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# **Building Capacity in Nonprofit Boards: Learning from Board Self-Assessments**

Judith L. Millesen – College of Charleston

Joanne G. Carman – University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Boards of directors of nonprofit charitable organizations have long been responsible for serving essential purposes and performing critical agency functions. Given these responsibilities, it seems reasonable to expect that a periodic review of a board's capacity to effectively govern a nonprofit charitable organization be conducted. Using data collected from 800 individuals serving as board members of 42 different performing arts nonprofits, this study reports on board member evaluations of their individual and collective participation in the governance process through a self-assessment undertaken to inform decision-making and build capacity at both the board and organizational levels. Findings suggest the need for more (or better) training/orientation opportunities; focused, intentional, and tailored recruitment processes; clear communication, greater role clarity, and specificity regarding board performance expectations; greater understanding about best practices and the need to add value; and time to cultivate openness and collegiality among the board members and between the board and staff.

Keywords: Nonprofit Governance, Self-Assessment, Capacity Building

Boards of directors of nonprofit charitable organizations have long been seen as serving essential purposes and performing critical agency functions. An estimated eight million Americans serve as board members or trustees of nonprofit organizations nationwide (Salamon, 2012). The public as well as public authorities expect that these individuals (who voluntarily give their time, experience, expertise, and other resources) will assure that the more than 1.41 million nonprofit organizations in the United States are governed effectively. Moreover, it is expected that these individuals will assure that the more than \$1.73 trillion in total revenue that these organizations generate is spent responsibly (Urban Institute, 2015). Given this extent of human and financial investment, it seems reasonable to expect that a periodic review of a boards capacity to effectively govern an organization be conducted.

While it is still by no means common, in recent years, many nonprofit boards have undertaken a self-assessment process in order to determine how to strengthen their performance—and ultimately strengthen the performance of the organization they govern (Harrison & Murray, 2015; Holland, 1991; Liket & Maas, 2015; Renz, 2016). This study reports on board member evaluations of their individual and collective participation in the governance process through a self-assessment undertaken to inform decision-making and build capacity at the board and organizational levels. Data for the study were collected over a two-year period (May 2013–

June 2015) from 800 individuals serving as board members of 42 different performing arts nonprofits. Each of the participating board members engaged in a self-assessment process administered by BoardSource, which then compiled the results and made the data available for synthesis and analysis.

The self-assessment asked board members to evaluate their performance using a series of questions based on recognized roles and responsibilities of nonprofit boards. The questions focused on nine different dimensions of performance: mission; strategy; funding and public image; board composition; program oversight; financial oversight; CEO oversight; board structure; and meetings. Each section of the self-assessment had an open-ended question about how the board might do better in each responsibility or best practice area. The self-assessment concluded with three open-ended questions designed to identify specific activities board members believed would enhance board performance.

Analysis of these assessment data provided us with insight about the kinds of issues boards struggle with as well as the level of consensus among members of individual boards. We also examined the characteristics of boards that had scores well above the benchmarks as well as those that had scores that consistently fell below the benchmarks. Finally, because respondents were given a chance to provide additional comments through open-ended questions at the end of each section, we were also able to learn more about factors that influenced how individual board members not only understood each of their responsibility areas, but also their thoughts about how individual and collective performance in each area might be improved.

The article begins with a brief review of the literature. Specific attention is given to literature on a board's role in assessing its own performance. These assessments are believed to allow an organization to effectively deliver on its public trust obligation and remain accountable to a demanding constituent base while still adhering to the fundamentals of good governance practices. The next section of the article describes the sample, instrumentation, and data analysis procedures; key findings follow. The article concludes with implications for practice and recommendations for future research. It is important to note that even though our data come from a study of governance practices for arts organizations, we believe the findings are broadly applicable to all nonprofits—particularly if leadership is open to considering how what we observed might play out in their own boardrooms.

## **Review of the Literature**

One of the things we struggled with when analyzing these data and writing this article was the lack of literature regarding board self-assessment practices. This dearth of literature means that we had a difficult time positioning our findings within the broader field. This was problematic for at least two reasons. First, the lack of published studies regarding board self-assessment practices meant that we had difficulty grounding our work in theory, which incidentally is closely related to our second challenge. Without a strong theoretical foundation from which we could frame our work, we made several assumptions to guide our analysis. For example, as outlined in the literature that follows, it is commonly assumed that the board undergoes a self-assessment process with the intention to improve its performance and strengthen the overall work of the organization. There are perhaps, though, other reasons the board might choose to undergo a self-assessment process, which would arguably call for analysis through a different theoretical lens. We further discuss this observation in our findings.

The major reason we assumed the board's primary motivation for self-assessment was to improve performance is precisely because much of the existing literature focuses on the ways in which adherence to prescribed best practices are thought to enable a board to improve

performance and influence organizational outcomes. Although every nonprofit board in the United States may not perform exactly the same functions, both the practitioner-oriented literature and academic research converges on a set of activities that are considered characteristic of high-performing boards. Ingram (2015) identifies 10 basic practices; Brown and Guo (2010) list 13 different roles; Inglis, Alexander, and Weaver (1999) record 13; Harrison and Murray (2015) identify seven common areas of responsibility; while Bradshaw, Murray, and Wolpin (1992) and Green and Griesinger (1996) each suggest that boards perform between seven and nine essential activities. Among these important functions are promoting an organization's mission and purpose, recruiting and evaluating the chief executive, ensuring effective planning and financial oversight, periodically assessing board performance, and facilitating access to key constituencies and resources.

There are also a number of different self-assessment tools that nonprofit board members can use to examine performance. Examples include Jackson and Holland's (1998) Board Self-Assessment Questionnaire (BASQ) and the Governance Self-Assessment Checklist (GSAC) developed by Gill, Flynn, and Reissing (2005). There are also a number of different self-assessment tools that BoardSource makes available to different types of nonprofit organizations (e.g., charitable nonprofits, community foundations, private foundations, credit unions, charter schools, and associations). Additionally, there is a free online board performance self-assessment tool called the Board Check-up, which uses the Board Effectiveness Survey Application (BESA) to help boards make changes in their governance practices (Harrison & Murray, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

Implicit in each tool is the notion that adherence to "best practices" measured through the self-assessment process will enable a board to have a direct impact on organizational performance (Bradshaw, Murray, & Wolpin, 1992). There is some empirical work that tests this assumption. Herman, Renz, and Heimovics (1997), for example, examined the ways in which prescriptive standards of effective governance were related to stakeholder assessments of board effectiveness. They found that nonprofit chief executives were likely to rate their board highly effective if the board engaged in certain best practices. These practices included collectively evaluating the performance of the board and chief executive, using a nominating committee to identify new members, electing officers, and assigning members to serve on committees.

While much of the literature attempting to link perceptions of board effectiveness and widely accepted notions of how a nonprofit board of directors *should* operate are somewhat dated (e.g., Bradshaw, Murray, & Wolpin, 1992; Green & Griesinger, 1996; Herman & Tulipana, 1985), we were able to locate three recent studies that specifically looked at the ways in which board activities influenced organizational performance. First, Cumberland, Kerrick, D'Mello, and Petrosko (2015) tested for deficits in four board role-sets (monitoring, supporting, partnering, and representing) and correlated these role-sets to board perceptions of organizational performance. They found that when there was balance across all role-sets, board perceptions of performance were high; yet, deficits in any single category (or an imbalance among the categories) had negative implications for overall perceptions of performance.

LeRoux and Langer (2016) examined the gap between board behavior and executive director expectations for board performance in 10 key activities, all of which can arguably be found in the best practices literature. Finally, even though Wellens and Jegers (2014) did not rely solely on normative expectations of board performance, the authors used a multiple stakeholder approach to integrate and summarize the literature on effective nonprofit governance. A common thread in these last two studies is the way in which the execution of board roles and/or governance practices is associated with stakeholder expectations of performance.

Even with this recent work examining the link between the execution of board responsibilities and overall organizational performance, a study by Lichtsteiner and Lutz (2012) noted that there is very little recent empirical evidence regarding the use of board self-assessments and the ways in which adherence to best practices influences organizational outcomes. One notable exception may be the work of Harrison and Murray (2015), who argue that their research focuses on measuring board performance based on self-assessment criteria developed by Murray (2009). Even so, these criteria closely mirror best practices and implicitly link the execution of these practices to improvements in nonprofit governance effectiveness.

Today nonprofit administrators confront a complex operating environment (Cumberland, et al., 2015), where competition for limited resources is fierce, multiple stakeholders often place competing demands on organizational outputs, and opportunities for growth tend to go unrealized. Boards of directors are seen as ultimately responsible for establishing organizational direction and can add value by broadening the organization's perspective (Ingram, 2015). They also help management recognize the major opportunities and challenges that are likely to affect the organization's future. They serve as the ultimate court of appeals in resolving conflicting claims on organizational resources; further, through their diverse perspectives, they identify blind spots that can potentially inhibit chief executives from properly assessing the need, direction, and speed of change.

From a legal perspective, board members have three duties. The first is the duty of care, which requires board members to exercise reasonable care by staying informed, participating in decisions, and acting in good faith when making decisions on behalf of the board. The second is the duty of loyalty, which requires board members to put the interests of the organization first when making organizational decisions. The third is the duty of obedience, which dictates that board members must be faithful to the organizational mission and act in a way that is consistent with the goals of the organization as well as federal, state, and local laws (Hopkins & Gross, 2010). Moreover, they have a fiduciary role, in that the board is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the organization fulfills its mission. Board members are expected to serve as stewards to protect the organization's assets and ensure that it operates according to applicable laws (Manucuso, 2009).

For these reasons, it is important to understand how these important members of society think about their roles and responsibilities as well as how they assess their performance in fulfilling various governance expectations.

## **Data and Methods**

In this study, we analyzed board self-assessment data from a sample of performing arts organizations (e.g., symphonies, orchestras, and philharmonics) in the United States that completed BoardSource's self-assessment process from September 30, 2013 to August 30, 2015. Eight hundred board members from 42 performing arts organizations completed the self-assessment survey. The number of members on each board completing the survey ranged from a low of seven to a high of 38, with the average being 19 board members. All boards independently participated in the BoardSource self-assessment process.

While the data did not contain descriptive information about the characteristics of individual board members or organizations, we were able to compile descriptive information about the organizations from their IRS Form 990 or 990 EZ (filing year 2014) as well as their websites. The organizations in the sample ranged in age and size (as measured by total annual revenues on their IRS Form 990). They also ranged with respect to the percentage of total annual revenues earned from contributions and grants, program service revenues, and the percentage of total annual revenues spent on salaries.

With respect to the age of the organizations in the sample, 24% ( $n=10$ ) were founded between 1928 to 1949, 36% ( $n=15$ ) were founded between 1950 to 1975, 33% ( $n=14$ ) were founded between 1975 to 2000, and 70% ( $n=3$ ) were founded from 2000 to 2011. With respect to size of the organizations in the sample, the total annual revenues for 62% ( $n=26$ ) of the organizations were less than \$1,000,000. The total annual revenues for 31% ( $n=13$ ) of the organizations were between \$1,000,000 and \$5,000,000. The total annual revenues for 7% ( $n=3$ ) of the organizations were more than \$10,000,000.

Thirty-six percent ( $n=15$ ) of the organizations raised less than 25% of their total annual revenues from program services. Fifty-two percent of the organizations ( $n=22$ ) raised between 25% and 50% of their total annual revenues from program services. Ten percent of the organizations ( $n=4$ ) raised between 50% and 70% of their total annual revenues from program services. Just one organization raised more than 99% of its total annual revenue from program services. Five percent of the organizations ( $n=2$ ) reported spending none of their revenues on salaries. Twelve percent of the organizations ( $n=5$ ) spent less than 25% of their revenues on salaries. Thirty-six percent of the organizations ( $n=15$ ) spent between 25% and 50% of their revenues on salaries. Forty-three percent of the organizations ( $n=18$ ) spent between 51% and 75% of their revenues on salaries. Five percent of the organizations ( $n=2$ ) spent more than 75% of their revenues on salaries (see Table 1).

The self-assessment questionnaire asked respondents to evaluate board performance in nine different performance areas (mission, strategy, funding and public image, board composition, program oversight, financial oversight, CEO oversight, board structure, and meetings). The questionnaire also asked respondents to answer questions about overall satisfaction with aspects of the board, including general effectiveness, operational practices, oversight responsibilities, board policies and procedures, and overall satisfaction with board service.

Respondents were also asked to answer three open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire designed to identify specific actions they believed would enhance board performance. The overall questionnaire was intended to help the board evaluate how well it was functioning and to identify specific areas where it might improve performance. While most of the questionnaire asked respondents to rate the board as a whole, the last section consisted of an individual self-assessment designed to help each board member evaluate his/her own effectiveness on 14 different criteria (we do not report on these data in this study). Board members were encouraged to be candid and to develop a personal development plan that would strengthen performance in the coming year.

Assessment sections began with a description of the board's responsibility in fulfilling a specific governance role followed by a request to rate the board's performance in activities related to that role. For example, in the section that asked board members to assess performance with regard to mission, the descriptive statement read:

One of the board's fundamental roles is setting direction for the organization. This begins with the board's responsibility for establishing the mission and defining a vision of the future. A mission statement is a concise expression of what the organization is trying to achieve and for whose benefit. A vision statement is an inspiring verbal picture of the organization's desired future. These statements serve as the foundation for making decisions. The board, working closely with the chief executive, should review them periodically and revise them if necessary. (p. 2)

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics

	Min.	Max.	Mean	S. D.
Contributions and Grants	7,249	12,241,727	1,198,873.67	2,569,884.13
Program Service Revenues	0	4,465,470	613,681.02	1,023,148.05
Total Annual Revenues	63,054	15,995,029	1,892,148.90	3,577,272.37
Salaries	0	11,386,079	1,075,667.79	2,305,032.96
Total Expenses	69,108	16,498,565	1,827,299.90	3,426,252.89
Year Founded	1926	2011	1966	22.44

Note:  $n=42$  organizations.

After reading each introductory description, participants were asked to respond to between five and 11 statements in each responsibility area for a total of 66 questions. The questionnaire included a five-point Likert-type scale (consisting of the following response options: “poor,” “fair,” “okay,” “good,” and “excellent”; respondents also had the option of answering “not applicable/don’t know”) to rate overall satisfaction with board performance in fulfilling each responsibility area.

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (version 23). In order to understand collective consensus of the board members, the data were aggregated so that the unit of analysis was the board. First, we calculated the percentage of the board that answered each survey item the same way. We intentionally focused our analysis on definitive responses. We left out “fair and “okay” responses; and, we grouped “good” and “excellent” responses together. “Not applicable” and “don’t know” responses were also grouped together; further, we counted “poor” by itself. Second, we operationalized the idea of consensus on the board as 75% or more of the board responding to the item in the same way (as “good” or “excellent,” “poor,” or “not applicable/don’t know”). This is a level that has been used in previous studies as a proxy for consensus (Diamond et al., 2014; Estabrooks et al., 2014; Tremblay et al., 2017). Finally, we summed the number and percentage of organizations where there was consensus for each survey item to identify patterns among the boards.

The open-ended qualitative data were analyzed using Atlas Ti (version 7). We conducted a classical content analysis using descriptive and pattern coding (Rogers & Goodrick, 2010). The coding process was iterative in that the data were coded and recoded three times. The findings from this analysis helped us to provide context for the quantitative findings with respect to the strengths of the boards, the challenges they face, and the opportunities to improve performance.

## Findings

The survey items with the most positive consensus (where 75% or more of board members rated their board as “good” or “excellent”) related to projecting a positive image of the organization (76%), giving the chief executive enough authority to lead the staff and manage the organization successfully (74%), creating a climate of mutual respect between the board and chief executive (71%), fostering an environment that builds trust and respect among board members (69%), board support of the mission (67%), ensuring that the budget reflects priorities (62%), monitoring the organization’s financial health (62%), taking action when needed (60%), reviewing and understanding the budget (60%), being knowledgeable and informed about programs and services (57%), and using effective meeting practices (50%) (see Table 2).

The survey items with the most negative consensus (where 75% or more of board members rated their board as “poor”) related to board performance in tracking progress toward meeting organizational goals (33%) and two main responsibility areas: board composition

**Table 2.** Performance Area and Survey Items with the Most Positive Consensus<sup>a</sup>

Performance Area	Survey Item	<i>n</i>	%
Funding and Public Image	Projecting a positive public image of the organization.	32	76
CEO Oversight	Giving the chief executive enough authority to lead staff and manage the organization successfully.	31	74
CEO Oversight	Cultivating a climate of mutual trust and respect between the board and chief executive.	30	71
Meetings	Fostering an environment that builds trust and respect among board members.	29	69
Mission	Supporting the organization's mission.	28	67
Financial Oversight	Ensuring the annual budget reflects the organization's priorities.	26	62
Financial Oversight	Monitoring the organization's financial health, e.g., against budget, year-to-year comparisons, and ratios.	26	62
Financial Oversight	Reviewing and understanding financial reports.	25	60
Meetings	Efficiently making decisions and taking action(s) when needed.	25	60
Program Oversight	Being knowledgeable about the organization's programs and services.	24	57
Program Oversight	Ensuring the board receives sufficient information related to programs and services.	23	55
Meetings	Allowing adequate time for board members to ask questions and explore issues.	23	55
Meetings	Using effective meeting practices—such as setting clear agendas, having good facilitation, and managing time well.	21	50

<sup>a</sup>As measured by whether 75% or more of board members rated the board as being “excellent” or “good” on the survey item.

(33%) and funding and public image (31%). Boards were dissatisfied with their ability to effectively orient new members (29%) and identify and cultivate potential board members (21%). Boards also expressed dissatisfaction in the area of fundraising, specifically as it related to introducing the organization to potential donors (31%), setting expectations for individual board giving (24%), and holding board members accountable for fulfilling fundraising responsibilities (19%) (see Table 3).

Finally, we looked at those responsibility areas where the consensus of the board was that they were unclear about how to rate board performance in a particular area (i.e., 75% or more of board members responded, “not applicable/don’t know”). Interestingly, although boards were satisfied that the budget reflected organizational priorities and that the organization’s financial health was regularly monitored, very few boards were knowledgeable about the organization’s financial oversight infrastructure (e.g., audits, investment policies, insurance, risk management, and IRS compliance). Similarly, even though boards believed there to be mutual respect between the board and chief executive, there was considerable ambiguity

**Table 3.** Performance Area and Survey Items with the Most Negative Consensus<sup>a</sup>

Performance Area	Survey Item	<i>n</i>	%
Board Composition Strategy	Planning for board officer succession	14	33
	Tracking progress toward meeting the organization's strategic goals	14	33
Funding and Public Image	Introducing the organization to potential donors	13	31
Board Composition	Effectively orienting new board members	12	29
Meetings	Engaging all board members in the work of the board	12	29
Program Oversight	Identifying standards against which to measure organizational performance	10	24
Funding and Public Image	Setting expectations for individual board members to participate in fundraising activities and solicitations	10	24
Board Composition	Identifying and cultivating potential board members	9	21
Funding and Public Image	Holding board members accountable for fulfilling their fundraising responsibilities	8	19

<sup>a</sup>As measured by whether 75% or more of board members rated the board as being “poor” on the survey item.

**Table 4.** Performance Area and Survey Items with the Most “Not Applicable/Don’t Know” Responses<sup>a</sup>

Performance Area	Survey Item	<i>n</i>	%
Financial Oversight	Ensuring that insurance carried by the organization is reviewed periodically	35	83
Financial Oversight	Complying with IRS regulations to complete Form 990	34	81
Financial Oversight	Ensuring the organization has policies in place to manage risks	30	71
Board Structure	Reviewing committee structure(s) to ensure it supports the work of the board	29	69
Financial Oversight	Establishing and reviewing the organization's investment policies	27	64
CEO Oversight	Approving the executive's compensation as a full board	26	62
CEO Oversight	Planning for the absence or departure of the chief executive	26	62
CEO Oversight	Formally assessing the chief executive's performance	26	62
Financial Oversight	Reviewing the results of the independent financial audit and management letter	24	57
CEO Oversight	Ensuring that the chief executive is appropriately compensated	20	48

<sup>a</sup>As measured by whether 75% or more of the board members responded with “not applicable/don’t know” on the survey item.



around chief executive assessment, compensation, as well as succession planning (see Table 4).

Some may worry that documented “not applicable/don’t know” responses in the areas of financial operations, CEO assessment, and board roles might undermine our overall results. The fact is, however, that our findings are quite consistent with other published studies in the field. Indeed, not only are these findings largely consistent with Miller and Lakey’s (1999) board self-assessment research, Miller (2002) suggests that one of the reasons board members do not know how to assess CEO performance is because they simply do not think it is necessary. Board members confuse developmental evaluation with meddlesome monitoring and do not want to be perceived as doubting or not trusting the chief executive to act in the best interest of the organization.

Similarly, Wright and Millesen (2008) found that board role ambiguity was related to a disconnect between what board members believed their roles to be and what chief executives expected. We suspect that, for many board members, the self-assessment process might be the first time they were introduced to the full range of board roles and responsibilities; thus, a certain amount of confusion, ambiguity, and uncertainty is expected.

Although the data listed above are telling, some of the most interesting information came from board member responses to the open-ended questions. Analysis of the qualitative data clustered in two ways. First, the qualitative data provide context for a number of the quantitative findings. Second, the qualitative data provide suggestions and recommendations from board members about how to improve performance. As previously noted, the self-assessment questionnaire included three open-ended questions that were designed to identify specific actions that board members believed would focus attention, improve training, and ultimately yield better performance outcomes for the board and the organizations they govern.

### **Providing Context and Improving Performance**

In this section we share qualitative data that help explain some of what we noticed in the quantitative data. Specifically, board members provided information about the challenges and opportunities they faced when tracking progress toward meeting goals, board composition, and fundraising. They also provided information about how to improve performance in these areas.

#### *Tracking Progress Toward Meeting Goals*

We have not identified standards...have not gathered data to support our programming...have not gathered sufficient data to measure needs of, and impact on, audiences.

One of the most common themes was about how to do a better job of evaluating programs and services. For many board members, a solid first step would be to begin collecting data about how well the organization is doing on reaching its goals. Herein lies (at least one of) the challenges: board members not only talked about failure to measure outcomes, as the quote above illustrates, they also expressed concerns about whether there was a shared understanding of program goals (e.g., standards) or how to evaluate programming. Even though board members believed programs were of value to the community, they were at a loss about how to capture data that would reflect what they instinctively knew. As one person noted:

We have no sense of what the metrics for tracking success or failure really are, beyond ticket sales and contribution numbers.

In particular, we have no way of assessing the success of our much-wanted education programs for schoolchildren—though we know in our hearts that they are successful.

The second challenge was a capacity issue and surfaced when discussing the importance of assessing outcomes, primarily because board members tend to rely on staff for this information. Many admitted to their staffs being “stretched very thin” or that people were already “working to capacity”; occasionally suggesting that if they had more money they would be able to devote the resources to “have the infrastructure and staff we need” for data collection and trend analysis. Even though board members recognized the limitation of a small staff, many respondents were either disturbed by the fact that the staff provided no information in this regard or they wanted more information and time dedicated at meetings to talk about how best to identify program outcomes and assess their effectiveness.

An interesting finding that may be of particular interest to chief executives, especially those looking to improve the overall performance of their boards, is how often board members expressed interest in “educating themselves on issues that impact the industry.” Specifically, board members expressed an interest in hearing from various program directors (e.g., educational and children’s), experts in the field, audience members, and peer institutions to learn more about industry standards, emerging trends, benchmarking, and other things that influence the workings of the organization. Here is what one board member had to say:

Recent board meetings have included hearing from musicians and what it takes to be prepared to perform; we’ve heard some about the [XXX] program. This is time well spent. We need to continue to be educated about the different programs and systems. We and the staff need to think more in terms of goals for each effort: What are we working to accomplish? What’s our timeframe? How do we measure our success or failure? I’ve wondered at times with the tremendous design, success, and efforts put into the educational programs, what is our goal here? Sometimes success can breed more effort, i.e., money, resources when perhaps we’ve gotten our “80 for 20” out of this and should put a program into maintenance, freeing up resources to work on another area. It’s hard to make that call when there don’t seem to be clear goals and progress against those goals to know if this effort is succeeding, good for the organization and should be continued, expanded, maintained or what? Operating on a “feel good” method may not be good for the broader organization’s goals.

It seems fairly easy to dedicate time at a board meeting to help the board grapple with some of these questions. The work the board does in figuring out how to clearly articulate institutional goals, learn about existing programs and services, and ultimately measure success could surely be leveraged in ways that attract additional resources to improve performance.

### *Board Composition*

As previously noted, the quantitative data provided general information about the board’s dissatisfaction with its ability to plan for board member succession, effectively orient new board members, and identify and cultivate potential board members. Analysis of the qualitative data show that succession planning was not limited to replacing leadership on the board but also how best to plan for organizational leadership transitions. As one board member noted, “We were taken by surprise by the resignation of our former ED...we need to pay better attention to succession planning.” Additionally, out of the 42 performing arts

organizations participating, five were working with a new executive director, and eight had no executive director currently employed. Interestingly, the percentage of those working without or with a new executive director is exactly the same as the percentage asserting there was a need for better succession planning (and the same percentage of organizations that indicated there was no succession plan in place).

While some board members pointed out the fact that there was a “very shallow bench for future board leadership,” perhaps the biggest factor influencing recognition of the need to pay more attention to board succession planning had to do with the average age of board members. As one board member noted, “Many of us are getting a little long in the tooth. The future of the orchestra is really in the hands of new, young board members.” Another offered:

The current board has a lot of work to do in this area. It needs to develop a plan for identifying suitable potential board members, develop a succession plan...The current board is aging and tired. We desperately need new and younger blood that would help pave the way for us to move into the future.

The need to develop a leadership “bench” and a recognition that the board was aging were not the only elements of diversity respondents felt strongly about. Board members also talked about the need to diversify with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, geography, socioeconomic status, and professional skills. One board member suggested that conversations around professional skills should not be limited to those typically discussed (e.g., finance, fundraising, and marketing), but also the perspective of those “with experience as serious amateur or former professional musicians.” As this person explained:

We are too heavy on business people who enjoy the music but know next to nothing about what it takes to play it. The artistic staff deserves a cadre of board members to whom they can talk about artistic decisions—board members who see the [XXX] Society not merely as the revenue generating arm of the orchestra, but as the chief sponsor of the musical life of the community.

Respondents were sensitive to assuring that the board reflected the demographics in their communities and that attention to diversity would help the board to better understand community expectations, combat the “snob image,” and promote learning from different perspectives. Consider this quote from a board member who expressed a unique perspective on learning through diversity:

As our community grows, we grow. Perhaps diversity attributes are not the same ones listed [in the self-assessment]? For example, many people relocate here...and yet I know of only one board member from that region. The point I make is that we need to embrace the experiences of the newest citizens as they represent a rich and meaningful experience of culture in other regions of the nation. We may be able to learn from them too as much as we are able to share our own methods and thinking.

Feedback regarding board recruitment also reflected a need to assure that existing board members were contributing their various gifts in ways that grew and strengthened the organization. Consider this comment:

We all need to help identify, recruit, and recommend individuals for our board. Also, everyone needs to focus on at least one

project, preferably different each season to help grow the organization. There is also lots of improvement needed in identifying and recommending potential sponsors and donors beyond the usual suspects we have each year. Overall, there needs to be better leveraging of strengths to cast the net further within our community. Each board member has a unique skill set, passion, or talent, which should be maximized. We should always be asking if our interactions with others could result in some sort of relationship whether it is as a prospective donor, sponsor, patron, or board member.

Considerations related to identifying talented recruits and succession planning were also expressed when board members talked about committee structure(s). Board members tended to share thoughts about the importance of encouraging active participation on standing committees and “increasing diversity to reflect the community and serve it appropriately.” Of particular importance was the need to focus on “bringing in younger people and those with ethnic differences”

Analysis of the qualitative data revealed a unique feature of performing arts boards that may have a negative impact on intentional efforts to diversify the board, particularly with regard to socioeconomic status. Several board members from different organizations mentioned there were “minimum gift requirements” expected of every board member that may prevent some members of the community from considering board service. Those who mentioned this requirement were torn between the need for the revenue these kinds of expectations generate and the benefits of inclusion:

As important as it is to have a board that can provide wealth, it also needs to provide a reach into uncharted corners of the community that are financially challenged to bring the symphony to them. Somewhere there is a balance.

At least one person on almost half of the participating boards that provided written comments (17) argued for a new or updated orientation process. One of these individuals was highly critical of the existing process stating that “a stack of papers is not an orientation”; however, most of the comments reflected a strong desire to create processes that helped reduce the learning curve, develop rapport, avoid cliques, and include less vocal or shy members. Additionally, many board members thought an important part of the orientation process should be “to identify what board members would like to contribute and match that with what [the orchestra] needs.” A number of board members believed this matching process was vitally important so that “We can utilize each member’s skills and talents effectively.” Consider, for example, this quote:

We have a highly talented and committed board. Committees and individual board members could be utilized more effectively to fully utilize our potential as a team. Board leadership in collaboration with staff should make extra effort to understand how each board member can utilize their talents, experience, and connections to support our orchestra.

These data hold useful implications for the field in ways related to both structure and process. For example, one respondent accurately framed the disparate responses received from more than 700 board members reflecting on the structural elements of size, composition, term limits, and committee structure, asking, “What is the structure of a truly functional board going forward?” Our data indicate the size of boards participating in the self-assessment varied considerably. Some boards were quite large with more than 30 people responding to the

survey, whereas others were quite small with fewer than 13 respondents. Some board members believed a large board offered the symphony “a broader mix of gifts and personalities to advance the work,” while others thought it important to keep the board small. Those advocating for smaller boards offered both emotional reasons, such as “It is important to maintain the family quality that has always been present.” They also offered rational explanations, such as “We need to reduce the size of the board to a smaller, working board. Research shows that smaller boards with active members are far more effective.” Regardless of board size, however, whenever the issue of term limits was discussed board members consistently wrote in favor of either establishing or enforcing term limits noting the need for “fresh new members with fresh new ideas and contacts.”

Process-related comments tended to emphasize the importance of meeting etiquette, both in terms of focusing on what matters and building rapport among members of the board; increasing board engagement/participation; holding people accountable; and the importance of clarifying roles among the various decision-makers affiliated with a performing arts organization.

Although one-half of the participating boards believed they were using effective meeting practices, some board members lamented about not having enough time to talk about what really mattered, “We always seem to be in a hurry to get out of the meeting and cut any meaty discussions short.” Similarly, there were some concerns about rehashing the same topics and the need to “spend more time in the generative mode.” Board members also saw real value in building rapport among members of the board:

[It would be good to] create more of a bond among board members. New members have joined the board, but little attempt has been made to acquaint them with other board members to make them feel a part of the team.

Not surprisingly, those board members arguing for finding “ways to actively engage new board members” were from larger boards or boards with an active executive committee. As one board member from a 29 member board offered, “Seems like many new board members kind of fade away into obscurity without ever being actively involved and eventually just stop coming to meetings.” One board member was frustrated that not everyone on the board participated in the governance process, “The whole board should participate in the governance process instead of delegating almost everything to the executive committee.” Another addressed the perception of surreptitious decision-making, “Engage all members of the board. A tremendous amount is done at the executive level, there needs to be more transparency to the full board.” Another emphasized the importance of “involving board members in meaningful discussions before decisions are made.” However, all appeared to question whether the existence of an executive committee actually impeded board engagement and participation.

Accountability was discussed in two ways. First, as a responsibility to follow-through on promises and commitments—consisting of periodic review of board commitments in terms of meeting attendance, participation at events, and engagement in fundraising, among others, and through “formal assessments of performance...in a positive manner” or “in a polite way.” These same expectations were also mentioned when board members discussed the work of committees. “The board must clearly indicate the responsibilities of each committee and evaluate their success(es) in fulfilling those responsibilities.” Board members felt strongly that board service was more than “just filling seats” or “a name on the list of trustees.” A second way board members talked about accountability was as an obligation to adequately prepare for meetings and to be knowledgeable about the kinds of things that were happening in the creative communities. “The board should stay informed about the latest studies, trends, and developments in the orchestra world particularly on financial, artistic, governance, and organizational fronts.”

Striking to us as we analyzed the qualitative data were the number of different constituent groups that shared in the governance function. In addition to the clearly understood need to clarify roles and responsibilities between the board and staff, performing arts organizations also need to specify how artistic directors, music directors, guild members, auxiliary volunteers, and musicians or artists participate in leading and governing an organization. Admittedly, not every performing arts organization will have a guild or an auxiliary, and sometimes the music director and the chief executive are the same person. The point is that proper attention must be paid to clearly specifying what is expected from various organizational leaders and how those activities contribute to the overall success of an organization.

### *Fundraising*

To anyone affiliated with nonprofit organizations, it should come as no surprise that the board members believed they could do a better job raising money for the organizations they served. Although there were a few who thought that a board member's gift of time should suffice, the overwhelming majority of those who offered suggestions about how best to do better fundraising tended to focus on three main ideas. First, board members felt strongly that the expectations regarding fundraising should be made clear at the very early stages of board recruitment. As one board member wrote, "Make it *clear* in writing what is expected of each and every board member before getting on the board and remind them at appropriate times during the year."

A second theme regarding fundraising was the need for additional training. Several admitted that most fundraising was done by a "small subsection of the board" and that they had empathy for those who felt uncomfortable asking for money; yet, they also believed a little training or "showing by example" might help overcome some of the reluctance. Additionally, board members wanted to know more about the general fundraising strategy and how charitable giving fit into the overall revenue stream for the organization. Moreover, they believed this strategy should be shared with the whole board (not just discussed by the development committee) on a regular basis so that all board members understood the importance of raising money beyond ticket sales.

Finally, board members talked about the relationship between taking responsibility, follow-through, and accountability with regard to fundraising. As one board member shared, "Each board member needs a deeper understanding of his/her responsibility to identify and court potential donors of any source, individuals, foundations, grants, or corporate." Understanding, as many board members wrote, is necessary but not sufficient. In addition to making a personal gift, all board members must play an active role in raising money for the organization, whether by assisting with annual events, selling tickets/subscriptions, writing grants, connecting the organization with prospects, or cultivating donors. Once people have committed to fulfilling a fundraising role, the board members believed that the board must develop accountability mechanisms that go beyond "lip service" to assure that goals are met and obligations are fulfilled. In sum, board members recognized that responsibility for raising money started with individual understanding of roles, followed by a promise to act that would then be monitored ("in a nice way") by fellow board members so that board members would be held accountable for doing what they promised.

The qualitative comments related to fundraising add much needed depth to the quantitative data, particularly with regard to how board members think about the relationship between fundraising and the financial viability of organizations that have historically generated substantial operational revenue through ticket sales. Today, board members of performing arts organizations face declining subscription sales, changing community demographics, pressure to remain relevant and accessible to diverse audiences, and technological innovations that are altering the landscape of cultural consumption (Lynch, 2017). Boards are thinking

more creatively about how to diversify revenue streams and build fundraising capacity in ways that consider identifying new sources of charitable dollars from individuals, corporations, foundations, and local businesses as well as various earned income opportunities.

Board members are also thinking deeply about how best to improve financial oversight in ways that assure “financially and musically manageable goals,” structure “performances to coincide with financial capability,” and critically examine whether “go to fundraisers” are generating enough money to justify the investment of time required to make them a success. As one board member shared when evaluating the practicality of a long-standing fundraising event, “It doesn’t cost money, but does it raise enough money to be worth the time? Another board member offered that it is important for the board to “cultivate new sources of support...[and] improve its financial oversight of the orchestra. More attention to detail and an understanding of the funding sources and expenditures will enhance the decision-making.”

### **Limitations**

Because the original intent of the self-assessment tool is to provide nonprofit boards with specific and tailored feedback about their single organization, there are some limitations associated with this study. For example, we do not know anything about the demographics of the individuals on the board as well as other important information, such as why they have chosen to serve on the board, their experiences with serving on other boards, or what they think they are able to contribute to the board with respect to their knowledge, expertise, and/or resources. Moreover, there is self-selection bias given that the boards whose members took the self-assessment are likely to be different from other boards. While some nonprofit boards do engage in regular self-assessment because it is a recommended practice (Renz, 2016), the data from this study suggest that boards may also engage in the self-assessment process because they are experiencing challenges and would like specific direction and feedback.

In addition, it is important to acknowledge that the BoardSource survey and other self-assessment processes are subjective, self-reported evaluations of board performance. Self-reports may lend themselves to socially desired responses and common method bias (Jakobsen & Jensen, 2015; Paulhus, 1991). Moreover, the focus here is on overall board performance, with the assumption that high-performing boards lead to high-performing organizations. Admittedly, additional performance data, e.g., outcome and impact data, financial information, and stakeholder satisfaction measures, would be needed in order to test this assumption (Nicholson, Newton, & McGregor-Lowndes, 2012; Theodos & Firschein, 2016; Voss & Zannie, 2000). Also, as noted in the literature review, there may be other reasons a board would choose to undergo self-assessment, which arguably would generate alternative assumptions guided by different theoretical perspectives (e.g., change management, organizational learning, or institutional crisis). Perhaps part of the self-assessment process then should involve a step that establishes context or specifies a reason for undergoing the analysis.

### **Concluding Thoughts and Directions for Future Research**

The findings from collectively analyzing the self-assessment data for a specific subsector of nonprofits (in this case, performing arts organizations) can help to inform the broader field. They also highlight specific areas where the boards of performing arts organizations clearly require assistance. For example, our analysis of these data suggests that performing arts boards need more or better training/orientation opportunities; focused, intentional, and tailored recruitment processes; clear communication, greater role clarity and specificity regarding board performance expectations; greater understanding about best practices and

the need to add value; and time to cultivate openness and collegiality among the board members and between the board and staff. Additionally, although over 60% of the participating boards were satisfied that the budget reflected institutional priorities, a surprising number of those who responded to the open-ended questions about how best to improve performance suggested that attention to matching direction with mission and vision would aid in oversight and accountability

Although these findings may not surprise those who work with boards or study governance, these data tell a story of potential. It is true that not every respondent provided written responses, yet those who did frequently mentioned a desire for more information, more training, and more engagement opportunities. In our experience across the sector, we have heard board chairs and chief executives express concerns that they might be asking too much from their boards; yet, the story these board members tell is something quite different. In terms of more training, board members wanted to learn more about trends in the field, they wanted to learn how to collect and evaluate data, they wanted to better understand how to hold people accountable for what they promised, and they wanted to be more skilled at communicating what they know in their hearts to be true—that the arts, in whatever form, make a difference in people’s lives. Board members also wanted to learn more about each other, not just what their fellow board members did for a living, but how their peers added value to the work of the organization, why the people who sat next to them every month wanted to serve, and even a little about who each board member was as a person—their interests, hobbies, and families.

As we analyzed these data we were struck by the simplicity of this request. From our perspective, regardless of the particular nonprofit subsector, the request for more information can easily be incorporated into existing meeting time, especially if these learning opportunities are contextualized within existing operations. For example, when considering an annual fundraising event, it may be a good idea to engage in a critical analysis of how the event has performed over time and, as some board members hinted at in their remarks, whether what has always been done is worth the effort. Similarly, if board members really wanted to learn more about how the educational programs were helping young people achieve more in the arts, perhaps inviting music teachers, performing arts instructors, or band directors to a board meeting to share insights and ideas would be a good use of time. Finally, several of the organizations were in the midst of an executive transition. It seems only reasonable to conclude that boards with a quest for learning might be receptive to information and training related to how best to manage leadership turnover (whether on the board or within the organization).

Learning more about board members as individuals can easily be accomplished by incorporating social time before or after meetings, creating “spotlight” articles in the newsletter, or through engaging opening comments at meetings. Beginning each meeting with a thought-provoking question that invites board members to share their ideas or thoughts is a great way to learn more about individual interests. These questions do not need to be invasive or personal; something as simple as “what is your favorite holiday tradition” or “where is your favorite vacation spot” or “what do you enjoy to do in your spare time” provides others with a glimpse of who board members are outside of the meeting time. It may be that the only thing required is to use meeting time differently. Rather than pouring over reports that have already been distributed and should have been read prior to attendance, use meeting time to discuss things that really matter, to be generative, and to build rapport among board members and staff. This is sound advice for all board chairs and executive directors, not just those serving arts organizations.

The board members participating in this self-assessment clearly recognized the importance of recruiting the next generation of board members and leaders. There are at least three important sector-wide implications for practice here. First, it makes no logical sense to recruit



strong, bright, capable board members if there is no plan to make use of their talents. There were comments from frustrated respondents about how underutilized some board members were. Further, our own personal experiences as board members and governance researchers, underscore these concerns. While no time is wasted informing board members of their fundraising expectations, all too often, those new to the board are not quite sure how their talents (not their ability to provide or attract financial resources) might best serve the organization. Spending time with new recruits to not only share how the organization might benefit from the skills new board members bring to the work but also to learn more about what motivated each person to join or how these new board members hope to add value is essential if engagement beyond fundraising is expected. Moreover, these kinds of conversations can also combat issues related to role clarity, providing each board member with a clear indication of what is expected.

This notion of learning more about how each board member thinks about adding value could also have implications for the self-assessment process and what might be possible if board members were taught how to really add value to the organizations they govern. What if a major aspect of the self-assessment process was a “personal inventory” where board members were asked to reflect on their personal and professional strengths, their real reasons for wanting to serve on the board, and how their interests and skillsets might advance the work of the organization? This kind of exercise would not only immediately engage board members in the kind of thinking and reflection that is often desired, it would also allow for meaningful committee placements and fulfilling service.

From an organizational perspective, focusing on how board members add value would inform the recruitment process. What if, for instance, at all recruitment cycles the governance committee wrote (or updated) a formal job description for each vacant seat? The job description would detail how the next board member would build on a strong foundation of existing work and move the board and the organization forward. As one board member wrote, “It is hard to recruit board members when there are not clear objectives.” While this would require significant upfront work, the potential payoff would very likely be worth the investment of time.

One additional point regarding recruitment using board talent effectively, in our practice and throughout the research presented here, we regularly field comments from board members who seem frustrated that major decisions are relegated to an executive committee. The board members who provided written responses to the self-assessment expressed a strong desire to be involved in the work of the organization and the board. They wanted to learn, to be involved, and to add value (beyond fundraising). For organizations that use an executive committee, it might be useful to think about how best to engage the whole board in decision-making.

With regard to fundraising, we learned that the development plan must be contextualized. It is not enough to tell board members that they need to raise money, we need to help them understand the leverage that can be created with philanthropic dollars and provide them with the language and skills needed to share that potential future with donor prospects. Performing arts organizations, specifically, are in a unique position to develop business models that generate revenue. For years, these organizations have successfully managed both the business and service aspects of a mission; thus, it only seems reasonable that this same thinking can inform the creation of new enterprises that build a stable source of income into the future. In fact, several respondents referenced the potential for earned income opportunities that would generate new or additional sources of revenue. What are the hidden opportunities in shrinking audiences, declining ticket sales, etc.? Although controversial, Pallotta’s (2012) notion of “increasing the size of the pie” might be exactly what is needed. Not only would it bring more people to the symphony (or related performances), it could also bring additional resources and engage more community members.

Another point related to fundraising, i.e., attracting new sources of income and “increasing the size of the pie,” is related to the number of times board members referenced the importance of revisiting the mission. In resource-scarce environments, the potential for nonprofit organizations of all types to be lured away from purpose at the promise of new income streams is a real concern. Spending time talking about and focusing attention on what matters provides board members with the script they need to leverage resources in support of a clearly identified purpose as well as the strength to abandon things that are no longer working.

Given that boards have legal obligations to exercise reasonable care, guard against self-interest, and remain faithful to the organizational mission, it seems only reasonable to include suggestions about how our findings might be used to improve overall performance related to oversight as well as to the ability to achieve the stated purpose of the organization. Our findings suggest that clarifying the organization’s purpose as well as being responsive to community expectations would not only assure that all board members were on the same page working toward a unified purpose but would also ensure accountability given that programming would be reflective of community expectations.

Our data indicate that board members expressed concerns that the mission was not clearly defined, which meant that oftentimes programming and approaches to fundraising were outdated or “stale,” simply repeating what had worked in the past without proper attention to inherent changes in the performing arts industry. As a result, several participants reported financial struggles that required the need to have “a realistic balanced budget” so that there was not an overreliance on the endowment (when one existed). Perhaps the best advice we might offer to those in the field came from one of our respondents:

The board needs to reach consensus on the meaning of the mission (as we define it today and going forward) and develop a vision of the organization that is vital, energized, and reflects the potential of this organization in spite of declining ticket sales and an aging audience base. We need to develop a simple strategic plan with goals, timeframe, and interim measurables we can use to evaluate the organization's progress against the desired direction—our “report card.” And we need to act as enablers, thinking big, expansively about what could be. Make decisions that have good analysis about how new programming fits with our strategy and how we will finance those decisions.

By their own admission, board members recognized that all too often the orchestra and symphony tend to be regarded as “elitist or snobby.” Even so, board members talked about the importance of shedding that image and being more deliberate about engaging the community (very broadly defined to include existing patrons, families, schools, music educators, and music associations) in deciding programming, setting strategy, defining the educational mission, and “getting the word out.” Board members believed that investments in these kinds of activities would allow performing arts organizations to “take back their narrative” while improving visibility, strengthening relationships with community members and local businesses, increasing ticket sales, and diversifying audiences. Additionally, focused attention on engaging with the community, they felt, has the potential to accomplish the related goals of attracting young people to performances and paving the way for a new generation of board members.

Although board members recognized the importance of community outreach and audience development, several admitted to not really knowing how to do this or how to change audience demographics; further, many struggled with how to “define the market.” Perhaps learning more about who is filling the seats at each concert or conducting community surveys to

determine the types of performances that audiences are interested in attending might be useful. Continuing to provide the same programming each year and then wondering why people do not attend seems like an exercise in futility. It might also be useful to learn from peers about how other symphonies have engaged the community in ways that broaden creative possibilities or engage diverse audiences. Additionally, it will be imperative to the future success of many nonprofit organizations to capitalize on the use of social media to engage audiences (and other clientele or stakeholders), communicate information, attract resources, and demonstrate accountability.

Finally, consistent with recommendations offered by Gill, Flynn, and Reissing (2005), and given that the assessment process is expected to facilitate thoughtful reflection about how well boards and their individual members perform essential tasks and important functions, learning more about what boards do after the assessment process is an important next step in this research. We know that some boards will continue the assessment process with BoardSource and contract with a consultant who will use the results of the assessment to structure a planning session or retreat, while others will complete the assessment and do follow-up on their own. Along with our partners at BoardSource, we are currently engaged in efforts to document the organizational learning that has taken place in both of these groups.

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

### **Notes**

1. The free online board performance self-assessment tool called the Board Check-up can be found at the following website: [www.boardcheckup.com](http://www.boardcheckup.com).

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## Author Biographies

**Judith L. Millesen** is Professor and director of the Master of Public Administration program at the College of Charleston. Her research has appeared in a variety of journals including *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Nonprofit Quarterly*, *Public Integrity*, and *Voluntas*.

**Joanne G. Carman** is Associate Professor and the Coordinator for the Graduate Certificate in the Nonprofit Management program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research has appeared in a variety of journals including *American Journal of Evaluation*, *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, *International Review of Public Administration*, *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, and *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*.