

A MULTIPLE CASE STUDIES REVIEW OF COLLABORATION
IN RURAL NONPROFITS

by

Jacob Ratliff

Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Liberty University, School of Business

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Abstract

This multiple case studies review of rural nonprofit collaboration explored themes related to the research problem of limited collaborative practice and outcomes in rural nonprofits. The research used a multiple case studies approach to examine current practices, barriers to collaboration, and identify best practices. Themes in existing literature on nonprofit collaborative practices and rural settings were examined to develop a conceptual framework of themes that would be explored in the research. Through the data collection and analysis process, several themes emerged. Most of the themes significantly aligned to the literature, while further developing understanding specific to the rural context of collaborative practice. Significant themes developed included the importance of leadership in rural collaborative practice, the relative lack of human capital, and practices that enhance collaborative capacity. These themes were discovered in the literature, but further expanded upon for application to rural settings. Areas where the research diverged from the literature included issues surrounding dispositions towards collaboration in rural contexts. Although the research uncovered specific struggles to collaborative practice, it also developed themes emphasizing the power of community involvement and leveraging of networks in rural areas. The outcomes of the research allow for future study of deeper themes in rural collaborative practice. Recommendations for business application include an overview of major themes, assessment opportunities, and suggestions for developing strategic plans to implement characteristics that facilitate greater collaboration.

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Dedication

To my wife, Hannah, for the countless sacrifices made and constant encouragement in this journey. Thank you for pointing me to the joy of Christ through the dissertation process and challenging me to steward this opportunity set before me with the greatest care. Your support has helped me reach this moment and prepared me for the next chapter in pursuit of the mission the Lord has entrusted to us both.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

This multiple case studies qualitative research focused on the collaboration of rural nonprofit organizations. The study explored current practices of rural nonprofits, barriers to collaboration, and best practices to improve rural nonprofit collaboration. The exploration of current literature regarding nonprofit collaborative practice provided the foundation for the case exploration of multiple rural nonprofit organizations. This research sought to contextualize collaboration in rural nonprofits and provide insight for ongoing developments in rural nonprofit research and practice by developing deeper understanding of the themes from the literature. A multiple case studies approach was used to conduct the research. Interviews with selected rural nonprofits were conducted and analyzed to identify themes in collaborative practice relevant to the problem and research questions. The discovered themes were analyzed in comparison with themes from the research. Based on the outcomes of the research, professional recommendations are applied to general business practice and rural nonprofit collaboration. Upon addressing gaps in the literature and other relevant outcomes from the study, recommendations for future research and applications were made.

Background of the Problem

As a form of increased sustainability, collaboration has grown as an emphasis in research and practice over the last several years (Sanzo et al., 2015). Despite an increasing emphasis on collaboration and significant support for its benefits, relatively few small nonprofits partake in collaborative efforts (Lee, 2017). Several barriers suppress effective nonprofit collaboration, including a lack of resources and structure to effectively leverage collaboration for increased sustainability and other desired outcomes (Kim & Peng, 2018). The need for collaboration has increased in urgency as nonprofits face capacity challenges (Intindola et al., 2016), and for-profit

organizations face higher accountability for corporate social responsibility (Ahmadsimab & Chowdhury, 2019). The convergence of cross-sector needs has made collaboration more appealing.

One of the most significant challenges facing the increased demand for collaboration is clearly defining the structure of partnerships and the desired outcomes of collaboration (Daymond & Rooney, 2016). An increasing body of research suggests that unequal engagement and disproportionate benefits between partners significantly influence the results of collaborative efforts and limit desirable outcomes from collaboration (Murphy et al., 2015). Several studies have found that many nonprofits experience a limited increase in capacity from cross-sector partnerships despite the expectation that collaboration should increase available resources and capacity (Shumate et al., 2018). Research suggests these problems are especially prevalent with large corporate partners. Often, corporations seek marketability from nonprofit partnerships in exchange for monetarily supporting nonprofits (Boenigk & Schuchardt, 2015). These partnerships have limited returns for nonprofits as the overall support of their mission is lacking. Therefore, collaboration lacks synergy to bring the desired growth from combined resources (Daymond & Rooney, 2016).

Research is beginning to explore the hidden costs of collaboration, which are often far more than anticipated, further limiting the benefits of collaboration (Murphy et al., 2015). These issues tend to be more profound and unique for rural nonprofits, which are typically small and limited in the human capital necessary to maximize the possible benefits of collaboration (MacDonald et al., 2022). Limited human capital manifests itself in many ways, including inadequate infrastructure and disorganization, further exacerbating imbalanced collaborations

(MacDonald et al., 2019). Based on these issues, it is apparent why many rural nonprofits forgo collaboration.

This research aimed to develop a deeper understanding of these issues and their unique features in rural nonprofits. Through an exploration of the root cause of issues and aversion to collaboration, the research project has sought to contribute significantly to the body of research. The development of a deeper understanding of the problems surrounding collaboration for rural nonprofits through a case studies approach has yielded significant insight into current practices and perceptions of collaboration in rural nonprofits. The increased understanding of the problems and perceptions developed through this research can improve collaboration through changed perceptions and practices for more desirable collaborative outcomes in rural nonprofits.

Problem Statement

The general problem to be addressed was the limited collaborative focus in nonprofit organizations, which results in weakened nonprofit performance. Significant research supports the positive effects of collaborative efforts for increasing nonprofit outcomes over the lifespan of partnerships (Le Pennec & Raufflett, 2018). Despite positive research supporting the benefits of cross-sector partnerships, collaboration remains relatively limited in nonprofits for several reasons (Madden, 2017). A growing body of research suggests that many organizations seeking collaborative partnerships do not develop collaboration that improves organizational capacity (Shumate et al., 2018). Organizations struggle to identify an appropriate structure to create meaningful collaboration (Bryson et al., 2015). These complexities in developing collaborative partnerships have developed significant barriers to engaging in meaningful collaboration, limiting the intended benefits of entering collaboration (Shumate et al., 2018). Complexities in collaboration are amplified in rural nonprofits' efforts for collaboration (Miller et al., 2017). The

additional challenges rural nonprofits face create additional barriers to meaningful partnerships, limiting collaboration in rural nonprofits and diminishing the possible benefits of well-integrated collaboration (Florini & Pauli, 2018). The specific problem addressed was the limited collaborative focus in rural nonprofits which results in lower performance in Appalachian nonprofits.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this multiple case studies qualitative study was to explore collaborative efforts in rural nonprofits. Specifically, the study focused on rural nonprofits' collaboration with other nonprofits, for-profit organizations, and government agencies. Emphasis was placed on the processes and outcomes in existing rural nonprofit cross-sector partnerships to develop a deeper understanding of the current state of nonprofit collaboration. The study explored barriers to collaboration in rural nonprofits and highlighted possible solutions for increased collaboration. Additionally, the study sought a deeper understanding of how leveraging collaboration can improve rural nonprofits' organizational outcomes. Relatively few studies examine collaboration in rural nonprofits (Kim & Peng, 2018). This study aimed to add to the body of knowledge surrounding nonprofit collaboration and provide contextual perspectives and recommendations for collaboration in rural nonprofits. Exploring current practices, barriers, and successful attributes in current rural nonprofit collaborations significantly contributed to the literature by providing contextualized best practices.

Research Questions

- RQ1. How do rural nonprofits use collaboration with other nonprofits, for-profit organizations, and government agencies?
- RQ2. What unique challenges exist for collaboration in rural nonprofits?

RQ3. How can rural nonprofits use collaboration to improve organizational outcomes?

Nature of the Study

For the purpose of this research, the qualitative design was used to provide insight into the experiential nature of nonprofit collaboration and develop a deeper understanding of central themes within research and practice. Using qualitative research allowed greater exploration of collaboration. Specifically, within the qualitative design, a multiple case studies method was chosen to provide greater opportunities for developing a deeper understanding.

Discussion of Design

For the purpose of developing a deeper understanding of cross-sector collaboration for rural nonprofits, a qualitative research design was most appropriate. The qualitative design focuses on deriving understanding from what is experienced (Stake, 2010). For the purpose of developing a deeper understanding of nonprofit collaboration, it was important to recognize the deeply experiential nature of collaboration. Quantitative research emphasizes what can be observed (Creswell, 2014), lending itself to understanding how things are, not why they are the way they are. Despite significant research that indicates an issue in nonprofit collaboration (Shumate et al., 2018), limited research addresses the deeper reasons why, and fewer studies address opportunities to strengthen collaboration (Miller et al., 2017), especially in rural settings. Developing a greater sense of understanding requires perspective beyond what can be observed. Rural nonprofit organizations must consider the experiential elements reducing the willingness and effectiveness for meaningful collaboration. For these reasons, the qualitative design was chosen to address gaps in the research pertaining to understanding nonprofit collaboration with a deeper sense of ability to address problems and expand collaborative horizons for rural nonprofits.

Discussion of Method

Within qualitative research, several research methods could be considered for exploring nonprofit collaboration. Ultimately, the chosen method for this research was a multiple case studies approach. The purpose of multiple case studies research is to provide a deeper understanding of theories and issues underlying cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this research, the desire to develop a deeper understanding of underlying issues in rural nonprofit collaboration requires the development of theory to support a better understanding for future research and practice. Developing such a framework was better suited to case study research due to the nature of case studies in focusing on central issues within collaboration at a rural nonprofit level. Although significant research into collaborative practice in nonprofits exists (Shumate et al., 2018), the profound gap in research was at a deeper theoretical level, especially for rural nonprofits.

An understanding of the prevalent issue of a lack of rural nonprofit collaboration has been established (Lee, 2017), but the understanding of underlying problems remains limited to mostly quantitative data and research on a more general basis (Le Pennec & Raufflet, 2018). Other approaches to qualitative research were considered but were not well suited to the purpose of the research. Specifically, methodologies such as narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, and ethnography do not capture the same research focus to establish a framework for understanding collaboration in small nonprofit organizations. The emphasis of narrative research rests on the experience of the subject (Creswell & Poth, 2018), shifting the scope of the research from the process of collaboration to the needs and actions of the individual organization.

Additionally, phenomenological research did not fit the needs of developing theories to inform collaborative practices because it emphasizes the nature of the experience (Creswell &

Poth, 2018), in this case, collaboration itself, and draws out outcomes of the experience. This research desired to establish the underlying issues in collaboration for nonprofits and inform future research and practice, not establish a deeper understanding of the experience of collaboration in rural nonprofits. Grounded theory was not well suited to the purpose of this research either due to its emphasis on examining and propelling existing theories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Despite significant research existing into the general problem (Intindola et al., 2016), the position of this research remained that further understanding of the underlying issues in collaboration and theories to inform future research and practice were the highest priority in this study.

Finally, ethnographic research was not applicable in these circumstances. Although the subject of the study, rural nonprofits, may exhibit some culture-sharing elements due to geographic location or commonalities, there is a great diversity of purpose and needs between nonprofits (Kim & Peng, 2018). The problem of rural nonprofit collaboration, therefore, transcends cultural elements and represents a more extensive issue affecting the operation and effectiveness of rural nonprofits (Kim & Peng, 2018). Unlike the ethnographic emphasis on the culture of the subjects (Creswell & Poth, 2018), this research aimed to understand the problem itself at a deeper level to inform future research and practice. The multiple case studies approach was chosen to expand the scope of the research from one perspective in a single case study to be more inclusive of multiple perspectives (Yin, 2018) to be sensitive to the potential for multiple underlying factors in the diverse terrain of rural nonprofit collaboration.

Summary of the Nature of the Study

The qualitative research design with the multiple case studies method was most appropriate for the purpose of this research. Qualitative research establishes the necessary level

of detail for developing a better understanding of the underlying themes in rural nonprofit collaboration. Through the multiple case studies method, this research sought to develop a contextualized understanding of how rural nonprofit organizations are currently collaborating, obstacles for rural nonprofit collaboration, and best practices to improve rural nonprofit collaboration. Examining the cases in this research provided the opportunity for a more developed understanding to inform future nonprofit collaboration research and practice.

Conceptual Framework

Developing the foundation of this multiple case studies required a significant review of the key components of the literature pertinent to the research questions. Based on the research questions, three broad themes in the literature were examined in-depth through the conceptual framework to support the research. Figure 1 illustrates major themes supporting the research to explore the research questions and guide the development of a deeper understanding of rural nonprofit collaboration. The first theme reviewed in the literature is the level of current collaboration in the nonprofit sector. Special attention was given to understanding how rural nonprofits interact in collaboration with other nonprofits, for-profits, and government agencies. Next, the current challenges in nonprofit collaboration were examined in the literature to provide the foundation for the case review of underlying barriers to nonprofit collaboration. Specific barriers to be examined in depth from the literature include human capital, capacity challenges, alignment issues, and access to partnerships.

Finally, a significant review of current best practices from the literature informed a cohesive approach to the case research. Organizations in the case study were examined for their level of collaboration, challenges in collaborating, and adherence to current best practices to develop a greater understanding of how approaching rural nonprofit collaboration can contribute

to the greater body of research and practice in nonprofit collaboration. Through the research, several key themes of the conceptual framework were reinforced with greater prevalence than expected in some of the themes, while a few new themes emerged.

Current Collaboration

Collaboration in nonprofit organizations is an ongoing development in nonprofit practice (Brock, 2019). Although collaboration increased with the philanthropic movement throughout the 20th century, recent developments in collaborative frameworks have increased the emphasis on meaningful collaboration (Brandsen & Pape, 2015). Understanding current types of collaboration provided a foundation for contributing to the research gap in rural nonprofit literature. Significant research suggests that intra-sector collaboration provides opportunities to expand the scope of the nonprofit sector by capitalizing on the specialized skills of other nonprofits (Zeimers et al., 2019). Beyond in-sector collaboration, the development of government collaboration has significantly increased as government organizations seek to capitalize on efficiency by using specialized nonprofit organizations to deliver policy and service objectives (Vinokur-Kaplan, 2018).

Finally, the for-profit sector is the most notable and growing field of cross-sector collaboration, with significant opportunities to increase capacity and platform through the resources of for-profit organizations (Sanzo et al., 2015). Examination of current collaboration addresses RQ 1, “How do rural nonprofits use collaboration with other nonprofits, for-profit organizations, and government” agencies?” The evaluation of current practice illuminates the current level of collaboration and collaborative outcomes. These outcomes address the aim of developing a deeper understanding of current practice and needs for future movements in research and practice. Regarding the themes associated with current collaborative practices found

in the literature, the study revealed a critical emphasis on leadership and board experience, along with increased evidence to support the importance of established networks and relationships as incubators for current and future collaboration.

Challenges to Collaboration

Despite the growing emphasis and understanding of nonprofit collaboration, there are significant barriers to meaningful collaboration (Shumate et al., 2018). One of the most significant concerns for nonprofit collaboration is the human capital requirements for developing collaboration (Kim & Peng, 2018). These issues can be especially prevalent in rural nonprofits because they are typically smaller and more affected by human capital constraints (Roy et al., 2015). Exploring current challenges in rural nonprofit collaboration addresses RQ 2, “What unique challenges exist for collaboration in rural nonprofits?” A micro-level examination of barriers to collaborative success was a significant aim of this research. By emphasizing the unique challenges faced by rural nonprofits, there was an opportunity to provide insight for future research and collaborative practice in navigating barriers to rural nonprofits' collaboration. The research itself supported the prevalence of limited human capital as a significant challenge to collaboration. Emerging themes in this area included perceptions of rural nonprofits and their collaborative partners, along with increased challenges in funding after COVID.

Further review of this barrier in the literature review contributed to the framework of the case studies to develop a better understanding of the nature of this burden. Similarly, general capacity challenges in the form of liquid assets and other capital can contribute to difficulties in developing and maintaining collaboration for nonprofits (Pope et al., 2015). Through this understanding, the research sought a greater understanding of how rural nonprofits are affected by capacity constraints and collaboration and inform future research and practice to address this

barrier. Another significant concern was the influence of alignment between nonprofit organizations and their partners. Research suggests that the alignment of goals and operations in collaboration can provide a significant barrier to a successful collaboration (Murphy et al., 2015). Exploring these relationships in rural nonprofits helped provide greater insight into the impact of this barrier and potentially inform a better understanding of alignment in rural settings.

Other significant barriers to nonprofit collaboration examined at length include costs associated with collaboration (Shumate et al., 2018) and the relative difficulty measuring social value (Polonsky et al., 2015). Both of these challenges have important implications for nonprofit collaboration, especially in the context of defining the necessary frameworks for successful rural collaboration that promotes social innovation. Understanding the nature of these challenges in rural nonprofit organizations can provide insight into the development of collaboration in rural areas and the general study of nonprofit management. Finally, exploring the role of access in rural nonprofit collaboration is especially important. Access remains a significant barrier across all sectors in rural environments (Azhar, 2018). Developing a deeper understanding of the role of access in rural nonprofit collaboration was essential in this case study research and can provide a significant foundation for further developments in the field of nonprofit collaboration.

Current Best Practices. The final major theme reviewed in the literature and used to form the case study research is the existence of current best practices for nonprofit collaboration. Although research is constantly changing and best practices are being developed over time, there are currently several significant best practice developments to consider in the context of rural nonprofits. Specific best practices include long-term partnerships, an emphasis on sustainability, and the role of compatibility in forming partnerships. Emphasis on best practices illuminates answers to RQ 3, “How can rural nonprofits use collaboration to improve organizational

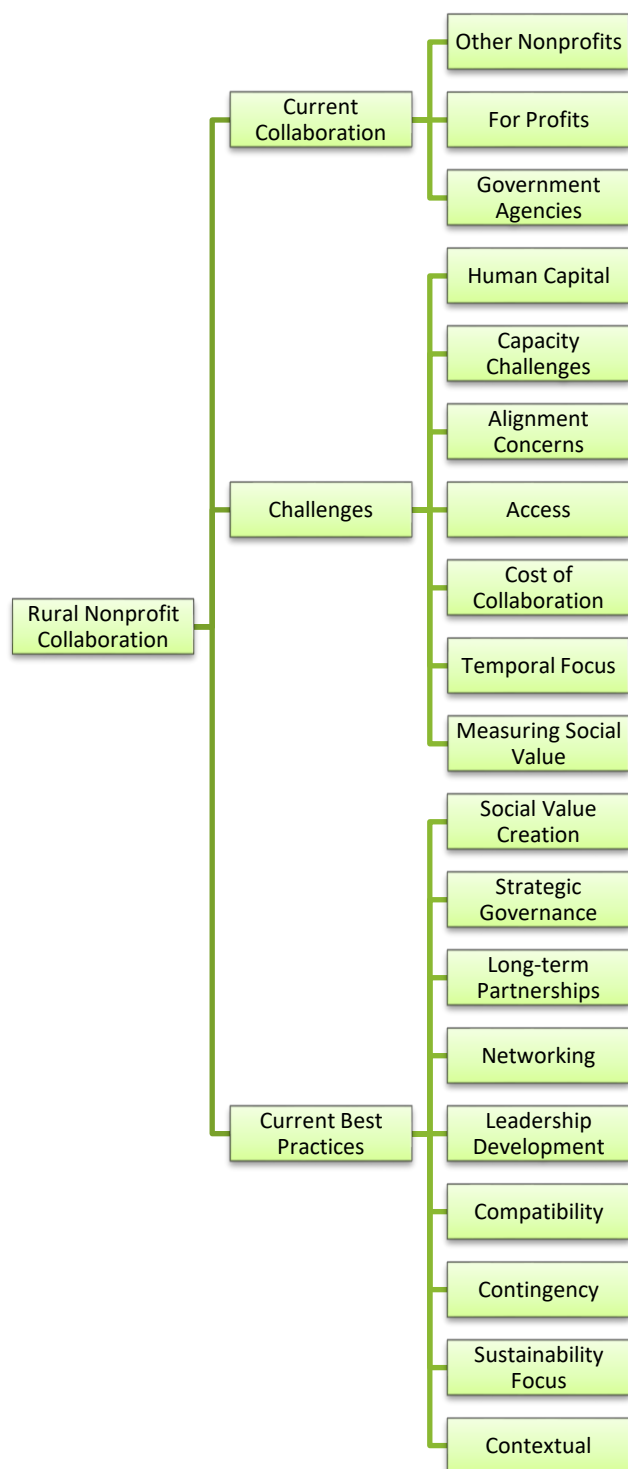
outcomes?” A thorough understanding of current best practices will inform how nonprofits use collaboration to improve organizational outcomes. By developing a framework of understanding for current best practices in rural nonprofit collaboration, this research helps provide a basis for future use of collaboration for increased success in nonprofit organizations.

Significant research has developed regarding the importance of a long-term focus on collaboration (Klitsie et al., 2018). Several studies have built upon this research, indicating that the length and nature of previous partnerships can impact the success of future collaborative efforts in nonprofits (Remund & McKeever, 2018). The case study built upon this research to review the existing collaborative capacity of nonprofits examined to further understand how rural nonprofits can leverage best practices for improved collaborative capacity. In addition to the length and experience of future collaborations, other best practices suggest an emphasis on sustainability as an aligning factor for collaboration (Feilhauer & Hahn, 2021; Florini & Pauli, 2018). Understanding how the case nonprofits approached sustainability helps further contextualize how rural nonprofits handle current best practices to maximize collaborative potential.

Finally, the case drew on the significant theme in the research regarding the importance of collaborative compatibility. Brown et al. (2019) suggested that compatibility in mission and operation is especially important for the long-term success of nonprofit collaborations. Through the case research, additional emphasis on the specific compatibility outlook of rural nonprofits contributed significantly to understanding the research and practice in the field of nonprofit collaboration.

Figure 1

A Conceptual Model for Exploring Rural Nonprofit Collaboration



Discussion of Relationships Between Concepts

Exploring the current collaborative practices of rural nonprofits, along with barriers to collaboration, provides the foundation for understanding current best practices and developing new collaborative approaches. By examining current levels of collaboration in rural nonprofit organizations, this research identified the areas for additional opportunities to collaborate and highlights the need for further research into nonprofit collaboration. Developing a deeper understanding of barriers to collaborative practice helps create a framework for understanding challenges in collaboration and examining how these challenges impact the organizations studied in the case research. Examining this framework through case study research provides an opportunity to identify areas to improve on for future collaborative efforts. Finally, by understanding current best practices, this research highlighted a holistic approach to gaps in the research, allowing for greater rural nonprofit collaboration.

Additional Themes Discovered in the Research to add to the Conceptual Framework

The outlined conceptual framework provided a sufficient basis for approaching the case research. However, through the research, relationships between themes became apparent, and several missing themes were added. These discoveries from the research can help further strengthen the conceptual framework. Specific additions or changes based on the research include recategorizing major themes into categories, acknowledging themes that were missed in the literature review, and identifying themes that were overemphasized in the initial framework. The categories for major themes discussed in the research findings included a restructuring to cover mission and values, organizational practices and leadership, changes or unique factors in the business environment, the nature of relationships with collaborative partners, and the role of community awareness and engagement. Themes that were emphasized in the literature review

and conceptual framework but less prevalent in the research findings included the emphasis on limited technological access length and structure of collaborative frameworks. More often, the nature of relationships favored organically developed relationships based on needs over structured collaborative agreements based on mission and value alignment.

Summary of the Conceptual Framework

Approaching the case research from three perspectives: current levels of collaboration, barriers to collaboration, and current best practices provided the necessary framework for meaningful research in rural nonprofit collaboration. By examining the literature surrounding each of these facets of rural nonprofit collaboration, this study was structured to examine how each element is applied in the cases. Developing a deeper understanding of the concepts from the literature through case study research provides a framework for deeper understanding and practice in rural nonprofit collaboration.

Definition of Terms

Several terms used in this qualitative research are necessary to define to ensure the correct interpretation of the study and its results.

Access: Significant research has been conducted on the impact of access on nonprofit and social initiatives. Lacking access to resources or networks can present significant barriers to effective collaboration (Hoe et al., 2019). In the context of this research, access is defined as the degree to which organizations are able to access other organizations. Limitations considered for barriers to access include geographic difficulties of rural organizations and technological limitations in rural areas.

Collaboration: Collaboration in nonprofit organizations can refer to partnerships with other nonprofits, government organizations, or for-profit organizations (Brock, 2019). For the purposes of this research, all three types of collaboration are examined.

Human capital: Human capital is viewed as the level of education and potential for the productivity of employees to determine their organizational and compensatory value (Marginson, 2017). Expanding this definition requires practitioners to view human capital as knowledge through education and skills developed through on-the-job training (Frederiksen & Kato, 2018). The emphasis of human capital in this study is developing a deeper understanding of how team human capital (Gerrard & Lockett, 2016) is enhanced through the development of competencies through collaborative practice.

Sustainability: Although sustainability is typically associated with the environmental aspects of corporate social responsibility, this research reviews the fiscal and organizational sustainability of nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit organizations must rely on the balancing of resources and structure to ensure longevity and the ability to complete organizational objectives (Lee, 2017). By building upon a deeper understanding of sustainability, the research aims to explore how collaboration impacts the sustainability of nonprofit organizations and opportunities to leverage cooperation in rural nonprofits for greater nonprofit sustainability. Environmental and supply chain sustainability as objectives of nonprofit-private collaboration are explored as components of corporate social responsibility's role in collaboration but are distinguished from the general term sustainability in reviewing the overall impact of collaboration on sustainability for nonprofits.

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

Understanding the presented research requires a proper discussion of the underlying assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the multiple case studies qualitative research.

Assumptions

The following assumptions are present in this case study research exploring current collaborative practices of nonprofits, challenges in rural nonprofit collaboration, and best practices to inform better rural nonprofit collaboration. First, it is assumed that nonprofit collaboration is beneficial for increasing nonprofit capacity and the accomplishment of nonprofit objectives. Although significant research exists regarding the possible benefits of collaboration, conflicting research suggests that collaboration can hinder nonprofit objectives and create mission issues (Shumate et al., 2018). Mitigating the underlying implications of this conflicting research requires an assumption in the study that potential positives of collaboration can effectively overcome possible negatives by identifying best practices to promote positive collaboration and control negative implications.

Another assumption of the study relates to the nature of the subjects in the case research. The aim of this study is to address rural nonprofit collaboration. This case study assumes a definition of rural that allows for the use of cases that are in the geographic area of Appalachia. The organizations studied in the cases differ in size and local context. Therefore, the assumption is made that the larger region of Appalachia influences collaborative efforts in a way that allows for productive research. Controlling for this assumption requires careful consideration of factors that may be isolated to collaboration in a local context rather than Appalachia's regional context.

Reviewing the impact of local factors in nonprofit collaboration creates an opportunity for this research to compare similarities and differences in rural contexts. Recent research on

effective control of various factors in the analysis of qualitative research suggests that a commitment to strong research design is an essential element in mitigating risks of assumptions across different contexts (Crane et al., 2016). The commitment to thorough research methodology is the source of integrity in the assumption that Appalachian nonprofits can provide useful information beyond local contexts.

There is also an assumption regarding the validity of responses from the case subjects. According to Yin (2018), research is an essential element of successful case study research. The researcher is responsible for ensuring a consistent process to improve the reliability and validity of research. Specifically, due to the varying sizes and structures of organizations examined in the case research, there was an opportunity for variance in responses to the case research that could create difficulties in comparing the cases. One way of mitigating this risk was the role of the researcher inherent to the case study design. The researcher controlled for variances by ensuring the thoroughness and accuracy of responses, providing clarifications as needed throughout the data collection process.

Finally, a critical assumption was the existence of a relationship between rural nonprofit collaboration and more effective collaborative practices. Although the scope of this research was limited to rural nonprofit collaboration, the intent of the research was a contribution to the broader fields of collaborative practice and nonprofit management. Generalizing rural nonprofit research to other contexts is difficult because of the variations in rural contexts (Vodopyanova, 2020). However, as with any narrow qualitative research, developing improved validity leads to more opportunities to apply research on a broader spectrum. If a relationship between rural nonprofit collaboration and general collaborative practices exists, this research can be applied to future research on collaboration as well as general nonprofit management. Similar applications

of narrow research to broader contexts require an appropriate level of saturation to assume validity across multiple contexts (Creswell, 2014).

Limitations

Possible limitations of this case study research are discussed below.

Application to all Rural Settings. Because each of the organizations considered for this case study research is limited to the rural Appalachian region of the United States, these results may not represent barriers and best practices for collaboration across all rural settings. Mitigation efforts for this limitation include efforts to ensure proper reliability and validity through strong research design. Using multiple cases with various rural demographics increases validity across the rural context. Additional validity efforts discussed in the reliability and validity sections of the research, improve the overall credibility of the research and increase applicability to other rural contexts.

Incomprehensive Constructs. Due to the vast possibilities within rural contexts and nonprofit environments, it is impossible to assume that all rural collaborative practice constructs were addressed. It is reasonable to assume some constructs that influence rural nonprofits' collaborative outcomes may not be addressed through this research. However, the study aimed to test the constructs presented to inform future research and practice. Building on the constructs presented with case research will allow further understanding and lay a foundation for additional targeted research and practice. The study's saturation with diverse perspectives from multiple rural nonprofits seeks to address these concerns, but limitations still exist. However, due to the efforts toward saturation and diversity in the research, the research should cover the most prevalent constructs in rural contexts and provide a strong baseline for future exploration of the constructs established.

Delimitations

The scope of this research aimed to address some of the possible limitations in the cases and identify themes relevant to the purpose and objectives of the study. For this purpose, the following should be considered as delimiters of the research.

Appalachian Context. The research was conducted within the Appalachian context. Appalachia is a traditionally rural area of the United States facing economic suppression. Exploring the elements of collaboration within the Appalachian context can illuminate possible themes for collaborative nonprofit efforts in the Appalachian region. Applying themes from this research outside of this context would require significant caution to ensure only applicable elements of the research are applied to different contexts. Using a criteria-based approach to apply this research can help keep the necessary elements in the appropriate scope.

Rural Nonprofits. This research related explicitly to collaborative efforts in rural contexts. Expanding the themes from this for application or research in other contexts should be done with caution.

Significance of the Study

The research was significant to the overall field of nonprofit management. Developing a greater understanding of collaborative efforts on the micro-level of rural nonprofits reduces significant gaps in the literature. Examining collaboration in-depth also provides opportunities for biblical applications in business practice, furthering the biblical worldview. Finally, as a function of nonprofit management, this research can contribute significantly to nonprofit leadership and management, providing opportunities for future research and practice.

Reduction of Gaps in the Literature

Although significant research exists to establish the importance of nonprofit collaboration for increased capacity (Le Pennec & Raufflet, 2018), there is limited research surrounding collaboration practices (Raeymaeckers et al., 2017). In the existing literature, the emphasis on the benefits of collaboration limits the research on practices that promote and enhance collaborative efforts for nonprofits. Existing literature on nonprofit collaborative practices focuses on governance and leadership (Chang et al., 2016). Limited research exists to explore contingencies for effective nonprofit collaboration. Current studies dealing with conditions for effective collaboration focus mainly on institutional resources and organizational practices that influence collaboration (Miltenberger & Sloan, 2017).

The significant gap reduced by this research is addressing the influence of location on collaborative practice. Focusing on rural nonprofits provided a narrower scope for understanding the impact of location on collaborative initiatives and outcomes. In addition to providing insight into the influence of location, this research addressed other significant gaps in research dealing with collaborative best practices by highlighting the adaptive mechanisms rural nonprofits apply to overcome unique collaborative barriers and establish lasting collaborative success.

Implications for Biblical Integration

Collaboration is essential in the biblical worldview. Keller and Alsdorf (2012) pointed out the importance of living out the gospel in work. Understanding the biblical worldview as an active living out of the gospel and scripture provides a framework for integrating biblical principles into nonprofit collaboration. Throughout scripture, there is a call for collaborative efforts. Two passages highlight the importance of collaboration. Ephesians 4 outlines the calling of believers to be of one mind, body, and spirit. This passage highlights the importance of

believers recognizing how individual gifting, callings, and passions contribute to the overall work of God's Kingdom. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 12 outlines the importance of understanding the role of each believer in the body. The passage provides emphasis on understanding the role of each member and including all members in the work of the body, no matter how great or small their role may seem. Integrating these principles into this research provided a new perspective both for the Christian calling and collaboration in nonprofits. Specifically, viewing collaboration through the biblical lens provides a greater sense of unity.

Although collaboration in nonprofits may face difficulties in aligning values and objectives (Intindola et al., 2016), following a biblical model allows collaborators to emphasize a greater sense of calling than the needs of individuals or individual organizations. Secularly, these principles are manifesting themselves through greater emphasis on sustainability as a uniting force for nonprofit and for-profit collaborations. Biblically, sustainability is supported strongly in the scriptural principles of God's redemptive work (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). Viewing workers and their collaborations as part of the Ministry of Reconciliation highlights the need for ethical delivery of services and operations that are conducive to the greatest outcome, and both principles examined at length in current collaborative literature (Brown et al., 2019).

Benefit to Business Practice and Relationship to Cognate

The significance of this research in the nonprofit management cognate is developing a deeper understanding of sustainable leadership and management in collaboration. Ongoing research suggests that collaboration is key for sustainability in the nonprofit sector (Feilhauer & Hahn, 2021). Exploring this relationship in greater detail provides the foundation for a better understanding of its application in the field of nonprofit management, as well as new directions for nonprofit management research. The significant contributions to the research aspect of

nonprofit management, including highlighting the relative lack of research to support rural nonprofit management (Zatepillina-Monacell, 2015) and the role of access to resources as a consideration in nonprofit planning, provide insight for future research. Exploring rural nonprofits has the potential to highlight unique practices and barriers to expand the understanding of nonprofit management.

Summary of the Significance of the Study

The research is significant in several ways. First, the research presents opportunities to address gaps in current collaborative research for nonprofit organizations. Studying the role of rural nonprofits in collaborative frameworks provides additional insight into the importance of location in developing collaborative theory and best practices. In addition to contributing to the greater field of nonprofit collaboration, the study addressed significant themes in the biblical worldview. Specifically, addressing collaboration in nonprofit organizations creates an opportunity to apply the biblical principles of unity and collaborative efforts in the ministry of reconciliation to business practice. Finally, this research would significantly contribute to the field of nonprofit leadership and management. By exploring the implications and conditions for rural nonprofit collaboration, this research can provide support for future research in rural nonprofit management, expanding the field and deepening understanding of nonprofit leadership and management practices.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Collaboration is important for the development and success of nonprofit organizations in the 21st century (Intindola et al., 2016). Examining the current collaborative frameworks across nonprofit, government, and for-profit sectors is a significant endeavor with implications for future research and practice. The following literature review examined three primary elements of

the literature to establish foundational knowledge for the study and inform future research and practice based on the proposed research.

First, the literature review examines current practices between the three types of collaborative partnerships. Significant research suggests important differences and implications for and practice in nonprofit to nonprofit, nonprofit and government, and nonprofit and for-profit collaboration (Smith & Phillips, 2016). Next, a thorough examination of current challenges facing nonprofit collaboration provides the foundation for further understanding of unique challenges in rural collaboration and developing the necessary framework for examining the research problem of limited rural nonprofit collaboration. A growing body of research suggests that although collaboration is widely accepted and theoretically embraced across sectors, there is ambiguity in how effective partnerships are in light of challenges surrounding effective collaboration (Shumate et al., 2018). A final element of the literature focuses on the effective best practices that separate ineffective collaboration and impactful collaborative efforts. Significant research exists that points to the need for unique strategy development for effective collaborative practice (Ihm & Shumate, 2018). Examining each of these themes in the literature provides the necessary framework for the proposed case research and can help develop a deeper understanding of the challenges facing rural nonprofit collaboration and opportunities to expand the collaborative practice in rural nonprofit settings.

Current Collaboration

Collaboration in nonprofit organizations has significantly increased over the last decade (Intindola et al., 2016). Current research suggests a continued increase in collaboration as nonprofits seek to navigate changing conditions and new demands for service delivery (Kim & Peng, 2018). Nonprofits engage in three primary forms of collaboration: nonprofit to nonprofit,

governmental collaboration, and collaboration with for-profit organizations (Henttonen et al., 2016). Each of these types of collaborative relationships has different motivators, practices, and outcomes. Exploring each collaborative type in depth expands understanding of the underlying motivations and practices in current collaborative movements. Developing this base-level understanding of collaborative efforts for the macro-level nonprofit provides the foundation for understanding and developing frameworks to explore the collaborative efforts of rural nonprofits at a deeper level and provide insight into better overall collaborative practices.

Collaboration with Other Nonprofits. The intra-sector collaboration of nonprofits is an important form of collaboration that is growing in practice (Vinokur-Kaplan, 2018). Emergent research points to the motivation and outcomes of nonprofit-to-nonprofit collaboration, providing the foundation for a deeper understanding of in-sector collaborative efforts and how they influence overall nonprofit collaboration. Several studies have indicated the current motivation and outcomes of collaborative efforts between nonprofit organizations, including increased sustainability by pooling resources (Wade-Berg & Robinson-Dooley, 2015), greater scope of service and mission expansion (Zeimers et al., 2019), and opportunities to address infrastructural challenges through specialization (Atouba & Shumate, 2015). Exploring each of these areas in depth develops a deeper understanding of the motivation behind current collaboration and outcomes of collaborative practices of intra-sector nonprofit collaboration. Through this increased understanding, the foundation for this multiple case studies research is strengthened, and directions for new research and practice can be developed.

Research concerning collaboration among multiple nonprofit organizations suggests one of the greatest motivators of nonprofit collaboration is the ability to pool resources (Wade-Berg & Robinson-Dooley, 2015). More recent research that expands on this theme suggests that

nonprofits enter collaborative nonprofit networks to develop value co-creation (Best et al., 2018). The concept of value co-creation is inherent in all types of intra-sector and cross-sector collaborations (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2019). However, within the context of intra-sector collaboration, developing a network for value co-creation allows nonprofit organizations to leverage unique environmental factors for greater access to limited resources (Best et al., 2018). Leveraging nonprofit networks allows organizations to improve their access to resources while offering valuable resources to other organizations (Hoe et al., 2019). Under these circumstances, nonprofit organizations seeking meaningful collaboration with other nonprofits must examine potential collaborative partners not only for missional alignment and organizational compatibility but also for contingencies based on resources offered (Best et al., 2018).

Current research into effective service delivery for nonprofit collaboration suggests that nonprofits must prioritize resource optimization and cost minimization to establish efficiency in nonprofit-to-nonprofit collaboration (Rodríguez-Espíndola et al., 2018). Many nonprofits have built upon this concept by emphasizing value co-creation through the pooling of scarce resources. An emphasis on pooling resources especially fits within intra-sector nonprofit collaboration, as nonprofits struggle with resource scarcity (Sowa, 2009). Emphasis on the scarcity of resources has important implications for nonprofit organization capacity (Shumate et al., 2018) and serves as a significant influence for collaborative efforts in nonprofit-to-nonprofit collaboration.

Another important motivator for nonprofit intra-sector collaboration is mission expansion. Nonprofit organizations seek collaboration with other nonprofits to increase social value and provide greater legitimacy to organizational missions (Zeimers et al., 2019). This is a significant differentiation in motivation from resource-focused collaboration because it shifts the

emphasis from survival to increased social validity (Zeimers et al., 2019). Sowa and (2009) Zeimers et al. (2019) emphasized two entirely different motivations for collaboration among nonprofit organizations. Examining both motivations provides greater opportunities for continued research and improved collaborative practice.

A final motivation explored for collaboration within nonprofit collaboration is the idea of specialization. Research suggests specialization is an important competency within nonprofit-to-nonprofit collaboration that can drive greater efficiency and increase desirable outcomes in nonprofit organizations (Chang et al., 2016). Specialized nonprofits offer greater efficiency by using resources in specialized manners to accomplish tasks that would require greater cost and competency development for partner organizations. By specializing, nonprofit organizations continue to capitalize on existing competencies while outsourcing activities that are not otherwise addressed (Pope et al., 2015).

Beyond motivation, another significant element in current intra-sector nonprofit collaboration is the importance of establishing specific roles within collaborative partnerships (Daniel & Fyall, 2019). Emphasis on the importance of individual competencies among nonprofit partnerships further supplements the value co-creation efforts inherent in nonprofit collaboration (Best et al., 2018). Building on this concept, Daniel and Fyall (2019) suggested nonprofits utilize specialized competencies and roles of nonprofits in collaborative partnerships to direct policy decisions within the collaborative framework.

Implications of this research can be significant for understanding dynamics in current collaborative efforts within the nonprofit sector. Specifically, there are significant implications when organizations do not properly align roles within the collaborative relationship (Daniel & Fyall, 2019). Highlighting this dynamic in the collaborative framework for nonprofit

partnerships provides the foundation for developing a deeper understanding of the motivations and practices driving current nonprofit-to-nonprofit collaboration.

Collaboration with Government Agencies. Collaboration of nonprofit organizations with other sectors varies widely. It is important to examine differences in motivations, approaches, and outcomes of collaborative relationships with other sectors. In this interest, exploring the nature of collaboration between nonprofit organizations and government organizations can have significant implications for developing an understanding of rural nonprofit collaboration. One of the most important differences in the collaborative nature of nonprofit-government collaboration is a shift in motivation.

Specifically, three significant themes exist in the literature surrounding nonprofit collaboration with the public sector. First, there is a significant emphasis on service delivery as government entities seek to meet needs through the specialized nature of nonprofit organizations (Roy et al., 2015). Building on this theme, government organizations seek collaborative relationships with nonprofit organizations to address service gaps and unmet needs (Miller et al., 2017). Mutual benefit for collaborative efforts also exists in nonprofits' abilities to specialize in meeting service needs government agencies are not equipped to address, while governments subsidize the financial and resource needs of nonprofits to execute service delivery (Hutton, 2018). Finally, government investments in nonprofit organizations emphasize a delegation of resources from the federal, state, and local levels of government to the community through nonprofits (Mitchell & Schmitz, 2018). Each of these themes must be explored in depth to provide the necessary understanding for the exploration of successful collaborative frameworks and the development of unique rural nonprofit research. In this interest, additional research in

each area is synthesized in the context of impacts on nonprofits, with special emphasis on outcomes for rural nonprofits in government-driven collaborative frameworks.

Current research suggests an important relationship between organizational culture and service delivery methodology and provides significant insight into the dynamics of nonprofit collaboration with government organizations (Roy et al., 2015). Following this ideology, Roy et al. (2015) provided significant contributions to the literature surrounding nonprofit collaboration by establishing the need for contingent thinking when evaluating the potential motivations and outcomes in nonprofit collaborations. Partnerships with government organizations can significantly influence the operations of nonprofits, with the ultimate focus remaining on effective service delivery.

For this reason, it is important to acknowledge the dynamics of service delivery and the implications for collaborative practices. Nonprofit organizations may differ significantly in their operational styles and organizational styles, but a primary concern in government decisions to provide collaborative assistance is the ability to effectively deliver services to target populations (Brandsen & Pape, 2015). Adopting this contingent thinking in analyzing nonprofit collaboration with government organizations provides the necessary framework for continued analysis of collaborative dynamics and developing a deeper understanding of how those dynamics impact practices of nonprofit organizations for enhanced collaborative practice and, ultimately, increased missional output.

Another relevant element of research surrounding nonprofit-public sector collaboration is the importance of addressing gaps in service. A recent study suggests gaps in service as a driving factor in nonprofit development and operation (Miller et al., 2017). An important implication of this research is the influence of social development on the mission and values of nonprofit

organizations. Emphasizing gaps in serving community needs provides a form of natural mission alignment for nonprofits and the public sector.

Because nonprofits seek to provide contributions to social needs (Miller et al., 2017) and the public sector emphasizes delivering services through resource allocation (Roy et al., 2015), both sectors establish mutual benefit in cooperative operations that implement service delivery to underserved segments of communities. Analyzing these motivations and their apparent alignment provides significant contributions to understanding dynamics in cross-sector collaboration and can serve in developing additional insights for rural collaborative efforts. Specifically, by acknowledging the overlapping motivational elements for nonprofit and public sector organizations, there is an opportunity to examine how these overlaps drive collaborative relationships and power dynamics within collaborative agreements between rural nonprofits and public organizations.

Although there is a significant emphasis in the research dedicated to government motivations of service delivery and leverage as the supplier of vital financial support, nonprofit organizations possess significant leverage in the collaborative relationship as well. Specifically, as both sectors seek to create social value and address unique social needs, nonprofit organizations develop levels of service specialization unique to local and regional needs that are not easily developed in government organizations (Hutton, 2018). This idea provides additional direction for nonprofits seeking to balance power in nonprofit collaboration. As nonprofit organizations develop specialized approaches to gaps in service delivery, they experience increased collective power and greater ability to amplify the inputs of government support for increased social value creation through effective service delivery (Mason & Fiocco, 2017).

A final motivational consideration for nonprofit collaboration with government organizations is the unique nature of resource delegation practiced by the public sector. Particularly, a significant overlap exists between the public sector's approach to delegating resources and nonprofit approaches to seeking resources (Mitchell & Schmitz, 2018). Important implications of this overlap include challenges assessing how outcomes in collaborative partnerships contribute to desired social value creation objectives within public-nonprofit collaborations. The research argued that although nonprofits may receive resources that support operations, there is little feedback to determine the long-term impacts on the social missions (Mitchell & Schmitz, 2018). These challenges are not unique to collaboration between nonprofit organizations and the public sector, and the research suggests that both sectors struggle individually to assess social output (Mitchell & Schmitz, 2018), but the exacerbation of these challenges in collaboration provides a significant point for future examination of how organizations engaging in nonprofit-government collaboration can approach partnerships for increased accountability and social impact.

Collaboration with For-Profits. Nonprofit collaboration with for-profit organizations has rapidly increased as members of both sectors seek greater social impact (Zeimers et al., 2019). In their most basic form, collaborative partnerships with for-profit firms are more focused on the fiscal sustainability of the nonprofit than previously discussed collaboration (Remund & McKeever, 2018). Collaborative efforts between nonprofit and for-profit organizations provide significant opportunities for social innovation (Sanzo et al., 2015). Motivations in this form of cross-sector partnership can vary widely (Athanasopoulou & Selsky, 2012), highlighting the importance of thoroughly exploring the underlying motivation and practices driving this form of collaboration.

Developing a deeper sense of understanding surrounding nonprofit collaboration with for-profits can have significant implications for the proposed research. Specifically, emerging research suggests that small nonprofit organizations in rural areas have a unique ability to bridge the gap between large multinational organizations and the communities they serve (Remund & McKeever, 2018). Building upon these movements in the literature has significant implications for contributing to research and practice in rural nonprofit organizations.

An emphasis on corporate social responsibility has been at the forefront of collaborative literature over the past 20 years. Significant drivers of collaborative practice based on CSR include an increased call for accountability in for-profit operations (Moog et al., 2015). Developing frameworks for increased CSR suggests bridging gaps in collaborative practice by determining a strategic alignment between business objectives and societal goals to create shared value between for-profit and nonprofit organizations (Athanasopoulou & Selsky, 2012). Approaching CSR in this context provides greater clarity to understanding dynamics in nonprofit collaboration with for-profit organizations. Similar to the co-creation of value emphasis in collaboration amongst nonprofits (Best et al., 2018), crossing sectors for increased social value develops a common ground to drive collaborative relationships.

In a similar strain of research, Sanzo et al. (2015) expressed this emphasis as a form of social innovation that drives society beyond the limited possibilities of individualistic approaches to social value creation. By collaborating across sectors, organizations create new perspectives to practice. Following this model can have a significant impact on how nonprofit organizations approach collaboration with private firms. Specifically, by understanding collaboration as a means of social change, nonprofit organizations can expand the objectives of collaborative

efforts beyond sustainability through increased resources to an enhanced focus on mission and social impact.

Continued developments in social innovation suggests that organizations must adopt different perspectives for approaching innovation based on sector and level of operation (Van Wijk et al., 2019). Particularly, organizations should consider how social objectives align with organizational needs for sustainability, along with aligning social innovation with movements at the micro and macro levels. This development in research is important for considering how rural nonprofits approach their role as social innovators at both the micro (local) and macro (national/multinational level). Assessing these objectives through the lens of collaboration with for-profit firms can significantly impact the level of social impact for nonprofit organizations, leveraging the resources of larger for-profit organizations tied to varying levels of the economic environment (Remund & McKeever, 2018).

Another area of increasing focus within social value literature is social enterprise. Socially driven entrepreneurship is emerging as a hybrid approach to the functions of nonprofits and corporate organizations by drawing on the emergent needs of society (Phillips et al., 2019). Social enterprise can provide significant value and insight in understanding and further developing cross-sector collaboration. Leveraging commonalities in the structure and organizational needs of social enterprises with both nonprofit and for-profit sectors can provide a unique perspective for understanding the intricate workings of nonprofit collaboration with for-profit organizations. Specifically, it is important for research and practice in social entrepreneurship to focus on elements of both social mission and profit (Kwong et al., 2017). Adopting this approach to examining social enterprises can help nonprofit organizations establish meaningful collaborative relationships based on the concepts inherent in seeking both

organizational sustainability and social mission, a task nonprofits struggle with significantly (Gibbons & Hazy, 2017).

In addition, Boenigk and Schuchardt (2015) placed a significant emphasis on the importance of brand power in nonprofit collaboration with for-profit organizations. The research suggests that large for-profit organizations are able to represent nonprofit organizations in ways that result in greater access to donors. Specifically, luxury brands are very active in nonprofit collaboration due to the mutual benefits of cause-related marketing. For-profit organizations benefit from positive public relations and general goodwill (Athanasopoulou & Selsky, 2012), while nonprofit organizations receive greater notoriety and acknowledgment among wealthy donor bases (Boenigk & Schuchardt, 2015).

Examining this relational dynamic in collaboration with for-profits can create important concepts for a greater understanding of effective collaboration and the creation of social value. Cautionary research suggests that cause-related marketing can have an inverse impact on social impact when for-profit organizations fail to embrace the social mission of the nonprofit, leading nonprofits to experience mission creep in efforts to maintain financial support by appeasing a donor base at the cost of social outcomes (Hielscher et al., 2017). Understanding these complex dynamics within nonprofit collaboration with the private sector contributes to the framework of understanding rural nonprofit collaboration and influences the directions for future research and practice.

Challenges to Rural Collaboration

Significant research exists to suggest that although collaboration is highly embraced as an important means for nonprofit organizations to improve sustainability and overcome resource limitations, nonprofits struggle to effectively collaborate in ways that lead to social value

creation (Shumate et al., 2018). Beyond this, small and rural nonprofit organizations may lack the collaborative frameworks of larger nonprofits with greater access to collaborative networks (Remund & McKeever, 2018). Understanding the underlying causes of these barriers to rural collaborative efforts, along with the unique manifestation of these challenges in the rural setting, can significantly contribute to the desired outcomes of the research. Several themes in the literature are apparent and point to possible complications facing effective rural nonprofit collaboration.

Limited Human Capital. According to Lee and Woronkiewicz (2018), human capital is one of the most important resources for nonprofit sustainability and social innovation. Human capital is comprised of the unique abilities, capacity to serve, and industry knowledge of individuals serving nonprofit organizations (Jaskyte, 2018). Often, nonprofit organizations express human capital as a greater need for sustainability than fiscal stability (Brown et al., 2016). Understanding the value organizations place on human capital points to the importance of collaborating with organizations with complementary human capital (Lee & Woronkiewicz, 2018; Zeimers et al., 2019) and serves as one of the more difficult barriers to nonprofit collaboration.

Weinstein and Cook (2011) suggested that one of the most difficult issues facing cross-sector collaboration is differentiation in human capital which ranges from different levels of competency or capacity due to different passions and focuses on organizational cultures built around human capital. These challenges can be particularly difficult for rural nonprofits seeking compatibility with larger nonprofits (Kim & Peng, 2018). Organizational structure differences created by different levels of human capital create unique tension for rural nonprofits.

One possible implication of disparity in human capital is a possible increased barrier to collaboration for rural nonprofits, which possess a strong organizational culture and a relatively low tolerance for change (Azhar, 2018). Specifically, due to the cultural undertones in rural communities, differences may be harder to overcome, exacerbating human capital struggles cited by Weinstein and Cook (2011). Further exploring this concept in research could assist with developing new approaches to overcoming barriers to rural nonprofit collaboration.

Another significant theme within human capital barriers is the turnover of human capital, especially in small nonprofit organizations (Henderson & Sowa, 2018). Considering the importance of long-term emphasis in nonprofit collaborations for social impact (Klitsie et al., 2018), failing to maintain a level of consistency in human capital can create significant barriers to effective collaboration. Additional research on limited human capital suggests that small organizations struggle to maintain the minimum level of human capital to effectively execute social innovation (Kim & Peng, 2018).

A final significant barrier to human capital is the limited nature of personnel in nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit organizations, especially small nonprofits, struggle to have adequate full-time and fully qualified personnel, relying on volunteers with varying degrees of skill (Pope et al., 2015). The prevalence of these concerns among small nonprofits makes personnel limitations especially relevant for rural nonprofits and further emphasizes limited human capital as a significant barrier to nonprofit collaboration.

Capacity Challenges. Similar to challenges in human capital, nonprofits face capacity limitations for other reasons that impede collaboration. Specifically, nonprofit organizations struggle with financial stability (Kim & Peng, 2018). In their research, Kim and Peng (2018) discussed a significant emphasis on financial stability as an overarching theme in nonprofit

management. Unfortunately, an emphasis on financial stability is a barrier to overcoming the startup costs for developing effective collaborative partnerships in small nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit managers struggle to conceptualize opportunities for financial stability aside from traditional structures of donor bases (Brown et al., 2016).

This limited perspective of opportunities for financial stability through other means, such as cross-sector collaboration, can significantly hinder organizational approaches to collaboration. Overcoming barriers to capacity is significantly linked to human capital as leaders must innovatively approach capacity limitations and opportunities to expand through collaboration (Madden, 2017). Contributing to concerns of capacity, nonprofit organizations may experience a lack of autonomy due to the dynamics of donor relationships. As organizations seek to navigate differences in donor expectations and social objectives (Mitchell, 2014), there is a limited window of opportunity for nonprofit organizations to expand efforts for collaboration. The complex relationships between capacity challenges, fiscal sustainability, and social objectives create a difficult environment for effective rural nonprofit collaboration. Developing a deeper understanding of these challenges can ultimately serve to empower nonprofit organizations with innovative approaches to capacity challenges by seeking well-aligned partnerships rather than continuing to rely on traditional means of fiscal sustainability (Madden, 2017).

Alignment Challenges. One of the most significant challenges facing current collaborative efforts in all types of cross-sector collaboration is the challenge of aligning diverse organizations for common goals and social value creation. Organizations seeking collaborative practice as a form of enhancing capacity and improving social impact struggle to establish the necessary collaborative structure for social innovation (Sanzo et al., 2015). Deep underlying challenges in organizational structures, leadership practices, resource allocation, differing needs,

and motivations all contribute to the prevalence of collaborative misalignment. Examining each of these challenges to alignment can provide important insight into collaborative challenges and inform future research and practice for improved collaborative outcomes, especially in rural settings.

One of the most prevalent challenges for nonprofit organizations seeking collaborative support is developing the necessary partnerships through shared governance and organizational structure (Cheng, 2019). Often, nonprofit collaborative efforts struggle with aligning leadership practices with collaborative partners, citing emotional intelligence as a primary competency necessary for effectively navigating the alignment of collaborative partnerships (Madden, 2017). Considering the limited human capital in nonprofit organizations (Kim & Peng, 2018), relying on social intelligence for alignment can create a unique barrier to the effective alignment of collaborative objectives in nonprofit collaboration.

One of the greatest obstacles driving alignment concerns and leadership conflict is the presence of unclear goals or objectives for collaborative frameworks, leading to conflicting decisions at the organizational level (Piatak et al., 2018). As organizations pursue individual self-interests through loose governance and unclear collaborative frameworks, collaborative outcomes and social impact are detrimentally impacted. Building on these alignment concerns can have important implications for future efforts of rural nonprofit collaboration and research in the current challenges.

Specifically, developing an understanding of the leadership challenges and framework issues through future research can highlight best practices for establishing collaborative frameworks that establish clear common goals and social norms within collaborative practices (Piatak et al., 2018). Important implications for nonprofit collaboration rely upon establishing

common interests and frameworks for approaching collaboration and social innovation. Partnerships may fail due to a lack of synergy between organizational interests and common social outcomes (Florini & Pauli, 2018). This can be especially challenging in small nonprofit organizations and their partnerships with small private organizations. According to Florini and Pauli (2018), small organizations typically struggle more with social alignments as the strains of fiscal sustainability have a heavier impact on decision-making processes. Reviewing these stressors and challenges in the context of rural nonprofit collaboration can provide additional support for the intended outcomes of the proposed case study research to explore rural nonprofit collaboration and inform improved collaborative research and practice.

Access to Collaborative Resources. One of the most significant barriers to collaboration in rural nonprofits is access to collaborative resources or networks. Significant research exists identifying sharing information as one of the most crucial elements of effective collaboration (Curnin & O'Hara, 2019), yet research suggests that individuals and organizations in rural settings are at a severe disadvantage for information sharing and other collaborative elements due to the infrastructural challenges of rural environments (Baumber et al., 2018). This form of exclusion serves as a significant barrier for nonprofit organizations seeking social innovation through collaboration. Exploring underlying factors to access barriers can provide significant implications for future collaborative practice and addressing the unique challenges of rural nonprofits.

Rural areas have limited infrastructural capacities, such as inferior data networks, information systems, and general access to technology (Hwang, 2017). Understanding the implications of limited technological competency is essential for understanding the complex and unique challenges facing rural nonprofit collaboration. Specifically, based on recent research

highlighting information sharing as essential for collaborative decision-making in nonprofits (Hwang, 2017), limited information sharing can present a serious barrier to nonprofit collaboration. Research suggests that a lack of technology access can significantly reduce the participation of nonprofit stakeholders, further exposing rural nonprofit organizations to the risk of mission creep and low social impact as the most important stakeholders are not able to provide feedback (Baumber et al., 2018). Particularly, in cases of disparate technological access in a region, individuals with limited technological access are underrepresented in decision-making processes while representing larger portions of the population and having valuable insight into the unique issues facing rural communities (Baumber et al., 2018). This phenomenon translates to limited collaboration as disparate access in a community narrows potential network opportunities for collaboration and ultimately excludes organizations from collaboration.

Organizations with greater technological access and competency are more likely to collaborate and benefit from social innovation facilitated by technology. These unique challenges in technological access present a significant barrier to collaboration in rural nonprofits. Addressing these challenges well could have the potential for exponential benefit as technology addresses information sharing for improved decision-making and also has the potential to address other related issues of human capital and volunteerism through opportunities of remote work.

Other significant challenges facing rural organizations based on access include access to volunteers. While organizations in urban or suburban environments have greater access to volunteer pools and existing communities, rural nonprofits struggle to have a significant volunteer base due to transportation, proximity, and other features of rural access (Follman et al., 2016). Inequitable access for volunteers is manifested in various ways, including the ability to

effectively pursue collaborative programming with partners. Additionally, rural communities typically lack workforce connections, further exacerbating issues of human capital (Florini & Pauli, 2018). The overlap of equitable access concerns and human capital concerns further complicates the requirements for rural nonprofit collaboration. Exploring the individual concerns as well as their compound effects through the proposed research can provide important insights into the current situation facing nonprofit collaboration and possible areas for collaborative innovation.

Cost of Collaboration. Drawing on the limited capacity and need for financial stability in nonprofit organizations, research is finding the high transaction costs of collaboration to be barriers to entry into collaboration partnerships (Witesman & Heiss, 2017). The costs of collaboration are often unforeseen and underrepresented in the literature, creating difficulties in understanding the true impact of costs on collaborative decision-making. Continued research suggests that organizations seeking collaborative partnerships must consider the opportunity costs associated with collaboration. Specifically, by choosing to seek collaboration, nonprofit organizations allocate resources to collaborative efforts and forgo resource allocation in an individual endeavor (Witesman & Heiss, 2017).

Adopting this approach to collaborative decision-making can have significant implications for rural nonprofits already struggling with fiscal difficulties. Research suggests that nonprofit organizations tend to have low expectations of being able to develop sustainability aside from traditional donor bases and funding models (Brown et al., 2016). This attitude in nonprofit decision-making creates a significant barrier to collaborative practice. These issues can be especially difficult for rural organizations struggling with the added burden of limited human

capital due to access barriers to an advanced workforce (Florini & Pauli, 2018) and volunteer bases (Follman et al., 2016).

Aside from financial costs and opportunity costs, emerging research suggests possible costs in organizational structure and social value. A possible non-fiscal cost is a loss of autonomy. Nonprofits report feelings of losing autonomy in collaboration (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019). Resource imbalances in firm-nonprofit collaboration can prove especially challenging as nonprofit organizations experience increasing pressure to follow the demands of for-profit partners providing resources (Witesman & Heiss, 2017). Relying heavily on the direction of a single partner can create issues in maintaining integrity in social innovation, leading to decreased social value creation (Sanzo et al., 2015).

Temporal Focus. Important barriers to successful collaboration also occur due to the temporal nature of nonprofit collaboration. Research developments into the comparative length of collaboration for successful and unsuccessful collaborative endeavors suggest that successful collaboration requires time to establish a return on collaborative investment (Peci et al., 2020). Specifically, recovering collaborative costs requires strategic planning for long-term collaboration to address the initial loss of resources and opportunities for pursuing collaboration. One study suggests short-term collaboration can limit outcomes from being driven by strategic organizational alignment, focusing on the relationships of individuals' board members or employees between organizations rather than a true collaboration based on common objectives and initiatives (Florini & Pauli, 2018). Adopting this attitude for collaboration requires organizations to look beyond individual relationships toward organizational relationships. The primary difference is the strategic alignment of resources based on the established relationships and structures of collaboration (Rodríguez-Espíndola et al., 2018).

Particularly, organizations must understand the dynamics of resource optimization, which is established through continuous communication and assessment of dynamic elements of communication. This process occurs gradually as organizations gain familiarity and achieve a level of synergy for collaborative decision-making and execution (Remund & McKeever, 2018). Failing to properly acknowledge the challenges of short-term collaboration can severely limit the social impact of collaboration (Peci et al., 2020) and lead to unnecessary transaction costs that further depreciate collaborative efforts. This can be especially challenging in the context of rural nonprofits experiencing significant turnover. The prevalence of leadership turnover can lead to lost collaborative power and lost social value as there is limited ability to focus on long-term collaborative outcomes in the face of constantly changing human capital. Again, the unique elements of rural nonprofits that create difficulty in general organizational operations present a compounding issue in collaborative efforts.

Measuring Social Value. A final and perhaps most challenging barrier for nonprofit collaboration is measuring social value creation. Nonprofit organizations consistently struggle to quantify social impact (Florini & Pauli, 2018), leading to a constant need to seek accountability and greater consistency in approaching social outcomes. A continually developing body of research suggests that partnerships that are only fiscal in nature have no direct impact on the social outcomes of nonprofit organizations (Sanzo et al., 2015). Failure to address the dynamic competencies of collaborative partners for compounded impact limits the effect of collaboration and significantly challenges the motivations of collaboration.

For some organizations, collaboration may be a public relations or marketing program with little actual buy-in or impact on social outcomes. Businesses may only be interested in the financial implications of collaboration. Without opportunities for financial returns through

increased public relations to boost market share or other clear, financially based metrics, some business partners are to enter more integrated partnerships beyond donations (Florini & Pauli, 2018). Focusing only on financial indicators can put additional pressure on nonprofit organizations to think in terms of financial stability instead of the overall social mission (Madden, 2017). These partnerships are especially troubling for nonprofit organizations seeking to remain true to the social mission and can actually cause greater harm than benefit. Being aware of the possible challenges of prioritizing fiscal outcomes over social value creation is essential for balancing the demands nonprofit organizations face.

Additionally, nonprofit organizations struggle to balance accountability with social value. Often, the expectations of stakeholders such as donors or collaborative partners have no relationship to intended social outcomes, further confounding collaborative efforts. The issues of scarcity in rural environments further complicate nonprofit collaboration and social value objectives as organizations operate with limited access to donors and collaborative partners, further straining the need to maintain relationships regardless of the impact on social objectives (Follman et al., 2016).

Cultural Challenges to Collaboration. A unique barrier to collaboration in rural nonprofits is the existence of cultural challenges. Specifically, within the context of rural nonprofits, organizations struggle to engage individuals in the social missions of nonprofits due to social norms and other cultural elements, such as views on opportunity and change (Azhar, 2018). Social innovation in rural settings can be viewed as disruptive and face significant resistance if there is no proper preparation and communication (Miller et al., 2017). Effectively addressing challenges to rural nonprofit collaboration requires a unique understanding of the

culture and an ability to communicate through multiple channels, determining which is most effective based on the social needs of the intended targets (Azhar, 2018).

Developing frameworks for effective collaboration in rural settings requires addressing multiple cultural barriers, including the social differences between rural and urban settings. Research suggests that one of the greatest barriers to success in rural settings that are not prevalent in urban settings is the overlap between personal and professional activity. Specifically, rural settings have higher expectations of leaders to develop relationships beyond their organizations, resulting in greater barriers to collaboration if leaders are not well-established in the community possessing personal relationships with leaders of other organizations (Miller et al., 2017). This research has important implications for addressing challenges to collaboration in rural nonprofits. Particularly, this research suggests that answers to collaborative problems must come from within rural communities to garner greater acceptance of long-term collaborative impact. Approaching nonprofit collaboration through a mixed personal and professional relationship approach will require longer timelines for creating effective collaboration.

The implications of this research further highlight previous research at the macro-level of nonprofit collaboration that suggests long-term partnerships have greater social value creation. Other implications of the cultural emphasis on relationships include the need for a strong board. According to current research, board presence and participation in facilitating collaborative relationships is a significant advantage in developing successful collaboration (Jaskyte, 2018). The need for personal collaboration in rural settings further affirms the importance of human capital on a nonprofit board.

Additional research suggests that another challenge nonprofit collaboration faces in rural settings is community involvement. Rural settings struggle to involve community actors in collaborative discussions and initiatives (Jang et al., 2016), yet research suggests a strong relationship between community involvement and collaborative effectiveness (Day et al., 2017). Without a strong community presence, collaborative relationships in rural settings lack the necessary direction to contribute to social outcomes. Communities must choose to change and desire social outcomes intended by the social efforts of nonprofits to receive the intended social benefits (Jang et al., 2016).

This is a complex dynamic in rural communities because similar to nonprofits serving the community, the members of the community often lack the necessary tools to access or participate in greater social initiatives (Baumber et al., 2018). Failing to account for the access challenges inherent in rural culture serves as a significant detriment to effective collaboration. Through the proposed research, exploring these concepts further can provide insight into future nonprofit practice in rural settings.

Current Best Practices

Upon developing an increased understanding of the importance of nonprofit collaboration, the current levels of collaboration across sectors, and the challenges facing nonprofit organizations, it is important to examine in-depth the central themes in the literature that highlight the pathways for future collaborative success. A unique understanding of the differences and similarities between each of the three sectors, nonprofit, government, and for-profit, has provided a significant basis for exploring challenges to effective collaboration in rural nonprofits. Particularly, examining the overarching themes in the literature concerning barriers to nonprofit collaboration, coupled with special considerations for the unique nature of the

manifestation of challenges in rural nonprofits, have illuminated potential areas of best practice in the literature. An overarching theme throughout the literature on best practices for nonprofit collaboration is the necessity of keeping social value creation at the center of all interactions and decision-making (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Goh et al., 2016). Emphasizing this approach to collaborative best practices, the following review of literature examines a possible framework for developing a deeper understanding of rural nonprofit collaboration that improves participation and effectiveness through recommended best practices.

Social Value Creation. Overwhelmingly, the central theme of collaborative best practice is an emphasis on social value creation (Zeimers et al., 2019). A growing body of research points to a number of negative influences in nonprofit collaboration, signaling a problem with measuring and creating social value through the lens of collaboration (Sanzo et al., 2015). Adopting an emphasis on social value creation as the ultimate measurement for collaborative success removes obstacles and distractions, refocusing collaborative partnerships to create common motivations and develop lasting partnerships (Florini & Pauli, 2018). This model enables nonprofits and their partners to move beyond simple resource-sharing to the compounding benefits of shared motivation, competency, and mission (Zeimers et al., 2019). Viewing social value as the central theme for collaboration is fundamental for several of the other best practices highlighted in the literature and appears to be a contingency for establishing collaboration as a valid means of mission fulfillment in nonprofit organizations. A thorough examination of the importance of social value creation to effective collaboration provides a foundation for greater research and management practice to drive innovation in overall nonprofit effectiveness.

Establishing social value creation as the central theme of collaboration begins with developing a framework and understanding of the purpose of collaboration. Specifically, organizations should work together to develop a set of measurable social objectives that can be used as the baseline for accountability in collaboration (Piatak et al., 2018). Approaching social value creation through this specific approach and measuring outcomes has several positive outcomes for social impact and overall collaborative outcomes. Particularly, by establishing set social value expectations, organizations address several of the concerns or challenges discussed in the literature and mitigate risk for collaborative efforts.

First, having a set of social value outcomes defines the nature and purpose of collaboration. Research suggests there are frequent alignment issues as for-profit organizations may prioritize profitability over social impact (Cheng, 2019), and government organizations may lack the necessary information to make effective collaborative decisions (Hwang, 2017). Clearly defining social value outcomes prior to engaging in collaboration and during planning can help ensure proper alignment.

Beyond establishing a greater sense of alignment, focusing on social value creation can further address inefficiencies in collaboration by giving a clear focus to collaborative activities. One of the most prevalent issues for nonprofit strategy is determining the true value of activities. Without clearly defined social objectives, collaborative activities lack direction and have a limited impact on nonprofit missions resulting in transaction costs with no social value return (Duncan, 2020; Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2019). This is especially problematic as nonprofit organizations face increasing scrutiny over the use of funds and social outcomes.

Strategic Governance. Developing and executing cohesive social value creation requires strategic governance to ensure collaborative relationships are successful. Significant research

examining the role of governance in successful collaboration suggests participatory strategic planning is a core principle of creating social value through collaboration (Pittz & Adler, 2016). Developing a cohesive strategy requires diverse perspectives, clearly defined roles, and continual adjustments to ensure all members of a collaboration are well represented (Cheng, 2019). Current research suggests that a cohesive strategy is especially important for sustaining effective long-term partnerships (Dong et al., 2019).

Exploring these concepts in depth through the literature can provide a framework for understanding and establishing best practices in governance. Understanding the general framework for successful strategic governance provides insight for addressing the unique circumstances of rural nonprofits and ultimately contributing to more effective rural collaboration. Research continues to suggest that one of the fundamental principles for developing and maintaining strategic governance in nonprofit collaboration is participatory decision-making (Pittz & Adler, 2016). Participatory decision-making revolves around information sharing and competency sharing among collaborative stakeholders to establish common goals and procedures to address social objectives (Chang et al., 2016; Sanzo et al., 2015). Information sharing can be difficult for organizations navigating diverse stakeholders that may have limited access to common technology (Hwang, 2017). This is especially true in the case of rural nonprofits struggling with limited access (Baumber et al., 2018).

Best practices for overcoming limitations in access to technology point to developing frameworks that allow increased participation (Hwang, 2017) and leveraging partner capacities to enhance technological access (Manikas et al., 2017). Specifically, one recent study recommends collaborating on innovative ways to engage stakeholders to increase participation in networks and by those nonprofits seek to serve (Pittz & Adler, 2016). Each of these concepts

points to an emphasis on networking for collaborative success. Further exploration of literature surrounding networking capacities provides deeper insight into rural nonprofit collaboration, as discussed later in the literature review.

Drawing on the importance of information sharing, there is also a significant emphasis on relationships in governance for nonprofit collaboration. Developments in research on nonprofit collaboration and relational aspects of strategic governance suggest that relationships among board members, executive directors, and their equivalents at partner firms or agencies represent capacities for successful collaboration (Jaskyte, 2018). The study develops an important concept of social capital, which focuses on the relationships between board members and how deeper relationships lead to greater feelings of trustworthiness, yielding higher collaborative output.

Building on these themes, Bouchard and Raufflet (2019) suggested that nonprofit organizations experience greater consideration from collaborative partners when there are deeper relationships. Specifically, for-profit organizations are more likely to give special consideration to long-term social outcomes over short-term profitability (Cheng, 2019). The study also found for-profit organizations are more willing to take risks for partners they trust, leading to greater investment in social outcomes. By fostering deeper relationships, nonprofit organizations bridge gaps in alignment and enable their collaborative partners to understand more of the social mission, moving the focus of collaboration from short-term profitability to long-term social outcomes (Florini & Pauli, 2018). Compiling each of these principles enables nonprofit organizations and their partners to create a clear sense of roles, responsibilities, and norms within collaborative partnerships. Having clearly defined aspects of governance reduces misalignment and allows organizations to participate and contribute in ways that best highlight their complementary attributes (Polonsky et al., 2015).

Long-term Partnerships. Another important theme in nonprofit collaborative literature is the length of partnerships. Emerging research demonstrates that although both short-term and long-term collaboration can be successful, there are differences in the function and types of collaboration depending on the length of the partnership (Shumate et al., 2018). Frameworks for collaboration develop in distinct stages, allowing for greater integration of practices and objectives over time (Klitsie et al., 2018). As collaborative relationships advance, organizations have a greater capacity to understand common goals and effectively leverage complementary resources (Henttonen et al., 2016). Adopting this approach to collaborative relationships highlights the importance of developing a diverse collaborative profile with the intention of developing lasting partnerships with greater integration of social objectives.

Understanding long-term partnerships in the context of rural nonprofits is important for developing this best practice further. First, organizations must understand and prioritize the contingencies for effective, lasting collaborative portfolios. Particularly, effective long-term collaboration requires a base-level of social capacity and strategic planning capacity (Shumate et al., 2018). Often, rural nonprofits are at a significant disadvantage due to the geographic limitations of rural settings, finding it difficult to develop strong relationships with organizations outside of direct contact (Sanzo et al., 2015).

One way of addressing these needs and developing stronger long-term collaboration is through an emphasis on a strong board of directors that can leverage relationships outside of the organization for improved collaborative resilience (Dong et al., 2019). Developing a strong board, in this sense, requires a deepening of relationships between board members to develop trust and optimize innovative thinking (Jaskyte, 2018). Following these principles, rural

nonprofits have opportunities to develop the competencies for lasting collaborative efforts and optimize social outcomes through long-term partnerships.

Important implications of practicing long-term partnerships as a collaborative best practice included increased feelings of trustworthiness, creativity, and innovation, contributing to the relational capital of nonprofit organizations (Jaskyte, 2018). Leveraging the benefits of long-term partnerships can help nonprofits overcome the difficulties of limited human capital and personnel turnover that are so prevalent in rural nonprofits (Florini & Pauli, 2018). A final important collaborative outcome of practicing long-term partnerships is the increased ability to form more collaborative relationships as organizations gain greater collaborative competency through the developmental stages of enduring collaboration (Feilhauer & Hahn, 2021).

Networking. Advancing on the competencies built through long-term collaboration, nonprofit organizations begin to develop collaborative networks to optimize collaborative outcomes through mutual relationships and greater shared resources and objectives (Feilhauer & Hahn, 2021). Building a collaborative network amplifies the power of collaboration by involving multiple collaborative partners to develop common goals across networks and further leverage strategic governance and alliance (Florini & Pauli, 2018). Specifically, by creating networks, collaborative power moves from individual firms working together to a wide array of organizations collaborating, sharing resources, and pursuing common goals.

One of the key outcomes of networking is the ability to expand the impact of collaboration across multiple organizations. Particularly, networking can provide opportunities for less connected nonprofits to overcome barriers to entry in collaboration. Entering collaborative networks gives access to collaborative partnerships that may not have otherwise been possible for small organizations with relatively limited social capital (Daniel & Fyall,

2019). These benefits are especially prevalent in less restricted networks that rely on flexible entry and decreased forms of bureaucracy (Henttonen et al., 2016). Through this approach to collaborative networks, the risk of collaboration is significantly lowered as organizations experience less of a threat of individual exposure to risk, drawing on a common desire to collaborate through the sharing of ideas and information more so than monetary transactions as with more individual collaborative interactions (Henttonen et al., 2016).

A significant outcome of effective networking is leveraging technological resources for greater access to potential partners and building information-driven relationships (Hwang, 2017). Developing common information systems and leveraging technology can help overcome some of the traditional limitations of rural nonprofit networking through increasing information sharing for better strategic alignment, communication, and tracking of social outcomes (Phillips et al., 2019), further expanding collaborative networks. Specifically, collaborative networks give organizations reason and opportunity to develop greater collaborative capacity through leveraging technology (Baumber et al., 2018; Chang et al., 2016). Building a reliance on technology for increased information sharing and communication increases the overall value creation in networks, further amplifying the effects of collaboration.

Another implication of improved collaborative networking is an increased opportunity for service delivery. Research suggests that on the individual service level, recipients of nonprofit services are more likely to be aware of and use nonprofit services when nonprofit services are shared through a broader communication platform of a diverse network (Azhar, 2018). This is especially important in rural settings where nonprofit organizations may experience greater difficulty communicating services to the communities they serve. Leveraging the power of

collaborative networks for greater access to intended recipients is an important byproduct of collaborative networking.

A final implication of networking is the increase in accountability. By developing common interests across multiple organizations, there is an increased opportunity for organizations to create accountability across multiple organizations (Piatak et al., 2018). Organizations participating in formal collaborative networking are more likely to experience increased competition for funding and service opportunities, refocusing efforts on demonstrable social impact (Hielscher et al., 2017). This emphasis provides greater validity to the need for nonprofits to have common definitions of social value, creating opportunities to collaborate on common measurements of social value. Through these interactions, networks are better equipped to self-regulate than single collaborative relationships due to the common practices and expectations of partners formed through the alignment of multiple perspectives in a network (Piatak et al., 2018).

Leadership Development. As discussed throughout the literature, leadership is an important capacity for effective collaboration (Remund & McKeever, 2018). Developing leaders for greater collaborative capacity is a core principle to leveraging collaboration and building social value through mutual endeavors.

Research suggests that one of the greatest sources of collaborative leadership is through an effective nonprofit board of directors (Jaskyte, 2018). Providing effective leadership from a board of directors influences collaborative capacity in several ways, including an increased sense of direction and outside expertise to drive connections to possible collaborative partners. Jaskyte (2018) cautioned that drawing on board of directors' expertise must be properly aligned with the social mission and rely on a focused strategy for collaboration. Balancing diversity on a

nonprofit board with a focus on social innovation can have significant benefits for a strategic approach to collaboration.

Beyond developing a strong board of directors, executive leaders in nonprofits and their collaborative partners have a significant impact on the overall success of collaboration (Remund & McKeever, 2018). An important theme from the literature is the idea of adaptive capacity, the ability of an organization to adapt based on collaborative needs and the competencies of its leaders to effectively innovate (Shumate et al., 2018). This suggests that one of the possible prerequisites to effective collaboration is an effective leadership model to moderate change and drive development throughout collaborative relationships. In this same theme, research also finds that leadership is essential for effective strategic governance as organizations seek to create clear roles and responsibilities in collaboration (Florini & Pauli, 2018).

General practices for developing effective leadership abound, but in the context of collaborative leadership, there are a few key principles for developing collaboration-oriented leaders. First, leaders in collaborative endeavors should possess sufficient expertise and understanding of complex social problems to create clear common objectives (Lee, 2015). This requires diversity in leadership through multiple perspectives to challenge the narrow-minded considerations of limited perspectives (Baumber et al., 2018). Second, organizations should emphasize the relational capacity of leaders, the ability of leaders to effectively establish trustworthiness, and a desire for unity in collaboration (Lee, 2015). Finally, organizations must prioritize the ability of leaders to balance social mission with demands for financial stability, which requires the ability to effectively relate social value creation to increased long-term profitability (Florini & Pauli, 2018; Remund & McKeever, 2018). Developing a framework for these leadership competencies in rural nonprofits is especially important as challenges of human

capacity limit the natural competencies of small nonprofits often found in rural settings, requiring greater emphasis on developing social capital (Brown et al., 2016).

Compatibility. Choosing partners is one of the most critical elements of effective collaboration. Organizations may struggle to determine the criteria for entering collaboration (Pittz & Adler, 2016). Developing a framework that emphasizes compatibility can provide the necessary structure to ensure partnerships add social value (Klitsie et al., 2018). Developing compatibility outlooks requires a clear understanding of the mission of collaboration and a strong commitment from all parties to the mission (Pittz & Adler, 2016). This understanding of commitment to common goals should provide the basis for the strategic planning phase of collaborative partnerships. Through the process of determining underlying strategic principles and social outcomes, collaborators can assess levels of compatibility and choose to avoid collaborations that do not mutually benefit or agree on collaborative action (Klitsie et al., 2018). Specifically, nonprofit organizations should be selective in choosing for-profit partners with a strong social emphasis on mission and action.

Often, nonprofit organizations struggle to reconcile with for-profit partners who use collaboration for marketing appeal in exchange for monetary support of the nonprofit with no real social value creation through actions, even sometimes counterbalancing monetary contributions with negative social impact (Ashraf et al., 2017; Remund & McKeever, 2018; Sanzo et al., 2015). These concepts can be especially important in the context of rural nonprofit organizations seeking collaboration with production, manufacturing, or mining companies seeking to offset environmental impact with nonprofit collaboration. Partnerships in these forms should go beyond monetary offsets through donations in exchange for impact. Rather,

organizations should partner to financially support and develop more sustainable practices (Ashraf et al., 2017).

Choosing to exclude these potential partners actually allows for the greater long-term sustainability of collaborative effectiveness by finding better-suited collaborative partners despite forgoing short-term opportunities for financial support (Pittz & Adler, 2016). The value of this focus in collaboration is an opportunity to create a sense of interdependence in which both organizations depend on the success of social impact for overall impact on organizational success (Klitsie et al., 2018). Collaboration thrives under these conditions as both organizations seek to leverage unique competencies and resources for the collective benefit (Sowa, 2009).

Contingencies for Collaboration. Emerging research suggests that collaboration can be burdensome rather than contribute to social value if organizations lack the capacity to manage collaboration effectively (Shumate et al., 2018). Based on this principle, an important best practice drawn from the literature is creating a contingency evaluation for entering collaborative partnerships. Developing a framework for establishing and evaluating contingency for collaboration should be contextually based and can provide important insight for collaborative decision-making (Roy et al., 2015).

Building on the need for contingency-based collaborative planning, organizations should consider several basic factors before collaborating. One of the most important contingencies is sufficient social capital. As thoroughly discussed in strategic governance and networking literature, social capital is a key contingency for effective collaboration (Ihm & Shumate, 2018). Organizations seeking collaborative opportunities should assess their social capacity and seek collaborative opportunities that complement current social capacity and provide opportunities to further develop the social capacity for greater future collaboration (Shumate et al., 2018).

Organizations should also consider their competencies in other areas, such as organizational structure, financial stability, and ability to innovate, as important contingencies for collaboration (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019). Building on core competencies as contingencies for collaboration, rural nonprofits may struggle due to a lack of equitable capacity to larger, more accessible firms (Baumber et al., 2018). Overcoming these limitations may require rural nonprofits to use a more segmented approach to nonprofit collaboration, starting with less complex collaboration to build competency and increasing collaborative initiatives as contingencies are met.

Sustainability Focused. Sustainability is a key element in the collaborative framework. At the organizational level, sustainability emphasizes resource optimization to develop greater opportunities for continued success in nonprofit value creation (Rodríguez-Espíndola et al., 2018). In the context of collaboration, sustainability should be viewed as an endeavor to create more efficient operations that limit waste and optimize valuable resources, proving to be mutually beneficial for all organizations involved (Ashraf et al., 2017). For-profit firms are especially receptive to collaboration in terms of a sustainability approach due to the rapid developments in corporate social responsibility and the long-term impact on profitability (Remund & McKeever, 2018). Through this approach, sustainability becomes a common method for expressing the mutual value created through collaboration.

Viewing collaboration as a form of sustainability planning, all organizations in partnerships and networks have opportunities to capitalize on the value of optimization, creation, and preservation of the future value of resources through collaborative action (Florini & Pauli, 2018). Approaching collaboration through the lens of sustainability has a valuable impact on balancing power in collaborative relationships, as nonprofit organizations can create expertise in

sustainability that is powerful for bargaining (Feilhauer & Hahn, 2021). A sustainability approach increases decision-making efficiency by emphasizing resource optimization, contributing to greater fulfillment of objectives across collaborative networks (Rodríguez-Espíndola et al., 2018). Naturally, lowering the cost of activities through resource optimization extends the capacity for social innovation by enabling greater impact with available resources.

Contextual Emphasis. A final best practice to consider is the need for emphasis on the context of collaboration. This theme is evident throughout the literature as factors such as organizational size, objectives, and settings have a significant influence on the frameworks for successful collaboration (Phillips et al., 2019). Understanding the context of collaboration requires a developed understanding of the resources available and the challenges present (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2018).

Building this knowledge can be especially important as organizations develop strategic plans to expand social capacity (Roy et al., 2015) and collaborate with organizations facing similar collaborative contexts (Pittz & Adler, 2016). Each context is unique, facing individual external and internal stressors, including organizational structure, financial stability, brand recognition, legal environment, and measures of success (Phillips et al., 2019). Understanding these elements of context is important for collaboration in rural settings. As discussed throughout the literature review, rural nonprofits face unique variations and amplifications of the challenges discussed throughout, leading to higher barriers to collaboration and a heightened need for consideration of best practices to drive a contextually based framework for collaborative success.

Table 1*Significant Compounding Barriers in Nonprofit Collaboration*

Study	Relevant Themes	Unique Impact on Nonprofit Collaboration
Florini & Pauli, 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accountability in fiscal responsibility and social outcomes of nonprofit collaboration Improved financial modeling of social innovation outcomes Relevant costs in collaboration and opportunities for optimization of social outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing working models for measuring social outcomes can be difficult due to limited personnel and expertise (Rodríguez-Espíndola et al., 2018). Understanding the financial impact of social innovation can drive more effective relationships and create greater sustainability for small and rural organizations (Jaskyte, 2018). Assessing the cost of collaboration provides rural nonprofits with the information necessary for choosing feasible collaboration opportunities (Sowa, 2009).
Sanzo et al., 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic alignment of nonprofit-business partnerships for 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic alignment through increased social innovation provides the necessary direction for collaboration and allows rural nonprofits greater participation in

Study	Relevant Themes	Unique Impact on Nonprofit Collaboration
	<p>increased social innovation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Importance of deep relationships for collaborative and innovative success 	<p>collaborative decision-making (Remund & McKeever, 2018).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited human capital in rural nonprofits creates a barrier to effective relationships (Polonsky et al., 2015), but focusing on strategic board development provides opportunities for expanding social capacity (Cheng, 2019).
Shumate et al., 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges to social value creation in nonprofit collaboration Importance of governance mechanisms The relevance of adaptive capacity to collaborative success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rural nonprofits' significant disadvantages in human and social capital further challenge the creation and measurement of social value (Baumber et al., 2018). Relatively smaller governance structures in rural organizations amplify the challenges of collaborative governance (Florini & Pauli, 2018). Limited adaptive capacity is based on the lack of synergistic creation due to turnover and other personnel limitations (Azhar, 2018).

Anticipated and Discovered Themes

Throughout the literature, significant themes are prevalent for understanding general conditions surrounding current nonprofit collaboration, barriers to collaboration, and best practices for effective collaboration. Applying these concepts in rural collaboration requires additional research into rural contexts for collaboration. Although the literature highlights some essential themes for rural settings, such as human and social capital disparities (Azhar, 2018) and issues with access to collaborative resources and networks (Hwang, 2017), further exploration is necessary. Notably, there is a significant possibility of contributing to a deeper understanding by exploring each of the themes discussed in Table 1. Exploring each of these themes in the context of rural collaboration can provide additional insight into the perceived disadvantages of rural collaborations and highlight opportunities to improve collaboration through contextualized best practice approaches.

Summary of the Literature Review

A thorough review of academic literature highlights important themes in the current state of nonprofit collaboration, as well as barriers hindering entry to collaboration and effectiveness of partnerships and the innovative best practices organizations use to approach improved social value creation through collaboration. Despite significant literature surrounding each of these areas, limited research exists to address the rural nonprofit context. Some literature examines rural nonprofits as a component of collaboration (Baumber et al., 2018; Florini & Pauli, 2018), and others review generalized approaches to service delivery in rural nonprofits. However, there is a gap in the literature focusing on rural collaboration in practice. Developing the research can significantly contribute to the current directions in literature and serve to address gaps in depth and application to rural contexts.

Summary of Section 1 and Transition

The qualitative research used the multiple case studies method focusing on the problem of limited rural nonprofit collaboration and seeks to develop a deep understanding of current collaborative practices in rural nonprofits, challenges to collaboration, and current best practices. A thorough examination of the literature surrounding rural nonprofit collaboration and key concepts for developing the framework and research questions for the case study were discussed at length in the first section of the research. Based on the concepts from the literature and the chosen research design and method, the next section of the study emphasizes the research design, methodology, and data collection practices.

Section 2: The Project

This section of the study outlines the research methodology and design. Considerable emphasis on the reasoning behind the selected methodology and design and how these selections align with the study's purpose is necessary for strong research. Discussion of qualitative methodology with a multiple case studies design in the context of rural nonprofit collaboration provides insight into possible ways of improving the understanding of barriers and best practices in current collaborative practices and how to develop frameworks for successful future collaboration. Throughout this section, particular emphasis exists on considerations for data collection and analysis. The case study design requires data collection from various methods, including interviews and surveys, analyzed thematically to draw a greater understanding of the research problem: limited collaboration in rural nonprofit organizations.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this multiple case studies qualitative study was to explore collaborative efforts in rural nonprofits. Specifically, the study focused on rural nonprofits' collaboration with other nonprofits, for-profit organizations, and government agencies. Emphasis was placed on the processes and outcomes in existing rural nonprofit cross-sector partnerships to develop a deeper understanding of the current state of nonprofit collaboration. The study explored barriers to collaboration in rural nonprofits and highlight possible solutions for increased collaboration. Additionally, the research sought a deeper understanding of how to leverage collaboration to improve rural nonprofits' organizational outcomes. Relatively few studies examine collaboration in rural nonprofits (Kim & Peng, 2018). This study aimed to add to the body of knowledge surrounding nonprofit collaboration and provide contextual perspectives and recommendations for improved collaborative practices in rural nonprofits. Exploring current practices, barriers, and

successful attributes in current rural nonprofit collaborations can significantly contribute to the literature by providing contextualized best practices.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher was critical for addressing the research problem. In this qualitative case study, the researcher was responsible for selecting participants based on research criteria and desired outcomes. After selecting appropriate participants and developing the necessary relationship for research, the researcher was responsible for determining a baseline for research participants' familiarity with the research problem and guiding research objectives within the case study's parameters. The researcher was responsible for collecting participant information, permission, and initial survey responses. Upon analysis of initial survey responses, the researcher conducted interviews and guided participant responses to develop the appropriate research themes to understand rural nonprofit collaborative practice.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research design was used for this study. The purpose of qualitative research is to develop a deeper understanding of relationships and experiences (Stake, 2010). The qualitative method aimed to provide insight into problems facing nonprofit collaboration in rural Appalachia and explored possible best practices to improve collaborative outcomes across the region. Because of nonprofit collaboration's experiential nature, a qualitative design allowed better opportunities to interact with the research and understand central nonprofit collaboration themes. The limited research in Appalachian nonprofits means an experiential research methodology provides the opportunity to guide future research and drive further understanding and application in rural nonprofit collaboration. Choosing a qualitative design over quantitative research allowed this research project to transcend what was observed and addressed questions

of the reason behind what is observed (Stake, 2010). A large body of research already confirms the existence of issues in nonprofit collaboration (Shumate et al., 2018); therefore, it is essential that ongoing research examine deeper reasons underlying these issues. Using the qualitative approach provides greater access to a contextual examination of themes and application of potential solutions, unlike the more static quantitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Discussion of Multiple Case Studies Method

This study used a multiple case studies method to approach the research questions. Case study designs are beneficial in the context of exploring and understanding relationships in practice. The case studies approach enables an exploration of shared experience and seeks to address the reasons behind observations (Stake, 2010). Case studies provide the opportunity to develop in-depth insight into nonprofit collaboration. Using a case study approach to deeply examine the experience of rural nonprofits gives rural nonprofits and their members opportunities to share experiences and outline common themes in rural nonprofit functions and collaboration. An especially important element of case study research is the role of the researcher (Creswell, 2014). By allowing the researcher to actively participate in drawing out themes in the research, there is more opportunity to develop an overarching narrative to connect elements of experience for understanding in a way that may easily be missed in another research method and design.

Developing a framework to examine experience in collaboration from multiple perspectives across rural nonprofits is especially important in the context of this research. Themes in the literature suggest that nonprofit collaboration is complex and has many layers within different levels and units of nonprofits (Jaskyte, 2018). Therefore, gaining multiple perspectives and emphasizing various elements of the shared experiences in rural nonprofit

collaborative efforts is substantial for developing a deeper understanding to improve future research and practice.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

This section covers a discussion of the data collected, themes discovered, and applications to the research problem. The research of the study was conducted over the co years with five nonprofit organizations. The primary source of data collected was through interviews with case participants. Each organization was strategically selected for the study, representing multiple disciplines, structures, and constituents. In each organization, key members of organizational leadership were selected for interviews. Information regarding organizations studied and the coding method is further explained in Figure 3. The methodology for coding participants, as presented in the discussion of findings, is alphabetical assignments based on their place within the study. For example, Nonprofit A features interviews with Interviewees A and B. Nonprofit B is represented by Interviewees C and D. Nonprofit C is represented by Interviewees E and F. Nonprofit D is represented by Interviewees G, H, and I. Nonprofit E is represented by Interviewee J. There is a total of 10 interviewees and five organizations represented.

The interviews focused on the research questions dealing with current collaborative practices of rural nonprofit organizations, barriers to collaborative practices, and opportunities to leverage collaborative practices for improved nonprofit outcomes. Each organization shared unique insight while also contributing to overarching themes. The discussion below expands on themes found in the research and how they reinforce, improve upon, or inform gaps from the literature review. Throughout the course of this study, several clear connections from the conceptual framework were prevalent, but there were also themes and applications that refuted or expanded upon existing themes.

A clear theme from the conceptual framework that was expanded upon was the issue of human capital. Conversely, issues such as technology were less critical than expected from the literature review. The conceptual framework heavily emphasized the role of structured collaborative practice, where the research lends itself to the need for strategically forming partnerships through organizational growth.

Themes Discovered

Through the analysis of the data collected, many themes emerged. For the sake of sharing the findings of the study, themes were organized into five broad categories, which hold several subthemes each. The five major themes that emerged in the research are strategic alignment to mission and values, organizational structure and strategic leadership, the collaborative framework, community engagement, and navigating contextual considerations. The rationale for each of these themes and its subthemes are discussed in depth in the following pages.

Strategic Alignment to Mission and Values

Perhaps the most significant theme discovered both in the literature review and the study is the importance of strategic alignment to mission and values. Organizations must be fundamentally driven by their missions and values to experience sustainability and achieve desired outcomes of collaborative practice. Members of each organization expressed in various ways the importance of being mission-driven, protecting against mission drift, and evaluating success based on achieving mission-oriented outcomes. The study supports the position that organizations must strategically align collaborative practices according to the organization's mission and core values. Subthemes that came out in the research included examining the mission of the organization for collaborative opportunities, organizational core values, values of leadership, mission and values alignment in collaborative relationships, and the role of faith-

based mission and values in shaping collaborative practice. Additional details for each of these subthemes, interpretations of the themes, and applications to the research are further discussed in the interpretation of themes, relationship of the findings, and representation and visualization of the data sections.

Organizational Structure and Strategic Leadership

Throughout the data collection, a significant theme was the relationship of organizational structure to collaborative practice and strategic leadership in collaborative efforts. Under this major theme, subthemes such as organizational structure, organizational culture, leadership strategy, and roles of leaders in the organization were most significant. Notably, there was significantly more data supporting the role of strategic leadership than organizational structure as having influence on the outcomes of collaborative efforts. Under strategic leadership, subthemes such as network, personal influence, public perceptions, shared experiences, specialized experiences and skills, and visionary leadership all represented significant aspects of collaborative practice. Based on the research, each of these elements impacts the way organizations approach collaboration and their ability to successfully navigate collaborative relationships. These claims are further explored through the interpretation of the themes, representation and visualization of the data, and relationship to the findings portions of this section.

Collaborative Framework

The next major theme explored was the collaborative framework. This theme examined the unique elements of collaborative relationships and how organizations leverage best practices to establish philosophy and relational practices that foster collaborative success. It emphasized the role and importance of navigating organizational differences for collective outcomes in

collaboration. Subthemes covered in this portion of the research included collaborative accountability, information sharing, organizational differences between large and small nonprofits, length and formality of collaborative relationships, needs-driven collaborative efforts, unique contributions of collaborative partners, and risks within collaborative relationships. Each of these subthemes is further examined in the following sections of the presentation of the findings.

Community Engagement

Perhaps the most unique of the themes to emerge is the nature of community engagement within rural nonprofit collaboration. In this theme, the research revealed significant insight for understanding how organizations identify other organizations as potential collaborative partners and are identified for collaborative efforts, as well as how collaborative efforts influence target outcomes in the communities of nonprofit operations. Overall, this theme appears to present the most significant implications for measuring collaborative outcomes and developing future collaborative opportunities. Three subthemes emerged in this section of the data.

First is the nature of the constituents of the nonprofits. The nature of the target recipients of services and social outcomes significantly influence the necessary approach and measurement of collaborative interventions. The other two subthemes support a significant finding of the research in outlining both the proactive and receiving natures of collaboration. Proactively, organizations create collaborative opportunities through presence in the community and reported outcomes of collaborative success. Organizations can be recipients of collaborative efforts through connections with the broader community and efforts of other organizations or community members to raise awareness surrounding the organization's cause. These unique subthemes are discussed at length in the remaining sections of the presentation of the findings.

Navigating Contextual Considerations

The final major theme explored in the data analysis was how nonprofits navigate changing contextual factors and the impact on collaborative endeavors. A unique element in this theme was it represented the most subthemes, ranging from considerations presented in the literature review, such as financial constraints in rural nonprofits, to unforeseen change agents, such as COVID. Specific considerations within this theme were explored in depth through the following portions of the presentation of the findings.

Interpretation of the Themes

Organizations Studied

In order to facilitate a better discussion of the themes unique to the organizations studied, Table 2 demonstrates the unique characteristics of each organization. As discussed in the validity section of the methodology, several factors were considered to ensure the organizations studied provided information pertinent to the research. The specific factors considered were size, structure, region served, and sector. For the sake of confidentiality, the organizations' names are not included.

Table 2*Characteristics of Organizations Studied*

Organization Label	Size	Sector	Primary Service Region	Structural Considerations	Interviewees
Nonprofit A	>100 employees; >\$10 million in revenue	Healthcare	KY (1 county), TN (1 county)	501(c)(3)	<i>A and B</i>
Nonprofit B	10-50 employees; >\$20 million in revenue	Community Development	54 Counties of Appalachian KY	501(c)(3); Community Foundation	<i>C and D</i>
Nonprofit C	<5 employees: revenue \$50- 100K	Social Services Ministry	Whitley County, KY	501(c)(3)	<i>E and F</i>
Nonprofit D	1 part-time paid executive director, board of 6 directors;	Social Services	Whitl ey County, KY	501(c)(3)	<i>G, H, and I</i>

Organization	Size	Sector	Primary	Structural	Interviewees
Label			Service Region	Considerations	
	revenue				
	<\$50K				
Nonprofit E	1 paid	Community	Southeastern,	501(c)(3)	<i>J</i>
	executive	Development	KY	Fiscally	
	director, 6			sponsored	
	directors,			program of 6	
	revenue >\$2			regional	
	million			CDFIs	

As referenced in Table 2, a diverse range of organizations was studied to give optimal perspectives and improve both reliability and validity of the data.

Interpretation of Themes

Nonprofit A. Identifies as a community health organization focusing on holistic care. Its mission incorporates medical care that is accessible to all people regardless of financial status or health insurance. As such, unique challenges exist that require creative solutions to ensure healthcare for vulnerable populations in the two counties served across Kentucky and Tennessee. Two executive leaders were interviewed, and both expressed unique challenges and opportunities associated with operating as a community health organization in rural Appalachia. Unique themes developed around missions and values include placing significant emphasis on human dignity and the pursuit of access for all, regardless of financial status. In both interviews, there was significant emphasis on the role of faith in making decisions about collaboration and the direction of the organization.

Interviewee B described the importance of faith, saying, “this is who we are... to bring light to those who live in darkness... we try to find missional providers who come from all over the place.” This same aspect of faith-driven mission is the basis for selecting collaborative partners. Both executive team members expressed the importance of excellence that reflects Christ-like service in identifying partners for collaboration. Additional emphasis on faith in collaborative structure was brought up during the discussion of the board structure. The organization operates with a board of directors who are well-known and deeply involved in the community. Their board members lead in spiritual emphasis and help drive connections to others who prioritize faith and stewardship as collaborative partners. Although faith is a driving factor, collaboration is pursued based on what brings the greatest outcomes to patients and the overall well-being of the community. This means there are opportunities to collaborate with organizations that are not specifically faith based.

One of the members interviewed explained that creating an atmosphere with the aroma of Christ attracted people from all walks of life, both as patients and potential collaborative partners, to come and see the difference at the organization. One clear point of emphasis was made regarding the nature of focusing on faith. Interviewee B stated, “a lot of people use Jesus as a mascot... we’re saying, no, we don’t want that... we want people to come here because they feel the presence of Jesus, they can smell the fragrance of God.” All things in the interviews point to a clear belief that faith is fundamental to the mission and the proper stewardship of the mission of this community health organization. The role of faith in organizations was lacking in the literature review. Therefore, the theme of faith is a significant introduction to research on nonprofit collaboration.

Another point of emphasis surrounding mission and values was an emphasis on quality of care. Interviewee B noted, “at the end of the day, it’s our patients that we’re going to make sure they’re still getting quality care if we collaborate.” This quote points to adherence to organizational mission as a strong point of emphasis in evaluating collaborative opportunities. As discussed in the literature review, organizations entering collaboration must ensure they do not experience mission creep or values misalignment. Nonprofit A ensures this by identifying partners who understand the mission and have a similar mission of seeing the whole community benefit. Interviewee B identified this as a key to finding partnerships, “we’re going to do our due diligence. It’s not just going to be that person happens to be friendlier than the other person.”

Lasting partnerships with mutual benefits, according to this model, must have alignment in mission and values. Through the discovery of these themes in the interviews with Nonprofit A, it is evident that strategic alignment to mission and values plays a significant role in the collaborative activities of the nonprofit. Leveraging organizational mission allows the organization to seek opportunities which further accomplish the mission of providing quality healthcare in the Appalachian region. This enables the organization to strategically navigate collaborative opportunities and further promote values of faith, equity, and quality care through developing partnerships with various organizations in the region.

Moving on to themes associated with organizational structure and strategic leadership, Nonprofit A provided significant implications for themes. One of the major themes discovered in this area was the emphasis on personal investment and the influence of leadership. Both members interviewed expressed deep personal commitment to the values of the organization and described personal investment through visionary leadership. Interviewee A described the role of leadership by saying, “inspire them towards the mission, inspire them about being a better

version of themselves every day... I'm not going to be here forever... I'm going to hand you the reins one day." Using this form of visionary leadership serves as the basis for identifying collaborative partners.

The emphasis in this research on the importance of strategic leadership builds on the work of Chang et al. (2016) discussed in the literature review. While the previous research emphasized the general nature of leadership in nonprofit collaboration, this research contributes an affirmation of the importance of leadership in establishing collaborative practice. The interviews with Nonprofit A demonstrate how leaders who strategically approach collaboration as an extension of vision are able to leverage greater outcomes in organizational endeavors through collaboration.

Recently, Nonprofit A has successfully established a partnership with state-level health services, providing telehealth well beyond the traditional service region. They are now able to provide telehealth in partnership with rural health departments, an opportunity that allows the state to provide services without having a service provider at each department. Interviewee A describes this as a win-win, opening doors for the health department to serve rural areas and for the organization to benefit from additional funding from the state. This type of innovative solution highlights the need for collaboration to be based on the needs and specializations of organizations. Seeing the role of innovation in the collaborative practices of nonprofits further points to themes discussed in the literature surrounding the ways collaboration improves social value outcomes (Sanzo et al., 2015).

Two other significant examples of collaboration shared in the interview with Interviewee A highlighted other significant themes. The first example was a situation in which a partner health organization for telehealth shifted its service region, eliminating services for the

organization. Based on the existing relationships with providers in the partner organization, Interviewee A was able to receive a referral to find a new service provider with no interruption of services. Without the existing relationships, this would have presented a significant collaborative hurdle, but based on the existing relationship and network of the affiliated provider, there was a positive outcome. In addition, another instance was a needs-driven innovative effort in which Interviewee A asked a current administrative support partner to collaborate to create a new service to better help with medical billing.

By sharing ideas and information, Nonprofit A was able to help create a product that benefited the partner organization and was able to market to other health organizations. Interviewee A shared that there was no expectation of remuneration for this consult because of the desire to see the other organization win, “I can’t be everything and I want them to succeed because when I need them, we can work together.” All of this points to a key attitude in collaboration. There must be a community-focused mindset. Individual success cannot drive healthy collaboration, but as modeled in Nonprofit A, as organizations work towards common goals, they experience true collaboration, leading to greater outcomes. These attitudes support the ideas presented in the literature regarding the importance of adaptive capacity in the form of leadership’s disposition toward collaborative practice (Shumate et al., 2018). The experience of Nonprofit A in engaging community partners for deeper collaborative outcomes highlights the importance of community engagement. By long-term cultivation of community trust and relationships with other leaders, Nonprofit A was able to utilize collaborative practice to overcome community issues establishing deeper connections to the community and enabling greater social value creation.

Nonprofit B. Nonprofit B focuses on community development as a community foundation committed to helping smaller organizations identify funding opportunities and providing fiscal support. It operates as an umbrella for several state-level funding projects in Kentucky and oversees 13 affiliate community funding organizations to help Appalachian Kentucky develop sustainable businesses and services. During its history, Nonprofit B has relied heavily on collaboration to establish its funding and help the organizations it serves accomplish their goals. By its very nature, the organization serves as a hub for collaboration. Interviewee D described the role of the nonprofit, saying, “We’re not doing the work; we’re making sure that the work can be done.” This attitude reflects a central theme for successful collaborative practice. There must be a willingness to move beyond a focus on individual outcomes for organizations and a desire to see community change.

As nonprofit organizations continue to evolve, the challenge of measuring social value creation can be alleviated in part by considering the impact nonprofits have in helping others succeed. This is the fundamental framework for Nonprofit B. Further in the conversation, the emphasis turned towards identifying important work outside the scope of the nonprofit’s own abilities but aligned with its mission. This highlights the importance of identifying collaborative partners that have aligned mission and values and can accomplish things for the organization’s mission that it cannot accomplish itself. By offering financial support along with information sharing, administrative support, and technical assistance, Nonprofit B has found significant success in expanding its reach through collaborative partners.

Another significant piece of the conversations with Nonprofit B covered barriers to collaborative success and innovative ways the organization is addressing them. Interviewee C has extensive experience working across multiple sectors in rural Appalachia. One of the

learning experiences identified in the research was the difficulty of cross-sector collaboration. Each sector has unique constraints and emphases that can complicate collaboration. Speaking of governmental collaborative efforts, Interviewee C described the relative challenges of making meaningful connections, particularly with federal organizations that set goals that might not reflect the missions, values, and needs of the service region, “you just don’t have the flexibility that you do with a private organization versus a public organization... there’s no continuity of leadership and no continuity of good ideas either.” Although Interviewee C shared that there are ways federal programs have aided the organization, the expressed concern is that federal programs lack the continuity to establish meaningful long-term connections.

Additionally, Interviewee C explained that because of the amount of money from federal programs, programs are written with large organizations in mind, meaning there are usually several levels of organizations between the program and its recipients, making requirements of grant funding and other programs prohibitive for the receiving organizations. Issues like this necessitate organizations such as Nonprofit B to play intermediaries for federal and state-level programs to rural nonprofits. The issues create the opportunity for needs-based innovations as organizations such as Nonprofit B serve as advocates for rural nonprofits, identifying funding opportunities and collaborating to secure opportunities. Along the way, organizations like Nonprofit B develop additional assistance opportunities through programs that leverage the resources of a larger nonprofit organization to make things such as technical assistance, program information, expertise, and other resources that might be prohibitive for smaller rural nonprofits to seek their own funding or assistance. These themes explored build upon concepts of the importance of collaborating based on the expertise of partners as introduced in the literature (Jaskyte, 2018).

Interviewee D addressed the issue of measuring success, explaining how communicating collaborative success impacts future partnerships and opportunities. By identifying ways in which collaborative efforts and supporting smaller organizations were able to expand community outreach, Nonprofit B has increased its measurement of collaborative success and social value creation. In part, it defines success as alleviating barriers smaller organizations face in meeting their goals and, in doing so, expanding the community reach of both organizations.

This further highlights the theme of community involvement and impact. As an organization takes on the burden of furthering the interests of the community and measuring impact beyond the organization's bottom-line, nonprofits are more positioned for long-term collaborative efforts. By improving the outcomes of other community players, nonprofits can serve as a catalyst for collective approaches to problems. Therefore, by removing the individual emphasis on community impact, there is an increase in community outcomes.

Nonprofit C. Nonprofit C is a rural ministry serving the homeless population in Whitley County, KY. It is a board-directed 501(c)3 with less than five paid employees. In 2020, the organization was forced to shut down due to COVID and the retirement of its executive director. In 2021, the current board voted to transition from an executive director-run model to a board-run model and rewrite by-laws to expand the ministry's reach. Within its new vision and structure, Nonprofit C seeks holistic approaches to homeless ministry. It provides training, workforce opportunities, and other support services to pursue holistic restoration of recipients of help. Several successful collaborative efforts have unfolded since the organization relaunched its services, including expanding the number of beds available and undertaking major renovation projects. The level of collaboration in this organization highlights the importance of community engagement as a means of increasing collaborative outcomes.

One specific way the organization has experienced this theme includes a revitalized effort to raise community awareness of the existence and mission of the organization. As the organization has relaunched after shutting down in 2020, the current board has leveraged its network of community partnerships to spread the word of the practical needs of the organization and improve opportunities to further serve the community. One of the most significant collaborative efforts has come through connections with local government, including high-level officials in both city and county governments. Interviewee E described the success of community partnerships stating,

that connection with the city government has been helpful. She knows a lot of things that the others of us don't. She's able to say, 'that might be possible' and she'll check on it and follow through and that's great.

Specific ways the city has helped through the mutual connection of a board member working at city hall include free trash pickup, assistance from city maintenance on various projects, and promotion through the city's social media. Interviewee E shared that this important connection came through a particular affinity of the city official for homeless ministry, "she has a passion for the homeless." In part, this highlights the importance of mission.

As organizations have clear missions that are communicated clearly with communities, there are organic opportunities for members of the community to engage in nonprofit work. One other significant partnership has been with a larger, more established nonprofit that seeks to address housing and food insecurity in Whitley County through home repair and building projects. This partnership led to significant help during the building phases of the relaunch, highlighting the themes of mission alignment, and leveraging the resources and expertise of other organizations in collaboration.

Other unique successes within a community awareness context include several regional nonprofits reaching out to help with different programs such as food stability and children's education. These outreaches have allowed Nonprofit C to add services such as nutritious food programs and a family education center. Interviewee E described the value of these partnerships saying, "She's been a huge help. She got a grant for a children's resource room" and "she's really good, she came up in the summer and she did vegetable planting and a raised garden." These collaborative opportunities were unsolicited and outcomes of community awareness and the personal networks of board members, further highlighting the theme of community connections and awareness.

Within this theme, organic opportunities for collaboration are presented to the nonprofit. The nonprofit is the recipient of community efforts to build upon the shared mission of the nonprofit and its community and the felt needs of its constituents. This theme emphasizes the reality that one of the best collaborative practices is to be visible to the community and allow opportunities to be presented that the organization might not have proactively engaged.

One other major source of success for Nonprofit C that came forward in interviews with both Interviewee E and Interviewee F, was the role of strong affiliations with other ministries. Both members serve with another, more established ministry serving to connect the 56 Baptist churches in Whitley County, KY. Interviewee F described it saying, "we have 56 churches. Not all of them are involved... it takes a lot of coordination... they begin to feel comfortable within that kind of system. They see that teamwork works." Nonprofit C was able to gain quick support due to its affiliation with the more established organization and relationships of trust and influence with the overlap of leadership. Additionally, Nonprofit C benefited from the team-

based leadership model of its affiliate organization that emphasized less bureaucracy in decision-making and transferred autonomy to teams for collaborative outcomes.

Interviewee F described it as getting out of a committee mindset and allowing teams to work between meetings instead of waiting until business meetings to make decisions. This organizational structure has informed the operations of Nonprofit C allowing it to leverage the expertise and knowledge of its partner organization to establish process for optimal outcomes without having to do its own research or learning through experience. This draws out the theme of relying upon the experience or expertise of collaborative partners, another benefit of collaborative endeavors in rural nonprofits.

In addition to the collaborative successes of Nonprofit C, the interviews also highlighted some of the unique challenges of nonprofit work in the rural context. One of the most significant felt needs was a lack of infrastructure. Particularly in dealing with homeless populations, Subject E expressed frustration with lack of availability of specialized healthcare, especially mental health, and the distance to government resources such as social security and driver's licensing agencies that provide necessary support for helping recipients of the services move forward in the holistic restoration process. Additional challenges discussed included negative public perceptions due to concerns with the way resources were handled under former leadership.

This concern highlights several themes in the research including negative narratives surrounding nonprofit work, the role of public image in receiving support, and the importance of demonstrating community-based outcomes and impact to secure future support. Thankfully, Subject E reported that as the organization has reestablished programs and made meaningful connections trust has been rebuilt replacing some of the negative public image with trust of

leadership and overall favor for the organization and its programs. This has led to increased opportunities for collaborative support.

Nonprofit D. Nonprofit D is a small nonprofit focused on raising awareness about disabilities. Its mission statement is clear, “disability does not equal inability.” Established in 2014, the organization is dedicated to sharing this message with as many people as possible. It accomplishes its work through speaking engagements to raise awareness, fundraisers that emphasize the unique challenges and opportunities associated with disabilities, and support-raising for other organizations serving individuals with disabilities.

One unique element of Nonprofit D is the personal connections to its mission. The founder is a published author, has a movie based on the book, has earned a PhD, and is a college professor. He travels speaking on the realities of life with a disability to help raise awareness and support of communities for individuals with disabilities. The aim is that through raising awareness and removing stigma, the mission of “disability does not equal inability” would serve to empower individuals with disabilities and their communities to support and celebrate their success. Nonprofit D approaches its mission from a distinctly Christian worldview, using speaking engagements to proclaim the gospel of the ultimate hope found in Christ while inspiring hope for a life of dignity and success for those with disabilities.

The personal influence of the founder is an important element that weaves into the collaborative success of the organization. Interviewee G, the organization’s founder, explained that the organization was birthed out of the realization of the influence gained with the publication of his book and the movie that resulted,

I started in 2014 around the release of the movie, which is the movie based on my life and the release of my autobiography. God had given me this platform of a book and a

movie, and I wanted to make a difference in the world. So, I started the nonprofit, the Foundation, and our vision is to promote the needs and potential of people with disabilities.

Nonprofit D has continually evolved to match opportunities to pursue its mission.

Early success included creative fundraisers such as “dinners in the dark” that allowed donors to experience a banquet served while blindfolded, “we do events like blindfolded 5K and dinner in the dark... we bring in a lot of volunteers to help with those.” Speaking of the importance of the board’s influence, Interviewee G “they were willing to come in and help provide accountability... help figure out ways of fundraising and being part of events.” Through this experience, donors were able to empathize with the experiences of the founder and others with various forms of disabilities. These events drew large community and regional interest leading to opportunities for partnerships, new speaking opportunities, and other open doors.

The organization went through a critical season of transition from 2019 to 2020 as they assessed how to continue pursuing the mission while moving away from some of the more labor-intensive events such as dinner in the dark. The timing turned out well as a board member Interviewee H expressed the reality that COVID would have ended dinners in the dark had the decision to discontinue them not already occurred in January 2020. A new era began for the organization as they sought new ways to engage the community and further the mission.

Interviewee G expressed serious concerns about the financial strain of small rural nonprofits. In the wake of ending the “Dinner in the Dark” and the additional financial concerns presented with COVID, the organization’s future became very uncertain. “There’s a lot less money to go around... we haven’t had an event since before COVID” said Interviewee G. Board

member, Interviewee H said, we are “trying to earn money, so that we can help and that’s the hard part for sure. And of course, people were off work with COVID.”

All three organizational members expressed the reality that there were times during the pandemic they could not seem to find a way forward. Interviewee I stated,

Through COVID it was frustrating, nothing worked during COVID... the fundraisers that we had done in the past just came to a halt and we saw the financial impact on the organization. Thank God we had some good supporters and people who just gave those godly gifts.

However, as a faith-based organization, they committed themselves to prayer, Interviewee I said, “We start every meeting with prayer. We end every meeting with prayer,” speaking of the director, “he always asks that God help us to utilize the organization for His work.”

One of the most interesting breaks came in early 2022 when one of the long-term board members heard about an opportunity where nonprofits were collaborating with for-profits on roundup donations,

One director was out in Colorado visiting his son and they went to a restaurant and there was an option on the receipt to round up to donate... and he has a business in town and said we need to do that and figured it out.

This turned out to be the thing that kept the organization alive during this season of transition. Interviewee G shared that without this opportunity, the organization would not have been able to continue its work, “that’s been a huge source of funding, getting thousands of dollars from an average of probably like a 50-cent donation. And it’s just been insane to see how that works.”

Interviewee I described the role of the roundup program saying, “that brought a lot of financial support and then the foundation was able to give back... to attend to Haiti and support

people and do different things.” This is just one of the many examples in the research of needs-driven innovation and information sharing as drivers of collaborative success. However, it is a powerful reminder that collaboration can truly allow organizations to have significant reach beyond their traditional mission.

One of the most significant findings from Nonprofit D was the role of board members and their personal influence. Beyond the previously shared example of board-driven collaboration, one of the most significant themes was the importance of shared experiences between teams, boards, and collaborative partners. In 2016, Nonprofit D began sending individual members to Haiti as part of a mission trip opportunity through a local church. In 2018, the founder and several members of the board decided to go together. This experience led to new partnerships and additional mission opportunities for the foundation. Interviewee I described the trips to Haiti as pivotal in defining the future of the organization, noting it was the starting point for collaborative partnerships in Haiti. Interviewee H described the trip to Haiti as not only pivotal for defining the organization’s direction in Haiti, but building the board’s effectiveness, “Most of us have been... we can see the ministry hands on, and I think that’s a huge deal.”

One of the most significant outcomes in Haiti was an opportunity to partner with a Haitian orphanage that helped children with disabilities. This partnership formed through the shared experiences of board members through missions. Interviewee I described an experience at the orphanage noting its poor conditions and saying of the founder, “he was really impacted, he’s like ‘had I grown up in a country like Haiti, that’s where I would have ended up because my parents couldn’t have afforded to take care of me.’” Having first-hand experience with the orphanage gave members of the board an increased sense of calling and trust in pursuing partnership. Beyond this, they were able to identify a member of the host team from their

missions experience to serve as a liaison in the partnership between the nonprofit and the orphanage in Haiti. Interviewee I described the connection as being the result of previous experiences,

We went down there to have interviews with locals to see who would be the best fit... we just weren't feeling any of the people were right... it ended up being one of our tour guides who helped us facilitate interviews... he spoke up and said you know I can do this.

This connection to a Haitian national who was able to serve as a liaison allowed the organization to enter the partnership with less barriers to navigate in terms of cultural differences, "God put him there... he spoke on behalf of the Foundation and the board and just made sure things were happening the way they should." However, it did come up through the interviews that there were unique challenges to partnership in Haiti, including political unrest, differences in philosophy about care of the children, and accountability for funds given in the partnership. These challenges highlight the theme of cross-cultural collaboration and the unique barriers present. In 2022, the partnership changed as the Haitian national serving as a liaison relocated to the United States. As a result, the organization ultimately was unable to sustain its partnership in Haiti.

This highlights how important individual influence and relational trust can be in collaborative partnerships. This theme draws out the volatility of partnerships, and how organizational changes in either party can cause collaborative instability. Despite these setbacks, Nonprofit D remains committed to cross-cultural collaboration. They are currently exploring a partnership in the Dominican Republic working with Haitian refugees through a connection established while partnering with the orphanage in Haiti. This demonstrates the theme of shared

experiences and prior collaborative efforts, showing that although changes might be necessary based on organizational change, a collaborative network can set the framework for future collaborative efforts.

A final significant outcome in the themes from interviews with Nonprofit D is the leveraging of networks and larger organizations to identify future collaborative work. Interviewee G has recently been exploring a new partnership with a larger organization in Lexington, KY with ongoing work in Africa. The connection is through a mobility coaching network that the founder participates in and in sharing details about their work both parties agreed there might be the opportunity for overlap. This opportunity to explore future collaboration further demonstrates the theme of organic collaboration through the networks of organizational leaders.

Nonprofit E. Nonprofit E was the most unique of the organizations studied. It is technically an alliance of organizations. It is a board directed 501(c)(3) with no employees or formal office space. It pursues grant funding and redistributes to smaller organizations. Despite its limited structure and overhead, the organization raised a \$2.4 million revolving loan fund from private, state, and federal sources. Designed to spur economic development in rural areas, the fund made low-interest loans to its members which lent funds to small businesses meeting their lending criteria. The fund revolved twice before its dissolution. The organization was originally built upon a felt-need of a large grant-making organization in the region to connect with others for sharing funds and finding projects to sponsor. At its core, the organization is founded on the importance of collaborative practice and seeks to leverage the momentum of regional efforts of both state and federal governments to connect with smaller organizations for community outcomes.

Interviewee J, a founding member of the association, has seen it go through many iterations since its founding in 1999. In its early years, Nonprofit E served as a solution to a problem several regionally associated CDFIs were finding. Despite continued government funding, the CDFIs were having a hard time finding projects to receive allocated funds. At the same time, small CDFIs in Appalachian Kentucky were experiencing an overwhelming number of requests and struggling to find the necessary funding for project requests. At this point, Nonprofit E was created as a collective effort of the six regional CDFIs and the fund was established to support the projects of smaller organizations in the rural areas of Kentucky. One significant benefit of this project was the unlocking of significant matching funds at a federal level. As the organizations gave to the fund, it was matched by federal programming and used to have greater impact with the eventual recipients in smaller community nonprofits.

One of the most significant things about the organization's early years is the emphasis on collaborative practice. Interviewee J described the early collaboration as exciting as organizations sat around the table to share felt needs, common problems, and common solutions. One of the best drivers of the collaborative framework was a diversity of leadership represented. The large CDFIs brought C-suite executives to the table, but also carefully brought in members of the next level of the organization. Interviewee J shared that in his experience, this drove the future of collaboration. Even as they left the table with clear vision, the inclusion of some of the other members of management sent a message of support, buy-in, and autonomy to pursue collaborative outcomes that would have been hindered if all decisions had to be made at the C-suite level.

By strategically including other members of management, strategic execution was easier because the players at the level of execution had already been included and caught common

vision. This draws out the theme of visionary leadership in collaborative practice. Because the leadership wanted to include multiple levels of the organization there were more players and room for more organic growth of collaborative partnerships. The emphasis on a collaborative environment further highlights themes previously discussed regarding the importance of leadership's dispositions and competencies in navigating change through collaborative practice (Shumate et al., 2018).

These elements cultivated an evolution from simply sharing financial resources to a more collaborative approach to many areas of the organizations. Specific outcomes were an overall culture of information sharing and technical assistance. As organizations in the alliance found best practices, they freely shared ideas and resources with other members. They also actively sought to collaborate for professional development and training opportunities to see all organizations in the alliance better positioned for success. Again, the research points to a mindset that see beyond the individual organizations to an active role in shaping community outcomes.

Representation and Visualization of the Data

Figure 2

Frequency of Major Themes by Nonprofit

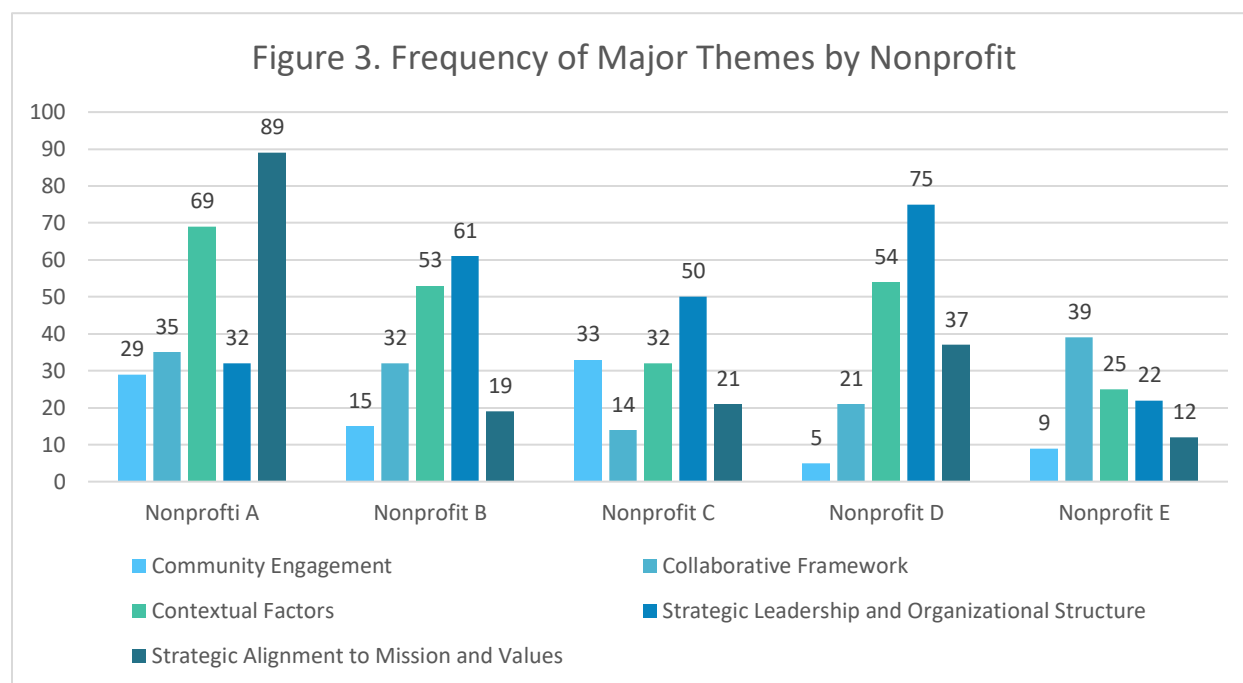


Figure 2 provides a visual representation of themes and their frequencies across interviews with each nonprofit organization. As noted from the representation, each major theme is represented to a degree in each nonprofit. The consistency of themes across organizations points to the validity of the themes. Each organization had specific themes that were more prevalent than other themes. In Nonprofit A the high frequency of mission and values is especially noteworthy as this major theme includes the subtheme of faith, a significant piece of the discussion of findings for Nonprofit A.

Another noteworthy emphasis is the prevalence of nonprofit leadership and structure in organizations B, C, D, and E. Each of these organizations placed heavy emphasis on the role of organizational leadership, especially expertise and network as being crucial for collaborative success. These themes are discussed in greater detail in the discussion of themes above.

Relationship to Findings

The data collected in this study points to a deeper understanding of the research problem and further informs understanding of the questions presented in the research. In most instances, the data serves to reinforce ideas from the literature review and contextualize the themes in greater detail in the rural nonprofit environment. However, in some instances the data collected highlights divergent or incomplete themes from the literature. All these elements in the data analysis develop a deeper understanding of the unique challenges facing rural nonprofits and the role of collaboration in improving nonprofit outcomes. This study can be used to develop future research in these areas and inform recommendations for better nonprofit practice.

The Research Questions

The data collected were based upon the three research questions:

RQ1. How do rural nonprofits use collaboration with other nonprofits, for-profit organizations, and government agencies?

RQ2. What unique challenges exist for collaboration in rural nonprofits?

RQ3. How can rural nonprofits use collaboration to improve organizational outcomes?

RQ1. Many of the themes in the data were related to RQ1. Specific themes introduced through the interviews related to how organizations collaborate with other sectors included the themes of cross-sector collaboration, specialized skills of collaborative partners, and the differences between large and small organizations. Several key elements related to cross-sector collaboration include the unique challenges of competing interests across sectors. Perhaps the most significant data point illustrating this issue is the concerns expressed during the interviews with Nonprofit B. Although the federal government offers the greatest level of funding, it also presents the most prohibitive framework. Due to the rigidity of government funding requests,

many rural nonprofits are excluded and therefore unable to participate in this form of cross-sector collaboration.

At the same time, there were many benefits and instances demonstrating the prevalence of cross-sector collaboration. Nonprofit A demonstrated a very successful collaboration with the state level government in establishing its partnership with Kentucky Cabinet of Health and Safety to offer telehealth options statewide through health departments. Another striking instance of successful cross-sector collaboration is Nonprofit C's strong relationship with city and county government. Subject E went so far to say that perhaps this was an advantage of being a rural nonprofit. Where governments in more urban areas might feel wary of collaborating with a faith-based organization, the rural government authorities appeared to embrace it. The ideas found in this section of the research support some of the concerns highlighted by Brandsen and Pape (2015) at a federal level while opening new considerations for how these constraints might be less at a local government level as demonstrated in the cases.

Further, other nonprofits with overlapping values and missions initiated collaborative projects to provide Nonprofit C with vital resources to expand services to children in the ministry. Although these organizations had no religious affiliation and might not be a typical consideration for collaboration, the synergy of being in the same sector with similar outcomes led to collaborative efforts. Several of the organizations pointed to the prevalence of private for-profit businesses contributing through donations, promotions, or in-kind services. Perhaps one of the more underutilized sectors of the environment, for-profit organizations can be engaged in collaborative efforts with relative ease compared to the organizational structure of government programs. A strong example of this was discussed in the leveraging of board connections to a private business to support fundraising through roundup donations for Nonprofit D.

RQ2. The challenges facing rural nonprofits are significant and diverse. One of the greatest challenges in both literature and the study is the issue of human capital. Almost every organization expressed instances where human capital was unable to meet demand further emphasizing the literature's theme of limited human capital as a barrier to collaboration (Zeimers et al., 2019) and threat to nonprofit sustainability (Lee & Woronkiewicz, 2018). In some organizations this meant a lack of quality board members and volunteers. For others, it meant a lack of employees to execute collaborative strategies.

One of the strongest examples was presented in the interview with Interviewee B from Nonprofit A discussing the challenges of recruiting and retaining quality healthcare providers. Interviewee B described the issue of convincing providers to take lower pay for more difficult work environments and less infrastructure for work-life balance. Ultimately, Interviewee B recommends a deep understanding and passion for the mission as the best principle for overcoming lack of human capital. In many senses, this idea came out in the research.

Interviewee D from Nonprofit B expressed concerns that the negative narrative surrounding rural Appalachia served as a barrier to human capital. These concerns echo the emphasis in the literature on barriers in human capital facing rural nonprofits (Kim & Peng, 2018). Likewise, Interviewee C cited turbulence in the political environment as contributing to limited human capital in divested rural communities.

All these points highlight the theme of limited human capital and compounding issues exacerbating the issue in the context of rural nonprofits. However, the pushback against negative narratives surrounding rural nonprofits challenges the theme of rural nonprofits being especially at risk for retaining human capital in (Florini & Pauli, 2018). The interviews with Nonprofit B seem to suggest the need to refrain from using this negative framework as it can keep human

capital out of the area, Interviewee D described this phenomenon saying, “there’s a narrative about rural areas... there’s nothing for people in Eastern Kentucky... that’s not necessarily true right... we find impact stories... so that they know there are possibilities here.”

In addition to these concerns, other issues exist, including negative narratives surrounding constituents, skepticism about nonprofit efficacy, political polarization, and lack of accurate information. The lack of accurate information was especially problematic during COVID for Nonprofit A. Both members interviewed expressed how misinformation drove disillusionment with healthcare and dissonance between providers and their patients. Each of these issues is significant in understanding challenges facing rural nonprofits. Another significant theme discovered related to challenges in rural contexts was the prevalence of food and housing insecurities. Nonprofit C provided several examples of the environmental considerations such as the opioid pandemic, poverty, and lack of access to assistance programs as driving further wedges between individuals in need and the available resources. These issues overlap into collaborative partnerships by creating an overwhelmed state in which services cannot meet demand or proactively establish partnerships due to the severity and urgency of problems faced in rural communities.

RQ3. Despite the challenges to collaboration presented in the data collected, several clear best practices emerged. One of the most significant best practices was leveraging the influence of organizational leaders. This theme presented itself in various ways. First, the personal network of board members or executive leadership proved to be a significant driver of collaborative success. One of the clearest instances of this was the success of Nonprofit C in connecting with community leaders and overcoming previously negative connotations regarding the nonprofit and forging meaningful partnerships with local government and other nonprofits in the

community. Another example of successfully leveraging the influence of leadership was the creation of Nonprofit D.

The founder recognized opportunities to leverage influence from publications and other promotions to further his personal mission of raising awareness and advocacy surrounding individuals with disabilities. The result is a diverse board focused on establishing meaningful and lasting partnerships to further the organization's mission. Additional benefits of leveraging influence were drawn out through board members' use of business opportunities to raise additional funding for the nonprofit organization through connections to the private for-profit sector.

Another significant best practice that was not anticipated is the role of information sharing. The successes of Nonprofit E especially illustrate how organizations that emphasize transparency and collaborative effort over organizational levels and division of information are more prepared to engage in meaningful collaboration. Other significant contributions to best practices include an emphasis on the role of visionary leadership and needs-based innovation. Several instances throughout the data point to a solutions-based approach to identifying collaborative opportunities.

As discussed in depth with Nonprofit A, starting with a problem that the organization does not have the current capacity to address itself, can be an excellent point for evaluating possible collaborative solutions. These ideas strongly reinforce the theme of innovative approaches to capacity and opportunities as discussed in the literature (Madden, 2017). A final recommendation based on the findings for RQ3 is the importance of a clearly defined mission and personal buy-in of leadership. Particularly in faith-based rural nonprofits, there appears to be a significant advantage in emphasizing an authentically Christian approach to all of work.

Conceptual Framework

The three main pillars of the conceptual framework provided an effective method for exploring the research questions. These pillars served as a helpful starting point in interviews and helped develop directions under each of the research questions. In some ways, however, there were directions within the data collection that demonstrated how more pillars might have been helpful for exploring the research questions at length. Ultimately, a better conceptual framework would have mirrored the major themes discovered as present in the earlier discussion of themes discovered.

An emphasis on collaboration across sectors was helpful for drawing out the status of collaboration. The themes presented under this point were helpful. In retrospect, a more comprehensive theme such as the major theme from the themes in the above discussion would have focused on the nature of collaborative relationships. This would have brought in more than simply the sectors and explored more dealing with the motivations behind collaboration and structures associated, in addition to the sectors.

Regarding the pillar of challenges present in the rural nonprofit collaboration context, this was a helpful category for exploring unique challenges to the rural nonprofit collaboration approach. However, a more helpful approach as outlined in the themes discovered would have potentially split the challenges question into three parts, exploring organizational factors, environmental factors, and factors dealing with constituents of the nonprofit. These all still fall under research question two and the major theme of exploring challenges in rural nonprofit collaboration but help highlight parts of the research exploration that might be missed within the originally presented conceptual framework.

The final pillar, best practices in nonprofit collaboration appeared to be the most incomplete nodule of the conceptual framework. Although the subthemes presented were overall in line with the findings of the research, their organization potentially hindered further prompts in the data collection. Specifically, having further defined pillars for strategic alignment of missions and values, strategic leadership and organizational structure, collaborative framework, community engagement, and contextual factors could have provided further insight during the data collection phase. The conceptual framework proved effective for the execution of research, and research-informed updates could provide a stronger conceptual framework for further study.

Anticipated Themes

In most cases, the conceptual framework provided a strong foundation for the data collected in the research. Most of the themes presented in Figure 1 were corroborated by the findings of the research. Specifically, the emphasis of the three main research questions and categories, nature of current collaboration, challenges to collaboration, and current best practices, proved to be helpful for analyzing the data and exploring the themes.

Significant themes in the conceptual framework that were prevalent in the data collected include the differences of cross-sector collaboration in the current practices, challenges of human capital and access to resources in the exploration of challenges, and leadership development, length of collaborative partnership, networking, and compatibility in the best practices discussion. Elements from the conceptual framework not presented in the research included measuring social value, measuring cost of collaboration, and contingency. However, the omission of these themes in this research does not necessarily exclude them from further exploration in future research or mean they are not present in the organizations studied, simply that they were not at the forefront of findings.

Based on the findings and the conceptual framework, possible ways to update the framework for future studies would include a greater emphasis on human capital and how to cultivate it. Additional elements that were not present in the framework that the research indicates would have been helpful are a greater emphasis on the role of needs-driven innovation and a higher-level of exploration of the role of leadership in fostering collaborative opportunities. Another helpful adjustment to the conceptual framework would have included a further delineation of themes such as “contextual” into both the positive and negative elements of the rural environment. Additionally, the research points to a higher emphasis on the role of information sharing, community focus, and the role of individual influence in rural settings.

The Literature

Overall, the literature provided a strong foundation for beginning the research. As discussed in the research problem, the literature provided significant information nonprofit structures and collaborative practice, along with adequate information about rural settings. However, the literature was very limited in perspectives that examined the overlap of collaborative practice in rural nonprofits. Therefore, themes from the literature review were individually included and examined. The research affirmed many of these themes further defining their relationships in the context of collaboration in rural nonprofits. Although most themes from the literature review were present to some degree, the data analysis helps define more specific relationships, add new themes, and redirect themes that are not applicable in the rural nonprofit environment.

Most of the research findings serve to reinforce themes found in the literature review. Similarities included emphases on the importance of leadership and organizational structure (Jaskyte, 2018), organizational capacity (Shumate et al., 2018) and human capital (Lee &

Woronkowicz, 2018), and challenges to access due to location or infrastructure in rural settings (MacDonald et al., 2019). Themes of the literature review that did not present prominently in the data collection included a serious barrier in technology (Hwang, 2017). Most organizations shared relative success in securing reliable technology. Especially in the wake of COVID several organizations found opportunities to further leverage technology.

One distinct technological issue alluded to in the literature review but further developed in the research is the reality of limited phone service (Hwang, 2017). Although most organizations in rural Appalachia have reliable internet networks, phone service can be limited to certain geographic regions complicating issues of remote work or working with partners outside of a reasonable driving distance. A significant theme in the literature that was refuted on multiple accounts was an increased barrier to information sharing in rural contexts (Baumber et al., 2018). The research actually pointed to heightened willingness to share information as expressed in the Nonprofit E's innovative network of sharing information and resources for economic development, along with the example of Nonprofit A sharing vital information to help partners create new services in the region and several smaller examples throughout the research.

Another theme introduced through the research that was not readily apparent in the literature was the relative geographic difficulties of traveling the region. Other themes briefly explored in the literature, but prominent in the research, include perceptions of rural regions, lack of access to assistance programs, and economic history of the region. All these factors were prominent in the research and had significant implications for collaborative practices.

The Research Problem

The research problem of limited rural nonprofit collaboration resulting in lower performance nonprofits is addressed throughout the data collection and analysis. The findings of

the analysis point to some of the known collaborative efforts in the region along with challenges face collaborative efforts and best practices that have been used to overcome challenges. The findings of the study further inform the research problem in many ways, but some of the most significant findings are discussed in this section. Perhaps the most significant finding in addressing the research problem is an emphasis on collaboratively minded leadership.

In all cases of the organizations studied, leaders had a mindset that extended beyond the organization itself. Driven by outcomes of the nonprofit and measurable community impact, leaders conducted themselves and their organizations in the ways most consistent with collective outcomes. In part, this can be a paradigm shifting approach to rural nonprofit collaboration. Rather than starting with identifying partners and establishing comprehensive collaborative practices, organizations can examine their leaderships' disposition towards collaborative opportunities, vision for needs-based innovations, and personal influence and network. Emphasizing these elements of organizational leadership and practice provide helpful insights for the research problem and can drive more long-term focused collaborative efforts such as those experienced in Nonprofit E.

Another important finding to further develop as an application to the research problem is the prevalence of defining social value creation through the lens of increasing the outcomes of collaborative partners. By measuring collaborative goals and outcomes, this research can serve to decrease some of the uncertainty surrounding measurable social value creation as discussed in the literature review. Through future applications this research can serve to further address the lack of collaboration in rural nonprofits and drive increased outcomes in rural nonprofits.

Summary of the Findings

Overall, this research serves to further understand the research problem of limited collaboration in rural nonprofits through exploration of the research questions which examined current collaborative practices, challenges preventing collaboration, and best practices to inform future collaboration. Although many themes were explored at length through the data analysis, the most significant findings center on a more thorough understanding of drivers of collaborative practice, the context of rural nonprofits, and best practices to inform future endeavors in rural nonprofits. Specifically, organizations with the greatest collaborative success have leadership that define success in terms of community outcomes regardless of organizational credit, have robust networks and personal influence, and leverage the resources of other organizations to address needs the organization cannot meet itself. In addition to the leadership qualities discovered, the research provides a deeper understanding of the challenges unique to Appalachia with a positive discussion of ways to overcome challenges and leverage strengths of the region. Finally, the research contributes a more thorough understanding of major themes surrounding the research problem, providing the opportunity for future research.

Overview of the Study

A multiple case studies methodology was used to investigate the problem of limited collaboration in rural nonprofits and the effect of limited collaboration on rural nonprofit outcomes. Throughout the course of the study, the literature was consulted to identify themes in rural nonprofit collaboration. The literature reviewed helped shape three research questions dealing with the current practices of rural nonprofits surrounding collaboration, barriers preventing collaboration, and recommendations for best practices emerging from the research. Ultimately, five organizations were selected for further investigation through interviews. Each

organization presented unique factors of size, service focus, and structure. All of the nonprofits met the researcher's definition of rural, operating in the Appalachian region with primary constituents being located outside of a metropolitan area. Fields represented included social work, ministry, healthcare, and economic development.

In order to further increase the reliability and validity of the findings, the research design included multiple interviewees from each organization. Upon collection of the interview data, it was transcribed using MaxQDA software and coded into major themes. Five major themes arose from the research and were further coded through subthemes. The presentation of findings section of the research paper included the analysis of major themes and subthemes according to their frequency, along with comparisons to the anticipated themes from the conceptual framework built upon the literature review. This section of the dissertation aims to apply the findings of the study to current business practice, with specific emphasis on the ways rural nonprofits can leverage the findings. Other items discussed in this section include recommendations for further study, personal and professional outcomes of the study, and considerations from the biblical worldview.

Applications to Professional Practice

The research yielded several themes and outcomes that can inform business practice. Major themes discovered to apply in both general business practice and rural nonprofits include an increased emphasis on organizational leadership and collaborative disposition. Other recommendations for application include the integration of faith into business practice and removal of barriers to collaboration. Specific strategies for application are addressed in the final part of the discussion.

Improving General Business Practice. Several significant themes emerged to further inform general business practice through the exploration of nonprofit collaborative practices. One significant theme was the importance of visionary leadership under the major theme of strategic leadership and organizational structure. Organizations in the study exhibited leadership that sought creative solutions to problems in the business environment. This visionary outlook included seeking to expand services offered by the organization by examining the business environment and identifying unmet needs. Leadership in the organizations studied identified both internal and external factors contributing to the unmet needs, then sought to creatively approach problems by expanding organizational capacity through the resources of other organizations. This practice highlights the value and potential of collaboration.

Through visionary leadership, organizations can identify organizations with the existing resources to execute strategic vision. Adopting a collaborative mindset as a leader allows organizations to approach problems in collaborative, needs-driven frameworks as opposed to the static opportunities from relying upon a single organization's resources. This approach allowed the organizations in the study to address problems in the business environment more proactively and plan future collaborative efforts. In several cases, it appeared that collaboration unlocked unseen potential of the organization and drove new opportunities for revenue and outreach that led to increased agility in a changing business environment.

This proved to be especially true in the rapidly changing environment surrounding COVID. Several of the organizations managed to leverage advancements of others to help sustain during the uncertain economic landscape during the first 2 years of the pandemic. Through visionary leadership and a focus on collaboration, organizations in the study

demonstrated the ability to improve both social value creation through expanded programs and increased revenue through programs offered in collaboration with other organizations.

Another important way the study informs general business practice is an increased emphasis on collaboratively focused environments. The organizations experiencing the most success in collaborative outcomes emphasized organizational cultures with information sharing and low power distances. By establishing settings where community focused outcomes are a priority, organizations in the study were able to freely share information with partners and seek creative solutions to common issues. The emphasis on a collaborative environment was a driving factor for several of the larger organizations in the study.

They saw the potential to increase the reach of their organizations by empowering smaller organizations already serving in the communities of impact. In general business practice, this can inform a strategy of differentiation and specialization. By leveraging the specializations of already existing partners, organizations can bypass prohibitive barriers to entry and other resource-intensive elements of engaging new projects.

Final implications for business practice include a greater emphasis on leveraging specialized experience, knowledge, skills, and networks of organizational leaders. Organizations are largely shaped by their leadership. Several of the organizations in the study expressed significant changes that occurred when there were changes in executive leadership and board structure. Learning to embrace these changes allowed organizations to navigate changes in the environment concurrent with the organizational changes. Leveraging the unique characteristics of leadership can drive organizations in new directions through collaboration and otherwise. Safeguards against mission drift are necessary, but there is significant potential to allow leadership to drive new directions.

Examples throughout the study including unique shared experiences in the boards along with networks and specialized skills of leadership that created new opportunities for increased reach in services, scope of services, and sustainability through program revenues and donations. All these benefits point to the necessity of leveraging human capital according to the unique giftings of a leadership team. There is not a one-size fits all for collaborative practice or business success, but adopting dispositions of flexibility, vision, and collaboration can prove incredibly beneficial to navigating various internal and external pressures.

Potential Application Strategies. The results of the study can be leveraged to help rural nonprofits and other organizations seeking increased collaborative outcomes evaluate their current practices and identify strategies for further collaborative success. Based on the findings of this research, a comprehensive approach to application strategies could include an assessment of each of the five major themes identified and mapping action steps based on the current status of each area. A more detailed approach to this application, and even a possible next step for research, would be creating an assessment based on the subthemes of each major theme. Upon completion of this assessment, organizations could identify actionable items under each area to improve collaborative disposition, identify collaborative partners, and measure collaborative outcomes.

Considering the prevalence of leadership and organizational competencies found in the study, this would be a helpful starting point for assessing strategies to implement findings of the research. Organizations could evaluate their leaderships' current level of collaborative disposition, capacity, and practices. Specific themes to explore more deeply in this phase of strategic implementation would be considering the competencies of leadership, leadership structure, shared experiences, attitudes towards other organizations, and network of possible

connections for collaboration. Upon identifying strengths and weaknesses, measurable steps could be established for implementation of leadership practices that facilitate more effective collaboration. Through this increased emphasis on strategic leadership and organizational structure, rural nonprofits implementing elements of this research could evaluate areas for improvement and expand collaborative capacity.

A close second is the role of strategic alignment of mission, vision, and values. Organizations can review their current collaborative practices and programs to determine where alignment is strongest along with any potential misalignments. Upon reviewing these elements organizations can determine any collaborative relationships to realign, leverage further, or eliminate based on any needs revealed in the assessment. Beyond this element, organizations can also review their missions to determine any ways their mission is being unfulfilled, or less than full potential, that could be addressed in collaborative practice with organizations suited to help fulfil the mission.

Next organizations could consider current factors of the environment surrounding their organization. This evaluation would include reviewing current unmet needs in both the organization and its market to determine what needs are able to be met by the organization and what can be accomplished through collaborative practice. In navigating this element of the assessment process, there is also the opportunity to identify resources that the organization or service area is lacking that might be available through a more established network or service. Identifying the needs and infrastructural issues of their region, organizations can further position themselves for collaborative success.

A major element of the research that was fairly limited in the literature was the role of communities in collaborative practice. Organizations can use this phase of strategic application

to identify specific strengths, weaknesses, attitudes, narratives, and resources of their communities. A SWOT analysis of community aspects might even be appropriate at this stage in addition to bringing in community members for feedback on current programs as well as unmet needs. Each of these factors can help identify areas where community involvement could be leveraged to improve collaborative practices. As a major theme discovered in this study, further exploring community involvement in identifying and defining collaborative outcomes could be a significant piece of strategic implementation.

Finally, organizations can begin to evaluate their collaborative frameworks. This process would start with any existing collaborative partnerships, evaluating outcomes, alignment, goals, and unique factors within the discussed themes contributing to the level of success in the collaborative practices. Through the evaluation of these factors, organizations can begin to leverage best practices identified in this research to determine necessary strategic moves to adopt a collaborative framework positioned for success based on available resources in collaborative relationships and elements pertaining to the nature of collaborative agreements. Defining a clear collaborative framework can help organizations develop a consistent approach to collaborative practice for increased focus, sustainability, and social value creation in collaborative relationships.

Upon completing the assessment for strategic practices surrounding collaboration, organizations can begin the process of mapping action steps to improve collaborative practices. Within each category actionable steps could be defined with measurable outcomes. Additional factors that would be important to include the strategic planning phase include member feedback in identifying action steps, measurable outcomes, and plans for evaluation. In addition to program or organization specific outcomes, it would be helpful to define social value creation

and other metrics of collaborative success beyond the financial outcomes of collaborative practice. After identifying a strategic plan, the organizations using this framework could include frequent feedback loops to evaluate effectiveness of the implementation and opportunities to continue improving outcomes through collaboration.

Summary

In conclusion of application to strategy, organizations can leverage the findings of this study to further inform business practices and application of strategy. Organizations can continue exploring the role of leadership, mission, environment, community, and partners in establishing successful collaborative practices. Other ways the study can benefit professional practice include pointing to further establishment of tools and resources to assess, identify, and implement collaborative practices in rural nonprofits.

Recommendations for Future Study

Based upon the findings of this research, there are several possible directions for future study. Diving deeper into the main themes developed in the study could yield further information about individual aspects of collaborative practice. Additionally, the prevalence of themes dealing with leadership and human capital would be significant to study further to understand how nonprofit organizations navigate these elements beyond the scope of this study which focused on collaborative practice. Ways to narrow the study for future research and testing in a quantitative study including comparative analysis between rural nonprofits and urban nonprofits on some of the specific themes, deeper exploration into collaborative dispositions based upon leadership qualities, and an exploration of unique outcomes based on organizations with a strong emphasis on faith. The research established some of the framework considerations for navigating

collaborative practices in rural nonprofits and lends itself to deeper study of rural nonprofits or other unique collaborative settings.

Reflections

The process of the research had a considerable impact on the researcher and has yielded several applications for personal growth. In addition to opportunities for personal growth and professional development throughout the dissertation, the process also yielded significant implications for the researcher's view of the biblical worldview and applications to business practice. The following discussion handles the impact of the research on the researcher along with opportunities for spiritual development through the research process.

Personal and Professional Growth

Throughout the research process the researcher was actively engaged in both personal and professional growth. First, this research expanded the researcher's understanding of the research process. Specifically, through this process there were unique opportunities to further grasp and apply concepts of research design. The most challenging piece of the research process was data collection. Through the process, the researcher grew to further understand how to effectively engage potential participants. One significant challenge personally and professionally was a change in career during the research process. This change required significant realignment of professional and academic goals. Although there were many times completing data collection due to changes in the researcher's daily routines, the end result was a deeper understanding of how to effectively plan for and accomplish professional goals. This process helped the research further understand the importance of professional boundaries and the prioritization of academic pursuits. Personally, these challenges encouraged growth in time management, perseverance, and

reliance upon the Lord. A particular way this process increased the researcher's faith was by emphasizing the importance of stewardship in academics.

Despite the unique challenges in career transition, the researcher was encouraged by colleagues, faculty, and administration to pursue godliness by properly prioritizing the academic commitments. Another significant way the research helped facilitate spiritual growth was by highlighting the importance of community. Without a strong network of believers supporting and challenging growth, the researcher would not have persisted in completion of the study. Specific ways the outcomes of the study impacted the researcher include an emphasis on faith in the workplace and the role of visionary leadership in collaborative practices. The researcher was encouraged, but surprised, by the prevalence of faith as a theme in the interview process. This challenges the researcher to dive deeper into integrating spiritual practices into leadership. Other personal growth implications included a further emphasis on vision-driven leadership.

The study revealed the proactive nature of collaborative practice further driving the researcher to consider areas of strength and weakness in personal and professional leadership. Two of the most significant outcomes for the researcher are a deeper network of other leaders in rural areas and a better understanding of making the necessary connections for collaborative success. It also increases the researcher's desire for further study, both academically, and professionally through application to the workplace.

Biblical Perspective

Implications for the biblical perspective are perhaps one of the most significant and personally applicable aspects of the study. Specifically, this study further informs the researcher's understanding of the biblical worldview and presents as an opportunity to help other leaders in nonprofits apply biblical truth in their collaborative practices and beyond. The

following discussion is not comprehensive but introduces several significant biblical themes that the research draws out.

The first significant biblical theme highlighted in the research is the Imago Dei. This theme deals with the reality of humanity as image-bearers. First discussed in Genesis 1:27, “So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God, he created them male and female.” The Imago Dei is a significant piece of the framework for understanding the purpose of being human. God specially blessed humanity as his image-bearers, “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it’” (Genesis 1:28). Despite the realities of the corruption of sin, and death that entered through it, all humanity continues as image-bearers.

Humanity’s role as image bearers has significant implications for applying the research. First, there is the reality that as image bearers with the call to fill the earth and subdue it, all humanity is in some way living out this calling. For those without the hope of Christ, and at times believers who are not walking in obedience, the distortion of sin leads to corrupted forms of fulfilling the call of humanity. Nonetheless, humanity carries on with the incredible task of demonstrating the dignity of life and creative expressions as means of reflecting the Creator. In this way, the research is significant for understanding motivations of mission and values in nonprofit work that encourage actions that further contribute to social value creation.

This longing of all humanity can be effective for driving collaboration, even if to a lesser extent for those who do not grasp or acknowledge the Imago Dei. This biblical worldview piece was especially clear in cases with Nonprofits A, C, and D. Each of these cases yielded significant support by being motivated to operate with collaborative practices for the sake of deeper serving and modeling the love of Christ to those who interact with the nonprofits.

A second significant biblical theme drawn out from the research is the idea of Christian community. With the most obvious passages supporting this theme being 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4:1-16, and Romans 12:3-8. In each of these passages there is significance on unity and the need for all members of the body of Christ to operate in humility and grace in working together for God's glory. This call for members of the body of Christ to operate for His glory should encourage Christian practitioners to consider the implications and benefits of collaborative process.

By leveraging the gifts of others, organizations can establish deeper impact in serving the Lord. This biblical theme is counterintuitive to much of business practice that would focus on organizational goals and outcomes first. However, considering the communal calling of believers, those applying the biblical worldview in collaborative practice should be more likely to consider the community impact over benefits to the individual organization. Adopting this approach can improve collaborative dispositions, encourage resource and information sharing, and inform definitions of measuring success.

A final biblically significant theme is how the research points to the gospel. Each of the interviewees expressed various hardships and limitations in their work. Although believers are called to engage the world around them, and there is the reality of redemption lived out in the life of the believer (Galatians 5:23; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12), there is the tension of the fleeting nature of this world (James 4:13-17) and the call to hope in eternal things (1 Peter 1:3-9). In the midst of all these themes, there is a call to store treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21; Matthew 13:44-46). Each of these points to the reality that life and lasting value is found in Christ alone (John 14:1-6; John 15:17).

These passages point to the reality that Christ is the only acceptable way of meeting the ultimate goal of a restored relationship with the Father (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). The organizations embracing this reality then worked from a place of Christ's finished work instead of a place of attempting to fulfill all things in the organization's mission. Embracing the ultimate hope found in Christ alone offers a far more stable framework for all things related to nonprofit work.

Summary

This section of the dissertation covers an in-depth discussion of applying the research to business practice, strategic implementation and integration of new concepts, recommendations for future study, personal and professional growth, and considerations from the biblical worldview. As a result of the study, there are several possible ways to inform general business practice and developing new systems for effective sharing of collaborative practice. The research was personally impactful on the researcher, challenging both academic and professional applications of research and emphasizing spiritual growth outcomes because of the rigor of the study. Finally, this section concludes with an exploration of biblical themes related to the study and applications to biblical

Summary of Section 3

Section 3 of the dissertation combines all elements regarding data collection and analysis along with applications to current practices and future opportunities. A significant portion of Section 3 is an emphasis on the presentation of findings with analysis and interpretations. In addition to establishing the outcomes of the research there are other elements explaining the importance of the research and its applications to business practice. There is also a portion dealing with how the data collected compares to the literature informing both conforming and

diverging views based on the limited research about rural nonprofits. Finally, Section 3 includes a significant discussion of personal outcomes of the researcher and applications of the biblical worldview in every field.

Summary and Study Conclusions

The research project, a Multiple Case Studies Review of Rural Nonprofit Collaboration, was designed to explore the research problem of limited collaboration and collaborative outcomes in rural nonprofits. Specifically, the study examined current collaborative practices of rural nonprofits, barriers to rural nonprofit collaboration, and best practices to further develop and encourage collaboration in rural nonprofits. A gap in the literature was identified in the relatively large amount of research on collaborative practice generally, with a heavier emphasis on large and urban nonprofits, and some research on the rural context, but no significant research examining collaborative practice in rural nonprofits. Considering the existing body of research, a conceptual framework was developed to identify anticipated themes.

The research outcomes indicate that although the findings were most consistent with the literature, some of the grouping of themes would have been helpful to approach differently in the conceptual framework. Additionally, the research helped identify where rural nonprofits require greater attention to themes in the literature, and where themes in the research findings deviated from the literature. Significantly, there was a heavy emphasis on the role of leadership in collaborative practice opening opportunities for future research and business application. Other themes and significant findings are addressed throughout the presentation of findings. Future study in collaborative practices of rural nonprofits can further address the research problem and improve rural nonprofit outcomes and provide opportunities to further contribute to general business practice.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

The purpose of this interview was to explore collaborative practices in your organization. Please answer each question to the best of your ability. Use specific examples and details in your responses. If you do not understand a question or would like to explore a question further, please let the interviewer know.

RQ1: How would you describe collaboration in your organization?

Does your organization collaborate with other nonprofits?

Does your organization collaborate with for-profits?

Does your organization collaborate with government entities?

What is your role in collaboration?

Who is responsible for facilitating collaborative efforts in your organization?

What does your organization do well in collaboration?

Can you provide examples of times your organization has collaborated with other organizations?

Would you describe the collaboration with other organizations as formal or informal? Why?

RQ2: What challenges to collaboration exist in your organization?

How does your organization measure collaborative success?

Does your organization lack critical resources for effective collaboration? If yes, explain.

Are there ever disagreements between collaborating organizations? If yes, explain. If no, give examples: misalignment, structural, etc.

Does your organization collaborate for long-term goals with long-term partners? If yes, explain.

If no, can you explain the nature of your short-term collaboration?

What is the greatest cost of collaboration?

What is the greatest challenge in your organization's collaborative model?

How is technology used in your organization's collaborative strategy?

RQ3: How could your organization increase collaborative effectiveness?

Does your organization collaborate for resources or outcomes? Explain.

Are there any leadership improvements that could improve collaborative success?

How does your organization find collaborative partners?

How could your organization find more collaborative partners?

Does your organization use a standard framework for finding compatible partners?

What are the long-term goals of collaboration?

What is the ideal length for collaboration?

Appendix B: Recruitment Procedures

Phone Script:

Introduction

I am calling as an independent researcher working on a doctoral dissertation. Would your organization be interested in participating in this nonpartisan research? The aim of this research is to develop a deeper understanding of current collaborative practices in rural nonprofits to establish a framework for more effective future collaboration. Your organization provides a unique perspective on rural nonprofits and could help develop a greater understanding of nonprofit collaboration.

Methodology

The study would be conducted in three parts with three unique groups from your organization. One group of participants would be organizational employees, including the executive director and another employee. A second group would consist of two board members. The final group would be two organizational volunteers. Each group would be asked to complete three phases of the research project, a pre-interview reflection, an interview, and a post-interview observation log.

Closing

Please let me know if this is a project your organization would be interested in contributing to, and I will be glad to provide additional details. If you are interested, I will send the participation registration and consent process.

Email Inquiry:

Would your organization consider participating in a nonpartisan research project focused on exploring collaborative practices in rural areas? This research project aims to develop a

deeper understanding of current practices in rural nonprofit collaboration and barriers faced in collaboration, to develop possible best practices for more effective rural nonprofit collaboration. If you are interested in this project, it would consist of three participant groups. First, we would like your executive director and another employee to provide input. The second group would include two board members. In the final participant group, we would want to contact two organizational volunteers. Each group would be asked to participate in three parts of the study: a pre-interview log, a 30-minute recorded interview, and a 2-week post-interview observation log.

Please review the attached registration and consent form and return it if you are interested in participation. I am glad to provide additional details upon request.

Appendix C: IRB Approval

4/2/24, 8:48 PM

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

<https://outlook.office.com/mail/id/AAQkAGRhNzEyNTRILTl2ZjYtNGRIYS1hZTMwLWVjOTNhMTNINDQwZQAQAMP%2B3buYRERBunallYOfz%2FI%3D> Page 1 of 2

IRB-FY20-21-455 - Initial: Initial - Exempt

irb@liberty.edu <irb@liberty.edu>

Tue 3/2/2021 4:36 PM

To: Ratliff, Jacob <xxxxxxxxedu>; Quatro, Scott A (School of Business) <xxxxxx@liberty.edu>

March 2, 2021

Jacob Ratliff Scott Quatro

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-455 A MULTIPLE CASE STUDIES REVIEW OF COLLABORATION IN RURAL NONPROFITS

Dear Jacob Ratliff, Scott Quatro:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46: 101(b):

Category 2. (iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

Appendix D: Visual Representation of Themes

Overarching Theme	Times Present in Data	Subthemes (# of occurrences)
Mission and Values	178	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith (70) • Organizational Focus on Mission (58) • Mission and Values Alignment with Collaborative Partners (50)
Nature of the Nonprofit and its Leaders	211	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational and Operation Factors (57) ○ Organizational Structure (18) ○ Organizational Culture (11) ○ Organizational Trust (10) ○ Board Structure (7) ○ Volunteers (6) ○ Autonomy of Organizational Members and Collaborative Partners (4) ○ Strategic Execution (1) • Leadership (154) ○ Network (61) ○ Personal Influence of Leaders (29) ○ Visionary Leadership (22) ○ Shared Experience (15) ○ Specialized Skills of Leaders (11) ○ Public Perception of Leaders (7) ○ Specialized Experience of Leaders (7) ○ Values of Leaders (2)
Nature of Collaborative Relationships	143	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs-driven innovation (33) • Leveraging Resources and Infrastructure of Larger Organizations (30) • Collaborative Accountability (19)

Overarching Theme	Times Present in Data	Subthemes (# of occurrences)
Community Engagement	128	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialized Skill or Knowledge of Collaborative Partners (16) • Length of Collaboration (12) • Risks of Collaboration (12) • Large vs Small Nonprofit Overheads (9) • Community Connections and Awareness (74) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Public Image of the Nonprofit (28) ○ Name Recognition of the Nonprofit (5) • Community Involvement and Impact (43) • Constituents of the Nonprofit (11)
Environmental Considerations	223	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers to Change in Rural Settings (31) • Cross-Sector Considerations (29) • Human Capital (28) • COVID (25) • Financial Constraints of Small Nonprofits (18) • Lack of Access in Rural Regions (18) • Changes in Business Environment (13) • Cross-cultural Considerations (13) • Regional Collaboration Efforts (11) • Lack of Infrastructure (10) • Leveraging Technology (10) • Financial Limitations in Rural Regions (7)

Overarching Theme	Times Present in Data	Subthemes (# of occurrences)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Negative Narratives of Nonprofit Work (5)• Stigma Surrounding Rural Contexts (3)• Benefits of the Rural Setting (1)