

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.

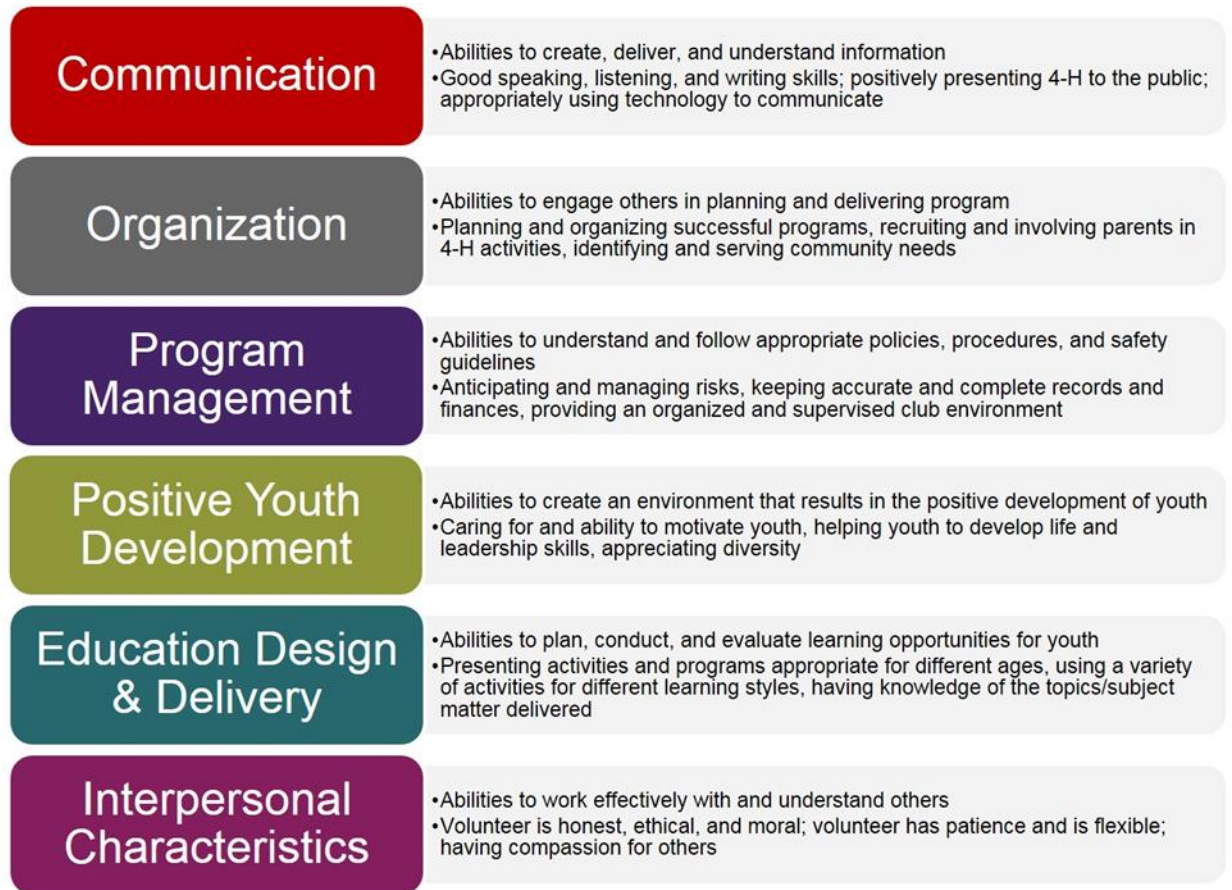


Figure 1
Volunteer Research Knowledge Competency (VRKC) Taxonomy Categories, Definitions, and Examples

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