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Value of Assessing Personal, Organizational, and Community Impacts of Extension Volunteer Programs

Rebecca Harrington

University of Minnesota, willi107@umn.edu

Tillie Good

Iowa State University, tbgood@iastate.edu

Kandi O'Neil

University of Wisconsin-Madison, kandi.oneil@wisc.edu

Samantha Grant

University of Minnesota, samgrant@umn.edu

Sarah Maass

Kansas State University, semaass@k-state.edu

See next page for additional authors



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Cover Page Footnote

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Authors

Rebecca Harrington, Tillie Good, Kandi O'Neil, Samantha Grant, Sarah Maass, Rachelle Vettern, and Patricia McGlaughlin

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REBECCA HARRINGTON¹, TILLIE GOOD², KANDI O'NEIL³, SAMANTHA GRANT¹,
SARAH MAASS⁴, RACHELLE VETTERN⁵, AND PATRICIA MCGLAUGHLIN⁶

AUTHORS: ¹University of Minnesota. ²Iowa State University. ³University of Wisconsin-Madison. ⁴Kansas State University. ⁵North Dakota State University. ⁶University of Illinois.

Abstract. Extension volunteers demonstrate personal, organizational, and community benefits. Our group of Extension professionals in the North Central Region applied these three levels of benefit to gather quantitative and qualitative data in a comprehensive evaluation of volunteer impact. Survey responses were received from 2,978 4-H youth development volunteers in 12 states. A mixed-methods approach, such as the one we used, can provide Extension professionals with evidence to communicate the value of volunteer programs and improve their practice in volunteer systems management.

INTRODUCTION

Extension relies on volunteers to design and deliver educational programs (Boyd, 2004; Vines & Anderson, 1976). Volunteer contributions make significant impacts on Extension as an organization and on the volunteers' communities. Volunteers also personally benefit from volunteering. The importance of their contributions, along with the level of staff investment required for managing volunteer systems, warrant application of time and resources to conduct an evaluation of volunteer program impact. Safrit (2012) asserted this:

Evaluation is critical, if not *the most* critical, component of managing an overall volunteer program and subsequently documenting the impact and ultimate value of the program to the target clientele it is designed to serve as well as the larger society in which it operates. (pp. 389–390)

In a review of evaluation studies published in the *Journal of Extension*, Workman and Scheer (2012) affirmed that we must document more than Extension participant numbers. Extension professionals must seek higher evidence of impact that shows change in practice and benefits to the community. Our ability to measure and evaluate the impact of volunteers can lead to additional support of volunteer programs and better programs (Adams et al., 2016; Meier, 2012). Providing relevant data to decision makers is important to build and maintain the support of Extension volunteer programs.

Extension professionals who serve as volunteer administrators can apply findings to improve volunteer systems management practices that lead to stronger programs.

Franz et al. (2014) called for a holistic approach to evaluation that considers both the private (direct to users) and public (indirect to nonusers) value of Extension programs. A number of studies have illustrated that volunteering benefits the individual and the organization for which a person volunteers. Specifically, volunteers have reported personal growth, increased self-confidence, knowledge and skills gained, and satisfaction when influencing the organization's mission (Adams et al., 2016; Grant et al., 2020; Larson Nippolt et al., 2012; Lough et al., 2009). As well, organizations benefit from engaged volunteers who help fulfill their missions and positively affect program recipients (Grant et al., 2020, Larson Nippolt et al., 2012; Lough et al., 2009).

However, Franz et al. (2014) noted that we in Extension fail to gather evidence of the public value of most programs, which would contribute to comprehensive evaluation. Extension program staff have a responsibility to demonstrate public benefit because of public funding they receive (Kalambokidis, 2011). There is a lack of literature documenting the combined value of volunteering with Extension programs to the volunteer, organization, and community.

Extension professionals can use a comprehensive evaluation approach, which includes volunteer impact, to improve their volunteer systems and practices. According to Adams et al. (2016) measuring volunteer impact can lead

to strategic changes that improve the volunteer program to grow the organization’s capacity.

Our research team designed the North Central Region 4-H Volunteer Impact Study to document the impact of volunteering on three levels: personal, organizational, and community. We gathered both quantitative and qualitative data to determine impact. According to Safrit (2012), “both types of data are important in documenting impact of volunteer programs” (p. 396). The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods often results in richer, more powerful, and more comprehensive data (Edwards et al., 2019; Garbarino & Holland, 2009).

We focused on the impact of volunteering with the 4-H youth development program in a 12-state region. Administering the study across states allowed for a broader study scope with a larger sample size. The study addressed the growing need to demonstrate impact by using data to tell the story of the private and public value of volunteers (Fruchterman, 2016). Using a study model that allows for gathering quantitative and qualitative data to examine multiple levels of volunteer impact has implications for advancing the assessment of Extension’s volunteer programs. All Extension professionals can use what we learned to undertake similar studies and articulate the volunteer impact to a number of stakeholder groups: existing and potential volunteers, Extension staff, Extension administrators, and public decision makers.

METHOD

MEASURE

We developed an online survey to measure (a) personal benefits 4-H volunteers reported gaining from their volunteer service, (b) organizational benefits 4-H volunteers have provided to Extension programs through their activities, and (c) public value to communities resulting from activities of 4-H volunteers. We defined the personal and organizational benefits indicators using a mix of past research studies, past evaluation efforts, and national and state 4-H logic models and volunteerism expertise of members of our team. To further define public value for our study, we worked with Dr. Nancy Franz, who is known for her work in the area of public value, to operationalize four main areas: stronger communities, better connected communities, improved health of communities, and increased civic involvement. We tested the validity of the survey instrument by having existing 4-H volunteers take the survey. Revisions were made on the basis of their feedback.

An introduction to each section provided the context we wanted the volunteers to consider when responding to the question set. The survey included 59 multiple-choice items, yes-no questions, Likert-scale-response items, and open-ended questions. For Likert scale responses, volunteers rated their level of agreement with each statement on a 1 to 4 scale as 1 (*not true*), 2 (*somewhat true*), 3 (*true*), or 4 (*very true*). Cronbach’s alpha for scaled items was 0.95.

Table 1. Sample Questions for Measuring Personal Benefits

After volunteering with 4-H...	Not true	Somewhat true	True	Very true	Not applicable
I built new relationships with youth.	<input type="radio"/>				
I was a caring adult for youth.	<input type="radio"/>				
I increased my ability to lead meetings.	<input type="radio"/>				
I increased my confidence as a leader.	<input type="radio"/>				
I increased my knowledge in a specific content area(s).	<input type="radio"/>				
I helped youth develop leadership skills.	<input type="radio"/>				
I learned how to think from diverse perspectives.	<input type="radio"/>				
I made a difference in the lives of youth.	<input type="radio"/>				
I positively impacted the community in which I live.	<input type="radio"/>				
I gained skills I can use when I volunteer in other settings.	<input type="radio"/>				

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The personal benefits section focused on what volunteers reported as their benefits to volunteering with 4-H. Volunteers were asked to rate how true statements were on the basis of their personal experience. The benefits were organized around their experience, leadership, content knowledge, positive youth development, skill transfer to other settings, and impact on young people and their community (Table 1).

The extent to which 4-H volunteers directly affected the organization was assessed. We asked about time spent planning and working directly with youth, frequency of volunteering, and benefits to the program and youth (Table 2 and Table 3).

Because Extension is a public system, we were interested in the impact volunteering with Extension had on the greater community (Table 4).

Contact Samantha Grant, samgrant@umn.edu, regarding the full survey instrument.

SAMPLE

Twelve participating states sent enrollment records of their 2017–2018 4-H adult volunteers to Samantha Grant, the principal investigator. She randomly selected a sample size of 1,000 volunteers from each state. This sample size was calculated to create a 95% confidence level for avoiding sampling error (Reisman, 2000). We oversampled volunteers choosing non-White racial categories or Hispanic ethnicity to attempt to gather feedback from diverse 4-H volunteers. For most states, the diverse volunteer sample was not more

than 100 volunteers, so in sum, volunteers representing racial and ethnic diversity made up about 10% of the sample.

PARTICIPANTS

Of the 12,000 volunteers invited to take part in the study, 2,978 volunteers completed the electronic survey, for a 25% response rate. Participants identified their race as White (93%), other combinations (3%), Black (1%), Asian (1%), and American Indian (1%); 2% were undetermined. Ninety-six percent of volunteers described their ethnicity as non-Hispanic; 4% identified their ethnicity as Hispanic. Volunteer roles were widely variable, as states categorized roles in different ways. “4-H club leader” and “project/activity volunteer” were the most common responses. Volunteer length of service varied, with 7% having volunteered 1 year, 32% 2–5 years, 24% 6–10 years, and 37% 11 or more years.

PROCEDURE

The volunteers received an electronic survey through Qualtrics, an online survey platform. Samantha Grant served as the point of contact and was the only individual with access to identifiable data.

We used the tailored design method (Dillman, 2007) for the electronic survey in an attempt to increase survey responses. Specifically, we used an introductory email message to alert volunteers of their selection as a survey participant and to emphasize the importance of the evaluation. We also sent a personalized survey message with the first survey link

Table 2. Sample Questions for Measuring Organizational Benefits by Contributing Time and Resources

	Yes, I've done this	No, I haven't done this	NA
I taught youth new skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I recruited new volunteers to 4-H.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I solicited donations on behalf of 4-H.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I spoke about the value of the 4-H program.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have volunteered for other Extension programs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Table 3. Sample Questions for Measuring Organizational Benefits by Helping Youth Gain Vital Skills

	Not true	Somewhat true	True	Very true
Volunteers help make youth ready for future careers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Volunteers help youth improve their decision making skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Volunteers help youth serve their communities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Volunteers help to build youth leadership skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Table 4. Sample Questions for Measuring Public Value

	Not true	Somewhat true	True	Very true
Volunteering with 4-H makes communities stronger.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Volunteering with 4-H contributes to better connected communities (improved community networks; expanded or deepened social, personal, and/or professional connections).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Volunteering with 4-H improves the health of communities (promoting physical and mental well-being of youth and adults in the community).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Volunteering with 4-H contributes to increased civic involvement (involvement in organizational or community decision making, voicing opinions to civic leaders).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

and two personalized reminder emails over a 4-week period to volunteers who had not completed the survey.

DATA ANALYSIS

It was important for our team to hear the voices of volunteers through both quantitative and qualitative responses. We analyzed quantitative data using frequency analyses. To analyze the significant amount of qualitative data, we participated in a data jam led by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension. A data jam is designed to build capacity in using digital tools to analyze qualitative data and to “produce concrete write-ups, models, initial theories, and visualizations through collaboration” (Schmeider et al., 2018, The Data Jam Initiative section, para. 2). Using multiple reviewers to analyze qualitative data was methodologically stronger because we could mitigate our biases (Schmeider et al., 2018).

The anchor question that guided our qualitative analysis was this: “As a result of being an Extension volunteer, how are communities impacted?” Using our anchor question, we generated and defined an initial set of codes. We used MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2017) as our qualitative data analysis software package to organize, annotate, and sort the qualitative data (Schmeider et al., 2018).

Our team analyzed 25 unique responses from each state, for a total of 300 responses per question for overall analysis. We ensured each respondent was included at least once in the qualitative analysis. We established a pattern of coding a question, reflecting on the data, identifying potential new codes, and writing initial findings related to the themes. This method of constant comparison analysis as adapted by Lincoln and Guba (1985) allowed us to revisit data after initial coding until it was clear that no new themes were emerging. We developed anchor examples and notes for each code to create consistency in their use.

RESULTS

Our research team published another article (Grant et al., 2020) that discussed the personal and organizational benefits of volunteering in youth development organizations. We will repeat some data and provide additional data to illustrate the value of assessing personal, organizational and community benefits resulting from volunteering with Extension programs. Herein we share most frequent quantitative and qualitative responses for each level of value.

PERSONAL BENEFITS

Volunteers benefited from their service in many ways. The most frequent ways they indicated were that they were a caring adult for youths (96%), they had fun (95%), and they built new relationships with youths (92%). Analysis of the qualitative data revealed two top areas of personal benefit: (a) volunteers gained skills that can be used in other settings and (b) they further developed their interpersonal skills. One volunteer said, “I think my experience with 4-H volunteering has made me a better person in all other settings.” Another said, “The main reason I got my current job is because of my experience in 4-H. My ability to guide 4-H meeting[s] made me able to facilitate classes and programs in my current position.”

ORGANIZATIONAL BENEFITS

The extent to which 4-H volunteers directly affected the organization was assessed. Volunteers reported that they contributed time and resources to the Extension program. A majority (63%) volunteered with 4-H between one and three times per month. On average, 4-H volunteers spent 9 hr a month volunteering.

4-H youth development programs aim to be a place where young people learn, lead, and build meaningful

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connections with adults. 4-H volunteers advanced this mission by teaching and mentoring youths and helping them gain valuable skills such as leadership (98%), giving back to the community (98%), decision making (97%), and career readiness (96%).

Volunteers shared qualitative examples of how they benefited 4-H and Extension. They served as liaisons between the 4-H youth development program and community partners. One of the most frequently mentioned benefits to the organization identified by volunteers was their ability to connect other organizations with Extension and make new connections in the community on behalf of 4-H. One volunteer noted, “Because 4-H involves several connected but separate groups . . . having people cross into multiple groups helps all groups learn and leverage the skills and focus of each individual group.” Volunteers raised awareness with nonprofits, businesses, civic organizations, and other stakeholders about Extension’s youth program. For example, one volunteer reported doing this by making people in the community “aware [of] the importance of youth growing into caring adults and [being] willing to give back to their communities.”

PUBLIC BENEFITS

Because Extension is a public system, we were interested in the impact volunteering with Extension had on the greater community. 4-H volunteers responded positively that they made communities stronger (92%), linked communities through improved social and professional connections (89%), improved the physical and mental health of communities (81%), and increased civic involvement (78%).

The qualitative data, where volunteers shared examples, showed that the public benefited when 4-H volunteers provided service to communities. Volunteers described how they used skills they gained as 4-H volunteers with other community-based organizations. One stated, “4-H volunteers never seem to be involved in only 4-H. They are out in the community taking part in other volunteer activities and encouraging their 4-H members to pay it forward also.” Volunteers shared how they leveraged financial resources to support local needs. One example was “working with the community advocating for our youth...It has been meaningful doing fundraising for local charities and helping students learn the importance of community.” The public also benefited when volunteers took active leadership roles in their communities. A volunteer gave this example, “When our community held a forum to find out how the community could improve, 4-H volunteers were some of the first people asked to participate; they are seen as important as school leaders, government leaders and church leaders.” They also talked about the value of networking in their communities, with one respondent stating, “The volunteers are working to link the community projects with 4-Her’s [*sic*] to provide

community connection for the members and to provide resources to the communities.”

DISCUSSION

Identifying personal, organizational, and community benefits results in a comprehensive view of the contributions of Extension volunteers. Using a mixed-methods approach provides evidence that can be used for communicating the value of volunteer programs to stakeholders and for improving staff practice in volunteer systems management.

COMMUNICATING VALUE

Possessing volunteer impact data allows for developing communication messages that can be tailored to a number of audiences, including potential and existing volunteers, government officials, Extension professionals, and Extension administrators. For each group, identifying key messages, channels for sharing the information, and the call to action or behavior change can lead to desired results. As an example, pairing volunteer images with study impact quotes can be effective in a social media recruitment campaign targeting potential volunteers.

Volunteers add value to their communities. They extend the reach of programs and give their time and resources to programs, leveraging the public dollars invested in Extension. Sharing these data-based public value messages with local and state government officials can leverage the financial support needed to sustain and grow Extension programs. We need to communicate the value of volunteer contributions, and the role of staff in leading volunteers so that Extension administrators are equipped with evidence to encourage Extension professionals to invest their time and organizational resources in volunteer development.

Craig and Borger (2019) reminded us that it does not really matter how data are collected or interpreted if our intended audiences cannot understand the results. Extension professionals should engage communication and public relations staff to help articulate the impacts of the volunteer program (Franz, 2009). These skilled colleagues can assist with the development of a communications plan and products that may include social media resources, email messages, infographics, and reports.

Our study showed that volunteers were critical ambassadors of the 4-H program. Future efforts should consider how to engage volunteers to develop and share public value messages. They can speak authentically to stakeholders about their volunteer experience. Franz (2009) shared a model of training volunteers in Cooperative Extension to be engaged in program evaluation and impact reporting. She further asserted that involving volunteers in this aspect of the work builds a sense of program ownership that contributes to volunteer retention.

IMPROVING VOLUNTEER SYSTEMS MANAGEMENT

Extension professionals can use impact findings from all three levels we studied—personal, organizational, and public value—to improve their volunteer systems management practices as effective volunteer systems rely on leadership of skilled Extension staff (Seevers et al., 2005; Washburn, 2017). Practices include identifying and selecting volunteers, providing appropriate orientation and training, engaging volunteers in meaningful roles, and recognizing and evaluating volunteer contributions (Boyce, 1971).

When recruiting volunteers, staff should name the personal benefits volunteers are likely to receive. In youth programs, messages about the positive interactions volunteers will have with youth and how they make a difference in the lives of young people will help attract individuals to volunteer roles. In another example, Newberry and Israel (2018) found that master naturalist program marketing messages to potential volunteers should center around the prospects of learning and helping the environment.

As volunteer role descriptions are developed, including impact statements that show the possible benefits to the volunteer, Extension clientele, and the public is important. For example, such descriptions should let 4-H volunteers know they will help youths gain new skills, make a positive difference in the lives of young people, have the potential to gain technical skills that are transferable to professional work environments, and make connections in their community.

Volunteers who feel they contribute to the mission of an organization generally are more satisfied and more likely to continue to volunteer (Blum, 2008). As volunteers are oriented to an Extension program, staff should share how their efforts help meet organizational goals. It is useful to provide examples of how, in the case of 4-H, they play an important role in facilitating the mission of helping young people learn and lead and to highlight that they may be asked to serve as a liaison between the Extension program and the community.

Personal, organizational, and community impacts can be effective in recognizing volunteers. Messages such as “Thanks for having positive interactions with young people” or “You really shined in teaching the group new skills” or “Your connections with the community helped our program grow” address specific impacts of a volunteer’s efforts.

A time for feedback, or evaluation, at the end of volunteer service provides the chance for volunteers to reflect on their role. Staff should refer back to impacts identified in the role description and ask volunteers whether they received the benefits they expected and whether there are other benefits that would be useful to include in future role descriptions.

CONCLUSION

Our study focused on 4-H volunteers, but the approach of communicating the impact of volunteers cuts across

Extension program areas. Replication of the study by others in Cooperative Extension can offer a national picture of the public value of Extension volunteers and elevate the importance of investing in Extension’s volunteer programs. Public value data reflective of other Extension program areas in addition to 4-H youth development are needed. Using our initial questions around personal and organizational benefits as a guide, Extension professionals involved in programs beyond 4-H youth development could adapt questions to reflect their specific programs. The public value questions are inclusive of all program areas.

There is a richness in assessing and communicating the personal, organizational, and community value of volunteer contributions. There is an urgency for stakeholders to understand the public value Extension volunteers bring to their communities. Considering a combination of quantitative and qualitative data paints the most comprehensive picture of impact to date. Research on how the beneficiaries of Extension’s volunteer programs (e.g., 4-H youth, community members, families) value the efforts of volunteers would add to the ever-important evidence and story of impact.

Extension volunteers are making an impact, as summed up by a volunteer who participated in our study: “4-H volunteers working with kids and building relationships with them will have a long term impact on that youth. Youth who are engaged by a caring adult will go on to have successful relationships in other areas of their lives benefiting the community.”

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