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### ABSTRACT

*Evaluating the impact of volunteer programs has become an important management and program development focus for volunteer managers and administrators. This article uses the Targeting Outcomes of Programs (TOP) model to differentiate between volunteer program inputs, outcomes, and impact. The authors explain and provide volunteer program examples of program inputs (resources, activities, and participation); outcomes (reactions, and changes in knowledge, opinions, skills, and aspirations); and impact (practice change, and societal, economic, environmental, and other impacts).*

## Assessing the Impact of Volunteer Programs

R. Dale Safrit and Mary Merrill

Contemporary volunteer organizations and programs exist in environments of increasingly scarce resources. Although not limited to the public sector, this phenomenon is especially critical to non-profit organizations that often must depend upon multiple funding sources in order to function and have come under increased public scrutiny to be accountable (Kearns, 1996). Taylor and Sumariwalla (1993) stated:

*Increasing competition for tax as well as contributed dollars and scarce resources prompt donors and funders to ask once again: What good did the donation produce? What difference did the foundation grant or United Way allocation make in the lives of those affected by the service funded?*

Fisher and Cole (1993) concluded that "because programs involving volunteers must compete for resources in the com-

munity as well as within the organization, program evaluation has become an indispensable tool of the volunteer administrator." Consequently, evaluating the impact of volunteer programs has become an important management and program development focus for volunteer managers and administrators, especially within the past five years.

Early writings in the profession of volunteer management either did not emphasize program evaluation at all (Naylor, 1973; Wilson, 1981) or only included limited information (Naylor, 1976; O'Connell, 1976; Stenzel and Feeney, 1968; Wilson, 1979). More recently, Fisher and Cole (1993) stated that "volunteer administrators are continually faced with the need to demonstrate the value of their programs" and devoted an entire chapter of their text to evaluating volunteer program processes, results, and impacts. Ellis (1996) concluded that "just as with employees, it is possible to monitor and

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measure the accomplishments of volunteers by stating goals and objectives ... and then assessing whether these were achieved."

## EVALUATION, IMPACT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Three closely-related terms are often used interchangeably by volunteer managers yet they are not synonymous. These terms are evaluation, impact, and accountability.

Thiede (1971) defined *evaluation* as the process of determining the extent to which program objectives are obtained. Steele (1970) believed that evaluation is "the process of judging (or a judgement as to) the worth or value of a program." Gay (1985) defined evaluation as "the systematic process of collecting and analyzing data" and stated that

*... with minor variations, most of the definitions basically represent one of two philosophical viewpoints ... : (1) Evaluation is the systematic process of collecting and analyzing data in order to determine whether, and to what degree, objectives have been, or are being, achieved; (2) Evaluation is the systematic process of collecting and analyzing data in order to make decisions.*

Boone (1985) concluded that evaluation involves making "judgements about ... programs based on established criteria and known, observable evidence." Whatever the specific definition or author, an overarching theme implies that evaluation refers to measurement: measuring the progress of program plans, measuring the success of program objectives, or measuring the effects of program activities.

In comparison, *impact* "refers to the extent to which the program has affected the audience. It refers to the extent to which people changed or benefitted because they participated in the program" (Spiegel and Leeds, 1992). Patton (1982) concluded that impact involves program results and effects "especially for making

major decisions about program continuation, expansion, reduction, and funding." Finally, Rossi and Freeman (1993) stated that impact assessment was the "evaluation of whether and to what extent a program causes changes in the desired direction among a target population." Thus, impact refers to a program's effects on the sponsoring organization, participants and clients, volunteer and paid staff, and the entire community or society.

Finally, *accountability* is "the process of reporting efficiency of program operations, primarily to the learners and leaders of the target publics, the organization, funding sources, the profession, and (where appropriate) the governance body" (Boone, 1985). Rossi and Freeman suggested that accountability involves providing evidence to program stakeholders and sponsors regarding the program. According to Brizius and Campbell (1991), "what sets today's emphasis on public accountability apart is the part of the message involving proof." Consequently, accountability refers to communicating the effects (impact) of a program that have been measured (evaluated).

## A NEW MODEL FOR ASSESSING IMPACT OF VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

In 1994, Bennett and Rockwell introduced the Targeting Outcomes of Programs (TOP) model, an integrated approach to program planning and evaluation. Originally designed for application in Cooperative Extension organizations, "TOP uses a single model to target outcomes, track the extent they are achieved, and evaluate program performance toward achieving them" (Bennett and Rockwell, 1994). A specific strength of the model is its focus upon connecting program development directly with program outcomes and impact evaluation. "TOP suggests an integrated approach to needs and opportunity assessment; program design; outcome tracking; program process evaluation; and program outcome/impact evaluation" (Bennett and Rockwell).

The TOP model suggests that in planning programs an educator or manager should first target the social, economic, and/or environmental conditions (SEEC) the program is designed to address. Then the question must be asked: What has to be changed to achieve the knowledge, opinions, skills, and aspirations (KOSA) in clients, paid and volunteer staff, etc., that will result in the desired impact and practice changes?

As an example, school administrators may identify a need to increase the number of students who are successfully passing the fourth grade proficiency test. There is a need to provide individualized, supplemental instruction to increase skill levels in primary students. Students who successfully pass the test move forward in the academic system and have greater chances for future academic and life success.

Next, client reactions should be anticipated that will ensure their participation in appropriately designed program activities. Schools can conduct teacher and parent surveys and community opinion polls to determine interest in having mentor/tutor programs for primary school students. Based on the identified need and the community support, a program manager identifies the number of volunteer mentors/tutors required to begin and sustain the program, screening and placement procedures, training needs (both hours of training and personnel to provide training), supplies, materials, and paid staff for ongoing supervision and support.

Finally, the program developer identifies the resources necessary to conduct the intended activities. Using the example of school mentors, this would involve such things as targeting (and subsequently recording) numbers of volunteers to be involved, hours of service expected from the volunteers, numbers of students to be served, and training and support resources/hours that will be required. (Of course, these types of records are usually maintained by a volunteer program.)

For example, the local school board has identified alarmingly low numbers of students passing the fourth grade proficiency examination. Past test scores and teacher input suggest that high numbers of students continue to read at a first or second grade level well into the fourth year of school. Fourth grade teachers report spending excessive amounts of time providing remedial instruction, primarily in literacy skills, in preparation for the examination. A community-based organization has agreed to recruit volunteer literacy tutors to address this situation. Research indicates that literacy tutors are most effective when working with first and second grade students in one-to-one situations. Practices such as reading aloud, encouragement and praise, and conversation about story content serve to increase skills, develop reading interest, and build self confidence.

The program developer/manager conducts interest surveys/interviews with parents and teachers; determines the number of volunteers needed; plans for the recruitment and placement of volunteers; identifies training needs, resources, and ongoing supports; and develops a budget as part of the program planning process. Program planning targets the desired impact and identifies the inputs needed to achieve the impact.

TOP also provides a conceptual map for evaluating programs based on program inputs, initial outcomes, and ultimate impact (see Figure 1). A program developer or manager first evaluates the resources (material and human), activities and client participation in the program (the inputs). Program inputs include material resources (such as budgets, appropriated funds, user fees, grants, and financial gifts), program materials (such as curricula and promotional materials), and organizational materials (such as office space, equipment, and utilities). Human resources include the actual program participants/students, paid and volunteer staff involved with the program and other

PLANNING AND EVALUATING VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS FOR IMPACT						
Program Inputs			Program Outcomes			
			Program Impact			
Resources	Activities	Participation	Reactions	KOSA (Knowledge Opinions, Skills, Aspirations)	Practice Change	SEEC (Societal, Economic, Environmental Conditions)
Budgets Program materials Organizational materials	Program planning meetings Volunteer recruitment and training Program activities with participants/clients	Participants/clients Paid staff Volunteer staff Organizational staff not directly involved with the program	Participant/client reactions Volunteer reactions Paid staff reactions	Participant/client changes in knowledge, opinions, skills, and/or aspirations  Volunteer changes in knowledge, opinions, skills, and/or aspirations	Participant/client changes in patterns of behavior  Volunteer changes in patterns of behavior	How participants/clients have been helped/hindered by KOSA and/or practice changes  How the public has been affected  SEEC impacts of the program

**Figure 1**

**The Targeting Outcomes of Programs (TOPS) model (Bennett & Rockwell, 1994) as applied to evaluating volunteer program impact.**

organizational personnel who indirectly support the program (such as clerical staff, advisory committee members, and board members). Program activities include program planning meetings of paid staff, volunteer recruitment and training activities, and activities with the program participants/clients.

Moving to program outcomes, the developer/manager evaluates the reactions of program participants as well as changes in their knowledge, opinions, skills, and aspirations (KOSA) as demonstrated in actual practices. Program outcomes include the reactions of program participants/students as well as paid and volunteer staff involved in the program. KOSA focuses upon both program participants/students as well as program volunteers and includes any knowledge they gained, opinions that changed as a result of the program, skills they developed through the program, and aspirations

they have as a result of being involved with the program. Practice changes are instituted as a result of any patterns of behavior by program participants/students or volunteers from knowledge, opinions, skills, and/or aspirations achieved through the program.

Using the case described above, through student, parent, teacher, and volunteer surveys, the program manager evaluates reactions to the mentorship experience. Pre- and post-tests may be used to measure improved confidence, increased self esteem, increased problem solving skills or study habits, and/or increased positive feelings toward the learning environment among students. Parents will feel a greater sense of involvement with the school or sense of satisfaction with the child's progress. Parents will have increased their skills for working with their children to improve learning. Volunteers have a new apprecia-

tion for the schools or feel a sense of connectedness to the educational process. Volunteers may aspire to a career in education and pursue new career choices. Finally, measuring the increase in skills of students involves a comparison of pre- and post-test scores regarding the mentoring process. Overall impact is measured by the number of students successfully passing the fourth grade proficiency test. The environmental impact of the program is measured in increased teacher efficiency, less need for remedial instructional time, increased academic success for students in succeeding years, perhaps higher graduation rates and increased employability. This information will provide a basis to assess the ultimate societal, economic, and/or environmental conditions (SEEC) the program intended to impact.

The evaluation process begins with inputs and leads to impact. This is the process that allows volunteer managers and administrators to answer the question: How effective was this volunteer program? The ultimate questions to be asked in assessing the impact of the volunteer program are: "How has the public (including nonprogram participants) been affected by the program? Have participants—individuals, families, and communities—been helped and/or hindered by the results of program induced changes in targeted practices? In what way? To what degree?" (Bennett and Rockwell, 1994). Such SEEC impacts for volunteer programs include not only direct impacts upon program participants/students, but also cost savings to communities and society realized as a result of the volunteer program.

## CONCLUSION

*Evaluation, impact, and accountability* are each distinct concepts important to contemporary volunteer administrators. The Targeting Outcomes of Programs evaluation model helps volunteer administrators distinguish between program inputs, outcomes, and impact. Traditionally, vol-

unteer administrators have focused primarily on program inputs and immediate outcomes. The challenge today is to use inputs and outcomes as a foundation for assessing client/participant behavioral and practice changes that are stronger indicators of program impact.

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