Introduction

How can nonprofit organizations make better use of today's rapidly changing information and communication technology? What obstacles do nonprofits face? This book presents research on special challenges facing nonprofits when investing in new technology. The nonprofit manager forewarned is forearmed.

Like O'Neill (2002), we define the nonprofit sector broadly and inclusively. In the United States, the sector includes at least 1.4 million nonprofit organizations pursuing charitable, educational, health, human service, scientific, cultural, advocacy, community development, mutual assistance, and other goals, in service to members, other targeted populations, or society in general. The sector also includes an unknown number of unincorporated, informal, voluntary associations that are integral to civil society. Voluntary associations may be even more numerous and varied than their incorporated brethren. The wide variety of nonprofits described on the following pages reflects our broad conception of the sector. As much as possible this book emphasizes one segment in particular: small- and medium-sized organizations devoted to causes of social justice.

The goal of this book is to promote understanding of ways that new information and communication technology helps—and hinders—nonprofit effectiveness. We trust that a larger body of dependable research on the subject could eventually inform the decisions made by the people who manage or lead nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit managers and leaders could make better technology-adoption and management decisions despite scarce organizational resources. Nonprofit finance and development directors could adopt more effective budget, business, and fundraising plans for investing in technology. Program staff and volunteers could do a better job of achieving goals and serving their organization's mission. Donors and grant makers could design more beneficial grant-making programs and incentives for nonprofits with fewer unwanted consequences. Public agencies could help improve the performance of nonprofit contractors and grantees that implement government programs and services.

This book helps lay an empirical foundation for usable knowledge about technology adoption in the nonprofit sector. Each chapter presents an original research project based on data and observations collected from nonprofits in the United States or Canada. The authors are comprised of practitioners with firsthand nonprofit and technological experience and scholars whose past work on the subject includes papers presented at research conferences or articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals. By commissioning this latest round of new research and presenting it in a single volume, we seek to promote and foster growth of a new and identifiable body of defensible knowledge about nonprofit uses of technology.

We offer this collection in hopes of encouraging creative reflection and additional research by others. We encourage all readers—nonprofit managers and leaders, consultants, technical assistance providers, public officials who contract with nonprofits, and philanthropists who fund nonprofits, as well as university faculty and students of nonprofit management—to join us in considering and discussing implications of the following chapters for technology-adoption decisions by nonprofits.

THE NEED FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Our review of published research literature finds that rigorous, defensible research on nonprofits and technology is in short supply. Research on information technology and the nonprofit sector has consisted largely of technology surveys and anecdotes about best practices, most of it self-published by nonprofits and foundations. Most peer-reviewed research has focused on for-profit organizations, with few published articles on nonprofits and technology (Pinho & Macedo, 2006).

Nevertheless, there is growing interest in the subject among scholars. Thirty papers on the subject, most by researchers from academic institutions, were presented at the Independent Sector (2001) Spring Research Forum on the Impact of Information Technology on Civil Society. For the past several years, annual conferences of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action have included sessions devoted to nonprofits and technology.

Some of the issues addressed by this book overlap those addressed by a much larger body of research on commercial uses of information and communication technology. For example, questions posed in this book about causal relationships between technology and nonprofit productivity parallel questions addressed elsewhere about the for-profit sector (e.g., Brynjolfsson, 1993; Triplett & Bosworth, 2003). Except for Eisinger's (2002) findings on the importance of computerization in increasing effectiveness in food-assistance programs, we lack comparable research on the link between technology, productivity, and effectiveness in the nonprofit sector. Linking technology and productivity may be more complex in the nonprofit sector, because in this sector there is greater ambiguity about the meaning of organizational effectiveness and performance (Baruch & Ramalho, 2006; Sowa, Selden, & Sandfort, 2004).

In short, we welcome helpful research on generic issues concerning use of technology across the for-profit, nonprofit, and public sectors. Our concern in this book, however, is the shortage of research addressing the special needs and attributes of nonprofits.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FINDINGS

What are the challenges that nonprofits face when trying to adopt new technology? In theory, nonprofits could face several distinct problems:

It is relatively difficult for nonprofits to invest in technology. By law, nonprofits do not have owner-investors. Unlike for-profit firms, nonprofit corporations cannot raise capital by selling shares. Although some nonprofits net discretionary income from earned revenue, most rely to a significant extent on individual donations and grants from government agencies and private foundations. Grant makers tend to fund direct costs of specific new projects with limited objectives. Nonprofits dependent on restricted grants find it relatively difficult or costly to raise funds for overhead, project continuation costs, general operating costs, fund-raising, new capital assets, and investment in technology.

Power asymmetries allow government agencies to force nonprofit contractors to invest in government-designed systems that facilitate government monitoring and accountability, while doing little to enhance nonprofit management and productivity.

In contrast to the for-profit world's focus on financial return on investment, nonprofits' tendency to have multiple, uncertain, conflicting, ambiguous, and hard-to-measure goals makes organizational effectiveness hard to define, thus complicating improvement of organizational effectiveness through technology.

Nonprofits serving the poor find it more difficult to raise funds, because their clients can offer little, if any, support. Consequently, those organizations are at an even greater disadvantage in the market for new technology.

These and other theoretical arguments about nonprofit technology adoption remain to be tested. We hope the studies offered in this book will facilitate such tests in future research.

The studies presented in the following pages help lay the foundation for future research. Part 1 of this book addresses the current capacity of nonprofits to use new information and communication technologies. Part 2 examines barriers to nonprofit adoption of new technology. Part 3 considers the future benefits of new technology for the nonprofit sector. Part 4 considers strategies for improving nonprofit utilization of information and communication technology.

Part 1: Technological Capacity of Nonprofits

Studies presented in part 1 of this book analyze large data sets to generate hypotheses about the capacity of nonprofits to use new information and communication technology. We begin with Richard Clerkin and Kirsten Grønbjerg's research on the presence of six kinds of information technology in a large, representative sample of all nonprofit corporations and congregations in the state of Indiana. Clerkin and Grønbjerg explore reasons that some categories of nonprofits (for example, those depending on the government or donations for more than half their

revenue) are more likely to use multiple kinds of technology, while other categories (those targeting low-income communities, for example) are less likely to do so. Clerkin and Grønbjerg find that use of technology is related to organizational size, location, mission, and types of activities. They suggest reasons for those statistical relationships and recommend that researchers try to identify underlying causes in the future.

Next is Julian Wolpert and John Seley's research describing the technological capacities of nonprofits in New York City. They consider whether and why nonprofits—especially smaller nonprofits serving low-income and disadvantaged populations—might lag behind for-profit firms and government in the use of technology. The authors offer a theoretical framework for understanding economic and government incentives for nonprofit adoption of new technology and explaining how those incentives might be offset by special constraints, including limits imposed on nonprofits by tax laws, private donors, and government contracts. Then, to describe technology uses, they analyze data from the Internal Revenue Service and a survey of New York City nonprofits. They note factors related to technology use, such as proportion of a nonprofit's revenue received from government. Wolpert and Seley conclude by asking whether investing in technology—instead of improving staffing or facilities—is the best use of scarce new resources for financially pressed nonprofits.

John McNutt's research considers nonprofit adoption of new-wave electronic techniques for public policy advocacy. He reviews nonprofit use of advocacy technology in terms of evolutionary stages. McNutt offers hypotheses about diffusion of technological innovations among nonprofit public policy advocates and explores those hypotheses by surveying organizations belonging to Voices for Children (formerly the National Association of State Child Advocacy Organizations). He concludes that although it is too early to know for sure, certain new-wave technologies might eventually be adopted by child advocacy groups, especially the larger organizations.

The studies in part 1 show that capacity is associated with organizational size, kinds of activities, and patterns of financial support, among other factors. Because these findings are largely based on cross-sectional data collected by surveys, we cannot be sure about what determines technological capacity. The studies found statistical associations—not necessarily causal relationships—between capacity and the other factors. Part 1 suggests reasons for these associations and potential hypotheses to be tested by future research.

Part 2: Barriers to Adopting Technology

In part 2, Peter Manzo and Bill Pitkin report on their survey of nonprofits in Los Angeles County, which is augmented by focus groups and expert interviews. Manzo and Pitkin name six barriers to nonprofit use of information technology that would increase organizational productivity. They conclude with their initial thoughts on remedial strategies for nonprofit managers.

Yvonne Harrison and Vic Murray argue that in addition to the digital divide that separates people with access to information and communication technology from those without access, there is also an "effectiveness divide" that separates organizations that do make effective use of technology from those that do not. Their research focuses on users' expectations as a potential barrier to effective technology use. Their theoretical model is tested with a survey of volunteer managers across Canada. Practical implications of the study address such issues as organizational culture, staff turnover, managers' prior experience, stress levels among staff, ease of use of new technology, and users' involvement in its development.

The studies presented in part 2 find a number of likely obstacles to nonprofit adoption of technology. These obstacles include uninterested donors, restrictive conditions attached to funding, piecemeal grant support for technology, ill-prepared staff, transitory commitments from volunteers, unsuitable technology in the marketplace, and neglectful consultants. Future research might suggest additional barriers. For example, Manzo and Pitkin's study is one of several in this book that portrays nonprofits straining against severe resource constraints. Thus, another barrier to adoption of technology might be nonprofit organizations' persistence in trying to satisfy too many needs in society with too few resources. The result would be a chronic state of crisis management in some nonprofits, causing diversion of scarce organizational resources away from the sort of long-term planning required for successful adoption of new information and communication technology.

Part 3: The Potential for Technology

The research in part 3 considers the unrealized potential of technology for the nonprofit sector and civil society. Peter Dobkin Hall's study explores the potential of information and communication technology to foster political empowerment of the general public. He reports on two surveys of technology utilization by public and private agencies in New Haven, Connecticut, and adds his personal observations as a participant-observer using information technology for neighborhood and community mobilization. His study describes dramatic growth in the use of information technology over a six-year period in a city challenged by poverty and divided by economic and social class. Nevertheless, his conclusions raise troubling questions about whether new technology is leading to broadly based public engagement in community and civic life or further empowerment of elites and special interests.

Samuel Nunn considers the potential of information technology for improving the performance of nonprofit community development corporations (CDCs). The subjects of his study are twelve CDCs in Indianapolis that are measurably different in the kinds and amounts of information technology they use. Nunn finds that those differences are related to budget size, revenue, productivity, and the number of alliances CDCs have with other organizations. His statistical analysis and exploratory interviews suggest that the causal relationship between improved technology and increased productivity is complex and merits further research.

The studies in part 3 challenge popular assumptions about the potential benefits of technology for goals pursued by nonprofit organizations. Nunn's study does not find what many might assume: a direct cause-and-effect relationship between adoption of technology and improved nonprofit productivity. Hall's study questions the potential benefits of technology for promoting individual civic engagement. His observations raise an important question about the future of democracy: will new technology support ordinary citizens' political empowerment or disempowerment?

Part 4: Strategies for Improving Technology Use

Dale Fitch begins part 4 by considering how strategies for designing information and communication technology affect human service agencies. Fitch frames the problem of improving information for decision making in terms of diverse worldviews and social justice among different roles and levels of analysis within the organization. His research describes the early progress of four human service agencies that are creating new information systems using system design modeling. Although his findings are preliminary, Fitch anticipates that resulting transformations of individual organizations using the new approach to systems design could lead to changes outside the organization in surrounding communities.

Paul-Brian McInerney's ethnographic research chronicles the history of "circuit riders" associated with nonprofit technical assistance providers. Riders began as roving consultants who protected smaller nonprofit organizations from "the cutthroat practices of for-profit consulting firms," and that protection helped those nonprofits use technology to better promote social justice, a healthy environment, and human dignity. McInerney describes riders as a social movement that was altered in fundamental ways by its success at winning support from organized philanthropy and other institutions and that now faces an uncertain future.

Carol Silverman and Kevin Rafter's research asks why some nonprofits succeed at adopting new technology while others struggle or fail. The study explores small- and medium-sized nonprofits' attempts to use technology for missions involving social justice. Findings include insights into the importance of organizational history and culture, abilities of preexisting staff, roles and availability of volunteers, resource constraints, and other factors both inside and outside the organization. The authors also explore how technology sometimes tempts nonprofit leaders to change the way they define success, with consequences for clients the nonprofit hopes to help. Silverman and Rafter offer recommendations for managers, funders, technical assistance providers, and others.

Each of the studies in part 4 suggests strategies for improving nonprofit utilization of information and communication technology. Fitch's preliminary observations encourage greater attention to information needed by decentralized decision makers when designing new information systems. McInerney's history of the circuit rider movement suggests that other technical assistance providers would be more effective if they had a more sophisticated understanding of the missions and programs of their nonprofit clientele, especially small- and medium-sized

nonprofits devoted to social justice. Silverman and Rafter's research suggests that stable philanthropic support, development of a technologically proficient staff, and a mission- and client-centered approach to technology-adoption decisions all contribute to successful adoption of new technology by small- and medium-sized social justice nonprofits.

EMERGING ANSWERS

As has been discussed, the studies in this book raise questions, present findings, and suggest answers in four areas: capacity, barriers, future potential, and strategies for improvement. Other themes recur throughout this book. All the studies—each one in its own way—address varying combinations of the following questions: What are the most important obstacles to adoption of new information and communication technology? Is the digital divide metaphor still relevant for the nonprofit sector? How well does the information technology industry—especially its consultants—serve the nonprofit sector? Does organizational size matter? Does using today's technology help or hinder management and leadership of small- and medium-sized nonprofit organizations? How might technology provide more support for collective action for social justice? What lessons does new research on nonprofits and technology offer managers, leaders, philanthropists, and public policy makers? What issues should researchers address in the future? The following are some answers that emerge, at least tentatively, when we consider this book as a whole.

Larger organizations are more likely to use technology. Quantitative data analyses by Clerkin and Grønbjerg, Wolpert and Seley, and McNutt all find that larger organizations are more likely to use new information and communication technology. The importance of organizational size is a recurring theme throughout the book. For example, Manzo and Pitkin report that staff in smaller nonprofits are more likely to need training in basic software applications. Findings suggest economies of scale in the adoption of technology. It may be that new technology is more useful when nonprofit payrolls are big enough to support larger, more differentiated staffs that include technical specialists.

The digital divide affects nonprofits. Unequal access to technology in society at large affects nonprofit use of technology. Clerkin and Grønbjerg find that nonprofits targeting low-income populations are less likely to use technology. Hall suggests that low-income families' lack of access to technology limits its usefulness to nonprofits. It might also be that nonprofits with low-income clientele have a harder time raising sufficient funds to invest in technology. Harrison and Murray argue that the digital divide in society is paralleled by an "effectiveness divide" in the nonprofit sector, dividing the volunteer agencies that make effective use of technology from those that do not.

Technology does not necessarily improve internal operating efficiency. In an ideal world, perfectly rational nonprofit organizations would use their scarce resources efficiently to serve their missions as effectively as possible. Rational organizations

large enough to achieve the required capitalization for economies of scale would invest in information and communication technology when doing so would increase productivity. Investment might be constrained by restrictions accompanying some grants or contracts, but gifts for general support, capital campaigns, and retained net earnings would be invested in technology when doing so is relatively cost effective. Clerkin and Grønbjerg, for example, find that nonprofits that work with or depend upon their local community, or that have extensive interorganizational collaborative relationships, are more likely to use the Internet and other kinds of technology that facilitate external relationships. Ideally, nonprofits would invest in technologies that increase their effectiveness. However, Clerkin and Grønbjerg conclude that the cause-and-effect relationship might not be so simple and that nonprofits might have other reasons for making the investment. Nunn, Fitch, Silverman and Rafter, and Clerkin and Grønbjerg are among those who conclude that investment in technology is not necessarily motivated by efficiency concerns and does not necessarily improve performance of nonprofit missions. Nunn finds, for example, that if the goal is maximum productivity, at least some nonprofit community development corporations underinvest in technology and then underutilize their rather modest technological resources.

Productivity is not the only reason for adopting technology. Internal operating efficiency is merely one of several possible motives for adopting technology. External conditions over which the nonprofit has little, if any, control can also influence technology-adoption decisions, cost-effectiveness notwithstanding. Manzo and Pitkin, among others, describe nonprofit acceptance of secondhand computer equipment donated by business corporations motivated by tax incentives, even when investing in new computers instead might have served nonprofit missions and goals more effectively. Clerkin and Grønbjerg find that other things being equal, nonprofit acceptance of government funding is associated with greater use of technology. Manzo and Pitkin, as well as Wolpert and Seley, discuss information-systems requirements imposed by government agencies that contract with nonprofits. Those requirements sometimes undermine efficient use of scarce nonprofit resources. Hall describes local civic leaders who discouraged use of some technologies in order to maintain their influence. That local tendency was eventually offset by state and federal grant programs that encouraged greater use of technology by local agencies and organizations.

Investment in technology may depend more on donor preferences than on cost-effectiveness considerations. Several studies suggest that funder and donor preferences, restrictions attached to grants and contracts, and limited availability of unrestricted general support and capital funds tend to limit nonprofit investment in technology. Clerkin and Grønbjerg suggest that greater technological capacity among educational or public-benefit nonprofits might be a result of funder preferences, rather than organizational attributes. Wolpert and Seley recommend that foundation and corporate donors focus their technology grants on "fledgling nonprofits that are providing the most innovative and effective services to disadvantaged populations." McNutt concludes that funders hoping to promote technology

should try to build relevant expertise and contribute more toward operating expenses. Manzo and Pitkin advocate that grant makers be more flexible when supporting new technology for nonprofits. They also suggest that grant makers be more willing to pay for core operating costs, infrastructure development, and indirect costs. Manzo and Pitkin recommend that funders, especially government agencies that contract with nonprofits, consider the added burden that special reporting requirements place on the limited information-systems capacity of many nonprofits.

The technology industry—including consultants—does not serve the nonprofit sector adequately. People in the nonprofit sector interviewed by Manzo and Pitkin complained that the market for information technology is better suited for profit-seeking businesses. Technological products and services are not designed with nonprofit operations in mind. Respondents also faulted technology consultants, especially male consultants who tended to be less responsive to the nonprofit sector's predominantly female workforce. Harrison and Murray conclude that industry should more extensively involve nonprofit users in the development of new technology. Fitch argues that software vendors and consultants tend to design information systems with the needs of centralized decision makers in human service organizations in mind, while neglecting the needs of decentralized decision makers who are on the front lines serving agency clients. McInerney reports that emergence of the circuit rider movement was in part a result of "cutthroat practices of for-profit consulting firms."

Organizational culture and personnel can impede technology. Manzo and Pitkin find that staff who are new to computers are often fearful and resistant. Those authors recommend that nonprofit managers—not just technicians and other specialized staff—be trained to implement new technology. Harrison and Murray find that negative expectations among individual users limited the usefulness of technology for nonprofits. Silverman and Rafter find that organizations that try to add new technology to programs already underway are less likely to succeed. McNutt finds that older technologies may be perceived as more effective by some public-policy advocates, while other advocates with a positive view of new technology are more likely to use it.

Several studies attribute lack of investment in technology to financial pressures on nonprofits. Perhaps we should consider what that finding suggests about organizational mission and culture. Some nonprofits, often those with social justice missions, focus on unmet needs in society. Inadequacy of those nonprofits' own resources is a chronic problem. Some organizational cultures might value maximum possible satisfaction of their clients' unmet needs in the short run at the expense of organizational planning and investment for greater effectiveness in the long run. Manzo and Pitkin, as well as Silverman and Rafter, were among those who concluded that underinvestment in long-term planning limits adoption of new technology.

More research is needed on nonprofits and technology. Every chapter in this book presents important questions meriting additional study. Hopefully interested

scholars will review individual studies carefully for implications for future research. Wolpert and Seley, for example, call for comparative research on whether or not nonprofits tend to underinvest in technology. McNutt asks why new-wave technologies seem to be underutilized by advocacy organizations. Harrison and Murray call for better conceptualization and operational definition of technology effectiveness among voluntary sector organizations. Hall asks whether the most promising course for technologically assisted citizen empowerment would involve selected segments of our citizenry or broadly inclusive civic engagement. Several studies in this book proposed untested reasons for the statistical associations they reported. Other studies also use ideas in need of testing, as they suggest explanations for findings and observations.

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Nonprofits and technology is a young area of inquiry. As in other fields and disciplines, growth of knowledge based on accumulating defensible research is typically slow and deliberate. At this early stage, scholars should be cautious about presuming to advise nonprofit managers and leaders. Nevertheless, here are some examples of tentative ideas suggested by studies in this book, for practitioners' consideration. Hopefully future research and experience will tell whether any of the following is good advice.

Implications for Nonprofit Managers and Leaders

Technology needs people. The long-term value of technology to the organization may depend on who is assigned to manage it. Success may depend on the special qualifications and long-term commitments of the staff or volunteers assigned to manage and maintain it and to train and encourage others to use it. If installation of new systems is delegated to technologically savvy interns while everyone else focuses on their usual assignments, the new systems may eventually wither and die. Successful adoption may also depend on the actions of formal and informal leaders. Their personal participation and commitment to new technology may influence other staff or volunteers to do likewise. If more people are involved in designing a new system to meet their own needs, more people might use it.

Technology also needs planning. Piecemeal investment in new technology in an ad hoc fashion may do little to improve productivity in the long run, and might even cause more problems than it solves. Organizations that are constantly preoccupied with urgent unmet needs in the communities they serve may have to adopt an especially disciplined approach to planning for the long term if they hope to operate more cost-effectively with the aid of new technology.

Technology does not always increase productivity or reduce long-term costs. Government contracts may impose new technology-based reporting requirements with significant costs and few, if any, benefits to the contractor. Proposal budgets should be augmented accordingly.

Implications for Funders

Nonprofits serving low-income clientele may have less to invest in new technology. Other things being equal, technology grants to nonprofits with largely low-income clientele may be more cost effective, provided there is adequate planning and technical support.

The most successful way to increase nonprofit effectiveness for the long term may be to invest in organizations, not just projects. Grants for adoption of new information or communication technology may yield better returns when they are designed to support the grantee's mission, strategic goals, and organizational development objectives, not just restricted project grant objectives.

Challenges for Future Research

A principal goal of this book is to encourage additional research on nonprofits and technology. As we mentioned previously, each of the following chapters proposes questions meriting further research. Taken as a whole, the book suggests other challenges for future research as well. What are the most important obstacles to nonprofit investment in technology? How does incidence of those obstacles vary as a function of organizational size? Does revenue mix (amounts and proportions of revenue from sales, fees, government grants and contracts, restricted and unrestricted foundation grants, small and large donors, membership dues, etc.) make a difference? Does greater access to capital (through capital campaigns, state and municipal government bonds, redevelopment and public facilities funds, lines of credit, etc.) promote successful adoption and use of new technology? How do mission and type of markets or clientele served (charity, education, health, human service, etc.) affect successful use of technology? Is the incidence of obstacles encountered affected by other factors (e.g., kinds of goods or services provided, board composition, geographic region, number of staff and volunteers)? What are some of the most successful models of government contracts and grants to nonprofits requiring nonprofit adoption of new technology, and why? What approaches to planning for new technology have worked best for nonprofits, and why? How should we define success with new technology? Perhaps most importantly, as future research suggests answers to these and other related questions, what might nonprofit managers, leaders, and funders do differently to put that knowledge to good use?

The job of exploring, testing, and improving our knowledge about nonprofits and technology lies ahead. We encourage future researchers to join that effort.

GENESIS OF NONPROFITS AND TECHNOLOGY

This book is the product of unusual collaborations. Contributing authors represent diverse disciplines, professions, and institutions. Draft research papers were commissioned and presented at a special research symposium on nonprofit technology adoption held October 24, 2004. The event was generously hosted by SBC

Communications Inc. (now AT&T) at its conference facilities in San Francisco. Invited participants included nonprofit managers, leaders, funders, consultants, activists, and scholars, all of whom joined in discussing and critiquing researchers' work and ideas in progress. We trust that bringing multiple perspectives to bear on nonprofit adoption of technology provides the truest path toward usable knowledge.

This project was made possible by generous financial support, assistance, and collaboration from the Community Technology Foundation of California. The foundation did much more than provide funds. There was a close working partnership between the University of San Francisco Institute for Nonprofit Organization Management and the Community Technology Foundation of California. One partner specialized in rigorous applied research to strengthen the nonprofit sector. The other was engaged in advocacy and grant making for social justice. Staff from both organizations worked side by side to make the research symposium on Information Technology in the Nonprofit Sector a productive and resounding success.

Recognition and thanks are due to each of the contributing authors for traveling from distant universities and communities in the United States and Canada to present and discuss their research with practitioners, scholars, technicians, and activists from throughout the state of California. Special thanks are due to SBC Communications Inc. for its kind hospitality and support for the symposium where authors first presented the research reported on the following pages. And finally, research by Carol Silverman and Kevin Rafter on nonprofits working for social justice was made possible by generous financial support provided by the Applied Research Initiative of the Community Partnership Committee organized during an earlier merger of Pacific Telesis Group with SBC Communications.

In short, this book was made possible by many people and organizations. As editors and facilitators of this project, we are grateful to everyone involved. Nevertheless, the findings and opinions presented in this book remain those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of funders, sponsors, or other participants.

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