

RESEARCH AND OPINION

Understanding the Governance of Nonprofit Boards of Directors in Metropolitan Milwaukee

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This report explores the operation and performance of nonprofit Boards of Directors operating in the greater Milwaukee area.¹ Board Directors representing 43 nonprofit organizations completed 568 total surveys that were administered as part of comprehensive organizational assessments and comprise the empirical base for this study. Each survey was administered as part of a “diagnostic clinic” sponsored by the Nonprofit Management Fund² and conducted between 1998 and 2006. The surveys addressed several governance practices and issues, including: pursuit of mission, recruitment and orientation, the expertise that Board Directors bring to the organization, understanding of governance roles, training needs, and assessment of fulfilling governance responsibilities.

Of the nonprofit organizations included in this study, 48% had missions focused on social and human services, 20% were arts and culture organizations, 9% were devoted to environmental protection, 6% focused on community or economic development, 5% had an educational mission, and another 10% had multi-faceted missions combining several of these categories.

The number of the Board Directors in these organizations varied from as few as 6 to a high of 40 Directors, with an average of 18. This range is consistent with national studies of nonprofit Boards of Directors across the United States,³ as well as the Boards in the greater Milwaukee area.⁴

The nonprofits in this study represent a variety of sizes measured by both organizational budget and the number of employees. The budgets of the nonprofits ranged from \$50,000 to just under \$3 million, which is the eligibility ceiling for a grant or a diagnostic clinic funded by the Nonprofit Management Fund. The number of full-time paid staff in the nonprofits in this study ranged from 0 (part-time staff only) to 79, with an average of 13 full-time staff. The sample of nonprofits, while not randomly selected, represents a cross-section of nonprofit organizations operating in greater Milwaukee. It under-represents the smallest nonprofits that were not of sufficient age or size to warrant an organizational assessment, as well as larger institutions with operating budgets over \$3 million.

The information gleaned from the survey provides insight into Board functioning and performance, data that can inform effective recruitment of Board Directors, learning and training opportunities for Boards, and strategies to enhance the overall effectiveness of Board governance.

Boards and Missions

One of the most important functions of a nonprofit Board of Directors is to determine the mission of an organization, review and revise the mission at appropriate junctures, and assess ongoing performance in light of achievement of the nonprofit’s mission. Governing Boards provide the guidance for nonprofits to keep moving toward a specified and agreed-upon target. Exceptional Boards shape and uphold the mission, articulate a compelling vision, and ensure congruence between decisions and core values.⁵

The first step in becoming an exceptional Board is to ensure that the organization is fulfilling its mission. All but 1% of the responding Directors are satisfied that the nonprofits they govern are moving forward toward achieving the approved mission. Two-thirds responded that their nonprofit was absolutely fulfilling its mission, and just more than a third stated that their organization was somewhat fulfilling its mission.



Board Director Recruitment and Orientation

If governing Boards are important to the stability and success of nonprofits, then it follows that the selection and orientation of Board Directors is similarly vital. Analysis of survey data shed light on the adequacy of nonprofit Board recruitment and orientation efforts. Board Directors were asked their level of agreement with the statement: “The Board Director recruitment process is clear and in writing.” Slightly more Directors (54%) disagreed with the statement than the 46% who agreed. More than half of the Directors did not see their organization as having a deliberate recruitment process, despite the importance of recruitment efforts, leaving the potential of a loose, unstructured process that could result in a less than desirable composition.

Other survey questions focused on the orientation of new Board Directors, with 61% of respondents agreeing that orientation to the Board was conducted within appropriate time of becoming a Director. Fifty-eight percent noted that there was a standard orientation manual for each new Director, and 48% agreed that the organization has a written job description for each Director. Thus, while some nonprofits have strong orientation processes in place—including orientation programs, written manuals, and Director job descriptions—about half of the Boards still have significant work to do in establishing a standard orientation process for new Directors to become versed in their governance responsibilities and acclimated to the culture of that specific Board.

Board Directors were asked to identify areas of training that would enhance their ability to fulfill their governance responsibilities. Their responses are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Training That Board Directors Would Like to Receive

Training Topic	Percent
Fundraising	62.7%
Planning	46.1%
Governance Responsibilities	38.7%
Setting Policy	31.7%
Program Development	31.0%
Committee Chairs/Staff Working Together	29.0%

Fundraising received the greatest interest as a training topic with two-thirds of Board Directors stating that they would like to learn more about raising funds. Previous publications have documented that Board Directors of nonprofit organizations are resistant to asking for money because they often have little experience in fundraising, as well as significant fears about making funding requests. Fundraising training can be expected to help conquer Board Directors’ fears of asking for funds and provide them with new fundraising techniques to increase their organization’s ability to achieve the mission.

If by definition the primary role of a nonprofit Board is to govern, to guide and steer the organization, then there should be an interest among Directors to learn more about planning and guiding the organization’s future in excess of the 46% tabulated as expressing that interest. Slightly less than half of the respondents would like to learn more about planning. However, since planning is a skill that is universally engaged at most places of employment, no matter if in the public, private or nonprofit sectors, perhaps Board Directors recognize that many already bring that skill to the Board room, unlike fundraising or setting policy.

The roughly 40% who identified governance responsibilities as desired training may serve on one of the Boards of the 43 nonprofits in this study that offered little or no orientation. In addition to training in governance, about a third was interested in educational sessions on setting policy and developing programs. A smaller group of 29% indicated an interest in learning more about committee chairs working together effectively with organization staff. Other training issues identified by the survey respondents in an open-ended question included learning more about trends in the nonprofit sector and reading financial statements.

Being a Board Director: Commitment and Experience

As part of the diagnostic clinic, Board Directors were asked questions that solicited opinions on personal involvement on the Board, time commitment, and satisfaction with the Board governance experience. One question asked Directors to report on the number of hours that they devote each month to Board and committee activities. The highest percentage of respondents, 41%, devoted only 1-3 hours per month, 31% gave 4-6 hours, 15% served 7-10 hours, and 13% volunteered more than 10 hours. When asked if their time availability in the next year will change, 23% stated that their time availability was expected to increase, 14% indicated it would decrease, and the balance of the respondents (64%) said their time would remain about the same. Best practices encourage nonprofit Directors to participate in Board and committee meetings, in addition to spending time fulfilling the rest of their governance responsibilities. While there may not be a prescribed number of hours that should be regularly allocated, it is likely that an average of more than three hours per month is required if attending a Board and a committee meeting, reviewing policy documents, reading materials, organizing fundraising efforts, or participating in planning processes are included in fulfilling governance responsibilities.

Another question in the survey asked respondents to rate their personal level of satisfaction with their experience as a Board Director. While the good news is that about two-thirds of Directors were either very satisfied or satisfied with their Board experience, a challenge is that one-third were only somewhat or not satisfied. In the latter case, it is doubtful that Directors are effectively connected to either the Board and/or the staff, and it is unlikely that the individual’s talents are being used to the fullest extent.



What Directors Bring to Their Board

In order to fill the breadth of their governance responsibilities, a diverse Board with a range of professional skills and personal talents is encouraged. Board Directors are not recruited at random. Typically, individuals are sought for Board vacancies who can bring complementary resources to the governing body. In the surveys, Directors were asked whether or not they brought each of a variety of skills to the Board. Their responses are reported in Table 2.

Table 2
Board Director Identified Expertise Brought to the Board

Expertise	Percent
Community Contacts	39.1%
Fundraising	36.8%
Planning	34.5%
Reside in the Community Served	26.1%
Financial Management	25.2%
Public Relations	24.1%
Corporate Management	21.5%
Entrepreneurship	20.4%
Nonprofit Management	20.2%
Human Resources	19.9%
Program Development	19.2%
Education/Schools/Academia	17.6%
Marketing	17.3%
Legal	11.1%
Real Estate	8.8%

Board Directors most often reported bringing their community contacts, fundraising expertise, and planning skills to the Board room.⁶ They were least likely to possess professional expertise in licensed fields, such as law or real estate. Interestingly, while 36.8% of the Board Directors identified fundraising expertise as the second greatest resource brought to the organization, many Directors 62.7% noted that fundraising was a high training need. (See Table 1.)

Table 3
Board Director Survey of Board/Staff Relationships

Elements of Board/Staff Relationships	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Board/staff roles are clearly distinct	4.3%	17.7%	65.0%	13.0%
Board and staff trust and respect each other	2.5%	9.3%	63.1%	25.0%
Staff adequately prepare materials for the Board	1.6%	11.1%	65.2%	22.1%
Board and staff operate as an efficient team	2.8%	22.1%	61.3%	13.8%

Directors were also asked whether their skills and talents were being fully utilized on behalf of the nonprofit. Fifty-six percent replied affirmatively, 19% answered negatively, and 25% were not sure. Where Board Director talent may not be fully maximized, nonprofits have more assets available than are being tapped, fully engaging the resources of the Board quite likely could propel organizations forward at a faster pace.

Board and Staff Relationships

It is rare that a nonprofit organization can be effective without the Board and staff working together in partnership—a system of parallel governance and management that creates the authority of both lay volunteers and professionals in making the best decisions on behalf of nonprofit organizations. The first principle recommended for exceptional Boards is to establish a constructive partnership between the chief executive and the Board. Several questions in the Board survey attempted to assess this partnership. (See Table 3.)

The results displayed in Table 3 indicate that most nonprofits in greater Milwaukee operate with relatively strong Board and staff partnerships. Three-quarters of Directors agreed that Board/staff roles are clearly distinct, and 87% agreed that staff adequately prepare materials for the Board. Eighty-six percent of respondents agreed that the Board and staff trust and respect each other, and 75% agreed that Board and staff operate as an efficient team.

Although it is allowed by statute in the State of Wisconsin to compensate Directors and Officers for their contributions of time and talent, in fact most Board Directors are volunteers. Staff acknowledgment of personal contributions by Board Directors may certainly increase their satisfaction in serving in a governance capacity and reinforce a positive working relationship with staff. In this sample, 86% of the respondents agreed that the Board Directors are thanked enough to feel appreciated for their contributions of time and talent.

Director Assessment of Board Performance

A substantial number of questions on the survey assessed various elements of governance effectiveness, including: affirmation of mission, policy setting, and fundraising.



Table 4

Board Director Rating of Board Performance on Multiple Governance Areas

Dimensions of Board Performance	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Affirming the mission	2.5%	14.3%	53.8%	29.5%
Setting policy	8.8%	30.5%	49.1%	11.5%
Approving corporate and financial business	8.3%	25.8%	51.3%	14.6%
Determining program direction	2.8%	22.1%	61.3%	13.8%
Approving and monitoring the budget	11.5%	25.6%	48.1%	14.9%
Raising funds	26.2%	39.7%	25.9%	8.2%
Supervising and evaluating the executive director	12.9%	30.3%	43.7%	13.1%
Representing organization to the public, media, and donors	9.6%	35.9%	41.4%	13.1%
Evaluating organizational effectiveness	20.2%	44.4%	31.5%	3.9%
Planning for the long-term future	21.6%	40.1%	31.9%	6.4%

Assessing Performance of the Board

Questions addressed how Directors evaluated their Board’s performance on typical governance responsibilities, those being: mission affirmation, policy review, oversight of finances and operations, fundraising, planning for the future, and evaluating effectiveness. (See Table 4.)

Not surprisingly, since 99% of the responding Directors agreed that their organizations were fulfilling their missions, Directors rated their Boards highly on affirming organizational mission: 84% indicated that their Board is doing a good or excellent job in affirming their nonprofit’s mission. Directors gave moderately positive ratings to their Boards’ performance with regard to setting policy, approving corporate and financial business, determining program direction, supervising and evaluating the Executive Director (performance was rated between good or excellent by more than 50% of the respondents). Board performance was assessed as weaker in the areas of evaluating organizational effectiveness (35% rated as good or excellent) and planning for the long-term future (38% rated as good or excellent). Directors also gave their Board a low rating with regard to fundraising (34% rated as good or excellent). Respondents appear to be honestly reflective and the findings suggest areas where their governance efforts might be enhanced (i.e., long-term planning, measuring effectiveness, and fundraising) possibly through training. (See Table 1.)

Assessing Policy and Conflict of Interest

Not all policies governing the operations of nonprofit organizations are included in the organization’s bylaws or personnel policies. Program operations, fundraising, and financial oversight are also directed through policy statements and documents. The Board Director survey included a question about whether or not policies adequately address organizational concerns. A majority of respondents (77%) agreed that the policies in place are adequate.

In this era of public accountability, conflict of interest and lack of ethical standards are areas of growing concern in organizational governance,

not only in the nonprofit world, but also in the public and private spheres, as well. Effective nonprofit governance depends on making deliberate and thoughtful decisions, minimizing destructive conflict, and respecting the integrity of the governing process. Nonetheless, conflicts of interest remain at the center of some of the most troubling controversies involving nonprofit governance. If Board Directors engage in conflicts of interest or other unethical behavior, the legitimacy of the nonprofit may be harmed and the ability to raise funds through government grants, foundation awards, or individual contributions is threatened. When asked about whether Board Directors place the interests of the organization above their own, 88% agreed that Directors did so; only 12% disagreed.

Assessing Board Fundraising

Fundraising is a critical responsibility for the Board of Directors for any nonprofit organization. As David Lansdowne has argued, “The logic is irrefutable: Board Directors own the organization and are its stewards. If they, who purportedly are the strongest advocates, won’t take a lead role in raising money, why should anyone else?”⁷⁷

Board Directors were asked in their survey whether or not they personally contributed to a variety of efforts to garner financial resources to support the nonprofit organization on which Board they sit. (See Table 5.) While best practices suggest that all Board Directors should make a financial contribution, only 83% percent of the Directors reported making such a contribution to the nonprofit organization. About three-quarters provided donor leads to staff, and solicited friends, employers, and personal contacts. About half met with current or potential funders, obtained pro bono resources, and sold tickets to or helped organize special events.

That Board Directors face challenges in being strong fundraisers is illustrated not only by data reported above, but also through another question that asked Directors to rate the effectiveness of the Board’s performance with regard to resource development. Only 3% of the Directors rated the Board’s resource development efforts as very effective.



Twenty-three percent said it was effective, 45% rated performance as somewhat effective, and 29% stated resource development efforts by the Board were not very effective. Respondents were also asked if Directors are able to provide leadership in attracting resources to their nonprofit (70% agreed), and if the Board exuded enthusiasm in its fundraising efforts (51% agreed). These data indicate that while very effective fundraising efforts are not typical of many Milwaukee-area nonprofit organizations, most Board Directors believe that they have leadership capacity for fundraising and half are enthusiastic about fulfilling this responsibility.

Table 5
Board Director Efforts to Support Fundraising

Fundraising Effort	Percent
Made a personal contribution	83.3%
Provided donor leads and contacts to staff	73.6%
Solicited friends, employers, personal contacts	72.9%
Met with current and potential funders	58.5%
Sold tickets to special events	53.2%
Obtained pro bono resources	49.1%
Organized special events	45.4%

Assessing Board Committees

The governance work of nonprofit Boards of Directors takes place not only in meetings of the full Board, but also through the work of committees of the Board. While the composition of Board committees varies substantially across nonprofit organizations, most nonprofit Boards operate with a limited number of committees. An earlier study of nonprofit organizations in greater Milwaukee found that well over half of the nonprofits operated with committees, and that both the size of the Board and organizational budget were positively correlated with number of committees utilized by nonprofit Boards.⁸

Board Directors in this study were asked to assess the effectiveness of specified Board committees. (See Table 6.) In general, Board Directors gave relatively high ratings to the effectiveness of their committees, with

64% or more of the respondents rating committees as effective or very effective. The one exception was the Board governance or nominating committee, where 42% of the Directors rated it as not very effective or only somewhat effective. Indeed, if the governance committees were more effective, orientation for Board Directors would become an integrated part of the nominations process and fewer Directors would need governance training. (See Table 1.) With adequate orientation and training, Boards would be better at fulfilling the breadth of their responsibilities.

The Directors were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “There are enough standing committees to accomplish organizational tasks.” While most Board Directors feel that their Board has enough standing committees to handle governance responsibilities, agreement or strong agreement was expressed by 77%, and only 23% noted some level of disagreement. Many of the Boards in this study commissioned standing committees around governance responsibilities, such as those identified in Table 6. Many other committees were also organized to address specific assignments at individual organizations, such as fundraising, marketing, or membership, but these were not consistently identified by the majority of the study participants.

Findings and Implications

The data from this study provides an opportunity to understand the current governance practices of nonprofit organizations in greater Milwaukee, as well as areas of possible weakness that might be enhanced through capacity-building efforts. Based upon these findings, we review key highlights of this research and offer recommendations for nonprofit organization promise and practice.

Much Good News: Board Directors Bring Important Assets to Nonprofits

This study has shown that nonprofits in greater Milwaukee are operating with assets that can be expected to enhance organizational effectiveness and mission accomplishment. Board Directors possess extensive professional skills and personal talents, community contacts, and the experience of serving on nonprofit Boards—all of which are important assets to effective

Table 6
Board Director Assessment of Specified Board Committees

Board Committees	Not Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Effective	Very Effective
Executive	6.2%	17.7%	50.9%	17.11%
Board Development/Nominating	14.9%	27.9%	48.1%	9.2%
Program	9.4%	21.3%	52.8%	16.5%
Personnel	8.5%	22.6%	59.1%	9.8%
Finance	8.2%	24.0%	53.0%	13.8%



governance. About half of the nonprofits reported having a standard recruitment process for attracting new Directors and orientation tools to empower the Directors to be effective in fulfilling their governing responsibilities. Board Directors generally trust and work well with the staff; Boards operate with roles distinct from those of staff.

Board Directors believe they are doing a good job of managing finances through such efforts as reviewing and approving financial business and monitoring the budget. Directors also rate highly their performance in affirming organizational mission, as well as supervising and evaluating the Executive Director.

Challenges to Effective Governance

Despite the good news of a strong asset base at many nonprofits, it is not apparent that the talents and expertise of Board Directors are fully utilized; 44% of Board Directors said that their skills and talents were not fully utilized or that they were not sure.

In many nonprofit organizations, Board Directors contributed three or less hours per month to the functioning of their Boards. This amount of time may be insufficient to fulfill the breadth of governance responsibilities.

Board Directors indicated substantial interest in learning more about a lengthy array of governing responsibilities including, notably, fundraising and planning. Most nonprofit executives, however, are not providing Boards with the training in which they are interested, and Board Directors are not necessarily finding these resources on their own.

Recommendations for Strengthening Boards

For the purpose of strengthening governance in nonprofit organizations, we offer the following recommendations.

● Board Director Time Commitment

Board Directors should carefully consider time commitments to Board service and honor them when made. Being an effective Board Director requires a regular, not sporadic, commitment of time and energy.

Attendance at Board and committee meetings is the primary point at which Directors can provide their expertise to assist the organization in moving forward to achieve its goals. Three or fewer hours per month is seldom enough to fulfill all governing responsibilities. As new Directors are recruited, the time expectations for Directors should be clearly defined as part of a standard orientation to Board service. New Directors should pledge to meet these expectations; if they cannot feasibly do so, they should seek some other way to contribute to the organization, possibly through committee participation or special projects.

● Training for Boards

Serving as volunteers, Board Directors appear to be strongly connected to their respective nonprofit organizations. They care about mission and they want to help the nonprofit to make a difference. By their own admission, Board Directors would like to receive training to aid them in

their governance work, and the training should cover a wide range of subjects beyond the frequently identified topics to also include sessions on reading financial statements, evaluating the executive, making meetings efficient, and marketing the mission. Executive Directors and Board Chairs should work together to identify appropriate Board training opportunities and materials to assist Board Directors in becoming more knowledgeable about their governing responsibilities.

● Making the Most of the Board

Board Directors are valuable assets. Cumulatively, Board Directors possess an array of talents, experiences, perspectives, passions, and connections to organizational mission. Data from this study suggest that a substantial percentage of Board Directors can and are willing to offer more personal resources to the organization. During the recruitment and nominations process, it is not uncommon for the Board (or an appointed committee of the Board) to analyze the current composition of the Directors in order to identify gaps in skills and resources. Usually that process is considered complete when candidates representing the gaps are presented as nominees and voted onto the Board. If this process continued through elections, an ongoing inventory of Board assets could be maintained. The organization would be better able to tap the full talent and resource capacity of the Board, and Board Directors would be more satisfied with their full contribution to the organization.

References

¹ This area includes the counties of Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Washington and Waukesha, Wisconsin which together have a population of slightly more than 1.5 million residents; most nonprofits in this study are located within the City of Milwaukee. The four county metropolitan area has 9,469 incorporated nonprofits, 6,747 of which are incorporated with 501 (c) 3 status.

² The Nonprofit Management Fund was created in 1994 and operates as a collaborative of 18 foundations, corporations and United Ways invested in building the capacity of small to mid-sized (under \$3 million budgets) nonprofit organizations in the greater Milwaukee area. Since 1994, the Fund has received over 1,400 applications and has awarded 1,000 technical assistance grants to nonprofits for the purpose of strengthening their management and governance. After three years of grantmaking, the Fund surveyed 150 local nonprofits that were eligible to apply for grants, but had not done so, in order to understand why they had not submitted an application. Their primary response was that they perceived their organization as having so many management and governance challenges, they did not know where to begin. In response to this realization, the Nonprofit Management Fund created an assessment process, the diagnostic clinic, to identify organizational strengths and weaknesses.



³ National Center for Nonprofit Boards, *The Nonprofit Governance Index* (Washington, D.C.: NCNB, 2000).

⁴ Stephen L. Percy and Patricia Wyzbinski, *Nonprofit Board Governance in Milwaukee: Operation, Diversity and Challenges*. (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Center for Urban Initiatives and Research, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2005).

⁵ BoardSource, *The Source: Twelve Principles of Governance That Power Exceptional Boards* (Washington D.C.: BoardSource, 2005).

⁶ We are struck by the apparent inconsistency between Tables 1 and 2, where in Table 1 (areas of desired training) fundraising and planning are the most frequently identified skill areas for training. At the same time, in

Table 2 (types of expertise that Board Directors bring to the Board) fundraising and planning are most frequently identified. As a whole then, many Board Directors seem to want training in the fields in which they already perceive they have talent they bring to the Board. We intend to explore this conundrum in a future piece.

⁷ David Lansdowne, *Fund Raising Realities Every Board Member Must Face* (Medfield, Massachusetts: Emerson & Church Publishers, 2006).

⁸ Stephen L. Percy and Patricia Wyzbinski, *Nonprofit Board Governance in Milwaukee: Operation, Diversity and Challenge* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Center for Urban Initiatives and Research, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2005).

A Funder's Perspective on Diagnostic Clinics

by Alicia Manning, Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation

For a small nonprofit organization, there are few exercises more daunting—and more potentially fruitful—than the diagnostic clinic. The clinic is a time-tested and rigorously thorough organization-wide assessment that unpacks all of an organization's many moving parts, lays them on the table to be scrutinized under work lights, and puts them back together so the whole machine runs more smoothly. Its ultimate objective is to improve a group's ability to fulfill its mission and enhance its benefit to those it serves. Yet, it can feel more like a long-postponed physical—painful, anxiety-provoking, sometimes awkward, but necessary. (And, in retrospect, it's something many nonprofit leaders wish they had done sooner.)

To leaders of very small grassroots or faith-based groups, the mere mention of a diagnostic clinic can cause tremors. These often founder-led organizations are especially vulnerable to the pitfalls of rapid, piecemeal organizational growth. Many have spent the vast majority of their time, talent, and treasure developing and expanding their missions and programs, yet virtually ignoring their unengaged boards and myriad management challenges—and, deep down, they know it! Their time is scarce

and their resistance is understandable. Why, many ask, would I want to invite a perfect stranger to come in and pore over the details of my daily work life, which is also my life's work, my calling?

Unfortunately, the answer is no. Far too many grassroots groups led by immensely-gifted practitioners break under the weight of their own success. Others simply wither away when their cobbled-together programs and make-shift solutions become dysfunctional or too difficult for outsiders to comprehend. Nearly every organization is able to benefit at one time or another from the fresh perspective of a disinterested party. Asking for help is not the same as surrendering authority.

Will the mere fact of having successfully completed a diagnostic clinic make an organization more attractive to funders? Let's hope not. The clinic has no place on a foundation checklist of prerequisites for funding. However, enduring its rigors is certain to make a group stronger. The end result will be leaders who project newfound confidence in their ability and competence in their chosen field, making it hard for the right funder to turn away.

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