



An Open Letter to Prospective Nonprofit Founders:

Lessons from My Journey

as founder of First Generation College Bound

Dear Prospective Nonprofit Founder:

As a nonprofit founder with more than 31 years of experience, I know the challenges faced and sacrifices required to start and sustain a nonprofit. I have no doubt that if you are serious about starting a nonprofit, you have the empathy, passion, and commitment it will take to help those in need.

Due to learning about the 20-year commitment of medical institutions to make sure a new drug or procedure is effective, versus the 4- to 6-year life span of public education innovations, I question the commitment of governments and school systems to our students, especially those of poverty. As a result, when I founded FGCB, I committed to spend a minimum of 20 years coaching students of poverty to attend college and graduate. I am blessed today to witness the results of FGCB's vision and mission.

As a nonprofit founder, I have learned that you cannot achieve your vision and mission alone. Developing a well-trained and motivated staff - what we call a "human resource infrastructure" - is a key foundation of any business. It provides the support that holds the business together and helps keep its shape.

This is generally the most costly part of any nonprofit. You may have been told about the availability of funding from government, foundations, and donors, but just because you've built a nonprofit doesn't mean that getting the funds to run it will be easy. Many founders face disappointment when the expected funding they've been told is available isn't forthcoming.

You will need support for this journey. I have been blessed to have the support of my wife, Pat, who keeps me encouraged, and a committed Board of Directors who continue to provide advice, encouragement, and support as needed during my FGCB journey.

You may need to volunteer your time in your nonprofit for several years to confirm the need for your vision and mission before funding is available to you. I did this for years while teaching full-time in the Howard County Public Schools and coaching part-time women's cross country and track at Catholic University of America. I also had responsibilities as a husband and father.

Having the income from two jobs enabled me to volunteer and to seek "the right funding," not any funding to sustain the organization. We couldn't chase just any dollars because we had a clear mission and were looking for funders who believed in the mission not to be distracted.

It is important you know for-profit businesses are transactional. As a result, they have a better chance of getting funding from a bank, government, or private investors because they can demonstrate a return on investment and how they will pay their bills beyond the approved funding.

The leaders of nonprofit organizations, especially grassroots nonprofits, may have the passion, knowledge, and commitment to help people in need, and may even be able to demonstrate results, but still be funding-challenged.

I believe this is because our work is transformative, not transactional, and due to funder distrust. Banks, investors, foundations, and government are not as willing to award funds to nonprofits because we cannot demonstrate that we have the funds to sustain the organization regardless of our success in addressing community or social needs.

Unlike a for-profit business selling goods and services, nonprofits cannot charge the real cost or fee for services, when we are serving people experiencing poverty. The people we serve cannot afford it. Most nonprofits are dependent on government and foundation funding, neither of which comes with any promise of long-term funding regardless of the success you may be having or the lives you may be changing.

For example, in Prince Georges County, Maryland there are more than 4,000 nonprofits seeking funding. Many are hoping to receive government funding, but the sheer number of organizations seeking the same funding poses a challenge for government funders with budget limitations.

Nonprofit organizations seeking funding from government, foundations, businesses, and individual donors should be able to answer the following questions of themselves:

- » Is the organization committed to its vision for the long-term?
- » If committed for the long-term, does the organization have a human resource infrastructure to sustain the mission or are they striving to put the human resource structure in place?

For nonprofits, being able to answer these questions and demonstrating your long-term commitment are critical to sustaining the organization and strengthens your ask, when seeking funding. It is important to focus on seeking funders and donors willing to support the transformative nature of your work.

Champions who believe in your work and are committed to your mission also play an important role. FGCB has been slowly recruiting champions and they are helping to raise funds to sustain our work. The committed giver who desires to support a nonprofit's work must have the same passion and belief in the mission as you do. My thirty-plus years of experience have shown me that they are out there. However, you must maintain your commitment to your mission and stay grounded in your impact as you seek them.

Training and ongoing leadership and professional development will also be important to the success of your nonprofit. Your passion alone won't make you successful. Seek training from those who understand the organizational development needs of nonprofits. There is no doubt that FGCB benefited from the training we received from the Ready to Work Capacity Building Program run by Venture Philanthropy Partners in partnership with Fair Chance.

The trainings had a tremendous impact on the way we view human resources. This is one of the most critical areas of need when starting a nonprofit beyond our commitment and passion to help others. There is no doubt if you are striving to start and sustain a nonprofit, you must understand the importance of raising funds for a human resources infrastructure.

I close by asking: Are you sure you want to start a nonprofit? The journey can be long and filled with challenges, but if you are committed to creating a transformative organization that changes lives, remember these final thoughts.

- » **Know your WHY.** Why do you want to start a nonprofit? Why is your mission and work important or even critical to those you serve? It's also important to have clarity on these questions when you are seeking funds from government, foundations, corporations, and donors.
- » **Self-care and quality of life are important as you strive to help others.** Don't forget to take care of yourself and those around you who are supporting you on your nonprofit journey.

Kind Regards,



Joseph Fisher
Founder & CEO



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