

Introduction to the Alliance for Nonprofit Management Articles

Judy Freiwirth

*Editor of the Alliance Articles
JNEL Editorial Board Member*

On behalf of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management and as the editor of this special section of the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership (JNEL)*, I am pleased to present three papers based on the presentations and discussions at the Alliance's 2016 national conference in Washington, DC. The Alliance is the national membership organization of capacity builders (consultants, funders, capacity-building organizations, and researchers) and strives to improve the effectiveness of individuals, groups, and organizations that are helping nonprofits and communities achieve positive social change. The Alliance focuses on the importance of a research-based practice and capacity-building framework and uses it to inform its work. This includes identifying practice implications and disseminating relevant nonprofit research; conducting collaborative research studies by its members; encouraging capacity builders to base their work on evidence; and advocating for research-based practice to the larger nonprofit sector.

Traditionally, the nonprofit research and academic community has operated independently from the practitioner sector, each functioning in distinct silos and limiting the effect of the research findings on nonprofit practice. By building bridges between the two communities, the Alliance strives to influence the capacity-building field to inform practice with research and to stimulate new research that has relevancy to practice. For this reason, the Alliance greatly values its partnership with the *Journal of Nonprofit Education* and looks forward to our continued working relationship.

Each year, the Alliance dedicates a significant portion of its national conference to “research to practice,” encouraging capacity builders to learn about new research and create ways to adapt their practices based in evidence. For the 2016 annual conference, the Alliance collaborated with the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) and organized a unique partnership model through overlapping conferences. As part of the collaboration, the organizations sponsored several joint research-to-practice sessions focused on three areas of capacity building wherein research has been limited: (a) using evaluations for capacity building and improving programs, (b) executive transition and succession planning, and (c) understanding how board chairs perceive and prepare for their roles as governance leaders.

The first article in this special Alliance section, “Strengthening Organizational Practice: Evidence From the Social Innovation Fund National Assessment,” examines

the effect of the Corporation for National and Community Service's Social Innovation Fund on the capacity-building practices of the nonprofits they fund as grantmaking intermediaries. Zandniapour, Griffith, Zhang, Sun, and Pershing focus on two research questions: (a) Does investment in evaluation and other capacity-building efforts change grantmaking and nonprofit programmatic practices? (b) What are the roles of funding agencies and organizational leadership in bringing about organizational change? They discuss the effect of the Fund on the capacity and practices of its grantees over 5 years; one significant finding suggests that with long-term funding and capacity-building support, nonprofits can increase their ability to implement and use evaluations to improve their programs.

The second article, "Executive Succession: Closing the Gap Between Ideas and Practice," is based upon the conference panel discussion with authors Don Tebbe, Amanda Stewart, Mary Bear Hughes, and Tom Adams. They explore the limited use of executive director leadership succession and transition approaches and tools as standard nonprofit management practices. Although executive director turnover is expected to dramatically increase as baby boomers retire, surprisingly there are few studies about executive director succession planning, including the effect of the executive transition practice. The authors discuss some of the underlying reasons why these practices are not used more widely and highlight their recommendations to the sector for how to increase the use of these practices. Perhaps one of the most important recommendation is their call for boards to understand that executive director succession planning is a core governance responsibility.

The third article by Freiwirth, Burns, Hiland, Gifford, and Beck, "Voices of Board Chairs—A National Study on the Perspectives of Nonprofit Board Chairs: How They Prepare for and Perceive Their Role in Relation to the Board, Community, and CEO" reflects the research conducted by the Alliance's Governance Affinity Group that was presented at the conference. Over 600 board chairs responded to the survey, resulting in one of the largest national studies of nonprofit board chairs. Although the practitioner literature points to the board chair as providing a pivotal leadership role for nonprofit boards, not much research to date focuses on this role. One of the important findings of this study is that most nonprofit board chairs do little to prepare for this crucial governance role. The authors provide a set of practice implications and recommendations, such as sector consideration for shared governance leadership models, rather than the traditional model of the single person, "heroic" model of board leadership. They also identify key research questions for critically needed future studies.

I invite you to use these three articles in the graduate-level classroom for teaching purposes and in consultant-led workshops, seminars, and training sessions. I also hope that these articles will stimulate additional discussions within the sector about the need to bridge the gap between the research and practice. For more information about the Alliance, please see <http://allianceonline.org>.