

12-1-2005

## What Motivates Volunteers to Serve in a Youth Literacy Program?

Ryan Schmiesing

*Ohio State University Extension*, [schmiesing.3@osu.edu](mailto:schmiesing.3@osu.edu)

Jeff Soder

*Ohio State University Extension*, [soder.5@osu.edu](mailto:soder.5@osu.edu)

Susan Russell

*Ohio State University Extension*, [srussell@postoffice.ag.ohio-state.edu](mailto:srussell@postoffice.ag.ohio-state.edu)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

---

### Recommended Citation

Schmiesing, R., Soder, J., & Russell, S. (2005). What Motivates Volunteers to Serve in a Youth Literacy Program?. *The Journal of Extension*, 43(6), Article 12. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol43/iss6/12>

This Research in Brief is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).



## What Motivates Volunteers to Serve in a Youth Literacy Program?

### Abstract

This article examines volunteers' motivation to commit to a successful, yet intensive, youth literacy program. Volunteers in a one-on-one youth literacy mentoring program were motivated by the values function of volunteerism; that is, they volunteered in order to exercise their altruistic values. This is a departure from much of the literature on volunteer motivation, which finds affiliation to be volunteers' primary motivation for volunteering. The article offers suggestions on recruitment methods that promote the value function of volunteerism and will be most successful in attracting individuals willing to make sustained commitments to youth.

### Ryan Schmiesing

Extension Specialist  
Columbus, Ohio  
[Schmiesing.3@osu.edu](mailto:Schmiesing.3@osu.edu)

### Jeff Soder

Research Associate  
Columbus, Ohio  
[Soder.5@osu.edu](mailto:Soder.5@osu.edu)

### Susan Russell

Extension Educator  
Findlay, Ohio  
[russell@postoffice.ag.ohio-state.edu](mailto:russell@postoffice.ag.ohio-state.edu)

4-H Youth Development  
Ohio State University Extension

## Introduction

Youth development programs are comprised of non-formal educational opportunities that typically transpire outside the traditional classroom setting. Frequently, volunteers provide leadership to the development and implementation of these activities. In 2003, more than 24,000 4-H volunteers committed their time, energy, and talents to programs involving youth ages 5-19 in Ohio's communities (Ohio State University Extension, 2004). Over the course of 100 years, volunteers have become the backbone for delivering programs that lead to the successful development of youth in Ohio and across the country.

Much of the literature on volunteer motivation builds upon the work of Atkinson and Birch (1978), who define three different sources of human motivation. Individuals are motivated by achievement (desire to perform at a high level); affiliation (desire for positive relationships); and power (desire to be in control and influence others). Maehr and Braskamp (1986) apply this framework to the world of work and the motivation of volunteers, again finding the same three sources of motivation.

A considerable amount of literature on volunteer motivation follows this framework and attempts to determine which of these three sources of motivation are most important to the individual volunteer. Rouse and Clawson (1992), in a study to determine what kinds of incentives were most valued, found older adults were motivated by achievement and affiliation. Culp and Schwartz (1999) found that tenured volunteers were motivated by affiliation and did not identify personal recognition as a significant reward.

More recently, Fritz, Karmazin, Barbuto, and Burrow (2003) found that the motivation of urban and rural volunteers was similar, and the particular kind of recognition they preferred (letters, phone calls) was congruent with their being motivated by affiliation. Braker, Leno, Pratt, and Grobe (2000) identified volunteers being motivated by their ability to help others and the satisfaction they received from helping others. In a study involving master volunteers, Wolford, Cox, and Culp (2001) identified the opportunity to learn new things (achievement) and wanting to be affiliated with the organization (affiliation) as primary motivators. White and Arnold (2003) suggested that volunteers were motivated by making a difference in the lives of youth and receiving satisfaction through helping others. Each of these researchers or authors have built upon the early work of Atkinson and Birch (1978) and often found the desire for affiliation as a primary motivator of volunteers.

Clary et al. (1998) depart significantly from the framework proposed by Atkinson and Birch (1978). As social psychologists who see human action serving personal and social goals, we were particularly interested in understanding volunteers' sustained commitment to helping others, and their significant contribution of time, energy, talent, and even money. Clary et al. postulate that volunteerism serves six functions for volunteers: volunteerism correlates with volunteers' altruistic *values*; volunteerism correlates with volunteers' desire for *understanding* and new knowledge, it serves a *social* function in that it involves relationships with others; it may serve a *career* function in that it provides training and contacts; it may have a *protective* function by protecting individuals from feelings of guilt from having too much; and volunteerism may have an *enhancement* function by improving self-esteem.

## Purpose and Methodology

Though numerous studies consider 4-H volunteers' motivation from an achievement-affiliation-power framework, to date, no studies were found that evaluated 4-H volunteers' motivation using the six functions of volunteerism described by Clary et al. (1998). The purpose of the study reported here was to investigate how volunteers' sustained commitment in a literacy project served their personal and social needs. Additionally, we sought to identify which of the six possible functions of volunteerism identified by Clary et al. were served through volunteering in the Literacy and Mentoring Partnership (LAMP) program in a rural Ohio community.

The LAMP program provided us with access to volunteers who were required to participate in an intensive training and had made at least a 1-year commitment to the program. The program required volunteers to spend 10 hours in literacy training prior to beginning the mentoring process. Upon completion of training, volunteers then met with one or two children during school hours, for a half hour, to engage them in literacy activities throughout the school year. Through anecdotal evidence, the program was seen by volunteers, schools, and the community as highly successful and beneficial.

A descriptive study based upon the functional motivations survey developed by Clary et al. (1998) was utilized. The first section of the instrument included the six functional motivational constructs measured by 30 items. Each function (construct) consisted of five items measured by a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (extremely unimportant/inaccurate) to 7 (extremely important/accurate). The second section collected demographic data on LAMP volunteers, including number of years served, gender, age, employment status, children in school, children in LAMP, grade mentored, other volunteering, place of residence, and ethnicity. Additional questions sought information about the LAMP program, including volunteers' greatest frustration, how volunteers learned about the program, and whether or not the volunteer had been a struggling reader as a child.

A pilot study was conducted with LAMP volunteers (not included in the study), with resulting Cronbach's Alphas indicating internal reliabilities ranging from  $\alpha = .57$  to  $\alpha = .88$ . As a result of the low internal reliabilities on the specific constructs of enhancement and social motivation, we eliminated one question from each, ultimately increasing the Cronbach's Alphas to meet the desired .70 (Stevens, 1992). One follow-up reminder postcard was sent two weeks after the initial mailing, resulting in a 73% response rate.

## Findings

### Selected Demographics

Volunteers responding to the survey were 43 years of age and primarily white (96%) and female (88%). More than half had children in school (61%), but very few had children in the LAMP program (4%). The vast majority of respondents also volunteered with other organizations (82%) in addition to LAMP. Most volunteers heard about LAMP either through a teacher/administrator (43%) or another LAMP volunteer (25%). Respondents indicated they were employed full-time (17%), part-time (34%), or not employed (34%).

### Functional Motivations of Volunteering

Out of the six possible functions of volunteerism, respondents rated the values function of volunteerism highest ( $M = 6.2$ ;  $SD = .6$ ). LAMP volunteers were much more motivated by the

opportunity to express their altruistic values and humanistic concerns through volunteering than by the other five functions (Table 1). Mean scores for the functions of understand, enhance, and social were close to neutral on the 7-point scale. The remaining two functions, protective and career, had mean scores significantly lower.

**Table 1.**  
Functional Motivation Constructs (n = 227)

Function	Mean	Standard Deviation
Values	6.1975	.64258
Understand	4.4519	1.26541
Enhance	4.3889	1.33805
Social	4.0556	1.39041
Protective	3.3358	1.33573
Career	2.8333	1.60330

## Conclusions/Recommendations

Dedicated volunteers in the LAMP project, who commit to volunteering weekly for a year or more, are primarily motivated by opportunities to exercise their humanitarian and altruistic values. Volunteers were not as strongly motivated by the other five functions identified by Clary et al. (1998). This is a significant departure from research that investigated the achievement-affiliation-power model of motivation and found that volunteers are frequently motivated by a desire for affiliation. Given this earlier research, we would have expected volunteers to be motivated by the social function of volunteerism.

In previous research, Clary et al. (1998) found that volunteers who score high on the values function of volunteerism also scored the highest on long-term intent to serve. This finding corroborates the results of this study, because LAMP volunteers, on average, commit to more than 2 years in the program. These same volunteers who were motivated by the values function of volunteerism had also made relatively lengthy commitments to the program.

Over half (51%) of the LAMP volunteers were employed part- or full-time. Additionally, the vast majority (82%) volunteered with other organizations. These individuals may already have full social lives and not be dependent upon LAMP to fulfill a social function. Additionally, LAMP volunteering may be a somewhat isolating activity, because it involves one-on-one mentoring with a student. Perhaps individuals seeking volunteer opportunities that fulfilled a social function pursued other kinds of volunteer opportunities.

The study results provide important insights into recruiting volunteers who will successfully commit to an intensive assignment such as the LAMP program. Clary et al. (1998) argue that potential volunteers respond best to volunteer recruitment materials that are matched to their motivation for volunteering. Recruitment materials that promote the value function of volunteering will appeal to volunteers who are motivated by their values. Thus, the LAMP project, if it aims to recruit volunteers similar to the ones who are currently committed to the program, should design recruitment materials that appeal to potential volunteers who are motivated by opportunities to share their altruistic values and humanistic concerns.

The school teacher/administrator and current LAMP volunteers also play important roles in LAMP recruitment as over two-thirds (68%) of current volunteers heard about the program through the school teacher/administrator or another LAMP volunteer. A personal invitation to join the LAMP project may have been instrumental in attracting highly committed volunteers and should not be underestimated as an effective recruitment tool. Last, the community's commitment to literacy, its promotion of the LAMP project, and the dynamic leadership of the project have all worked to create a positive LAMP image that has undoubtedly helped with recruitment of talented and committed volunteers (personal interview with Sue Arnold, 2003).

The findings of this research suggest that a similar program that wishes to attract committed volunteers who engage in significant training to serve youth in a one-on-one situation might promote the value function of the volunteer opportunity. Recruitment tools that appeal to the

volunteer's "altruistic values and humanitarian concerns for others" will be most attractive to this group (Clary et al., 1998, p. 1517). School personnel and teachers might also emphasize the value function of volunteerism when making their appeals. It is important to note, though, that the value function of volunteerism was motivating for a very homogenous demographic (i.e., white, middle-aged females), and a different demographic may be motivated by other functions of volunteerism.

We cannot conclude this article without mentioning the sheer number of respondents who wrote in the comments section that they appreciated the opportunity the program gave them to spend with children. Perhaps neither model of volunteer motivation adequately captures the joy many adults experience when interacting with children. These adults may need no further motivation to commit to LAMP.

## References

Atkinson, J., & Birch, D. (1978). *An introduction to motivation* (2nd ed.). Cincinnati: D. Van Nostrand Company.

Braker, M. J., Leno, J. R., Pratt, C. C., & Grobe, D. (2000). Oregon extension volunteers: Partners in action. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 38(2). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2000april/rb3.html>

Clary, E. G., Snyder, M., Ridge, R. D., Copeland, J., Stukas, A. A., Haugen, J., et al. (1998). Understanding and assessing the motivations of volunteers--A functional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(6), 1516-1530.

Culp, K., III, & Schwartz, V. (1999). Motivating adult volunteer 4-H leaders. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 37(1). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1999february/rb5.html>

Erwin, S., McNeely, N. M., Safrit, R. D., & Schwartz, V. (1996). *Volunteers and Ohio State University Extension: A winning team*. Columbus: authors.

Fritz, S., Karmazin, D., Barbuto, Jr., J., B., & Burrow, S. (2003). Urban & rural 4-H adult volunteer leaders' preferred forms of recognition and motivation. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 41(3). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2003june/rb1.shtml>

Maehr, M., & Braskamp, L. (1986). *The motivation factor*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Ohio State University Extension. (2004). *2003 Ohio 4-H statistics*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Extension.

Rouse, S. B., & Clawson, B. (1992). Motives and incentives of older adult volunteers. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 30(3). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1992fall/a1.html>

Stevens, J. (1992). *Applied multivariate statistics for the social sciences* (2nd ed.). Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

White, D. J., & Arnold, M. E. (2003). Why they come, why they go, and why they stay: Factors affecting volunteerism in 4-H. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 41(4). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2003august/rb5.shtml>

Wolford, M., Cox, K., & Culp, K., III. (2001). Effective motivators for master volunteer program development. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 39(2). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2001april/rb4.html>

*Copyright* © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, [joe-ed@joe.org](mailto:joe-ed@joe.org).

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)