

# VOICES OF BOARD CHAIRS



A National Study on the  
Perspectives of Nonprofit Board Chairs:  
How they prepare for and perceive their role in relation  
to the board, community, and chief executive officer

## ALLIANCE GOVERNANCE AFFINITY GROUP RESEARCH TEAM:

Judy Freiwirth, Psy.D., Mary Hiland, Ph.D., Michael Burns, M.A.,  
Gayle Gifford, M.S., and Debra Beck, Ed.D.

[www.Allianceonline.org](http://www.Allianceonline.org)





Dear Nonprofit Leader,

We are thrilled to share with you this in-depth research report on board leadership, the first of what we anticipate to be a series of research projects that engage our membership in important issues affecting the nonprofit sector. The field has undergone a profound and exciting transformation in the last decade as we have moved deeper into the information age, and the area of governance is exploring ways to find new alignment.

We would like to thank personally the Governance Affinity Group and its Research Team for their work on this research project and in their efforts to propel the Alliance as an important voice in the nonprofit sector. This report is a great example of the best of what Alliance membership brings to the sector and how capacity builders working together can make a stronger impact for the greater good.

We thank you for your interest in this research and invite you to join the Alliance as our programming aims to further the thought leadership of the top practitioners in capacity building. In the coming months we anticipate reaching out to our membership to further explore next steps on continuing the research around board leadership and look forward to engaging with you more deeply in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Brothers', written in a cursive style.

John Brothers, Board Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ana LaDou', written in a cursive style.

Ana LaDou, Executive Director

# VOICES OF BOARD CHAIRS

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>What Previous Research Tells Us</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Study and Findings</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Descriptive information about the Board Chairs and CEOs</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Governance Practice implications and Recommendations</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>The Nonprofits in Profile</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>About the Alliance</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>About the Research Team</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>27</b>

# INTRODUCTION

There are 1.57 million nonprofits in the United States (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2015) and likely as many board chairs. Although the practitioner literature points to the board chair as being instrumental in providing critical leadership for nonprofit boards, there is surprising little research on the topic of board chairs. Moreover, the research on this topic primarily reflects the voices of chief executive officers or executive directors (for this study both will be referred to as CEOs) and occasionally board members, rarely the voice of board chairs.

*Voices of Nonprofit Chairs* reflects the voices of 635 nonprofit board chairs primarily from across the United States. The study is intended as a first step in hearing directly from board chairs about their experiences and perceptions, acknowledging the importance of the leadership role of board chairs and the significant dearth of research in this area.

*Voices of Nonprofit Chairs* presents the findings from a research study conducted by the Alliance for Nonprofit Management's Governance Affinity Group, a national group of nonprofit consultants, researchers, funders, and other capacity builders who focus on developing new approaches of governance, conduct research, and promote research-based practice. A research team of the Affinity Group members conducted the research. As the premier community of capacity builders, the Alliance for Nonprofit Management ([www.Allianceonline.org](http://www.Allianceonline.org)) is a catalyst to ignite and accelerate the impact of individuals, organizations and communities working to achieve positive social change. It is a national membership organization which also focuses on supporting the collection, dissemination, and adoption of research-based nonprofit management, governance, and organizational development practices.

This study sought to answer two research questions:

- 1) How do individuals prepare for their role as chair of a nonprofit board? and,
- 2) What do board chairs perceive their leadership roles to be in relationship to the board, the community, and the CEO?

# WHAT PREVIOUS RESEARCH TELLS US

## Board Leadership

Most of the research regarding board leadership has focused on the board as a whole, rather than on the board chair's leadership (Herman and Heimovics, 2005; Aarinpoush and Hall, 2007); and, Axelrod, 2005). Harrison and Murry (2012) identified three sets of relationships in which board chairs execute their leadership role in nonprofits: a) the board chair-CEO relationship, b) the board chair-board member relations, and c) the board chair-external stakeholder relationships. The following summary of the previous research is organized in a similar fashion.

## Board Chair and CEO Relationship

Of the board chair research, it seems that most studies focus on the relationship between chairs and CEOs. The strongest board chair-CEO relationships are characterized by mutual trust and respect, a balance between governance and management, and regular open communication (Milleson, 2004). Lecovich & Bar-Mor (2007) and Hiland (2006) found that the quality of the board chair-CEO relationship was more influenced by the strength of trust than by adherence to defined or prescribed roles. Lecovich & Bar-Mor (2007) also concluded that role definition was not a factor in the dominance of either in the relationship, but rather their own agreed-upon division of labor. And, Jager and Rehli (2012) found that board chairs and CEOs work effectively and efficiently together when their capabilities compliment the other. Jager & Rehli (2012) and Hiland (2008) offered that monitoring their preferences and adapting to each other was also important to a strong board chair-CEO relationship.

In a study conducted by BoardSource (2015), 246 board chairs who were part of the BoardSource's subscription network, indicated through a survey,

that board chairs set the tone for the collective culture of the board. In the same study, nonprofit CEOs rated their board chairs with a general "B" score, relatively higher on managing relationships with the CEO and among board members than on facilitative leadership functions, such as managing group decision making, framing issues, and setting expectations. And, in a separate 2004 study, Murray concluded that another normative characteristic of the chair's role in relation to the board is to function as a "gatekeeper" of information of interest to the board.

Several studies point out that board chairs and CEOs often have different perspectives about various aspects of the board and their nonprofits (Bernstein, Buse, & Bilimoria, 2014; BoardSource, 2015). One study concluded that board chairs may have an unrealistically positive view of their and other board members' impact on their boards (Bernstein, Buse, & Bilimoria, 2016). The BoardSource (2015) study reported that board chairs' ratings tend to be slightly higher than that of CEOs. But both studies agree on what they see as the most important skills and behaviors for board members and on areas for improvement.



What is less understood about the relationship between the chair and the CEO is how they share power and the impact of that arrangement on board performance (Brown, 2009). One of the few studies which focus on power issues and governance (Murray, Bradshaw, and Wolpin, 1992) observed five broad patterns of power relationships in a sample of Canadian nonprofits: the CEO-dominated board; the Chair-dominated board, the power-sharing or democratic board, and the fragmented board. They found that the CEO-dominated board was the most common.

### **Board Chair Relationship with the Board — Leadership Effectiveness and Impact**

Harrison and Murray (2012) have conducted the most comprehensive (four phase) board chair study to date. They obtained descriptions and examined patterns of chair leadership from those who interact with them—CEOs and other board members. Their study states that board chairs are perceived by CEOs and other board members to have an impact on the performance of the CEO, board, and organization, and have the most impact on: a) clarifying the board's role in the organization, b) setting the broad direction for the organization, c) helping the board become organized and efficient, d) meeting its fiduciary responsibilities, e) overseeing the organization's performance, and f) attracting top quality board members.

Harrison, Murray, and Cornforth (2013) identified the board chair characteristics perceived to be effective or less effective. The study categorized the personal qualities and behaviors for effective and ineffective chair characteristics into five clusters including: a) motivation and style, b) capacity to lead, c) personal attributes, d) ability to relate, and e) ability to advance the organization externally. The study, however, did not include the self-perceptions of the chairs; rather it provided a useful list of perceived impacts of effective and less effective board chairs.

### **Board Chair and External Stakeholder Relationship**

Although the practitioner literature and normative board practice provides board chair job descriptions to include: a) serving as a community ambassador and advocating for the organization, b) serving as an organizational spokesperson along with the CEO, and c) cultivating relationships with stakeholders (Wertheimer, 2013), there is little research on the role of the board chair in relationship to advocacy, the media, stakeholders and the community. The existing research supports the critical importance of boards interacting with and including constituents and community stakeholders in governance work such as advocacy (Freiwirth, 2013). However, there is very little research to describe the numbers of boards and board chairs in the United States engaged with stakeholders, or the role of chairs with external stakeholders or in advocacy. The BoardSource (2015) study concludes that only 37% of the boards they surveyed report that they monitor the impact of public policy on their organizations, and only 33% of those organizations work with the CEO to educate policy makers. The study does not specifically address the role of board chairs or their leadership in the external arena.

Overall, there has been a limited quantity of research conducted on the topic of board chairs. And, little of this research has provided significant data on how board chairs prepare for their roles as chair and how they perceive their role in relationship to the CEO, the board as a whole, or with the community in which their organization serves.

# THE STUDY

**The Research Team developed an online, electronic survey questionnaire with 46 quantitative and qualitative questions. The questions focused on the board chair's perceptions in two areas:**

- 1** 1) their preparation for service as a board chair, including those resources or experiences that were helpful or not helpful to them in their role as chair, and
- 2** 2) their role and relationship with the CEO, the board as a whole, and the community. In addition, the survey collected data on their perceptions about how board chairs were selected, their leadership style, and demographic information about their nonprofits and themselves. The survey was tested with a sample of board chairs and peer reviewed.

The research team obtained data from a wide range of board chairs using a snowballing technique (Wright & Stein, 2005), in which the survey was distributed electronically using email, social media, newsletters, and websites to a wide range of CEOs, board members, consultants, capacity building organizational staff, academics, and foundation officers. Those contacted were, in turn, asked to pass the survey along to board chairs in their networks. A condition for survey participation required that they either were currently serving as a board chair or had done so within the previous 12 months. At the close of the 120-day period for distributing and receiving responses, 635 self-identified nonprofit board chairs representing local, regional, and national organizations in 42 states completed a questionnaire.

## THE FINDINGS

**This section provides data and some interpretation of the data gleaned from the survey. Only data deemed by the Research Team to be significant and meaningful enough to inform nonprofit governance practices are presented.**

### **A. Preparation for the Board Chair Role**

A primary focus of this study was to learn about nonprofit board chair preparation. More specifically, questions were directed to learn about the resources, tools, and/or activities perceived to be helpful to individuals in preparing themselves to become a board chair; whether or not individuals prepared in any way ahead of assuming the chair position; and, how individuals were selected to be chairs.

About half of the respondents indicated they did nothing specific to prepare to become a board chair.

**51%**

## FROM BOARD CHAIRS

*"I probably should have taken more time to more formally educate myself on being a board chair/ president or to be exposed to good governance—a model. When you start out helping a friend... you just do your best."*

*"I didn't prepare at all really. I'm just doing it. Who has time to prepare? I barely have time to be board chair."*

*"My board career..... was due to the loss of multiple board members within a short period. I served as a regular board member only one month after joining, then two months as secretary, then a month as vice chair and then chair."*

*"I had no training for this and feel others would do a better job. However, this is where I'm 'planted' so I'll do my best while I'm still serving."*

*"The board chair and vice chairs just quit one day and I was left. The E.D. begged me to take it because she needed a Board Chair for grant applications."*

About half of the respondents (51%) indicated they did nothing specific to prepare to become a board chair. When provided a range of specific ways they might have prepared for the board chair role, only a little over half of the respondents (56%) stated they followed some intentional process. And when considering possible preparatory steps like first holding a different officer seat or chairing a board committee, only 13% of the respondents stated that they had held the role of vice chair. Eighty percent of respondents thought that serving as a committee chair was helpful experience for becoming a board chair, but did not indicate that it was an intentional route to board chair. Only 19% percent of respondents indicated that "becoming a chair was a natural progression," but the data didn't reveal how that was interpreted by the respondents. Only twenty-four percent were recommended by their nominating committee when asked how they came to be board chair.

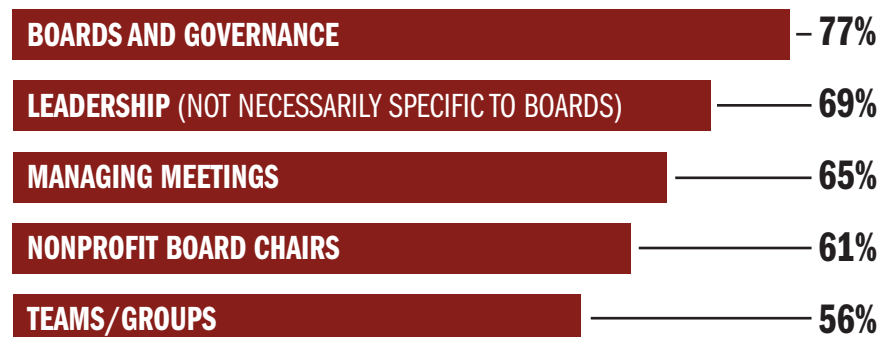
Probing further, the Research Team wanted to understand what people, resources, or experiences board chairs felt were helpful to them in preparing for their position.

The board chair respondents frequently turned to the prior board chair as having an influence on them. Seventy percent rated "observing the prior board chair" as helpful or very helpful, and 50% found asking the outgoing chair for advice helpful or very helpful. Fifty-eight percent also found asking the CEO for advice high on their list for helpfulness. Interestingly, consultants and coaches were reported as the least likely to be found helpful and also the least likely to be considered a resource.

Chairs identified the Internet (42%), local workshops (37%), and books they had purchased (33%) when asked about what sources of information were found helpful. It is interesting to note that only 11% of respondents described their local libraries as somewhat to very helpful.

In their preparation, when given choices of subject matter board chairs found helpful, boards and governance rose to the top as described in Table 1 below:

**Table 1:**  
**Subject Matter Found Helpful to Board Chairs**

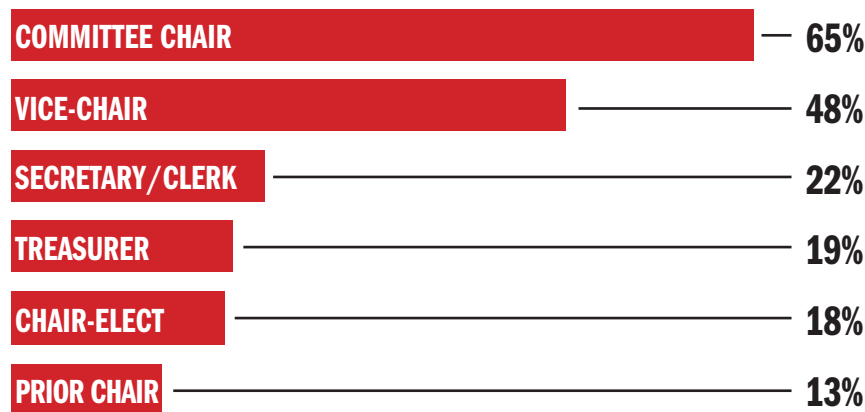




In the open-ended comments made in response to the above questions, board chairs referred most frequently to different types of experiences – versus people or information – they found helpful in preparing to become board chair. For instance, 82% of the board chairs found that serving on a committee, in their current or a previous nonprofit, was a helpful preparatory experience. In fact, this was a much more common experience for the board chairs responding than any board officer role. Fifty-two percent indicated that being a board chair in another nonprofit was a helpful preparatory experience.

**Board chairs cited mentoring and peer networking as two resources they would have liked to prepare to be a board chair.**

**Table 2.**  
**Previously Held Officer or Leadership Position in Same Nonprofit**



The final question about preparation for becoming a board chair was: “In hindsight, what one resource, person, or experience would you like to have had to help you prepare to be a board chair?” The most common themes that emerged in response included: a) mentoring, b) peer networking, c) training, and d) access to a specific resource on demand.

Overall, the board chairs’ responses indicated an interest and willingness to learn. They tended to look to a colleague such as a former board chair and/or the CEO within their current organization for advice, and were not aware of, or choose not to use, a variety of resources external to their nonprofits that might be helpful to their role as chair.

## **B. Perceptions of the Board Chair Role**

A second focus of the survey was board chairs’ perceptions of their roles, specifically in relationship to the board, the CEO, and the community. These relationships align with Harrison and Murray’s (2012) three sets of relationships in which board chairs execute their leadership role in nonprofits: the chair in relationship to the board, the chair in relationship to the CEO, and the chair’s relationship to external stakeholders or community.

*From one board chair:*

*“A training on how to be a board chair by an external objective organization would have been helpful. I have since joined a networking group specifically for women board chairs which has been extremely helpful for sharing knowledge, experience and resources.”*

*From one board chair:*

*“It will be a challenge to train and engage my next successor as chair. There are not a lot of people who are willing/able to spend the time necessary to serve in this role. Additional training opportunities for nonprofit leadership would be helpful to improving the skill sets necessary, but you can’t always make more time available.”*

*Another board chair stated; “I would have liked a go-to mentor type resource. I used a local consultant to some extent, but the organization didn’t have any resources available or committed for my development as a board chair.”*

## 1. Chair Role in Relation to the Board

### Primary Duties

Respondents were asked to identify what they perceived to be their top three duties as board chair in relation to the board. They selected the top three duties from a list of eleven commonly accepted board chair duties found in the practitioner literature (Wertheimer, 2013). Duties ranking the highest included the following:

- Keep the board's focus on the organization's strategic direction – **64%**
- Ensure the board fulfills its governance responsibilities – **49%**
- Preside over and manage board meetings – **42%**

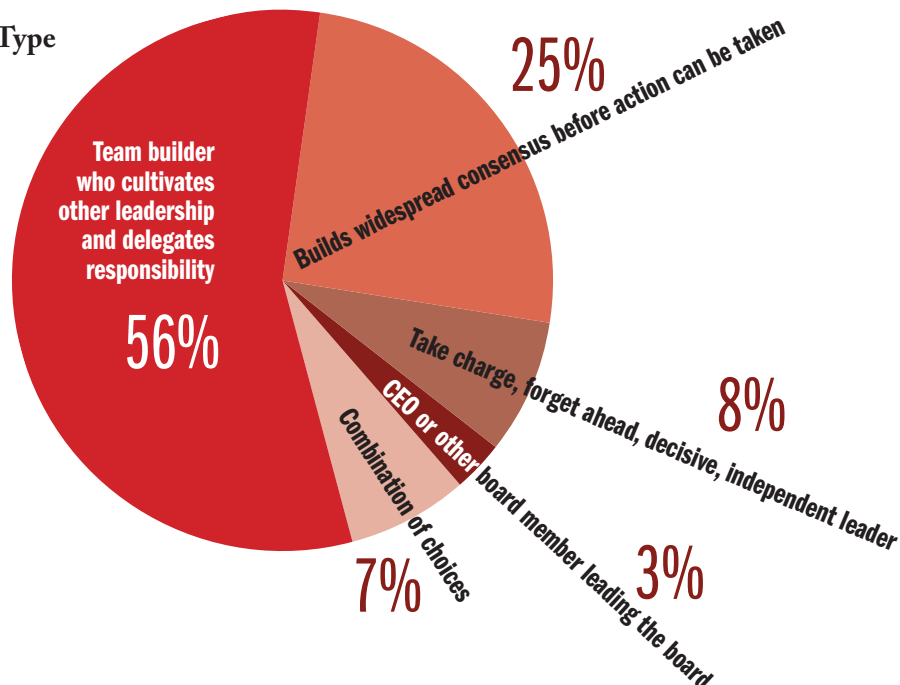
Respondents, however, expressed their reluctance to choose three “top” duties, as they viewed their role with the board as both multifaceted and often situational.

### Leadership Model

To further understand the board chairs' understanding of their role, the survey also solicited perceptions about the board chair's style of leadership. The Research Team hypothesized that the style of leadership may affect perceptions regarding role. With this premise in mind, the survey asked respondents to select the type of leader they perceived themselves to be from a list of four options. A little over half of the respondents felt that they were a “team builder who cultivates other leadership and delegates responsibility”, and only about a quarter of the respondents reported that they “built widespread consensus before action can be taken”.

About 8% of respondents described themselves as a “take charge, forge ahead, and decisive, independent leader.” Three percent of respondents stated that the CEO or another board member was actually leading the board. Within the 7% who chose “other” as a response, there were respondents who described themselves as a combination of the choices, depending on the situation. See the table below for more specific information.

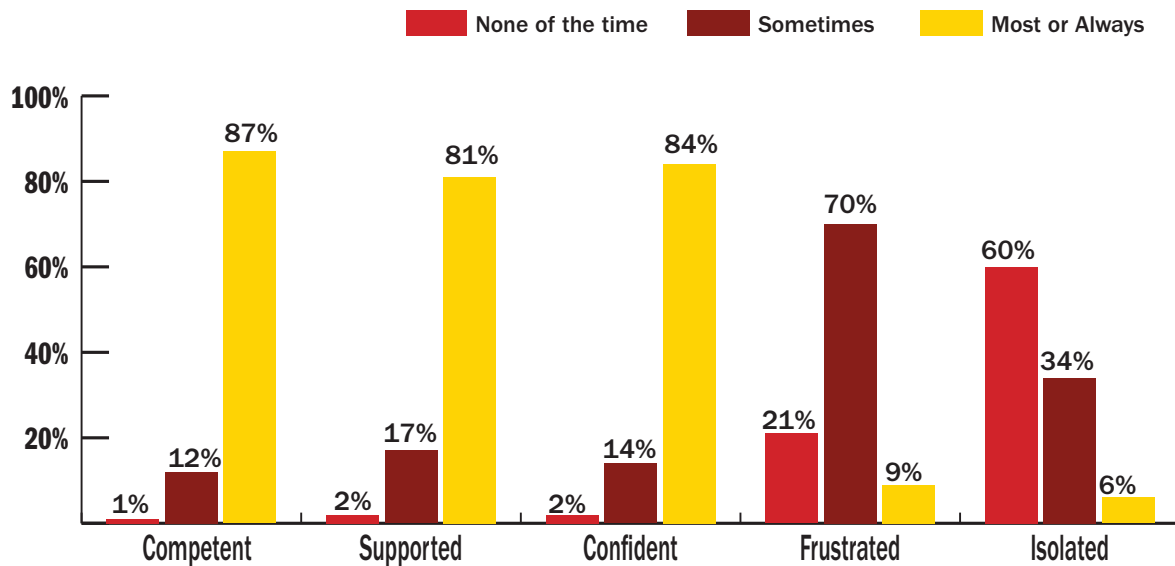
**Table 3:**  
**Leadership Type**



### Perceptions Regarding Leadership

Perceptions of the experience in leading as chair also matter when attempting to understand the chair to board relationship. The survey offered board chairs five choices to describe their feelings about leading the board. Chairs reported high degrees of feeling competent (87%), confident (84%), and supported (81%). Seventy percent reported feeling sometimes frustrated and only 34% sometimes felt isolated. See further details in table below.

**Table 4:**  
**Feelings about Leading the Board**



#### **Perceptions of several board chairs on leadership:**

*"I have always led an organization with enthusiasm, confidence and focus. My CEO knows to lead the group with the same traits."*

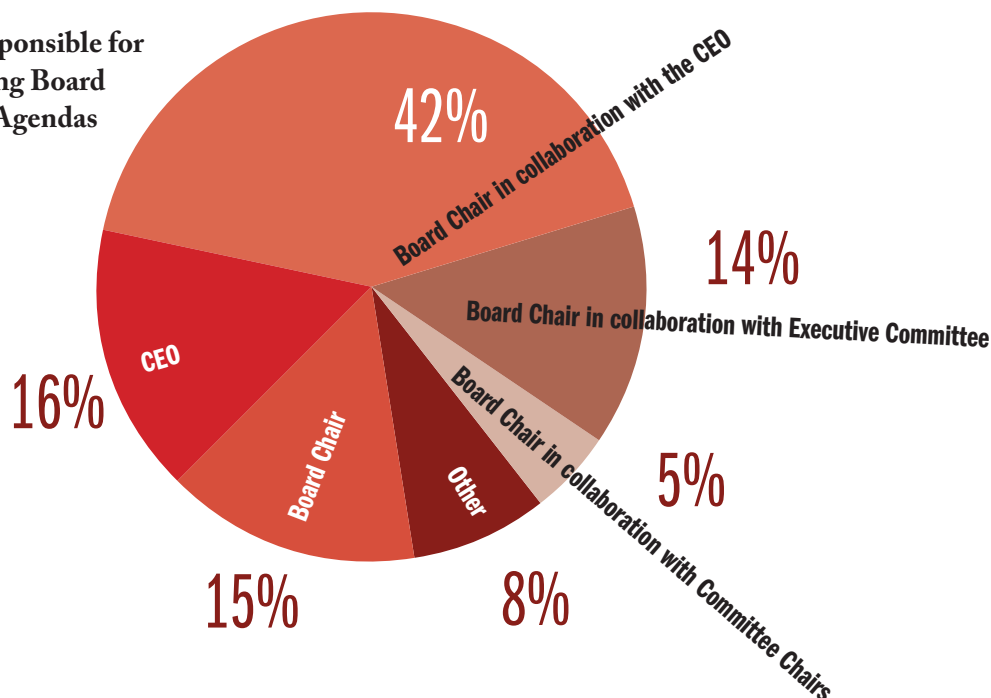
*"[Serving as a board chair] sometimes feels like herding cats."*

*"I declined leading this board for many years in that I feel my talent is best used behind the scenes. But we found ourselves without a viable candidate and I agreed to 'fill in' for a year or perhaps two until another board chair could be groomed. I see my strength as strategic, and not as a front person..."*

### Leadership Practice

An additional insight about the role of the chair in relation to the board is provided by understanding the process for constructing board meeting agendas. When the respondents were asked who was the most responsible for developing board meeting agendas, 42% indicated that they developed agendas in collaboration with their CEO, sixteen percent indicated that the CEO develops the agenda, and 15% of board chairs develop it alone.

**Table 5:**  
**Most Responsible for**  
**Developing Board**  
**Meeting Agendas**



The comments regarding who was most responsible for developing board meeting agendas were nuances of the above. For example, some common responses included: “the agenda is created in executive committee on which the CEO serves” or “the CEO draws up the agenda in collaboration with the board chair.”

## 2. Chair Role in Relation to the CEO

As stated earlier, a second perspective for understanding the role of the chair can be gained from understanding the board chair’s relationship to that of the CEO. Therefore, in the survey respondents were asked to describe the nature of their relationship with the CEO and the specific roles of each.

### Nature of the Board Chair – CEO Relationship

When asked to describe what their relationship with the CEO was built on, respondents selected the following:

- Communication between meetings (92%)
- Meeting obligations to one another (90%)
- Mutual trust (88%)

### Specific Roles in Relation to the CEO

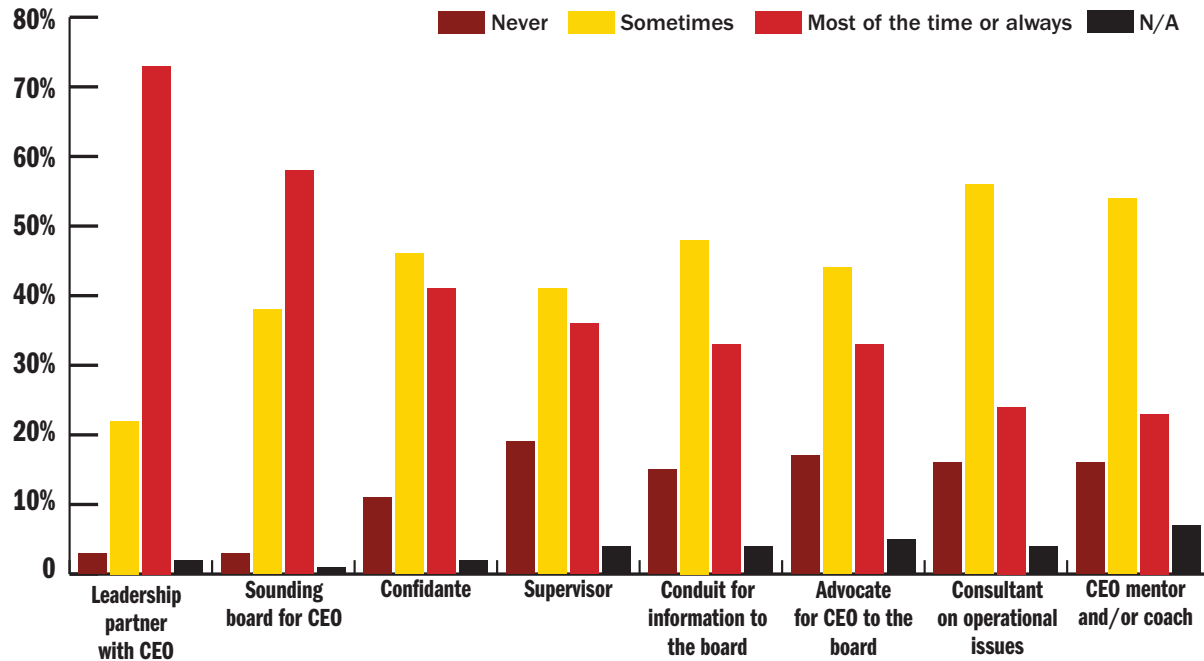
Respondents also described what they perceived to be their roles in relationship to the CEO. The survey offered a list of normative practices from which to choose. Chairs were asked to select “Not Applicable” if they did not feel an option was an appropriate role for a board chair. The highest ranking roles in the board chairs’ relationship to their CEO (cited as “most” or “all of the time”) were: as a leadership partner (73%) and as the CEO’s sounding board (58%). The chart below provides additional responses.

*From two board chairs:*

*“Strong CEO & strong board [were] at loggerheads with each other over several issues. They are finally learning to trust each other.”*

*“The CEO is a talented executive with a very collaborative and transparent approach. This allows my role to be primarily support, strategy and building consensus on the board.”*

**Table 6:**  
**Board Chair Roles in Relation to the CEO**



A majority of chairs (81%) identified themselves at least sometimes serving as a consultant on operational issues to the CEO; almost a third (30%) of the chairs selected the option “most of the time” or “always.” Seventy-seven percent identified themselves supervising their CEO at least some of the time, with 46% of that group finding themselves in that role “most of the time” or “always.”

As another reference point to understand the chair/CEO relationship, chairs were asked to describe their “power relationship.” Sixty-three percent described the CEO and chair as equally strong, with 19% stating that they had a strong CEO and weak board. Many of the comments on this question indicated some transitions in the relationship or that they were currently working to strengthen the relationship.

*From one board chair:*

*“The CEO is new so he needed additional support while getting ‘up to speed.’ Now the CEO is assuming more and more responsibility and direct supervision is no longer needed.”*

### 3. Board Chair’s Leadership Role in Relationship to the Community and Stakeholders

The third relationship area explored was the role of the chair in relation to the community and stakeholders. Both the nonprofit research and practitioner sectors have been increasingly interested in encouraging boards to engage to a greater extent with external stakeholders and the communities they serve, as well as to engage in advocacy and public policy.

Respondents reported that they were most engaged with the community by attending community events (49% “sometimes”; 42% “frequently”), and promoting involvement of constituents (39% “sometimes” and 45% “frequently”). The findings, however, were unclear regarding how survey



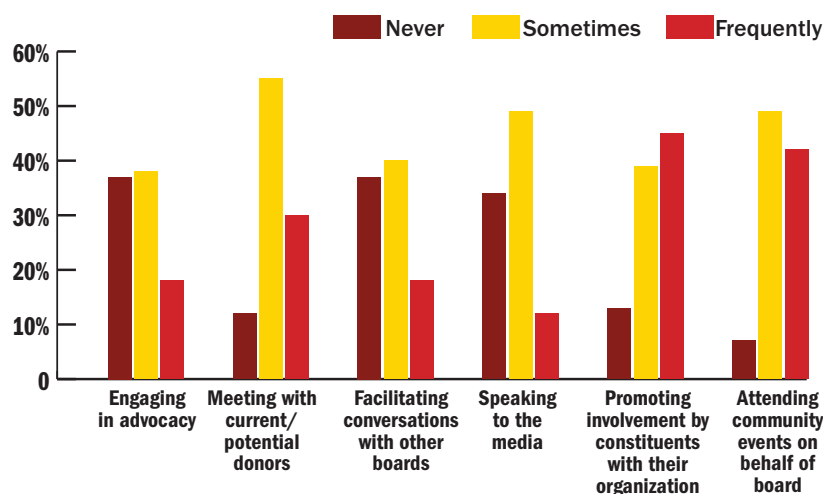
*Two board chairs described their co-leadership models below:*

*“Our designations are President and Vice President, but only because our bylaws require it. No one would take the position of President, so my co-President and I took the position(s) in order for the organization to keep going. We have divided the responsibilities according to where we live, our lifestyles and our temperaments. It is a very successful cooperation. We don’t know if the organization will keep the format or not. If it does, we will need to formalize it in some ways.”*

*“My co-chair is more of the “face” to the organization (i.e. she attends many more events than I do and participates in a lot of the networking) I do all the behind the scenes work.”*

participants understood the meaning of “promoting involvement by constituents with their organization.” Only eighteen percent of the respondents indicated that they frequently engaged in advocacy or interacted with other boards, and 12% indicated that they “frequently” spoke to the media. Thirty percent of respondents indicated that they “frequently” met with current or potential donors, while a little over half (55%) of the respondents reported that they “sometimes” met with current and potential donors.

**Table 7: Board Chair Engagement with the Community**



#### 4. Co-Leadership among CEOs or Board Chairs

Most boards follow traditional practices in which one board member, individually, assumes the leadership role of the board chair. While there is increasing discussion within the sector that the solo leadership role of the board chair is onerous and that co-leadership or shared leadership model might lead to more effective governance, there has been little experimentation or research in this area. For this reason, the survey asked about co-chair and other shared leadership models. The responses revealed that only six percent of the chairs described themselves as co-chairs. As a way to understand the leadership culture in their organizations, the respondents also were asked to describe shared leadership models within their staff. Only 8% of the respondents reported that their organizations had co-executive leadership; the highest percentages reporting that were from arts, culture and humanities organizations (15%) and environmental organizations (14%).

Only 8% of respondents reported that their organizations had co-executive leadership.

# DESCRIPTIVE BOARD CHAIR AND CEO INFORMATION

Three sets of questions were asked to gain demographic understanding about respondents and their organizations. The first set focused on gathering information about the respondents and the second set focused on gaining some insights about the CEOs. The third set focused on the demographics of the respondents’ organizations is included later in this report.

## A.The Board Chairs

What types of experiences did survey respondents bring to the board in their new leadership position? What types of nonprofits, in what organizational life stages, were they called to govern? Several survey questions offer detail that help to answer those contextual questions.

### 1.Tenure as board chair

Length of service in their current board chair position ranged from “less than one year” to “more than five years.” Survey participants selecting the more than five years were asked to offer a more specific response; responses ranged from six to 25 years. As described in Table 8 below, a majority (63%) had served as board chair for only two years or less.

Table 8: Chair Tenure

Chair Tenure	
Number of Years of Service	Responses
Less than one year	21%
1 year	16%
2 years	26%
3 years	16%
4 years	7%
5 years	5%
More than 5 years	10%

### 2.Time served on the current board:

Respondents were asked how long they had served on the current board prior to accepting the chair position. Just over half (55%) had been on their boards three years or less before becoming board chair and almost a quarter served on their board less than a year before becoming board chair.

About half of board chairs only served on the boards for 3 years or less before becoming board chair.

Table 9: Chair Length of Board Service

## Chair Service

Number of years served	Responses
Less than 1 year	16%
1-3 years	39%
4-6 years	27%
7-9 years	10%
10-12 years	4%
More than 10 years	3%

Note: Responses for the “more than 10 years” category ranged from 13-25 years.

### 3. Years Served

Respondents were asked about years served in one of six common board leadership positions: vice-chair, treasurer, secretary/clerk, chair (served prior to current period), chair-elect, and committee chair. As described in Table 10 below, serving as committee chair was most common.

Only 10% of respondents served as vice-chairs 3 years or more prior to becoming board chairs.

Table 10: Years Served in Leadership Position

## Leadership Service

Board Position	1 year or less	2 years	3 years	> 3 years	Never
Vice-chair	20%	18%	4%	6%	52%
Treasurer	5%	6 %	4%	4%	81%
Secretary/Clerk	8%	8 %	3%	3%	78%
Chair: Prior	4%	4%	1%	3%	87%
Chair-elect	11%	4%	1%	2%	82%
Committee Chair	13%	20%	10%	21%	35%
Other	8%	7%	2%	6%	77%

Table 11: Current Service on other boards

## Current Service

Current Service on other boards	Responses
1 board	46%
2 boards	28%
3 boards	15%
More than 3 boards	10%

### 4. Total years of board service

Survey respondents were asked about their cumulative nonprofit governance experience – the total number of years served on any nonprofit board. Respondents chose from one of six ranges from “three or fewer years” to “more than 15 years.”

**Table 12: Cumulative Years  
of Board Service**

## Years of Service

Total number of years	Responses
3 or fewer years	7%
4-6 years	14%
7-9 years	15%
10-12 years	16%
13-15 years	18%
More than 15 years	30%

Those choosing more than 15 years were encouraged to offer a more specific number of years. The highest was 60 years. A correlation between the response here and the respondent's age would be expected. However, the survey did not include a question regarding the latter.

### B.The Nonprofit CEOs

The survey also included questions requesting general information about the presence of, and the circumstances surrounding, the chief executive officers within the respondents' organizations.

**Table 13. General Information about CEOs**

## CEO Info

General CEO Information	Yes	No
Nonprofit has a CEO	86%	14%
CEO is a voting member of the board	15%	85%
Nonprofit has co-CEOs	7%	93%
CEO is the founder	16%	84%

### 1. Length of time CEO in current position

Finally, board chair respondents were asked to identify the length of time that their current – or last CEO if the organization was in leadership transition – had been in the position. The findings revealed a relatively even distribution of tenure lengths for the CEO from only one to two years to more than 12 years. Responses are shown in Table 14 below.

**Table 14: CEO Tenure**

## CEO Tenure

Number of Years CEO in current position	Responses
1-2 years	27%
3-5 years	22%
6-8 years	18%
9-12 years	12%
More than 12 years	22%

# GOVERNANCE PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research was conducted to increase understanding of nonprofit board chairs, their preparation, and their perception about their roles, as a platform to inform nonprofit and capacity-building practices. Although it was not the intent of this study to link board chair preparation and/or the understanding of board roles to board or organizational effectiveness, the findings provide important practice implications and recommendations for the sector described below.

## **1. Develop an intentional, well planned practice of board chair preparation and succession planning.**

It was concerning that 51% of the board chair respondents indicated that they did nothing special to prepare for being a board chair. Moreover, 16% of board chairs reported that they had only served on their board less than a year, and 56% reported that they only served on their board three years or less before becoming chair, and therefore providing very little time for preparation for such a key leadership role. While most respondents, when asked how they came to be board chair, indicated some type of intentional consideration, an interesting theme emerged from the qualitative responses: the movement of individuals into the board chair role as a result of unexpected events. These events included the unanticipated resignation of the chair, or the inability of candidates designated as next in line to serve because of work, health, or family demands. Some chairs noted their progression into the role was based on simply being available or willing to serve because others were unwilling. An intentional, well-planned practice of grooming and selection, which includes leadership development for new board chairs, may facilitate more successful transitions and effective board leadership, as well as a deeper bench of leadership.

## **2. Clarify the role of the chair in relationship to the full board, to the CEO, and the organization's community, so that there is shared agreement within the board.**

The data indicated a variety of perceptions among respondents of the board chair's role. With organizations of many sizes and stages of development, and in response to differing community conditions, boards will benefit from greater clarity and shared agreement on what role their board chair should be playing, rather than letting each chair define



that role for him or herself. This recommendation is also based upon the findings from Harrison and Murray's research (2012). Once defined, it is important to communicate that role clearly among the board and staff. And of course, research data can help inform those role definitions.

### **3. Provide training, mentoring, and coaching opportunities specifically for board chairs.**

The data demonstrate that a high percentage of board chairs in the study do not engage in training, mentoring, or coaching to help them adapt to their new position or to increase their effectiveness. But, mentoring, training, and peer networking were identified as the number one resource they would have liked to have to help them prepare.

Harrison and Murray's study (2012) on perceived characteristics of effective versus non-effective chairs identified skills and practices which can be learned either through education, mentoring, or coaching. Some of those skills include: a) facilitation skills, b) team development skills/how to build board cohesion, 3) collaboration skills, 4) dealing with conflict, c) how to build motivation, d) developing a working partnership with the CEO and, e) how to provide vision and direction. Capacity-building initiatives and consulting assistance which facilitate one-to-one mentoring or coaching for board chairs and for emerging governance focused on these skills would offer critical and useful leadership development for board chairs. Additionally, peer-learning initiatives for board chairs and prospective chairs would provide useful forums for board chair learning and preparation.

A significant number of respondents cited that observing or getting advice from prior board chairs or friends who had been board chairs was helpful. More questions than answers arise from this finding. What is unknown is precisely what benefits were being drawn from these observations and advice. What exactly were the board chairs learning from the previous board chairs? And, given that former chairs were identified as important role models, what is the consequence when those chairs did not perform effectively? Does this method of modeling just create repetitive cycles with generations of ineffective chairs, thereby perpetuating poor leadership? These are significant questions for future research.

### **4. Build leadership capacity for many potential board leaders, including committee chairs.**

Respondents identified that the most frequently held leadership position prior to becoming the board chair was that of a committee chair – even more frequently than any other officer roles. Moreover, 82% of the respondents cited their experience as committee chairs as important in helping them prepare for serving in the board chair position. The data suggests that more attention needs to be given to preparing committee chairs for

their leadership position as both a committee chair and as a route to the board chair position. The preparation could include mentoring and skills based training, such as how to design effective agendas, facilitate meetings, build consensus, etc.

Intentional succession planning, which includes identifying potential leaders on the board at least a year in advance of their assuming the chair position, along with mentoring or other leadership training would provide new board chairs with the needed support for effective leadership. In addition, as suggested by the data, providing committee chair experience, coupled with leadership training, can be helpful in building a larger pool of potential effective leaders. In order to develop a deeper pool of potential leaders, not only would board chairs benefit from mentoring and training, the data suggest that boards as a whole and committee chairs in particular would benefit from regular board leadership development training and coaching.

## **5. Provide more accessible and research-based resources for board chairs and capacity-builders.**

The data indicate that in general, respondents did not access internet, workshops, books, or other written resources that could help prepare them for their role as board chair. While the data did not reveal why they were not accessing these resources, there may be a number of reasons. Perhaps they were overwhelmed with the enormous amount of online resources for boards, including articles, magazine, tools, blogs, and other social media, all purporting that they are so-called “best practices”. Additionally, based on the research in preparation for this study, while there is indeed a plethora of prescriptive literature, there are few resources that are specifically focused for board chairs or for capacity-builders who help support chairs, and even fewer that are based on research or evidence. Even if these resources were available, it is uncertain whether board chairs would access them. Readily accessible, research-based practice tools and resources specifically intended for board chair development could make a significant positive impact.

## **6. Support the board chair leadership function to improve both the chair’s and board’s involvement in community engagement and advocacy.**

Although it is increasingly accepted in the nonprofit sector that the board’s external advocacy and community engagement role is an important responsibility, the data indicates that board chairs do not generally engage externally with the community, media, funders, other boards, or stakeholders. The data also may suggest that board chairs did not view community engagement as an important part of their role.

In alignment with the BoardSource (2015) study, board chairs indicated a generally low frequency in how engaged they were with the community. Of particular note is the very low percentage of those that engaged in advocacy, spoke to the media, and met with current and potential donors on a frequent basis. Only 18% of respondents indicated that

they frequently engaged in advocacy or interacted with other boards; only 29% frequently met with current or potential donors, and only 12% indicated that they frequently spoke to the media. The survey, however, did not delve into the “why” behind these responses. Therefore, it is not clear from the data if the responses indicate that board chairs did not feel that these responsibilities are part of their or the board’s role, or that they did not have the knowledge and/or training to engage with their communities, funders, and other stakeholders.

Although a higher percentage of board chairs (45%) indicated that they frequently promoted involvement by constituents in their organizations, it remains unclear how this question was understood. Did the chairs understand this to mean only engaging constituents to participate in program activities? Did it mean engaging them in occasional focus groups or surveys? Or did it mean engaging constituents in some level of governance or organizational decision-making? Further research is needed to explore these questions.

As advocacy and community engagement are important governance functions, board chairs can serve in an important leadership role promoting the board’s external role in both advocacy and engaging the organization’s stakeholders. As part of the preparation for board chairs recommended earlier in this report, board chairs would benefit from gaining critical leadership skills in advocacy, funder and donor cultivation, media relations, and community engagement. Capacity-building initiatives, which include coaching and mentoring should incorporate these skills for both the board chair and emerging leaders within both boards and their committees.

## **7. Consider moving from a ‘heroic’ individual model of leadership to shared leadership.**

Normative practice for nonprofit boards has been to have one primary leader, the chair, who generally holds much of the power and authority for leading the board. Is the widely practiced individual model of leadership the most effective practice? Are the leadership responsibilities for board chairs unrealistic for one person to execute effectively? Or, would a shared leadership model provide a more useful model for boards? There is growing research in this area which has demonstrated the relationship between shared leadership and a positive impact on team performance outcomes (Nicolaidis et. al., 2014) that may have implications for board functioning. In addition to increased positive outcomes, another benefit of shared leadership models is that they provide a more intentional way to build leadership skills and experience beyond the single chair, thereby developing a wider pool of leaders for boards.

There are different models of shared leadership that boards could consider adopting, including: a) co-chairs who divide up the leadership responsibilities, b) multiple leaders within boards who share different aspects of the leadership responsibilities, c) expanding executive committees beyond officers in order to distribute coordinating responsibilities, and d) disbanding executive committees while distributing leadership among multiple board members.

## Future Research

The study raises additional research questions for future exploration. Some of these questions include the following:

- Do other board members' perceptions of the board chair's role and effectiveness match with the board chair's perception?
- What might an effective mentorship initiative look like?
- How do stages of an organization's/board's development affect the type of chair role needed for boards?
- How does the research on characteristics of board chairs affect the board's effectiveness as a working team?
- What are effective ways to increase awareness of the importance of advocacy and other community engagement for board chairs and boards?
- How do current and prospective board chairs best gain the types of leadership competencies described in Harrison and Murray's work? What are the implications for capacity building?
- What are and how can shared leadership models lead to more effective governance? How might these models affect leadership development and succession?
- What makes the difference between boards that understand the importance of connecting with their constituents and stakeholders and those that do not?

# THE NONPROFITS IN PROFILE

The survey included several general questions asking for detail about the nonprofits where respondents served as board chairs, as well the CEOs serving as leadership partners with the governing body.

## Geographic Representation

Most of the respondents (96.21%) had headquarters in the United States. Responses came from all but eight states (Hawaii, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Jersey, North Dakota, South Carolina, Utah, and Vermont), and the U.S. territory Puerto Rico also was not represented. Responses from 23 states accounted for less than one percent each, whereas two states, California (27.84%) and Massachusetts (11.17%), accounted for more than a third of the survey responses.

## Mission

Mission area	Responses
ARTS, CULTURE & HUMANITIES	15%
EDUCATION	15%
ENVIRONMENT & ANIMALS	5%
HEALTH SERVICES	8%
HUMAN SERVICES	23%
INTERNATIONAL, FOREIGN AFFAIRS	1%
PUBLIC, SOCIETAL BENEFIT	17%
RELIGION RELATED	3%
MUTUAL/MEMBERSHIP BENEFIT	3%
UNKNOWN, UNCLASSIFIED	1%
NONE OF THE ABOVE	8%



## Nonprofit Tax Status

(4% of respondents were outside US)

Tax status	Responses
501(c)3	91%
501(c)4	2%
501(c)6	1%
Don't know	6%

## Size

Annual budget	Responses
Less than \$500,000	40%
\$500,000-\$999,999	18%
\$1 million-\$4.999 million	26%
\$5 million-\$10 million	7%
Greater than \$10 million	8%
Don't know	1%

## Number of Employees

Number of employees	Responses
Less than 1	11%
1-5	37%
6-10	15%
11-20	10%
21-50	11%
51-100	5%
101-250	7%
Greater than 250	3%

# CONCLUSION

These research findings are intended to contribute to the limited body of research on board chairs and to the greater understanding of board leadership and board chairs. The Research Team believes these findings and practice implications can encourage boards to place a greater emphasis on intentional board chair preparation and succession planning, as well as to strengthen board leadership.

The Research Team also intends that these findings will encourage more research in this critical area of board leadership and expand the possibility for shared leadership. Future research in the area of board leadership and chairs will help boards and board chairs have greater access to research-based practice, ultimately improving the effectiveness of nonprofit governance.

## REFERENCES

Bernstein, R, Buse, K., and Bilimoria, D. "Perspectives from Nonprofit Board Chairs and CEOs on Board Governance Leadership and Performance: Are They Really Working for the Same Organization?" Paper presented at the annual conference of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action, November 2014.

Bernstein, R., Buse, K., and Bilimoria, D. (2016). "Revisiting Agency and Stewardship Theories: Perspectives from Nonprofit Board Chairs and CEO's. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, 2016. Published online DOI: 10.1002/nml.21199.

BoardSource. (2015). *Leading With Intent: A National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices*.

Brown, W. A. (2007). "Board Development Practices and Competent Board Members: Implications for Performance." *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 17(3) 301-317.

Brown, W.A. (2009). "Power on Nonprofit Boards: Considering the Influence of the Board Chair." Paper presented at the Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership Conference: Boards in Uncertain Times, Exploring the Implications of Financial, Technological, and Generational Change for Nonprofit Governance, April 2009.

Bugg, G. and Dalhoff, S. (2006). *National Study of Board Governance Practices in the Nonprofit and Voluntary sector in Canada*. London, Ontario: Strategic Leverage.

- Freiwirth, J. (2014). "Community-Engagement Governance: Engaging Stakeholders for Community Impact." In *Nonprofit Governance: Innovative Perspectives and Approaches*, edited by Corn, C., & Brown, W., New York: Routledge Publishers. 183-209.
- Harrison, Y. and Murray, V. (2012). "Perspectives on the Leadership of Chairs of Nonprofit Organization Boards of Directors: A Grounded Theory Mixed-Method Study." *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, 22 (4), 411-437.
- Harrison, Y., Murray, V. and Cornforth, C. (2014). "The Role and Impact of Chairs of Nonprofit Boards" in Cornforth & Brown (eds.). *Nonprofit Governance: Innovative Perspectives and Approaches*, London: Routledge Press, 71-83.
- Herman R.D. and Heimovics, R.D. (2005). "Executive Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations" in R.D. Herman & Associates (ed.), *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hiland, M. (2006). "The Board-Chair – Executive Director Relationship: Dynamics that create value for nonprofit organizations." *Journal of Nonprofit Management*, 1-10.
- Iecovich & Bar-Mor, (2008). "Relationships Between Chairpersons and CEOs in Nonprofit Organizations." *Administration in Social Work*, 31(4), 21-40.
- Jager & Rehli, (2012). Cooperative Power Relations Between Nonprofit Board Chairs and Executive Directors, *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, 23 (2), 219-236.
- Murray, V., Bradshaw, P., & Wolpin, J. (1992). Power in and around boards: A neglected dimension of governance. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, 3, 165-182.
- National Center for Charitable Statistics, The Urban Institute. (2012). "The National Almanac: 2012."
- Nicolaides, V., laPort, K., Chen, T., Tomassetti, A., Weis, E., Zaccaro, S., & Cortina, J. (2014). The Shared Leaders of Teams: A meta-analysis of proximal, distal, and moderating relationships, *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25, 923-942.
- Otto, S. (2003). "Not So Very different: A Comparison of the Roles of Chairs of Governing Bodies and Managers in Different Sectors." In C. Cornforth (ed.) *The Governance of Public and Nonprofit Organizations: What Do Boards Do?* London: Routledge Publishing.
- Wertheimer, M. (2013). *The Board Chair Handbook*, 3rd ed. Washington, DC: BoardSource.
- Wright R. and Stein, M. (2005). "Snowball Sampling." In K.K. Leonard (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Social Measurement*. San Diego: Academic Press.

## ABOUT THE ALLIANCE FOR NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

The Alliance is the national voice and catalyst for the field of capacity building. We improve the effectiveness of the individuals, groups, and organizations who are helping nonprofits and communities achieve positive social change. Using a “Research to Practice” platform, the Alliance is committed to identifying and exploring both academic and practitioner research and field experiences in peer-to-peer exchanges designed to identify how capacity builders can increase the effectiveness, efficiency and impact for their clients and communities. We accomplish this through:

- Programming that enables our members to meet the highest standards of capacity building and professional assistance
- Research, development, and dissemination of cutting-edge theory and practices
- Generation of provocative dialogue between capacity builders, organizations, and funders

For more information about the Alliance: [www.Allianceonline.org](http://www.Allianceonline.org)

## ABOUT THE ALLIANCE GOVERNANCE AFFINITY GROUP

The Governance Affinity Group provides a forum to forward creative and innovative thinking in the field of governance and board development, including the generation of new governance approaches, models, practices, and research. Through the development of original research and new approaches, the Affinity group promotes research-based practice among a diverse group of consultants, researchers, and capacity-building organizations. The Affinity Group hopes to not only further the field, but also to increase the knowledge base, generative thinking, and consulting skills of its members and other capacity-builders. For more information about the Affinity Group, contact Judy Freiwirth, Psy.D., Chair, [Judy@NonprofitSA.com](mailto:Judy@NonprofitSA.com)

**For reference purposes, please use the following citation:**

Freiwirth, J., Hiland, M., Burns, M., Gifford, G., & Beck, D. *Voices of Board Chairs: A National Study on the Perspectives of Nonprofit Board Chairs*. New York: Alliance for Nonprofit Management, 2016.

Please visit [www.Allianceonline.org](http://www.Allianceonline.org) to download a PDF of this report.

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH TEAM

**Judy Freiwirth, Psy.D.**, Principal of Nonprofit Solutions Associates and has been consulting, training, speaking for national, regional, and community-based nonprofits, networks, and coalitions for over 35 years. She is the Founder & Chair of the Alliance's Governance Affinity Group and primary developer and researcher for a new governance framework, Community-Engagement Governance™. She has published numerous articles for *The Nonprofit Quarterly* and a contributing author for two recently published books, *Nonprofit Governance: Innovative Perspectives and Approaches*; and *You and Your Board: New Practices for Challenging Times from Researchers, Provocateurs, and Practitioners*. She serves on the Editorial Boards of the *Journal of Nonprofit Leadership and Education* and the *Journal of Nonprofit Management* and holds a doctorate in psychology, specializing in organization development. For more information, [www.NonprofitSA.com](http://www.NonprofitSA.com)

**Mary Hiland, Ph.D.** is President of Hiland Consulting, working to unleash the potential of nonprofit boards for community impact in partnership with executives. She has over 40 years' experience in the sector, both as an executive and board member. Mary has been consulting for the past 14 years, focusing on effective governance (the emphasis of her Ph.D.), the board/executive partnership, coaching of executives and board leaders, and strategic alliances/planning. Mary is a speaker, researcher, and author, and has contributing to four books including *You and Your Nonprofit Board New Practices for Challenging Times from Researchers, Provocateurs, and Practitioners* (2013). She is based in the Bay Area, California. For more information, [www.hilandconsulting.org](http://www.hilandconsulting.org)

**Mike Burns, M.A.**, has been a partner and organizational development consultant at BWB Solutions in Branford, CT since 1994 and has more than 20 years of experience as a nonprofit manager. His work focuses on strategic and business planning, nonprofit governance and helping nonprofits assess their readiness for mergers. His blog, Nonprofit Board Crisis, highlights nonprofit governance matters. Mike has a B.S. in Business Administration from Marquette University and a Master's Degree in Nonprofit Management with a focus on governance from Lesley College. He also holds a graduate certificate in Nonprofit Marketing Management from the University of Hartford. For more information: [www.bwbsolutions.com](http://www.bwbsolutions.com)

**Gayle L. Gifford, M.S.**, is President of Cause and Effect, Inc., a New England-based firm that helps nonprofits build capacity for greater social impact. Gayle's 30 years of sector expertise includes governance, strategic and business planning, fund development, and public engagement. She holds the advanced fundraising credential ACFRE. Author of the primer *How to Make Your Board Dramatically More Effective, Starting Today*, she is also a contributor to four other books on nonprofits. She holds an M.S. in organization and management and is an adjunct in the Masters in Public Humanities program at Brown University. For more information: [www.ceffect.com](http://www.ceffect.com)

**Debra Beck, Ed.D.**, is a Wyoming-based blogger, consultant and adult educator specializing in nonprofit board learning and development. An experienced online instructor, Debra has created and taught distance-delivered courses on nonprofit for graduate and certificate programs at the University of Wyoming, Duquesne University, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her current teaching responsibilities include courses dedicated to nonprofit boards/governance. Debra is an experienced workshop facilitator and trainer, delivering face-to-face and synchronous online (webinar) learning events to national and international audiences. For more information, see [www.boardlearning.org](http://www.boardlearning.org)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to acknowledge and thank several people who have provided invaluable assistance in the research and for this report.

The 635 board chairs who participated in this research and helped made this study possible.

Dr. Terrie Temkin, Principal of CoreStrategies for Nonprofits and a long-time Alliance Governance Affinity Group and Alliance member, who served as an external reader, and provided her editing expertise for both the survey instrument and this report.

Chrissie Bonner, Principal of Illustrating Progress and Alliance board member, for her invaluable design of the study's Infographic.





**Alliance for Nonprofit Management**

The Alliance for Nonprofit Management is the national voice and catalyst for the field of capacity building. We improve the effectiveness of the individuals, groups, and organizations who are helping nonprofits and communities achieve positive social change.

For more information about the Alliance and membership, contact:  
Ana LaDou, Executive Director at [ana@allianceonline.org](mailto:ana@allianceonline.org).

**[www. Allianceonline.org](http://www.Allianceonline.org)**



[www.facebook.com/AllianceForNonprofitManagement/?fref=ts](https://www.facebook.com/AllianceForNonprofitManagement/?fref=ts)



<https://www.linkedin.com/groups/725897>

For inquiries regarding speaking engagements, presentations, workshops or articles on this research or other governance topics, please contact our Governance Affinity Group:

Judy Freiwirth, Chair, at [Judy@NonprofitSA.com](mailto:Judy@NonprofitSA.com)