Increasing Parent Volunteer Participation in 4-H

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Abstract

Volunteering for educational and youth organizations is a high priority with the American public. It is the second largest segment of the over 61 million adults who volunteered in the United States in 2006, double the number in 1989. Researchers have found that adults volunteer because they have a child enrolled in the program. With this premise in mind, this study explored reasons why parents were not actively volunteering with a youth program. A qualitative study was conducted by interviewing parents with a child in a youth program but who were not enrolled as volunteers. Findings indicate that parents look for a program which offers a safe, fun, learning environment, and one which is organized and welcoming to family involvement. Once these elements are evident in a program, parents are more apt to volunteer their time in support of their child's involvement. Implications of these findings for parent involvement are provided.

Keywords:

volunteer, 4-H, youth development, recruitment, retention, incentive, enticement, family volunteering

Introduction

Parent volunteers are an integral component of youth development organizations (McCurley & Lynch, 1996). The demographic of a typical volunteer in America is a married, college educated, white female between the ages of 35 and 54 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). This demographic has changed little over the years. Dunn (1989) reported similar findings in his study of over 500 volunteers with youth organizations such as Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4-H, and Jr. Achievement. Although volunteering for educational and youth service is a high priority with the American public, a common challenge in youth development programs is lack of adult leadership to mentor and work with youth

who would like the opportunity to be involved.

The most common reason adults volunteer with the 4-H youth development program is that they have a child enrolled in the program (Copernicus, Inc., 2001; Culp, 1995). With this premise in mind, the present study explored why more parents or guardians were not actively volunteering with the program. Participants were asked to share information about what entices them to volunteer and what makes them feel prepared to volunteer. Two main questions were posed regarding implications for practice: 1) how can youth development professionals effectively involve parents of youth members; and 2) how can a greater number of volunteers be retained beyond the first one or two years of their involvement.

Volunteering for educational and youth organizations is a high priority with the American public. It is the second largest segment of the over 61 million adults who volunteered in the United States in 2006, double the number in 1989 (Independent Sector, 2007). Volunteers want to align themselves with an organization they value and that is valued in the community. Those who commit their time and talents must be satisfied with the organization and their role within it (Dorsch, Riemer, Sluth, Paskevich, & Chelladurai, 2002). Essential elements identified in successful volunteer-led programs include: clear policies and procedures, orientations and trainings, a safe and supportive environment, and involving volunteers in setting goals and measures of outcomes so they can see how they have helped the organization succeed (Graff, 2005; Dorsch, et al.).

Volunteers also expect an organization to be structured, organized, and that there is open communication among its members and staff (Braker, Leno, Pratt, & Grobe, 2000; Grossman & Furano, 2002; Volunteer Centre of Ottawa, 1992). Some volunteers have indicated a need for more support and communication specifically regarding opportunities and events (Braker, Leno, Pratt, & Grobe). Others have indicated the main reasons for discontinuing as a volunteer were feelings of being unappreciated, a lack of help, and not enough time (Culp & Pilat, 1998; McCurley & Lynch, 2006). Grossman and Furano (2002) discussed the importance of paid staff interaction with volunteers in the form of ongoing support and communication. The Volunteer Centre of Ottawa (1992) shared similar findings about the need for more feedback, support, and recognition for volunteer efforts.

White and Arnold (2003) found the top three reasons for individuals to volunteer with a youth program were: making a difference in the lives of youth, helping others, and because their children were involved in the program. Individuals indicated the main reason for not continuing to volunteer was that their children were no longer involved, with time constraints identified as the second most commonly cited reason. Over 60% of respondents in a study of volunteers in environmental education became volunteers because of their children. Although many of them shared a career or love of the outdoors, 70% indicated that an interest in youth was a more important indicator of their volunteer involvement (Smith & Finley, 2004).

Methods

The present study employed a qualitative methodology in conducting semi-structured interviews with 31 individuals who had children enrolled in the 4-H program but who were not currently enrolled as volunteers. Data collection was conducted by three members of the organization's state volunteer council in an active research approach to a topic affecting their program. Also enlisted was the help of a university

undergraduate student who had no prior involvement with the program. Each interview was conducted using the same semi-structured interview schedule, thus insuring all participants were given the opportunity to respond to a core set of questions. Interview questions were formulated and pilot tested with members of the target audience to further refine their effectiveness. Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In conducting qualitative research, Creswell (1998) suggests that a specific sample size cannot be predetermined at the outset of the study, but that saturation will be achieved by review during the analysis phase. He emphasizes the importance of the qualitative approach of phenomenology is to "describe the meaning of a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (1998, p. 122) and suggests interviews with up to 10 individuals. Kvale (1996) suggests 15 ± 10 interviews, with a caveat that the importance lies in the crafting of questions and analysis of interview data rather than on the quantity of interviews.

Participants were purposively selected from a statewide 4-H enrollment database that contained the names of all members in the state. The database was then queried as to a selection of youth enrolled in the program who did not have a parent enrolled as a volunteer. Representative areas of the state were selected based upon the geographic location of members. All but one participant in this phase of the study were Caucasian, as is consistent with the population of the state. Ninety-three percent of participants were female; 3% were age 28 or younger, 23% between the ages of 29-39, 52% were ages 40-51, 10% ages 52-59, and 10% age 60 and over. Forty-nine percent resided in a rural area of less than 50,000; and 48% in suburban and metropolitan

areas. The high percentage of female respondents may be indicative of the mother enrolling the child in the program. Volunteer enrollment in the larger statewide population of the youth organization is 70% female.

Data were analyzed using a method described by Bogdan and Biklen (2003) which allows researchers to look for major themes in answer to the research questions. A team of five researchers, composed of two state specialists, two county-based program educators, and a volunteer, individually analyzed the data by reading transcripts and becoming immersed in the data. Themes were then shared with the group in order to clarify any questions or uncertainties. As Creswell (1998) and Moustakas (1990) caution, the first step in data analysis is for researchers to bracket their own biases or preconceptions. As Van Manen (1990) suggests, it is not possible to completely bracket out or ignore one's own conceptions or biases. What is important is to reflect upon these, consider how they may influence one's thoughts, and to put them aside so as not to allow them to color the truth as one reads it from the perspective of participants.

Findings

Four overarching themes of shared experiences emerged from the data. These themes illustrate elements that respondents said must be in place in order for them to volunteer their time. The four themes, in order of importance, were:

- a safe place in which youth learn while having fun
- relationships with and support from other adults who care about youth
- a youth group which has organization, structure, and communication and
- being able to do things together as a family.

In addition, an unanticipated finding regarding participants' concept of volunteering will also be described.

A Safe Place in Which Youth Learn While Having Fun

This was the most prevalent theme throughout the data. Parents said they wanted their children to be in an organization where children were safe, children were having fun, and they were learning. They indicated that the greatest enticement to learning was that it was something in which their children were interested. As one parent indicated, "If my kids are interested then I am more than happy to volunteer." Another parent stated, "Things where my children are going to learn educational things, and she actually wants to do it. If it is something she doesn't want to do, then it is not worth my time." As this was the most recurring theme expressed by participants, further review brought to light sub-themes within a larger thematic framework found to be significant in participant responses.

Their Own Kids are Involved

Parents indicated that it was important to choose a youth organization that was a good fit for their children and their families. They were then more inclined to volunteer or to help out in supportive roles which brought the family together. As one parent stated, "I like to be involved with my children's learning. I like to see my children grow. I like to know what they are learning and what goes on, so that's why I am involved."

A Chance for Youth to Excel

Parents also talked about finding an organization which allowed their children to excel. As one respondent shared, "I really appreciate another program that allows individuals to feel their worth." A key element for youth to excel had to do with what one respondent termed a healthy *low key* competition that encouraged youth to excel for themselves and to feel good when others excel. These sentiments were summarized by one parent who said:

> [It is important to have] . . . loyalty to friends. She cheers for them and if they do better than she does, then she's okay with that. It's given her a little competitive ability without making it that she has to be best. It's just that she can be good for herself and cheer on those around her.

Relationships with and Support from Other Adults who Care about Youth

Respondents indicated that the building of relationships with other adults who cared about youth was an important aspect in volunteering. One parent stated, "I think one of the biggest positives for me has been getting to know these other parents and them taking my daughter under their wing with their knowledge--and be willing to share that." For others, the building of relationships was more about sharing responsibilities of club leadership. As one participant said, "I learned immediately--ask the parents. What would you like to see? On a one-time basis, what [would] you like to help us out with. It got them interested."

Respondents were clear about the need to know that once they began to volunteer their time, they would have support of others rather than being expected to take on club leadership by themselves. As one respondent shared, "It is nice to be able to work with other folks. I don't have to do all of it and, yet, I can help and it ends up being a cooperative effort."

Organization, Structure, and Communication

Respondents spoke of the importance of clear expectations regarding the volunteer

role. In essence, they told us that the organization should be run in an organized manner so that volunteers knew what to expect of the organization and they were clear as to what was expected of them. One person said they needed, "good training, good communication, good homework packets where I can browse and read, and a list of people to call who have been volunteers previously."

Organization, structure, and communication appear to be key factors in not only keeping families involved with an organization but, most importantly, in deciding whether to have their family involved in the program. As one respondent stated, "I look for structure; things where they have leadership, and that it is planned and they have contingency plans in case something goes wrong." Parents who volunteer are looking for organizations which offer activities they feel are organized and meaningful. One parent said, "I look for things that are well organized, well planned out activities that are time efficient and not wasteful."

Respondents spoke of a need to be informed, in a timely fashion, of upcoming events and activities, and they wanted to know how they can become involved. One person said, "I want to work with an organization that says this is what we are going to do. We have a plan of what we are going to do, and know why we are doing it." The importance of a calendar of events, and the availability of the calendar was important to respondents. As one shared, "Early calendaring is a big deal for me."

Being Able to Do Things as a Family

With time constraints of work, family, church, and other venues, it was important for respondents to be part of an organization that was of interest to their kids and allowed them to do things together as a family. As one person stated, "That's what

is important, that we have family time." Participants told us that volunteering should not be something that takes one away from the family, but should be something that adds to the family. As one parent stated, "It should be something that is family-oriented and something that you don't have to get rid of your kids to go do." Another participant stated, "When you are involved as a family it's a lot more fun, you know more about what's going on and you are better able to help your kids."

The Meaning of Volunteering

An unanticipated finding was how respondents conceptualized and thought about volunteering. Although participants were identified as being a parent of a 4-H member and were not enrolled as a volunteer, many of the respondents did, indeed, volunteer time with the program. They may not have considered it a formal arrangement and submitted the required enrollment forms, but many participants shared stories of how they had provided some type of support for the club in which their child was involved. As one respondent indicated, "I have not been a volunteer but I have supported my friends who have chosen to volunteer by assisting with activities or helping to drive kids places they need to be."

Implications for Practice

Participants stated that once they found certain essential components in an organization, they were more apt to volunteer their time in support of their children's involvement. The following implications are provided based upon the findings of the study. It can be argued that these are important factors which need to be addressed in order to attract volunteers to the program, and to keep them involved.

Safe and Fun Learning Environment

This was a key component in not only selecting an organization for the growth and development of their children, but also the door to volunteering for parents. Respondents indicated that safety was a concern when selecting a program for their children, therefore, programs should include a screening process and appropriate risk management training. It needs to be conveyed in program literature that these procedures are included. It is important to find a balance of hands-on, fun, experiential activities. Respondents said it was important that their children find the program to be fun, one in which they are making friends, being involved, and learning skills in the process. The program must keep the interest of the youth in order for the parents to devote time in supporting their child's involvement.

Youth need to have a sense of ownership of the program. Respondents said they wanted a program in which their children could be with others and develop their independence. The club or group environment makes a difference. Youth need an opportunity to hold an office, to experience leadership and followership, and to learn to make group decisions. Parents need to know that youth have a voice in determining the program.

Relationships and Support

Participants said it was important to know that they would have the support of others in their volunteer role; that the responsibility for youth success was shared by families and club leadership. One respondent said she learned quickly the importance of getting parents involved right away. Training, support, and resources are needed for volunteers to recruit parents to become actively involved; to encourage parents to work alongside their children.

In order for more parents to see themselves in an integral volunteer role, it is important that events such as county and statewide volunteer leader trainings, leader luncheons, committee work, leaders' councils, training workshops and related events be revisited so that the name and focus of the group is welcoming to parent volunteer participation. Parents as well as club leaders need to be involved in these activities as they can foster relationships between those who are in club leadership roles and those in parent volunteer roles. There is a need to adapt language that recognizes the role of parents as volunteers even though they may not be enrolled or see themselves as volunteer leaders.

There is a need to be more cognizant of involving volunteers in visible roles within the program. Volunteers should be encouraged to participate in activities such as recognition events and sharing leadership as integral members of the program. More tasks can be delegated to volunteers with paid staff serving in a supportive role; a certificate signed by a key volunteer may be more meaningful than receiving a certificate signed by an administrator with whom the volunteer may have had little or no personal contact.

Organization, Structure, and Communication

Respondents indicated an expectation that information would be readily available in a timely fashion in order for them to effectively carry out their volunteer role. It is important that volunteers be involved in development of an annual calendar of events, and they need to know not only when and where events will take place, but who among them is involved in providing leadership and support to each event.

Respondents said that time was a precious commodity. They indicated that

they wanted to participate in activities that were fun, educational, and well organized. Training sessions need to be on target with volunteer needs. They want to know the plan of what they are doing and also *why* they are doing it. They want to see a connection between a fun activity and the learning or benefit which is behind it.

When prospective volunteers meet with staff for orientation they need to know what is expected of them and what they can expect from staff. A volunteer handbook and policy manual should be readily available resources so that individuals know where to go if they have a question. A mentoring model is a valuable tool in connecting new volunteers with more experienced volunteers. A Web site has become a must in today's society, providing an instant link to information, training, resources, and online discussion groups. It is imperative that information is current and reflects the involvement of parents as volunteers.

Customer service and how the office responds to phone calls and emails is a critical component of communication. The staff should be well versed in the program or know with whom the person should be speaking for further information. Event registration and information should be readily accessible to staff answering the phones as well as accessible to the public via Web site, newsletter, email, or other forms of communication.

Doing Things as a Family

Respondents indicated that it was important to choose a youth organization that was a good fit for their children and their family. A family-oriented, community club approach which encourages the family to learn together is helpful in addressing this need. Respondents indicated a need to be with youth as they learn in order for them to feel a part of what their children are learning and to determine the best ways to support

their children's involvement. Activities such as family night, family camp, or family community service activities can serve to enhance the connection between youth and parent.

Concept of Volunteering

Many respondents, although identified as having children in the program but not enrolled as volunteers, were actually volunteering their time to support their children. There may be a hesitancy to formalize the role of volunteer through the enrollment process. Formal enrollment as a volunteer may imply to parents that they are now expected to take on a larger role without help from others. No matter the level of involvement by each individual volunteer, it is important for all volunteers to know they can call upon others to share responsibilities. Program administrators may need to shift from assuming that if there is no regular contact with parents of members, they must not be actively volunteering with the program. The present study suggests that many parents not formally enrolled as volunteers are supporting their children's involvement in ways that may not be obvious. Key volunteers should be encouraged to ask parents to *help out* with the club or group in small ways and to enroll these parents as volunteers.

Inherent within the structure of most organizations is recognition of key volunteer efforts through annual recognition events, while overlooking the importance of the lesser seen parents as volunteers and supporters of the their children's involvement. Key volunteers need to be equipped with resources for not only recruiting parents but recognizing parents for their involvement; to communicate that as supportive parents, they are integral volunteers.

Conclusions

While implications of this study may be applied cautiously due to the nature of the qualitative approach to a specific sample, the volunteerism concepts are applicable in other youth serving organizations. Having a child in the program is a strong motivation for parents to volunteer. Parents look for a program which offers a safe, fun, learning environment, and one which is organized and welcoming to family involvement. Once these elements are found, parents are more apt to volunteer their time in support of their child's involvement.

Prospective volunteers need to feel a sense of shared responsibility within the program setting. They need to feel their involvement is appreciated, and to know there is ongoing support and communication between fellow volunteers and staff. At all levels of involvement, it is important for volunteers to know they can call upon others in support of their volunteer roles. It is not feasible that findings from the present study will represent the diversity of parent volunteer roles in all youth organizations. The findings may provide additional basis for future studies to be conducted to see if common themes emerge across different unique populations.

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