

Opinion



Looking for strategic opportunities

Progress depends on targeted investment

North Carolina has enjoyed a long tradition of collaboration among government, business and the nonprofit sector. Each of the three sectors, however, can be a reluctant partner of the others. That's quite apparent today, with government walking away from its traditional role of supporting social services, business consolidating and nonprofits growing wary of politicians and business executives who have taken to singing the praises of voluntarism — often in place of dollars.

As a result, the collaboration on which much of our state's progress has been built is at risk of deteriorating.

All involved should fight hard to ensure not only that the partnership does not come apart, but that it gets stronger. The importance of

deepening the strategic alliances in our state is put in sharp

focus in a new report by the North Carolina Progress Board. To sustain the economic and social progress we have enjoyed for a generation, the report says, North Carolinians will have to make even more efficient use of our resources to meet the most critical issues facing our state.

The report recommends 12 broad goals for the four biggest issues the state faces — building a prosperous economy, improving the lives of children and families, preserving a sustainable environment and providing quality education for all North Carolinians. The report also sets precise targets for meeting those goals

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and identifies indicators to measure progress toward

reaching the targets.

At a time when foundations, corporate funders and state and local officials are taking a hard look at how to put their dollars to work, the Progress Board has offered a carefully designed investment guide. Keeping North Carolina's momentum, the board says, depends on targeting available resources strategically to address our most pressing needs.

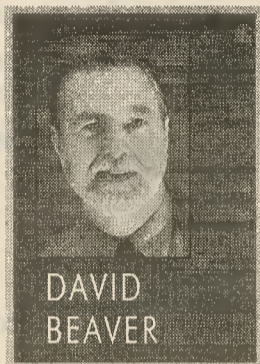
The strength of our democracy lies in the freedom of individuals and groups to try their own hand at solving problems. In North Carolina, individuals and organizations have

taken that opportunity one step further and formed strategic alliances that marshal limited resources.

Now, with resources becoming increasingly tough to find, North Carolinians have a valuable map to help guide us into the 21st century. The Progress Board has taken a hard look at our state, identified the toughest challenges we face and set goals for overcoming those challenges. In deciding how to direct their resources, funding organizations, public officials and individual donors can use the recommendations of the Progress Board to ensure that North Carolina continues to be a state in which progress is a reflection of informed planning and strategic alliances.

Tapping community resources

Nonprofit media co-ops could fill big gap



DAVID BEAVER

The incredible range of the nonprofit family of services stretches from soup kitchens to art museums.

Current cutbacks in government funding and the new frugality of the business world have caused widespread belt-tightening and shortages throughout our communities.

If you wanted to assist this broad spectrum of activities and services — short of the unrealistic prospect of replacing this dwindling funding — what would and could you do? According to a 1989 survey of the directors of all the public service organizations in Wake County, you might think about helping them communicate.

The survey showed, with startling clarity, the failure of an entire community's nonprofit services to adequately communicate their programs to their surrounding community.

When measured in dollars, the agencies estimated that if solved by their conventional methods and funded by diverting money from their primary programs, the solution

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of the largest unaddressed social service problems in the U.S.

The Wake survey was sent to 325 agencies, and slightly more than half responded. Among the findings:

- Eighty-three percent of the agencies said improving public communication was the most important requirement for improving public service in the county.

- Nonprofits' satisfaction at their ability to use selected media skills fell short by 35 percent of their perceived need to use those skills.

- Nonprofits' actual ability to get feature stories into the media fell short by 76 percent of their perceived need for those stories.

- The media techniques most relied on were word-of-mouth, telephone calls and brochures.

- Nonprofits' perceived need to plan formal media programs exceeded by 103 percent their current satisfaction at their ability to create those programs.

Since 1989, conditions for nonprofit media have — if anything — worsened, despite the high-profile emergence of the Internet.

The committee that conducted the Wake survey recommended a potentially workable solution. If put into effect, that solution could help make up the widening gap, and also might produce a powerful new voice for the nonprofit community as a whole — without regulation and without new dollars. The idea is community media co-ops.

Nonprofit media co-ops are jointly owned and controlled by member nonprofits, which pool existing media tools, skills and expertise. Co-ops provide a powerful new way to start and advance nonprofit activities of every kind

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In-kind giving

A win-win situation for donors and donees

By ROLLYN TRUEBLOOD

Summer is the quiet season. Donors are on vacation and grant deadlines have long since passed. However, even if you reached your fiscal goal, you know inflation-creep and new grant rules specifying audits may inhibit next year's campaign. Have you considered all possibilities? Will your board members help?

Only the very lucky have board members who are not afraid to ask for cash donations. Several of us have clients or employment precisely because others feel intimidated. Instead, consider asking board members if they know people who work for firms struggling to succeed and might be willing to contribute an in-kind donation. Helping associates out of a jam may be easier than asking for money — and, then again, favors are reciprocal.

Undervalued or nonperforming assets are economic challenges

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struggling businesses find difficult to reconcile on balance sheets to boards of directors and stockholders. These firms rarely meet their charitable obligations, because their cash flow will not allow cash outlays, but all know that a problem gone is a problem solved.

In-kind donations allow firms to give away undervalued, non-performing or fully depreciated assets such as excess inventory, devalued real estate, obsolete equipment, slow-moving receivables, bad debts, frozen currencies or excess manufacturing capacity. All of these are available for the asking and you do not have to have warehouses, trucks and extra labor on your payroll.

Barter firms are willing to use their networks and to convert in-kind gifts into cash and cash equivalents on your behalf. Often you only have to fill out a form identifying who has the gift and where to send the check. The barter firm finds the buyer, makes shipping & storage arrangements and collects

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Investing in nonprofit labor

Kuralt celebrated people who care

ABOUT CHANGE

enough time simply carrying out your mission.

But you face a slew of other challenges as well. You have to deal with your board and staff; run your organization or program; recruit and manage volunteers; raise money; work with the media.

It's easy to get burned out and to wonder why you're knocking yourself out when it would be a lot easier simply to take your talents and find a better-paying job in the for-profit sector.

But you don't. You got into nonprofit work because — like the people whose stories Charles Kuralt told so well — you care about people and about making a difference. You've acquired on-the-job training and learned a little bit, if not a lot, about helping your organization to be more entrepreneurial. And you know that money and job benefits are no substitute for the satisfaction that comes from helping people.

That's not to say that money and benefits don't matter. They matter a lot. One of the big issues that nonprofit boards and funders are going to have to

North Carolina native Charles Kuralt, who died July 4, gave America a priceless gift: He reminded us of who we are. In his chosen medium of television, in which hucksters cash in on blood-letting and flesh-peddling, newsman Kuralt told us simple tales of individuals who care about one another.

"We believe there is a solution to every problem," he told nonprofit leaders in Charlotte several years ago. "We are problem-solvers. . . . Even in a complex technological society, it is true that one man or woman can make a difference."

That's a lesson that people working in the nonprofit sector cannot afford to forget.

At this time of year, in what many people refer to as the "dog days," it's easy to lose sight of what led us into nonprofit work. Summer can be oppressively hot, with relief nowhere in sight. Work is tough, and seemingly thankless and endless.

If you work in the nonprofit sector, all year can seem like the dog days — with the exception of the heat. You're underpaid, overworked and juggling more tasks than you care to think about. Your organization's mission is to deal with the most pressing needs in your community, and you have a tough-

confront — and soon — is the big gap between the compensation offered by the nonprofit sector and the business sector. The nonprofit sector, which is society's research-and-development arm, also is a kind of farm system that produces skilled leaders but can't keep them on the farm. Nonprofit board members and funders need to find ways to increase their investment in staff so that staff stay in the sector; infusing nonprofit work with their sense of caring.

In his signature "On the Road" reports, Charles Kuralt helped us remember who we are. Americans see problems and use common sense and know-how to find ways to solve them. We care, we figure out how to help and we make a difference.

People who devote their lives to nonprofit work also care, often at a heavy personal cost. It's up to nonprofit boards and to foundations and corporate funders to invest the resources needed to improve working conditions for people toiling in the sector. It's time to make a difference for the people who work hard to make a difference.

Todd Cohen