Training Methods and Needs Related to Volunteer Management Competencies of Extension 4-H Youth Development Agents

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Abstract
The purpose of the descriptive study reported here was to describe professional and personal training experiences related to volunteer management and development. A mail questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 4-H Youth Development Agents nationally. 4-H Youth Development agents reported low-levels of participation in volunteer management professional development activities during a 24-month period. However, when asked to identify specific areas of training needed, a long and varied list was generated. Primary needs identified were in the areas of recruitment and motivation, conflict management and liability issues, evaluation, and time management.

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Introduction

Volunteers have been an integral part of the development and delivery of 4-H educational programs since its inception (Wessel & Wessel, 1982). Creating and managing a strong volunteer program allows the Extension agent to maintain and improve programs as well as introduce new ones to meet the needs of youth. A strong volunteer program requires not only capable and willing volunteers but also professional staff with the knowledge and skills necessary to coordinate and direct the efforts of the program. As an organization's need for volunteers strengthens, the need for a person to take responsibility for inducing constructive change in volunteer management within the organization and community increases (Wilson, 1976).

Since the emergence of volunteer management as a recognized profession, many theoretical models (Boyce, 1971; Penrod, 1991; McCurley & Lynch, 1996; Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998; Wells, Safrit & Schmiesing, 2000) have been researched and created, as well as many lists of volunteer management competencies (Hastings & Lifer's PRK, 1988; the *4-H PRK* (no date); the American Volunteer Association's (AVA) functional areas and competency statements; and Fisher & Cole, 1993) have been established. 4-H Youth Development Extension Agents are expected to master competencies through pre-service training, in-service workshops, seminars or programs, and on-the-job experience.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study was to describe professional and personal training experiences related to volunteer management and development. Specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Describe volunteer-based professional development activities experienced, and

2. Describe qualitatively, agents' training needs related to volunteer management/development.

Methods and Procedures

The descriptive study reported here utilized a mail questionnaire to collect data. The population of the study was a census of 4-H Youth Development Agents in the United States in 2001 (N = 2189). A random sample of 350 agents was selected. A panel of experts assessed the instrument for content and face validity. Reliability was assessed through a pilot test using 40 4-H agents not included in the study. Data were collected from October through November 2001 following a modified Dillman procedure for U.S. mail surveys. A final usable response rate was 51% (n = 131). Early and late respondents were compared statistically on selected characteristics. No significant differences were found allowing the results to be generalized to the population. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Open ended questions were analyzed to determine trends and patterns in responses.

Results and Findings

A description of the respondents indicates that 68% were female, 92% Caucasian, and the majority (34%) between the ages of 46-55. Almost 65% reported a Master's degree as their highest level of education. The average number of years as a CES agent was 11.7. Although relationships were investigated between selected demographics and professional development related to attitude and perceived competence with selected volunteer management functions, no reportable associations were found.

Objective One

During a 2-year period, approximately 45% of all respondents reported they had participated in Extension-sponsored professional development activities related to volunteerism, while roughly 30% participated in non-Extension sponsored professional development activities. Most frequently participated in activities were seminars and workshops, followed by reading journals and other volunteer-related literature. Professional development activities least engaged in included academic and continuing education courses.

During a 24-month period, agents reported only a total of 1-5 hours were spent participating in seminars/workshops or professional conferences related to volunteerism. Additionally, membership in professional volunteer management organizations was low. Agents were engaged in reading professional articles on the topic in journals and other related literature an average of only one-five times during the 24-month period (Table 1). Therefore, while 4-H agents do participate in professional development activities related to volunteerism, it is at a very low level.

Table 1.
Participation in Volunteer-Related Professional Development

	Extension Sponsored		Non-Extension Sponsored	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Hours Spent in Volunteer Related Seminars/Workshops				
No Hours	16	10.2	89	55.6
1-5 Hours	138	82.6	68	42.5
6 or More	12	7.2	3	1.9
Attendance at Volunteer-Related Professional Conferences				
None	105	64.8	140	87.5

1-2	57	35.2	18	12.5
Membership in Volunteer-Related Professional Organizations				
None	67	40.4	103	64.4
1	73	44.0	34	21.3
2	19	11.5	14	8.8
3 or more	7	4.1	9	5.5
Number of Times Spent Reading Volunteer-Related Journals				
None	67	41.0	83	51.9
1-5	84	52.5	71	44.4
6 or more	9	5.6	6	3.7

Objective Two

When asked to identify training needs related to volunteer management and development, several common themes emerged. More than 200 responses provided suggestions for training topics. The two most commonly cited were recruitment and motivation of volunteers and conflict management skills.

Recruitment/Motivation

One agent quite emphatically stated, "Train youth development (4-H) coordinators <u>HOW TO RECRUIT</u> volunteers."

Several others simply identified the following key words and phrases, "Recruitment and retention," "Recruitment and rotation of leaders," "Recruitment and motivation strategies," and "how to recruit, train and fire volunteers."

Conflict Management and People Skills

Conflict management and people skills represented a high number of individual responses. One agent stated, "I need to know how to handle volunteers who conflict with other volunteers, and also how to terminate volunteers."

Another said, "I want help dealing with difficult volunteers."

Still others said the important needs were: "cooperation, conflict management, respecting ideas of others and how to get volunteers motivated and involved."

New Agent Training and Preparation

New agent training and preparation also elicited several comments. One individual stated, "I feel we hire individuals too young and they are not ready to work with volunteers. In some cases, the volunteers have more experience than the 4-H agent. The first six months of training should be with an experienced agent, learning how to manage programs and volunteers."

Another stated, "People skills for new agents is a must. Understanding failure and being able to keep trying and dreaming."

Another agent stated, "I feel there is a lack of knowledge about what a good volunteer program looks like and what it takes to implement a middle-management system. This is a major barrier that a young agent runs into."

Other Suggestions

Other suggestions for training topics frequently cited were time management, establishing a common vision, legal issues and liability, and volunteer evaluation: "How do I release volunteers that no longer fulfill expectations of our program/youth development?" and "I am concerned about liability issues with volunteers and any new legal issues."

Others wanted help with volunteer evaluation. One agent stated, "I need help in knowing (they) are in the right place, filling the right needs and that they are happy."

In regards to time, the following quote seems to sum up feelings expressed. "I have recognized that a sole agent can not have an effective program without volunteers. I will also state this . . . one agent with total 4-H responsibility can only do so much. Volunteer development is a job in and of itself."

And finally, "In completing this questionnaire, I learned that one of the barriers is lack of time to work with volunteers. I feel all the categories deserved a 4, but time limitations prevent me from fully accomplishing the objectives. Volunteer management is a job in and of itself, but an agent has program development, academic committee work, etc. It is a real juggling act. Volunteers deserve more time than I have to give."

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

Volunteers are an important part of American society as well as a critical element of the 4-H Youth Development program. As the 4-H program continues to grow and increase, it will require more and more volunteers. The 4-H agent will be required to become an expert in volunteer management in order for the program to prosper. Low levels of participation in volunteer-related professional development activities were found. Yet, when asked to identify specific areas of training needs, a long and varied list was established. These two findings raise some interesting questions.

How will the 4-H Youth Development Program continue to survive if training needs are evident but not pursued by agents? The extensive list of training topics generated by 4-H agents indicates that they are interested and do want help. What is preventing their participation? What factors influence decisions about how they currently are receiving training and information? Should pre-service training and/or experience in volunteer management be required for employment? Can the use of mentors assist newly hired agents needing these management skills? Should in-service training be mandatory for all Extension agents working with volunteers, but especially 4-H agents?

Agents identifying training needs frequently cited the desire for more practical, hands-on approaches to training. Are there other delivery modes than those currently practiced that are better suited to train and prepare agents in volunteer management? How can agents be prepared for the time and training commitment a strong volunteer program needs?

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