

# Administration of Volunteer Programs as a Career: What Role for Higher Education?

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*This study sought to identify how administrators of volunteer programs regarded volunteer administration as a career and the extent of their readiness for greater involvement with higher education. Four hundred sixty-three usable questionnaires from full-time, salaried administrators were returned and analyzed. Findings are reported regarding demographic characteristics, professional commitment, volunteer program status, preparation needed by administrators, and the role of universities. The study concludes that higher education institutions should proceed cautiously in developing degree programs or elective clusters for pre-service or in-service development of administrators of volunteer programs.*

The administration of volunteer programs (AVP) as an emerging occupational practice is largely uncharted. Little is known about the nature of AVP as a career and the characteristics of persons who pursue careers in this field. The absence of such data has not deterred some institutions of higher education from treating persons in AVP as a new student market. However, the efforts of higher education institutions to provide educational preparation and enhancement through associate, bachelor, or master degree programs, for the most part, have not proven successful. Some misunderstanding of the nature of this potential "market" has occurred. A closer examination may identify some indicators of the readiness of this emerging occupational practice for greater involvement with higher education.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study addressed two principal questions: What are the characteristics of careerists in the administration of volunteer programs and what is the nature of the administration of volunteer programs as a career? Specifically, the study collected data about these research questions: a) What are the demographic characteristics of these administrators as to educational level, years in volunteer administration and present position, gender, age, and race? b) What is the extent of the administrators' professional commitment to the field of volunteerism? c) How did these administrators come to their current position as salaried administrators? d) What is the status of the volunteer program in the agencies in which they work? e) What is the role of universities in volunteer administration? f) What are the minimum educa-

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tional and preservice requirements for persons entering the administration of volunteer programs as a career?

## METHODS

The population for the study was full-time and salaried administrators of volunteer programs. Because no national list of these persons exists, the membership lists of three groups were used: a) the directors of Voluntary Action Centers (VACs), b) the Association for Volunteer Administration, and c) the National School Volunteer Program. Because membership in the National School Volunteer Program and the Association for Volunteer Administration is open to all interested persons and not just full-time salaried volunteer administrators, a letter describing the study and a card requesting information about their employment status and agency were mailed to each member of these two associations. They were asked to indicate on the card whether they were full-time and salaried administrators and to return the card. A total of 1136 persons responded; of this total 675 indicated that they were full-time and salaried volunteer administrators and 461 indicated that they did not administer volunteer programs or if they did they were not full-time or salaried. These 675 persons combined with the 367 VAC directors comprised a population of 1042.

A questionnaire consisting of three parts was prepared. Part I consisted of 55 items regarding the tasks that administrators of volunteer programs performed. Part II solicited opinions about the administration of volunteer programs as a career. Part III solicited information about the background and characteristics of the administrators. Only the data from Parts II and III are reported in this study.

A copy of the 16 page survey, arranged in a booklet form, was mailed to the 1042 persons comprising the population. Of the 1042 surveys mailed, 523 were returned for a response rate of approximately 50 percent. Of those instruments returned, 60 contained too many omitted items to be included in the analysis, leaving a total of 463 usable survey instruments for analysis. No follow-up mailing was attempted.

Frequency distributions of responses to all questions were compiled and checked for out-of-range responses. Percentages and means were tabulated for all items.

## RESULTS

### *Characteristics of Administrators*

The results of the survey revealed that 89 percent of the administrators were female, 96 percent were white, and the mean age was 44 years. The largest percent (39.5) had been in AVP five to ten years, but one out of four (21.2 percent) had been in AVP four or fewer years (Table 1). Almost half (44.9 percent) had been in their present position between four and ten years, but over a third (36.1 percent) had been in their present position three or fewer years.

With regard to education, 32.6 percent of the administrators held less than a bachelor's degree, 38.8 percent held a bachelor's degree, 28 percent held the master's degree, and less than one percent held the doctorate. About 30 percent indicated that they had completed the AVA certification requirements or were working toward completion. Only a small percentage indicated that they were working toward a higher degree (Table 2). The administrators had taken degrees in or were working

**TABLE 1**  
**Years In Volunteer Administration and Present Position**

<u>Years in Volunteer Administration</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Years in Present Position</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
1-4	98	21.2	1-3	167	36.1
5-10	183	39.5	4-10	208	44.9
11-20	120	25.9	11+	83	17.9
21+	48	10.4			

toward degrees in a variety of subject areas. Social sciences, education and counseling, and public affairs and protective services were most often reported (Table 3).

In terms of salary level reported, 83 percent were above \$10,000 annually. Only five percent reported an annual salary less than \$10,000 and 27 percent were \$25,000 and over. In the middle were 28 percent who earned a salary of \$15,000 to \$20,000; 29 percent made between \$20,000 and \$25,000.

*Professional Commitment to Administration of Volunteer Programs*

Professional commitment to AVP as a career was determined by four indicators. Table 4 shows that a majority of the administrators, 57 percent, agreed that volunteer

**TABLE 2**  
**Educational Level and Certification**

<u>Highest Degree Attained</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Working on Degree</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
Less Than Bachelors	151	32.6			
Bachelors	180	38.8	41	8.9	
Masters	129	27.8	38	8.2	
Doctorate	3	.6	19	4.1	

AVA Certification

Completed	72	15.6
Working Toward	70	15.1

**TABLE 3**  
**Degree Subject Areas: Completed and Working Toward<sup>1</sup>**

DEGREE	BACHELORS		MASTERS		DOCTORATE	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Social Sciences	96	20.7	16	3.5	4	0.9
Education & Counseling	77	16.6	71	15.3	13	2.8
Letters	37	8.0	5	1.1	1	0.2
Psychology	32	6.9	6	1.3	1	0.2
Business & Management	22	4.8	12	2.6		
Public Affairs & Protective Services	22	4.8	45	9.7	1	0.2
Volunteer Administration	3	.6	1	.2	1	0.2

<sup>1</sup> The subject matter areas for a small percentage were agriculture, citizenship (civic activities, communication, home economics), liberal arts/general studies, life sciences, philosophy/religion/theology, and physical sciences.

administration was their primary professional orientation. Regarding preference for employment in some other field if they were starting their career over, 60 percent disagreed that they would select some other field. When asked if they felt more loyalty to the institution than to AVP, 56 percent indicated they felt more loyalty to AVP; 65 percent did not view their position as an intermediate point in an administrative career at their institution.

When asked how they came to their current position, 34 percent responded that the position evolved from previous employment, 26 percent pursued the position actively, for 20 percent the position evolved from previous volunteer work, and 18 percent came to the position by happenstance.

#### *Status of the Volunteer Program*

On the whole, the administrators believed that the volunteer program had high status in their agency (See Table 5). Ninety-two percent indicated that their agency had a written policy on the mission of volunteers. Sixty-nine percent believed that they had as much job security as other administrators in the agency. They overwhelmingly agreed (86 percent) that agency staff were not indifferent to the volunteer program. Eighty-nine percent believed that the governing board of their agency had shown considerable support for the volunteer program. Seventy percent believed that the administrator of volunteer programs had considerable influence on

TABLE 4  
Professional Commitment to Volunteer Administration

		<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Agree</u>		
Primary Professional Orientation	No. %	193 41.7	224 57.1		
Prefer Employment in Other Fields	No. %	316 68.2	136 29.4		
More Loyalty to Institution than Volunteer Administration	No. %	261 56.3	187 40.3		
Current Position as Intermediate Point in Administrative Career at Institution	No. %	300 64.8	153 33.1		
				Evolved from Previous Employment	Pursued Position Actively
How Came to Current Position	No. %	Happen-stance 65 18.4	Evolved from Volunteer Work 92 19.9	158 34.1	120 25.9

staff-related policies. Sixty-nine percent believed that staff members at their agency regarded AVP as a professional occupation.

Another indicator of the status of the volunteer program was the salary of the administrators of volunteer programs compared to administrators in a comparable position in the agency: 28 percent believed that their salary was lower, 31 percent about the same, 5 percent higher, 12 percent did not know the salary of others, and 13 percent had no others for comparison.

In most agencies, the volunteer program tended to be operated by one or two persons; 41 percent reported that they were the only full-time staff member; 34 percent reported two full-time staff members; and 24 percent reported three. While the administrators of volunteer programs tended to work as the sole staff person managing the volunteer program, they also tended to report directly to the chief administrative officer of the agency; 45 percent reported directly to the chief administrative officer, 37 percent had one intermediary, 11 percent had two, and 3 percent had three.

#### *Preparation Needed for AVP*

Another aspect of the study was to determine the prerequisite education and experiences needed to become an administrator of volunteer programs. Table 6

**TABLE 5**  
**Status of Volunteer Program**

		<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Written Policy Statement on Mission of Volunteers	No.	426	33
	%	92	7.1
		<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Agree</u>
Volunteer Administrators Have Less Job Security	No.	319	125
	%	68.9	27
Agency Staff Indifferent to Volunteer Program	No.	397	56
	%	85.7	12.1
Governing Board Shown Considerable Interest in Volunteer Program	No.	45	410
	%	9.7	88.6
Volunteer Administrator Influence on Staff- Related Policies	No.	176	277
	%	38	59.8
Staff Members Regard Volunteer Administration as Professional Occupation	No.	131	319
	%	28.3	68.9

shows that 70 percent believed the bachelor's degree should be the minimum educational requirement, 21 percent the high school diploma, 6 percent the master's degree, and none the doctorate. In terms of preservice experience, nearly 80 percent thought that previous administrative experience was needed, 68 percent that previous volunteer experience was needed, and 30 percent that previous volunteer experience with a similar agency or client was needed.

#### *Role of Universities in AVP*

Table 7 shows that the administrators believed that the role of the universities included several functions: conduct research (90 percent); translate theory and research findings into practice application (90 percent); provide formal training in volunteer administration as part of degree programs (91 percent); provide non-credit workshops (81%); and provide consultative services (80 percent).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The results of this study provide little incentive for higher education institutions to develop degree programs or elective clusters for the pre-service or in-service de-

**TABLE 6**  
**Education and Experiences Needed for Career in Volunteer Administration**

Minimum General Education Requirements	No.	%	Previous Experience	No.	%
High School	97	21.0	Previous Volunteer Experience	316	68.3
Bachelor	326	70.4	Previous Volunteer Experience with Similar Agency or Client	137	29.6
Master	27	5.8	Previous Administrative Experience	365	78.8
Doctorate	0	0			

velopment of administrators of volunteer programs. Institutions that do should proceed with great caution. There are several reasons for this conclusion.

First, the administration of volunteer programs is an occupational practice without specified entry level educational requirements or clear consensus about what those requirements should be. In most instances, the qualifications desired in an administrator are set by individual agencies that negotiates with each candidate for the position. In many instances, the agency provides no incentive or support for advancement through higher levels of educational attainment. In most cases, she may have to pay her own tuition, attend classes on her own time, and receive no raise in salary if she attains a higher degree.

The majority of administrators in this study set minimal educational entry level

**TABLE 7**  
**Role of Universities in Volunteer Administration**

		<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Agree</u>
Conduct Research	No. %	41 8.8	418 90.3
Translate theory and research into practice application	No. %	43 9.3	418 90.3
Offer formal training and degree programs	No. %	35 7.7	423 91.4
Offer non-credit workshops	No. %	82 17.7	374 80.8
Provide consultative services	No. %	83 17.9	368 79.5

requirements: the bachelor's degree. However, almost a fourth believed the high school diploma was an appropriate educational level. As a group, these administrators were not actively pursuing higher degrees. For example, while one-third did not hold a bachelor's degree, only 8.9% were working toward a bachelor's. One-third held a bachelor's, but only 8.2% were working toward a master's.

Second, another disincentive is how these administrators regarded their professional commitment and the status of their program. From 35-44 percent noted on each of the indicators of professional commitment that they were not professionally committed to this field. This may be the result of the absence of socialization experiences that normally occur in professional preparation programs or from the problems with status in the agency. With regard to status, most believed that their programs had high status in the agency, but many (approximately one-third) believed that other administrators in the agency had more job security, their salary was lower than other administrators, and that other staff members did not regard their position as a professional occupation. One respondent attributed the low pay to women filling the positions; men would have been paid more, she believed. One can only speculate that women in this position suffer from gender discrimination.

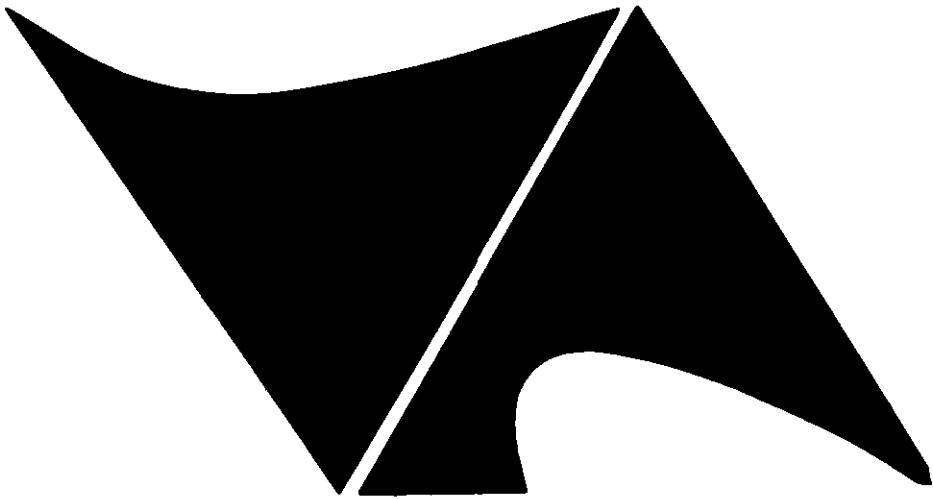
Third, higher education institutions may lack the resources to organize degree programs or elective clusters. The overwhelming endorsement the administrators gave to several aspects of the university's role may mask deeper problems. Respondents commented on enrolling in courses and finding the professors without knowledge of administration of volunteer programs. Others questioned whether a degree in volunteer program administration offered any job mobility and whether there would be jobs for persons who graduated with such degrees. The question of faculty expertise in volunteer program administration and the desire of employers for persons with degrees in administration of volunteer programs have to be addressed by higher education institutions.

Fourth, the professional associations of administrators of volunteer programs have not endorsed any preparation programs for these practitioners. About 30% of the respondents indicated that they had completed the Association for Volunteer Administration certification requirements or were working toward completion. This program, however, only assesses current levels of performance; it does not address what competencies persons should have prior to becoming administrators of volunteer programs. The Association for Volunteer Administration certifies but it does not train. Normally, professional associations that have certification programs also prescribe specific levels of educational preparation. That is not the case with professional associations for the administration of volunteer programs.

Fifth, a more critical ingredient is missing and that is general societal recognition that the administration of volunteer programs is an occupation that requires personnel who have undergone long-term, intensive training and who use specialized knowledge in their work. Neither practitioners of an occupation nor universities can bestow such status without the agreement of the public and employing agencies. A climate conducive to recognition of a higher status for administrators of volunteer programs might occur if a National Service Corps Act were enacted or if for some reason the lip service accorded volunteerism in America were suddenly translated into programs and financial support.

When viewed in historical perspective, the data show a first generation of practitioners attempting to advance themselves into a socially recognized occupation. No

one can predict what a similar survey might show ten or twenty years from now. In the meantime, higher education institutions ranging from community colleges to research universities have an obligation to promote volunteerism and the occupation of administration of volunteer programs. The occupation needs the knowledge based approach of higher education. But higher education institutions should not make premature assumptions about the readiness of administrators of volunteer programs to swell the ranks of adult learners in higher education.



***JOURNAL OF  
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RESEARCH***

*Studies of Volunteering, Citizen Participation,  
Philanthropy, and Nonprofit Organizations*

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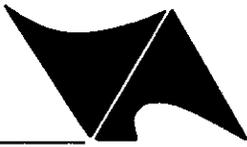
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