
Collaboration Among Rural Nonprofit Organizations

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Collaboration has received strong impetus in recent years. Service providers face greater expectations that they will share human and financial resources with other organizations, conduct joint planning, and devise other ways to break down organization barriers. This article analyzes collaborative practices among nonprofit organizations in rural southern Illinois and the Mississippi Delta. Environmental factors present in rural areas suggest that collaboration may be difficult to accomplish. Clients are scattered over a large geographic area, they are hard to contact because of transportation problems, community financial resources are limited, staff salaries are low, and some rural populations resist service offerings. Despite these difficulties, nonprofits in the two rural regions do engage in significant collaborations, and their leadership shows strong commitment to partnering with other organizations. Certain characteristics of the rural environment actually facilitate collaboration.

People write these grants and they write about collaboration and it sounds good on paper, but they don't really follow through on a lot of it—they don't do what they say they are going to do.

In this area, it's not a new thing. We have to collaborate because the resources are limited.

—CEO of a rural nonprofit in Illinois

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THIS comment illustrates the frustrations and hopes, and promises and pitfalls, of collaboration among organizations. The concept and practice of collaboration is not new to public and nonprofit organizations, but has gained momentum as a result of changing attitudes toward government and growing expectations about private sector social responsibility. Practitioners and scholars alike increasingly are curious about how interorganizational collaboration is structured, about best practices, and about the conditions that spawn success and failure.

This article analyzes collaborative practices of nonprofit organizations in two rural regions: seven counties in southern Illinois and six counties in the Delta region of Mississippi. Both regions encompass large expanses of agricultural and forest land, are dotted with small towns, and register relatively high rates of poverty and unemployment. These conditions are likely to affect adversely the resources of the regions' nonprofit organizations and, hence, their ability and desire to forge collaborations. Yet the two regions are not immune to larger governmental and social forces' stimulating joint planning and resource sharing among nonprofits, government agencies, and business. Those pressures, along with innovative nonprofit sector leadership and necessity of pooling resources, are in fact influencing collaborations in southern Illinois and the Mississippi Delta. As we shall see, there are also factors particular to rural location and regional historical and cultural characteristics that mold nonprofit organization collaboration.

Collaboration

Collaboration increasingly has found expression in law, public policy, and management practice. Popular beliefs that government should be smaller, more efficient, decentralized, and privatized have fueled initiatives to forge more intentional relationships among the government and private for-profit and nonprofit sectors. Viewed in a negative light, collaboration is considered an antidote to bloated, rigid government bureaucracy. From a positive standpoint, collaboration enables society to draw on the creative energies and human and financial resources of all sectors, bringing them together to benefit communities and the nation.

Federal policymakers have had a strong influence by inserting requirements for collaboration in legislation. To cite a few examples, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Continuum of Care Program requires providers of homeless programs in communities and regions to conduct joint planning and together apply for federal funding (Barnard-Columbia Center for Urban Policy, 1996). Furthermore, providers of homeless programs are to link up with other service organizations to secure comprehensive care for individuals and families. The urban and rural empowerment zone/enterprise community projects are explicitly designed to leverage

government funds committed to community economic development with private sector financial investments. Community nonprofit organizations are to play a leading role in addressing social issues and in building up community identity.

Other examples include the welfare reform Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, which is predicated on the assumption that nonprofit organizations and business will take on greater responsibility to provide jobs and social supports to the poor and unemployed; the Access to Jobs program of the Transportation Equity Act of the 21st Century, which requires a “collaborative transportation/human services planning process” (U.S. Department of Transportation, 1999); and the Welfare to Work program that seeks to “foster new partnerships between and among public and private organizations who have traditionally served welfare recipients” (U.S. Department of Labor, 1999). Rural collaborations have been actively encouraged through the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Rural Development Partnership (Murray and Dunn, 1996; Radin and others, 1996). This program, working in cooperation with state rural development councils, promotes an approach to rural development that emphasizes creation of government, business, and nonprofit partnerships. A collaborative approach is present in a number of other federal initiatives that affect welfare systems in rural as well as urban areas, including the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 and the Workforce Investment Act of 1998.

Despite all the policy language and emphasis on collaboration, capturing its meaning and intent can be challenging. Are organizations collaborating when they simply agree to share information with each other about their service activities, or does collaboration require some commitment to sharing of organizational resources or formal coordination of services? Most definitions assume the latter—that true collaboration requires mutual obligations among organizations and a belief that they can maximize effectiveness and efficiency only by working together and sharing resources. This is implicit in Barbara Gray’s definition of collaboration as “the pooling of appreciations and/or tangible resources, e.g., information, money, labor, etc., (2) by two or more stakeholders, (3) to solve a set of problems which neither can solve individually” (Gray, 1985, p. 912).

“Service integration” in part captures central qualities of collaboration (Waldfoegel, 1997). Kagan (1993) documents that service integration has a long history and has been given particular attention since the 1960s. Reacting to the rigid bureaucratic boundaries created by categorical grant programs, federal, state, and local governments have sought ways to break down those barriers that prevent addressing the comprehensive needs of service recipients in a coherent fashion. A service integration approach calls on agencies to combine organization structures through such procedures as sharing office space, sharing client information, sharing staff and coordinating staff

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assignments, and jointly applying for grants or engaging in joint budgeting (Kagan, 1993).

Here, we adopt O'Looney's definition of collaboration, which encompasses both service integration and broader dimensions of administrative philosophy and practice:

The term "collaboration" is used to denote the processes and governance approaches (e.g., negotiations, shared leadership, consultation and coordination, consensus building, etc.) that tend to promote a new service delivery system that is integrated. "Service integration" in turn refers to this new, collaboratively-built, system [O'Looney, 1994, p. 62].

Collaboration in this sense refers to the overarching commitment to working closely with other organizations where their missions overlap and intersect and where the combining of resources leads to improved service effectiveness and efficiency. Service integration—concrete steps taken to break down organization barriers—is central to the process of forming collaborations.

Collaboration in Rural Illinois and Mississippi

Rural nonprofit organizations experience unique environmental problems that shape the face of service delivery and may affect collaboration. Geographic size is one issue. Because rural service providers often attend to a population dispersed over a wide territory, identifying potential clients and informing people of available services can be difficult and costly. Accessing services can be a problem for clients. Absence of public transportation and lacking a car, clients are unable to reach service facilities or can only do so on an irregular basis (Ginsberg, 1993; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1997). Service organizations find that in order to reach clients, staff may have to drive long distances, or to aid clients in receiving comprehensive services, they personally have to transport clients to distant locations. Providing these services drives up operational costs and reduces the time staff have to counsel other clients. Consequently, the organization appears inefficient according to standard performance measures. Cultural issues can affect service delivery. Rural people often rely on informal networks of aid (families, friends, churches) and thus can be hard to reach or resistant to formal organizational assistance (Martinez-Brawley, 1993). Farmers, it has been found, are not inclined to seek some types of services, particularly mental health (Center for Mental Health Services, 1998). Organizational problems include the inability of local communities to provide strong financial backing and difficulty in attracting professional staff due to noncompetitive salaries.

These and other issues potentially affect the ability and desire of rural-based nonprofits to seek out collaborations. On the one hand, combining of resources could be one way for rural nonprofits

to overcome financial constraints. However, the competition for scarce resources in rural areas may just as well drive self-interest behavior. Dispersal of clients and service providers over a large geographic area might inhibit collaboration. Distance can make it difficult for nonprofit organizations to remain in close contact with each other, and even more so if they are lacking computer technology that eases information sharing and daily interaction. Tight, small town identities could inhibit formation of regional collaborations, the kind of partnerships that are most needed in rural areas.

Obstacles to service delivery in the rural environment do not necessarily inhibit collaboration, however. As we shall see, rural nonprofits in the areas we studied are interested in collaborating with others and have succeeded in doing so.

This study investigates collaborative efforts of nonprofit organizations in rural southern Illinois and the rural delta region of Mississippi. Although the two regions share characteristics of rural location and high rates of poverty and unemployment, they also harbor important differences that enrich this comparative study. The southern Illinois counties are predominantly white, while the Mississippi Delta counties are predominantly African American (see Table 1). The Mississippi counties are also much more densely populated. Poverty and unemployment rates are high in both localities, exceeding the average for their states (see Table 1). But the poverty rate is unusually high in the delta counties, ranging from a low of 31.8 percent in Washington County to a high of 44.9 percent in Holmes County. A common feature that the two regions share is

Table 1. Demographic Data for Southern Illinois and the Mississippi Delta

| <i>County</i> | <i>1990 Population</i> | <i>Percentage White</i> | <i>Percentage Black</i> | <i>Percentage Population in Poverty, 1995</i> | <i>Median Household Income, 1995</i> |
|--------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---|--|
| <i>Illinois</i> | 11,439,603 | 78.4 | 14.8 | 11.3 | 38,078 |
| Alexander | 10,626 | 66.6 | 33.0 | 28.7 | 18,952 |
| Hardin | 5,189 | 98.0 | 1.3 | 19.7 | 22,457 |
| Johnson | 11,347 | 90.0 | 9.3 | 14.7 | 28,124 |
| Massac | 14,752 | 93.5 | 6.1 | 14.2 | 26,844 |
| Pope | 4,373 | 93.2 | 6.0 | 16.6 | 24,678 |
| Pulaski | 7,523 | 66.8 | 32.9 | 24.9 | 21,518 |
| Union | 17,619 | 98.3 | 0.7 | 15.9 | 26,367 |
| Total | 53,810 | | | | |
| <i>Mississippi</i> | 2,573,216 | 63.5 | 35.6 | 21.4 | 26,501 |
| Bolivar | 41,875 | 36.2 | 63.1 | 35.2 | 19,740 |
| Holmes | 21,604 | 24.0 | 75.8 | 44.9 | 14,382 |
| Humphreys | 12,134 | 31.8 | 68.1 | 38.9 | 16,370 |
| Leflore | 37,341 | 38.6 | 60.7 | 34.7 | 19,610 |
| Sunflower | 32,867 | 35.3 | 64.1 | 41.9 | 18,275 |
| Washington | 67,935 | 41.5 | 57.8 | 31.8 | 22,917 |
| Total | 145,821 | | | | |

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce (1991, 1996).

that each has been awarded a rural empowerment zone designation by the federal government. The delta's empowerment zone has been in place since 1996; southern Illinois received its award in 1999.

Data contained in the 1997 Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Business Master file and the National Center for Charitable Statistics core file reveal that there are 121 nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporations in the seven southern Illinois counties and 399 in the six Mississippi counties. These are charitable organizations that qualify for tax-exempt status under the federal tax code, making contributions to them tax-deductible. Most are public charity-service-providing organizations (91.7 percent in Illinois and 84 percent in Mississippi). Relatively small organizations, those recording less than \$25,000 in annual income, comprise approximately three-fourths of the nonprofits in each of the two regions.

We used a multiple-method approach to gathering data and information on collaboration to learn about the effects of rural location and distinguish any differences between nonprofit collaboration between southern Illinois and the Mississippi Delta. A survey instrument, mailed to directors of nonprofit organizations, was first used to gather data on collaborative activities and ascertain attitudes and perceptions toward collaboration.¹ In-depth interviews were then held with select groups of nonprofit directors to gain detailed knowledge of organizational histories and collaborative activities.² Finally, focus groups were held with directors in both regions to explore nonprofits' experiences with collaboration.³

Collaborative Practices and Attitudes

In February 1999, surveys were mailed to directors of 292 nonprofit organizations in thirteen counties in Illinois and Mississippi. A second wave of surveys was mailed to nonrespondents three weeks after the initial mailing. Twenty surveys were returned as undeliverable, meaning that the organizations likely were no longer in existence. Of the remaining 272 outstanding surveys, 66 were returned, for a response rate of 24 percent.⁴ Although a higher response rate is desirable, we believe that the returns are representative of those organizations most engaged in collaborative activities. Larger, more well-established nonprofits (which appear in the IRS core file of organizations required to file annual tax returns) represented 65.1 percent of respondents (30.5 percent of the original list of 292 organizations). Returns from these large organizations equaled 65 percent of all returns received from each state. Surveys from each state were roughly proportional to their representation in the original mailing. Mississippi returns totaled 65.2 percent and Illinois 34.8 percent of the total, as contrasted to, respectively, being the location of 73 and 27 percent of the total number of organizations.

The first section of the survey listed twenty-three items describing collaborative activities that can be grouped into five subsets: case

management, community planning, two types of organization integration, and interorganization planning. Survey respondents were asked to check each item describing an activity their organization is currently engaged in and then check whether the activity is held with other nonprofits, government agencies, or both. Table 2 records the survey findings.

Case management activities are the most prevalent forms of collaboration. Nonprofits are actively engaged in referring clients and in receiving referrals, and in sharing information with other organizations. These activities are carried out jointly with government agencies and other nonprofit organizations. Communitywide planning and community issue assessment are also fairly popular, with nearly two-thirds of the organizations indicating their participation in these activities. Again, the activities are in conjunction with government and nonprofit agencies.

Varieties of organization integration are less popular with the organizations surveyed. Half reported that they share volunteers and space, write grants with others, and belong to coalition or umbrella organizations. There is much less in the way of organization integration in the more difficult to accomplish areas of shared staffing, joint budgeting and purchasing, and the pooling of finances. Overall, organization integration is more likely to occur with other nonprofit organizations, especially with respect to financial and staff collaboration.

Interorganization planning is not prominent. Half of the organizations conduct strategic planning with others, and 44 percent assign staff to interagency planning teams. However, the practice of adopting common service procedures, program guidelines, and assessment strategies is supported by only approximately one-third of the nonprofits. Interorganization planning, when it occurs, is generally not exclusively with other nonprofits or with government agencies. These data suggest that only a limited amount of service integration has been achieved through the blurring of organization barriers.

The now-popular practice of case management has taken hold in the nonprofits. They apparently are quite willing to share client information with other nonprofit organizations and with government service agencies. Furthermore, they appear to have close connections with other service providers and feel comfortable in working with them. Most of the nonprofits both refer clients and take referrals from others. Yet the willingness to collaborate through information sharing and client referrals does not extend to adopting common service delivery procedures, guidelines, and assessment strategies. Building up a bond of trust among organizations so that they are willing to share information and are committed to aid clients in receiving each other's services is an important accomplishment. Organization boundaries remain somewhat tight, though, so that clients are subject to the differing service procedures of each organization. To be fair to the nonprofit organizations, they often have little flexibility to

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Table 2. Collaborative Practices by Surveyed Organizations (n = 66)

| Variable | Engaged in Activity | | In Cooperation with (Percentage) | | |
|---|---------------------|------------|----------------------------------|------------|------|
| | Number | Percentage | Other Nonprofits | Government | Both |
| <i>Case Management</i> | | | | | |
| 1. Refer t | 58 | 89.4 | 8.5 | 5.1 | 86.4 |
| 2. Receiv | 55 | 83.3 | 5.5 | 3.6 | 90.9 |
| 3. Share i | 49 | 74.2 | 14.3 | 6.1 | 79.6 |
| 4. Evaluat | 46 | 69.7 | 17.4 | 6.5 | 76.1 |
| 5. Particip | 39 | 59.1 | 28.9 | 7.9 | 63.2 |
| <i>Variable Text:</i> | | | | | |
| 1. Refer people to other organizations for service. | | | | | |
| 2. Receive referrals for service from other organizations. | | | | | |
| 3. Share information about people we serve with other service providers. | | | | | |
| 4. Work with other organizations to evaluate service needs of people and develop a plan for receiving services. | | | | | |
| 5. Participate in a network with other organizations sharing information about service recipients. | | | | | |
| <i>Community Planning</i> | | | | | |
| 6. Commu | 42 | 63.6 | 28.6 | 0.0 | 71.4 |
| 7. Examin | 42 | 63.6 | 16.7 | 7.1 | 76.2 |
| 8. Particip | 34 | 51.5 | 17.6 | 2.9 | 79.4 |
| <i>Variable Text:</i> | | | | | |
| 6. Participate in communitywide planning activities. | | | | | |
| 7. Participate in communitywide efforts to examine community problems and issues. | | | | | |
| 8. Participate in training program with other community leaders to improve communications. | | | | | |
| <i>Interorganizational Planning</i> | | | | | |
| 9. Strate | 34 | 51.5 | 32.4 | 2.9 | 64.7 |
| 10. Inter-a | 29 | 43.9 | 13.8 | 0.0 | 86.2 |
| 11. Comm | 25 | 37.9 | 44.0 | 16.0 | 40.0 |
| 12. Progra | 24 | 36.4 | 37.5 | 12.5 | 50.0 |
| 13. Asses | 22 | 33.3 | 27.3 | 4.5 | 68.2 |
| 14. Missio | 21 | 31.8 | 52.4 | 0.0 | 47.6 |
| <i>Variable Text:</i> | | | | | |
| 9. Participate in strategic planning with other organizations. | | | | | |
| 10. Staff serve on interagency teams for planning or service coordination. | | | | | |
| 11. Adopted common set of procedures with other organizations for delivering services. | | | | | |
| 12. Adopted program service guidelines in cooperation with other service providers. | | | | | |
| 13. Adopted assessment strategies in cooperation with other service providers. | | | | | |
| 14. Joined with other organizations to write common mission or vision statements. | | | | | |

Table 2. (Continued)

| Variable | Engaged in Activity | | In Cooperation with (Percentage) | | |
|--|---------------------|------------|----------------------------------|------------|------|
| | Number | Percentage | Other Nonprofits | Government | Both |
| <i>Organization Integration I</i> | | | | | |
| 15. Share | 33 | 50.0 | 45.5 | 6.1 | 48.5 |
| 16. Share | 33 | 50.0 | 51.5 | 9.1 | 39.4 |
| 17. Grant | 33 | 50.0 | 45.5 | 9.1 | 45.5 |
| 18. Coaliti | 32 | 48.5 | 46.9 | 0.0 | 53.1 |
| <i>Variable Text:</i> | | | | | |
| 15. Share volunteers with other service providers. | | | | | |
| 16. Share space for serving clients with other service providers. | | | | | |
| 17. Engage in grant writing with other organizations. | | | | | |
| 18. Work in partnership with other organizations through a coalition or umbrella organization. | | | | | |
| <i>Organization Integration II</i> | | | | | |
| 19. Curren | 24 | 36.4 | 66.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 |
| 20. Share | 22 | 33.3 | 45.5 | 18.2 | 36.4 |
| 21. Pool fi | 19 | 28.8 | 63.2 | 0.0 | 38.6 |
| 22. Joint p | 13 | 19.7 | 61.5 | 0.0 | 38.5 |
| 23. Joint b | 11 | 16.7 | 63.6 | 9.1 | 27.3 |
| <i>Variable Text:</i> | | | | | |
| 19. Currently implementing a grant with another organization. | | | | | |
| 20. Share staff with other service providers. | | | | | |
| 21. Pool financial resources with other organizations to provide services. | | | | | |
| 22. Join with other organizations to purchase services and supplies for our own operations. | | | | | |
| 23. Carry out joint budgeting with another organization. | | | | | |

alter service procedures. Government grants, regulatory bodies, and accrediting agencies dictate service procedures (including restrictive confidentiality guidelines), and the service agencies have little choice but to comply.

These restrictions also are likely have an impact on nonprofits' ability to collaborate in the realm of budgeting and finance. Such restrictions have less effect on sharing of space, joint grant writing, or sharing of volunteers, which may partially explain why we see more of these activities.

Organization integration may be limited, but there is evidence that the nonprofit directors accept the general philosophy of collaboration. This is suggested by their participation in communitywide planning and problem identification events. Their philosophical orientation toward collaboration is further suggested by responses to a second set of items.

Survey respondents were asked to check their responses, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, to a series of nineteen

statements (grouped here for analytical purposes into five categories as recorded in Table 3). These statements reflect attitudes toward collaboration, organization responses to collaboration, and sources of pressure to collaborate. Examining reactions to statements 1 through 9, we find that nonprofit directors have a strong sense that collaboration is an effective way to deliver services and that the practice benefits the organization in several ways. The directors' orientation toward the general philosophy of collaboration is very positive. They are less certain that the spirit of collaboration among organizations has changed much in recent years (see items 18 and 19), meaning perhaps that the newer policy requirements and trends in administrative practice have only mildly influenced collaborative activities. Responses to items 11 and 13 show that inducements to collaborate

Table 3. Nonprofit Leaders' Perceptions of Collaboration ($n = 66$)

| <i>Statement</i> | <i>Mean^a</i> | <i>Standard Deviation</i> |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Value of Collaboration to Service Delivery | | |
| 1. Collaborating with other nonprofits is an effective way to deliver services. | 1.53 | 0.76 |
| 2. Collaboration can improve the quality of services delivered to people. | 1.83 | 0.93 |
| 3. Collaborating with government agencies is an effective way to deliver services. | 1.90 | 1.13 |
| Value of Collaboration to the Organization | | |
| 4. Collaboration with other organizations is very important to my own organization. | 1.76 | 1.04 |
| 5. Collaboration helps build a strong sense of community. | 1.98 | 0.97 |
| 6. Collaboration improves the visibility of nonprofit organizations within the community. | 2.04 | 0.93 |
| 7. My organization is very active in collaborating with others. | 2.12 | 1.22 |
| 8. Collaboration helps nonprofits make important political connections within the community. | 2.39 | 1.32 |
| 9. Collaboration helps break down bureaucratic barriers between organizations. | 2.49 | 1.41 |
| Inducements to Collaborate | | |
| 10. Federal welfare reform created more interest in collaboration among nonprofits. | 2.56 | 1.32 |
| 11. In recent years my organization has felt more pressure from government to join in collaborative activities with others. | 3.29 | 1.61 |
| 12. Creation of the federal empowerment zone in our area has created more interest in collaboration among nonprofits. | 3.32 | 1.52 |
| 13. In recent years my organization has felt more pressure from other nonprofits to join collaborative activities with others. | 3.59 | 1.44 |
| 14. My organization increased its collaboration as a result of welfare reform. | 3.75 | 1.52 |
| 15. My organization has increased its collaboration with other organizations as a result of creation of the federal empowerment zone. | 3.90 | 1.62 |
| Organization Effects of Collaboration | | |
| 16. Collaboration with other organizations costs a significant amount of staff time. | 2.65 | 1.32 |
| 17. Collaboration costs a significant amount of organizational financial resources. | 3.63 | 1.30 |
| Recent Trends in Collaboration | | |
| 18. There is a stronger spirit of collaboration among organizations than in the past. | 2.79 | 1.20 |
| 19. We find that other organizations are now more willing to collaborate than in past years. | 2.91 | 1.29 |

^aRespondents were asked to check one of the following responses to each item: 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = somewhat agree; 4 = somewhat disagree; 5 = disagree; 6 = strongly disagree.

emanating from government and other nonprofits have not been particularly strong. Welfare reform does seem to have had some effect on stimulating a general climate of collaboration (item 10) but not much effect on the work of individual agencies responding to the survey (item 14). Creation of a federal empowerment zone has not had much influence on collaboration (items 12 and 15). As for direct effects on the internal operations of the organization, collaboration is seen as costing significant staff time (item 16), but does not result in significant financial costs (item 17).

To obtain a sense of the impact of rural environment on nonprofits' structure and behavior, we presented respondents with a list of twenty factors and asked them to check whether they considered each item an important issue (see Table 4). High demand for services ranked as the top issue, followed by local resource concerns (inability of the population to give time or money). One of the potential effects of geographical remoteness of rural areas is distance from private foundations, which tend to be located in urban areas. The nonprofit directors reported that making connections with foundations is an important issue, but also felt that tapping into government funding is problematic. Staffing is a concern for respondents. They

Table 4. Nonprofit Leaders' Perceptions of Importance of Rural Factors (n = 66)

| | <i>Response (percent)</i> | | |
|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| | <i>Important Issue</i> | <i>Not Very Important</i> | <i>Don't Know</i> |
| 1. High demand for our services | 86.2 | 7.2 | 6.2 |
| 2. Limited ability of local population to donate money | 84.4 | 10.9 | 4.7 |
| 3. Limited ability of local population to donate time | 77.8 | 20.6 | 1.6 |
| 4. Limited access to grant-making private foundations | 77.8 | 15.9 | 6.3 |
| 5. Lack of sufficient financial aid from government | 73.4 | 17.2 | 9.4 |
| 6. Serving clients in a large geographical area | 69.2 | 26.2 | 4.6 |
| 7. Low staff salaries, making it difficult to attract and retain employees | 66.7 | 27.0 | 6.3 |
| 8. Compliance with state regulations | 64.6 | 26.2 | 9.2 |
| 9. Compliance with federal regulations | 63.1 | 24.6 | 12.3 |
| 10. Lack of grant-writing skills and experience in our organization | 57.6 | 37.9 | 4.5 |
| 11. Limited availability in local population of potential employees with administrative skills | 56.3 | 35.9 | 7.8 |
| 12. Limited availability in local population of potential employees with appropriate skills to deliver services to our clients | 53.8 | 35.4 | 10.8 |
| 13. Location of my organization in a rural/nonmetropolitan community | 53.1 | 43.8 | 3.1 |
| 14. Competition with other nonprofits for grants and contracts | 49.2 | 36.9 | 13.8 |
| 15. Insufficient financial support from such community fundraising organizations as United Way | 46.2 | 41.5 | 12.3 |
| 16. Governing board members' lack of knowledge of duties and responsibilities | 43.1 | 50.8 | 6.2 |
| 17. Inadequate training opportunities for staff | 34.4 | 59.4 | 6.3 |
| 18. Inadequate links with state or national professional organizations | 32.8 | 54.7 | 12.5 |
| 19. Lack of sufficient financial management skills in our organization | 25.0 | 65.6 | 9.4 |

clearly feel the impact that low salaries have on recruitment and retention of staff. Potentially, recruitment problems affect the level of skills within the organization. A slight majority of directors are concerned with the ability of staff to write grants, demonstrate administrative skills, and possess skills necessary to serve clients effectively (items 11 and 12). Little concern is expressed for accessing training opportunities and linking with professional organizations (items 18 and 19), and financial management skills (likely to be a responsibility of the directors) are of least concern (item 20). Being located in a rural area is considered to be an important issue by a majority of respondents (53.1 percent), and an even larger number recognized serving a large geographic area as a significant issue (69.2 percent).

Finally, we asked respondents whether their organization had expanded services within the past five years and, if so, in what ways. Nearly three-fourths responded that they had expanded services (see Table 5). Most of those had engaged in in-house service expansion (item 1), as opposed to extending services through linking with other organizations (item 9). Although only a slight majority checked that introducing case management was part of their recent service expansion (item 7), most are more actively engaged in receiving and making client referrals (items 2 and 4). Other service expansion includes securing new grants (item 3) and hiring more staff.

Table 5. Nonprofits' Expansion of Services (n = 66)

| | <i>Number of Organizations</i> | <i>Percentage of Total</i> |
|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Agencies reporting having expanded services in the past five years | 47 | 73.4 |
| <i>Ways in which services have been expanded:</i> | | |
| 1. Expanding the type of services our organization provides | 40 | 85.1 |
| 2. Providing services to clients sent to us by other organizations | 34 | 72.3 |
| 3. Securing new grants and/or contracts to expand services | 34 | 72.3 |
| 4. Directing clients to other organizations where they will receive additional services | 33 | 70.2 |
| 5. Expanding staff work responsibilities so that more services can be provided | 29 | 61.7 |
| 6. Hiring more staff so that more services can be provided | 28 | 59.6 |
| 7. Using case management approach to assessing the range of service needs of clients and, when appropriate, their families | 26 | 55.3 |
| 8. Redefining the mission of our organization to reflect expansion of services | 22 | 46.8 |
| 9. Expanding the type of on-site services to our clients provided by other organizations | 18 | 38.3 |
| 10. Adding or increasing fees for services paid by clients to help pay for service costs | 15 | 31.9 |

The overall impression given by the survey data is that nonprofit leaders in the southern Illinois and Mississippi Delta regions are very supportive of the concept of collaboration and put it in practice. They believe in its benefits for service delivery and mission accomplishment, and they recognize communitywide benefits to collaborative planning. Nonprofit leaders, in our discussions with them, used such metaphors about partnership, scheming, plotting, and marriage to characterize collaboration. These metaphors convey a philosophy of inventiveness, mutual obligation, and sharing.

In practice, collaboration occurs largely through various aspects of case management, particularly the sharing of information on clients and services and in making and receiving referrals. Directors stressed the importance of formally cementing organization case management relationships through signing memoranda of understanding (MOUs). These MOUs specify services that organizations will provide each other and the procedures for doing so.

Working with other nonprofits and with government agencies to examine and discuss community issues is also popular. Collaboration does not extend to sharing of staff or space, the pooling of financial resources, or other actions that tend to diminish organization boundaries more concretely. This, of course, is a difficult feat to accomplish no matter how strong the pressures for collaboration.

Nonprofit directors acknowledge the importance of rural environmental factors, which have the potential to color collaboration. Such issues as demand for services, difficulty in securing external financial aid, and geographic size of the service area can be both a hindrance and incentive. These resource and service challenges can cause organizations to protect their own organizational integrity and resist appeals to work cooperatively with others, or they can prod organizations to seek each other out to pool limited resources, thereby strengthening their ability to deliver services. Concern over attracting skilled employees and retaining those who are hired can cause organizations to focus on internal management issues. Getting their own jobs done might be quite sufficient without worrying about linking up with other service providers.

Despite these potential constraints, as the survey data have shown, nonprofit leaders are receptive to collaboration. Rural location factors have apparently not stymied the practice of collaboration.

The Environment of Collaboration

Interviews and focus group sessions with nonprofit leaders brought out environmental factors that help shape collaboration. One important factor is the differing administrative and policy climates of Illinois and Mississippi.

In Illinois there are more extensive information sharing, planning, and problem-solving networks than in Mississippi. A local area network (LAN) joins nonprofit mental health and substance abuse

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treatment facilities, and a related LAN exists for children and adolescents programs. LAN networks were created throughout the state by a former director of the Illinois Department of Mental Health. Agency representatives meet regularly to discuss common concerns, share information about each others' activities, and discuss obstacles to their working cooperatively. Often they review individual client cases in an attempt to coordinate services and also to overcome government regulations that sometimes inhibit effective multiagency case management.

The Provider Advocate Coalition (PAC) was created as a result of a pilot project established in southern Illinois to plan for and test the state's response to welfare reform under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. PAC brings together representatives from the local offices of state agencies that disseminate social welfare services and nonprofit services providers (including health, mental health, homeless shelters, economic development, and women's shelters). At the meetings, participants share information about new and continuing programs, discuss government programs and new sources of funding, commiserate about difficulties in serving clients, discuss ways to resolve service problems, and examine ways in which they might collaborate.

LAN and PAC have proven to be effective means to improve information sharing among service organizations (nonprofit and government). These formal networking groups have enabled staff of the different organizations to forge closer personal ties, making it easier to access each others' resources to serve clients. Participants have been encouraged to create more ways to collaborate.

Comparable networking and planning groups that join organizations over a multicounty area were not found in Mississippi. Within counties, there are scheduled monthly meetings of government and nonprofit service providers where information is shared. But these networking meetings appear to have less impact on bringing service organizations together to problem-solve and examine issues of mutual concern. In all of our discussions about collaboration with nonprofit directors in Mississippi, this networking group was mentioned only once. Illinois leaders almost always volunteered information about their planning and information-sharing networks and gave illustrations of the networks' positive results.

Differing state policy responses to welfare reform also shape collaboration. Illinois adopted a "one-stop-shopping" or case management response to welfare reform and its meeting the needs of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) clients. Pilot programs testing the system were established in five locations in the state. Through funding from the Anne E. Casey Foundation, the southern seven counties of Illinois became one of the pilot sites. An organization, Federation of Community United Services (FoCUS), which was composed largely of communities' political and business leaders, was created to plan for implementation of the state's new

welfare reform system (Tracy, Chezem, and Tracy, 1999). From FoCUS emerged the PAC, which acts as a vehicle for government and nonprofit service providers to talk directly with each other and work out issues related to welfare reform and aiding TANF clients.

In Mississippi, the government-initiated project most likely to stimulate regionwide planning is the Mid-Delta Empowerment Zone Agency (MDEZA). In the initial stages of its development, MDEZA brought together a wide array of nonprofit, government, and business leaders from the parts of the six delta counties it covers, but it does not appear to have had a long-lasting impact on bringing organizations together. Informants indicate that MDEZA struggles to maintain the participation of its seventy-five-member board, and turnover of incumbents in the director's position has weakened its leadership.

Strong leadership and leaders' commitment to working cooperatively with other organizations is distinctly important. The nonprofit leaders we interviewed, most of whom were women, had either worked a number of years in their organizations, and thus had made a distinctive impression on it, or had provided leadership in community development and social services in their communities over a long period of time. These are strong individuals who are devoted to serving their clients well and to the development, growth, and strengthening of their organizations. Collaboration for these leaders is a means to get things done. They realize that their organization cannot operate in isolation from others. In order to extend services out into the community, establish credibility, obtain needed community resources, and enhance effective service delivery, leaders realize that they must join with others in planning, information sharing, problem solving, joint service delivery, and so forth. The leaders establish personal connections with each other, building up bonds of trust, and they commit organization resources to collaboration.

In Mississippi, we found that a number of nonprofit directors developed their leadership and organizing skills during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. A director of a rural health organization, for instance, spoke of having a shotgun pointed at her head by a white farmer while trying to register black tenant farmers to vote. For this woman and other directors we interviewed, the civil rights struggle emboldened them to commit their lives to community development and to acquire political influence. Through their determined efforts, black nonprofit leaders have made inroads into the local political and economic establishment, making connections that aid effective collaboration.

Yet race remains a factor. A recent study of one of the six delta counties portrays it as a place where the old plantation society lives on (Duncan, 1999). Although the plantations are gone, there remains a sharp social, economic, and political divide between blacks and whites. Census data support this view of social and economic

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segregation. Data from the 1990 census (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1991) show that of the fifty-two census tracts in the six counties, thirty-seven are overwhelmingly black (over 60 percent of population), eight are mostly white, and seven are nearly evenly mixed. There is a wide economic gap between white and black census tracts. Bolivar County is a good example. One of its seven census tracts is mostly white (located in Cleveland), and five are nearly all black. Median family income in the white census tract was \$35,899, but ranged only between \$12,298 and \$15,094 in the black census tracts. Poverty rates are high in the black census tracts, but poverty is barely present in the white population centers. White census tracts are urban; all rural census tracts are predominantly black.

Race and segregation do seem to have a negative effect on collaboration, although the extent of that impact is not clear. One nonprofit director stated, "You have to understand, we have two of everything in this county." There are two sets of schools, two sets of churches, two sets of social service organizations, and two sets of community service clubs—one white and one black. This divide inhibits collaboration. The black director of a rural health nonprofit expressed her frustration with the lack of cooperation from a hospital in the county seat. She felt that the white administration of the hospital was at least in part a factor in their tenuous relationship.

It is essential not to overstate the impacts of race on collaboration and to recognize the positive accomplishments that have occurred. The black director of a nonprofit spoke approvingly of the cooperation she received from local police departments and the courts. Her organization gives support services to women who are victims of spouse abuse, and it also offers behavioral treatment programs to abusers. On occasion an individual police chief might decide not to send white spouse abusers to her treatment program, but overall she felt the support she received from law enforcement, judges, and the community was strong.

One environmental factor of much concern in this study was rural location. Discussions with nonprofit leaders revealed, as did the survey responses, that rural location does affect service delivery. Nonprofit directors in our conversations cited as important issues transportation problems for clients, serving clients of a large territory, reluctance of some rural residents (particularly farmers) to seek out mental health and counseling services, limited ability of local residents to give money to the organization, low staff salaries, grant programs designed from an urban perspective, and distances that must be traveled to participate in statewide meetings of service providers. All of these factors challenge service delivery, but they do not necessarily have an adverse impact on collaboration.

Rural location for the most part is viewed as an incentive to collaborate. Resource constraints in rural areas are believed to necessitate collaboration among rural service providers. Many nonprofit leaders we interviewed maintained that collaboration has been a long-standing practice.

Certain qualities of rural, small town life are viewed as assets. Because there are fewer agencies than in urban areas and because they live in the same communities, it is easier for directors and staff of organizations to get to know each other and forge personal ties. Staff are likely to know individuals in other organizations to whom they need to refer clients or obtain information. This helps make interagency interaction less formal and facilitates boundary spanning. It is perhaps an easier task than in large cities to get representatives of nonprofit organizations together in groups to network and collaborate in the delivery of services.

Obstacles to collaboration are present, but rural factors are not given much weight. Such behaviors as turf protection, partners' "hogging the glory" when collaboration succeeds, violating trust, partners' adopting an "I" instead of a "we" attitude, and partners' not living up to their obligations are among the most important challenges. These behaviors, of course, are not limited by geography.

Conclusion

This comparative study of southern Illinois and the Mississippi Delta gives evidence that in an era in which public policy mandates collaboration, rural nonprofits have the capacity and desire to collaborate with other service providers. Chances of success in program-mandated collaborations can be enhanced when they are built on existing networks of collaboration among rural nonprofit and government service providers that are constructed on personal relations among organization leaders and staff and on the inclination of organizations to collaborate because of resource constraints. Nonprofit leaders in the two regions possess the philosophy and personal commitment to working systematically with other organizations. That philosophical orientation reaches to the heart of O'Looney's (1994) definition of collaboration. Government can assist in making collaborations more intentional by providing incentives, leadership, guidance, and mandates. Whatever means are used, it is essential to recognize that existing collaborative practices and supportive attitudes are significant resources to employ.

Among the organizations we studied, collaboration is most easily accomplished at the level of information sharing, client referral, interagency problem solving (especially in respect to individual clients they share), and devising procedures for serving each others' clients. These forms of collaboration fit well with the informal, personal networks that exist among personnel of rural service providers. Building up more intensive, organization boundary-spanning collaborations is in part made difficult because government grants, on which many rural nonprofits rely, remain compartmentalized. Each grant program imposes its own specific budgeting, accounting, and performance requirements. A nonprofit that is receiving several separate grants and is responsible for satisfying the distinct documentary requirements of those separate grants will find

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it difficult to break down organization boundaries through interorganization budgeting, accounting, and evaluation. Until this changes, perhaps priority in policymaking should be placed on multiorganization case management and information sharing.

Furthermore, the unique service delivery constraints and organization environmental conditions present in rural communities should be recognized in public policy and implementation processes. Failure to do so may inhibit the collaborative enterprise that government policy now typically insists on. To illustrate, transportation taxes both organization financial and human resources. Grant programs pose disincentives to provide client transportation when they prohibit reimbursement of transportation costs and fail to count staff time dedicated to transportation as service time. These restrictions make collaboration through transporting clients to other service providers more difficult to accomplish.

Finally, and very important, it is evident that rural nonprofit organizations are not lacking in dynamic, competent leadership. Rural regions are usually depicted as being deficient in talent. Indeed, respondents to our survey echoed this concern in respect to recruitment of competent staff. But we found throughout both regions nonprofit directors who are highly skilled managers and leaders, have high levels of dedication and enthusiasm born of deep roots in their communities and their organizations, and are innovative and flexible. These people should not be ignored. Instead they should be empowered to lead collaborative endeavors and be employed as change agents.

There is much promise in the collaboration practices of nonprofits in rural Illinois and Mississippi. Energetic, innovative leaders are keenly aware of mandates for collaboration and realize the benefits of such practices. They are also very familiar with the bureaucratic obstacles present in laws and regulations and with the natural tendencies of organizations to focus on internal needs. Yet a philosophical orientation toward collaboration spurs them on to take advantage of rural and small town characteristics that can facilitate collaboration.

Notes

1. Organizations and addresses were identified through the data supplied by the Urban Institute, National Center for Charitable Statistics. Organizations for which it was apparent the survey was not appropriate—such as university clubs and fraternities and sports clubs—were taken out of the list.
2. Organizations were selected in part on the basis of their survey respondents who indicated significant collaborations. We also chose a mix of nonprofits in terms of service mission and size of organization. Altogether we interviewed the directors of eleven nonprofits in Illinois and twelve in Mississippi, the directors of the two empowerment zones, and one local office director of the Department of Human Services in Illinois and two in Mississippi.

Of the twenty-eight persons interviewed, eighteen were women and eleven were African American.

3. Our research was directed at discovering the manner in which rural nonprofits collaborate and directors' attitudes toward collaboration, perceptions of its benefits, and opinions about obstacles and opportunities. We did not develop independent measures of organizational effects of collaboration.
4. Respondents to our survey represent a diverse group of nonprofits. Based on information supplied in the surveys and using the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities, we are able to classify the organizations as follows:

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| Arts, Culture, Humanities | 1 |
| Museums | 1 |
| Education | 2 |
| Elementary, Secondary Education | 1 |
| Adult, Continuing Education | 1 |
| Health | 5 |
| Hospitals, Primary Care | 1 |
| Health Treatment/Outpatient | 4 |
| Mental Health | 7 |
| Mental Health Treatment | 7 |
| Employment | 1 |
| Employment/Job Training | 1 |
| Food, Agriculture, Nutrition | 3 |
| Food Service (food pantries) | 3 |
| Housing, Shelter | 4 |
| Housing Development | 4 |
| Recreation Sports | 2 |
| Fitness, Community Facility | 1 |
| Amateur Sports Club, League | 1 |
| Human Services | 20 |
| Multipurpose Organizations | 6 |
| Children/Youth Services | 7 |
| Family Services | 2 |
| Residential, Custodial Care | 3 |
| Special Populations Services | 2 |
| Community Improvement | 11 |
| Community Improvement, Capacity Building | 5 |
| Economic Development | 3 |
| Business and Industry | 1 |
| Community Service Clubs | 2 |
| Religion, Spiritual Development | 5 |
| Christian | 5 |
| Unknown | 5 |

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