

Impact of the 2007-2009 Recession on Nonprofit Resources

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Introduction

Nonprofit organizations exist in an environment of internal and external constraints that limit operations and guide the decision making of nonprofit leaders. A reliance on charitable giving and external funding makes nonprofit organizations' financial security tenuous, particularly in times of economic downturn. Theoretically, nonprofit organizations should diversify revenue sources in order to withstand the decline of any particular source. Yet many organizations rely on one funding source for the majority of their revenue and economic downturn affects the range of funding sources available. Simultaneously, many nonprofits that provide services for those in need face increasing demand during economic downturn. These changes exacerbate the financial constraints that nonprofit organizations typically face and challenge nonprofit organizations' operations and impact. As strain increases on essential resources and nonprofits find themselves doing more with less, nonprofit leaders must determine the best way to move forward.

Nonprofit organizations rely on a variety of funding sources in order to finance their operations and programs. The majority of funding for the nonprofit sector comes from earned income, such as member dues or fees for the organization's goods and services. In 2005, approximately 50% of nonprofit revenue for reporting public charities came from earned income from private sources (Blackwood, Wing, & Pollak, 2008). The prevalence of the fee-for-service model within the nonprofit sector challenges the notion that nonprofit organizations operate on handouts from governments and individuals. It also indicates that nonprofit organizations are responding to the needs and demands of the public. However, this percentage is based on the nonprofit sector as a whole and is not representative of all nonprofits, as revenue sources vary greatly depending upon the type of organization.

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The remaining revenue for the nonprofit sector in 2005 was comprised of government fees for nonprofit goods and services (20%), private contributions (12.3 %), government grants (9 %), investment income (5.4 %), and other sources (2.9 %)(Blackwood et al, 2008). Economic downturns, such as the 2007-2009 recession, have the potential to negatively impact the range of funding sources, imposing additional administrative and operational difficulties on the nonprofit sector despite diversified funding. This paper seeks to explore the impact of the economic downturn on the nonprofit organizations in Richmond, Virginia within the context of a national analysis.

Current State of US economy

In December 2007, the United States economy entered into a recession that tightened constraints on the private, public, and nonprofit sectors alike. According to the CIA World Factbook, the US economy's growth rate of 1.09% in 2007 slowed to 0% in 2008 and dropped to -2.6% in 2009. In addition, US per capita GDP fell from \$48,200 in 2007 to \$46,000 in 2009 (2010). As a result, federal, state, and local government organizations are facing reduced revenue and have reduced funding to nonprofit organizations. For example, the Wall Street Journal reported, "states allocated 5% less in 2009 and 4% less in 2010 to pay for education, health care and human services, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities" (Banjo and Kalita, 2010).

At the same time, individuals are facing economic difficulties. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2010a), national unemployment rates in the United States rose from 4.6 percent in 2007 to 10 percent in late 2009. Unemployment rates vary across states and localities, however, with rates as high as 14.4 % in Nevada and 30.4% in El Centro, California in August 2010 (BLS, 2010b; BLS, 2010c). With so many individuals facing unemployment, wage

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freezes, furlough time, and other austerity measures, individuals' discretionary income has become limited. In addition, sharp decreases in investments and retirement funds have contributed to an environment of uncertainty that makes it difficult for individuals to donate to nonprofits, even if they recognize that the need for donations is significant.

The stock market crash also depleted the endowments of many nonprofit organizations. Walter Powell, co-director of the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, makes the point that some of the wealthiest nonprofit organizations were the hardest hit by this recession due to the dramatic drop in their endowments. While foundations typically provide anywhere from 2 percent to 40 percent of nonprofit organizations' funding, they will be giving "at least a third less in the foreseeable future" (Golden, Longhofer, & Winchester, 2009). Therefore, foundations with large endowments and the nonprofits that relied on them as funding sources are challenged to remain operational.

As the recession diminished the donating capacity of these funding sources, the nonprofit sector is left questioning its economic future. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (2010), the recession ended in June 2009. However, this is related to the point when the economy began to see sustained growth and does not mean that economy has returned to its pre-recession capacity. As evinced by the current unemployment numbers, the symptoms of the recession remain a current challenge for employers and employees alike. According to Gregory Acs (2008), "it took about five years for the unemployment rate to drop back to levels preceding the 1980-82 and 1990-92 recessions. Thus, even if the recession end[ed] in 2009, unemployment rates may not be as low as 2007's 4.6 percent for years to come." In addition, GivingUSA Foundation (2010) reports that, after previous recessions, charitable donations took three to five years to reach pre-recession levels. This suggests that nonprofit organizations

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should not expect their funding challenges to be resolved for several years. Instead, organizations will have to adapt to an uncertain climate and be proactive in finding solutions to funding and operational challenges.

Literature Review

In order to assess the extent of the recession's impact on the nonprofit sector, organizations that focus on research and philanthropy have been accumulating information on changes in charitable giving. The current literature indicates that charitable giving to nonprofit organizations declined in 2008 and 2009 compared to prior years. However, variation exists depending upon the type of donor, the type of nonprofit, and the size of the organization's budget.

In their seventh annual economic survey in late 2008, GuideStar surveyed nonprofit organizations across the country to compare contribution levels during the first nine months of 2008 with contribution levels during the first nine months of 2007. According to GuideStar (2008), the percentage of respondents reporting that contributions had decreased nearly equaled the percentage that said contributions had increased for the first time in five years. While 38 percent of organizations saw an increase in donations, 35 percent saw a decrease. In contrast, 52 percent of organizations surveyed saw an increase in contributions and only 19 percent saw a decrease when surveyed in 2007. Respondents indicated that the primary reasons for the drop were that "Fewer individuals gave" (63%) and "Gifts from individuals were smaller" (60%). Only 34% cited the next most frequent reason, "Corporate gifts were smaller" (GuideStar 2008). With individual donations representing a larger percent of nonprofit revenue than corporate donations, the decrease in frequency and size of individual donations represents a serious challenge for many organizations. Despite decreased donations, 64% of participants reported

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that demand for their organizations' services increased during the first nine months of 2008 compared to the first nine months of 2007 (GuideStar 2008). Similarly, GivingUSA Foundation found a 5.7% decrease in charitable donations in 2008 (Strom 2009).

In late 2009, Guidestar conducted their eighth annual economic survey comparing how organizations fared in the first nine months of 2009 compared to the first nine months in 2008. In general, things were worse during the first nine months of 2009 with 51 percent of organizations reporting decreased contributions, compared to 35 percent in 2008. Again, the major factors cited for the decline were that fewer individuals gave (69%) and individuals gave less (69 %). At the same time, 62 percent of respondents experienced increased demand for services. See figure 1 for a brief comparison of changes in contributions by year.

Period Covered by Survey	Contributions Decreased	Contributions Stayed about the Same	Contributions Increased	Don't Know
Jan.-Sept. 2009	51%	25%	23%	1%
Jan.-Sept. 2008	35%	25%	38%	2%
Jan.-Sept. 2007	19%	25%	52%	4%

Figure 1 (GuideStar 2009)

Guidestar's survey highlights the percentage of organizations that experienced declining contributions. GuideStar reported, "there were no statistically significant differences in declining contributions across organization size, program area, or geography" (Guidestar 2009). In contrast, GivingUSA Foundation conducted a study that focused on the extent to which charitable giving declined, highlighting differences between donors and recipients. In fact, GivingUSA emphasized that the results of their study represented an average that would not be indicative of the impact on all program areas or geographical areas. GivingUSA Foundation (2010) reported that overall charitable giving from individuals, corporations, and foundations fell

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3.9 percent in 2009. Specifically, individual giving fell an estimated 0.4 percent in 2009, charitable bequests fell an estimated 23.9 percent, foundation funding fell by 8.9 percent, and corporate giving rose an estimated 5.5 percent. Differences also exist depending upon the type of charity receiving the donations. As a whole, donations to religious organizations, education, foundations, public benefit organizations, and arts, culture, and humanities organizations decreased. In contrast, giving to health, human services and international affairs organizations increased. According to the executive summary released by GivingUSA (2010), the overall decline in charitable giving:

reflects the continued recession in 2009, which particularly affected charitable recipients that otherwise receive contributions for new buildings, endowment campaigns, and long-term planning. These include education, arts, foundations, and freestanding donor-advised funds (which are part of public-society benefit). The types of charities that showed estimated growth typically provide immediate services, such as human services, health, international aid, and even environment. Religion showed a very slight decrease (p 1).

Several studies have also focused on the impact of the recession on larger organizations. Barton & Hall (2010) reported that donations to the country's biggest charities, such as United Way Worldwide, the Salvation Army, and the American Cancer Society, dropped 11 percent in 2009. The report only includes charities that raise the most money from contributions from individuals, foundations, and businesses, rather than government funding.

The decrease in funding influences nonprofit leaders' decision making related to their organization's operations and workforce. This has been especially significant for organizations that experience increased demand for their services during economic downturns, such as health

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and human services organizations. *The Urban Institute* conducted a study of human services groups with over \$100,000 in annual expenses. The study concluded that declines in government funds on top of declining contributions and investment income have led to a “hollowing of organizational capacity that may take years to rebuild, if ever.” As a result, 82 percent of organizations reported that they have scaled back their operations. In addition, organizations have reduced programs or services (21%), reduced the number of individuals served (17%), frozen or reduced staff salaries (50%), reduced staff benefits (23%), drawn on reserves (39%), or borrowed money (22%) (Williams, 2010).

While many studies have focused on the impact of the recession on financial resources, others have examined the impact on human resources. Bilzor (2010) reported the following:

Initial analysis of data on 21 states spread broadly across the country reveals that nonprofit employment actually grew by an average of 2.5 percent per year between the second quarter of 2007 and the second quarter of 2009, the worst part of the recent recession. By contrast, for-profit employment in these states fell during this same period by an average of 3.3 percent per year. And this pattern held for every single state examined.

However, this growth varied by state and nonprofit field. In New Jersey, for example, nonprofit job growth during the recession was only .7 percent. Social assistance organizations, which become increasingly important during a recession, experienced job losses in some areas. Social assistance organizations in Washington DC experienced job losses of 4.5 percent (Bilzor 2010).

A study of workforce changes over a more recent period, however, presented a grimmer outlook. Salamon, Geller, & Spence (2010) examined changes in staffing between October 2009 and March 2010. In a survey with 423 responding nonprofit organizations, the researchers found

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that 31% of organizations reported net reductions in their workforces, 23% of organizations reported employment gains and 46% reported no change. These reductions compound the effect of previous cutbacks (Salamon et al, 2010). Similarly, Cohen (2009) reported that for most nonprofits surveyed by nonprofit associations and the United Way in 2008, personnel is the largest budget item and is therefore an easy target for nonprofit budget cuts. For example, of the agencies responding to the United Way survey in Atlanta, 21% reported staff lay offs and 20% reported reduced staff hours. Similar numbers anticipated those actions in 2009 (Cohen, 2009).

The studies outlined above presented valuable information on how the recession affected the nonprofit sector's financial and human resources. Overall, charitable giving declined in 2008 and 2009. More organizations saw decreased contributions and were forced to make changes to program activities and staff administration as a result. Much of the literature also indicates that variation in funding exists depending upon the funding source and the nonprofit recipient's program area and size. Possible bias exists based on the responses captured in each survey because respondents are not necessarily representative of the sector as a whole. However, many of the studies utilized large enough response pools to generate confidence in generalizing these results to the wider nonprofit population. It would be beneficial for future research to be conducted as longitudinal studies with consistent participants. In addition, nonprofit organizations would benefit from a local perspective that highlights their unique economic situation. This paper seeks to examine the impact of the economic recession on nonprofit organizations in Richmond, Virginia, within an analysis of the national data discussed above. Finally, the author will highlight the implications of the economic downturn on the future of nonprofit leadership and management.

Nonprofits in a Pinch

Much of the literature available on the impact of the recession points to unexpected financial hardship in 2008 and 2009. While most donors have less money available, an analysis of changes in charitable giving at the donor and recipient levels indicates that donors have shifted their contributions in response to financial hardship. According to GivingUSA (2010), organizations that focus on health, human services, and international aid generally saw an increase in funding in 2009. The increase represents understanding that the services provided by these organizations are essential and that funding them takes a priority when donors are contributing less money. In contrast, foundations, educational organizations, and arts, cultures, humanities organizations experienced a decline in funding in 2009. Based on this report, donors appear aware that the critical services provided by service and aid organizations become increasingly important during recessions and have shifted their giving in response.

Though it is much less dramatic than other changes, the decline in religious donations is also noteworthy. According to GivingUSA (2010), donations to religious organizations dropped by .3 percent in 2009. Hall (2010) distinguished between donations to large and small religious organizations, reporting that donations to large religious organizations increased by 1.4 percent but donations to small religious organizations decreased by 6.9 percent from 2007 to 2009. It is unknown whether individuals shifted their giving from religious organizations to nonreligious organizations or whether donors to religious organizations simply gave less. However, the decline is interesting because religious organizations receive the greatest proportion of charitable dollars each year.

It is also important to note the measures taken by nonprofit organizations in response to recent funding constraints. Many nonprofits cope with decreased funding by reducing the size,

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scope, and number of their programs or services. Given that nonprofits exist to serve the public, the decision to cut programs or services may seem to be the least desirable reaction to financial hardship. In actuality, choosing to reduce programs rather than staff could ultimately benefit the nonprofit organization and the community it serves. Reducing program activities enables an organization to focus on fewer, more successful services. Reducing staff size, pay, or benefits will negatively affect the organization's quality and impact, as nonprofits rely on their staff for program implementation. Given that nonprofits frequently encounter staff burnout and high turnover rates, organizations should attempt to retain and support the staff on which they rely.

Despite the financial struggles that an organization may be facing, it is essential that nonprofits avoid burdening staff in order to retain staff with the knowledge and experience required for success. As will be discussed later, a nonprofit organization may want to engage in strategic planning process to determine whether the ability to provide fewer services, with higher quality and effectiveness, is more appealing than providing the more services with fewer staff resources, and potentially at lower quality. The decision to provide fewer services while retaining qualified staff may ultimately enable to organization to withstand sustained environmental constraints.

Local Nonprofit Organizations

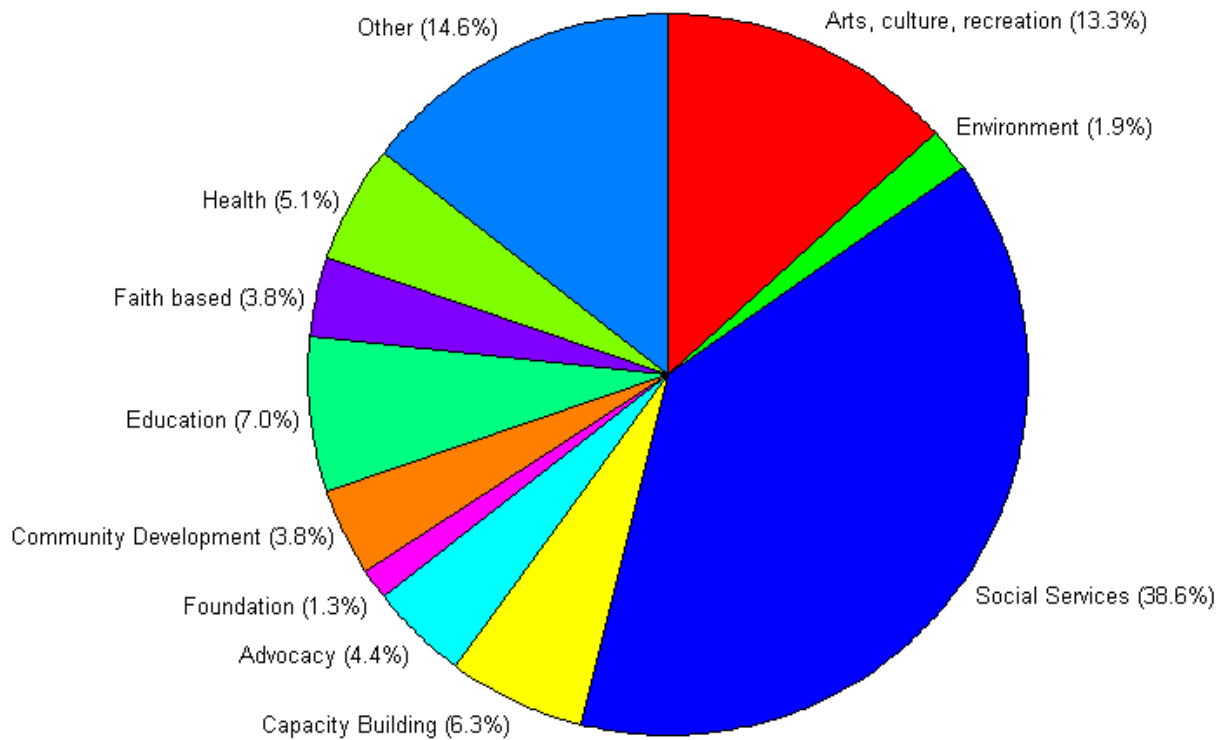
Survey Overview

A comparison of national and regional statistics indicates that the recession has not hit Richmond, Virginia as hard as other areas. In contrast to the national unemployment rate of 9.6%, unemployment in Richmond is approximately 7% as of August 2010 (BLS, 2010c). In order to measure the impact of the recession beyond basic indicators, the researcher used a convenience sample to conduct a pilot survey of nonprofit organizations in Richmond, Virginia.

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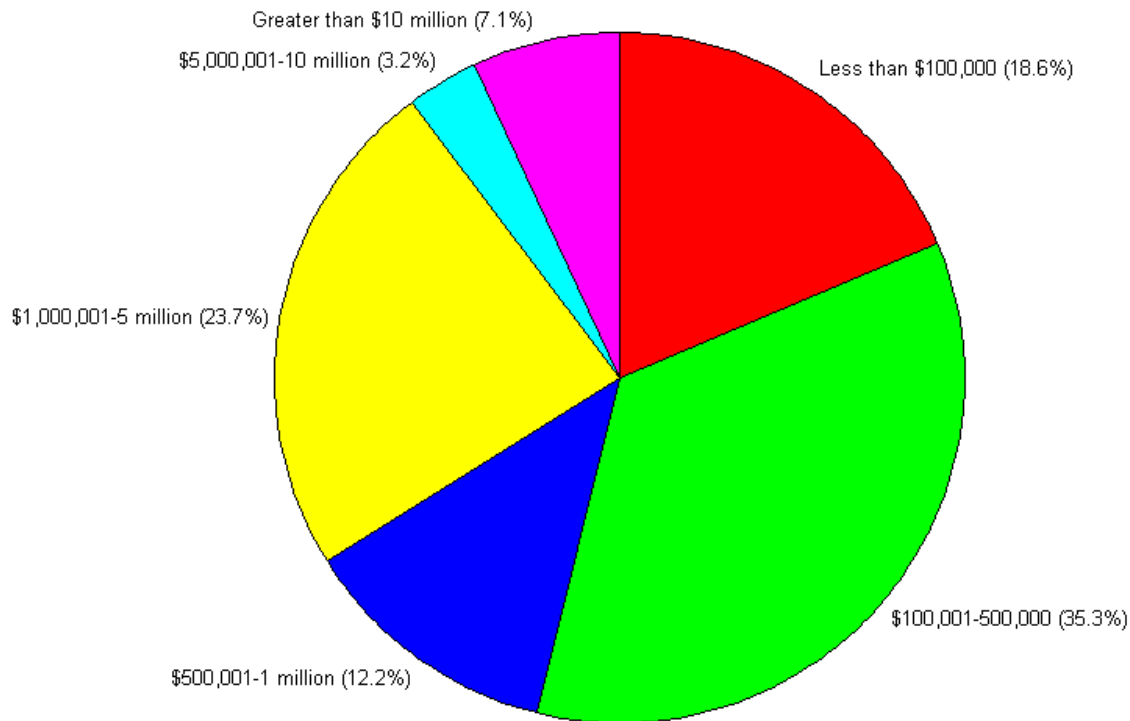
158 nonprofit organizations responded to the survey, representing organizations of varying sizes and missions. Of the organizations represented, 38.6% (61) were social services organizations. Most of the organizations represented in the survey were small. 18.6% of respondents had annual budgets of less than \$100,000 and nearly 54% had budgets of less than \$500,000. See Figures 1 and 2 for a breakdown of survey respondents by organization type and budget size.

Figure 1: Organization type



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Figure 2: Budget Size



Changes in Revenue

Respondents were asked to evaluate how different areas of funding changed within the last year by selecting from the following choices: increase, small decrease, large decrease, remained the same, or not applicable. 55.5% of respondents indicated that they experienced a decrease, either large (19.4%) or small (36.1%), in individual donations. 57.6% of respondents indicated a decrease, either large (23.8%) or small (33.8%), to corporate donations. 45.4% of organizations saw a decrease, either large (24.3%) or small (21.1%) in foundation funding. The percentages of organizations experiencing a decrease in funding were consistent with the 51% of organizations that reported a decrease in Guidestar's eight annual economic survey. This indicates that nonprofits in Richmond have had similar funding challenges as the sector as a whole. See Figure 3 for additional details regarding funding changes.

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The most frequently chosen response for government funding, earning income, and investment earnings was "NA," indicating that fewer organizations in Richmond rely on these sources of income than on others. Government funding declined for 34.2 percent of organizations, while it remained the same for 20 percent and increased for 9.7 percent of organizations. While investment income was not a source of income for nearly half of the organizations represented in the survey, 17% saw a small decrease, 17% saw a large decrease and 17% saw no change.

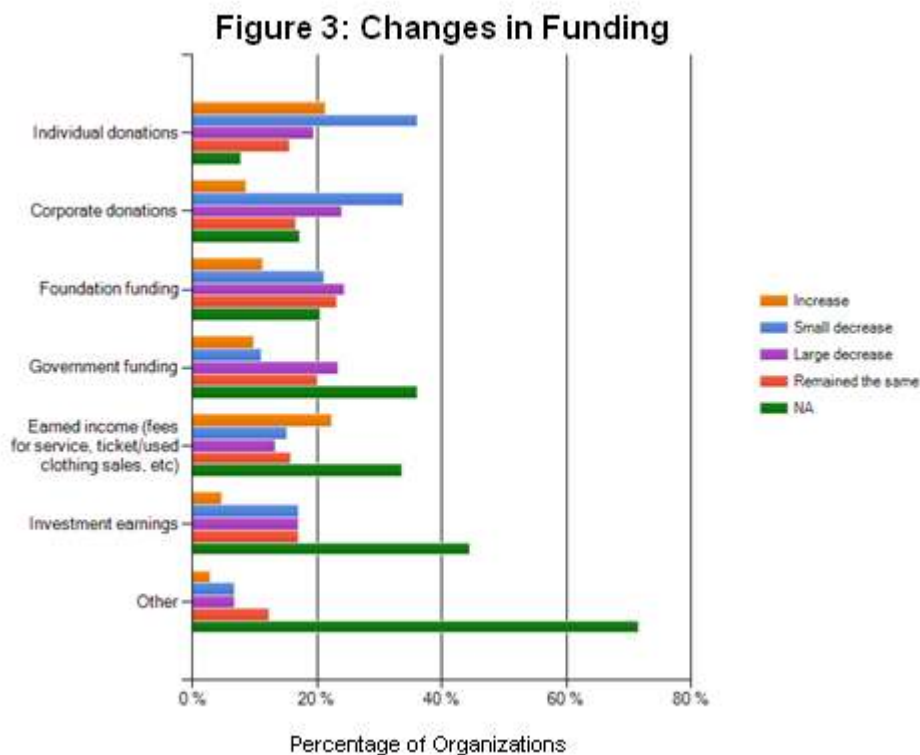
Earned income was not a source of revenue for one third of the organizations represented in this survey. However, respondents indicated that earned income increased more frequently than any other revenue source. This increase may reflect the public's transition to nonprofit service providers in order to benefit from lower fees charged by the nonprofit sector. Nonprofit organizations can provide the same goods or services to the public, but often do so at a lower rate than their for-profit counterparts. When individuals feel the impact of the economic recession, they may be more inclined to utilize the nonprofit alternative.

Of the 61 social services organizations that responded to the survey, 68.4% saw a decrease (either large or small) in individual donations, 70.7 saw a decrease in corporate donations, 51.7 saw a decrease in foundation funding and 41.7% saw a decrease in government funding. The majority of social services organizations indicated NA for categories earned income, investment income, and other revenue sources. While these organizations often experience increased demand for their services, the funding decline was more severe than the local average.

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Changes in Operations

If applicable, participants were asked to indicate how their organization's operations had been affected by a decline in revenue (participants were able to select more than one response). Out of 147 responses to this question, 20.4 % indicated that this did not apply to their organization. In contrast, 20.4 % of organizations, spanning many program areas, were concerned about survival and 1.4 % reported that their organizations were closing. Both of these responses came from capacity building organizations. The majority of the responses, however, fell somewhere in between. These organizations reduced staff (43.5%) and reduced services (29.9%) in order to cope with funding shortages.



Staff represents the largest expenditure for most nonprofits and is therefore the easiest target of budget cuts when facing financial uncertainty. In this survey, 43.5 percent of respondents indicated that they had reduced staff. Those who selected “other” changes reported

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hiring freezes, wage freezes, furlough time, and reduced pay, benefits, and training for current staff. While these changes represent an organization's need to cope with the reality of their funding environment, they may contribute to staff burnout.

In addition, 29.9% of respondents indicated that they had reduced services. Those who selected "other" changes also reported delaying the growth or expansion of the organization, as well as "doing more with less" and "working smarter." While it is often difficult to determine how they can best "work smarter," these organizations may find themselves in a better position after economic recovery than those who reduced staff or operations. As was noted previously, the reductions of organizational capacity could take years to rebuild. In contrast, organizations that take a strategic and proactive approach to economic challenges may emerge from the recession as stronger organizations.

Participants were also asked to suggest recommendations for what can be done locally to address the strain on nonprofit organizations. Several responses, primarily from capacity building organizations, referenced collaborations between local organizations. Mergers and partnerships can provide the means for two or more organizations to increase the impact of their services. Combining human, financial, and knowledge resources can enable nonprofits to be more efficient and effective while reducing the competition for the shrinking supply of charitable donations. Yet this can be a difficult touchy subject for nonprofit leaders to broach, as those involved often find it difficult to make the necessary compromises. As Lois Savage of Lodestar Foundation noted, "leaders need to look beyond their organization and focus on the mission they're trying to accomplish" (Banjo and Kolita, 2010). If a merger presents an opportunity for likeminded organizations to accomplish their missions, then leaders will need to assume the responsibility of formulating consensus, establishing a plan, and implementing changes. The

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prevalence of this suggestion by respondents from capacity building organizations highlights the recognition that partnerships can create the groundwork for high-impact nonprofit endeavors.

Respondents also indicated that the sector's financial woes could be remedied by publicizing how nonprofit organizations benefit the community. These responses link concerns about limited funding to the public's lack of understanding about nonprofits' missions and activities. Yet this lack of understanding is related to each nonprofit organization's branding and marketing strategy. Each nonprofit organization must assume the responsibility to inform the public of how they operate in order to fulfill their mission and improve the community as a whole. Communicating to the public and building relationships with donors can help expand interest a nonprofit's mission and encourage financial support.

Where to from here

The US economy will eventually recover from this current recession. However, nonprofit operations will not necessarily return to business as usual. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linksy (2009) note that the current crisis "merely sets the stage for a sustained or even permanent crisis of serious and unfamiliar challenges" (p2). The competition, constraints, uncertainty, and instability that characterized this recession are the new normal that nonprofit leaders must accept and adapt to in order to manage successful organizations.

Rather than hunkering down to weather the recession, Heifetz, Grashow, and Linksy (2009) encourage nonprofit leaders to use the recession as an opportunity to "hit the organization's reset button" (p3). This may include changing rules, reshaping the organization, and redefining the work that people do, while retaining the organization's mission and core identity. The process of reinvention involves analyzing the organization's current operations and making strategic decisions about what is working and what is not. Nonprofit organizations

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should adapt to the changing environment with flexibility and openness and draw on the collective intelligence within the organization in order to “thrive in a changing and challenging world.” The Giving Institute (2010) echoes these recommendations, advising nonprofit organizations not to overreact, but rather to review their current budget and plans and to be flexible with their goals in light of donor capabilities. Existing donors will continue to be the most valuable resource, so organizations in need must continue to demonstrate need, cultivate relationships with current donors, and seek support for what the organization needs most.

Strategic analysis in light of the constraints discussed above will be essential for nonprofit success in the coming years. In addition to funding constraints, nonprofits face increasing demands from donors to show that the donated funds are achieving the nonprofit’s goals. Donors have become more active in their search for information about the nonprofits to which they donate. Therefore, nonprofit leaders must be willing to have open discussions about programs that are not working and plans for improvement. If strategic analysis indicates that the best, or only, option is to merge with another organization with a similar mission or programs, the possibility should be carefully considered. Although mergers can be difficult for both organizations, they have the potential to strengthen both organizations and achieve greater impact in the community.

While communication with donors is always an important aspect of a nonprofit’s activities, donor relationships become particularly important during recessions. Dire reports and grim outlooks can create an environment in which small contributions seem insignificant. However, small contributions can enable organizations to withstand other funding declines in order to survive recessions. Nonprofit leaders must continue to reach out to donors by

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communicating the organization's impact and needs, asking for donations, and expressing sincere gratitude for donor support.

Conclusion

The current economic recession has challenged the nonprofit sector in many ways. As a whole, the nonprofit sector's major revenue sources declined during the recession. Funding shortages made it difficult for nonprofits to continue operating at pre-recession levels and forced nonprofit organizations to evaluate their unique position within the context of a challenging and evolving external environment. As a result of reflection on their organization's position, environment, and finances, leaders made difficult decisions regarding changes in workforce, programs, and direction. These changes included reducing the size and scope of the organization's program activities and reducing the size, pay, and benefits of the workforce. In other situations, organizations recognized the possibility of mutually beneficial partnerships that could enable organizations to pool their resources to achieve a greater impact. Despite the difficulty, resistance, and fear that may accompany such decisions, organizations must seize the opportunity to make changes that enable the organization to survive the recession.

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