



WORKSHOP RESOURCE · OCTOBER 2026

Nonprofit Transparency and Public Trust

An Annotated Bibliography for Nonprofit Leaders: eight peer-reviewed studies on disclosure, accountability, and giving

Agard Research Associates Inc.

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About This Resource

This resource accompanies the Agard Research Associates Inc. workshop on nonprofit transparency and public trust. It brings together eight peer-reviewed studies that examine how nonprofits disclose information, how donors and other stakeholders respond, and how transparency can be measured and regulated. Each entry summarizes what a study asked, what evidence it used, and what it found. It then assesses the study's strengths and limitations and draws out a lesson for practice.

SELECTION

Every source is a peer-reviewed journal article published between 2013 and 2025. Together the studies cover a range of methods, from interviews, case studies, and a laboratory experiment to large statistical samples and index construction, and settings in the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Spain, and Belgium. They are grouped into four themes, and each theme closes with questions for workshop discussion.

READING THE ENTRIES

Citations follow the American Political Science Association's *Style Manual for Political Science* (Revised 2018 Edition). Numbers in parentheses within an entry are page numbers in the article being discussed.

A NOTE ON THE EVIDENCE

None of these studies measures public trust directly. The large US studies link transparency to donations and contributions, which are related to trust but are not the same thing, and their designs show association rather than cause. The one experiment observes how 36 university students used information when dividing \$10 among themselves and two charities, and its authors describe the sample as small and the results as preliminary. The qualitative studies show how charity managers and staff think about accountability, not how the public responds. The lessons drawn here should be read with those limits in mind.

The Studies at a Glance

THEME	STUDY	METHOD	EVIDENCE	SETTING	DATA PERIOD
1	Hyndman and McConville (2018)	Semi-structured interviews	19 interviews with 26 participants at large fundraising charities	United Kingdom	Not reported (manuscript received March 2017)
1	Yang and Northcott (2019)	Case studies	27 interviews plus annual reports and other documents from two charities	New Zealand	April 2012 to July 2014
2	Blouin, Lee, and Erickson (2018)	Regression analysis	3,217 nonprofits rated by Charity Navigator	United States	2011
2	Harris and Neely (2021)	Regression with a two-stage selection model	14,217 nonprofits; 6,309 in the contribution tests	United States	2012 to 2014
2	McDowell, Li, and Smith (2013)	Internet-based laboratory experiment	36 students (all but one undergraduates) at one Midwestern university, each dividing \$10 among themselves and two charities	United States	Not reported (published 2013)
3	Cabedo et al. (2018)	Disclosure index	Social reports of 49 NGOs in the Spanish Development NGOs Coordinator	Spain	Collected 2015; reports mostly from 2014
3	Dethier, Delcourt, and Huybrechts (2025)	Literature review, index, and website content analysis	432 nonprofit websites	Belgium	Literature from 2010 to 2022; coding date not reported
4	Katz, Ely, and Calabrese (2025)	Content analysis of public comments	459 public comment submissions on the draft Form 990, coded into 5,277 discrete comments	United States	2007 rulemaking

Data periods are as reported in each article. Where an article does not report when its data were collected, the table says so.

I. Accountability in Practice

How charity managers use reporting and direct communication to build trust



Both studies look inside large charities to see how managers and staff decide what to report, to whom, and through which channels. Their shared conclusion is that publishing reports is where accountability begins, not where it ends.

Hyndman, Noel, and Danielle McConville. 2018. “Trust and Accountability in UK Charities: Exploring the Virtuous Circle.” *The British Accounting Review* 50 (2): 227–37.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bar.2017.09.004>.

Hyndman and McConville examine how charity managers use public and private accountability mechanisms to respond to stakeholders and build trust. Their qualitative study draws on 19 interviews with managers at large UK charities. Interviewees described using different forms of communication to meet the information needs of different stakeholder groups. The authors characterize the relationship between accountability and trust as a “virtuous circle”: accountability can help build trust, and trust can, in turn, make accountability more effective. Publicly available communications were viewed as “necessary, but not sufficient” (235), because stakeholders may need tailored, direct, or private communication as well.

The article’s main strength is its attention to how accountability works in practice, rather than treating transparency as simply publishing information. Its interviews provide detail about managers’ perspectives, but they do not directly measure public trust or establish a causal effect. The focus on large UK charities also limits how readily the findings transfer to small organizations or the US nonprofit context. For nonprofit managers, the lesson is to publish good-quality public reports while also communicating directly with key stakeholder groups in ways tailored to their information needs. The article does not report when the interviews were conducted, although the journal received the manuscript in March 2017.

Yang, Cherrie, and Deryl Northcott. 2019. "How Can the Public Trust Charities? The Role of Performance Accountability Reporting." *Accounting & Finance* 59 (3): 1681–707. <https://doi.org/10.1111/acfi.12475>.

Yang and Northcott examine how managers, staff, and volunteers at two New Zealand charities develop and communicate performance-accountability information, using a case-study design. The study finds that these charity actors can shift reporting practices toward disclosure that is more relevant and accessible to the public.

The article explores how such practices might contribute to public trust, but it does not directly measure trust; the data were originally collected for a broader study of nonfinancial performance reporting, and the interview guide included no questions specifically about public trust (1691–92). Its findings therefore concern reporting practices and their potential implications, rather than demonstrating that disclosure increases trust. The evidence comes from 27 semi-structured interviews conducted between April 2012 and July 2014, supplemented by the charities' annual reports and other documents (1690–92). Both charities ranked among the largest 4 percent of New Zealand charities (1689), so the findings may not transfer readily to small organizations. For nonprofit managers, the lesson is to explain program performance in audience-relevant terms and to avoid assuming that publishing information alone proves that stakeholders understand or trust the organization.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Which of your stakeholders rely only on your public reports, and which hear from you directly?
2. How do you explain program performance to people who do not read financial statements?
3. What would a first-time donor learn about your results from your website alone?

2. Disclosure and Giving

What studies of US nonprofits and donors show about disclosure and giving



The first two studies ask whether more transparent organizations receive more support. Both find that greater transparency is associated with more support, and that the advantage is greatest for organizations with strong financial results to report, such as a high share of spending on programs; both are correlational. The third, a small experiment with university students, looks at how individuals divide a small sum among themselves and two charities. Most participants looked at what the charities did and aimed to achieve before turning to their financial figures, and those who viewed both charities' efficiency ratios did not give significantly different amounts to the two. None of the three studies measures trust directly.

Blouin, Marie C., Roderick L. Lee, and G. Scott Erickson. 2018. "The Impact of Online Financial Disclosure and Donations in Nonprofits." *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing* 30 (3): 251–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10495142.2018.1452819>.

Blouin, Lee, and Erickson examine whether nonprofits' voluntary online disclosure of IRS Form 990 information is associated with donations. Their analysis uses disclosure information from Charity Navigator's 2011 records for 3,217 nonprofit organizations, rather than an original review of each organization's website. They find that posting the Form 990 on the organization's own website is strongly associated with donations after accounting for organizational characteristics including age, size, and fundraising expenditures. They also find that donations rise with the program expense ratio, and that this relationship, along with having a program ratio above the sector mean, is stronger for organizations that post their Form 990 online (260–61).

The large organizational sample and focus on observable disclosure and donation outcomes are strengths. However, the observational design cannot show that disclosure itself causes donations to rise, as the authors acknowledge (263). Donations are also not a direct measure of public trust. Their results further suggest that disclosure may not be associated with higher donations when the disclosed financial information does not reflect favorably on the organization (261). The data reflect Charity Navigator

records from 2011, so they should not be treated as a description of current disclosure practices. For nonprofit managers, the practical takeaway is to make required financial documents easy to find, while ensuring that reports are accurate and accompanied by clear explanations of the organization's finances and programs.

Harris, Erica E., and Daniel Neely. 2021. "Determinants and Consequences of Nonprofit Transparency." *Journal of Accounting, Auditing & Finance* 36 (1): 195–220.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0148558X18814134>.

Harris and Neely examine organizational characteristics associated with nonprofit transparency and whether transparency is associated with future contributions. Using a sample of more than 14,000 nonprofits, they find that stronger governance, better financial performance, and more professional staff are associated with greater transparency. Greater transparency is also associated with higher future contributions (a measure that includes government grants as well as donations), and organizations with stronger performance to report gain an additional advantage in contributions. Transparency is measured by the Bronze, Silver, and Gold levels that GuideStar (now part of Candid) assigned according to how much information an organization added to its profile beyond the required Form 990 (197). The article was first published online in 2018 and appeared in the journal's 2021 issue; the analysis pairs Form 990 data from the 2012 NCCS Statistics of Income file with GuideStar transparency levels for the same period (which the authors refer to as 2012/2013 information), and the contribution tests use 2013/2014 contributions for a subsample of 6,309 organizations (202, 205).

The large, diverse sample allows the authors to examine patterns across many nonprofit organizations. They also use a two-stage selection model to account for organizations' choice to be transparent (205). However, the observational design means the associations do not establish that transparency causes increased contributions. Organizations that are already well managed or financially successful may both disclose more and attract more funding. In addition, GuideStar profile information is self-reported, and the authors note that organizations may present overly favorable information (214). The study does not directly measure public trust, so contributions should not be treated as evidence of increased trust. For nonprofit managers, the findings suggest that transparency works alongside organizational capacity and performance: managers should maintain useful public profiles, report performance accurately, and make

financial and program information accessible. They should also avoid assuming that disclosure alone can compensate for weak performance or governance.

McDowell, Evelyn A., Wei Li, and Pamela C. Smith. 2013. “An Experimental Examination of US Individual Donors’ Information Needs and Use.” *Financial Accountability & Management* 29 (3): 327–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/faam.12017>.

McDowell, Li, and Smith use an internet-based experiment to observe what information people look at when choosing between charities, and whether that information is reflected in how much they give. Thirty-six students at a Midwestern US university, all but one of them undergraduates, served as proxies for individual donors (333–34). Each divided \$10 among themselves and two real charities that fulfill wishes for children with life-threatening illnesses, while a computer program recorded which information pages they opened, in what order, and for how long (334). The charities were similar in size, but one spent less than 65 percent of its expenses on programs and the other about 90 percent (334–35). Most participants viewed each charity’s basic information first, then its program and mission, then its goals and outcomes; the efficiency ratios usually came later, if at all (335–36). Time spent on the program and mission pages and on the goals and outcomes pages was significantly correlated with the amounts given (340). By contrast, participants who viewed both charities’ efficiency ratios did not give significantly different amounts to the two, and viewing the ratios was not significantly correlated with how much they gave (340–43). The article does not report when the experiment was conducted.

The study’s strength is that it observes what participants looked at and what they gave, rather than relying on what donors say in surveys or inferring their preferences from organization-level data (328, 331). Its limits are substantial, and the authors acknowledge them: a small sample of students at one university, a choice between only two organizations, and no account of tax deductions (333, 344). The authors call their results preliminary and read the efficiency result as showing that donors tolerate differences in efficiency when a cause is seen as very worthy of support (329); because both charities served such a cause, the result may not extend to others. It also sits uneasily with the two large studies in this theme, which find the link between disclosure and giving strongest for organizations with strong financial results; the authors note that earlier research on efficiency and giving is similarly mixed (331–32). The results should not be interpreted to mean that financial information is unimportant to every donor. For

nonprofit managers, the findings suggest pairing financial reporting with clear explanations of mission, programs, and outcomes, which the authors recommend presenting in more detail (344).

FOR DISCUSSION

- 1.** How quickly could a donor find your most recent Form 990 on your own website?
- 2.** What does a donor learn about your mission, programs, and results before reaching your financial figures?
- 3.** Is your Candid profile current, and does it add anything beyond Form 990?

3. Measuring Transparency

Turning transparency into indicators an organization can score



These studies convert transparency into observable indicators and apply them to real organizations.

Cabedo and colleagues find the starkest gap in information about results, with no organization reporting the social impact of its projects, while Dethier, Delcourt, and Huybrechts find the weakest scores for information that lets readers verify what they are told.

Cabedo, J. David, Iluminada Fuertes-Fuertes, Amparo Maset-LLaudes, and José Miguel Tirado-Beltrán. 2018. “Improving and Measuring Transparency in NGOs: A Disclosure Index for Activities and Projects.” *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 28 (3): 329–48.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21298>.

Cabedo and colleagues develop an index for assessing how nongovernmental organizations disclose information about individual activities and projects. They distinguish three dimensions of project information (technical, financial, and what the authors call scope, which covers beneficiaries and social impact), then apply the index to the social reports published by 49 Spanish NGOs. One notable result is that none of the 49 organizations disclosed any information about the social impact of their projects beyond identifying who benefited (343). The article therefore highlights a gap between reporting that activities occurred and reporting what those activities achieved. The sample was drawn from members of the Spanish Development NGOs Coordinator (CONGDE), chosen because its members are among Spain’s largest NGOs, and the authors collected the data in 2015 from each organization’s most recent social report posted online, most of which covered 2014 (338).

The index also has limits. It relies on information that organizations publish voluntarily, so its results depend on the truthfulness of that information (345). In addition, project-level disclosure is only one part of an organization’s overall accountability. For nonprofit managers, the study suggests that reports should go beyond listing activities and expenditures. Organizations can also explain project goals, who was served, what outcomes were achieved, and how outcomes were assessed. Where quantitative impact data

are unavailable or unsuitable, managers should explain the methods and limitations of their evaluation rather than imply that activity counts alone demonstrate social impact.

Dethier, Fanny, Cécile Delcourt, and Benjamin Huybrechts. 2025. “Toward a Normative Approach of Nonprofit Organizations’ Transparency: Conceptualization and Index.” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 36 (5): 758–75.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-025-00761-z>.

Dethier, Delcourt, and Huybrechts argue that nonprofit transparency should be understood not only as a way to gain organizational benefits but also as a responsibility arising from nonprofits’ public-interest role. Building on a systematic literature review, they define three dimensions of transparency: completeness, accessibility, and inferability. They then develop an index and assess it through a content analysis of 432 nonprofit websites in Belgium. In this framework, inferability concerns whether users can determine whether disclosed information is accurate; it is distinct from accessibility, which concerns whether the intended audience can find and understand the information. Applied to those websites, the index showed inferability to be the weakest dimension, with an average score of 0.09 on a scale of 0 to 1, compared with 0.58 for accessibility and 0.37 for completeness (768–71). The literature review covers articles published between 2010 and 2022 (762), but the article does not report when the websites were coded.

The framework’s main strength is its attention to the quality and usefulness of information, rather than disclosure volume alone. The authors also acknowledge that the index is most feasible for nonprofits with sufficient staff and resources. Because the empirical analysis examines websites in Belgium, its indicators may not transfer directly to every legal and organizational context, including the United States. For nonprofit managers, the practical lesson is to make disclosures complete, accessible, and verifiable. Organizations should provide context, explain methods and definitions, and make it possible for readers to check claims against supporting evidence. They should also consider resource constraints when deciding how to implement more extensive reporting practices.

FOR DISCUSSION

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- 1.** Where would you score lowest: finding information, completeness, or verification?
 - 2.** Can a reader check your impact claims against a source, a stated method, or an outside evaluation?
 - 3.** Which one indicator could you improve before your next annual report?

4. The Regulatory Baseline

How Form 990 came to require what it does



Form 990 is the starting point for nonprofit disclosure in the United States. This study shows that the form’s contents reflect choices made in a contested rulemaking process, which is a reason to treat it as a minimum rather than a complete account of an organization.

Katz, Juniper, Todd L. Ely, and Thad D. Calabrese. 2025. “Who Determines Where the Sun Shines: Nonprofit Sector Stakeholders and the IRS Form 990 Redesign.” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 54 (4): 981–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640251332892>.

Katz, Ely, and Calabrese examine stakeholder participation in the federal rulemaking process that produced the 2007 redesign of IRS Form 990. They analyze the 459 public comment submissions made during the redesign, which they coded into 5,277 discrete comments (984), to identify which groups participated and what priorities they expressed. Their findings emphasize that the nonprofit reporting framework was shaped by a diverse set of stakeholders, including for-profit firms and trade associations, and that the redesign produced selective transparency, expanding disclosure of governance, compensation, and professional fundraising while leaving organizations that file group returns relatively opaque (993–94). The authors also discuss the IRS’s removal of the proposed spending and fundraising ratios from Part I of the draft form after it received 148 comments on the topic, 115 of which opposed the ratios (992–93). The evidence is based on comments associated with the 2007 revision, not on a study of current nonprofit managers’ reporting behavior.

A notable strength of the article is its explanation of how disclosure requirements emerge from competing interests and regulatory decisions. Its focus on a historical rulemaking process means it is not a comprehensive guide to every current Form 990 requirement, and it does not directly measure public trust or how the public uses the form. For nonprofit managers, the main lesson is to distinguish legal compliance from broader accountability. Form 990 is a baseline, not necessarily a complete explanation of an organization’s mission, activities, or results. Managers should understand required disclosures and

consider what additional information stakeholders need, while recognizing that reporting rules are shaped by political and institutional processes.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do your stakeholders need to know that your Form 990 does not tell them?
2. Where do you publish that information, and who keeps it current?
3. How would you explain your program spending ratio to a donor who asks about it?

Lessons Across the Studies

Read together, the studies point to six practical lessons for nonprofit managers and boards.

Make financial information easy to find, then go beyond it. Posting Form 990 on your own website, and adding information beyond Form 990 to public profiles such as GuideStar, are both associated with higher contributions, especially for organizations with strong results to report (Blouin, Lee, and Erickson 2018; Harris and Neely 2021). Give readers the context they need to interpret the figures.

Report results, not just activities and spending. Describe programs and their outcomes in plain language (Cabedo et al. 2018; Yang and Northcott 2019). In one small experiment, most participants looked at what charities did and aimed to achieve before looking at their financial figures (McDowell, Li, and Smith 2013).

Go beyond the public report for key stakeholders. Charity managers report that direct, tailored communication builds trust that published reports alone cannot (Hyndman and McConville 2018).

Make claims verifiable. Cite sources, explain methods, and break figures down so that readers can check them (Dethier, Delcourt, and Huybrechts 2025).

Treat Form 990 as a floor. Its contents reflect regulatory choices, not a complete account of an organization (Katz, Ely, and Calabrese 2025).

Keep the limits of the evidence in view. Disclosure is associated with higher donations and contributions, but none of these studies shows that disclosure causes trust.

About This Report

Agard Research Associates Inc. is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research institute based in New Jersey. This workshop resource neither supports nor opposes any political party, candidate, or piece of legislation. It summarizes and evaluates published, peer-reviewed research, and it identifies the setting and data period of each study so that readers can judge how far its findings apply. Citations follow the American Political Science Association's *Style Manual for Political Science* (Revised 2018 Edition).

This resource provides general information only and does not constitute legal advice. Statements about each study reflect the article as published; the data periods are given in the table in “The Studies at a Glance.”

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Contact: <https://www.agardresearchassociates.org/contact-us>

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