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Extension Education and Volunteer Service: Assessing Motivation and Action



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Extension Education and Volunteer Service: Assessing Motivation and Action

Abstract

Extension educators who depend on volunteer action to increase program impact need information on volunteer motivation and service. The objectives of the study reported here were to (1) examine volunteer motivation among Extension program graduates; and (2) examine relationships between motivation factors and service. A questionnaire sent to 374 Extension program graduates measured agreement with statements in five motivational domains. We found inconsistency between respondent rankings of factor importance and factors closely tied to level of volunteer service. Extension education coordinators who assess and address motivational factors linked to service may be able to enhance voluntary action.

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Introduction

Extension educators increasingly rely on the efforts of volunteers to provide service to enhance the reach and impact of Extension programming (Boyd, 2004). At the same time, Extension program developers have been faced with the need to account for program effectiveness and to demonstrate impact (Aguilar & Thornsby, 2005).

To address both imperatives, program facilitators have engaged in evaluation of program content and delivery by measuring learning that would enable participants to provide such service (e.g., Jayaratne, Hanula, & Crawley, 2005). Many Extension educators also track levels of volunteer activity after program completion (e.g., Meyer & Hanchek, 1997). In both cases, information provided by carefully structured evaluations is useful for formative and summative purposes (Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000). The link between specific program content and level of volunteer engagement, however, has not been frequently examined by Extension educators, in spite of the fact that such information would be helpful in modifying program content and delivery to enhance service.

Volunteer motivations for service have been studied in a variety of contexts to determine the underlying reasons for helping behaviors, to identify factors related to frequency and duration of volunteer service, and to examine changes in participant attitudes following volunteer activities (Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Donald, 1997; Clary et al., 1998; Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese, 2001). These efforts have identified several motivation factors that are related to voluntary action in general, including individual value sets, the desire to learn, personal development, community involvement, and enhancement of self-esteem (Omoto & Snyder, 1995). In one effort to identify motivations for volunteer action by participants in an Extension education program (focused on youth literacy), Schmiesing, Soder, & Russell (2005) found that participants' values (altruism) were most important

in the decision to engage in volunteer activity. However, these workers did not attempt to assess degree of involvement as a function of motivation.

We were interested in examining motivations for service *and* the relationship between motivation and the level of voluntary action by graduates of an Extension education effort, the Iowa Community Tree Steward (ICTS) program. The goal of this program is to educate citizen volunteers to care for and help manage community tree resources throughout the state of Iowa. The program provides information on tree identification, proper tree planting and maintenance, tree diseases, insect pests, and how to implement community tree programs within their communities. Participants in the ICTS program complete 24 hours of training and are expected to contribute a total of 24 hours of community service.

As of 2004, 519 people had completed the ICTS program and according to program staff records had contributed a total of 14,971 hours of service. This amounts to an average of 29 hours per person (121% of what is requested), indicating success at engaging participants in community tree care. However, volunteer hours have not been evenly distributed, as some volunteers have contributed hundreds of hours, while others have not contributed any.

Understanding the link between program characteristics and volunteer motivation/action is important for both accountability and for increasing the capacity for resource management. Thus, the objectives of the study reported here were twofold: (1) to assess factors affecting motivation to contribute volunteer hours; and (2) to examine the relationships between motivation factors and the activity level of participants.

Materials and Methods

Survey Administration and Content

We used a mail questionnaire designed to survey graduates of the Iowa Community Tree Steward program (ICTS) about their experiences after completing the program. The questionnaire was mailed in the fall of 2004 to 374 ICTS graduates who had completed the program between 1994 and 2004 (those with verified address records, including only one member of two-member households where both participated). We followed the Total Design Method of Dillman (2000). Each survey was accompanied by a cover letter explaining the study and a pre-paid response envelope. Follow-up postcards and second surveys were mailed to non-respondents at two-week intervals after the first mailing.

The survey contained 31 questions about motivation, advocacy for trees and natural resources, types of activities that volunteers engaged in, and impact on community tree management. Questions were presented in three formats: multiple choice, a five-factor Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree), or as "yes" or "no" queries. Between three and five questions were posed to respondents about motivation in each of five areas that are known to influence volunteers in other contexts: values, understanding, personal development, community concern, and esteem enhancement (Omoto & Snyder, 1995).

Data Analysis

Summary data were tabulated to describe percentages of survey participants that selected one of five Likert-scale responses to each questionnaire statement. Statistical analyses included calculating Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) for the motivation subscales (values, understanding, personal development, community concern, and esteem enhancement) using the ALPHA function in SAS.

A regression analysis procedure was used to examine relationships between (1) number of years since ICTS participation, (2) employment status, and (3) aggregate responses to motivation subscale items with reported total volunteer hours using the PROC GLM function in SAS. Cronbach's alpha values > 0.70 were accepted for internal consistency for the subscales tested (Nunally, 1978). Statistical significance for the regression analyses was determined for $p < 0.05$.

Results

Respondent Characteristics

We received 219 completed questionnaires and 14 incomplete surveys (out of 374 mailed), for a response rate of 62%. The majority of respondents were males (60%), and the average age of respondents was 52 years. Most respondents were full-time employed (56%), followed by retired persons (26%) and part-time employed individuals (11%).

Responses to Motivation Statements

A majority of respondents agreed with statements related to values and strongly agreed with statements related to understanding (examples are provided in Table 1). Survey respondents also agreed with statements related to personal development and community concern. Respondents generally disagreed with items related to esteem enhancement. Values of Cronbach's alpha

indicated good internal consistency for two of the motivation subscales (values and personal development) as well as for motivation overall (Table 2).

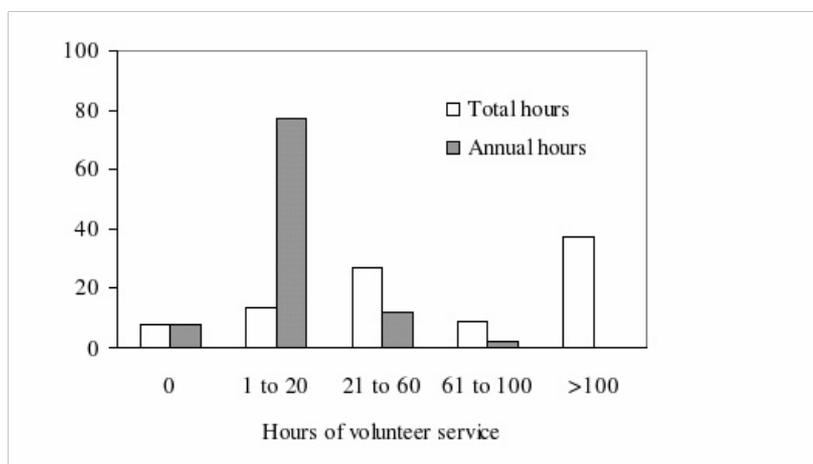
Table 1.
Percent of Respondents Agreeing with Statements for Five Motivation Factors

Statement	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree
Values		
Values played a role in my decision to enroll	75%	21%
I have an obligation to help the environment	60%	27%
Understanding		
I like learning about tree care	91%	8%
I like being informed about new developments in tree care	81%	17%
Personal Development		
I enjoy meeting others with similar interests	74%	23%
Volunteer activities allow me to interact with others	53%	41%
Community Concern		
Promoting tree care in my community is important	75%	24%
I enjoy contributing to my community's betterment	73%	25%
Esteem Enhancement		
My level of volunteer activity is influenced by others	16%	25%
My neighbors' opinions influence my volunteer activity	9%	20%

Reported Volunteer Service

Respondents reported a wide range of volunteer service, from zero to over 100 total hours (Figure 1). The average length of participation was 5.6 years, and average volunteer service was close to 15 hours per year. About one-fourth of respondents indicated cumulative service levels below that requested by ICTS program facilitators. However, a significant proportion (37%) reported serving totals of over 100 hours.

Figure 1.
Total Number of Hours Served and Average Annual Volunteer Hours



Regression Analyses

The regression model did not indicate a significant relationship between employment status and hours of service (Table 2). The model did indicate significant relationships between length of time since program enrollment and total hours of service and between aggregate responses to personal development items and total hours of service (Table 2). Relationships with total hours of service were detected for values, understanding, and community concern, although low internal

consistency was determined for items on the understanding and community concern subscales. Responses to esteem items also were not internally consistent and in aggregate not related to total hours of service (Table 2).

Table 2.
Regression Analysis for Service in Relation to Independent Variables

Item/Scale	Regression Coefficient	Significance ^f
Number of years since ICTS participation	0.11 ^g	***
Employment status (FT or not)	0.01	NS
Motivation Factors		
Values ^a	0.04	*
Understanding ^b	0.03	*
Personal development ^c	0.16	***
Community concern ^d	0.06	*
Esteem enhancement ^e	0.003	NS
Whole model	0.28	***
<p>a. 4 items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.71.</p> <p>b. 3 items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.63.</p> <p>c. 5 items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.73.</p> <p>d. 3 items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.53.</p> <p>e. 3 items, Cronbach's alpha = 0.61.</p> <p>f. *, **, and *** denote significance at the 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01 levels, respectively.</p> <p>g. Regression coefficients indicate addition of each variable to a model containing all others, thus individual contributions do not add up to the whole model coefficient.</p>		

Discussion

Respondent Characteristics

We were surprised to learn that many respondents were employed full-time, since retirees would be more likely to have time to devote to participation in the program itself as well as subsequent volunteer activity. We were also surprised that there was no significant relationship between employment status and hours of volunteer service. The majority of ICTS graduates have pursued both training and volunteer work in addition to full-time jobs, which does not appear to influence the level of volunteer time committed to the program.

Responses to Motivation Statements

Respondents most strongly agreed with statements related to understanding, followed by values and community concern. This suggests that respondents' desire to learn new skills and their interest in helping the environment and promoting community betterment are important motivators for initial participation in the ICTS program. These findings support those of previous research with volunteers in natural resource-related programs (Still & Gerhold, 1997; Donald, 1997; Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese, 2001). These responses also reflect the materials used to recruit participants for the ICTS program, which outline the program's focus on education and resource management for community betterment.

However, respondents' level of agreement with items related to the five subscales was not strongly related to their level of volunteer service. This corroborates earlier work examining the relationship between respondent rankings of motivation factors and their actual service in both human services (e.g., Omoto & Snyder, 1995) and natural resource stewardship contexts (Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese, 2001).

Regression Analyses

Our overall model accounted for almost 30% of the variation in number of reported hours. We found a significant relationship between length of time since program enrollment and number of total hours of service, which we expected but included in the overall model to allow us to subsequently detect the effects of other variables.

In spite of respondents' relatively high rankings of understanding, community concern, and values items, the strongest relationship we detected between the motivational factors and total hours of service was for the personal development subscale. This also corroborates previous reports (Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese, 2001) that volunteers are most strongly encouraged by interaction with others, providing impetus to engage in volunteer activities more frequently and for longer periods of time.

Extension educators need to be cognizant of the apparently consistent contradiction between participant rankings of motivational elements (typically high for learning/understanding, values, and community concern) versus those that appear to be more closely linked to volunteer service (personal development, social interaction). In addition, for many programs it may be appropriate to shift the focus of recruiting materials to attract and retain volunteers based on factors that lead to greater commitment (as suggested by Clary et al., 1998; Schmiesing, Soder, & Russell, 2005).

It is also important to note that a number of other factors we did not investigate could be related to volunteer commitment--quality of the program itself, competence of staff conducting the program, variations in recruitment, and demographic factors that we did not assess.

Conclusion

From the perspective of Extension educators, a return on the investment made in program development and delivery via voluntary action by participants after program completion is increasingly important. Participants' enrollment in some Extension programs appears to be strongly linked to the importance they assign to learning and skill development. However, regression analyses have consistently indicated that respondents' rankings of importance for different motivational factors are not necessarily related to the frequency or duration of their volunteer activities. Thus, evaluation aimed at understanding the relationship between program characteristics and subsequent voluntary activity should go beyond analysis of participants' self-reported motivations.

Coordinators for the ICTS program are interested in increasing the duration and frequency of volunteer participation in active resource management. Our results indicate that volunteer efforts are in fact ongoing--that is, length of time since enrollment is positively related to hours of service.

However, our results also indicate that program recruitment should address the importance of personal development, perhaps by inviting participation of small groups (rather than individuals) from the same community to increase voluntary action after program completion. In addition, program coordinators may wish to create or support opportunities for volunteers to conduct activities in groups (during the program itself or by facilitating their knowledge of potential future project partners) to gain more consistent and possibly greater levels of volunteer service.

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