Editorial

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Lester M. Salamon Memorial Issue, Part I

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After Lester Salamon’s untimely passing in August 2021, Nonprofit Policy Forum launched a call for papers requesting contributions for a memorial issue to take the place of a Gedenkschrift (Essays in Memory of … ) to honor his legacy and immense contributions to the development of nonprofit studies both in the United States and at a global level. As is appropriate for such a volume, many long-term colleagues, former research associates, Hopkins philanthropy fellows as well younger scholars in the field wanting to engage with his work responded and are represented. This issue presents the first set of papers of the Memorial issue, focusing largely on American contributions. The October 2023 issue will contain the second part, comprising internationally-focused papers.

The impetus behind the development of this special issue dedicated to Salamon’s work and legacy was that two of the three current editors of NPF had the privilege of successive, long, and close working relationships with him. After leaving the Carter Administration’s Office of Management and Budget, Salamon joined the Urban Institute in 1980 to develop his third-party government theory (Salamon 1981) and the tools of government approach (Salamon and Lund 1989; Salamon 2002) that both seek to improve understanding of the reality that many public programs involve collaborations of some combination of federal, state, and local government agencies, nonprofits, and businesses.

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In late 1980, a group of nonprofit leaders, including Brian O’Connell, head of the newly-formed national, nonprofit umbrella association Independent Sector, became familiar with Salamon’s work on collaborative governance and asked him to focus, specifically, on deepening understanding of the engagement of nonprofit organizations in government programs. In particular, these leaders asked Salamon, with the assistance of Alan Abramson, to analyze the potential impact on nonprofits of the budget cuts being proposed by the new president, Ronald Reagan. While the Reagan administration’s rhetoric suggested that private philanthropy could make up for government budget cuts, the analysis by Salamon and Abramson (1981) pointed out the large share of nonprofit revenue coming from government and concluded that it

Lester M. Salamon (Photo credit: Rodrigo Merino, Santiago, Chile. Used with permission.)
would be exceedingly difficult for philanthropy to offset these cuts, especially in the short-term.

This initial 1981 report gained significant interest and led Salamon to expand his work on nonprofits into a major research project involving continuing work at the federal level along with a field study of nonprofits in sixteen local communities around the U.S., including one large city, one medium-size city, one small city, and one non-metropolitan area in each of the four main Census regions. In the 1980s, the field study produced many reports on the size and scope of the nonprofit sector in each of the study sites and on the changing relationship between nonprofits and government in these sites. Many of the insights from Salamon’s early theoretical and empirical work at the Urban Institute are incorporated in his book, *Partners in Public Service* (Salamon 1995).

In 1987, Salamon became professor of political science and founding director of the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Among his earliest initiatives at Hopkins was the creation of an International Fellows in Philanthropy program, which brought nonprofit practitioners and interested academics from all over the world to Baltimore for a semester or academic year to study the American nonprofit experience and share about the nonprofit, voluntary and philanthropic traditions of their home countries. More consequentially, with the help of Helmut Anheier and Gabriel Rudney, he launched the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (CNP) to take the pioneering empirical work globally. An initial pilot phase with seven countries ran from the late 1980s into the early 1990s (Salamon and Anheier 1996).

Stefan Toepler spent the 1993/94 academic year at IPS as an international philanthropy fellow and then joined the CNP core team in 1995 as the second phase of the project was starting that eventually expanded to over 40 countries (Salamon et al. 1999). At CNP, he primarily coordinated the research of the local associate teams in Central and Eastern Europe and later the Middle East and also oversaw the background work on nonprofit law across all project sites, which resulted in the *International Guide to Nonprofit Law* (Salamon and Toepler 1997). Until his departure to George Mason in 2002, Toepler also participated in various domestic projects, including the Maryland nonprofit sector study that pioneered the use of ES-202 employment data to track the size, scope and trends in the nonprofit sector at the state level (Salamon et al. 1997). Beginning in 2014, Toepler rejoined Salamon to work on government/nonprofit relations in Russia at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow.

This issue starts off with a paper by Dennis Young—Lester’s contemporary and fellow founding father of the field—on nonprofit resilience, a concept that figured large in Salamon’s thinking on the state of the American nonprofit sector from about 1997—when the Maryland ES-202 study first flagged the countercyclical nature of
nonprofit employment (i.e. that nonprofits added employees during recession while the rest of the economy shed jobs) and he further developed the resilience case in the Holding the Center report for the Nathan Cummings Foundation (Salamon 1997)—through the 2000s with the State of Nonprofit America books (Salamon 2012). In his article “Nonprofits as a Resilient Sector: Implications for Public Policy,” Young develops the conceptualization of resilience further, discussing organizational level strategies, but, importantly, also extends it to the network and sectoral levels. In doing so, he draws out policy implications, suggesting that efforts to strengthen organizational resiliency may not necessarily be best suited to secure resilient networks or ensure the resilience of the nonprofit sector at large.

The next two articles engage with Salamon’s (1987) core conceptual contribution to the development of nonprofit studies: “voluntary failure,” aka interdependence, theory. In “Extending the Interdependence Theory to Local Public Service Provision: Evidence from Iowa,” Shafiq, Albrecht, and LeRoux examine government-nonprofit partnerships by drawing in part on a unique database of government service agreements maintained by Iowa’s Secretary of State. Their article first describes the extensive variety of service areas where government partners with nonprofits and then discusses three cases from the areas where nonprofits are most prevalent in Iowa: risk management, information services, and parks and recreation. The authors find that government provides critical funding for nonprofits, and that nonprofits help government attend to public concerns that are difficult for government to address on its own. With their analysis, the authors develop support for Salamon’s partnership theory beyond the human services area where it is most often studied.

Jang, Valero, and Ford’s article on “Homeless Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Revisiting Salamon’s Voluntary Failure Theory” applies Salamon’s voluntary failure theory to homeless services during the COVID-19 pandemic to understand government-nonprofit relationships based on semi-structured interviews with homeless network leaders. Their work expands Salamon’s contribution as it offers a robust picture of government and nonprofits working together to help a vulnerable population during the crisis and offers lessons demonstrating the value of building and consolidating partnerships for nonprofits to expand resources and supports available for them.

This issue concludes with a review by Andrea Bassi of Civil Society: Concepts, Challenges, Cases. The book honors the career of Helmut Anheier—Lester Salamon’s key collaborator in the international work through much of the 1990s. The October 2023 continuation of the Lester M. Salamon Memorial Issue will feature additional takes on voluntary failure, nonprofit/government partnership and social origins from various international perspectives.
References