

[News and Hot Topics](#) » A Great New Report to Praise, Criticize, and Use

A Great New Report to Praise, Criticize, and Use

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

March

2004

In February, the Urban Institute released its new study, *Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations: A Briefing Report*. Everyone is urged to download and read this 34-page PDF from http://www.nationalservice.org/research/vol_capacity_brief.pdf. You can also read the press release, containing a summary of the key finds, at http://www.usafreedomcorps.gov/about_usafc/whats_new/announcements/20040219-1_A.asp. The study was organized by the UPS Foundation, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and the USA Freedom Corps and it is probably the strongest argument I've ever seen in the United States for the value of, in the words of the report, *investment* in volunteer management:

Funders and organizations that invest in staff volunteer coordinators and training will produce charities and congregations with a greater capacity to their use of volunteers. This report finds that investments in volunteer management and benefits derived from volunteers feed on each other, with investments bringing benefits and these benefits justify greater investments. We conclude that the value that volunteers provide to organizations they serve should make the effective management of volunteers a key priority. (pp. 29-30)

The Briefing Report is well-written and easy to read. But, as with all studies, there are some questionable assumptions and conclusions. My favorite saying is that statistics are like bikinis; they reveal what is interesting and conceal what is essential. I'll outline some of the items I found to praise and to criticize here, and then invite you to do the same. Even more important, the Urban Institute is asking for comments directly. As of March 1 they are opening a Web site for this purpose:

www.volunteerinput.org. I sincerely hope that those of us with a stake in the profession of volunteer management will make our voices heard.

The Good

Above anything else, we should praise the study's sponsors for asking these questions about infrastructure. Bravo that the study knew about, accepted, and built on best volunteer management practices and attempted to learn whether these were widely adopted. The formula to measure an organization's Investment in Volunteer Management is an indicator that can be replicated.

There is no finding that will surprise any Energize site visitor, but perhaps it had to be said by those with more power and influence. As research, the statistical samples and sources seem strong, and it's wonderful to see someone use the IRS Form 990 database on this subject. Including faith communities alongside nonprofit charities is fascinating, too.

Here are a few statements that really caught my eye. I hope we all quote these in hundreds of places!

- *The greatest challenges that charities and congregations face is an inability to dedicate staff resources to and adopt best practices in volunteer management. (p. 2)*
- *Three out of five charities and only one out of three congregations with social service outreach activities reported having a paid staff person who worked on volunteer coordination. However, among these paid volunteer coordinators, one in three have not received any training in volunteer management, and half spend less than 30 percent of their time on volunteer coordination. (p. 3)*
- *Less than half of charities and congregations that manage volunteers have adopted most volunteer management practices advocated by the field. (p. 3)*
- *Of charities with a paid staff volunteer manager, only one in eight have someone who devotes 100 percent of his or her time to volunteer management. Only one congregation in our study said it has a full-time volunteer coordinator. (p. 8)*
- *Taken together, the findings regarding paid staff support for management of volunteers point to low professionalization and capitalization of volunteer administration in the United States. The fact that many coordinators are getting some training suggests that many are interested in learning about how to manage volunteers. However, the small amount of time spent on volunteer administration suggests that charities and congregations do not have the resources to allocate to volunteer management or that they devote their organizational resources primarily to other efforts. (p. 10)*
- *Recruiting volunteers with the right kinds of skills is a big problem for 18 percent and a small problem for 44 percent of charities. However, the greater the percentage of time a paid staff person spends on volunteer administration, the less likely a charity is to report problems with recruiting. (p. 12)*

Let's also credit the researchers for asking comparative questions about resources put into fundraising (55% of agencies have a paid fundraiser while only 39% have a paid coordinator of volunteers) and for adding strong statements about the value of volunteer centers to connect organizations and potential volunteers.

The Bad

While the broader professional field of volunteer administration is certainly implied, there is no evidence that the study involved any representative of it. The absence of references at the end of the report, whether to organizations such as AVA or Points of Light, to Web sites such as this one, or to books and journals in the field, continues the usual practice of keeping such resources invisible or inaccessible to people who read the study and want to learn more.

Some other things troubled me:

- *Boards of directors are not included* . Not one word was said in the report to link volunteers who serve on nonprofit boards of directors to the direct service volunteering studied. This perpetuates the traditional and counterproductive separation of such volunteers as somehow inherently different, although the principles of good volunteer management apply equally to gaining the best and most diverse board (a need that many organizations have). It's interesting that the report says: Before undertaking this study, we did not know the proportion of public charities in the United States that involve volunteers in their operations (p. 6). We actually *did* know that 100% of them have a board comprised mainly of volunteers, which makes the finding of four in five charities use volunteers (p. 6) open to debate.
- *Who's a volunteer?* There is no way to know whether respondents included student interns, stipended volunteers (such as AmeriCorps), workfare participants, etc. in any of their answers, nor if they use a varied vocabulary to attract new volunteers. For example, have those organizations reporting low numbers of highly-skilled volunteer ever recruited for donated professional services or *pro bono* contributions, rather than sticking with the V word?
- *Recruitment was studied without correlation to the vital question of volunteer work design* . Problems of recruitment were presented as due to lack of information and staff time, although many of us feel that a large part of the problem is lack of skill in creating meaningful and attractive roles for a diverse audience of prospective volunteers to do. This is why, for example, the study says: We excluded the challenge of too many volunteers' because we believe it to be different from the other kinds of challenges considered (p. 13). To me, any organization claiming too many volunteers has no idea how to put them to work!
- Though separated statistically, *the report implies that the responses of faith communities can be compared to nonprofit organizations* . This seems to show a lack of understanding about how congregations operate, particularly the widespread resistance to management vocabulary and theory of any kind as non-spiritual and out of place in a religious group.
- *Missing entirely are government management practices in their involvement of volunteers* . Although volunteers work by the thousands in every level of government (just think schools, parks, prisons, libraries, veterans hospitals, etc.), the public setting is absent from this study. Once again, government tells us what to do without applying the same principles to itself. How many paid and trained volunteer program managers are in government agencies? Will government commit more funds to building its own volunteer infrastructure? You won't learn any of the answers from this study.

As you might expect, I am concerned about the emphasis on volunteers as an alternative to adequate funding:

A volunteer's time is an important resource for many charities and congregations, especially those that do not have the money to hire labor to carry out certain tasks. Volunteer time is comparable to a monetary donation. (p. 29)

The assumptions inherent in this section of the report could be a Hot Topic in itself.

The Ugly

It's hard for me not to question the political reasons for this study and its conclusions. It seems integrally connected to, as stated, President Bush's Call to Service and his mandate that national and community service programs optimize program design and serve as engines of volunteer mobilization (p. 5). That would be fine if the findings were not so self-serving to benefit both the Corporation for National and Community Service and the press for more faith-based initiatives.

Most troubling is the conclusion that:

The most popular capacity building option among both charities and congregations with social service outreach activities is the addition of a one-year, full-time volunteer with a living stipend (like an AmeriCorps member), with responsibility for volunteer recruitment and management. (p. 3)

All this emphasis on the need for a true commitment to volunteer management and the answer is a one-year volunteer? I guess this proves the adage of If all you have is a hammer, you see everything as a nail. AmeriCorps just as so many VISTAs before them certainly can be enormously helpful in building agency capacity to involve volunteers. But they are *not* the best solution, even with the recognition that they need training in the subject:

After being trained in volunteer management practices, AmeriCorps members can be placed in organizations where they can help address a number of volunteer management challenges. We found that AmeriCorps-type volunteers could be particularly useful in charities that are challenged in recruiting enough and the right kinds of volunteers, as well as in those charities that do not have time or money to train and supervise volunteers. (p. 31)

Just a few reactions:

- Why let agencies off the hook from making a long-term commitment (of funds and attention) to volunteer management?
- Why imply that someone fresh out of minimal training in volunteerism can be effective if no one else in the organization gets additional training to support them?
- Who is going to give this training in volunteer management practices? The Corporation? And who is going to train *them* ?
- Will we really give religious congregations an AmeriCorps placement to increase their recruiting?

Connection to religiously-affiliated groups was the only external variable studied in depth, clearly because of the Bush Administration's emphasis on faith-based service. The findings are presented without explanation or justification of these questions, and with unsupported optimism:

although charities with ties to religious organizations have greater investment in volunteer management, they also report more challenges. However, we expect that their adoption of a greater number and variety of management practices gives them greater potential for overcoming these challenges. (p. 22)

Using the Report

There is so much good in this report that it should have an impact beyond its political uses. How can we quibble with the statement:

We conclude that the belief that volunteers are beneficial leads charities to invest in their management of volunteers, and that investing in the management of volunteers leads them to value the benefits of their volunteers more. (p. 20)

Is this not ammunition with which to approach Executive Directors? Funders? Faculty of nonprofit management courses? Anyone who is resistant to spending money on or paying attention to volunteer involvement? It is up to us, collectively and individually, to disseminate the highlights of this study as widely as possible.

What do you think about the findings?

Related Topics: [National Service](#) | [Preparing for Volunteers](#) | [Program Assessment](#) | [Research on Volunteering](#) | [Statistics on Volunteering](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

News Update, 11 June 2004, from Susan:

See the new *From Research to Action: A unified national response to the 2004 Volunteer Management Capacity Study* that has just been released "for distribution to the field for review and reaction." This updated set of eight proposed national strategies indeed integrates many of the suggestions made by the field. You can continue to submit comments at: www.volunteerinput.org/ – influence the next stage, too!

Submitted on 11 May 2004 by Derreth Duncan, Manager, Volunteer Services, Thirteen/WNE, New York, NY 10001

Clear Speech and Best Practices.... Where Are They?

I was particularly interested in the Challenge and Benefit Indices, others as well. But, to be truthful, I didn't really understand them. Maybe a pass through a clear speech decoder might help. There's a good metric in there somewhere and we could use it.

Along with plain language, best practices are also missing in this report. Excellent, in-depth analyses of volunteers have been offered elsewhere by Independent Sector, AARP, Points of Light and previously by UPS but none of the relevant literature is reflected in the narrative. With two footnotes and a few selected sponsor cites, you would think that this was the first time the issue of volunteer management capacity had been raised. We know that's not true.

Get Me Re-Write

Call me picky but I also felt that the "Volunteer Management Capacity Study" was edited badly. The same sentence is repeated on pages 4 and 5. Facts were not checked and sources were glossed over. For example, they quote from the 1998 UPS report (I assume they mean "Managing Volunteers – A Report from United Parcel Service") that "volunteers do not always feel their volunteer experiences

make best use of their skills and interests.” This was mentioned in the 1998 report but it ranked third on the UPS scale of poor volunteer management practices well behind “not well managed” at 26% and “not good use of time” at 23%. I think that’s important to know. This was an incredible research effort but with editing like this a great deal of the complexity of the study must have been left on the cutting room floor.

Breaking news update! Submitted on 5March2004 by Susan:

The USA Freedom Corps has just posted President Bush's *Executive Order National and Community Service Programs* , executed at the White House on February 27th:

http://www.usafreedomcorps.gov/about_usafc/whats_new/announcements/20040...

Readers of this Hot Topic are especially directed to Sec. 2 (a):

"National and community service programs should support and encourage greater engagement of Americans in volunteering"

and the subsequent Sec. 3 (c) ii and iii:

ii) National and community service programs should leverage Federal resources to enable the recruitment and effective management of a larger number of volunteers than is currently possible;

(iii) National and community service programs should increase efforts to expand opportunities for, and strengthen the capacity of, faith-based and other community organizations in building and strengthening an infrastructure to support volunteers that meet community needs;

The "use" of the Urban Institute/UPS Report by the President and the Corporation has begun!

Submitted on 5March2004 by Femida Handy, Assoc. Prof, York University, Ontario, Canada

Please check out a recent study we did on cost benefit analysis of hospital volunteers in Canada.

The use of volunteers in hospitals has been an age-old practice. This non-market community involvement is a distinctive aspect of North American life. Hospitals may be attracted to increase the use of volunteers, both to provide increased quality of care and to contain costs. Hospitals rely on the use of professional administrators to use the donated time of volunteers efficiently. In this study we examine the benefits and costs of volunteer programs to hospitals and derive an estimate of the net value for the use of volunteers in hospitals that accrue to the hospitals and the volunteers. In particular, the costs and benefits to hospitals are detailed. Using 31 hospitals in and around Toronto (Canada), and surveying hospital volunteer administrators, hospital clinical staff and volunteers themselves, we find a striking payoff for hospitals: an average of \$6.84 in value from volunteers for every dollar spent, i.e. a return on investment of 684%. Civic and community participation is indeed valuable.

Handy, F. and N. Srinivasan. "Valuing Volunteers: An Economic Evaluation of the Net Benefits of Hospital Volunteers" *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, March 2004 vol 33, 1 pp28-54

Submitted on 5 March 2004 by Rosanna Tarsiero, VPM, Bipolar Dream, Web-based organization

I think we have to make an extra effort so to understand *why* people working as VPMs are not trained. And by that I mean, what is the reason (or bias) that makes this kind of training to be thought as "unnecessary" in so many cases. If a person has to be hired as a typist, training or experience are required. But this is not the case with VPMs. Why?

I think the big big big bias that is responsible of this lack of training is that "everybody has enough social and communication skills to manage human relationships". But this is not true. Also, these "soft skills" involve mainly anger and conflict managements, which typically are culturally different. Therefore, if we have a different range of volunteers, we *need* training, no matter how good we are with respect to our own culture.

Therefore, the next step is: how to convince them that managing volunteer is a job that need training because the "normal" social/communication skills are not enough, especially in setting like online volunteering and international NGOs?

Submitted on 3 March 2004 by Hillary Roberts, President, NJ

Will these reports ever address solutions? It would be far more interesting to read that a funded "NP Think Tank" and/or "Nonprofit Consulting Network" was opening doors to help create policies and procedures that address varied needs among NPO's. A small biz administration specifically for the NP owner & their team.

As much as we can learn from surveys, it's putting these lessons into practice, sharing the resources and offering managers at every level SKILLS that's missing for me.

I find it profoundly frustrating that leaders continue to spend dollars reassessing what's wrong and not nearly enough on how to solve issues NPO's continue to face.

Doesn't this lack of focus on resolution continue a misdirection for all! Where's the beef?

Submitted on 3 March 2004 by Jackie Norris, Executive Director, Metro Volunteers, Denver, CO, USA

As always, Susan, you are SO RIGHT ON TARGET! I just read the study this past weekend, and had exactly the same reaction. While there is good information in the study, and no real surprises for any of us, it seemed very self-serving to me...even though I greatly admire and appreciate what Americorps has done, and continues to do. It left me, once again, totally frustrated at our profession being overlooked by every level of the administration. I think your article should be published in the Chronicle of Philanthropy!!!!

Submitted on 3 March 2004 by Karen Knaub, Volunteer Coordinator Visiting Nurse Association of Cape Cod, MA

Thank you for addressing issues of interest to professional volunteer managers written about in the Urban Institute Report. I highlighted pertinent sections and sent a copy to my supervisor as part of my annual appeal to make my position full time.

Needless to say, the promotion of AmeriCorps volunteers as the solution to understaffed and underfunded volunteer departments in nonprofit agencies doesn't help my case. Putting personal interests aside, I would say it is like sticking a bandaid on a hemorrhage.

The Report emphasized the correlation between staff time dedicated solely to volunteers and the number of volunteers recruited. The use of full-time stipended people encourages the philosophy that any warm body is better than none. Is that the way we accept volunteers into our programs? Hopefully, not. It is not a solution with any depth of understanding about the level of management needed to do the job. We already have too much employee turnover in our field. More should be done to increase the importance and value of volunteer management within all organizations that incorporate volunteers into their staffs. Toward that goal, the first thing that needs to happen is to convince ourselves that we are a valuable management asset to our organization. This discrepancy might have been noticed, if, as you point out, Susan, a professional manager of volunteers had been at the table.

Submitted on 2 March 2004 by Claudia Collier, Program Assistant - VINE Faith in Action, Minnesota

Susan, I knew we could depend on you to help us look at this report from all sides. Though like you I was glad to see the survey was taken, I came away uncomfortable with some its conclusions.

First, the very blatant, supposedly overwhelming support for AmeriCorps members. Don't get me wrong, AmeriCorps and other National Service programs have their place. But really, our organization does not want or need annual turnover in their volunteer coordination area. By the time an AmeriCorps member can get into the job, they're usually finished with the program.

My other concern is the report did not address funding/funders well enough. My frustration comes since I am the former director of a now closed Volunteer Center. Let's be blunt...dollars for Volunteer Centers or recruiting, training and retaining volunteers is not "sexy". It's not direct enough.

My last concern is more personal regarding the church setting. As an active church MEMBER involved through my congregation I am NOT a volunteer...I am a servant, with a theology and motivation that is not addressed in this report...with good reason. Thanks for a great summary.

PRIVACY STATEMENT

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

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025

