



Cooperative Extension Program
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Volunteer Administration in the 21st Century:

Understanding and Managing Direct and Episodic Volunteers

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All people have circles of influence within their homes, among their friends, and in their communities that help them contribute in a positive way to society. Many find that volunteering helps them contribute to a better society and a brighter future for the next generation.

Many organizations rely heavily on volunteers, and Texas Extension is certainly one of them. Extension volunteers help identify the educational needs in their communities and determine how those needs can best be met. They are also responsible for delivering many of those programs. Without effective volunteers, many Extension programs would not exist.

There are challenges to recruiting and working with volunteers. Wendy Biro-Pollard, in her workshop “The Long and Short of Nonprofit Management,” has identified several trends that affect volunteer management today.

Time poverty

- Lack of time is the number one barrier.
- The perception is that volunteer work requires a long-term commitment.

- Fewer people are committed to long-term volunteer work.
- People weigh their return on investment.

Responsiveness

- People expect answers, information and resources NOW.
- They want 24/7 access to information and resources.
- They want to be well informed (monthly newsletters may not be sufficient).

Technology (We must use technology to help us change how we are doing business.)

- Chat rooms/listservs offer ways to link, share and dialogue.
- Web sites offer new marketing options.
- Teleconferencing, video conferencing, virtual meetings, digital members, and virtual volunteers encourage participation.

Changing expectations (The younger generation is more entrepreneurial and less likely to be attracted to a large, bureaucratic structure.)

- They see technology as a way of connecting to a global world.
- They are comfortable working alone or in a virtual team.
- They want a variety of exciting, fun projects.
- They look for projects that can advance their careers.
- It is best to contact them via e-mail.

Changing expectations (The older generation likes to come together to solve problems.)

- They like working in teams.
- They are comfortable making commitments and assuming leadership roles.
- They often like things the way they are and are reluctant to implement change.
- They prefer conformity, uniformity and order.

Types of volunteers in Extension

Direct volunteers

Direct volunteers fulfill many roles within Texas Extension. A direct volunteer may work independently or with other volunteers to meet the goals and objectives of a program. Generally, a direct volunteer will have considerable knowledge about the program, be motivated to help the program succeed, and commit to long-term service.

Episodic/random volunteers

Today, there may be more people interested in being episodic or random volunteers. These are volunteers who are involved with a single or limited activity, event or program on a short-term basis. Volunteer administrators often find it difficult to manage episodic/random volunteers. Here are some things you can do to make the experience successful for everyone involved.

Develop creative ideas for using episodic volunteers.

Have a brainstorming session with staff and long-term volunteers to identify tasks that could be delegated. Turn these tasks into opportunities for episodic volunteers. But be sure episodic volunteers are given meaningful tasks

and not just menial ones. Find out what special skill the volunteer has and take advantage of it.

Ask a management consulting firm to do pro bono work in helping your organization identify roles for episodic volunteers.

Create an effective volunteer management system.

Train staff members and other volunteers to support episodic volunteers.

Plan how episodic volunteers will be used and who will train and supervise them.

Use current volunteers as team captains for episodic volunteers.

When recruiting, ask a staff member who has had success working with episodic volunteers to advertise for you.

Be sure episodic volunteers have the help they need to be successful.

Design a 15-minute orientation. Episodic volunteers need less information than long-term volunteers.

Make instructions clear and concise. Standardize instructions when possible. Assign tasks they can begin to work on quickly.

To prevent confusion and frustration, be very clear about who will give them their directions. If there is confusion about tasks or responsibilities, be prepared to intervene immediately. With short-term volunteers there is no time to wait and hope it will get better. When issues are not resolved, volunteers may leave thinking the volunteer program is not well managed. This can create bad publicity for the organization.

Be creative and flexible.

Arrange for episodic volunteers to work flexible hours, when it is convenient for them.

No matter what, make it a positive experience for the volunteer. Make sure the volunteer finds the program interesting and is motivated by others with whom he or she is working.

Managing volunteers

The four main roles involved in managing volunteers are project coordinator, advisor/mentor, one-time event coordinator and on-going activity coordinator. These roles can be filled by staff members

or by other volunteers. In fact, a well-developed system will include several volunteers, both youth and adult, in each role.

Project coordinator

Responsibilities

- Chairs project committees or task forces, which may have subcommittees responsible for different activities.
- Coordinates and enhances the educational aspects of events.
- Teaches and guides other volunteers who in turn teach and guide other adults or youth.

Interests and skills

- Knows the subject matter.
- Understands educational processes and outcomes.

Examples

- “Walk Across Texas” team leader
- Livestock show or contest superintendent
- 4-H dog project leader
- Master Gardener educational enrichment program leader

Advisor/Mentor

Responsibilities

- Supports and encourages other volunteers and leaders.
- Helps with special projects and needs.
- Recruits other volunteers and members.

Interests and skills

- Has experience in Extension work or similar work, and experience in the community.
- Is able to give support and feedback to other volunteers.

Examples

- Experienced volunteer or master volunteer with one or several newer volunteers “under his wing”
- 4-H club manager
- TEEA advisor

One-time event coordinator

Responsibilities

- Oversees a particular event (either annual or one-time).

- Develops and implements specific goals, strategies and schedules.
- Mobilizes a group of workers.
- Delegates and coordinates specific tasks and responsibilities.

Interests and skills

- Is willing to accept responsibility for a limited time.
- Is disciplined and focused on the specific purpose, goals and strategies.
- Is able to work well under pressure.

Examples

- Result demonstrator
- Fund-raising event chair
- 4-H fashion show chair

On-going activity coordinator

Responsibilities

- Visualizes long-term goals and results.
- Designs on-going programs.
- Develops and implements step-by-step strategies.
- Maintains records and tends to administrative details.

Interests and skills

- Is committed to long-term volunteer and program development.
- Can facilitate effective meetings.
- Can create information-management systems.

Examples

- Recruiter
- Fund-raising coordinator
- Public relations coordinator
- 4-H school enrichment coordinator

Summary

There is no doubt that the time invested in volunteer-driven programs is well worth it. The more time a paid staff volunteer coordinator devotes to volunteer management, the greater the organization's capacity to take on additional volunteers and use them effectively. Volunteers often make the difference in whether or not a program is successful. They can also be wonderful ambassadors for Extension in the community.

Every interaction with a volunteer is an opportunity to build a relationship. Volunteers given the chance to do meaningful, challenging work with their peers are likely to make a strong commitment to the organization that values their efforts.

Additional reading

Fox, W. and K. Penrod. (1989). A Vision for Strengthening Local Leadership: How to Create an Effective Volunteer Coordinator System. Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service.

Macduff, N. (1998). Recruiting and Retention. <http://www.bmi.net/mba/july98recruit.html>

Biro-Pollard, W. (2004). The Long and Short of Nonprofit Management. <http://www.nsc-aaf.org/BIOS/ebrochure305x2.pdf>

Other publications in this series on volunteer administration:

D-1451, Volunteer Administration in the 21st Century: Roles Volunteers Play in Texas AgriLife Extension

D-1452, Leadership Advisory Boards

D-1453, Program Area Committees and Youth Boards

D-1454, Volunteer Associations and Groups

D-1456, Managing the Risk Associated with Volunteer Service

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