

Identifying Volunteer Core Competencies: Regional Differences

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INTRODUCTION

Early volunteer activity in America centered around protecting one's self, family, property and community from theft, damage, injury and loss of life. Volunteer activity in early America occurred in response to both domestic and national conflicts. With this long period of domestic peace and prosperity comes a new wave of volunteer efforts (Ellis & Noyes, 1990). Predicting and preparing for volunteer activity during peace time becomes more difficult. Historically, people have come together to unify against external challenges. Rallying people for causes with less immediate concerns often proves to be somewhat more difficult. This process, of gathering unpaid people to rally behind a cause, has resulted in the emergence of volunteerism. As a field, volunteerism brings several needs; some of which are the need for research in the area of volunteer development and administration, professionalization of volunteer administrators, and volunteer leadership education (Culp & Nolan, 2000).

Volunteer administration is currently experiencing rapid growth, development and evolutionary change. In order to effectively prepare for volunteer administration in the early twenty-first century, one must first identify clientele and organizational needs and determine ways that volunteer efforts can assist in serving both the organization and its clientele in fulfilling these needs. An important next step, that is often overlooked by 4-H agents serving in the role of volunteer administrators, lies in developing volunteers in order to more effectively serve Extension and its clientele. A perusal of the volunteerism literature in 4-H Youth Development reveals a number of previous studies (Banning, 1970; Clark & Skelton, 1950; Culp, 1995; Culp, 1996; Culp & Schwartz, 1998; Denmark, 1971; Parrott, 1971) that have sought to identify the demographic indicators that describe 4-H Youth Development volunteers. Additionally, the report *Giving and Volunteering in the United States* (Independent Sector, 2002) is published biannually and provides in-depth, broad-based, documentable information

describing a cross section of American volunteers. However, none of these studies have focused on identifying the skills or competencies that volunteers need in order to deliver programs, lead initiatives or activities or work effectively with their target audiences. Additionally, regional differences in 4-H Youth Development volunteers have largely been unexplored.

A number of recent studies (Boyd, 2002; Culp & Kohlhagen, 2004; Deppe, 1998; Deppe & Culp, 2000; King, 1998; Kohlhagen, 1999; Stone & Coppernol, 2002; North Carolina Cooperative Extension, 2002) have investigated the competencies needed by volunteer administrators who direct these programs and coordinate and supervise the unpaid staff. The study of competencies needed by the volunteers who deliver the program, however, has largely been unresearched.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to determine the skill set and competency areas in which volunteers will need to demonstrate proficiency, and to determine how regional differences may impact those skills and competencies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Volunteers assume a wide range of responsibilities in 4-H, community and civic organizations. Working with volunteers is an Extension tradition (Patton, 1990) as well as the primary method of delivering the 4-H program. Since the inception of the 4-H program, volunteer leaders have been central to its success (Wessel & Wessel, 1982). Extension professionals make extensive use of volunteers by asking them to serve in a variety of roles and delegating to them responsibilities for projects, programs, events and activities.

Volunteers are an essential component of the Cooperative Extension Service in the United States. Nearly 625,000 volunteers deliver 4-H Youth Development programs to American youth annually (National 4-H Headquarters, 2002.) 4-H Youth Development Professionals need to consider the most opportune ways to manage volunteer programs in order to maximize volunteer contributions to the organization. 4-H Youth Development Professionals need to work effectively with volunteers in order to fulfill the goals of the program.

Volunteer administration is a rapidly growing field. Volunteer administrators will need to strategically position themselves for dynamic audiences and clientele, as well as a changing volunteer base, in order to serve the needs of society in the next century. Innovative programs should be implemented which will anticipate and meet these evolving needs. Therefore, the tools and technologies which volunteer administrators use to manage and develop programs for these changing audiences will need to evolve for the Third Millennium® (Culp, Deppe, Castillo & Wells, 1998)

A competency is an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation. Underlying characteristic means the competency is a fairly deep and enduring part of a person's personality and can predict behavior in a wide variety of situations and job tasks. Causally related means that a competency causes or predicts behavior and performance. Criterion-referenced means that

the competency actually predicts who does something well or poorly, as measured on a specific criterion or standard. Examples of criteria are the number of new volunteers recruited or the number of people recognized at an annual banquet (Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

Competencies indicate Ways of behaving or thinking, generalizing across situations and enduring for a reasonably long period of time (Guion, 1991). The type or level of a competency has practical implications for human resource planning. Knowledge and skill competencies tend to be visible, and relatively surface, characteristics of people. Self-concept, trait, and motive competencies are more hidden, deeper, and central to personality (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Hedges (1995) defined a competency as an observable and measurable behavior that has a definite beginning and ending, can be performed within a limited amount of time, consists of two or more competency builders, and leads to a product, service, or decision. He further defined a competency builder as the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to perform a given competency (p. 13).

Background and Setting

The purpose of this study was to identify the competencies which volunteers will need in order to effectively deliver 4-H Youth Development programs and activities in the next decade and to determine if differences in these competencies exist between Extension regions. This study will provide State Volunteerism Specialists and county 4-H professionals throughout the United States with a national focus and direction related to the levels of competency and the perceived needs of 4-H volunteers. Volunteer development activities, volunteer certification standards and master volunteer programs may then be developed and tailored to the skills and competencies needed by those who deliver the programs to youth.

Problem Statements

1. National data that identifies the competencies needed to effectively work with 4-H youth is non-existent.
2. The need exists to prioritize at a national level, the identification and development of volunteer core competencies which 4-H professionals can utilize in supporting, building and delivering 4-H Youth Development programs.
3. The need exists to prioritize at a national level, the identification and creation of volunteer development resources which 4-H professionals can utilize in constructing, delivering, and evaluating 4-H Youth Development programs.
4. The Cooperative Extension Service provides little education or resources to new professionals regarding volunteer development.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the competencies which 4-H Youth Development volunteers need in order to conduct programs for 4-H youth.
2. To determine if differences related to the perceptions held of the volunteer development competencies exist between Extension regions.

PROCEDURES

Research Design & Subject Selection

This exploratory survey research is descriptive and correlational in nature and was conducted utilizing mail questionnaires as outlined by Dillman (1978). The target populations for this census were identified as adult volunteers who interact directly with youth in the 4-H Youth Development program, 4-H Youth Development agents and state volunteerism specialists in the United States. A random sample of 100 adult volunteers who served in direct-contact roles with youth were assembled in each state. Three states were purposefully selected from each of the four Extension Regions (North East, South, North Central and West) with an additional state selected from the South and North Central, to more accurately represent the 4-H member and adult volunteer population distribution in the United States. A total of fourteen states were originally selected and agreed to participate in the study. The names of current field staff members selected to participate in the study were obtained from the Cooperation Extension Service personnel directory in each of the target states. The 12 states completing the study are included in Table 1. Fifty (50) 4-H agents, employed six months or more, were sampled in the 12 states. A census survey was employed for the state volunteerism specialists at 1890 land-grant universities (N=50) were census surveyed.

Table 1. Regions participating in the study with return rate.

Region	Volunteers		Agents		Specialists		Totals	
	<i>sample</i>	<i>return</i>	<i>sample</i>	<i>return</i>	<i>sample</i>	<i>return</i>	<i>sample</i>	<i>return</i>
North East	206	99	52	38	8	8	266	145
No. Central	368	176	339	136	13	13	720	368
South	310	79	240	63	11	11	561	153
West	471	166	118	71	11	11	600	248
Totals	1355	520	749	308	43	43	2147	914
Return Rate		38.38 %		41.12%		84.00 %		

Instrumentation, Data Collection and Analysis

The instrument utilized in this study was developed to identify the demographic differences between volunteers, agents and state volunteerism specialists. Face validity was established by a panel of experts drawn from 4-H volunteers, agents, specialists and experts in the field of volunteerism and research methodology who were not involved in the study.

The samples were sent a mailed questionnaire as outlined by Dillman (1978). The questionnaire contained one qualitative and two quantitative components. The quantitative components focused on the characteristics of the respondent=s volunteer program, including number of 4-H members, number of youth and adult volunteers, middle managers and the number of agents working with 4-H, as well as the respondent=s demographic characteristics.

Questionnaires and a cover letter inviting participation in the study were distributed electronically to the specialists and agents. Both groups were directed to access the appropriate version of the questionnaire via the University of Kentucky 4-H Youth Development website. Responses were transferred into a data set located at Purdue University. A reminder message was electronically mailed to the samples three weeks after the initial mailing. Because the data which were submitted to the Purdue database was anonymous, no attempt at non-respondent followup was made.

Questionnaires were disseminated to the volunteer samples in each state via US Mail, along with a cover letter and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. Reminder postcards were mailed to non-respondents three weeks after the initial mailing, asking for a response within two weeks.

As noted in Table 1, the following response rates were achieved: 38.38% for volunteers, 41.12% for agents, 84% for specialists for a combined rate of 40.54%. Data from the quantitative questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics, chi-square and analysis of variance utilizing SAS (SAS, 2002) to determine differences between the three populations. An alpha level of .05 was set a priori.

Limitations

1. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, results cannot be generalized.
2. In the southern region, nearly twice as many of the responses were from Kentucky as were from Georgia and Texas combined (92 versus 50) with none from Mississippi. Therefore, the results in the southern region may not be representative of the entire region.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In Part I of the questionnaire, all respondents were asked to identify current or future skills or competencies which ... will be needed by volunteers who work directly with youth in order to effectively deliver 4-H programs. Sixteen lines were provided for responses. No minimum or maximum number of skills or competencies were requested. As expected, respondents provided input in a variety of ways. Some provided single word responses, others wrote complete sentences while others wrote paragraphs.

Using the system of three raters (Culp & Pilat, 1998) three researchers from three different Extension Regions (Ken Culp, III - Southern; Renee K. McKee - North Central; and Patrick Nestor - North East) read all questionnaires and came to consensus on the proper qualitative category for each individual response in Part I before assigning a quantitative code. The three raters began by identifying qualitative categories by coding the Specialists= responses as this was the smallest and most manageable data set. They proceeded to Agent responses and finished with the volunteers= data set.

Identification of Competencies

Table 2 lists the 32 competencies which were identified by the participants, stratified by the four Extension Regions. The top 10 competencies, as identified by the aggregate included: Communication; Organization, Planning Skills and Record Keeping; Subject Matter Skills; Interpersonal Skills; Leadership; Ages & Stages of Youth Development; Technology & Computer; Youth/Adult Partnerships, Enjoy working with kids; Patience; Time Management & Time Availability. The first 18 competencies were identified by more than 10% of the aggregate sample. Competencies 11 through 18 include the following: Organization Structure of 4-H and the Cooperative Extension Service; Group/Facilitation Skills/Team Building; Teaching Skills/Program Delivery; Caring, Compassionate, Love Kids; Diversity; Behavior & Conflict Management; Ethics, Honesty, Morals, Role Model; Risk Management & Liability. The remaining competencies (those whose average frequency ranked them from 19th to 32nd, included the following: Volunteer Recruitment / Parent Involvement; Motivation; Financial Resources & Procurement; Community Capacity Building; Experiential Learning; Youth Empowerment & Delegation; Being willing to learn and change; Addressing different Learning Styles; Assessment and Evaluation; Problem Solving Skills; Marketing and Publicity; Club Management; Needs Assessment; and Recognition (see Table 2).

Communication was the most frequently identified competency that volunteers will need to effectively deliver 4-H programs in the next decade and was identified by 41.26% of the respondents. With a chi-square value of .0597, this competency approached significance with the highest frequency in the West (47.18%) and the lowest in the South (33.55%). Agents and specialists should plan volunteer development activities that focus on developing, applying and teaching speaking, writing, listening and non-verbal communications skills. This may be accomplished by offering communication workshops, building communication components into most 4-H programs and activities and teaching volunteers to speak in a youth vernacular in order to further develop this skill. A communication component should be integrated into as many 4-H projects, programs and activities as possible. Additionally, administrators, specialists, agents, volunteers, parents and members should all be expected to inclusively share organizational information and practice open communication with all participants and stakeholders.

The second competency identified was Organization, Planning Skills and Record Keeping which was listed by 36.78% of respondents. On a regional comparison, this was the most highly significant competency identified with a chi-square value <.0001. AOrganization/Planning Skills and Record Keeping@ was identified twice as frequently in the West (45.97%) than in the South (22.37%) with intermediate values reported in the North East and North Central (33.10% and 38.15%, respectively.) Teaching volunteers record-keeping skills, how to manage paper, learning how to leave a paper trail and teaching file and record maintenance (how to organize information and resources) should improve their level of performance.

Subject matter skills was third, listed by 31.61% of respondents, and was significantly different among regions. This competency was identified most frequently in the West (39.11%) and least frequently in the North Central (24.92%), although it was ranked as fourth most important competency in the North Central. Specialists should consider developing state-wide

volunteer certification programs or organize state or regional volunteer forums or educational conferences by subject-matter tracks in order that volunteers may acquire the technical information which they believe is necessary for them to fulfill their role.

The fourth competency identified, Interpersonal skills was listed by 31.11% of all respondents. Frequently identified as descriptors in the interpersonal skills category were extroverted personality characteristics such as being Aoutgoing,@ Afun-loving@ and Aeasy to talk to.@ The research team determined that interpersonal skills was not a competency (as it cannot be taught) and therefore removed this descriptor from the competency list for the second study. However, interpersonal skills is included as a personality trait that may be important to consider when recruiting, screening or engaging volunteers and is included in a separate category in the second study. This competency also posted significantly different rankings among regions with the highest frequency being in the North Central and South (34.46% and 33.87%, respectively.)

The fifth competency to be identified was Leadership by 21.72% of the combined sample. Leadership skills ranked as the fifth most frequently cited competency. One of the basic tenets of 4-H Youth Development programming is to develop leadership skills in both youth and adults. Agents and specialists should, therefore, continually seek ways to teach volunteers to develop leadership skills or teach leadership education workshops to youth. These topics could include parliamentary procedure, how to plan and conduct a meeting, event or activity, as well as modeling, teaching and developing leadership skills in youth. This category was identified least often in the South (12.50%).

The sixth competency was Ages & Stages of Youth Development, with a combined listing percentage of 21.49%. Opportunities to integrate ages and stages information into subject-matter workshops or as a component of larger or more engaging workshops should be sought.

The scores for the seventh and eighth competencies were tied. Technology and Computer Skills was tied as the seventh most frequently identified competency with a combined total of 21.26%. Faced with leading 4-H clubs and activities in the technology age, technology and computer skills was identified as the seventh most important competency. Agents and specialists should provide educational opportunities for volunteers to become more computer literate and develop technological and computer skills. Additionally, teaching volunteers to access and utilize the internet, county, state and national 4-H websites will increase their capacity to gather information, ideas, resources and curriculum. Finally, volunteers should be taught to utilize the computer as an instructional tool as well as being taught how and where to seek grants for educational resources and technology.

The category Youth and Adult Partnerships; Enjoy working with kids was also tied as the seventh most frequently identified competency with a total frequency score of 21.26%. Agents and specialists should create opportunities for youth and adults to collaborate on projects and activities, mentor each other and integrate youth and adult interactions into the 4-H curricula wherever possible. With a score of 13.16%, the South identified this competency one-third less frequently than the other regions.

The ninth most frequently identified competency, Patience presented one of the most interesting and challenging categorical variables to the research team and was not significantly different among regions. While the combined score was 17.13%, the research team determined that patience was not a skill or competency, but rather a personality trait. This descriptor was, therefore, removed from the competency list for the second study. Patience is included as a personality trait that may be important to consider when recruiting, screening or engaging volunteers and is included in a separate category in the second study.

Rounding out the top ten was the competency Time Management and Time Availability which received an average frequency score of 16.78%. Time management and availability ranked tenth in importance and was significantly different between regions with the highest frequency scores being found in the West (22.98%) and the lowest found in the South and North East (10.53% and 12.41%, respectively.) Agents and specialists should consider offering time management workshops as volunteer development opportunities and make greater use of the web, a county homepage and e-mail as means to communicate information to those who cannot visit the Extension Office during business hours. Considering that the majority of volunteers are employed, agents should also consider offering extended office hours one day each week and be realistic and honest about time requirements when developing position descriptions and during recruitment efforts.

The Organizational structure of 4-H and the Cooperative Extension Service ranked 11th. It was identified twice as frequently in the North Central (20.92%) than in the South (11.18%). The researchers determined that this item was not a skill or competency but rather a topic which should be presented during volunteer orientation. In order to effectively lead or deliver 4-H programs, events and activities, volunteers must understand the structure of the organization which they serve and the connection between 4-H and Cooperative Extension.

Group facilitation and team-building skills ranked 12th and were identified significantly more frequently in the West. Because volunteers largely work with groups of youth, (and, to a lesser extent, adults) developing the skills to facilitate group activities and build teams will be highly important.

Teaching and program delivery skills ranked thirteen. This competency was identified three times more frequently by the West (22.18%) than by the North East (7.59%). Whether volunteers teach subject matter, leadership, parliamentary procedure, communications, creative arts or demonstrations; developing the ability to teach and convey information is a critical component of a 4-H volunteer=s role. They could, however, be called upon to teach other volunteers teaching and program delivery skills.

Regional Differences

Nearly two-thirds (20) of the 32 competencies were found to be significantly different when compared by Extension region. This finding illustrates that the 4-H program, or the manner in which 4-H programs and activities are delivered, are vastly different among Extension

Regions. The twenty competencies that were significantly different when compared across Extension regions included: Organization/Planning Skills & Record Keeping; Subject matter skills, information and knowledge; Leadership; Youth / Adult Partnerships, Enjoy working with kids; Time Management & Availability; Organization Structure of 4-H & CES; Group Skills, Facilitation & Teamwork; Teaching Skills / Program Delivery; Caring, Compassion, Love and Understanding; Diversity; Behavior Management & Conflict Resolution; Ethics, Honesty, Integrity & Being a Good Role Model; Risk Management & Liability; Recruitment & Parent Involvement; Motivation; Financial Resources / Fund Raising; Community Capacity Building, Service Learning & Community Service; Willing to Learn and Change; Marketing & Publicity; Assessment, Evaluation & Accountability. Additionally, two competencies (ACommunication@ and ARisk Management / Liability@) approached significant when subjected to the Chi-square test ($p = .0597$ and $.0544$, respectively.)

It is noteworthy to point out that the frequency with which these significantly different competencies were identified was the lowest in the Southern region for 14 of the 22. (Table 2.)

Table 2. Competencies which volunteers will need in order to effectively deliver 4-H Youth Development programs by Extension Region.

Competency	NC	NE	South	West	Total	Chi-square
Communication	40.92	40.00	33.55	47.18	41.26	.0597
Organization/Planning Skills; Records	38.15	33.10	22.37	45.97	36.78	<.0001
Subject matter skills; knowledge	24.92	30.34	34.87	39.11	31.61	.0029
Interpersonal Skills	34.46	18.62	25.66	33.87	30.11	.0017
Leadership	21.85	19.31	12.50	28.63	21.72	.0018
Ages & Stages of Youth Development	23.08	26.21	16.45	19.76	21.49	.1626
Technology & Computer	17.23	23.45	25.66	22.58	21.26	.1339
Youth/Adult Partnerships; Enjoy kids	24.31	20.69	13.16	22.58	21.26	.0450
Patience	17.23	13.79	15.79	19.76	17.13	.4683
Time Management & Availability	16.92	12.41	10.53	22.98	16.78	.0045
Organizational Structure: 4-H & CES	20.92	13.79	11.18	15.73	16.55	.0353
Group Skills/Facilitation/Teamwork	13.23	15.17	11.18	21.37	15.52	.0188
Teaching Skills; Program Delivery	11.69	7.59	13.82	22.18	14.37	.0002

Care, Compassion, Love, Understand	12.31	15.17	7.24	18.15	13.56	.0155
Diversity	12.62	17.24	6.58	13.31	12.53	.0463
Behavior Mngmt /Conflict Resolution	10.46	20.69	12.50	9.27	12.18	.0054
Ethics, Honesty, Integrity, Role model	8.00	8.97	7.24	17.34	10.69	.0010
Risk Management; Liability	8.92	16.55	8.55	9.27	10.23	.0544
Recruitment, Parent Involvement	11.08	4.83	2.63	10.48	8.39	.0038
Motivation	4.00	10.34	3.29	9.27	6.44	.0053
Financial Resources/Fund Raising	4.62	3.45	3.95	9.27	5.63	.0302
Community capacity building, SL, CS	4.00	1.38	3.95	9.68	5.17	.0012
Experiential Learning	4.92	6.90	5.92	3.63	5.06	.5080
Empowerment & Delegation	5.23	6.90	1.97	4.84	4.83	.2446
Willing to learn and change	1.23	6.21	3.29	5.65	3.68	.0124
Learning Styles	4.00	1.38	3.29	4.44	3.56	.4276
Needs Assessment	1.85	1.38	1.32	4.03	3.22	.1859
Problem Solving Skills	2.15	2.76	3.29	4.03	2.99	.6178
Marketing; Publicity	3.69	0.69	0.66	4.84	2.99	.0296
Club Management	3.08	3.45	1.97	2.42	2.76	.8410
Assessment/Evaluation/accountability	1.23	4.14	1.32	6.45	2.30	.0022
Recognition	1.85	2.76	1.32	2.42	2.07	.8023
	n=325	n=145	n=152	n=248		n=870

Values are expressed in percentages of people in each educational category reporting each competency.

Values in rows are significantly different when subjected to the Chi-square test.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Twenty (20) of the 32 competencies identified in this preliminary study were significantly different among Extension Regions. The relative importance of the competencies needed by volunteers to effectively deliver 4-H Youth Development programs in the next decade, therefore, is somewhat different among regions. This would indicate that volunteers have greater regional differences that has been previously thought. Care should be taken, therefore, not to assume that materials developed for

volunteers in any region are completely interchangeable with another region.

2. Of the 20 competencies identified as being significantly different among regions, roughly two-thirds (14 of the 20) had the lowest values in the Southern Region. This could imply that 4-H volunteers are the most uniquely different in the South, due, perhaps, in part, to the greater emphasis on school delivery methods in the Southern Region.
3. Volunteer competencies were found to be most similar in the North Central and Western Regions, where strong leader-led community club programs are the cornerstone of the county 4-H program. Agents in the North Central and West should feel comfortable in sharing and interchanging materials developed for volunteers in these two regions.

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study surveyed direct service 4-H volunteers and agents in 12 states and a census survey of all state volunteerism specialists, and identified 32 competencies for volunteers who deliver 4-H Youth Development programs and activities. Of the 32 competencies, 20 were significantly different and two others were very nearly significant when stratified across Extension regions. The competencies, as identified by the aggregate included: Communication; Organization, Planning Skills and Record Keeping; Subject Matter Skills; Interpersonal Skills; Leadership; Ages & Stages of Youth Development; Technology & Computer; Youth/Adult Partnerships, Enjoy working with kids; Patience; Time Management & Time Availability; Organization Structure of 4-H and the Cooperative Extension Service; Group/Facilitation Skills/Team Building; Teaching Skills/Program Delivery; Caring, Compassionate, Love Kids; Diversity; Behavior & Conflict Management; Ethics, Honesty, Morals, Role Model; Risk Management & Liability; Volunteer Recruitment / Parent Involvement; Motivation; Financial Resources & Procurement; Community Capacity Building; Experiential Learning; Youth Empowerment & Delegation; Being willing to learn and change; Addressing different Learning Styles; Assessment and Evaluation; Problem Solving Skills; Marketing and Publicity; Club Management; Needs Assessment; and Recognition.

Nearly two-thirds (20) of the 32 competencies were found to be significantly different when compared by Extension region. Two additional competencies approached significant when subjected to the Chi-square test. This may illustrate that the 4-H program, or the manner in which 4-H programs and activities are delivered, are vastly different among Extension Regions.

Phase II of the study, which will involve 27 states, will explore three aspects of the competencies that were identified in Phase I. These three aspects include their level of importance, level of competence and frequency of use. Phase III will focus on developing assessment inventories for determining volunteer=s level of competence in each of the skills; lesson plans for developing the skills and competencies; and evaluation tools for use in assessing if competency has been attained in each skill.

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