

The Recognition Preferences of Ontario County 4-H Volunteers

Sarah Bagley Wilhelm
AFLS B-108 University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR 72701
sarahbagley@lanternenglish.com
479-575-2035

Donna L. Graham
AFLS B-108
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR 72701
dgraham@uark.edu
479-575-6346

Casandra Cox
AFLS B-108
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR 72701
ccrumle@uark.edu
479-575-2040

K. Jill Rucker
AFLS B-108
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR 72701
kjrucker@uark.edu
575-575-3506

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Introduction/ need for research

In 2017, the 4-H program utilized about 500,000 volunteers nation-wide to make its programs possible (National 4-H Council, 2017). These volunteers fill numerous roles and are valuable to the program, quantitatively and qualitatively, if the volunteer work benefits both the volunteer and the organization (Stone & Edwards, 2008; McKee & McKee, 2012). Volunteers have various motivations and needs. Recognition is one way to satisfy these needs. The effective development of a recognition strategy requires in-depth knowledge of current volunteer motivations and recognition preferences for sustained volunteer involvement. Although some research has been conducted regarding 4-H volunteer recognition preferences, many studies are a decade or more old (Boz, 2000; Culp, & Schwartz, 1998; Fritz et al., 2000; Fritz et al., 2003; Stillwell et al., 2010). Therefore, more current and specific research is needed. The purpose of this research was to identify best motivational practices for recognizing volunteers. This study supports Research Priority 6: Vibrant, Resilient Communities as specified in the National American Association for Agricultural Education Research Agenda (Roberts, et al., 2016).

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" proposed human behavior is motivated by underlying needs and emphasized one human action could find its motivational source in a variety of desires (Maslow, 1954). The functional theory of volunteering (Clary et al., 1998) aligns with Maslow's theory that people are motivated for different reasons and can perform the same action for different reasons. The functional analysis of volunteerism appears to be similar on the surface but reflect markedly different underlying motivational processes. Clary et al. (1998) posit that volunteers choose activities based on their perception of how well the activity matches their personal motives. Therefore, understanding volunteer motivation is important for determining appropriate recognition techniques and essential to recruiting and retaining volunteers (Clary et al., 1998). The framework used for volunteer management is the ISOTURE model, which present a logical progression of management steps of identification, selection, orientation, training, utilization, recognition and evaluation.

Methodology

This census study utilized a quantitative, nonexperimental design to describe existing characteristics and behaviors of Ontario County New York volunteers and determine relationships between characteristics (demographics, roles, motivations) and behavior (motivation and recognition preferences). Demographic variables measured included age, gender, ethnicity, education, as well as current or past affiliation with the 4-H program as a youth and/or parent.

Volunteer motivation was measured using the Volunteer Function Inventory (VFI) to determine volunteer motivation (Clary et al., 1998). The instrument includes 31 Likert questions that establish motivation based on six constructs: *values*, *enhancement*, *understanding*, *social*, *career*, and *protective*. The recognition preferences were measured using a Likert-style scale to determine to what degree a recognition method was "meaningful". Emails were sent through the 4-H Online system and included an anonymous link to the Qualtrics survey. Two reminder emails were sent after the initial distribution, as prescribed by Dillman et al. (2014).

Results/Findings

Out of 94 volunteers, 62 responded, resulting in a 66.0% response rate. The majority of volunteers were white (96.7%), ages 50-59 (25%), with a college degree (83.9%). 4-H alumnus

represented 48.4% with 67.7% of the volunteers having a child in the program. Additionally, participants reported volunteering for 0-5 years (59.6%) and 51-100 hours annually.

Respondents were asked to rate motivation categories using the scale of 1= not at all important to 7= extremely important. The highest scoring motivation category was *values* (M = 5.10, SD = 1.00) which is motivation based on genuine concern for human need. Next was *understanding* (M = 4.56, SD = 1.24), the desire for new experiences and enhancements and the ability to exercise knowledge and skills, followed by *social* motivation (M = 4.43, SD = 1.80), the desire for social interaction. The lowest desired forms of motivation were *protective* (M=2.99, SD=1.25), the desire to escape negative thoughts or guilt and *career* (M = 2.64, SD = 1.37) defined as the desire for developing skills and connections to further one's career. The top recognition preference for volunteers was seeing youth succeed (M = 3.82, SD = 0.38), but verbal thanks (M = 3.34, SD =0.62) and thank you notes (M = 3.29, SD =0.70) were also identified as meaningful recognitions. Tangible gift related items were all ranked fairly low: small gift (M = 2.53, SD =0.95), certificate or plaque (M = 2.45, SD 0.95), and treats such as candy or baked goods (M = 2.08, SD = 0.99). When examining public and private recognition techniques, recognition at an event such as a volunteer dinner (M = 2.81, SD = 0.82), 4-H achievement night (M = 2.75, SD = 0.86), or public event (M = 2.65, SD =0.93) were slightly meaningful. Recognition on social media (M= 2.19, SD = 0.93) or in the program newsletter (M= 2.40, SD =0.89) were ranked low). Selection for leadership opportunities also received more average rankings with mentorship opportunities (M = 2.71, SD = 0.94) and event or committee leadership (M = 2.65, SD = 0.93). The rating scale was 1= not meaningful to 4= very meaningful. All correlations between volunteer characteristics and motivation/recognition preferences were negligible or low.

Conclusions

Respondents had a strong affiliation for the 4-H program either as parents, alumni or both. They volunteered because they recognized the value of the program from a human need, and seeing youth succeed was the most important recognition or reward. This reaffirms Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in regards to love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1954) and previous studies (Culp & Swartz, 1998, Culp, 1997, White & Arnold, 2003). They also sought to develop new skills and knowledge emphasizing the need for training opportunities as a form of recognition. Thank you notes or a verbal thank-you were rated highest for recognition preference. The Ontario County volunteer motives and their desired recognitions are congruent with motives for volunteering described by Clary et al. (1998).

Implications/recommendations/impact

These findings can be used for retention and motivation of volunteers to improve recruitment efforts, and to decrease turnover, and training expenses. The Ontario County 4-H program should implement a personal recognition strategy where personal and intrinsic recognitions are emphasized. 4-H agents should recognize volunteers by verbal thanking and written notes and showcasing member successes. Moreover, the program should foster a positive relationship to attract and retain volunteers who have a personal 4-H program affiliation. Many 4-H parents leave volunteering once their child has aged out (Culp, 1997), so these volunteers should be targeted for retention at least in an episodic capacity once their children have left the program. Volunteer motives should be assessed to ensure the success of volunteer retention. This study should be replicated to learn of 4-H volunteer recognition preferences for broader generalization.

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