

Volunteer Administrators' Perceptions of the Importance of and their Current Levels of Competence with Selected Volunteer Management Competencies

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The volunteer administration profession has evolved as contemporary society continues to change. This evolutionary growth has required volunteer administrators to develop new management strategies to meet the current and emerging community needs that may be addressed through volunteerism. As the volunteer administration profession has evolved, so have the interests of managers of volunteers in ensuring that they have the necessary personnel management and technical skills to be successful in their positions (Fisher & Cole, 1993).

Since the early 1970s, authors, researchers, and practitioners have proposed numerous volunteer management models that address competencies necessary for managers to successfully implement and administer volunteer programs. The earliest volunteer management literature presented either highly conceptual or very pragmatic perspectives regarding the components of managing volunteers. Boyce (1971) presented one of the very first comprehensive models of volunteer management that remains a basis for the profession today. His systematic I.S.O.T.U.R.E. approach to volunteer leader development suggested seven subcategories inherent in volunteer management: identification, selection, orientation, training, utilization, recognition, and evaluation.

Using Boyce's conceptual model more than two decades later, Safrit, Smith and Cutler (1994) developed B.L.A.S.T.: Building Leadership and Skills Together, a volunteer management curriculum targeted toward 4-H Youth Development professionals.

Other authors recognized that volunteer management approaches had to expand beyond a focus upon the individual volunteer to address organizational systems as well. Developing a volunteer management model based on best practices, Wilson (1976) focused upon the critical practical roles of salaried managers of volunteers, including motivating volunteers; establishing a positive organizational climate for volunteer involvement; planning and evaluating volunteer programs; developing volunteer job descriptions; recruiting, interviewing and placing volunteers; and effective communications. Another pragmatic approach, proposed by MacKenzie and Moore (1993), identified fundamental management principles and practices formatted into worksheets to assist the day-to-day manager of volunteers.

Ellis (1981) identified components of volunteer management by proposing professional, administrative approaches to volunteer management. Navarre (1989) approached volunteer management from a staff manage-

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ment focus in grassroots volunteer organizations. Navarre's focus included the importance of having written job descriptions; recruiting, interviewing, orienting, and training new volunteers; and volunteer supervision, evaluation, and motivation. Approaching volunteer management in a very similar manner, Stepputat (1995) identified ten overarching categories that were necessary for successful volunteer management, including recruitment; screening; orientation and training; placement; supervision and evaluation; recognition; retention; record keeping; evaluation; and advocacy and education. Brudney (1990) identified practical components for public agencies to implement in order to mobilize volunteers for public service in communities.

From a purely conceptual approach, several authors have developed volunteer management models within the context of the United States Cooperative Extension System. Kwarteng, Smith and Miller (1988) identified eight conceptual components to volunteer administration: planning volunteer programs; clarifying volunteer tasks; and the recruitment, orientation, training, support, maintenance, recognition and evaluation of actual volunteers. Penrod's (1991) L.O.O.P. model suggested the following conceptual components of volunteer management: locating and orientating volunteers, operating volunteer programs, and perpetuating volunteer involvement. Most recently, Culp, Deppe, Castillo, and Wells' (1998) G.E.M.S. model built upon and reorganized the earlier works of Penrod and Kwarteng et al. by organizing components of volunteer administration into four primary categories: Generating, Educating, Mobilizing, and Sustaining volunteers.

In recent years, researchers have increased their investigation of the level of importance and perceived competence with selected volunteer management components and sought to further clarify necessary core competencies. Harshfield (1995) investigated the perceived importance of selected volunteer management components in western U.S. schools, while King and Safrit (1998) did likewise for Ohio 4-H Youth Development agents. Collins (2001) conducted a similar study (using the

questionnaire developed by King and Safrit) to investigate Michigan 4-H Youth Development agents' perceptions of the importance of and competence with selected volunteer management components. Again based upon the same instrument, Hange, Seevers, and Van Leeuwen (2002) investigated the perceptions of 4-H agents across the United States regarding competence levels with selected volunteer management functions. Most recently, Boyd (2004) conducted a nationwide Delphi study to identify competencies required by Cooperative Extension professionals managing volunteers in the next decade.

While all of the previously identified volunteer management models and studies have contributed positively to the volunteer administration profession, rigorous research is needed in order to develop a holistic perspective of contemporary volunteer management not restricted to a single geographic region, or specific volunteer organization or program. Such applied research could serve as the foundation for developing a holistic, unifying model of contemporary volunteer management in a profession that continues to change rapidly even today.

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this descriptive research was to investigate contemporary volunteer administrators' perceptions of the importance of and their current level of competence with selected volunteer management competencies. The researchers used Safrit and Schmiesing's (2004) qualitative research as the basis for identifying 140 individual contemporary volunteer management competencies encompassing nine holistic components (i.e., constructs) of volunteer management organized into three overarching categories. The three categories and nine constructs include Category I: Personal Preparation (three constructs): 1. Personal and Professional Development, 2. Serving as an Internal Consultant, and 3. Program Planning; Category II: Volunteer Engagement (four constructs): 4. Recruitment, 5. Selection, 6. Orientation and Training, and 7. Coaching and Supervision; and Category III: Program Perpetuation (two constructs): 8. Recognition, and 9. Pro-

gram Evaluation, Impact and Accountability.

The population for the study was the 2,057 individual members of the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA) as of July 1, 2004. The population included 1,889 AVA members from the United States, 98 from Canada, and 70 from other countries. The researchers utilized a census and mailed survey to collect data. The survey was organized into two sections. Section I investigated respondents' perceptions of the importance of, and their current competence with, the 140 individual volunteer management competencies. Section II collected data describing respondents' selected personallogical traits including gender, age, race/ethnicity, highest level of formal education attained, years in current position, type of agency/organization in which the respondent works, and current status as a member of a local Directors Of Volunteers In Agencies (DOVIA) professional association.

The researchers piloted the survey with members of the South Carolina Association of Volunteer Administration (SC AVA) to establish the survey's internal consistency as an indicator of reliability. Resulting Cronbach alphas for individual constructs ranged from .73 to .93 for "importance," and .78 to .95 for "competence." Since all values were greater than .70, the researchers determined the survey to be reliable (Stevens, 1992).

The researchers submitted an application to the administrative office of AVA requesting the Association's approval of and support for the study, and the AVA director for marketing and membership supplied the researchers with pre-printed mailing labels for AVA members. The survey, along with a cover letter and self-addressed return envelope (that was postage prepaid for U.S. participants), was mailed to participants August 20 to 23, 2004, with a requested return date of September 1. On September 8, the AVA office manager e-mailed a personalized message to all members encouraging them to participate and respond by September 15. The e-mail resulted in 23 current members contacting the researchers indicating that they had not received a survey packet. (Of the 23, 14 had only recently joined AVA and had not been

included in the original mailing labels.) To facilitate these members' participation in the study, the researchers e-mailed the questionnaire to these individuals as a Word file attachment, requesting that they fax their completed questionnaire to the researchers by the final response deadline. The AVA office manager sent a second and final personalized e-mail reminder to all members on September 10.

As of September 15th, 538 completed questionnaires had been returned (including 14 returned by the U.S. Postal Service marked "undeliverable" and two that were indecipherable) resulting in 522 usable questionnaires and a final response rate of 26% (Wiseman, 2003). The researchers calculated appropriate correlation coefficients comparing responses from early and late respondents and found no statistical differences between the two groups. The researchers surveyed 150 randomly selected non-respondents to compare their responses with those received by the September 15 deadline (Linder & Wingenbach, 2002; Miller & Smith, 1983) and found no statistical differences among early respondents, on-time respondents, and non-respondents for either personallogical traits or the research variables. The researchers analyzed the data using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 12.0, calculating appropriate descriptive statistics to satisfy the research objectives.

FINDINGS

The typical respondent was a white (92%) female (88%) with a mean age of 49.0 years. She had a Bachelors degree (45%) and had been in her current position in a health or mental health organization (24%) for 6.9 years. (An additional 30% of respondents had a Masters degree.) Fifty-eight percent of respondents had been employed five years or less in their current position, while 55% of all respondents indicated they were current members of a local DOVIA professional organization.

Mean scores (Table 1) describing respondents' attitudes regarding the level of importance for the nine volunteer management constructs ranged from 3.31 ("Serving as an

internal consultant”) to 3.51 (for both “Recognition” and “Program planning”). Likewise, mean scores describing respondents’ perceptions of their current level of competence with the nine volunteer management constructs (Table 1) ranged from 2.90 (“Evaluation, impact and accountability”) to 3.30 (“Recognition”).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In regards to level of importance, respondents rated each of the nine volunteer management constructs as 3.31 or greater, indicating that the constructs are important in the daily management of volunteers. The nine constructs investigated in the study are comparable to the 14 certification categories identified by AVA (2004) for content of its Certified Volunteer Administrator (CVA) credentialing process as well as the volunteer management constructs identified by King and Safrit (1998); Collins (2001); Hange, Seevers, and VanLeeuwen (2002); and Boyd (2004.)

However, none of the nine constructs was rated by respondents greater than 3.30 in terms of current level of competence. This holistic finding in itself suggests a significant reality gap between “what is” (i.e., current competence) and “what should be” (i.e., level of importance) that provides a framework for professional development opportunities for AVA members. Historically, professional development opportunities and initiatives have been focused upon survival skills needed for individuals new to the field, largely resulting from the enormous and ongoing turnover in the profession. However, regardless of professional tenure or position longevity, continuing professional education programs for volunteer administrators should focus on the nine volunteer management constructs both individually and holistically. Too often, volunteer administration workshops and conferences, DOVIA meeting programs, certification and credentialing initiatives, and formal post-secondary courses are structured to focus upon one or more of the respective individual components while failing to provide a comprehensive, holistic fundamental understanding of the profession.

Four of the five highest rated volunteer management constructs for both level of importance and current level of competence (“Program planning” and “Recognition”: both $x = 3.51$, “Orientation and training”: $x = 3.49$, and “Recruitment”: $x = 3.45$) have each been traditional foundations of the volunteer management profession since its earliest days (Boyce, 1971; Ellis, 1981; Navarre, 1989; Wilson, 1976). These critical constructs are fundamental to the profession, and entail the core knowledge and skills necessary to plan for, locate, engage, and support individuals in meaningful volunteer roles. However, in today’s ever changing social and organizational climates, basic competence in these constructs alone is no longer adequate in creating sustained contemporary systems and communities of volunteers.

In terms of level of importance, the lowest rated construct of “Serving as an internal consultant” ($x = 3.31$) has been emphasized as an integral component of contemporary volunteer management only within the past

TABLE 1

Mean Scores Describing Volunteer Administrators’ Perceptions of the Importance of, and Their Current Level of Competence with, Nine Volunteer Management Constructs (N = 522)

Volunteer Management	Mean (s.d.) Construct	
	Level of Importance	Current Competence With
Personal Preparation		
Personal & professional development	3.48 (.38)	3.14 (.46)
Serving as an internal consultant	3.31 (.40)	2.98 (.48)
Program planning	3.51 (.35)	3.15 (.47)
Volunteer Engagement		
Recruitment	3.45 (.39)	3.08 (.49)
Selection	3.33 (.40)	3.06 (.49)
Orientation & training	3.49 (.42)	3.18 (.51)
Coaching & supervision	3.43 (.38)	3.08 (.47)
Program Perpetuation		
Recognition	3.51 (.33)	3.30 (.44)
Program evaluation, impact & accountability	3.35 (.42)	2.90 (.51)

several years. Bradner (1999) identified "Advocacy" and "Consulting" as new skills for volunteer administrators in the AVA publication, *Portrait of a Profession: Volunteer Administration*. The current AVA Web site (2004) identifies the core content of the current credentialing program for volunteer administrators to become Certified Volunteer Administrators based on an earlier 2004 Practice Analysis copyrighted by AVA. Included in the domain of Professional Principles are three sub-categories: Professional Ethics, Professional Development, and Advocacy. Included within the Advocacy category are specific competencies focused upon advocacy for the volunteer organization and volunteer-based programs.

The second-lowest rated construct of "Selection" ($x = 3.33$) has received increased scrutiny and attention in the past decade. Professionally, volunteer selection as a management component has moved steadily away from a traditional open-door acceptance approach to more highly structured targeted selection processes involving specific selection strategies (Loar, 1994; Patterson, Rypkema, & Tremper, 1994; Schmiesing & Henderson, 2000) and policy development (Graff, 2002). However, the authors suggest that with the ever increasing numbers of new volunteer programs and organizations targeted toward vulnerable populations (e.g., youth, the elderly, and uniquely-abled individuals), volunteer selection as a core competency will continue to evolve and increase in level of importance.

The researchers were not surprised that "Program evaluation, impact, and accountability" received the lowest mean score ($x = 2.90$) for current level of competence. In the past five years the profession of volunteer administration has placed enormous emphasis on the need and methods to evaluate program impacts upon organizational clientele served by volunteers (Rabiner, Scheffler, Koetse, Palermo, Ponzi, Burt, & Hampton, 2003; Rehnberg & DeSpain, 2003; Safrit & Merrill, 1998, 2000; Safrit, Schmiesing, King, Villard, & Wells, 2003; Singletary, Smith, & Hill, 2003). More than ever before in the history of formal volunteerism as well as the profession of volunteer administration,

there is a critical need (some would argue, mandate) for volunteer administrators to be competent in measuring the differences the programs they manage make in clientele's lives, and to communicate those differences to the clientele themselves, program staff and volunteers, organizational decision makers, funders, the general public and professional peers. Indeed, for a volunteer program to be merely assumed successful is no longer acceptable; to be documented successful yet silently effective in sharing a program's successes is no longer adequate. The continued success and existence of individual volunteer programs and their sponsoring agencies, as well as the continued growth and evolution of the volunteer administration profession, depends largely upon each individual volunteer administrator's competence in evaluating the impact of volunteer programs s/he manages, and being accountable for those impacts.

The construct which respondents rated the second lowest in terms of current competence was "Serving as an internal consultant" ($x = 2.98$). As early as 1976, Naylor suggested that "We need professionals, not mere technicians, people with wide and forward vision, to coordinate otherwise unrelated factors into a functioning administrative whole" (p. 48). Almost 20 years later, Stepputat (1995) recognized "... the critical need to increase the numbers of professional volunteer administrators who are able to serve as a link between the needs of an organization or agency and the skills and availability of the volunteers" (p. 158). Almost another decade later, the Association for Volunteer Administration (2004, September) still emphasizes emphatically the critical need for volunteer administrators not only to be adept at managing volunteers, but also to be recognized as advocates and internal resources for volunteer resource management within the overall sponsoring agency. The authors suggest that the single most critical conclusion resulting from this study is the discerned need for effective and focused system-wide professional development initiatives to assist volunteer administrators, both tenured and new to the profession, in understanding, embracing, and

modeling this critical core competency.

Based upon the current study, the researchers have been contacted by leaders of DOVIA groups in the United States, Canada, and Australia requesting to replicate the study with the DOVIA's entire membership, the majority of which are not currently members of AVA. The expanded database would allow the researchers to compare and contrast this study's data with that collected from additional managers of volunteers in diverse cultural contexts. The resulting findings would provide an even stronger and more valid snapshot of the requisite volunteer management competencies required to effectively and efficiently identify, select, support and sustain volunteers in contemporary programs and organizations around the world. The ultimate goal is not merely a unifying model for contemporary volunteer administration, but rather a rededication to the fundamental knowledge, attitudes, skills and aspirations that comprise our profession.

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