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4-H Youth Development Professionals' Perceptions of the Importance of and Their Current Level of Competence with Selected Volunteer Management Competencies

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4-H Youth Development Professionals' Perceptions of the Importance of and Their Current Level of Competence with Selected Volunteer Management Competencies

Abstract

The descriptive research reported here investigated Extension 4-H Youth Development professionals' perceptions of the importance of, and their current level of competence with, 127 selected contemporary volunteer management competencies organized into nine constructs. A census of NAE4-HA members was used to collect data using a Web-based questionnaire. While respondents indicated that all nine constructs were important in their management of volunteers, corresponding levels of competence were not as high. We conclude that a framework for professional development for NAE4-HA members related to the management of volunteers be developed and implemented focusing holistically on the nine volunteer management constructs.

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Introduction

The successful engagement of volunteers has been a fundamental tenet of Cooperative Extension since its creation. As early as 1952, Schlup considered the "network of county extension agents and local volunteer leaders" (p. 344) as a basic feature of successful Extension programming. Seevers, Graham, Gamon, and Conklin (1997) stated that "from its beginnings, volunteers have been active partners in the daily operations of Extension" (p. 188). Boone, Safrit, and Jones (2002) concluded that "active volunteer involvement not only is critical to the successful implementation of the [Extension] program . . . but may also serve as important adult learning for the volunteers themselves" (p. 184).

The successful identification, engagement, and support of volunteers in Extension programs do not occur spontaneously, but rather require a logical and systematic approach. Since its creation nearly 35 year ago, Boyce's (1971) I.S.O.T.U.R.E. model (Identification, Selection, Orientation, Training, Utilization, Recognition, Evaluation) for volunteer management in Cooperative Extension remains an important theoretical foundation for contemporary volunteer administration. Numerous other conceptual models for volunteer administration have also been suggested for Extension programming contexts (Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998; Kwarteng, Smith, & Miller, 1988; Penrod, 1991). Other contemporary researchers have investigated Extension professionals' competence with selected volunteer management competencies (Boyd, 2004; Collins, 2001; Hange, Seevers, & VanLeeuwen, 2002; King & Safrit, 1998).

Beyond Cooperative Extension contexts, Safrit and Schmiesing (2004) conducted a qualitative study that resulted in the initial identification of 140 potential volunteer administration

competencies. Subsequent quantitative research with professional volunteer managers nationally (Safrit & Schmiesing, 2005; Safrit, Schmiesing, Gliem & Gliem, 2005) resulted in a first contemporary model for volunteer administration based upon empirical data.

While volunteers are important human resources in all Cooperative Extension educational programs, they are especially critical in the successful planning and implementation of Extension 4-H Youth Development programs. According to the most recent National 4-H Youth Development Enrollment Report available (United States Department of Agriculture, 2005), in 2005, 537,841 adults and youth volunteered their time, energy, and talents in support of community-based 4-H programming. Consequently, it is critical that Extension professionals providing leadership to 4-H programs better understand how to effectively and efficiently manage and support this enormous volunteer workforce.

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this descriptive research reported here was to investigate Extension 4-H Youth Development professionals' perceptions of the importance of, and their current level of competence with, selected contemporary volunteer management competencies. Safrit and Schmiesing's (2005) and Safrit, Schmiesing, Gliem, and Gliem's (2005) findings were used as the basis for identifying 127 individual contemporary volunteer management competencies encompassing nine holistic components (i.e., constructs) of volunteer management, organized into three overarching categories. The three categories and nine constructs included the following.

- Category I: Personal Preparation (three constructs)
 - Personal and Professional Development
 - Serving as an Internal Consultant
 - Program Planning
- Category II: Volunteer Engagement (four constructs)
 - Recruitment
 - Selection
 - Orientation and Training
 - Coaching and Supervision
- Category III: Program Perpetuation (two constructs)
 - Recognition
 - Program Evaluation, Impact, and Accountability

The population for the study was the 3,017 individual members of the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents as of November 14, 2004 as identified by the association, with 2,697 having useable email addresses. A census of NAE4-HA members was used to collect data using a Web-based questionnaire. The questionnaire was organized into two sections using a four-point Likert-type scale for responses. Section I investigated respondents' perceptions of the importance of and their current competence with the 127 individual volunteer management competencies. Section II collected data on selected demographic variables.

An initial e-mail invitation was sent to participants on January 19, 2005 announcing the study and requesting their participation, as well as a follow-up reminder email the week of January 24, 2005. The on-line instrument remained open through the week of February 7, 2005. Upon reviewing the responses, we found 110 surveys that were not useable, resulting in 510 usable responses and a final response rate of 20%. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 12.0, calculating appropriate descriptive statistics to satisfy the research objectives.

Findings

The typical respondent was a white female, born in 1960, having a Masters degree and spending approximately 80% of her time devoted to 4-H youth development programming. The overwhelming majority of respondents (73%) work in a single county arrangement and have been employed approximately 10.5 years in their current position.

Mean scores (Table 1) describing respondents' attitudes regarding the level of importance for the nine volunteer management constructs ranged from 3.34 ("Evaluation") to 3.55 ("Orientation and Training"). Likewise, mean scores describing respondents' perceptions of their current level of competence with the nine volunteer management constructs (Table 1) ranged from 2.71 ("Evaluation, impact and accountability") to 3.04 ("Recognition").

Table 1.
Mean Scores Describing 4-H Youth Development Professionals' Perceptions of

the Importance of, and Their Current Level of Competence with, Nine Volunteer Management Constructs (N = 510)

Volunteer Management Construct	Mean (s.d.)	
	Level of Importance	Current Competence With
Personal Preparation		
Personal & professional development	3.41 (.43)	2.95 (.51)
Serving as an internal consultant	3.41 (.42)	2.87 (.54)
Program planning	3.43 (.44)	2.91 (.60)
Volunteer Engagement		
Recruitment	3.46 (.43)	2.82 (.56)
Selection	3.41 (.39)	2.89 (.54)
Orientation & training	3.55 (.43)	2.97 (.60)
Coaching & supervision	3.48 (.39)	2.88 (.54)
Program Perpetuation		
Recognition	3.41 (.42)	3.04 (.52)
Program evaluation, impact, & accountability	3.34 (.46)	2.71 (.54)

Conclusions and Implications

Respondents rated each of the nine volunteer management constructs as 3.34 or greater, indicating that the constructs are important in the daily management of volunteers. The nine constructs investigated in the study are comparable to the 14 certification categories that comprise the Certified Volunteer Administrator (CVA) credentialing process.

Regarding current level of competence, the respondents rated none of the nine constructs greater than 3.04. Based upon this finding, there appears a significant reality gap between "what is" (i.e., current competence) and "what should be" (i.e., level of importance). As a result, a framework for professional development opportunities for NAE4-HA members related to the management of volunteers should be developed and implemented that focuses on the nine volunteer management constructs.

Many of the informal and formal educational programs related to the management of volunteers have traditionally focused on the individual components of volunteer administration. Furthermore, educational programs have focused on traditional aspects of volunteer administration, such as selection, recognition, risk management, orientation, and training. While these components are certainly important to the overall administration of the volunteer program, they must be incorporated into a more comprehensive approach to ensure that the gap between "what is" and "what should be" is closed.

Interestingly, the level of importance of findings on each construct was very similar, with the exception of "orientation and training" (3.55) and "program evaluation, impact, and accountability" (3.34). It was not surprising that "orientation and training" was the highest in terms of level of importance because there has been increased emphasis on the importance of this construct in recent years. However, we are very surprised by the finding regarding "program evaluation, impact, and accountability" because it was not as high as expected. In recent years, there has been increased emphasis placed on evaluation and impact documentation within the Cooperative Extension System, and perhaps more specifically the 4-H Youth Development program. It could be concluded that 4-H professionals are more focused on the impact the program is having on youth (and not the volunteers) and that there are relatively few research/evaluation reports focusing on the impact of volunteering in and of itself.

In terms of current level of competence, respondents indicated being most competent with "recognition" (3.04) of volunteers, "orientation and training" (2.97), and "personal and professional development" (2.95). The constructs of "recognition" and "orientation and training" are long-held components of volunteer administration in the 4-H Youth Development program, thus we would expect that 4-H professionals are very competent in these areas. Somewhat surprising, on the other hand, was the finding related to "personal and professional development," which focuses on the individual professional. It is encouraging that professionals feel that they are competent in terms of seeking out professional development opportunities, participating in programs, and networking.

The construct of "recruitment" (2.82) was rated second lowest in terms of competence by respondents. Over the years, 4-H Youth Development professionals have likely relied heavily on

current volunteers and members to recruit new volunteers. This strategy, largely carried out by word of mouth, has proved successful in more traditional settings. More recently, as 4-H Youth Development professionals have expanded programming to new audiences, traditional methods of volunteer recruitment may not be effective. The fact that respondents perceived themselves as not as competent with recruitment as we would have thought may be attributed to the necessity to expand recruitment efforts and a lack of understanding of how to carry out those strategies.

The lowest rated construct in terms of competence was program "evaluation, impact, and accountability" (2.71). This was not a surprising finding as there continues to be a struggle in terms of impact evaluation by 4-H professionals across the country. While the Cooperative Extension System has placed increased emphasis on impact evaluation, there has not been that emphasis on volunteer involvement; rather it has been focused on youth involvement. Before professionals will implement impact evaluation strategies focusing on volunteer leadership development, there must be a greater emphasis placed on this construct from a national and state level, with significant studies completed that may be replicated on the local level.

Ultimately, the success of the 4-H Youth Development program is largely the direct result of the strength of its volunteer corps. With the recent loss of the Association of Volunteer Administrators (AVA), it will become increasingly important for State 4-H programs to implement comprehensive volunteer development programs that are guided by faculty and staff who have the requisite knowledge and background in volunteer administration. Furthermore, the Cooperative Extension organization should continue to conduct research to determine the level of competency related to volunteer administration in all program areas, thus establishing a stronger foundation for both professional and organizational development.

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