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The Nonprofit World Needs an Intellectual Push

By Pablo Eisenberg

The nonprofit world is intellectually moribund. While many scholars publish books and articles about philanthropy, most are irrelevant to what is actually going on. What's more, few people who work at nonprofit organizations have seriously thought and written about what they do or should do and how both charities and foundations need to change to meet the challenges of the next 25 or 50 years.

While some of the inactivity is the result of inertia and a lack of confidence in writing skills, the biggest problem is the lack of opportunity afforded to nonprofit representatives by the news media, trade associations, and publications that cover nonprofit organizations.

While *The Chronicle* regularly offers three to four pages for editorial and opinion pieces by staff members of nonprofit organization and other institutions, few other publications offer much space for thoughtful articles. Many of the best publications, such as *Youth Today*, are limited to specific fields of nonprofit activity.

The mainstream news media are even less willing to publish thoughtful discussion about nonprofit organizations. Until a few months ago, *The Financial Times* devoted a small section to opinion articles about philanthropy. Unfortunately, the practice was dropped for financial reasons.

While some nonprofit officials occasionally manage to get an opinion article published in a major newspaper like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, or *Los Angeles Times*, it is a frustrating and disappointing process at best.

The large majority of opinion pieces seem to be reserved for syndicated columnists. The remaining few are devoted to politically well-connected writers, with a rare piece here and there from a nonprofit official. And the odds of publication are even lower if the subject of concern is a well-established powerful institution.

The scarcity of outlets for nonprofit reflections could not come at a worse time. Charities and foundations are in flux, besieged by

rising expectations, an uncertain financial future, and a lack of clarity about their priorities and future direction. The big questions not only have been left unanswered but, in some cases, have yet to be asked or properly framed. Among them:

- Where should we draw the line between nonprofit and for-profit organizations?
- To increase public accountability and ethical practices, what mix of government rules and self-regulation do nonprofit organizations need?
- What relationship should the nonprofit world have with the federal government? Should it be more adversarial than it is now?
- Should there be limits on nonprofit compensation, or should pay be market-driven?
- How can the country ensure that foundation governance is more democratic?
- Are nonprofit boards the key to public accountability and oversight?

The emerging centers for investigative journalism like ProPublica — a news organization financed by philanthropists — are not the answer to the nonprofit world's need for introspection and reflection.

Those centers, by their nature, will focus on scandals, poor governance and financial irregularities and, for the most part, will ignore the nonprofit world. They will not involve nonprofit executives and their boards, from which constructive ideas and solutions must come.

Nor will the growing profusion of blogs add much to the discussion and thinking that must take place within nonprofit organizations and philanthropy.

Written by a wide variety of people with or without a great deal of experience, untested by any form of quality control, the blogs may instead sow a good deal of fractured thinking and confusion in the debates about the future of nonprofit organizations.

So what is needed?

In the first place, the nonprofit world must develop new outlets to permit its executives to air their views, opinions, and recommendations for change.

Trade associations like the Council on Foundations, Independent Sector, the National Council on Nonprofits, and others could begin their own publications to encourage both their members and nonmembers to think and write. But those publications should not become propaganda vehicles for the associations' self-interests and programs, but rather independent sources of ideas.

The most promising step would be the creation of an independent magazine, issued monthly, that would publish articles between 1,000 and 6,000 words, enough space to permit contributors to expand their ideas and analysis beyond the short space permitted in typical newspaper op-eds.

A type of *New York Review of Books* for nonprofit groups, the journal could attract not only the few seasoned thinkers in philanthropy but many more people who have not yet had the encouragement and opportunity to publish but have a wealth of ideas and suggestions to share.

If the publication included articles from all points of view, including unpopular opinions, it would have an edge that could provoke sharp discussions and debates, making it more exciting and readable than what is currently available to nonprofit workers today.

The cost of producing such a publication could be shared by a variety of foundations, nonprofit groups, and individuals.

While money is tight for all new nonprofit efforts, there are still enough resources available to support the intellectual infrastructure of the nonprofit world. If action is not taken, the nonprofit world will not be able to generate the cerebral firepower it requires to shape a promising long-term future.

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