

How to Approach Nonprofit Program Expansion Without Losing Focus

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When I started [BelieveNBooks](#) in 2021, the goal was simple: Give unused books a second life in the hands of children who needed them. Our first drive at [Canterbury School](#) in Fort Myers, Florida, collected more than 3,000 books for [Guadalupe Center](#), an education nonprofit in Immokalee, Florida.

As we grew, I learned that more books did not always meet the need. That raised a question about nonprofit program expansion: When should we expand, and when should we improve what we already do?

Evaluate the Need and Capacity for Nonprofit Program Expansion

When you run a nonprofit, new ideas are everywhere. An array of nonprofits share their need for your support. A funder sponsors a program. A volunteer exposes you to new possibilities. During this time of continued learning, I often felt a surge of motivation to immediately start building — to turn every idea into an initiative before thinking twice about what problem it would solve.

Growth can lead to [mission creep](#), the idea of slowly adding new programs beyond a

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reliable student ambassador or commitment to making it an annual effort, would the impact justify building the infrastructure?

Sometimes the barrier is not a lack of books or ideas, but [the infrastructure needed to deliver them](#). When a volunteer became unavailable after offering to deliver books in Philadelphia with us, I was forced to dig deeper into transportation options through local nonprofit partners and institutions. This challenge led me to resurrect an idea I'd had long ago to recruit volunteer drivers in the city. If successful, the effort could help us reach more recipients.

Moreover, when we struggled to find high school volunteers in Florida, we did not abandon the logistics that made our work possible. Instead, we were fortunate to gain a dedicated network of Florida Gulf Coast University undergraduates enrolled in service-learning courses. These leaders continue to help with storage, inventory, sorting and deliveries, enabling our headquarters to continue operating.

Now, before expanding an initiative, I ask myself:

- What problem are we actually solving?
- Can we execute the solution well?
- When does added volume cause diminishing returns?

These questions keep us grounded and aligned with our mission.

## Refine Existing Programs Before Expanding

There was something wonderfully straightforward about hosting book drives. Everyone understood the why behind the work: fostering intellectual curiosity, school readiness and expanded horizons. Schools would approve the project, set up fliers and donation boxes, and collect books. Our volunteer team would sort books by age before boxing and delivering them to recipient organizations.

Partner feedback helped us identify two ways to improve the program without starting over.

### 1. Address Barriers Beyond Access

As BelieveNBooks grew, the multifaceted nature of the literacy gap became evident. At my one-year check-in with Guadalupe Center, I learned that our youngest book recipients faced a barrier we had not accounted for.

Some families needed support reading English-language books aloud at home. A child might own the book and still need someone to bring the story to life. That feedback led us to create PageTurner, pairing kits of physical books with free corresponding YouTube read-aloud videos. The program reached more than 3,000 children.

### 2. Reconsider How Much Is Enough

Access and volume are different. Initially, we wanted to maximize the number of books each child received. But when we looked more closely at the experience of our youngest readers, we realized that a smaller and more manageable distribution may better allow young children to revisit and enjoy their books. This insight inspired the My Very Own Book program, allowing us to expand book and video pairs to 6,500 children enrolled in Florida's voluntary prekindergarten program this fall.

These experiences now guide how I evaluate program success. Before adding something new, I ask whether we can better meet children's needs by adapting what we already offer.

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Strengthening an existing program is not always enough. Sometimes, serving the mission means changing how we deliver it. As I considered expanding BelieveNBooks internationally, I recognized the logistical constraints of moving donated books across borders: high prices, small volumes shipped and trouble reaching rural communities.

Rather than simply asking where we could send more donated books, I began wondering what stories children on other continents needed most. Conversations with community leaders pointed to a need for stories introducing African youth to relatable women role models and career possibilities. BelieveNBooks responded by distributing reading material focused on African women trailblazers. The approach changed, but we were still using books to expand children's horizons.

## Grow Without Losing Your Center

Much of my learning has happened through board meetings, partner feedback, volunteer turnover, transportation problems, failed recruitment efforts and programs that needed restructuring. Sometimes my takeaway is to keep going. Other times it is to scale back, pivot entirely or pause altogether.

For me, nonprofit program expansion now starts with understanding the need, not choosing the next initiative. Sometimes that means refining what we already offer, strengthening the infrastructure behind it or developing a different model. The goal is not simply to do more, but to choose the approach that serves the mission and that we can sustain.

*The preceding content was provided by a contributor unaffiliated with NonProfit PRO. The views expressed within may not directly reflect the thoughts or opinions of the staff of NonProfit PRO.*



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Natasha Agarwal is the founder and CEO of [BelieveNBooks](#), a nonprofit working to expand children's literacy across the United States and Africa. Under Natasha's leadership, BelieveNBooks has distributed more than 250,000 books through partnerships with schools, libraries, shelters and nonprofits, as well as launched programs ranging from community book drives to read-aloud programs to "[Tales of African Women Trailblazers](#)," expanding access to reading resources and diverse representation for 50,000 children. Natasha is a sophomore at the [University of Pennsylvania](#) with interests in law, policy, AI and community development.

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