
Philanthropy in Rural America: A Scoping Review of The Last 25 Years

Nora Leinen¹, Matt Ehlman^{1,2}, and Dwight Burlingame³

¹Rural Philanthropy Institute

²The Numad Group

³Indiana University Indianapolis, Emeritus

Abstract

While rural communities consistently hold higher levels of poverty and have lower health outcomes than the rest of the country, we know that persistently only 7% of philanthropic dollars are given to address issues facing rural communities (Smart et al. 2023). With 20% of the U.S. population living in rural areas (US Census 2023), this is not simply a reflection of population differences but indicative of a comparative underinvestment by philanthropy. With the rural nonprofit sector playing a critical role in meeting community needs, providing safety net systems, and filling the gaps between government services and for-profit entities, it is imperative we learn more about how the nonprofit sector in rural communities is working and the ways in which philanthropy, when correctly applied, can impact lives within these areas. While ample research and literature exist on the nonprofit sector as a whole and on the nature of rural America, the literature specifically covering the rural nonprofit sector is lacking. To better understand the current state of rural philanthropy research, a scoping review was conducted February through November 2024. This review found that there is a significant lack of literature regarding philanthropy in rural America. Those articles that were reviewed looked at obstacles rural nonprofits face and suggestions for philanthropists when engaging in rural nonprofit funding; however, data and case studies on success or failures of rural philanthropy are missing from the literature as well as additional information and data on how rural nonprofits currently sustain themselves through changing economic and demographic landscapes. This article seeks to serve as an analysis of existing literature and to identify potential areas of additional research.

Keywords: *rural, philanthropy, foundational philanthropy, nonprofit, rural community*

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INTRODUCTION

Rural nonprofits play an increasingly important role in small towns and communities across the United States, addressing some of the most pressing issues facing their communities and providing basic services such as food and housing assistance to fire protection, senior services, and childcare. While certain perceptions of rural communities in the United States may lead to the belief that there are fewer unmet needs in rural areas than urban, rural counties often face unique deficits that become even more prevalent with economical stress and cuts to social services (Norris-Tirrell, Blessett, & Knox 2014). Rural areas also rival urban areas in certain types of crime (property, violent, domestic partner violence) and “the physical and mental health of rural Americans are much

worse compared to their non-rural counterparts” (Walters 2020, p. 64). Through their efforts, rural nonprofits are an essential sector addressing these issues and allowing rural communities to survive and thrive.

While rural communities consistently hold higher levels of poverty and have lower health outcomes than the rest of the country, we know that persistently only 7% of philanthropic dollars are given to address issues facing rural communities (Smart et al. 2023). With 20% of the U.S. population living in rural areas (US Census 2023), this is not simply a reflection of population differences but indicative of a comparative underinvestment by philanthropy. With the rural nonprofit sector playing a critical role in meeting community needs, providing safety net systems, and filling the gaps between government services and for-profit entities, it is imperative we learn

more about why philanthropy is less present in the rural nonprofit sector and the ways in which philanthropy, when correctly applied, can impact lives within these areas.

Ample research and literature exist on the nonprofit sector as a whole and on the nature of rural America; however, the literature specifically covering philanthropy in the rural nonprofit sector is lacking (Anderson 2017; Ashley 2014; Crawford 2019; Gallagher 2021; Walters 2020). By looking at the literature that currently exists concerning philanthropic efforts and the nonprofit sector in rural America, this article seeks to understand more about why this gap in philanthropy exists, examine potential solutions to bolster the industry, and explore the opportunities for additional research. Through this research we expect to learn that rural communities and nonprofits have specific characteristics that cause them to be overlooked by philanthropy. Through the examination of these characteristics and the existing literature on philanthropy we look to identify actionable practices to increase philanthropic investment in rural communities and additional research questions that would expand our understanding and support effective investments.

METHODOLOGY

A scoping review of relevant literature was conducted February through November 2024 to characterize the field of philanthropy and its intersection with the nonprofit sector in rural areas. According to Munn et al., a scoping review is used to “determine the scope or coverage of a body of literature on a given topic and give clear indication of the volume of literature and studies available as well as an overview (broad or detailed) of its focus” (2018, p. 2). This review will establish a foundation of literature and research on the intersection of philanthropy and the nonprofit sector in rural areas. A scoping review provides a basis for identifying areas where more research is needed. To ensure the quality and efficacy of the scoping review, the authors utilized guidance from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) and the associated checklist (Tricco et al. 2018). Khalil et al. noted that “these should be referred to in all scoping reviews to improve the overall quality” (2021, p. 159).

In conducting this review, the authors consulted university library services and established practitioners and scholars in the field to identify search terms, sources, and inclusion and exclusion criteria appropriate for the goals of the study. Academic Search Complete, JSTOR, ProQuest Central, and Google Scholar were searched utilizing the identified search terms. Literature that met the inclusion criteria examined aspects of rural philanthropy, rural nonprofit, or both. The search criteria was

narrowed to last 25 years (yr. 2000 and forward). This determination was made by the changing definitions of rural, culturally and statistically. Additionally, research was narrowed to organizations and studies regarding the United States, eliminating any literature referencing the philanthropic, non-profit, or non-governmental organizations located outside of the United States.

The first step of the search process included the originally established search terms in pursuit of peer-reviewed literature, dissertations, sector reports, book chapters, and journal articles (rural + nonprofit; rural + philanthropy). Across the field, a handful of specific reports and authors from the last decade or so were repeatedly referenced, illustrating the value of past research and a need for continued study. To increase relevant results and ensure thorough coverage of the field, the search terms were then broadened to include synonyms of the original terms (e.g., third sector, place-based, community-based, local, independent sector, farming community, etc.), specific demographics (e.g., Native American, LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, etc.), geographic regions, human needs/services, and specific terms associated with the makeup of philanthropic entities (volunteerism, capacity, impact, etc.). A full list of search terms is outlined in [Table 1](#).

Next, references of the included literature were examined for relevant additions. A third step of the search process specifically targeted publications and resources linked through nonprofit associations in rural areas, rural industry coalitions, and rural-funding foundations. Some of these organizations and the media they are currently producing are mentioned below in the relevant sections to encompass the areas of contemporary development in rural philanthropic study. Non-academic website searches are outlined in [Table 2](#). One of the arguments presented in this paper advocates for additional peer reviewed research on the subject in an effort to expand empirical knowledge and provide a basis for better decision making.

The outcomes of the scoping review revealed that while there is literature on rural nonprofits and the services they provide, as well as the government funding mechanisms that help many of the organizations survive, there is little regarding private philanthropy and its effect on these organizations. In an effort to dig deeper into the issue of underinvestment by philanthropy in rural communities, we reviewed literature that focused on rural nonprofit organizational capacity to help identify areas that could provide answers to this persistent lack of philanthropic investment. We hope this scoping review helps to encourage new research to support philanthropic investment in rural America including case studies and longitudinal analysis on successes and failures of philanthropic projects, changes in the philosophy of philanthropic investment to rural areas, and investigations into

the forces that drive, or stymie, these efforts.

DEFINING RURAL

As we dissect the research findings, the first hurdle encountered is that there is no unanimously agreed upon definition of what constitutes “rural” (Carlson & Cook 2021; Heflin & Miller 2012; Neuhoﬀ & Dunckelman 2011; Swierzewski 2007). Rural can be a statistical analysis based on population density and geographic orientation, but rural is also often used as a descriptor that encompasses cultural characteristics that cannot always be captured in stark numerical values. Analytically, rural areas are most commonly described along a spectrum of population density and in relation to their proximity to urban areas (Carlson & Cook 2021; Crawford 2019; Heflin & Miller 2012). The Census Bureau historically defines rural as census tracts that are not “urban areas” (with at least 50,000 people) or “urban clusters” (between 2,500 and 50,000 people). The Office of Budget and Management’s Core Based Statistical Area typology is also commonly utilized. This categorizes counties into designations of metropolitan, micropolitan, and noncore; the micropolitan and noncore counties are considered rural (Heflin & Miller 2012). Additionally, the USDA, a government leader on many rural issues, grant funding, and agricultural tracking, utilizes a variety of county code systems including those that expand rural to Frontier and Remote Area (FAR) designations (USDA ERS 2015) that more accurately account for those rural communities that experience extreme low population density and geographic isolation.

Frustrated by the variations and inadequacies of these designations, some have taken to creating additional classifications. Isserman (2005) created a county-level classification system based on population density and distribution of population between urban and rural areas within a county, resulting in four classification levels: urban, rural, mixed-rural, and mixed-urban. Another categorization system by The American Communities Project has created additional classifications based on a wide selection of measures in each county, including population density, bachelor’s degree holders, household income, and racial and ethnic composition (Chinni 2012).

With so many numerical classifications, it’s easy to see why, inevitably, cultural classification becomes increasingly important when defining rural communities. Dabson described rural America as “a special place—or more accurately a mosaic of many special places—where connection to the land is the defining characteristic, reinforced by history, culture and lived experiences” (2020, p. 1). Rural is also a cultural descriptor that has been constructed over centuries: “social scientists have identified a series of themes that people commonly associate

with rural areas, including agriculture, natural amenities, tight-knit communities, and distinct regional traditions and values” (Carlson & Cook 2021, p. 4). When defining and describing rural America, Dabson cautions that “there is a fine line between focusing on the characteristics, needs and opportunities of rural areas, and putting rural in a box that is distinct and disconnected from the rest of the country”, noting further that “To succeed, metropolitan America needs a healthy and sustainable rural economy and culture, and in turn rural America needs vibrant, well-functioning cities and suburbs to thrive and flourish” (2015, pp. 1-2). The goal, according to Dabson, “should be to ensure that geography is not a destiny, that well-being and equity are core concepts for all, wherever we may live” (2020, p. 5).

For a review of the rural nonprofit sector and its relationship with philanthropy, these varying definitions of rural present an intriguing challenge. While some literature will self-identify as pertaining to rural areas in its scope, others rely on more nuanced definitions of rural and others yet may be exploring topics that are examining and impacting rural America but are not labeled as such either due to perception or statistical exclusivity associated with the rural label. This can also cause confusion not only for foundations looking to identify rural areas for funding initiatives, but for rural areas who may or may not fit into the definition of rural selected by the funder. In this review, we find this semantic confusion, as well as public perceptions of rural America, aids in the underinvestment in our rural communities by foundations.

FOUNDATIONS, PHILANTHROPY, AND THE RURAL NONPROFIT SECTOR

A portion of the research found focused specifically on the relationship between private foundation funding and the rural nonprofit sector. While private family and community foundations do exist in rural areas, a scarcity of funding remains one of the greatest ongoing challenges for rural nonprofits (Atkins, Allred, & Hart 2021; Cohen 2015; Neuhoﬀ & Dunckelman 2011; Newstead & Wu 2009; Pender 2015). Foundations are an important source of funds for the rural nonprofit sector because they have more freedom in their funding priorities (Walters 2020) and are relatively independent from political and market pressures (Pender 2015). Atkins, Allred, & Hart’s research on philanthropy’s rural blind spot found that “grant makers have historically devoted fewer resources to less densely populated suburban and rural communities, even though they may be just as distressed as, if not more so than, their urban counterparts” (2021, 28). “At the same time, 20% of all people in the United States live in a rural community, and 78% of our country’s high-poverty counties are rural” (2021,

Table 1

Topic	Search Topics	Definitions
Rural	“Rural” OR	A variety of definitions exist for rural. If the article or study included organizations in reference to rural as it relates to the United States, it was included.
	“Place-Based” OR	Place-based initiatives aim to improve quality of life and access to opportunity for people—particularly people of color and families with low incomes—who live in neighborhoods, cities, and rural communities experiencing disinvestment (Urban Institute 2025).
	“Community” OR	
	“Farming Community” OR “Local”	
AND the following, each searched separately with “rural” and permutations of “rural” as listed above		
Philanthropy	“Philanthropy” OR	Philanthropy in broad terms means acts of goodwill to promote human welfare. For the purposes of this study we have narrowed this definition to an organization distributing or supported by funds set aside for humanitarian purposes (Merriam-Webster 2022).
	“Third-Sector” OR	The third sector covers charity and voluntary work, and is also known as the ‘not-for-profit’ industry. The organizations it includes are neither public (owned by the state) or private (owned by individuals), which is where the name third sector comes from. Registered charities, social enterprises, cooperatives, research institutions, and NGOs all fall into this category (Oxford Scholastica, 2024).
	“Independent” OR “Independent Sector” OR	
Nonprofit	“Nonprofit” OR	
	“Voluntee*” OR	
	“Capacity” OR	
	“Impact” OR	
	“Organization” OR “Charit*”	
AND the following, each searched separately with “rural” and permutations of “rural” AND “philanthropy” OR “nonprofit” and permutations of “philanthropy” OR “nonprofit” as listed above		
Geography	“United States” OR	
	“America” OR	
	“Southern” OR	
	“Indian Country” OR	
Demography	“Nativ*” OR	
	“Indigenous” OR	
	“LGBT*” OR	
	“Black” OR	
	“African American” OR	
	“Hispanic” OR	
	“Latin*” OR	
	“Immigrant” OR	
	“Minority” OR	
	“BIPOC*”	

1). In a study of private foundation funding in 50 randomly selected non-urban counties, Englar found that “the *mostly urban* counties received an average of \$16.05 in grants per person while *mostly rural* and *completely rural* recorded \$9.92 and \$2.46 respectively” (2018, 33).

A better understanding of the nonprofit sector in rural America may help foundations not only understand the pressing issues of these vital organizations and their obstacles but also provide a roadmap for funders on how to invest in rural America with increased intentionality

Table 2. Websites included in the search process

Name of Website	Search Procedure	Articles Included
Native Americans in Philanthropy	Under the “Knowledge Center” tab, search terms included philanthropy	1
US Census Bureau	Search “Rural”	1
Bridgespan Group	Under “Insights” tab, search resource library for “Rural”	2
Aspen Institute	Review articles under “Philanthropy & Social Enterprise” tab	2
USDA - Economic Research Service	Review articles under “Research Spotlight”	1
Chronicle of Philanthropy	Under search function “Rural”	9
Inside Philanthropy	Under search function “Rural”	2
Daily Yonder	Under search function “Philanthropy”	3
National Council for Nonprofits	Review articles under Research, Reports, and Data on the Non-profit Sector	0
National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy	Review articles under Resource Center	1
Urban Institute	Review articles under Stories, Data Tools, and Blogs	1

and impact.

Unequal Distribution

Though private independent foundations are an important piece of the funding puzzle for rural nonprofits, very few foundations are located in rural areas, affecting the rural nonprofit sector’s ability to access this type of funding (Kenney 2022; Perry 2007). Perry noted “that the absence of in-state foundations with large assets is a huge disadvantage for charities” (2007, p. 2). Kenney further stated that “fundamentally, there’s not enough rural philanthropy because the philanthropic sector, in its assumptions, rationales and functions, is non-rural. Philanthropy lives in, comes from, and knows cities” (2022, p. 1). When foundations do support rural communities, Pender noted that “counties with a larger college-educated share of population or with more assets held by nonprofit organizations tend to receive more grant funds per person in both nonmetro and metro counties” (2015, p. 1). This uneven distribution can impact high poverty communities even more acutely,

One might imagine that because Appalachian poverty is regularly reported on by the press that the region gets its fair share of philanthropic resources. Not so. According to a 2017 report from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, the coalfields of Central Appalachia receive an average of \$43 per capita in annual philanthropic giving, compared to \$451 nationally (and \$4,095 in the San Francisco Bay Area). (Crosson 2021)

Pender discusses the extent of this disparity, “there are large variations in the rural distribution of foundation

grants, with 18% of nonmetro counties having no grant recipients from 2005 to 2010 and some counties receiving more than \$10,000 per person” (2015, p. 2).

Atkins, Allred, & Hart explained that even when grant makers have equity in mind, “they are likely to systematically overlook the most distressed communities, which are in more rural areas across the United States” (2021, p. 28). A report from the Economic Research Service confirmed a gap in foundation giving to rural areas, finding that “the average real value of grants provided by large foundations to organizations based in nonmetro counties from 2005 to 2010 was only about \$88 per person—less than half the average provided to organizations in metro counties” (Pender 2015, p. 2). In Native American communities specifically, “regardless of measure used, it was found that less than one percent of total foundation giving is going to support Native American organizations and causes” (First Nations Development Institute 2024, p. 6). The Potlach Foundation and Native Americans in Philanthropy have tracked giving in Indigenous communities for over 20 years and highlighted that while there are a few exceptions, including grants made by the Bush Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, the majority of foundations spend very little time and focus on Native American communities, and the vast majority of investments fund programs and projects without focus on long-term capacity building that could provide lasting change in these communities (Bond et al. 2019; Mukai and Lawrence 2011). Black and Hispanic communities face similar disparities, with the Black Belt region and Mississippi Delta receiving \$41 per person in philanthropic spending to the national average of \$451 per person (Smart 2023).

Perceptions and Reality

A small chunk of literature went on to try and determine why philanthropy has a persistently small presence in rural America. Many found that perceptions, both positive and negative, inevitably shape our policies, actions, and attitudes toward rural areas (Carlson & Cook 2021; Norris-Tirrell, Blessett, & Knox 2014; Karmazin 2016; Kenney 2022; Perry 2007; Swierzewski 2007). Interviews with rural researchers, nonprofit directors, and philanthropists conducted by Carlson & Cook found that “Americans hold complex, contradictory, and deeply ingrained narratives that shape our nation’s policies and actions toward rural communities. One interviewee described this dynamic: ‘Americans simultaneously view rural areas with both romanticism and disdain’ ” (2021, p. 11). Rural communities are thought of as self-sufficient, independent, and idyllic areas while at the same time they are also perceived as old, unintelligent, backwoods, and economically doomed (Carlson & Cook 2021; Karmazin 2016; Perry 2007). A common positive perception, as described by Newstead and Wu, embraces “a Norman Rockwell picture of rural America: white picket fences, everyone goes to church, and everyone helps the person next door,” which may be partially true but does not include the fuller picture of underlying rural poverty and other significant challenges (2009, p. 3).

These perceptions and misperceptions inevitably influence funding flowing into rural areas (Karmazin 2016; Kenney 2022; Perry 2007; Potlatch Fund 2007; Swierzewski 2007). As Swierzewski’s research revealed, “focus group participants and funders alike agree that perceptions and stereotypes of rural America most likely shape grantmaking behavior to some extent, even if unintentionally” (2007, p. 7).

The beliefs and perceptions of funders may prevent them from pursuing relationships with rural nonprofits. Many funders hold the belief that they can maximize their impact by directing grants toward more densely populated areas (Atkins, Allred, & Hart 2021; Swierzewski 2007). Atkins, Allred, & Hart counter this idea by pointing out the rates of poverty are higher in rural areas than urban and adding that:

it would be difficult to demonstrate that a grant going to a metropolitan community to improve high school graduation rates, increase the food security of agricultural workers, or reduce childhood lead poisoning assists a greater number of individuals than if the same grant goes to a nonmetropolitan community ... giving to more densely populated areas does not clearly result in a greater equity return on investment for the grant maker (2021, p. 31).

Because philanthropy is often more about relationships

than money, opportunities need to be created that dispel stereotypes, initiate conversations, and build genuine connections between funders and rural nonprofits (Swierzewski 2007).

While the literature makes a clear case that there is a chronic underinvestment from foundations in rural areas and provides clues to why this may be the case, much of the literature is regionalized and outdated. As we continue to review the literature available, we find a gap in the overall understanding of the history, national impact, and current trends related to foundational philanthropy in rural areas. Without a more concerted and unified approach to rural investment, disparities will continue, and rural communities will continue to be unevenly funded and underserved. In his article for the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Cohen noted: “To strengthen America overall, foundations need to wake up to the needs and economic potential of rural America and invest more time and attention to building its philanthropic capacity” (2009).

CHALLENGES OF THE RURAL NONPROFIT SECTOR

A large portion of the literature available discusses the unique challenges rural nonprofits face, and these challenges can be specifically correlated with characteristics that traditionally make rural areas hard to fund in the eyes of philanthropy. An examination of this literature helps increase insight into the reason why philanthropy may overlook rural nonprofit organizations. Like the rural communities they serve, rural nonprofit organizations face common challenges, though there are no homogeneous solutions (Swierzewski 2007; Walters 2020). Most of the challenges experienced by rural nonprofits stem from a lack of resources and geographic isolation, which lead to further difficulties (Swierzewski 2007; Sweet 2013; Walters 2020). Korsching et al. described that “years of population decline and infrastructure deterioration make it difficult for leaders in many rural communities to find the financial resources for providing an adequate level of necessary community facilities and services” (2010, p. 465).

In addition to a lack of financial and other resources, rural nonprofits face related challenges due to the isolated nature of their communities: “nonprofit organizations in the rural community are faced with numerous disadvantages; lack of resources, poverty, changing demographics, and other idiosyncrasies associated with the rural environment such as, transportation, politics, polity, and working conditions” (Sweet 2013, p. 17). Despite these challenges, interviews of rural nonprofit leaders conducted by Walters found “how remarkably committed nonprofit leaders and their organizations are to these vulnerable communities. They are open to change,

adapting to the needs of their service areas, and developing smart solutions and collaborations to solve problems” (2021, p. 504).

Lack of Capacity

The literature describes a lack of capacity to pursue, attract, and implement funding as a primary contributor to the lack of resources in the rural nonprofit sector (Atkins, Allred, & Hart 2021; Cohen 2015; Gallagher 2021; Kapucu, Healy, & Arslan 2011; Swierzewski 2007; Walters 2020). Atkins, Allred, & Hart described how a “lack of human capital and economic disadvantage predict communities’ likelihood of both applying for and receiving funding” and that “the ability to receive funding relies on the presence of individuals or institutions with the capacity to apply for them”; they further note that “the most distressed communities are the least likely to apply for funding” (2021, pp. 28-29). Larger nonprofits in rural communities are more likely to continue to apply for and receive funding over smaller and less-resourced nonprofits (Cohen 2015; Hunt & Smith 2019). Hunt and Smith articulated that these “metrics for either eligibility or success prove unattainable in rural America. For instance, many major foundations award grants only to large organizations with budgets of at least \$500,000. They want to ensure that grantees have the necessary structure and staffing to manage large grants and multifaceted programs. But most rural organizations are smaller than that” (2019, p. 2).

Because of these trends, “foundation grantmaking to rural areas, it appears, may be exacerbating not only inequities between urban and rural, but within rural America itself, providing disproportionately less support to areas with lower socio-economic status measures, including poverty, because of the purported lack of capacity of the nonprofit organizational infrastructure that exists” (Cohen 2015, p. 2). Walters’s research, however, suggests that rural nonprofits may possess valuable capacity assets that are not necessarily recognized by funders: “The bottom line, however, is that what they are doing works for their organizations, and perhaps, it is the capacity builders and funders who may need to adjust expectations” (2021, p. 505).

Compounding this challenge, rural nonprofits encounter additional barriers in obtaining support for general operational costs that would increase their capacity to pursue and manage additional funding: “funders prefer to fund programs as opposed to operational costs; the nature of nonprofit funding requires that organizations keep administrative costs as low as possible, focusing on funding programs in the short term, rather than on building capacity for effectiveness in the long term” (Kapucu, Healy, & Arslan 2011, p. 238). As Paarlberg noted,

any effort to build local philanthropy in rural places must (1) take an intentional place-based approach that builds upon the unique assets of each local community, (2) invest in community and organizational infrastructure and capacity building, (3) strengthen relationships and build partnerships across community organizations and (4) build on local efforts to foster aid to local issues (Paarlberg 2023).

Discounting the needs and voices of rural nonprofit leaders, funding only the largest and most capable organizations, and refusing to fund operational costs keeps small rural nonprofits from growing their capacity.

Attracting and Retaining Talent

A scarcity of skilled human resources is another pervasive challenge for rural nonprofits, affecting board membership, volunteers, and staff (Anderson 2017; Neuhoff & Dunckelman 2011). Smaller budgets mean lower salaries, which make it difficult to attract the skilled employees that are needed (Neuhoff & Dunckelman 2011; Lasley, Ferrell, & Arbuckle 2013; Swierzewski 2007; Walters 2020). Rural nonprofits often “face serious obstacles building the financial resources to not only appropriately staff their organizations, but also to attract and retain highly qualified employees against the currents of persistent youth out-migration without adequate salaries” (Swierzewski 2007, p. 12). Additionally, if qualified candidates are hired, it can be difficult to retain them on a smaller budget with fewer opportunities for raises, development, and advancement (Neuhoff & Dunckelman 2011; Sweet 2013; Walters 2020). Contributing to the scarcity of skilled human resources are the “lower rates of educational attainment in rural areas” that reduce the pool of potential candidates for staff, board membership, and volunteer roles (Neuhoff & Dunckelman 2011, p. 10).

Geographic Isolation

Rural nonprofits serve a population that is dispersed over a broad geographic region, making outreach and service delivery more challenging in addition to increasing costs (Allard 2008; Snavely & Tracy 2000; Swierzewski 2007; Walters 2020). Through Fanburg’s research we know “On average, rural nonprofits are charged with serving over 49 square miles, compared to half of a square mile of urban organizations and about five square miles of suburban organizations” (2011, p. 31). Public transportation in rural regions is typically absent, and if clients do not have access to reliable transportation, they may be unable to access services (Snavely & Tracy 2000). The large geographic regions that are served and the dispersed populations of these areas create difficult decisions for rural nonprofits. Should they “limit their services to the

population that can easily reach them, expect beneficiaries to travel long distances, or take the services to the beneficiaries, which can be expensive and time consuming” (Neuhoff & Dunckelman 2011, p. 11)? Swierzewski also noted that “few foundations are aware of the ‘hidden costs’ associated with the multi-functional work typical of many rural nonprofits, as well as the distance often required to perform that scope of work,” making it potentially more challenging to obtain funding that accounts for these additional needs (2007, p. 13). The geographic isolation may even influence funding decisions due to the perception that rural communities are too diffuse, but Carlson and Cook countered that “in reality, rural communities are often anchored by small towns or cities that are regional service centers, providing foundations with high-leverage opportunities for regional impact” (2021, p. 19).

INCREASING COMMUNICATION AND UNDERSTANDING IMPACT

In response to both the literature regarding obstacles faced by rural nonprofits as well as the lack of investment by foundations, there have been several efforts to address some of these concerns and lay a blueprint for best practices in funding rural areas. A prominent strategy for growing the capacity of rural nonprofits, as outlined in the literature, is increasing funders’ and philanthropists’ overall commitment to rural communities, which could mean adapting their approaches to better meet rural needs (Carlson & Cook 2021; Gregg 2019; Hunt & Smith 2019; Swierzewski 2007). As stated by Carlson & Cook, “there is an imperative for funders to increase their focus on rural areas, which will require a different way of working. Effective rural philanthropy challenges pre-conceptions about rural communities, focuses on building from within and impact over scale, and prioritizes cocreation” (2021, p. 19). In addition to a stronger commitment to funding rural organizations, Gregg stated that “philanthropists need an array of tools beyond their checkbook: hosting convenings, facilitating conversations, offering trainings, and engaging rural leaders as thought partners. These are essential ways that funders can validate local efforts while bringing in outside expertise and best practices” (2019, p. 2).

Flexible Grantmaking

Grantmakers often establish eligibility and reporting criteria that create barriers and exclude rural nonprofits from participation (Burger 2019; Ferguson & Pipa 2020; Hunt & Smith 2019; Howard 2022). The first barrier to funding is often size (Hunt & Smith 2019; Potlatch Fund 2007). Foundations tend to fund larger organizations with sizeable budgets, “often excluding grants to

small organizations because the foundations do not have the resources to manage a large portfolio of small grants” (Potlatch Fund 2007, p. 21) or because they believe the larger organizations will be more successful in managing grants (Hunt & Smith 2019). Burger suggested foundations “rethink the criteria for matching grant dollars, with the idea that towns often have hidden talents and resources that can accelerate a project, even if those do not fit neatly on a budget line item” (2019, p. 2). These potentially unintentional barriers for rural communities underscore findings by Swierzewski, whose interviews revealed that “foundations and nonprofits often have disagreed about the most appropriate grantmaking for the sector. Nonprofits have long criticized foundations for expecting capacity, effectiveness and sustainability when their own grantmaking strategies seldom support meeting those demands” (2007, p. 19). Rethinking eligibility criteria and matching requirements, streamlining the application processes, and providing operational support for building capacity would help small rural nonprofits access additional funding.

Measuring Impact Differently

In addition to flexible grantmaking and eligibility criteria, funders need to think differently about how they measure impact when working with rural communities (Carlson & Cook 2021; Squire 2021; Swierzewski 2007; Walters 2020). “Probably the most notable challenge is measuring impact, which is often viewed in terms of the number of people served per dollar. While it is understandable that staff members of urban-based foundations look to that measure, it does not translate well to rural communities” (Hunt & Smith 2019, p. 2). Foundations often prioritize scaling up and pursuing situations with the highest potential for impact communicated by impressive numbers. Interviews conducted by Swierzewski found that this desire to continually scale up presents a real barrier: “both nonprofit participants and foundation interviewees agreed that, perhaps more than anything else, it is the sparse populations or the numbers that ultimately work against rural communities in attracting the attention of the nation’s foundation community” (2007, p. 11). Squire (2021) described that scale may look different in rural communities. Some measure of scale can be achieved “by working with a consortium of rural communities toward a shared goal” or “within a single community by deepening the impact rather than broadening it” (pp. 5-6).

Rural communities are more likely to have multiple risk factors present when compared to metropolitan areas (Heflin & Miller 2012). This creates a need for integrated service delivery and for investments that serve multiple domains (Heflin & Miller 2012; Squire 2021). Strategies that are successful in more densely populated

areas may not translate well to more rural communities (Hefflin & Miller 2012). In addition to investing across multiple need areas simultaneously, foundations have found success by “providing more technical assistance, engaging in more advocacy, and offering activities led by foundations to help nonprofits build fundraising capacity, and providing consulting, all to help nonprofits survive” (Sheets, Marcus, & Migliaccio 2009, p. 82). Although the overlapping and complex needs of rural communities may seem like a drawback of investing in these places, “it can also be an enormous opportunity. Because rural communities are small, it is easier for modest investments to support progress on multiple fronts” (Squire 2021, p. 4).

To address the challenge of scale and measuring impact in rural communities, “many philanthropies doing place-based work adopt a posture of learning” (Squire 2021, p. 5). Kubish reflects on the importance of this type of relationship building,

Rural philanthropy is so much more than grant-making; it is community building. The concept of ‘meeting communities where they are’ is both literal and figurative. Rural funders must travel to communities and get to know the residents. Funders need to learn about local priorities, challenges and resources; take their cue from listening to local residents; and design grant-making to meet the communities’ needs (p. 514).

This includes a more informal approach to measuring impact “that includes inviting grantees to discuss their work with the funder; what went well, what barriers they are facing, and what their plans are moving forward. Interviews, site visits, and trend analysis can also help funders understand what is working and what is not” (Squire 2021, p. 5). These nonprofits were able to describe their impact and tell their story effectively, despite their small numbers, and attract national funding support (Hunt & Smith 2019, p. 4).

Involving Local Leadership

To effect change in rural communities, which are each unique in their challenges and opportunities, the communities themselves must be involved in setting funding priorities and making decisions (Carlson & Cook 2021; Dabson 2020; Dwyer & Keefe 2020; Gregg 2019; Kunesh 2016; Russell 2018). “Rural communities, like anywhere else, have vibrant—and perhaps overlooked—opportunities and assets. It is vital for funders to enter such communities with humility and emphasize listening to local leaders, many of whom have dedicated their lives to these communities” (Gregg 2019, p. 1). Squire similarly described “community leaders who understand the history of the place, directly experience its

challenges, and have existing relationships are better positioned to chart the community’s path forward” (2021, p. 2). The needs of rural communities tend to be specific to the given region, making local residents uniquely qualified to understand the nuances of the community and how to prioritize change (Gregg 2019; Russell 2018; Squire 2021).

Allard described the critical role of the nonprofit sector in rural areas; “not only does the nonprofit sector administer many government-supported services, it also offers assistance financed through philanthropic and charitable giving. Nonprofit service agencies may be more trusted in high-poverty neighborhoods and more responsive to community priorities than government agencies” (Allard 2008, p. 79). These deep commitments to community can at times be antithetical to the opportunities philanthropy may present. Especially in diverse rural communities, decades of distrust may be hurdles funders need to anticipate when approaching or seeking out rural grant opportunities. It is not surprising given the history of slavery, colonization, and xenophobia that some communities are more comfortable with insular levels of community giving. Gordon noted, “When Native Communities have entered the grantseeking world they often have been left feeling diminished and demoralized by both the process and the outcome” (2007, p. 3). Local partnerships will also help ensure the work is carried forward once the funding phases out (Squire 2021). Though “transformation must be driven by rural communities themselves ... they cannot take this journey alone—structures at the federal and regional levels are needed to provide an overarching vision, coordinate and direct resources, and encourage learning across rural America” (Dabson 2020, p. 10).

Establishing Long-term Funding Commitments

While flexible grantmaking and investing across multiple domains are critical for meeting needs in rural communities, long-term funding commitments are equally important (Carlson & Cook 2021; Kenney 2022; Neuhoff & Duncelman 2011; Squire 2021; Swierzewski 2007). “To address complex, adaptive social challenges, you must be in it for the long haul. Overcoming decades of rural underinvestment and rural perceptions of being left behind does not align neatly onto logic models, and a willingness to hold on and break through initial inertia, strategic redesigns, and inevitable staffing turnovers is indispensable to long-term success” (Kenney 2022, p. 1). Carlson & Cook recommended that rural communities need funding commitments of at least five years in order to move the needle on meeting complex needs (2021). “Philanthropists who invest in rural communities must be prepared to stick around for a while, es-

pecially if they are building capacity from the ground up ... Philanthropies can cause more harm than good if communities become exhausted by the revolving door of people who ostensibly want to help but do not stay long enough to see it through” (Squire 2021, p. 4).

Interviews conducted by Neuhoff & Dunckelman found that rural nonprofit leaders are prioritizing funding opportunities “that have the potential to grow into large, long-term commitments and putting much less effort into one-off grants with limited long-term potential” (2011, p. 12).

Building Relationships Between Rural Nonprofit Leaders and Funders

Due to the geographic distance often involved, relationship-building between potential funders and rural nonprofit organizations needs to be prioritized and intentionally promoted from both ends (Carlson & Cook 2021; Newstead & Wu 2009; Russell 2018). Deepening a commitment to funding rural America “will require learning more about the history and context of the rural places they might invest in and unlearning the harmful stereotypes of rural people that have proliferated in the national discourse for years and have become more acute with the country’s increasing political polarization” (Carlson & Cook 2021, p. 21). To do this, relationships must be built. As Russell noted, “philanthropists who want to help rural communities thrive need to get out from behind their desks and out into the community” (2018, p. 1).

Because many foundations and granting institutions are located in more densely populated areas, it is difficult for rural nonprofits to cultivate relationships with funders and communicate the needs of their communities (Atkins, Allred, & Hart 2021; Carlson & Cook 2021; Perry 2007; Swierzewski 2007). Carlson & Cook noted that “rural philanthropy is distributed unevenly and often concentrated in the home regions of companies or foundations, leaving many persistently impoverished areas that have carried the brunt of extractive economics with an even lower share of funding” (2021, p. 19).

Building Local Infrastructure

Infrastructure in rural areas has been long neglected and needs to be prioritized for support in order to work towards effectively meeting community needs (Aspen Institute 2021; Hunt & Smith 2019; Kenney 2022; Kubish 2021; Swierzewski 2007). As Kenney pointed out, “an initiative will only go as far and for as long as the corresponding capacity of the locally managing institutions, and rural institutional ecosystems have been comprehensively neglected for decades.” Despite this knowledge, “foundations often resist paying to improve the basic

physical, social, and professional infrastructures of a region because it can be difficult to track quantifiable outcomes ... The lack of this infrastructure is a significant barrier for getting to the outcomes that grant makers are hoping to achieve” (Hunt & Smith 2019, p. 4). Although funders may genuinely want to facilitate change in rural communities, “too much rural philanthropy sputters out because it fails to acknowledge that you cannot just add more responsibility to an already overloaded civic infrastructure” (Kenney 2022, p. 2). As Squire stated, “only once there is sufficient local capacity is it possible to convene community leaders, seed local partners, and begin to envision how philanthropy dollars can help the community define and realize its vision” (2021, p. 2).

Encouraging Affiliations, Partnerships, and Collaborations

Collaborations of various types among rural nonprofit organizations and also among rural funders represent additional strategies for increasing the capacity of rural nonprofits and meeting rural needs (Millesen 2015; Neuhoff & Wu 2010; Snavelly & Tracy 2000; Snavelly & Tracy 2002). Given their limited financial and human resources and the interconnected nature of rural needs, nonprofits can often maximize their impact by forming collaborations with other area nonprofits (Neuhoff & Dunckelman 2011; Snavelly & Tracy 2000; Snavelly & Tracy 2002). Snavelly & Tracy stated that “rural location for the most part is viewed as an incentive to collaborate. Resource constraints in rural areas are believed to necessitate collaboration among rural service providers” (2000, p. 160). Neuhoff & Dunckelman further noted that “the challenge of breadth versus depth is particularly salient, given the constraints on leadership in rural areas. Yet we have seen rural nonprofits respond effectively by collaborating with other local nonprofits to ensure coordination of programs—or even merging with another local nonprofit” (2011, p. 13).

Collaboration between funders has also proved to be an important strategy in increasing funding to rural communities (Millesen 2015; Perry 2007; Sheets, Marcus, & Migliaccio 2009; Swierzewski 2007). Funder collaboratives can achieve beneficial results “working together to achieve collective impact, joining forces with other funders to accomplish shared goals, networking to achieve economies of scale, or forming strategic alignments around a common vision” (Millesen 2015, pp. 128-129). Sheets, Marcus, & Migliaccio found that “many foundations are functioning as conveners, connectors, and collaborators. In a recent study, two-thirds of foundations said they would engage in more collaborations and partnerships, and about one-third planned to initiate more conferences and other meetings” (2009, p. 82). Funder collaboratives experience the same pitfalls and

challenges that nonprofit collaborations experience, but “sometimes, simply acknowledging the common ground and maintaining a commitment to be flexible, fluid, and responsive to emergent challenges and developing opportunities is enough to jump-start meaningful collaborative effort” (Millesen 2015, p. 144). Ultimately, creating an effective collaborative requires “working with others to assemble the various gifts each brings to the table with the goal of doing something together that could not be done through individual effort” (Millesen 2015, p. 150).

GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Given the depth and breadth of the literature on the nonprofit sector in general, there is a limited amount of research and literature related specifically to the rural nonprofit sector, which has distinct challenges and opportunities worth exploring. Over a third of the literature reviewed here is over ten years old, and data related specifically to philanthropic investment in the rural nonprofit sector is scarce. The literature is also limited regarding rural perspectives and needs to be communicated directly from rural communities. While the literature consistently states that local voices and leadership should be included in decisions that affect rural communities, the same can be argued for collecting data, success models, and best-practices related to the rural nonprofit sector.

While data and research generation may be lacking in terms of philanthropy and rural nonprofits, there is no shortage of rural advocates who are beginning to raise their voices in an effort to highlight the work being done in communities across the country. Erin Borla, executive director of the Roundhouse Foundation, recently profiled in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, hosts a podcast specifically focused on philanthropic funding in rural communities. Her episodes focus on successful case studies and voices of nonprofit organizations across the country, and their needs echo much of the opportunities for change highlighted in the articles reviewed here (Gose 2024). Additionally, multiple regional and demographically focused foundations are finding success in rural focused funding, including the Black Belt Community Foundation, Native Americans in Philanthropy, The T.L.L. Temple Foundation, and many others across the nation (Gose 2024). While significant impacts on the overall monies committed to rural areas has yet to be seen, the evolution of these conversations shows a rising awareness of the need for a larger philanthropic focus in rural communities. Increased research on capacity, impact, and scalability of rural nonprofit work and case studies of foundations working in rural areas can only serve to improve the conversation around rural philanthropy and the opportunities it provides to the residents of rural America.

QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

This review of the literature has identified several areas where more research is needed. Government funding priorities are shifting and while they have been a steady source of funding for several of our rural nonprofits, recent changes will have significant impacts on the way these organizations operate in the future. It is important to understand the abilities and constraints for philanthropic investment in rural areas where the funding landscape continues to change and new methods of sustainability are sought. One of these new methods of sustainability that is suggested for research is what is being called, “The Great Wealth Transfer”. This phenomenon will affect rural communities in new ways and the generation that inherits this wealth may have different giving patterns to their parents. Additionally, many of the younger generation may have moved from their rural communities meaning the wealth transfer may also transfer geographically from rural to urban, continuing the wealth extraction historically endemic to rural America and exacerbating the philanthropic gap across the nation. In an article published in Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy’s *11 Trends in Philanthropy for 2025* report, Abalo discussed these shifts in the context of current philanthropic investment and changing demographics in rural areas, “More than one in five older adults live in a rural-designated community, but estimates indicate that only 6% of large foundation grants are directed towards rural areas” (2025), indicating the obstacles and opportunity these changes hold.

It would be interesting to also understand the role of community foundations and local donor philanthropy in this wealth transfer. In *The Daily Yonder*, Sarah Melotte discusses this wealth transfer and how community funds are trying to get ahead of the wave, “working on redirecting money from the Great Wealth Transfer by reminding people that even a seemingly small gift allocated in a will to a local foundation can make a big difference” (2024). The role of community foundations and donor advised funds, changing tax laws in references to donor advised funds and rural sources of wealth, including agriculture, are key to understanding how this wealth transfer may work in favor or against the sustainability of small-town nonprofits. Many recent articles on rural philanthropy are focused on using rural community foundations as vessels for the wealth transfer to keep assets in rural communities (Joslyn 2018; Melotte 2024). Ben Gose described this trend in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, “The approach ... in many largely rural states, including Kansas, Iowa, and Wyoming, starts by identifying the household net worth in a county, estimating how much of that wealth will transfer in the next decade, and then imagining a future in which 5 percent of the transfer goes to charity” (2025). As the wealth

transfer continues, time will tell if these strategies prove successful in supporting nonprofit efforts in rural communities.

According to the literature, rural perceptions, both positive and negative, affect funding decisions directed toward rural communities. From a rural funder's perspective, perceptions of rural communities may have changed over the last fifteen years. It would be helpful to more deeply understand the effect these perceptions have on investment in rural minority communities. Case studies regarding funders who prioritize rural needs and their funding habits and the alignment this has with the needs and capacity of rural communities should be examined. To help build the capacity of rural nonprofits, the literature points to potential collaborations with state or national affiliate groups which may affect how rural funders view nonprofits with these affiliations. Exploring these questions from funders' perspectives would better inform and help connect the rural nonprofit sector to potential funding opportunities.

CONCLUSION

This article reviewed and synthesized research on philanthropy and its interaction with the rural nonprofit sector. Though the character and needs of the rural nonprofit sector are unique and the influence of the sector on rural communities is significant, more research is needed in order to not only increase philanthropy in these areas but help determine how philanthropy can best affect change in these communities. What is clear, however, is that growing the rural nonprofit sector's capacity and ability to meet community needs is not something that can be done in isolation or by individual nonprofits. Advocating for increased investment in rural communities, cultivating meaningful relationships with funders and removing application barriers, encouraging collaborations, and building rural infrastructure will take a coordinated effort from rural communities, the nonprofit sector, funders, local leadership, and the state and federal government to be successful. Additional research and data on the rural nonprofit sector is needed to help guide these changes in a meaningful way. Additionally, more models are needed exemplifying efforts and successes in the rural nonprofit sector. Though rural communities are varied and what works in one place may not work in the next, models of success—and those of past lessons learned—provide ideas and inspiration, if not a clear roadmap.

What is not discussed in this article is the ways rural nonprofits and state and federal funding interact. As the government funding streams continue to fluctuate, it will be imperative we know more about the role of philanthropy in rural communities and how all partners can adjust and work together to ensure vital services are continued and communities can continue to thrive. New

research and case studies on rural philanthropy and nonprofit effects in rural communities could serve to provide funders the information needed to make rural funding a sustainable trend that could make positive long-term impacts on rural residents and illuminate the effect a prosperous rural America could have on the country as a whole.



Nora Leinen is the Associate Director of Rural Philanthropy Institute, a nonprofit focused on increasing awareness, inspiring conversation, and catalyzing research and knowledge about the importance of nonprofit organizations in rural America. She holds a master's degree in English Literature from Marquette University where she attended as a Trinity Fellow.



Matt Ehlman is the founder and a board member of the Rural Philanthropy Institute and co-founder of The Numad Group, a fundraising, communications, strategic planning, and program evaluation agency. He earned his PhD in philanthropic studies from the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University, where he was recognized as a Eugene R. Tempel Fellow.



Dwight Burlingame is Professor Emeritus of Philanthropic Studies, Glenn Family Chair in Philanthropy Emeritus at Indiana University Indianapolis. He has more than 50 years of experience as a professor, dean, and vice president at five universities and is currently a board member at the Rural Philanthropy Institute.

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