

**Florida Cooperative Extension Volunteer Leadership Certification Program**

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## **Abstract**

Volunteers are the lifeblood of the County Extension Service (CES) and play a significant role in assisting Extension agents to provide services to the community. One in every eight Americans has provided service to the CES. Because of this, it is becoming increasingly important that Extension agents be provided with the tools necessary to lead and manage volunteers.

A needs assessment was conducted to determine the knowledge and expertise of professionals who supervise Extension volunteers. The survey showed that Extension agents had concerns in the following areas: The implementing constructs that constitute good volunteer programs, such as motivating, recruiting, training, recognition, and evaluation; and the need for training in order to perform these tasks.

Using this information, the Center for Volunteer Leadership Development (CVLD) developed a comprehensive series of nine teaching modules and in-service trainings for Extension professionals. Each self-paced module consists of several teaching tools including video presentations, PowerPoint slides, texts, supplemental readings, and exercises.

This curriculum is applicable to not only Extension programs, but to volunteer programs of any type. The principles that were used in developing the Certification program speak to the importance of effective volunteer leadership and the self-paced modules cater to adult learner needs.

## **Introduction**

Today, volunteers play a significant role in assisting Extension agents provide services to the community. Seevers, Graham, Gamon, and Conklin (1997) wrote that volunteers are the lifeblood of Extension. With each American being a potential client of Extension there is no way that, the paid staff of Extension could provide outreach to such a vast audience. They even went on to say that one in every eight Americans has provided service to the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) equaling five times the entire CES budget. Extension throughout the U.S. actively seeks ways to better volunteer services.

These endeavors are helping ensure that volunteers in the CES are used effectively, managed effectively, and involved in meaningful experiences. With the current hourly value of volunteer time, reaching over \$16.05 per hour it is becoming increasingly important that volunteers are treated with professionalism. Extension has long recognized the importance by providing resources to Extension professionals with models of volunteer management. The LOOP model, locating, orienting, operating, and perpetuating has been used since its introduction in 1991 (Seevers, et al., 1997) (Penrod, 1991).

The LOOP is a simplified model compared to the issues that Extension faces today concerning volunteers. Today, legal issues, program development, evaluation, motivation,

leadership, recognition, etc are all essential to leading successful volunteer programs. Seevers, et al. (1997) indicated that Extension professionals spend a third of their work time with volunteers.

Florida 4-H has used the ISOTURES model to assist Extension professionals in leading its volunteer programs. ISOTURES represents identification, selection, orientation, training, utilization, recognition, evaluation and supervision of volunteers (FCES, 2001).

Even with these models in place, it was still unclear whether Extension professionals were ready to lead successful volunteer programs.

In 1999, the Florida Cooperative Extension Service estimated that 42,000 volunteers contributed nearly 2 million hours of service to Extension-related programs. Until recently, there has been no comprehensive long-term support offered to Extension Agents who supervise volunteers, nevertheless, most Agents are expected to recruit, train, and manage volunteers to extend their educational programs.

A needs assessment was conducted to determine the knowledge and expertise of professionals who supervise Extension volunteers. The Center for Volunteer Leadership (CVLD) in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida developed a survey in accordance with the National Standards for Volunteer Managers established by the Association for Volunteer Administration.

## **Methods**

A letter requesting participation in the needs assessment was sent to Extension professionals with volunteer responsibility as a portion of their job description. Respondents were self-selected in that surveys were mailed to individuals who responded to the request. Seventy-nine survey questions covered a variety of tasks supervisors routinely encounter, these include: recruiting, training, and evaluation. A Likert-scale format was used to gauge the respondent's level of agreement with the importance of each statement and the extent to which they need more training in order to perform the task described. Likert categories ranged from strongly disagree, disagree, no opinion, agree, and strongly agree.

The figure below shows a sample of the survey format.

This task is important in managing volunteers:						I need more training in order to perform this task:				
SD	D	NO	A	SA	Describe the role of volunteers in Florida Extension.	SD	D	NO	A	SA
SD	D	NO	A	SA	Define tasks and responsibilities for my volunteers.	SD	D	NO	A	SA
SD	D	NO	A	SA	Provide adequate volunteer supervision.	SD	D	NO	A	SA
SD	D	NO	A	SA	Recognize volunteer accomplishments.	SD	D	NO	A	SA

Figure 1. Sample survey format for volunteer needs assessment.

Forty university and county faculty completed the survey. Overall, respondents represent 22 counties, an equal mix of rural and urban communities. Two-thirds of the respondents are female. The ages range from 26 to 62 years. Sixty-two percent of the respondents have a Master’s degree, 24% Bachelor’s and 13% Doctoral degrees. Respondents indicated their area of specialization as either plant science (30%), family, youth and consumer sciences (22%) or youth development (19%). Twenty-seven percent checked ‘other’ and listed areas of specialization such as agricultural education, organizational management, leadership administration, mass communication, and adult higher education.

The majority (55%) of respondents have no formal volunteer management training, 36% have attended at least one Extension in-service training and less than 10% received training on the job or through county sponsored programs. In addition, 32% of the respondents noted that within the last five years, they have read books on managing volunteers and/or listened to cassette tapes to improve their leadership and management skills. Respondents also use the Internet as a regular source of information on issues relating to volunteer management. Several respondents are members of national organizations like the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA) or involved in local volunteer networks.

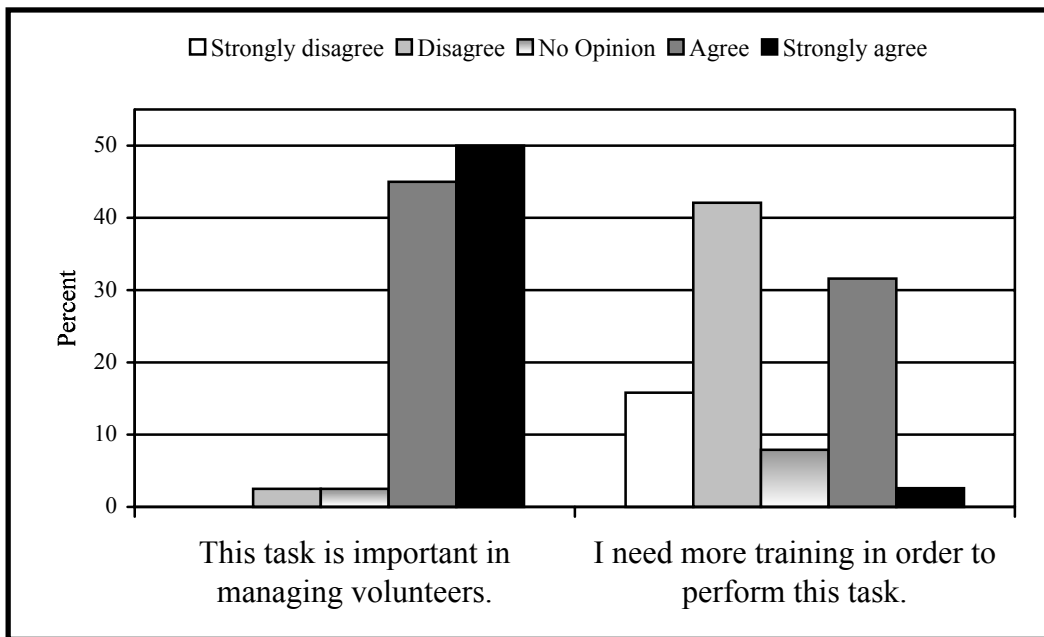
## Results

Throughout the survey, respondents agree or strongly agree on the importance of constructs that constitute good volunteer programs, such as motivating, recruiting, training, recognition, and evaluation. They also recognize the need for additional training in order to

perform these tasks described.

One area where respondents feel most confident, or that they do not need additional training, is the orientation of volunteers to the Florida Cooperative Extension Service. They feel confident in their ability to communicate the history and mission of Florida Extension to volunteers, as well as explain the importance of volunteer involvement in Extension. They agree (45%) or strongly agree (50%) that it is important to recognize the role of volunteer involvement in Florida Extension, though most disagree (42%) or strongly disagree (16%) they need additional training to perform this task (Figure 2).

Respondents indicated that in order to effectively perform tasks required to manage volunteers, they need additional training in most other aspects of volunteer management including identifying volunteer needs and interests, recruiting and training volunteers, recognizing and rewarding volunteer accomplishments, and evaluating individual volunteers and volunteer programs. One area in particular, where respondents agree (53%) or strongly agree (32%) on the need for additional training, is designing and implementing a volunteer recruitment plan (Figure 3). Respondents also indicate a need for training in associated tasks such as



identifying volunteer needs and interests, and motivating volunteers.

Figure 2. Respondents' level of agreement with professional development tasks (n=40).

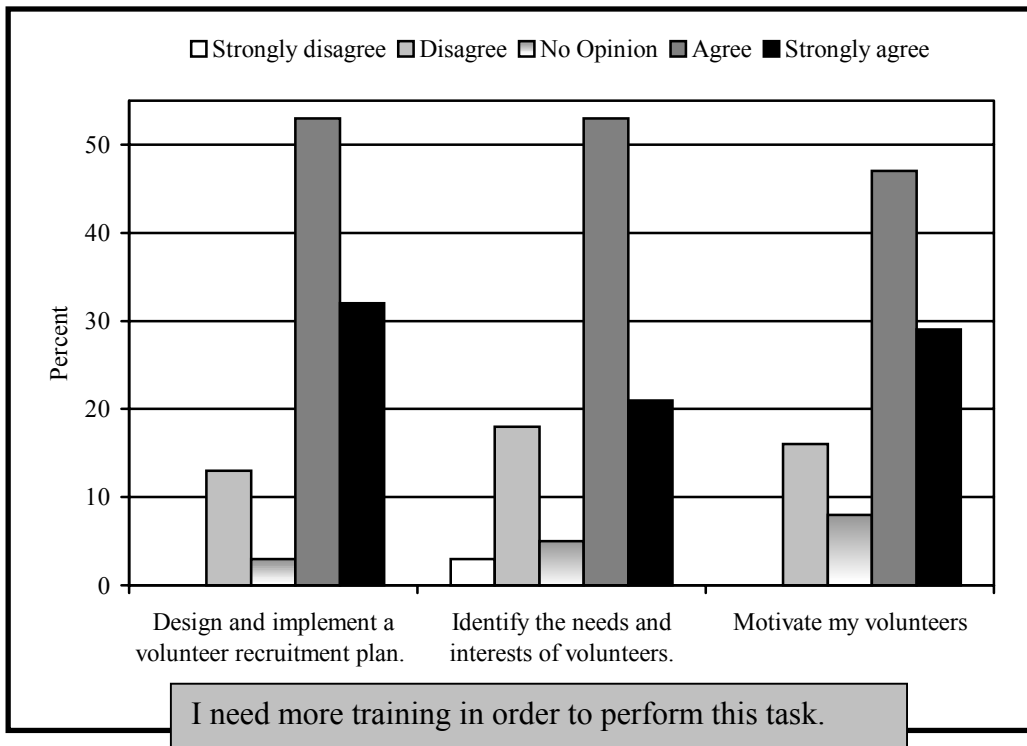


Figure 3. Respondents' level of agreement with professional development needs (n=40).

Specific programmatic areas where respondents agree or strongly agree on the need for additional training include explaining the rights of volunteers (72%) and terminating volunteers (82%).

Another area where respondents feel a need for additional training is monitoring and evaluating individual volunteers and volunteer programs. Respondents agree (47%) and strongly agree (24%) there is a need for training on how to supervise volunteers. Similarly, they agree (42%) and strongly agree (26%) on the need for additional training in order to evaluate their volunteer programs.

For the most part, respondents feel confident in their ability to recognize and reward volunteer efforts through letters, commendations, news articles and plaques; however, they indicated a need for information on conducting formal volunteer recognition events (39% agree and 16% strongly agree).

## Conclusions

The survey revealed valuable information on the needs of Extension professionals who manage volunteers. In general, Extension professionals recognize the importance of volunteers and their contribution to Florida Extension; nevertheless, they recognize that in order to effectively manage volunteers, they need training in the basic managerial aspects of recruiting, training, and evaluating volunteers.

The Center for Volunteer Leadership Development (CVLD) used this information to develop a comprehensive series of teaching modules and in-service trainings for Extension professionals. As a result of the study, the CVLD developed nine modules:

- Volunteerism in America (currently available on – line)
- Motivating volunteers
- Building a volunteer staff
- Recruiting volunteers
- Legal issues in volunteer management
- Evaluating volunteer programs
- Volunteer leadership (release Spring 2003)
- Supervision of volunteers (release Spring 2003)
- Service-Learning (release Spring 2003)

The modules are self-paced and allow Extension professionals to work on the readings and exercises individually. Each module consists of several teaching tools including video presentations, PowerPoint slides, texts, supplemental readings, and exercises. Extension professionals are able to request modules by contacting the Agricultural Education Department. Extension professionals have the option of requesting all modules at once in a set or individually. The goal of the self-paced modules is that Extension professionals will be able to take their time in order to get the full benefit of the materials. Assistance is always available from the CVLD.

The Florida Cooperative Extension Volunteer Leadership Certification Program is a way for Extension professionals to earn a certificate recognizing them as certified volunteer leaders. The Certification requires that Extension professionals complete nine modules, a proficiency quiz of material covered in each module, and a personal philosophy paper. A panel of experts, including a faculty member, a CVLD member, and an Extension Specialist, review completed

materials. The panel then awards certification to the Extension professional.

Training and Certification may help reduce turnover in volunteers and increase the self-efficacy of Extension professionals leading volunteer programs.

### **Implications**

In the future the presentations and exercises will be available on-line with texts and supplemental readings being sent to the Extension professional. Future in-service trainings will allow Extension Agents to access information at their leisure then come together at designated times via the WebCT chat room to share their experiences in managing volunteers.

Certification in many industries may count toward continuing education credits, tenure, and merit increases.

This curriculum is applicable to not only Extension programs, but to volunteer programs of any type. The principles that were used in developing the Certification program speak to the importance of effective volunteer leadership and the self-paced CD ROM modules complement adult learner needs.

## References

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