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**Recruitment and Retention of Volunteers in Florida:  
Results From a Practitioner Survey**

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**(Editor-generated) Abstract**

*The authors examine volunteer recruitment and retention practices of nonprofit organizations in Florida. A self-administered questionnaire was sent to the total population of 485 volunteer administrators with a 33% completion rate. Findings suggest that person-to-person volunteer recruitment was most effective, followed by targeted recruitment. Mission-related volunteer roles, volunteer training, volunteer recognition practices, and written volunteer job descriptions were found to be important retention practices employed by the responding nonprofits.*

**(Editor-generated) Key Words:**

volunteer, recruitment, retention, mission, training, recognition, written job descriptions

Professionalization in the field of volunteer administration is growing rapidly. As a result of this trend, specialists in volunteer management by participating in research studies have assisted other volunteer managers in their daily responsibilities (Fisher and Cole, 1993). This paper builds on these works, and advances the profession of volunteer administration by sharing the results of an exploratory study performed in December 201 that examined the volunteer recruitment and retention practices of nonprofit organizations in the state of Florida.

To begin, an overview of the literature on volunteer recruitment and retention will be presented. Then the methodology of the study will be presented. The article concludes with a discussion of the significant findings and the importance of these to the profession of volunteer management.

**Volunteer Recruitment and Retention**

Attracting and retaining valuable volunteers for an organization requires a strategic approach, careful planning, and the ability to tap into, and capitalize on the strengths, skills, and experience of those most willing to commit time and energy to help an organization reach its goals (Walker, 2001).

Establishing a structure for the recruitment and retention of volunteers is a fundamental element in managing a volunteer program (Hansen, 2000), and effective recruitment and retention practices are essential in an organization that utilizes volunteers (Bradner, 1999). Further knowledge in this area can improve the volunteers recruitment and retention practices of volunteers within the field.

**Recruitment**

It is difficult to isolate the topic of recruitment, because its ultimate success is intertwined with the development of high-quality volunteer assignments, and with having an organization prepared to utilize

volunteers' time and talents effectively when they arrive (Stallings, 2001). However, four specific types of recruitment have been identified and discussed in the literature.

The four recruitment methods are warm body recruitment, targeted recruitment, concentric circles and ambient recruitment. First, warm body recruitment seeks to recruit large numbers of volunteers without specific skills, but who will do the activity required by the organization. This has worked well for environmental groups that pick up litter or clean the beaches. Second, targeted recruitment requires a specific skill or talent, and the organization must seek out the limited individuals who have those skills. Third, concentric circles recruitment relies on word-of-mouth from other volunteers in the organization. Satisfied volunteers recruit friends and family to volunteer with the organization. The last type of recruitment is ambient recruitment, which refers to recruiting volunteers within a closed system, such as a corporation or a church congregation. Recruitment is done by the other organization, but the nonprofit must establish and maintain the relationship with the closed system organization (McCurley, 1995).

Recruitment techniques must be matched to the challenges, complexities, and risks of the job (Bradner, 1999). Before the recruitment campaign is launched, it is beneficial for an organization to develop a strong and compelling mission statement, conduct a needs assessment, create a climate of agency readiness for volunteers, and develop written job descriptions for the volunteer positions (Bradner, 1999). Organizations should also determine why they want volunteers and design valuable work assignment (Ellis, 1994). The mission statement should be used as a baseline from

which goals are created, and strategic objectives are reached (Glasrud, 2001).

An important key to recruitment is understanding why people volunteer and finding ways to meet those needs. Volunteer managers need an understanding of what motivates people to commit their personal resources, emotional energy, and time to volunteering (Meneghetti, 1999). Having insight into the reasons why people volunteer helps the volunteer administrator attempt to fulfill these needs, resulting in a higher volunteer retention rate.

### **Retention**

Retention of the volunteer staff is an important part of guaranteeing the success of a program. Written job descriptions clearly inform the volunteer of duties and organizational expectations, and provide ways to incorporate the unique talents of the people contributing their time (Masaoka, 2001). These job descriptions help to recruit, screen, place, and manage the volunteer workforce (Bradshaw, 1996). Without a quality job description, the chance of an uncompleted job or a possible misunderstanding of the job increases (Piper, 2000).

In addition, the training, education and development of a volunteer workforce can have a remarkable effect on improving the retention rate of volunteers. Volunteer managers must take steps to help their volunteers grow, learn, and build self-esteem to maintain their interests in the program (Bradner, 1999). Training is also important in risk management. Risks to the organization are minimized when volunteers are prepared for the tasks they are assigned to accomplish. (Ott and Nelson, 2001). Simply acknowledging the efforts of the volunteer can also raise the rate of retention. This can be achieved by a smile and a greeting, a thank you note, a phone call, or

through a formal volunteer recognition program (Yoho, 2001).

The literature review found that a limited amount of research has been conducted on volunteer recruitment and retention strategies, and the findings of this study are intended to advance the field.

### **Methodology**

This exploratory study was sponsored by the Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida, as an Honor in the Major thesis. Data were collected in the fall of 2001. A self-administered questionnaire was sent to the total population of 485 volunteer administrators of non-profit agencies in the state of Florida, as identified by the GuideStar and Philanthropic Incorporated database. Collection methods included self-administered questionnaires, followed by telephone calls and emails to increase the completion rate to 33% after accounting for undeliverable questionnaires.

The data collected from the surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics, a medium for describing data in a manageable form (Babbie, 1990; Meier and Brudney, 1997). The majority of the data is presented using percentages, with the application of cross tabulations to compare possible relationships between two variables (Parker & Rea, 1997).

### **Findings And Implications**

Attracting and retaining the best volunteers for an organization requires a strategic approach, careful planning, and the ability to tap into and capitalize on the strengths, skills, and experience of those most willing to commit time and energy to help the organization reach its goals (Walker, 2001). Many factors are incorporated into the volunteer recruitment and retention process. Organizations must

deliberately plan to attract and keep the type of volunteers needed to fulfill their mission.

In table 1 types of volunteer recruitment methods used Florida nonprofits are presented. Concentric circles recruitment was used most frequently by 87% of respondents (Always 43% and Sometimes 44%). This finding supports the literature, which indicates that organizations have found person-to-person volunteer recruitment to be very successful (Bradner, 1999).

Targeted recruitment was the second most frequently used recruitment method with 76% of respondents using this method, however only 31% of respondents used this method all of the time. The least frequently used form of recruitment was warm body recruitment with 42% indicating they never used this method. To make this information more meaningful, the data were analyzed to determine the degree to which different organizations used the different recruitment strategies on a consistent basis (Table2).

Here the study found three main areas of interest. First, the utilization of concentric circles when dealing with youth (90%) and elder (80%) services recognizes the importance of referral in building a volunteer base for dealing with vulnerable populations. Second, when direct client contact is less, the utilization of warm body recruitment increases as seen in its higher usage by environmental services (38%). Third, the use of target recruitment predominates in educational services (95%) reflecting the need for a skill base to share knowledge.

In addition, to matching the type of recruitment with the specific needs of the organization, volunteer administrators need to be aware of the reasons people volunteer.

Because people volunteer for a variety of reasons the most successful organizations have abandoned the "sign-up sheet" approach to volunteer recruitment and opted

to practice a more strategically planned method (Walker, 2001). By determining the reasons that induce people to donate their time, talents, and experience, an organization is more likely to sustain an effective volunteer workforce. In Table 3 the reasons for volunteering, as perceived by experienced volunteer administrators, are presented.

For survival, many nonprofit organizations are becoming more business-like and embracing the economic model, which focuses on self-interest. In volunteer management it is important not to lose sight of the value of altruism, which is voluntary, intentional behavior that benefits another. Inherent in altruism is the understanding that this behavior is not motivated by the expectation of external rewards or avoidance of externally produced punishments (Chou, 1998). In this study, volunteer motivation was predominately perceived to be altruistic, with 96% of respondents indicating people volunteered to serve the community, and 89% of the respondents indicating that most people volunteer to make the world a better place. On the other side of the scale, only 12% of respondents felt that people volunteered to appease feelings of guilt.

The responses from the Florida survey are comparable to those obtained by the Peter Drucker Foundation, which found a common reason for volunteering was to make a difference in one's community, one's society, one's own country, and beyond (Drucker, 2001).

Personal satisfaction and altruism are compelling reasons to volunteer, but in most cases, people must be assured of additional benefits before they will commit their personal time and energies to a cause (Walker, 2001). The importance of organizational strategies to enhance the volunteer experience cannot be understated. Four areas of organizational strategies were explored: mission-related roles, volunteer

training, volunteer recognition practices, and written job descriptions.

For volunteers to remain with an organization, they must feel that their work has meaning. Roles that support the mission help communicate the importance of the volunteer to the organization, in Florida 93% of respondents indicated that there was consistency between the mission and the roles of volunteers in achieving that mission.

Training can improve the retention of volunteers by developing knowledgeable and skilled volunteers, while protecting the organization from liability (Bradner, 1999; Ott and Nelson, 2001). Here the findings indicate a significant portion of the respondents (78%) provide training for the volunteers.

Volunteer recognition communicates to volunteers that their work makes a difference to the organization, clients and the community. Even if the work itself provides satisfaction, acknowledgement and recognition are important in meeting the needs of the volunteers, if they are to continue with the organization (Ott and Nelson, 2001; Stepputat, 1999). In Florida 69% of respondents stated that their organization had a volunteer recognition program, which indicates a strong awareness of this aspect of volunteer management.

Job descriptions for volunteers are an important part of volunteer management and the risk management program of any non-profit organization. With a well-written job description, the organization delineates what a volunteer will do and the limits of his or her responsibility. The job description also provides the framework for evaluating the work of the volunteer, protecting the organization from liability, and strengthening and improving communication between the board and management (Piper, 2000; Stepputat, 1999). Having volunteer job descriptions reflects an advanced volunteer program, and in Florida

60% of respondents indicated that their organizations had clear job descriptions for each volunteer position. Based on these findings, volunteer management in Florida's nonprofits is moving toward a great level of management sophistication.

The success of retention strategies in Florida nonprofits was indicated when 92% of the respondents replied that volunteers are content and satisfied with the volunteer experience. Volunteers who feel as if they are making a real difference while learning new skills, making important community contacts, or gaining new experiences in the process will be more likely to continue to volunteer for an organization (Walker, 2001).

When asked if the recruiting practices of the organization were successful, only 73% indicated that they were. This may be indicative of the type of recruitment strategies being utilized, or the transient nature of volunteers for most organizations. There did not appear to be a relationship between the type of recruitment, and the level of success indicated by respondents.

The extensive use of specific recruitment and retention strategies speaks to a growing professionalization of volunteer management in Florida. Yet, it is very interesting to note that only 25% of the respondents were in a position with the title of volunteer administrator, and only 39% of respondents indicated they had received any training in volunteer management. These figures reflect the struggle that volunteer administration faces in many organizations with limited resources.

### **Study Limitations**

The Florida study found a very encouraging picture of volunteer recruitment and retention practices, as indicated by volunteer administrators in nonprofit organizations. There were, however, limitations to the study in the form of a time

constraint, limited access to qualified personnel for completion of the questionnaire, a small budget, and questionnaire design errors. Specifically, the questionnaire design errors include, but are not limited to, the tone used in the responses to the management section questions, and a poor choice of response format. Despite the limitations and constraints, supportive and valuable findings were discovered that assist in understanding the field of volunteer management in the state of Florida.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the recruitment and retention practices of volunteer administrators in the state of Florida. What emerged from the study were indicators of the professionalization of the field of volunteer management. The first indication of professionalization was found in the use of specific recruitment strategies to meet organizational needs. Identification of an organizational need and the development of a recruitment plan to meet the need reflect, sophistication in volunteer management, such as concentric circle recruitment to serve vulnerable populations.

The second indication of professionalization was found in the high percentages of organizations that use volunteer retention strategies. Strategic thinking is demonstrated when the mission becomes the driving force for organization (Bryson, 1995) and the volunteer program. An altruistic mission that provides a volunteer with opportunities to serve the community is an invaluable recruitment and retention tool, meeting the need of most volunteers to do meaningful work. The high percentage of respondents indicating the use of volunteer training is another sign of professionalism, and a way to demonstrate the importance placed on the work provided by volunteers. A formal recognition

program is another professional tool found in a significant number of Florida nonprofit organizations. Lastly, the fact that 60% of Florida nonprofit organizations have clear job descriptions for each volunteer position is very significant. Job descriptions are the basis for performance evaluations and for risk management programs, which are found in the more professional organizations.

These findings provide a picture of a state where volunteer administration is struggling to provide for the needs of the volunteers and the needs of the organization, despite limitations in volunteer management education (61% without education in volunteer management).

To address the issue of education, universities are increasingly offering courses in nonprofit management. This study is the direct result of a student becoming so excited about volunteer management after taking a course, what an honors thesis was developed. Not only are practitioners focusing on the field, students are seeing volunteer management as a professional opportunity. This study of volunteer management in Florida can provide the field with useful information linking the literature and practice, and it can serve as a guide to future students on how to go from the classroom to the field.

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### About the Authors

*(At the time this was originally published...)*

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Mary Ann Feldhiem has extensive volunteer experience as a direct service health care volunteer, as a board member, as the Director of Volunteers at large hospice, and as the creator of a Hospice Volunteer Training Manual that won recognition from the National Hospice Organization. Currently, she is an assistant professor at the University of Central Florida and the coordinator of the nonprofit management certificate program, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in volunteer management.

**TABLE 1**  
Recruitment Methods

<b>Method of Recruitment</b>	<b>Always</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Never</b>
Warm Body Recruitment	14%	25%	19%	42%
Targeted Recruitment	31%	45%	8%	16%
Concentric Circles Recruitment	43%	44%	4%	9%
Ambient Recruitment	18%	36%	19%	26%

**TABLE 2**  
Recruitment Type “Always” Used by Organization Type

<b>Organization Type</b>	<b>Warm Body</b>	<b>Concentric Circles</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Ambient</b>
<b>Public Service</b>				
Fire Services	13%	94%	50%	31%
Educational Services	6%	88%	95%	50%
Environmental Services	38%	62%	60%	62%
<b>Social Services</b>				
Youth Services	9%	90%	78%	63%
Elder Services	10%	80%	70%	50%
Health Services	27%	91%	64%	72%

N=141



**TABLE 3**

Reason for Volunteering

Rank	Most People Volunteer to...	Agree	Disagree	Neutral/ Don't know
<b>1</b>	<b>Help others by serving the community.</b>	<b>96%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>
2	Make the world a better place	89%	9%	2%
3	Enjoyment from working with the client population.	85%	12%	3%
4	Socialize with other volunteers.	67%	31%	2%
<b>5</b>	<b>Gain career related experiences.</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>6%</b>
6	Repay benefits received	45%	48%	7%
7	Fulfill a requirement.	43%	48%	10%
8	Enhance prestige.	42%	53%	5%
9	Carry out a religious belief	38%	54%	8%
10	Provide an appeasement to guilt.	12%	76%	12%