

Valuable Study

Investing in volunteer management

The Urban Institute has released a new study that makes the strongest argument ever presented in the United States for the value of, in the words of the report, "investment" in volunteer management.

Organized and funded by the UPS Foundation, the Corporation for National and Community Service (the Corporation), and the USA Freedom Corps, the report finds that:

... [I]nvestments in volunteer management and benefits derived from volunteers feed on each other, with investments bringing benefits and these benefits justify greater investments. We conclude that the value that volunteers provide to organizations they serve should make the effective management of volunteers a key priority. (p. 29-30)

This may sound self-evident, but no other formal study has documented this basic conclusion. Proponents of strong agency infrastructure to support volunteer engagement therefore hope that this report will lead to change.

Rationale for the study

In 1998, the UPS Foundation surveyed volunteers and presented the finding (also no surprise) that volunteers do not always feel their volunteer experiences make best use of their skills and interests. In response to this and President Bush's subsequent "Call to Service" encouraging Americans to

give 4,000 hours to volunteer work, the Corporation for National and Community Service and the USA Freedom Corps organized the current study of volunteer management capacity. Because of the Bush Administration's agenda to include faith communities in social service delivery, religious congregations were added to the study.

Funded by the UPS Foundation, the Urban Institute conducted the study in the fall of 2003, using a representative sample of 1,753 charities, drawn from the Form 990s filed with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and 541 congregations (of all faiths) identified via American Church Lists.

A "Briefing Report" was issued this past February 19 with a degree of hoopla (press releases, a special Washington gathering, etc.). On March 1, the VolunteerInput.org Web site was opened and feedback is still being solicited. A final report, incorporating comments from the field, will be issued next month at the annual Points of Light Foundation Conference in Kansas City, Mo.

Good news/bad news

The study deserves praise for finally asking solid questions about the capacity of agencies to work effectively with volunteers. Bravo, too, that the researchers knew about, accepted, and built on "best volunteer management practices" and attempted to learn whether these have been widely adopted.

If nothing else, the findings might make some decision-makers stop and think. Many of the report's conclusions are strongly worded and can be used to advocate for building infrastructure.

But the bad news is that the findings are quite damning. Given nonprofit agencies' constant search for resources, it is abundantly clear that the skills and talents of community members are not considered valuable enough to make the most of them. Planning and money are focused on raising funds, almost to the exclusion of raising friends. Consider the facts presented:

- Three out of five charities and only one out of three congregations with social service outreach activities reported having a paid staff person who worked on volunteer coordination. However, among these paid volunteer coordinators, one in three have not received any training in volunteer management, and half spend less than 30 percent of their time on volunteer coordination. (p. 3)

- Less than half of charities and congregations that manage volunteers have adopted most volunteer management practices advocated by the field. (p. 3)

- Of charities with a paid staff volunteer manager, only one in eight have someone who devotes 100 percent of his or her time to volunteer management. Only one congregation in our

study said it has a full-time volunteer coordinator.... (p. 8)

- ... the small amount of time spent on volunteer administration suggests that charities and congregations do not have the resources to allocate to volunteer management or that they devote their organizational resources primarily to other efforts. (p. 10)

The researchers deserve credit for asking comparative questions about resources put into fundraising (55 percent of agencies have a paid fundraiser while only 39 percent have a paid coordinator of volunteers) and for adding strong statements about the value of volunteer centers to connect organizations and potential volunteers.

Concerns

Several omissions in the study are puzzling and problematic. A few examples are:

Boards of directors are not included. Nothing links volunteers who serve on nonprofit boards of directors to the direct service volunteering studied. This perpetuates the traditional and counterproductive separation of such volunteers as somehow inherently "different," although the principles of good volunteer management apply equally to gaining the best and most diverse board (a need that many organizations have).

It's interesting that according to the report: "Before undertaking this study,

we did not know the proportion of public charities in the United States that involve volunteers in their operations" (p. 6). We actually did know that 100 percent of them have a board comprised mainly of volunteers, which makes the finding of "four in five charities use volunteers" (p. 6) open to debate.

Who's a volunteer? There is no way to know whether respondents included student interns, stipended volunteers (such as AmeriCorps), workfare participants, etc. in any of their answers, nor if they use a varied vocabulary to attract new volunteers.

Though separated statistically, the report implies that the responses of faith communities can be compared to nonprofit organizations. This seems to show a lack of understanding about how congregations operate, particularly the widespread resistance to "management" vocabulary and theory of any kind as non-spiritual and out of place in a religious group.

Missing entirely are government management practices in their involvement of volunteers. Although volunteers work by the thousands in every level of government (just think schools, parks, prisons, libraries, veterans hospitals, etc.), the public setting is absent from this study.

Once again, government tells us what to do without applying the same principles to itself. How many paid and trained volunteer program managers are in government agencies? Will government commit more funds to building its own volunteer infrastructure? This study neither asks nor answers such questions.

Politics

One reason given for the report is: "President Bush's Call to Service and his mandate that national and community service programs optimize program design and serve as engines of volunteer mobilization" (p. 5). Politically, this translates into a new focus for the Corporation for National and Community Service. Most troubling is the conclusion that:

- The most popular capacity building option among both charities and congregations with social service outreach activities is the addition of a one-year, full-time volunteer with a living stipend (like an AmeriCorps member), with responsibility for volunteer recruitment and management. (p. 3)

All this effort to document the need for a true commitment to volunteer management and the answer is a one-year volunteer? AmeriCorps members certainly can be enormously helpful in building agency capacity to involve volunteers. But they are not the best solution.

Yet the report states: "After being trained in volunteer management practices, AmeriCorps members can be placed in organizations where they can help address a number of volunteer management challenges. We found that AmeriCorps-type volunteers could be particularly useful in charities that are challenged in recruiting enough and the right kinds of volunteers, as well as in those charities that do not have time or money to train and supervise volunteers." (p. 31)

Who is going to give this training in volunteer management practices? The Corporation? And who is going to train them? Can someone fresh out of minimal training in volunteerism be effective if no one else in the agency is prepared about this subject?

Despite such concerns, David Eisner, the new chief executive at the Corporation, has already begun to make speeches about how AmeriCorps will take up the challenge of the study's findings.

This report deserves broader application than new goals for AmeriCorps and it certainly should not be used to let agencies off the hook from making a long-term commitment of funds and attention to volunteer management. After all, the report clearly reads:

"We conclude that the belief that volunteers are beneficial leads charities to invest in their management of volunteers, and that investing in the management of volunteers leads them to value the benefits of their volunteers more." (p. 20)

This can be used as potent ammunition with which to approach executive directors, funders, faculty of nonprofit management courses, and anyone else resistant to spending money on – or paying attention to – volunteer involvement.

The report, Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations, can be downloaded – and responses submitted – at a special Web site: <http://www.volunteerinput.org>. ■

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, a Philadelphia-based training, publishing and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism. She can be reached via email at susan@energizeinc.com. Her Web site is www.energizeinc.com