

# Administrative Lessons from Volunteer Profiles

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The importance of knowing why people volunteer goes beyond the frequently cited justification of wanting to better understand human behavior and motivation. Knowing why people volunteer may provide important clues as to what people expect from a volunteer program in return for volunteer participation (Anderson and Moore, 1974; Frisch and Gerrard, 1981). Knowing who volunteers and why may aid organizations in their quest to increase the size of their volunteer pool or reduce the rate of volunteer drop-out. In order to hold current volunteers and attract new ones, program administrators must have knowledge of their task-related expectations, and the needs of those who volunteer. Acquiring information of this type on a regular basis may help individual agencies assess the stability of their volunteer personnel, as well as place them in a better position to adjust recruitment programs and volunteer positions to changes in the environment. This type of data would contribute to more efficient management of volunteer personnel and volunteer programs.

Surveys of volunteer personnel conducted on a regular basis are capable of detecting changes in the goals underlying individual participation (Deci, 1975; Gillespie, 1977).

The data gathered from such studies can also uncover shifts in motives for specific or identifiable subgroups such as men or women, the young or elderly, and so forth (Gillespie and King, 1985). On the basis of a clear understanding regarding developing trends, administrators might respond in a variety of ways. For example, they could rewrite job descriptions, add or delete specific job descriptions or specific job tasks, or even restructure whole departments to meet the changing needs and priorities of volunteer personnel. Of course, there are limits to the extent that organizations can be flexible and adaptable in changing to volunteer needs (Mileti and Gillespie, 1976).

Generally speaking, however, very few voluntary organizations conduct regular surveys of their volunteer personnel. Those agencies that do survey their volunteers do so sporadically and rarely solicit information regarding attitudes toward volunteer experiences. In order to provide volunteers with more satisfying work experiences, agencies must know who their volunteers are, why they volunteer, and what attitudes they hold toward their volunteer experiences. This study provides some preliminary answers to these questions. The study describes a sample

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of American Red Cross (ARC) volunteers, as well as the reasons they gave for volunteering and their attitudes toward several key facets of volunteer experience. The findings from this study provide data that illustrates the manner in which administrators and coordinators of volunteer programs might use regular surveys of volunteer personnel to make their volunteer settings more compatible with the needs and goals of volunteer staff.

## METHOD

### Sample and Population

The respondents for this study were drawn from a cross-sectional mail survey of volunteers to a chapter of the ARC located in a major midwestern city. Questionnaires were mailed to current and former volunteers. The addresses were obtained from a "master" list on a computer file maintained by the ARC. Out of 5,000 questionnaires distributed 1,346 (26.9 percent) completed and usable questionnaires were returned. The return rate was surprisingly low, suggesting some problems with the file of volunteer addresses. Surveys of the general population typically report return rates of 35 to 50 percent in the absence of any follow-up procedures, as was the case in the present study. No doubt the return rate could have been bolstered through the use of some follow-up procedures, but this by itself is insufficient to account for the discrepancy between what one might normally expect in returns and what in fact was returned. The most likely interpretation of this outcome is that the 1,346 questionnaires that were returned represented a stable 35 to 50 percent of the ARC volunteers and that the mailing list was an inaccurate sampling frame for the ARC volunteer population. This interpretation is supported with the observation that the average American family changes their address every four years, thus suggesting that 1,000

of the questionnaires were non-deliverable.

The mailing list is a matter of concern because its weakness reduces our confidence in generalizing findings from this study. One way of increasing the level of confidence in generalizability of these findings is to compare key demographic characteristics of respondents in this survey with those of other surveys of volunteers. The differences between this survey and several national surveys on three important demographic variables, sex, age, and marital status were minimal in each case except sex (U.S. Department of Labor, Manpower Administration, 1969; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1981; Independent Sector, 1981; VISTA, Action Annual Report, 1974; VISTA, Action Annual Report, 1979; Babchuk and Booth, 1969; Independent Sector, 1981). The proportion of women to men is significantly greater than what is generally found in national surveys. Nevertheless, the direction of difference remains consistent and, therefore, does not undermine the comparability sought through this study. We believe that the sample of volunteers used in this study is comparable in many respects to volunteers in general.

### Data Collection

The respondents to the ARC survey were asked thirteen questions pertaining to their experiences as volunteers. Six personal characteristics--age, sex, ethnic affiliation, marital status, number of children at home, and family income--were elicited through both open-ended and fixed-choice questions. Two employment attributes--number of hours of paid weekly employment and occupation--were elicited in the same way. The manner in which the data for this study were measured is described below. Respondents were asked to rate six facets of their volunteer experience by how much they enjoyed that particular aspect. A four-point summative scale was used to rate six

categories of the volunteer's experience. Respondents were then asked to identify the single most important aspect of their experience. The respondents were also asked to rate the extent to which the skills they developed during their ARC experience contributed to five categories of career events.

## FINDINGS

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics along with the percentage and number of respondents characterized by each of them. These ARC volunteers were predominantly female, white, married, and lived with family incomes similar to those within the general population. The median family income in the United States in 1980 was \$21,904, which appears to be slightly below that of the ARC volunteers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1981). The marital status of the Red Cross volunteers was very similar to the general population.

The differences between the Red Cross volunteers and the general population in terms of marital status vary from slight to moderate. Almost 66 percent of the general population was married compared to 65.2 percent of the ARC volunteers; 20 percent were single compared to 30.8 percent of the ARC volunteers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1981). The differences among the various subcategories of single persons are considerable in every instance. Of the general population, 20.2 percent were single and have never been married, compared to 16.6 percent of the ARC volunteers; 7.7 percent of the general population were widowed, compared to 11.9 percent of the ARC volunteers; and 6.1 percent of the general population were divorced, compared to 3.6 percent of the ARC volunteers. These differences are better understood when the ages of these volunteers compared to the general population are examined.

Most of these volunteers are middle aged, the average age being 45. A wide standard of deviation of 17.3 and an age range of between 16 and 97 indicates that the full age spectrum is represented with the ARC volunteers. Table 2 presents the age categories, the frequencies, and percentages for each age bracket.

The mean number of children at home (1.0) was very similar to the mean number of children per family (1.28) in the general population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1981). Table 3 presents the frequencies and percentages for this variable.

The most frequently cited occupation (39%) was housewife/homemaker/retired (18.9% housewives, 12.4% retired, and 7.7% homemakers). Professionals (a white-collar salaried position) comprised 37% of the responses. The clerical/skilled occupational category accounted for 16.9% of the responses (10.9% clerical and 5.4% skilled). These findings (see Table 4) indicate that many of the Red Cross volunteers do not work outside the home because they are either retired or managing a household.

The current employment status was ascertained by asking them how many hours a week they worked in paid employment. The mean number of weekly hours worked was 14.4 with a standard deviation of 19.3 hours for 1,349 volunteers. This finding is understandable, given the demographic profile of the ARC respondents described above. This finding is also relatively unique in that national studies of volunteers seem to consistently report that most volunteers come from the ranks of the employed, especially individuals employed full-time (See Action, 1974, Independent Sector, 1981, and Gallup Poll, 1983).

## VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES

Many of these volunteers had worked at the ARC for a fairly substantial length of time (7.08 mean

**Table 1**  
**Frequencies and Percentages for the Sex, Ethnic, Affiliation,**  
**Marital Status, and Family Income of 1,297 Red Cross Volunteers**  
**During Spring 1980**

Personal attributes	Categories	Percent	N
Sex	Female	77.6	1,041
	Male	19.1	256
	Missing Data	3.3	49
Ethnic Affiliation	White	76.2	637
	Black	3.1	26
	American Indian	0.0	0
	Spanish-Speaking	0.5	4
	Asian	0.1	1
	Other	0.0	0
	Religious Response	13.3	111
	American, etc.	6.8	<u>57</u>
Total			836
Marital Status	Married	65.2	877
	Single (single, never married, divorced, widow/widower)	30.8	<u>415</u>
Total			1,292
Family Income	10,000 or below	13.2	178
	10,000 to 19,999	22.6	304
	20,000 to 29,999	23.0	309
	30,000 or above	21.6	<u>291</u>
Total			1,082

**Table 2**  
**Frequencies and Percentages for Age of 1,346 Red Cross Volunteers**  
**During Spring 1980**

Personal attribute	Categories	Percent	N
Age	18 - 25	19.4	248
	25 - 32	10.9	147
	32 - 38	14.9	200
	38 - 54	25.7	346
	54 - 65	12.7	171
	65 - above	17.4	234

**Table 3**  
**Frequencies and Percentages for the Number of Children at Home**  
**for 1,346 Red Cross Volunteers**  
**During Spring 1980**

Personal attribute	Categories	Percent	N
Number of Children at Home	0 - 1	64.2	864
	1 - 2	19.2	257
	2 - 3	11.9	160
	3 or more	4.8	<u>65</u>
Total			1,346

**Table 4**  
**Occupations of 1,346 Red Cross Volunteers During Spring 1980**

Category	Percent	N
Housewife/Homemaker/Retired	38.2	420
Professional	37.0	407
Clerical/Skilled	16.3	179
Student	6.1	67
Unskilled	2.4	26
Missing Cases	18.5	<u>247</u>
Total		1,346

years); yet a wide standard deviation of 8.45 shows considerable variation with many of the volunteers having worked much less than the mean score at around seven years and many having worked more than seven years. Most volunteers worked during the day on an average of nine (8.92) days a month. Evenings and weekends ranked second and third, respectively. Although fewer individuals volunteered on weekends, those that did averaged almost 9.5 (9.49) days a month.

The importance of face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication with regard to attracting volunteers was evident in these findings. Learning of volunteer opportunities through a friend or another agency are predominantly the ways that these volunteers heard about the ARC programs (see Table 5).

The respondents were asked to rate six facets of their volunteer experience by how much they enjoyed that particular aspect. They were given four categories from which each facet could be rated. Table 6 represents the response categories and means, standard deviations, and number of respondents characterized by each category.

Table 6 shows highly skewed distributions on all facets of the ARC volunteer experience. The overwhelming majority of respondents in each instance rated their experience as being enjoyed very much or a great deal. We found that pride in being a volunteer was the most highly rated experience, followed by assigned work, other ARC volunteers, ARC staff, non-ARC volunteers, respectively.

Respondents were asked to identify the single most important aspect of their volunteer experience. Table 7 presents the response categories and the percent and number of respondents characterized by each category. The volunteer experiences have been rank-ordered according to the percentage of respondents indi-

cating each category as the single most important aspect of their volunteer experience.

Table 7 shows a clear-cut ranking of the aspects associated with the volunteer experience. The top two most important aspects--pride in being a volunteer, and assigned work--reflect a distinction between contributing service for personal reasons and contributing service with some idea of exchange in mind. Those who indicated that the single most important aspect of their volunteer experience was the pride that it brought them would not seem to be asking for much, if anything, in return. On the other hand, those who indicated that the nature of their assigned work was the single most important aspect of their volunteer experience would seem likely to become disenfranchised if the work was not contributing to their own skill development or goal satisfaction.

The respondents were also asked to rate the extent to which the skills they developed during the ARC experience helped them to achieve or secure the following: a paid job, return to school, make career decisions, develop new interests, accept other volunteer jobs, none of the above, other. Table 8 presents the response categories, the means, standard deviations, and number of respondents characterized by each category.

The information in Table 8 suggest that the ARC experience can and does contribute to the development of new interests on the part of those who have volunteered and that the ARC experience does seem to contribute toward one's accepting other volunteer jobs again, indicating a rather favorable assessment of the experience. In addition, volunteer work sometimes contributes to securing a paid job, but typically this is not the case. Although volunteer work rarely plays a part in one's decision to return to school, it can be helpful in making career decisions.

## ADMINISTRATIVE LESSONS

There are a number of administrative lessons and insights that can be gleaned from surveys such as the one reported here. For example, the demographic profile of these volunteers provides a useful picture of the volunteers in this agency. More importantly, the demographic profile identifies several under-represented groups that may be a source of volunteer support if approached directly. Minorities are severely under-represented on this agency's volunteer staff; a situation that is interesting in light of the fact that the central administration of this particular chapter is located in a predominantly black area and in a position of high visibility. Moreover, the metropolitan area this ARC covers is approximately 30% black. It would seem that this category of citizens might prove to be a potentially valuable source of volunteers. In particular, volunteer programs which meet the needs and goals of minority citizens might be expanded and developed in order to attract and retain these volunteers.

The mean number of children in the homes of those who volunteer with the ARC is low. This finding seems to suggest two things. First, families with three or more children are grossly under-represented on the Red Cross volunteer staff, possibly because of the additional child care responsibilities. If volunteering at the ARC is problematic for larger families or families with significant child care responsibilities an increase in volunteers from this group might be enhanced by developing some type of child care arrangement for these families. Private business and corporations have been providing child care services for quite some time and they have been instrumental in helping to reduce child care related absences from the job. No doubt similar types of services might also benefit volunteer agencies and personnel.

The importance of face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication

with regard to attracting volunteers was clearly evident here. Learning of volunteer opportunities through a friend or another agency were the predominant ways that these volunteers heard about the ARC programs. This finding also suggests that for this agency and others in similar situations, a significant amount of recruiting can be accomplished through the time and effort devoted to maintaining a relatively satisfied volunteer staff, as they are the ones most likely to have significant impact on volunteer recruitment.

Most of the ARC volunteers volunteered Monday through Friday during the day. How many ARC volunteers would increase the number of hours and days that they volunteer for the ARC if more weekend and evening opportunities were provided cannot be estimated from this data. Surveys such as the one reported here, however, might provide the type of data to answer this question, which would result in an increase in both per capita hours volunteered as well as provide more opportunities for non-volunteers to get involved.

When asked to rate various facets of their volunteer experience on the basis of how much they enjoyed it, the overwhelming majority of respondents in each instance rated their experience as being enjoyed very much or a great deal. This finding can be used by volunteer directors and administrators in several ways to improve their programs. First, such data provide a baseline from which changes in volunteer attitudes toward their experiences at the agency can be measured. Secondly, these data may be used during recruiting drives to emphasize and underscore the quality of volunteer opportunities. Finally, these data can be used to identify sources of volunteer discontent and dissatisfaction, all of which may adversely affect the volunteer's decision to continue volunteering. Since current volunteers serve as important and valuable recruiters, minimizing and eliminating

Table 5

Number and Relative Percentage of 1,346 Red Cross Volunteers  
Informed About Volunteer Opportunities  
Through Nine Forms of Communication

Ways Learned of Volunteer Opportunities	Percent	N*
Friend	34.6	261
Referred by another agency or professional	23.3	176
Can't recall specifically	19.6	148
Speaker	13.1	99
Newspaper	4.1	31
Relative	3.1	23
TV Announcement	0.9	7
Church	0.8	6
Radio	0.4	3

\* The total N is less than 1,349 because of 389 cases no longer volunteering and 146 cases were missing (non-response).

Table 6

The Extent of Enjoyment Attached to Six Facets  
of the Volunteer Experience by 1,346 Red Cross Volunteers  
During Spring 1980

Facets of Volunteer Experience	Degrees of Enjoyment		
	Mean	S.D.	N
Pride in being volunteers	3.55	0.57	1141
Assigned work	3.46	0.56	1010
Other Red Cross volunteers	3.41	0.56	1042
Red Cross staff	3.26	0.62	893
Non-Red Cross staff	3.23	0.59	771
Non-Red Cross volunteers	3.20	0.61	753

negative aspects of their experiences might enhance the volunteer recruitment process substantially.

The findings from this survey indicate that the two most important aspects of these ARC volunteer experiences--pride in being a volunteer, and assigned work--reflect an interesting and useful distinction in terms of the reasons these individuals have for volunteering. Those volunteers that indicated that the single most important aspect of their volunteer experience was the pride that it brought them would not seem to be asking for much in return. On the other hand, those who indicated that the nature of their assigned work was the single most important aspect of their volunteer experience would seem likely to become dissatisfied if the work was not contributing to their own skill development or goal satisfaction. The ratio of people volunteering for personal reasons to those volunteering on an exchange basis has administrative implications in that a preponderance of one over the other will determine the type, complexity, and number of incentive or reward systems established by the volunteer administrator. More specifically, this type of information will help those individuals responsible for organizing and managing volunteer programs decide how agency resources earmarked for volunteer incentives will be allocated.

Finally, for these individuals, the ARC experience can and does contribute to the development of new interests. For some volunteers the ARC experience contributes toward their acceptance of other volunteer jobs and for a minority it contributes to securing a paid job. This information may be helpful in developing new ways of presenting the Red Cross volunteer experience to those who have not yet had the opportunity to contribute some of their time and expertise (Zakour, 1985), and has similar implications for other organizations.

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Table 7

Rank-Ordered Percentages and Frequencies of Eight Facets Associated with the Single Most Important Volunteer Experiences

Rank Order	Facets of Volunteer Experience	Percent	N
1	Pride in being a worker	37.2	308
2	Assigned work	28.6	237
3	Other Red Cross volunteers	14.7	122
4	Personal satisfaction	5.3	72
5	Red Cross staff	3.6	49
6	Non-Red Cross staff	1.3	17
7	Non-Red Cross volunteers	1.1	15
8	Red Cross training	0.6	8

Table 8

The Extent to Which Skills Acquired During the Red Cross Experience Contributed to Other Career Events for 1,349 Red Cross Volunteers

Other Career Events	Means	S.D.	N
Develop new interests	3.15	0.84	705
Accept other volunteer jobs	2.66	1.11	563
Secure paid job	2.20	1.30	509
Make career decisions	2.19	1.16	485
Return to school	1.64	1.01	455
None of the above*			257

\* The "other" category resulted in very little additional information; 1-6 people checked the addition aspects as having been derived from their Red Cross experience: gained knowledge, helped to feel good about self, helped in caring for own children, just wanted to be helpful, reduced fear of giving blood, helped to stay in shape, gained confidence working with people, and learned to appreciate others.