

## **Evaluating the Impact of Volunteer Leadership Programs**

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### **Abstract**

A major challenge of volunteer driven organizations is the need to document the impact of volunteer efforts and accomplishments. Assessment and documentation are important to the organization, the volunteer leadership educator, the clientele, stakeholder groups, and the volunteers themselves. Determining the impact of volunteer programs requires assessing the outcomes in terms of both the project and the growth and development of the volunteer. When evaluation is a planned part of program development and goals are determined for both the impact on the community and the individual volunteer it is possible to truly assess outcomes.

### **Introduction**

A major challenge of volunteer driven organizations is the need to document the impact of volunteer efforts and accomplishments. Because volunteer leadership educators expend time, money and resources on volunteer involvement and development, it is essential to assess and document the impact of volunteer accomplishments as well as to justify the expense of volunteer programs (Ellis, 1986). Both assessment and documentation are of great importance and interest to the organization, the volunteer leadership educator, the clientele, stakeholder groups and funders, as well as the to the volunteers themselves. No one wants to give time, energy or resources to something which has no benefit or impact.

One of the most uncreative - and least helpful - questions posed to volunteer leadership educators is: "How many volunteers do we have and how many hours did they give us last year?" (Ellis, 1986). For many volunteer leadership educators, documentation consists of counting numbers: of volunteers, volunteer hours served, program participants, clientele reached and so forth. However, simply presenting the number of hours served without analyzing what was accomplished during those hours is not worth compiling. One of the problems in evaluating volunteer achievement is that certain types of volunteer positions require services which are described in terms of quality rather than quantity (Bradner, 1999) as well as those which have long-term outcomes. These include positions which provide assistance or support which are difficult to quantify, such as mentoring, counseling, roles in youth development and so forth.

The increasing pressure to provide evidence of the effectiveness of social programs and initiatives has led to a strong focus on outcome evaluation. Demonstrating effectiveness and measuring outcomes and impact are important and valuable components of volunteer leadership programs (Curnan & LaCava, 1998.)

Part of the evaluative challenge facing volunteer leadership educators is to help coordinators of volunteer programs to take the first step in moving beyond counting numbers of participants and hours served into understanding other aspects of volunteer program evaluation. A second challenge facing volunteer leadership educators lies in helping coordinators of volunteer programs understand, interpret and articulate the differences between the terminology which is utilized in the profession to describe volunteer program evaluation as well as to determine the value of volunteer efforts. These terms include

*evaluation, program assessment* and *impact*. Finally, volunteer leadership educators need to assist coordinators of volunteer programs in determining the level of evaluation which their organization is currently utilizing, as well as determining the most appropriate level for the volunteer leadership program which is being conducted.

## **Review of Literature**

The review of literature will be divided into two sections. The first section will focus on defining the terms which are often utilized in volunteer program evaluation. The second section includes a discussion of three different program evaluation models.

### Definition of Terms

Evaluation is defined by Neufeldt and Guralnik (1988) as: (1) to find the value or amount; (2) to judge or determine the worth or quality; (3) to find the numeric value; expressed in numbers; (4) estimate.

Assessment is defined by Neufeldt and Guralnik (1988) as: (1) to set an estimate or value; (2) to estimate or determine the importance or value.

Impact is defined by Neufeldt and Guralnik (1988) as: (1) the power of an event or program; (2) to produce changes, move the feelings.

A comparison of terms finds three key similarities in the definitions of evaluation and assessment. These include the words "value," "estimate" and "determine." Impact, however, has a different meaning. Whereas the definitions of evaluation and assessment involve establishing relative or immediate worth, or placing a value on the project, activity or program; the definition of impact focuses upon programmatic strength and the ability to produce change. Impact therefore is likely to involve an assessment or evaluation in the future.

Evaluation consists of gathering information to determine value and make decisions about the effectiveness of the program. Data is often collected in order to make immediate adjustments in a program. This is called process evaluation. Collecting data for use in long-term decision making is called impact evaluation. Impact evaluation provides information which will assist the volunteer leadership educator in determining the current value or worth of a program or activity, as well as making a judgement about the power of the program and its ability to produce intended changes in the target audience (impact.)

### Evaluation Models

#### Targeting Outcomes of Programs (TOP) Model

Rockwell and Bennett (1999) proposed a seven-step model which integrates the activities and both the number of participants and their level of participation into evaluation, assessment and impact. The data collected at each level provides greater evidence of the program's effectiveness than the proceeding level (Rennekamp, 1998). The Rockwell and Bennett Model is represented in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Targeting Outcomes of Programs (TOP) Model (Rockwell & Bennett,1999)

*Resources* focus on resources expended. These may include the number of volunteers who staff the activity, the number of volunteer or staff hours contributed, the number of dollars (either actual or in-kind) spent, etc. Resources may also include educational materials provided, communication costs and transportation (Rockwell & Bennett, 1999).

*Activities* include those things which are done to engage the participants (Rockwell & Bennett, 1999). Activities include educational programs, workshops, conferences and events, service, etc. Activities must be linked to KOSA, Practice and SEEC in order for a successful evaluation to be conducted and for any impact to be gathered.

*Participation* focuses on the target audience, program deliverers as well as actual attendees (Rockwell & Bennett, 1999). Simply stated, participation is who comes, who is expected to come and who delivers the program. This may include individuals, organization, families or communities.

*Reactions* are an immediate participant response to the activity (Rockwell & Bennett, 1999). Reactions are often collected quantitatively via a written questionnaire or qualitatively by responding either in writing or verbally to open-ended questions. Reactions may also be collected qualitatively by debriefing or collecting feedback at the conclusion of the activity. The key information being sought in this level is "What is the participant's reaction to the activity?"

*KOSA* (Knowledge, Opinions, Skills & Aspirations) provide initial impact data (Rockwell & Bennett, 1999). This data is collected at the conclusion of the activity and focuses on four key questions:

"As a result of participating in this activity...

what new knowledge did the participants gain or learn?"

what opinions did the participants change?"

what skills did the participants develop?"

what aspirations do the participants have?"

*Practices* are a modification or change in a practice in the participant's behavior or lifestyle. Practices are intermediate outcomes which are determined with some type of follow-up evaluation (Rockwell & Bennett, 1999).

*Social, Economic or Environmental Conditions (SEEC)* which are improved as a result of having participated in the activity (Rockwell & Bennett, 1999). These are long term outcomes. The three foci of this impact level will not be obtainable for every activity. However, at least one foci (social, economic or environmental) should be addressed during program planning in order to arrive at a measurable outcome in the future.

### Strategy for Accountability:

Ladewig (1999) described three performance measurement categories. These three categories include relevance, quality and accomplishments. Each performance measurement category will be described in detail.

*Relevance* includes the processes used to identify issues and develop educational activities. Program relevance would include a description of the factors which led to the identification of the issue or need as well as the creation of the program or activity. Describing the target audience, involving planning groups, creating collaborations, conducting needs assessments, establishing priorities and projecting outcomes all provide data related to program relevance. Examples of measurable program relevance include: describing the situation which led to needs identification; the specific people or groups involved in developing and/or conducting the educational program or activity; and the process utilized to develop and implement the educational program or activity (Nall, 1999.)

*Quality* measurements include a variety of data. These include the frequency and types of participation of target audiences; the importance of the educational program or activity to the participants and stakeholders; the educational methods utilized to deliver the educational activity; demographic information about the participants (including race, gender, age and economic status); the level of appropriateness (age and educational) of the educational activities for the participants; standards, criteria or goal achievement in certification programs or curricula; and participant reactions (Nall, 1999).

*Accomplishment* measurements provide evidence and data which answers the question: "What difference did this activity make to the participants?" The accomplishment performance measurement determines if a behavioral or practice change occurred with the participant(s). Questions answered may include: Did the public benefit? Was capacity built through knowledge gained, skills developed or opinions changed?" (Nall, 1999.)

### Stages of Volunteer Program Evaluation:

Culp (1999) identified four stages of volunteer program evaluation. (See Figure 2.) These four stages included: inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts. Each stage will be discussed in brief.



Figure 2: Four Stages of Volunteer Program Evaluation (Culp, 1999).

*Inputs* are the initial stage and include those resources which are necessary to obtain the desired outputs. Examples of inputs include: the number of volunteers, the number of hours which the volunteers devoted to an activity, the value of the volunteer's time and specific volunteer performance (Culp, 1999).

*Outputs* are the second stage of volunteer program evaluation and are needed in order to achieve the expected outcome of the activity. Output examples include: the numbers and demographic profiles of program participants which were reached or served through volunteer efforts and the specific programmatic or activity offering which was delivered by the volunteers (Culp, 1999).

*Outcomes* are the third stage and are the output results. Outcomes are necessary in order to impact the participants. Examples of outcomes include: tangible results which are expressed in numbers; the number of homes built; tons of food collected for a food drive; the number of people who received a benefit as a result of participating in the activity; the amount of money raised from an activity; the dollars

realized in salary savings as a result of volunteer contributions; the economic value or impact of a purchase which resulted from the activity (Culp, 1999).

*Impacts* constitute the fourth stage of volunteer program evaluation. Impacts document the resulting impact of the program or activity upon the participants, the volunteers and the sponsoring organization. Examples of impacts include: the number of homeless people who received housing and improved their lifestyle and standard of living; the number of people who learned how to prepare a balanced meal and continued to do so six months after the learning activity; the number of cases of pre-cancer identification and initial treatment from patients receiving cancer screening (Culp, 1999).

## Discussion

As volunteer and leadership educators our job is often two-fold. On the one hand, we are teaching concepts related to the task or project; on the other hand, we are teaching program management, organization and leadership development. We are providing an opportunity for individuals to gain subject matter knowledge and skills to reach a goal *and* organizational/ management skills to facilitate a process also needed to reach the goal.

Volunteer and leadership educators develop curriculum and teach topics such as: organization, planning, delegation, communication, collaboration, meeting management, parliamentary procedure, group decision making, critical thinking, active and reflective listening, teamwork, group work and dynamics, conflict management, boardsmanship, community structures, creative thinking, etc. This infinite list of topics reflects the knowledge and skills needed to serve in various volunteer and leadership roles. There is a body of knowledge and experiences which lead to skill development that the leadership educator facilitates. This is usually in addition to the subject matter content related to the project or activity. Thus, the *impact* of our educational programs include what the volunteer leader knows and does (KOSA and Practice) and the social, economic or environmental conditions that are changed (SEEC) as a result of their work (practice).

The challenge in determining the *impact* of volunteer leadership programs is in determining what happens as a *result* of the educational program. Accountability requires that we know what happens as a result of the professionals educational efforts *and* what happens as a result of the volunteer leader's efforts. At best, we need to determine the accomplishments related to our programs. We know that this volunteer may utilize the skills and knowledge which they learned from our educational efforts while later giving leadership in the community but we can't always document it.

Volunteer leadership educators in all roles feel the pressure to determine the outcomes and impact of volunteers who have participated in our educational programs. Accomplishments described in terms of what was taught, who participated and participant reactions may help volunteer leadership educators to determine cost effectiveness, appropriateness of methodology and the degree to which target audiences were reached (Rennekamp, 1995). However, for many stakeholders and program administrators, this is considered insufficient. Most want additional information related to knowledge gained, practices changed and social, economic or environmental conditions that are changed as a result of the volunteer leadership educator's efforts. To truly *evaluate* the program and determine impact, higher level data is required.

The Rockwell and Bennett hierarchy (1999) is a model for targeting outcomes of programs and has been adapted for the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service as a program development model used in planning and evaluating programs. Data may be collected at each level of the hierarchy. The data collected at the KOSA level provides stakeholders some evidence of impact and is a "stepping stone" to determining practice change (Rockwell and Bennett). As volunteer leadership educators work toward assessing impact at the SEEC level, the resources which are necessary in order to collect data and determine impact also increase. As the hierarchy is climbed it becomes increasingly difficult to ascertain program outcomes which directly result from educational efforts. Because of the time lag required to

determine practice changes and SEEC outcomes, it is difficult to separate program impacts from other sources of change.

The following statements are examples of data at each level for three types of volunteer development efforts: a series of workshops, a day camp and an advisory council.

#### Inputs:

- Fourteen staff days went into planning this event.
- A grant of \$5,000 provided resources to use with the youth.
- Two hours of planning and preparation went into each of twelve mini-lessons.

#### Activities:

- A series of four workshops were held to teach skills related to the task.
- A day camp brought youth together to learn team-building skills.
- A mini-lesson on communication skills was provided at each monthly council meeting during the year.

#### Participation:

- There were 25 participants in each of the four workshops.
- Thirty youth participated in the team-building day-camp.
- Fifteen council members were present for all 12 lessons on communication skills and another 10 were present for 7-9 lessons.

#### Reactions:

- Following each workshop the participants indicated the material was helpful.
- The teens all said they enjoyed the day and asked for other day camps.
- The council members said they liked the mini-lessons and learned a lot.

#### KOSA:

- Following the workshop on *Parliamentary Procedure*, the participants completed a questionnaire. All participants could correctly order items for an agenda and make and amend a motion.
- All teens were able to identify six characteristics of effective teams and indicated they planned to use these skills in other groups.
- Following each mini-lesson, the council members were asked to identify three things they planned to do to improve communication.

#### Practice Change:

- Utilizing the planning, organizational and collaboration skills taught in the workshop series, the participants conducted a county-wide food drive to collect canned goods to be donated to the Salvation Army.
- Ten teens form a school club to implement a recycling program. The club has six principles of effective teams as their operating guidelines.
- All council members were observed using active listening techniques of restating, clarifying and questioning to improve communication within the council.

#### SEEC:

- The county-wide food drive resulted in 25 tons of canned goods being donated to the Salvation Army, thus saving them \$15,000 in food costs and feeding 100 families for 10 weeks.

- The school recycled aluminum cans and paper. This reduced the amount of trash in the land fill, saving the community \$5,000 and raised \$1,400 which was used to landscape the building.

### Getting to Impact:

Determining impact begins with the planning process. In order for any program evaluation or assessment to be effective, the initial step must be an identification of measurable goals and objectives. If measurable goals and objectives are articulated for the volunteer leadership program in the beginning, it will obviously be possible to ask whether these have been met (Ellis, 1986). If it is important to know what the participant's learned, the volunteer leadership educator must determine what is to be taught. This determination must be done as a part of program planning. Writing goals and objectives is not a new or unfamiliar activity for most volunteer leadership educators.

What is new, however, is that volunteer leadership educators must write plans, set goals and determine objectives *with the end result (outcome) in mind*. Using the KOSA, Practice Change and SEEC levels in program planning provides a framework for determining program outcomes. If participants learn this concept or develop these skills, then they can make these changes in what they do. If they change what they do (practices) then these changes in social conditions (SEEC) may result.

All three models of evaluation share some similarities. Each model provides a vehicle to reach and begin measuring impacts. Although the vehicle names are different, their destination is similar, whether they are called KOSA, Practice or SEEC, (Rockwell & Bennett, 1999); Accomplishments, (Ladewig, 1999); or Outcomes and Impacts, (Culp, 1999). In order to measure any impact, leadership educators must begin with what knowledge is gained or skills, opinions or aspirations are developed.

The failure to specifically articulate goals for the project (content) as well as the individual's growth and development severely limits the evaluation's potential. Volunteer leadership educators tend to focus on the outcomes of the project (i.e., youth who participate in *Reality Store* will gain knowledge about family financial management) rather than plan for the programmatic benefits or impact upon the volunteers who deliver the program or activity.

The volunteer who brings together twenty-five representatives from local businesses, secures \$500 to support the activity, coordinates six teachers, writes newspaper articles and oversees the implementation of the activity in three sites will develop management, organization, communication and delegation skills. But since the articulated goal relates to knowledge gained by the youth participants, that is what is evaluated. The volunteer's growth, development and knowledge gained through the experience is often over-looked. Even follow-up evaluations with the volunteer leadership educator and other volunteers will focus on improving the activity when planning for the next year.

Evaluating volunteer leadership program effectiveness is dependent upon the identification of goals which clearly articulate a benefit to the volunteer leaders who deliver the activities to the target audience. In most cases, the volunteers themselves are not identified as an audience. Rather, the volunteers are seen largely as a vehicle by which activities, educational programs or subject matter are delivered to the target audience.

In order to effectively assess the impact of volunteer leadership education, assessment must exist on two planes. The impact of the program or activity on the target audience *as well as* the impact upon the volunteer. Volunteer leadership development should not happen by accident. Goals and objectives related to the growth and development of the volunteer should be clearly articulated in the planning process. While it is certainly important to evaluate the outcome of the activity and its impact upon the target audience, it is equally important to plan for and a benefit to the volunteer. For volunteer leadership educators who plan for and measure the benefits upon both audiences, the impact of a single activity can be doubled!

Effective volunteer leadership educators should make an effort to develop knowledge and skills in those

volunteers who deliver educational activities. An assessment of both the activity ("How well did the activity achieve its goals with the target audience?") *as well as* the impact of the activity upon the volunteer leaders who delivered it to the target audience ("Through this experience and the training provided by the professional, what knowledge was gained, skills were developed, or practices implemented?") must be conducted.

This constitutes a key difference between "Volunteer Development" and "Volunteer Management." In Volunteer Development, the Volunteer Administrator/Coordinator/Leadership Educator considers and plans for the growth and development of the volunteers who participate in and deliver the activity or program. Conversely, Volunteer Managers utilize volunteers to deliver programs to target audiences without thought, plan or regard to any potential benefit which the volunteers themselves might gain.

### **Implications**

- The impact of the educational activity upon volunteer leaders becomes an intentional, planned component of programs. Anticipated impacts are clearly articulated during the planning process.
- Volunteer leadership educators should focus on evaluating the impact of a volunteer education program while developing program plans (annual plans of work).
- Effective program evaluation is ongoing and continuous, consisting of multiple assessments. Long-term impact requires long-term measurements.
- Each volunteer leadership educator must realize that impact is not measured in terms of quantity or numbers only (number of pounds of food collected, number of participants, or cubic yards of recycling material gathered) but rather in the long-term benefit or impact (number of families or people who were fed for a week due to the food drive or the cubic yards of space saved in a landfill.)

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