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Did the COVID-19 Pandemic Reshape Nonprofit Service Delivery?

Gregory A. Smith

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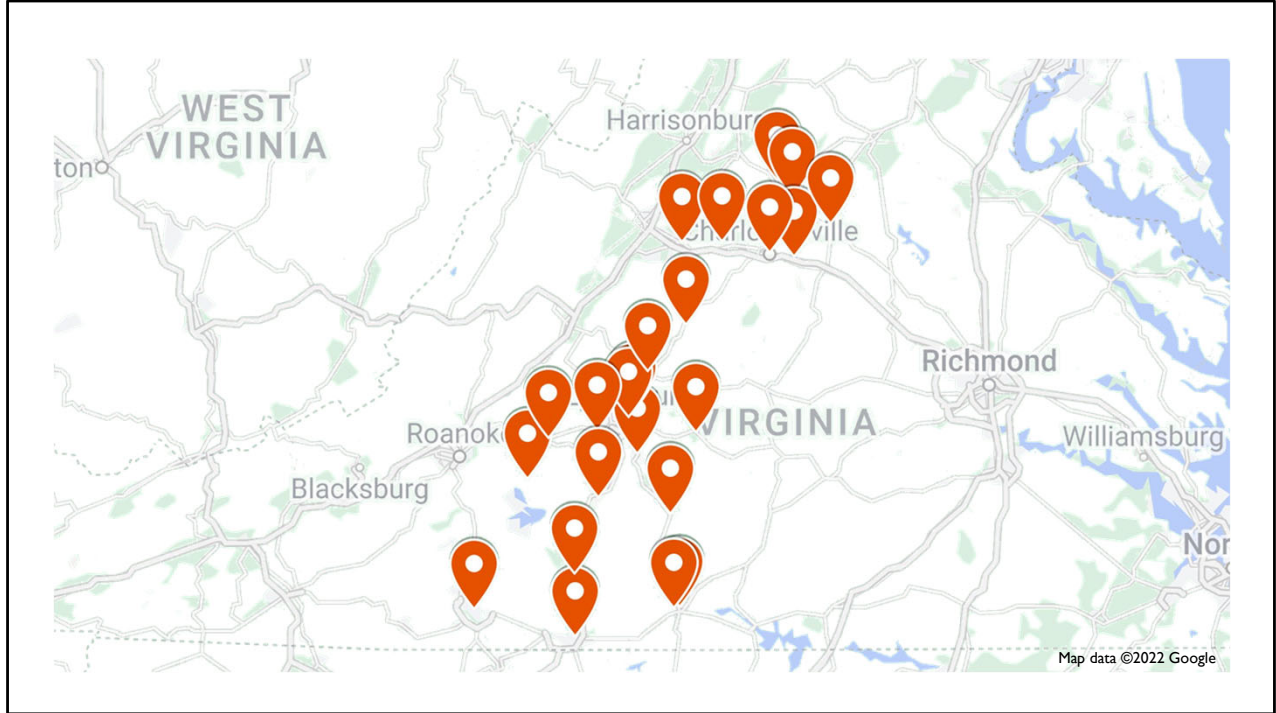
The idea for the research reported here emerged in April 2020, when I was searching for a doctoral dissertation topic. At that point, just a few weeks had elapsed since the World Health Organization had determined that the spread of COVID-19 qualified as a pandemic. Many aspects of my own life had suddenly changed. The library where I worked had assigned most of its employees, including me, to work from home. The two doctoral courses that I was taking shifted from in-person to online delivery. The local church where I was an active member had suspended in-person gatherings and had transitioned its worship and educational ministries to virtual venues to the extent possible. These three areas of my life were intertwined with nonprofit organizations, and all involved substantial changes in service delivery. As I reflected on my situation, it occurred to me that the disruptive environment was likely to lead to lasting change in at least some segments of the nonprofit sector. Over the next two years, I designed a research study to explore patterns of change in nonprofit service delivery arising from the pandemic.

Literature Review

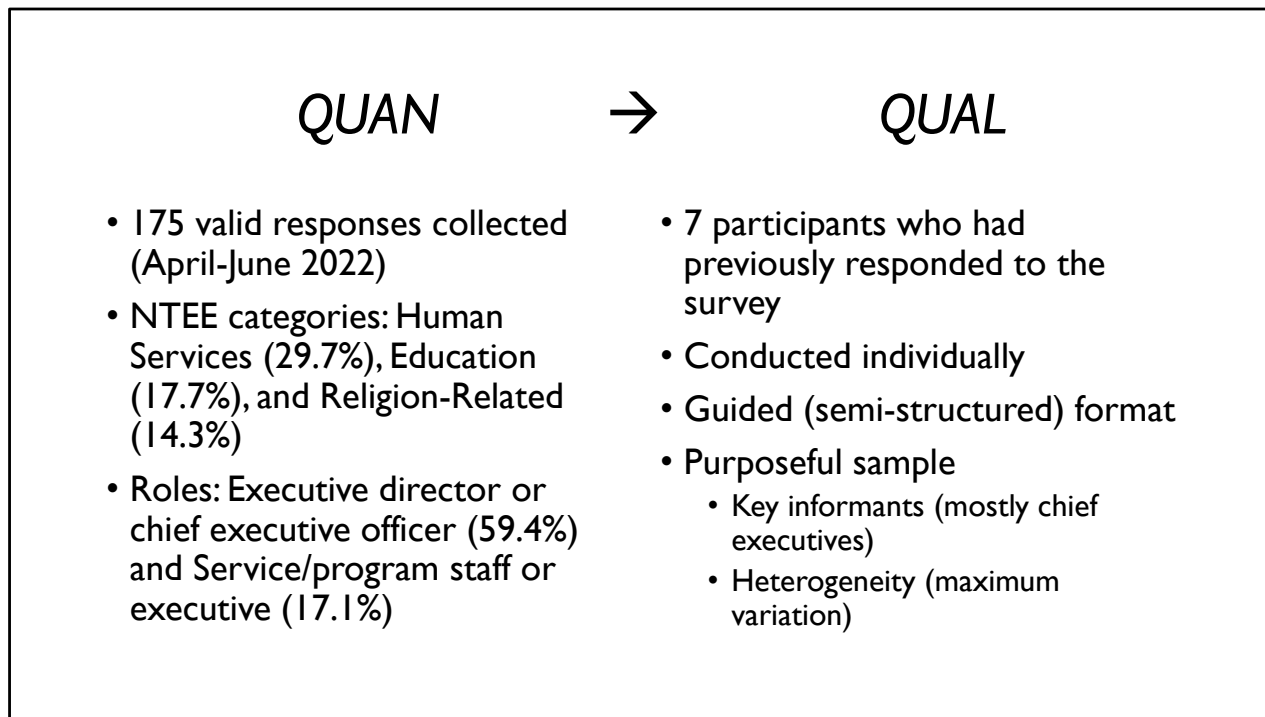
Organizational theories	Focus of response to environmental change:
<i>Strategic management</i> →	• Competitive advantage
<i>Resource dependence</i> →	• Ongoing viability
<i>Neo-institutionalism</i> →	• Coherence with a field
Empirical studies	Changes in service delivery:
Emerging evidence	• What
	• To whom
	• How, when, where



By design, scholarly research builds on prior research studies. This posed a challenge for me, as I had chosen to research a phenomenon that had not occurred before the spring of 2020. Not being able to rely on prior studies of the pandemic's effects on nonprofit service delivery, I reviewed three kinds of literature. First, I looked at empirical studies of strategic change in nonprofit organizations, with a particular focus on past crises (recessions, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, etc.). Many of the studies cited specific theories that sought to explain how organizations responded to environmental change. This led me to explore the literature of strategic management, resource dependence, and neo-institutionalism. Finally, I reviewed emerging evidence of the pandemic's impacts on nonprofit service delivery, as reported in news and professional media.



I chose to conduct my study in the piedmont Virginia region, including portions of Central and Southside Virginia, where I resided, worked, and studied. Operationally, this included points within and around the U.S. 29 Highway corridor. Organizations targeted in the study were public charities located in the cities of Charlottesville, Lynchburg, Danville, Martinsville, and 19 surrounding communities.

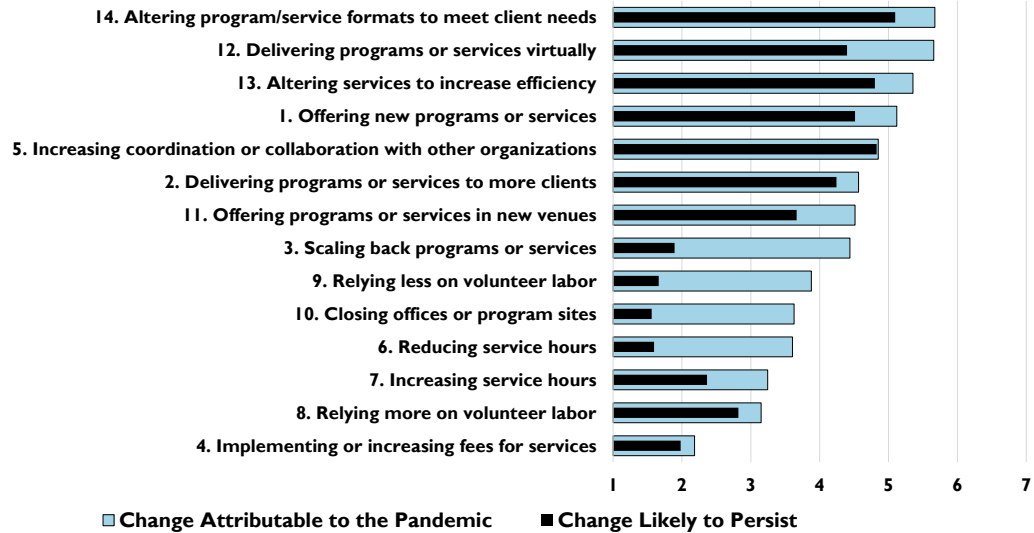


I designed a mixed-methods study to develop the fullest possible understanding of the phenomenon. Specifically, I undertook an explanatory sequential mixed-methods study, first collecting survey data and then conducting interviews. The quantitative and qualitative phases were of roughly equal importance to the overall study (equivalent-status design). Both phases were executed in 2022, when organizational leaders could be expected to differentiate between the pandemic’s temporary and enduring effects on service delivery.

The survey attracted 175 valid responses. Survey responses represented a wide variety of organizations, as reflected by their age, size, presence or absence of a faith-based mission or identity, and National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) classification. Human Services, Education, and Religion-Related organizations had the most respondents, but almost all NTEE classifications were represented. Most respondents were either chief executives or employees responsible for service delivery.

I recruited 7 interviewees from among the survey respondents (nested sampling). I conducted interviews individually with the help of an interview guide (semi-structured). I targeted potential interviewees with the aim of maximizing the diversity of organizations represented in the sample, while taking care to ensure that participants held positions that would allow them to qualify as key informants.

Changes Made and Likely to Persist



The literature that I reviewed—particularly the studies of past crises and the emerging evidence of the pandemic’s impacts—identified a list of service delivery changes that were presumably occurring in some nonprofit organizations. I distilled the list to 14 kinds of change. The survey asked respondents whether their organizations had made such changes, and if so, whether they were likely to persist.

Results from this matrix of questions are displayed in the graph, representing averages for all 175 responses. Changes are sorted in descending order based on the extent to which respondents agreed that their organizations had made them due to the pandemic. Some kinds of change were clearly much more common than others. Certain types of change, if made, were very likely to persist (e.g., increasing coordination or collaboration with other organizations), while others tended not to persist (e.g., closing offices or program sites).

Dependent Variables

Factors Defined *a Priori*

- Scope
- Conditions
- Persistent Scope
- Persistent Conditions

Factors Extracted from Data

- Alignment
- Retrenchment
- Persistent Opportunity
- Persistent Retrenchment

I was not merely interested in looking at pandemic effects on nonprofit service delivery across the sector; I also sought to determine whether patterns of service delivery differed between various groups of organizations and respondents.

I used different combinations of the 14 types of change to create 8 dependent variables. Four of these were defined before I gathered data; I extracted the other four factors from the data. Variables included changes attributed to the pandemic (not highlighted) as well as those that were expected to persist (highlighted).

Independent Variables

Organizational Attributes

- Age
- Size
- NTEE Classification
- Faith-Based Mission/Identity

Respondent Attributes

- Role in Organization
- Sex

Organizational Congruence with Theories

- Strategic Management
- Resource Dependence
- Neo-institutionalism

I tested 9 independent variables to determine if attributes of organizations or respondents made a difference in the patterns of service delivery change that they described.

Statistically Significant Findings

Dependent Variable	Organizational Attributes				Respondent Attributes		Organizational Congruence		
	Age	Size	NTEE Classification	Faith-Based Mission/Identity	Role in Organization	Sex	Strategic Management	Resource Dependence	Neo-institutionalism
Scope		•					•		
Conditions				•	•		•		
Alignment		•			•		•		
Retrenchment	•		•	•					
Persistent Scope		•					•		
Persistent Conditions		•			•		•		
Persistent Opportunity		•			•		•		
Persistent Retrenchment									

I calculated inferential statistics (e.g., ANOVA and linear regression) to test for statistically differences or relationships based on the intersection of 9 independent variables (IV) and 8 dependent variables (DV). Findings were statistically significant in roughly one-fourth (19) of 72 IV-DV combinations (denoted with bullets in the grid). Below is a summary of observations:

- Statistically significant findings were more common for initial patterns of change than for enduring ones.
- Differences were found between the smallest organizations (those with annual expenditures \leq \$250,000) and various larger size categories.
- Board members were less aware of service delivery changes than were chief executives or service/program staff/executives.
- Strategic management was the only theory found to predict independent variables.

Decreases in Service Delivery and/or Clientele

“What we did lose was programming with **our veterans**They would meet here every Monday night.They **have not come back since COVID**.We have not done a Veterans Day or Memorial Day ceremony because that was led by [organization name], and they’re all elderly.”

—Interviewee from Organization P
(NTEE Classification: Public, Societal Benefit)



Analysis of interview transcripts allowed me to identify 10 patterns of enduring service delivery change that applied across multiple interviewee organizations. Seven of those patterns are addressed in this and the following slides.

1. Decreases in Service Delivery and/or Clientele

Some interviewees explained that the pandemic served to reduce demand for certain programs and services provided by their nonprofits. As illustrated by the quote on this slide, since the pandemic, some organizations have struggled to deliver services to older adults.

Increases in Service Delivery and/or Clientele

“The demand for our services just looks a lot different. **We’ve got a huge demand for behavioral health.**”

—Interviewee from Organization H
(NTEE Classification: Health)

2



2. Increases in Service Delivery and/or Clientele

Interviewees representing some nonprofit organizations described the pandemic as a source of increased demand for certain programs and services. As illustrated by the quote on this slide, demand for behavioral health was one such service.

Increased Focus on Mental Health Services

“One program we’re piloting ... is kind of a friendly caller program, where ... some of our more elderly volunteers ... [are] going to call or maybe visit one or two of our recipients who do not have family members. ... So **it is not just a hot meal**, although that is incredibly vital to their physical health and wellbeing. **It is definitely a mental health support as well.**”

—Interviewee from Organization HS-2
(NTEE Classification: Human Services)



3. Increased Focus on Mental Health Services

The pandemic caused uncertainty and fear among many community members. As illustrated by the quote on this slide, multiple interviewees explained that their nonprofits had increased their focus on services with a mental health component. Interestingly, this generalization was true of 4 organizations, each with a different NTEE classification: Health; Human Services; Public, Societal Benefit; and Religion-Related.

Virtual Service Delivery

“We have definitely decided that **the online aspect of what we do isn’t going away.**”

—Interviewee from Organization E
(NTEE Classification: Education)

4



4. Virtual Service Delivery

Survey data showed that it was common for nonprofit organizations to shift to virtual service delivery because of the pandemic. However, survey data also revealed that such shifts were not necessarily enduring. Interviews confirmed this finding. As illustrated by the quote on this slide, some organizations found virtual delivery successful enough to warrant continued use.

Virtual Service Delivery

“What makes [organization name] special is the fact that we’re community. You sit down, you have a cup of coffee with somebody, you’re waiting for class to start, you’re talking to them about the weekend. You have us, the staff, making connections so new people meet other people. **We’re constantly fostering conversation and friendship. You don’t get that virtually.**”

—Interviewee from Organization P
(NTEE Classification: Public, Societal Benefit)



4. Virtual Service Delivery (continued)

As illustrated by the quote on this slide, not all nonprofits’ experimentation with virtual delivery yielded satisfactory results.

Service Delivery at Partners' Sites

“**Other organizations** that ... were utilizing us for programs and services and coming here, **are now wanting us to come to them**. So we have started doing outreach opportunities. We've actually gotten some grant support to help us to purchase additional supplies that can be used primarily to be taken off site and used in other locations.”

—Interviewee from Organization A
(NTEE Classification: Arts, Culture, and Humanities)



5. Service Delivery at Partners' Sites

Two interviewees, including the one quoted on this slide, reported that, post-pandemic, their organizations encountered increased requests to deliver services at physical sites other than their own.

New Services

“In the middle of the pandemic, we were able to hire an additional counselor. We just noticed very early on ... the loneliness, the depression, the anxiety through all this. So **the biggest thing we started during all of this was our counseling center.**”

—Interviewee from Organization R
(NTEE Classification: Religion-Related)



6. New Services

As illustrated by the quote on this slide, some nonprofit organizations found that the pandemic created opportunities that aligned with their capabilities, leading them to launch new services.

Infection Control Measures

“I don’t know that we’ll ever go back to not having people wear masks in the clinical area. ... We used to count on stomach viruses and flu and things like that running through our staff. ... Enforcing a mask policy in the clinic has resulted in a lot less staff outages because of our staff being sick.”

—Interviewee from Organization H
(NTEE Classification: Health)



7. Infection Control Measures

As illustrated by the quote on this slide, multiple interviewees described the persistence of infection control measures that were initially implemented because of the pandemic.

Analysis of interview data allowed me to identify 3 additional patterns of enduring service delivery change:

- Ongoing Staffing Challenges
- Modification of Organizational Structures
- Uncertainty about Organizational Sustainability

Gregory A. Smith, Ed.D.

Associate Dean, Library Technologies & Collection Services
Liberty University

greg@liberty.edu

[linkedin.com/in/smithinfo/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/smithinfo/)



A copy of the dissertation on which this presentation is based is available via the QR code on this slide or at this link: <https://digitalshowcase.lynchburg.edu/etd/53/>. Of course, the dissertation provides much more detail about relevant literature, methodology, and data analysis than could be included in this presentation. Additionally, it discusses (1) areas of corroboration and conflict between the quantitative and qualitative data sets and (2) suggests implications for nonprofit management, policy-making, and research.

Dissertation Abstract

The organizational environment that emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic was essentially a new phenomenon. The extent to which public charities were transformed for the long term, and the nature of enduring changes that they adopted, were not immediately clear. This study employed mixed methods—specifically, an explanatory sequential design—to assess and describe service delivery changes that occurred among nonprofits with offices in Virginia’s piedmont region. An online survey was administered to 175 nonprofit leaders (mostly chief executives and service/program officers). Specific kinds of change were grouped into 8 dependent variables, with some being defined *a priori* and others being extracted from the data. A variety of statistical procedures were run, finding significant differences or predictive relationships ($p \leq .05$) for several independent variables, including organizational attributes (age, annual expenditures, National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities classification, and presence of a faith-based mission/identity), one

respondent attribute (role in organization), and congruence with one theory (strategic management). Differences and effects were generally small. No difference or relationship was found for respondent sex or congruence with two other theories (resource dependence and neo-institutionalism). After performing substantial quantitative analysis, the researcher conducted guided interviews with 7 leaders who had responded to the survey. All panelists qualified as key informants; collectively, they were selected to represent the diversity of the region's nonprofits. Qualitative data were analyzed through a recursive process that included writing analytical memos, creating verbatim transcripts, and performing multiple stages of coding. Interview findings, which were written up in the voice of the panelists, illustrated shifts in demand for nonprofit services, the emergence of virtual delivery in parallel or combination with in-person services, and the launch of new services, among other patterns of persistent change. Interviewee statements exhibited congruence with strategic management, resource dependence theory, and neo-institutional theory. Findings from the two data sets were integrated, showing areas of corroboration and conflict. Finally, the researcher formulated implications for nonprofit management, policy-making, and research.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, nonprofit organizations, service delivery, organizational change, organizational theories, Virginia piedmont, explanatory sequential design