in 2024 and employs close to 9% of the national workforce [1]. Most of these organizations begin with an explicit statement of purpose, and many of them grow. As they add programs, open new sites, hire staff, and accept larger and more varied sources of funding, a recurring practical worry is whether the organization that emerges from expansion still does what it set out to do. Practitioners who build mission-driven organizations describe a tension between the pull of growth opportunities and the discipline required to keep a founding purpose intact. The concern motivating this

study is straightforward: some organizations appear to scale while remaining recognizably themselves, and others gradually become something their founders would not recognize.

This study is grounded in the experience of building such an organization. The first author founded and leads StrategicMinds, an international volunteer chess organization that began in 2023 as a single club in Toronto and now runs ten chapters across six countries, teaching chess to underrepresented children at no cost through year-round weekly lessons and international tournaments. Growing from one club into a six-country network while keeping the same founding mission is precisely the tension this study examines. That first-hand experience motivates the question but is not evidence for it; the analysis that follows rests entirely on public data about other organizations.

That worry is not new to scholarship. Organizational researchers have long discussed goal displacement and the erosion of founding commitments, and the idea of “mission drift” has become a standard lens for hybrid and social-purpose organizations that must reconcile a social mission with financial demands [2,3]. Much of the empirical literature, however, measures drift only indirectly. Studies frequently treat a change in financial structure, such as the share of spending that reaches programs or the balance of earned versus donated revenue, as evidence that a mission has shifted [4]. A financial ratio is a convenient proxy, but it is a weak one: an organization can hold a high program-expense ratio while quietly changing what its programs are for, and it can let that ratio fall for reasons that have nothing to do with purpose. If the question is whether organizations remain faithful to a stated purpose, the most direct evidence is the stated purpose itself, observed over time.

This study takes that direct route. Every organization filing the full IRS Form 990 must describe its mission and its program accomplishments in free text, and those filings are public. By comparing an organization’s earliest and latest filed mission statements, one can measure how far the wording of its stated purpose has moved, its mission-statement drift, and ask which organizations move and which hold still. The approach builds on a growing body of work that applies computational text analysis to nonprofit documents [5] and on established methods for comparing the meaning of two passages of text [6]. It deliberately keeps the dependent construct anchored to the words organizations use, not to their budgets.

Three questions organize the analysis. First, can mission-statement drift be measured in a way that is stable across reasonable analytic choices and distinct from financial change? Second, how common is drift among organizations that are large enough to be under genuine expansion pressure? Third, which observable characteristics, namely size, age, sector, funding composition, and the pace of revenue growth, accompany holding a stated purpose versus drifting from it? The study is explicit about what it can and cannot see. It measures the publicly stated purpose, an observable trace of an organization’s commitments; it does not observe the internal decisions, governance routines, or intentions that practitioners associate with preserving a mission. The findings are therefore reported as associations, not as causes.

The study makes two contributions. The first is a measurement instrument: a transparent, reproducible way to quantify how far an organization’s stated purpose has moved over time, computed entirely from public filings and validated both for internal consistency, across three independent constructions, and for discriminant validity against a financial comparison. The second is descriptive evidence at a scale rarely brought to this question: a map, across more than twenty thousand organizations, of how common mission-statement drift is and which observable characteristics accompany it. Neither contribution settles the question of why organizations hold or drift, and the study is careful not to claim otherwise; rather, it supplies a measure and a baseline against which the internal mechanisms that practitioners describe can later be tested. The remainder of the paper situates the work in the literature on mission drift and organizational text, describes the data and the three drift measures, reports the descriptive and confirmatory results, and discusses what the measure can and cannot establish.

2. Conceptual background and related work

The notion that organizations can drift away from their founding aims has deep roots in organizational theory, where the displacement of original goals by the imperatives of survival and growth is a classic theme. In the contemporary literature the construct is most developed for hybrid organizations, which pursue a social mission alongside commercial activity and must continually manage the tension between the two [3,7]. Microfinance provided one of the first settings in which mission drift was named and debated, as institutions balancing outreach to the poor against financial sustainability were suspected of gradually serving wealthier clients [2,8]. The same vocabulary now travels across social enterprises, charities, and nonprofits more broadly.

Empirical studies of drift have taken two main forms. One is the close comparative case study, which follows a small number of organizations through growth and documents how they negotiate competing missions [9]. Such work is rich in mechanism but limited in scope, and its conclusions are difficult to generalize. The other form is the large-sample financial study, which infers drift from movements in revenue composition or spending ratios across many organizations [4]. This approach scales, but it equates a financial signal with a change of purpose. The interpretive risk is well illustrated by the broader debate over how

nonprofit revenue structure should even be measured, where the choice of index materially changes the conclusions drawn [10]. When a financial ratio is the dependent variable, a study of “mission” is in practice a study of money.

A third route has become feasible as nonprofit text has become machine-readable at scale. Computational social-science methods are now an accepted part of the nonprofit researcher’s toolbox, including the analysis of the free-text fields in regulatory filings [5]. Organizational identity, too, has been shown to be legible in the language organizations use about themselves; studies of nonprofit rebranding find that shifts in stated identity surface in external communications [11]. At the same time, accountability scholarship reminds us that what an organization says about its purpose is bound up with the expectations of donors, regulators, and beneficiaries, so the stated mission is a meaningful object of study in its own right [12]. The diversity of how “drift” is even framed, as failure or as fulfillment, further underscores that the construct needs an explicit, transparent measure rather than an implicit financial one [13].

A further gap sits at the junction of two literatures that rarely meet. A large body of work studies how organizations scale, much of it concerned with for-profit growth and its operational demands, while a separate body studies how mission-driven organizations protect their social purpose. The question of what happens to a founding purpose during growth falls between them: scaling research seldom asks whether purpose survives, and purpose research seldom observes growth at scale. Comparative case studies of social ventures have begun to bridge the two by tracing how a small number of organizations manage the tension as they grow [9], and panel studies have shown that the financial structure of a large cross-section of nonprofits can be reconstructed from Form 990 filings [14]. What has been missing is a measure that observes the founding purpose itself across many organizations and over time. A text-based measure of mission-statement drift is designed to fill that gap: it scales to the whole filing population, it observes the stated purpose rather than a financial stand-in, and it can be related to the structural and growth characteristics that the scaling literature has long emphasized.

Measuring change in text over time carries its own methodological obligations. Comparing the meaning of two statements can be done with measures of semantic similarity that have been validated in dedicated benchmarks [6], and modern methods for representing the meaning of whole sentences make such comparisons practical across large corpora [15]. These tools are not infallible: such similarity estimates can be sensitive to the particular model, corpus, and random initialization used, so a single number can be fragile [16]. A credible text-based measure of drift must therefore be shown to be robust to these choices and to be measuring purpose rather than some incidental property of the filing. The measurement approach developed below meets both obligations: it fixes all random seeds, reports three independent operators, and tests the measure against a financial comparison, and it complements the panel tradition in nonprofit research that builds longitudinal datasets from Form 990 filings [14].

3. Materials and Methods

This study is observational and follows the reporting discipline of the STROBE guideline for observational research. It draws only on publicly available archival records about organizations, not on data about identifiable individuals, so institutional review board oversight was not required.

3.1 Data sources and sample

The study draws on two public-domain federal data sources. The primary source is the IRS Form 990 electronic filing archive, which since the 2019 processing year has released the full text of e-filed returns, including the mission description (Part III) and, as a fallback, the activity-or-mission description (Part I), together with the financial fields used here: total revenue, total assets, contributions, government grants, program-service revenue, and total expenses. The second source is the IRS Exempt Organizations Business Master File, which supplies each organization’s National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) sector code and its IRS ruling year, used to compute organizational age. Both sources are works of the U.S. government and are in the public domain.

The population of interest is U.S. nonprofits that file the full Form 990 and that can be observed longitudinally, that is, organizations with at least two full-990 filings spanning three or more tax years between 2018 and 2023. This population was measured, not estimated, at 292,351 organizations. A simple random sample of 25,000 organizations was drawn from that frame with a fixed seed, yielding 120,458 individual filings. After requiring that both the earliest and latest mission statements contain at least five tokens (to exclude empty or boilerplate fields) and that the earliest-to-latest gap be at least three years, the analytic panel comprised 22,638 organizations. The study design is an observational longitudinal panel, and the eligibility criteria were full-990 filing status, a stated mission of at least five tokens at both the earliest and latest filing, and an earliest-to-latest gap of at least three calendar years. Restricting to full-990 filers focuses the analysis on organizations large enough to face genuine expansion pressure: full-990 filing is required of organizations with gross receipts of at least \$200,000 or assets of at least \$500,000. The construction of the panel is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Construction of the analytic panel from the IRS Form 990 electronic filing archive.

Stage	Organizations / filings
Full-990 longitudinal filers, ≥ 3 -year span, 2018–2023 (population)	292,351
Random sample drawn (fixed seed)	25,000
Individual filings extracted	120,458
Analytic panel (mission ≥ 5 tokens; ≥ 3 -year gap)	22,638
Complete-case sample for regression (all covariates present)	11,447

3.2 Measuring mission-statement drift

The outcome the study measures is how much an organization's stated mission changes in wording between its earliest and latest filing. The main measure compares the meaning of the two statements with a standard, openly available text-comparison tool and records how far apart they are, so that identical wording scores zero and completely different wording approaches one (the exact tool and settings are given in the accompanying code; the general approach follows established methods for comparing sentence meaning [6,15]). Because any single automated comparison can be sensitive to its exact setup [16], two further measures are computed as checks, one based on the particular words each statement uses and one based on its main themes; all three runs automatically over the filed text with fixed settings, so the results can be reproduced exactly.

The measure is put through two checks. The first asks whether the three measures agree with one another, which they should if all are tracking the same underlying change. The second, and more important, asks whether change in the mission text is distinct from financial change: a comparison variable is built from the change in each organization's ratio of expenses to revenue, and its relationship to the text measures is examined. A measure that merely relabelled financial efficiency would track this comparison closely; a genuine measure of change in the stated purpose would not.

This financial comparison is chosen deliberately, because spending ratios are exactly what earlier studies have used as stand-ins for mission [4,10]. Showing that mission-text change is unrelated to it is therefore the central validity claim of the measure, not a side check. Reporting three text measures rather than one serves the same purpose: a pattern that holds across all three is unlikely to be an artefact of any single method.

3.3 Predictors and pre-specified hypotheses

Each organization is described by a small set of characteristics measured at its earliest filing: its size (revenue), its age, its field of activity, and the mix of its funding among donations, earned program revenue, and government grants. Two further variables capture its trajectory over the window: how fast its revenue grew, and how much its funding mix shifted toward earned and government sources. Extreme values in the financial variables were trimmed before analysis so that a few outliers could not drive the results.

Three hypotheses were fixed in advance, before any model was run: that faster revenue growth goes with more drift (H1), that a shift toward earned and government funding goes with more drift (H2), and that older organizations drift less (H3). Each hypothesis was tested on the main measure and required agreement from at least one of the two check measures before being treated as supported, and the three tests were adjusted together so that testing several at once did not inflate the chance of a false positive.

The hypotheses were tested with standard regressions that relate drift to these characteristics while holding the others constant, using errors robust to uneven spread in the data. Because most organizations show no drift at all, the regression coefficients are read as average associations rather than as a complete model of the distribution; models designed for such zero-heavy outcomes would fit the shape more exactly, but they were not needed for the associations of interest, and a separate analysis that sorts organizations into higher- and lower-drift groups (summarized later by a standard accuracy measure) points the same way. The sample of 11,447 organizations with complete information is ample for the small associations reported below. Full technical settings are recorded in the accompanying code. Throughout, the confirmatory tests fixed in advance are

kept separate from exploratory description.

4. Results

4.1 The measure: agreement and discriminant validity

The three text measures of drift agree closely with one another. Across the analytic panel the rank correlation between the semantic and vocabulary measures is 0.86, between the vocabulary and topic measures 0.99, and between the semantic and topic measures 0.85. The agreement indicates that the measured drift is not an artifact of one particular representation of text. The financial comparison tells the opposite and more important story: each text measure correlates with the change in the expense-to-revenue ratio at a rank correlation of only about 0.02. Mission-statement drift and financial-efficiency change are, in this sample, statistically unrelated. The measure captures change in what organizations say their purpose is, not change in how efficiently they spend, the property the design required. Figure 1 shows the joint pattern.

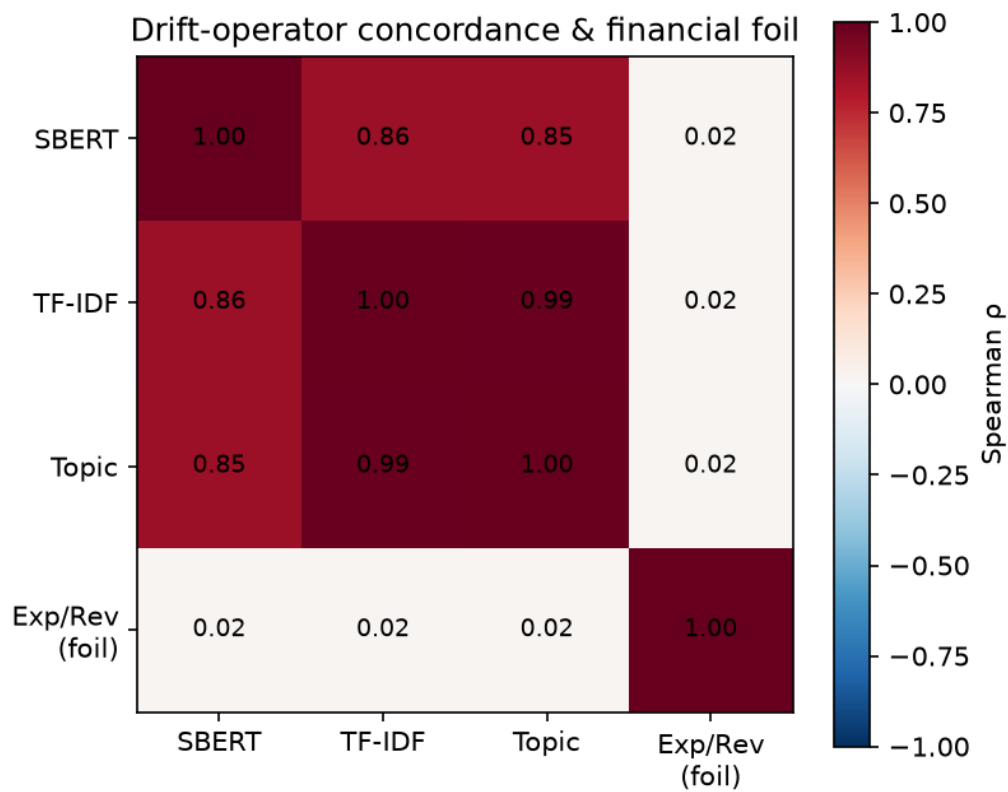


Figure 1. Rank correlations among the three text measures of mission-statement drift and a financial-efficiency comparison. The three text measures agree closely (0.85–0.99) while each is uncorrelated with the financial comparison (≈ 0.02), evidence that the measure tracks stated-mission change rather than efficiency.

The distribution of drift is heavily concentrated at zero. Across the 22,638 organizations, 63.9% show effectively no change in their stated mission between their earliest and latest filing, and the median drift on the primary measure is zero; the mean is 0.068. In other words, for organizations large enough to file the full Form 990, holding the stated purpose is the rule, and visible movement is the exception. The variation that the rest of the analysis explains lives in the roughly one-third of organizations whose stated mission did change. Figure 2 displays the distribution.

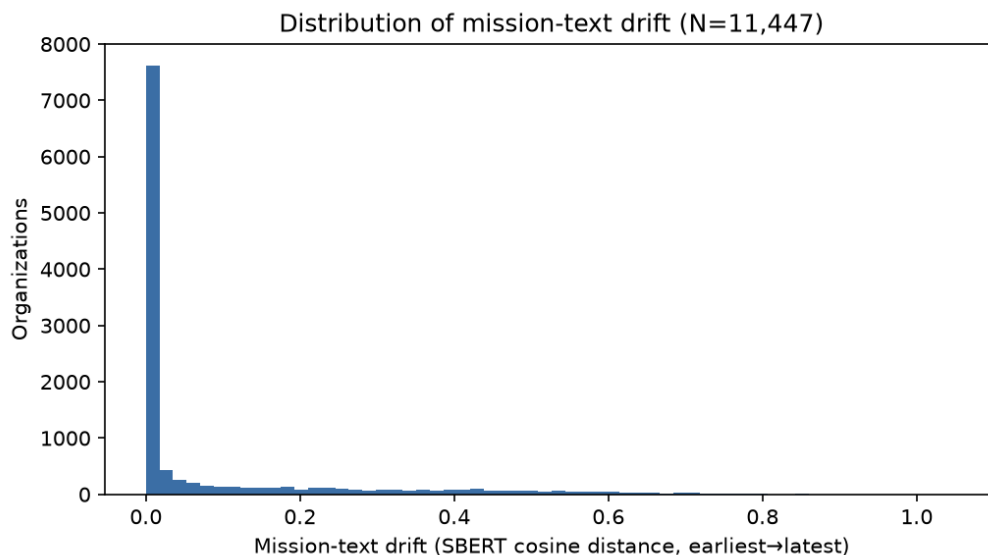


Figure 2. Distribution of mission-statement drift (primary semantic measure) across the analytic panel. The mass at zero reflects the 63.9% of organizations whose stated mission is effectively unchanged; the dispersed right tail contains the organizations that drift.

4.2 Descriptive patterns

Table 2 reports descriptive statistics for the analytic panel. The typical organization is well established, with a median age of 23 years, and the observation window spans a median of five years. The funding mix is varied: contributions and program-service revenue are each substantial on average, and reliance on government grants is concentrated in a minority of organizations. The dispersion of the drift measures, alongside their zero medians, confirms that drift is a minority phenomenon with a long right tail rather than a smoothly distributed trait.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the analytic panel (N = 22,638). Drift medians of zero reflect the concentration of organizations at no change. The funding shares and the growth variable are reported after winsorization at the 1st and 99th percentiles, as used in the models; before winsorization these ratios are unbounded, because each divides a revenue component by total revenue and a small number of organizations report a component exceeding total revenue.

Variable		Mean	Median	SD
Mission drift (semantic measure)		0.068	0.000	0.154
Mission drift (vocabulary measure)		0.123	0.000	0.260
Mission drift (topic measure)		0.046	0.000	0.111
Organization age (years)		28.1	23	21.8
Size (log total revenue)		13.2	13.1	2.30
Contributions share of revenue		0.49	0.50	0.41
Program-revenue share		0.37	0.16	0.40
Government-grants		0.28	0.12	0.34

share			
Revenue CAGR over window	0.07	0.05	0.22
Observation window (years)	4.23	5	0.96

Drift also varies by field of activity. An exploratory comparison across NTEE major groups shows higher average drift among science and technology, medical-research, and food and agriculture organizations, and lower average drift among public-safety, mutual-benefit, and recreation organizations, although the median in most groups remains at or near zero and several high-drift groups contain few organizations. The pattern is summarized in Figure 3 and is treated as descriptive rather than confirmatory.

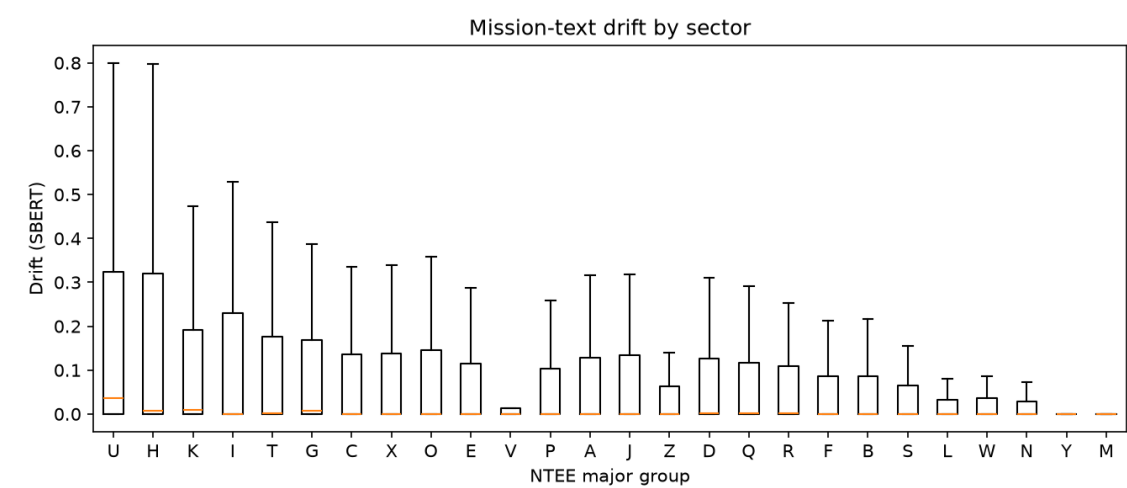


Figure 3. Mission-statement drift by NTEE major group (exploratory). Boxplots show that average drift varies across fields while the median remains near zero in most groups; group sizes vary and the smallest groups should be read with caution.

4.3 What accompanies drift: pre-specified tests

The pre-specified tests yield a clear and modest pattern. Faster revenue growth is associated with greater mission-statement drift, net of size, age, sector, and funding mix; the standardized coefficient is 0.010 and the association survives correction for multiple testing (adjusted $p < 0.001$) and holds with the same sign on the robustness measures. The first hypothesis is supported. Older organizations drift less: the standardized age coefficient is -0.007 (adjusted $p < 0.001$), also concordant across measures, supporting the third hypothesis. The second hypothesis is not supported. A shift in funding composition toward earned and government revenue is not associated with greater drift; its coefficient is small, statistically indistinguishable from zero ($p = 0.12$), and if anything carries the opposite sign to the one hypothesized. Table 3 records the three verdicts.

Table 3. Confirmatory hypotheses specified a priori, with verdicts (linear model, HC3 robust standard errors, Holm correction; standardized coefficients and 95% confidence intervals on the primary semantic measure, with sign concordance required on ≥ 1 robustness measure).

Hypothesis (specified a priori)	Std. coefficient	95% CI	Adjusted p	Verdict
H1: faster revenue growth → more drift	+0.010	[0.007, 0.014]	< 0.001	Supported
H2: shift to earned/government revenue → more drift	-0.003	[-0.007, 0.001]	0.12	Not supported
H3: older organizations → less drift	-0.007	[-0.011, -0.003]	< 0.001	Supported

The full linear model places these results among the other structural predictors. These structural terms entered the model as covariates rather than as hypotheses specified a priori, so the associations in this paragraph are exploratory and are reported as such. Larger organizations drift more (standardized coefficient 0.016), and a greater reliance on contributions is associated with more drift (0.012), while a greater reliance on government grants is associated with less drift (-0.008). The program-revenue share is not associated with drift once the other terms are present. The signs are stable across the three drift measures. The incremental contribution of the trajectory variables is real but small: adding the growth term raises the explained variance of the structural model, and the full model accounts for about 2.4% of the variation in drift. Figure 4 presents the standardized coefficients with their confidence intervals.

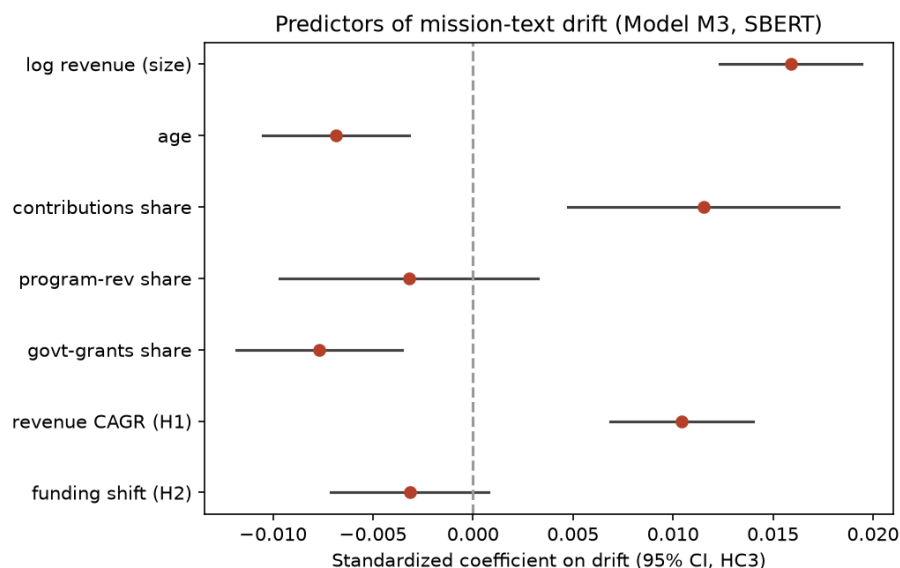


Figure 4. Standardized coefficients (with 95% confidence intervals) from the full linear model of mission-statement drift. Revenue growth and size are positively associated with drift; age and government-grant reliance are negatively associated; the funding-shift and program-revenue terms are not distinguishable from zero.

The relationship between growth and drift is not a simple straight line. Grouping organizations by their revenue-growth decile shows that drift is elevated at both extremes: organizations that contracted and organizations that grew most rapidly both show more drift than organizations growing at a steady, moderate pace, which sit at the minimum. The pre-specified linear test captures the rising right-hand side of this pattern, the part that corresponds to expansion pressure, and the non-monotonic shape is shown in Figure 5 as an exploratory description. The growth-and-drift association should therefore be read as “rapid growth accompanies more drift,” not as “any increase in growth increases drift.”

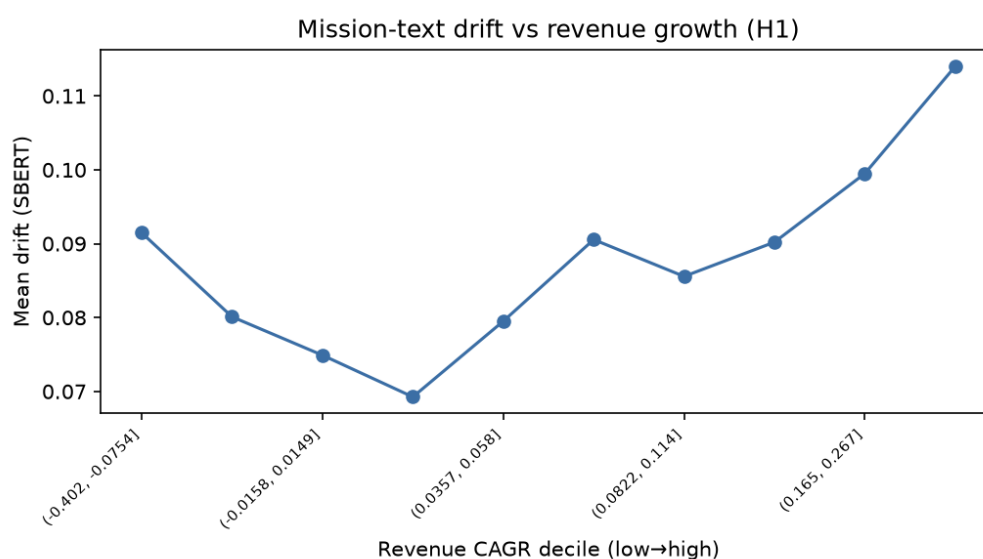


Figure 5. Mean mission-statement drift by revenue-growth decile (exploratory). Drift is lowest for steady, moderate growers and rises at both the contracting and the fastest-growing ends, a U-shaped pattern whose right-hand rise corresponds to the pre-specified growth hypothesis.

Age shows the expected monotonic relationship: average drift declines as organizations get older, consistent with the idea that a stated purpose becomes more settled over time. Figure 6 shows the gradient.

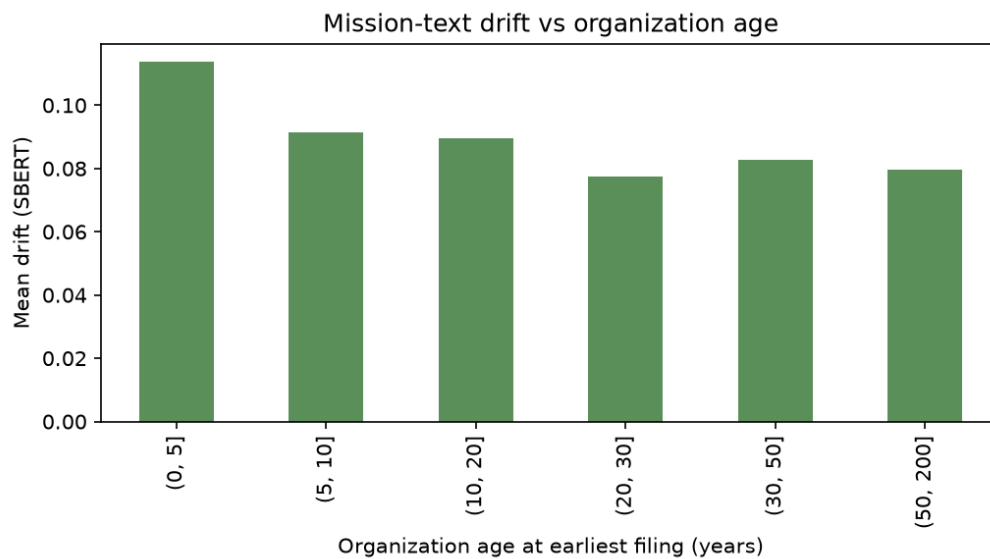


Figure 6. Mission-statement drift by organization age band. Average drift declines with age, consistent with the supported hypothesis that older organizations hold their stated purpose more closely.

4.4 Identifying the most-drifted organizations

The same characteristics were used to try to identify the organizations in the top third of the drift distribution. The logistic model discriminates only weakly, with a cross-validated area under the ROC curve of 0.60, above chance but far from a reliable classifier. The direction of the odds ratios echoes the linear model: the odds of being a high-drift organization rise with size and with revenue growth and fall with age and with reliance on government grants. Table 4 reports the odds ratios and Figure 7 the ROC curve. The weak discrimination is itself a finding: knowing an organization's size, age, sector, funding mix, and growth tells one relatively little about whether it will hold or drift, because most of the variation in drift is idiosyncratic.

Table 4. Odds ratios from the logistic model identifying top-tertile (high-drift) organizations (five-fold cross-validated AUC = 0.60). Values above one indicate higher odds of high drift.

Predictor	Odds ratio
Size (log revenue)	1.26
Revenue CAGR	1.15
Contributions share	1.28
Program-revenue share	0.95
Government-grants share	0.81
Funding shift	0.92
Age	0.88

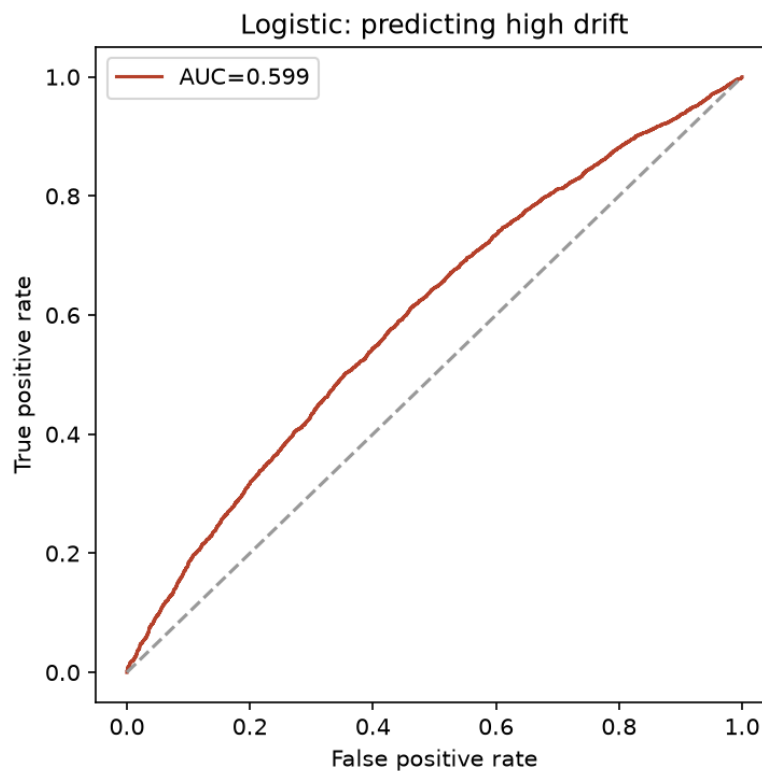


Figure 7. Receiver-operating-characteristic curve for the logistic classification of high-drift organizations. The cross-validated area under the curve is 0.60, indicating weak but better-than-chance discrimination from observable structure.

5. Discussion

The first contribution of this study is methodological. Mission drift can be measured directly from the words organizations use about their purpose, in a way that is reproducible from public filings, stable across three independent text measures, and distinct from financial change. The near-zero correlation between the text measure and the financial comparison matters because so much prior empirical work has equated a moving financial ratio with a moving mission. The most directly comparable recent study forecasts mission drift in European social enterprises from financial indicators [4], and the broader debate over how nonprofit revenue structure should be measured shows that such financial signals are sensitive to the analyst's choice of index [10]. The near-zero correlation reported here indicates that stated-mission change and financial-efficiency change are statistically independent in this sample, which means that financial-proxy studies and text-based studies are answering different questions. For research that is about fidelity to a stated purpose, the stated purpose is the more faithful object of measurement, and the agreement of three differently constructed text measures, against a backdrop of known fragility in single embedding-based comparisons [16], gives some confidence that the signal is the organization's language rather than an artifact of method.

The second contribution is substantive, and it begins with a corrective to the framing that motivated the study. Among organizations large enough to face expansion pressure, stability is the dominant outcome: about 64% show no meaningful change in their stated mission over a span of several years. This tempers the intuition, common in the hybrid-organization literature, that growth routinely corrodes purpose [3]. The mission-drift construct was forged in settings such as microfinance, where institutions balancing outreach against sustainability were suspected of gradually serving wealthier clients [2,8]; the stability rate documented here indicates that, for the U.S. nonprofit population as a whole, drift in the stated mission is the exception rather than the rule.

Where drift does occur, it accompanies the conditions one would expect from the growth-versus-purpose tension. Faster revenue growth is associated with more drift, and younger and larger organizations drift more, all net of sector and funding mix. This large-sample association complements the close comparative case studies that have documented how individual social ventures negotiate competing missions as they scale [9]: where case work can show the mechanism in a handful of organizations, the present design shows that the growth-drift relationship holds across tens of thousands. The shape of that relationship is informative. Drift is lowest for steady, moderate growers and rises both for organizations that are contracting and for those expanding most rapidly. A plausible reading is that disruption of either kind, the strain of rapid scaling or the pressure of decline, is what unsettles a stated purpose, while steady organizations have the least reason to restate themselves. The supported association with age points the same way: an older organization has had longer to settle its language and to

institutionalize its identity, so its stated purpose is more firmly anchored.

The funding results refines a common assumption. The hypothesis that a shift toward earned and government revenue would drive drift was not supported; if anything, organizations more reliant on government grants drift less, and those more reliant on private contributions drift more. The government-grants association was a covariate rather than a hypothesis specified a priori, so it is exploratory and is offered as a direction for future work rather than a confirmed result. One interpretation is that the contractual and reporting obligations attached to government funding hold an organization's stated purpose in place, whereas dependence on donations leaves more room to restate a mission as fundraising priorities evolve. This reading is consistent with accountability scholarship that treats the stated mission as shaped by the demands of an organization's principal funders [12] and with the view that nonprofits hold multiple institutional logics whose balance is conditioned by their resource base [7]. It remains an association observed in archival text and should be investigated directly rather than assumed.

Across every specification, observable structure explains only a small share of the variation in drift, and the classifier of high-drift organizations performs only modestly. This is not a defect of the analysis but a finding about the phenomenon: whether an organization holds or drifts from its stated purpose is not well predicted by its size, age, sector, funding mix, or growth rate. The practitioner intuitions that motivated this study, that purpose is preserved through specific internal practices such as periodic review of a written purpose, explicit criteria for declining growth, feedback between new and original units, and a willingness to slow expansion, point precisely at the kind of internal, decision-level factors that public filings cannot observe. The low explained variance is consistent with the possibility that such internal mechanisms, rather than external structure, are what separate holding from drifting. Testing that possibility would require data this study does not have, of the kind that close-grained organizational research is built to collect.

For practitioners and funders, the pattern carries a measured message. Because stable stated missions are the norm, a change in an organization's filed mission is itself an informative signal worth attention rather than a routine event, and the conditions under which it is more likely, rapid revenue growth and organizational youth, identify where vigilance is most warranted. The finding that reliance on government grants accompanies greater stability, while exploratory, suggests that the external reporting discipline a funder imposes may help anchor a stated purpose, a possibility that grant-makers and boards concerned with mission integrity could weigh. At the same time, the weak predictive power of all observable structure is a caution against managing mission fidelity by dashboard: the data do not support the idea that watching an organization's size, age, sector, or budget will reveal whether its purpose is holding. The signal that would reveal that, on the evidence here, lives in the organization's own words and, most likely, in the internal practices that produce them.

A brief illustration comes from the first author's own organization, offered as a case seen from the inside rather than as part of the measured sample. StrategicMinds grew from a single Toronto club in 2023 to ten chapters across six countries, yet its founding mission, teaching chess to underrepresented children without charge, did not change as it expanded. As an organization based outside the United States it does not file Form 990 and so lies outside the study population; it cannot be scored by the measure used here and enters no analysis. Read through the article's frame it is an example of the "holding" pattern that the large-sample results find to be the norm, a single case consistent with that finding rather than evidence for it, and no causal claim is drawn from it.

Taken together, these findings define a productive division of labour for future research on mission fidelity. The text-based measure offers a scalable, low-cost screen that can identify which organizations have restated their purpose and can describe the structural conditions under which restatement is more or less likely; it builds on the emerging acceptance of computational text analysis within nonprofit studies [5] and on evidence that organizational identity change surfaces in the language organizations use about themselves [11]. What the measure cannot do is adjudicate whether a given change of wording reflects genuine reorientation, sharper communication, or fulfillment of the original purpose by new means, a distinction that has long complicated the drift construct [13]. Pairing the public-data screen with targeted study of the internal practices inside high-drift and high-stability organizations is the natural way to connect the observable trace measured here to the decisions that produce it.

6. Limitations

Several limitations bound the interpretation of these results. The measure captures an organization's stated purpose as filed, which is an observable trace of its commitments rather than its internal intent. The study cannot see the governance routines, decisions, or motivations that practitioners associate with preserving a mission, and it makes no claim to measure them; a stable mission statement is evidence of stable language, not proof of preserved intent, and a changed statement may reflect clearer communication as much as a changed purpose. For the same reason, all relationships reported here are associations, not causal effects.

The data impose further bounds. Mandatory electronic filing fixes the observation window at roughly three to six years, so long-run drift over decades is not observed. The analysis is restricted to full-990 filers, which excludes the many small organizations that file shorter returns and limits generalization to the larger, more established part of the sector. A substantial share of organizations file identical mission text year after year, producing the concentration of zero values; the five-token filter and the agreement requirement across three measures reduce, but do not eliminate, the influence of boilerplate. Finally, some financial variables, above all the change in funding composition, contain extreme values that required trimming, and the modest explained variance means that the supported associations, while statistically robust, are small in magnitude and should not be over-read.

Missing data warrant particular comment. The regression sample of 11,447 organizations is smaller than the full analytic panel of 22,638 because complete-case estimation drops any organization missing a covariate. The attrition is driven almost entirely by two financial fields: the government-grants share and the funding-mix shift are reported by only about 53% of filers, whereas every other covariate is present for at least 94%. The organizations retained for the regression are therefore not a random subset; they are larger (mean log revenue 13.8 versus 12.6) and show somewhat higher average drift (0.088 versus 0.049) than those dropped, while being similar in age. Two implications follow. The structural associations generalize most safely to larger, government-grant-reporting organizations rather than to the full panel. And the null result for the funding-mix hypothesis is estimated on this reduced and selected sample, so it may reflect limited power as much as a true absence of association; it should be read as not detected here rather than as shown to be absent.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to ask which observable characteristics distinguish mission-driven organizations that hold their founding purpose through growth from those that drift, and to do so without reducing purpose to a financial ratio. By measuring the semantic change in organizations' own filed mission statements across 22,638 U.S. nonprofits, it offers a transparent, reproducible instrument for studying mission fidelity over time and, to the authors' knowledge, one of the first large-sample maps of its correlates. The headline findings are that stated-mission stability is the norm among organizations under expansion pressure, that drift, where it occurs, is associated with rapid growth and with organizational youth and is moderated by reliance on government funding, and that observable structure nonetheless leaves most of the variation in drift unexplained. The practical implication is twofold. The growth-versus-purpose tension that practitioners describe is visible in the data, but it is a tendency rather than a law; and because external structure predicts drift so weakly, the decisive factors are likely to be the internal practices that this kind of public data cannot reach. Mapping those practices to measurable outcomes, and extending the measure to longer windows and to smaller organizations, is the natural next step.

Author Contributions

Aaron Leib Litovsky: conceptualization, methodology, data collection and analysis, and writing — original draft. Vladimir Luzgin: methodological guidance, supervision, and writing — review and editing. Both authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability

All data are public. The mission text and financial fields derive from the IRS Form 990 electronic filing archive, and sector and ruling-year information from the IRS Exempt Organizations Business Master File; both are works of the U.S. government in the public domain. The constructed analytic panel and the code used to build and analyze it are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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