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## Equipping Extension Professionals to Lead Volunteer Systems: An Evaluation of an Online Course

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# **Equipping Extension Professionals to Lead Volunteer Systems: An Evaluation of an Online Course**

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*Extension professionals enter their role with content-specific expertise; however, experience in volunteer leadership and management competencies is often limited. This study focused on the effectiveness of the Achieving the Extension Mission Through Volunteers (AEMTV) course in preparing professionals to use the Identification, Selection, Orientation, Training, Utilization, Recognition, Evaluation (ISOTURE) model to learn and apply volunteer systems concepts in a cohort-based online learning environment. We used quantitative and qualitative methods to assess how the course impacted participants and the programs they lead. Data from 127 participants indicated they increased their knowledge, improved volunteer systems, and influenced the quality of programming delivered in communities. Our research confirmed that the ISOTURE model (Boyce, 1971; Dolan, 1969) continues to be an effective framework for learning and applying volunteer systems management practices. We recommend that Extension collaborates across states to formalize and create additional online professional development relevant to all program areas to elevate Extension's impact nationally.*

**Keywords:** professional development, ISOTURE, online learning, volunteer systems, volunteers, achieving the Extension mission through volunteers

## Introduction and Literature Review

Extension professionals enter their role with content-specific expertise; however, experience in volunteer leadership and management competencies is often limited. Volunteers are critical in the delivery and outreach of Extension programs, leading to changes in community conditions and contributions to public value (Allred et al., 2011; O'Neil et al., 2021; Van Den Berg & Dann, 2008). Volunteer development is a core competency to Extension professionals' work (Cooper & Graham, 2001; Diem, 2009; Donaldson & Vaughn, 2022; Heck et al., 2009; Stone & Rennekamp, 2004).

The North Central Region Volunteer Specialists identified an absence of consistent and accessible training on volunteer leadership development and managing volunteer systems. Achieving the Extension Mission Through Volunteers (AEMTV) course was developed to address this need for Extension professionals who utilize volunteers to deliver programs (North Central Regional 4-H Volunteer Development, 2021). This national cohort-based online course increased availability for in-depth professional development and created a space for collaborative learning across Extension disciplines (Robideau & Santl, 2020).

Non-credit adult learners need to understand and commit to the increased time required to complete online course activities (Vu et al., 2014). Active participation leads to application when the learner designates time on their professional calendar to engage in cohort learning (Robideau & Santl, 2020). This is a new experience for professionals who are accustomed to shorter online or in-person workshops that occur at specified times.

North Central Extension Deans and Directors and 4-H Youth Development Program Leaders provided financial support for course development. We utilized the team approach to online development that follows the ADDIE (Assess, Design, Develop, Implement, Evaluate) model (Robideau & Vogel, 2014). This approach capitalized on the content expertise of experienced Extension professionals and delineated clear roles to facilitate course development. Roles included one project manager, three educational designers, and 14 content experts from eight states. North Central Volunteer specialists and an Extension evaluation specialist led the evaluation.

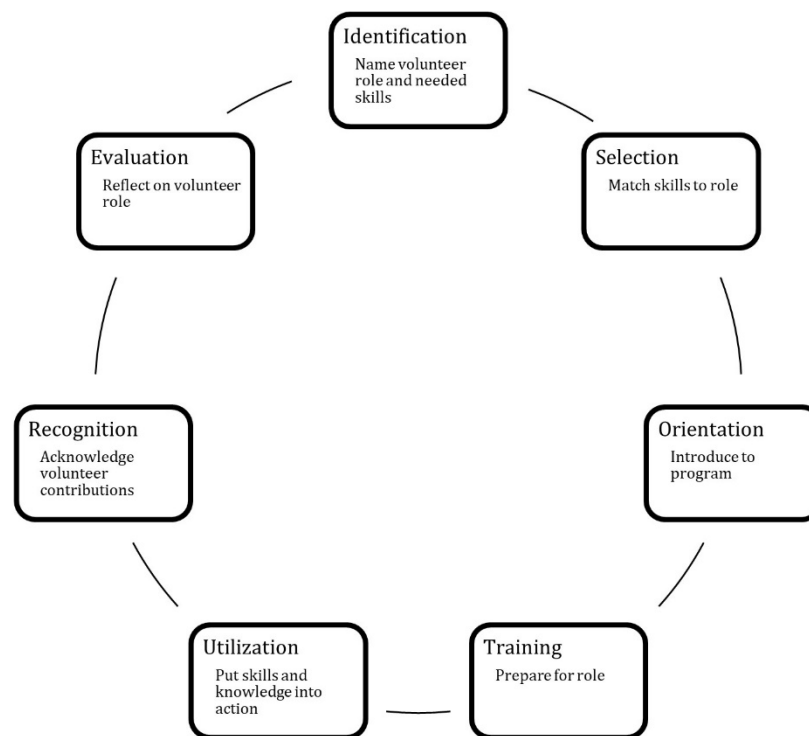
Content experts identified three areas of research that provided the course framework:

1. The Identification, Selection, Orientation, Training, Utilization, Recognition, Evaluation (ISOTURE) Model (Boyce, 1971; Dolan, 1969).
2. The Developmental Stages of an Extension Professional (DSEP) Model (Rutledge, 2021).
3. Communicating the Public Value of Extension Programs to Stakeholders (Franz, 2015; Kalambokidis, 2004).

We were intentional in the design of a cohort-based online learning experience for multiple disciplines. These three research areas also provided the framework for the evaluative study.

The first was the **Identification, Selection, Orientation, Training, Utilization, Recognition, Evaluation (ISOTURE) model** (Boyce, 1971; Figure 1). This model provided the framework of the course. The course modules prepared participants to implement volunteer development and administration practices. Boyce (1971) outlined a seven-step process for working with volunteers, otherwise known as the ISOTURE model. ISOTURE stands for *identification* of the volunteer, *selection* of the role that is best suited for the volunteer, *orientation* of the volunteer to the role and organization, *training* the volunteer and adding to their knowledge and skill set, *utilization* of the volunteer in the role they have been selected and trained to carry out, *recognition* of the volunteer's contributions, and *evaluation* of the volunteer's role.

**Figure 1. "ISOTURE Model"**



Effective organizations utilize a volunteer framework (Culp, 2012; Windon et al., 2021), like ISOTURE. Boyd (2004) identified the importance of professional development around the seven ISOTURE steps to be effective volunteer managers. Washburn et al. (2020) indicated that the readiness of the professional to involve the volunteer in program planning and implementation starts with meaningful engagement of volunteers. Ongoing evaluation of volunteers is important to recognize their meaningful contribution and sustain their engagement (Culp, 2012). Volunteers help expand the programmatic reach of Extension professionals; therefore, it is important to provide leadership development opportunities for volunteers (Boyce, 1971).

Next, the **Developmental Stages of the Extension Professional (DSEP) model** (Rutledge, 2008) provided a framework to prepare professionals to work with volunteers and support volunteer development. The DSEP model of service, education, management, and leadership builds on Boyce's (1971) research of ISOTURE volunteer engagement practices and transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990), resulting in increased Extension outreach. Rutledge's framework connects to the "Utilization" step in ISOTURE, intentionally engaging volunteers throughout the stages. The DSEP model depicts how professionals can move through the developmental stages and encourages staff to assess the situation and adjust their leadership style to build capacity in volunteers. Rutledge's leadership and management experiences over 40 years as a county educator, area educator, program specialist, and program leader allowed him to test and apply research, resulting in the creation of the DSEP model (Rutledge, 2021).

The third area of research was **Communicating the Public Value of Extension Programs to Stakeholders** (Franz, 2015; Kalambokidis, 2004). This provides a structure for professionals to empower volunteers to create message points around communicating the public value of Extension programs. The work of Extension volunteers leads to changes in communities and contributions that have impacts far beyond the local program where they volunteer. The public value of Extension volunteers has been documented and supports the need to focus on volunteer systems in the development of Extension professionals. As Extension budgets tighten, attention needs to be placed on engaging volunteers in community programming that increases civic engagement, better connects communities, makes communities stronger, and improves the health of communities, resulting in increased public value (O'Neil et al., 2021). This includes supporting and partnering with Extension volunteers as they contribute value to the communities in which they live and work (Franz, 2011).

Professionals in the course engage in content, reflect on their work, and apply volunteer systems concepts to their programs. They spend four to six hours per week completing designated modules while interacting with online activities, including pre-recorded presentations, discussion boards, and live webinars. The online learning community extends beyond geographical borders and supports networking across states and disciplines. Nearly 1,000 professionals representing multiple program areas from 40 states took the course between 2015–2022. Figure 2 (AEMTV Course Outline) contains the course details and content.

*Figure 2. AEMTV Course Outline*

<b>Course Week</b>	<b>AEMTV Course Content</b>	<b>Cohort Participant Notes</b>
<b>Week 1</b>	<p><b>Intro Week:</b> The first week of the course is very important! Before we dig into the content, we work to develop our online learning community, ensure all participants are familiar with the course site, understand how to write &amp; interact in Discussion Boards, and ensure that everyone has the technology they need to be successful.</p>	Block 30 min. to 2-hour segments of “course work” on your calendar this week, adding up to 4-6 hours
	<p><b>Video Conference Call #1 Creating Your Online Learning Community</b> Cohort facilitators will guide a conversation, with time for questions and comments.</p>	Participate in a Video Conference Call with your cohort. Link will be provided by facilitators.
<b>Week 2</b>	<p><b>Module 1: Volunteerism in Extension</b> After this Module you will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Define volunteerism and how critical volunteers are to Extension programs.</li> <li>● Recognize the elements of an effective volunteer delivery system and the role of the volunteer program manager within the context of local Extension programming.</li> <li>● Assess current volunteer delivery systems including specific elements of volunteer development, volunteer system management and personal readiness.</li> <li>● Identify your personal approach to volunteerism as it relates to your volunteer program manager role.</li> </ul> <p><b>Module 2: Trends and Motivations</b> After this Module you will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Articulate trends in volunteerism, including identifying generational differences in volunteers, differentiating between traditional volunteers and potential new volunteer types</li> </ul>	Block 30 min. to 2-hour segments of “course work” this week, adding up to 4-6 hours
	<p><b>Webinar #1: Volunteerism in Extension and Course Introduction</b></p>	Participate in 1 of the 2 webinar presentations. Link on course site.
<b>Week 3</b>	<p><b>Module 3: Identifying and Recruiting Volunteers</b> After this Module you will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Conduct a community assessment of volunteer capacity</li> <li>● Create a volunteer role description to match identified needs</li> <li>● Develop a volunteer recruitment plan</li> </ul>	Block 30 min. to 2-hour segments of “course work” on your calendar this week, adding up to 4-6 hours

Week 4	<b>Work Week</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This week is designed to provide an opportunity to dive deeper into the first few weeks of content and to catch up with any incomplete course activities to ensure you are prepared to participate in Modules 4-6.</li> </ul>	Work Week – Content Deep Dive, Block the time you need to complete coursework to this point
	<b>Video Conference Call #2: Deeper Dive into Topics Identified by Cohort</b> Cohort facilitators will guide a conversation, with time for questions and comments. Then, there will be an opportunity to dig deeper into course topics that are of interest to the cohort group	Participate in Video Conference Call with your cohort. Link will be provided by facilitators
Week 5	<b>Module 4: Selecting and Matching Volunteers</b> After this Module you will be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify best practices of selecting volunteers</li> <li>Locate local policies and procedures related to your program area</li> <li>Explain components of a volunteer orientation</li> </ul>	Block 30 min. to 2-hour segments on your calendar of “course work” this week, adding up to 4-6 hours
Week 6	<b>Module 5: Supporting Volunteers</b> After this Module you will be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Determine appropriate training for volunteers using role description.</li> <li>Apply formal and informal methods of recognizing volunteers according to their individual motivation.</li> <li>Build rapport with volunteers that reflect professional boundaries and communication.</li> <li>Apply appropriate coaching methods to volunteer systems management.</li> <li>Implement a comprehensive volunteer support system that includes training, coaching, and recognition.</li> </ul>	Block 30 min. to 2-hour segments of “course work” on your calendar this week, adding up to 4-6 hours
	<b>Webinar #2: Handling Volunteer Dilemmas and Practicing Feedback</b>	Participate in 1 of the 2 webinar presentations. Link provided on course site.
Week 7	<b>Module 6: Communicating Public Value</b> After this Module you will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand the impact of volunteers to Extension and how they extend the university's reach.</li> <li>Distinguish the difference between individual, organizational and public value.</li> <li>Understand methods to assess stakeholder perspectives.</li> <li>Demonstrate how communicating value can be integrated into programming.</li> <li>Articulate the impact of volunteer involvement in your local program.</li> </ul>	Block 30 min. to 2-hour segments of “course work” this week, adding up to 4-6 hours
	<b>Video Conference Call #3: Put it to Practice</b> Cohort facilitators will guide a conversation, with time for questions and comments. Cohort members each share an example of how they will use content from the course.	Participate in the final Video Conference Call with your cohort.



	<b>Webinar #3: Communicating Public Value and Applying ISOTURE to your work</b>	Participate in 1 of the 2 webinar presentations. Link provided on course site.
	<b>Course Completion</b>	Last day course is moderated by cohort facilitators. Course is open through March.

### Purpose of Study

This paper focuses on the effectiveness of the AEMTV course in preparing professionals to use the ISOTURE model to learn and apply volunteer systems concepts in a cohort-based online learning environment. The DSEP model results will not be discussed. We designed and administered an evaluation to

1. Document the ISOTURE model knowledge gained by individuals.
2. Assess to what extent participants applied course learnings to their role.
3. Determine the extent to which participants increased their networking with other professionals.
4. Assess the impact of a cohort-based online learning experience.

### Methods

#### Census

We focused on the experiences and outcomes of professionals who participated in the AEMTV course. The census represented four years of cohort participants from 2015 (pilot year) through 2018. Prior to recruiting participants, state volunteer specialists confirmed email addresses for individuals who completed the course and were still employed by Extension. After accounting for incorrect email addresses, 379 individuals were invited to participate in the study.

We had 154 respondents (41% response rate) from 17 states. Those missing significant data or key variables were removed from the analysis, resulting in 127 respondents. The majority of respondents (54%) had five or fewer years of Extension experience. Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the census: gender, race/ethnicity, and program area.

**Table 1. Covariates / Demographic Information (N = 127)**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
Gender		
Female	91	72
Male	18	12
Preferred not to respond	20	16

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Race / Ethnicity		
American Indian / Alaska Native	1	1
Black / African American	2	2
White	101	79
Preferred not to respond	12	18
Program Area		
4-H Youth Development	85	67
Agriculture (Master Gardeners, etc.)	24	19
Family Living / Health & Well Being / Human Development	6	5
Natural Resources	2	1
No Response	10	8

### Instrument Design

We designed a questionnaire to measure each course outcome. The study used quantitative and qualitative methods to assess how the course impacted participants and the programs they lead. Each research objective was assessed with both quantitative and qualitative questions. This methodology was useful for addressing a mixed methods approach (Stoecker & Avila, 2021). We developed an online survey using a retrospective pretest-posttest design to measure course participants' understanding and application of the ISOTURE model (Boyce, 1971), the DSEP model (Rutledge, 2008), and the online learning experience, including networking.

A closed-ended 4-point Likert scale, from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (4), was used to collect quantitative data. Questions were divided into three constructs containing multiple items to understand Extension professionals':

1. knowledge and readiness (eight items aligned with the ISOTURE model),
2. behavior changes (six items), and
3. programmatic changes (six items) when working with volunteers.

By analyzing each item separately, we measured a single knowledge and readiness construct by combining individual items into a single metric. Quantitative survey questions related to this article can be found in Tables 2 and 3.

The reliability of the scales for the three main constructs was tested using Cronbach's alpha. The Cronbach alpha results were .910 for knowledge and readiness items, .736 for behavior change items, and .684 for programmatic changes when working with volunteers. The results indicated (knowledge and readiness) scales were strong and (programmatic changes when working with volunteers) were moderately reliable (Bernardi, 1994; Bonett & Wright, 2015; Field, 2013).

We made a deliberate decision to include open-ended questions to align with each construct and learn more about the subject being studied through the participant's qualitative comments. Their comments added to the richness of the data and supported the quantitative results (Fielding,

2012). The goal of qualitative research is to formulate ideas and theories to learn more about the subject being studied (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), so we included open-ended questions aligned with the ISOTURE model (Boyce, 1971), the DSEP model (Rutledge, 2008), and the online learning experience (Robideau & Matthes, 2021). We used the Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) mixed methods triangulation to design the evaluation. This design compares and contrasts quantitative and qualitative results and then interprets the two together. Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) noted this method is “used when a researcher wants to directly compare and contrast quantitative statistical results with qualitative findings or to validate or expand quantitative results with qualitative data” (p. 62).

The survey was reviewed by the University of Wisconsin IRB, which determined that an IRB was not needed since it was a course evaluation. Data were collected using a single Qualtrics electronic survey. Dillman’s (2007) tailored design method was used to increase the response rate. We piloted the survey with participants in multiple states to ensure question clarity and construct alignment. We used an introductory email message to alert course participants to the survey and the importance of the evaluation. We then sent a message with the first survey link and two reminder emails over a four-week period to individuals who had not completed it.

### **Data Analysis**

We conducted a simple frequency analysis of individual items and calculated basic descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation. As an initial step, all data were cleaned following the recommendations of Morrow and Skolits (2012), and information was de-identified. Tests for normality and outliers were completed following the guidance of Gordon (2010). We examined the three main constructs measured on the questionnaire: (a) eight-item measure of knowledge and readiness, (b) six-item measure of application/behavior change, and (c) six-item measure of programmatic change. Mean scores for each construct were generated in order to provide an overall score. We tested the reliability of these measures using Cronbach’s alpha. All statistical analyses were conducted using STATA 14.1 (StataCorp, 2015). To analyze the retrospective pretest-posttest items for change, we used paired sample *t*-tests and calculated effect size using Cohen’s *d*. We used analysis of variance to test for differences that could be attributed to covariates, including program area, years working with Extension, and generations.

Questions guiding our qualitative analysis were “As a result of taking this course as an Extension professional, (a) Describe how you work with volunteers differently and (b) Share one way you have moved from doing a project, event, or activity yourself to empowering volunteers to take leadership for that project, event, or activity.” We conducted thematic coding of open-ended responses to understand how the course led to participants’ increase in knowledge and behavior change. Qualitative responses were coded and analyzed using MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2017) and a collaborative data jam process (Schmieder et al., 2018) to develop summarizations, initial theories, and visualizations. Primary coding aligned with the ISOTURE

model (Boyce, 1971), the DSEP model (Rutledge, 2008), and online learning (Robideau & Matthes, 2021). Through this process, other emergent themes were identified. Using Creswell and Plano Clark's (2017) methods, further validation of items was confirmed as the research team found similar themes in responses to the open-ended items for each set of questions.

## Results

The quantitative and qualitative analysis demonstrated the online course met the needs of learners, regardless of their age, gender, or program area. All items tested at the 95% confidence level. No statistical differences between demographic groups, disciplines, or states were found.

### ISOTURE Knowledge Gained

The findings demonstrated how participants applied the ISOTURE model to their work with volunteers in Extension programs. The quantitative results confirmed the course met the objectives (see Table 2). Respondents rated each item using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (4).

**Table 2. Respondents Knowledge and Readiness to Utilize the ISOTURE Model (N = 127)**

Survey Question	% Strongly Agree/Agree	Mean Score	SD
As a result of participating in the Achieving the Extension Mission Through Volunteers Course (AEMTV), I can:			
Articulate to others how volunteerism impacts Extension Programming	95.3	3.26	0.566
Analyze my program's current volunteer delivery system	92.9	3.21	0.5846
Develop role descriptions that align with volunteer roles	95.3	3.24	0.559
Align recruitment with the specific volunteer role	88.1	3.09	0.597
Apply best practices in selecting volunteers	92.9	3.23	0.593
Apply coaching strategies when working with volunteers	90.6	3.09	0.550
Articulate my approach to volunteerism	89.7	3.13	0.591
Understand volunteers need different types of recognition	96.8	3.45	0.613

In the qualitative ISOTURE analysis, we explored what participants learned and applied. It was guided by this question, "As a result of taking this course, describe how you work with volunteers differently." We coded and analyzed 79 unique responses. Integrated quantitative and qualitative analysis is discussed in each element of the ISOTURE model below.

Boyce (1971) discussed the importance of identifying volunteers for specific roles. During the AEMTV course, participants identified Extension volunteer positions, wrote role descriptions to meet those needs, identified individuals who have those skills, and recruited them to be volunteers in the created positions (Boyce, 1971). After completing the course, 95% of

participants strongly agreed or agreed they could develop role descriptions that align with volunteer roles; 52% reported they created role descriptions.

We coded 54 qualitative statements from 44 respondents who reported examples of how they identified program needs and volunteer roles, recruited volunteers, and used role descriptions post-course. A Minnesota participant shared, “I’m more intentional in selecting volunteers for roles, and rather than just write a position description for recruitment, we use it as a guiding piece to their work.”

Selection is the process of evaluating the experience, skill set, and interest of prospective volunteers to determine alignment with existing volunteer positions (Boyce, 1971). Volunteer selection begins with screening potential volunteers and matching their skills to the position, which increases the likelihood of success in volunteering. After completing the course, 93% of respondents could apply best practices for selecting volunteers, 88% could align recruitment with the specific volunteer role, and 70% reported they recruited volunteers for new positions.

Thirty-four respondents gave qualitative examples of selection. One Wisconsin participant said,

I consider their intrinsic and extrinsic motivators and try to tailor volunteer options to their specific needs and goals. I am more thoughtful in reaching out to specific volunteers that would be a good fit for particular roles rather than having an open-door recruitment plan.

A Missouri horticulture participant said, “I place volunteers where they are best suited and where they have an interest. I use their ability to match them up to projects, rather than just asking for people to volunteer for something.”

Orientation is the process of introducing volunteers to program expectations. Training prepares volunteers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to be successful in their role (Boyce, 1971). While only three course participants talked about developing and implementing an orientation, 23 respondents shared how they prepared volunteers, including role-specific training on curriculum content, and program delivery.

A Maine participant shared,

After the course, I invited all of the involved volunteers to come in for a “Professional Development” time. I did some teaching on how they could vet curriculum, how to plan their own meeting times, and how to set up shareable documents so that they could take turns with the teaching. It worked great!

Utilization is the process of providing the opportunity for volunteers to put acquired knowledge and skills into action and to function in a supportive environment (Boyce, 1971). Utilization is maximized when professionals match, prepare, and support volunteers to move into leadership

roles based on their skills and abilities. Professionals provide feedback and encourage volunteers to try new roles, creating opportunities for growth. We coded 20 qualitative statements from 17 respondents who identified building relationships with volunteers to coach, supervise, discipline, assess dilemmas, and provide feedback. Twelve people shared examples of how they maintained volunteer relationships. Ninety percent of the respondents indicated they learned coaching strategies.

Results documented examples of increased program quality. Course participants understood the benefits of recruiting volunteers to teach content in subject matter areas where participants lacked knowledge.

One Indiana participant commented,

For the last two years, I have offered a Container Gardening program by myself, covering just the basics and giving a general demonstration. This week, I offered the program again, but this time, I got my Master Gardeners [*sic*] volunteers [*involved*] in the process. ... Overall, this program was, by far, the best that I have delivered because I was able to engage my volunteers and encourage them and use the [*sic*] as a resource for a better educational experience of the participants.

Another Wisconsin participant stated,

We focus on citizen science programming, so I've made more efforts to empower volunteers to design their own projects based on questions relevant to their roles as citizen scientists rather than employing a top-down protocol for what data to collect and how to collect it.

It is important for professionals to understand different types of recognition to meet the motivational needs of volunteers (Boyce, 1971). After the course, 63% recognized volunteers according to their individual motivation. A Wisconsin participant shared, "I had an increased understanding in how to assess the motivations and rewards that could be utilized, which lead to a better fit of volunteers to needs."

We coded 24 qualitative statements from 23 respondents identifying how they recognized volunteers. A Missouri participant working with Master Gardeners stated, "I am more cognizant of their needs as well as the needs of the chapter. I continually thank volunteers and tell them how important they are..."

Evaluation captures the success of a volunteer in a specific role, offers the opportunity to provide feedback, assists in achieving personal goals, and improves their effectiveness to impact program success (Boyce, 1971). Participants gained skills to create, revise, evaluate, and grow volunteer systems. This study yielded four coded qualitative statements that reflected knowledge gained

related to the evaluation of volunteers. A North Dakota participant said, “I had never consider [sic] formally seeking evaluation from volunteers on their experience. This really resonated with me as a considerably important part of sustaining happy volunteers.”

### Applied Course Learnings

Our quantitative and qualitative analysis confirmed that participants applied knowledge gained in the course as they worked with volunteers. Participants identified how they changed their behavior by applying ISOTURE constructs to strengthen their management of volunteer systems, which impacted community programming. Respondents reported completion of multiple knowledge and readiness tasks (Table 3) taught in the course related to the ISOTURE model and Communicating the Public Value of Extension Programs to Stakeholders.

**Table 3. Respondents Behavior Change and Application of the ISOTURE Model and Communicating the Public Value of Extension Programs to Stakeholders (N = 127)**

Survey Question	%	No. of Participants
After taking the course, which of the following items have you completed (check all that apply):		
Created role descriptions for volunteers	52	66
Recruited volunteers for new positions	70	89
Recognized volunteers according to their individual motivation	63	80
Communicated with stakeholders the value of volunteers in my program	69	87
Used my elevator speech to communicate with potential volunteers and stakeholders	50	63
Used the Decision-Tree to address challenging situations	15	19

The results in Table 4 show statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ) improvements for each statement. Using Cohen’s  $d$ , we calculated the effect sizes of these changes from medium ( $> .5$ ) to large ( $> .8$ ) effects, highlighting large increases in average scores. After the course, more than 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that volunteer systems management practices were reflected in their personal approach.

This indicates that the course effectively changed how Extension professionals work with volunteers and use research-based practices to empower volunteers to plan, lead, and teach programs. An Illinois participant shared, “There was a lot of value in the course. ... I find myself pulling out different things ... it's not an overnight process, but certain skills learned throughout the course begin to appear.”

**Table 4. T-Tests for Application and Behavior Change of Respondents (N = 127)**

	Before		After		Mean Difference	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
	% Strongly Agree/Agree	Mean Score	% Strongly Agree/Agree	Mean Score			
I empower volunteers to take the lead on projects that interest them	81	2.91	100	3.61	0.70	13.57***	1.36
I recruit others to deliver programs	68	2.72	95	3.32	0.61	10.81***	0.71
I include volunteers in setting the vision for the program	76	2.86	95	3.36	0.50	9.42***	0.87
I delegate tasks to volunteers so I don't have to be at every event/activity	61	2.64	96	3.38	0.73	12.28***	1.20
I am comfortable letting others teach volunteers	72	2.82	90	3.19	0.37	7.84***	0.55
Most aspects of the program are my responsibility	80	2.96	58	2.61	-0.35	-6.27***	0.51

*Note.* Respondents rated each item using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (4). \*\*\**p* < .001 (tested at 95% confidence threshold).



## Online Learning and Networking Experience

The online learning environment was an effective platform for participants to increase their skills in managing volunteers; 90% agreed it met their needs as adult learners. A Minnesota participant shared, “The course design, along with information through the online platform, provide [*sic*] a valuable opportunity to learn about volunteer systems ... with others who are working with volunteers to gain additional perspectives and a broader network of colleagues.” The course influenced 30% of participants to develop online learning content or teach online; this was an unintended outcome. An Indiana participant stated, “I currently use Zoom, Recorded Videos, and open chat sessions to both train and recruit volunteers. This is as [*sic*] a direct result of the course.”

Two benefits of the cohort learning environment for participants are accessibility and networking (Robideau & Vogel, 2014).

### *1. Accessibility*

Because of the online format, more professionals were able to access this training. One participant from Missouri commented that they found the course to have “convenient and relevant subject matter.” Travel and specific time needed for in-person training was decreased in this learning environment, as a Wisconsin participant shared, “It is well done and flexible for staff’s challenging schedules.” Although accessibility of online learning is a benefit, professionals did indicate a challenge to designate time to complete course content. “You really need to block schedules and dedicate time,” a Wisconsin participant noted, “It is too easy to get caught up in the daily emergency and not put the dedication into the online course.”

### *2. Networking*

Participants valued the course design, which incorporated networking across states, program areas, and experience levels. A Minnesota participant reflected, “It certainly brought a richness to the learning environment to have a variety of Extension areas, length of tenure, and geographies across the country represented.”

Discussion board groups with 30–35 people shared ideas and applied course content. Live webinars brought the groups together in a synchronized experience. A Nebraska participant noted, “I really appreciated the discussion during the course and have used many of the ideas that other participants shared...”

Developing a trusted learning community is imperative for a positive networking experience. A Nebraska participant mentioned that the course provided “...the opportunity for collaboration to discuss volunteer successes and challenges in a safe space.” There was a strong learning

community during the course; however, less than 20% continued to network with others after completion.

Table 5 summarizes the key themes that emerged during the data jam process (Schmieder et al., 2018) from the qualitative responses describing the benefits of the online learning environment.

**Table 5. Benefits of the Online Learning Environment**

<b>Qualitative Code - Key Themes</b>	<b>No. of Statements</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
Intentional networking	49	40
Continued learning and developing online	23	23
Advantages of overall online experience	20	16
Online learning community – sense of belonging	16	14
Taught online after taking the course	16	11
Strategies to improve online learning experience (dedicate time to course)	14	11

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study is that a retrospective evaluation could lead to variance within the sample from when respondents completed the course to when they completed the survey. We also recognize there are limitations when interpreting the results. When course participants self-report, they use their perceptions at the point of evaluation. They may be under- or overreporting their knowledge gained and behavior changed (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002).

### **Discussion and Implications**

Professional development in Extension needs to include volunteerism as a core competency for all experience levels, age groups, and program areas and utilize online learning as a delivery method. This includes identifying volunteer leadership development and best practices in managing volunteer systems as training components for individuals who work with volunteers (Barnhart, 2008; Safrit et al., 2005). Program quality is impacted by professionals' preparedness in their roles (Garst et al., 2014). It is necessary to equip all Extension professionals with a framework, like ISOTURE, to manage volunteer systems.

A Minnesota participant described how the course prepared them for their work with volunteers,

It provides a solid framework to approach volunteer management. It is the only course like it for Extension professionals. It gives great ideas and a great path for colleagues to follow as they work with volunteers at many stages. It professionalizes aspects of this work in an important way.

## **Identification and Selection**

Creating role descriptions that articulate needed skills attracts the right volunteer for the right position and increases engagement and retention. Our study found that respondents who completed the course assessed the volunteer needs of their program and identified specific roles to address those needs. Professional development offerings need to include time for professionals to assess the skills and talents of prospective volunteers and conduct targeted recruitment for the positions to increase the likelihood of both volunteer satisfaction and program success.

## **Orientation and Training**

Our study confirms the difficulty Extension professionals have in differentiating between orientation and training. Orientation provides an introduction to the role and responsibilities of the position. Training, however, provides focused learning on topics for volunteers' growth and development. These two are frequently combined and are not as effective when doing so. Both orientation and training impact volunteer engagement; however, they have different roles.

Pierucci and Noel (1980) established orientation as one factor that contributes to a volunteer continuing with an organization. Fahey et al. (2003) identified training as the most significant piece of volunteer retention, and lack of training is the biggest contributor to volunteer turnover. Extension professionals need to understand how to develop an orientation plan that includes an introduction to the volunteer's role and the organizational structure. Training is necessary for continued volunteer skill development to increase volunteer retention. Both orientation and training are necessary to strengthen Extension volunteer systems.

## **Utilization**

Volunteer engagement needs to be a key focus of professionals' efforts because utilizing volunteers provides organizational benefits (Terry et al., 2011). Programs are a higher quality experience and more relevant to audiences when professionals are taught how to intentionally engage volunteers when teaching content-specific areas when the professional may not be the expert (Rutledge, 2008). When a volunteer offers their talents to an organization, it is important to utilize their unique skill set to support the program. This allows time for the Extension professional to shift their focus to other program needs. When this happens, the Extension program builds capacity, and volunteers feel valued for their contributions. Our study participants identified the importance of building relationships with volunteers, maintaining those relationships, and coaching volunteers to try new roles that create opportunities for personal growth.

## **Recognition**

Extension professionals in the AEMTV course learned to further value volunteers and not take them for granted. Course participants understood the importance of recognizing volunteers based on individual motivation. Professional development content should link motivation to recognition because it demonstrates to the volunteer that they are valued and appreciated. Recognition of a volunteer's contribution enhances their satisfaction, which affects their willingness to continue to serve the organization (Arnold et al., 2009).

While most volunteers are recognized at least annually, incorporating multiple appreciation methods is necessary for retention. Thanking volunteers and highlighting their value to your organization are paramount.

## **Evaluation**

Extension professionals need to learn how to intentionally plan for evaluation throughout the volunteer's involvement with the organization. Boyd (2003) identified evaluating volunteer efforts and accomplishments as an important competency for the management of volunteer programs. As indicated by our study's qualitative data, professionals should understand how to provide feedback to volunteers. This includes listening and having conversations about the volunteer's experience, what was accomplished, how the experience could be improved, and the volunteer's plans for the future. The evaluation process strengthens the relationship between the volunteer, the professional, and the organization. When professionals make changes based on the evaluation, volunteers feel valued (Boyd, 2003).

## **Online Learning**

When using an online course for professional development, communicate clear time expectations in publicity, during the registration process, in pre-course communication, and as the course begins. In our course, the number of hours needed to complete the work was communicated, but some participants were not prepared for the time commitment. A Wisconsin participant shared, "Don't underestimate the time this course takes. Plan it, block it, and don't let things sneak into the time that is blocked."

Engaging professionals in training that models the use of virtual learning strategies provides participants with an experience that increases their confidence in both learning and teaching online (He, 2014). Discussion boards, pre-recorded presentations, and real-time webinars provide time to practice virtual learning and imagine how technology can be used in volunteer development. Learners increase confidence and reduce anxiety by experiencing online teaching strategies. AEMTV participants gained confidence and skills in virtual learning, which was an unintended outcome of the course.

The results of this study demonstrate the effectiveness of the Achieving the Extension Mission Through Volunteers course in preparing Extension professionals to learn and apply volunteer systems concepts in a cohort-based, online learning environment. Course participants increased their knowledge, improved volunteer systems, and influenced the quality of programming delivered in communities. Our research confirmed the ISOTURE model (Boyce, 1971) continues to be an effective framework for learning and applying volunteer systems management practices.

Leveraging human and financial capital across states was critical in the design, development, and implementation of the course. We encourage additional research on evaluating the impact of volunteers when they are prepared to communicate the public value of Extension programs. We recommend that Extension collaborates across states to formalize and create additional online professional development relevant to all program areas to elevate Extension's impact nationally. Suggested content includes teaching and learning strategies, program evaluation, and equitable programming. Investing in professional development delivered through distance learning is essential to expand online course offerings in any profession. This saves time and money and fosters stronger cross-disciplinary and multi-state work.

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