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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR NONPROFIT LEADERS IN RURAL ALASKA:
PERCEPTIONS, ACCESS, UTILIZATION, AND NEEDS

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL ALASKA

Abstract

This project explores the nature of professional development for fundraising professionals on the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska. Surveys and semi-structured interviews identify perceptions of professional development opportunities, utilization, barriers to access that impact participation, and specific training topics of interest.

The data illustrate a limited awareness of existing resources, preference for in-person training opportunities, and limitations in time and resources necessary for travel for professional development opportunities. The training content's applicability to rural Alaskan communities as well as facilitator experience with Alaskan or rural nonprofits are noted as primary concerns when considering participation. Interviews show most subjects do not view nonprofit resource development as a career path or vocation, but instead see themselves as generalists attracted to the mission of the organization.

Findings from this project may inform content, design, and marketing of professional development curricula for rural nonprofit professionals, as well as modes of delivery.

Key Words

Professional development, rural philanthropy, nonprofit professionals, training, fundraising, continuing education.

Introduction

The nonprofit sector is expanding all while record numbers of senior nonprofit leaders are retiring, increasing the need for professional development opportunities for emerging nonprofit leaders (Tierney, 2008). This dynamic is of particular concern for those working

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within rural areas, where access to educational opportunities and experienced role models may be limited.

Rural professionals often experience and carry out their work differently than their urban peers. Mellow examined these differences and found several concerns shared by rural nonprofit professionals: they perform the same work as their urban counterparts but with fewer resources; they often need to adjust conventions to the unique realities of rural settings; and they manage complicated dual relationships within the community (Mellow, 2005). Professionals in rural environments report higher sensitivity to social norms and higher expectations to be perceived as trustworthy, available, and committed (Salomon, 2003). These differences may alter rural nonprofit professionals' views of the relevancy of professional development or influence how expertise is applied to practice in rural settings (Mellow, 2005; Salamon, 2003; Pohjoispuro, J. J., & Vernon, 2006).

Data from the Association of Fundraising Professionals, Association of Donor Relations Professionals, and Certified Fundraising Executive International show that rural Alaskan fundraisers, in particular, do not engage in professional development opportunities at the same rate as their urban counterparts. Involvement by Alaskan nonprofit professionals in such activities is especially crucial now, as the state faces a \$3 billion shortfall in its annual budget due to decreased oil prices and production. Alaskan nonprofits rely on state funding more than the national average. The state's 6,000 registered nonprofit organizations have historically relied on government grants for an average 57 percent of annual organizational revenue in contrast to the national average of 36 percent (Goldsmith, 2006). The current unprecedented reduction in the state economy makes programs and services provided through the nonprofit sector particularly vulnerable.

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Reductions in state funding require new approaches to ensure sustainability of Alaska's nonprofit sector (McMillian, 2014). Alaskan nonprofits must embrace and implement other means to attract philanthropic support, all while facing an increasing shortage of senior nonprofit leaders.

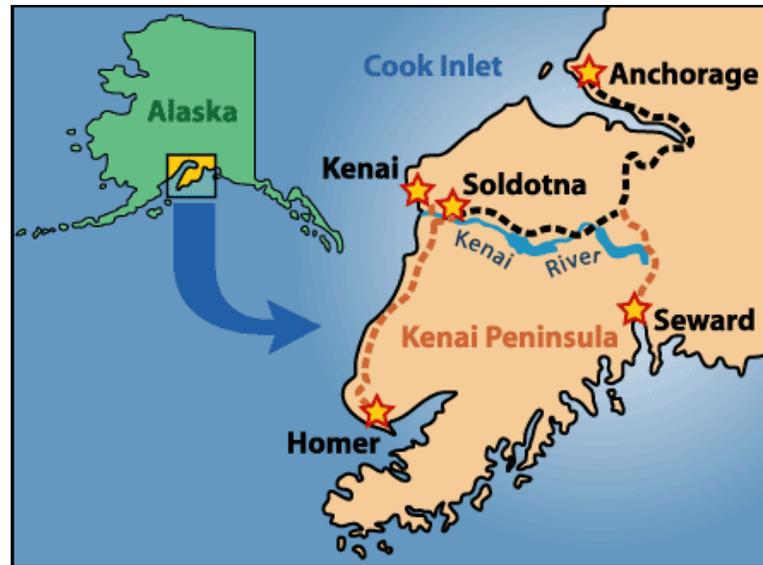
Project Description

This project aims to examine the nature of professional development for rural nonprofit leaders living and working on the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska, with the intent to identify and understand factors that influence participation rates. By exploring factors of awareness, accessibility, utilization, and perceptions of nonprofit development opportunities, we might better understand the specific training needs for nonprofit professionals in rural areas. Insights may inform changes in content, marketing, and mode of delivery for professional development opportunities to better appeal to nonprofit leaders in rural Alaska and beyond.

Setting

The Kenai Peninsula is home to several towns and villages situated along a curving 260-mile road southwest of Anchorage. The population density of the peninsula is 1/km² (3/sq mi), and the communities range in population from 120 to 7,250 residents as of 2010.

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Methods

A list of nonprofits on the Kenai Peninsula was generated using information from the Kenai Peninsula United Way and the State of Alaska nonprofit registry. Organizations located in areas without road or internet access were eliminated from the sample. Thirty organizations were initially randomly selected from the list using the Excel Rand Function. The person primarily responsible for resource development at each nonprofit was identified through web research and/or phone contact. These thirty nonprofit professionals were asked to participate in an email survey consisting of multiple choice, Lickert scale and open response questions delivered through SurveyMonkey (see Appendix B). Two weeks after the original request was sent, another ten professionals were identified from the list of nonprofits and invited to participate. This process resulted in a total of 34 respondents completing the online survey between December 8, 2014 and January 7, 2015.

The same process was used to identify ten subjects to participate in semi-structured interviews by phone or in person (see Appendix C). The ten respondents were asked the same

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questions in a similar order, with some variation in response based on the natural flow of the conversation. Three of the interviews were conducted in person and seven were conducted via phone. The average interview time was 40 minutes. Dates and locations of these interviews are displayed below.

Interview	Method	Job Title	Informant's Location	Interview Date	Interview Location
1	Phone	Executive Director	Homer	1/8/15	Office, Homer
2	In Person	Development Manager	Homer	1/9/15	Café, Homer
3	In Person	Director	Soldotna	1/12/15	Café, Soldotna
4	Phone	Coordinator	Soldotna	1/14/15	Office, Homer
5	Phone	Executive Director	Kenai	1/14/15	Office, Homer
6	Phone	Membership Manager	Kenai	1//19/15	Office, Homer
7	In Person	Executive Director	Kenai	1/23/15	Café, Kenai
8	In Person	Director	Homer	2/19/15	Office, Homer
9	Phone	Executive Director	Seward	2/20/15	Office, Homer
10	Phone	Development Director	Kenai	2/20/15	Office, Homer

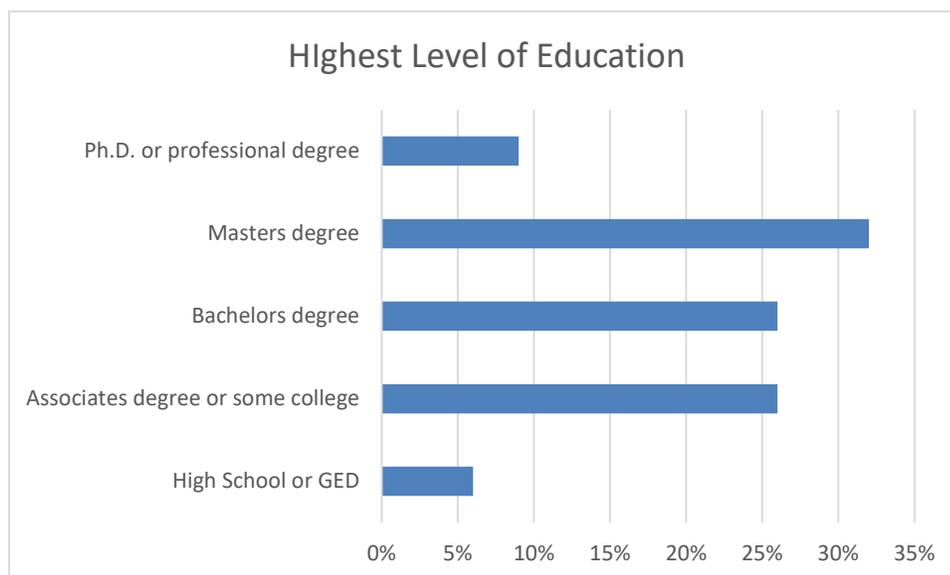
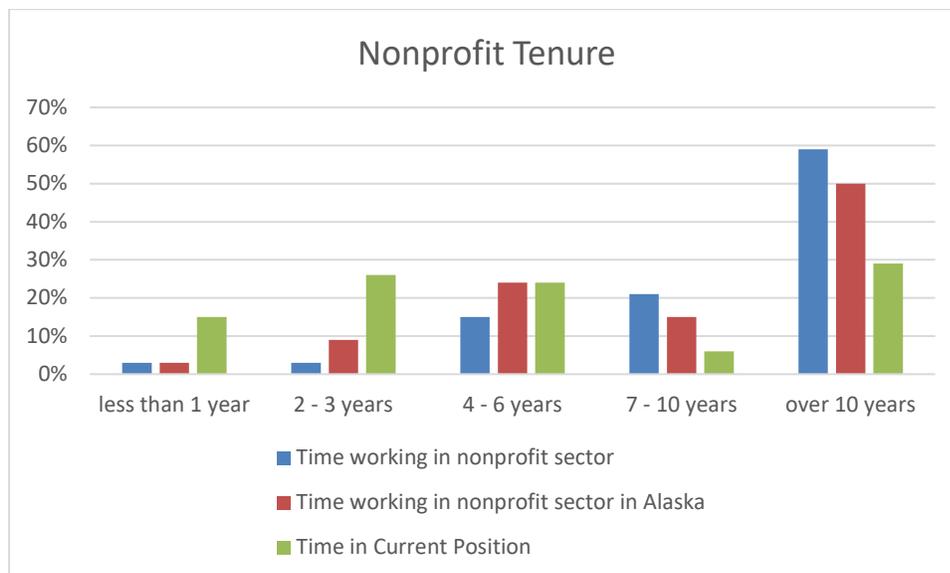
Data from the surveys and qualitative interviews were analyzed separately. Open-ended questions were coded and categorized by themes, while closed-ended questions were tabulated

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and/or scored. Tables were developed displaying themes and response numbers for open-ended questions, as well as displaying responses and scores for closed-ended questions.

Participants

Almost 80 percent of participants report to have been working in the nonprofit sector for 7 years or more, and 65 percent have been working for Alaskan nonprofits for 7 years or more. Their education levels vary, with subjects identifying their highest levels of education at the high school, associates, bachelors, masters, and Ph.D. levels of education.



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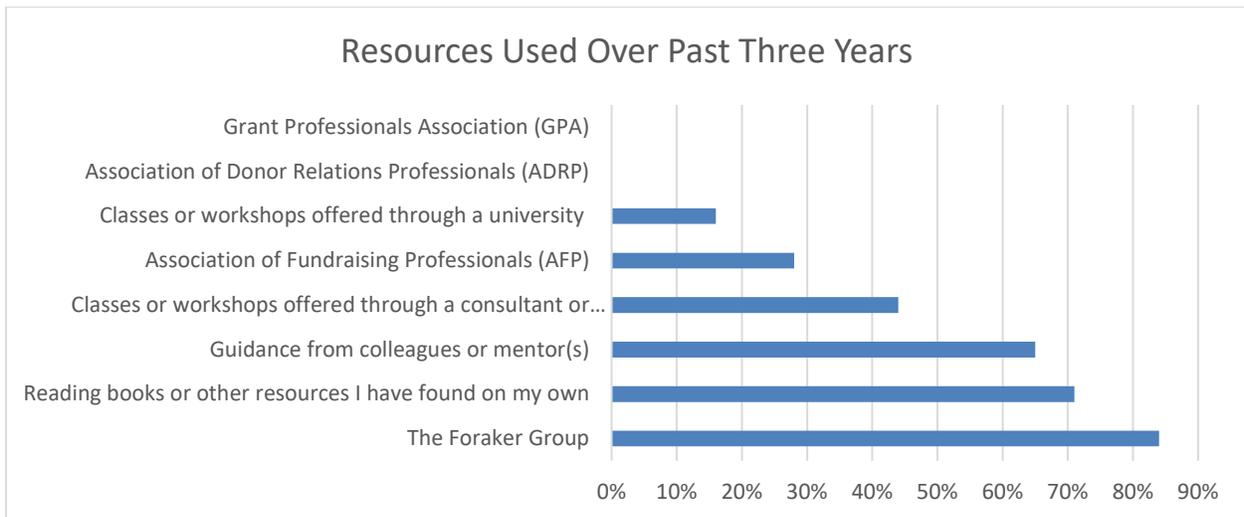
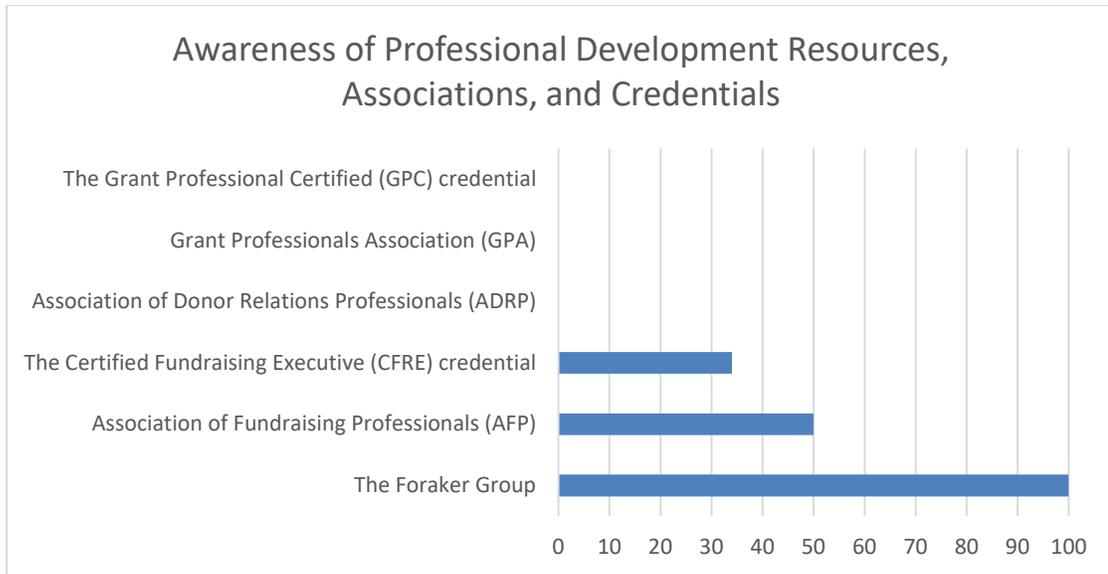
Findings

Findings show a lack of awareness of existing professional fundraising associations, certifications, and educational opportunities. The majority of education on the topic comes from two primary sources: an Anchorage-based consulting firm and peer support. Subjects do not identify as nonprofit development professionals, but instead view themselves as generalists doing whatever task is needed to support the given cause. When considering participation in professional development opportunities, participants identify the cost as well as the facilitator's experience with Alaskan or other rural nonprofits as key concerns.

A. Awareness and Utilization of Current Resources

When asked about their awareness and utilization of resources for nonprofit development, only 50 percent of respondents said they were familiar with the Association of Fundraising Professionals, and 34 percent were familiar with the CFRE credential. Eighty percent noted that given the small population, networking and informal peer relations serve as a primary source of professional development. The same number identified The Foraker Group, an Anchorage-based nonprofit consulting firm, as their primary source of development knowledge. One-third mentioned that they had looked for information on resource development online, but found the process of identifying applicable content to be challenging and time-intensive. Two subjects considered technical assistance provided as part of state or federal grants to be the most beneficial resource they have used.

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B. Strengths and Deficits of Professional Development on the Kenai Peninsula

Nine of the ten interview subjects noted that living in small communities fosters informal peer support among those in nonprofit roles. One comment was especially illustrative:

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P3: I know that the current E.D. of the museum used to be in this job I have now. If I get stuck or I wonder if a certain approach has been tried here before, I can just ask her the next time I run into her.

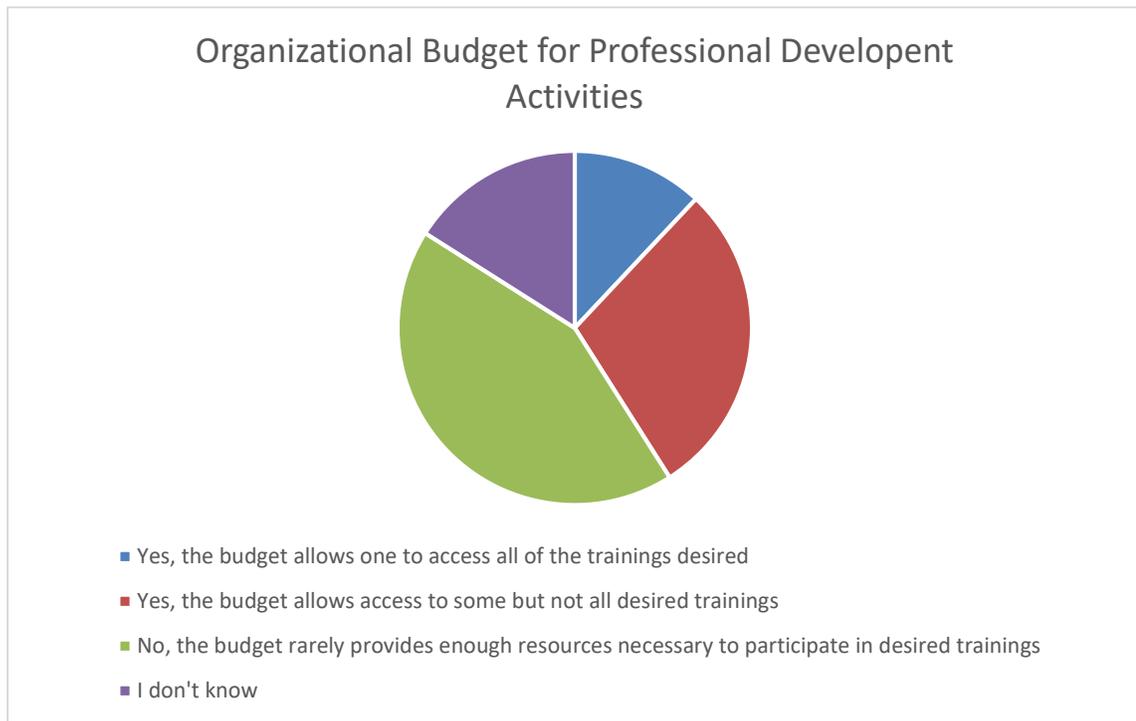
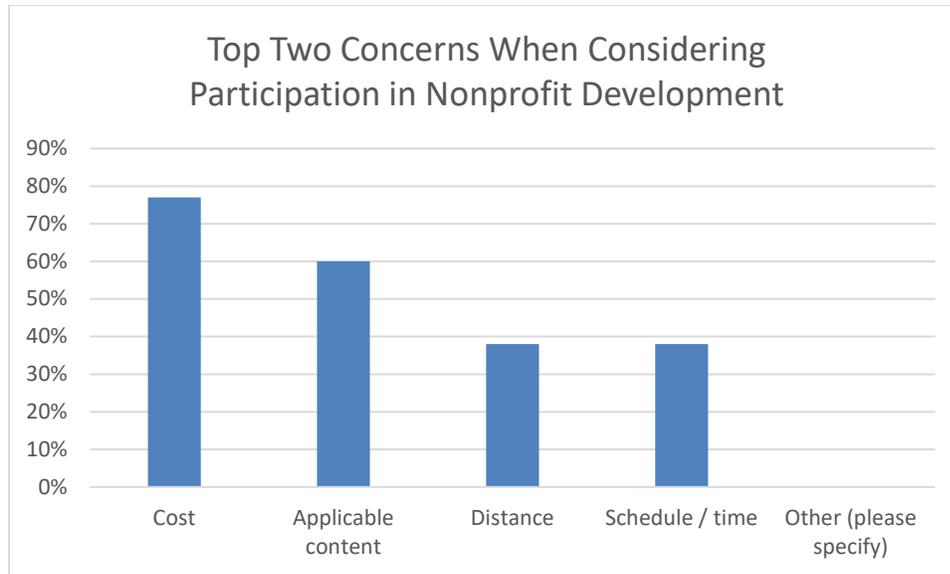
When asked about the deficits of training opportunities, participants noted concerns about training content, time, expense, and technology.

P2: Like it or hate it, the most successful fundraisers around here are gun raffles. No training or webinar out of New York or L.A. is going to tell me the best way to do a gun raffle.

P9: We don't have the same funding sources as they do in the Lower 48, so we need training that speaks directly to what we do have.

Almost eighty percent of participants noted that the cost of travel to and from Anchorage makes most in-person trainings prohibitive for many organizations. Approximately 40 percent of subjects noted that their organizational budgets were not sufficient to cover the travel costs and attendance fees for most development opportunities. The needs for improved internet connectivity and better web or video conferencing equipment were noted by one-third of respondents.

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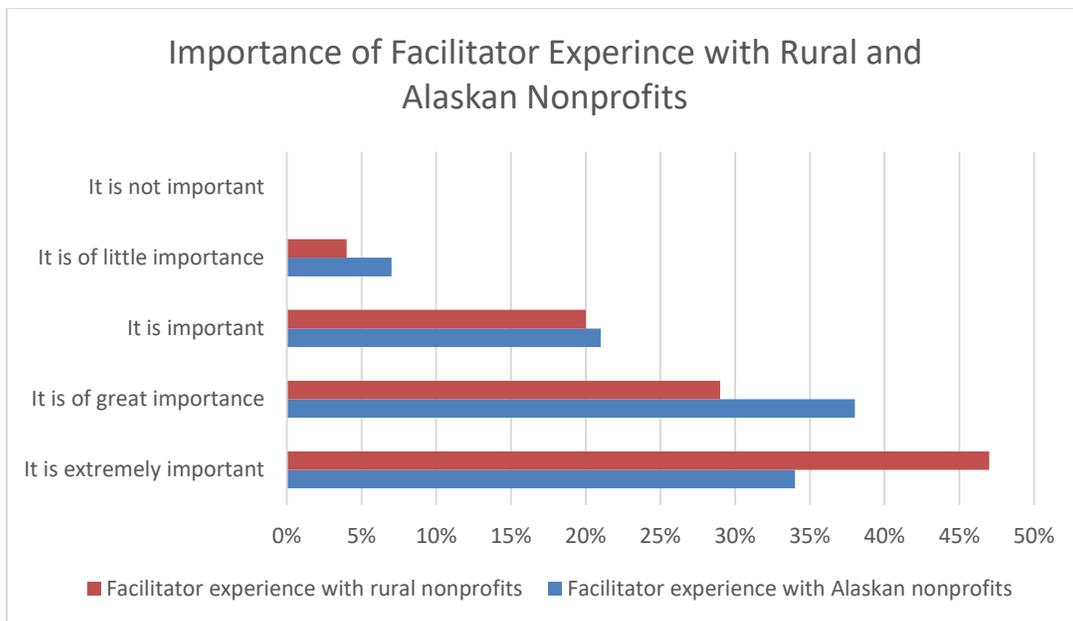


C. Considerations When Choosing Professional Development Opportunities

Aside from the costs of development opportunities, other areas of consideration were the facilitator's experience with, and the training content's applicability to, rural organizations and the Alaskan non-profit sector specifically.

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Over 75 percent of respondents said that it is “extremely important” or “of great importance” that a training instructor or facilitator have experience with rural nonprofits. When asked about a facilitator’s experience with Alaskan nonprofits, the results were similar, with over 70 percent saying such experience is “extremely important” or “of great importance.” The applicability of training content to rural communities – or the ability of an instructor to help participants understand how to make a strategy work within the limitations of their organizations – was noted as an area of concern among 60 percent of respondents.



D. Requested Topics Acknowledged Need for New Strategies

Data collection for this project began in December 2014, shortly after the governor of Alaska began to warn the public of the need for drastic cuts in all areas of the state budget. Each of the ten interview participants expressed concern over the inevitable funding cuts, and seven acknowledged the need to find new development strategies.

P4: We’re still coming to grips with Foraker telling us we can’t count on events as a main source of revenue. It’s a brave new world, and we’re still 30 years behind.

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P2: Many (nonprofit organizations) barely squeaked through the past several years with the recession. Now the state is going to slash budgets like we've never seen before. Some organizations are going to be fighting just to survive. The old special event standby isn't going to cut it anymore.

Long-term sustainability was the primary concern and topic of interest for future training opportunities. The majority of respondents indicated a desire to learn new fundraising approaches, but none were sure of the exact methods and tactics that would be most useful. As one respondent explained,

P9: We don't have enough of a population to solve the problem with letters requesting annual gifts, and we don't have enough foundations to solve the problem with grant writing. We already know we can't survive on events. I just hope that somebody out there knows the magic answer.

In addition, trainings on board development and prospect research were requested by half of those interviewed. Of particular interest were trainings on how to identify foundations outside Alaska that might fund Alaskan projects and advice on how to motivate board members to fundraise.

E. Modes of Training

While 82 percent of respondents said that they would be willing to participate in online trainings or webinars, 60 percent expressed dissatisfaction with remote trainings and a strong preference for in-person professional development opportunities. Reasons included time zone differences, difficulty concentrating and temptation to multitask during the presentation, inability to ask questions in the moment, and lack of follow-up with instructors or other workshop participants. The following two responses were particularly illustrative:

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P8: (At in-person workshops) I can talk to the instructor during the break and ask questions specific to our situation. During a webinar I might not see how it is helpful to us specifically, or I might get pulled away to deal with a client issue.

P5: For me it's not so much the presentation itself, it's the connections that happen with other participants during the class. With webinars you miss seeing each other, and you don't have that networking that really makes it valuable.

F. Balancing Resource Development with Other Responsibilities

Only 22 percent of subjects had full-time roles devoted to resource development; the majority were responsible for fundraising in addition to other duties. The most common title among the respondents was Executive Director.

Job Titles of Those Responsible for Resource Development	
Executive Director / CEO / Director	22
Development Director / Manager / Coordinator	5
Program Director / Manager / Coordinator	4
Office Manager	2
Board President	1
Total Respondents	34

Most Important Responsibility	
Resource development / fundraising	11
Staff and volunteer management	7
Program Development	5
Board development	5
Marketing / public relations / community relations	4

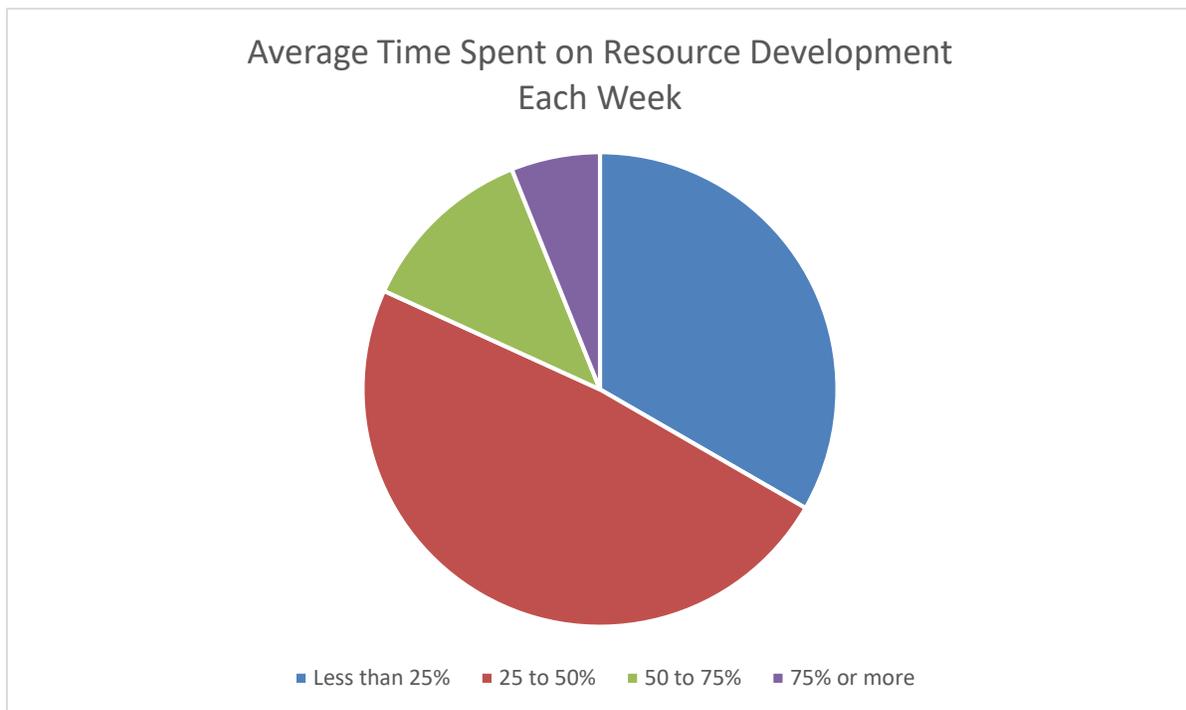
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Budgeting / financial operations	2
Total Respondents	34

Despite identifying resource development as one of their top priorities, over 80 percent of respondents reported spending less than half of their time on development tasks. The following two comments were illustrative:

P4: In large organizations you have a person just for grant writing or just for event planning. We don't have that here. What you would call our fundraising professional is also the receptionist who runs the payroll.

P1: I'm the development person, I'm the finance person, I'm also the facilities person and the marketing person and the volunteer manager....how much time should I be devoting to trainings? It's nice to do sometimes, but I doubt I'll be making more time for it. Maybe, if I knew it would be worth it.



G. Professional Identity

Six of the ten interview participants referred to never having thought of themselves as “nonprofit development professionals” until our conversation. Five of the ten discussed how professional identity is less defined in rural Alaska than in urban areas, and that the motivations to apply for development positions in rural Alaska has more to do with an organization’s mission or the benefits associated with the job than the fundraising role itself. Two comments illustrate this theme:

P5: People don’t move up here with their career in mind. They choose to live here, and then find a way to make it work. Many people piece together two or three part-time jobs so they can stay. When there is a nonprofit job available, they look at it and think ‘I can figure out how to do that.’

P1: I doubt people see themselves as ‘development professionals,’ even if that is what they do all day. They see themselves as advocates for providing food to those in need, or helping senior citizens, or whatever the cause is. If the senior center needs a direct care aide, they go for it. If it needs a fundraiser, they go for it.

H. Dual Relationships in Small Communities

As expected, all participants spoke of being acquaintances or friends with current and prospective donors. While relationship development is often described as the pinnacle of nonprofit development, 70 percent of interview participants described how the familiarity that comes with life in a small town hinders — not helps — fundraising and volunteer recruitment efforts.

P7: When you’re in a small town, you know your donors. You know Bob just lost his job. Or Susan, who just had twins so she wouldn’t have time to volunteer. We know

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them, so it is easy to come up with reasons why now isn't the best time to ask for anything.

P9: In our town, donors get solicited by any two or three organizations in the same week. We are all competing for the same dollars all the time. You can't avoid having to ask your friends for donations. And then later they ask you to support their cause. We're just moving the same money around.

Discussion

Respondents rely on few resources for professional development: peer support, an Anchorage-based consulting firm, and books or articles found online. This lack of awareness and use of other available resources raises concerns about the breadth and diversity of guidance for rural nonprofit leaders. As 65 percent of participants had been working in the Alaskan nonprofit sector for more than 7 years, it is doubtful that alternative resources and perspectives are discussed in peer-to-peer mentoring. Furthermore, their lack of affiliation with resource development as a profession makes rural nonprofit leaders less likely to seek out alternative resources on their own. Assumptions that a training facilitator lacks sensitivity to challenges unique to rural nonprofits further reduces the likelihood that rural fundraising professionals will participate in educational opportunities, despite acknowledgment that new methods are needed given changes in the state economy.

Data from qualitative interviews support earlier findings by Mellow (2005) and Salamon (2003) that rural professionals face strict societal expectations and challenges balancing dual community roles. Subjects noted how knowledge of or personal relationships with donors – unavoidable in small communities – limits outreach and solicitation efforts. The following comment was particularly illustrative:

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P2: Last week I gave the board a list of potential donors. As we went down the list, people came up with excuses as to why we can't ask that person now. They're going through a divorce, or they have a kid in college. By the end, we didn't have a list at all. We had eliminated almost everyone because of personal things we knew about them.

Suggestions for Application

Several survey respondents and interview participants offered suggestions to help improve access to professional development opportunities for nonprofit leaders. Six mentioned travel scholarships provided by sponsoring organizations as a means to improve the accessibility of professional development. Five subjects suggested that nonprofits in the same town collaborate and share the costs of bringing an instructor to town. Three others felt that the Foraker Group should invest in having consultants operate from rural offices across the state.

Data from this project may inform both content design and marketing of professional development targeted to nonprofit leaders in rural communities. Facilitators may consider crafting condensed training plans with exercises that encourage each participant to envision, with the help of the facilitator, how a practice might be applied to his or her particular agency. Care should be taken to recognize the constraints of rural organizations, and examples should incorporate challenges unique to communities with relatively few prospects for board service and local annual fund donations. Webinars should be planned with the Alaskan time zone in mind and offer opportunities to interact with the facilitator during the training. Curricula content should include ample means of improving revenue diversification, such as social entrepreneurship, inter-agency collaborations or mergers, and planned gifts.

Marketing of training opportunities for rural nonprofit professionals should clearly establish the credibility of the facilitator by highlighting his or her experience with rural

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nonprofits. Instead of using language that promotes the training as career development, the marketing materials should focus on how application of the training content will further success amid challenges unique to rural communities.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

Limitations in this project include elements of self-selection bias and researcher bias inherent in all surveys and interviews. Furthermore, this project used a small sample size. Findings cannot be generalized to the rest of Alaska, as differences in road access, internet accessibility, and cultures may affect access to and awareness of educational resources. More research is needed to determine whether these findings are mirrored across Alaska as well as other rural communities throughout other states.

In addition, given the range of program and administrative responsibilities shared by rural nonprofit professionals, as well as their tendency to identify as generalists rather than as fundraising professionals, future research may explore utilization of professional development activities outside the scope of resource development. Such a project may aim to determine whether incorporating training in resource development along with education in client services and program operations might increase participation rates.

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Appendices

Appendix A
Study Information Sheet

Appendix B
Survey Questions

Appendix C
Interview Questions

INDIANA UNIVERSITY STUDY INFORMATION SHEET FOR

**Professional Development for Nonprofit Professionals on the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska:
Access, Utilization, and Needs.**

You are invited to participate in a research study of the nature of professional development for nonprofit professionals on the Kenai Peninsula. You were selected as a possible subject because your name was associated with a nonprofit listing obtained through the United Way, Foraker, and/or an internet search. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Heather O'Connor under the direction of Dr. Dwight Burlingame of the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to assess what educational resources local nonprofit professionals access, what barriers might prevent access, what types of trainings are needed, and how those needs might be better met.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

If you agree to participate, you will be one of approximately thirty subjects who complete an emailed survey. Of these, ten will also be asked to participate in individual interviews.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

Participate in an emailed survey within 10 days of receipt. The survey requires less than 10 minutes to complete.

In addition, you may be asked if you would participate in one phone interview. The interview will require no more than a half-hour of your time.

RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

Participants risk a loss of confidentiality. If any of the questions asked make you feel uncomfortable, you may choose to refrain from answering, skip a question, or end the interview at any time.

BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

There are no direct benefits.

ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

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Participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw or decline to answer any question at any time without consequence.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Indiana University Institutional Review Board or its designees.

COSTS

You will not be responsible for any study-specific costs.

PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study, contact the researcher Heather O'Connor at (907) 299-7200.

For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information, or offer input, contact the IU Human Subjects Office at (317) 278-3458 or [for Indianapolis] or (812) 856-4242 [for Bloomington] or (800) 696-2949.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time.

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**Professional Development for Rural Fundraisers on the Kenai Peninsula
Survey Questions**

Online Survey

1. How long have you worked in the nonprofit sector?

Less than one year

- 2-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 6-10 years
- Over ten years

2. How much of that time has been with nonprofits based in Alaska?

Less than one year

- 2-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 6-10 years
- Over ten years

3. What is your highest level of education?

- High School
- Associates degree, Professional Certificate, or 1-3 years of college
- Bachelors Degree
- Masters Degree
- Ph.D. or professional degree

4. What is your current job title? _____

5. How long have you been in your current position?

- Less than one year
- 2-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 6-10 years
- Over ten years

6. What are the three most important tasks / responsibilities that you perform in your current position?

7. About how much of your time do you spent on resource development (grant writing, fundraising events, appeal letters, individual solicitations, etc.)?

- Less than 25 percent
- 25 to 50 percent
- 50 to 75 percent

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75 percent or more

8. Does your organization allocate resources for training and education programs that might be applied to nonprofit management and fundraising?

- Yes
- No
- I do not know

8a. If yes, is the amount allocated adequate?

- Yes, the budget allows one to access all the trainings desired
- Yes, the budget allows some access to trainings
- No, the budget rarely provides enough resources necessary to participate in desired professional development opportunities

9. Are you are you familiar with any of the following: (check all that apply)

- Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP)
- Association of Donor Relations Professionals (ADRP)
- Grant Professionals Association (GPA)
- The Certified Fundraising Executive (CFRE) credential
- The Grant Professional Certified (GPC) credential
- The Foraker Group
- I'm not familiar with any of these

10. What resources have you used in the past 3 years for nonprofit professional development training or education (in person or online)?

- Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP)
- Association of Donor Relations Professionals (ADRP)
- Grant Professionals Association (GPA)
- The Foraker Group
- Classes or workshops offered through a university
Which university? _____
- Classes or workshops offered through a consultant or other entity
Which entity? _____
- Guidance from colleagues or mentor(s)
- Reading books or other resources I have found on my own
- Other: (please describe) _____

11. Which of have you found to be the most helpful to your role in resource development?

12. Have you ever participated in online classes, online seminars / webinars, or online conferences?

- Yes

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No

12a. If no, why? _____

13. Would you be interested in pursuing online professional development opportunities?

Yes

No

13a. If no, why? _____

14. How important is it that a professional development opportunity on nonprofit resource development be offered by an Alaska-based organization or facilitator?

It is extremely important

It is of great importance

It is important

It is of little importance

It is not important

14a. Why?

15. What are the two biggest factors you consider when deciding whether to register for a nonprofit development opportunity? (Choose two)

Cost

Distance

Schedule / time

Applicable content

Other (please specify): _____

16. What barriers do nonprofit professionals face in accessing adequate training in Alaska?

17. What could be done to ease the barriers (either internally or statewide)?

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Interviews

Note: the order of the questions may change, depending on the participant's response.

1. What resources are you aware of for professional development for nonprofit professionals in Alaska?
2. Do you feel like there is a lack of training for nonprofit professionals in Alaska?
3. What are some of the training and professional development resources that you have used to help you complete your work more effectively?
- 3a. Which of these have you found to be most beneficial for your role as a nonprofit professional in Alaska?
4. In your experience, what kind of training methods do you learn best from and why?
5. What other training and professional development resources would you use if they were available to you?
6. How often would you want/need to access them?
7. What are the strengths of the current training and professional development opportunities offered for nonprofit professionals in Alaska?
8. What are the deficits of the current training and professional development opportunities offered for nonprofit professionals in Alaska?
9. Are there ways these problems might be addressed?
10. Do you have any final thoughts about professional development for Alaskan nonprofit professionals that you would like to add?