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Nonprofit Organizations and Arts Education in a Rural Community
By: Elise Lael Kieffer, PhD

The connection between public administration and nonprofit administration has been in existence since ancient times, when individual volunteers (the predecessors of a formal nonprofit sector) met humanitarian needs to which the government was unwilling or unable to attend. Addams (1910) formalized this intersecting relationship during her time working in Chicago's slums with refugees. Pandey & Johnsons (2019) drew connections between public administration, public policy, and nonprofit management. They concluded that discoveries in one of those domains should necessarily be applied to the others. They advised that continued research should draw explicit connections across those sectors and highlighted examples of the many intersections between the three.

Nonprofit organizations play a particularly active and critical role in rural communities across the U.S. They often serve as a gap-filling mechanism to meet demands unmet by government entities stretched thin across sparsely populated areas (Walters, 2020; Kieffer, 2020). In addition to limited federal and state resources, nonprofit organizations in rural communities operate in a complicated local political environment wherein they are often perceived as competitors for limited local resources. This political climate is made additionally problematic by the reality of small-town interpersonal relationship dynamics and multi-generational family histories that permeate the local population. To a greater extent than their urban counterparts, nonprofit practitioners in rural communities contend with outsider status, local perceptions, and persistent lack of funding.

This chapter explores these challenges through the founding and growth of one nonprofit inter-disciplinary arts education organization in a rural Appalachian community by examining

the opportunities and challenges confronting nonprofit organizations in rural communities. The chapter concludes with a strong case for the essential value that nonprofit organizations bring to rural communities.

What We Know So Far

Rural communities face a diversity of challenges that are influenced by and in-turn influence crime, poverty, education, health, and more. To confront these challenges, rural municipalities rely heavily on nonprofit organizations. Walters (2020) studied the organizational capacity of rural nonprofits that communities depend upon. Harrington (1962) published *The Other America*, a text largely credited with initiating the War on Poverty, a focused priority of U.S. policy makers in the late twentieth century. That book illuminated the realities of generational poverty prevalent in rural communities across the United States. Four decades later, a 2003 edition lamented that in much of rural America, the characteristics of poverty remain unchanged (Sarnoff, 2003; Kieffer, 2020).

Intersection of Sectors

Nonprofit organizations are uniquely important in the U.S. They do not exist independently, but rather in an interconnected, interdependent relationship with the public and private sectors of our society (Berman, 2002). Where local governments cannot, or will not step in to meet community needs, nonprofits become pivotal players, confronting societal challenges and improving quality of life for local residents (Berman, 2002). If one imagines the standard Venn diagram, as shown in figure one, there is a dedicated space for services provided by federal, state, and local governments. Those are the services that will help the most people by expending the fewest, or most reasonable, expenditure of taxpayer resources. Those services are often restricted to those most in-need, leaving a population of citizens ineligible for support

somewhere in the middle of great and moderate need. The private, or for-profit sector, identifies niches both within and without their own circle to provide services. However, unlike public services, those private services are only available to those with the independent economic resources to pay. The nonprofit sector then fills the gaps in service that are not provided for by the business (for-profit) and government (public) sectors. Nonprofit organizations focus their missions on servicing unmet needs, and unreached populations. When nonprofit organizations find their missions or programs to be redundant, they necessarily shift to become unique service providers again.

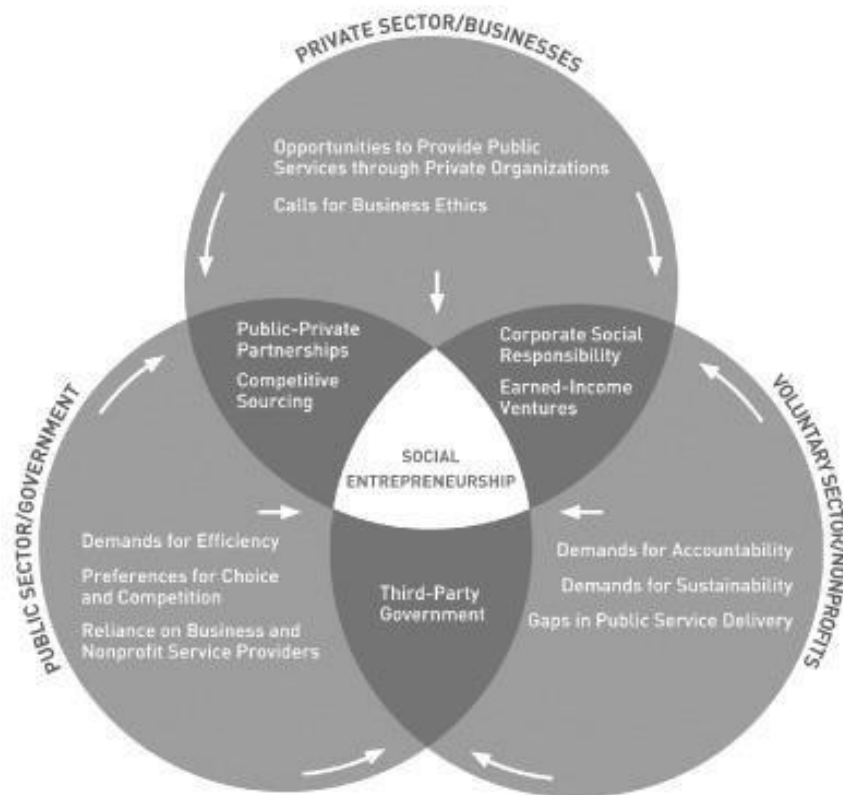


Figure 1

Social Entrepreneurship Venn diagram (Venture Pragmatist, 2010).

Nonprofit organizations influence and effect on communities “is so far-reaching – touching on every aspect of our lives and every level of institutions” (Renz, 2010, p. 4). Nonprofit organizations accomplish the fulfillment of their missions through creative partnerships, collaborations, programming, and outreach (Salamon, 2014). As noted by Berman (2002), “Increasingly, the nation is calling upon its nonprofit companies to take on some of the country’s most pressing social welfare and educational needs” (p. 8). This is not a new phenomenon.

Jane Addams and the History of Nonprofit Organizations

There is much to learn about the history and evolution of the nonprofit sector within the U.S., but that is not the focus of this chapter. However, one important piece of historical context is critical to the understanding of what follows. The work of Jane Addams existed in the very space referenced above. Where public services were not allocated, and private services were unattainable, The Hull House was founded to meet and serve the myriad needs of a particular population.

Widely acknowledged as the founder of modern social work, and a predecessor of the nonprofit movement, Jane Addams worked with immigrant communities in Chicago in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Addams devoted her work toward solving “wicked problems,” those challenges that remain unaddressed or under-addressed by currently available programs. Wicked Problems are not so-called because of moral importance, but rather because they perpetuate, despite myriad efforts directed toward their amelioration.

Addams approached her work with impoverished immigrant populations in Chicago by including their voices in the strategies directed at helping them. Her work was unique because, unlike many of her contemporaries, she sought the voices of those she served, including and

incorporating them into their own solutions. Further, she did not replicate services. She identified a gap in the available opportunities for a specific population of individuals and she worked with those individuals to fill that gap (Lake, 2014).

Addams recognized that government institutions, created by the people, should be the embodiment of those people. When government is not meeting the needs of the people, it is failing. Perhaps government alone cannot do this great task, but it can support those organizations working alongside it toward that end (Addams, 1910). People are resourceful and when their institutions fail them, they will creatively work to solve their own problems. It is in this context that the modern nonprofit sector still operates.

Into Modern Rural Life

Despite the essential services provided to rural communities by nonprofit organizations, rural communities are generally awarded less than six percent of federal grant funding (Arneal 2015). Rural donors also give at less frequently and lower amounts than their urban counterparts (Center on Philanthropy, 2010). Additionally, the Rural Philanthropic Analysis project suggested that “only seven percent of donor dollars are designated to rural areas” (Walters, 2020, p. 66; Campbell University, 2018). In addition to this lack of financial resources, rural nonprofit organizations also contend with their geographic isolation as a major hurdle. “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” (Walters, 2020, p. 67; Fanburg, 2011).

Rural Arts Accessibility

For the sake of this chapter, one specialization in nonprofit service provision will be highlighted. As with other areas of nonprofit service, the arts and culture sector faces resource

and accessibility challenges when operating in rural communities. Sidford (2011) noted that despite the increasing engagement of rural populations in community-based arts programs, less than two percent of foundation funding for the arts goes to rural communities. “The arts provide unique value to rural communities....Arts-based development facilitates growth and a sense of community within rural areas. Collaborating on arts initiatives helps build community capacity” (Kieffer, 2020, p. 30).

Specific Rural Context

The organization at the heart of this study is Burkesville Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA), an interdisciplinary arts education organization founded in Burkesville, Kentucky (Cumberland County) in 2012. To understand the intricacies of this case, it is first necessary to understand the geographic isolation of the community.

When railroads were introduced to the Appalachian region, communities were revitalized, revived, and connected to one another and the broader world as many had never before been (Barker, 1991, Kieffer, 2019; Kieffer, 2020). This connection brought a renaissance of Appalachian folk arts and culture into the broader mainstream consciousness. In those communities, traditional Appalachian arts and crafts still thrive and support Appalachian artists, driving the economy and tourism in their communities (Kieffer, 2020). However, the community at their heart of this study rejected the railroad and the accompanying benefits.

Nestled in the center of seven contiguous counties, untouched by railway access, Cumberland County remains one of the most isolated counties in the Commonwealth (Wooten, 1992; Kieffer, 2020). Within that collection of counties, K-12 public schools struggle to maintain the inclusion of any arts curriculum within their schools (Graff, 2012; Kieffer, 2020). “The most isolated communities are so economically depressed that they have lost pride in their cultural

heritage, making the need to preserve their artistic traditions and promote artistic innovation more necessary” (Kieffer, 2020, p. 34). That gap in available public arts education creates an environment wherein the impact of nonprofit arts organizations is even greater. Again, the nonprofit sector identified a gap in public services and private opportunities, and an organization was born.

Burkesville Academy of Fine Arts

After two years of unofficial community activities, Burkesville Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA) was officially founded and incorporated in 2012. It was first conceived and planned as a summer program for local children. It would be an interdisciplinary camp, offering exposure to all aspects of the arts. The founder was a transplant from outside the community, but she worked to recruit local artists from various fields of specialty to teach a range of classes in music, theatre, dance, and visual arts. Those artist-instructors were a combination of native residents and transplants. BAFA found ways to interact and collaborate with the community, increasing effectiveness, impact, and access to services.

In a small, rural community in Appalachia, success is driven by relationships.

The growth and impact BAFA experienced was only possible through the deliberate and strategic cultivation of interpersonal relationships and collaboration between BAFA and community stakeholders. BAFA representatives utilized the most effective communication strategies in their small town. Local radio interviews, school assemblies, and the start of a weekly arts column in the newspaper. Through collaborations with the city and county government, the public library, the public school district, the University of Kentucky Extension Office, and other nonprofit organizations, BAFA grew into a vibrant and integral part of the

community. Its growth and presence in the community brings unique opportunities to local residents.

City Support

Almost immediately, the opportunity arose for the local government to reject or support the BAFA initiative. Qualified instructors were willing and available to teach, but where could the organization actually hold the camp? The town's mayor and city council saw the benefit of the program for local children and immediately offered the city's park facilities as the location for BAFA's first summer camp. This partnership held for the first three years of BAFA camp. Dance, photography and stage make-up classes were held in the Agriculture building. Music and art classes happened in the historic log cabin, a preserved one-room school house. Theatre was taught on the stage of our outdoor amphitheater, and anything else that didn't have a location met under the picnic pavilion. Although BAFA did provide hand soap and toilet paper, the camp also relied on the city's restroom facilities.

It is impossible to overstate the value of this connection between BAFA and the city government. Without cooperation from the municipality and support of city services, no matter how stellar the arts programming, it never would have happened. The city never supported BAFA with actual funding, but with the sharing of spaces, and the accompanying utility costs of using those spaces, the city facilitated the birth and growth of BAFA as an independent nonprofit organization.

School District

Cumberland County, Kentucky has one school district containing three schools. There is a K-5th grade elementary school, a 6th-8th grade middle school, and a 9th-12th grade high school. The Cumberland County school district has no vocal music programs, no dance programs, one

art teacher at the high school, and one band director (also at the high school). Private instruction is equally unavailable. Students who come from families with substantial resources might travel up to two hours multiple times weekly for dance or music instruction. This commitment is prohibitive for those whose financial limitations, work schedules, or personal inclinations do not allow for that level of travel and that commitment of time.

Knowing the limitations of their own resources, educators and administrators within the Cumberland County School District quickly latched on to the value of BAFA's mission. Before the second summer of programming, BAFA was identified as an officially sponsored summer opportunity for local youth. Scholarships to attend were made available through 21st Century grant funding, the camp was promoted and endorsed through the schools, and registrations doubled. A week of camp for pre-school aged children was also added to BAFA's programming.

Desirous of taking the program further, and further increasing local opportunities, district teachers and administrators worked with BAFA to plan a more ambitious project. BAFA partnered with the schools to produce the musical, *The Wizard of Oz* in the fall of 2013. It is impossible to overstate what a big commitment this was from the schools, and how outside of the box the thinking was that brought it to pass. The best district performance space was at the middle school, attached to the gymnasium. For many years that stage-space had been unused for its intended purpose. It was, instead, functioning as a catch-all storage space. To even use the stage as a stage, substantial inconvenience and effort was required. Its location in the gym also meant that in order for BAFA to use the space, basketball practices would be affected. Either BAFA would be on stage behind the curtain rehearsing to the accompaniment of bouncing basketballs and coaches' whistles, or everyone would have to compromise. BAFA learned quickly that no one messes with Kentucky basketball.

Regular communication occurred between school administrators, individual instructors, coaches, and BAFA personnel. An uneasy understanding was reached to accommodate the needs of all groups. The final show, featuring a cast of over 60 performers ranging from 5-17 years old, produced the first full-length musical production that anyone in local memory could recall in their own town. Although highly successful, this particular partnership would not be repeated. This production proved to stretch the stakeholders too far, and future BAFA performances were held elsewhere. However, the district and administrative support of this endeavor, the community-wide visibility it provided, and the sheer number of performers included, moved BAFA's programming to another level.

By the third summer, BAFA's camp enrollment had tripled and they were able to purchase their own property to be renovated and outfitted to include private spaces for music lessons, a dance studio, and a classroom space for visual arts instruction. The first year of camp BAFA had five full-time paid staff – all instructors with no assistants on hand. By the third year, in partnership with the city, and the local school district, BAFA had twelve full-time paid staff. Six of those staff were instructors and every instructor had a dedicated classroom assistant. With the purchase and renovation of their own building, BAFA evolved from a summer program into a full-time community arts center with year-round educational opportunities in the arts.

The collaboration between BAFA and the school district was mutual. In addition to the support from the district toward BAFA's offerings, BAFA provided on-site opportunities at each of the school campuses. BAFA instructors brought dance and music classes to the elementary and middle schools. BAFA instructors facilitated "Arts Days" at the middle school. These were formatted like a one-day BAFA camp, during which students could explore dance, visual arts, drama, and music. BAFA instructors worked with the high school also, supporting classroom

activities that included arts initiatives. This brought BAFA representatives in front of every student in the school district, providing exposure to the arts for every public-school student in Cumberland County, regardless of whether they ever attended an external BAFA event.

Fischel (2006) highlighted the influence of public schools not only on the students receiving direct education services, but also on the adult community that interacts with and through the schools. I would argue that by networking and sharing resources with the schools in the community, BAFA found community support much more readily than they would have done if they had tried to operate independently. Because BAFA invested in the local schools, the community invested in BAFA. The social capital engendered through this one collaboration cannot be overstated.

Library and other Nonprofit Organizations

One challenge of operating a nonprofit organization in a rural community is the increased competition with other organizations for funding from a smaller pool of donors. The donor pool is limited by both a lack of population density, affecting available donors, and a generally lower socio-economic capacity of the locality. To mitigate these challenges, BAFA found ways to support other local initiatives. In so doing, it was able to establish its place in a community that is otherwise skeptical of newness and of “the arts” as a nonprofit endeavor in a sector that is more often perceived to be populated by charity organizations. Student participants and instructors in BAFA’s many programs provided entertainment for other nonprofit organization’s fundraising and community engagement events. Being present and showing support for other charitable initiatives gave BAFA a unique opportunity to create relevance for its activities that expanded beyond the arts and culture sector. BAFA students and instructors demonstrated that BAFA could support other local issues of concern, including Relay for Life events, other small local

human service nonprofits, the library, the Chamber of Commerce, the Farmer's Market, and more.

Cross-sector and inter-sector collaborations like those utilized at BAFA serve to meet the needs of rural communities. Through their increased capacity, these partnerships then create more effective solutions and more impactful programming. Improved opportunities emerge for residents in rural communities when sectors collaborate, rather than compete (Walters, 2020).

Growth

By year four, BAFA had purchased and moved into its own building where began implementing year-round programming, including music, dance, and art lessons, in addition to full-length theatrical productions. In six years, BAFA went from two weeks of full-capacity summer programming in 2012 to six weeks of arts-based camps in 2017 and multiple full-length stage productions each year. BAFA is still serving an identified community need. The local government placed value on that service, and facilitated the first steps of the organization. The lives of local children are richer for it.

No one in the county fiscal court or city council was asking themselves how they could increase arts programming in the community. That was not a need they had identified. However, they showed great forward thinking when the founder stepped forward with an idea, and a plan. They supported and endorsed the program in the ways they were able. In due course, that program would provide increased summer traffic to the community, with campers and families coming from counties across central Kentucky and Tennessee, as well as several states.

Obstacles and Opportunities

As previously suggested, it was BAFA's willingness and eagerness to actively participate in the community that enabled the founder, instructors, and organization as a whole to establish

trust within the community. Local residents in rural areas are often wary of outsiders who enter into their close-knit, multi-generational communities (Kieffer, 2019; Kieffer, 2020; Walters, 2020). The reality of small-town interpersonal relationship dynamics and multi-generational family histories permeate the local population. To a greater extent than their urban counterparts, nonprofit practitioners in rural communities contend with outsider status, local expectations, and persistent lack of funding.

Outsider Status

Communication between organizations and sectors are central to BAFA's success, however these very things were also a challenge. The initial perception of local residents was that BAFA was a business, rather than a nonprofit organization. This perception was fueled by the lack of previous exposure to the arts, the otherwise social service-dominated local nonprofit sector, and the founder's status as a transplant into the community (outsider status).

Rural communities are often skeptical of nonprofit organizations. This mistrust is fed by a consistent expectation that people come into their community with an outside agenda, and they come to take and use local resources, leaving less for the residents. While these attitudes are somewhat based on historical misdeeds, they are also fed by the perpetuation of rural stereotypes in popular culture (Kieffer, 2020; Walters, 2019). These attitudes serve to discourage external nonprofit organizations from entering into some communities, which then perpetuates the lack of services available to those populations.

External funding sources often require collaboration between entities, and the hesitancy to enter into collaborative partnerships then further disadvantages organizations operating in small towns. Additionally, the lack of external support not only decreases service capacity, but

also quality of service. With no external review or standard of care, organizations can offer diminished quality of services, at further detriment to the community.

While cooperation among local entities has been found effective and should be encouraged as a mechanism for maximizing resources, there is often a lack of local advocacy in support of such cooperation. This absence of support for collaborative efforts is additionally fueled by a feeling of competition for resources (despite the reality that collaboration maximizes resource effectiveness), and suspicion of others with alternative interests and agendas (Lackey, Freshwater, and Rupasingha, 2002). This mistrust and skepticism is present in collaborations between various nonprofit organizations and between nonprofits and local governments, as well.

Local Expectations

Lichter and Crowley (2002) noted that within the U.S., many poorer populations feel entitled to public support. That mindset of entitlement has contributed to the perpetuation of poverty within rural, impoverished communities. Exacerbated by the rejection of new people and opportunities, rural residents tend to prefer the status quo. This includes embracing their socio-economic status, as well as the opportunities currently available, rather than welcoming new developments. They will both receive and accept what has always been available, but might be hesitant to accept something new, no matter how beneficial the offering. Activities like the aforementioned newspaper column served to promote BAFA's activities by educating the community. Columns such as "Why do theatre tickets cost so much?" brought awareness to the community about the nature of the organization, as a nonprofit.

When the problem of underexposure to opportunities is generational, as is so often the case in rural towns, parents place less value on opportunities that were unavailable to them as

children. After all, what they had, or didn't have, as children was good enough for them, so it is also good enough now for their own children (DeYoung 1993; Kieffer, 2019). DeYoung (1995) also found that rural school administrators intentionally model and teach their own perceptions of normative behavior and expectations. This perpetuates what was before, into what still is now. What was familiar and normal to them as children continues to be promoted as normal for their students (Kieffer, 2019). In addition, King (2012) credited not only the unfamiliarity of opportunities but also the perceived necessity. Those living in generational poverty come to process opportunities on the basis of survival. As stated by Lichter and Crowley (2002) "Poverty often begets more poverty" (p. 24). This results in a nonprofit sector identifying gaps in service but a population sometimes unwilling to accept the offered solutions.

Persistent Lack of Funding

There is a relatively known and understood vastness of need in rural communities, yet there remains a perpetual underfunding and underinvestment therein. Even in an environment where philanthropic giving rises, funding to rural initiatives remains depressed (Cohen, 2011). Rural communities account for approximately 18 percent of the U.S. population but only 8 percent of foundation funding. Per capita, the rural nonprofit sector is only about 30 percent the size of the sector in urban areas. Nonprofit organizations in rural communities lack both actual financial resources, and also the capacity to pursue them (Neuhoff & Dunckelman, 2011).

Conclusion

Nonprofit organizations serving rural communities face economic struggles differently than their urban counterparts. Persistent poverty in rural areas results in the perpetual demand of serving more individuals with less resources. In rural communities, public and private funding is consistently under-invested. Rural nonprofits receive both less federal funding and less private

support. The private support they do receive from local residents is often insufficient to meet organizational demands. This creates an atmosphere in which nonprofit organizations have to be innovative to meet local needs and fulfill their missions. These creative approaches include partnerships with other nonprofit organizations and across sectors (Walters, 2021).

Despite the obstacles in their way, nonprofit organizations continue enhancing rural life in communities across the U.S.. The essential value that nonprofit organizations bring to rural communities needs more research attention, but the ultimate goal of nonprofit practice, whatever the service area, is to improve the quality of life in communities (Long, 2001). Meanwhile, nonprofit practitioners often find that interactions with local government are awkward, because government officials under-value or misunderstand the work of the organization (Walters, 2021).

Rural communities are often defined by persistent poverty and lack of access to experiences and services more readily available in urban communities. They need improved healthcare access, infrastructure improvements, and, as in the case of BAFA, access to public funding for the arts (Kieffer, 2020). Every dollar is hard-earned and hard to come by. We squander those dollars when we do not strategically work together, across sectors, to support our constituents. Every dollar must be spent wisely. If local governments and their local nonprofit organizations could communicate more effectively, and collaborate more willingly, they might stretch those dollars further.

Nonprofit organizations are critical to the building of healthy communities. They provide important services that support economic growth, educational opportunities, and improved outcomes in all areas of life. As Jane Addams pioneered, nonprofit organizations continue to serve as spokespeople for their special populations, advocating for otherwise unseen or

underserved individuals. Government alone cannot meet every need for every citizen. However, it can support the efforts of those organizations striving to do just that.

Local governments can support their nonprofit sectors by including them in policy-making discussions and solutions. Nonprofit organizations in direct service to the community should be at the table when that community is being considered. A strong nonprofit sector contributes to a stronger community with a higher quality of life.

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