Bridging the Gaps: Local Government and Nonprofit Collaborations

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Local governments and nonprofit organizations often struggle to provide quality services to their residents and clients. One potential way for these organizations to overcome obstacles in service provision is to engage in joint programming and service delivery. In this study, we use original survey data collected from local government and nonprofit managers in the state of North Carolina to examine recent trends in collaboration between these sectors. Specifically, we explore the perceptions of these managers concerning the types of collaborations that work best, the types of collaborations that are least successful, and the factors that foster or hinder cooperation. We also explore the perceptions that these managers have about the other. We hypothesize that positive perceptions of the other sector, greater access to resources, operating in a more urbanized environment, and participation in past positive cross-sector collaboration experiences will all lead to increased collaboration between local governments and nonprofits. We find, however, that although an organization's resources and managerial perceptions of the other sector do influence collaboration, having participated in a past successful collaboration does not necessarily lead to an increase in future partnerships.

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The interweaving of governmental programs and nonprofit organizations is increasing (Kettl, 2015); and, collaborations between local governments and nonprofit organizations now play an important role in service delivery. These collaborations are often mutually beneficial arrangements given that local governments tend to seek additional expertise and capacity while nonprofits tend to pursue increased resources (Gazley & Brudney, 2007). Both sectors, though, often seek collaboration as a matter of necessity—especially given increased demands on time and resources as well as increased competition for funding (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Provan, 1984).

Collaborations, however, are not cost-free endeavors. Resources, particularly employee time, must be spent in coordinating and maintaining collaborations. As a result, conflicts can arise over decision-making authority, institutional goals, and program accountability.

While a great deal of scholarly attention has focused on collaborations *between* nonprofit organizations, we understand much less about why local governments and nonprofit organizations choose to collaborate with one another. This study, therefore, seeks to tackle this issue. Specifically, in this study we ask: *What factors influence collaboration among local governments and nonprofit entities?*

To answer this question, we examine how managers' perceptions of the other sector, organizational resources, geographic setting, and past collaboration experiences all influence the likelihood of engaging in future cross-sector collaborations. Using an original survey of government and nonprofit leaders in North Carolina, we questioned managers in these organizations about their collaborations with the other sector as well as their perceptions of any accomplishments that have been achieved from past collaborations. Overall, this study builds on prior research and makes a preliminary assessment of potential predictors of cross-sectoral collaborations.

Understanding Collaboration

Nonprofit organizations collaborate with one another in an effort to jointly supply services or bolster their individual capabilities to meet client needs. Sowa (2009) found that early child care and education nonprofits strategically collaborated with one another often with the intent of seeking benefits for their core services and programs. This type of collaboration strengthens the capabilities of nonprofit organizations. Indeed, these collaborations often signal a path toward increased capacity since these collaborations can lead to positive impacts on management processes and outcomes. (Guo & Acar, 2005). These collaborations can also increase the level of services available to clients (Selden, Sowa & Sandfort, 2006).

Although collaborations *among* nonprofit organizations can certainly yield many benefits, we know much less about whether the same benefits emerge from cross-sector collaborations. Yet, more and more the complexity of social issues has led governments and nonprofit organizations to collaborate with one another (Cornforth, Hayes, & Vangen, 2015). In a time of increased demand for services, partnering with government often allows nonprofits to shortcut lengthy processes of collecting information on specific citizen groups (Young, 2000). Some research, for instance, has shown that government and nonprofit collaborations can occur out of necessity to streamline processes and avoid service duplication (Wolff, 1992).

In this study we examine a set of potential drivers of collaboration that have not been extensively studied, if at all, in the government and nonprofit collaboration literature. Specifically, we explore how, if at all, opinions of the other sector, access to greater resources, geographic restrictions, and prior collaboration experiences influence government and nonprofit collaborations.

Organizational Perceptions

It is naïve to believe that collaborations between local governments and nonprofit organizations are only driven by sheer necessity. Many collaborations are more nuanced. Thus, to neglect a local government's perceptions of a nonprofit organization, and vice versa, would be missing a major piece of the puzzle that allows us to form a clear picture of why the two sectors do or do not collaborate.

Two major factors that have been shown to influence collaboration decisions are trust (Alexander & Nank, 2009; Snavely & Tracy, 2002; Witesman & Fernandez, 2012) and negative mutual

perceptions (Cairns & Harris, 2011). Nonprofits often work with public agencies to address social problems in disenfranchised communities (Alexander & Nank, 2009). Such high stakes make trust and favorable perceptions of the other sector imperative.

The perception of an organization's quality is also meaningful in collaboration decisions among local governments and nonprofit organizations. Indeed, It is important for organizations to collaborate with other organizations that they view in a favorable manner. Gowan, Seymour, Ibarreche, and Lackey (2001), for instance, found that perceptions of quality in public organizations were often lower among employees and managers than customers. Such low perceptions of quality could lead a potential collaborator to avoid what may be perceived as wasting organizational time.

In this study we examine whether managers' quality assessments of organizations in the other sector and their perceptions of overall differences in operations between the two sectors impacts their likelihood of collaboration. We expect to find that more favorable perceptions of the other sector will lead to increased collaborations. This finding would reinforce previous literature showing that quality means something and is a significant driver of collaboration efforts.[1]

> *Hypothesis₁: When managers of local governments and nonprofit organizations hold negative perceptions of the other sector, they will be less likely to report engaging in prior collaborations. They will also be less likely to anticipate engaging in future collaborations.*

Organizational Resources

Local governments and nonprofit organizations are continually mindful of their resource situations; and, they often seek ways to remedy shortfalls. For local governments, a resource deficiency can mean a lack of expertise in a particular service delivery area. For nonprofits, a lack of resources often means a lack of funding (Gazley & Brudney, 2007). Recognition of these needs tends to be a motivator influencing collaboration (Gazley & Brudney, 2007). While Smith (2012) asserts that governments and nonprofits sometimes compete for resources, it is possible that they also partner in the face of limited capacities. Indeed, collaborating with one another can save organizations in both sectors money. For example, nonprofit organizations have access to human capital in the form of volunteers and other part-time or temporary employees that can be a benefit to local governments (Shields, 1992).

Resource dependency theory (RDT) assumes that organizations with fewer resources will be more likely to engage in collaborations. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) found that organizations are motivated to collaborate with one another in order to survive in times of resource scarcity. Since organizations are affected by their environments, uncertainty drives survival decisions and causes organizations to collaborate and pool resources (Pfeffer, 1997; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Provan, 1984).

Although RDT suggests that fewer resources will lead organizations to collaborate, some organizations (even in the face of scarce resources) may be ill-equipped to collaborate since collaborations are not free of costs. Contracts need to be made between organizations, relationships need time to develop, and there are time and administrative costs that will need to be incurred. Some collaborations may even require a full-time staff position to coordinate organizational partnerships. For these reasons, AbouAssi, Makhlouf, and Whalen (2016) have argued that organizations with *greater* capacity are more likely to seek collaborations. However, Cairns and Harris (2011) found that a *lack* of capacity outside of financial resources—e.g., time

and skills—may challenge an organization's ability to collaborate. Mulroy (2003) also found that organizational funding uncertainties can inhibit collaboration.

These mixed findings present a conflict in the literature. That is, while RDT suggests that organizations with fewer resources will be more likely to seek collaborations, some scholars assert that these same organizations may have less capacity—e.g., time, staff, and/or monetary resources—to enter into collaborative relationships. We, therefore, hypothesize that while organizational capacity may influence the extent to which organizations have relied on collaboration in the past, access to resources will shape future expectations regarding collaboration based on the need for organizational survival. This is particularly important in a contemporary post-recession economy.

> *Hypothesis$_{2a}$: Organizations with greater resources will have engaged in more past collaborations with organizations in another sector (either local government or nonprofit).*

> *Hypothesis$_{2b}$: Organizations with fewer resources will anticipate more future collaborations with organizations in another sector (either local government or nonprofit).*

Geography

Few studies have addressed geographic (particularly urbanity versus rurality) limitations as a factor influencing government and nonprofit collaborations. Citing findings from Davis and Weber (2001) and Galloro (2001), Sowa (2009) distinguished between urban and non-urban early childhood education providers. However, this study is a rarity in terms of research exploring urban and non-urban divides in cross-sector collaborations.

Operating in a rural environment can be challenging for local governments. Poverty is often rampant in these areas and occurs alongside many other local government struggles (DePillis, 2014). One struggle is that rural governments usually lack the tax revenue to change the realities of poverty. Despite this challenge, demand for government services tends to be consistently high in rural areas.

Rural nonprofits also face challenges. According to at least one survey, approximately 73% of rural nonprofits report annual budgets of less than $500,000 (Fanburg, 2011). However, these same organizations cover an average service area of 49.1 square miles. This is in contrast to the 0.5 square miles and 4.8 square miles of average service area covered by urban and suburban nonprofits, respectively (Fanburg, 2011).

These geographic challenges make local government and nonprofit collaborations in rural areas a natural step toward better serving communities. Yet, these challenges also make collaborations difficult. Indeed, although rural organizations possess a scarcity of resources which (in theory) incentivizes collaborations, they are also faced with fewer potential partners. Thus, with generally fewer resources and fewer potential partners, we hypothesize that rural local governments and rural nonprofit organizations will collaborate less than their counterparts in urban areas.

> *Hypothesis$_3$: Organizations in rural areas will report having engaged in fewer past collaborations than organizations in urban environments. Rural organizations will also be less likely to anticipate engaging in future cross-sector collaborations than their urban counterparts.*

Prior Collaboration Experiences

Organizations also interact in order to achieve legitimacy (Nathan & Mitroff, 1991; Provan & Milward, 2001). This is a core institutional explanation for why two entities may choose to collaborate. Linden (2002) has argued that when organizations have collaborated in the past future risks may be mitigated by positive experiences. Essentially, this means that experiencing collaborative success can lead to future collaborative desires.

The concept of path dependency is, in part, predicated on this notion. When an organization finds that an arrangement works and is successful, not only is deviation from that arrangement undesirable it also tends to be extremely difficult (Pierson, 2000). Baum (1996) wrote of a similar phenomenon known as "repetitive momentum." Once an action yields successful results, momentum for continuing that action builds. This acceptance of successful practices and the desire to continue these practices may apply to organizational collaborations as well. Thus, we hypothesize that once a local government or nonprofit organization feels that a collaborative effort has accomplished its intended goals and has yielded effective results that entity will show more willingness to collaborate in the future.

> *Hypothesis$_4$: Organizations that have experienced positive prior experiences in cross-sector collaboration will be more likely to anticipate future collaborations.*

Data and Methods

To examine past and future collaborations between local governments and nonprofit organizations, we conducted a survey of nonprofit managers and local government managers in North Carolina. Our distribution lists were obtained from the North Carolina Center for Nonprofits (for nonprofit organization contacts), the North Carolina League of Municipalities (for city government contacts), and web page searches (for county government contacts). This was a closed survey only available by email or mail invitation. In total, we reached out to 1,290 executive directors, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), and organizational leaders of different 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, 534 city managers, and 100 county managers. Only one individual from each organization was able to access the survey.

All respondents were first contacted by email with an invitation to participate through Qualtrics online software. Reminder emails were sent two weeks after the initial invitation to all those who had not yet responded. All invitations were linked to a specific email address and multiple attempts to open the survey were prohibited. The survey was opt-in.

To explore collaborations, we asked a mixture of multiple choice and open-ended questions concerning past collaborations (in the past three years), respondents' impressions of the other sector (that their organization collaborated with), and their anticipation of future collaborations. Surveys distributed to respondents in different sectors were identical, with the occasional rewording to make the question applicable to either nonprofits or local governments.[2] We selected a broad definition of "collaboration," which we defined in the survey as:

> [Any] active, formal, or informal partnerships...through which your organization shares financial or other resources, including such things as delivering services, developing strategic plans or initiatives, applying for grant funding, working with clients or volunteers, fulfilling contracts, sharing or supplying office space or other resources, or other forms of cooperation.

Our response rate was 14%, although this varied by organizational type. Our response rate for nonprofit organizations was 15%. Our response rate for city managers was 12%. Our response rate for county managers was 9%. The types of nonprofit organizations that responded also varied. They included health-related agencies, youth advocacy organizations, arts councils, educational institutions, and professional associations, among others. The size of the local governments ranged from small towns with only one full-time employee to large counties and metropolitan municipal governments with thousands of employees.

Respondents ranged from leaders representing organizations with budgets in the thousands of dollars to those representing organizations with multimillion dollar budgets. Sample frequencies are shown in Tables 1a and 1b. As shown in Table 1a, about 9% of the nonprofits that responded to the survey indicated that their organization worked mainly in the "arts, culture, or humanities," subfield. Statewide, also approximately 9% of all nonprofits in North Carolina have a primary focus on arts, culture, or humanities.

In examining factors that potentially influenced collaboration, we were primarily concerned with two questions presented to respondents in the survey. The first was the self-reported frequency of their organizations past collaborations. The second was respondents' perceptions concerning the likelihood of future collaborative partnerships.[3, 4] In addition to these primary concerns, we were also interested in relationships between these two questions and respondents' impressions of the other sector, their perceived level of organizational resources, the organization's geographic location, and the organization's prior experience with collaborations.

Our questions concerning perceptions of the other sector focused on a variety of issues such as perceptions of the general quality of services provided by the other sector as well as perceptions of whether the other sector could be relied on to represent the entire community. To measure organizational resources, we included an objective measure of each organization's annual revenues. This measure was created using a seven-point scale of self-reported yearly revenue for nonprofit respondents and an identical seven-point scale of yearly revenues (obtained from public records searches) for local governments. In addition to this objective measure of organizational resources, we included two subjective measures. These measures were included in order to examine whether respondents *believed* that their agency had the resources for collaboration as well as their perceptions of whether logistical differences between sectors (e.g., hours of operation or office locations) made it difficult to collaborate.

To measure geographic differences, we created four mutually exclusive indicator variables: rural local governments, urban local governments, rural nonprofits, and urban nonprofits. In determining rural and urban areas, we relied on U.S. Census data. Using this data, we classified counties with more than 250 people per square mile as urban.[5] This resulted in 20 of the counties being categorized as urban and 80 of the counties being categorized as rural.

Lastly, to assess how past interactions likely influenced future collaborations, we included respondents' answers to a series of questions about past collaborations with the other sector. These questions asked respondents about their opinion as to whether past collaborations were effective overall, saved the organization money, increased the quantity of services provided, increased the quality of services provided, and/or increased citizen engagement.

Table 1a. Sample Frequencies Compared to State Frequencies (Nonprofits)

Variable	Coding *(If used in analysis)*	*n* *(Sample %)*	State % *(Where available)*
Organizational Revenue	1=<$100k 2=$100k-$499,999 3=$500k-$999,999 4=$1M-$4,999,999 5=$5M-$9,999,999 6=$10M-24,999,999 7=$25M+	1=32 (16%) 2=55 (28%) 3=44 (22%) 4=45 (22%) 5=7 (4%) 6=7 (4%) 7=8 (4%)	1=41% 2=33% 3=8% 4=11% 5=2% 6 and 7=5%
Organizational Type/Setting	0/1=Urban 0/1=Rural	Urban=136 (86%) Rural=61 (14%)	
Nonprofit Subfield		Arts=17 (9%) Education=49 (24%) Environment=10 (5%) Health=41 (21%) Human Service=46 (23%) Social=20 (10%) Religious=2 (1%) Other=12 (7%)	Arts=9% Education=19% Environment=5% Health=12% Human Service=33% Social=10% Religious=8% Other=2%

Note: Organizational type/setting is an indicator variable.

Table 1b. Sample Frequencies Compared to State Frequencies (Local Governments)

Variable	Coding *(If used in analysis)*	*n* *(Sample %)*	State % *(Where available)*
Organizational Revenue	1=<$100k 2=$100k-$499,999 3=$500k-$999,999 4=$1M-$4,999,999 5=$5M-$9,999,999 6=$10M-24,999,999 7=$25M+	1=2 (<1%) 2=12 (4%) 3=5 (3%) 4=20 (7%) 5=5 (3%) 6=12 (4%) 7=18 (7%)	1=41% 2=33% 3=8% 4=11% 5=2% 6 and 7=5%
City of County Government	1=County 2=City	1=9 (12%) 2=65 (87%)	1=100 (16%) 2=534 (84%)
Organizational Type/Setting	0/1=Urban 0/1=Rural	Urban=24 (30%) Rural=50 (70%)	Urban=20% Rural=80%

Note: Organizational type/setting is an indicator variable.

Results

Our first goal was to determine overall trends indicated by our survey responses. Descriptive statistics reveal that our respondents reported generally high levels of collaboration. Over half of respondents (55%) reported that their organization had collaborated with an organization in the other sector "frequently" or "very frequently" in the past three years. Only 14% of respondents reported that their organization had not collaborated with the other sector in the past three years.

When asked about their interactions with the other sector, 49% of respondents reported that their organization's interactions with the other sector had increased in the past three years. Another 46% of respondents reported that their organization's interactions with the other sector had

remained constant in the past three years. Only 5% of respondents reported that their organization's interactions with the other sector had decreased in the past three years.

We also asked respondents whether they perceived that interactions with the other sector would increase, decrease, or stay the same over the next three years. In response to this question, 48% of respondents said that they believed working with the other sector would increase over the next three years. Another 48% of respondents said that they believed interactions with the other sector would stay the same over the next three years; and, only 4% of respondents said that they believed their work with the other sector would decrease over the next three years.

In addition to these questions about past and future collaborations, we also asked respondents to identify the service areas where past collaborations occurred between their organization and organizations in the other sector. Respondents were then able to select as many service areas that they believed were applicable (out of 19 provided). They were also able to include a service area that was not listed by typing their answer in an open-ended response field. The three most selected service areas included education (*n*=120), social services (*n*=117), and economic development (*n*=100).

We also asked the specific duties, services, and/or resources that were shared between the organizations. Respondents could again select multiple options (out of 13 provided) or include a shared response that was not listed by typing their answer in an open-ended response field. For this question, the three most selected duties (or shared resources) included information exchanges (*n*=175), grant funding (*n*=142), and public/private partnerships (*n*=124).

Respondents were also asked a series of questions concerning accomplishments of their past collaborations. The majority of respondents reported favorable experiences with collaborations. Indeed, 53% of respondents stated that past collaborations were either "effective" or "very effective." Another 29% of respondents stated that past collaborations were "somewhat effective." Approximately 9% of respondents stated that their past collaborations were either "ineffective" or "very ineffective," and about 5% commented that their past collaborations were "somewhat ineffective." For example, in discussing a collaboration with a city parks department, one nonprofit manager noted that "It took a while to get everyone to the table, but now that they are there it works because everyone receives something from the partnership."[6]

As displayed in Table 2, we also asked about the extent of collaborations to meet more specific outcomes. Most respondents reported that collaborations seemed to accomplish a great deal, such as increasing access and quality of community services, increasing citizen engagement, and increasing trust levels between local governments and nonprofits. However, past collaborations seemed less successful at increasing resources. Indeed, fewer respondents reported that collaborations increased funding for either the nonprofit or local government; and, less than one-third (31%) of respondents reported that collaborations reduced competition for resources between local governments and nonprofits at least "to some extent." As one nonprofit manager in our survey commented, "Case managed services at the high school level proved unsucceful [sic] in that incarnation because school personnel did not have the flexibility and autonomy to do the job effectively and meet state and federal requirements while providing individualized services to students."

As a final measure of overall trends, we asked a series of questions concerning respondents' impressions of the other sector. We asked each local government respondent whether s/he agreed or disagreed with a set of statements concerning nonprofit organizations and vice versa for nonprofit managers. Here again, the questions were worded exactly the same for organizations in

Table 2. Accomplishments from Past Collaborations

Accomplishment	None	To Some Extent	To A Great Extent	Not Sure/Does Not Apply
Saved money for the organization	29%	33%	22%	16%
Increased community services	4%	42%	48%	6%
Increased the quality of services	5%	46%	44%	5%
Secured new funding for the nonprofit	33%	33%	19%	15%
Secured new funding for the local government	40%	29%	8%	23%
Reduced competition between local governments and nonprofits	40%	19%	12%	29%
Increased volunteers and other resources	25%	46%	18%	11%
Increased trust in the other sector	8%	43%	34%	15%
Increased citizen engagement in community activities	10%	48%	29%	12%

both sectors with the exception of slight rephrasing to make the questions appropriate for that sector.

As displayed in Table 3, there were several trends that emerged concerning impressions of the other sector and potential limitations to collaboration. Nearly one-fourth (24%) of respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that competition for resources limited collaborations between nonprofits and local governments. Another limiting factor for many organizations was resources. Indeed, 27% of respondents "agreed" that a lack of resources within their organization inhibited partnerships. Only 12% of respondents "agreed" that operational differences between nonprofits and local governments were a limiting factor. This finding suggests that logistics, such as hours of operation or office locations, did not significantly inhibit working together. There were some concerns about representation. Nearly one-fourth of all organizations (23%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the other sector "cannot be relied on to represent the entire community." Lastly, most respondents (67%) "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" with the statement that the other sector provided "unreliable or poor quality services."

To further examine levels of association between our independent factors and collaboration, we used Kendall's tau-b test which is appropriate since we have ordinal variables. Other measures for interval level data may not show proper levels of association (Liebetrau, 1983). Kendall's tau-b provides a level of association ranging from -1.0 to 1.0, with larger values indicating stronger associations and statistical significance of the relationship. Table 4 displays the Kendall's tau-b coefficients for each of our independent variables. The *p*-values are provided in parentheses. As shown in Table 4, several variables have a statistically significant relationship to past and future collaborations.

Concerning Hypothesis 1, we expected that for each of our "Opinions of the Other Sector" variables there would be a negative effect. That is, we expected that those expressing lower opinions of the other sector would be less likely to have engaged in past collaborations. Our findings support this hypothesis. Specifically, our findings show that organizations with negative opinions of the other sector are significantly less likely to report prior collaborations across all four of our opinion questions. Future collaborations appear to be influenced by two of our four opinion questions. These findings are in line with previous studies showing that trust is a key factor in cross-sector collaborations (Alexander & Nank, 2009; Snavely & Tracy, 2002; Witesman & Fernandez, 2012).

Table 3. Opinions about the Other Sector

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. "Private interests (including those of nonprofits) do not belong in public service delivery."	15%	40%	31%	10%	4%
2. "Competition for resources discourages local governments and nonprofits from collaborating."	11%	38%	27%	21%	3%
3. "[Our organizations] do not have the staff or time to manage collaborations with nonprofits."	10%	40%	23%	23%	4%
4. "Differences in hours of operation, office locations, or other administrative differences between nonprofits and local government make it difficult to collaborate."	11%	52%	25%	11%	1%
5. "[The other sector] provides unreliable or poor quality services."	18%	49%	28%	3%	1%
6. "[Our organization] has not developed strong enough relationships with the nonprofit sector to partner with them."	23%	43%	14%	17%	2%
7. "[The other sector] cannot be relied on to represent the entire community."	7%	39%	31%	18%	5%

Our results also show that Hypothesis 2a is supported by both objective and subjective measures. Objectively, we find that respondents who reported that their organizations had higher revenues were also more likely to report prior collaborations. This result provides validation to the assertion of AbouAssi, Makhlouf, and Whalen (2016) who argued that greater organizational capacity can lead to increased collaborations with other entities. We find that subjective opinions, such as perceptions of logistical limitations (e.g., hours of operation and other administrative practices), limit past collaborations. Indeed, the perception that a respondent's agency lacked the resources to collaborate influenced the extent to which they engaged in prior collaborations.

We did not, however, find strong support for Hypothesis 2b. That is, we did not find that revenue was associated with future collaborations. Thus, the rejection of Hypothesis 2b fails to confirm a link between organizational needs and motivations to collaborate, as suggested by Gazley and Brudney (2007). This is not to say that this linkage does not exist. Our findings simply could not confirm it. The lack of support for Hypothesis 2b also fails to substantiate RDT as an explanation for local governments and nonprofit organizations engaging in collaborations.

Concerning organizational type and location, Hypothesis 3 is somewhat supported. That is, rural governments were more likely to report fewer prior collaborations; and, both, urban and rural governments were less optimistic concerning future partnerships. Nonprofits, though, (both rural

Table 4. Levels of Association

Variable	Kendall's Tau-b (Significance (*p*-value))	
	Past Collaborations	Future Collaborations
Opinions of the Other Sector		
Private Interests Should be Separate	-0.18* (0.00)	-0.18* (0.00)
Resource Competition	-0.22* (0.00)	-0.07 (0.16)
Not Representative of Whole Community	-0.15* (0.00)	-0.08 (0.13)
Unreliable/Poor Services	-0.25* (0.00)	-0.11* (0.05)
Resources and Practical Limitations		
No Resources for Collaboration	-0.28* (0.00)	-0.14* (0.02)
Logistical Differences	-0.21* (0.00)	-0.08 (0.14)
Organizational Revenue	0.22* (0.00)	-0.09 (0.09)
Organization Type		
Rural Local Government	-0.12* (0.01)	-0.12* (0.00)
Urban Local Government	0.08 (0.07)	-0.21* (0.00)
Past Accomplishments		
Overall Effective Collaboration		0.09 (0.11)
Saved Money		-0.02 (0.73)
Increased Services		0.05 (0.41)
Increased Service Quality		0.09 (0.14)
Increased Citizen Engagement		0.71 (0.26)

Note: *$p < 0.05$ (two-tailed).

and urban) were more likely to report that they expected an increase in future collaborations. Future research should explore possible explanations as to why these differences might exist.

Lastly, to examine Hypothesis 4 we looked at associations between self-reported prior collaboration successes and the likelihood of future collaborations. These impressions of past collaborations, justified or not, provide insights into whether nonprofits seek partnerships with local governments (and vice versa) to meet shared goals for the communities they serve. Considering the work of Baum (1996), Pierson (2000), and Linden (2002), we expected that prior experiences would influence a respondent's expectations of future behaviors. However, this does not appear to be the case for our respondents. None of our past accomplishment variables were significant predictors of future collaborations. Given that our research can best be characterized as exploratory, though, further study of Hypothesis 4 is warranted using a more extensive dataset.

Discussion

Our goal in this study was to provide preliminary insights into potential explanations for the emergence of collaborations between local governments and nonprofit organizations. We also sought to assess the likelihood of future partnerships, which are key facets in collaborative governance. With ever-increasing resource pressures on both local governments and nonprofits, it often makes sense for these two sectors to cooperate when their goals align. In fact, one might question why these partnerships are not more frequent given the increasing needs of nonprofit clients and the citizens served by local governments. As one of our respondents noted, "[contracting with nonprofits] has been a wonderful relationship, and they offer a great service. As a small town, we could not even come close to offering this level of service [which is] reaching into our community."

It should be noted, though, that some of our respondents expressed caution in partnering with organizations from a different sector due to lack of control over certain endeavors. One respondent, for example, commented that "Success [is] directly related to strong trust factors between employees of both the nonprofit and local municipality. Both entities [need to be] willing to allow [one another] to lead/provide in their particular areas of expertise."

As shown in Table 4, organizations must have the resources available to initiate and manage collaborations. As noted by one respondent, "We were glad to get out of one grant because the paperwork was horrendous. We needed a full-time person just for the reports."

As another resource, we also found that organizational revenue was related to past collaborations. Specifically, respondents at organizations with higher revenues were more likely to report past collaborations. These financial resources, however, were surprisingly not a significant predictor of future collaborations (see Table 4). This finding could indicate that respondents in organizations with fewer resources (in the form of revenues) may view future partnerships as a potential solution for revenue shortfalls. Therefore, even though organizations with fewer resources may not have been able to collaborate in the past, leaders of these organizations may be able to see the benefits of collaboration. Still, these respondents at low resourced organizations may be faced with the practical reality of the capacity limits of their organizations—especially if there are no organizations willing to collaborate with them. Given the importance of resources (particularly financial) for these organizations, then, it may be difficult to increase collaborations. Thus, further research on the role of organizational resources and collaborations is certainly warranted.

We also found that opinions of the other sector, to some degree, mattered. For example, respondents expressed a belief that private (nongovernment) interests should not be involved in public actions. There were also perceptions of the quality of services provided by organizations in the other sector. Table 4 shows that generally negative views of the other sector (whether justified or not) were associated with fewer past collaborations and less optimistic predictions of future collaborations. Perceptions of past collaborations, however, had no bearing on perceptions of future partnerships. This suggests that other factors, such as resource limitations, may be more influential than past successes in predicting future collaborations. These factors, though, may also be intertwined. One respondent, for instance, in explaining why his/her organization no longer collaborates with the other sector noted that the partnership "end[ed] up costing us more than the funds provided and we cannot cover the losses every year." Future research should explore the variety of forces driving cross-sector collaborations at the local level.

As with any exploratory study there are constraints that limit our findings. First, we assessed perceptions of sector leaders in only one state. However, it is possible that collaborations and/or perceptions of collaborations will vary among states. Prior studies, though, have argued that there are advantages to research that focuses on a single state, such as the potential increase in internal validity (Nicholson-Crotty & Meier, 2002).

Second, in this study we measured perceptions of past and future collaborations in terms of frequency and accomplishments. We did not, however, measure the collaborations themselves. Thus, we relied on only managers' assessments of these relationships without independently assessing the frequency or success of the partnerships. It is possible that respondents may have overestimated or underestimated the frequency of their past collaborations. It is also possible that respondents may lack the ability to accurately assess the accomplishments of past collaborations. However, we also know that perceptions can greatly influence behaviors. Thus, perceptions are worthy of study, particularly for assessing the likelihood of future collaborations.

Lastly, we note that there could be some self-selection bias (Couper, Kapteyn, Schonlau, & Winter, 2007). Indeed, those who held particularly strong feelings (one way or the other) regarding collaborations with the other sector may have been more likely to respond to our survey. Future work should focus on a broader group of respondents, perhaps from many states, and should rely on more systematic sampling strategies.

Conclusion

This study bridges a gap between two related yet distinct sectors, nonprofit and local government. As many communities move toward collaborative governance it is important to assess factors that facilitate government and nongovernment partnerships. In this study, we identified potential drivers of collaboration between local governments and nonprofit organizations. Our work contributes to the theoretical understanding of these collaborations by exploring managers' perceptions concerning the types of collaborations that work best, the types of collaborations that are least successful, and the factors that foster or hinder collaboration. We add to the literature by exploring the perceptions that managers in both sectors have about the other. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, our main contribution is providing groundwork for future studies of nonprofit-government collaboration.

From a practitioner perspective, our findings should be useful. While exploratory in nature, our findings illustrate not only the value of trust among collaborating entities, but also the importance of organizational capacity in making partnership decisions. As such, practitioners would be well served to carefully evaluate the capacity that their organizations have for collaboration as well as the value added of any potential collaboration partner. Future research should examine nuances of cross-sector collaborations in order to provide more concrete recommendations to practitioners. This study is intended to be only a starting point for the continued examination of this topic.

Notes

1. In our survey, we did not define quality. We allowed each respondent to determine quality in his/her own way. For example, one local government official commented about quality by noting that at times some nonprofit organizations "were either unable to continue services at the expected level or in hind sight [*sic*] were never properly prepared to deliver services at expected levels."
2. For example, we asked nonprofit managers, "In the past three years, has your interaction with local governments increased, decreased, or stayed the same?" For the survey sent to local government managers, this question was rephrased to ask, "In the past three years, have your interactions with nonprofits increased, decreased, or stayed the same?" Other than these minor changes all questions on both surveys were identical.
3. Specifically, we asked "Within the last three years, how often has your nonprofit (local government) organization collaborated or partnered with a local government (nonprofit) in any form of public service delivery or planning?" Respondents could answer on a five-point scale ranging from "Very Frequently" to "Never."
4. Specifically, we asked "Over the next three years, do you expect interactions with local governments (nonprofits) to increase, decrease, or stay the same?"
5. See the Rural Center of North Carolina (http://www.ncruralcenter.org).
6. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from responses to our survey. The selected quotes are intended to be illustrative and not necessarily summative of all trends.

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