



Nonprofits Need to Change for Good, and the Moment Is Now

An incredibly challenging year has highlighted for nonprofits the value of authentically putting organizational egos aside, collaborating more deeply, and honestly considering mergers—and those practices need to continue.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit the United States, nonprofits—just like organizations in other sectors—scrambled not only to meet the needs of their constituents, but also to survive. At Generation Citizen, where I served as CEO through the end of December 2020 and remain on the board, we followed the protocols advised at the time. We prioritized employee health and ensured staff had what they needed to work at home, and we shifted our national civics education programming and advocacy work as much as possible to the virtual world.

But something else also happened in those first few weeks: We felt the energy to shift our organization and the broader civics education sector in a more foundational way. In conversations with other national civics education providers, we saw an appetite for real and deliberate collaboration, including joint distribution models, shared capacity and personnel, and potential mergers. After years of friendly, and not-so-friendly, competition, we glimpsed a moment to rethink the system of civics education.

I believe three elements contributed to this more-collaborative way of thinking. First, there was a real possibility that the fundraising landscape would completely alter and that the pandemic could cause a full-scale economic depression. Organizations feared that donor and public dollars would dry up. The stock market crash in mid-March 2020 contributed to this line of thinking.

Second, the disorganization of the programmatic market for many nonprofits became more apparent. In the education sector, for example, schools and caregivers needed high-quality programming, but were inundated with uncoordinated content and support. It became evident that every organization was out for itself. One funder, who was also a parent searching for high-quality academic instruction, told me he received teaching materials from so many different organizations that he didn't know where to start.

Third, the pandemic itself provoked a deep sense of organizational humility. In education, virtual classrooms became the norm overnight. The ensuing digital divide, where more-affluent students had greater access to computers and steady Internet connections than poorer students, threatened to make an already inequitable education system worse. Meanwhile, unemployment skyrocketed, and small businesses began to close all around us. It was no time to focus on individual organizational solutions when such huge, systemic problems loomed.

These new realities led to real conversations about the potential for deeper and sustained collaboration. For example, organizations in the civics education sector across the United States came together to form the Common Good Collaborative, a network of the leading programmatic providers. The collaborative aimed to create a common learning agenda for parents, explicitly providing suggested lesson plans that elevated the best of each organization's services and materials. It also began to explore the potential for future mergers, and staff members at all levels of our organizations took part.

A Return to the Status Quo

Months later, besides our pledge to collaborate more actively, nothing has fundamentally shifted in the civics education sector. The collaborative has morphed into a learning community, rather than a more ambitious project to reset the field and aggregate coordinated lesson plans for schools and teachers. In talking to teacher-training organizations and institutions like SeaChange Capital Partners, which focuses on nonprofit mergers, other nonprofits throughout the field have experienced the same.

The main reason for this return to the status quo, I believe, is that the financial sector has remained strong. A healthy stock market has kept foundation and individual dollars flowing. Indeed, the majority of nonprofits have been able to more or less stay the course by revising their pitches to emphasize their organizational responsiveness, a deeper commitment to racial equity, and relevancy in an age of crisis. There's nothing wrong with this playbook; it's what Generation Citizen used, and it's how a lot of nonprofits kept going. But in this moment of reckoning with long-standing racial and economic inequities, environmental disaster, and affective political polarization, it's not enough. Nonprofits need to do more than continue providing good services to constituents; we must fundamentally change the way we work to move the needle on enduring, systemic issues. To do this, nonprofits and philanthropists need to recognize, and seize, some of the opportunities that emerged at the onset of the pandemic:

1. Leave Organizational Egos at the Door

Humility—a term I used above—has become hackneyed in the COVID-19 era, but it was a breath of fresh air at the beginning of the pandemic. With so many organizations forced to dramatically shift their operations and think critically about finances, many were forced to move organizational egos aside, and think about how to fit into and best serve the larger public sector. Rather than being the best, the only, the biggest, sometimes by trying to do everything, nonprofits needed to do a real analysis of the particular value they provided to the world—to identify their competitive advantage—and then join forces with others to create broader and deeper impact.

At the beginning of the pandemic, members of the Common Good Collaborative gathered to map our realm of the education system, with the aim of creating a cohesive curriculum for educators and care-givers that mixed and matched the best of each organization. We determined that iCivics had the best online material. The National Constitution Center had especially effective programming focused on civics knowledge. Facing History was able to situate the current political moment in history. The Mikva Challenge could effectively train teachers en masse. And Generation Citizen had a unique ability to focus on experiential civics and equity. Rather than promoting each organization as the only entity that could provide effective civics education resources, we pledged to co-create, co-brand, and co-share the materials.

But while we hoped this effort would lead to efficient collaboration, better outreach to districts and schools, and ultimately more impact, it never really took off. Without funding to help support the collaboration and amid a host of other demands, our collective energy went elsewhere—toward maintaining, pivoting, and promoting our own organizations.

Still, by acknowledging the strengths of others and the greater good that can happen when organizations do more than fend for themselves, sector mapping and coordination efforts can succeed. The right kind of support and incentives from funders helps.

2. Collaborate Intentionally and Creatively

Organizations often talk about collaboration but fail to follow through when priorities like fundraising, team dynamics, constituent needs set in (as noted above). But thinking about collaboration in different ways, including using shared staff and

distribution models, can offer tangible and immediate benefits to all involved, as well as the broader sector.

In some cases, nonprofits hire specialized staff whose unique skill sets don't match up with year-round work. Rather than underutilizing their talents, there may be opportunities to share them with other organizations in a way that benefits the entire sector. At the beginning of the pandemic, for example, Generation Citizen had extra capacity due to a smaller-than-expected caseload, and iCivics needed curriculum expertise, so one of Generation Citizen's experts temporarily joined the iCivics team at 50 percent time. This not only saved iCivics the difficulty of hiring someone new but also gave our staff members a chance to learn from another organization and gain valuable expertise building curriculum for a different type of organization.

Shared distribution models—ones oriented to serve an array of constituent needs, rather than promote one resource at the expense of others—are another way to collaborate in a way that serves the greater good. Rather than every education nonprofit competitively pitching their offerings to the same school districts, for example, there may be opportunities to present schools, school districts, cities, and states with a menu of curricula and services from which they can pick and choose. The nonprofit High Resolves has piloted this approach with its Composer education platform. Rather than promoting only its own work, High Resolves' platform allows schools and districts to choose and blend lessons from a variety of providers.

The need for nonprofits to think creatively and be open to the possibilities of shared resources is as important now as it was at the start of the pandemic. Listening to the needs of peer organizations and supporting projects that aim to improve the workings of the sector more broadly are effective places to start.

3. Don't Be Afraid of Merging

The cultural and financial challenges associated with mergers often steer nonprofits away from them. But if organizations are serious about achieving as much impact as possible, they need to actively consider them—from a place of possibility, rather than from a sense of duty or a deficit mindset. Indeed, studies of nonprofit mergers show that they generate greater impact, expand geographic reach, and serve more constituents.

As just one example, in 2013 the arts education organization Urban Arts Partnership acquired the Manhattan New Music Project, a nonprofit doing adjacent work in a different geography. Two years prior to the merger, the Manhattan New Music Project received a prestigious Investing in Innovation grant from the US Department of Education, but it later struggled to retain funding. The merger allowed its innovative

model, which uses arts-based strategies to improve academic outcomes, to carry on after the federal grant had run out and without the high overhead the organization would have needed to find new funding.

Mergers don't need to equate to people losing jobs and ruinous cultural conflict; they can be a great tool for increasing impact and collaboration. More funders should support, rather than shy away from, mergers when there are concrete benefits to be had, and nonprofit boards should better understand when they make sense for fiscal and other reasons.

While none of these solutions is necessarily new, the pandemic has shed new light on the usefulness and possibility inherent in working together and given us the opportunity to fundamentally rethink how we operate. Let's not let this moment pass us by.

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