

Professional Practice

*Steven Rathgeb Smith,
Guest Editor*

This is the last *JPAM* Professional Practice on my watch, with Steven Rathgeb Smith as guest editor on “Nonprofits and Government—Implications for Policy and Practice.” Fittingly, as his introductory essay explains, Steve has invented a new and more structured alternative format for this feature. Special thanks should be extended to him and to his four contributors, and also to Heather Trela at the Rockefeller Institute who has ably coordinated this series.

Richard P. Nathan,
Editor

- Smith, S. R., & Lipsky, M. (1993). *Nonprofits for hire: The welfare state in the age of contracting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sommerfeld, D., & Reisch, M. (2003). The “other America” after welfare reform: A view from the nonprofit sector. *Journal of Poverty*, 7, 69–95.
- Stuber, J., & Schlesinger, M. (2006). Sources of stigma for means-tested government programs. *Social Science & Medicine*, 63, 933–945.

Nonprofits within Policy Fields

Jodi Sandfort

As Steven Smith describes in the introductory symposium essay, the overall growth of nonprofit organizations during the last 40 years has real significance for public policy and management. The trends of increased demand for expanded services, greater market orientation, and policy devolution all create an environment within which nonprofits have thrived. However, we, as public policy scholars, often have a limited understanding of these agencies, their roles, and relationships within policy systems (Donahue, 1989; Kettl, 2002; Milward & Provan, 2000). Others in this symposium examine nonprofits at the micro-organizational level, exploring management challenges, organizations’ relations with government offices, and services to citizens. In this essay, I highlight nonprofits’ role at the mezzo-level by focusing on policy fields (Berman, 1978; Hjern & Porter, 1981). As an analytical construct, policy fields are state- or locally-bounded structures that highlight the roles and relationships among organizations carrying out a substantive policy and program area, such as workforce development, early childhood education, or housing, in a particular place (Goetz & Sidney, 1997; Milward & Wamsley, 1984; Sandfort & Stone, 2008; Stone & Sandfort, 2009). Although some networks are purposively designed for service delivery, many networks within policy fields emerge through the development of working relationships, the formation of coalitions, the ongoing experiences of incrementally implementing and refining policy ideals. (See Provan & Milward, 1994, for more on service delivery; see Klijn, 1997, for other networks). Policy fields both result from relationships in policy systems and shape relationships within them. They are emergent structures in particular places (Stone & Sandfort, 2009).

Nonprofit organizations play many roles in policy fields. They use resources from private and public funders and provide resources, such as information and services. As a study of a youth services field illustrates, nonprofit organizations sometimes work together to promote new ways of understanding, change professional practices, share program ideas, and develop new public policies (Scott et al., 2006). They can interface with multiple government systems including county human services departments, state departments of education, and local school districts in a coordinated way. Yet, in other states or localities, youth services fields are not as robust. Networks and expertise are fragmented and conflict abounds. Conventional modes of policy analysis, which discounts institutions and relationships that help to account for place-based variation, often do not provide much insight into these situations.

When policymaking and administrative authority is devolved, policy fields operate as complex systems where financial resources, policy ideas, and relevant practices flow across institutional boundaries in unpredictable ways. To represent such

a system, it is often useful to use a visual depiction, such as causal mapping (Bryson et al., 2004; Sandfort & Stone, 2008). When fully developed, these word-and-arrow diagrams illustrate the institutional relationships, the vertical and horizontal influence, and resource flows within the system. For our purposes here, the maps highlight the complex and multi-faceted roles of nonprofit organizations and their relationships with public organizations in devolved policy contexts.

SOCIAL POLICY FIELDS

To illustrate, I will draw upon examples from my own research within human services fields in one state. Although the structures represented are complex, they are not unique; education, health, and international development all rely upon public, nonprofit, and private institutions to develop and implement policy in devolved settings. The first example comes from a current research project examining implementation of Minnesota's safety net programs. It involves a statewide network of Community Action Agencies (CAAs) created during the 1960s' War on Poverty to help low-income people (Clark, 2000). The second focuses on early childhood education in Minnesota. This field emerged incrementally over 40 years as changing social and economic realities required more care for young children before they reached school age (Ellsworth & Ames, 1998; Lombardi, 2003).

In Minnesota, CAAs implement a number of well-known federal programs: the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG), the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), Weatherization Assistance, and Head Start. They also help families access federal and state tax credits. As large, multi-service agencies, most also receive public support for emergency shelter and food commodities, and county contracts for welfare-to-work and other family support programs. As Figure 1 illustrates, many state and national public institutions structure this policy field within Minnesota. Their influence is felt through funding, regulation, and performance requirements.

Yet, nonprofit agencies also play important and diverse roles. Most fundamentally, the local service-providing CAAs are nonprofits themselves, working with other nonprofits and filling gaps in local service delivery. At the state level, Minnesota Community Action Partnership acts as the network hub of the 28 local CAAs. Other statewide nonprofit organizations also are significant in this field, including Hunger Solutions, Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless, and Accountability Minnesota; each provide specific content expertise, research, and professional development opportunities, all essential implementation resources for local service providers (Hill, 2003). Since most local CAAs are Head Start grantees, the state-level Head Start Association is also significant. Although many of these state-level nonprofits work with other institutions, they are not highlighted in Figure 1 because those relationships are not central to the safety-net field of Community Action. In this way, this visual representation of the policy field reflects the particular conceptual boundaries Community Action members make themselves between those "within" and those "outside" their system. These boundaries structure the network and shape how collective understanding and resources flow within it (Fligstein, 2001; Sandfort, 1999).

At the national level, nonprofit organizations are also significant in the field, each playing slightly different roles. The National Association for State Community Service Programs administers public programs through a contract with the Department of Human Service, providing training for state administrators and documenting state-level performance. Two other nonprofit organizations, the National Community Association Foundation and CAP LAW, provide more typical policy advocacy, promoting federal legislation and administrative changes that benefit the field. The Community Association Partnership is a membership organization, working with state-level offices to represent more than 1,000 local CAAs nationwide. In this field, where significant financial resources come from federal sources, this

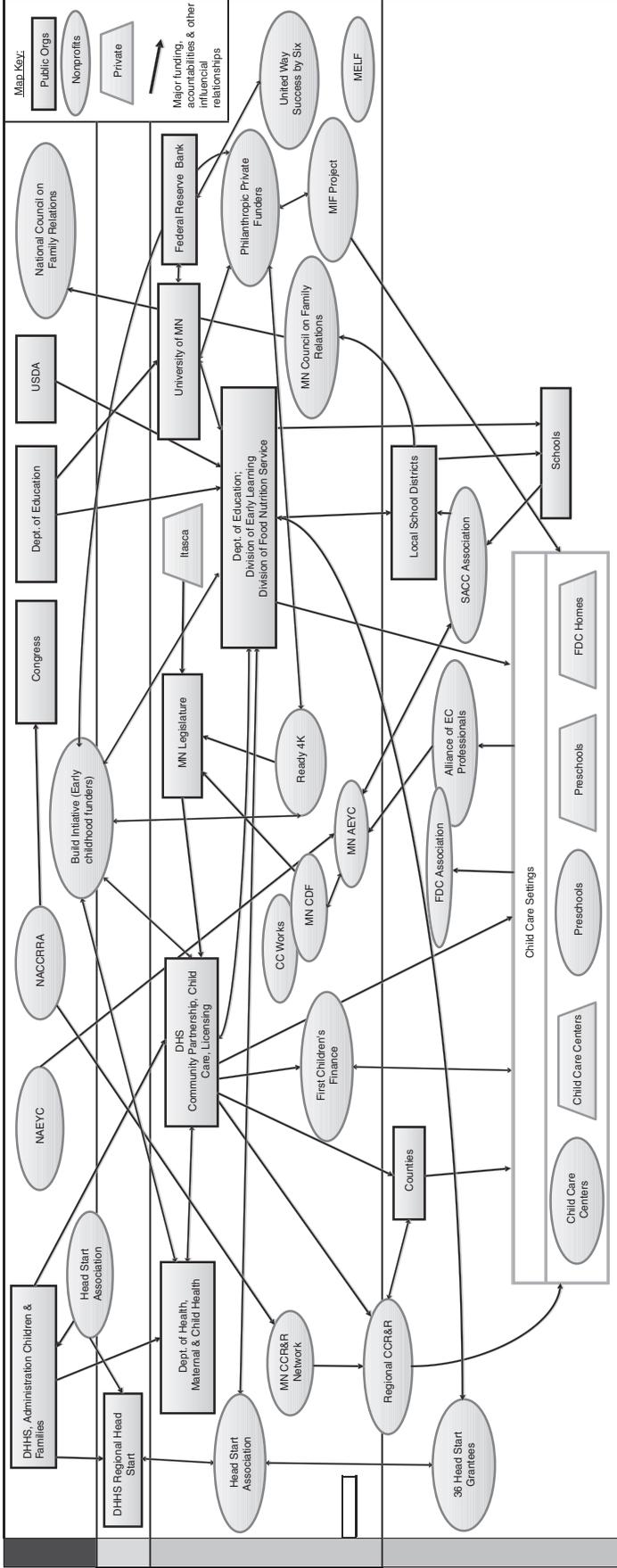


Figure 1. Safety-Net Policy Field of Community Action in Minnesota, 2008.

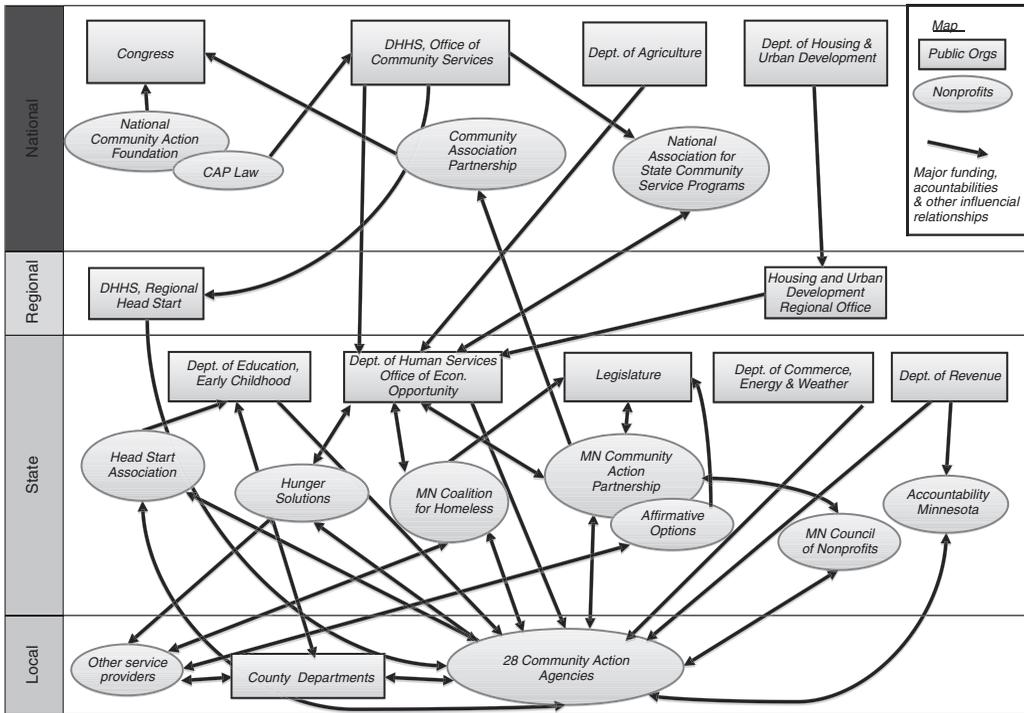


Figure 2. Early Childhood Education Policy Field in Minnesota, 2008.

nonprofit assures local agency perspectives are not lost in national policymaking. From the state and local vantage point, all of these national nonprofits are visible and significant. In this particular field, actors see their work as complementing government; both public and nonprofit organizations work to assure the partnership has integrity (Salamon, 1995; Young, 2006).

Minnesota’s early childhood education field is quite different. It is shaped by multiple and disjointed public policies, divergent ideologies, and contested roles (Bruner et al., 2004; Chase, Dillon, & Valorose, 2008; Norman-Major, 2008). Direct service to children and families are provided in diverse settings: 36 nonprofits provide Head Start; 820 licensed nonprofit and private child care centers and 519 nonprofit and private preschools serve children; approximately 10,500 licensed homes operate family day care; public schools operate another 338 preschool programs; and virtually all of Minnesota’s school districts provide early childhood parental education programs (Chase, Dillon, & Valorose, 2008). As Figure 2 illustrates, these service providers are embedded in complex institutional relationships clustered around public funding streams.

One well-established approach is Head Start, delivered through grants by both CAAs and other nonprofits. It is rooted in a top-down federal system reflected by the program and performance standards of the Department of Health and Human Services and reliance on a regional federal office. Yet, Minnesota’s Head Start Association (a nonprofit that represents the interests of direct service providers) also helped secure state general funds to supplement this grant, solidifying nonprofits’ abilities to provide supplemental education services and family support consistent with the national program. Nonprofit service providers participate enthusiastically in this statewide association.

Minnesota’s Child Care Assistance Program has different consequences; it provides voucher-like subsidies to families receiving welfare and other low-income families

who are working or in training to decrease child care expenses. Funding comes from the federal and state Departments of Human Services (DHS), but counties administer the program. Some counties contract with regional child care resource and referral organizations (CCR&R) to carry out administration. These nonprofit organizations—embedded in their own national and state professional network—also supply parents with information and offer providers training. DHS regards these regional nonprofits as critical partners to assure adequate operations of the child care market and contract with them to implement quality enhancement strategies among diverse care providers. DHS also contracts with the nonprofit First Children’s Finance, which offers loan pools and technical support to bolster provider start-ups. A number of nonprofit advocacy groups advocate for changes in public child care assistance, particularly because funding levels do not reach all working families needing quality care. Child Care Works and the Children’s Defense Fund conduct research and mobilize constituencies for public funding increases or adjustments in program eligibility. Yet Ready 4 K has a different policy agenda. As does the Minnesota office of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Yet all are significant institutions in the field; NAEYC accreditation is recognized as a field standard and policy design enables higher public subsidy rates for accredited programs. Numerous small nonprofits representing interests of various groups of providers, including the Family Day Care Association, School-Aged Child Care Association, and the Alliance of Early Childhood professionals, also have their own agenda for policy change.

Minnesota’s Department of Education is also involved in early childhood education. The department administers the Child & Adult Care Food program, an important revenue source for many early childhood providers. School districts also implement both School Readiness, a flexibly designed preschool for at-risk children, and Early Childhood Family Education, a universally accessible parent education program. Implementation of these programs occurs through public organizations; nonprofits only operate as professional associations, such as the Minnesota and National Councils of Family Relations, which sponsor professional training and publications. While this branch of the field possesses more power, it is difficult to engage people within it in larger system reform efforts.

The University of Minnesota and regional Federal Reserve Bank also are significant because of their particular expertise. Minnesota’s historically civically engaged business, United Way, and private philanthropic funders also are active players, providing about \$24 million to the field in 2007 (Pratt & Spencer, 2000; Chase, Dillon, & Valorose, 2008). Private business leaders created the nonprofit Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF) to fund research and development in the field. A foundation also enabled a Minnesota team of nonprofit, private, and public sector leaders to participate in a national peer learning effort coordinated by the Build Initiative. Their efforts have not yet, though, created significant changes in public funding or governance.

The siloed nature of this field, illustrated in Figure 2, is widely recognized by professionals in the field. Irreconcilable philosophical differences about early childhood curriculum, family support, and outcome measurement often surface. Competition among nonprofits for funding and authority is heated. Any coalitions for policy change have fragile bonds. The structure of the field separates all from their common aim—assuring that all the state’s children are ready to learn when they enter kindergarten (Chase, Dillon, & Valorose, 2008).

IMPLICATIONS OF A FIELD-BASE ANALYSIS

Although there are many differences between Minnesota’s community action and early childhood education fields, I use these two examples to illustrate a few points central to the institutional context of human services emerging from devolution.

Table 1. Nonprofit roles in these illustrative fields.

	Community Action, Safety-Net			Early Childhood Education		
	National	State	Local	National	State	Local
Professional Membership Services (training, publications, accreditation)	xx	xx		xx	xx	
Advocacy for Incremental Public Policy Changes (research, lobbying, public education)	xx	xx		xx	xx	xx
Fundamental Systems Change (funding, untraditional coalitions, innovative ideas)				xx	xx	
Public Program Administration	xx					xx
Program and Management Capacity Building (funding, technical assistance)		xx			xx	
Service Delivery			xx		xx	xx

First, while public policy structures some aspects of each field, through establishing administrative authority, funding forms, and flows, these fields are also structured by the presence and roles assumed by particular institutions in Minnesota, both public and nonprofit. State agencies compliment a broad swatch of nonprofits in the community action field. Minnesota's Community Action Partnership works in concert with other nonprofit education and advocacy groups, allowing it to specialize in some program areas without becoming overextended. Each public authority in early childhood education has developed its own group of nonprofit infrastructure organizations, rather than working more seamlessly. Many small state- and local-level nonprofits try to assert authority, causing contested ideas to surface frequently. Table 1 summarizes the roles played by nonprofits in these fields. More general discussions of the nonprofit sector emphasize expressive, political, and service roles (Boris, 2006; Frumkin, 2005). Yet nonprofits within these two policy fields represent members' interests, advocate for both incremental policy and more fundamental systems change, administer public programs, support capacity development within other nonprofits, and serve citizens directly. Each emerges at a different level in the policy system; a particular organization moves into a role only after assessing opportunities and dynamics within the field.

A second point relevant to the new institutional context is the significance of institutional relationships within a particular policy field. Figures 1 and 2 include arrows highlighting major funding, accountabilities, and other influential relationships. The limited scope of this essay does not allow full description of the nature of relationships within these two fields. Some come from public funding or policy authority; others emerge from services partnerships, professional affiliations, or social networks through which professionals share information. They are both formal and informal, and the day-to-day operation of policy fields hinges upon these nuanced and multi-faceted relationships (Isett & Provan, 2005; Klijn, 1997; Sandfort & Milward, 2008). When aligned, the ongoing process of interaction and information sharing establishes order within complex systems (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). When characterized with mistrust and opposition, it can also contribute to system fragmentation.

Finally, the emergent nature of policy fields creates additional complexity for scholars and practitioners. For researchers, it is difficult to understand field dynamics without careful study. Adoption of a realist perspective that bounds investigations according to the parameters perceived by policy actors has real potential. The particular elements structuring fields are not generalizable place to place. The absence or presence of philanthropic institutions, service provider networks, and professional associations have critical roles in shaping state-level programs and policies. For teachers, the significance of fields pushes us to help students develop more analytical abilities to appreciate the development of institutional roles, the importance of interorganizational relationships, and the operation of power within complex systems (Sandfort & Stone, 2008).

For policymakers, the existence of policy fields creates new challenges and opportunities. The complexity of many fields—the unique roles of public and private institutions in a particular place, the significance of relationships, the fluid changes within these structures—highlights the importance of implementation conditions. New policy will more likely achieve its desired intent if policymakers can see, and account for, the structure and dynamics within policy fields. Policy tools matter. But so do the systems within which these tools are applied and modified through implementation. When asked, local practitioners recognize the significance of policy fields in their work; yet they experience it in terms of individual personalities or reputation, without an analytical framework that uncovers more general dynamics at work.

Devolution and privatization have increased the substantive importance of policy fields at the state and local levels. Certainly, public policy and funding are structuring forces. Yet policy field actors also develop very specific knowledge of the institutions, particular local sources of power, and appropriate techniques for making systems change within their state and local context. There is much to be learned about the roles of nonprofit organizations and the consequences of these structures on policy development, implementation, and evaluation.

JODI SANDFORT is Associate Professor at the Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota.

REFERENCES

- Berman, P. (1978). The study of macro- and micro-implementation. *Public Policy*, 26, 157–184.
- Boris, E. (2006). Nonprofit organizations in a democracy: Varied roles and responsibilities. In E. T. Boris & C. E. Steuerle (Eds.), *Nonprofits & government: Collaboration and conflict* (pp. 1–35). Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
- Bruner, C., Wright, M. S., Gebhard, B., & Hibbard, S. (2004). Building an early learning system: The ABCs of planning and governance structures. University of Iowa: State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network.
- Bryson, J. M., Ackermann, F., Eden, C., & Finn, C. B. (2004). *Visible thinking*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.
- Chase, R., Dillon, K., & Valorose, J. (2008). *Early care and education in Minnesota: Asset review and status report*. St. Paul, MN: Wilder Research Center.
- Clark, R. F. (2000). *Maximum feasible success: A history of the Community Action Program*. Washington, DC: National Association of Community Action Agencies.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48, 147–160.
- Donahue, J. D. (1989). *The privatization decision: Public ends, private means*. New York: Basic Books.

- Ellsworth, J., & Ames, L. (Eds.). (1998). *Critical perspectives on Project Head Start: Revising the hope and challenge*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Fligstein, N. (2001). Social skill and the theory of fields. *Sociological Theory*, 19, 105–125.
- Frumkin, P. (2005). *On being nonprofit: A conceptual and policy primer* (1st ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goetz, E. G., & Sidney, M. S. (1997). Local policy subsystems and issue definition: An analysis of community development policy change. *Urban Affairs Review*, 32, 490–512.
- Hill, H. C. (2003). Understanding implementation: Street-level bureaucrats' resources for reform. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 13, 265–282.
- Hjern, B., & Porter, D. O. (1981). Implementation structures: A new unit of administrative analysis. *Organizational Studies*, 2, 211–227.
- Isett, K. R., & Provan, K. G. (2005). The evolution of dyadic interorganizational relationships in a network of publicly funded nonprofit agencies. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 15, 149–165.
- Kettl, D. (2002). *The transformation of governance*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Klijn, E. (1997). Policy networks: An overview. In W.J.M. Kickert, E. Klijn & J.F.M. Koppenjan (Eds.), *Managing complex networks: Strategies for the public sector* (pp. 206–232). London: Sage Publications.
- Lombardi, J. (2003). *Time to care: Redesigning child care to promote education, support families, and build communities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Milward, H. B., & Provan, K. G. (2000). Governing the hollow state. *Journal of Public Administration and Research Theory*, 10, 359–380.
- Milward, H. B., & Wamsley, G. L. (1984). Policy subsystems, networks, and the tools of public management. In R. Eyestone (Ed.), *Public policy formation* (pp. 3–25). Boulder: Westview Press.
- Norman-Major, K. A. (2008). *Balancing the four E's: Analyzing the place of equity, equality, efficiency and effectiveness in Minnesota's early childhood policy debate*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Pratt, J., & Spencer, E. (2000). Dynamics of corporate philanthropy in Minnesota. In S. R. Graubard (Ed.), *Minnesota, real and imagined* (1st ed.). St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press.
- Provan, K. G., & Milward, H. B. (1994). Integration of community-based services for the severely mentally ill and the structure of public funding: A comparison of flow systems. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 19, 865–894.
- Salamon, L. (1995). *Partners in public service: Government–nonprofit relations in the modern welfare state*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Sandfort, J. (1999). The structural impediments to human service collaboration: The case of front-line welfare reform implementation. *Social Service Review*, 73, 314–339.
- Sandfort, J., & Milward, H. B. (2008). Collaborative service provision in the public sector. In S. Cropper, M. Ebers, C. Huxham & P. S. Ring (Eds.), *Handbook of inter-organizational relations* (pp. 147–174). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sandfort, J., & Stone, M. M. (2008). Analyzing policy fields: Helping students understand complex policy environments. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 14, 129–147.
- Scott, W. R., Deschenes, S., Hopkins, K., Newman, A., & McLaughlin, M. (2006). Advocacy organizations and the field of youth services: Ongoing efforts to restructure a field. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 35, 691–714.
- Stone, M., & Sandfort, J. (2009). Building a policy fields framework to inform research on nonprofit organizations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 38, 1054–1075.
- Young, D. R. (2006). Complementary, supplementary, or adversarial? Nonprofit–government relations. In E. T. Boris, & C. E. Steuerle (Eds.), *Nonprofits & government: Collaboration and conflict* (pp. 37–79). Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.