Organizational capacity of nonprofit organizations in rural areas of the United States: A scoping

review

Abstract

Rural America is facing a plethora of problems related to poverty, crime, health, and education. Nonprofit organizations serve a vital role in rural communities by providing services and advocacy to residents. Yet, it is unknown if rural nonprofits have the means to effectively address the complex issues before them. This study examines the results of scoping review which characterizes the state of empirical knowledge regarding the organizational capacity of rural nonprofits in the United States. Fifteen articles from the past decade uncovered challenges and strengths related to organizational capacity, though more research is necessary to inform funders and educators.

Keywords: rural nonprofits; organizational capacity; capacity building

**Practice Highlights**

● Despite minimal financial resources, rural nonprofits were engaged in creative problem-solving and implementing innovative solutions through building peer networks and fostering partnerships to meet the needs of their communities.

● Areas of challenge for rural nonprofits included resource development, technology, recruitment and retention, leadership, evaluation, and programmatic issues related to rural contextual factors.

● Further research is needed in most domains of organizational capacity in rural nonprofits including resource development, financial accountability, human resources, strategic planning, and communications – among others.

**Introduction**

Approximately 60 million individuals – slightly over 19 percent of the United States (U.S.) population – reside in rural areas (United States Census Bureau, 2016). While the physical landscape of rural America is diverse – rolling fields of corn, bountiful mountain ranges, or stark deserts – the social image of rural America that emerges is often idyllic, and the portrait of small-town living is romanticized (Shucksmith, 2018). Rural dwellers are thought to have a "sense of community, connection to the land, intimacy among community residents, orientation towards self-sufficiency, an ability to develop natural helping networks, an ability to develop helping networks, and an abundance of personal space" (Scales, Streeter, & Cooper, 2013, p. 13). Indeed, rural communities have many assets. However, moving well into the twenty-first century, these areas are experiencing unprecedented challenges, such as inadequate financial and human resources, health disparities, and crime (e.g., Dawson, 2017; North Carolina Rural Health Research Program, 2017; United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2017). When government entities are disinclined to help and family and friends are ill-equipped, nonprofit organizations can step in to assist rural residents with their problems, and in turn, improve communities (Berman, 2002; Renz, 2010). What is unknown is if rural nonprofits have the means to address these complex issues effectively.

Utilizing a scoping review approach, the present study examines the current state of empirical knowledge regarding the organizational capacity of rural nonprofits located in the U.S. which has not been considered in previous research. The evidence revealed in the scoping review serves as a foundation to identify and analyze strengths and challenges in rural nonprofits as well as determine future research, education, and policy needs for these organizations.

More broadly, this study contributes to U.S. rural literature, which is lacking. Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith (2011) surmise that place-based identity is considered less often by scholars because a cultural hierarchy exists where rural areas are undervalued and the belief that the distinctions between rural, urban, and suburban life are unimportant as part of identity. Rural, urban, and suburban areas differ in many ways – socially, politically, and geographically (Parker, Horowitz, Brown, Fry, Cohn, & Igielnik, 2018). Thus, acknowledging place-based identity is essential when conducting research to inform policy and practice. Factors associated with place help to create a context that influences people, groups, and communities – a principle synonymous with conceptual frameworks like systems theory, ecological perspective, and person-in-environment, all of which guide social work practice and other human-service oriented professions (Zastrow, Kirst-Ashman, & Hessenauer, 2019).

### *Relevance to human service organizations*

In 2016, there were about 57,700 registered nonprofits in non-metro areas of the U.S. (Guidestar by Candid, 2016; USDA Economic Research Service [ERS], 2018). Of those organizations, nearly 22,000 of them (about 38%) fall under the broad category of Human Services in the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) system (Urban Institute, 2019a) and further broken down into eight major groups (categorized by letters I to P) under the broad category including (I) crime and legal related; (J) employment; (K) food, agriculture, and nutrition; (L) housing and shelter; (M) public safety, disaster preparedness, and response; (N) recreation and sports; (O) youth development; and (P) human services (Urban Institute, 2019b). This broad category of Human Services is the largest among the ten categories, and thus, nonprofits existing in rural areas of the U.S. have a great likelihood of assisting people in some way. Findings in this study are relevant to rural human service organizations for a few reasons.

First, funders interested in improving quality of life in rural communities through the missions of organizations can make informed decisions about investments related to enhancing the infrastructure and operations of rural nonprofits. Further, rural nonprofits and their funders may seek assistance of capacity builders, and empirical knowledge will help capacity builders to provide more targeted solutions.

**Background**

*Hardship in rural America*

The economic struggles brought on by the Great Recession, which commenced in 2007 and persisted nearly a year and half, continue to negatively impact rural America. Gains in rural employment have lagged far behind the millions of jobs added in urban areas following the Great Recession (USDA, 2017). A significant decline in agriculture, mining, oil, and manufacturing – key industries in rural areas – without the induction of new commerce have contributed to a less-than-stellar comeback (Goetz, Partridge, & Stephens, 2017). As a result, poverty remains extensive in rural America. Compared to 13.6 percent in urban areas, nearly 17 percent of rural residents are impoverished (USDA, 2018). More alarming are the geographic concentrations of poverty over the long-term: more than 85 percent of the persistently poor counties are rural – meaning that 20 percent or more of residents were impoverished during the past four census survey cycles – and the majority of those counties (84 percent) are in the Southern region (USDA, 2018).

Economic disparities, among other issues, have led to several social problems plaguing rural areas. Despite the misconception that rural areas are safer and less prone to crime, statistics show that rural areas rival urban areas in some property crimes (e.g., household burglary) and violent crimes (e.g., aggravated assault) (Dawson, 2017). Intimate partner violence and sex

crimes are prevalent and yet under reported in rural areas due to lack of anonymity among other reasons (Braithwaite, 2014; Lewis, 2003; Peek-Asa et al., 2011; Rural Health Information Hub, 2017b). Compared to major urban areas, children in rural areas are almost twice as likely to be physically, sexually, or emotionally abused and more than twice as likely to be physically or emotionally neglected (Administration for Children and Families, 2010).

The physical and mental health of rural Americans are much worse compared to their non-rural counterparts. Obesity and chronic illnesses are considerably higher in rural areas (Befort, Nazir, & Perri, 2012). Nearly 19 percent of rural residents have at least one mental illness (Rural Health Information Hub, 2017a). For the past two decades, rural locations had more deaths by suicide than urban locations, and the suicide rate of young people who are 10 to 24 years old is nearly double (Dawson, 2017; Ivey-Stephenson, Crosby, Jack, Haileyesus, & Kresnow-Sedacca, 2017). In addition to being uninsured at a higher rate, rural Americans also have less access to primary care physicians and mental health providers (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2017; North Carolina Rural Health Research Program, 2017; Rural Health Information Hub, 2017a). Consequently, the all-cause mortality rate for individuals residing in rural areas is higher than in urban areas (North Carolina Rural Health Research Program, 2017).

The rural education system is also not without challenges. Students who are racial or ethnic minorities or live in poverty have lower test scores and are less likely to graduate in rural areas compared to students in urban schools (Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017). College readiness of rural students is also a concern. Only 28 percent of rural students took an advanced placement course and less than half took the ACT or SAT college entrance exam (Showalter et al., 2017). On the other end of the education spectrum, rural areas often lack high-

quality childcare and preschools, which not only adversely influences childhood development, but also negatively impacts the economic stability of caregivers who need to work (Malik, Hamm, Adamu, & Morrissey, 2016).

### Government support in rural America

The previous section provides a glimpse into the most pressing challenges faced by rural residents of the U.S. and demonstrates that these areas, like their urban and suburban counterparts, also need attention. Meanwhile, the voice of rural Americans is growing louder and more powerful. In the 2016 election, rural voters, who identify strongly as Republican, helped elect President Donald Trump, as he made rural development and growth a major part of his platform (Goetz et al., 2017). Compared to 35 percent in urban areas and 50 percent in suburban areas, 62 percent of rural voters chose President Trump (Kurtzleben, 2016). In the Fiscal Year 2018 (FY18) federal budget, President Trump followed through on some promises by proposing increased funds to improve infrastructure in rural communities, such as improving high-speed internet access, as well as the response to the opioid epidemic (Office of Management & Budget, 2017). Despite these promises made by him as a candidate, in both the FY18 budget and the proposed FY19 budget, President Trump recommended Congress make substantial cuts to human services, education, and agriculture programs that impact rural communities (Office of Management & Budget, 2018; Schultheis, 2018; Stabenow, 2017). While Congress declined most of the reductions to key services in rural areas in FY18, some programs that address major social problems sustained losses, including the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program that ensures low-income individuals and families have food (National League of Cities, 2018).

### Nonprofits in rural America

Nonprofits play a pivotal role in addressing challenging societal problems and improving the quality of life for all (Berman, 2002). A nonprofit is an organization that operates for the benefit of society and does not generate profit for individuals who govern it (Hopkins, 2015). More than 1.2 million nonprofits exist in the U.S., adding nearly $940 billion to the economy (National Council of Nonprofits, 2017). Because of the numerous definitions of rurality, the number of registered nonprofits in rural areas varies (the figures above utilize the USDA ERS definition of rural/nonmetro). One report suggests that urban areas have three times as many nonprofits as rural areas (Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011).

The nonprofit sector fills gaps that are not handled by the business and government sectors. The impact of nonprofits "is so far-reaching – touching on every aspect of our lives and every level of institutions" (Renz, 2010, p. 4). Many times, nonprofits accomplish their respective missions with creative approaches through service, advocacy, expression, community building, and promotion of public good (Salamon, 2014). Collaborative efforts spearheaded by nonprofits and their leaders have led to societal progress and systems change in areas like poverty, education, and disease prevention and eradication (Walker, 2017). Because there are fewer of them, rural organizations, especially those with human services' missions, are tasked with addressing a multitude of issues in their communities – from substance abuse and employment training to child maltreatment and mental health issues; in other words, they might function as one-stop-shops (Rural Health Information Hub, n.d.; Scales et al., 2013).

Rural nonprofits face obstacles in their efforts to better society. During the Great Recession, nonprofits experienced major financial losses, as funding sources decreased significantly or even dried up while there was an increased need for assistance from the public (Lin & Wang, 2015). One study found that rural organizations were experiencing the most fiscal

stress (Lin & Wang, 2015) and continue to struggle to secure contracts, grants, and donations.

Between 2005 and 2010, rural areas were awarded less than six percent of federal domestic grant

funding (Arneal, 2015). Compared to urban donors, rural donors give at a lower rate and at lower

overall amounts (Center on Philanthropy, 2010). Further, the Rural Philanthropic Analysis

project suggests that only seven percent of donor dollars are designated to rural areas (Campbell

University, 2018). Despite the emergence and growth of social enterprise in the nonprofit sector

as a way to diversify funding portfolios (e.g., Stecker, 2014), little empirical knowledge is

available about this financial avenue in rural organizations. With increased competition,

economic disparities present and less available resources, rural nonprofits are surviving at a rate

lower than their urban counterparts (Walker & McCarthy, 2010). Further, fewer financial

resources leads rural nonprofits to struggle with insufficient staffing (both in quantity and

quality) because of low salaries and lack of advancement opportunities (Mackie & Lips, 2010).

     Exacerbated by financial disparities, geographic isolation is problematic for some rural

nonprofits. On average, rural nonprofits are charged with serving over 49 square miles,

compared to half of a square mile of urban organizations and about five square miles of suburban

organizations (Fanburg, 2011). Accordingly, in rural agencies, either employees must travel to

the clients, requiring company vehicles, gas, and maintenance which are large expenses, or

clients must come to the organizations – sometimes from far distances. With the latter, clients

may not have reliable transportation, money for gas, or the extra time to drive to access services

(Allard & Cigna, 2008; Snavely & Tracy, 2000). Geographic isolation also contributes to many

other problems with providers such as difficulty connecting with peer professionals, minimal

access to training and capacity building opportunities, and fewer service providers leading to

higher caseloads, increased job stress, and ultimately burnout (National Advisory Committee on

Rural Health and Human Services, 2016). Many of these issues might be addressed by

technology and quality internet (Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005), but 45 percent of rural areas still

do not have access to broadband internet (Bailey, 2017).

Social barriers may also present. In some rural communities, residents might be wary of

receiving assistance from providers, which may be due to the notion of rugged individualism –

opposition to relying upon the state for aid (Bazzi, Fiszbein, & Gebresilasse, 2017). When they

do need help, they turn to their family members or friends. Since there are fewer agencies and

practitioners in rural areas, these ideals have turned into productive coping mechanisms.

However, for nonprofits that are present, rendering services to communities who reject their

purpose can be difficult (Scales et al., 2013).

In recent years, cross-sector collaboratives have emerged as mechanisms to meet the

needs of rural communities – nonprofits, businesses, and government-funded entities (e.g.,

schools) come together to address the intricate problems facing their areas (Biddle, Mette, &

Mercado, 2018). When trust is established, these partnerships can produce effective solutions for

rural populations, but locals (i.e., residents inhabiting the rural community) might be wary of

outsiders imposing their agendas (Biddle, Mette & Mercado, 2018; Snavely & Tracy, 2000).

***Nonprofit framework and organizational capacity***

*Parts of a nonprofit*

To understand organizational capacity, it is first necessary to understand the integral parts

of a nonprofit. De Vita and Fleming (2001) provided a framework that illustrates five,

interconnected parts of an organization including vision and mission; leadership; resources;

outreach; and products and services. Vision and mission relate to the reasons an organization

exists, the cause being addressed, and the goals they set out to accomplish. Leadership refers to

staff and volunteers who, through their own actions or empowerment, motivate others in the

organization to strive to achieve the mission and realize the vision. Executive directors and

Board of Directors are traditionally seen as the core leaders in nonprofits, but staff and

volunteers in other roles can be the driving force in executing programs and services. Resources

can be many things: financial, human, physical, and technological are a few examples. For

example, grants and donations allow organizations to hire and retain staff, purchase computers to

conduct business, and pay for space to operate. Outreach is external communication with outside

stakeholders such as service users, donors, peers, and agencies. One instance of outreach is

connecting with stakeholders on social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. Products

and services denote what is being provided by an organization (e.g., housing assistance; De Vita

& Fleming, 2001).

*Organizational capacity elements*

The word "capacity" means "the facility or power to produce, perform, or deploy" or

capability (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As demonstrated in nonprofit literature, organizational

capacity is complex, multidimensional, and hard to define precisely because the needs of every

organization to function and be successful are different (Andersson, Faulk, & Stewart, 2016).

Light suggests that organizational "capacity encompasses virtually everything an organization

uses to achieve its mission, from desks and chairs to programs and people" (Light, 2004).

Connecting to the nonprofit framework (Devita & Fleming, 2001), each part of an organization

has or lacks the capacity to contribute to the organization as a whole. Within organizations, the

parts (e.g., leadership) that need attention may differ, but when one part suffers, other parts feel

strain (De Vita & Fleming, 2001).

Many nonprofits are struggling with shortfalls related to capacity, often leading to inability to meet the needs of stakeholders (Despard, 2016) resulting in nonprofits being uncompetitive for grants (Karsh & Fox, 2014). Moreover, publicized incidents of financial mismanagement, ethical violations, inadequate reporting, and an inability to show or disregard measurable outcomes have led to reduced trust in the nonprofit sector (Gauss, 2015). Though nonprofits may combat societal challenges like poverty, crime, and health disparities, public and private investors (e.g., individual donors, government) have been left questioning whether nonprofits have the capacity to utilize funds effectively to meet the needs of the populations they serve (De Vita & Fleming, 2001; Minzner, Klerman, Markovitz, & Fink, 2014). As most nonprofits require donor support to survive, addressing concerns about organizational capacity issues is critical.

To inform assessment, building, and maintenance of capacity, models have been constructed to conceptualize and operationalize organizational capacity factors. Three models are described here. A recent study by Brown, Andersson, and Jo (2016) describes and tests "the nonprofit value framework to organize capacity elements into resource attributes and management functions" (p. 2908). Resources are described as four types of capital including human, financial, physical, and social. Management functions – defined as human relations, open systems, internal processes, and programs and services – are presented within a quandrant of internal and external orienations and flexible and control structures (Brown et al., 2016). For example, fundraising is categorized as an external, flexible structure. The nonprofit value framework posits that through the coexistence and collaboration of resources – tangible and intangible – and management processes, organizations can achieve optimal performance (Brown et al., 2016). Minzner et al. (2014) describes within the capacity building logic model of the

Compassion Capital Fund (CCF), which was a federally-funded program, the elements of capacity that intermediaries focused on to provide training and technical assistance to nonprofits. Elements included organizational development (strategic planning, management and administration, and financial management); program development; resource development; community engagement; and leadership development (Minzner et al., 2014). Similarly, after review of early capacity literature, Andersson et al. (2016) determined that these categories encompassed the multidimensionality of organizational capacity: "organizational mission and vision; strategy and planning; program design and evaluation; human resources; board and management leadership; information and technology; financial systems and management; fund development; and marketing and communications" (p. 2865).

*Capacity building*

Capacity building initiatives set out to improve deficient parts of nonprofits to increase performance and subsequently, organizational effectiveness (Sobeck & Agius, 2007). Capacity building involves activities like one-on-one or group trainings, consultation, and technical assistance and could be facilitated by a host of providers: academic institutions, federations (e.g., United Way), government offices, nonprofit intermediaries, and foundations (Backer, Bleeg & Groves, 2004). Sometimes, organizations that provide services to enhance capacity in other nonprofits are called nonprofit management support organizations (MSOs) (Connor, Kadel-Taras, & Vinokur-Kaplan, 1999). For instance, an organization may be struggling to determine program goals aligned with the mission and vision, and thus, the process of strategic planning – the formal process of setting goals, objectives, and timelines – may be guided by an MSO. The success of capacity building necessitates organizations on the receiving end of assistance have some existing competencies and internal structures (i.e., the basic elements of a nonprofit) on

which to build; openness to addressing complications and incorporating solutions at all levels of

the organization; and a willingness to invest in the change process for the long term (Struyk,

Damon & Haddaway, 2010).

Little research is available about organizational capacity of nonprofits located in rural

areas of the U.S. Because rural nonprofits are often much smaller than their urban counterparts

(Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011), applying findings – though also limited – related to capacity

challenges in small nonprofits might be useful to provide some perspective. Kim & Peng (2017)

note that the overwhelming majority (80%) of registered nonprofits have budgets of less than $1

million and struggle with capacity issues related to various areas (i.e., human resources). Though

small nonprofits have a need for capacity building, many cannot afford to participate – sparing

the money or time is not an option (Kapucu, Healy, & Arslan, 2011). However, limited financial

resources is often a motivator for small nonprofits to participate in capacity building activities in

hopes of improving organizational factors that might generate more funds (Kapucu et al., 2011).

While some are ready for training, organizations may not be prepared to make changes based on

the newly obtained knowledge and skills. They may not have the time, funds, or staff to

implement the strategies provided by capacity building facilitators (Kapucu et al., 2011). Or,

organizations may not be prepared to make a shift in their culture, climate, and values that

capacity building often requires (Sobeck & Aguis, 2007). On the facilitator side of capacity

building, entities that provide training and assistance to nonprofits to improve their infrastructure

regularly conduct assessments to understand problems within agencies (e.g., Kapucu et al.,

2011). However, contextual factors, like size or geography of nonprofits, are not often

considered in generating solutions because they turn to best practices which have mostly

emerged from larger nonprofits and for-profit entities (Andersson et al., 2016). Assumptions that

all nonprofits require the same elements of capacity to be effective in meeting their missions are

misguided (Kapucu et al., 2011).

### *Purpose of the current review*

Rural nonprofits are important players in addressing economic, social, and health

problems and improving the quality of life for residents. Thus, it is crucial that rural nonprofits

have the organizational capacity to accomplish their missions. However, little knowledge is

available about rural nonprofits' organizational capacity because contextual factors, like

geography, are not often considered when examining organizational capacity. Therefore, the

purpose of this scoping review is to uncover the state of empirical knowledge related to

organizational capacity of rural nonprofits in the U.S. in the twenty-first century.

Because rural areas are struggling with specific challenges related to their location,

values, and culture, the gaps in empirical knowledge may lead facilitators of capacity-building

activities like nonprofit MSOs to make incorrect assumptions about how to best help rural

nonprofits. The findings of this scoping review will allow researchers, educators, and

practitioners of the nonprofit sector to be informed about organizational capacity in rural

nonprofits and to assist them in a more efficacious manner. Ultimately, the end goal is that rural

communities will be healthier and safer as a result of the work of rural nonprofits.

## Methods

A scoping review was conducted in May and June 2018 to characterize the state of

knowledge regarding the organizational capacity of nonprofits in rural areas of the U.S.

Colquhoun et al. (2014) defines a scoping review as a "form of knowledge synthesis that

addresses an exploratory research question aimed at mapping key concepts, types of evidence,

and gaps in research related to a defined area or field by systematically searching, selecting, and

synthesizing existing knowledge" (p. 1294). Scoping reviews share many of the same standards

and processes as traditional systematic literature reviews, but systematic reviews are designed to

answer specific, rigid research questions with the goal of uncovering precise evidence and

informing decision making (Munn et al., 2018). By comparison, a scoping review aims to

address broader research questions and objectives with the purpose of identifying, mapping, and

discussing concepts (Munn et al., 2018). The current study is foundational and exploratory as no

previous systematic reviews of literature exist related to the topic at hand (to the knowledge of

the author), and thus a scoping review provides a starting point to identify potential research and

policy needs moving forward. Prior to initiating the search process, the author reviewed

organizational capacity literature and conferred with the University librarian regarding the

appropriate procedures for scoping reviews and choosing the most optimal search terms,

inclusion and exclusion criteria, and databases based on the goals of the study.

The framework from Andersson et al. (2016), which outlined the broad concepts of

organizational capacity of nonprofits, was used to generate the search categories. This

framework was chosen for a few reasons. First, the capacity concepts map well onto the parts of

the organization as defined by De Vita and Fleming (2001) with each part being considered.

Additionally, the Andersson et al. (2016) framework, as they note in their study, was a synthesis

of the most commonly used elements in capacity and capacity building research and

interventions. Table 1 outlines the search topics, terms, and definitions for the study.

Articles that met inclusion criteria examined at least one topic related to organizational

capacity of nonprofits located in rural areas of the U.S.; were empirical (employed quantitative,

qualitative, or mixed-methods study design); and collected and/or utilized data from January

2008 to May 2018. Studies that examined nonprofits of any type (e.g., human services, arts,

animal) were included in the study. Though they play an important role in well-being of rural

communities (Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005), studies examining rural governmental agencies

(e.g., health departments) were beyond the scope of this review and excluded as their operational

standards are mandated by local, state, and federal officials. The restricted date range was chosen

because modern-day information is needed to inform research and practice due to rapidly

changing technology and social and political conditions. Articles were excluded if they were

strictly theoretical or conceptual or presented in a language other than English, given the author's

inability to effectively translate non-English articles.

<p style="text-align:center"><em>&lt;Insert Table 1&gt;</em></p>

In the first step of the search process, peer-reviewed or grey literature, including

dissertations and governmental and nongovernmental technical and progress reports, were sought

out in Academic Search Complete, Web of Science, Scopus, Social Services Abstracts, Social

Work Abstracts, and ProQuest Dissertation and Theses Global using Boolean logic and data

criterion between January 2008 and May 2018. These databases were chosen on the

recommendation of the University librarian to certify an exhaustive search for the type of

literature being sought. Academic Search Complete (Ebsco, n.d.a.), Scopus (Elsevier, 2019), and

Web of Science (Clarivate, n.d.) are three of the most comprehensive, multidisciplinary indexing

services that provide access to thousands of periodicals. Social Services Abstracts (Proquest,

n.d.a.) and Social Work Abstracts (Ebsco, n.d.b.) were added to capture social work-, human

services-, and sociology-related articles. Proquest Dissertation and Theses Global (Proquest,

n.d.b.) is known to be the largest repository of dissertations and theses in the world. These

databases returned 11,081 articles which were imported into EndNote 8 for distillation.

As a second step, additional websites that are prominent in the nonprofit sector or rural research were selected based on the practice knowledge of the author and suggested websites provided by Rural Health Information Hub, a government resource for rural matters. Table 2 provides a list of the websites and search procedures. The search of the websites yielded four additional studies. The final step was to scour references of included articles to ensure a thorough search, though no additional studies were found.

<center>*<Insert Table 2>*</center>

From the 11,081 articles found in the databases, 8,370 articles were removed as duplicates. The titles and abstracts of 2,711 articles were reviewed: Articles were eliminated if they were outdated, unrelated to topics of interest, conceptual or theoretical, or written in non-English language, which resulted in 40 articles for full-review.  With the addition of four articles from the website review, 44 full-text articles were reviewed. As a result of this intensive screening, eight were removed as further description of data indicated they were not from the last decade; four were strictly theoretical; and 17 were not topical. Thus, twelve studies from the database search and three studies from the website search met all inclusion criteria. Figure 1 illustrates the process and results of the search and distillation.

<center>*<Insert Figure 1>*</center>

**Results**

In total, fifteen articles were included as part of the present study. Table 3 provides names of authors; publication year; type of article; geographic setting; missions of nonprofit; study purpose; study design and sample information; analytic methods; and key findings related to rural nonprofit organizational capacity. There was a mix of peer-reviewed articles; dissertations or theses; and reports available on organizations' websites. The geographic settings

for the fifteen articles varied considerably: four examined organizations across the U.S.; seven

selected one or a few states; one concentrated on the southern region; and one was unidentified.

Nonprofit organizational settings were related to substance abuse treatment; healthcare; arts

oriented; business and economic; animal services; and other human services.

The study designs of all articles can be categorized as non-experimental with cross-

sectional time frames. Two studies were quantitative; six were qualitative; and seven were mixed

methods. One used random sampling; another used random sampling and purposive sampling;

and the remaining 13 used purposive sampling. Sample sizes ranged from one organization to

343,851, with eight studies having a sample under 30.

*<Insert Table 3>*

### Summary of salient findings related to organizational capacity of rural nonprofits

In this section, a summary of salient findings regarding organizational capacity of rural

nonprofits is provided by topic. Figure 2 illustrates the organizational capacity topics within the

15 included articles.

*<Insert Figure 2>*

*Resource development, financial health, and financial systems*

Every study except one (Sweet, 2013) conveyed difficulties with finances and resource

development. Studies found that insufficient funding impacted organizations' missions, strategic

planning, program design, service provision, staffing and leadership, human resources,

communications, and technology. Rural nonprofits had smaller budgets compared to urban

nonprofits (Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011; Newstead & Wu, 2009). Fundraising presented a

major challenge as organizations noted that they were short-staffed and did not have adequate

training in fundraising (Anderson, 2017; Seale, 2010). In one study, some organizations shared

that they did not have annual fundraising strategies nor clear fundraising assignments (Sanders, 2014). Knudson (2016) notes that the organization of inquiry had recently adopted a resource development plan to address financial inadequacies. One study included organizations that were utilizing social entrepreneurship as a source of funding (Lee, 2011). In most studies, however, the topics of fund development planning and revenue stream diversification, such as social entrepreneurship, were not discussed or referred to minimally. Nonetheless, four studies shared the organizations' staff and volunteers were very inventive with the limited amount of available resources (Anderson, 2017; Lee, 2011; Office of Rural Health Policy, 2011; Skinner, Franz, & Kelleher, 2018). To address some of the financial challenges, rural nonprofits were building networks, creating partnerships, and collaborating with other organizations to share resources (Lee, 2011; Newstead & Wu, 2009; Office of Rural Health Policy, 2011; Skinner et al., 2018).

Accessing information about funding opportunities and receiving grant awards from federal, state, and local sources were also very difficult for rural organizations, though they are trying (Anderson, 2017; Lee, 2011; Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011; Seale, 2010; Tighe, 2013). Knowledge and time were identified as factors that impacted one organization's ability to find and respond to request for proposals (Anderson, 2017). Newstead & Wu (2009) indicated that rural nonprofits are applying for grants, and those who were successful were very strategic in funding opportunities that they pursued (i.e., only those opportunities that met their missions). Organizations who were receiving grant funding noted that government cuts impacted their financial health and ability to fulfill their missions (Lee, 2011; Tighe, 2013), while one nonprofit shared that they were too reliant on grants (Knudsen, 2016).

Mixed results were found with other financial health indicators. In comparison with urban nonprofits, rural organizations in one study were operating in the black with reserves

available, and overall, they are dying off at slower rate (Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011). Audi,

Kates, Capen, & Polito (2016) also found that rural nonprofits in their study had more cash on-

hand than for-profit peers. Related to reserves, other studies found that rural nonprofits did not

have backup emergency funds (Knudsen, 2016; Seale, 2010) and had smaller operating margins

(Audi et al., 2016). Few findings were shared in the articles about financial systems and

accountability related to planning, budgeting, policies, or procedures. Only one study suggested

that board members were confident in their ability to monitor the financial status of the

organization and that they monitored financials on a regular basis (Sanders, 2014).

*Strategic planning, mission, and vision*

        None of the studies specifically addressed organizations' strategic planning process or

their capacity to conduct it. Sanders (2014) found that board members felt confident about

understanding the strategic vision and needs of the organizations they served.  Organizations in

four studies were open to changes to meet the needs of the community and utilized creative

problem-solving approaches (Knudsen, 2016; Lee, 211; Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011; Office of

Rural Health Policy, 2011). Three studies minimally discussed that organizations were unable to

be attentive to future endeavors and deliberate about preparation for impact and growth because

they were focused on immediate needs – filling fundraising gaps, keeping the doors open, and

providing essential services (Anderson, 2017; Knudsen, 2016; Lee, 2011). The geographical

settings and the natural resources around the organizations in two studies contributed positively

to mission and services offered to the community (Knudsen, 2016; Lee, 2011).

*Human resources and legal affairs*

        Finding and keeping qualified staff as well as volunteers who had the necessary

education and skillsets to provide services and management were major barriers to

accomplishing goals, positive outcomes, and growing organizations in some cases (Anderson, 2017; Edmond, Aletraris, & Roman, 2015; Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011). Three studies indicated that staff were not receiving adequate and consistent training due to funding (Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011; Tighe, 2013) or the leader's lack of willingness to budget for it (Sweet, 2013). However, Knudson (2016) shared that the executive director of the organization studied had recently attended leadership and management training. No specific findings were available about rural nonprofits' ability to conduct human resources processes internally such as onboarding of new staff, staff performance evaluations, and benefits analysis. Also, little to nothing was shared about the volunteer management practices in rural nonprofits. Minimal findings were offered about nonprofits' knowledge and ability to handle legal affairs: Sanders (2014) and Knudson (2016) shared that there were a few policies that were undeveloped but needed. One study found that board members in the organization of interest were confident in adhering to nonprofit regulations (Sanders, 2014).

*Leadership and staffing*

In the Office of Rural Health Policy (2011) study examining innovative behavioral health providers, several organizations were found to have committed employees. The same study also shared an example of when strong leadership exists growth can occur – one organization had operations in seven states. Considering job satisfaction and organizational commitment, Sweet (2013) indicates that employees in one rural nonprofit were highly committed and satisfied with their jobs, having strong desires to give back to their community. Nonetheless, staffing and leadership challenges were abundant in the included studies. Because these organizations often struggled to recruit and retain competent professionals, organizations were understaffed. Sometimes, not having enough providers meant turning away potential and existing clients who

required services (Anderson, 2017; Tighe, 2013). More often, existing employees were taking on

additional responsibilities and carrying heavier workloads (Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011; Seale,

2010; Skinner et al., 2018; Tighe, 2013). The stress of inadequate resources – financial and

human – led to turnover in executive positions, which created additional challenges (Knudsen,

2016; Lee, 2011).

*Programming*

Even with limited resources, many organizations within the included studies were

offering innovative programming and meeting a variety of needs in communities (Lee, 2011;

Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011; Newstead & Wu, 2009; Office of Rural Health Policy, 2011;

Seale, 2010; Skinner et al., 2018). The Office of Rural Health Policy (2011) study provides

examples of organizations engaging in promising practices; for example, one organization was

utilizing peers – those who had experience similar challenges – to address behavioral health

issues due to limited access to qualified providers. With less available funding and smaller

budgets impacting staffing and training among other aspects, the quantity and quality of

programming suffered in some organizations (Edmond et al., 2015; Neuhoff & Dunckelman,

2011; Seale, 2010). Additionally, traveling longer distances to access or deliver services was

necessary, and the financial burden fell on either clients or organizations to pay for gas and

reliable transportation since public transportation is not an option (Anderson, 2017; Neuhoff &

Dunckelman, 2011). The concept of individualism surfaced in Anderson's study (2017), finding

that residents were hesitant about accepting help. Related to evaluation, a few studies found

organizations were utilizing data to understand and maximize their impact (Knudson, 2016; Lee,

2011; Sanders, 2014). In some organizations though, while staff wanted to participate in

collecting and analyzing data, excessive workloads, minimal time, and knowledge were barriers

(Knudsen, 2016; Office of Rural Health Policy, 2011). Lack of funding also prohibited

organizations from contracting with an outside entity to conduct evaluation (Office of Rural

Health Policy, 2011).

*Communication – Internal & External*

Internal communication concerns the dialogue between and among staff and

administration within an organization, which was singularly addressed by Sweet (2013). The

participants of Sweet's study shared that they were unhappy with the communication from

organizational leaders. While not specifically addressing communication processes, the Office of

Rural Health Policy (2011) study found collaboration among staff in some organizations

promoted succesful programs.

Several studies noted that many organizations participated—and for a few, relied heavily

on—collaboration and communication with other nonprofits, funders, governments, and elected

officials (Knudsen, 2016; Lee, 2011; Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011; Office of Rural Health

Policy, 2011; Seale, 2010; Skinner et al., 2018). For some rural nonprofits, engagement with

clients and supporters is also strength, and they are well-known (Lee, 2011; Office of Rural

Health Policy, 2011; Seale, 2010). Bartow (2017) indicated that all of the orgnaizations in their

study were utilizing Facebook in some way to help their causes. Yet, some organizations were

struggling to connect with stakeholders as much as they desired (Bartow, 2017; Lee, 2011;

Sanders, 2014; Seale, 2010; Tighe, 2013).

*Technology*

Only one study discussed technology capacity issues in rural nonprofits (Gellar,

Abramson, & Leon, 2010). This study found that 77% of rural organizations felt their technology

set up was sophisticated to moderately sophisticated (Gellar et al., 2010). Their study also found

that just over a third of the rural organizations had access to high-speed, broadband internet. Additionally, Gellar et al. (2010) indicated that IT staffing, training, and networking were deficient. While many rural nonprofits are struggling with IT challenges, the Office of Rural Health Policy (2011) study mentioned that some organizations are harnessing technology to provide innovative programs such as telehealth services to reach clients who are unable to travel.

*Limitations of included studies*

All studies had a limited focus on organizational type or capacity issues examined. Specific to quantitative studies, one study focused on a singular region of the country with no non-rural comparisons, while the second study was limited by self-reported data. Another limitation overall is that there are only two quantitative studies, both focused on healthcare-type settings. Qualitative and mixed-methods studies had a few limitations in common: small sample restricted to one area or state and narrow perspective as one or few members of an organization were interviewed. In qualitative studies, respondents may have not felt compelled to share or be honest due to lack of anonymity. Specific to the mixed methods studies, there was a lack of inferential analyses.

**Discussion**

This scoping review characterizes the state of knowledge regarding organizational capacity of rural nonprofits in the U.S within the past ten years. Fifteen articles met inclusion criteria. These studies identified an array of challenges for rural nonprofits, as well as some strengths and assets.

***Resource development, financial health, and financial systems***

Many of the problems confronted by rural nonprofits stem from inadequate financial resources. Financial planning (i.e., developing fundraising or fund development plans) and

diversifying revenue streams are critically important – although very complex – in the survival of

nonprofits especially in the wake of government funding cuts (Lu, Lin, & Wang, 2019). In the

studies included, it was mostly unclear if organizations were developing fundraising plans or

considered diversifying their sources of revenue. As many of the organizations were

understaffed, it is likely that they may not have a designated person for fundraising (i.e., director

of development) so the executive director, board members, and volunteers – who have limited

time and other responsibilities – must take on the task. Also concerning is the minimal training

and professional development related to fundraising. Thus, agency representatives may not know

when to ask, how to ask, or may not be asking for money and other resources at all. Fundraising

is not a simple endeavor – it is "…a multi-disciplined process requiring extensive involvement of

staff and volunteers in a series of interrelated steps…. that when properly managed leads to the

successful alignment of all the 'rights'…" (Tempel, Aldrich, Seiler, & Burlingame, 2015, p. 34).

Though more investigation is needed to understand fundraising processes in rural nonprofits, the

absence of knowledge, planning, time, and dedicated fundraising staff might be a possible

explanation as to why less than 10 percent of donor dollars are dedicated to rural areas

(Campbell University, 2018).

Though they should not be the only source of income, grants are vital in creating a

diversified fundraising strategy (Karsh & Fox, 2014). The lack of knowledge and staff identified

in the studies could also offer insight into trends that rural areas receive fewer grants than urban

areas (Arneal, 2015). While not identified in the included articles, another possible issue related

to reduced awards in rural areas is that funders often require applicants to demonstrate

organizational capacity in applications. Before investing, funders want to be assured that

organizations have a solid infrastructure – for example, staffing, technology, policies, and

procedures – to effectively carry out programming (Karsh & Fox, 2014). Rural organizations

simply may not meet their standards. Nonetheless, foundations – particularly as they have more

freedom in their priorities – have an important role to play in building capacity and investing in

innovation to assist in solving complex societal problems (e.g., poverty, health disparities;

Jaskyte, Amato, & Sperbrer, 2018). Funding innovation, and even early idea generation as

Jaskyte et al. (2018) suggests, in rural nonprofits could lead to unprecedented changes; see

Corpening, Morgan, Quashie, & Bryant (2018) as an example.

Considering the rural versus urban findings, some types of nonprofits have stable

financial health despite the challenges they face. Rural nonprofit leaders may subscribe to fiscal

conservatism as part of their political orientation. Therefore, if money is unavailable, going into

debt to add or provide services is not an option for some rural organizations. While this

philosophy might allow organizations to stay afloat, the needs of communities may go unmet if

no other solutions are available. Nonetheless, many of the organizations in the included studies

were identified as resourceful and innovative when trying to help their rural constituencies. As

the Office of Rural Health Policy (2011) study points out, promising practices are emerging from

rural organizations and attention should be paid to their work.

### *Strategic planning, mission, and vision*

The process of strategic planning allows organizations to formally establish and make a

pledge about the direction of mission and vision through goals, objectives, and strategies

(Allison & Kaye, 2015). Some organization representatives discussed their immediate focus on

providing services rather than planning for the future. In places where fewer services are

available to address limited basic human needs (i.e., food, water, health, safety), justifying time

spent in meetings and writing plans might be difficult and construed as wasteful. Overall, there is

not enough information from the studies included in this review to know if rural organizations

are engaging in regular, quality strategic planning or have the knowledge to accomplish such a

laborious task. If they are not conducting strategic planning, the stakeholders of the organizations

– clients, staff, and community at-large – may suffer as successful nonprofits often attribute their

positive outcomes to quality strategic plans (McNerney, Perri, Reid, & Brown, 2014). Results

showed that some rural organizations are engaging in problem-solving and are open to change.

Thus, it is possible that with proper training in strategic planning, these nonprofits could make

bigger impacts in their communities while also having solid, sustainable futures.

### *Human resources and legal affairs*

Recruitment and retention were noted as complicated for some rural nonprofits. This is,

at least in part, a consequence of brain drain – young adults who are educated and productive are

choosing to leave rural areas for suburban and urban areas where career and leisure options are

plentiful (Carr, 2009). With less financial resources in rural areas, salaries, opportunities for

advancement, and professional development may be lackluster compared to urban-based

organizations (Aguiniga, Madden, Faulkner, & Salehin, 2012). Professionals, particularly those

who invested money and time into a college education, desire to put their knowledge and skills

to use in organizations who can invest back in them through fair compensation and training. Yet,

those with talent and knowledge are sorely needed as nonprofit employees, board members, and

volunteers in rural communities to address economic, social, and health disparities. In recent

years, policy endeavors in some states (e.g., Kansas and Nebraska) have focused on creating

opportunities and incentives for professionals to return or move to rural communities (Kumar,

2018).  As many rural nonprofits rely upon knowledge and collaboration from peer

organizations, learning from those who have lower turnover and highly committed employees

(such as those found in Office of Rural Health Policy [2011] study) to seek out solutions for improved recruitment and retention might be beneficial.

With limited available funding, consistent training may not be occurring in rural nonprofits. Because change is incessant with best practices, technology, and knowledge, professional development for staff is essential to be effective and efficient in fulfilling organizational objectives (Pynes, 2013). In rural nonprofits, training may be even more important as workers often have to be generalists, filling all kinds of roles, because there are fewer organizations and qualified staff (Humble, Lewis, Scott, & Herzog, 2013).

Capacity for handling legal issues was not discussed in the studies. Thus, based on this review, it is unknown if rural nonprofits understand the vast government regulations. Rural nonprofits impacted by geographic isolation and lack of financial resources may struggle with access to expertise and education regarding legal issues. Consequences of risk and noncompliance can result in financial and criminal penalties, loss of employees, damage to the reputation, or doors shuttering (Mintz, 2012). Legal issues, among other capacity components, are especially important to nonprofit operations, and supplementary knowledge is needed to identify and remedy problems.

### *Leadership and staffing*

This review revealed that some employees of rural nonprofits feel overworked as a result of being understaff. Excessive workloads and role overload can lead to job dissatisfaction (Hermon & Chahla, 2018), burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001), and intention to leave employers (Yanchus, Periard, Moore, Carle, & Osatuke, 2015). These consequences were also found to be relevant with leaders of the organizations in the review's studies. Losing leaders, specifically highly effective ones, can result in major financial costs, loss of institutional

knowledge and memory, and negative impacts to service provision and employee performance (Selden & Sowa, 2015). An unknown for rural nonprofits is if they are succession planning and preparing for departures – unexpected or expected.

*Programming*

Rural nonprofits desire to have a positive impact on their communities, and many are doing great work as evidenced in the present study and others (e.g., Baker-Tingey, Powell, & Powell, 2018; Gipson, Campbell, & Malcom, 2018; Mitchell, Nassel, & Thomas, 2015; Mott, Keller, & Funkenbusch, 2017). With limited financial and human resources, organizations are providing innovative programs to rural communities. Still, limited offerings and access to services were common challenges in rural nonprofits, which is consistent with earlier studies (Allard & Cigna, 2008; Snavely & Tracy, 2000). In some areas, technology has helped with connecting individuals with necessary services, but as nonprofits are struggling with financial resources, purchasing technology may not be an option – not to mention the lack of training or staff available to implement and provide technical assistance (Chung-Do et al., 2012). Moreover, rural residents are also suffering from high levels of poverty; if they are unable to afford gas or transportation, access to technology and internet may also be problematic. Considering these programmatic barriers, some rural residents may not be accessing the services they need.

Despite stated desires to conduct and participate, evaluation of programming and performance measurement may also be deficient in rural nonprofits. Not conducting program evaluation is problematic for a number of reasons, but two in particular should be considered closely: 1) Funders expect nonprofits to be accountable and demonstrate results (Carman, 2008); this may be another reason that explains private and public funders reluctance to award grants to rural nonprofits; and 2) Evaluation helps determine program elements that are working and the

effects on clients and communities (Karsh & Fox, 2014). If rural nonprofits are not evaluating

their programs, it is possible that they do not know if their programming is addressing the

challenges that they set out to resolve.

*Communications – internal & external*

As only one study in the review formally observed internal communication between

employees and management, further examination of communication practices and procedures

may be justified since job satisfaction has often been tied to supervisory support and

organizational environment (Acquavita, Pittman, Gibbons, & Castellanos-Brown, 2009).

Because some rural nonprofits struggle to obtain qualified employees, it is essential for retention

purposes that elements of job satisfaction be considered to cultivate and maintain organizational

capacity – namely the human capital aspect.

External communications with funders, government entities, and community members

were a strength for many rural nonprofits. These relationships led to creative answers to difficult

challenges, resulting in innovative programs to meet the needs of their communities. Some of the

organizations that were part of these studies might serve as models for practice in other rural

areas. The question arises – how is this information best shared with rural practitioners and

leaders? Yet, for some organizations, collaboration and communication with stakeholders and

other organizations were also a challenge, and ideological differences and individualism may be

contributing factors. In the same tone that community members are not trusting, engaging with,

or supporting rural nonprofits, these same organizations are wary of potential outside partners.

They are not trusting of stranger organizations' intentions. Identifying and cultivating potential

partners also takes much time, effort, and funds that rural nonprofits often cannot afford to give

(Snavely & Tracy, 2000). However, funders often demand collaboration among nonprofits and

development of cross-sector alliances to avoid duplication of services (Karsh & Fox, 2014;

Shumate, Fu, & Cooper, 2018). Avoiding external communications altogether may result in

diminished connections with residents, other agencies, and local government entities, leading to

negative implications for resource development and service provision. To strengthen stakeholder

relationships, more research is needed to understand the investments by rural nonprofits into

internal and external communications, possibly with a focus on those organizations that have

been identified as successful in this domain.

### *Technology*

Consistent with the literature, Gellar et al.'s (2010) findings related to limited availability

of high-speed internet for some rural nonprofits has major implications. Affordable broadband

access is an important policy issue for rural residents and nonprofits as it encourages economic

and social development and sustainability (Pant & Hambly Odame, 2017). Related to IT

capacity, limited information is available about other technology issues that rural nonprofits may

face and the technological solutions that they might not be aware of or using which might relieve

other organizational problems. As shown in the Office of Rural Health Policy (2011) study and

others, technology could be used to address key challenges in rural areas such as geographic

isolation and access to services (e.g., telehealth projects).

### *Limitations of the current review*

Limitations of this scoping review should be considered. The search and distillation

processes were conducted by one researcher. Including additional reviewers may have resulted in

differences in article inclusion. Also, while thoroughly outlined, the grey literature search may

have omitted studies as it was impossible to search the large universe of websites related to the

nonprofit sector. Additionally, it is possible that some terms were omitted in the search strategy

because the concept of organizational capacity encompasses many interconnected elements and

is difficult to define. To address these limitations, the author worked with a university librarian

with expertise in the subject content and methodology to ensure proper execution of the strategy

proposed and capture relevant literature. It is also important to note that "rural" can be

characterized in numerous ways – one periodical noted 15 active federal definitions of rural in

2013 (The Washington Post, 2013). The current study adopted an inclusive approach by

including any article that identified organizations as "rural," with no regard to the specific

definition. Nonetheless, studies that may not have used the word "rural" specifically and

identified organizations in "nonmetropolitan" areas – which is another descriptor of rural

communities – may have been omitted from the current study. Future literature syntheses should

include synonyms of "rural." Another limitation of the study is the exclusion of literature

utilizing data collected before January 2008. While relevant findings may exist in older studies,

advancing the state of the literature requires timely data. Finally, the current study uncovered few

studies (15) and included all types of nonprofits. Thus, it is necessary to be cautious in drawing

conclusions and generalizing findings. Still, results from this scoping review serve as

introduction into examining the capacity of rural organizations from which future research and

discourse can build.

**Implications**

***Research implications***

Considering the economic struggles of many rural areas, it is not surprising that this

review found several deficits and problems that stemmed from money – or lack thereof – such as

inadequate staffing, training, and technology. With organizational capacity being a multifaceted

concept with interconnected elements, it was predictable that studies did not conduct

comprehensive organizational assessments. Yet, all areas of capacity should be examined to offer

a full picture an organization's ability to accomplish their mission. It can be concluded from this

review that, overall, not much is known *empirically* about the organizational capacity of rural

nonprofits.

While the studies included in this review provide insight into some topics, numerous gaps

exist in understanding organizational capacity of rural nonprofits. Related to financial health,

there are several unknown factors about rural nonprofits: if and how often are they developing

fundraising plans and are diversifying revenue streams; if they have specific fundraising staff; if

fundraising training is being conducted for staff and volunteers; if staff or volunteers have grant

proposal writing knowledge; how often grant proposals are being submitted and to whom; if they

are engaging in social enterprises or market-based revenue generating activities; and if

organizations have financial accountability and monitoring procedures. Other areas where

knowledge is limited include rural nonprofits' knowledge of and engagement in strategic

planning, succession planning, human resources processes, staff training, legal compliance and

monitoring, program evaluation, and internal and external communications processes with

stakeholders.

The findings of this study imply the necessity of future research – both quantitative and

qualitative – regarding rural nonprofits in the U.S. First, a more comprehensive study of

organizational capacity and its various domains is needed to identify the strengths and challenges

within the different categories of nonprofits (e.g., human services, arts, education) in rural areas.

Upon identifying organizational capacity challenges, more complex inquiries into these specific

topics should occur based on nonprofit category and potentially, geographic area of the U.S.

(e.g., South). Using a strengths-based approach, studying those rural organizations who have

overcome challenges and are utilizing promising or evidenced-based practices would be a helpful

addition to empirical literature as well as rural leaders and program developers. Further, an

investigation examining relationships between organizational capacity and organizational

variables, such as age, organizational life stage, and leadership, within rural nonprofits would

contribute to this knowledge base. Finally, an exploration of how contextual factors – being in a

rural area – might impact (both positively and negatively) organizational capacity of rural

nonprofits is essential.

This study and its findings also reiterate Thomas et al.'s (2011) stance that place-based

identity may not be an important variable of concern for scholars. Belanger (2012) conjectures in

an editorial on this topic that research about rural communities and services does exist, but

findings are not easily discoverable as they are hidden within studies with a larger focus (i.e., a

study on healthcare services for women that may examine rural versus urban differences as one

variable of interest). The need for more rural-focused investigations (as opposed to comparative

studies) is critical to the development of place-based initiatives and interventions that can

effectively address challenges in rural communities, which might be different from the

approaches used in urban and suburban areas (Dankwa-Mullan & Pérez-Stable, 2016; Heflin &

Miller, 2011).

### *Policy and practice implications*

Regarding policy efforts, several organizations and alliances exist at the state and

national levels that advocate for the well-being and prosperity of rural residents and their

communities (e.g., The Rural Assembly, National Rural Health Association, Rural Policy

Research Institute). These groups work to educate policy makers on a variety of issues from

broadband access to health to economics (Center for Rural Strategies, n.d.). While the work of

these entities has and continues to be pivotal in rural development, this study, along with others, illustrates that rural policy efforts may not be translating into financial investment (i.e., grants) to rural nonprofits as they receive few federal and foundation dollars. Perhaps, lack of empirical knowledge regarding rural nonprofits, their contributions, and their struggles is partially to blame. In addition to research, rural nonprofit leaders should feel compelled and empowered to reach out to their local and state officials and funders to share their good works, and moreover, nonprofit MSOs should teach these organizations how to effectively communicate with parties in power.

In practice settings, rural nonprofits of all kinds are providing valuable services to their communities, often with few resources (i.e., human, financial, technological). This study revealed that collaborative, inventive, and innovative strategies are being utilized to manage and conquer challenges in rural nonprofits. Certainly, collecting and distributing knowledge of these successes are important and can be accomplished through formal and informal research and communication efforts. However, because context matters and essentially all communities are different (i.e., what works in one community may not work in another), another idea is to expose rural nonprofits to creative design and problem-solving techniques (e.g., design thinking) so that they may initiate, discover, and manage processes and solutions that best fit the needs of their communities. Nonprofit MSOs could take the lead in providing these trainings and ensuring that rural nonprofits are able to attend despite financial or other barriers.

**Conclusion**

Rural areas in the U.S. are facing a great deal of adversity: disproportionate levels of poverty, crime, health disparities, and substance abuse, among other hardships. When local, state, and federal governments cannot fill the gaps, nonprofits often intervene to strengthen

communities, but it is unknown if they have the tools needed to meet their missions. This scoping review provides a first look into what is currently known empirically about the organizational capacity of rural nonprofits in the U.S. and adds to the limited rural-focused literature.

The present inquiry's findings are important because nonprofit stakeholders have become fixated on understanding and building capacity to improve organizational effectiveness (Andersson et al., 2016). Because of the critical role performed by nonprofits, the government, foundations, and corporations devote millions annually to strengthen the infrastructure of nonprofits (Sobeck & Agius, 2007). Nonetheless, the needs, desires, and assets of nonprofits located in rural areas have been limitedly scrutinized. Further, little empirical knowledge is available about the capacity of small nonprofits overall (Roeger, 2010). Uncovering an improved understanding of rural nonprofits' challenges and strengths related to capacity will lead educators, funders, and other stakeholders to better assist these organizations –as well as small nonprofits located in other parts of the U.S.– to become more resilient and meet their missions to address and solve the economic, health, and social problems afflicting our communities.

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Table 1

*Database Search Terms & Definitions*

| Topic | Search Terms | Definitions |
|---|---|---|
| Rural | "rural" **AND** | There are several definitions of rural presented by the federal government and previous research. If the study identifies participant organizations as rural, it was included. |
| Nonprofit Organization | "nonprofit*" OR "non-profit*" OR "not-for-profit*" OR "non-governmental organization*" OR "NPO" OR "charit*" **AND** | By the definition of the Internal Revenue Service, a registered nonprofit must exist for the purposes of charity, religion, education, science, literacy, public safety, cruelty prevention, or amateur sports competition. They should not allocate earnings to shareholders nor substantively participate in lobbying or political campaigning (Internal Revenue Service, 2017). If the study identifies participant organizations as nonprofits, it was included. |
| **AND the following, each searched separately with "rural" and each of the capacity search terms** | | |
| Capacity | "capacit*" OR "operation*" OR "infrastructure" OR "function*" OR "capabilit*" OR | Organizational capacity is "an enabling factor that allows an organization to pursue and meet certain ends" (Andersson, et al., 2016). |
| Strategic Planning | "strateg*" OR "plan*" OR "mission" OR "vision" | "Strategic planning is a formalized process by which an organization makes a study of its vision for the future, typically three years or more from the present" (Grobman, 2011, p. 31). |
| Program Design & Evaluation | "program design" OR "program development" OR "program evaluation" OR "evaluation" OR "assessment" | Program design is "a process that an organization uses to develop a program. It is most often an iterative process involving research, consultation, initial design, testing and redesign" (McGuire, 2016). Program evaluation refers to the methodical gathering and examination of data related to an intervention and service users to understand impact and improve future delivery of programming (Brun, 2005). |
| Human Resources & Legal Affairs | "human resource*" OR "legal*" OR "law*" OR "statute*" | "Human resources management…is the design of formal systems in an organization to ensure the effective use of employees' knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics…to accomplish organizational goals" (Pynes, 2013, p. 7). Nonprofit legal affairs are comprised of laws related to organization formation, acquisition of tax-exempt status, reporting, philanthropy and fundraising, disclosure, business activities, and governance principles and liabilities (Hopkins, 2015). |
| Leadership & Staffing | "leader*" OR "board" OR "executive*" OR "administrat*" OR "manag*" OR "supervis*" OR "staff*" OR "personnel" | "Strong and effective leadership is the lynchpin of the system…. Leadership for nonprofit organizations may come from many sources, including professional staff, board members, and volunteers" (De Vita & Fleming, 2001, p. 18). |

Table 1 Continued

*Database Search Terms & Definitions*

| Topic | Search Terms | Definitions |
|---|---|---|
| Technology | "technolog*" OR "information system*" | Technology refers to the available hardware and software and the ability to utilize such technology by employees (De Vita & Fleming, 2001; Sobeck & Agius, 2007). |
| Financial Systems & Accountability | "financ*" OR "bookkeeping" OR "fiscal" OR "budget*" | Elements of nonprofit finance includes financial planning, budgeting, policies and procedures, recording, reporting, and monitoring (Renz, 2010). |
| Resource Development | "fund development" OR "fundraising" OR "advancement" OR "donor*" OR "donat*" OR "public support" OR "private support" OR "volunteer*" OR "earned income" OR "entrepreneur*" | Nonprofits must have resources to sustain operations including financial, human, and physical resources (De Vita & Fleming, 2001). Public and private support must be generated through development activities including fundraising, grant writing, and entrepreneurial endeavors (Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2016). |
| Communications | "marketing" OR "communication*" OR "promotion" OR "brand*" OR "external relation*" OR "public aware*" OR "outreach" OR "public relation*" | "Communication to enhance image and build reputation should be part of a nonprofit's strategic plan" (Tschirhart & Bielefeld, 2012, p. 330). Internal (within the organization) and external communications (branding, marketing, and public relations) are integral parts of organizational capacity (Allison & Kaye, 2015). |

**Table 1. Database Search Terms & Definitions.** Table 1 provides an exhaustive list of search terms and definitions utilized in the search part of the scoping review process.

Table 2

*Websites included in the search process*

| Name of website | Search procedure | Articles included |
|---|---|---|
| Bridgespan Groups | Under the "Insights" tab, clicked "Library," and then searched "rural." | 2 |
| Center for Civil Society Studies at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies | Scoured their "Listening Post Project" publications. | 1 |
| Center for Rural Affairs | Examined "Reports & Publications," and then "White Papers and Research Publications." | 0 |
| Lilly Family School of Philanthropy | Used their search tool and the term, "rural." | 0 |
| National Center for Frontier Communities | Used the search tool in the Resource Library and searched the term, "nonprofit." | 0 |
| National Council of Nonprofits | Under the "America's Nonprofits" tab and clicked "Research, Reports, and Data." | 0 |
| Rural Behavioral Health Initiative for Children, Youth, and Families | Examined the "Resources" page and clicked subheading, "Products and Tools." | 1 |
| Rural Community Assistance Partnership | Examined the "Resources" page. | 0 |
| Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation (Rural LISC) | Used their search tool and typed in "nonprofit." | 0 |
| Rural Policy Research Institute Library | Examined the publications listed on the "Library" page. | 0 |
| The Urban Institute | Used the power search option with the term, "rural nonprofit" and chose research area, "nonprofits and philanthropy." | 0 |

**Table 2. Websites included in the search process.** Table 2 outlines the websites included in the scoping review process, the search procedures utilized on those websites, and the number of articles included from those websites.

Table 3
*Studies meeting inclusion criteria*

| Authors, Publication Year & Article Type | Location & Mission of Nonprofits Studied | Main Study Purpose | Study Design, Analytic Methods, & Sample Characteristics | Key Challenges of Organizational Capacity |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anderson, T. (2017) Dissertation | South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, & Iowa<br><br>Animals, Food, and Youth Mentoring | Explore the challenges impacting rural nonprofits and understand how they impact board members' undertakings | Qualitative; elite-interviewing with grounded theory<br><br>$N = 24$ (all rural) | Top constraint was obtaining financial and human resources. Other constraints were distances traveled by clients to access programs; hesitance of rural residents use services; imparting necessity of services to community at-large; and obtaining skills needed to help provide services and mature the organization. Scarcity of qualified board members, volunteers, and staff; skill sets; and funding harmfully obstructed activities of the board and services delivered. Most organizations did not receive federal or local grants. Rather than strategizing for the future, most were focused on surviving. |
| Audi, G.; Kates, F.; Capen, M.; Polito, A. (2016) Peer-reviewed article | United States, Southern region<br><br>Hospitals | Examined the relationship between nonprofit and for-profit rural multisystem hospitals and their financial performances | Quantitative; non-experimental, causal-comparative; ANCOVA with GLM procedure<br><br>$N = 123$ (all rural, 62.6% nonprofit) | While nonprofit hospitals in rural areas had more cash-on-hand for daily expenses, they had reduced operating margins and return on equity compared to their for-profit counterparts, indicating poor financial health. |
| Bartow, S. (2017) Dissertation | Central New York: Chenango, Delaware, and Otsego counties<br><br>Human services | Analyzed rural New York nonprofits' use of social media platforms as instruments to communicate with stakeholders and meet their organizational missions | Qualitative; open-ended questioning with a conceptual framework<br><br>$N = 10$ (all rural) | Most of the executive directors were unaware of the utility of Facebook beyond sharing events. Other social media platforms were infrequently used because both staff lacked the knowledge regarding benefits and usage. No consistency existed regarding responsibility of social media, which was attributed to lack of time and resources. |

Table 3

*Studies meeting inclusion criteria*

| Authors, Publication Year & Article Type | Location & Mission of Nonprofits Studied | Main Study Purpose | Study Design, Analytic Methods, & Sample Characteristics | Key Challenges of Organizational Capacity |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Edmond, M.; Aletraris, L.; Roman, P. (2015) Peer-reviewed article | United States, National<br><br>Substance use-disorder treatment | Compared the variances in treatment quality between rural and urban substance abuse treatment centers | Quantitative; non-experimental, causal-comparative; descriptive statistics, chi-square, t-tests & multivariate regression<br><br>$N = 591$ (20% rural, 72% nonprofit) | Rural substance abuse centers were more likely publicly funded; had fewer counselors with master's degrees; and offered less services, innovative treatments, specialized tracks, and wraparound services. |
| Gellar, S.; Abramson, A. Leon, E. (2010) Report | United States, National<br><br>Economic growth; human services; arts | Sought to understand the technological capacity of nonprofits | Mixed-methods; triangulation with survey with quantitative and open-ended questions; descriptive statistics and thematic analysis<br><br>$N = 223$ (28% rural) | Compared with urban and suburban organizations, rural nonprofits were less likely to have their computers networked together; to have a paid, full-time staff person dedicated to IT needs; and to provide IT training to non-IT staff. Only 39 percent of rural nonprofits had access to high-speed internet. |
| Knudsen, A. (2016) Master's thesis | Colorado<br><br>Youth-serving organization | Evaluated the influence a nonprofit with a few satellite offices on their community while also identifying assets and challenges | Mixed methods; triangulation with secondary data, interviews, and observations; descriptive statistics and thematic analysis<br><br>$N = 1$ (rural) | Several challenges were recognized: heavily grant-funded; leadership turnover; issues with data collection and analysis for multiple sites; unprepared for growth in the region; nonexistent or vague policies around collaborations; uneducated about how to impact change through political activity; no backup plan if fundraising fails; and maintenance issues due to little funding. |

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| Lee, A. (2011) Dissertation | Charleston, West Virginia; Greene County, Tennessee; & Athens, Ohio<br><br>Economic development | Sought to understand how rural economic growth-oriented organizations functioned in meeting their missions | Qualitative; case-study approach; hypothesis testing through replication<br><br>$N = 3$ (rural) | All organizations had experienced reduced foundation and government funding. As a result, executive directors were constantly fundraising and neglected the mission. Public perception dictated that nonprofits should operate with scant staffing and resources. With relentless stress over insufficient resources, turnover in leadership caused instability. |
| Neuhoff, A. & Dunckelman, A (2011) Report | United States, National<br><br>Human services | Contrasted the rural and urban nonprofit sector through examining finances, staffing, and other capacity issues. | Mixed methods; triangulation with secondary data analysis and case study; descriptive statistics and thematic analysis<br><br>$N = 343,851$ (secondary data; 16% rural); $N = 2$ (case study, 1 rural) | Less than 20 percent of rural organizations had budgets larger than $1 million and also obtained less federal and state funding. Recruiting qualified personnel and board members was difficult because rural organizations had smaller budgets, and there were fewer talented professionals available because of lower educational attainment. Retention was also challenging because agencies were unable offer raises, training, and promotion. The scarcity of nonprofits in rural areas and lack of public transportation created service-access problems and budgetary issues for agencies. |
| Newstead, B. & Wu, P. (2009) Report | California & New Mexico<br><br>Youth-serving organizations | Investigated the financial health and capacity of youth-serving organizations in rural and urban areas | Quantitative; non-experimental, Comparative; descriptive statistics<br>$N = 882$ | Rural nonprofits were half the size financially as urban organizations and spent twice as less on their clients. |

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| Office of Rural Health Policy (2011) Report | United States, National<br><br>Behavioral health | Examined behavioral health organizations with inventive programming but might be struggling to expand or fully implement services due to capacity issues | Mixed methods; triangulation with surveys and open-ended interviews; descriptive statistics and thematic analysis<br><br>$N = 62$ (surveys); $N = 11$ (interviews, all rural) | Most organizations were unable to devote staff to program evaluation. Staff struggled to collect data because of workload and lack of time. Staff also may not have the skills to conduct or participate in evaluation. Due to limited financial resources, organizations were unable to hire external consultants to facilitate evaluation. |
| Sanders, R. (2014) Dissertation | Not provided<br><br>Youth-serving organizations | Assessed and aimed to improve fundraising skills of board members | Mixed methods; action research intervention design with survey and open-ended interviews; descriptive statistics and thematic analysis<br><br>$N = 5$ (all rural) | Participants were unclear about the policy outlining responsibilities for fundraising. Participants were less confident about the adoption of an income strategy; adoption of a conflict of interest policy; members acting as representatives; and members upholding commitments. |
| Seale, E. (2010) Dissertation | North Carolina<br><br>Human services | Examined the economic and political challenges faced by one rural and one urban nonprofit and their impact on organizational capacity and services | Qualitative; comparative case-study approach with deductive analytic method<br><br>$N = 22$ (10 rural, 2 nonprofit) | Rural nonprofits had less capacity than their urban counterparts. Rural organizations struggled with building trust and connecting with residents. Collaboration between rural agencies was limited. Inadequate resources – human and financial resulted in hardship. Staff were overworked due to being shorthanded. They also did not have the training nor time to invest in grant writing and fundraising. Organizations often did not have reserves for shortages. Expanding services was not a possibility. |

Table 3 Continued

*Studies meeting inclusion criteria*

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| Skinner, D.; Franz, B. & Kelleher, K. (2018) Peer-reviewed article | Appalachian region of Ohio, 32 counties<br><br>Hospitals | Explored the challenges rural hospitals faced upon employing the CHNA in their communities | Qualitative; semi-structured interviews with grounded theory approach<br><br>N = 21 (18 rural) | Organizations did not have enough staff to meet the government mandate of conducting a community health needs assessment. They also did not have funds to add dedicated employees; instead, the workload of existing staff increased. |
| Sweet, K. (2013) Dissertation | Eastern North Carolina<br><br>Mission unclear | Investigated the attitudes and experiences of nonprofit employees to assess their overall job satisfaction and organizational commitment | Qualitative; semi-structured interviews with transcendental phenomenological approach and comparative analysis<br><br>*N* = 10 (employees in a rural organization) | Communication between staff and leaders was unsatisfactory. Staff were displeased with the support received from leadership. Leaders were resistant to innovation and change as well as investing in staff development and training. Leaders lacked knowledge pertaining to funder requirements and implored staff to ignore them, which created difficult situations for staff. |
| Tighe, J. (2013) Peer-reviewed article | Appalachian region<br><br>Housing counseling | Explored nonprofits available resources and service provision abilities | Mixed methods; triangulation with secondary analysis and survey with quantitative and open-ended questions; descriptive statistics and thematic analysis<br><br>*N* = 104 (all rural, 93% nonprofit) | There was a significant lack of financial resources due to funding cuts at the state and federal levels. Few agencies were actively fundraising due to lack of staff and time. With little funding available, staff had minimal access to innovative and updated training and knowledge related to their services. Most organizations were unable to add staff, and people requiring service were turned away. Considering the sparse population density, organizations in rural areas utilized expensive forms of advertising to connect with potential service users. |

**Table 3. Studies meeting inclusion criteria.** Table 3 provides the studies meeting the inclusion criteria and shares relevant information about the studies including author, year published,

geographical context, missions of the organizations examined, purpose of study, methodology, and key challenges regarding organizational capacity found in the study.