Small Nonprofit Collaboration: Exploring practice implications for rural organizations

Terry Fernsler, PhD, Corresponding Author

Nonprofit Studies, School of Social Work

Health and Behavioral Sciences | JMU MSC 4303

235 Martin Luther King Jr. Way | Harrisonburg, Virginia 22807

fernslts@jmu.edu

and

Karen A. Ford, DSW

School of Strategic Leadership Studies

Lakeview Hall | JMU MSC 1505

298 Port Republic Road | Harrisonburg, Virginia 22807

forka@jmu.edu

Abstract

A growing and current body of literature discuss collaborative best practices, pitfalls, funder pressures, and present case studies. Missing from this literature is the representative voices of small nonprofits and their views regarding collaborative activities designed to reduce fixed costs, reach more clients, maximize fundraising, and manage external environments. Small nonprofits have been encouraged to consider collaboration to leverage their resources and viability. Many rural nonprofit organizations can be classified as small nonprofits. These organizations respond to local needs with people deeply invested in their communities. In this study, representatives of small nonprofit organizations were surveyed to learn whether collaboration differs in small nonprofit organizations from findings in the literature about nonprofit organizations of all sizes. The information gained from this research can be used by leaders of rural nonprofit programs to guide their understanding of successful collaboration and barriers for small nonprofits.

Introduction and Literature Review

Your life will become better by making other lives better

-- *Will Smith (Cyrus, 2016)*

Most practitioners understand, at least conceptually, the value of working with other nonprofits, government agencies, and more frequently today, businesses to accomplish important public purposes. The subject of interorganizational collaboration has been in the human/social services literature since the 1970's (Reitan, 1998) and it appears that the understanding of collaboration with its intendent questions and issues remain to this day (Friend, 2000). A growing body of literature encourages nonprofit organizations—and in particular small nonprofits—to consider collaborative efforts to reduce costs, reach more people, and maximize fundraising (Berkowitz, 2001; Chen & Krauskopf, 2013; Foster & Meinhard, 2002; Hiland, 2003; Irvin, 2007; McLaughlin, 2010; Ricke-Kiely, Parker, & Barnet, 2013; Sinha, 2013; Wilson, 2013). The rise in interest surrounding nonprofit collaboration is to be applauded because the creation of each nonprofit organization is a collaboration between individuals itself.

Collaboration is closely linked to and a synonym of cooperation. Cooperation is a word we all likely know from childhood both from our parents and our teachers. Many of us needed assistance to be nudged into cooperative behaviors and the outcomes were generally positive. The move to collaboration, then, is not too much of a stretch from an individual level, although it is more nuanced on the organizational level.

The simple definition of collaborate, per Merriam-Webster.com (2016), is to work with another person or group in order to achieve or do something. More specific to this work is Merriam-Webster.com's full definition of the word: "to cooperate with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected." The organizational move to cooperating with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected often requires assistance, pressure and/or support. Power differentials between organizations are often a perceived or real issue connected to resource dependencies and community status (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve & Tsai, 2004; Snavely & Tracy, 2002; Huxham, 1996).

501(c)(3) public charities are the largest category of the twenty-nine types of tax-exempt nonprofit organizations defined by the Internal Revenue Code, comprising over two-thirds of all registered nonprofits (McKeever, 2015). McKeever's Urban Institute study showed that small organizations constitute the majority of public charities, yet they make up less than two percent of all public charity expenses ($30.1 billion) (Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2015). The motivations, benefits and costs of small nonprofits that collaborate may differ from those of larger organizations. In this study we partition small nonprofits from their larger, better resourced counterparts to determine what motivates small nonprofits to collaborate, or why they do not.

Small Nonprofit Organizations

Many rural nonprofit organizations find themselves in this category of small nonprofit organization. Sixty-six percent of nonprofits in the United States have less than $500,000 in annual expenditures (McKeever, 2015). Seventy-four percent of nonprofits organizations active in the arts, education, health care, and human services can be classified as small nonprofits (Roeger, Blackwood, & Pettijohn, 2012). Roeger, Blackwood, & Pettijohn's (2012) findings were very similar: nonprofits with budgets under $100,000 make up 45% of the sector. Nonprofits with budgets between $100,000 and $500,000 make up 29% of the mix.

In rural areas, an even larger percentage of nonprofits are small. According to Neuhoff and Dunckelman (2011), 73% of nonprofit organizations in rural areas have annual budgets of less than $500,000, with a median annual budget of $156,000 (compared to a median annual budget of $296,000 for urban nonprofits). Rural areas account for only eight percent of the total spending in the nonprofit sector. The nonprofit sector is three times smaller in the rural United States on a per capita basis than it is in urban areas.

Small nonprofits are the organizations that respond to local needs with people deeply invested in their communities. The demand for community-specific services is appreciated and is critical to building dynamic and responsive neighborhoods and towns. The services provided contribute to the overall quality of life and expanding the social safety net. Many of these nonprofit organizations, which have always run on a shoestring budget and volunteer staffing, now find themselves stretched further than ever and looking at cutting services or shuttering operations.

Given the current funding environment, small nonprofits especially have been encouraged to consider various collaborative options to leverage their resources and viability. A sample of recent literature (Chen & Krauskopf, 2013; McLaughlin, 2010; Ricke-Kiely, Parker, & Barnet, 2013; Sinha, 2013; Wilson, 2013) discusses collaborative best practices, pitfalls, funder pressures, and present case studies. Collaboration takes place out of self-interest on some level, however organizations through their board and staff are able to choose a range of behaviors on the collaboration spectrum (Irvin, 2007; Reilly, 2001; Snavely & Tracy, 2002; Sowa, 2009).

Literature on Nonprofit Collaboration

Theories relating to why nonprofit organizations exist and how they operate focus primarily on economic theories. Weisbrod (1975) and Hansmann (1980) wrote extensively about market failure, in which demand for a good or service is too low for the for-profit sector to provide. In some cases where the market does not work, government may step in to provide goods or services but may not be able to fill the needs of all. This government failure (Weisbrod,

1975) is satisfied by nonprofits stepping in on behalf of people marginalized from the good or service. Contract failure occurs when there is a breakdown in the relationship between buyer and seller, such as when a third party benefits. In contract failure, nonprofits may serve as intermediaries. In all these cases, nonprofits fill gaps in service or products provided by the public and business sectors. This typically leads to institutional theories in which nonprofit organizations structure themselves according to what is prevalent in the field. Scott (1995) explains how organizations strive for legitimacy through structures and cultures that are similar to each other. Market forces increase the value of collaborating in order to grow and compartmentalize.

Pluralistic theory (Grobman, 2015) is when the public decides nonprofits are needed because government fails to respond at all to needs, even though the government could provide them more efficiently. Nonprofits are entrepreneurial and responsive when government is not. Organizations, under this theory, acquire needed resources through interactions, such as collaborations.

The task of theories is to explain. There is no unitary theory to explain nonprofit organizations. Rather, there is a rich array of theories which explain the presence of nonprofit organizations. The theories fall into areas such as public goods theories, trust related theories, and economic theories under which the theories above may be placed. As the sector continues to evolve, future theories will build upon these and adapt to emerging areas of nonprofit activity.

Small nonprofits may collaborate in order to “scale up,” an isomorphic tendency learned from the corporate sector. On the other hand, just as state and local governments may serve as laboratories of democracy, entrepreneurial nonprofits may serve as “laboratories of public benefit.”

A National Council on Aging (2005) survey found that "almost half of the local organizations (aging services) with fewer that twenty-five volunteers do not pool their resources for any activity." In 2005, only twenty-nine percent of organizations indicated they would be interested in collaborative efforts. However, only twelve years later the National Council on Aging (2017) website contained two pages of references regarding collaboration activities as well a tab with resources on partnering with the national office (National Council on Aging, 2017). Times change, resources change and priorities change.

Missing from much of the literature is the representative voice of small nonprofits and their views and experiences regarding collaborative activities designed to reduce fixed costs, reach more clients, maximize fundraising, and manage external environments. Collaboration can be time consuming to be effective. Shared goals must be identified and competing goals acknowledged. The participants must be committed to working together and developing the joint commitment takes time and emotional energy (Campbell & Binstock, 2011).

Having fewer resources available, common among smaller nonprofit organizations, provides encouragement toward collaborative activities (Guo & Acar, 2005; Campbell, 2003; Irvin, 2007). Fiscal resources certainly impact an organization's interest and ability to collaborate. Juxtaposed to much of the literature targeting small nonprofits, and nonprofits in general, are the findings of Guo and Acar (2005) indicating that among other things larger budget size and those not operating in social service or education arenas are key indicators of more formal and successful collaborative activities. However, missing from the discussion are capacity issues relating to staffing patterns and physical location. These are issues that impact small nonprofits, especially those operating in small cities or towns and rural settings.

All in all, organizations of all sizes seem to be learning there are both benefits and costs to collaboration. Fears, founded and unfounded, are expressed by nonprofits of all sizes. Nonprofit organizations indicated the benefits include trust as a motivator for reciprocal behavior (Snavely & Tracy, 2002), improved reputation, strengthening competitive advantage, and closing service gaps (Sowa, 2008), improvement of quality and efficiency (Kohm, LaPiana, & Gowdy, 2000), providing more services (Graddy & Chen, 2006), growth, access to transfer capital and increase in donations (Galaskiewicz, Bielefeld, & Dowell, 2006), to acquire resources, reduce uncertainty, enhance legitimacy, attain goals, and increase organizational learning (Brass, et al,, 2004), and improve effectiveness (Hutt & Walker, 2006).

Distance from each other and from prospective resources complicate the ability of organizations to collaborate in rural communities (Snavely & Tracy, 2000). On average, in rural America, there is one nonprofit for every 50 square miles, while in urban areas there is one nonprofit every half of a square mile. Rural nonprofits serve much larger areas, with highly dispersed populations to serve and little or no low-cost transportation available to serve them. Nonprofit leaders must confront difficult decisions about limiting services (Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011).

Research has shown that certain conditions increase the likelihood of collaborating among nonprofit organizations:

1. That collaboration is more likely among smaller organizations (Mano, 2014),
2. Collaboration is more likely among older organizations (Brass, et al., 2004; Graddy & Chen, 2006; Kohm, LaPiana, &Gosdy, 2000),
3. Collaboration is more likely to occur when funders pressure an organization to work with other organizations (Graddy & Chen, 2006; Sowa, 2008);

4. Location (proximity) influences collaboration likelihood;
5. Financial security increases the likelihood of collaboration (Snavely & Tracy, 2012), and;
6. Collaboration is increased with certain types of service (Kohm, LaPiana, &Gosdy, 2000).

Experienced professionals can benefit from the research on collaboration spanning the last twenty years. However, much of this research is contained in journals that do not always find their way into the hands of practitioners in the field. To be sure, there are organizations designed to meet the needs of nonprofit organizations such as the National Council on Nonprofits, the National Center on Nonprofit Enterprise, National Council of Nonprofit Associations and BoardSource. Without a way to disseminate and home in on collaboration, this information can easily become lost in the multitude of publications offered by these and other organizations.

Making knowledge regarding the conditions that increase the likelihood of collaborating may take some of the mystery or trepidation out of organizations considering collaborative activity and will highlight areas to address when considering collaborative activities. Understanding whether the perceptions and practices of small rural nonprofit organizations differ from those of nonprofit organizations more generally will inform nonprofits in rural areas and aid in their drive to be more effective.

The data: What drives collaboration in small nonprofits

Measuring the attributes of small nonprofits that collaborate helps students and professionals identify those organizations and settings that are more likely to collaborate. For organizations, knowing key attributes assists them in identifying the attributes they may want to strengthen to increase the likelihood of collaboration.

Who collaborates among small nonprofit organizations and their motivations

Some of the challenges facing small agencies impacted the number of respondents in the study. We can, however, shed light on reported thoughts and a variety of collaborative activities reportedly leading to possible next steps and collaborations with others.

Since we were interested in learning whether collaboration differed in small nonprofit organizations from findings in the literature about nonprofit organizations of all sizes, we tested for variables found in the research literature listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Variables Affecting Collaboration of Small Nonprofit Organizations

Size of organization
Age of organization
As a means of increasing access to resources, predictability, and legitimacy
Funder pressure
Financial security
Type of service

To find a sample of small nonprofit organizations (annual budgets of $500,000), we took two tracks. First, a United Way Executive Director offered to send a notice to participate in the survey to United Way agencies through the United Way Small Cities listserve. The listserve serves United Ways in smaller communities which tend to have a greater percentage of smaller nonprofit organizations (Grønbjerg & Paarlberg, 2001). . The Small Cities listserve provides access to thousands of nonprofit organizations through hundreds of local United Ways (L. Toni-Holsinger, personal communication, February 26, 2016). Overcoming the layers of access to these organizations—encouraging United Ways to post or send notices, then getting organizations to participate—proved challenging. We cannot know how many representatives of nonprofit organizations saw the invitation to participate in the survey because local United Ways mediated whether to pass the survey along to their member organizations. While we cannot accurately calculate the response rate, 25 organizational representatives responded from the Small Cities listserve.

The second method of finding respondents was to search the websites of local United Ways in communities with which the authors were familiar in several mid-Atlantic states, the southern Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest. While we found numerous organizations on these sites, many did not have their own websites and/or contact information, and not all met the annual budget size criterion as noted in their Forms 990 on Guidestar. Nevertheless, email messages were sent to 120 of these organizations inviting them to participate in the survey. Of the 120, twenty-two responded, for an 18.3% response rate. Finally, nineteen local organizations were sent a link to an online survey, with five respondents, for a 26.3% response rate.

The total sample was 52 small nonprofit human services organizations. The bias for human services organizations prevented us from adequately testing whether collaboration is predicted by other types of nonprofit service.

Not all respondents answered each question, as seen in Table 2. None responded to all questions.

Table 2.
Sample size of Examined Variables

Survey question	Variable name	Number of responses
What is the size of your annual operating budget?	Finsize	44
How many full-time paid staff does your organization employ?	FTstaff	42
How many part-time paid staff does your organization employ?	PTstaff	39
How long has your organization been incorporated as a 501(c)(3)?	Yrsinc	47
Our organization is successful in meeting its mission	Meetmiss	43
Funders have suggested or required collaborative activities	Fndurge	43
We have sufficient cash reserves to see us through most potential cash flow challenges or revenue	Reserves	47
Has your organization recently collaborated or currently collaborated with another organization	Constant	43

N = 52

Results

Logistic regression was conducted to predict collaboration by size (operating budget, staff size), age (number of years incorporated), success in meeting the mission, pressure from funders, and financial security (presence of sufficient cash reserves). The model adequately accounts for the dependent variable (chi square = 10.490, p = .162, df = 7). Table 3 shows that the test for the model is not significant. Nagelkerke's R^2 of .337, Cox & Snell R^2 of .226, and R^2_L of .230 indicates the effect size is not large.

The Wald criterion demonstrated that only meeting the mission (*p* = .050) and years incorporated (*p* = .072) made a significant contribution to prediction. Organization size, pressure from funders, and financial security (reserves) were not significant predictors for collaboration in small nonprofit organizations.

Table 3.
Variables in the Equation, Seven Predictor Model

								95% C.I.for EXP(B)	
		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	Lower	Upper
Step 1	Finsize	-.563	.544	1.070	1	.301	.570	.196	1.654
	FTstaff	.602	.396	2.311	1	.128	1.825	.840	3.964
	PTstaff	-.439	.417	1.108	1	.292	.644	.284	1.460
	Yrsinc	-.747	.416	3.229	1	.072	.474	.210	1.070
	Meetmiss	-1.410	.718	3.856	1	.050	.244	.060	.997
	Fndrurge	-.631	.640	.974	1	.324	.532	.152	1.864
	Reserves	-.320	1.055	.092	1	.761	.726	.092	5.737
	Constant	10.103	5.883	2.949	1	.086	24425.892		

Results were also analyzed using qualitative data. Surveys revealed that 96% of respondents have discussed collaborative ventures. Most respondents (76.7%) reported that their organization has collaborated or is currently collaborating with other organizations. Respondents reported that 49% considered their area of operations to be in a small city setting while 39% considered their area of operations to be in a rural setting. The remaining 12% indicated they operated in a suburban or urban setting. Indicating smallness, 40% identified as grassroots organizations.

Size

We used the organization’s annual budget size and number of full-time and part-time staff to further delineate organization size. Budget sizes were fairly evenly (and not normally) distributed, with twelve in the $0 to $100,000 range, fifteen in the $101,000 to $300,000 range, nine in the $301,000 to $500,000 range and eight in the $501,000 to $700,000 range, as learned from the survey responses. In our sample fifty-three percent of organizations responding had under $300,000 in annual expenditures Efforts were focused on organizations with budgets of under $500,000; otherwise more organizations in the highest range could have been found. Respondent organizations tended to have zero to two full-time employees (64% of respondents) and three to six part-time employees (79.5% of respondents)

In this sample, size of the organization was not statistically significant in predicting collaboration; all organizations were small and there was no statistically significant difference in what might be considered subcategories of small size. More than 63% of respondents have collaborated, indicating a high collaboration rate among small nonprofit organizations.

Age

Age of the organization was measured by the number of years incorporated. While there was some range in the ages of organizations in the sample, most (37, or 78.7%) were at least 15 years old. The age of the organization was statistically significant in predicting collaboration in our sample.

Meeting the Mission

We used meeting the organizational mission as a measure using collaboration to increase access to resources, predictability, and legitimacy. An organization that met its mission well was presumed to have access to sufficient resources, and was rated high in predictability and legitimacy. Most respondents (95.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that their organization was meeting its mission. Meeting the mission was statistically significant in predicting collaboration in this study.

Pressure from Funders

Another question asked whether collaboration was more likely if funders pressured the organization to collaborate. Most (88.4%) respondents indicated that funders have encouraged collaboration. Pressure from funders did not prove to be statistically significant in predicting collaboration in our sample, however.

Financial Security

The number of respondents were almost evenly divided between those who felt their organization had sufficient cash reserves and those who did not. While most respondents (76.7%) reported that their organization has collaborated or is currently collaborating with other organizations and 96% of the respondents have discussed collaborating. Predicting collaboration by financial security of an organization was not statistically significant.

Notably, when identifying factors that would lead an organization to consider collaboration, 71% indicated that the potential to improve or expanding the scope and quality of programs was a paramount factor demonstrating the fidelity to agency mission. Meeting finance and resource needs were a reason for 61% of respondents to consider a collaborative venture, confirming the quantitative findings of access to resources as a predictor of collaboration. The two other resource-based areas of consideration for collaboration were co-location (52%), and shared administrative services with a likeminded agency (38%). The preferred type of collaboration identified was single program based and time limited (63%).

When determining a potential collaboration, partner goodness-of-fit was the key consideration. A reason not to collaborate was the lack of a good fit, indicating the importance of mission and organizational programming in the decision-making process. Having support and or consultation and training available was an important consideration to 59% of respondents.

Having no readily identifiable service or organizational needs in place was a reason for not actively pursuing collaboration opportunities.

Specifically looking at barriers to collaboration, respondents noted the top barriers, in order of importance, were:

- time constraints;
- mission and culture alignment;
- funding equity and concerns;
- staffing/volunteer resources;
- governance issues/concerns.

Twelve individuals who completed the survey indicated that they would be willing to talk with the researchers in greater detail. The researchers were able to contact five of these nonprofit professionals. Trust, linked to both individuals and the collaborating agency, was the key finding from the respondents. The amount of time effective collaboration required was the second most mentioned issue. These findings are consistent with the written survey results.

Limitations

Finding contact information for small nonprofit organizations was difficult resulting in the relatively small sample size. However the sample is sufficient for the tests when using a *p* value of .10 for statistical significance.

We selected human resource services organizations because they tend to be smaller organizations, and they are diverse within the human services field. We intentionally selected a small city listserve, along with a convenience sample of known small nonprofit organizations, to better find the desired sample of small nonprofit organizations. Further research should consider a larger sample size and official support from umbrella organizations such as the United Way

Worldwide. While size of the prospect organizations for the survey was screened by annual budgets of $500,000 or less eight respondents, who were kept in the results, reported annual budgets of between $500,000 and $700,000.

The data came from organizations who volunteered to take the survey. Organizations that collaborate may be more apt to self-select to this survey, especially if there is a stigma—perceived or actual—in reporting that one's organization does not collaborate. We attempted to ameliorate this by keeping responses confidential, but confidentiality is not always sufficient. The level of response from organizations that do not consider the use of collaboration may be quite low. Therefore, we suggest that further research should be designed to more effectively include organizations that do not collaborate.

Out of our control were capacity issues endemic to small nonprofits, which may have had an impact on the time organizations had to devote to a survey. Capacity issues also influence having the time to insure up to date contact information, social media sites and front desk staffing options.

The literature also indicates that collaboration is used to identify customer needs (Hutt & Walker, 2004); we did not include a measure for this variable in our survey.

Discussion for Small Nonprofit Collaboration

In this study, Meeting the Mission is represented in the survey by increasing access to resources, predictability, and legitimacy. The Meeting the Mission variable and Age of the Organization were the only two variables that were statistically significant in predicting collaboration among small nonprofit organizations. This confirms prior research (Brass, et al., 2004; Brass, Galaskiewicz, Grive, &Tsai, 2004; Galaskiewicz, Bielefield, & McDowell, 2006; Graddy & Chen, 2006; Kohm, LaPiana, &Gowdy, 2000; Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2015) that collaboration is predicted for successful and older nonprofit organizations of all sizes. The remaining variables—size, pressure from funders, and sufficient reserves—did not confirm prior research and may indicate differences in small nonprofit organizations.

Knowing that access to resources, predictability, and legitimacy (as measured in this study by success in meeting the mission) along with the age of the organization were statistically significant in predicting collaboration behaviors for small nonprofit organizations provides a platform for further research and consulting strategies. Additionally, identifying a venue for nonprofits to explore collaborative opportunities in their communities through partnerships with universities, United Ways and other local nonprofit alliances or groups is critical to advancing knowledge about and the realities of collaborative ventures.

The barriers to collaborating faced by small nonprofit organizations are relevant to rural nonprofits. Rural nonprofit leaders might find it more productive to expand efforts on some potential barriers such as mission and culture alignment or funding equity. Some concerns, such as time availability and staffing/volunteer availability to devote to collaborative efforts, are capacity issues that may be difficult to overcome in rural areas.

However, Neuhoff and Dunckelman (2011) noted some organizations that altered their program to minimize distance barriers to meeting the mission by going to sites where the beneficiaries already convene (e.g., at a school or church) or by moving programs from after-school hours to weekends or other uninterrupted blocks of time. Another strategy they found was a local group affiliating with a state or national nonprofit federated organization. These federated organizations offer a brand and reputation that funders recognize and trust. Many also offer their affiliate organizations assistance in applying for grants and contacts with corporations.

Some even provide pass-through funding to affiliates. Joining these federated organizations potentially offer at least four important resources to help meet the mission:

- Training and professional development opportunities;
- An opportunity for local leaders to build relationships with their peers and share ideas;
- Recruiting assistance and access to a larger alumni network;
- Access to proven programs, evaluation, and performance measurement tools. This can increase program effectiveness and can help save the cost of developing a program from scratch.

A few national nonprofit networks have experimented with unique structures for serving rural areas, although Neuhoff and Dunckelman (2011) were not able to determine whether those innovations were effective or sustainable. These included encouraging urban affiliates to reach out into neighboring rural areas, bringing neighboring urban and rural affiliates together in a partnership or merger, setting up multi-county rural affiliates, and creating one statewide organization instead of a state office and multiple local affiliates. All of these approaches require an increased level of collaboration between affiliates, which cannot be forced; national nonprofits such as Communities in Schools and Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, have observed that top-down mandates for collaboration and consolidation frequently fail. Nevertheless, their willingness to experiment is encouraging.

Many of the nation's largest national networks—Communities in Schools, Boys and Girls Clubs, Teach For America, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)—have invested heavily in rural communities. These organizations do it from a sense of "filling the gaps" in mission, expanding their services to rural areas with high levels of need and low levels of services. Sometimes rural affiliates can be incubators of program innovation (Neuhoff and Dunckelman, 2011); financial constraints force rural affiliates to be highly disciplined and creative with their resources, leading to the development of new and innovative solutions. In addition, rural nonprofit affiliates are much more likely to be a “big fish in a small pond” (Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011) with a heightened ability to work closely with key local decision makers to align resources. Finally, rural nonprofit organizations often find they have greater access to political channels, given the influence of legislators representing rural areas at both the state and national levels.

Other potential collaborations that can be strengthened include those with government agencies or government-funded agencies, such as collaborations between Cooperative Extension offices and 4-H clubs, or the Corporation for National and Community Service and many social service and human service nonprofits. In all these cases, local nonprofit organizations should be careful not to cede too much power to the national partners.

The turmoil to nonprofit organizations caused by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to have long-lasting effects on them. The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation (Searce and Wang, 2020) commissioned a study about resilient nonprofits have been during 2020. Organizations that recognized new opportunities, including communicating more openly with other organizations and tended the cultivation and stewardship of relationships among, fared best. The pandemic has brought sharp clarity to the intersection of health, employment, and housing issues and how greater collaboration across disciplines will be more vital for small and rural nonprofits in meeting their missions in a changing environment. This increases the importance of collaborations even beyond the pandemic.

Collaboration is not for everyone. For many rural nonprofits, there may not be an obvious collaboration to join, and not all networks provide real benefits to their members. Yet collaborating is becoming increasingly important for nonprofit organizations of all sizes (Austin, 2010) as funders and stakeholders recognize the interrelatedness of social concerns (Byrne, 1998) and want to have a greater impact on resolving seemingly intractable issues. Knowing what encourages collaboration may help small nonprofit organizations focus on their strengths and resources they can bring to working with others and prevent a discussion of deficits when presenting the topic of collaboration.

Nonprofit management and leadership in rural communities requires a combination of often unique skills and knowledge. Building on past, present and future research enhances the commitment nonprofit professionals and students have to moving the sector forward with confidence.

References

Austin, J. E. (2010). *The collaboration challenge: How nonprofits and businesses succeed through strategic alliances* (Vol. 109). John Wiley & Sons.

Berkowitz, B. (2001). Studying the outcomes of community-based coalitions. *American journal of community psychology*, *29*(2), 213-227.

Brass, D. J., Galaskiewicz, J., Greve, H. R., & Tsai, W. (2004). Taking stock of networks and organizations: A multilevel perspective. *Academy of management journal*, *47*(6), 795-817.

Byrne, D. (1998). *Complexity Theory and the Social Sciences: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Campbell, A. L. (2003). *How policies make citizens: Senior political activism and the American welfare state*. Princeton University Press.

Campbell, A. L. & Binstock, R. H. (2011). Politics and aging in the United States. In *Handbook of aging and the social sciences* (pp. 265-279). Academic Press.

Chen, B., & Krauskopf, J. (2013). Integrated or disconnected? Examining formal and informal networks in a merged nonprofit organization. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, *23*(3), 325-345.

Cyrus. (2016). 20 Will Smith Quotes That Will Inspire You. (June 7). Retrieved from https://www.goalcast.com/2016/06/07/20-will-smith-quotes-that-will-inspire-you/. (December 30, 2019).

Foster, M. K., & Meinhard, A. G. (2002). A regression model explaining predisposition to collaborate. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *31*(4), 549-564.

Friend, M. (2000). Myths and misunderstandings about professional collaboration. *Remedial and Special Education*, *21*(3), 130-160.

Galaskiewicz, J., Bielefeld, W., & Dowell, M. (2006). Networks and organizational growth: A study of community based nonprofits. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *51*(3), 337-380.

Graddy, E. A., & Chen, B. (2006). Influences on the size and scope of networks for social service delivery. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *16*(4), 533-552.

Grobman, G. M. (2018). *An introduction to the nonprofit sector: A practical approach for the twenty-first century*. White Hat Communications.

Grønbjerg, K. A., & Paarlberg, L. (2001). Community variations in the size and scope of the nonprofit sector: Theory and preliminary findings. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *30*(4), 684-706.

Guo, C., & Acar, M. (2005). Understanding collaboration among nonprofit organizations: Combining resource dependency, institutional, and network perspectives. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *34*(3), 340-361.

Hansmann, H. B. (1980). The role of nonprofit enterprise. *The Yale law journal*, *89*(5), 835-901.

Hiland, M. L. (2003). Nonprofit mergers. *Consulting to Management*, *14*(4), 11.

Hutt, M. D., & Walker, B.A. (2006). A network perspective of account manager performance. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *21*(7), 466-473.

Huxham, C. (Ed.). (1996). *Creating collaborative advantage*. Sage.

Irvin, R. A. (2007). Collaboration and barter. *Financing nonprofits: Putting theory into practice*, 207-226.

Kohm, A., La Piana, D., & Gowdy, H. (2000). Strategic restructuring: Findings from a study of integrations and alliances among nonprofit social service and cultural organizations in the United States.

Mano, R. S. (2014). Social media and online health services: A health empowerment perspective to online health information. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *39*, 404-412.

McKeever, B. O. (2015). The nonprofit sector in brief 2015. Urban Institute.

McLaughlin, T. A. (2010). *Nonprofit mergers and alliances*. John Wiley & Sons.

Merriam-Webster.com (2016). Retrieved from http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/collaboration.

National Council on Aging (2005). National Council on Aging. Retrieved from https://www.ncoa.org/.

National Council on Aging (2017). National Council on Aging. Retrieved from https://www.ncoa.org/.

Neuhaff, A, & Dunckelman, A. (2011). Small but Tough: Nonprofits it Rural America. Boston: Bridgespan Group. Retrieved from file:///F:/Rural%20Nonprofits/Small-but-Tough_-Nonprofits-in-Rural-America.pdf.

Reilly, B. (2001). *Democracy in divided societies: Electoral engineering for conflict management*. Cambridge University Press.

Reitan, T. C. (1998). Theories of interorganizational relations in the human services. *Social Service Review*, *72*(3), 285-309.

Ricke-Kiely, T. A., Parker, J., & Barnet, T. (2013). Nonprofit Mergers: An Implementation Plan. *Administration in Social Work*, *37*(2), 158-170.

Roeger, K. L., Blackwood, A. S., & Pettijohn, S. L. (2012). *The nonprofit almanac 2012*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.

Searce, D. & Wang, J. (2020). *Resilience in 2020: Field Research on how Nonprofits are Faring amid Crisis and Disruption.* Washington, DC: National Center for Family Philanthropy. Retrieved from doi.org/10.15868/socialsector.

Sinha, R. (2013). *Food and Poverty: the political economy of confrontation* (Vol. 4). Routledge.

Snavely, K., & Tracy, M. B. (2002). Development of trust in rural nonprofit collaborations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *31*(1), 62-83.

Sowa, J. E. (2008). The collaboration decision in nonprofit organizations: Views from the front line. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*.

Svinicki, M., & McKeachie, W. J. (2011). Experimental Learning: Case-Based, Problem-Based, and Reality-Based. *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research and Theory for College and University Teachers, 14*.

Weisbrod, B. A. (1975). Toward a theory of the voluntary non-profit sector in a three-sector economy. In E. S. Phelps (Ed.), *Altruism, morality, and economic theory* (pp. 171-195). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Wilson, W. J. (2012). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. University of Chicago Press.