

**Governing Government-Nonprofit Partnerships:
Linking Governance Mechanisms to Collaboration Stages**

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Abstract

How are government-nonprofit partnerships governed when nonprofits play significant roles in financing and creating public services? This article examines the linkage between governance mechanisms and various collaboration stages of government-nonprofit partnerships. Using a multiple case design of ten government-nonprofit partnerships for public parks in major cities of the Ohio River Basin Region, four major mechanisms are identified: representing government on the nonprofit board, reaching a formal agreement, building relationships, and building leadership capacity. Several related propositions are presented to facilitate future theory testing.

Key Words

Governance, Management of services, Nonprofit organizations, Partnership, Public-private interaction.

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Introduction

Partnerships between nonprofit organizations and government agencies have received increasing attention from scholars ever since the privatization era in the 1980s (Gazley & Guo, 2015; Gray, 1989). However, with the focus on outsourcing and contracting out in the New Public Management movement (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Salamon, 1986, 1987), nonprofits are still regarded as an instrument or extension of government agencies in government-nonprofit partnerships, thus having few opportunities of participating in joint decision making with government agencies (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Gazley, 2008). Recent research in public and nonprofit management challenges this conventional wisdom that nonprofits are always the weaker actors compared to their government counterparts. Scholars found that nonprofit organizations can become powerful actors and play important roles in financing and creating public service provision (Neslon & Gazley, 2014; Schaeffer & Loveridge, 2002; Schatteman & Bingle, 2015). Nonprofits can also serve as a coordinator, facilitator, community bridger, or mission steward in government-nonprofit partnerships (Alexander & Nank, 2009; Mendel & Brudney, 2012). As the role of nonprofits continues to grow, government-nonprofit partnerships require different forms of governance and accountability (Acar, Guo, & Yang, 2008; Fyall, 2016). There is a big knowledge gap in the literature regarding how government-nonprofit partnerships are governed and how collaborative relationships change over time (Vangen, Hayer, & Cornforth, 2015).

Rooted in the literature of collaborative management and the governance of cross-sector partnerships (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Austin, 2000; Brinkerhoff, 2002; Gazley, 2008; Selden, Sowa, & Sandfort, 2006; Stone, Crosby, & Bryson, 2010; Vangen et al., 2015), this article contributes to the public administration literature through a comparative case study of the

governance practices of government-nonprofit partnerships created to support public parks in major cities of the Ohio River Basin Region. The guiding research question of this article is: *How are government-nonprofit partnerships governed when nonprofits play important roles in financing and creating public services?*¹ More specifically, this article seeks to understand how various governance mechanisms are linked to different stages of the collaborative relationships. Although the purpose of this study is not advocating for one model or one type of government-nonprofit partnerships, the benefits and advantages of integrative government-nonprofit partnerships are clearly recognized (Alexander & Nank, 2009; Austin, 2000; Brinkerhoff, 2002). By examining the presence of different governance mechanisms in multiple stages of the collaboration continuum, this article offers insights about what management and governance practices public managers need to consider when forming integrative partnerships between governments and nonprofits.

The article begins with a review of recent literature on the governance of government-nonprofit partnerships and the collaboration continuum framework. Drawing on the literature and multiple case studies of government-nonprofit partnerships for public parks, propositions about several governance mechanisms and how they play out in different stages of the collaboration continuum are presented to facilitate future theory testing. The article concludes by discussing the implications for managing government-nonprofit partnerships and future research.

Governing Government-Nonprofit Partnerships

Compared with organizational governance, the governance of partnerships is more elusive since no clear entity is in charge (Stone et al., 2010). Vangen et al. (2015) defined the governance of a collaborative partnership as the “design and use of a structure and processes that enable actors to direct, coordinate, and allocate resources for the collaboration as a whole and to account for its activities” (p. 1244). Three major governance mechanisms stand out in the literature to coordinate the partnerships: structure, processes, and the actions and perceptions of individual actors (Bryson et al., 2006; Huxham, 2003; Stone et al., 2010; Vangen et al., 2015).

Provan and Kenis (2008) provided a starting point for understanding the governance structure of inter-organizational relationships. Situated in the contracting relationships between government agencies and nonprofits, three models of network governance were developed. Participant-governed networks are governed by formal and informal interactions of members and have no separate governance entity in the network. A lead organization structure is a network which has a core organization to coordinate activities and make decisions for network members. A network administration organization structure is a network that has a separate organization formed to manage and coordinate network activities. While these governance structures set the boundary of the partnerships, they are also possible to be changed and adapted (Cornforth, Hayes, & Vangen, 2015).

Formal and informal rules about collective decision making are also crucial to the success of partnerships. These rules provide the structure for the interactions of public and nonprofit

partners, shaping the scope and incentives of participating partners. Ostrom (1990) used operation rules, policy rules, and constitutional rules to describe the multilevel institutional components of self-governance systems. Operation rules govern day to day network activities. Policy rules determine what activities are allowed in networks, and constitutional rules decide who can participate in the collective decision-making process and how collective choice rule can be changed. These multiple levels of rules play important roles in governing government-nonprofit partnerships (Stone et al., 2010, 2013).

The processes of trust building, leadership building, and conflict resolution also play important roles in governing government-nonprofit partnerships (Bryson et al., 2006; Stone et al., 2013). Trust is considered a key to the success of partnerships and it holds collaboration together (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Trust can be built through information sharing, relationship building, demonstrating competency through reaching smaller goals, and forming reliable patterns of interactions over time (Alexander & Nank, 2009; Bryson et al., 2006). In terms of leadership building, Crosby & Bryson (2005) listed sponsors and champions as two essential leadership roles an effective partnership should have. Sponsors are the players with more authority and prestige, and they will support the collaborative efforts even without participating in daily management and operation. Champions are the players who have the skills and passion for doing the actual work on the ground and keeping the collaboration going. Since there are often power imbalances in cross-sector partnerships, conflicts are often inevitable in these partnerships. Effective conflict resolution mechanisms and the strategies to equalize power among partners are crucial to the success of cross-sectoral partnerships (Bryson et al., 2006).

The actions and perceptions of partnership participants constitute the third major governance mechanism of government-nonprofit partnerships. Partners often bring different institutional logics and governance orientations to cross-sector partnerships, which shape the expectations of participating partners, and the structure and processes of collaboration (Suárez & Esparza, 2017). The incentives for collaborative arrangements are sometimes stronger for governments than nonprofits because the benefits are system-wide. Public funding, therefore, often serve as important mechanisms to create incentives for nonprofits to participate in such collaborative arrangements (Jang & Feiock, 2007). Herranz (2008) used community-based networks, entrepreneurial-based networks, and bureaucratic-based networks to describe different sector-based values and strategic orientations in multisector networks. Bryson et al. (2006) regarded collaboration members' degree of embracement of the market-based logic, the state-based logic and the democracy-based logic as essential conditions to the design and implementation of cross-sector collaboration (p. 50). More powerful actors in a partnership also often bring the dominant institutional logic to the partnership, regardless of whether they have formal leadership roles or not. In a longitudinal case study of cross-sector collaboration for neighborhood regeneration in the UK, Vangen et al. (2015) found that although the city council served as the formal lead partner, the nonprofit partner became the powerful key player by participating in multiple levels of the governance activities. In addition to the inherent institutional logics brought by members from different sectors inside the partnerships, prior interactions and shared experiences among partners also shape the governance of government-nonprofit partnerships. Positive prior collaboration experiences are likely to create trust among partners, thus increasing the intensity and effectiveness of the partnerships (Bryson et al., 2006; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Stone et al., 2010).

In sum, structure, processes, and the perceptions and actions of partners constitute the three major categories of governance mechanisms for government-nonprofit partnerships. These governance mechanisms identified in the existing literature also guide the research design and question development of this study. The use of different governance mechanisms can often shape the outcomes and stages of government-nonprofit partnerships.

Characterizing Government-nonprofit partnerships: The Collaboration Continuum

Because of the complexity of government-nonprofit partnerships, it is both difficult and problematic to rely on a single theory or framework to understand this complicated phenomenon. Scholars emphasize the need to view collaborations as multi-stage, multi-dimensional, complex and dynamic processes that are embedded in the larger institutional and social system (Gazley & Guo, 2015). Over the years, there have also been multiple efforts to identify different forms of inter-organizational collaboration (Agranoff & McGuire, 2004; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Herrenz, 2008; Guo & Acar, 2005; Schaeffer & Loveridge, 2002). The intensity of the collaborative relationships stands out as a key dimension of understanding government-nonprofit partnerships.

Austin (2000) developed a three-stage model to capture the collaboration continuum: philanthropic stage, transactional stage, and integrative stage. The philanthropic stage refers to the stage when each partner provides input such as money or human resources while they are largely independent of each other. The transactional stage refers to the stage when the

partnerships focus on specific and explicit programs and shared objectives. A collaboration reaches the integrative stage when the relationship looks like a joint venture and the mission of the collaboration is central to both organizations' strategies. The use of a continuum recognizes the dynamic nature of collaboration and how the collaborative relationships evolve. Bryson et al. (2006) defined a collaborative continuum with one end for organizations that do things alone and barely relate to each other, and the other end where organizations are merged into a new organization to solve the problem. Brinkerhoff (2002) regarded mutuality- the mutual dependence or the intensity of the collaborative relationship - as a key definitional dimension to differentiate contracting, partnership, extension and co-optation. Selden et al. (2006) also listed the intensity of the relationship as the key criteria to distinguish among cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and service integration in human services nonprofit collaboration. Schaeffer and Loveridge (2002) treated joint decision making as a key criterion of distinguishing various forms of public-private partnerships. Although all the above frameworks recognize the importance of collaboration intensity in distinguishing different types of partnerships, Austin (2000)'s collaboration continuum is so far the most prevalent framework in the literature. In addition, this framework has the advantage of focusing on the dynamics and possible evolution through a range of collaboration stages (Gazley & Guo, 2015). Because of the above reasons, Austin (2000)'s collaboration continuum framework is used in this article to characterize different stages of government-nonprofit partnerships. Figure 1 depicts a graphical illustration of the collaboration continuum framework.

[Figure 1 Here]

As the collaborative relationship becomes more intensive along the collaboration continuum, the nature of the collaboration also changes, thus presenting different kinds of management and governance challenges for partnership participants. Moving to a more intense level of engagement can bring significant collaborative gains and value-added, such as being more responsive to community needs, greater flexibility and legitimacy, and utilizing the partners' distinctive advantages (Alexander & Nan, 2009; Brinkerhoff, 2002). However, it also presents more risks to partnerships and requires more managerial and leadership efforts for coordination and governance (Austin, 2000; Brinkerhoff, 2002). Understanding the governance mechanisms for each stage of the collaboration continuum is, therefore, crucial to the success of government-nonprofit partnerships.

Data and Methods

This article uses a multiple case design to examine how various governance mechanisms of government-nonprofit partnerships are linked to different stages of the collaboration continuum. Each case is used to confirm or disconfirm the propositions and inferences drawn from other cases. This inductive case-oriented method is particularly suitable to generate theory from cases in new topic areas (Eisenhardt, 1989; George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2006). It is a way of looking at the phenomenon “empirically from the perspectives of those immersed in these arenas” (Agranoff, 2007, p. 37). This case-oriented approach starts with certain theories or theoretical frameworks during the initial research design. In the meantime, the researchers also allow new theories to emerge from existing data, which guide future data collection and analysis strategies. As Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 12) pointed out: “a theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the reality than a theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based

on experience or solely through speculation.” It is a very useful approach for public management scholars to “lay out how cutting-edge practice can be conceptualized in a way that is useful to academic and practitioner alike” (Agranoff, 2007, p. 35). Agranoff and Radin (1991) provided detailed instructions about the methodological sequence to carry out such research projects.

Content analysis of participating organizations’ websites was conducted before carrying out formal interviews and stopping the recruitment of more research participants. This procedure was used to identify the collaborative stages of these partnerships and make sure that all three stages are represented in the selected cases. Formal agreements, such as management contracts and memorandums of understanding (MOUs), were also gathered from the interviewees before interview meetings. Information from organizations’ websites, agreements of the partnerships, and other web sources complement the data gathered through in-person interviews.

Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary data for this study. The interviews followed a general discussion guide that would be tailored to each specific interviewee according to existing info gathered about the partnership. The discussion guide included 1) history and the evolution of the partnership; 2) the roles nonprofits and governments play in the partnership; 3) formal agreement or informal coordination mechanisms of the partnership; 4) communication between nonprofit and government partners; 5) mechanisms for addressing disagreements; and 6) important lessons learned from managing the partnership. Each topic included one to three probing questions to clarify meaning and fostering conversations. All but one of the 15 interviews were recorded during the interview process, after getting permissions from the

interviewees. Informed consent from human subjects was obtained per the IRB approved process, and possible consequences were explained in the study.

The final analysis incorporated 150 pages of analytical memos written after interviews, partnership agreements, and selected transcripts from the 15 interviews. The document was reviewed and analyzed by the researcher to generate codes for governance mechanisms and collaboration stages, informed by existing literature. Following methods for building theory from cases (Eisenhardt, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), these codes were then compared across multiple cases to identify and cross-verify the linkages between different governance mechanisms and the stages these partnerships are in. Content analysis of organizational documents facilitated and aided the coding and analytical process. After several rounds of iteration between the tentative propositions and the cases, final propositions about how and why certain governance mechanisms are more salient in certain collaboration stages were presented and discussed in the article.

Policy Context and Research Participants

This study takes place in the context of government-nonprofit partnerships for public parks in large U.S. cities. Compared with other public services where governments collaborate with nonprofits in the delivery of public services, several distinct features stand out for these government-nonprofit partnerships. Parks and recreation is a public service subsector where nonprofits collaborate closely with local governments to solve a public problem. Because of multiple benefits urban parks and green spaces provide, the management and funding of urban

parks are traditionally regarded as a pure government function. However, because of the increasing demand for urban green spaces and the fiscal stress local governments are currently experiencing, local governments lack the capacity and are not expected to do this alone. This is especially true when local parks and recreation services are considered a non-essential public service, therefore at the forefront of budget cuts (Skidmore & Scorsone, 2011). Such characteristics of parks and recreation services push local governments to explore alternative funding sources and intergovernmental or cross-sector collaboration opportunities. In the meantime, nonprofits are documented to play significant roles in financing and creating these services through government-nonprofit partnerships (Harnik & Martin, 2015; Walls, 2014).

Park supporting nonprofits were identified through a unique city park-supporting nonprofits database, which was constructed by the author through a combination of keyword search and the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) code identification of the 2013 National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) database. This database contains nearly three hundred nonprofit organizations that are set up with a primary purpose of supporting a city or county park in the 149 largest U.S. cities. Geographical locations were narrowed down to the major cities or counties of the Ohio River Region, which include Indianapolis in Indiana, Nashville in Tennessee, Louisville in Kentucky, Cincinnati in Ohio, Columbus in Ohio, and Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania. This region was selected because major cities in this region are usually regarded as peer cities in terms of their social and economic development (Urban Studies Institute, 2014). However, the characteristics of their park systems and the forms of their government-nonprofit partnerships for parks vary significantly. Columbus and Franklin County Metro Parks (overlapped with the city of Columbus), Great Parks of Hamilton County (overlapped with the

city of Cincinnati), and Allegheny County (overlapped with the city of Pittsburgh) were also included in this study since these governmental agencies also manage public parks that are located within the boundaries of these major cities.

The city park-supporting nonprofits database was then matched with the above geographical regions to identify possible government-nonprofit partnerships in this region since those park-supporting nonprofits often partner with local governments to provide funding, programming, or management support for an entire park system or a specific park unit. After utilizing this strategy, 13 government-nonprofit partnerships were identified. Interviewees were then selected and contacted based on these 13 partnerships. They are individuals who take key leadership roles in the parks department or park-supporting nonprofits, which may include the parks department director, executive director or the board chair of the nonprofit organization. 25 individuals were finally contacted by the researcher, which include 11 public managers and 14 nonprofit managers. After three rounds of contacts and invitation (first two rounds in email and the third round by phone), 15 individuals representing 11 government-nonprofit partnerships accepted the interview invitation and participated in the study, including four public managers and 11 nonprofit managers. The other ten individuals either declined or did not respond to the research participation request. Interviews were carried out either in person or on the phone, ranging from 30 minutes to 75 minutes.

The collaboration stage of a government-nonprofit partnership was determined by content analysis of the partnership agreement and the discussion question: “what roles does your

organization play in the partnership?” Since parks and recreation services are traditionally provided only by government agencies and governments own these properties, a more integrative partnership often means that governments share more power and responsibilities with nonprofit partners. The partnership is in the philanthropic stage when nonprofit partners are expected to only raise private donations for public parks. The transactional stage is reached when nonprofits not only raise money but also deliver and provide programming support that benefits their members. The partnership reaches the integrative stage when nonprofits share the planning, management or operational responsibilities with local governments. Using this criterion, the collaboration continuum framework was applied to the selected government-nonprofit partnerships. Table 1 lists the partnerships, their locations, major purposes, and corresponding collaboration stages.

[Table 1 Here]

Findings: Governance Mechanisms for Government-Nonprofit Partnerships

The findings are presented in the forms of theoretical propositions about how various governance mechanisms are linked to different collaboration stages of government-nonprofit partnerships. Some of them echoed the major findings of existing research on the governance and management of government-nonprofit partnerships, while some beyond the current state of knowledge. These propositions can guide future empirical research.

Governance of Partnerships as Government Representation on the Nonprofit Board

Government officials appointing the executive director or sitting on the board of nonprofit partner organizations stands as one common governance mechanism for these partnerships. Out of the ten partnerships in this study, seven partnerships have this mechanism in place. For the other three partnerships, nonprofits made conscientious decision not to formally place government officials on the board to keep their independence. However, public managers are still actively participating in the board meetings. For one of the partnerships that do not have government officials serving on the nonprofit board, the parks director served as the executive director of the nonprofit partner for a long time. Appointing government officials on the board of nonprofit partners is an easy way of keeping track of what nonprofit partners are doing in the park. From the perspective of nonprofit partners, having government officials on their board would also increase their legitimacy and provide open channels of communication with public officials (Malatesta & Smith, 2014). However, it may also represent a certain degree of government control over nonprofit partners, thus resulting in negative consequences for the partnership, such as creating confusion for potential donors.

Similar practices have been found in social and human services nonprofits which rely extensively on governments for funding (Guo, 2007; Van Slyke, 2007; Grønberg, 1993). Social and human nonprofits are seeking board members that have governmental affiliations to help obtain government funding. However, in the case of government-nonprofit partnerships for parks, appointing government officials to the board of nonprofit partners is usually a condition in the formal partnership agreement. Board members with government affiliations are typically ex-

officio members of the nonprofit board, meaning that these board members are appointed only because of their current position in the government.

By appointing government officials as ex-officio members of the nonprofit board, local governments establish a formal mechanism of transforming the governance of a partnership to the governance of a single organization, which is less elusive and facilitates easier managerial oversight (Stone et al., 2010). For the three cases of integrative partnerships, there is a legal mandate of such practices to ensure government representation and public oversight over participating nonprofits. For example, one formal agreement of the integrative partnerships stated how government officials should be represented on the board of nonprofit partners.

Conservancy by-laws shall provide for the appointment of various ex-officio members to its board of directors as well as the appointment of certain other directors as well as for the appointment of certain other directors by the Mayor. In particular, the appointment of at least five board members shall be the power of the Mayor with the confirmation of City Council. In addition, ex-officio members of the board shall include the Mayor, the Director of the City's Department of Parks and Recreation, the Director of the Department of Public Works and the Director of City Planning.

Proposition 1: Integrative partnerships are more likely to have a legal mandate for the government representation on the board of nonprofit partners.

Governance of Partnerships as Formal Agreements

Establishing a formal agreement is another governance mechanism of government-nonprofit partnerships. Although a contract or formal agreement is optional for a public-private partnership (Peters, 1998), it does provide clarity and formality to the partnerships. Five out of the ten

partnerships rely on a formal agreement or MOU to govern the interactions between government agencies and nonprofit organizations. The predominant reason for why a partnership does not have a formal agreement is that the relationship is very stable and has worked well. From the perspective of some partnership participants, there is no reason for an agreement until something goes wrong. However, all the integrative partnerships rely on a formal agreement. When talking about the most important thing about managing the collaborative relationship, one nonprofit manager in an integrative partnership stated that:

Agreements that clearly state responsibility and authority [are the most important thing]. The mistakes I have made are: when the relationship is warm and fuzzy, you trust people to get along together, or you trust that a relationship will work. This is not good. You need to clearly and crisply identify who is responsible and the resources they have for that responsibility. Because something is going to go wrong. Personalities are going to change. You have to clearly define each person's responsibilities in the agreement. And those [relationships without an agreement] fall apart. They will fall apart every single time, even though people are really good. People screw up. People are flawed. You need to have the accountability built into the agreement. Tell me what you're going to do and then how I should hold you accountable to do it. Accountability and responsibility are linked.

Corresponding well to these comments, one nonprofit manager in a philanthropic partnership, which does not have a formal agreement, stated the disadvantages of solely relying on the intentions of public officials and political leaders:

Current Mayor really sees our value. However, the past Mayor may not. There can be tensions depending on who is in charge politically. We do not care who takes charge politically as long as they love parks. When they do not value what we do, it is difficult to do what we do. We do not have the support from the city. We had a previous park director that did not really care about parks. It makes my job tougher.

When comparing the agreements reached by integrative partnerships with the other two types of partnerships, one clear distinction stands out. Philanthropic and transactional partnerships emphasize more on the responsibilities of nonprofit partners and the provisions of risk

management. It serves as a major mechanism for local governments to monitor and control nonprofit partners. One public manager in a philanthropic partnership stated: “the major challenge of relying on nonprofits is insurance and liability. The formal agreement is set up to address these issues.”

For the integrative partnerships, the agreement is more about specifying the roles, rights and responsibilities of each party in the partnership. With these clearly defined boundaries (Ostrom, 1990), partners are less likely to have role ambiguities. In addition, there are also provisions in the agreement that constrain both governments and nonprofits. For example, the agreement of one integrative partnership clearly stated that: “the conservancy, preservation, and maintenance of the Property will be done only in accordance with the Master Plan.” It is made clear that the master plan is the boss, instead of the public or nonprofit manager. This provision creates incentives for nonprofit partners to continue investing in public parks without the worry of governments overturning their projects. The agreement is a result of negotiations between two equals. As one interviewee of an integrative partnership stated, the master plan is the document that guides the direction of the partnership, instead of local governments:

What we wanted to do was bring those parks into our master plan, architecturally, landscape design, programmatically, but we would not make an investment in those unless the city would guarantee that they’re going to sustain it and won’t screw up our investments. The lesson from Central Park in New York is that it’s a great park because one master plan is adhered to. It’s not cut up by a thousand decisions by little soccer groups. So, we entered into that agreement with the Metro so that we would be the operators of these Metro-owned properties within the master plan.

Proposition 2: Integrative partnerships are more likely to rely on formal agreements to structure the interactions of partners, which clearly state the rights and responsibilities of each partner, and include provisions at the constitutional level that govern both parties.

Governance of Partnerships as Building Relationships

Although a clearly stated and thoughtfully developed formal agreement plays an instrumental role in governing collaborative relationships, public and nonprofit managers also realize that a formal agreement cannot solve every problem. Relationship building thus stands out as a third governance mechanism of these government-nonprofit partnerships, which helps create clearer mutual expectations and reduces transactions costs in the collaborative endeavor (Bryson et al., 2006). A continuous communication process, facilitated by the efforts of building relationships, also serves as an important mechanism securing accountability to the public (Velotti, Botti, & Vesci, 2012). One public official described why communication and building relationships are important for managing government-nonprofit partnerships:

The MOU is very direct and clear. However, the real works happen between the lines. I know their director's number by heart, and I can call her right now and say we need to this, can you help? I know that she will say yes if she can. The MOU will draw hard lines and govern what it is. The gray areas are much more important than the black and white ones.

When talking about how to build relationships with government officials, one interviewee listed the importance of common exposure through which public and nonprofit managers can spend extensive time together and jointly envision the possibility of the partnerships. Before that partnership took shape, public officials and nonprofit managers went out for a field trip in the

New York City together to learn from NYC's park management experiences. In addition to common exposure, one nonprofit manager also stated the importance of a constructive mindset in building successful collaborative relationships:

It is important to understand that while fundraising is the primary goal. There are many ways that the foundation can be helpful to the government department. Getting close enough to them to figure those out is very helpful in building the relationship. It is important to have the bigger picture in line instead of sticking to this is what I do, and this is what you do. I can help the county government do their job if I can do it in a helpful way. It is helpful to have people in this organization that has experiences with the government and know what their constraints are. You must understand that to work with them successfully.

These quotes suggest that personal level interactions and relationship building often go hand in hand with formal agreements. Good personal and professional relationships among partners create trust and more fluid communication channels between partners. From a knowledge management perspective, interpersonal communications facilitate the exchange of practice-based knowledge among partners, which is crucial for the success of public-private partnerships (Boyer, 2016). All of the partnerships without a formal agreement listed communication and a healthy relationship with partners as the most important thing in managing government-nonprofit partnerships. One nonprofit manager explained:

You must build a good relationship with the park manager. They will be your representative downtown. It is important to have a strong relationship with the park manager because they are usually supporting the park unit, instead of the downtown parks department. If the relationship is not good, more efforts need to be spent on persuasion, instead of actual programs. You do not have much control over who is in the administration. So, your next best thing is the personal relationship, which is one on one. You are more likely to get support if you talk to and look at them. Get to know whom you are dealing with and look for common ground.”

Proposition 3: Building personal relationships with partners is important across all stages of the collaboration continuum. Integrative partnerships are likely to rely on both formal agreements and personal relationships for the governance of the partnerships, while philanthropic and transactional partnerships tend to extensively rely on personal relationships.

Governance of Partnerships as Building Leadership Capacity

The fourth governance mechanism standing out in the interviews is building leadership capacity, especially on the nonprofit side. Nonprofit partners are expected to signal to the public and local governments that they have the capacity and commitment to fulfill their promises. This is particularly salient for integrative partnerships as governments are expected to involve nonprofits in some of the core parts of public service provision, such as the planning and management of public services. Because of the constraints local governments face, public managers may not have the resources and attention needed to lead government-nonprofit partnerships. If nonprofits can take the initiative and demonstrate to the governments that they are capable and committed to the improvement of the public services, local governments are more likely to share responsibilities in government-nonprofit partnerships. One nonprofit leader from an integrative partnership articulates the reasons why the governance of collaboration comes in the form of building leadership and driving the direction of the partnership:

The city has a much broader agenda. If you are the mayor, you have to worry about the police, the fire, taxes, companies moving in and moving out, and everything. So, to get the attention of governments, have them know what you are doing and give their blessing are sometimes challenging. It is not even the problem that they are hostile to or against it. It is just hard to get their attention. Then, another problem is that the way our city is organized is in the separation of governments, makes it harder than other places because you cannot just talk to the parks department. You have to talk to the department of public works, and the parks department, the city planning department, and the city has a

sustainability coordinator. It has a lot of touch points, which consumes resources and makes it challenging to coordinate. We have tried very hard to go through all these touch points. This is a big challenge for us.

By the same token, because there is not a strong parks director in the governmental structure, this gives us the opportunity to become a thought leader. Who else will coordinate all these? If you are the director of the Department of Public Works, no matter how much you love parks, you still have to think first about the road maintenance, snow removal, and all these other things.

When being asked about how the nonprofit would be able to fight back if local governments do not follow the partnership agreement, one nonprofit manager of an integrative partnership responded:

The agreement has the tool to do it. However, more important than that, we do a better job than Metro Parks. It is our delivery of service standards that are so high, that if someone wants to blow it up, the public would probably rise and revolt. This agreement rotates automatically unless a member of the city council has a question about the agreement. We are on our second 5 years. We are the gift that they can get credit for without spending a lot on. We are taking responsibilities, and smart politicians are going to like us.

We have a very robust financial backing, through revenue generation, endowment, and annual fund. We secured the confidence of our public partner when we were able to raise 13 million for capital projects by ourselves. There is a level of credibility and business planning built into it.

In addition to providing leadership to coordinate fragmented government actions and demonstrating the ability to achieve effectiveness and financial sustainability, nonprofit partners also possess unique advantages in keeping the vision and design of a great park system.

Visionary leadership is often provided by nonprofit partners in integrative partnerships. For example, getting involved in the master plan development process and being able to help governments adhere to the plan stand out as two important roles nonprofit partnerships play in

integrative government-nonprofit partnerships for public parks. One nonprofit manager in an integrative partnership talked about why the nonprofit partner is in a better position of providing visionary leadership and keeping a great park design:

The master plan is our guiding document. So, we don't let that get carved up. We don't let it get punched unless a lot of steps are made. What you see in a lot of rural and urban city park districts, is that every park starts with a master plan, and then immediately it's carved up because a soccer league comes in and wants a soccer field over here or someone gets excited and wants a playground over here. And they're not bad intentions. They're perfectly good, understood intentions. But you lose a great park design when you start cutting it up for the needs of the moment. And the neat thing about us [the nonprofit partner], is that the local government finds it very hard to resist those tensions because when that neighborhood association shows up, when that league shows up, the democratic process is to be responsive and reflective of the needs of the people, more so, sometimes than the longer-range needs and the vision of the park. Since we are in a position where we don't necessarily have to respond to voters, we can actually have our master plan be our prime directive and our prime document rather than public opinion. And we think, it's a value statement, that in a hundred years, that results in a superior public parks system.

Compared with their government counterparts, nonprofits also possess some operational advantages in terms of being more closely connected to the community and bringing business thinking to the partnership. As one nonprofit manager in an integrative partnership pointed out:

We have to be so much sharper in terms of our business modeling and our business projections. Because we don't have that public dollar that's going to come in every single year. We don't accept anything as deferred maintenance. Everything we have installed in this park is a ticking time bomb because it's going to need to be replaced at some point. So, we're already budgeting and saving for the replacement costs of that good. In the public sector, that doesn't happen. This is not to demean the public sector. No one gets elected to replace a bathroom. They're elected to build something new. So, everything gets built on top of each other, and they're now coming back to fix it. This is how you end up with \$14 billion in backlog with the National Parks Service.

For philanthropic and transactional partnerships, the leadership role of nonprofit partners is much weaker compared with integrative partnerships. When being asked about why not taking more management and leadership responsibilities in the partnership, one nonprofit manager of a

philanthropic partnership responded: “the way I see this is that the people at the parks district are the expert in what they do. And the best way we can help them is through some ways of private funding. We are not needed in that capacity [management and operation].” Perceptions about the capacities of government partners clearly have a big influence on the leadership capacity of nonprofit partners.

Because of the newness of involving nonprofits in the management and maintenance of public parks, it requires a leap of faith and credible commitment from the public sector to move the partnership to the next level. Building stronger leadership capacity of nonprofit partners, therefore, stands out as a key mechanism of governing integrative partnerships, which “demand more managerial and leadership effort, and, therefore, entail a much deeper commitment” (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012, p. 743). Stone et al. (2013) also found that both champions and sponsors are needed in collaborative settings to transform the partnerships. Suárez and Esparza (2017) regarded managerialism and empower agency as two crucial processes of institutional change in the nonprofit sector that shape the forms and dynamics of government-nonprofit partnerships. In integrative partnerships, nonprofits often play the role of champions who lack formal authority but actively coordinate the behaviors of partners and supply ideas to help solve the public problem. Government agencies, on the other hand, serve as sponsors who have formal authority to obtain political legitimacy and support for the partnership.

Proposition 4: Integrative partnerships are more likely to rely on capable nonprofit partners who play key leadership roles in government-nonprofit partnerships.

Summary of Findings

Four governance mechanisms are identified in this study: government representation on the nonprofit board, establishing formal agreements, building relationships, and building leadership capacity. It resonates with existing literature's emphasis on the structure, processes, actors, and rules for the governance of collaboration (Vangen et al., 2015; Stone et al., 2010; Ostrom, 1990). This study also proposes the linkage between governance mechanisms and different stages of the collaborative relationships. Integrative government-nonprofit partnerships are more likely to be developed when 1) there is a legal mandate for government representation on the nonprofit board; 2) partners rely on both personal relationships and clearly specified formal agreements that structure multiple levels of interactions among partners; and 3) a partnership involves nonprofit partners that have strong leadership capacities and serve as champions for the partnership. Partners can develop trust and align mutual expectations not only through relationship building but also an effective institutional design of the partnerships.

Conclusion and Implications

This study identifies various governance mechanisms of government-nonprofit partnerships and how they are linked to different stages of the collaboration continuum. It addresses the knowledge gap of how government-nonprofit partnerships are governed when nonprofits play important roles and financing and creating public services. It also complements the insufficient attention devoted to various forms of nonprofit collaboration (Gazley & Guo, 2015, p. 25). In the context of government-nonprofit partnerships for public parks, the findings of this article

“supports a narrative of growing nonprofit power and reduced government control” (Fyall, 2016, p. 947). Nonprofit organizations have great potential and are playing more and more important roles in public service provision through government-nonprofit partnerships. Governance mechanisms identified in this article are helpful for public and nonprofit managers to better create, design, plan and implement such partnerships. The interaction between formal and informal governance mechanisms seems to be a key to understanding the evolution of government-nonprofit partnerships.

Some of the governance mechanisms discussed in this article are familiar, but the emphasis on the linkage between governance mechanisms and collaboration stages of government-nonprofit partnerships is novel. The tradeoff between capacity and control seems to be a key driver of partnership governance practices (Suárez & Esparza, 2017). On the one hand, moving government-nonprofit partnerships to a more integrative stage often means giving nonprofits more discretion and building stronger nonprofit capacity, especially in areas where public services are traditionally financed and managed by local governments. On the other hand, sharing power in government-nonprofit partnerships also means less control of local governments in the quality of public services. Governance mechanisms described in this article represent various forms of institutional adaptation public and nonprofit managers have designed to reconcile such trade-offs and maximize the collaborative advantage. For example, government representation on the nonprofit board not only provides more legitimacy to nonprofit partners but also builds formal mechanisms for governments to keep track of the activities of nonprofit partners. Formal agreements that clearly state the rights and responsibilities of each partner not only empowers partners but also build accountability mechanisms in government-nonprofit

partnerships. Public managers who get the most from partnerships are intentional about the benefits and costs of different forms of government-nonprofit partnerships, learn with their partners, design proper institutional support for collaboration, and are willing to take risks to find more effective ways of providing high-quality public services.

This article has some limitations that must be noted. First, despite a conscientious effort to reach out to both public and nonprofit managers, there are more nonprofit managers who accepted the study invitation. Therefore, the conclusion of this article may be biased towards the perspective of nonprofit managers. Further research could be conducted to represent more balanced responses of public and nonprofit managers and compare these responses, as public and nonprofit managers often seek different goals in government-nonprofit partnerships (Gazley & Brudney, 2007). In addition, this study focuses on the comparative analysis between cases, instead of within case analysis which tracks the evolvement of governance mechanisms in each partnership. As a result, we cannot fully discern the causal relationship between collaborative stages and governance mechanisms, or whether the intensity of collaborative relationships is attributable to the adoption of different governance mechanisms. Longitudinal case studies can be conducted to test our propositions and understand the interplay of different governance mechanisms in government-nonprofit partnerships.

Another limitation of this study is the uniqueness of the parks and recreation context and the geographical focus of this study. Selecting cities in a single geographical region or policy context can limit the variations in the external environment to ensure the better internal validity of the

study. However, the generalizability of the findings may be limited as a result of such an inquiry strategy. The purpose of a public-private partnership plays an important role in shaping the dynamics of collaboration (Becker & Patterson, 2005). In addition to parks and recreation services, government-nonprofit partnerships are also prevalent in other public service subsectors, such as education, public libraries and sustainable development (Neslon & Gazley, 2014; Deslatte, Schatterman, & Stokan, 2018; Schatterman & Bingle, 2015). The propositions of this study should, therefore, be validated and tested in other public service subsectors and geographical context, where governance mechanisms identified in this study may play out differently. Additional governance mechanisms may also be revealed through such inquiries.

The prevalence of government-nonprofit partnerships for public service provision has important implications for public service provision and urban governance. As governments at all levels face increasing fiscal pressure and constantly search for alternative modes of public service provision, this trend will likely continue to grow. It is no longer possible to treat nonprofits only as the subordinate or the tools of government in government-nonprofit partnerships. This study takes a step of recognizing the value of more capable nonprofit partners in government-nonprofit partnerships, and suggest multiple governance mechanisms public and nonprofit managers could use to reconcile the dilemma between capacity and control in managing these partnerships.

Notes

1. The term partnership is used interchangeably in this study with collaboration because both terms are prevalent in the public management literature to describe similar phenomena (Cornforth, Hayes, & Vangen, 2015; Stone et al., 2010).

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