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Targeted Recruitment of 4-H Volunteers Involves Understanding Who Currently Volunteers and Why

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PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE



Targeted Recruitment of 4-H Volunteers Involves Understanding Who Currently Volunteers and Why

Abstract

Targeted recruitment of volunteers appeals to volunteer managers who desire to increase both their program scope and the efficiency of their outreach efforts. This article describes a Pennsylvania study looking at who currently volunteers to teach youth about natural resources (forestry, wildlife, and water) through 4-H, for the purpose of better identifying and finding more volunteers. A telephone survey with 4-H agents and semi-structured interviews with 4-H volunteers depict the current natural resources volunteers and suggest three promising groups of potential volunteers. Important characteristics to look for among the members of these groups and a direct recruitment approach are presented.

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Introduction

4-H teaches life skills through individual and group learning opportunities. To achieve this objective, 4-H relies on adult volunteers or "leaders," to work with youth who undertake educational, hands-on projects. Finding adults willing to do this volunteer work is increasingly difficult and challenging (Rodriguez, Hirschl, Mead, & Goggin 2000), yet targeted volunteer recruitment (i.e., identifying and reaching out to potential leaders with the desired skills, commitment or even willingness to help) may offer some hope.

Targeted volunteer recruitment holds strong appeal among all types of volunteer managers who desire to increase both the scope of their programs and the efficiency of their outreach efforts. While research and methods for targeted recruitment are not standardized (Ellis, 1996), they generally involve looking closely at those who currently volunteer for an organization, determining why they do so and then using this knowledge to identify new volunteers (Ilsley & Niemi, 1981; Sure, 1988; Greene, 1992; King & Lynch, 1998; Smith, 2001).

To undertake targeted recruitment, it is useful for volunteer managers to gain an understanding of demographic and background information for their current volunteers. Normally, 4-H programs do not collect this type of information, or it is collected in a limited fashion. Consequently, current recruitment involves broad-based appeals to all adults in communities where youth live.

This article presents an approach for gathering information about the people who volunteer to lead particular types of 4-H projects. In the study described here, 4-H agents (volunteer managers) served as key-informants to identify and characterize those who currently volunteer to lead natural resources projects (forest, wildlife or water sciences.). Then, current 4-H leaders (adult volunteers) working with these projects were interviewed.

Volunteers leading natural resources projects were the focus of this study for two reasons. First,

natural resources projects are a logical choice in view of Pennsylvania's extensive forest conditions, offering strong potential for program expansion. Second, 4-H agents in Pennsylvania express particular difficulty in recruiting volunteers to lead these projects.

Literature Review

The literature on volunteerism is extensive and has much to offer in regards to general volunteer trends, issues, motivation theories, and volunteer marketing. Studies show that formal, service-oriented volunteer work in the United States has increased in popularity in the past 20 years, but that much of this increase has been short-term or occasional volunteering. Forty-Four percent of adult Americans, over aged 21, do some type of formal volunteering (Independent Sector, 2001).

No single theory on volunteer motivation is accepted in the literature, although several are widely known and used. These include needs theory (Maslow, 1943), expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), motivational theory (McClelland, 1970) and social exchange theory (Glueck, 1980).

While each theory offers its own explanation of why people volunteer, when viewed together, they are in sum useful in gaining an understanding of this complex phenomenon. Numerous studies in the past 40 years have used one or several of these theories, and most have concluded that people volunteer for diverse reasons, both altruistic and egoistic (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glenn, 1991). Further, volunteer marketing studies have shown that each organization attracts their own particular volunteer type (Heidrich, 1988), and that potential volunteers can be targeted using demographic characteristics, background information, attitudes, job context and other variables (Yavas & Riecken, 1981 & 1985; Wymer, Riecken, & Yavas, 1996).

Only a few studies focus on volunteerism in environmental or natural resources education. Environmental education program volunteers have been shown to have high altruistic values and demonstrate strong interest in the environment (Greene, 1992), and some adult volunteers have benefited from the inter-personal relationships developed with youth while volunteering (Ricard, 1994).

Other, broader studies with 4-H volunteers provide relevant findings. One study demonstrated how age, 4-H background (years as a 4-H member), children who are 4-H members, and perceptions about the public image of 4-H, all positively influenced a person's decision to volunteer and length of service (Rohs, 1986). Another study confirmed these findings and reported several significant negative motivators for volunteering with 4-H such as: lack of additional adult assistance, feeling unwanted, lack of time and one's own children leaving 4-H (Culp, 1997). The need for more scientific studies, both basic and applied, on all types of volunteerism is a recognized concern (Gidron, 1978, Smith, 1985; Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Wymer et al., 1996), and the field of natural resources and environmental education volunteerism offers an opportunity for useful research.

Methodology

The study used a two-phase approach. The first phase, conducted in the spring of 1999, involved a telephone survey with 4-H agents in all 67 Pennsylvania counties.

The second phase, in the autumn of 1999, consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted over the telephone with 41 randomly selected 4-H volunteers currently leading natural resources projects. A sample size of 45 was originally planned, but through the process of calling and calling back volunteers, 41 finally participated in the study. These volunteers were selected from 69 names provided by 4-H agents in Phase I. With their verbal consent, the interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed. Participants in both phases of the study were Pennsylvania residents. The telephone survey and interview methods closely followed those recommended by Dillman (1978, 2000).

Results

Telephone Survey with 4-H Agents (Phase I)

The telephone survey conducted with 4-H agents yielded an overview of and general information about the current status of volunteerism in 4-H natural resources projects and programs across the state. These agents indicated that they were currently working with a combined total of 10,079 adult 4-H volunteers, and they reported that only 318, or 3.2%, of these volunteers worked with natural resources projects. Fifty-six of Pennsylvania's counties (84%) reported that they had at least one natural resources 4-H Leader in their county program.

The telephone survey gathered 4-H agents' opinions and perceptions about the common traits of adults who volunteer for natural resources project work. Agents were allowed to give multiple responses. Categorized responses from two open-ended telephone survey questions are shown in Tables 1 and 2; only those responses given by 20% or more of the agents are reported.

Table 1.

4-H Agents' Perceptions on the Common Traits of Adult Volunteers Working with 4-H Natural Resources Projects (N=56)

Most Common Traits	Frequency	Percent*
1. People Interested in the Environment or Outdoors	35	62
2. Parents of Kids Involved	19	34
3. People Involved in Outdoor Sports	17	30
4. Teachers with an Interest in the Environment	15	27
5. Individuals with Post-Secondary Education	11	20
*Percentage of individuals who gave this response.		

Clearly, an interest in the environment or outdoors was the key trait that 4-H agents believed was common among volunteers for these projects. Approximately one third of the agents also reported that these volunteers were parents of 4-H members or people involved in outdoor sports (e.g., hunting, fishing, or hiking). About a quarter said the volunteers were teachers with an interest in the environment. Twelve percent of the agents with natural resources volunteers working in their counties indicated that they did not know these particular leaders very well and they were uncertain how to characterize them. This was especially true with new agents.

The 4-H agents also contributed a wealth of ideas and suggestions for how they might attract volunteers into 4-H natural resources projects. While their responses were diverse, six distinct ideas were given by 20% or more of the state's 67 4-H agents (Table 2).

Again, the agents were allowed to give multiple responses. Many of the less frequently cited responses were often specific to a particular agent's experience or county situation. The most frequently given responses listed in Table 2 imply four distinct groups of individuals as sources of possible volunteers and the remaining two suggest processes or approaches to identify potential volunteers. The four groups of potential volunteers include natural resources/environmental professionals, 4-H parents, existing 4-H volunteers (working with other 4-H projects) and schoolteachers.

Table 2.
4-H Agent's Ideas and Suggestions for Attracting More Adult Volunteers into 4-H Natural Resources Programs (N=67)

To Attract More Volunteers	Frequency	Percent*
1. Explore Contacts with NR ¹ Agencies & EE ² Centers	25	37
2. Make Direct Requests to 4-H Parents	22	33
3. Train Existing 4-H Volunteers	20	30
4. Reach Out to Teachers with School Promotions	18	26
5. Increase Adult Involvement at 4-H Day Camps	17	25
6. Appeal through Newsletter/Newspaper Articles	14	21
*Percentage of individuals who gave this response. 1 NR= Natural Resources; 2EE= Environmental Education.		

Semi-Structured Interviews with Current Natural Resources Leaders (Phase II)

The semi-structured interviews gathered quantitative and qualitative data about current 4-H natural resources volunteers and their views on volunteering. Information on socio-demographics, 4-H connections, volunteering experience, and potential volunteers helped to form a more complete understanding of who currently volunteers, why they volunteer, and what they think about finding and motivating potential volunteers.

The volunteers interviewed were mostly females (66%), and approximately 56% of those interviewed were college educated. Five (12%) had natural resources related degrees; however, the 41 interviewees were employed in a wide diversity of occupations. Ninety-five percent of these volunteers were parents and 68% of them currently had children in 4-H. More than three-quarters of the volunteers (76%) currently lived in rural areas or on farms.

Forty-three percent of those interviewed had been in 4-H as children, and four (10%) had taken natural resources projects as a child. Most (71%) of the volunteers were currently working with a traditional community 4-H club rather than a special interest or school-based group. One volunteer described his connection with 4-H camping as a child:

"I was a 4-H'er and I especially loved the camping program. I stayed in touch with this even after I grew up. My agent asked me to get back into the natural resources projects by starting a community club."

Another volunteer described her experience this way:

"My older daughter joined 4-H when she was eight and a friend of mine's daughter also joined. She and I decided to be leaders together and set up our own community club."

Almost 60% of the current volunteers indicated that they got involved initially because their own children were in a 4-H group, and 41% said they were asked by a family member or another person to volunteer. Twenty-nine percent indicated that their 4-H background motivated them to volunteer.

The volunteers indicated three main factors that initially attracted them to volunteering. The responses given by at least 20% of the volunteers included: the opportunity to work with youth, affiliation with the 4-H organization, and the desire to teach and share about natural resources (Table 3). However, now that they were volunteers, they noted that seeing youth develop and self-improvement opportunities were also important motivators. One volunteer described his attraction to 4-H volunteering this way:

". . . the thing about 4-H is that it's boys and girls and parents all together. Scouting is divided between boys and girls, and I have six kids, both sons and daughters, so this was the way we went. The other thing that has always been attractive to me about 4-H is ... the variety of projects, and the flexibility of 4-H. It allows you to do different things as well as the conventional projects. Like we were able to create our own fishing project, which is now used by the county... Parents have fun going along too, so it's one less thing that's tearing children away from parents. Both parents can be involved."

Last, 90% of those interviewed indicated they had the assistance of another person with their volunteer work and that this was important to their success. Almost two-thirds (63%) indicated that a family member assisted them, and even more (71%) said that they also had help from a non-family member such as another parent or friend.

Table 3.

Frequency and Percentage of 4-H Natural Resources Volunteers' Responses on Things That Initially Attracted or Appealed to Them About Volunteering (N=41)

Initial Attractions	Frequency	Percent*
1. Interest in Working with and Teaching Kids	14	34
2. Organizational Aspects of 4-H ¹	14	34
3. Desire to Teach and Share About Natural Resources with Kids	11	27
*Percentage of individuals who gave this response. ¹ Co-ed nature of the program, range of ages, inclusion of parents, life skills emphasis, variety of projects, autonomy allowed volunteers.		

The interviewees contributed much on the topic of identifying potential volunteers. Most (70%) expressed that an interest in and love for kids was the chief factor for volunteer success; this was

far more frequently mentioned than an interest in natural resources (41%). When asked who would make good volunteers, the interviewees identified adults interested in natural resources, natural resources professionals, 4-H parents, hunters and anglers, and teachers (Table 4). They did not, however, specifically mention current 4-H volunteers leading other projects as a potential group to recruit into the natural resources projects.

Table 4.

Frequency and Percentage of 4-H Natural Resources Volunteers' Responses on Who Would Make Good Volunteers for 4-H Natural Resources Projects (N=41)

Who Should Be Recruited?	Frequency	Percent*
1. Adults Interested in Natural Resources	21	51
2. Natural Resource Professionals	15	37
3. Hunters and Anglers	11	27
4. 4-H Parents or Potential 4-H Parents	11	27
5. Teachers	9	22
*Percentage of individuals who gave this response.		

The interviewees expressed strong opinions about who would make good volunteers, and sometimes their remarks were contradictory, such as these two responses:

"Look at industry people more . . . there are foresters who work in different companies who want to do something with youth. They have not been approached. Especially go after the younger ones with kids of 4-H age, they're seeing what's happening in schools today and don't like it. This is a way [for them] to counter that."

". . . the contacts just have to be made with the kinds of people interested in this area. People who are involved with outdoor hobbies are more likely to do this than people whose career is in natural resources. The career people are tired of it when they get home from work."

In regard to attracting new volunteers, the main method suggested by current volunteers (56%) was better and increased advertising about the 4-H natural resources projects. Subject matter training and asking people directly were also considered important by 20% of those interviewed. The current natural resources volunteers rated six items as very important to a potential volunteer who would work with natural resources projects. These included:

- Opportunities to meet natural resources professionals,
- Opportunities for their own children to learn and grow,
- Assistance with the volunteer work,
- Up-to-date materials,
- Training on the subject matter, and
- Provision of equipment such as field guides, compasses, and binoculars.

Various other items rated were of lesser importance.

Finally, most of volunteers interviewed (69%) felt that a lack of time due to competing interests for youth and adults was the main reason preventing adults from volunteering. Other volunteers (36%) indicated that the overwhelming responsibility of leading a 4-H group, negative perceptions about 4-H (28%), and lack of awareness of this opportunity (28%) were barriers to greater involvement.

Discussion and Conclusions

Pennsylvania 4-H has a strong interest in increasing the number of volunteers willing to work with youth on natural resources related projects. There are several driving concerns; among them is the extent of forests in the state, economic and ecological importance of natural resources, and the need to encourage responsible resource stewardship to sustain the myriad values of the state's natural resources. However, finding adult volunteers to lead these projects is difficult and challenging.

This research project identifies an approach for finding potential volunteers based on

characteristics defined by county Extension agents and current volunteers. This approach of seeking out individuals who in some way represent the existing cadre of volunteers has in the past been shown successful (Wymer et al., 1996) and is applicable for finding all types of 4-H or Extension volunteers. However, no one had specifically considered its application to natural resource education volunteers for youth.

The participants in this study suggested that many current volunteers have chosen environmentally focused careers or have an affinity for outdoor avocations. While this common denominator is important, the current volunteers (70%) suggested that having an interest in or a love for kids is more important in volunteer success. Not surprisingly, 71% of the current natural resources project volunteers interviewed are leading or working with traditional or community-based 4-H clubs, and 95% are parents. They most often have a college degree (56%), and, as suggested by the interviewees, there is a high correspondence with natural resources related education (12%).

The study suggests that finding volunteers to work with natural resources education programs might involve following a hierarchical approach, starting first with targeting 4-H parents. Since 60% of the current volunteers got involved because of their children, it's logical to start here. But don't wait for them to step forward. Talk with them, gauge their interest in the outdoors and natural resources topics, and ask them directly for their help. Forty-one percent of the volunteers interviewed recalled being directly asked for their assistance.

Next, if, as the participants suggest, natural resources directed people are desirable, then develop advertising and marketing programs to pique their interest. Additionally, learn who among them have children (especially in the targeted ages), and ask these adults for help first. As is the case with many people, they may be hesitant to become "full-time" or "long-term" volunteers at first, but because of their interests and their children's involvement, they may willingly deliver program elements or lead part of an education program.

A full 90% of the current volunteers interviewed indicated that they have the assistance of another adult in carrying out their volunteer assignment. If a natural resources professional is paired with another volunteer, such as a parent or 4-H organizational leader, it greatly increases their willingness to volunteer and ultimately program success.

Last, more research on the three main groups of potential natural resources volunteers (4-H parents, 4-H leaders, and natural resources professionals) and their motivations could enhance targeted recruitment efforts. Who, specifically, is most willing to volunteer among these three groups? What factors (background or present) determine which individuals are most likely to volunteer? Could a simple tool be developed that might help to identify those most likely to achieve success as a 4-H natural resources volunteer?

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