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Urban and Rural 4-H Adult Volunteer Leaders' Preferred Forms of Recognition and Motivation

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Urban and Rural 4-H Adult Volunteer Leaders' Preferred Forms of Recognition and Motivation

Abstract

The article describes a study comparing the motives of urban and rural volunteers and identified differences in recognition preferences. A survey sent to 714 leaders across urban and rural Nebraska yielded 326 usable responses. Urban and rural respondents identified affiliation as their primary motivation. Urban respondents were more positive about the state and county 4-H programs. Rural volunteers were less interested in recognition at the county fair. Both groups identified "Letters from 4-H members" as the most meaningful form of recognition. The article presents recommendations for broader volunteer recruitment strategies and more personalized 4-H volunteer recognition.

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Introduction

In order to serve rural and urban 4-H members, 4-H relies heavily on adult volunteer leaders. Dramatic rural-to-urban shifts in Nebraska's population base have resulted in 4-H becoming more heavily reliant on urban adult 4-H volunteer leaders than ever before. Assumptions about volunteer motivation, recognition, and perception of program quality should be challenged to determine if the old assumptions based on a past experience with predominately rural volunteers fit the new mix of 4-H volunteer leaders in Nebraska. The study reported here compared the motives of urban and rural 4-H volunteers and identified differences in recognition strategies by:

1. Classifying demographics of respondents;
2. Identifying preferred forms of recognition;
3. Assessing perceptions of program quality; and
4. Analyzing primary motivation of volunteers using statements.

Method

Sample

The population for the study consisted of 4-H organizational and project leaders. Addresses for the 737 organizational and 1242 project leaders were secured from the Nebraska State 4-H Office. Using a stratified, random sampling strategy (i.e., percentage of organizational and project leaders and five Extension districts), 264 organizational and 450 project leaders ($n=714$) were sampled across the urban and rural Cooperative Extension educational programming units (EPUs).

The study divided Nebraska 4-H programs into two categories, urban and rural volunteers. The urban population was classified as the Metro EPU that is an array of four counties: Lancaster, Douglas, Sarpy, and Saunders. The rural population was defined as the remaining 20 EPU's across the state, which comprises 51% of the state's population.

Instrumentation

Preferred forms of recognition were measured using 19 demographic and attitudinal items from an instrument developed by Culp and Schwartz (1999). The 19 items featured a mix of Likert-type scales (5=very important, 1=very unimportant), rank ordering, and frequency counts. Motivation was measured using 27 statements (based on McClelland's trichotomy of needs theory, 1961) which featured Likert-type scales (7=Agree, 4=Neutral, 1=Disagree) developed by Henderson (1981). The 27 statements were later collapsed into the three primary motivation subscales of achievement, affiliation, and power. The instrument was reviewed by a panel of University of Nebraska Extension faculty and graduate students to establish face validity.

Procedures

The coded instrument, cover letter, and return, postage-paid envelope were mailed to 714 organizational and project leaders. Within 2 weeks, 210 respondents had returned instruments. Two weeks after receiving a postcard reminder, 92 additional respondents had returned instruments. Using the recommended procedure for non-respondent follow-up of Miller and Smith (1983), a random sample of 100 non-respondents was sent instruments and return, postage-paid envelopes. This procedure yielded 28 more responses. In total, 330 instruments were received, for a return rate of 46%; four responses were deemed unusable. First, second, and third respondent groups were compared and no significant differences were found among their demographic, rank ordering, or attitudinal responses. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the motivation data was .89, with motivation subscale (achievement, affiliation, and power) alphas ranging from .82 to .88.

Findings

Demographics

Rural and urban volunteer profiles in this study were more alike than they were different. On the average, volunteers were 43 years of age and generally had children who were eligible for participation in 4-H programs. Rural and urban volunteers also had been 4-H members at a similar rate (70%). More than 92% of the respondents were married. Rural 4-H volunteers in this study were engaged in more volunteer organizations than urban 4-H volunteers were (MN 4.12 rural, MN 3.78, urban, Chi-Square Test, Prob.=.04).

Recognition

Urban volunteers reported that they felt significantly more appreciated by Extension staff (16.5% urban/6.9% rural) and less appreciated by 4-H youth (67% urban/77% rural) than rural volunteers did (Wilcoxon 2-Sample Test, $z=.03$). Rural and urban volunteers committed a comparable annual amount of time to service (65 hours urban/53 hours rural). While their commitment was far below Banning's (1970) finding of a national average of 200 hours of annual 4-H volunteer service, it parallels findings that volunteer service has been on a steady decline in the United States (Putnam, 2000).

Rural and urban respondents' most appealing form of volunteer recognition was a "letter from a 4-H member" (69 [54%] rural/104 [52%]/urban). Rural and urban volunteers were also appreciative of a "phone call from a 4-H member" (ranked third by 82 [41%] of the rural respondents and second by 46 [36%] of the urban respectively). However, a "letter from Extension Educator" was ranked second by urban respondents (48 [38%]) and sixth by rural respondents (64 [32%]).

Conversely, the least appealing forms of volunteer recognition for both rural and urban respondents were:

- "Visit from Extension Educator" (ranked 16th by 12 [9%] of the rural respondents and 17 [9%] of the urban respondents);
- "Recognition at State Fair or Roundup" (ranked 15th by 13 [10%] of the rural respondents and 22 [11%] of the urban respondents); and
- "Phone call from Extension Educator" (ranked 14th by 20 [16%] of the rural respondents and 30 [15%] of the urban respondents).

Urban respondents ranked a "letter from Extension Educator" higher (second) than rural respondents (sixth). Rural respondents found a "ceremony held at the county fair" significantly less appealing than urban respondents did (Wilcoxon 2-Sample Test, $z = .03$).

Table 1.
Urban and Rural 4-H Volunteer Most Appealing Forms of Recognition

Type of Recognition	Urban n = 127			Rural n = 198			Total n = 326		
	#	%	Rank	#	%	Rank	#	%	Rank
Formal Recognition Banquet	30	24	10	41	21	13	71	22	13
Informal Recognition (at mtg)	29	23	11	48	24	11	77	24	11
Recognition at State Fair or Roundup	13	10	15	22	11	15	35	11	15
Letter from Extension Educator	48	38	2	64	32	6	112	34	4
Letter from 4-H member	69	54	1	104	53	1	173	53	1
Visit from parents	21	17	13	51	26	10	72	22	12
Phone call from Extension Educator	20	16	14	30	15	14	50	15	14
Phone call from 4-H member	46	36	3	82	41	2	128	39	2
Coverage in newspaper	42	33	5	73	37	3	115	35	3
Receiving plaques, certificates, pins	40	31	6	70	35	4	110	34	5
Ceremony held at county fair	32	25	9*	47	24	12*	79	24	10
Letter from parent	43	34	4	64	32	6	107	33	6
Visit from Extension Educator	12	9	16	17	9	16	29	9	16
Visit from 4-H member	25	20	12	68	34	5	93	29	8
Phone call from parent	37	29	7	59	30	8	96	29	7
At club's annual Achievement Program	34	27	8	54	27	9	88	27	9
<p>Note: Respondents were asked to rank their five most appealing forms of leader recognition (1=most appealing, 2=second, etc.). *p <= .05</p>									

Program Quality

Urban respondents indicated the quality of the 4-H program at the state, county and club levels

was excellent to good (see Table 2). Rural respondents identified the quality of their state, local and club levels as good. Significant differences were found between urban and rural perceptions of program quality at the state and county levels. While still positive, urban respondents were slightly more positive about the state and county 4-H programs than rural respondents were.

Table 2.
Comparison of Urban and Rural 4-H Volunteer Perceptions of Program Quality

How would you rate the overall 4-H program...	Urban n=127		Rural n=199		Overall n=326	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
In your state?	1.85*	0.76	2.07*	0.85	1.98	0.83
In your county?	1.91*	0.93	2.19*	1.02	2.00	1.00
In your club?	2.24	1.00	2.41	0.97	2.35	0.99

Note: 1=Excellent, 3=Average, 5=Unsatisfactory.
*p <= .05

Motivation

In general, urban and rural volunteers had similar motivation patterns. They were predominately motivated by affiliation needs followed by achievement and power needs. It is important to note that a comparison of volunteer leaders' attitudes yielded a significant difference between urban and rural respondents on the item "I am a 4-H volunteer because I like the challenge of the task." However, the difference in mean values of the two groups was negligible.

Conclusions

4-H volunteers in this study tended to have children who were in 4-H, were in families with married heads of household, and were 4-H alumni. 4-H was one of several community organizations in which volunteers participated, and rural 4-H volunteers were more likely to be engaged in more volunteer organizations than urban 4-H volunteers were.

For the most part, the forms of appreciation found most appealing in this study were those that were personal. The desire for personalized recognition was congruent with the respondents' predominant motivation need for affiliation (Henderson, 1981; McClelland, 1961). 4-H member appreciation expressed through letters or phone calls was highly valued overall, and a substantial number of respondents in each group had strong preferences for recognition through a letter from the Extension educator.

Visits or phone calls from the Extension educator held little comparative appeal for urban and rural volunteers in this study, and respondents appeared to be less interested in State Fair or Roundup recognition than almost any form of recognition explored in this study.

Although they still ranked them as above average, rural volunteers were less positive about their state and county 4-H programs than were urban volunteers. Perhaps rural volunteers viewed the 4-H program as a critical component to community viability. Many rural communities in Nebraska are economically distressed, and this may be affecting the priorities of rural volunteers. Rural communities may look to the Extension office as the "front door of the University," and, if they feel that answers are not coming from the Extension office, then their needs are not being met. However, it is possible that Extension educators may be unfairly associated with federal and state government administrators and consultants, who are often viewed as well intentioned but ineffective (Foster & McBeth, 1996).

Extension has established itself as an integral part of rural communities, and there is a higher expectation given past performance. Higher percentages of rural youth are likely to participate in 4-H programs than urban youth are. Extension has acknowledged the need and the challenges in penetrating the urban Extension audience. But urban respondents may still be less informed and, consequently, less critical of the services they receive.

Affiliation, the need to establish a relationship with another, draws urban and rural volunteers to 4-H. Likely the relationship they are interested in is the relationship with their own children, and this may be spilling over into higher parental involvement in 4-H volunteering.

Recommendations

A key component to expanding urban and rural 4-H programs is increasing the volunteer pool. For this expansion to occur, volunteer recruitment strategies must be employed that go beyond recruiting predominately married adults and/or those with a 4-H background.

Encouraging 4-H members to express appreciation for the service volunteer leaders provide could be reinforced through 4-H curricula and regularly emphasized by Extension educators and staff during county-level program delivery. Extension educators taking the time to write genuine, personalized letters expressing appreciation for volunteer service is of similar importance.

4-H is one of many community organizations that compete for volunteer time. It is important that Extension staff develop and implement strategies to retain, recognize, and develop volunteers. This is particularly important for rural volunteers, who tend to volunteer with many organizations and who are also less positive about of county programs than urban volunteers are. With competing service organizations vying for volunteers, retention becomes a paramount challenge in rural settings.

4-H volunteers generally have children who are involved in the 4-H program, and their volunteering coincides with the years of their children's involvement. This involvement would likely span a number of years. If 4-H volunteers receive similar recognition (pins, certificates) at similar events year after year, the sentiment of the recognition is diminished. This is not to say that some traditions should not be established, but that patterns and forums (State Fair) for the recognition can trivialize the gravity and sentiment of the awards. Therefore, Extension staff are strongly encouraged to vary ways and contexts in which they recognize their volunteers.

4-H has become part of the rural social fiber and has the potential to become an integral part of the urban social fiber. However, applying volunteer recruitment and recognition strategies that are timeworn and possibly a mismatch for the urban population will not increase the likelihood that 4-H will make this transition. Further research is needed to profile urban volunteers' and members' reasons for volunteering for and participating in 4-H. A parallel study could be done with rural volunteers, and this information could be used to update and strengthen recruitment and retention of both volunteers and members.

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