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Mystifying Data: Can America's Promise Get Away with It?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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On May 17, 1999, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) issued a spiral-bound report with a four-color cover, containing 2 pages of text and 1 illustrative diagram. This spiffy document entitled, Executive Summary: Performance Measurement Study of Americas Promises Commitments, is available for free to anyone and was announced with press release fanfare. The arrogance of this document is breathtaking.

In a time when all nonprofits are being held to the standard of impact measurement, this document trumpets out activity counts as if *doing* something is equivalent to *accomplishing* something. The PwC report coincides with the news that Americas Promise (AP) has decided to remain in business as a full organization past its original year 2000 sunset date. So one can only assume that the attitude at AP is that everyone is so awed with the Emperor, no one will remark on his lack of clothes.

For those of you who have not yet seen the report, it is simple to summarize (clearly there must be a longer report somewhere, but this is the material widely disseminated.) PwC notes from the outset that data are presented as reported by the commitment makers (the underlining is theirs). In other words, the only source of data is the companies and large agencies that made commitments in the first place. Not one recipient of services or donations was asked to validate the claims -- neither nonprofit or public agencies nor, naturally, children themselves. Furthermore, there is a complete abandonment of any focus on volunteering. No one is assessing whether volunteering has increased, strengthened, or made a difference. This PwC report discusses the number of delivery sites, not service providers (i.e., volunteers).

Here are the published results of the study. (I am giving you *every* figure in the Executive Summary.) Out of 441 Commitments made to AP, only 91 commitment-makers reported, claiming to have provided service at 14,000 Reported Delivery Sites and -- take a deep breath for this one -- claiming 10,354,634 Children Reached. Yes, that's ten million, three hundred fifty-four thousand, six hundred

thirty-four. (And I thought the number was 10, 354, 672!) The total number of children under the age of 17 in the United States as of January 1999, according to the U.S. Census Bureau Web site, is 50,906,000. So, according to AP and affirmed by PwC, AP has reached 20% of the total youth population. At that rate, you and I ought to be able to walk out to any street corner and yell out will any young person who has been reached by Americas Promise please identify yourself? -- and get 1 in 5 positive responses!!

Now, let's take these statistics further. Are we supposed to extrapolate that, if 20% of the commitment makers (the % of those that reported) served 20% of youth, did 100% serve the *entire* youth population?

The dollar value figures reported by only 47 commitment-makers (out of 441), show 22,000 Reported Delivery Sites and \$209,501,335 Total Dollar Value. This figure ostensibly includes gifts of goods and money as well as the value of volunteer services (the calculation method used is not described.) Does any of this make sense to anybody? Does this mean if all 441 had reported, the figure would be larger than the gross national product?

But here is the best part. PwC uses the two text pages of the report to explain its methodology and, in one of only four section headings, remarks on Data Integrity. In these all-important few paragraphs, PwC states: ...However, there are several factors that are not addressed in this review that could influence the number of children reached and the dollar value of all commitments. These factors include: Duplication; Inaccurate data; Inadequate data. So what else is left? In the old days, when accounting firms focused on impartial audits rather than on vague consulting, no CPA would have released a report based on guess work. This is not a clean review and no one should quote the data without PwCs caveats. Yet in America's Promise's press release announcing the report located at (no longer available) http://www.americaspromise.org/rtn2_frame.htm, AP freely throws around the numbers with no caveats. (By the way, I'd love to refer you to this "Executive Summary" on the Internet but couldn't find any links to it on AP or PwC's sites.)

PwC notes that the commitment reporting requirements currently in place were not designed to produce information that could be easily audited (page 2). Yet it persists in calling the exercise a performance measurement study. I clearly remember Colin Powell being interviewed by Ted Koppel on Nightline during the Presidents Summit. Koppel asked Powell how AP would make sure that these commitment-makers actually follow through on what they have promised. Powell responded --with stunning naivete -- that when American business leaders say theyll do something, they will.

The real mystery is why there has been such public silence surrounding the inadequacies of Americas Promise. In most other circumstances, a report such as this one would have been loudly challenged or, at least, received some scrutiny. And PricewaterhouseCoopers might have been embarrassed enough to refuse to issue a questionable report with its good name on the cover. Is all of this just another example of the big lie? Make statements so grandiose that no one could imagine anyone would fabricate them?

During the past two years, I have been interviewed about AP by about a dozen reporters from various publications, some of general interest and some in the nonprofit field. In every case the reporter told me: Its a relief to find someone willing to be quoted. Everyone else insists on speaking off the record.

I understand that many people can tell wonderful stories about specific, local results of AP's efforts. However, the purpose of this Hot Topic is not to share success or horror stories, rather to ask you the following questions:

- Even if these extreme figures are accepted at face value, can anyone demonstrate that children "reached" were "helped"?
- At a time when real service programs are being held to such high accountability standards for relatively small amounts of money, how can a multi-million dollar organization get away with so little scrutiny?
- Why are so many people afraid to go public with negative opinions widely voiced behind the scenes?
- What exactly is the risk of questioning Colin Powells leadership or why he is requiring megabucks for his presentations to conferences?
- What consequences -- real or imagined -- do people anticipate if they protest the squandering of so much money, media attention, and even good intentions while the genuine needs of youth remain unmet?

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Submitted by Korinna Dietsch, America's Promise Fellow, Grand Rapids, MI

As a Promise Fellow, I experience first hand the trials and tribulations of a national non-profit that is still underdeveloped in many ways. However, what I also experience are the collaborations among non-profits and businesses with the action of serving the children. Nation-wide A.P. receives quite a lot of publicity, although; this is not always the case locally, and so it is unfair to say that those involved with A.P. are seeking the glory shed from Powell and his brood of large Fortune 500 corporations. My stipend-paid job as a Fellow is being done because there are children in Grand Rapids going without. Period.

Submitted by Kathy Rossow, Niles, Michigan

From a Volunteer Center in southwest Michigan, we are "underwhelmed" by AP. Recently (June 1st) I sent a letter to General Powell (Ret.) and asked why Volunteer Centers and the considerable work they have done for AP have never once been highlighted in the weekly reports we receive by fax. No answer to date--and no appearance of Volunteer Centers on the faxes. He did mention VC's in his comments via video at the National Conference in Las Vegas, but that WAS a heavily VC audience. As

to being a "Community of Promise"--we decided long ago that, in order for our community to be considered one, we did NOT need permission from AP to consider ourselves such. Too many "hoops" to waste our time when there is important work to be done to provide our children with the five resources. Thanks for letting me vent!

Submitted by Cheryl Morehouse, Manager, Volunteer Services, Nebraska, USA

Thank you, Susan, for being bold enough to tell it exactly how it is! I was so excited when I first heard about America's Promise to Youth, as I love young people and have the opportunity to work with many, especially those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. I was excited at the possibility of a unified local and national effort. What a disappointment, even early on. Like Michelle's comment from Seattle, those of us dealing with youth were not even included in the development of the local promise group and were left out of the process. Publicity/prestige, politics and hype were more important than actually touching young people's lives. I too was told that "the promise group from our area was "working on it" and that they would notify me when my help was needed. I never heard from them again. I think to make any impact on youth, our whole society is going to have to adopt an "every one reach one" philosophy, and cut out all the administration and duplication. I think Big Brothers/Big Sisters has the right idea.

Submitted by Frank Pomata, Director, MS 172 Beacon Program, Queens, NY USA

Wow!! Your commentary, as well as the responses I read, was direct and disturbing. I left an America's Promise-affiliated organization that was fabricating numbers to inflate what little progress was being made in serving kids locally. Instead of reporting the real numbers and acknowledging the difficulties inherent in the nature of this work, the leadership just plugged in the numbers they wanted to see on my reports. It's troubling to learn that this was being done on a much grander scale.

Submitted by Misha Lasco Pheifer

"...the genuine needs of youth remain unmet?" Mmm. After reading this article, as a dedicated AP Promise Fellow, I want to scream out anything that could possibly touch the compassion of a person's heart. This initiative is a far cry from statistics, data, and money. The time and money pouring into AP is on its way directly back to the nation - however in a form immeasurable by the means in which it arrived. It's not all about these figures, it's about connecting with your neighbor, whomever they are, acknowledging one another's being. At what point in time did humanity become so black and white so as to forget the joy of a hug or hello for absolutely no reason whatsoever, if only to receive the warmth back?

Submitted by Mary Kay Hood, Director of Volunteer Services, Hendricks Community Hospital, Indiana

As an active participant in our local DOVIA, I was amazed and surprised that when our DOVIA threw ourselves to the summit participants indicating a willingness to help in any way we could, we were flatly dismissed! Not once was any volunteer manager asked to participate or give an opinion on any aspect of America's Promise, the Summit or any of the grass roots efforts that were supposedly taking place locally. So, I'm not surprised to be given non-documentable reports, facts, statistics or whatever.

Submitted by Eileyn Sobeck-Bador, Volunteer Coordinator Senior Solutions of SW Florida, An Area Agency On Aging, Florida

All talk + No Substance = Politics. Volunteers shouldn't be political pawns. Outcomes must be fully documented with some room for qualitative data, accurately recorded with backup information for accountability.

Submitted by Michael Baker , Exec. Director, Volunteers for Outdoor Arizona, Arizona, USA

I greatly appreciate your thoughtful and frank comments on AP hype. It is a shame that people and organizations get caught up in using the feel-good image we associate with volunteering primarily for self promotion. Like most worthy endeavors, real volunteer promotion is tough work--rewarding but not especially glamorous.

Submitted by Darshell Silva, America's Promise RI AmeriCorps Promise Fellow, RI USA

I am truly embarrassed by the state of affairs with America's Promise's public image. As 1 of 350 people nationally working as an AmeriCorps Promise Fellow I can personally attest to reaching and helping 200 youth here in Rhode Island (since February). This may not be a lot in some people's eyes but I feel that locally we (myself and 4 other fellows) are doing a good job reaching/helping the youth in Rhode Island. The actual work of America's Promise is getting done at a local level and I resent the fact that the reports coming from America's Promise national are making those of us doing the work look like we aren't doing much at all. I am also sure that the other fellows doing the work feel the same way and can give actual concrete numbers, facts, and statistics to support the fact that America's Promise is getting things done.

Submitted by Debbie Thompson, volunteer coordinator Faith Lutheran Church, IL

Personally, I think that many people see this as another empty government promise. All lip service and not much real action. I live in an area that has AP volunteers and they are paid more than many of the full time professional staff in the communities in which they serve. I was under the impression that service meant volunteer work or a small stipend for living expenses. I haven't seen the statistics,

but I'm not surprised. I, too, have been disappointed with the AP organization as it makes a poor showing for local volunteerism.

Submitted by Jayne Cravens, Virtual Volunteering Project, Austin, Texas

America's Promise is volunteerism's equivalent of the DARE program (lots of flash, no real impact). I talk to all sorts of people terribly frustrated with America's Promise, but not one of them will go "on record." Maybe that's changing slowly but surely? THANKS SUSAN!!

Submitted by Phyllis J. Dorr, Volunteer and Intern Program Manager, Museum of Health & Medical Science, Houston, Texas U.S.A.

Without actually reading the article for myself, my opinion based on your assessment of what you understand of the material is: "So, what's new?" Working in education for forty years and following trends and fads in the intent of stated goals for enlightened methods of helping children, I am disheartened to see how little has been gained. Too much self-serving bureaucracy and nest feathering continues to consume any resources available. Non-profit organizations as well as for-profit organizations are too top heavy with administration and under-funded where some good could be done - at the ground level.

Submitted by Lillian Haversat, The Maine Volunteer Connection, Inc. (MVC), Union, Maine and the National Assembly of State Offices of Volunteerism, Owls Head, Maine. (I chair their America's Promise Committee and am supervising the development of the plan for their commitment).

It seems that we all smile when we talk about AP and wonder at the importance of it all. What I am concerned about is the double dipping by states with relation to the national commitments made by national organizations. In most states, the impact is measured twice. Once by the national organization using data from the states and then by the states using the same data. Who gets credit for what? And who is really being served? I rather like the idea of 10 million kids already being helped. That means that the problems of youth will be solved in my lifetime and leave me with many years to bask in the glory and the sun. And they said that the problems were huge and could not be solved, how wrong they were, at least according to their own statistics.

Submitted by Deborah Witmer, Lead Care Coordinator, Chicken Soup Brigade, Seattle, WA USA

This report does seem to reflect what I have thought of AP all along: all talk and no action. The hype sounded good to begin with; and frankly, I expected more out of Colin Powell. But this report is troubling in that PW seems to back off on any real evaluation and simply parrot the "party line" they have been given. I expected better from them, as well. The most troubling to me is the fact that they

have decided to continue operation past their sunset date - with no real results to show for their work so far. Seems to me that we have a situation where some are getting some pretty good salaries to sit around and pat themselves on the back - and they don't want to give that up. I would challenge them to a REAL audit - and full disclosure to the public about their expenditures, salaries, etc. In the end, I am glad that AP never really welcomed Professional Volunteer Managers on board - now we can't be tainted with their inaction. Although I am NOT afraid to voice a dissenting opinion, I must be clear that this is my personal opinion and I in no way speak for my organization.

Submitted by Arlene Osborn, Outreach Coordinator, Wyoming Congressional Award Council, Wyoming

If you think this is awesome, you should check out the Congressional Award program! (that was tongue in cheek, of course.)

Submitted by Julie Gillis, Austin State Hospital, Texas

I see much of AP as a very well run political campaign. A presidential figure works with important heads of corporations and state governments capturing (and corporatizing) a "trend" of service in a nation that is in (I believe) emotional despair. Much of this may very well be extremely well intentioned and some of it might be an agendaed maneuver on the parts of the above parties. Reaching out to the community is a "feel-good" kind of thing. Good for business. Good for political careers (he still may run for pres in 4 years) - theoretically a win win for politics and kids. Except the already present volunteer management field got left out somehow.....I'm not sure how we are viewed by the AP. Perhaps we weren't included because we weren't "sexy" enough, didn't wield enough political influence, or perhaps they just wanted it to look like they invented service. Who knows.

I do think that many of us haven't voiced public opinions because AP seems pretty strong, powerful and funded by lots of money and we pick up on the inherent political power of that. Which brings to mind the fact that our profession hasn't evolved towards that kind of political power (whether that is a good or bad thing is another hot topic.) Also, we may instinctively know that public outcry might make it look like a bunch of disgruntled people dislike all the good things that AP is doing and that could be spun as us being bitter and unsupportive rather than right. They have the money to spin us any way they want so we do have to be careful how we play with them.

I think if you want to influence a system you have to know how to join with them and influence on both your turf and theirs. Right now politically theirs is more powerful so we need to figure out where we go. As for C Powells comment on American business' doing what they say they are going to do, that wasn't naivete, it was a great political presidential statement. Great press, feel good all around. The man is sharp, quick, and would make an awesome pres candidate.

Submitted by I am afraid to say, Community Resources Coordinator. I will be fired if I say, Atlanta, GA

What a challenging discussion. I would have to say that the most troubling part of AP is not so much the lack of accountability (I expected it) but the uncomfortable way in which politics was interjected into the whole process. We were asked to provide data that would be used by the Democratic Party to further their own ends. We are a non-political organization, but the door was AP. Once it was opened on a national level, there was no closing it.

Submitted by Lucia Causey, Chair, Valley's Promise Steering Committee, Metropolitan Phoenix AZ USA

Thank you, Susan, for this topic! Last Wednesday, June 30, approximately 100 youth and adults gathered to celebrate some good things that have been happening in the Phoenix metropolitan area in collaboration with Valley's Promise, the Alliance for Youth. The best part: many entities, from across sectors and including youth, are talking with each other and taking action that is benefiting some youth in our community. The sad part: we have no hard statistics to verify what has been going on other than individuals, businesses, (for-profit and nonprofit), schools, communities of faith, telling us some wonderful stories. In my opinion, more thought should have been put into accountability issues before AP promised that 2 million+ children will be served. Good slogan - impossible to track. I, like you, find it very difficult to accept the numbers you quoted. One more thing that has helped our initiative: the arrival of a Promise Fellow to keep this all-volunteer effort in motion. Thank heavens for the Corporation's involvement.

Submitted by Michelle Casey, Manager - Volunteer Services, University of Washington Medical Center, Seattle, Washington USA

For those of us who have followed the development of America's Promise (AP), this report should not have come as a big surprise. Delusions of grandeur have been par for the course in my opinion. All talk and little or no follow-through. I have been skeptical from the get-go about reported numbers and success stories. It seems that if we try to dig deeper we are met with resistance. If I ran my programs that way, I would have been relieved of my duties. I am held accountable for the numbers I present and must show how I arrived at them. In other words, proof.

As to the question about being afraid to "go public" I will have to refer to personal experience. How about the fear of career suicide? When you disagree with the "big guns" it doesn't always matter how diplomatically or thoroughly you present the issues. Most of my concern has been in regard to the genuine needs of the youth. Where I was at (location) many of the providers dealing with youth were not even included in the development of the local promise group and were left out of the process of working with AP. It appears to me that publicity/prestige and hype were more important than the work actually being done. We were told that the promise group from our area was "working on it" and that they would notify us when our help was needed.

Since some of us were not included in the AP process, we continued to work together and collaborate on projects that served the youth in our area. Some of us were labeled as trouble makers for our

efforts, when in reality we just refused to be left out and wanted to make sure that our ideas and opinions were known. I have learned from experience that it was better to keep my mouth shut than risk losing any opportunity for career advancement or even worse losing any support that I was getting for the programs I had working with youth. I want to include the disclaimer that this is not reflective of my current employment or geographical location. Please do not associate these comments with my current work.

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