

The CVA Credential: A Mark of Excellence

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Abstract

The Certified in Volunteer Administration (CVA) credential offers an important professional development tool for practitioners with at least three years of experience mobilizing and managing volunteers. This performance-based certification program consists of an exam and a written portfolio, and provides a way for individuals and organizations to demonstrate their commitment to excellence.

Keywords:

volunteer management, certification, credentialing

To put CVA after my name ensures to all that I will bring legitimacy, integrity and a high standard of performance to the area of volunteer management.”

Nancy Scott, CVA, Nova Scotia, Canada

Introduction

Certification is one of the hallmarks of a profession, and a very effective way for practitioners to demonstrate their commitment to excellence. The field of volunteer resources management is no exception, as represented by the Certified in Volunteer Administration (CVA) credential which is offered by the international Council for Certification in Volunteer Administration.

While the Council for Certification in Volunteer Administration is a new organization, the CVA certification program is not new. It was developed over 35 years ago by another international organization, the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA) and underwent a major revision in 2000. In early 2006, when it became clear that AVA was being forced to dissolve, efforts immediately began to preserve the CVA program. Ownership was

transferred to the newly created CCVA in June 2006. The Council is now uniquely positioned to greatly expand the impact of the CVA credential through a federated approach involving national and international organizations which support the field of volunteerism and volunteer management.

The CVA is a voluntary designation, grounded in core competencies and standards developed by colleagues and peers. Unlike other certificate programs available from colleges or universities, the CVA credential is not based on a set of required classes or courses. Rather, it is designed to measure an individual's "knowledge-in-use"—the application of knowledge and skills by those with real-life experience in this role. This includes the assessment of a candidate's ability to structure tasks, produce ideas, and solve

problems as measured through an exam and a peer review process.

Over 750 individuals, primarily in the U.S. and Canada, have earned their CVA since the program began, with an average of 100 new candidates registering each year. It is open to salaried and non-salaried individuals from all types of organizations and settings who have at least 3 years of experience in volunteer resources management. The CVA designation is steadily becoming more widely known, and is now beginning to appear in job advertisements for positions in nonprofits and government agencies.

Core Competencies

Individuals pursuing the CVA credential are expected to demonstrate successfully their knowledge and ability to apply skills required for competent volunteer management, based on their actual performance in the role. Periodic surveys (every 4-5 years) are conducted in order to identify critical skills and knowledge relevant to effective volunteer involvement. A task force of practitioners and academic representatives develops the survey, and oversees its distribution to those in the field. This process captures the most current practices in the field and provides a credible basis for professional training, education and certification. The current set of core competencies focus on these areas:

Professional Principles—ethical practice, pluralism, professional development, and advocacy

Leadership—types and models, decision making

Organizational Management—models, tools such as communication and team building, financial and program accountability

Planning—strategic and operational, risk management

Human Resources Management—volunteer program management, supervision,

staff/volunteer relationships, information collection, and reporting

Value of the CVA Credential

A highly visible, credible credential sends powerful messages to employers, supervisors, academics and practitioners. It reinforces the need for best practices, ethical standards, and competent management of volunteers as a human resource for accomplishing an organization's mission. It also improves an organization's reputation and community image, thus attracting support from volunteers and donors. Finally, a credential that is promoted and supported across the entire service field becomes the generally accepted foundation for all related training and education.

For the individual manager of volunteers, earning the CVA can bring many personal and professional benefits. Jan Rosser of Norfolk, Virginia, described her experience:

“I am very proud to have become Certified in Volunteer Administration. The process was both challenging and fulfilling. I am fortunate that my supervisor not only encouraged me to apply to the program, but also rewarded me with a compensation increase at the time of completion. In addition, she encouraged me to submit a report to our Board of Directors outlining job titles, descriptions and salaries of those with the CVA distinction. Receiving the CVA is by far one of the most important accomplishments for me in terms of my professional development.”

Candidates who complete this certification also find that the process provides a unique opportunity to:

- clarify and articulate personal values and professional ethics
- assess individual expertise against standards of performance
- gain self-esteem through peer recognition

- increase confidence in problem-solving skills
- educate others about volunteer resources management
- increases personal and professional credibility
- demonstrates the transferability of knowledge, skills, and abilities
- enhance employability
- gain greater respect from coworkers

The CVA credential is also viewed as valuable for those serving in resource roles, such as Volunteer Centers and state commissions on service and volunteering. Teresa Gardner-Williams of the Prince George's County Volunteer Center comments, "Volunteer Centers have not only the tasks of recruiting and referring volunteers but the responsibility to enhance and strengthen the local volunteer resources management community. My CVA gives me the opportunity to both model professional achievement for colleagues and to educate the general public about the profession and the core competencies we practice."

The Credentialing Process

A two-part measurement methodology has been designed to demonstrate a candidate's knowledge and application of

the core competencies. The multiple choice Exam is made up of 80 questions documented to the CVA primary references. It is a two-hour proctored test, given once a year in May at local sites selected by candidates. Multiple choice questions include knowledge, application and case study formats directly linked to several books and articles which address the core competency areas. Many candidates form local study groups to prepare for the exam, and find that the readings help to affirm and polish their on-the-job practices.

The Portfolio is written according to a specific format to reflect the candidate's real-life experience in volunteer administration. It has two sections: a 500-word personal philosophy statement, and a 1500-word management narrative analyzing a program or project in which the candidate was or is involved as a volunteer administrator. Both pieces are written based on the candidate's experience within the field (i.e. observations, actions, insights, lessons learned) rather than on presenting information from textbooks or classes.

The CVA program runs on an annual cycle, with registration open from October 1 to March 1. Interested candidates may visit the CCVA web site at www.cvacert.org for more information about the process and how to get started.

About the Author

Katherine H. Campbell, CVA, serves as Executive Director of the Council for Certification in Volunteer Administration. She has been active in the field of volunteer management for over 30 years as practitioner, author, trainer, consultant and leader. For several years she worked at the Virginia State Office of Volunteerism, and served as executive director of the international Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA) from 1997 to 2003. Katie has authored and co-authored several articles and publications on the subject of volunteerism and teaches as adjunct faculty at Virginia Commonwealth University and University of Virginia. She earned her CVA credential in 1996.