

The International Volunteer Impacts Survey

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Abstract

The field of international volunteer service (IVS) is growing worldwide, yet there is little systematic evidence of outcomes for volunteers. Current scholarship about IVS is largely descriptive and lacks consistent measures and comparative designs that permit claims of impact. This lack of reliable information limits what researchers, program administrators, and policy makers can claim about program effects. This paper reports on a publically-available “tool of the trade”, the International Volunteers Impacts Survey (IVIS), which measures impacts of IVS on volunteers. The 90-item IVIS survey -- which can be administered by program staff, evaluators, and researchers – has undergone rigorous factor analysis procedures to assess the conceptual basis and reliability of a range of international volunteer outcomes. These outcomes include international contacts, open-mindedness, international understanding, intercultural relations, global identity, social skills, life plans, civic activism, community engagement, media attentiveness, and financial contributions. This paper discusses the importance and use of this survey for assessing IVS volunteer outcomes and building the knowledge base on IVS.

Key Words:

international, volunteering, research, evaluation, survey

Background

The field of international volunteer service (IVS) is growing worldwide; in

conjunction with this growth, more individuals are crossing international borders to volunteer (McBride, Benítez, &

Sherraden, 2003). Organizations in the non-profit, for-profit, and public sectors are developing new and unique program models to accommodate growing needs (Allum, 2007). Journals in a range of disciplines are publishing more articles, and international associations sponsor more conference presentations on IVS. National and international policymakers and opinion leaders are discussing the relative benefits of IVS, including the role of IVS as a diplomatic tool (Clinton, 2009; Demopoulos, 2005). Despite global enthusiasm for IVS, there is conceptual and operational ambiguity on the nature and impacts of international volunteering. The proliferation of diverse IVS program models contributes significantly to this ambiguity (Allum, 2007; Sherraden, Stringham, Sow, & McBride, 2006).

Most existing research on IVS is descriptive and is based on case studies and cross-sectional surveys (Powell & Bratović, 2006; Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008). While extensive anecdotal evidence about the benefits of international service on volunteers is available, stakeholders increasingly require systematic evidence of impacts. Few quasi-experimental and experimental research projects utilize rigorous research designs and standardized instruments to examine IVS impacts (Powell & Bratović). Even with rigorous designs, the data may not be illustrative for the field without standardized instruments that accurately measure the range of intended IVS volunteer impacts across program models.

This article reports on the second requirement, a “tool of the trade” for the IVS field called the International Volunteer Impacts Survey (IVIS). This 90-item survey was developed using factor analysis procedures that assess the conceptual basis and reliability of a range of international volunteer outcomes. This survey is freely

available to the field (Lough, McBride, & Sherraden, 2009). We anticipate that this survey will be deemed useful by the field, and implemented across multiple programs to determine the relative effectiveness of differing program models, thus informing policy and program development.

The International Volunteer Impact Survey (IVIS)

Development of this survey is part of a larger research project at the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis, USA. The project examines IVS programs that differ across key characteristics, such as organization type, degree of internationality, eligibility requirements, length of service, and service activities. Through quantitative and qualitative methods, the study assesses outcomes for volunteers, organizations, and communities. The research design is longitudinal and quasi-experimental with matched comparison groups (McBride, Lough, & Sherraden, 2008).

To assess outcomes on the volunteers, researchers developed the IVIS survey. Questions are based on a comprehensive review of previous studies that summarize possible volunteer outcomes (Sherraden, Stringham, Sow, & McBride, 2006). These outcomes include international contacts, open-mindedness, international understanding, intercultural relations, global identity, social skills, life plans, civic activism, community engagement, media attentiveness, and financial contributions.

The IVIS underwent review by experts in the field, and was tested on respondents from diverse programs serving in different capacities. These respondents included those who had yet to serve (pre-test), those who had served (post-test), and those who had not served (comparison test). This design allows programs to measure differences between those who participate in

IVS and those who do not. The survey underwent extensive analytical testing; standardization of the survey occurred in three phases: (1) survey development, (2) survey pilot, and (3) survey validation. The details about this process, the factor analysis results, and the full survey are publically available at:
<http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/WP09-31.pdf> (Lough, McBride, & Sherraden, 2009).

Use and Implications of the IVIS

The IVIS responds to calls from the field regarding the need for standardized tools to assess the impact of international volunteering and service (Dingle, Sokolowski, Saxon-Harold, Smith, & Leigh, 2001; IVR, 2004; Powell & Bratović, 2006). It contributes to the knowledge base of the forms, functions, and outcomes of IVS (Allum, 2007; McBride, Benítez, & Sherraden, 2003; McBride, Sherraden, Benítez, & Johnson, 2004; Randel, German, Cordiero, & Baker, 2004; Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008; Sherraden, Stringham, Sow, & McBride, 2006). The survey is relatively easy to implement and was developed for online administration, which is comparatively cost-efficient. The survey takes approximately 20 minutes for respondents to complete. With these strengths in mind, several strategies are important for further adoption and use of the IVIS.

In order to assess impact accurately, the IVIS must be paired with a repeated measures research design that is implemented across IVS programs. Current research utilizing the IVIS is limited because it includes only a few programs, and the majority of respondents come from the United States. In order to build a knowledge base on the impacts of IVS that is applicable globally, replication with different programs in different parts of the world is essential.

As programs use the IVIS, additional outcome categories can be added to make it applicable to more programs in different contexts. In short, the tool itself is of little use beyond the present study if others do not implement it.

Over the long-term, as programs gather information on volunteer outcomes, potential differences in outcomes can be compared. As these outcomes are compared, they can inform empirically-based decisions on IVS policy and practice. Administrators in the field need this knowledge to understand the advantages and consequences of promoting differing program models that send volunteers overseas (Allum, 2007; Caprara, Quigley, & Rieffel, 2009). As a field, we must be open to considering which types of program models are most effective at achieving specific outcomes. This knowledge is necessary to evaluate program aims, to shape efficient policy, and to inform effective IVS practices.

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