

Promoting Organizational Sustainability: Engaging Volunteers to Tell the Program Impact Story

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Abstract

As pressure builds for volunteer resource managers to show impact and accountability for the use of funds and delivery of services, volunteers should be more fully engaged in helping with this process. This article provides a four step process used with volunteers in Virginia Cooperative Extension to conduct program evaluations and document impact, including (1) mapping the intended program, (2) determining what impact will be measured, (3) collecting and analyzing data, and (4) telling the impact story. Lessons learned in this process are shared to help volunteer resource managers benefit from this pilot program.

Key Words:

evaluation, impact, volunteers, Cooperative Extension, accountability

Introduction

In the last decade, many organizations have been subjected to heightened accountability that requires showing the impact of their work (Anderson & Zimmerer, 2003; Jackson & Smith, 1999). Many volunteer resource managers embrace these accountability mandates to ensure organizational sustainability. In fact, some organizations with large volunteers programs are required by federal law to report specific program accountability efforts (Carmen, Fredericks, & Introcaso, 2008; Agricultural Research, Extension, and Extension Education Reform Act, 1998). Organizations can improve their response and results related to this accountability movement and show the true depth and scope of program impact by training and engaging volunteers in planning,

implementing, and reporting program evaluation and related impacts.

Background

The vast majority of entities that fund organizations expect a higher level of accountability than ever before. In fact, some funders tie funding to the level of organizational impact attained (United States Office of Management and Budget, 2009). Many funders focus specifically on economic, environmental, and social impacts that lead to changing major conditions rather than just the activities carried out to reach that impact (Hendricks, Plants, & Pritchard, 2008).

As the call for increased accountability becomes pervasive in organizations, so does the reality that many of these organizations are operating with fewer paid staff and these staff often have

increasing administrative responsibilities or a larger scope of work. Also, many paid staff do not have formal training or interest in program evaluation and related impact reporting. Therefore, volunteers must be enlisted to help organizations plan, implement, and report program evaluation and impacts. For many organizations, this may simply be an extension of the current roles carried out by volunteers. In other organizations, it may require building a corps of volunteers to address this work (Whitmore, 1998).

Sadly, the program development, program evaluation, and volunteer literature and practice do not reflect this need to train and support volunteers in specifically and systematically assisting with program evaluation and reporting. The literature provides discoveries, tools, and results about evaluation of volunteer programs and volunteers (Murphy, 2002; Rabiner et al., 2003; Safrit & Merrill, 1998; Safrit, Schmiesing, King, Villard, & Wells, 2003; Stuart, 2009) but not about volunteers

servicing as program evaluators and impact reporters. To address this dearth in practice, select volunteer groups and paid staff with Virginia Cooperative Extension engaged in a pilot effort to determine how best to train and work with volunteers to improve organizational program accountability.

Engaging Volunteers in Program Evaluation and Impact Reporting

In 2007, the Virginia Cooperative Extension Program Development Unit piloted a program to build the evaluation capacities of volunteers and the paid staff who work with them to improve organizational accountability (Figure 1). A number of four-hour workshops on program evaluation and impact reporting were conducted with Master Gardeners, 4-H leaders and members, and paid Extension agents. An abbreviated version was conducted for Master Naturalists, and state Extension Leadership Council members (Table 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual representation of a pilot program to build the evaluation capacities of volunteers, and paid staff who work with them, to improve organizational accountability.

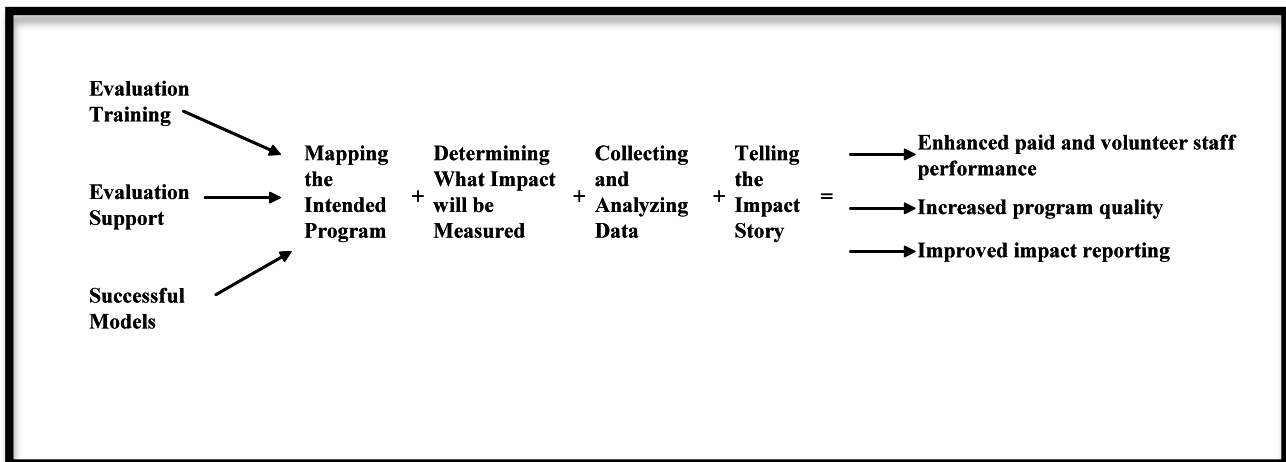


Table 1
Virginia Cooperative Extension Evaluation Program Participants

Type of Participant	Organizational Role	Background
Master Gardeners	Youth and adult volunteers provide horticultural knowledge and encourage best practices through community-based youth and adult education	Master volunteers usually receive in-depth training of at least 40 hours and in turn give at least 40 hours of educational public service
4-H Leaders	Adult volunteers help youth develop life and subject matter skills	These volunteers also build and maintain a local, county, or state-wide educational 4-H program infrastructure
4-H Members	Teen members serve in volunteer leadership roles and also engage in developing life and subject matter skills	These volunteers work in partnership with adults at the local, county, and/or state levels
Extension Agents	Paid staff who facilitate volunteer and program development	These staff are usually employees of the land grant college in each state and may be faculty in an academic department
Master Naturalists	Youth and adult volunteers provide natural resource knowledge and encourage best practices through community-based youth and adult	Master volunteers usually receive in-depth training of at least 40 hours and in turn give at least 40 hours of educational public service
State Extension Leadership Council	Adult volunteers from across the state provide advocacy and local linkages for the state Cooperative Extension system	These volunteers often advocate for the value of Extension with elected officials who help fund staff and programs

These workshops guided volunteers and their paid staff through four steps to improving program evaluation and impact reporting: 1) mapping the intended program, 2) determining what impact will be measured, 3) collecting and analyzing data, and 4) telling the impact story. After participation in the workshops, local paid staff were urged to continue providing support to volunteers to keep evaluation projects progressing. The organization's program development specialist, program evaluation specialist, and district program leaders continued to provide project-by-project support for paid staff to assist volunteers. This support included additional training, technical assistance, and sharing practical models and advice.

Mapping the Intended Program

This preliminary step asks paid and volunteer staff to discuss and record the theory or intent behind a program. In other words, why a program needs to take place, resources needed to conduct it, how it will be carried out, and what it is intended to accomplish. A logic model is often used as a tool to document program theory or intent (Corbin, Kiernan, Loble, Watson, & Jackson, 2004). The logic model or map helps determine which parts of the program will be the focus of the evaluation and helps explore factors and assumptions that may impact the work. For example in Virginia, 4-H teen volunteer leaders created a logic model on the expected youth development outcomes of 4-H summer camp and how they planned to reach those outcomes.

Determining What Impact will be Measured

Using the logic model or other methods to map the theory or intent of the intended work, paid and volunteer staff next determine what impacts they want to measure and what questions they will try to answer related to those impacts. This may

include what program participants have learned, how the participants' attitudes have changed as a result of the program, or how the participants' changed behavior could lead to larger economic, social, or environmental change. For example, a group of Virginia Master Gardener volunteers created a logic model of their "Gardens for Critters" program they conducted at a local zoo. By reviewing the intended outcomes for the program, they decided to measure the increase in knowledge of zoo visitors about the connections between zoo animal and human nutrition after visiting the animal nutrition garden they had created.

Collecting and Analyzing Data

In this step, paid staff and volunteers select methods to gather data that best fit the impacts they want to measure. Most common methods for this work include interviews, questionnaires, direct observation, secondary data, and case studies (NOAA Coastal Services Center, 2004). After the data is collected, paid and volunteer staff jointly analyze and interpret the data often in small work groups. For example, Virginia 4-H teen camp counselors, adult volunteers, and paid 4-H agents decided to use focus groups to determine the impact of the camp program on camper development of leadership skills. The focus groups were held as part of the daily cabin conversations conducted between counselors and campers in their cabin each night before bedtime. The counselors, adult volunteers, and agents analyzed the focus group data in their camp program debriefing meeting and used the data to improve future camp programs.

For those who train volunteer and paid staff in collecting and analyzing data, there are several issues that are important to address. First of all, analyzing data together allows paid and volunteer staff to bring both perspectives on a program to the table.

Second, it is important to train paid and volunteer staff to be objective in their data collection and analysis to avoid as much bias as possible. This is especially true if the paid and volunteer staff are personally strongly invested in the program being reviewed. Sometimes it may be best to ask individuals from outside the organization to assist with this process if bias cannot be overcome. Third, it is important to keep track of and discuss negative and unintended findings in the data analysis process. These findings can sometimes be the most instructive for improving program quality. Finally, it is important to address respondent confidentiality in data collection and analysis with paid and volunteer staff. This is especially true if a small number of respondents are providing data or the staff have close relationships with the respondents.

Telling the Impact Story

Finally, paid and volunteer staff determine which stories they want to tell about program impact. They also determine which audiences need to hear the stories and how they will reach them. In this accountability step, public success stories or impact reports are commonly the preferred format for government funded engaged scholarship (Virginia Tech College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 2008). For example in Virginia, Master Naturalists gathered data from current volunteers in the program to determine what they liked best about their volunteer work and what projects volunteers had completed in their time with the program. The local chapter coordinators used this data to submit impact reports to the state paid coordinator. The coordinator in turn compiled this data from around the state to send to the programs funders to illustrate the impact and value of their investment.

Lessons Learned

Cooperative Extension is a complex organization that makes program evaluation capacity building especially dynamic (Franz & Townson, 2008). Therefore, piloting a new program and recording lessons learned is important determining how best to implement or not implement aspects of the program on a larger level. Even though this program was piloted for two years, nine clearly-identified lessons emerged to improve the program and strengthen it as a model for deeper adoption by Virginia Cooperative Extension and by other organizations.

Building Joint Capacity

It is important to build program evaluation capacity jointly between paid and volunteer staff who work with each other. Where training was conducted only with paid staff or only with volunteer staff, follow-up action was minimal. In some instances, volunteers were highly motivated to conduct program evaluation and report results but the paid staff were not comfortable with sharing those tasks with volunteers. Some paid staff were not comfortable with their own evaluation and reporting skill levels so failed to support volunteers attempting to conduct this work. On the other hand, some paid staff were also very gung ho but had a hard time motivating volunteers who had not attended training.

Support is Critical

A second lesson is that strong support is needed to sustain volunteer-led program evaluation, similar to other volunteer development efforts. Some volunteers need to be exposed to previous successful models to use as a guide; others need a strong set of parameters to work within to keep their efforts focused. The paid staff members and volunteers need to take enough time to lay a strong foundation and commitment to each

other to engage in this important work. Problems can arise if paid and volunteer staff take on evaluation and impact reporting work without calculating the risks and benefits of that effort. For example, negative results about a program may create community backlash against those who conducted the evaluation. Paid and volunteer staff who are new to an organization or new to program evaluation and impact reporting often need extra support up front until the work becomes comfortable or internalized by the individuals and the organization.

Volunteers are Excellent Evaluators

Volunteers can conduct program evaluation and report impact very well and often better than paid staff. Volunteers often enhance the depth and scope of program evaluation. Therefore, a wider variety and deeper level of impact reports can result. Volunteers often get more authentic data about programs and program impact due to their place in the organization. Sometimes they are closer to the program operations and the impact than the paid staff. For example, 4-H camp teen volunteer counselors were much more successful at gathering program evaluation data from younger 4-H campers than were the paid 4-H agents who had more social distance from the campers.

Following University Protocol

A fourth lesson learned is that in academic and/or university environments, if program evaluation data will be shared in papers or at conferences, permission to conduct the evaluation is needed from the Institutional Review Board at any college or university that receives federal funding. This process is completely foreign to volunteers and many paid staff so individual instruction on this process is helpful and actually should be mandatory. Volunteer resource managers need to ensure protection of human subject

through training offered by the university's Institutional Review Board for paid and volunteer staff who will be engaging in program evaluation and reporting work. Clear examples by Review Board trainers of what requires Board approval and what does not is highly valued by paid staff to help them understand Board requirements.

Tracking Challenges

It can be difficult to track volunteer efforts on program evaluation and impact reporting. This is especially true if volunteers are geographically dispersed from paid staff, their participation is episodic or volunteer evaluation and reporting efforts are new for the organization. Paid staff must provide systematic ways to collect progress updates from volunteers on their evaluation and reporting work. Online databases that volunteers can access through home computers are becoming increasingly popular to capture this information.

Communicate Proactively

Paid staff need to discuss among themselves and with volunteers who "owns" the evaluation and reporting process and products. Control and legal issues around participant confidentiality, data collection, formal reports, and who gets credit tend to develop. Policies and guidelines on these issues need to be communicated up front with all paid staff and volunteers. For example, when a paid staff member submits a written program evaluation report to a funder, will the volunteers who helped collect the evaluation data be credited in the report?

Negotiating Needs

Involving volunteers in program evaluation can increase ownership of the process and the programs similar to other participatory action processes (Piercy &

Thomas, 1998). However, it can be difficult to balance the needs of paid staff and volunteer staff when needs differ. It is important to make everyone's needs known and negotiate how best to meet as many of these needs as possible. Some compromise may be necessary to stay within the organization's mission or to reach a consensus if groups or teams are conducting the program evaluation. For example, a volunteer may be very excited about collecting program evaluation data on an environmental education program near his/her home but instead the paid staff would prefer to collect the data across a larger geographic area. It may be best to have this particular volunteer pilot the data collection process at his/her favored location and to find other volunteers to conduct evaluations later in other locations.

Maintaining Evaluation Rigor

Some people believe that program evaluation data collected by volunteers compromises validity and reliability. If this is a concern, paid and volunteer staff need to understand these two critical concepts and how their program evaluation practices and methods can affect them. For example, volunteers (and paid staff for that matter) need to be trained on how to conduct interviews without injecting personal opinions or bias into the process.

The Need for Flexibility

Paid staff need to be flexible in their program evaluation and impact reporting work with volunteers. Unintended and important outcomes can arise by helping volunteers address their interests rather than only the interests of the paid staff. Everyone in the program evaluation partnership needs to be open to changing plans and processes as the context around them changes. For example, recent focus groups conducted with farmers examined how they prefer to

learn. If the focus group facilitator had stuck just to those questions and not allowed the farmers to add their own perspectives, she would have missed important information on what motivates farmers to learn in the first place.

Conclusions

Now that the effort to engage volunteers in program evaluation and impact reporting has been piloted in Virginia Cooperative Extension and lessons have been learned and examined, the program needs to expand to more sites and with more programs. This will help paid staff understand how best to implement the program with a wider group of volunteers. Members of the organization who train paid staff also need to integrate this effort more fully into volunteer and paid staff orientation and training. Most importantly, issues arising from engaging volunteers in program evaluation, impact, and accountability (e.g. ownership of the process and products, validity and reliability, etc.) need to be discussed more fully by the organization to set parameters and guidelines for future success across the system.

On a different level, success stories of volunteers engaged in program evaluation and impact reporting need to be collected and shared widely. This will hopefully promote the development of regional, state, and national networks of paid and volunteer staff willing to help this movement, and themselves grow personally.

As pressure increases for volunteer resource managers to document impact and accountability for the use of funds and delivery of services, volunteers should be more fully engaged in helping with this process. Even though this program was piloted with volunteer and paid staff with Virginia Cooperative Extension, there are implications for most volunteer-based organizations. All organizations are feeling

understaffed and stretched. Engaging volunteers in program evaluation and reporting has the potential to help extend the capacity of paid staff. The process of engaging volunteers in this work can also enhance volunteer recruitment and retention. New volunteers may be attracted to an organization because new skills such as data collection and analysis are needed. Volunteers who engage in program evaluation and impact reporting may feel a heightened sense of ownership and success and may deepen their commitment to the organization. Finally, involving volunteers in program evaluation work may be a way to help volunteer and paid staff get a fresh and affirming look at their work and prevent burn out.

A common phrase heard in program evaluation and impact reporting circles is that if you measure what you value, then others will value what you measure. This is also true for engaging volunteers in program evaluation. If volunteers measure what they value, they will get others to value what they measure and they themselves may become more committed to the organizations they serve. These are all important keys for enhancing organizational accountability and sustainability in these tough economic times.

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