

[News and Hot Topics](#) » The Limits of the "V" Word

The Limits of the "V" Word

By [Sarah Jane Rehnborg](#)

October

1998

Note from Susan: *Happy October to all. Because I've been on the road for most of September, this seemed like a good time to post a hot topic written by someone else. Sarah Jane Rehnborg, the Director of the Center for Volunteerism and Community Engagement at the University of Texas in Austin, posted the following comments to CyberVPM. I found them provocative and therefore of value as a "hot" topic. Thank you, Sarah Jane for allowing us to consider these thoughts.*

Are we helping ourselves by continually trying to group everything that happens in our field under the label "volunteer"? We are selling ourselves short by not clarifying our language and by lumping all manners and forms of service within one broad and reasonably useless classification of "volunteer."

Case in point. In 1990, the National Research Council published a book, *Volunteers in Public Education*. While it is an interesting piece of literature, I doubt very much that we would find a comparable publication entitled "Salaried Employees in Public Education." IF one did find such a publication that was of any value, it would likely be a book of graphs and charts and salary comparisons, and perhaps information about certification requirements and education. A book such as "Salaried Employees in Education" would not exist because it would be of very limited value. It would not begin to ferret out the issues confronted by education nor issues on student achievement (the basic purpose for these employees). So if there is something about the work that salaried people do that requires thoughtful and discrete analysis, shouldn't the same be true of the work of volunteers?

We spend a great deal of time helping those who would engage a volunteer design the best type of service opportunity to meet real needs. So, if we carve out volunteer assignments and organize thoughtfully, why don't we analyze and report with equal thought and analysis? It would seem to me that we are doing ourselves, our work and our field a large disservice by being so cavalier in our analysis and reporting. Simply put, a volunteer is not a volunteer is not a volunteer! Aspects of operating systems may be highly similar (how to manage volunteers), but not the output or the work (what the people we manage accomplish). After all if we don't value and understand the nuances, why should anyone else?

One publication that has taken a stab at teasing out the work of the service community is the Annenberg Institute's *Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change* report. Although they do use the "V" word, they do so sparingly. Rather they identify 7 forms of service performed by communities in support of schools. They report: "Taken together, however, the following seven types describe the broad focuses of public engagement today: parent participation, community and parent organizing, standards development and implementation, strategic planning/community visioning, public conversation and deliberation, governance and shared-decision making, legislation and policy development" (p. 23). They go on to provide examples of each form of service and share what is being learned as a result of this. (You can see for yourself at <http://annenberginstitute.org/publications/reasons-hope-voices-change-report-annenberg-institute-public-engagement-public-educatio>)

When I have spoken with school principals and administrators about community engagement, explore the range of engagement and then describe the skills required to engage the community effectively, they simply cannot get enough information. This is, from our perspective, volunteer management, but we haven't taken the time to articulate our cause in the language that is valued by the "consuming" audience--an audience, I might add, that often regards volunteers as fluff, but considers the community as critical.

So as to the future. We need to stop talking to ourselves and find the people who believe that they have found or "reinvented" volunteering. Perhaps they do have something to offer us and we need to learn the music that other choirs sing. And if we really believe that what we do is important, we had darn well better spend some time really thinking about what we are about so that we can articulate the true value of the effort, not the pious platitudes that we believe make us important!

Okay, it's your turn to comment. Here's a starter question:

How can we begin to report the nature of the work (and achievements of) volunteers instead of the simplistic and probably meaningless "head count" of how many nonsalaried workers we've recruited?

Related Topics: [Definitions of "Volunteer"](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Philosophy](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Submitted by Janace Pope Ponder

Just from the marketing session Mike King did on Marketing, it is obvious that the "name" of a product is primary to "selling" that product...I work in a public education program called Help One Student To Succeed which we actually purchase from the HOSTS Corporation in Vancouver, Washington and its name sells itself...we use "literacy mentor/tutors" to help at-risk students read and one of our "campaigns" used the Superman symbol and we did bumper stickers, logos, etc. with SUPERMENTOR on it...We have people calling all the time asking: How do I get to be a

Supermentor...when we tell them it is HOSTS...helping one student to succeed, they immediately know what it is. Because of the sometime stigma about the validity or quality of volunteerism, I think it is so important to allow the name to do our work and speak specifically of the talent, gifts, abilities and resources that caring people contribute to a needy world.

Submitted by Penny S. Deurwaarder, Volunteer Program Manager, Oregon Veterans' Home, The Dalles, Oregon USA

Our Volunteer Program is very new and already I am swamped with the need to track volunteer numbers and hours. Instead of looking at what has been accomplished, everyone is more concerned with numbers. If we only track numbers, aren't we then doing a disservice to the volunteers we have that make a difference with their actual work? Our great need is to be able to present our legislature with solid information on the quality of volunteers and their work, not the quantity. I would rather have a few who truly want to give, than a lot who just want to be counted. Quality benchmarks in this field would make reporting much easier and more meaningful, so if anyone has ideas, please step forward and not be counted.

Submitted by Frank Squillace, Director, Volunteer Services, Martha Jefferson Hospital, Charlottesville, Virginia

In healthcare, I believe this is the number one issue for Volunteer Directors. We do not provide glamorous medical procedures, we do not generate revenues outside of occasional fundraising and most likely, we will be the last departments to receive FTE staff support. This topic should be the discussion of every Volunteer meeting across the country for the next year: How valuable are we to our organizations; how do we prove it and once we do, will people listen long enough to support us in both traditional and non-traditional ways? Thanks for posting this!

Submitted by Bob Toye, Manager - Partnerships & Programs, Telephone Pioneers of America, Denver, Colorado, USA

It sounds so simple -- just do it. Instead of tracking mere heads, track the number of schools that benefit from your volunteers, for example, and the number of volunteers per school, class, student and teacher. It's a matter of changing the thought process to focus on the end result, the output versus the raw material input (heads, hours).

We at the Telephone Pioneers of America, an education-focused organization of 800,000 employee and retiree communications industry volunteers, concerned ourselves for years with the number of volunteer hours members contributed each month/year. That was all well and good for a time. Eventually, and happily, the overall participation numbers (20-30 million hours annually) became larger and larger, but so large as to strain credibility.

In recent years we have concentrated on getting our chapters to report to us in terms of what they have achieved through those volunteers heads and hours. We still like big results, of course, but we also realize there is perhaps even more value in being able to report 100,000 "I Like Me!" books distributed, 120,000 Talking Book machines repaired, 65,000 computers recycled for needy schools, 4,000 Pioneer Playground Maps painted, etc. These results are more tangible and therefore easier to internalize and appreciate. We also look to correlate these achievements to dollar values, the costs the schools would have incurred to achieve the same results.

Submitted by Laura Carlson, Volunteer Coordinator, St. Amant Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

One obstacle I have run into as a volunteer manager is the lack of statistical information out there (other organizations) on their volunteers. Yes, we know how many volunteers we have, and how many hours they put in (and so we should), but does anyone else track how many volunteers come through our doors and fulfill/do not fulfill their commitment? I have statistics for the last three years on the number of adult volunteers who actually fulfilled their commitment - a Benchmark? - I don't know, because I have been unable to find anyone else tracking that info. Are we doing well in comparison to others, or very poorly?

Often volunteer assistance is based on intangibles - how much impact do they actually make on your clients? Is this measurable? We need to be able to measure, benchmark, and make improvements - if we don't know where we are and what our impact is, how can we improve it. This type of data gives us reportable information. Therefore credibility. This is a little easier for people involved in fundraising - how many dollars raised - but what about a true volunteer program? I look forward to seeing other people's thoughts!

Sign up for our Newsletter

PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025