

Research on Volunteerism: Researchers' Interests and Practitioners' Needs

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While research on voluntary associations and nonprofit organizations has never been stronger (Peterson, 1985), there is little information available that specifically addresses a need for research in volunteerism. What research is needed? What are the interests of potential researchers? In what areas is there the greatest agreement between research needs of volunteerism practitioners and the interests of those who might do the research? This article begins with the assumptions that practitioners have perceived research needs, potential researchers have specific areas of interest which they can identify, and there is sufficient agreement between the two groups to generate useful research projects. The Center for Volunteer Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, undertook a study in 1988 to test these assumptions.

The study was an outgrowth of a concern of the Resource Development Committee of the advisory council, Center for Volunteer Development. The committee, charged with a responsibility (among others) for finding funds which the Center could use for mini-grants, felt it could not approach potential funders until it had useful information about volunteerism research needs in Virginia and the availability of professionals interested in conducting such research.

A review of the literature was undertaken to learn if any scholar(s) had conducted a study which focused on volunteer research needs identification and the interests of potential researchers. None was found. Articles were found, however, in which the writers (Allen, 1983; Ellis, Peterson, Moyer,

Hodgkinson, Naylor, 1985) addressed the need for volunteerism research. None of the writers, other than Ellis, made a concentrated effort to identify major categories in which the research was needed. An Info Trac search and a review of appropriate selected abstracts, indices, working papers and books revealed no additional information that focused sufficiently on the concern to be of value to the researchers.

PURPOSE

The major purpose of the study was to determine the areas of agreement between perceived research needs of volunteerism practitioners and the interests of potential researchers. Answers to three questions were sought:

1. In what categories of information do volunteerism practitioners perceive a need for research?
2. What are the research interests of collegiate social science faculty members in regard to volunteerism?
3. In what categories of information is there greatest agreement between perceived research needs of practitioners and research interests of faculty?

METHODOLOGY

The study consisted of two phases: a mail survey to potential researchers in academic settings, and a hand-out survey to practitioners attending the 1988 Virginia Department of Volunteerism (DOV) conference.

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Phase I

A three-page survey was designed to determine the interests of a purposive sample of college faculty in conducting research on volunteerism. Only two questions were asked. The first dealt with the subject's current research on volunteerism (identification of any research underway and whether the research was funded or funds were being sought) and the second with the volunteerism research interests of the potential researcher.

To determine the interests of potential researchers, the question was asked "Would you consider conducting research on volunteerism if funds were available?" If the response was "yes," the researcher could then indicate an interest in as many of the 14 given research categories (with space provided for adding additional categories) as he or she desired. Each category was accompanied by subcategories which could be considered operational definitions. For example, the category "Black volunteerism" was operationally defined by these possible responses: types of organizations that attract Blacks and why, Black volunteerism patterns, Black volunteerism in traditionally non-Black organizations, and cultural uniquenesses that describe their helping patterns. Again, respondents could indicate an interest in as many subcategories as they wished. Additionally, space was provided for open response.

The categories listed on the survey form were influenced greatly by those outlined by Ellis (1985) as major topics of research need (who volunteers, motivation issues, overview subjects such as history of volunteers and international volunteerism, and organization related) and the operational questions for those topics. Ellis' work was basic for two reasons: (1) no other person has contributed the same type of information to the literature, and (2) she is a scholar and practitioner of volunteerism who has gained wide respect for her work, astuteness, and outstanding knowledge of what is needed in the field. The research questions Ellis asked were studied, and then choices of which to include were based on those most closely reflecting needs for information in Virginia as determined by assistance requested or questions asked the Center for Volunteer Development since its inception in 1981.

The target research group selected to receive the survey was the 222-member Virginia Social Science Association, a professional organization of social science faculty at the postsecondary level. This group was chosen because (1) traditionally, volunteerism research in academia has been conducted by social science educators, and (2) it provided a sample of convenience which was fairly representative of postsecondary institutions throughout the state.

Phase II

For this part of the study, information was gathered from practitioners attending the 1988 conference of the Virginia Department of Volunteerism. As with the subject group in Phase I, this group provided a sample of convenience. The primary reason it was chosen was because of the prohibitive difficulty and expense involved in obtaining a random sample. (No complete mailing list of volunteer practitioners exists in the state.) Additionally, it is felt that participants at the annual DOV conference represent the most diverse group of practitioners to assemble annually in the state. Analysis of the 1988 conference list of 474 people revealed that 51% were directors of volunteer programs within government agencies or public institutions, 28% were volunteers or directors of volunteer programs in volunteer associations, and 21% were volunteers or on-site directors of volunteers in corporate settings. The majority were paid directors.

The survey designed for use with the practitioners, and placed in the conference registration packets, was similar to the one sent to potential researchers. The first question was "In which of the following categories do you feel research is needed?" The same research categories and operational definitions offered as choices for the potential researchers were offered as choices for the practitioners. Again, space was provided for adding other categories or definitions under the given ones.

The second question dealt with the type of role the respondent was currently practicing in regard to volunteerism, *i.e.*, salaried coordinator, an unsalaried community volunteer, or unsalaried corporate volunteer. The final question asked "Would you be willing to work with one or more faculty

members in designing and carrying out a research project?"

FINDINGS

Research Interests of Social Science Faculty

Of the 76 faculty members or potential researchers who returned a survey (34.2% response), 47 indicated they would be interested in conducting research on volunteerism if funds were available, and three others indicated a possible interest. Seven additional faculty members were currently conducting volunteerism research projects, three of which were funded. One of these reported great difficulty in getting the research funded, whereas the other two said it had not been a problem. (One was funded through a university foundation grant, one from the Association of American Colleges, and one from the National Endowment for Humanities.) The other four faculty researchers were still seeking funds although the projects were underway.

Table I shows frequencies and the percentage of respondents interested and possibly interested in the given categories of research (rank ordered from greatest interest to least interest). In regard to the category "organizational issues," the largest number of faculty (19) expressed an interest in research related to measuring program effectiveness and retention of volunteers. Eighteen faculty were interested in research

on recruitment, followed by 25 expressions of interest in volunteer screening, 14 each in burnout and skills development or retraining, and 10 in organizational issues related to volunteer associations. The subcategory "legal issues" was also reported by eight respondents as an area of interest.

The category "gender patterns" drew an interest response from 28 of the respondents. The two major research interests were how changes in lifestyles or the economy affect male and female volunteer activities such as where, when, how much time, and roles (22 faculty); and whether men and women assume different volunteer roles because of their age. Interest areas added by respondents were types of agencies or programs that attract males/females, retired men as volunteers, and female volunteers in all-male settings (*e.g.*, prisons).

Those faculty who ranked "student volunteerism" (24) as a category of research interest were specifically interested in the types of organizations that would attract student volunteers and why (20 faculty), student volunteerism patterns (19 faculty), and unique terms that describe student helping patterns (14 faculty).

In regard to the category "motivational issues," the highest interest was expressed in motivational differences between salaried workers and volunteer workers; for the category "school volunteerism," it was the impact

Table I
Faculty Interest in Volunteerism (n=50)

Rank	Category of Interest	%*	Frequency
1	Organizational Issues	64	32
2	Gender Patterns	56	28
3	Student Volunteerism	48	24
4	Motivational Issues	42	21
5	School Volunteerism	40	20
6	Black Volunteerism	38	19
7	Low-Income Volunteerism	30	15
8	Criminal Justice Volunteerism	22	11
8	Asian Volunteerism	22	11
10	Funding	20	10
10	Board/Staff Relationships	20	10
10	Self-Help Networks	20	10
13	Native American Volunteerism	16	8
14	Hispanic Volunteerism	10	5

*Rounded to the nearest whole percent

of volunteer experiences on career choices of students; and for the research categories "Black volunteerism" and "low-income volunteerism," of greatest interest were the types of organizations that attract Blacks and those with low incomes as volunteers.

The highest reported research interest for the category "criminal justice volunteering" was alternative sentencing in volunteer settings; for "Asian volunteerism," cultural uniquenesses that describe their helping patterns; funding, charitable giving; board/staff relationships, role delineation; self-help networks, cooperatives for health care, housing, *etc.*; and for "Native American volunteerism" and "Hispanic volunteerism," types of organizations that attract these two groups and why, and their volunteerism patterns.

Categories of research interest reported by the researchers as open response were "volunteerism in Mennonite communities," "volunteer activities of the elderly," "relationship of marital status to volunteerism" (especially among young adults), "involvement of volunteers in community colleges," "impact of boards of trustees on Afro-American higher education," and "volunteers and the political process."

Perceived Research Needs of Practitioners

Fifty-three (11%) of the practitioners

returned the surveys. More than two-thirds of these classified themselves as salaried volunteer coordinators. Thirty-nine of the 53 people indicated a willingness to work with a faculty member in designing and carrying out a research project for which the practitioner felt a need and in which the researcher was interested. Table II shows in rank order from greatest to least interest the frequencies and percentages of respondents interested in given categories of research. Since a purpose of the study was to report categories in which practitioners perceived a need for research, all respondents are included, not just those who indicated a willingness to help with the research.

As shown in Table II, the highest percentage of practitioners perceived a need for research in the category "motivational issues." Within this category, 25 respondents expressed a need for research on the effects of stipends and other rewards, 23 felt the effect on motivation of length of time in leadership roles should be researched, and 22 perceived a need for research on motivational differences between salaried workers and volunteer workers. Open-ended responses indicated a perceived need for research on motivation of volunteers to accept leadership positions, and how differences in age, gender, socio-economic status, race, religion, *etc.*,

Table II
Practitioners' Perceived Research Needs (n=53)

Rank	Category of Interest	%*	Frequency
1	Motivational Issues	96	51
2	Organizational Issues	94	50
3	Low-Income Volunteerism	91	48
4	Gender Patterns	81	43
5	Student Volunteerism	77	41
6	Board/Staff Relationships	70	37
6	Funding	70	37
8	Black Volunteerism	66	35
8	Self-Help Networks	66	35
10	Criminal Justice Volunteerism	64	34
11	School Volunteerism	62	33
12	Asian Volunteerism	13	7
13	Hispanic Volunteerism	11	6
14	Native American Volunteerism	9	5

*Rounded to the nearest whole percent

affect motivation.

"Organizational issues" was also perceived by a high percentage of the practitioners as an area of research need. In this category, recruitment was reported as the area of greatest need (28 practitioners), and information on organizational issues of volunteer associations was perceived by the fewest number (6) as a research need. Responses also indicated that 26 practitioners perceived a need for research on tools for measuring effectiveness; 25, retention; 2 each on skills development/retraining and tools for screening volunteers; 20, corporate volunteerism; 19, burnout; 16, legal issues; and 12, volunteerism in civic groups. Open-ended responses indicated a perceived need for research on developing ownership of/commitment to program goals; professionalism (*e.g.*, standards and certification), and communication between co-equal and interdependent departments and committees.

Low-income volunteerism was also seen by practitioners as an area of great research need, particularly in regard to the types of organizations that attract low-income volunteers and why (29 practitioners), volunteerism patterns of those with low incomes (28), and the unique terms that describe

their helping patterns (21). In regard to the category "gender patterns," the greatest perceived research need was on how economic and lifestyle changes affect the volunteer activities of males and females.

Table II shows that a high percentage of the practitioners perceived a need for research in all given categories except Asian, Hispanic, and Native American volunteerism. The lack of high interest in those three categories is undoubtedly due to the fact that Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans account for a relatively low percentage of the population in Virginia. Volunteerism among the Black population, which accounts for about 19% of Virginia's population, was perceived, however, as an area of research need by 35 of the practitioners.

In the category "student volunteerism," the greatest expressions of research need were in regard to patterns of volunteering (26 practitioners) and the types of organizations that attract student volunteers and why (25). Role delineation was seen as the primary research need (24) in the category "board/staff relationships." In regard to the category "funding," charitable giving was perceived by 25 practitioners to be an area of research need; for "self-help networks," it was cooperatives for various causes (24);

Table III
Comparison of Rankings Between Faculty Interest in Volunteerism and Practitioners' Perceived Research Needs

Category of Interest	Researchers'		Practitioners'	
	Ranking (n=50)	%	Ranking (n=53)	%
Organizational Issues	1	64	2	94
Gender Patterns	2	56	4	81
Student Volunteerism	3	48	5	77
Motivational Issues	4	42	1	96
School Volunteerism	5	40	9	62
Black Volunteerism	6	38	7	66
Low-Income Volunteerism	7	30	3	91
Criminal Justice Volunteerism	8	22	8	64
Asian Volunteerism	8	22	10	13
Funding	10	20	6	70
Board/Staff Relationships	10	20	6	70
Self-Help Networks	10	20	7	66
Native American Volunteerism	13	16	12	9
Hispanic Volunteerism	14	10	11	9

Practitioners

Figure 1

Interest in Motivational Issues Indicated by Practitioners and Faculty Researchers

"criminal justice volunteerism," alternative sentencing in volunteer settings (21); and, "school volunteerism," the impact of volunteer experiences on career choices of students (17).

Research Categories of Greatest Agreement Among Researchers and Practitioners

When one compares the interests of faculty in volunteerism research with the perceived needs of practitioners for research (Table III), it is readily apparent that more than 50% of the practitioners perceived a need for research in all of the given categories except three, whereas only the first two categories listed received an expression of interest from more than 50% of the faculty researchers. Three of the same categories are rank ordered four or above in both Tables I and II, although the rank orders are not parallel. These data indicate that the categories of greatest research agreement among researchers and practitioners are "organizational issues," "motiva-

tional issues," and "gender patterns."

After the researchers' interests were compared with perceived needs of practitioners, a grid was developed for each given category of research so agreement between individual researchers' interests and the perceived research needs of individual practitioners could be identified and studied. It is important to note that only those practitioners (n=39) who indicated a willingness to assist faculty with research were included in this analysis.

On the grid, for each category of research, the names of practitioners willing to help faculty with research were listed on the horizontal axis, and the names of all faculty researchers on the vertical axis. Whenever both the researcher and the practitioner were interested in a given category, the appropriate intersection on the grid was marked. For instance, one can see in the example illustrating the interest in motivational issues (Figure 1) that all practitioners but one were interested in research

Table IV
Possible Research Combinations Between Researchers and Practitioners

Rank	Category of Interest	Researchers (n=50)	Practitioners (n=39)	Possible Research Combinations
1	Organizational Issues	32	37	1184
2	Motivational Issues	22	38	836
3	Gender Patterns	26	30	780
4	Student Volunteerism	24	31	744
5	Low-Income Volunteerism	15	33	495
6	Black Volunteerism	19	26	494
7	School Volunteerism	22	24	480
8	Self-Help Networks	14	25	350
9	Criminal Justice Volunteerism	11	26	286
10	Funding	11	25	275
11	Board/Staff Relationships	9	30	270
12	Asian Volunteerism	11	6	66
13	Hispanic Volunteerism	5	5	25
14	Native American Volunteerism	8	3	24

on motivation, whereas only 22 of the researchers were interested. A count of the marked intersections reveals 836 possible research combinations if one considers the given category only. (Consideration of sub-categories would result in fewer possible combinations.) This means that any one of the 22 researchers could be paired with any one (or possibly more) of the 39 practitioners for a research project. The count, carried out for each category, was useful to show quickly in which categories lay the greatest possible research combinations. Table IV shows that the greatest possibilities (number of marked intersections = 1,184) occurred for the category "organizational issues" and the least (number of marked intersections = 24) for the category "Native American Volunteerism."

No grids were prepared for the subcategories or operational definitions for each given category, yet within these lie the most crucial information for pairing researchers and practitioners for research. A computerized relational database is being established, however, that will provide this additional information. Names, institutions or organizations, addresses, phone numbers and interests (categories and subcategories) of researchers and practitioners will be

entered. This database will allow precise matches for cooperative work to be made quickly as funds become available.

SUMMARY

This study indicates that the practitioners who responded to the survey perceive a need for research in many given categories related to volunteerism. It also shows that social science faculty have an interest in research on volunteerism and would be willing to conduct joint research projects with practitioners if money were available. Additionally, the study shows strong agreement in several categories between the perceived research needs of volunteerism practitioners and the interests of faculty researchers. Strong agreement is said to exist where there are the greatest number of possibilities for joint research projects. By this definition, the strongest agreements exist in the categories "organizational issues," "motivational issues," "gender patterns" and "student volunteerism." The agreements for all other categories, nonetheless, with the exception of Asian, Hispanic, and Native American Volunteerism, are also high.

It is reasonable to conclude that the Center for Volunteer Development could

initiate a great deal of research if funds were available. In light of practical considerations, however, it will probably fund only four or five projects in the near future. Already the results of this study have helped the advisory council secure funds for these studies. The results will further determine the nature of the studies and who will do the research. Preliminary work has shown the (1) some faculty and practitioners have left the positions they were in when they completed the survey, (2) some faculty are interested in grants larger than those the Center can make available, and (3) geographic proximity is a problem for some pairs of researchers and practitioners, as is finding a common time to work on the research project.

The sample populations for this study were nonrandom and nonrepresentative, and the results should be viewed in light of these limitations. They do, however, raise questions that call for continued research into what research is needed, and who will and can do it. The findings also add to the continuing discussion regarding availability of funds for volunteerism research. From where will they come? There are virtually no grant funds available for research in a field of action that doesn't fit neatly into some prescribed academic discipline (Allen, 1983). Probably the best approach to funding is for practitioners and researchers to define clearly a research agenda for volunteerism and then seek funds based on it. This seems imperative as volunteer organizations look toward the coming decade and the projection that they will be called upon to serve increasing numbers of people and with fewer resources to do it, at least from governmental bodies.

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