

**Assessing The Impacts On Volunteers Who Participate  
in Rural Community Development Efforts**

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**Abstract**

*This pilot study develops and tests criteria to use in assessing impacts on volunteers who participate in rural community development efforts. Study participants were volunteers who worked together over a four-year period to establish and sustain a farmers market in a remote rural community facing socioeconomic challenges. A major finding is that a strong relationship exists between volunteers' knowledge gains and the volunteer resource manager's role, in addition to volunteers' program experience and their value of the experience. Results from this pilot study may help in developing effective volunteer leadership education programs and in establishing guidelines to replicate future impact assessments.*

**Key Words:**

volunteers, community development, training, rural

**Introduction**

Rural communities in geographically isolated areas provide unique opportunities for volunteer-based community development programs. Volunteers typically lead these efforts and provide the majority of labor required (Claude, Bridger, & Luloff, 2000). Yet, volunteers with strong leadership skills are often lacking. In this program context, volunteers become an integral part of Land Grant University Cooperative Extension programs, intended to improve the quality of life in rural

communities. Therefore, the need for knowledgeable volunteers is critical (Brennan, 2007). The impact volunteers can have on their community prioritizes developing those leadership skills that can make volunteer time more productive. The goal of this study was to measure the impacts on volunteers who participated in a community development effort to establish and sustain a rural farmers market over a four-year period. A better understanding of these impacts could lead to improved

volunteer training and more effective and satisfying volunteer experiences.

### **Literature Review**

Previous research indicates that volunteers benefit significantly from their experiences. Such benefits include stronger social networks, healthier lifestyles, improved interpersonal relationships as well as increased self-confidence, increased self-esteem, and better working relationships (Schmiesing, Soder, & Russell, 2005). Other studies have described benefits as learned leadership skills that have included networking, listening, communication, problem-solving and collaboration skills (Emery & Flora, 2006; Singletary, Smith, & Evans, 2005) as well as conflict management, strategic planning and grant writing skills (Tackie, Findlay, Baharanyi, & Pierce, 2004). Furthermore, skills that specifically address community development include learning how to learn, lead, build community and take action as part of a group (Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995). In fact, some studies have suggested that Extension volunteer experiences teach volunteers the interpersonal and group relational skills needed to become effective community leaders (Diem & Nikola, 2005; Ohnoutka, Waybright, Nichols, & Nestor, 2005).

These studies provide criteria useful in evaluating the impact of the volunteer experience on volunteers. This study draws upon these criteria and adds to the research literature in striving to evaluate the long term impacts of volunteerism as it relates to learned leadership skills (Diem & Nikola, 2005; Rebori, 2003; Singletary, Smith, & Hill, 2002).

### **Context of Community Development Program**

This community development example is located in Tonopah, Nevada.

Although 87 percent of Nevada's population is located in the Las Vegas or Reno metropolitan area (Albrecht, 2008), Tonopah is 220 miles from Las Vegas, making this town of 2400 people geographically isolated. In addition to its remote location, Tonopah is a high desert community with an average precipitation of 5.8 inches and an elevation of 6000 feet, making for a short growing season.

University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE) Educators develop, conduct and evaluate outreach education in rural communities. A needs assessment conducted by an UNCE Educator concluded that community development in Nye County, specifically economic development and community leader capacity building, was a critical issue that needed to be addressed (Meier, 2007). Residents expressed keen interest in starting a farmers market in order to increase access to and encourage local production of vegetables and fruit.

### **Overview of Rural Farmers Market Community Development Program**

The residents looked to the Extension Educator, in this case the volunteer resource manager (VRM), to develop and run the farmers market. Instead, the VRM convened interested citizens for the purpose of organizing a volunteer initiative to achieve this goal. Although the volunteers were passionate about having a local farmers market, they lacked the leadership skills and self-confidence to take action.

Through mentoring and other forms of informal education, such as modeling, the VRM taught the group how to form a community action team. The VRM provided one-on-one and small group opportunities to plan and implement development strategies, complete grant applications. Through these interactions, the

VRM taught citizens important volunteer skills, such as how to follow local government protocol, effective committee procedures, conflict resolution and grant writing (Brennan, 2007).

The VRM nurtured volunteers' self confidence and critical thinking skills by encouraging volunteers to take ownership of the farmers market through a process of transformative participatory evaluation. That is, the VRM understood that initially the volunteers relied upon her for leadership. The VRM in turn taught volunteers processes for facilitating group decision making concerning the development, improvement and implementation of a farmers market (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). The VRM's goal was to teach volunteers the leadership skills necessary to instill self-confidence to the point that they no longer relied on the VRM for leadership and the success of the farmers market. Initially, there were six dedicated volunteers who, with guidance from the VRM, wrote the mission statement and objectives of the farmers market, determined what tasks needed to be done and assigned each volunteer a role such as vendor coordinator.

The VRM taught this core group how to recruit, retain and manage additional volunteers. Conflict resolution and communication skills were crucial to the success of the volunteer recruitment campaign, which resulted in a volunteer coordinator and 35 active volunteers. Over time, the VRM's role evolved into liaison between the town and the farmers market committee and committee advisor, thus transforming the volunteers themselves into leaders.

The Tonopah Farmers Market completed its sixth season in 2010 with the same core volunteers running the market, along with assistance from about 30 other volunteers, 34 vendors and approximately 200 adult visitors to each market.

## **Methodology**

### *Population*

Questionnaires were administered to all 35 community development program volunteers when they attended the 2008 and 2009 Extension annual banquets. The survey response rate was 100%.

### *Instrumentation*

A questionnaire was developed to assess the impacts on volunteers who participated in this community development program. The context of this study is the outreach program the VRM developed to address community development in a rural, economically challenged and isolated area through increasing social capacity in the form of volunteers passionate about creating a farmers market. This inspired research questions about how to build social capacity and sustain effective volunteers. The VRM believed that the perspectives of community development volunteers concerning their experiences and the impacts that their volunteer experiences have on their communities, could influence the design of future community development programs that positively impact communities and volunteers. The VRM designed and managed the volunteer based program and also developed and implemented the impact assessment.

To create the research questions, the VRM applied community development and leadership development theories with examples of impact evaluations of leadership capacity building programs designed for community volunteers (Allen et al., 2002; Dillman, 2002; Frechtling, 2008; Patton, 2010). A panel knowledgeable about the Tonopah Farmers Market program, but who were not volunteers reviewed drafts of the questionnaire and a panel of experts reviewed the final questionnaire. The investigators modified

the questionnaire based upon their recommendations. Finally, the questionnaire was tested using three local volunteers who were not affiliated directly with the program in order to identify missing attributes and check for wording clarity.

The questionnaire included demographic questions about the volunteer related to age, gender, residency and volunteerism. The remainder of the questionnaire featured 34 Likert-type scale items to assess: 1) volunteers' leadership knowledge gains; 2) VRM effectiveness; 3) volunteers' program experience; and 4) volunteers' value of their volunteer experience.

Twenty question items assessed leadership skill knowledge gains were adapted from similar volunteer evaluations (Rebori, 2003; Singletary et al., 2002) and focused on learned leadership skills as described by others (Braker, Leno, Pratt, & Grobe, 2000; Luke, 1998; Morse, Brown, & Warning, 2006; Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995). These skills, among others, included communication, social interaction, conflict management, goal setting and personal time management in addition to how to run effective meetings, market and evaluate a program, and acquire program support (Vettern, Hall, & Schmidt, 2009). This section also included two questions about how volunteerism helped strengthen leadership skills that were helpful at home, school or at work (Meier, 2008). Items to measure knowledge gains were intended to measure the extent to which volunteers learned about important leadership skills, including communication, collaboration, goal setting, civic governance and problem-solving.

Four question items measured the effectiveness of the VRM as an impact on the volunteers. These included questions about networking, information

dissemination, quality of meetings, and leadership skill development.

Volunteer program experience question items were intended to measure program impacts in terms of shaping ongoing leadership behaviors through volunteerism. These five items included whether or not they would want their friends or family to volunteer as well as perceived improvements in their self-confidence and leadership abilities.

Finally, the five volunteer value items were designed to measure program impacts in terms of motivating future volunteer behaviors and included actual improvements made, meeting people, working with other community members and learning new skills.

The questionnaire asked volunteers to rate each item. For example, volunteers' knowledge gains were assessed by such questions as: 'I learned to value the viewpoints of others involved in the program.' Response options ranged from 'Learned Very Little' to 'Learned Very Much' on an equally weighted five-point scale, with the Likert-scale rating of 3 representing "neutral".

The completed questionnaires served as the data source for this study. Cronbach's coefficient alpha (CCA) was used to estimate internal consistency of the 34 items. The average alpha score for all 34 items was high ( $r = .948$ ) (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). This indicates that most of the items measured similar attributes and served as reasonable measures of these attributes.

#### *Data Collection*

The volunteers received a printed copy of the two-page questionnaire that included a cover letter explaining the purpose of the questionnaire, the approximate length of time required to complete it and an assurance of anonymity.

This data collection protocol received exemption from the University of Nevada, Reno Human Subjects Committee and did not require signed consent forms. This modified retrospective pre-post evaluation method reduces the potential for invalid responses that may occur when administering a standard pre-test at the beginning of an Extension program when participants have limited knowledge and likely cannot respond accurately to questions being asked (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000).

### **Results**

Almost two-thirds of the group was female. The majority of respondents (38%) were 60 years old or older, and 32.4 percent of the respondents were between 50 and 59 years of age. The majority (88.6%) of volunteers had spent at least two years in Tonopah and 40 percent reported living in the community for more than five years. Full-time or part-time employment was reported by 45.5 percent with retirees comprising approximately 40 percent of the group. While approximately half of the volunteers had volunteered less than two years with this program, 60 percent of all respondents indicated that they plan to continue their volunteer service for the next five years or longer.

Table 1 presents ranked mean scores for each of the 34 assessment questions, subdivided into the categories of volunteer knowledge gains, volunteer experience, VRM effectiveness and value of volunteer experience. A review of these data indicates overall positive impacts. Volunteers achieved knowledge gains important to developing leadership skills and indicated that their volunteer experience positively shaped their view of their future leadership behaviors and likelihood of volunteer activities in similar programs.

### **Discussions and Conclusions**

The study results suggest that volunteer-based community development programs in isolated rural communities produce positive impacts for both the volunteers and their community. In areas where volunteers are relied upon to improve quality of life, volunteers with effective leadership skills are indispensable. Thus, VRMs must possess the capacity to recruit, train, and retain competent volunteers. Data from this assessment provides VRMs with a starting point for better understanding this aspect of volunteer recruitment and development programs.

#### *Leadership Skills*

The top five ranked leadership skills volunteers reported they had developed as a result of their volunteer experience focused on interpersonal, communication, and organizational competencies. These results indicate that, as a result of the program, volunteers may possess adequate levels of self-confidence and knowledge to accept new and additional leadership roles.

These volunteers are uniquely positioned to teach newer volunteers how to delegate tasks, develop, and implement program goals. Therefore, VRMs may find success when more experienced volunteers are available to help newer volunteers develop group program goals and teach them how to manage their workload and time commitment. Experienced volunteers are often well suited to match tasks with volunteers who possess talents and knowledge in specific areas.

This study also revealed that this group of volunteers may need to strengthen the lowest ranked leadership skills in order to have a more enriching volunteer experience. The abilities to effectively manage conflict and facilitate group meetings are important skills for community development leaders to possess (Allen et al.,

2002). Additionally, having a basic understanding of how local government works will assist volunteers in accomplishing program goals more effectively. VFMs may want to consider working in partnership with local officials to offer training specifically in this area. VRMs may need to train volunteers in these areas early in the community development program in order to afford volunteers ample opportunity to practice and strengthen these skills.

#### *Volunteer Experience*

In this study, volunteers strongly indicated their intention to invite friends or family members to volunteer. Accordingly, VRMs might develop venues for recruitment that encourages expanding the volunteer base through association. Word of mouth, particularly in a small town, is powerful and can grow a cadre of volunteers. In this study, volunteers rated their personal self-confidence and ability to lead others comparatively lower than the other volunteer experience items. These leadership skills often require time in order to fully develop--VRMs need to be patient but persistent. It may take years for a particular volunteer to develop the self-confidence to feel comfortable in a leadership role. Therefore, VRMs should encourage ongoing progress in this area and provide opportunities for the volunteer to experience success in a leadership role (Emery & Flora, 2006; Fisher & Cole, 1993). VRMs might consider pairing volunteers to work on specific tasks or special projects in order to boost their confidence and learn from one another.

#### *Volunteer Resource Manager Effectiveness*

This study indicates that the VRM played a critical role in teaching volunteers the skills and concepts necessary in shaping important leadership behavior and qualities.

The recognized effectiveness of the VRM suggests that there is a logical opportunity for VRMs to teach volunteers about organizational structure and protocol and basic components of effective groups through example. Volunteers can gain confidence and feel safe by taking on more responsibilities as leaders if they have a sound role model to follow and to mentor them (Densten & Gray, 2001; McKee, 2007).

#### *Value of Volunteer Experience*

In this study, volunteers reported that they valued their volunteer experience. They indicated that the social aspects of the experience, which included working alongside other community members, were very satisfying. VRMs will want to respect the social nature of volunteers. They should provide time and space for social interaction in concert with completing the task at hand. Volunteers also valued meeting their project goals. Although community recognition for volunteer efforts was not valued as highly, VFMs should strive to celebrate the accomplishments of volunteers. Annual volunteer celebrations provide a ready venue to formally acknowledge the work of volunteers, document their accomplishments, and also provide an opportunity for social interaction.

The results of this study should be useful to VFMs in designing programs to recruit, train and retain volunteers. The need for skilled volunteers in rural communities has never been greater. This study indicates that volunteers benefit from their volunteer experiences. It also suggests that VRMs dedicate time and energy to teaching newly recruited volunteers the leadership skills necessary to sustaining a community development program. VRMs must first assess volunteers' leadership skill development needs. Subsequently, VRMs must respond to the assessment results by

providing formal and informal learning opportunities. When VRMs are aware of their volunteers' leadership development needs, they will be able to target and strengthen volunteers' skills throughout the program. Finally, VRMs must evaluate the impacts on volunteer skills development of trainings, administrative support, and the volunteer experience.

The criteria and instrumentation developed for this evaluation were used with a small group of farmers market volunteers in a specific community context. One of the limitations of this study is the small number of participants, which is a direct consequence of conducting research in small communities and with such a narrow focus. However, this study could be expanded to incorporate farmers market volunteers from other rural communities. It could also be replicated in a wide range of similar volunteer-based efforts. These two recommendations may address concerns about the small sample size.

Suggestions for further research with a similar assessment tool include a comparison study between urban and rural volunteers, other community development projects, and with larger numbers of volunteers. The results from similar research can assist VRMs in further determining training needs and strategies to better prepare volunteers to identify important local issues and to be successful in their efforts to address identified issues to improve their community.

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Table 1  
*Respondent Numbers and Ranked Mean Scores (and Standard Deviations) for Study Constructs*

	N	M	SD
<b>Volunteers' Knowledge Gains (Leadership Skills)</b>			
Value viewpoints of others involved with program	35	4.23	.69
How to share workload with other volunteers	35	4.06	.91
How to listen to others	35	4.03	.95
How to apply individual talents and knowledge to improve community	34	4.03	.97
Importance of having program goals	32	4.03	.78
Effective ways to market a local event	34	4.00	.99
How to interact professionally with other community members or groups	34	3.91	.93
How to develop program goals	32	3.78	1.10
How to evaluate program impact on community	34	3.68	1.07
Problem-solving skills	33	3.67	1.02
How to express personal viewpoint to others	33	3.58	1.03
Personal time management skills	31	3.52	1.09
How to get program support from other organizations	32	3.47	1.22
How to look at an issue or decision critically	33	3.42	1.00
Social interaction skills	34	3.42	.99
Conflict management and mediation skills	32	3.38	1.13
Skills that help at home	34	3.24	1.13
How local government works	31	3.16	1.24
Skills that help at school and/or work	34	3.15	1.21
How to run an effective meeting	32	3.06	1.16
<b>Volunteer Experience:</b>			
Would invite friends or family members to volunteer	34	4.53	.51
Gained personal satisfaction from the social interactions	34	4.32	.68
Is now more likely to take action when there are problems in the community	34	4.06	.74
Improved personal self-confidence	34	3.56	.75
Improved ability to lead others	33	3.45	.83
<b>Volunteer Resource Manager Effectiveness</b>			
Helped to ensure that volunteer meetings were productive	33	4.36	.74
Provided opportunities to communicate with other organizations or government officials	33	4.21	.99
Provided timely and useful information related to program	33	4.15	1.12
Developed others' leadership skills	33	3.88	.96
<b>Value of Volunteer Experience</b>			
Working with community members	34	4.65	.54
Seeing something that volunteers worked on actually happen	34	4.62	.65
Meeting new people	34	4.32	.77
Learning new things or developing skills	34	4.24	.86
Recognition in the community for volunteers' efforts	33	3.30	1.33

Code Rating: 5 = very much; 1 = not very much