

Exemplary Volunteers: What Is the Role of Faith?

Laura Littlepage
Center for Urban Policy and the Environment
School of Public and Environmental Affairs
Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis
342 N. Senate Ave.
Indianapolis IN 46204-1708
Phone: (317) 261-3061
llittlep@iupui.edu

James L. Perry, Ph.D.
School of Public and Environmental Affairs
Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis
801 W. Michigan Street, BS 4078
Indianapolis, Indiana 46202
Phone: (317) 274-1078
perry@iupui.edu

Jeffrey L. Brudney, Ph.D.
Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs
Cleveland State University
2121 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44115
(216) 687-2135 (voice)
(216) 687-9239 (fax)

Philip K. Goff, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Religious Studies
425 University Blvd., CA 341B
Indianapolis, Indiana 46202
Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis
(317) 274-1465
pgoff@iupui.edu

Abstract

This study investigates the motivations and voluntary activities of exemplary volunteers. The researchers surveyed winners of the Daily Point of Light Awards and the President's Community Volunteer Awards and conducted in-depth telephone interviews with a sample of the mail survey respondents. Researchers then compared the survey data with information about typical volunteers. The findings indicated that although award-winners are more likely to be religious than the general population, most religious award-winning volunteers contribute their efforts to religious and nonreligious organizations. Also, many award-winning volunteers not religiously active have a spiritual motivation. Some began volunteer work after experiencing "life-

changing” events. Award winners generally respond favorably to public recognition in the local media, or at their school, worksite, or place of volunteering.

Key Words:

volunteer, motivation, religion, faith

Introduction

Although many studies have demonstrated a relationship between religiosity and volunteering (Greeley, 1997; Hodgkinson, Weitzman, & Kirsch, 1990; Lam, 2002), this research has generally examined either the general population or members of faith communities only, rather than focusing on those who volunteer. In addition, some studies have found only a weak relationship (Wuthnow, 1999) or no relationship (Hunter & Linn, 1980). Are the connections between religion or faith and volunteering found mainly in the context of the congregation and religious organization? Or do these connections extend to relationships outside congregations and religious organizations?

Wuthnow (1999, p. 352) maintains that much of the higher rate of volunteering in the context of religious organizations is for church-supported activities, and that religious influences and attendance are most pronounced within church-related volunteering. His analysis of the Independent Sector’s 1994 Giving and Volunteering Survey found that much of the volunteering, especially among evangelical Christians, was concentrated within congregations and devoted to the maintenance of these congregations.

In contrast, Hodgkinson (1990) argues that churches inspire a desire to help others that moves people beyond the church setting. She maintains that religious institutions foster philanthropy and voluntarism, both within their own communi-

ties and generally for other causes, including community and public service [p.291]. ... Religious association is capable of inspiring social reform and experimenting with meeting human needs. The experiments of religious organizations in housing, community development and international relief and development are but a few of the more profound recent examples available in social reform. (p. 297)

In Hodgkinson’s model, the researchers would expect that there would be a relationship between faith and formal and informal volunteering; that religious volunteers would volunteer for church-related and non-church-related activities; and that award-winning volunteers would be more likely to be religious than the general population. Based on both survey and in-depth interview data, the research examined these issues to determine how faith relates to motivations to volunteer in exemplary volunteers. The study also examined how these volunteers prefer to be recognized for their efforts.

Methodology

The research by the Center for Urban Policy and the Environment (Center) was conducted in partnership with the Points of Light Foundation (Foundation). The Foundation provided contact information for winners of the Daily Point of Light Awards (DPOL) and the President’s Community Volunteer Awards (PCV), awarded on

behalf of the President of the United States. The Foundation has issued more than 1,100 Daily Point of Light Awards since 1998, and more than 150 President's Community Volunteer Awards since 1992, to individuals, groups, and organizations across the country. The researchers defined exemplary volunteers as winners of either of these two awards. Each award had a contact person associated with it. In the case of groups and organizations, the contact person either started the organization or was integral to the success of the effort. The researchers asked the contact person to complete the survey based on their experiences.

Survey Sample Population

The researchers developed a survey instrument using multiple sources for the measures for religiosity, voluntarism, and motivations to volunteer. In January and February 2004, the researchers mailed the questionnaire to all award winners, and received a response return rate of 38 percent (525 surveys returned).

To ensure that respondents were representative of all award winners, the researchers examined two indicators: percent of respondents by state compared to all winners, and percent of respondents by year of award compared to all winners. The respondents were widely distributed and did not over-represent any state. As might have been anticipated, a higher percentage of winners from recent years responded, although not dramatically higher.

Measures of Religiosity

The definition of religiosity can vary. Three different types of self-reported religiosity were measured: (1) religious involvement; (2) religious activity; and (3) professed closeness to God or spirituality.

Religious involvement is measured by membership in a place of worship, education

in a religious school (one point for each level—elementary, middle or high school, college, or after-school or weekend classes), and having family and friends of religious affiliation or faith background.

Religious activity is measured by how often the person attends religious services, prays or reads religious texts, practices religious rituals at home, takes part in any activities of a place of worship (other than attending services), and takes part in any of the activities or groups of a religion or faith service organization (such as Knights of Columbus or Hadassah).

Many people, even those not involved in organized religion, profess to be spiritual persons. In a recent Gallup Poll (Gallup & Lindsay, 2004), 39 percent of Americans identified themselves as spiritual, not religious; 54 percent as religious; and 6 percent as both. Spirituality in this study is measured by how close the person feels to God (Hill & Pargament, 2003) when they are: performing acts of kindness, watching a beautiful sunset, performing religious traditions at home, meditating alone, or participating in a religious community through communal worship, celebration, memorial, or ritual. Spirituality can exhibit itself, then, among both religious and nonreligious individuals.

Measures of Volunteering

Both formal volunteering (for an organization) and informal volunteering (for example, helping run errands or doing yard work for people not living with you) are important to measure (Wilson & Musick, 1997). In addition, the researchers measured total hours dedicated to either informal or formal volunteering, as well as the number of different volunteer activities (either by type of organization for formal volunteering

or by type of activity for informal volunteering).

Measures of Motivation

The researchers measured six motivations that can be satisfied by volunteering (social, values, career, understanding, protective, and esteem) for each respondent (Clary, Snyder, & Ridge, 1992). The researchers also measured three indicators of public service motivation developed by Perry (1997), including commitment to public interest/civic duty, compassion, and self-sacrifice. Clary's volunteer motivation scale and Perry's public service motivation scale have been tested and attain high reliability and validity. In addition, two survey items measured *religious and spiritual motivation*: volunteering is a practice encouraged by my religious beliefs, and it is my obligation to help others in need. These items were added as a way to measure one conception of why people help each other; that is, it is a mandate of their faith to do what they can to make the world a better place for all people.

Interview Methodology

To provide a more in-depth understanding of the role of faith and religion in volunteering, the researchers purposefully selected a small, heterogeneous sample ($n = 26$) of responding award recipients for telephone interviews. The interviewed subsample encompassed substantial variations of demographic characteristics. The questions probed their goals, values, how they developed their volunteer commitment, and the role faith played in their volunteer commitments. Collected in 2004, this qualitative information supplements the data obtained from the mail surveys. The interviews were modeled on research conducted on moral commitment (Colby & Damon, 1992). In this research, almost 80

percent of these "moral exemplars" attributed their core value commitments to their religious faith, even though the nominating criteria for the awards did not include any specifically religious factor.

Respondents were categorized into four groups by cross-classifying them along two dimensions, religious activity and religious worldview. The responses were first separated into two categories—those with a high level of religious activity (as measured by several questions), and those with a low level of religious activity. The researchers then subdivided each group into two more groups: those who had an individual worldview and those who had a communal worldview. A wide representation of ages and religions were within these four groups.

Description of Award Winners

Demographics

To see how exemplary volunteers compare with volunteers in general, the researchers compared the sample to the 2003 Current Population Survey (CPS) Supplement on Volunteering. Because the research data were collected in early 2004 and retrospective in nature, the 2003 CPS Survey was used for comparison.

As Table 1 illustrates, in many ways (gender, income, and race) the surveyed award winners are similar to other volunteers. There are some differences—award winners appear to be more highly educated, more likely to be retired, and older (over age 60). The age and employment status differences seem reasonable given that award recipients are generally expected to have more experience with the activity, likely to have more free time to volunteer, and have fewer family commitments. Thus, the researchers would expect them to be older and at a different stage in life compared to the typical volunteer.

Table 1
***A Comparison of Demographic Characteristics of Responding Award
Winners and All Volunteers***

	Survey Respondents (2004)	CPS Volunteers (2003)
Gender		
Male	42.4%	41.3%
Female	57.6%	58.7%
Education		
Some high school	2.2%	9.4%
High school degree or GED	7.3%	23.4%
Some college	19.1%	19.3%
Less than a bachelor's degree	12.6%	9.8%
4-year degree or higher	57.8%	38.2%
Other	1.0%	1.0%
Employment Status		
Employed	56.3%	67.1%
Not employed	5.7%	3.3%
Retired	28.7%	14.2%
Full-time student or Other	9.3%	15.5%
Household Income		
Less than 20,000	11.7%	10.7%
20,000-39,999	18.8%	21.2%
40,000-59,999	19.9%	20.7%
60,000 or more	49.7%	47.5%
Age		
0-14	1.2%	NA
15-24	10.9%	13.8%
25-39	6.9%	25.3%
40-59	40.0%	41.2%
60+	41.0%	19.6%
Hispanic		
Yes	4.1%	5.2%
No	95.7%	94.8%
Don't know	0.2%	
Race		
White	85.2%	89.6%
Asian	1.9%	2.0%
Black	8.6%	6.0%
American Indian	2.1%	0.6%
Other	1.8%	1.7%
Don't know	0.4%	
Average Volunteer Hours	251.3	137.2

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (CPS) Data. 2003 and 2004 Survey of Award Winners

Another unsurprising difference between the two groups is the amount of time devoted to volunteering. Award winners

Religion

To examine whether or not the religious denominations of award winners were significantly different than denominational affiliations nationally, Table 2 shows a comparison. Although the study sample had slightly higher percentages of Jewish respondents and slightly fewer Atheist/Agnostic people than the national average, in general the distribution of respondents by religion appears similar to the national distribution.

How Religious Are Award Winners?

More than half (55.7 percent) of the award winners say they attend religious services at least two or three times a month. Nationally, several surveys estimate that regular church attendees make up

report on average 251 hours per year, almost twice as much as the reported average for all volunteers (137 hours per year). approximately 40 percent of the general population (volunteers and nonvolunteers). A recent Gallup survey (Gallup & Lindsay, 2004) puts this figure at 41 percent. Similarly, the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS) (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2002) estimates church attendance at around 40 percent. The GSS also found that 18.6 percent of their respondents never attend religious services, compared to only about half that number, 10.2 percent, in the study sample. As attending religious services is a measure of religiosity for the purposes of this study, these differences indicate that the award winners are more religious than the general public. This factor might lead this group to be more likely to volunteer only for religious organizations, consistent with Wuthnow's (1999) arguments.

Table 2
A Comparison of Religious Self-Identification of Survey Respondents to National Averages

Denomination	Survey Respondents	National *
Christian, Non-Catholic	55.0 %	56.0%
Catholic	23.0%	24.4%
Jewish	6.0%	1.7%
Hindu	0.4%	0.2%
Muslim	0.4%	0.5%
Atheist/Agnostic	2.0%	4.8%
Other	13.0%	12.4%

* Source: *Exploring Religious America*, 2002 and 2004 Survey of Award Winners

Do Religious Volunteers Help Outside Their Church?

While 25 % of the general public who volunteer (according to the 2004 CPS survey) say that their only volunteer activity is for a religious organization, among the award-winning volunteers—even among those classified as very religious—only 8.6 % volunteer solely for religious organizations. Most (70%) volunteer for both religious and nonreligious organizations, and one in five volunteer for nonreligious organizations only. These findings support Hodgkinson’s (1990) arguments.

The respondents have varying levels of religiosity, depending on whether religiosity is measured by involvement (e.g., church membership, religious schooling), participation in religious activities (e.g., attending services, praying, taking part in rituals at home), or perceived closeness to God.

Is There a Relationship Between Religiosity and Volunteering?

These results show that award-winning volunteers donate their time to both religious and nonreligious organizations. The following sections examine whether religiosity is related to level of volunteering (hours spent and number of volunteer activities).

Formal Volunteering

As Table 3 illustrates, the number of formal (organizational) volunteering

activities seems to bear a stronger relationship to religiosity than do total hours volunteered. This finding may occur, in part, because the exemplary volunteers contribute many volunteer hours (almost twice the national average), but the number of different types of volunteering they do varies demonstrably. All three measures of religiosity are significantly correlated with formal volunteering activities. Religious activity is highly correlated with formal volunteering hours, and it explains 22.9 percent of the variance in formal volunteering hours.

Informal Volunteering

Informal volunteering (helping out) activities are significantly correlated with three measures of religiosity, and the number of informal volunteering hours is significantly correlated with reported closeness to God and religious activities. Religious activity explains 19.8 percent of the variance in informal volunteer hours, which seems to suggest that religious activity encourages people to give more hours toward helping people outside of an organization. These findings indicate that, at least for these award-winning volunteers, the relationship between religiosity and both formal and informal volunteering is more one of “loving thy neighbor” (all of your neighbors) than serving one’s church.

Table 3
Correlations of Measures of Religiosity to Measures of Volunteering

	Formal Volunteering Hours	Formal Volunteering Activities	Informal Volunteering Hours	Informal Volunteering Activities
Religious Involvement	.069	.108*	.057	.113*
Religious Activity	.229**	.176**	.198**	.157**
Perceived Closeness to God	.095	.184**	.104*	.134**

*significant at .05 level

**significant at .01 level

How Do Award Winners Describe Their Motivation?

As described in the methodology section, to provide a more in-depth understanding of the role of faith and religion in volunteering, the researchers purposefully selected a small, heterogeneous sample ($n = 26$) of responding award recipients for telephone interviews. Among interviewees, there was a wide representation of ages and religions. The average age of interviewees was 54, with the range from 14 to 78 years of age. The interviewees included 16 men and 10 women. The group interviewed did not differ substantially from the group of all award winners by their motivations, the number of volunteer activities, or the number of hours volunteered.

Award Winners Follow Different Paths

Though half of the interviewees selected indicated they were not active religiously, almost all (85 percent) of the respondents said that they had either a religious or a spiritual reason for their volunteering activities. Comments from people with very low levels of religious activity included:

- “Teaching of Jesus is part of what I am and what I am meant to be.”
- “The Bible is a guideline for how we should lead our lives.”
- “I am spiritual but not religious.”
- “I rely on God all the time.”

These findings confirm the observation that most of the exemplary volunteers feel a “closeness to God,” and the responses may provide a better measure of religiosity and how it relates to volunteer activity. Another commonly mentioned motivation was “wanting to give back.”

Another notable finding from the interviews is that involvement in volunteering does not necessarily follow a linear progression. That is, senior volunteers did not necessarily begin volunteering as youths,

then as young adults, and continuing through the present. Several of the interviewees had not volunteered either as children or young adults. Some had their first volunteer experience as late as their sixties. Others volunteered as children, but then did not volunteer again until years later. Some respondents did not consider the work they did for their church, either as children or adults, as voluntary or volunteering. Rather, either the volunteer activity was something they did for their faith, or it was something they were required to do by their parents or social norms.

A novel finding from the interviews was a motivation not widely discussed in the volunteer motivation literature: life-changing events. These are precipitating, dramatic events that lead people to volunteer with extraordinary intensity—the type of dedicated activity that produces award recognition. Approximately one-fourth of those interviewed cited such events as part of their motivation. These respondents included a mother who became active in victims’ rights and counseling after her three children were brutally murdered; a woman who became active in prenatal and well-baby care after she was diagnosed with cervical cancer and learned she could not have children; a woman who became active in hospice care after her father died a long, slow, painful death; a father who began helping at-risk youth after losing his son in an automobile accident; and a man who began helping the homeless because of his mentally ill son.

How Do Award Winners Prefer to be Recognized?

Though usually not a major motivating factor, recognition can be an important aspect in a volunteer's satisfaction with their efforts. Retention of existing volunteers is critical for most organizations, and both

effective feedback and recognition are part of this process.

How do volunteers prefer to be recognized? The Points of Light Foundation and the Volunteer Center National Network are administering the new President's Volunteer Service Award, which is a recognition program for Americans of all ages who contribute a significant amount of time to volunteer service, and they asked the Center to include a question on the survey instrument mailed to respondents to help determine appropriate recognition for this new award. The possible responses to the preferred types of recognition question on the survey were:

- would be thrilled to get this as recognition,
- an acceptable form of recognition,
- would not consider this an acceptable form of recognition, and
- no opinion.

As Table 4 shows, most respondents would be thrilled to receive public recognition in the local media. The next most popular recognition method is written acknowledgement at school or place of employment, followed by written acknowledgement at the place of volunteering. These preferred recognitions have the added benefits of publicizing and promoting volunteer activity in general, and the activity of the award-winning volunteer in particular. In contrast, the findings in Table 4 reveal that the overall sample of award-winning volunteers valued the more "material" motivations, such as receiving a patch or pin, trophy, and apparel, the least. Because the mail survey sample consists of award-winning volunteers with atypically high levels of donating time (see Table 1), one should be cautious in attempting to generalize these results concerning recognition to the general population of volunteers.

Table 4
Percentages of Respondents Who Would "Be Thrilled" to Receive Various Types of Recognition

Type of Recognition	%
Public recognition in local media	59%
Written acknowledgement at school or place of employment	47%
Written acknowledgement at place of volunteering	41%
Certificate	34%
Verbal acknowledgement at place of volunteering	32%
Verbal acknowledgement at school or place of employment	30%
Patch or pin	27%
Trophy	27%
Apparel	22%
No recognition	7%

When the various types of recognition are cross-tabulated by age groups, most outcomes are similar to the overall group, but there are a few exceptions. At least 53 percent of respondents from all age groups wanted some form of recognition. However, the younger the group of volunteers, the more likely they are to be thrilled to receive some form of recognition, compared to their older cohorts. For the overall group of all ages, over half of the volunteers would find receiving a certificate, trophy, apparel, or a written acknowledgement at school or place of employment acceptable or thrilling, but the younger the age group, the higher the percentage who find it acceptable or thrilling.

Conclusion and Practical Implications

Few studies have examined volunteers who have received major awards for their efforts (Brudney, 2000; Brudney & Willis, 1995). Although caution must be used in generalizing from a distinctive sample of award-winners, the analysis holds important implications for volunteer recruitment.

One implication of the findings centers on the importance of recognition to volunteers. Even among award-winning volunteers, for whom one might well conclude that intrinsic motivations are most salient to yield such high levels of voluntary activity, at least half (53 percent) of all age groups said they wanted some form of recognition. Recognition is likely to be even more significant for the typical volunteer, whose motivations for giving time are much more variable. Our findings show, too, that inexpensive forms of recognition, such as written acknowledgements and press releases, are highly desirable. The results indicate that the younger the age group of volunteers, the more likely they were to appreciate some form of recognition. Younger volunteers can be expected not

only to want recognition as a matter of course but also additional forms of recognition, such as awards and acknowledgements that might lead to advances in school, work, and other aspects of life.

Second, the study reveals the spiritual or religious roots of volunteering for many people, even when they do not exhibit high levels of religious activity, according to the study's measures. Thus, volunteer programs that seek additional volunteers might appeal to the motivation to express spirituality or faith through service. The volunteer program need not be explicitly religious to attract these volunteers, but simply allow for such expression. For example, including quotations from volunteers with spiritual or religious motivations in recruitment and promotional materials could signal to potential recruits the opportunity to realize or live their faith through volunteering.

A critical issue facing the field of volunteer administration and management is how to recruit volunteers for more than episodic or one-time events. The concept that most exemplary volunteers are motivated by their spirituality and/or religiosity implies that religious congregations may be a good place to recruit volunteers for ongoing activities. Certainly, these volunteers have very high levels of volunteer involvement.

Third, although award-winning volunteers may be more religious than the general population, the findings of this study demonstrate they do not confine their volunteering exclusively to religious organizations. Indeed, most award winners volunteer for both religious and nonreligious organizations, and also volunteer informally. Thus, simply because a person finds spiritual or religious fulfillment through volunteering does not mean that she or he is available for service only to religious organizations. Because of the breadth of the service interests of these volunteers and the depth of

their commitment (as manifested by such indicators as hours donated), organizations (both religious and nonreligious) should not hesitate to attract and recruit these volunteers.

Finally, the in-depth interviews with some award-winners revealed that life-changing events led them to volunteer at extraordinary levels sufficient to earn prestigious honors. These events inspired manifest changes in lifestyle toward service. The researchers draw two lessons from these accounts. First, the traditional stereotype of increasing volunteer involvement from youth through adulthood does not hold for all people. Instead, the message is more optimistic—people can become interested and motivated to volunteer with strong conviction and intensity at any age. In fact, many of these award-winning volunteers (as well as other volunteers) are seniors. Organizations seeking volunteers should not make unwarranted assumptions about the volunteer behavior they might expect based on the ages of potential volunteers or their possible lack of prior volunteering experience. These findings show that people may grow into volunteering at any stage of the life cycle.

The second lesson is that the life-changing events that inspired the turn to volunteering could not have been predicted, even by the award winners. Thus, organizations that enlist volunteers should be aware that just as with a variety of other influences, the experiences they offer to volunteers might turn an ordinary volunteer into an exemplar. There is no higher calling for volunteer administration.

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About the Authors

Laura Littlepage is a senior policy analyst at the Center for Urban Policy and the Environment and clinical lecturer in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis. Her research interests include volunteering and evaluation. She was co-investigator of a four-year evaluation of Join Hands Day, a national day of service, and was co-investigator of several national evaluations for the Points of Light Foundation.

James L. Perry, Ph.D., is Chancellor's Professor, School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA) at Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). His research focuses on motivation, community and national service, and government reform. His most recent books are *Civic Service: What Difference Does It Make?* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004) and *Quick Hits for Educating Citizens* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

Jeffrey L. Brudney, Ph.D., is the Albert A. Levin Chair of Urban Studies and Public Service at Cleveland State University's Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs. He has written extensively on volunteerism, service delivery, research methodology and public management. Brudney has received national and international awards for his research, and serves on the editorial board of journals in public administration and the voluntary, nonprofit sector.

Philip K. Goff, Ph.D., is director of the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture and associate professor of Religious Studies and American Studies. He has just published a co-edited volume titled "The Columbia Documentary History of Religion in America Since 1945" (Columbia University Press, 2005). His specialization is American religious history, with research interests in both the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.

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