

AGRICULTURAL AND EXTENSION EDUCATION VOLUNTEERS: CRUCIAL STAKEHOLDERS

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Abstract

Shrinking budgets, competition for non-mandated government funds, organizational downsizing, changing agricultural context, and a need to embrace increasing clientele promote the consideration of revisiting the importance and contributions of organizational volunteers. Increasing vertical integration of agricultural enterprises and fewer professionals because of downsizing to provide education or services to many audiences contribute to this view. Suggested new roles of volunteers are those of advocacy and doing what other agency personnel have done in the past. The present study was a descriptive survey of Extension volunteers in one state. Major results depict the typical volunteer for this study to be a married, white female who is over 50 years of age, a college graduate, above average income, and no children at home. Major reasons for volunteering included: personal satisfaction, building friendships, use one's knowledge base, and about one-in-three of the volunteers had volunteered to deal with a pressing community issue. Volunteers reported that they contributed on the average one hundred hours, their perception of monetary value of their service was \$1,700 per year, they had received 24 hours of training, and had been volunteers for an average of ten years. The major activity that the volunteers reported for the past year was "extending information" to someone through group instruction or one-on-one delivery. Recruitment of volunteers and roles that they play may need to be revisited in the context of globalization and privatization. A key element in recruiting volunteers worldwide may be to match an individual's interest with community issues where the volunteer's major role would be one of advocacy.

Introduction

Agricultural and extension educators have a plethora of opportunities and threats that will impact most extension programs around the world. Concentrated population growth in many urban areas has stretched the resources and capacity of educators in terms of both program content and delivery strategies. Many urbanized areas have limited agricultural pursuits in terms of traditional agricultural production. In fact, the major agricultural enterprise in these areas is urban horticulture. Hundreds of daily requests, for help with yard and plant problems, have crippled extension programs where, previously, emphasis has been placed on one-on-one personal visits by the educator. Coupled with hundreds of requests for assistance has been the need to “recover costs” particularly with reference to educational materials. Shrinking budgets, downsizing staff, and limited knowledge of “agriculture” have serious consequences for maintaining non-formal educational programs in the future.

In rural areas where traditional agricultural enterprises may still flourish, there are as many problems as in urban areas. Traditional agricultural enterprises may experience a ratio of educators to clientele which is too high to warrant continued funding. Increasing vertical integration of some enterprises may also decrease the need for highly specialized educators but leave an unmet need for trained personnel to serve limited-resource and small-scale producers.

One response to both the urban and rural contexts has been the need to revisit the role and importance of volunteers in responding to clientele needs and community issues.

Background

The stakeholders for agricultural and extension education programs have emerged as crucial players at the beginning of this new century. Many agricultural and extension programs have to compete with mandated programs, such as public education and social services, to be funded. Coupled with this competition for program resources are diminishing interest in traditional agriculture and, perhaps, new definitions of “agriculture” and “volunteer” around the world.

In many parts of the world, agriculture is a large-scale enterprise, and both the number of farms and farmers has rapidly decreased. It is difficult to compete with vertically-integrated and well-funded agricultural enterprises. As agricultural and extension educators plan and implement programs, perhaps for the agricultural producers left behind, volunteers have major roles to play in the new agricultural system.

There are numerous definitions of “what is a volunteer”? Cnaan et al. (1996), in a detailed review of literature, proposed a four-dimensional perspective on describing a volunteer. They proposed four common dimensions: (1) the volunteer nature of the activity, (2) the nature of rewards, (3) context under which the volunteer works, and (4) who benefits from the volunteer activities. Dancy and Wynn-Dancy (1995) contend that the success of the volunteer may lie in their abilities to empathize, empower, and engage. Cnaan and Cascio (1999) believe that the best volunteer is one who genuinely wants to volunteer; the weakest volunteer is the one assigned or recruited for an activity. Results from the Human Ecology Forum (Moen, 1998) depict the successful volunteer as one who has opportunities to learn, can use talents in a meaningful way, can grow in leadership, is stimulated by new experiences, and who can make friends.

Purpose

The primary purposes of this paper are to: identify characteristics of contemporary volunteers, document reasons for volunteering, describe what they do for the organization, describe the volunteers’ perceptions of

their impacts, and indicate what were rewarding experiences for the volunteer.

For some time, there has been an assumption that volunteering as a process is the same process in both rural and urban areas. Halpert (1988) concluded that the key to developing a successful volunteer model in rural areas is to recognize and capitalize on the components of rural cultures which make the rural area different from urban areas. In fact, Therivel calls for a new “volunteerism”. The new volunteer is portrayed as: (1) a citizen advocate, (2) one who has a supplemental function of providing services which previously had been provided by some government agency, (3) one who models the new forms of assistance in educational programs, and (4) one who is in continuous training to be prepared.

Methods

This study was a descriptive survey of individuals who had been identified by a local Cooperative Extension Center (101 in North Carolina) as performing some task/function for the local center. Local extension centers were asked to provide a listing of all volunteers for the past year with addresses. The total number of volunteers in the state was 74,357. Local extension centers reported numbers of volunteers from 58 to over 10,000. The local centers were grouped by number of volunteers and 14 counties were selected randomly by strata to participate in the study. Individuals sampled in a county ranged from 50 to 300. A total of 3,500 surveys were mailed to selected individuals. Seven hundred thirty-four surveys were returned because of incorrect address or addressees had moved. Of the remaining 2,766 delivered surveys, there were 760 questionnaires returned for a response rate of 27.5 percent. There were 204 questionnaires discarded because the majority of the questionnaire was blank. Data described in this paper are for 556 respondents. In an attempt to follow-up on the low response rate, two factors emerged. Individuals reported the questionnaire was too long and local extension personnel did not encourage individuals to respond. At the time of writing this paper, the major analytical technique has been to summarize descriptively the data with measures of central tendency and dispersion.

Results

Who Volunteers?

The mean age of volunteer respondents was 55.9 years. Approximately two-fifths (42.2 percent) of the respondents were sixty years of age and over (Table 1). The majority of the volunteers were female (72.7 percent) and predominantly white (85.6 percent). Most of the respondents were married (75.7 percent), and the majority of the individuals were college graduates or higher (52.2 percent). Three-fifths of the respondents (63.5 percent) had no children in the household and the median household annual income was between forty and sixty thousand dollars. It appears that the typical volunteer for this study was a white female, older than 50 years, a college graduate, married with no children at home, and who had an income greater than the average citizen of the state.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Volunteers

Age	Number	%			
			50-59	103	20.2
Less than 30 years	16	3.1	60-69	109	21.4
30-39	45	8.9	70+	106	20.8
40-49	131	25.6	Total	510	100.0

Gender			Some college	165	30.6
Male	152	27.3	College graduate	130	24.1
Female	390	72.7	Graduate work	152	28.1
Total	542	100.0	Total	540	100.0
Ethnic Background			Number of children		
African-American	35	6.6	1-2	342	63.5
White	457	85.6	3+	161	29.9
Others	41	7.8	Total	36	6.6
Total	534	100.0		539	100.0
Marital Status			Total annual income		
Single	29	5.6	Less than \$20,000	60	12.9
Married	392	75.7	20,000-39,999	119	25.6
Educational Attainment			40,000-59,999	109	23.4
High school graduate or less	93	17.2	60,000-99,999	111	23.9
Divorced/separated	32	6.1	100,000+	66	14.2
Widowed	65	12.6	Total	465	100.0
Total	518	100.0			

Characteristics of Volunteering

Only three-fourths (75.5 percent) of the respondents reported that they were volunteers for the organization (Table 2). These individuals volunteered for more than one program area. Approximately one-half of the volunteers had performed some function for both 4-H and agricultural programs (48.7 and 50.0 percent respectively). About one-tenth (10.3 percent) of the individuals reported that they were members of other agencies that worked with Extension programs.

The reason reported most frequently for volunteering was personal satisfaction (66.7 percent) followed by building friendships (59.7 percent). It is interesting to note that about two-fifths (43.2 percent) of the respondents reported that they volunteered to use their knowledge base while two-fifths (40.8 percent) reported they volunteered in order to gain skills. About one-in-three of the respondents (33.3 percent) reported that they were recruited as volunteers. Of equal interest is that 31.5 percent of the respondents reported that they were volunteering to meet the expectations of another group. Approximately one-fourth (27.7 percent) of the volunteers indicated that they were volunteering to deal with a pressing community issue.

What Do Volunteers Do for the Organization?

For the past year, the average amount of time volunteered was 109.3 hours. The volunteer reported an average of 24.3 hours of training. They estimated their total dollar value of their volunteer activity last year was \$1701. Approximately three-fourths (75.3 percent) of the volunteers reported that they had volunteered for the same number of hours or more hours than in the past year. The average time that the volunteer had performed some volunteer function was for 10.1 years. The majority of the respondents reported that their major function was "extending information" to some public. The primary techniques for extending information by the volunteers was through group instruction or one-on-one coaching/ sharing (Table 3).

Approximately two-thirds (68.5 percent) of the volunteers reported their major activities to be helping to complete tasks such as supervising other volunteers, coordinating events, marshalling public support, providing funds/facilities, and etc. Slightly more than one-half (56.1 percent) of the respondents indicated that their major function was advising Extension by serving on boards, committees, and advisory groups. Approximately one-eighth (13.8 percent) of volunteers reported major functions to be working on community projects or other major work efforts.

Table 2. Characteristics of Volunteering

Volunteer status	Number	%		
yes	420	75.5		
no	94	16.9		
not sure	42	7.6		
Total	556	100.0		
Program Area			Reasons for Volunteering	
4-H	271	48.7	Personal satisfaction	371 66.7
Family/Consumer Science	219	39.4	Build friendships	332 59.7
Ag/Natural Resources	279	50.0	Meet expectations of	
CRD	53	9.5	a group	175 31.5
Volunteers from other			Develop new interests	156 28.1
agencies	57	10.3	Deal with pressing	
Extension Advisory			community issues	154 27.7
Leadership system	71	12.8	Gain skills	227 40.8
Miscellaneous	80	14.4	Become certified to	
			perform tasks	104 18.7
			Recruited	185 33.3
			Use my knowledge	240 43.2
			Miscellaneous reasons	143 25.7
How Individual Learned of Volunteer Opportunity				
Recruited	210	37.8	Through participation in	
Family member involved	107	19.2	another group	91 16.4
Family member who			Mass media	51 9.2
benefited	68	12.2	Sought opportunity on own	67 12.1
Other means	31	5.8		
Don't remember or know	14	2.5		

Perceived Impacts of Volunteering

Study respondents reported that their volunteering had brought about change in individuals and their communities (Table 3). Impacts identified included: increasing the self esteem and skills of others, increasing attendance and participation at activities, increasing the number of programs for diverse community groups, increased visibility for the organization, providing more opportunities in the community, and helping others to accomplish their goals. The primary outcome that respondents reported as impacts for themselves was learning new skills.

Rewarding Experiences for Volunteers

Volunteers reported that examples of their most rewarding experiences in volunteering included: conducting programs, seeing youth succeed, helping others, seeing children benefit, helping people with problems, making a difference in someone's life, seeing young farmers succeed, and sharing knowledge and skills. They also reported rewarding experiences for themselves to be: learning skills, meeting new friends, and working with neighbors.

Table 3. Time and Outcomes of Volunteering

Activities	Number	%
Extending information	444	79.9
Community projects	77	13.8
Completing tasks	381	68.5
Advising	312	56.1

Perceived impacts of volunteering

- Increased public awareness of agriculture
- Fostered need to preserve farmland
- Children learned skills
- Positive intervention for children
- Increased attendance at activities
- Increased programs for elderly
- More opportunities for youth
- Helped others accomplish goals
- Nurtured others
- Learned new skills
- Increased funding for youth programs
- Enhanced organizational visibility
- Increased self esteem of others

Most rewarding outcomes of volunteering

Youth advancement	Seeing children benefit
Conducting programs	Success of young farmers
Pride in seeing others succeed	Meeting new friends
Helping others	Working with neighbors
Learning skills	Helping people with problems
Sharing knowledge and skills	Making a difference in someone's life

Educational Importance

There is no doubt that agricultural and extension educators must envision volunteers as both stakeholders and program collaborators in formal and non formal educational endeavors in the coming decades. In many urban areas around the world traditional agriculture in the form of row crops is being replaced with rapidly increasing consumer horticulture programs. Also, there has been an increase in the number of volunteers in rural areas. Agricultural and extension educators must encompass the rural culture in recruiting and retaining volunteers and also must collaborate with urban volunteers in embracing new functions of citizen advocacy and volunteers staffing and delivering services that other agencies had done in the past.

Agricultural and extension educators around the world need to examine the need for a rural model of volunteerism and prepare volunteers for advocacy and program delivery functions.

Three issues for agricultural and extension educators to address include: (1) recruitment of volunteers for specific roles and functions; (2) training volunteers where agriculture and volunteerism are being re-defined; and (3) careful assignment of volunteers based on their motivation, level of skills, and opportunities for volunteers to experience professional growth and enjoyment of volunteer activities.

Has the concept of volunteer changed over time? Culp (1996, p. 44) concluded that, in a study of Indiana 4-H volunteers, the profile of a typical volunteer in 1994 “was remarkably similar to profiles of other 4-H and youth organizational volunteers from across the United States since 1950.” Results from a Gallup survey in 1994 portray the typical volunteer as female, high educational attainment, married, high household income, and in households with a number of children.

What can we say from this survey? The typical volunteer was similar to the preceding profiles with the exception of having more children in the household. Study respondents did report interest in advocating for community issues, felt they were providing services that had been previously provided by another agency, did perceive that they assisted in providing programs that would not have happened, and had a moderate amount of training. While Culp (1996) and others advocate recruiting by examining factors that are most likely to lead to volunteering, perhaps the future global position is to recruit by issue or cause such as farmland preservation, safe communities, quality of child care, etc.

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