

Exploring the Role of Virtual Communities in Supporting Volunteer Relatedness

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Abstract

The existing body of research on volunteer retention relies on face-to-face practices; however, many nonprofit organizations increasingly rely on online communication to connect with volunteers. The research reported in this paper explores the role a virtual community for national service members played in supporting volunteer motivation through the lens of Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2002) Self Determination Theory. A qualitative analysis found that when members had the opportunity to communicate asynchronously online, they discussed their motivation for serving, provided emotional support to one another, and collaborated on projects.

Keywords: volunteer retention, virtual community, qualitative analysis, AmeriCorps, national service

Introduction

As many nonprofit organizations have faced increased financial constraints, volunteers have become an even more vital part of providing services that are desperately needed in communities across the country. Many nonprofits rely on volunteers to keep their day-to-day operations going as they have faced ongoing cuts to staffing dollars. Not only do program staff members have more job responsibilities and fewer resources, but so too do volunteers. Economic challenges have increased work demands and stretched family resources. As a result, individuals are becoming more interested in accessing resources on their own time and learning asynchronously through distance education. Research has shown that online communities can help individuals gain access to information, build networks, and feel emotionally supported (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997). However, little research exists to understand the role of virtual communities in supporting, training, and connecting volunteers.

To address some of these challenges, an online community to support the social and educational needs of full-time AmeriCorps members was developed. A virtual volunteer community housed in a course management system offered the structure needed to both educate and connect these national service members. This study examines the interactions of national service members in an online community to better understand the conversation topics being pursued through asynchronous conversation and the motivational needs these conversations satisfied.

Review of Relevant Literature

Self-Determination Theory. Individuals choose to volunteer for many reasons and a variety of factors influence their decision to continue on in their role as a volunteer. While a volunteer's continued service is one indication of his or her motivation, further insight is needed

to fully understand the factors that support sustained motivation. Frenedo (2013) found that Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2002) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a useful theoretical framework for further investigating the factors that influence motivation (2013). SDT attempts to explain how an individual's motivation is related to social-cultural factors and personal wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). SDT posits that specific environmental circumstances either hinder or support humans' innate desire for a unified sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2002). An understanding of how social environments satisfy an individual's basic psychological needs is critical to SDT. SDT proffers that individuals have three core needs that are universal: competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

Competence is defined as a person's perceived ability and effectiveness related to a particular skill set. Humans' desire to feel competent leads them to move beyond skills necessary for survival; rather, they are inspired to learn for the satisfaction of learning something new and being more effective (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Relatedness refers to having a sense of connectedness with others, to belonging to a community, and to caring for and being cared for by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Mutual trust between individuals is critical for building strong relationships; a willingness to be vulnerable and open about oneself is critical to establishing trust (Brown, 2012). Ryan and Deci (2000a) described relatedness as more closely connected to the desire for a communal union with other people. Autonomy is defined as the ability to decide one's own behavior and make one's own decisions. Autonomous behavior takes the form of actions that embody self-expression, personal initiative, and agency.

Methods

A non-experimental descriptive research design helps to understand the role that participation in a virtual community played in supporting national service members' relatedness

satisfaction. Qualitative analysis serves to better understand what types of conversations national service members had during asynchronous communication and how relatedness needs were satisfied by those conversations. What follows is a description of the national service members who participated in the online community and an examination of their discussion board postings. A discussion of the results, significance, and limitations of the findings follows.

Sample

The sample for this study is comprised of AmeriCorps members who served in the final year of a large statewide mid-western national service grant. As part of that initiative, the AmeriCorps members participated in the virtual volunteer community.

Table 1

Description of Sample

Gender:	47 female	15 male		<i>n</i> = 62
Race:	20 African American	42 Caucasian		<i>n</i> = 62
Level of education:	90.3% completed a Bachelor's or more	38.7% completed some college	3.2% had high school completion	<i>n</i> = 62

Usage data collected by the learning management system indicated that most members (more than 80%) contributed eight or fewer discussions to the online community throughout the course of their service. The remainder posted between 11 and 108 total discussions. Of these highly active users, the mean number of posts contributed was approximately 37. The member serving in the state office who was responsible for supporting the online community (individual identified as V8) posted 108 discussions. Respectively, the remaining four top posters created 54 (V5), 46 (V10), 39 (V16), and 38 (V18) discussions.

The learning management system also collected number of posts opened by each member of the community. Although number of posts opened may not be an accurate picture of the time a member spent reading, some information can be gathered by examining the reading patterns of members given the fact that they were not required to open any posts. From that perspective, one may assume that the usage data for number of posts opened gives some picture of participating by reading. For this purpose, the following exploration of number of posts open will be described as reading behavior. The reading activity of members varied greatly. Though only a small group of members regularly contributed to conversation, a majority of them read somewhat more frequently. Approximately 25% of members read 50 or fewer discussions. The majority of members (approximately 55%) read between 50 and 200 discussions. The remaining 20% read between 200 and 712 discussions. Again, the member serving in the state office (V8) had the highest reading record (712 discussions). Beyond V8, the most active readers included V16 (617 discussions read), V18 (561 discussions read), V12 (427 read), V5 (425 read), and V32 (423 read).

Description of Qualitative Data

The content of posts in the online community was examined to better understand the role it played in supporting participants' sense of belongingness. A variety of discussion boards existed with different purposes and audiences within the community. A description of each forum, total number of posts, and total number of replies is listed in the table below. Note that in this instance, threads are defined as original postings and replies as responses underneath those original postings.

Table 2

Description of Discussion Forums

Forum name	Description	N of threads	N of replies	Ratio of threads to replies
<i>What's New?</i>	This forum was used predominantly for one-way communication to disseminate information about due dates, upcoming opportunities, and program announcements. All members of the community had a forced subscription to the forum, meaning that they received an email every time something new was posted. The forum served as an archive they could return to regarding various announcements in case they deleted the email. This forum is not of interest given its limited scope.	130	13	10:1
<i>Introduce Yourself</i>	In this forum, members and program staff introduced themselves. Many of them used a standard format that was suggested. It asked them to share their name, service site, two words that described them, places they had lived, their hobbies, what they were excited about in their service, what they could share with others through their service, favorite book or movies, and three issues about which they felt passionately.	52	99	~1:2
<i>AmeriCorps and Civic Reflection: You Got Served</i>	This forum invited members and program staff to reflect on issues related to their service experience. Primary posters would share a quote, song, poem, story, or video and talk about how they thought it related to volunteerism or civic engagement. Secondary discussions included responses to primary posts and follow up conversation about the topic and individual experiences of volunteering.	32	129	~1:4
<i>Member to Member: A Forum for All AmeriCorps Members</i>	This forum was set so that only AmeriCorps members and the program director could access it. It was done under the guise that members need a place where they could share frustrations and ask questions freely but also that the program director could participate in those conversations. Its goal was to facilitate ongoing conversation between members and staff of the program. Conversations here were varied and included requests for information (statistics, nominations for awards, etc.), dissemination of information (training dates, event invitations, etc.) and requests for advice and/or support.	30	44	3:4

Focus of the Qualitative Analysis

The analysis focuses on three discussion forums: *Introduce Yourself*, *You Got Served*, and *Member to Member*. These discussions provide snapshots of online activity throughout a member's service year to indicate how participants interacted with one another. These forums were selected because they included the most robust conversation, the most diverse population of national service members engaging in discourse, and conversation topics that were most likely to encourage the development of relationships between members. No alterations were made to conversations beyond the removal of identifying information.

Table 3

Cohen's Kappa for Discussion Forums

Discussion Board:	Introduce Yourself	You Got Served	Member to Member	All Discussion Boards
Cohen's Kappa:	.809	.571	.565	.708

During the first review of data, common themes were noted and utilized to determine an initial set of codes. Initial codes included: (a) reason for serving, (b) relatedness to staff, (c) relatedness to volunteers, (d) seeking support, (e) exhibiting empathy, (f) accountability, (g) offering advice/support, and (h) showing vulnerability. A second coder examined one third of the data set selected at random from each discussion forum after being trained using the established code book; refinement efforts were made to establish a common coding scheme. Those refinement efforts resulted in collapsing of many codes into larger categories. The satisfaction of belongingness/relatedness needs as a motivational construct was used as a framework for coding the data. There was not sufficient evidence that volunteers experienced relatedness differently in relationships with one another as compared to program staff; therefore, there was no basis for

separating them; similarly, other codes like empathy or showing support were attributes of belongingness. As a result, one category for “general relatedness” was established. Existing codes that fell under the umbrella category of relatedness (relatedness to staff, relatedness to volunteers, empathy, accountability, and offering advice/support) were recoded under “general relatedness.” The codes of “reason for serving” and “vulnerability” were kept intact because they showed a pattern in the data that did not directly connect to the construct of belongingness. Inter-rater reliability was acceptable according to Jeong (2003) with a Cohen’s kappa coefficient of .708 for all discussion forums overall.

Results

When national service members engaged in conversation with one another and with program staff through discussion boards in the online community, they generally focused on describing their motivation for serving, supporting one another from an emotional and material perspective, and sharing fears and challenges related to their national service member roles.

Explanation of Codes

Motivation for serving

When discussing their reasons for serving, members’ conversations fell into two primary categories: personal development and desire to improve one’s community. AmeriCorps members described a desire to use their talents and the knowledge they acquired through education and experience. For example, V21 shared: “I was intrigued by this [AmeriCorps experience] because I had just finished my [experience in a youth program] and wanted to work more with youth. I loved working with youth and teaching them skills I had learned while I was in [the youth program].” Several members discussed the importance of gaining professional experience in their chosen field through their service experience. One individual wrote, “I’m looking forward

to a great second year where I can continue to improve my skills, network with others, and help others in the process!” (V46). Another shared, “In general I’m just really pumped about this great opportunity to gain so much experience doing something I really care about” (V41). Finally, AmeriCorps members expressed a desire to build their personal and professional network.

Beyond their personal development goals, AmeriCorps members expressed a strong desire to give back to their community. This sentiment was eloquently expressed by V38: “I’m returning to volunteer in the community that I grew up in. It will be wonderful to reconnect with a place that taught me so much, while bringing with me the experiences that I have gained since leaving town.” Similarly, national service members expressed a desire to make a lasting impact on these same communities. One wrote, “I am [...] excited to be in the community and be able to help improve it” (V60). Finally, AmeriCorps members articulated their goals of improving the future for youth. V47 wrote of a desire to “chang[e] the lives of children who are in need.”

General relatedness

An analysis of the discussion forums revealed a substantial effort on behalf of members to build a supportive community. AmeriCorps members supported one another both emotionally as well as materially. Evidence that members worked towards establishing rapport, building a sense of connectedness, and conveying a sense of empathy could be seen throughout all three discussion boards. For instance, in the *Introduce Yourself* discussion forum, V8 responded to the introduction provided by V36 by writing, “It seems like you will have a lot to offer our program as far as resources with your educational background, and I’m really excited to have you on board as a fellow service member!”

In the *You Got Served* discussion forum, participants discussed issues related to being a

national service member. This discussion board was often fraught with emotional and impassioned dialogue because AmeriCorps members sought out the experience based on their personal values and goals. As a result, the conversations were rich with connection, feeling inspired by others, and words of encouragement. For instance, in responding to a post shared by another member, V57 wrote:

I am finishing my second year and I [...] am nervous[...]. Where will I be next year as I finish my year of service? [...] After reading this post I think I will start to use this phrase! "Just like you, I will bloom where I am planted!"

AmeriCorps members described how the online forum served as an outlet to connect them to a physical community of people in similar circumstances despite feelings of isolation in their service site. For instance, after watching a video of two members talking about their service year, one AmeriCorps member (V38) who served remotely during the summer months shared,

I really feel isolated from the AmeriCorps community out here [...] I just feel a lot more connected and refocused having heard that interview. So wow, thanks! [...] You put out another thought provoking post.

By watching the video shared and engaging in conversation about it with other members, V38 shared a decreased sense of isolation and renewed sense of purpose. Though not able to physically connect with a community of her peers, V38 described how technology supported feelings of connectedness.

Beyond emotional support, national service members also used the discussion forums as a venue for requesting and offering material support. This was seen throughout both the *Introduce Yourself* board as well as the *Member to Member* board. For example, V16 sought individuals to pilot and review a curriculum he was working on as part of his service goals. Similarly, V15 wrote to other members for sample stories used to show success in monthly reports. Often, individuals would respond by suggesting tools they found already posted in the

online community or by sharing things they had created. Similarly, V8 used the boards to remind the cohort of upcoming workshops and encourage their participation relative to their personal and professional development goals.

Vulnerability

The *You Got Served* discussion forum provided an opportunity for members to discuss issues related to volunteering and their motivation to serve. Though much of the discourse in this forum focused on the life-altering aspects of volunteering, many AmeriCorps members also used the forum as an outlet to share their struggles. One common theme was the ongoing challenge of remaining motivated. For instance, V8 spoke about the difficulty of maintaining her enthusiasm for volunteering amidst the mundane tasks: “In my second year of service, my zeal for ‘changing the world’ sometimes gets lost in the everyday shuffle of the office or my calendar.” Also writing about motivation, V38 shared:

I think all of this talk about refueling can be really healthy for all of us. Motivation waxes and wanes for all of us [...] I'm now also understanding the ins and outs of keeping a non-profit organization running on a day-to-day basis. I see the struggles that we face to recruit volunteers and keep the lights on at the office.

National service members often use their national service experience as a stepping stone into the world of nonprofit and social service work. Because they came to their role with limited experience, many of them admitted to being naïve when it came to the reality of the situation – that is, that working with youth and volunteers and trying to make a positive difference in the world was sometimes unrewarding, boring, or fraught with tension.

Other members spoke of the vulnerability of national service as an exercise in humility.

Describing this experience, V35 shared:

[At my service site] I found myself constantly going to co-workers and management team to get help with simply navigating [technology]. It was humiliating to admit that I did not know how to use these programs. [...] I am learning how to become a

better listener, organizer, time manager, and leader. I have become better in these areas of my life both in and out of my workplace. I have learned what it takes to operate a nonprofit [...] excellent humility, listening skills, organizational and time management skills, and teamwork.

Though well connected in her community, V35 described a sense of discarding all her previous experiences and knowledge and having to begin anew. Asking for help and learning to juggle multiple responsibilities were difficult and embarrassing. The lesson learned, however, was the importance of admitting the struggle and relying on others for support; through the experience of being broken down, V35 was able to build herself back up and become stronger for her future efforts.

Members often described the feeling of being overwhelmed or discouraged by the slow process of change and seemingly insurmountable odds when working to alleviate the difficult circumstances faced by the youth they served. In this post, V10 asserted the importance of making even small efforts to improve the conditions of her environment. Admitting a sense of powerlessness and helplessness is the core of vulnerability; nonetheless, individuals who choose to persevere accept that sometimes it might be difficult to push through the challenges. The *You Got Served* forum was the only forum in which any instances of vulnerability were coded. It also housed the highest number of posts coded for general relatedness.

Discussion

This study reported here examined what conversation topics were being pursued through asynchronous communication between national service members. Findings from the study indicated that AmeriCorps members' conversations generally focused in three areas: reason for serving, general relatedness, and vulnerability. Items categorized under reason for serving were consistent with research on volunteer motivation. Clary and Snyder (1999) identified six principal reasons that serve as the driving force behind volunteering: (a) career development, (b)

building self-esteem, (c) self-protective, (d) social, (e) understanding more about the world, and (f) personal values. Other studies found that volunteers sought new relationships through serving (Proteau & Wolff, 2008) or volunteered because someone they cared about asked them to (Okun & Eisenburg, 1992).

The importance of positive relationships with other AmeriCorps members and program staff was also underscored in the existing literature. Gidron (1985) found individuals who had strong relationships with others were more likely to persevere in their role. Lammers (1991) found similar results: volunteers must have established a connection to others connected to the program in order to remain committed. Bruny (1981) found that recognition by one's peers is the most meaningful form of recognition for a volunteer. By offering emotional and material support through the online community, AmeriCorps members were able to establish relationships with each other in ways that might have otherwise not existed due to the locational proximity of their service sites. The online community provided an outlet for relationships established at the beginning of the service year to continue to grow.

Finally, the importance of vulnerability in establishing relatedness was highlighted in the literature. Research from the field of therapy underscores the healing power of self-disclosure and the role of vulnerability in bringing about connectedness (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan, 2008). Mutual sharing creates a sense of empathy and builds a stronger relationship. Brown (2012) described vulnerability as critical to establishing trust and reiterated the importance of appropriate boundaries in the context of sharing. National service members in the forums shared experiences that were contextualized by their service roles. From that respect, members maintained a level of professionalism by not disclosing more than what was appropriate given the nature of the relationship.

Limitations of the Study

Findings from the study are limited in several ways. First, as a qualitative study examining online interactions between a limited number of national service members cannot be considered representative of a larger body of AmeriCorps members or volunteers as a whole. Qualitative studies are meant to begin to understand phenomena; as a result, their findings cannot be generalized. Additionally, choosing to volunteer as a full time national service member is empirically different from the more casual volunteering done by the majority of the population. In many respects, national service members function more as staff in their time commitment to the program. Third, the virtual community was examined as an artifact; that is, it was not built with research in mind. As a result, it was impossible to go back and understand the nature of the lived experience from participants by asking them directly. Finally, the researcher of the study was also the program director for the national service program. All efforts to remove my own bias were made; however, one may not ever fully remove one's own existing knowledge base about the program, its history, and the members in it that is difficult to impart to others. Through bringing in a second coder, efforts were made to increase the validity of the findings.

Implications for Practitioners

The findings of this study reveal that online communities support belongingness in ways that are particularly effective for *some* national service members. Additional research is needed to better understand how and for whom this medium works. A small number of individuals were highly active in contributing posts to the community and therefore helped to sustain it. Similarly, Hampton, Goulet, Marlow, and Rainie (2012) found that so-called "power users" on Facebook contribute significantly more content than their peers. These power-users comprise 20 to 30% of individuals using Facebook. The study found that individuals who frequently update their status

on Facebook show higher levels of perceived social support and emotional well-being. What is not clear, however, is what drives individuals to become highly active in online communities and what those who are only moderately active or participate by reading gain.

From the practitioner standpoint, volunteer administrators might utilize those individuals who are heavily involved in the program and with whom they have a sense of connection if moving forward with an online community. Strategic involvement of what Cooperative Extension calls “middle manager” volunteers (Schwartz, 1978) is critical. Middle managers are volunteers who are in key leadership roles in the program who provide support to other volunteers through training, supervision, and advice. Middle managers could help volunteer administrators sustain the conversation in an online community and actively engage less experienced volunteers.

Another successful aspect of the online community is that it served as a one-stop shop; that is, AmeriCorps members completed their monthly reports, accessed resources meant to help them in their roles, received updates on program news, and communicated directly with one another. The success of this particular iteration of an online community over previous versions offered is that members needed to go there to access all the information they needed to succeed in their roles. Additionally, the online community was available from the beginning of the service year. Members got into the habit of going there to connect with others and gather information critical to their success.

Conclusion

To date, no other study has examined the role of virtual communities in volunteer motivation. This case study showed that virtual volunteer communities can be an effective medium for bridging the gap between ideal circumstances that support AmeriCorps member

motivation and retention. When AmeriCorps members are given an outlet for communicating and supporting one another that is not reliant on a shared time or space, they can establish connections that support relatedness, help them process the national service experience, and collaborate on shared projects. Given the reality of decreased resources and diminished staffing, the potential implications for nonprofits utilizing volunteers and national service members are many. Though the long-term implications for this research are many additional studies into the future, this study took the first step in understanding the role that virtual volunteer communities play by describing what happened in one context with a group of full time national service members. This approach helps researchers know what interventions they might consider in the future and what frameworks are valid. For instance, through the lens of SDT, volunteer program managers could work to create online spaces that build competency through training and access to resources, autonomy through allowing a shared space to offer unique ideas, and relatedness through asynchronous discussion boards and synchronous chats to process the shared experience and provide emotional support. Through this study, practitioners can better understand what design elements are crucial to the success of online volunteer communities.

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The campaign to create Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument: A case study

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Abstract

In 2014 a previously little-known, but archaeologically rich, area outside of the neon city of Las Vegas, Nevada was designated by Congress as the Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument (TUSK). This case study will show how well-coordinated voluntary action was largely responsible for the creation of this national monument. There are three primary objectives for this research project; first, to provide a sequential overview of how a group of women (and later a larger group of community members) went from a loosely connected group to a functioning nonprofit, formally recognized by the IRS and the greater community. Second, to highlight how cause-oriented activism can be latent within a group of people but, when activated, can result in long-lasting change and third, to briefly highlight how this national monument was created largely because of the incredible commitment and work of local activists and voluntary action.

Key words: volunteers, environmental issues, voluntary action, national monuments

Introduction

Home to a geologic record of thousands of fossils of Ice Age mammoths, bison, American Lions, dire wolves and more, the Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument (hereafter denoted as TUSK, the National Park Service designation) stands as a testament to both those fossils and to the community of civically minded people who advocated for its creation. With priorities of conservation, protection, and interpretation, a previously unconnected group of people became fierce community advocates, working with political representatives, community leadership and various nonprofit groups on the monument creation. Collectively, they committed to years of meetings, tours, educational campaigns, active volunteer management and community engagement on behalf of public land.

This case study will show how well-coordinated voluntary action created a legacy of land preservation for future generations in under a decade. Unknowingly at first, the original five members committed to learning the ropes of the non-profit world as they went from a loose coalition of people committed to a goal, to a coalition under the umbrella of another non-profit, and finally to the creation of their own nonprofit. A nonprofit complete with by-laws, Executive and various committees, formal documentation and auditing procedures, and the myriad of responsibilities that are required of non-profits. This eclectic group of volunteers then further engaged their community in a long-term intensive campaign to create the monument.

Background

There are currently 129 national monuments within the United States, run by different federal agencies and created in different ways. While national monuments are found all over the nation, the majority of monuments are found in the Western United States (Rothman, 1989). One state in particular, Nevada, has had three monument designations within the past 3 years

including TUSK. Nevada, while known for catering to vice and to exploiting natural resource, is also home to residents who care deeply about the preservation of public lands, often dedicating thousands of collective hours (as discussed later) in pursuit of preservation.

A brief overview of the state of Nevada is helpful to put this project and the significance of its voluntary action into context. According to Ren (2011), author of the 2010 American community survey brief on lifetime mobility in the U.S., Nevada had 24.3% of current residents born in Nevada residing within the state (the average US rate is 58%). This speaks to the highly transient nature of the state's residents. In addition, Nevada ranks 50th in number of non-profits (Word, Lim, Servino & Lange, 2014) also ranking 49th in community volunteerism with only 20.3% of residents volunteering (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2013).

Previous research has shown that a third of volunteers who are active one year do not participate in voluntary action the next (Corporation, 2007). Yet despite those somewhat dismal numbers in the state of Nevada, five individuals estimated they invested over 21,580 hours in service to the creation of this national monument between 2006-2014. This number does not include the number of volunteer hours from those 100+ involved who weren't interviewed, or those 100+ individuals who participated in the Site Stewardship program, a program that trains and uses community volunteers to monitor the fossil sites.

Case Study Methodology

To better understand the contributions of volunteers in the creation of this unique national monument I developed a holistic, single-case study (Yin, 2014) of the Protectors of Tule Springs (POTS). Case studies are empirical inquiries where researchers investigate "a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-world context" using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2014). POTS members (with emphasis on the founding members) and several

very involved community members were the unit of analysis within the local, state, and national context of volunteer-led efforts to transform this site into a national monument. POTS' involvement serves as the "case" in this instance as they had the longest involvement with the site, and it is bounded to those who were actively involved in the creation of the national monument (with one exception noted below).

The time-period under study includes activities before (eventual) POTS members knew each other, through site preservation and community engagement, all the way through to the passage of the legislation in support of the monument. I reviewed archival documents including newspaper articles, Congressional bills, public documents from nonprofit and local, state, and federal sources, as well as local and national media coverage. Although much of the data collected relates to actions before the creation of the monument, part of the analysis also includes a contemporary contextual element that allows for a deeper understanding of the long-term effect of voluntary action.

Using a grounded theoretical approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I conducted retrospective semi-structured interviews with the original five members of POTS and additional stakeholders to gather information about their personal experience as volunteers and members of the community that worked to create the monument. The interviewees consisted of the original five women involved in creating POTS, a Park Ranger who became involved after the creation of the National Park but with whom I collected institutional data regarding the monument-making process, a supportive legislator active during the course of the monument's creation, a faculty member from the local university, and select members of the Tule Springs Coalition (created by the National Parks Conservation Association). There were multiple other individuals and

organizations who worked on this monument, but this case study is bounded to the POTS organization.

Protectors of Tule Springs (POTS)

Though in the area since the Pleistocene era, the value of the Tule Springs area wasn't well known to residents in the development that abuts the site of the monument. In 2006, as required for most environmental projects, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) requested citizen input regarding potential upcoming private development. One such meeting culminated in the creation of a group that would remain dedicated to the preservation of TUSK. Helen Mortensen, a long-time advocate for causes within the state of Nevada, was present, hoping to find others who would work on behalf of this project. Mortensen's involvement in the Las Vegas Valley had spanned decades and she would provide immeasurable guidance regarding the potential monument.

Jill DeStefano attended the meeting and though she had never been politically active before, quickly exhibited many of the characteristics of a social entrepreneur (Frumkin, 2005). She would count this as the beginning of the campaign to preserve Tule Springs. As she stated, she "was hooked" and set out to ensure protection of this unique site that was virtually in her backyard (personal communication, 2015). DeStefano stated, "when I first became aware of the BLM Environmental Impact Study and at the same time was informed of the enormous number of fossils found on the surface of the area, I knew I had to organize a group of citizens [sic] to protect this historical and cultural treasure, so Protectors of Tule Springs (POTS) was created" (POTS, 2015). Sandy Croteau, a member of the POTS five stated it was the "perfect storm of the right women" (2015).

The group began to work without a formal strategic plan, which is common with many nonprofits, particularly smaller ones (Stone, Bigelow & Crittendon, 1999). This is also where they started to consider various stakeholders for resource development and potential collaborations (Brown & Iverson, 2004). There is evidence of strategy formulation as the group began to “develop plans to achieve the organization’s goals and objectives consistent with its mission and philosophy” (Stone et al., 1999, pg. 380, Shortell et al., 1985). While nonprofits can be characterized as having multiple and conflicting goals (Stone, et al.1999), this group had one overarching goal to guide them, that of preservation of this space as a national monument. Having one relatively non-controversial goal was cited by interviewees as being one of the primary reasons for the incredible support of the community and eventual creation of the monument. The volunteer group mobilized immediately in partnership with BLM, taking fifty residents out to view the mammoth site in October of 2006 (POTS, 2015). They also started to become a visible presence and voice in community meetings, with many becoming involved in the Site Stewardship program through the National Park System.

Volunteering wasn’t without its struggles though, as highlighted by one incident. While attending a BLM stakeholder meeting, a consultant for the developers instructed DeStefano to “stay home and play bridge, we are building on all of this land” (DeStefano, 2015). Fortunately, the group didn’t stay home and play bridge, but continued to seek new opportunities and relationships. In 2007, the Friends group held their first public meeting with 48 people in attendance and it was here the members adopted the name “Protectors of Tule Springs” (POTS, 2015). Throughout the year, they continued to meet with various stakeholders including Senators, local tribal leaders, representatives from the nearby cities, various nonprofits and military leadership from the nearby Nellis Air Force Base.

Initial preservation efforts focused on ensuring the land was not turned over to private developers. In 2008, the group collected 10,000 signatures to stop development of the land, and handed the petition over to then Senator Harry Reid (D-NV). Eventually, the group received a break from impending development from an unlikely source; the 2008 recession. The Las Vegas Valley was hit very hard, stopping investment in the area and making the possibility of diversifying an economy heavily dependent on gaming and extractive industry attractive. The group and community recognized and grasped the value of this opportunity as it related to the monument; highlighting the fact that volunteer administrators must be cognizant of their environmental and social contexts so they may seize opportunities

In 2010, POTS, (active since 2006), local and state governments, the Metro Chamber, Outside Las Vegas Foundation, The Audubon Society, Sierra Club, and various other political, conservation oriented and neighborhood groups joined the Tule Springs Coalition, a coalition created by the National Park Conservation Association (NPCA). This coalition reached across different organizational priorities, objectives (both in general and as they related to public land uses), and diverse viewpoints about the ownership of public land within the state. Here is where initial strategic planning occurred as the group met to establish boundaries for the proposed national monument (even though it may not have been called as such). During this time, the groups were told that “legislation is imminent” (POTS, 2015) and though legislation didn’t pass during the next two legislative sessions, the group kept their momentum up, still offering guided tours, educating the community and meeting with various stakeholders. In February 2013 POTS’ evolution into a full-fledge nonprofit was complete as they incorporated as a formal 501©3 nonprofit, under their previous name “Friends of Tule Springs Wash”.

Final designation of TUSK occurred in 2014, when it was included as part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). A state senator at the time supported the bill and stated in the interview that the inclusion of this preservation piece in a defense bill was ideal; that the monument designation process should be completed through the legislative process, with executive orders pursued after legislative efforts had failed. The bill included zero funding, though this is common for national monument designations (Clarke & Angersbach, 2006).

The work is far from over though, as community activists must stay engaged as there remains a need for long term involvement to create a visitor's center, to secure funding, hiking trails, and put an end to vandalism of the area.

Discussion

This study revealed several important lessons of interest for volunteer program administrators, particularly those working in communities with low social cohesion. While statistically, volunteer numbers are low and mobility is high within the state of Nevada, residents are indeed making significant changes on both local and national levels. The steps involved in the process for POTS (outlined in Figure 1) included initial awareness, coalition and resource building, policy and coalition building, legislative action and then maintaining continued support for the national monument.

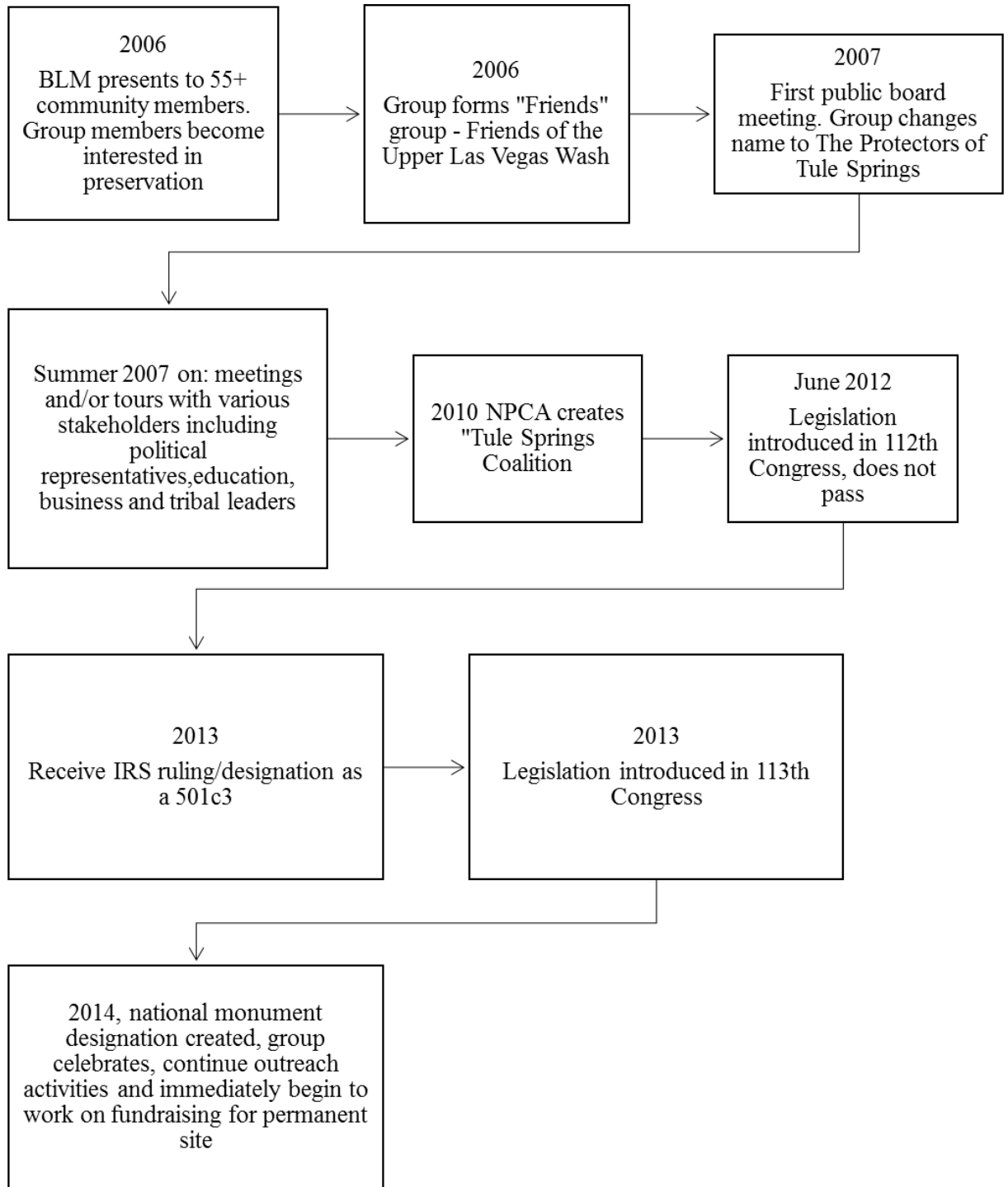


Figure 1. Sequence of events

In their research regarding improving the relationship between stewardship programs and volunteers, Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese (2001) provided several recommendations for success;

consider volunteer motivations, provide learning opportunities, highlight volunteer successes, provide time for reflection and social activities, and utilize volunteer time and abilities effectively. Each of the recommendations was referenced to some degree during interviews, with the following themes arising out of this case:

- Cause-oriented activism; clear and well-articulated goals for the movement
- Collaboration and meaningful involvement of a variety of stakeholders
- Volunteer involvement and guidance; allowing volunteers to choose roles and activities that interested them and were consistent with their values
- Consistent communication and relationship building with diverse groups

Interviews with DeStefano and several of the interviewees revealed lack of activism in their past, but when met with the reality of increased development and destruction of archeological treasures, they became passionate “believers”, with strong commitments to the cause (Frumkin, 2005, pg. 133). The existence of a clear goal was cited by several interviewees as a significant reason for their success.

Additionally, when asked how they leveraged lean resources and an eclectic group of volunteers, interviewees discussed how POTS leadership placed volunteers in positions based on their skills, needs and motivations (as recommended by Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese, 2001). This allowed volunteers, as Frumkin notes, to “express their values and commitment through work, volunteer activities, and donations” (2002, pg. 23), ensuring that volunteers who were invested in preserving the fossil beds, were also invested in their role within the organization. Some led tours out on the site, others created brochures and others worked with other stakeholders on creating support for the monument.

These volunteers met with local and national representatives, led tours and meetings, raised funds, and educated the community on the value of this area that could have been the site of another home development. This provides volunteer administrators with an understanding of a successful campaign led by deeply committed volunteers.

National monuments and voluntary action

Projects with long-term effects on local land use consistently meet with criticism from local communities, unless active community organizing and relationship cultivation has taken place to include local voices. Policy-makers find that it is critical to gain stakeholder involvement to make informed management decisions (Stave, 2002). POTS, through consistent education campaigns, cultivation of community partnerships and dogged determination, did not encounter large scale opposition, and because TUSK was created through Congressional action, Tule Springs is not under review by Executive Order 13792 (2017).

Conclusion

In this case study members of a retirement community created a nonprofit, joined the Tule Springs Coalition, and actively volunteered on behalf of land preservation and policy change. At the beginning of this project, DeStefano was told it takes upwards of 20-40 years to get a national monument designation (Personal Communication, 2015). However, TUSK took less than ten years of concerted volunteer effort. While it is typically dangerous to draw a causal inference between an individual group and a given outcome, particularly because it is difficult to weigh the inputs from the various local and national partners, it is undeniable that the POTS nonprofit and volunteers actively contributed to the creation of this national monument. Those interviewed were passionate agents of change and regeneration; using informal lectures, classroom visits, tours, casual or formal discussions and the creation of informative materials as

their methods of building community involvement and investment. Overall, this situation can serve as an example for volunteer program administrators who seek to mobilize their communities in pursuit of significant change.

Tule Springs have been called the “model park for the coming century” (DeStefano, Personal Communication, 2015) because of its uncommon proximity to a large urban center and incredible support from the community. In 2016, the United States celebrated the National Parks System’s centennial, and while we celebrate the beauty of these sites, it also behooves us to take a moment to consider the dedication, the countless volunteer hours, of those who have worked to preserve these national lands.

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Evaluating Volunteer Competencies to Achieve Organizational Goals

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Abstract

Volunteers with competence in specific areas of knowledge, skills, and abilities are better able to thrive in their roles, and aid the organization in achieving its desired outcomes and impacts. Organizations with volunteers should engage stakeholders to establish volunteer competencies, and periodically review and revise them. A descriptive, cross-sectional study using a mixed-methods design was commenced to explore and compare perceptions from three stakeholder groups about six volunteer competency and personality trait categories. The categories had not been reviewed in nearly 10 years. Additionally, the study gathered data from an important stakeholder group who had not been consulted when the competencies and personality traits were initially crafted – clients. Over 10,000 responses were received through an online survey. Respondents generally agreed the six volunteer competency and personality trait categories were still important for volunteers to possess. However, new themes emerged from qualitative comments about other knowledge and skill areas in which volunteers should be trained, such as how to positively engage youth with mental health disorders and physical disabilities. Results from this study will assist the organization with prioritizing its future volunteer orientations and trainings, along with making changes to its recruitment and evaluation processes. Volunteer resource managers should consider replicating a process similar to the one outlined in the study to create new, or evaluate current, volunteer competencies.

Key Words: volunteer management, competency, training, performance

The Need for Competent Volunteers to Achieve an Organization's Mission

The need for training and orienting volunteers is a common theme across Safrit and Schmiesing's (2012) review of major volunteer resource management models in *The Volunteer Management Handbook*. Harriet Naylor (as cited in Safrit & Schmiesing, 2012) put forth one of the first systematic plans for volunteer management in 1967, which included a comprehensive and unified training program and approaching volunteers as adult learners. Milton Boyce (as cited in Safrit & Schmiesing, 2012) further codified a framework for volunteer resource managers to use with his ISOTURE model in 1971. The "O" and "T" in ISOTURE represent *orienting* and *training* volunteers, respectively, to develop their leadership capabilities. The more recent GEMS model, postulated by Culp, Deppe, Castillo, and Wells in 1998 (as cited in Safrit & Schmiesing, 2012), GEMS, stands for *generate, educate, mobilize, and sustain*. GEMS draws upon previous volunteer management models, and recommends volunteer education include four components: *orienting, protecting, resourcing, and teaching*.

Volunteer resource managers could use a competency framework to guide the planning and facilitation of orientations and trainings in order to enable volunteers to thrive, and that align with achieving the organization's mission. Volunteer competencies are defined as essential knowledge, skills, and abilities needed in order to achieve programmatic outcomes (Schipman et al., 2000). Volunteers should be able to complete tasks they are assigned so that they feel like their work makes a positive difference for clients (Backer, Allen, & Bonilla, 2012). In addition, competencies can assist organizations with establishing recruitment criteria to target new volunteers with specific abilities. Competencies can also be used as a way to evaluate volunteers in order to make decisions regarding retaining, retraining, or relieving them.

An Example of Volunteer Competencies

The Volunteer Research Knowledge and Competency (VRKC) Taxonomy, adopted by the National 4-H Council (n.d.), is an example of competencies and personality traits recommended for volunteers to possess. The taxonomy is an outline for developing the capacity of adults who volunteer with 4-H - a global positive youth development (PYD) organization (National 4-H Council, 2017). 4-H's PYD framework postulates that youth who engage in a long-term relationship with a caring adult volunteer, are involved in skill-building projects, and who participate in leadership experiences will be more likely to become contributing members of society and less likely to engage in risky behaviors as they mature (Lerner, Lerner, & colleagues, 2013). Adult volunteers engaged with 4-H are the interface through which positive relationships are forged with youth at the local level. Therefore, adult volunteers should possess certain traits and exhibit proficiency in certain competencies that catalyze positive youth development processes to take place.

The VRKC taxonomy was determined by Culp, McKee, and Nestor (2007) through a national survey of adult 4-H volunteers, county 4-H professionals (who train, manage, and evaluate local volunteers), and state specialists. Six domains, encapsulating a broad range of skills and knowledge needed by volunteers to effectively deliver programming in order to achieve youth development outcomes, were identified through the survey and later vetted by 4-H National Headquarters. Figure 1 exhibits the six major categories of the taxonomy, and includes a definition and examples for each category.

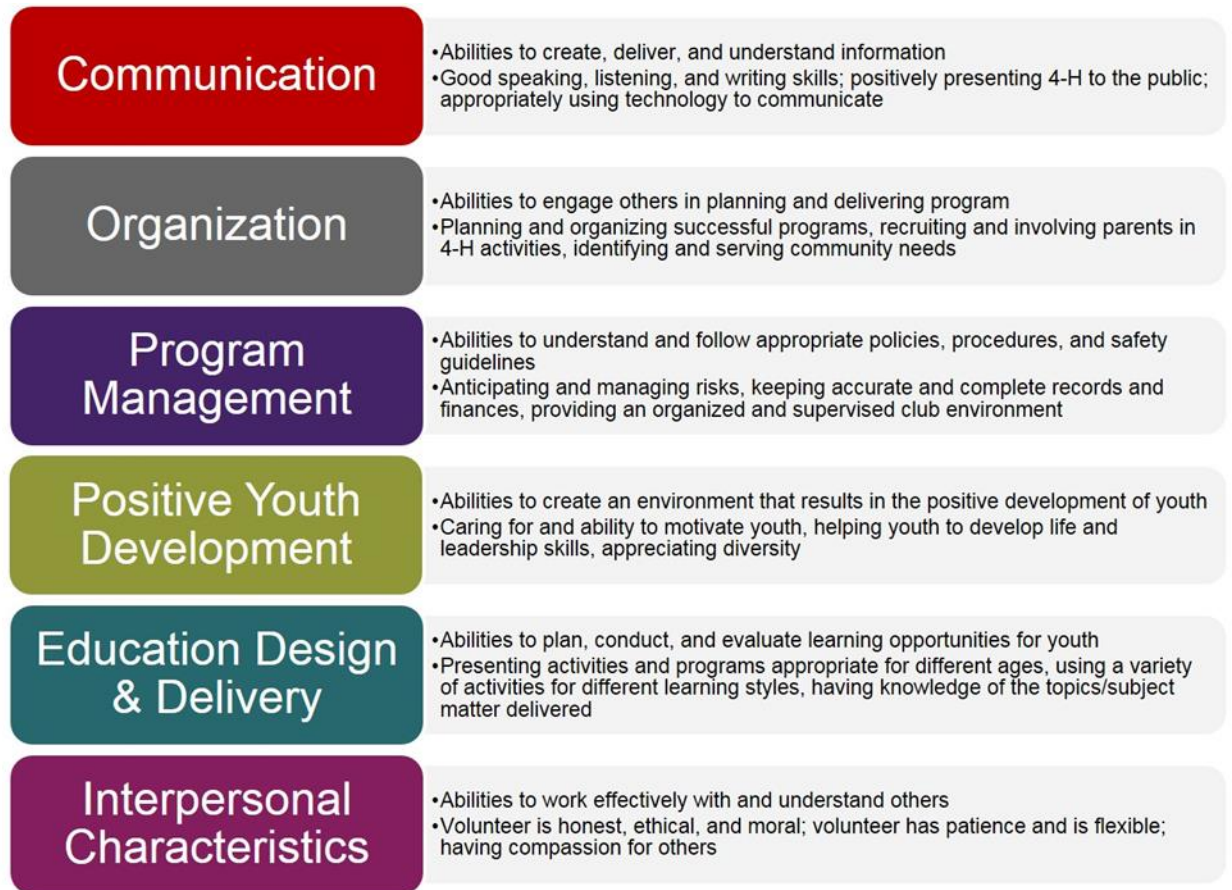


Figure 1
Volunteer Research Knowledge Competency (VRKC) Taxonomy Categories, Definitions, and Examples

The Need for Formative Evaluation

Establishing competencies should be a collaborative process that gathers input from internal and external stakeholders. These stakeholders should represent a broad range of experience, expertise, and responsibilities. Recommended stakeholders to engage include: organizational leaders (especially those who are responsible for the strategic direction of the organization), experts or specialists in content areas that volunteers may need to know, those who manage and evaluate volunteers, volunteers themselves, and clients. Even organizations that already have volunteer competencies should periodically engage the aforementioned

stakeholders to review and revise the list in order to meet emerging client needs, adhere to new policies, and influence how desired organizational outcomes and impacts are achieved.

The VRKC taxonomy guides volunteer development for 4-H. Yet, the VRKC had not been reassessed in nearly 10 years; and there was a lack of published research related to 4-H adult volunteer competencies, the VRKC, and if the domains were believed to be aiding in achieving the organization's mission. The original survey used to create the competencies had also not consulted a key stakeholder group – clients. As a result, a team of researchers crafted a study to gather and compare perspectives about the VRKC from three important stakeholder groups – adult 4-H volunteers, county 4-H professionals, and parents/guardians/family members of 4-H members (i.e., clients). Feedback was also sought to inform new statewide recommendations for volunteer training agendas for county 4-H professionals to use with their volunteers. The study's design and results follow. The methodology outlined next could be adapted by volunteer resource managers to inform the creation or revision of volunteer competencies for their respective organizations.

Study Objective and Design

The objective of the study was to explore and compare perceptions of three stakeholder groups about the importance of competencies as identified in the VRKC taxonomy. Stakeholder groups included: 4-H club volunteers; county 4-H professionals; and parents, guardians, and adult family members of 4-H club members.

The research team commenced a descriptive, cross-sectional study using a mixed-methods design to address the aforementioned objective. The study was modeled after Dillman's (2000) Tailored Research Design, and administered through Qualtrics – a platform for the creation, distribution, and analysis of online surveys. The survey began by collecting

demographic data about the respondents' involvement with 4-H and their location. Then, participants rated the importance of each of the six VRKC categories based on how important they believed each competency was for 4-H volunteers to have in order to deliver 4-H programs that have a positive impact on youth. The survey concluded with an open-ended question and additional demographic questions about gender, age, ethnicity, and race.

Five-point Likert-type scales were used to collect the importance ratings, and scale options ranged from "Not important" to "Very important." For example, the question pertaining to the VRKC competency category of communications asked participants, "How important are county 4-H Volunteers' abilities to create, deliver, and understand information? Examples: Good speaking, listening, and writing skills; Positively presenting 4-H to the public; Appropriately using technology to communicate."

The open-ended question at the end of the survey asked respondents to type in their ideas of other characteristics not listed previously mentioned in the survey that 4-H club volunteers need to have. This question collected qualitative data to clarify the quantitative ratings, and to potentially identify new areas of knowledge, skills, and abilities that may need to be added to the VRKC.

A link to complete the survey was emailed to all county 4-H professionals, and current volunteers and families with valid email addresses. All county 4-H professionals and approximately 93% of all current volunteers and families in Ohio 4-H's volunteer management system had valid email addresses. Pre-notification and invitation emails were sent in December, 2016, along with email reminders to participants who had not participated in the survey each week for three weeks. The survey was open, and data collected, for 23 days. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics (i.e., means and standard deviations) using Qualtrics

and SPSS Statistics. Qualitative comments were reviewed, coded, and categorized by one researcher, and checked for accuracy by another member of the research team as recommended by Dey (1993).

Survey Results

In total, 10,771 responses were received from the three groups for an overall response rate of 24.4%. Importance means for all categories were greater than 4.00 across all three of the stakeholder groups based on a five-point Likert-type scale. Respondents believed all six categories ranged from important to very important for volunteers to possess, as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1
 Descriptive Statistics for Importance Ratings of Volunteer Competencies by Stakeholder Group

Competency	4-H Professionals' Importance Ratings ^a		4-H Volunteers' Importance Ratings ^b		4-H Family Members' Importance Ratings ^c	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
4-H Program Management	4.76	.487	4.64	.575	4.59	.600
Communication	4.65	.531	4.56	.624	4.57	.614
Interpersonal Characteristics	4.78	.417	4.76	.461	4.73	.496
Positive Youth Development	4.78	.458	4.76	.467	4.69	.537
Organization Education	4.35	.706	4.50	.629	4.55	.601
Design and Delivery	4.09	.830	4.41	.661	4.40	.679

Note. *SD* = standard deviation. Competency categories with the highest means are bolded.

^aN = 113 for 4-H professionals.

^bN = 4572-4582 for 4-H volunteers.

^cN = 5298-5307 for 4-H family members.

Participants provided qualitative data in response to the question, “What other characteristics not listed do 4-H club volunteers need to know or have so that they can have a positive impact on youth?” The results are presented in Figure 2 using a word cloud where text size correlates to the number of responses received in each category. The larger the text, the more responses received. Responses categorized as personal characteristics received the highest number of mentions.



Figure 2
Word Cloud of Categorized, Open-Ended Responses Received about Other Characteristics 4-H Volunteers Need to Possess in Order to have a Positive Impact on Youth

Note. Text size correlates to the number of responses received in each category. The larger the text, the more responses received.

Exact number of mentions and examples of each category are also presented in a table in the Appendix. Respondents generally confirmed the importance of a volunteer's personal characteristics, which also received the highest, or tied for the highest, mean score across all three group's importance rankings. One new competency theme emerging from the qualitative comments, and not addressed in the VRKC, was an ability to positively engage youth with mental health disorders and physical disabilities.

Validity and Limitations

Nonresponse error and exclusion of some participants without emails were threats to the validity of this study. However, comparing early to late respondents is one recommended way of controlling nonresponse error (Miller & Smith, 1983; Radhakrishna & Doamekpor, 2008). Independent samples t-tests were analyzed through SPSS Statistics to compare early and late responses across importance means for each competency category. None of the six VRKC categories were significant at the 0.05 level. The research team concluded that results can be generalized to the Ohio 4-H volunteer and parent populations.

A limitation of this study was the absence of youth voices. Youth are the main 'clients' of 4-H, important stakeholders, and may have been able to provide some insight on volunteer competencies. However, youth may not have the maturity to appropriately judge characteristics necessary to promote their development. The researchers believed reliable and valid data were collected through the triumvirate of professionals, parents, and volunteers.

Discussion

Competent volunteers are more likely to feel engaged and motivated to carry out activities that support an organization's mission (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Volunteer resource managers and organizations need training plans in place to increase competence in specific areas

that will assist with meeting strategic goals. These training plans should be created and amended in consultation with important stakeholder groups. Ohio 4-H engaged three stakeholder groups through the aforementioned study to solicit feedback on current volunteer competencies (i.e., the VRKC): organizational leaders and volunteer managers (i.e., county 4-H professionals), volunteers (i.e., adult 4-H volunteers), and clients (i.e., parents/guardians/family member of 4-H youth members).

High importance means reported for all competencies, combined with affirming qualitative comments, suggest the VRKC should continue to be used in the context of 4-H to identify, train, and evaluate volunteers. The interpersonal characteristics category received the highest overall importance mean rating. This category also received nearly twice as many open-ended responses as any other category. Yet, interpersonal characteristics are not considered a competency that can be taught (Culp et al., 2007). Volunteers bring these innate traits with them when they volunteer for an organization, and these traits are difficult to alter through interventions. The respondents' emphasis on personality traits suggest that it should be the first 'filter' through which volunteers must pass in the selection process. Suggestions of personality traits varied widely, but characteristics receiving a high amount of mentions included: patience, being unbiased/nonjudgmental, adaptable, fun/sense of humor, caring, integrity, passion for 4-H and youth, willingness to learn, and willingness to invest personal resources. As a result, the list of personality characteristics should be used to craft recruitment and screening criteria for volunteer resource managers (i.e., county 4-H professionals) to use. The success of recruitment and screening may also be a factor in determining the likelihood of volunteers to develop competence in the other taxonomy categories.

The positive youth development (PYD) competency was the second highest overall importance mean rating, and supported by a high number of qualitative comments. PYD encompasses the framework and theories explaining the methodology of 4-H's activities in order to achieve desired outcomes and impacts. Results from this study suggest that 'how' to facilitate 4-H activities should be complimented with 'why' 4-H activities are facilitated at orientations and trainings in order to increase the likelihood of achieving PYD outcomes. Qualitative comments also revealed an emerging competency theme of adults positively engaging youth with mental health disorders and physical disabilities. The research team recommends adding this theme to the VRKC category of *Education Design and Delivery*.

Volunteer resource managers should consider replicating a process similar to the one used in this study to create new, or evaluate current, volunteer competencies. An online survey is useful for organizations that have a large geographical reach and client base. Similar data gathering can also be facilitated using structured processes and face-to-face interactions, such as the nominal group technique (Fink, Kosecoff, Chassin, & Brook, 1991). Feedback should be solicited periodically from stakeholder groups to adjust the competencies in order to meet emerging needs. Formalizing volunteer competencies, such as the VRKC, assist organizations with developing long-term professional development plans for volunteers; guiding the design of orientations, trainings, and resources; promoting consistency across counties, regions, and states; and achieving organizational goals.

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Appendix A
 Categorized, Open-Ended Responses about Other Characteristics 4-H Volunteers Need to Possess in Order to Have a Positive Impact on Youth

Category	Examples	Number of Mentions
Personal Characteristics	Patience, enthusiastic, passion for youth, flexible, impartial, integrity	1365
Knowledge and Resourcefulness	Background/technical knowledge, rules, ability to identify resources	537
Understanding Positive Youth Development	Identifying individual needs, ability to motivate, age-appropriate activities	510
Effective Communication	Listening, using technology and social media, articulating the 'why' of 4-H	319
Diversity Competence	Understanding backgrounds and situations of youth, learning styles	293
Management of Club and Events	Ability to fundraise, time and risk management, plan of activities	271
Ability to Work Well with Others	Recruiting adult help, conflict resolution, community engagement	254
Other categories	Facilitating experiential learning, community/societal orientation, mental health and disabilities proficiency	< 250 each