Steven Rathgeb Smith’s Reflections on Receiving the Arnova Distinguished Achievement Award

I am deeply honored and humbled by this distinguished Achievement Award. I am deeply grateful for the generous and wonderful introduction by Elizabeth and my selection by the award committee for this honor. And, I would like to express my appreciation for the support of ARNOVA president, Francie Ostrower, and ARNOVA’s new executive director, Shariq Siddiqui. I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the enduring support of my family including my wife Penny, my sister Nanette, my daughter Miranda, and my friends, David Fink and Phyllis Hyman who are here with me today.

This award has certainly prompted a lot of reflection on my part on my intellectual and personal journey in the last 40 years. After college, I worked in direct services in child welfare and then pursued a career as a social worker, eventually getting a master’s in social work. It was in my work in direct services that I initially became intrigued by the government-nonprofit nexus that has been the focus of my research interests throughout my career. I once worked for Catholic Charities of New York City in foster care services. The agency was almost entirely funded with public funds from the city of New York. Subsequently, I was on the board of a residential agency for the developmentally disabled in the Boston area which worked closely with the state on the deinstitutionalization process. I eventually received a doctoral degree in political science where my doctoral dissertation focused upon government contracting with nonprofit organizations. However, I did not think of myself as someone primarily interested in nonprofits and philanthropy, although my research at the time was strongly influenced by the research of scholars involved with ARNOVA’s predecessor organization, the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars or AVAS including Eleanor Brilliant, and previous award winners Felice Perlmutter and Lester Salamon. I was trained as a political scientist and my disciplinary interests centered on policy implementation, policy process, interest groups and community organizations. Indeed, I identified strongly with scholars in the 70s and 80s who had studied the policy implementation of the War on
Poverty and related federal initiatives which had relied heavily upon nonprofit organizations for their implementation.

So when I started teaching at Washington University in St. Louis and then Duke University, I did not regard myself as a nonprofit scholar per se but as a political scientist. My engagement with the world of nonprofit researchers started at a conference in Indianapolis in 1988 sponsored by the Independent Sector and the Center for Philanthropy at IUPUI. I still vividly recall a conversation with Jon Van Til, then editor of *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (NVSQ) and Bob Herman who had just been elected president of AVAS. Jon and Bob, as well as other attendees at the conference including Peter Dobkin Hall, Dwight Burlingame, Virginia Hodgkinson, and many others got me excited about the possibilities of becoming part of the ARNOVA community. I then started to participate in the annual ARNOVA meetings as well as the spring research conference sponsored at that time by the Independent Sector. The inter-disciplinary aspect of ARNOVA and the interest of many ARNOVA scholars in the relationship between theory, empirical research, and practice including the implications of scholarship on the nonprofit sector on public policy was of special attraction to me. The smaller scale of the ARNOVA conference, compared with the large disciplinary conferences, was also compelling as well as the opportunity to participate in a conference where most of my fellow attendees were interested in a range of similar issues.

Thus during the 1990s, I became increasingly engaged with ARNOVA and its membership including correspondence with other members and occasional visits to their host institutions. I still vividly recall that one of my first overseas visits as a much younger scholar of nonprofit organizations was to London where I included a meeting with Margaret Harris at the London School of Economics. But ARNOVA became a central part of my scholarship and my professional life when I was appointed as editor of *NVSQ* in 1996 at the annual meeting in New York City. Even before I was officially editor in 1998, I became part of the broader ARNOVA family that supported me and the journal: Susan Ostrander, Susan
Chambre, Carl Milofsky, Eleanor Brown, Joe Galaskiewicz, Kirsten Gronbjerg, David Hammack, Elizabeth Boris, Putnam Barber, and Judith Saidel to name just a few. Without their ongoing feedback and input, I simply would not have been able to achieve my goals as an editor. I must say we also had a lot of fun along the way with many long and lively dinners, early morning breakfasts, conference calls, and social and professional meetings.

But as editor of *NVSQ*, I was also immediately connected in new and different ways to the ARNOVA membership. Indeed, I would not have been able to effectively do my job as editor without the willingness of you, the membership, to undertake reviews, submit and revise your papers, identify promising papers, and publicize the journal. The editor’s job also prompted concerted attention to the breadth of topics that fell within ARNOVA’s scope and to the strong intellectual currents that often link scholars across the disciplinary divide. The editor’s post also spurred my ongoing interest in the place of nonprofit scholarship within universities and the relationship between nonprofit scholarship and the disciplines.

From my perch as editor, I was also in the middle of ARNOVA’s transformation as an association. When I initially became a member of ARNOVA, it was an entirely voluntary association. By the time I became an editor, ARNOVA had a full-time executive director and 3 full-time staff; membership had grown substantially; and the association now had several hundred thousands of dollars in foundation grants. The 1990s and 2000s were a time of growth and opportunity in the profession with new centers on nonprofit management established, many new university based programs on nonprofit management and philanthropy, new academic journals in the US and abroad focused on nonprofits and philanthropy, and new intermediary associations including consulting firms and other academic associations. Overall, a dramatic upwelling has occurred in research on the theoretical and empirical dimensions of nonprofits and their work. Reflecting this growth, ARNOVA’s membership grew from under 300 in the early 1990s to over 1200 by 2010. Arguably, the number of faculty positions in fields related to nonprofits and
philanthropy is at an all-time high. Nonprofit scholarship is also recognized as a legitimate field of research inquiry.

Yet, this growth and development in the field of nonprofit and philanthropic studies brings a new set of opportunities and challenges for ARNOVA as an association and the field. Growth in the association means that the conference is larger and the networks between members have changed. Member interests are more diverse and many members now strongly identify with other members in their own research area of interest such as social enterprise or nonprofit law. Thus, the association needs to be able to provide the familiarity and deep connection characteristic of a smaller association within the context of a large association while at the same time building a commitment to a larger association that needs member dues to support the infrastructure of the association. A younger generation of scholars has also embraced social media that requires innovation in strategy in terms of communicating with members and the wider academic and practitioner community. The growing interest in open source publishing is changing the business model of journals and associations dependent upon their royalty income. And the proliferation of on-line journals creates new expectations from members on the responsiveness of associations to their members.

The evolution of the field and ARNOVA also reflects the overall growth of nonprofit organizations in the US. The doubling of the number of nonprofit organizations since the mid-1990s has combined with a general interest in accountability and performance in public, nonprofit and for-firms to create a new set of policy and practice issues for scholars, policymakers, and nonprofit staff and volunteers including: the evaluation of outcomes, social innovation, social enterprise, and capacity building and infrastructure support. Widespread interest exists in hybrid models of nonprofit and for-profit organizations such as social impact bonds, B Corporations, Lc3s, Community Interest Companies. Social enterprises such as the Billings Forge Community Works, a highly innovative nonprofit here in Hartford that operates a restaurant and downtown café employing disadvantaged youth and adults have captured the attention of
funders and policymakers interested in new approaches to solving social problems. Yet these issues raise important questions about theory, practice, and policy that need tackling by scholars.

One of the previous winners of this distinguished award is Burton Weisbrod who made many pioneering contributions to our understanding of nonprofit organizations. He proposed a highly creative and important model of why nonprofits exist. But he was also keenly interested in policy and practice and as I was recently mentioning to a colleague, his insights on nursing homes and differences between nonprofits and for-profits remains quite relevant 20 years later.

Like Burt, I have also been interested connecting theory and practice in my own research. In ARNOVA, I found a home for this interest. But ARNOVA also is represented in the longstanding interests of many members in community organizations, citizen participation, and democracy as exemplified in one of the other previous award winners, Jon Van Til. As I have written in recent years, I remain especially interested in the role of nonprofit organizations in citizen participation and engagement as well as the relationship of nonprofits and their communities. Further, I have argued for more attention by scholars and policymakers to citizen engagement and the contributions of nonprofits to their communities within the context of performance management for nonprofits and public agencies.

In sum, the warmth and openness of ARNOVA as an association has provided me with an entirely new set of professional and personal networks that have enriched my research, led to lifelong friendships, and engaged me with associational leadership and governance. I am deeply honored by this award and I am very grateful for the support and trust that you have shown me over the years.

Thank you very much.

Steven Rathgeb Smith

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