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Measuring the Impacts of a Volunteer-Based Community Development Program in Developing Volunteers' Leadership Skills

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Abstract: This article summarizes the results of an evaluation of the impacts of a community development program to develop leadership skills in its adult volunteers. The evaluation featured 20 questions about leadership skills learned as a result of volunteer experiences. Data analysis strategies beyond a simple means ranking resulted in evidence indicating that the variable on personal time management skills is strongly correlated with other important leadership skills that community development volunteers learned. Therefore, as Extension professionals design training programs for community development volunteers, it is recommended that they focus efforts on developing personal time management skills as a major component.

Introduction

Previous research published in *Journal of Extension* has examined the personal costs and benefits of volunteerism (Farris, McKinley, Ayres, Peters, & Brady, 2009; Osborne, 2005; Schaubert & Kirk, 2001). This research indicates that volunteers experience significant benefits that include stronger social networks, healthier lifestyles, improved interpersonal relationships as well as improved self-confidence, self-esteem, and working relationships with others (Schmiesing, Soder, & Russell, 2005). Other studies have described benefits as learned leadership skills that have included networking, listening, communication, problem-solving, and collaboration skills (Singletary, Smith, & Hill, 2002; Singletary, Smith, & Evans, 2005) as well as conflict management, strategic planning and grant writing skills (Tackie, Findlay, Baharanyi, & Pierce, 2004). Additional skills include learning how to learn, lead, build community and take action as part of a group (Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995). In fact, some studies have suggested that Extension volunteer experiences teach volunteers the interpersonal and group relational skills needed to become effective community leaders (Diem & Nikola, 2005; Ohnoutka, Waybright, Nichols, & Nestor, 2005). In contrast, costs associated with volunteerism have focused largely on the personal time demands that volunteerism requires (Braker, Leno, Pratt, & Grobe 2000).

Because volunteers comprise the backbone of many Extension community development programs, it is important to understand how they are affected by their volunteer experiences. Understanding these impacts can help Extension professionals design more effective programs that are intentionally dualistic in purpose in developing community while also developing and strengthening community leaders. This is particularly important for programs located in isolated and economically depressed rural communities where services and resources are limited. In this program context, volunteers become an integral part of Extension programs designed to increase the quality of life of local residents. Therefore, it is essential to successful community development programs that rely on volunteers to consistently evaluate the leadership skills that volunteers learn that will make their volunteer time more productive and enjoyable.

This article describes the results of an impact assessment conducted in 2009, using data collected from questionnaires with individuals who volunteered in a rural community development program — Tonopah, Nevada Farmers Market. These volunteers developed and implemented the market, which included risk management, fundraising, recruiting vendors and volunteers, and on-site logistics. While the primary purpose of the research was to measure the impacts of the community development program in developing volunteers' leadership skills, a secondary goal was to identify a consistent set of leadership skill items to evaluate the impacts of community development programs that rely nearly exclusively on volunteers in rural communities. The end result can help Extension professionals improve program design to accomplish specific learning objectives targeting volunteers' leadership skills.

Methods

For the purpose of the study reported here, a questionnaire was developed to assess program impacts on volunteers' leadership skills. The questionnaire featured 20 question items that used a five-point

ordinal Likert-type scale to assess learned leadership skills. Questions were adapted from similar volunteer surveys (Rebori, 2003; Singletary, Smith, & Hill, 2002) and focused on learned leadership skills as described by others (Covey, 1990; Luke, 1998; Morse, Brown, & Warning, 2006; Diem & Nikola, 2005; Braker, et al., 2000; Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995; Paxson, Howell, Michael, & Wong 1993).

These skills, among others, included communication, social interaction, how to work with others, conflict management, goal setting, and personal time management in addition to how to run effective meetings, market and evaluate a program, and acquire program support (Vetter, Hall & Schmidt, 2009). The survey also included two questions about how volunteerism helped strengthen leadership skills that were helpful at home, school or at work (Meier, 2008). A draft questionnaire was developed and reviewed by a panel of experts for content validity, question item clarity and comprehension. The questionnaire was revised based upon their recommendations.

Questionnaires were administered at the 2008 and 2009 Extension annual banquets to all 35 community development program volunteers. The response rate was 100%. The volunteers received a printed copy of the questionnaire, which included a cover letter explaining the purpose of the questionnaire, the approximate length of time required to complete it, and an assurance of anonymity. Volunteers were instructed to place the completed questionnaires in a sealed box and to omit any identifying marks. The questionnaire asked volunteers, "As a result of participating in this Extension program, I learned..." with each learned leadership skill item presented for the volunteer to rate. This modified retrospective pre-post evaluation method reduces the potential for invalid responses that may occur when administering a standard pre-test at the beginning of an Extension program when participants have limited knowledge and likely cannot respond accurately to questions being asked (Davis, 2003; Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000).

Results and Discussion

Completed survey questionnaires served as the data sources for the study. The data were analyzed utilizing the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 17.0) for Windows XP. In addition, a Cronbach's coefficient alpha (CCA) was calculated to estimate internal consistency (instrument reliability) of the 20 Likert-type scale items for each survey group. The Cronbach score for the 20 items was high ($r = .943$). These scores indicate that there was high internal consistency between variables (Carmines & Zeller, 1979).

Most (70.7%) of the volunteers were at least 50 years old (Table 1), and 60% of all respondents were female. Retirees represented the largest group of respondents (39.4%), while 27.3% worked full-time.

Table 1.
Anticipated Volunteer Time with Program

Years	N	Percentage
18-29	2	5.8

30-39	3	8.8
40-49	5	14.7
50-59	11	32.4
60-69	9	26.5
70+	4	11.8

Thirty-seven percent had been volunteers for one 1 to 2 years, and most of the volunteers (60%) indicated they planned to volunteer with the program for at least 5 more years (Table 2).

Table 2.
Age Distribution of Volunteers

Years	N	Percentage
Less than 1	2	6.7
1-2	3	10
2-3	4	13.3
4-5	3	10
5+	18	60

With regards to perceptions of leadership skills volunteers learned from their program experiences, survey respondents were asked to rate skill items, using a scale of 1 being learned very little to 5 being learned very much. Table 3 illustrates the ranked mean scores for the 20 question items from highest to lowest. These results indicate that the volunteers with this community development program achieved knowledge gains with respect to the majority of leadership skill items featured in the questionnaire.

Table 3.
Ranked Mean Scores for Volunteer Learned Leadership Skills

As a result volunteering with this community development program, I learned...	N	Ranked M
To value the viewpoints of others involved with my program	35	4.23
How to share the workload with other volunteers in my program	35	4.06
How to listen to others	35	4.03

How to apply my individual talents and knowledge to improve my community	34	4.03
Why it's important to have program goals	32	4.03
Effective ways to market an event in my community	34	4.00
How to interact professionally with other community members or groups	34	3.91
How to develop goals for my program	32	3.78
How to evaluate the impact of my program on my community	34	3.68
Problem-solving skills	33	3.67
How to express my personal viewpoint to others	33	3.58
Personal time management skills	31	3.52
How to get support for my program from other organizations	32	3.47
How to look at an issue or decision critically	33	3.42
Social interaction skills	34	3.42
Conflict management and mediation skills	32	3.38
Skills that help me at home	34	3.24
How my local government works	31	3.16
Skills that help me at school and/or at my job	34	3.15
How to run an effective meeting	32	3.06
Rating Code: 1 = Learned very little; 2 = Learned little; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Learned much; 5 = Learned very much		

The sensitivity of the instrumentation when assessing the impact of any effort is a concern. This was a particular concern for this effort given the small number of volunteers (35) involved in a community development program in a rural, isolated town with a population of only 2,800. Therefore, an additional analysis, a Spearman's rank order correlation, among the 20 variables, was conducted to measure the strength of the relationships among the impact variables. Spearman's rank order correlation was chosen because the data were finite and the total N was small, collected using a Likert-type scale questionnaire.

Table 4 illustrates the results of the correlation analysis. The variable that showed the highest congruence among the 20 leadership skill impact items was the item [that the volunteer learned] "personal time management skills." All items showed strong relationships when correlated with this learned leadership skill item, which ranked 10th in the mean scores provided by volunteers (see

Table 3). Personal time management skills appear to be very important when working with volunteers to develop community. Such a modest mean ranking by volunteers, however, may not communicate the importance of this learned skill in the success of a community development program reliant upon volunteerism.

Eighteen of the 19 items were statistically significant, and 10 of these showed high correlation coefficients as well (above .600), indicating strong relationships. In fact, the strength of relationships between the item "personal time management skills" and eight of the leadership skill items is quite notable (above .700). These eight items included: how to share the workload with other volunteers; how to listen to others; how to apply individual talents and knowledge to improve community; why it's important to have program goals; effective ways to market a community event; how to interact professionally with other community members or groups; how to develop program goals; and social interaction skills.

These correlation results for the survey data indicate that much of what volunteers learned through their community development involvement may hinge on learning how to manage their personal time. The results suggest further that when assessing impacts on volunteers of community development programs, Extension professionals go beyond simple ranking of variables to use tests of association to determine if key impact variables show congruence with other variables.

Table 4.
Intercorrelations for Volunteers' Learned Leadership Skills by "Personal Time Management Skills"

Learned Leadership Skills	N	r
To value the viewpoints of others involved with my program	35	.575 ^a
How to share the workload with other volunteers in my program	35	.773 ^a
How to listen to others	35	.799 ^a
How to apply my individual talents and knowledge to improve my community	34	.791 ^a
Why it's important to have program goals	32	.783 ^a
Effective ways to market an event in my community	34	.704 ^a
How to interact professionally with other community members or groups	34	.787 ^a
How to develop goals for my program	32	.735 ^a
How to evaluate the impact of my program on my community	34	.452 ^b
Problem-solving skills	33	.609 ^a

How to express my personal viewpoint to others	33	.436 ^b
How to get support for my program from other organizations	32	.483 ^a
How to look at an issue or decision critically	33	.333
Social interaction skills	34	.728 ^a
Conflict management and mediation skills	32	.621 ^a
Skills that help me at home	34	.455 ^b
How my local government works	31	.362 ^b
Skills that help me at school and/or at my job	34	.418 ^b
How to run an effective meeting	34	.533 ^a
^a significant at the .01 level		
^b significant at the .05 level		

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research presented here provides important insight into leadership skills that volunteers learn while working to better their communities. The study also reveals particular skills that might be targeted for further strengthening through community development programs. These findings are useful to Extension professionals in planning community development programs that rely heavily upon volunteers. Small, remote, economically struggling rural communities need volunteers with effective leadership skills to help improve the quality of life within the community and contribute to programs that stimulate their local economy.

By going beyond a basic analysis of the questionnaire data analysis in the study, it became apparent that personal time management skills strongly related to half of the leadership skills measured with eight of these items very strongly related. This result begs Extension professionals to dig deeper as they analyze program impact data and to recognize the value of effective personal time management skills to community development volunteers.

A recommendation for future research is to replicate the study over time with a larger and different pool of volunteers. Similar results would indicate that volunteers in rural community development programs who develop personal time management skills as part of their program experience are very likely to develop other leadership skills.

Extension professionals in rural, economically depressed areas will continue to design community development programs that rely heavily on volunteers. Therefore, in designing the volunteer training element of these programs, critical components should include strengthening personal time

management skills. This may require Extension professionals to explore ideas and expectations about time with volunteers. Extension professionals may focus efforts on teaching volunteers how to identify program goals and personal goals, identify activities to achieve both sets of goals, and how to prioritize those activities. For example, volunteers may benefit from developing a "time management matrix" to learn how to categorize and prioritize the importance of program and personal time demands (Merrill & Merrill, 2003).

The findings from the study indicate that focusing on the development of personal time management skills may in turn help volunteers to learn other leadership skills, increase benefits from volunteerism, and improve their overall satisfaction and effectiveness as community development volunteers. Volunteer-based community development programs that invest considerable resources in developing these skills in volunteers during the initial training and then consistently throughout their tenure as community development volunteers are likely to be effective in developing community leaders.

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