

the improve groove

The Improve Group Quarterly Newsletter

Issues With Non-Profit Accountability

By Rebecca Stewart and Deborah Goldstein

How much are nonprofits going to be caught up in the current federal focus on corporate accountability? This was the focus of the Charities Review Council's 2005 Annual Forum. Keynote speaker Dean Zerbe, Senior Counsel of the State Finance Committee delivered the view from Congress regarding non-profit accountability to the federal government including the IRS. A panel discussion and response followed, with Ron Schultz (Leonard Street Deinard), Patty Wilder (Catholic Charities), Karen Schnatterly (Carlson School of Business) and John Cowles Jr. (Humphrey Institute 2005 Louis W. Hill Fellow in Philanthropy).

Dean Zerbe reinforced the IRS's viewpoint that governance is a common concern in both the corporate and non-profit sectors. An active board is important to both – accountable for the quality of services and the integrity of the organization's financial management. He raised specific concerns about 990 tax forms. With no common standards for reporting, the forms are problematic as a source of information for donors or other stakeholders. As the major tool of communication to the IRS, the 990 form may be insufficient in its ability to highlight major organizational changes. Zerbe criticized the non-profit sector's inclination to dismiss incidents of irregular financial practices by some organizations as isolated. He noted that 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 organizations are used for gain by some; over half of all corporate tax shelters used 501(c)3's as facilitators. This is a major source of the federal drive to analyze effective administration and discipline of the law as it relates to non-profit finances and taxes. Like in the corporate sector, there is significant concern that small non-profits may be overburdened with new regulations. At the same time, if concerns about tax status abuse are not addressed, doubt could be cast on the whole sector.

Panel comments echoed the need for overall transparency in non-profits to enhance the sector's reputation. Ron Schultz cautioned against allowing commitment to an organization's mission to translate to ends justifying the means, particularly as related to fundraising and other financial activities; he encourages non-profits and charities to match fundraising activities as closely as possible to the mission. Patti Wilder sited naiveté in financial matters as a challenge facing many smaller organizations. John Cowles proposed a non-profit Securities and Exchange Commission.

Working with clients, The Improve Group has witnessed organizations and their boards evolve improved governance practices and plan for greater accountability. We work with organizations to streamline this challenging process with planning and facilitation services that help board and staff members work through complex decisions.

Strategic Planning: It Works! By Marian Kimball Eichinger

What do these scenarios have in common? A department is facing budget cuts and low morale; A Board has several new Directors with little knowledge of the history, values or direction of the organization. An organization has completed an evaluation and is unsure how to use the data.

Strategic planning is a process of visioning, planning and goal setting, one that is not limited to for-profit organizations. The process is usually broken into four stages with each stage building on the last. They are: philosophies and values; strengths and weakness; vision/goal setting; and planning. The first two stages allow participants to take stock of their current situation within their organization and in the community at large. Participants share and become familiar with the founding values of their organization, its history and mission, where it is succeeding and where it needs improvement, what may be holding the company back and what doors may be

open for growth. Using this knowledge, participants visualize and come to consensus about what they want the organization to achieve and become in the next several years. The final stage builds the bridge from present to future when participants agree on concrete and feasible plans and strategies for achieving future success.

Strategic planning is a learning and unifying opportunity for people to come together as a team, and take ownership of the future of the organization. Throughout the process information is shared, analyzed and discussed through large and small group activities, worksheets, and brainstorming sessions. Long term results of strategic planning may be increased commitment and productivity, greater focus, increased communication and teamwork, and improved problem-solving.

For more information, see Bryson, J (2004) Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations : A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organizational Achievement

Health Amenities Research in Minneapolis

By Brooke Ahlquist

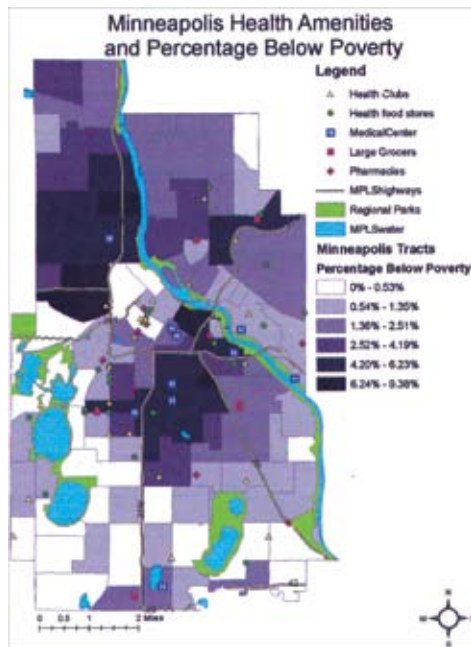
In order to expand our areas of expertise, the Improve Group has become involved in its first health-related project. An independent research grant was awarded to summer research assistant, Brooke Ahlquist, in June. The project, entitled "Accessibility of Healthy Amenities in Minneapolis," is a joint venture with the Department of Geography at the University of Minnesota and will be completed August 2006.

The availability of resources necessary for a healthy and productive life varies dramatically within the major urban areas of the United States. The research assesses the distribution of "health amenities" in the Minneapolis that can potentially enhance quality of life. A healthy environment, including health amenities, can contribute to or provide the opportunity for a healthy lifestyle as defined by current medical and public health experts.

Rapidly increasing rates of obesity and Type 2 diabetes in the U.S. have brought dietary intake and exercise to the forefront of public health concern. The role of the environments in which people live, in addition to individual behavior, has begun to be recognized for its role in raising risks of obesity and Type 2 diabetes. This research project aims to identify salient variables that distinguish healthy from unhealthy environments within the City of Minneapolis.

The project will document the availability of health amenities such as grocery stores that offer nutritious foods, pharmacies and green space. It will rely on qualitative research to assess the meaningfulness of particular variables, while quantitative analysis will assess association among variables. Finally, case studies of positive changes in the availability of health amenities will provide insight into the politics of enhancing healthy environments.

This research project marks the beginning of independent research projects supported by the Improve Group and an expansion into health-related program evaluation in the future.



Map created by Brooke Ahlquist using Metro GIS

Response Problems & Solutions in Surveys

By Nathan Paine

A high response rate is an important factor in legitimizing a survey's results. When a survey elicits a high response rate, its findings are viewed as more accurate. A low response rate potentially damages the credibility of the survey, as the sample is less likely to be representative of the target population. Low response rates are a continual problem for research projects that use surveys to gather information.

Non-response arises in two basic ways. Firstly, the inability to make contact with selected survey participants contributes to non-response, particularly if the survey is compulsory (i.e., quality of contact information and methods). Secondly, the refusal to participate in full or in part also generates non-response. Additionally, non-response presents problems for the findings from surveys. First, it reduces sample size, therefore increasing sampling error. Second, it contributes to bias when the non-respondents differ systematically from the respondents around one or more characteristics (i.e. when the non-response is not random).

During the survey planning and implementation steps, it is important to account for numerous factors that can influence the response rate for a survey. Some of these factors include:

- Quality and currency of the target population data;
- Data collection methods;
- Response "load" or inconvenience imposed by the survey; and
- Survey design and layout, including language and readability.

The Improve Group employs the use of a pilot test to test and evaluate the survey methods and to approximate an expected response rate. Identifying and analyzing the reasons for non-response is important, because the level of bias depends on reason for non-response. Non-contacts may have different characteristics from those refusing to participate, and both may possess different characteristics from the survey respondents. Demographic and other relevant characteristics of respondents should be compared with non-contacts and those who refused to see if there are systematic differences. Non-response bias can be compensated for by means sampling weight adjustment during the analysis phase.

Because the amount of non-response error is difficult to measure, it is best to focus efforts on minimizing its occurrence during survey design and implementation. Follow-up of non-respondents is the most effective way to increase the response rate. Follow-up can also help to identify any differences between respondents and non-respondents.

CLIENTS

Don't forget about our corporate giving program! We'd like to hear about small needs (\$500-\$1,000) with which the Improve Group can assist your organization or favorite cause. For more information call us at 877-IMPRVGP.

STAFF

After working with us full-time all summer, Kifah Abdi returned to her school-year job with Minneapolis Public Schools. Although we miss her energy around the office, we'll still get to see her part-time on individual projects.

After her second summer with The Improve Group, Research Assistant Brooke Ahlquist returns to the University of Minnesota to continue her Masters Degree in Geography. We look forward to working with her again in Summer '06!

Leah welcomed her new baby, Adrian Howard on August 17. Both mom and baby are doing great and are enjoying their time together! Leah will be back in the office part-time in September and October and resuming a normal schedule in November.

Fitness abounds! Nathan is training for the Twin Cities Marathon on October 2, and Becky is training for a 10K race. They've amazed the rest of us with tales of their many-hour runs.

OTHER NEWS

We've moved to our new office and have settled in. We are currently undergoing a technology upgrade project that will allow staff to work remotely and at client sites much more easily. The new office has been buzzing!

Please watch for the Improve Group at the Minnesota Council of Non-profits 19th Annual Conference. This year's theme, Framing: Crafting Messages That Build Support. We will be co-facilitating a workshop with Reid Zimmerman titled Inspiring Engagement by Collecting and Communicating Results, on Thursday, November 3, from 1 to 4:30 p.m. For more information, visit <http://www.mncn.org/conference/>.

community spotlight

Performing Arts Workshop (the Workshop) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping young people develop critical thinking, creative expression, and basic learning skills through the arts. It provides arts education to youth in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond with its three core programs: **Artists-in-Schools** - provides process-oriented arts instruction to child development centers and public schools; **Artists-in-Community** - tailoring arts instruction in after-school programs, homeless shelters/housing facilities, and county community/court schools; and **Professional Development** - working with teachers and teaching artists to use the creative process to bring curriculum to life.



Deborah Goldstein of the Improve Group interviewed Tom DeCaigny, Executive Director of the Workshop about his work:

DG: What makes the Performing Arts Workshop unique?

TD: Our teaching methodology sets us apart from other arts education organizations. Performing Arts Workshop is 40 years old, and this longevity has allowed us to evolve our methodology to focus teaching on problem solving and critical thinking skills and makes us effective with the youth we serve.

DG: What are some of the challenges other arts education organizations face?

TD: Public understanding for the value of the arts. There is an over-emphasis on high-stakes testing, particularly in language arts and math, putting the arts and sciences on the backburner. I think that people sometimes lose sight of how much the arts and creativity inform other subjects as well as their own intrinsic values.

DG: What are some of the things you are particularly proud of?

TD: I am proud of our work with juvenile offenders and students in special education programs. We have helped our artists develop skills to help these youth find their own voice. The arts allow them to express themselves and their observations of the world; they gain new ways to articulate meaning.

DG: What special perspective do you bring to the Workshop?

TD: I bring a vision to the historical base of the Workshop and place our work in a contemporary context to reach a broader base of young people. I let our assessments of community needs guide this visioning.

DG: What are you looking forward to in the coming year?

TD: There are great opportunities in the professional development of our artists coming up. I'm looking forward to putting more resources and time into building community with artists and sharing the best practices of what we do with school districts, government agencies and other organizations. One exciting thing coming up is the release of the San Francisco Unified School District's Arts Education Master Plan. It has made recommendations that are important to the future of arts education in San Francisco. I sat on the development and curriculum committees for the Master Plan and help make recommendations that take advantage of the rich cultural capital of San Francisco while remaining replicable in other districts I believe the Master Plan and other master plans, like the one in Los Angeles are setting an institutionalized standard for arts education across the state.

Upcoming Grants and Requests for Proposals

The Improve Group often receives RFP and grant notices. Below are some that are coming up in the next several months. If you want more information about any of the notices listed below, or want tips on applying for grants, please let us know! You can contact Deborah at deborah@theimprovegroup.com.

The William T. Grant Foundation announces a new grant competition that will support intervention research to improve youth-serving organizations, such as schools and community-based organizations. The goals of the grant are to support studies focused on improving youth-serving organizations and to build a greater capacity for the field of intervention research focused on such organizations. They will support a small group of experimental and high-quality quasi-experimental studies that provide theoretically important findings on how these organizations operate and how to improve them. We are interested in both newly initiated intervention studies and existing studies seeking additional support for assessing organizational structures, processes, and practices. The deadline for Letters of Inquiry is October 17, 2005, and the deadline for invited full proposals is February 13, 2006. The Request for Proposal (RFP) available on the Foundation's website, www.wtgrantfoundation.org.

The Alston/Bannerman Fellowship Program is committed to advancing progressive social change by helping to sustain long-time activists of color. The program is designed to give activists financial support and freedom to "take a break and recharge." Each year, ten organizers of color working for social change receive \$15,000 to take sabbaticals of three months or more. To qualify for an Alston/Bannerman Fellowship, an applicant must be a person of color; have more than ten years of community organizing experience; be committed to continuing to work for social change; and live in the United States or its territories. For more information: Visit www.alstonbannerman.org/generalinformation.html. The deadline for this grant is Thursday, December 1, 2005.

The Gerald R. Ford Foundation awards grants of up to \$2,000 in support of research in the holdings of the Gerald R. Ford Library. A grant defrays travel, living, and photocopy expenses of a research trip to the Ford Library. Foreign applicants are responsible for the costs of travel between their home country and North America, since the grants only cover travel within North America. Each year's application deadlines (post-mark deadlines) are MARCH 15 and SEPTEMBER 15. You may submit applications at any time, and those received too late for one round will automatically be considered in the next. More information is available at <http://www.ford.utexas.edu/library/hpgrants.htm>.

The U.S. Civilian Research and Development Foundation (CRDF) First Steps to Market (FSTM) program provides funding for first-time commercially-oriented projects among U.S. for-profit companies and universities, institutes, and/or companies in Eurasia. The objective of the program is to stimulate the creation of new U.S.-Eurasian commercial research and development (R&D) partnerships and business opportunities. FSTM projects are limited to 12 months in duration. The maximum CRDF contribution to the project is \$20,000. The U.S. company is required to provide a minimum \$5,000 cash contribution to the project. All funds may only be used for the Eurasian team's expenses. There is a rolling deadline for this grant, and more information is available at http://www.crdf.org/Application-Forms/FSTM_PA.htm.

The Bush Foundation works to enhance the quality of life by helping nonprofit organizations achieve their goals and supporting leadership development for individuals. Grants and fellowships are provided in the following areas: Arts and Humanities, Ecological Health, Education, and Human Services and Health. Most Bush grants are awarded to organizations in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. The Bush Foundation requires acceptance of a letter of inquiry before proposals are submitted. Letters of Inquiry can be submitted anytime and will be promptly reviewed by Bush Foundation program staff.



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