Continuing Education for Today's Volunteer Leader

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The political and economic situation today offers a great challenge to communities. Just when needs for human service agencies are expanding, government budgets for them are down; private nonprofit organizations will lose billions in government aid in the next few years; and new tax laws have weakened tax incentives for private sector contributions (Nebraska Organization of Volunteer Leaders, 1983). In this era of shrinking resources, the role of the volunteer becomes more critical than ever before.

> Some 35 million Americans still do it. They donate billions of hours a year to hospitals, schools, churches, social welfare agencies, professional organizations, neighborhood groups, clubs and political campaigns. Many of these organizations could not survive without these volunteers (Nebraska Organization of Volunteer Leaders, 1983).

In these difficult economic times, with some people working longer hours to combat inflation and homemakers joining the workforce, what motivates people to volunteer? Christiansen and Garrett's article, "Why People Volunteer," reports two findings which most theorists and practitioners accept (Dik and Warnock, 1982): (1) Social responsibility is a value inculcated into the American way of life. Social scientists have found that Americans engage in helping behavior because they have been taught to do so and not because of basic instinct. (2) Reciprocity is another reason; people give factors for help previously received or in anticipation of future personal benefit.

Regardless of their motivations, volunteers are a necessity in today's society. There is a new emphasis in volunteerism developing in our communities today. Volunteers are an important segment playing crucial roles during hard times.

Because of our economic times, administration of volunteer programs and the role of the administrator have increased in importance in the last few years. As volunteer programs grow and become a more important part of ongoing services to people, the job of the administrator as well as the scope of the programs will continue to change (Schindler-Rainman and Lippitt, 1975).

Because of this continuous change, the Division of Continuing Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) has been concerned with offering up-to-date educational programs for volunteer lead-

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ers. Before the introduction of a Certificate Program in Volunteer Leader Development, UNL conducted a needs assessment to identify specific concerns of volunteer leaders in Nebraska. A second needs assessment recently re-identified these needs so that programs would reflect the changing roles of volunteer leaders.

The professional training of volunteer administrators makes them more able to be visible, effective, initiative-taking and heard in their organizations. Volunteer departments are rising in status and becoming more pervasive in their activities throughout most organizations (Schindler-Rainman and Lippitt, 1975).

If organizations are to remain viable, they must have an ongoing training plan for self-renewal. Commitment to the self-renewal idea implies that plans will be translated into action and that the organization will be flexible enough to change plans when better ones are found and to fit plans to people.

A continuous learning plan for the training and development of all volunteer leaders means simply that there is a realistic, well-integrated plan that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The "end" of such a plan indicates only that the individual participating in it is now ready for further exploration and enrichment individually (Stenzel and Feeney, 1968). The UNL Division of Continuing Studies is in the middle of this process in re-evaluating the needs of Nebraska's volunteer leaders.

Building content for the training and development of individuals must be focused on effecting changes in the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of volunteer leaders. The end result should be improved services to the organization itself, the community at large, and self-learning and development of the individual (Stenzel and Feeney, 1968).

NEEDS ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

After conducting the volunteer leader training program for five years, the UNL Division of continuing Studies and the Nebraska Organization of Volunteer Leaders became concerned about the future of the program. Because the roles and needs of volunteer leaders change, a new needs assessment was performed to identify necessary changes for the training program. The major issues addressed in the new needs assessment were:

1. Whether continuing education was still important to volunteer leaders.

2. What types of topics were most relevant to their needs.

3. Whether the documentation of completion of training--whether in CEU's and a certificate or in college credit--was important to volunteer leaders.

4. How the program could best be packaged and marketed in terms of time, place, program length, price, and instructional delivery method.

The survey instrument was sent to 1,800 persons in Nebraska who are involved in the supervision of volunteers, including both past participants in the Volunteer Leader Development Series and non-participants. The return was 152 surveys, for a response rate of 8.4 percent. The low response may be due to the fact that the survey was sent to many people not familiar with the concept of the Volunteer Leader Development Series, coupled with the fact that follow-up techniques were not used.

RESULTS

The first issue addressed, the importance of continuing education, was supported by a vast majority of respondents (97 percent). Eighty-one percent felt there is a need for the Volunteer Leader Development Series.

The survey included a list of 14 topics, including such skills as man-

agement, marketing, interviewing techniques, program development, communication, and conflict management, which respondents rated on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = "would definitely participate," 5 = "would definitely not participate"). Space to write in additional topics also was included. Interest in topics was analyzed by examining both the mean rating for each topic and also the percentage of people rating a topic 1 ("would definitely participate") or 2 ("would probably participate"). The topics found to be of most interest to volunteer leaders are listed in Table 1.

Over half of the respondents (64 percent) were interested in the Volunteer Leader certificate, which would document completion of a certain number of CEU's. Half of the respondents were interested in college credit, and half were not.

In looking at the marketing information gained from the survey, one of the first issues of importance is to identify the target audience. In the case of this training program, two primary audiences were found to be relevant: the volunteer leader and the organization which that leader represents. The organization is vital in its support for continuing education activities, both financial and otherwise. One question addressed this issue in asking how tuition fees are paid. About 67 percent of respondents indicated their organization paid at least part of the fees for attending. Almost half the respondents said their organization paid the total fee. This finding supported the importance of the organization as an audience. Eighty percent of the respondents indicated they would attend programs such as these for a fee in the range of $20 to $40 per day.

Timing of workshops was addressed through questions on workshop length, the number of workshops to hold per year, and the months and days of the week to hold them. The most likely amounts of time to attend one workshop were considered to be one, two, three, or four days.

Eighty-eight percent of the respondents would take one or two days, with few willing to take longer. Of that 88 percent, half would take one day and half two days.

The most popular months for holding workshops were February, January, March and November, in that order. Least favored were June, August, September and December. Days of the week for holding workshops were rated on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = "strongly support" and 5 = "strongly oppose." Rankings for days of the week were determined using the same method as was used for topics--both the mean rating and the percentage of respondents rating an item 1 or 2 were considered. Weekdays were strongly preferred over weekends, with Wednesday the most popular day for a workshop, followed by Thursday, Tuesday, Friday and Monday.

Respondents also were asked how many workshops they would attend in a one-year period to earn a certificate. Choices given the respondents were two, three, four, or five or more workshops; attendance at one workshop was not considered a viable choice for earning adequate CEU's for a certificate. About half of the respondents would attend two workshops in a one-year period, and another quarter would attend three, with fewer willing to attend four and even fewer five or more.

The delivery method of instruction is another important aspect in offering a training program. The DCS can offer instruction through various modes, using traditional seminar or workshop format, or less traditional devices such as correspondence or technological means such as teleconferencing. Respondents were given four types of learning methodologies which could be used for training and were asked to rate these on a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 = "very interested" and 5 = "not interested." By far, the most preferred learning method was the seminar-workshop-conference mode. This is

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TABLE 1

TOPICS OF MOST INTEREST TO RESPONDENTS

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Playing the Board Game

Working with boards and advisory committees; purposes and objectives of boards and advisory committees, responsibilities of board and staff members; parliamentary procedure.

The Volunteer Leader and the Community

Identifying needs and concerns of community; functioning as a change agent; expectations and leadership styles of the volunteer leader.

Volunteer Program Development

Needs assessment; setting goals, program development; setting priorities, planning and evaluation of activities.

Relating to the Public

Marketing; relating through media, communication techniques; understanding the volunteer; recruitment.

People Management

Delegation, time management; supervision; evaluation of personnel.

Communication

Principles, interpersonal communication skills, techniques for group leadership and participation, listening, and other communication skills.

Conflict Management .

Causes of conflict, professional and personal needs of others, enhancing brainstorming skills, resolving conflict situations, recognizing roadblocks, and sending clear messages.

Designing a Creative Volunteer Training Program

Planning, designing, and executing a training program; orientation and on-job training of volunteers.

not surprising; in general, participants in continuing education have not flocked to nontraditional methods. A national survey on adult learning interests and experiences (Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1974) revealed that most Learners and Would-be Learners prefer lectures, classes, and on-the-job training as learning methods.

We might infer that some reasons for the strong preference for the workshop setting might be: (1) this is the method most familiar to most people; and (2) a workshop setting encourages more interaction among participants, and therefore more sharing of ideas in addition to the formal training taking place. While the workshop format was most preferred, receiving a 1 or 2 rating by 78 percent of respondents, the other three methodologies included in the survey received moderate interest. Teleconference, credit class, and independent study course all were rated as a 1 or 2 by about a third of the respondents.

Possible locations for workshops were rated so the most popular sites in Nebraska for holding workshops could be determined. Nine population centers in Nebraska were listed, but respondents could write in other choices. The two most popular sites for workshops were Lincoln and Omaha, the major cities in the state. Cities in central Nebraska were favored next, with the least popular site being the sparsely populated Panhandle. These findings are not surprising, as they follow the pattern of population density in the state.

In addition to collecting information about programming, some demographic data were tabulated regarding the respondents and their organizations. The number of volunteer leaders in the organization ranged from one to 2,000, one being the most common number and seven the median. The number of volunteers in the organization ranged from two to 2,000, with 100 being the most common response and 70 the median.

Over 70 percent of the respondents were not members of the Nebraska Organization of Volunteer Leaders (NOVL).

The respondents represented many types of agencies. The categories of youth, health, elderly, social services, and government were the most highly represented. Respondents could check all appropriate categories, so total response was greater than the number of respondents. The types of agencies represented are given in Table 2.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this needs assessment indicate substantial support among respondents for continuing education activities for volunteer leaders. It appears that further study would be useful in learning more about specific needs for credit program and other creative learning activities.

Cull and Hardy (1974) state:
We have learned that the greatness of our civilization depends upon the increase of individual strength and the development of qualities that will lead to self-actualization. In order for progress and goodness to be realized in our society, we must develop greater respect for each volunteer leader and strive to understand in a personal way their needs, their fears, and their longings and then relate to them.

The situation today challenges volunteer leaders to commit more time, more energy and more effort to managing volunteers. To meet this challenge, volunteer leaders must engage in professional growth activities.

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TABLE 2

TYPES OF AGENCIES

Category	Number	Percentage
1. Health	43	20.5
2. Youth	42	20.0
3. Social Services	30	14.3
4. Elderly	20	9.6
5. Government	20	9.6
6. Churches	12	5.7
7. Education	9	4.3
8. Recreation	7	3.3
9. YMCA/YWCA	7	3.3
10. Child Care	7	3.3
11. Library	4	1.9
12. Arts & Humanities	3	1.4
13. Corrections/Courts	3	1.4
14. Miscellaneous	3	1.4
	210	100.0