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THE FORMATIVE ROLE OF FOUNDING NARRATIVES
IN COMMUNITY SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

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At various stages throughout their development, nonprofit organizations undertake formal planning processes to identify, clarify and operationalize their understanding of mission. A sense of mission that is both clearly defined and commonly shared provides, among other things, “social justification” for an organization and reflects the group’s intention to serve the public interest (Bryson, 2005). Due to their orientation toward a public purpose, the mission-orientation of nonprofit organizations is thought to differentiate them from profit-driven firms (Anheier, 2005; Bryce, 2000; Bryson, 1988). A well-conceived mission establishes an organization’s legitimacy in a particular field of endeavor, as well as provides guidance about the path an organization should take to fulfill its perceived role in society (Bryson, 1988; Wolf, 1999).

The governing board of a nonprofit organization typically plays a major role in the discernment of its mission. As part of its governance functions, the board undertakes formal planning to help clarify and pursue the guiding mission and purpose of the organization and, in many ways, the board is regarded as the “keeper of the vision” for an organization. Unless an

organization has a clearly defined mission, some argue, its governing body or management may fail to make the “right choices” about how to proceed (Light, 2002). Furthermore, an organization’s mission plays a role in inspiring new involvement by others, an essential function if an organization is going to grow or thrive (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003).

In certain instances, however, the formal planning efforts of a nonprofit organization may be augmented with—and perhaps complicated by—a narrative or story about the organization’s founding that can have surprising longevity and potency. Smaller organizations in early stages of their development may be more prone to cultivate such narratives, especially in the absence of formal planning processes by a governing board. The continued presence of an organization’s founder may perpetuate his or her envisioned ambitions (Block & Rosenberg, 2001). The founding narratives of larger, more established organizations may seem to be lost to institutional memory, only to be revived later on with surprising efficacy at a critical juncture (Barthel, 1997).

A founding story or narrative serves a number of purposes for voluntary organizations, purposes that are closely aligned to its sense of mission. The unique tale that an organization has to tell about its purpose or goals helps to set it apart from other organizations and construct a unique identity for an organization (Ochs, 1997). An organization may rely on a particular myth or narrative to establish its legitimacy or to gain recognition (Selznick, 1957). In addition, a mission helps to “generate moral allegiance” to a particular cause or purpose by galvanizing the support of group members (Barthel, 1997). Even more importantly for boards with planning and goal-setting responsibilities, a founding narrative is likely to include an expression of the organization’s most essential values and the desired state of change to which the organization ultimately aspires. Such stories reveal the envisioned relationship between those who receive services and those who provide them (Schwabensland, 2006).

The significance of these stories, particularly for board governance, has not been widely or empirically examined. Recent research has suggested that board members of voluntary organizations are frequently unaware of the “mythic significance” of such stories (Schwabenland, 2006). The paper explores the extent to which founding narratives, even when fragmented or distorted by time, can impact board planning and visioning efforts.

To understand the role these founding narratives serve in defining or controlling organizational mission, this study draws from interviews with individuals involved in the establishment of 23 community-based organizations in three Midwestern cities. The organizations involved in the study were engaged in services related to low-income housing and each had a link to a religious organization, which may account for the prevalence of powerful, symbolic tales about their founding. Although these organizations varied in size and maturity, many wrestled with issues of identity, legitimacy and efficacy based on reference to a founding story and purpose. As the study revealed, the influence of an organization’s founding story can have a profound effect on the ability of subsequent governing bodies to refine or redirect organizational mission. In fact, revising or reframing an organization’s own story can be a risky endeavor. Close attention to these founding narratives provides useful insight for practitioners as well as challenges for researchers whose conventional tools of inquiry may not include detection of such narrative activity.

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