



Nonprofit Transparency and Public Trust

For nonprofit managers and board members

Agard Research Associates Inc.

Workshop · October 2026



Today's workshop



THEME 01

Accountability in practice

How managers try to build trust through reporting and direct contact.



THEME 02

Disclosure and giving

What US studies of nonprofits and donors show about giving.



THEME 03

Measuring transparency

Turning disclosure into indicators you can score.



THEME 04

The regulatory baseline

How Form 990 came to require what it does.

Each theme closes with questions for discussion.

The evidence base at a glance



8

Peer-reviewed studies

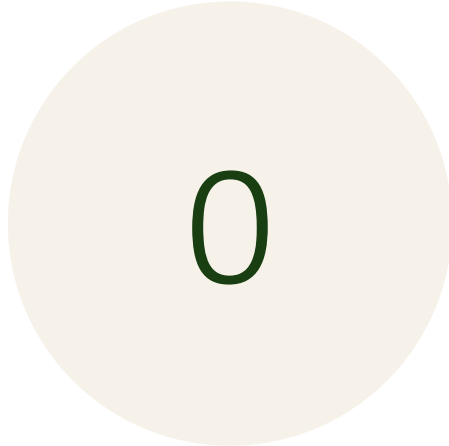
Published from 2013 to 2025 in accounting, marketing, and nonprofit research journals.



5

Countries

The United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Spain, and Belgium.



0

Direct measures of trust

No study measures public trust itself. The large US studies use donations and contributions instead.

Sources: the eight studies listed on slide 23. Full annotations are in the accompanying bibliography.

Read the evidence with its limits in mind

None of these studies measures public trust directly.

The lessons in this workshop describe associations and practices, not proven causes.

1

Large US studies link transparency to donations and contributions, which are related to trust but are not the same thing.

2

Their designs show association, not cause. The link could also run the other way: organizations that raise more may be the ones that choose to disclose.

3

The one experiment observes how 36 university students used information when dividing \$10 among themselves and two charities. Its authors call the results preliminary.

4

Interview and case studies show how managers and staff think about accountability, not how the public responds.

Sources: Blouin, Lee, and Erickson 2018, 263; Harris and Neely 2021, 205; Hyndman and McConville 2018, 230; McDowell, Li, and Smith 2013, 329, 333–34; Yang and Northcott 2019, 1702.

THEME 1

Accountability in practice

How charity managers use reports and direct communication to build trust.

Hyndman and McConville (2018)

Yang and Northcott (2019)



Necessary, but not sufficient



WHAT THEY STUDIED

Nineteen interviews with 26 participants responsible for reporting at large UK fundraising charities.



WHAT THEY FOUND

Managers pair public reports with direct, tailored communication. Accountability and trust can reinforce each other in a “virtuous circle.”



WHAT IT CANNOT TELL US

These are managers’ views. The study does not measure trust, and the charities are large.



I think there has to be that fundamental trust, and if that trust is affected in any way whatsoever it undermines the fundraising which is our lifeblood.

Charity manager, interview I18
(Hyndman and McConville 2018, 230)

Source: Hyndman and McConville 2018, 228, 230, 232–33, 235–36.

Make results meaningful to the public



WHAT THEY STUDIED

Two large New Zealand charities, drawing on 27 interviews conducted from 2012 to 2014 and the charities' own reports.



WHAT THEY FOUND

Staff went beyond the regulator's financial requirements, sharing outcomes through plain language, beneficiary stories, newsletters, and direct contact.



WHAT IT CANNOT TELL US

The data came from a broader study, and the interview guide included no questions specifically about public trust.



[People] do not know what financial information, outputs and outcomes are. We need to use simple words they can resonate with.

Community development worker, Charity B
(Yang and Northcott 2019, 1695)

Source: Yang and Northcott 2019, 1689–97, 1702.

Discussion: accountability in practice

Think about one stakeholder group your organization depends on.



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?

Sources: Hyndman and McConville 2018; Yang and Northcott 2019.

THEME 2

Disclosure and giving

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

Blouin, Lee, and Erickson (2018)

Harris and Neely (2021)

McDowell, Li, and Smith (2013)



Posting Form 990 is linked to giving



WHAT THEY STUDIED

Nonprofits drawn from those rated by Charity Navigator in 2011, comparing those that posted Form 990 on their own websites with those that did not.



WHAT THEY FOUND

Online posting was strongly associated with higher donations, especially when program spending compared well with the sector average.



WHAT IT CANNOT TELL US

The results are correlational, as the authors note, and donations are not the same as trust.

NONPROFITS STUDIED

3,217

Charity Navigator records from 2011. Disclosure without good news may not be associated with higher giving.

Source: Blouin, Lee, and Erickson 2018, 257, 261, 263.

Transparency and future contributions

14,217

NONPROFITS STUDIED

Form 990 data from 2012, paired with GuideStar transparency levels.

16%

WENT BEYOND FORM 990

About one in six added information to their GuideStar profile beyond the required Form 990.

6,309

IN CONTRIBUTION TESTS

Greater transparency was associated with higher contributions a year later, most of all for strong performers.

The authors controlled for self-selection, but the design remains correlational, and profile information is self-reported.

Source: Harris and Neely 2021, 195, 197, 202, 205, 214.

What participants looked at, and what their gifts reflected

STAGE 1: WHAT THEY LOOKED AT

1

Basic information

First for 34 of 36 participants (Organization A) and 24 of 36 (Organization B).

2

Program and mission

Second for 31 of 36 (A) and 22 of 36 (B).

3

Goals and outcomes

Third for 27 of 36 (A) and 20 of 36 (B).

Efficiency ratios usually came later, if at all: 20 of 36 participants opened Organization A's program ratio.

STAGE 2: WHAT THEIR GIFTS REFLECTED

Nonfinancial information

Time spent on the program and mission and the goals and outcomes pages was significantly correlated with the amounts given to both organizations.

Efficiency ratios

The 19 participants who viewed both program ratios gave, on average, \$2.51 to the charity with the lower ratio and \$2.29 to the one with the higher ratio. The difference was not significant.

What it cannot tell us: the participants were 36 students at one Midwestern university, each dividing \$10 among themselves and two charities with the same mission, and the authors call the results preliminary.

Source: McDowell, Li, and Smith 2013, 329, 333–36, 340–44.

Discussion: disclosure and giving

Look at your organization the way a prospective donor would.



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?

Sources: Blouin, Lee, and Erickson 2018; Harris and Neely 2021; McDowell, Li, and Smith 2013.

THEME 3

Measuring transparency

Turning transparency into indicators an organization can score.

Cabedo et al. (2018)

Dethier, Delcourt, and Huybrechts (2025)



Activities are partly reported; impact is not



WHAT THEY STUDIED

An 11-item index of project disclosure, covering technical, financial, and scope (beneficiary and impact) information, applied to the social reports of 49 Spanish NGOs.



WHAT THEY FOUND

None of the organizations reported the social impact of their projects, and many gave no information about who benefited.



WHAT IT CANNOT TELL US

The index relies on what organizations choose to publish, and the sample is drawn from large Spanish NGOs.

SOCIAL IMPACT REPORTING

0 of 49

NGOs in the sample disclosed information about the social impact of their projects.

Source: Cabedo et al. 2018, 336, 338–40, 342–43, 345.

Easy to reach, hard to verify



ACCESSIBILITY

Can the intended audience find and understand the information?

COMPLETENESS

Does the website give a full account, including financial information?

INFERABILITY

Can readers check that the information is accurate?

Source: Dethier, Delcourt, and Huybrechts 2025, 765–71.

Discussion: measuring transparency

Imagine an outside reviewer scoring your website tomorrow.



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?

Sources: Cabedo et al. 2018; Dethier, Delcourt, and Huybrechts 2025.

THEME 4

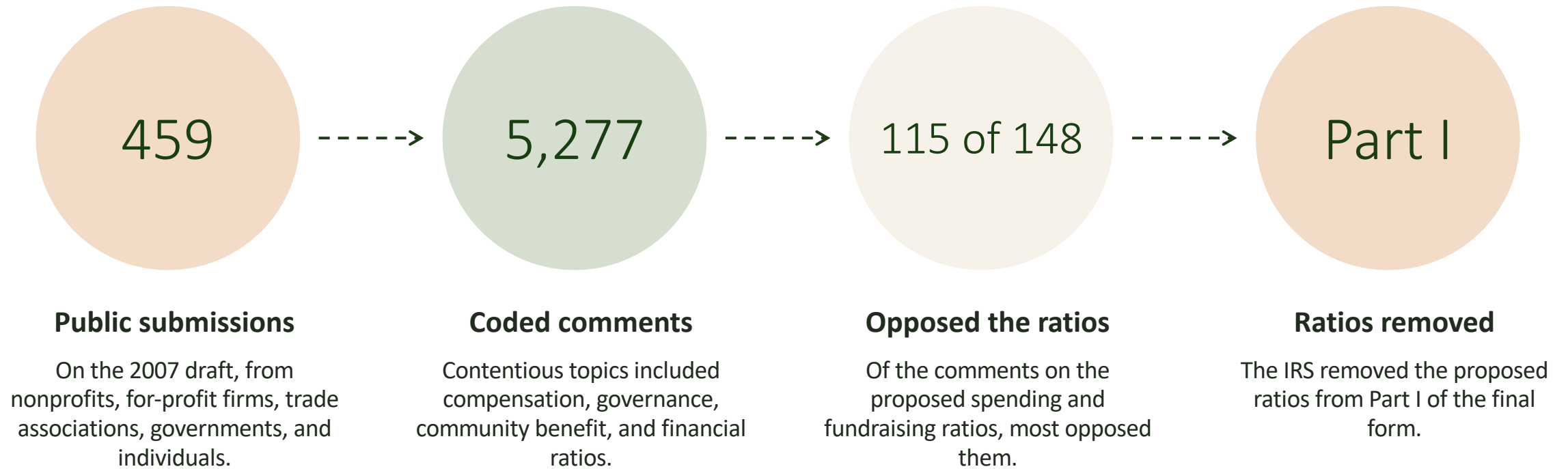
The regulatory baseline

How Form 990 came to require what it does.

Katz, Ely, and Calabrese (2025)



Form 990 reflects negotiated choices



Treat Form 990 as a floor, not a complete account of your organization.

Source: Katz, Ely, and Calabrese 2025, 983–85, 987, 992–93.

Discussion: the regulatory baseline

Form 990 tells the public a great deal, but not everything.



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?

Sources: Blouin, Lee, and Erickson 2018; Katz, Ely, and Calabrese 2025; McDowell, Li, and Smith 2013.

Lessons across the studies

1

Make financial information easy to find, then explain it.

Post Form 990 on your website, give donors context, and add more to public profiles.

Blouin, Lee, and Erickson 2018, 261–62, 264; Harris and Neely 2021, 214.

2

Report results, not just activities and spending.

Describe programs and outcomes in plain language. Most participants in one experiment viewed them before financial figures.

Cabedo et al. 2018, 343; McDowell, Li, and Smith 2013, 335–36; Yang and Northcott 2019, 1694–97.

3

Make claims verifiable.

Cite sources, explain methods, and break figures down so readers can check them.

Dethier, Delcourt, and Huybrechts 2025, 765–66, 771.

4

Talk directly with key stakeholders.

Managers report that tailored, direct communication builds deeper trust than published reports alone.

Hyndman and McConville 2018, 235–36.

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

Activity: a quick transparency self-check

Can people find it?

- ☐ Our latest Form 990 is posted on our website.
- ☐ Our audited financial statements are available.
- ☐ Our Candid profile is current and complete.

Can people understand and check it?

- ☐ We describe outcomes in plain language.
- ☐ Our impact claims state their sources and methods.
- ☐ Our reports break figures down by program.



Mark each statement yes, partly, or no for your organization, then choose one item to work on first.

Sources: Blouin, Lee, and Erickson 2018; Dethier, Delcourt, and Huybrechts 2025; Harris and Neely 2021; Yang and Northcott 2019.

Sources

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.

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.

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.

Harris, Erica E., and Daniel Neely. 2021. “Determinants and Consequences of Nonprofit Transparency.” *Journal of Accounting, Auditing & Finance* 36 (1): 195–220.

Hyndman, Noel, and Danielle McConville. 2018. “Trust and Accountability in UK Charities: Exploring the Virtuous Circle.” *The British Accounting Review* 50 (2): 227–37.

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.

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.

Yang, Cherrie, and Deryl Northcott. 2019. “How Can the Public Trust Charities? The Role of Performance Accountability Reporting.” *Accounting & Finance* 59 (3): 1681–707.

DOIs and full annotations: *Nonprofit Transparency and Public Trust: An Annotated Bibliography for Nonprofit Leaders* (Agard Research Associates Inc., October 2026).



Transparency is where accountability begins,
not where it ends.

Publish what is required, explain what it means, and make it possible to check.

Agard Research Associates Inc. is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research institute in New Jersey.

This presentation accompanies ARA's October 2026 workshop resource, *Nonprofit Transparency and Public Trust: An Annotated Bibliography for Nonprofit Leaders*. It does not support or oppose any party, candidate, or legislation, and it is general information, not legal advice. Version 1.0, October 2026.

Nonprofit Transparency and Public Trust: For Nonprofit Managers and Board Members © 2026 by Agard Research Associates Inc. is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>