It's Time to Start Counting Volunteers Seriously

By Susan J. Ellis

December 2001

We all owe an ongoing debt of gratitude to the Independent Sector (IS) for its role in attempting to quantify the giving of money and time in the United States. While it is unfortunate that a subject as broad as this continues to rely on one periodic study, we were at least beginning to gather comparable data. Therefore I was dismayed to discover that IS - without any notice of which I was aware - changed both its data gathering company and the parameters of its study this year. The most disappointing part of the change, which is explained on page 4 of the summary report at http://www.independentsector.org (not available as of 2014), is that the data now refers to adults age 21 and older, instead of the previous age 18. Ironically, I encountered exactly this issue a few months ago in Australia and challenged some government officials there on this very point. Even the forward-looking Canadians have limited their data gathering to adults.

How can we continue to proclaim our interest in encouraging youth to volunteer if we do not collect data on whether or not they are? The first study done on volunteering in the United States in 1970- and the only one done by the federal government - looked at Americans aged 14 and up. Why could this not have continued? Even age 18 was not old enough to give an accurate picture of youth service. I suspect it's because - rhetoric notwithstanding - these studies care much more about the amount of money given than about volunteering. And 14-, 16-, and even 18-year-olds are not major check writers.

Even beyond an acccurate estimate of volunteering by youth, we will never have meaningful data on volunteering in general if it is forever entwined with financial donations. No study can cover these two broad topics well at the same time. In fact, we ought to be looking to a variety of research so that we can begin to understand what people do in their communities now. There is already a wealth of information out there but we have never tried to gather, disseminate, or analyze it. I have long felt that it is insufficient to ask individuals, "do you volunteer?" We have ways of calculating the amount of money donated to organizations from the financial and tax reports of those organizations, for which the question to individuals of "do you give money?" simply rounds out the picture. Why can't we get some data about volunteering from the both the organizations that benefit from the services of volunteers and those who organize volunteering?

For example:

- **Where are data about the quantity and quality of volunteer involvement in the annual reports of nonprofit organizations?** For too long we have allowed accountants to dictate this whole issue, as if the only meaningful way to "account" for volunteers is the dollar value of their service. This is a red herring. It ought to be possible for organizations do provide some basic numbers: how many people volunteered this year? what were their ages, gender, race, etc.? If the argument is that this information is too difficult to collect, we ought to respond that maybe the problem is no one cares. Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Girl Scouts, literacy councils, hospitals, and the vast majority of formal settings sure *ought* to know how many people they are involving. They count employees. They count clients. Why not count - and report - volunteers? The American Cancer Society has been saying for over twenty years that it has "one million volunteers." As that advertised number has never changed, it makes me wonder whether or not they have ever actually done a count.
  Further, the annual reports of these organizations contain much more than financial statements. There are always essays and photographs produced for the purpose of informing the public and funders about the accomplishments of the organization. Why are volunteers so rarely highlighted? Or tacked on as an afterthought (don't tell me it's alphabetical order - I've heard that one, too)?

  It also ought to be possible to develop reporting systems that answer some interesting questions, such as: how many volunteers come in as individuals vs. in groups? what about families volunteering together? how many students come from mandated school programs and do they remain longer than they are required to do so? does the profile of volunteers match the profile of the organization's clients and/or the community it serves?

  Financially, we can compare organization to organization in terms of the ways they spend their money, or the amount of excess revenue over expenses. Why can't it be possible to assess and compare the involvement of volunteers? (And why aren't more foundations asking such questions?)
- **Where are reports about community service organized by schools?** Given the official nature of these settings, and the type of data gathering that is done there routinely on other subjects, why can't we expect to learn what students are doing in the community, how many hours they are doing it, whether or not they stay active beyond minimum requirements, and what impact they may have had?

- Parenthetically, it occurs to me that Independent Sector might at least ask the adults they survey whether young people in the household are involved in volunteering, too.

- **All-volunteer associations are equally liable for lack of reporting.** We have heard a great deal about the reduced level of membership in civic clubs, fraternal groups, and other membership organizations. But what about the members they do have? The real question here is

distinguishing between people who *join* a group and those who actually *do volunteer work* for and through it! Some honest disclosure, while potentially embarrassing, might actually help these organizations to improve their recruitment of new members. How about some collaboration on a format for reporting such data as: number of new members; average duration of membership; age, gender, and race profiles for "members" and for officers and other truly active participants?

- **Why can't youth-involving organizations report on the accomplishments of their participants?** It is more than folklore that Boy and Girl Scouts do community service, as do faith-based youth groups, sororities and fraternities, etc. Would it be so very hard to agree on a few basic pieces of information that all these groups would collect and report?

- As long as I've been in the field, I have witnessed the tension between Volunteer Centers and other referral agencies who want to assess their effectiveness in directing people to volunteer opportunities versus the agencies who ultimately "get" the volunteers and see such involvement as "belonging" to them. Let's get our act together! Any community in the world where there is a volunteer center or similar body, or where there is a DOVIA or other professional network of volunteer program managers, can decide - on its own - to collect and report "The State of Volunteering Here." It simply takes will. It doesn't even take money. But it does take a commitment to volunteerism *as a field*, without concern for "ownership" of information. With computers, listservs, data gathering Web capability, and other electronic tools, this is no longer a major chore. The cumulative information that we ourselves are sitting on is so incredibly important.

By the way, we do not even have an accurate count on how many directors of volunteer services are out there. We only have estimates. Because our job titles vary so enormously and because so many of our colleagues wear multiple hats, we are even harder to count than volunteers! But shouldn't we occasionally try? Now *there's* a way to celebrate International VPM Day!

All of this, of course, speaks purely to counting heads. I have not even mentioned a tally of number of hours, largely because this has always seemed relatively meaningless to me as a measure of quality of service. In fact, I have routinely challenged interpretation of previous IS studies in which people bemoan the discovery that the number of volunteers has gone up but the average number of hours served has gone down. Perhaps this is a wonderful piece of information. Maybe it means that volunteers have grown so effective in their service (or are so well managed by staff who understand volunteer administration principles) that they can accomplish more in less time!

This topic is - as so many are - critically connected to a number of other issues. For example, the debate about vocabulary is front and center here. If we are going to count volunteers, whom do we mean? Do we count board members? Stipended Ameri*Corps participants? Student "interns"? But I'm at the point of not caring. In the absence of any study of value, any new contribution is a start in the right direction. If we begin in our backyards, we can eventually cultivate the entire field.

Related Topics: Evaluation | Program Assessment | Government Relations/Codes | Monetary Value of Volunteer Time | Research on Volunteering | Statistics on Volunteering

Posted 06 Jan 28 by Mary Williams, Lena Mae Farris Foundation
Volunteer Coordinator, Washington, TX United States
What a great and unresearched topic to address. The importance of volunteering is minimized in our current society. It would be wonderful to have thought-provoking questions addressed and publicized in an overt manner. Volunteering is so underrated but is so beneficial to the recipient, and there is always something to do. Volunteering is healing to the giver and assistance to the recipients. It might be good to have statistics of the number of recipients being helped and some of their comments. Yea-a to all of the wonderful people who volunteer to help others in need!

Posted 12Dec01
Submitted by Robert Leigh, Chief, UNV Representation Office for North America, New York, NY
As so often, you have put your finger on a key issue. In many countries, especially in developing regions, measuring is one key factor in convincing policy makers and others that volunteering makes a significant contribution to society, and therefore merits support. Advocacy was very much one of UNV's goals when it invested in the Tool Kit project (no longer available, 2014), in collaboration with INDEPENDENT SECTOR and the Institute for Volunteering Research in the UK. The Tool Kit provides any organization that wishes to embark on measurement with elements which can be adapted to local circumstances. One of the many success stories of the International Year of Volunteers (IYV) already in evidence is the growing number of countries interested in measuring volunteerism. At a recent meeting of developing country focal points involved in such research, one message came out loud and clear. Contrary to what you state, "will" is not enough: measuring does "take money" and this fact of life must be taken into account. The notion that volunteering is cost effective but not cost free applies as much to measurement as any other area of volunteering. If IYV has contributed a little to exploding the myth of volunteering being a free ride, then this will have been a not inconsiderable advance.

Posted 12Dec01
Submitted by Colleen Kelly, Executive Director, Volunteer Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
Thank you for referring to us as forward-looking Canadians! We have been very focused on young people as volunteers and our surveys have included volunteers aged 15 and older. From 1987 to 1997, there was an increase in the number of youth volunteers - defined as age 15 - 24. The 2000 National Survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participating told us those aged 15 - 24 who volunteered declined to 29% in 2000 from 33% in 1997. Almost one in 5 (18%) of these young volunteers reported that some or all of the hours they contributed were required by their school, their employer, or government. On December 5, 2001, the Government of Canada signed an Accord developed with the Voluntary Sector as part of the Voluntary Sector Initiative. The Voluntary Sector Initiative also released a report on the Canada Volunteerism Initiative along with commitment for funding of $50 million over five years. This includes funds for ongoing research on volunteerism

including the continuation of a Canada Survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participating. Complete details of the funding will be approved by the Treasury Board and will be released in 2002.

Posted 12Dec01
Submitted by Bonnie Jennings Steele, Director of Volunteer Services; President-elect, ASDVS, Stamford, CT
One place to begin is to enlist the support of the major volunteer database design firms who have sold their record-keeping software to thousands of volunteer programs across the country and beyond. Many have access to this data through modem connects with their users. If the clients were willing to participate, this would be an excellent start. Having used two of these programs, I know there are categories that all users enter data in. These could be identified and used for simple data collection and future benchmarking.

Posted 12Dec01
Submitted by Sister M. Peter Bernard, Holy Family Home & Shelter, Inc., Connecticut/USA
The backbone of Holy Family Home & Shelter, Inc. has been and continues to be its Volunteers. The Shelter opened its doors in February of 1989 in a small city in Eastern Connecticut. Since that time several hundred volunteers from Junior High students to Professors of two local universities have been part of the staff. At this time we have 6 adult volunteers from neighboring towns; UConn and Eastern CT State Univ. provide us with interns and work/study students and course related hours. Also, ECSU has a on campus housing requirement of 12 hours community service per semester. Also, participants from the Foster Grandparent program, 4 grandmothers, are here 5 days a week.

Posted 12Dec01
Submitted by Diane Bright, Director, Care Team Ministry, Faith in Action, Wisconsin, USA
I agree with the idea of counting volunteers. We do it in our nonprofit and it helps convey the need, importance, value, etc. I believe that it is important that we NOT worry about whether these figures would be added into the current delivery system data. When extrapolated, it would be denoted VOLUNTEERS and could be impressive when comparing.

Posted 12Dec01
Submitted by Judy Rust, Dir. of Volunteers at Minnetrista Cultural Center/Oakhurst Gardens, Indiana
I am in total agreement with your opinion. In this day it is not that hard to count the data (there is good software that is inexpensive our there. We need to use our resources and keep the records that will help with this information. Those of us who do count the information we would love to share our data - but how and where would we send it. If someone really cared they would contact AVA membership and Points of Light membership to get a base started. With a bit of publicity I can see others joining in. Youth are definitely a part of the mix. We see more and more involvement by youth from 10-21. The colleges and schools are trying to encourage philanthropy through community service. That ultimately will impact the donated dollars. Service and commitment come first and the dollars will follow. I say put the cart before the horse and begin somewhere.

Posted 9Dec01

Submitted by Gail Orser, Guideposts, New York, USA

Great article. I definitely agree that we need to be documenting the number of volunteers and that we need to include youth. If we do not encourage youth to volunteer and count their contributions will they consider being volunteers in their adult lives? The joy of volunteering is learned. One has to participate in order to understand the rewards. We need to encourage our youth to volunteer and let's measure their contribution. It is an interesting topic. We certainly count our volunteers at Guideposts. Counting the number of hours would have to be an estimate, because much of the volunteering takes place in their own homes. But we could certainly ask them to give us an average. We will do that in 2002.

Posted 9Dec01

Submitted by Bonnie Esposito, Director, Minnesota Office of Citizenship and Volunteer Services, MN USA

Gathering this information is vital to volunteer programs to use in funding proposals, reports to funders and boards, as well as recognition for volunteers and staff. One of the problems with large-scale collection is cost. In Minnesota we do an annual statewide survey by partnering with the University of Minnesota and two state agencies. Still, the cost is so high we can only collect the barest of information and sadly don't survey young people. We can report the "rate" (66% in MN), hours, where people volunteer, but would love a more extensive survey -- which has been cost prohibited. We are very disappointed in the new IS survey since with the new collection we can no longer exactly compare our "rate" to the national average. This was an important comparison for elected officials and funders -- how does Minnesota stand nationally? The new survey makes that hard since they no longer count informal volunteering.

Posted 6Dec01

Submitted by Jean Strating, Volunteer Program Specialist Alachua County Library District, Florida, USA

I think the observation of the way money is getting tangled in with volunteerism is very timely. To confirm this all one has to do is look at the job board in the Chronicles of Philanthropy. If you look under Volunteer Management Positions, you will find several jobs as Development Directors...requiring fund raising skills. The other one that is fairly new is the position of "Membership Director" which places volunteers, but is really about fund raising. Volunteer Managers, more and more, are having to justify their existence or wear more than one hat or are put in part time positions. Volunteer Centers should be helping us out, but even they have to have programs like food drives, etc. to keep community attention on them. On the positive side, the Library I work for provides monthly reports on the number of volunteer and their hours to our Governing Board.

Posted 05Dec01

Submitted by Julian M. Young, Project Manager - Computer Dimensions, Inc., South Carolina - USA

People need to celebrate on a regular basis. However, in order to do this, data has got to be collected in a format that will give good reports so that the information can be disseminated through the right organizations. Updated individual information keeps statistical data valid and useful to whoever

needs to use it. If you don't already own software to help you keep and manage data well, this might be an excellent time to investigate the various programs available.

Posted 01Dec01

Submitted by Thomas Karwaki, Nativity House of Tacoma, WA USA

Accountability is the issue raised this month. The problem is that if we try to measure volunteers we may end up viewing the volunteers as an input in the production/delivery system. Some non-profits, particularly fraternal and "animal" organizations/clubs do gather data on the number of volunteer hours etc. on a project and annual basis. Governmental agencies, such as local public safety, hospitals and state corrections, are collecting and reporting this data in part to garner public support and to show the level of support within the community. But the schools are not doing a great job of reporting -- and we should be striving to measure volunteers from age 14 or 18 up.