

The Emerging Impact of Volunteers at Performing Arts Centers in the United States

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Abstract

During the 1960s, when performing arts centers were first being established in the United States, thousands of individuals began to volunteer for these institutions. However, there is very little documentation on how these volunteer programs evolved and what they have become almost 50 years later. Performing arts venues simply could not have survived in our communities without the support of volunteers. In 2007, the author realized how valuable it would be to everyone in the field to learn basic information about these volunteer programs. She informally surveyed volunteer resource managers and program administrators at performing arts centers, with the goal of sharing the results with the group for purposes of in-house promotion of volunteer programs, outreach presentations on the status of volunteerism at performing arts centers throughout the United States, and promoting arts volunteerism globally.

Key Words:

performing arts, volunteers, volunteer resource managers

Introduction

Toward the end of the 20th century, volunteer resource managers at performing arts centers (PACs) attended volunteer conferences, yet little attention was given to the role that volunteers played in the arts. At an annual International Association of Volunteer Administrators Conferences, a small group of volunteer resource managers at museums, PACs, theaters, and other cultural venues began to discuss best practices for volunteerism in their venues. It was at these gatherings that the author (who is the Kennedy Center's volunteer program manager) began to develop a vision that led to compiling basic statistics on volunteer programs at PACs.

While doing research in the field, she discovered how little information was available on volunteer programs at PACs in the United States, or for that matter, world-wide. The need for basic information

became an issue as she consulted more arts administrators, especially those from other countries who were seeking advice about the roles volunteers played at Washington, DC's Kennedy Center. In 2007, she sent an informal survey to the volunteer resource managers at PACs in the United States to find out what their volunteers did. The results would be used for outreach initiatives by the Friends of the Kennedy Center program to promote the importance of volunteers in the arts for local communities. In addition to sharing this information with peers in the field, these results would also serve to assist arts administrators from other countries wanting to utilize volunteers at their venues.

Defining the Audience

In the early part of the 20th century, concert halls generally presented only musical performances, and opera and theater

venues, likewise. In the last half of the 20th century, performances in artistic disciplines began to be presented in one facility rather than in separate locations. In the last 40 years, communities throughout the country began building modern PACs that allowed the community to go to a central location to attend performances in various art forms, e.g. music, theater, dance, opera, etc. In the 1960's and into the early 1970's, the institution that today we consider a PAC came into its own as a complex of multiple venues of varying sizes, enabling simultaneous presentations of many kinds of performances. Volunteer programs began to emerge as well in conjunction with this new form of PAC.

In late winter of 2007, the author emailed a survey to 95 volunteer resource managers at targeted PACs around the United States. The email stated that the information gleaned from the survey would be an excellent resource to share with management as a reflection of how vital volunteers are to the operations of each of these venues. The questions asked explored three most fundamental aspects of volunteer programs: (1) the management hierarchy of volunteer resource managers and staff vs. volunteer ratios; (2) the utilization and variety of volunteer positions available at these PACs; and, (3) the value of contributions made by volunteers annually. Fifty-four individuals responded (a 57% response rate).

Survey Findings

The survey findings were heartening, indicating a healthy state within the industry along with plenty of room for growth.

Management Hierarchy of Volunteer Resource Managers and Staff vs. Volunteer Ratios

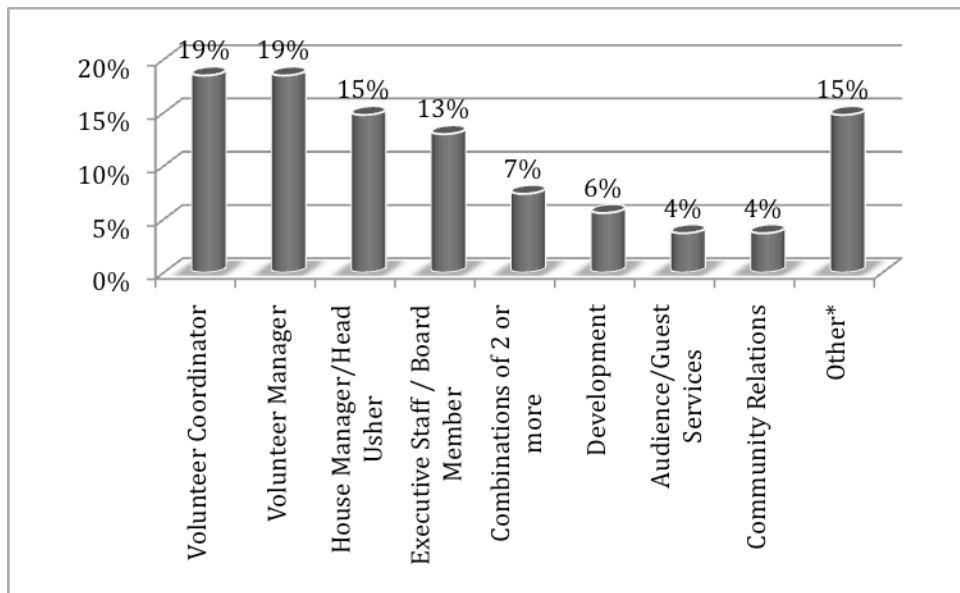
The organizational structure of the respondents' volunteer departments varied greatly, making it difficult to accurately analyze management hierarchy of volunteer resource managers and staff vs. volunteer ratios (Figure 1). Some PACs had dedicated staff who oversaw all the volunteers within the organization, while others use a department-based volunteer coordination program wherein the department manager was also responsible for the volunteers, with volunteer coordination being one element of the job description. It was difficult to draw clear lines between these two types of organizational structures and subsequently compare them. A small number of volunteer resource administrators (15%) reported to executive staff or were executive staff members themselves.

An overwhelming number were run by one or two paid staff people (61%). The average number of staff running these programs was 1.6. Based on the average number of volunteers at each respondent organization, each staff managed an average of 200 people (i.e., 1.6 average paid staff managing an average of 362 volunteers; Figures 2 and 3).

Utilization and Variety of Volunteer Positions

Volunteers were utilized in a remarkably wide range of positions. The areas that received the highest number of responses – ushers (87%), tour guides (56%), administration (55%), retail (29%), concessions (27%), and special events (18%) – might have been expected. Some PACs were very creative and used volunteers for a variety of activities including data maintenance, gardening, information technology, writing for the web page, and serving as “house doctors” for theaters.

Figure 1. Job titles reported by respondents.



* Included Administration, Event Coordinator, Operations Manager, Programs Assistant, and Staffing Coordinator

Figure 2. Numbers of volunteers reported by respondents.

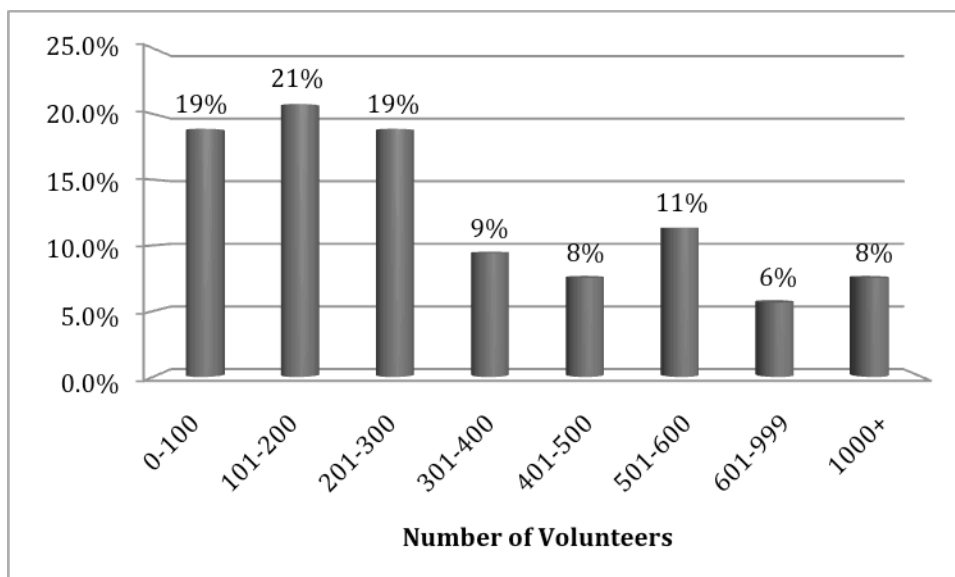
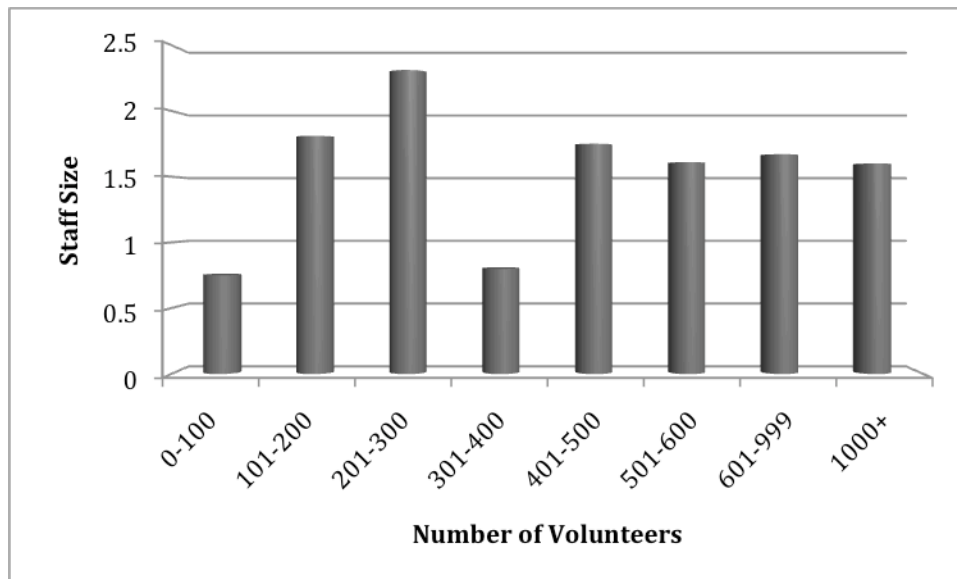


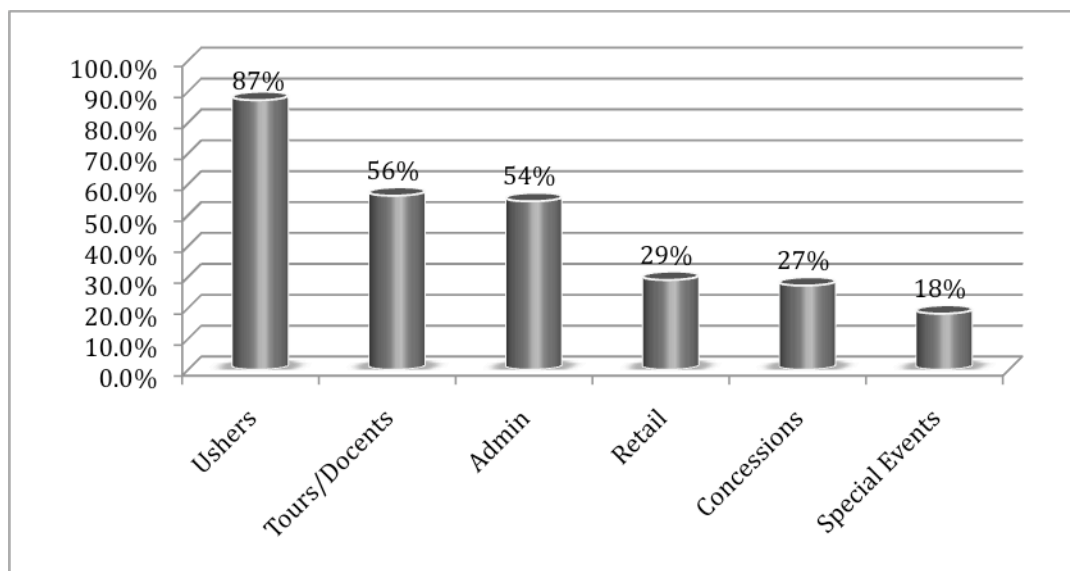
Figure 3. Average staff size per volunteer corps reported by respondents.



Volunteer resource managers may take a cue from the answers to the question, “In which areas do you utilize volunteers?” to develop growth and diversity for their programs. Since almost half of the

responders (44%) indicated they used volunteers only on an as-needed basis, the areas where others utilize them may help managers develop a wider range of permanent ongoing positions.

Figure 4. Areas of volunteer utilization reported by respondents.



Value of Contributions Made by the Volunteers Annually

While many of the respondents appear small and/or underdeveloped (i.e., 52% of volunteer programs contributed fewer than 10,000 hours of service per year), the impact of volunteer time was exponential (Figure 5). One-half of the programs saved their organizations more than \$100,000 a year, and the average savings was \$338,926.73 annually. Dollar values were independently reported by the respondents. Therefore, their calculation methods for the value of a volunteer's time varied, based on the most accurate method of calculation for each particular organization.

Responding volunteer resource managers were accomplishing a great deal with small budgets (Figure 6). More than half of the respondent organizations (54%) operated with budgets of less than \$10,000 annually, and four had no established budget.

Sharing the results

In July 2008, the results were shared as an executive summary and graphs with all PAC volunteer resource managers, with the hope of keeping everyone engaged for future research and outreach efforts. The author encouraged them to share the information with staff and identified one piece of data that she found particularly interesting — where volunteer resource managers, or those staff who supervise volunteers, fit into the organizational hierarchy of their PACs. At some organizations, all volunteers reported to the same administrator (whether or not “volunteer” was in their job title) while at others, volunteers reported to different individuals depending on what their volunteer duties entailed. The author responded strongly to this because she believed that when addressing the “three Rs”

of volunteer management — recruitment, retention, and recognition — having the entire volunteer corps managed by the same department bodes well for a healthy and stronger program.

The results encouraged everyone to acknowledge the invaluable services their volunteers provided, and that their contributions of time, talent, and care would only increase with the right practical and innovative tactics to promote new volunteer positions to staff. The money volunteers save PACs annually should never be undervalued. However, the human resources they provide cannot be measured in dollars. The assumed incentive for their willingness to commit themselves to these organizations, a love of the performing arts, is the most valuable commodity and we should never lose sight of this fact.

Looking Ahead

PAC volunteer resource managers should use the results to market their programs institutionally and within their communities. These results could also serve as an excellent resource for reflecting how vital the volunteers are to the operations of PACs.

Founded in 1965, six years prior to the Kennedy Center's opening in 1971, the Friends of the Kennedy Center volunteer program has always been a vital part of the national PAC's day-to-day operations. In the 21st century, the Friends consider outreach regarding the impact of arts volunteerism on local, national, and international levels to be an important component of the program. Two outreach committees address this vision, one for local and national outreach and the other addressing the importance of arts volunteerism from a global perspective. They reach out to the community by educating audiences on how to promote arts volunteerism to international circles in the

greater Washington, DC area as well as other countries. They continue to develop

strategies to inform targeted arts centers in other countries about the Friends program.

Figure 5. Estimated annual value of volunteer services reported by respondents.

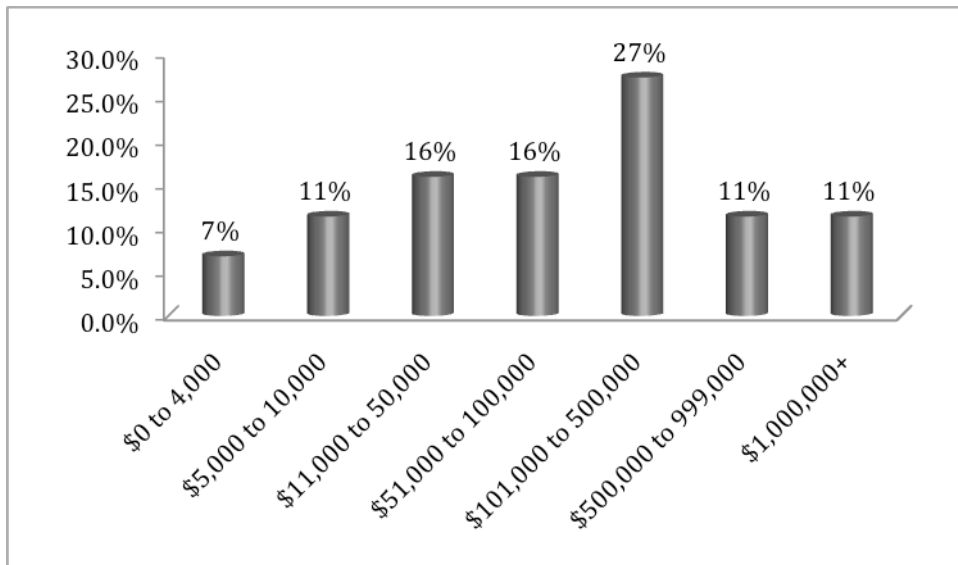
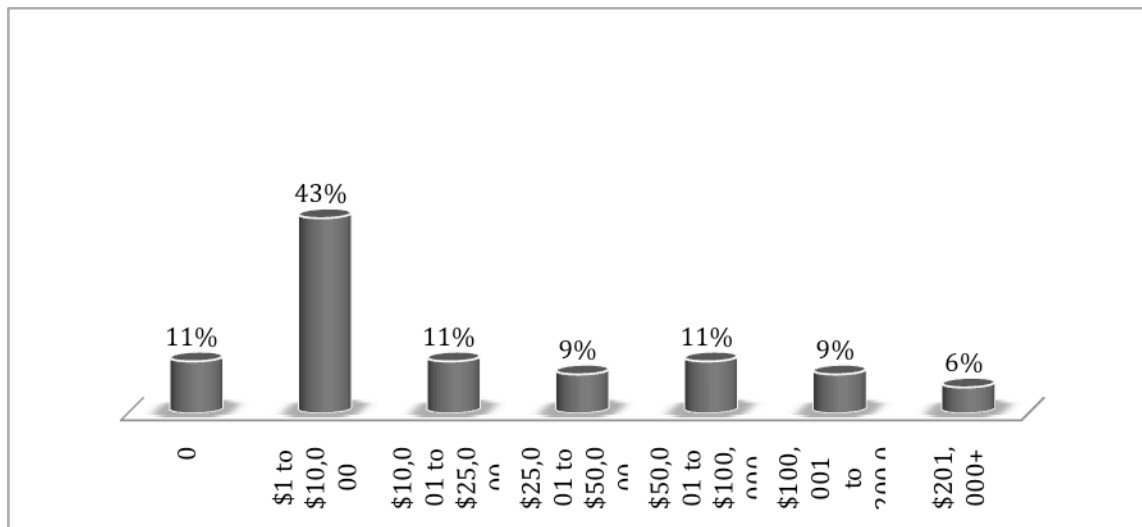


Figure 6. Budgets of departments responsible for volunteers reported by respondents.



Regarding future surveys, another will be sent in early 2010 to PAC volunteer resource managers to continue to collect data. A separate survey will be sent to volunteer resource managers at concert halls to begin collecting data on these volunteer programs. Theater and dance venues will also be targeted for information about their program. Posting the results with Administrators of Volunteer Programs in Performing Arts (AVPPA), the first-ever network for volunteer resource managers in

the performing arts) at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AVPPA/> is another goal. Although some AVPPA members received the survey when they were invited to join the network in 2008, the resource will always be there for access by members. Encouraging these members to continue research in their communities could potentially be another way to unify the members and share the importance of arts volunteerism with others.

About the Author

Brooks Boeke is the Manager of the Friends of the Kennedy Center volunteer program in Washington, D.C., and has more than 15 years of experience in the field of volunteer resource management. In conjunction with her position, she has published two books: *Cooking with Friends* (a cookbook which remains a top-10 bestseller in the Kennedy Center's gift shops) and *Curtain Up on the Friends, A History of the Friends of the Kennedy Center Volunteers*, which is not only a history of the Friends of the Kennedy Center organization, but also a valuable resource on the "three Rs" of volunteer management: recruitment, retention, and recognition. She also consults regularly with arts administrators worldwide to assist them in starting up their own volunteer programs.