

# Nonprofit Board Role Ambiguity

## Investigating Its Prevalence, Antecedents, and Consequences

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This study investigates the degree to which nonprofit board volunteers understand their role and performance expectations in the organizations they govern. Using data collected from chief executives and board members, the authors first compare board member self-reports of role ambiguity with chief executive assessments of how well board members understand their roles. They then examine the antecedents and consequences of board role ambiguity, finding that training and feedback can decrease role ambiguity and that role ambiguity adversely affects board engagement.

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In a recent article on volunteer turnover and retention, Jamison (2003) notes that although volunteers compose more than one third of the nonprofit labor force in the United States, a number of empirical studies have demonstrated a high level of dissatisfaction with the volunteer experience. She further argues that because nonprofit organizations are often contracted to provide public services, there are important human resource issues related to volunteer management. In fact, one of the most important challenges facing nonprofit organizations today is managing and engaging a volunteer board of directors, particularly because, as Herman (2005) notes, “some management practices appropriate for service volunteers do not square with our understandings of the rights and privileges of the ultimate bosses” (p. 89).

Volunteer boards are asked to play a special role in nonprofit organizations. Although the legal standard to which an individual director is held may vary from state to state, all board members are expected to assume a fiduciary responsibility to ensure proper fiscal oversight and managerial supervision while ensuring that the organization’s actions are consistent with its stated goals and objectives (Leifer & Glomb, 1997). The fiduciary responsibilities of a nonprofit board of directors differ from the obligations of boards in the public and private sectors because nonprofit board members are not charged with maximizing shareholder

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wealth, nor are they instructed delegates of their beneficiaries. Instead, the fiduciary principle in the nonprofit sector requires that the nonprofit board uphold a trust that is both created and constrained by the public, with the expectation that the institution remain true to the mission and purpose for which it was established (Smith, 1995). In other words, the nonprofit board has both legal and moral fiduciary responsibilities (Carver, 1997; Groudine & Miller, 2002; Miller, 2002).

In addition to (or perhaps because of) this legal and moral fiduciary responsibility, empirical research has repeatedly found a relationship between the performance of nonprofit boards and the performance of their organizations (Bradshaw, Murray, & Wolpin, 1992; Green & Griesinger, 1996; Herman & Renz, 2000; D. K. Jackson & Holland, 1998). Although its importance may be commonly accepted, managing the board remains a challenge. Many chief executives and board members are dissatisfied with their board's performance (Holland, 2002) and often initiate efforts to change the board (Brudney & Murray, 1998), even though there often is considerable uncertainty as to what specific strategies may improve board performance (Holland, 2002).

Perhaps devising strategies to improve performance is particularly difficult because of the nature of the relationship between the organization and its board members. Board members are often busy professionals who volunteer to represent the public's interest in organizational decision making. This creates at least two fundamental difficulties. First, because board members are volunteers, the organization cannot rely on many of the typical mechanisms used to manage and motivate employees. Most notably, promises to provide (or threats to withdraw) economic incentives are not applicable. Furthermore, in spite of any complementary or specialized knowledge board members may have to aid decision making or assess performance, their irregular and limited interaction with the organization and executive leadership can hinder effective communication or evaluation.

A second difficulty raised by this relationship concerns the board's place in the organizational hierarchy. As representatives of the public's trust, board members are expected to ensure that organizational action reflects mission-related goals and objectives. The board does this by providing leadership during organizational goal setting and strategic planning, through monitoring financial performance and conducting regular programmatic oversight, and by performing regular performance appraisals of the chief executive. That said, often it is not the board but the chief executive who has the knowledge, experience, resources, or incentives to provide organizational direction and leadership (Heimovics & Herman, 1990; Herman, 2005). Although Chief executive expertise does not absolve board members of their responsibilities to provide oversight and make policy, the chief executive is often expected to provide the tools and information necessary to effectively govern. Because chief executives and the board's leadership both have some role in board development and functioning (Fletcher, 1992), it is likely that considerable uncertainty regarding governance expectations exists (Middleton, 1987).

To aid efforts in managing and maximizing the utility of nonprofit boards, practitioners and scholars alike have attempted to answer many important questions about what nonprofit boards do or should do (Axelrod, 1994; Block, 1998; Fletcher, 1992; Gill, 2005; Houle, 1997; Ingram, 2003; Kearns, 1995) and what can be done to effectively engage the board in executing these best practices (Herman & Heimovics, 1990). Although helpful, this line of research is somewhat limited as the enactment or even the impact of specific board roles and responsibilities will depend on the current relationship between the organization and its

environment. As Herman and Renz (2000) pointed out, nonprofits are evaluated by multiple criteria and constituencies, thus making the search for a single set of universally applicable behaviors or best practices difficult if not impossible.

Widmer (1993) illustrates the implications of the inherent conflict and confusion nonprofit board members face because they are often asked to play multiple board and organizational roles. More recently, Miller and Faerman (2003) echo these concerns, asserting that organizations and boards often struggle with various messages about what they should be and do—and thus face competing and often conflicting demands. They implicitly call for similar research suggesting that there may be times when boards choose to pursue specific roles over others. Consequently, rather than looking for a specific set of behaviors that determine the role, a simple and more fundamental question is to what extent board members are aware of their roles and responsibilities.

This study contributes to the literature on board performance by investigating the extent to which board members in a northeastern state are knowledgeable of their roles and responsibilities and the ways in which this understanding is related to board engagement. To do this, we first look at board member and chief executive assessments of how well board members understand their roles. Then, to provide a better understanding of the current board practices related to this issue, we look at the antecedents and consequences of board role ambiguity. In particular, we test whether increasing training and feedback is likely to decrease the role ambiguity experienced by the board and whether role ambiguity adversely affects board engagement.

## **Nonprofit Boards and Role Ambiguity**

Work roles are the recurrent activities that an individual performs in his or her relationship with an organization that influence organizational output. As is true in any relationship, individual roles are not developed unilaterally. Roles are determined through the interaction between role senders who establish and communicate standards of behavior and role receivers who are supposed to understand and accept those expectations. Role ambiguity occurs when an individual lacks role-related information, often as a result of inadequate communication. When applied to nonprofit boards, work roles are equivalent to governance tasks. This means that role ambiguity is likely to be a result of poorly communicated expectations among executive leadership and board members.

There are a number of reasons to suspect that board members may experience a high degree of ambiguity in their roles. Such ambiguity could be a result of the uncertainty regarding who should have the primary responsibility to establish and communicate the standards of board behavior. In other words, is it the board chair or the chief executive who establishes board operating procedures? Of course, the best practice literature makes it clear that the board must accept responsibility for its own performance, yet, as previously noted, it is often the executive leadership who have the specific knowledge and expertise to inform the work of the board (Heimovics & Herman, 1990). Moreover, data collected in this study indicate that a majority of board members (85.9%) and chief executives (79.6%) agree that the chief executive is the primary visionary for the organization, providing additional support for viewing the chief executive as a role sender. Even if there is agreement over who establishes the standards of board activity, board members often experience role ambiguity as a

result of inadequate communication of these standards (Green & Griesinger, 1996; Holland, 2002; Weaver & Inglis, 1999).

Not surprisingly, the two most common mechanisms used to communicate such expectations, training and performance feedback, have received attention in the nonprofit board literature. Unfortunately, this work has found that these mechanisms are often under utilized. Surveys of nonprofit chief executives and board members have found that very little board training or orientation occur and that the most important area needing additional training concerned the clarification of board roles and responsibilities (Green & Griesinger, 1996; Weaver & Inglis, 1999). Research has also shown that most boards do not regularly evaluate their performance or receive performance feedback from the chief executive (Green & Griesinger, 1996; Holland, 2002). For example, in Wandersman and Alderman's (1993) study of American Cancer Society chapters, it was shown that only 33% of the chapters evaluated performance. More specifically, Hager and Brudney (2005) reference three different studies in addition to their own, empirically demonstrating that very few nonprofit organizations conduct evaluations of their volunteer programs.

Such summative and formative evaluations of individual and group performance are instrumental to the board developing a comprehensive understanding of what is expected and knowing how execution of specific tasks produces desired results. As a result, these findings raise important concerns regarding the ability of board members to understand or fulfill their various roles. This has led some to note that "if board members are not trained and their performance is not evaluated, how can they perform their responsibilities at high levels?" (Green & Griesinger, 1996, p. 394). In fact, without training and performance feedback, how can board members even be expected to know their roles and responsibilities? Thus, in addition to expecting that board members will experience considerable role ambiguity, it is hypothesized that

*Hypothesis 1:* Providing board training and development will reduce board role ambiguity.

*Hypothesis 2:* Providing the board with performance feedback will reduce board role ambiguity.

It is worth noting that although it seems intuitive that training and feedback are likely to reduce ambiguity, we were able to find no study of nonprofit boards that empirically makes this link. Most of what is written about board ambiguity references the performance implications of role-related ambiguity, advancing an argument that performance suffers when board members do not perform their roles because their roles are ambiguous. Moreover, our professional experience indicates that there is widespread concern among chief executives about whether participating in board training is asking board members to "do too much." What we test in this study is whether training and feedback are associated with role ambiguity in ways that increase board engagement. The implicit assumption is that engaged boards enacting appropriate role-related behaviors (as a result of training and performance feedback) will advance mission-related goals and objectives in a way that is consistent with expectations.

## **Role Ambiguity and Board Performance**

Work-related role ambiguity deals with workers' perceptions regarding the clarity with which job duties and their relative importance are defined. Without this information,

employees are uncertain as to not only what tasks to complete but also how best to evaluate or alter their performance on those tasks relative to expectations. It is not surprising then that since the introduction of the role ambiguity concept by Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoeck, and Rosenthal (1964), research has consistently demonstrated its influence on employee turnover (Abramis, 1994; S. E. Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Netemeyer, Johnston, & Burton, 1990) and performance (Tubre & Collins, 2000). Jamison (2003) empirically demonstrates this same effect on volunteer turnover, noting, "Volunteers who are adequately informed about task expectations prior to service tend toward higher levels of satisfaction leading to continuing service" (p. 129). Even at the governance level, nonprofit organizational effectiveness has been linked to the extent to which board members feel that they were properly informed of their roles and responsibilities (Herman & Tulipana, 1985).

When investigating the link between role ambiguity and employee performance, research has suggested that understanding one's role at work can decrease work motivation and performance because of either its psychological or substantive dimensions (Steers & Porter, 1974). Psychological effects occur when employees are not certain that they know or understand their role. The uncertainty associated with role or task ambiguity often produces a sense of futility that reduces the likelihood that an individual would attempt certain activities or continue those activities when he or she experiences difficulty (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Kahn et al., 1964; Wright, 2004). Similarly, role clarity may also have a direct effect on work motivation because a better understanding of an employee's performance expectations makes him or her feel more responsible and, consequently, more committed to his or her work (Salancik, 1977). Role ambiguity, therefore, can then be expected to reduce an individual's sense of responsibility or commitment to work outcomes. It is not unreasonable to expect role clarity to produce similar affects with regard to volunteer performance and motivation. In fact, Dailey (1986) asserts that the similarities between employees and volunteers suggest that much of the research investigating the relationship between employee attitudes and employee behaviors can help us understand job satisfaction and commitment among volunteers. Jamison (2003) also points to a number of empirical studies demonstrating the antecedent conditions leading to employee turnover are quite similar to the factors under which volunteers decrease their involvement.

The lack (or inadequacy) of role-related information can influence work motivation and performance even when individuals are not aware that it exists. Such substantive or external effects occur because people need accurate role-related information to direct their attention and effort toward the behaviors most pertinent to the desired performance (Locke & Latham, 1990). Role ambiguity, therefore, would have an adverse effect by diverting attention away from expected tasks and making it harder for the individual to adjust his or her behavior based on an accurate understanding of the relationship between his or her efforts and resulting performance.

This latter effect of role ambiguity is especially important when understanding external measures (not self-reports) of a person's work motivation or engagement. Although subjective (or self-report) measures of role ambiguity recognize that inadequate role information can leave individuals uncertain about their roles, it ignores the possibility that limited information may also leave individuals confident that they understand their roles even when they do not. In particular, any disagreement between the chief executive and board members regarding the degree to which the board understands its roles and responsibilities may

suggest that expectations have not been communicated clearly enough to be mutually understood. Even when board members are confident that they understand their roles and responsibilities, there may still be inadequate role-related information that diverts attention and effort away from the behaviors most pertinent to the desired performance and lowers objective assessments of board engagement. Consistent with this line of thinking, we hypothesize that

*Hypothesis 3a:* Self-reports of role ambiguity experienced by nonprofit boards will have a direct, negative effect on board member engagement.

*Hypothesis 3b:* The degree of disagreement between chief executive and board member assessments of role ambiguity experienced by nonprofit boards will have a direct, negative effect on board member engagement.

## Method

### Sample Selection and Survey Administration

The data for this study were collected as part of a survey of nonprofit chief executives and board members in a northeastern state during 2004. The survey was conducted in two stages. First, a survey was sent to the chief executives of all 447 nonprofit organizations affiliated either with the state's nonprofit association or with a statewide infrastructure organization focused on board development. To maximize the survey's response rate (Dillman, 1978, 1991), questionnaires were coded for tracking purposes, and nonrespondents received three additional mailings: a postcard follow-up sent 10 days after the questionnaire, a second questionnaire survey mailed after 21 days, and a second postcard mailed after 28 days. The total number of chief executives who responded to the survey was 219, representing a 49% response rate.

In the second stage, 100 organizations were randomly selected from the 219 organizations from which a response to the chief executive survey was received. For these 100 organizations, the organizations' 990 forms were used to identify six board members from each organization, including the president, vice president, treasurer, and three other board members chosen at random.<sup>1</sup> For those organizations that did not specify board officer information, six board members were randomly selected. As a result, 597 surveys were sent to board members from 100 different organizations.<sup>2</sup> Of these, 46 respondents were omitted from the survey because of incorrect addresses, and another 13 were omitted because the identified individuals no longer served on the board. Of the resulting sample of 538, we received 249 responses from board members serving on 93 different nonprofit boards, resulting in a 46% adjusted response rate. Organizational characteristics of both samples are provided in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

### Measures

Each of the study variables was measured using the responses from multiple survey items using either a 6-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*) or a 5-point (ranging from 0 to 4) frequency-of-occurrence scale (*almost never, rarely, sometimes, often, almost always*). A full list of relevant questionnaire items and coding scales appears in the appendix. In an attempt to compensate for the study's reliance on self-reported

**Table 1**  
**Organization Characteristics**

	Percentage Response	
	Executive Director Sample <sup>a</sup>	Board Subsample <sup>b</sup>
Annual operating budget		
\$25,000 or less	5.2	1.9
\$25,001 to \$100,000	11.4	9.6
\$100,001 to \$250,000	24.6	29.8
\$250,001 to \$500,000	24.6	23.1
\$500,001 to \$1,000,000	12.3	14.4
More than \$1,000,000	21.8	21.2
Full-time equivalents		
Less than 1	5.1	0.0
1 to 5	49.1	51.4
5.1 to 10	16.7	21.9
10.1 to 20	9.7	8.6
20.1 to 50	8.3	7.6
More than 50	11.1	10.5
Year established		
Before 1970	19.2	19.2
1970 to 1979	19.2	20.2
1980 to 1989	30.0	32.7
1990 to 1999	25.8	23.1
2000 to 2004	5.6	4.8
Service type		
Arts and culture	9.7	7.6
Education	12.9	8.6
Environment	12.4	15.2
Health	9.5	6.7
Human services	45.0	52.4
Other	10.6	9.5
Board size		
0 to 9	22.7	24.8
10 to 15	42.6	41.9
16 to 20	19.0	16.2
More than 20	15.7	17.1

a.  $n = 217$ .

b.  $n = 93$ .

data, three board variables (role ambiguity, performance feedback, and training) were measured in two different ways: using the responses of the board members and using the responses of the chief executives. To the extent possible, board members and chief executives were asked to respond to similarly worded questions regarding the existence of role ambiguity, training, and performance feedback in the board work environment. As depicted in Table 3 (see below), the role ambiguity and training measures achieved acceptable levels of reliability in both samples (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ranged from .67 to .78).<sup>4</sup>

To recognize important nuances that can be captured when looking at role ambiguity as reported by both the board and the chief executive, two measures of role ambiguity were created, adapting a three-item scale of task-goal specificity (Steers, 1976), and a fourth item was developed to reflect the committee structure of board work. To measure the potential psychological effects of role ambiguity on work motivation and performance, we used the board's self-report of the role ambiguity that exists in their work. To avoid contaminating the findings with common method bias by solely relying on chief executive role ambiguity assessments, the substantive dimension of role ambiguity was measured by determining the relative disagreement (discrepancy reported as a proportion) between the board's and the chief executive's independent assessments of the board's role ambiguity.<sup>5</sup> This second measure recognizes that if role information is not adequately communicated, then the board members may well believe that they understand their role even when they do not.

Consistent with previous research that suggested that chief executive assessments of board effectiveness or performance have higher validity (Brudney & Murray, 1998; Green & Griesinger, 1996), board engagement was measured by the chief executive's response to seven items describing the overall efforts of the board. Of these seven items, four items were adapted from a work motivation scale intended to depict the intensity, direction, and persistence of work effort (Wright, 2004). To this, another three items were added to ask about specific board-related efforts, such as participating in board meetings, attending organizational events, and commitment to helping the organization succeed. As with the other study measures, the board engagement measure achieved an acceptable level of reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ).

## Results

### Univariate Analysis

To get a sense of how to characterize the board environment according to the study variables, when comparing chief executive and board member assessments, a number of interesting patterns emerge. First, consistent with previous research (Green & Griesinger, 1996; Holland, 2002; Weaver & Inglis, 1999), both groups generally report that the board does not receive much in the way of training or feedback. For example, fewer than half of the board members and chief executives generally or strongly agree that orientation programs exist for new board members (45.3% and 49.1%, respectively), whereas only about one fourth believe that board members receive training on how to perform their responsibilities (22.9% and 27.4%, respectively). In fact, a substantial number of board members and chief executives report that board members primarily learn their roles through on the job experience rather than training (57.0% and 44.0%, respectively). Similarly, regardless of whether board members or chief executives were asked, only one third felt confident that the board receives performance feedback from others or its own assessments.

Table 2 illustrates that board members and chief executives from the same organizations sometimes disagree on the extent to which training or feedback occur. Not surprisingly, however, many of these differences seem to follow a pattern of self-attribution or social desirability bias. In particular, board members tend to respond slightly more favorably than the chief executives when describing the extent to which the board allocates training funds,

**Table 2**  
**Comparing Executive Director (ED) Responses to Matching Board Response**

	<i>M</i>		
	ED	Board <sup>a</sup>	<i>t</i>
<b>Role ambiguity</b>			
Board tasks are not clearly defined.	3.14	2.74	-2.52
Board members know exactly what is expected of them (R).	3.85	4.63	5.69
Board members understand fully which of their job duties are more important than others (R).	3.90	4.76	7.86
Committees have a stated purpose and annual plan of work (R). <sup>b</sup>	2.52	2.95	3.74
<b>Training</b>			
This organization conducts orientation programs to introduce new board members to the organization (history, structure, mission, etc.).	4.11	3.87	-1.77
Board members receive training on how to perform board duties and responsibilities. <sup>b</sup>	1.84	1.48	-2.99
The primary way board members learn what is expected of them (roles, responsibilities, policies, and procedures) is through experience.	2.82	2.55	-1.86
The board allocates organizational funds for board training and development.	2.98	3.46	2.89
Veteran board members serve as mentors for new recruits.	3.75	4.12	2.10
<b>Feedback</b>			
Our board regularly assesses its performance.	2.86	3.65	5.10

Note:  $n = 93$ .

a. Board measures for each board were estimated by the average score of all responses from that board.

b. Used a 5-point frequency scale (*almost never/never, rarely, sometimes, often, always/almost always*). All other items used a 6-point agree-disagree scale (*strongly disagree, generally disagree, disagree a little, agree a little, generally agree, strongly agree*).

provides mentoring, or regularly assesses its own performance, and chief executives are more likely to assert that board orientation and training takes place than are board members.

Although board members and chief executives generally agree that little board training feedback occurs, they disagree on the extent to which board members know and understand their roles. Although almost two thirds of board members are confident that they know what is expected of them, only two fifths of the chief executives feel the same way. Similar differences exist when looking at board member and chief executive assessments of how well board members understand their job priorities or whether their committees have a stated purpose or work plan. This pattern holds true even when only looking at organizations in which the responses of the chief executives can be directly compared to the responses of their own board members (see Table 2). Overall, these data suggest that the board members often think they understand their roles, even when chief executives think they do not.<sup>6</sup>

Together, these findings suggest that although many chief executives do not think the board understands its role, they also do not make use of common orientation or training practices that could help communicate board roles and responsibilities. Board members, on the other hand, are more confident that they understand their roles and, therefore, may be less likely to seek clarification or guidance from their chief executives. As a result, the board members may be enacting their roles in ways that are not consistent with the expectations of their

**Table 3**  
**Measure Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliability**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Executive director										
1. Board engagement	23.77	5.58	(.86)							
2. Board role ambiguity	10.87	3.69	-.67*	(.76)						
3. Training and development	15.40	5.04	.62*	-.70*	(.78)					
4. Performance feedback	4.58	2.01	.55*	-.46*	.49*	(.48)				
Average board members										
5. Board role ambiguity	8.41	2.27	-.29*	<b>.40*</b>	-.23*	-.21	(.67)			
6. Training and development	15.48	3.54	.26*	-.35*	<b>.43*</b>	.17	-.47*	(.71)		
7. Performance feedback	5.60	1.57	.23*	-.39*	.19	<b>.12</b>	-.59*	.54*	(.61)	
8. Role ambiguity disagreement	0.45	0.36	-.32*	.45*	.35*	-.16	-.36*	-.02	.09	(—)

Note:  $n = 93$ . Bolded correlations reflect interrater agreement.

\* $p < .05$ .

chief executives or, in some instances, not reflective of mission-related goals and objectives. Although such differences may reflect conscious disagreements between the board and the chief executive about governance roles, the lack of consistent board training and performance feedback strongly suggests that at least some of this disagreement may be because of the lack of role-related communication and information.<sup>7</sup>

### Bivariate Analyses

Table 3 provides the means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of the study measures. All multiple-item measures achieved an acceptable level of reliability (ranging from .67 to .86), with the exception of the two measures of performance feedback (.48 and .61). Such analyses, however, are less appropriate for the feedback measures because they represent formative (rather than reflective) measures in which each item represents a different form of feedback and, therefore, can make a unique contribution to the construct's measurement (Law & Wong, 1999; Law, Wong, & Mobley, 1998). It is also interesting to note that the chief executive and board member reports regarding the level of performance feedback the board receives were largely unrelated ( $r = .12, p > .05$ ). Given the potential for self-serving social desirability bias in these scores, perhaps this finding is not surprising.<sup>8</sup> The board members' and chief executives' assessments of role ambiguity and training were correlated (.40 and .43, respectively), providing additional confidence in those measures.

The bivariate correlations provided in Table 3 offer support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Regardless of the measure of training and role ambiguity used, the correlation between these two variables was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) and ranged from  $-.23$  (between the board's assessment of role ambiguity and the chief executive's assessment of training) to  $-.70$  (using the chief executive's assessments of both constructs). Thus, consistent with Hypothesis 1, board training and development is associated with reduced levels of role ambiguity among board members. Similarly, the correlations between role ambiguity and performance feedback support Hypothesis 2 in that they were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) and in the predicted

**Table 4**  
**Regression Analysis Results Predicting Board Engagement**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	Sig.
Independent variables				
Role ambiguity	-0.91	0.24	-.37	.00
Role ambiguity disagreement	-7.47	1.55	-.49	.00
Control variables				
Annual budget (1,000s)	-0.00	0.00	-.24	.01
Board size	0.23	0.10	.24	.02
Year established	-0.02	0.03	-.08	.48
Service type				
Arts	0.31	2.29	.01	.89
Education	-2.21	2.09	-.11	.29
Environment	1.16	1.64	.08	.48
Health	4.95	3.51	.14	.16
Human services	-0.71	1.37	-.06	.60
Constant	75.58	62.83		.23
$R^2$	.47			
Adjusted $R^2$	.40			

Note:  $n = 93$ .

direction (ranging from  $-.21$  to  $-.59$ ). As expected, role ambiguity decreased as the amount of training and performance feedback increased.

### Multivariate Analyses

To test Hypothesis 3, board engagement was regressed onto the two measures of role ambiguity controlling for several additional influences on board motivation including organizational size, year established, board size, and service type. The results of a hierarchical regression analysis indicate that board role ambiguity decreases board engagement, thus supporting Hypothesis 3 (see Table 4). The hypothesized model explained more than one third of board engagement (adj.  $R^2 = .40$ ), significantly better than the explanatory power provided by the controls alone (adj.  $R^2 = .18$ ). As expected in Hypotheses 3a and 3b, both the self-report of role ambiguity and the external assessment (role ambiguity disagreement) measures were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), suggesting that role ambiguity decreases board engagement regardless of how it is measured. Not surprisingly, role ambiguity does not completely account for all of the variance in board engagement, perhaps in recognition that boards can be engaged in activities that generally support their organizations even when they are not fully aware of (or enacting) specific role expectations.

In addition to the effect of our focal independent variable, only two of the four control variables were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). The size of the organization's budget was inversely related to the board engagement, and the number of individuals on the board was positively related to board engagement. Although the relationship between budget size and board engagement may seem counterintuitive at first, it simply highlights that the board's role may be more complex in larger organizations. Organizations with more resources may

increase the opportunity for, and visibility of, failure in communicating role-related information. The positive relationship between board size and engagement may represent the aggregate nature of the chief executive's assessment of the board. Although larger groups may decrease the average effort expended by each group member, the performance of the group itself may increase because many hands make light work.

## Discussion

This study contributes to our understanding and management of board performance by investigating the prevalence, conditions, and consequences of role ambiguity in nonprofit boards of directors. In particular, our findings suggest that ambiguity often exists regarding the board's role because of a lack of communication. Moreover, this ambiguity has an adverse effect on the degree to which the board is actively engaged in the organization.

Regarding the prevalence of role ambiguity, this study found that although board members report experiencing a moderate amount of role ambiguity, chief executives report that a much higher degree of board role ambiguity exists. In other words, these findings highlight that board members often think they understand their roles even when the chief executives disagree. There are a number of potential reasons why boards and their chief executives might differ on their assessments of the level of board role ambiguity. It could represent a simple pattern of self-attribution bias, with board members responding to questions about their own understanding or performance in a manner that will make others view the board more favorably. Alternatively, differences could also reflect the existence of multiple competing expectations commonly associated with board roles and responsibilities (Miller & Faerman, 2003; Widmer, 1993). It may also be the case that the chief executive prioritizes certain activities (e.g., fund-raising), whereas the board members place emphasis elsewhere (e.g., oversight). That said, the disagreement in role ambiguity assessments might just be more evidence of the existence of role ambiguity. Role ambiguity occurs when board members do not know or understand the performance expectations and established standards of behavior. If role information is not adequately communicated, then the board members may well believe that they understand their role even when they do not. Thus, these findings may simply be a result of the confusion inherent in ambiguity.

Consistent with this latter explanation, this study finds evidence to support that much of this disagreement is associated with poor communication between the board members and their chief executive. Even when chief executives believe their board members do not understand their roles and responsibilities, they often fail to use mechanisms that would help to better communicate governance expectations. Admittedly, such communication can take many forms, and not all are necessarily underutilized. For example, we found strong evidence to suggest that chief executives are communicating with board members in that more than 80% of both groups report they receive succinct agendas and supporting materials prior to board and committee meetings. Consistent with previous research, however, this study found that the training and performance feedback was inversely related to role ambiguity (S. E. Jackson & Schuler, 1985) and that boards receive little training or feedback (Green & Griesinger, 1996; Holland, 2002; Weaver & Inglis, 1999). Such communication is important not only to initially establish board direction and expectations but also to initiate ongoing dialogue necessary

to evaluate and calibrate board action. Without the type of information provided by training and performance feedback, board members may be more likely to assume that they understand their roles and less likely to seek role clarification or guidance. This is not to suggest that the nonprofit board sit idol waiting for the chief executive to provide leadership and direction; rather, our findings simply emphasize the importance of open communication, shared expectations, and periodic performance reviews. Whether such activities are initiated and led by the board or the chief executive is probably less important than that both actively take part.

Finally, when investigating the potential organizational consequences of board role ambiguity, this study found a strong relationship between role ambiguity and board engagement. As expected, board role ambiguity significantly lowered the extent to which the chief executive perceives that the board was actively engaged in the organization. Taken together with the findings regarding the importance of board training and feedback, this has a number of important implications for how to more effectively engage board members in work essential to the nonprofit organization.

First, our findings provide empirical support for commonly espoused but often ignored advice regarding formal orientations and continuous learning. It is essential that the nonprofit leadership (the board chair in tandem with the chief executive) carefully develop clear role expectations for individuals serving on the board and for the board as a collective. Without clear performance expectations, it is difficult for board members to focus their attention and effort on the desired activities or be able to accurately evaluate and adjust their own performance (Steers and Porter, 1974). This assertion is consistent with Nobbie and Brudney's (2003) findings regarding the effect of ongoing board development processes on performance.

The second implication of these findings for managing and engaging boards concerns the importance and difficulty of effective communication. Developing clear role expectations for the board is not enough; these expectations must be communicated to the board in a way that promotes continuous learning. Although it is true that board members often have a strong commitment to the cause and bring a wealth of professional knowledge and practical expertise to the governance table, it is also true that harnessing that passion and skill in pursuit of mission is compromised unless expectations about performance are clearly articulated. Like all other members of the organization, board members need training to understand what they are expected to do and how to do it. Training, however, provides only initial general role-related information.

To help board members transfer the information and skills gained in training to the boardroom requires hands-on coaching through ongoing feedback and evaluation. In fact, performance feedback is often assumed to be one of the primary ways in which roles are learned and clarified. To properly understand and effectively execute their governance responsibilities, the board members must invest time and resources in board development. Gathering feedback from stakeholders and periodically assessing individual and collective performance are ways in which the board can convert their commitment and perspective into activities that are consistent with mission-related goals and objectives.

Board chairs and chief executives may balk at the thought of adding board training or engaging in board evaluation, particularly because these suggestions are in stark contrast to the current operating practices of many nonprofit boards. Often so much emphasis is placed on the "efficient" use of time (meeting agendas that focus more on "making sure the meeting

ends on time”) that there is little time left for figuring out how to effectively engage board members. As a result, the very reason board members are recruited to the board (to add their perspective or expertise) is derailed in the quest for efficiency (or, in the words of chief executives, “out of respect for the busy schedules of our board members”). As many board members join the board because they “want to help” and are committed to governing “their” organizations well, board chairs and chief executives can be respectful of the board’s time *and* ask board members to participate in ways that promote engagement. Yet to achieve both objectives there must be a clear articulation of expectations and a thoughtful, reflective evaluation of performance.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that clear performance expectations must be established and effectively communicated. Admittedly, this may seem like a daunting task given resource limitations and a fear of putting too much stress on volunteer board members. Such concerns cannot be overlooked, but they must be put into the broader perspective of long-term board development, its effect on volunteer board engagement, and its role in organizational performance. Although maintaining relationships are important, they are important only if they consistently result in behaviors and outcomes desired by the organization. If the board is a group of individuals generously donating their time and talent in support of a common purpose, then its success requires a shared understanding of those goals and the roles each individual should play to achieve them.

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## Appendix

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### Board Member Survey Measures

#### Training and Development

I received training on how to perform my board duties and responsibilities.

This organization conducts orientation programs to introduce new board members to the organization (history, structure, mission, etc.).

The primary way I learned what was expected of me (roles, responsibilities, policies, and procedures) was through experience.

The board allocates organizational funds for board training and development.

Veteran board members serve as mentors for new recruits.

#### Role Clarity

As a board member, most of my tasks are not clearly defined.<sup>a</sup>

I know exactly what is expected of me in my role as a board member.<sup>a</sup>

I understand fully which of my job duties are more important than others.<sup>a</sup>

Committees have a stated purpose and annual plan of work.

#### Performance Feedback

I get helpful information from others (the chief executive, peer board members, other volunteers, community members, etc.) about how well I am performing my job.

Our board regularly assesses its performance.

### Executive Director Survey Measures

#### Training and Development

Board members receive training on how to perform board duties and responsibilities.

This organization conducts orientation programs to introduce new board members to the organization (history, structure, mission, etc.).

The primary way board members learn what is expected of them (roles, responsibilities, policies, and procedures) is through experience.

The board allocates organizational funds for board training and development.  
 Veteran board members serve as mentors for new recruits.

#### Performance Feedback

I provide the board with feedback and guidance on the quality of their work.  
 Our board regularly assesses its performance.

#### Role Clarity

Board tasks are not clearly defined.<sup>a</sup>  
 Board members know exactly what is expected of them.<sup>a</sup>  
 Board members understand fully which of their job duties are more important than others.<sup>a</sup>  
 Committees have a stated purpose and annual plan of work.

#### Board Engagement

Board members put forth their best effort to get work done regardless of the difficulties.<sup>b</sup>  
 It has been hard for me to get board members involved.<sup>b</sup>  
 This board does less than other similar boards.<sup>b</sup>  
 The board does only what I ask them to do.<sup>b</sup>  
 The board is committed to playing their role in helping this organization succeed.  
 Board members are prepared for and participate at board and committee meetings.  
 Board members attend social events sponsored by this organization.

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a. Adapted from Steers (1976).

b. Adapted from Wright (2004).

## Notes

1. If no personal contact information for board members was available, another nonprofit organization from the 219 organizations was chosen at random.

2. Three organizations listed only five board members.

3. Of the 93 organizations for which board member responses were received, 20 organizations had one board member response, 30 organizations had two board member responses, and 43 organizations had three or more board member responses.

4. No tests of internal reliability of the performance feedback items were performed, as feedback was operationalized as a summed score (formative) measure, in which each item can make a unique contribution to the construct's measurement. As a consequence of this conceptualization and the use of only two items in the measure, analyses that rely on internal consistency are not appropriate (Law & Wong, 1999; Law, Wong, & Mobley, 1998).

5. This type of role ambiguity is reflected by the extent, rather than the nature (or direction), of the disagreement between the board and chief executive's assessments of how well the board understands its role. Therefore, the measure was calculated as the absolute proportional difference between the two assessments.

6. It is interesting to note that the difference in the board's perceived understanding of performance expectations occurred only when referring to the board's role. A high percentage of board members and chief executives were confident that "board members clearly understood the direction (values, mission, vision, and objectives) of the organization" (82% and 84%, respectively).

7. This interpretation is consistent with previous insights about the importance of training and performance feedback. In studying the effectiveness of the policy governance model, Nobbie and Brudney (2003) found that board development training associated with the adoption of policy governance and the standardized board training of the National Center for Nonprofit Boards (now BoardSource) contributed to organizational effectiveness. The implicit assumption is that a serious commitment to and investment in board training and development results in a better understanding of purpose, which in turn leads to improved performance.

8. As indicated in Table 2, the board may be predisposed to reporting more favorably about its own assessment behavior. Similarly, the chief executives may be more likely to report in the second question that they provide more feedback and guidance.

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