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Extension Agents as Administrators of Volunteers: Competencies Needed for the Future

Abstract

Extension faculty, in their role as administrators of volunteers, often lack the competencies to fully manage and utilize this tremendous resource. This article reports the findings of a nationwide Delphi study that identified 33 competencies required by persons leading volunteers. These competencies included skills in the broad constructs of organizational and systems leadership, developing a positive organizational culture, personal skills that will help them in developing effective teams and managing change, and skills in daily management of volunteers. It is recommended that Extension devote greater time and resources to helping faculty acquire these competencies.

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Introduction

Volunteers play an essential role in the delivery of educational programs conducted by the Cooperative Extension program in the United States. For example, in the area of 4-H and youth development, some 587,485 volunteers (National 4-H Headquarters, 2002) delivered educational programs to American youth in 2002. In other areas of Extension, master volunteers deliver educational programs in such diverse areas as gardening, natural resources, parenting, clothing, and food preservation (USDA, 2002). They serve critical roles on advisory committees and governing boards. Vines and Anderson (1976) stated, "without the cooperation and energy of tens of thousands of volunteers, it's inconceivable that Extension could succeed in rallying the resources it has to help solve individual and community problems" (p. 92).

Many terms have been used to describe those who lead and direct volunteers: "coordinator," "manager," "director," or "administrator." For the purpose of this article, the term "volunteer administrator" is used to describe those persons who direct or lead volunteers in organizations.

Volunteers need the direction of administrators who can focus their efforts toward solving specific problems. Volunteers are used extensively in every program area of Extension. This makes every county-level Extension agent a manager or administrator of volunteers. Job descriptions of administrators of volunteers typically include the recruiting, screening, education, and recognition of volunteers for an organization (Conners, 1995). In addition, administrators of volunteers must assess the need for volunteers within their organization and serve as a volunteer management "consultant" to other employees in the agency who utilize volunteers.

County Extension agents often lack the competencies needed to be effective administrators of volunteers. This situation can negatively affect programs in a variety of ways, including quality of work and programming, participation, and organizational liability and risk management issues.

Numerous studies have identified the deficiencies of Extension professionals in coordinating volunteers and volunteer programs (Collins, 2001; Culp & Kohlhausen, 2001; Deppe & Culp, 2001; Hange, Seevers and VanLeeuwen, 2002). In a national survey of Extension agents, Hange, Seevers, and VanLeeuwen discovered a gap between county Extension agents' perceptions of the

importance of nine volunteer management functions and their level of perceived competence in those functions. Collins, Culp and Kohlhagen, and Deppe and Culp found similar deficiencies among Extension agents working with the 4-H and youth development programs in Ohio, Kentucky, and Michigan.

Hange, Seevers, and VanLeeuwen also found that, while Extension agents do participate in professional development opportunities related to volunteer management, they do so at a relatively low level. Agents reported spending only 1-5 hours on volunteer management related professional development over a 24-month period (2002).

Insufficient training for Extension agents/educators is also a concern to the national Extension leadership. Jon Irby, former National Program Leader for Leadership and Volunteer Development, CSREES-USDA, stated, "To be an effective recruiter, trainer, developer, and manager of volunteers, our field staff (Extension agents) need learning experiences that will provide the critical skills and knowledge for these roles" (Irby, 1999).

Because of this concern, many state Extension programs have included skills in the management of volunteers in their list of competencies that faculty must possess or acquire in order to be successful as county Extension educators (Stone & Coppennoll, 2002; North Carolina Cooperative Extension, 2002). But exactly what competencies do county Extension agents need to be effective leaders of volunteers? Previous studies have examined agents' needs with regards to management functions as described by various models such as ISOTURE (Boyce, 1971), GEMS (Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998), or L-O-O-P (Penrod, 1991).

Sue Vineyard believed that the person responsible for coordinating volunteer activities in the 21st century will need to have a broader range of competencies, skills, and expertise in order to meet the growing challenges of coordinating volunteer efforts in those organizations that utilize them (1993). However, in the early part of the 21st century, it really is not known what competencies will be needed in the coming decade, thus the reason for the study reported here.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study reported here was to develop consensus among a panel of experts regarding the competencies that would be required by administrators of volunteers in the coming decade. Competencies are the application of knowledge, technical skills, and personal characteristics leading to outstanding performance (Stone & Bieber, 1997). The specific objective of the article is to define the competencies required by administrators of volunteers in the next 10 years.

Methods/Procedures

The Delphi technique was the method used to develop group consensus. The Delphi technique was first developed by the Rand Corporation in the 1950s. It is a technique primarily used for forecasting, policy investigations, and goal setting (Ulschak, 1983). While the majority of its use in Agricultural Education research has been in the area of curriculum development, it has also been widely used to determine essential competencies in many fields (Martin & Frick, 1998; Shinn & Smith, 1999). The Delphi technique requires the use of a jury of experts in a given field to develop consensus regarding the answer to a specific question or series of questions.

Three rounds were required to achieve consensus among 13 experts in volunteer administration. Guidelines for conducting a Delphi study followed those proposed by Linstone and Turoff (1975). The panel of experts consisted of administrators of volunteers, directors of regional volunteer centers, Extension volunteer development specialists, and university faculty members from across the nation. These experts were identified by their reputation and level of involvement in the profession and by their research and publication record in the field.

Round I

In the initial round, the jury was asked to identify three to five competencies that they believed administrators of volunteers will need in the next decade. A competency was identified as a knowledge, skill, motive, or characteristic that causes or predicts outstanding performance. Fifteen of the original 20 members of the jury responded to the first round for a response rate of 75%. Dalky (1969) found that when the size of the jury was greater than 13, mean correlations were greater than 0.80, satisfying questions of process reliability.

Round II

Faculty members with experience in volunteer administration examined the statements identified in Round I to find commonalities among them and to combine similar statements. The original language of the expert jury members was retained without trying to clarify or interpret meaning. These combined statements were used to create the instrument for Round II. In the second round, the jury rated their strength of agreement for each statement on a six-point Likert-type scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree. All 15 members of the jury who responded in Round I also responded to Round II.

Round III

The purpose of Round III was to begin the process of developing consensus among the jury. Those statements that received a five or six (agree or strongly agree) from at least two-thirds of the jury responding in Round II were kept for the third round. Jury members were sent a third revised instrument and asked to re-evaluate each statement retained from the second round. Thirteen of the 15 jury members responded to this round. Dillman's Tailored Design Method (2000) was used for non-response follow-up. Frequency distributions were again used to select responses based on a two-thirds majority.

Findings and Discussion

Competencies

In Round I, the expert jury originated 72 competency statements. Combining similar statements resulted in the formation of 33 competencies required by administrators of volunteers in the year 2010. Group consensus was reached in the third round, and all 33 competency statements were retained.

Three faculty members subjected these statements to an unstructured Q-sorting procedure. Kerlinger (1986) describes an unstructured Q-sort as "a set of items assembled without specific regard to the variables or factors underlying the items" (p. 511). The faculty members met to compare constructs and reach consensus where items were placed in different categories. The Q-sorting procedure resulted in the development of five constructs. The constructs and their accompanying statements may be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Competencies Required by Administrators of Volunteers During the Coming Decade

Organizational Leadership

- Ability to access the needs of clients, the community, volunteers, and the organization.
- Ability to turn needs into plans and plans into action.
- Articulation of organizational vision to stakeholders and others.
- Articulation of volunteer efforts and accomplishments.
- Commitment to the vision of the organization.
- Creative use of technology to effect program impact.
- Long-range strategic planning skills.
- Short-range skills in planning and organizing.

Systems Leadership

- Collaborating with others.
- Shared leadership--shifting the mantle of leadership to others when the task calls for specific expertise.
- Understanding and utilizing group dynamics, personality type, and team-building strategies.
- Understanding the system in which you operate.
- Willingness to share power and give up control.

Organizational Culture

- Acting as an internal consultant on volunteer management within the organization.
- Creating a positive environment in which volunteers can learn and operate.
- Inspiring commitment and eagerness to learn by volunteers.
- Positive attitude and energy--seeking success and helping others.
- Relationship skills--the ability to motivate and work with others effectively.
- Trusting volunteers to get the job done.

Personal Skills

- Ability to predict and manage change.
- Creative thinking to accomplish goals and meet growing demands.
- Communication skills: verbal, non-verbal, listening.
- Good conflict-resolution skills.
- People skills: The development of the total person.

Management Skills

- Understanding the functions and implementation of an effective advisory system for volunteers.

- Competent in recruiting volunteers.
- Competent in screening volunteers.
- Competent in matching volunteers to agency needs.
- Competent in orienting and training volunteers.
- Competent in protecting volunteers, clients, and the organization.
- Competent in evaluating volunteer efforts and accomplishments.
- Competent in recognizing volunteers.
- Competent in retaining volunteers.

(Boyd, 2003, p. 52)

Competencies falling under the *organizational leadership* construct included skills in planning and needs assessment, strategic planning, and a commitment to and communication of the organization's mission and vision to volunteers, clientele, and the general public. According to Fisher and Cole (1993), volunteer administrators wear many hats besides that of managing volunteers. They are frequently the most public people in the organization, interacting with clients, donors, and the media.

Systems leadership competencies involved understanding the agency's organizational system, and sharing leadership and power within the organization through delegation and collaboration. It also involves understanding others and the ability to build and sustain teams to more effectively address problems. Sharing power and leadership responsibilities involves delegating important tasks to volunteers that both aid in their personal development and extend the capabilities of the volunteer administrator.

Competencies identified under *organizational culture* include helping others within the organization understand the philosophy of volunteerism and how volunteers contribute to the mission of the organization. Creating an atmosphere of trust between employees and volunteers, and the ability to inspire and motivate volunteers through a well-communicated vision are also essential.

The *personal skills* category not only included skills that build better relationships with volunteers, but also the ability to creatively solve problems, and predict and manage change. While verbal communication skills are important in almost every profession, the jury of experts emphasized the development of listening skills as a critical competency. Change is constant in Extension, and the ability to anticipate and plan for change is essential to Extension's viability.

Management skills included those functions necessary to creating and maintaining a volunteer program: recruiting, screening, training, recognizing, and evaluating volunteers. These competencies are found in most of the accepted volunteer management models and are the most frequently addressed skills during Extension trainings.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study indicate that leaders of volunteers need skills in areas other than those identified in the various volunteer administration models used in Extension. The predominantly used models (ISOTURE, LOOP, GEMS) include management functions such as identifying, recruiting, placing, directing, and evaluating volunteers. However, volunteer administrators also need to be competent in systems leadership, developing a positive organizational culture, and personal skills that will help them in developing effective teams and managing change.

The role of volunteer administrator is one that is not well understood or valued (Connors, 1995). In their study to identify trends that will affect volunteer leadership in the next 10 years, Culp and Nolan (1999) identified the volunteer administrator's continuing professional development as the second most critical trend.

Trends in volunteerism in Extension further highlight this need. Since 1990, the number of 4-H volunteers in the U.S. has shrunk by 11.5%, while 4-H enrollment has increased more than 24% (Allan T. Smith, National 4-H Program Leader, personal communication, March 12, 2003). On the other hand, master volunteer programs have experienced phenomenal growth. For example, in the same time period, the number of Master Gardner volunteers in Texas exploded by 630%, from 730 to 5,329 (Texas County Master Gardener Programs, 2001). Other states have experienced similar growth in Master volunteers in all of Extension's program areas.

The implications are clear: volunteers are critical to Cooperative Extension's mission, yet research repeatedly demonstrates that agents need additional training in the competencies required to effectively manage and lead them.

The following steps are necessary to enable Extension agents in all program areas to be able fully to utilize volunteers.

1. Systematic and ongoing faculty development in volunteer leadership is needed based around the five competency areas identified in this study. Special attention should be paid to assessing and developing skills in the areas of systems leadership, developing a positive organizational culture, and personal skills.

2. Extension organizations should make the acquisition of these competencies a part of the employee's performance expectations.
3. Extension organizations should make faculty development time and resources for the acquisition of these competencies a high priority as they allocate scarce resources.

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