

10-1-2013

## Affecting Community Change: Involving Pro Bono Professionals as Extension Volunteers

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### Recommended Citation

Kelley, D. T., & Culp, K. (2013). Affecting Community Change: Involving Pro Bono Professionals as Extension Volunteers. *The Journal of Extension*, 51(5), Article 5. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol51/iss5/5>

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## Affecting Community Change: Involving *Pro Bono* Professionals as Extension Volunteers

### Abstract

*Pro bono* volunteers provide an effective means for Extension professionals to expand limited financial and human resources. Volunteers recruited from business settings can provide skills, abilities, expertise, leadership, and resources to Extension programs. Allowing professional volunteers to meet their desired leadership goals while simultaneously meeting the desired outcome of the Extension program requires effective communication with the corporation as well as the *pro bono* volunteer. To develop a *pro bono* volunteer program, Extension professionals should: identify shared outcomes; build collaboration; and effectively communicate how *pro bono* service provides an opportunity to achieve goals while meeting programming outcomes.

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### Introduction

In an era of shrinking budgets and increased competition for community resources, Extension professionals should consider alternatives to paying for professional services. An often overlooked alternative to hiring professionals is to identify service roles that could be performed by *pro bono* volunteers in Extension programs.

Many Extension programs struggle to deliver programs and provide services on smaller budgets, thereby making volunteers even more vital (JA Worldwide, 2009). In essence *pro bono* volunteering is an in-kind donation for professional service companies (Warshaw, 2010). Involving *pro bono* volunteers is an effective way for Extension professionals to work smarter and extend limited financial and human resources.

When forming a Cooperative Extension Public Information and Marketing Advisory (PIMA) Board, Fromer (1990) created a model of *pro bono* service that other Extension professionals could follow. The PIMA *pro bono* Board consisted of: the president of a media services firm, the program director

of Connecticut's public television station, the public information director of a nonprofit agency, a corporate communications administrator at a major insurance firm, the public affairs director of a network television station, the vice president of an advertising agency, the marketing director of a management and development company, the director of institutional relations at the University of Connecticut, and the development director of a large conference facility. Everyone contacted agreed to serve on the PIMA Board as a *pro bono* volunteer.

Young professionals seeking to establish themselves in a community and occupation may be interested in volunteering or performing *pro bono* service (Culp, 2009). Many small business owners turn to *pro bono* work to fight the economic slump and foster new customer relationships. For a small business that has lost clients or seen revenue-generating projects dry up, performing free work is a way to keep employees engaged while cultivating new relationships (Flandez, 2009). Whether it's an architecture firm preparing preliminary designs for projects it hopes will be funded in the future or a catering company hosting a barbecue to showcase its culinary talents a few months before holiday party season, small businesses are increasingly turning to *pro bono* work as a means to engage in charitable giving, keep their employees active and motivated, and develop relationships that may blossom into future business contracts.

However, involving *pro bono* volunteers requires the Extension professional to adopt a different mindset and a completely different supervision style than those used with traditional, direct service volunteers. Deloitte, a Fortune 500 Company, reported that non-profits were unprepared to accept help and uncertain as how to ask for assistance from large and small companies who were willing to share their professional expertise and assistance (Deloitte, 2009). The question facing Extension is: "How can Extension professionals prepare to engage *pro bono* professionals in meaningful, skill-based volunteer roles?"

## Review of Literature

*Pro bono* work is one of the most powerful ways that companies can support charitable organizations, strengthen the nonprofit sector, and communicate its values (Deloitte, 2010). *Pro bono* service provides an avenue for companies to make a meaningful impact in communities by leveraging its greatest asset: the best thinking of its people (Deloitte).

*Pro bono* programs embody companies' strategic approach to community involvement, which focuses on helping nonprofits deal with some of the issues that challenge their capacity to address social problems. The ability of successful professionals to help their clients address their business challenges makes them uniquely qualified to help *pro bono* clients tackle the challenges of their organizations as well.

Companies often find their involvement in building stronger communities is good not only for society, but also for their organization because it contributes to the healthy environments that businesses need to thrive (Deloitte, 2010). Additionally, *pro bono* service helps attract, develop, and retain talent while showcasing the company's values and capabilities.

The number of skilled individuals seeking meaningful volunteer work has increased dramatically as millions deal with lay-offs and cut-backs or seek new skills to remain competitive in a challenging job

market. Small business owners seek ways to meaningfully engage with the community, keep their employees busy, and cultivate future marketable relationships (Steinhorn, 2009). In 1992, 31% of companies reported using employee volunteer programs to support core business functions. By 1999, that had increased to 81% of respondents. Moreover, there has been a significant increase in companies that incorporate the volunteer program into the company's overall business plan, an increase from 19% in 1992 to 48% in 1999 (Points of Light Foundation and Allstate Foundation, 2000).

Companies are optimistic about volunteerism and increasingly turn to employees to help make significant social impact in the communities they serve. Instilling measures of accountability drives results as well as implementing business-oriented approaches to increase social impact (Deloitte, 2010). In addition to the potential benefits to Extension, *pro bono* volunteer service affords many advantages to the partnering company. These benefits can be outlined by the Extension professional when recruiting the professional's involvement. These advantages include:

- An improved rating among employees for their employer as a place to work compared to other companies. (63% "above average" or "one of the best" compared to 57% before the program was in place)
- Increased job satisfaction levels. (64% were "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied," compared to 62% before; satisfaction among volunteer program participants rose to 67%.)
- Increased positive word of mouth among employees about their employer. (54% reported "they would speak highly of their employer," compared to 49% before the program was put in place; among volunteer program participants, the rate rose to 57%.)
- Higher retention rates for employees who participated in volunteer activities than for those employees who did not (JA Worldwide, 2009).
- Increase ability to attract new employees. (Approximately 62% of workers 18 to 26 years old prefer to work for a company that provides opportunities for employees to apply their skills to benefit nonprofit organizations. About 76% of young workers felt that volunteering helped them hone their leadership skills, and 75% said volunteering let them develop skills they could use at work [Deloitte, 2007]).

A consistent leader in recruiting and utilizing corporate volunteers to teach youth, Junior Achievement Worldwide (2009) released a summary report detailing the benefits of employee volunteer programs. The report relayed that there are ample quantitative and qualitative studies that show that being a good corporate citizen can also be good for a company's bottom line. There is a direct correlation between active community outreach programs and increased revenues and customer loyalty for businesses that engage in helping their communities (2009).

Unlike financial donations and in-kind support, employee volunteer programs allow companies to foster a more personal link to the community by sharing its human resources with organizations in need. As the economy slows and nonprofit organizations struggle to provide services on smaller

budgets, volunteers become increasingly vital to the health of our nation's communities. In return for this help, companies benefit with more productive and satisfied employees, a stronger bottom line, and an improved standing in the community.

The Deloitte (2010) report identified three steps that Extension professionals should consider when creating volunteer programs with greater impact. First, businesses should consistently communicate their goals for social impact to Extension. Setting achievable objectives and establishing an action plan to meet them are as crucial to service projects as they are to any other worthwhile endeavor. Second, corporate executives should reinforce with employees before, during, and after their *pro bono* projects, the message that *pro bono* service has an important purpose. Third, *pro bono* and skilled volunteers and Extension should hold each other accountable. Metrics should be established, and Extension should report on *pro bono* volunteer performance against goals. Often, the support of the Extension volunteer specialist will need to be enlisted as collecting data, analyzing outcomes, and reporting on performance could be beyond the capacity of over-worked Extension professionals. Additionally, this provides a unique opportunity to develop collaboration with the company, the Extension professionals, and the land-grant university.

The Nonprofit Readiness Toolkit for *Pro Bono* Volunteers, developed by the Corporation for National & Community Service (2009), is designed for nonprofit organizations considering using *pro bono* and highly skilled volunteers. The toolkit outlines a process for Extension professionals to use when strengthening existing volunteer programs by preparing the organization for the involvement of *pro bono* and highly skilled volunteers.

The toolkit will help Extension professionals anticipate how they can use *pro bono* and highly skilled volunteers to enhance Extension efforts through the online resource center of the Corporation for National & Community Service. Companies engaged in *pro bono* service demonstrate that it can come in many different shapes and sizes (Hartman & Park, 2010). The traditional and arguably most established source of *pro bono* volunteers is found in the legal profession. The goal of the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on *pro bono* and public service was to develop a national survey that captured the amount of *pro bono* work being done by lawyers in the United States and to obtain a clearer understanding of why attorneys do or do not volunteer their time to offer legal assistance to people of limited means. The survey was conducted at the end of 2004. Key findings in the National *Pro Bono* Survey (American Bar Association, 2005) include:

- Two-thirds of respondents (66%) reported doing some level of free *pro bono* services for people of limited means and/or to organizations serving the poor.
- There was a positive linear correlation between age and incidence of providing *pro bono* service. Older attorneys were more likely to report performing *pro bono* service than were younger attorneys.
- The prime motivator for attorneys who have performed *pro bono* service is the combined sense of professional duty and personal satisfaction derived from the work (70%). The study shows both the profound sense of responsibility that attorneys have for engaging in public service and the need that exists for increasing the amount of *pro bono* legal services that attorneys provide for

the poor.

Warshaw (2010) suggests three basic models for nonprofits to use when engaging pro bono volunteers in their program. These include the Intermediary Model, the Corporate Model, and the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Model. The DIY Model has the greatest potential for Extension.

Most Extension programs already tap the professional expertise of board members, donor organizations, and individuals in the community. The DIY *Pro Bono* Model suggests an intentional and strategic approach, much as is typically done for traditional volunteers, that identifies where professionally-skilled volunteers could be helpful and then builds organizational capability to identify the needed talent, bring them onboard, manage the projects to successful completion, and provide the recognition for those doing the *pro bono* work.

## Implications for Extension Programs

Deloitte (2009) reported that most nonprofits are generally unprepared to accept *pro bono* help. Extension is probably not different from other nonprofit organizations in this regard. Organizing Extension programs to make effective use of the time and talents of *pro bono* volunteers presents a challenge. The use of established tools such as planning aids (Culp et al, 2009), plans of work, and other organizational tools can be valuable assets in providing the structure and organization necessary for *pro bono* volunteer involvement.

Extension professionals are likely to be uncertain as how to ask for *pro bono* assistance (Deloitte, 2009). Understanding the outcomes sought by individual corporations or businesses and their desire to support specific issues must be respected by Extension professionals. Seeking the outcomes shared by the community business and Extension is a logical first step. Building a collaboration between the community business and Extension is the second step. Developing an awareness of how *pro bono* service can provide the opportunity to achieve desired leadership goals while simultaneously meeting the programming outcome of the Extension program requires effective communication and is the third step.

Companies are looking for a personal link to the community by sharing their human resources with nonprofit organizations (JA Worldwide, 2009). Companies benefit from employee volunteer programs with more productive and satisfied employees, a stronger bottom line, and an improved standing in the community (JA Worldwide).

Extension professionals will need to develop their own *pro bono* engagement and supervision capabilities. The *pro bono* volunteer model best suited for Extension in meeting community needs is the DIY Model. Use of this model would necessitate the development of a *pro bono* program that relied upon the ability of the Extension professional to identify pro bono service roles as well as coordinate pro bono volunteers.

## Conclusion

Extension has long relied on both volunteer and community involvement in delivering programs that meet local needs. Engaging *pro bono* volunteers is an effective way to accomplish both. The careful

matching of community needs with the skills and resources of *pro bono* volunteers can be accomplished when an Extension professional, working as a volunteer administrator, identifies a need and brings the two together. Involving *pro bono* volunteers in Extension programs will benefit the community, Extension, and the *pro bono* organization alike by meeting community needs, expanding Extension's outreach, and engaging the organization in the community. *Pro bono* volunteers can provide valuable skills, services, and access to resources that most Extension programs could neither provide nor be able to afford.

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