Assessing Skills as a Volunteer Administrator: A New Approach to Certification

by Sarah Jane Rehnborg, CAVS

If you were asked, "What is that you do as a volunteer administrator?" how do you suppose you would answer? That you recruit, train, and place volunteers. . . .that you interview and guide them. . . .that you speak publicly on behalf of your agency by carrying its message to the community. . . .that you keep records and spend a great deal of time on the telephone. . . .that you recognize the achievement of volunteers through formal dinners and events? While each of these responses may be accurate in part, none of them fully answers the question.

The answer is incomplete, in part, due to the complexity of the position itself. Eva Schindler-Rainman and Ron Lippitt (1975) in their book The Volunteer Community describe the role of the volunteer administrator as being more than just that of administration. They describe the position as a new multi-faceted, challenging and versatile role. It includes the following kinds of 'hats'. The administrative hat, the public relations or community relations hat, consultant hat both within the organizations and to organizations in the community, and a training hat, which includes the training of relevant and appropriate staff and volunteers (p. 103). Budgetary constraints currently faced by many organizations require some administrators to wear a fundraising and fiscal management hat. An advocacy hat has grown increasingly important

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in working with vocal and concerned community groups. Survival needs have prompted the acquisition of a power and influence hat. The role continues to grow and with it, the answer to the question of what the volunteer administrator does continues to expand.

Another reason why the answer to the question is oft times incomplete relates to the skills and experiences of the person answering the question. Because there is no one method to prepare for a position in volunteer administration, persons enter the field with a wide variety of backgrounds. Some volunteer administrators have acquired their jobs from the ranks of committed and active volunteer within the agency. Others have been assigned the role while already employed by the agency in a different capacity. Some persons are hired to perform the task of volunteer administration according to the varied, and often ill conceived, specifications of the employing agency.

During a workshop held recently in the state of Pennsylvania, I had the opportunity to ask a group of volunteer administrators about the life experiences which they felt prepared them for their job. The responses were as varied as the individuals present. Answers ranged from "raising 6 children" to courses in writing, and other formal and continuing education programs of every possible description. Volunteer experiences from board and committee responsibilities, to fundraising, to political campaigns, to church work and to work with handicappers were considered significant preparatory opportunities for the job. Paid job experiences were also considered vital. Positions in nursing and case work were found helpful, as was good supervision, opportunities for career change, and the chance to try out the administrative responsibilities of organization and coordination. Personal attri-

butes of smiling, liking people, enthusiasm and lots of motivation entered into the responses.

The position is complex and multifaceted. The preparatory development of individuals for the position is equally varied. There is no doubt that the richness of backgrounds of the persons working in the field has contributed to its vitality. The complexity of the position contributes to the excitement of the persons in these jobs and to the numerous accomplishments of volunteers working within service providing agencies. The position is dynamic, the opportunities are unlimited.

The question then becomes how does a professional group with such a wide variety of backgrounds, and with such diversity of job responsibilities begin to develop itself - set standards for job performance and educational development - identify a basic body of knowledge - credential its practitioners - help persons enter the field - and above all maintain its flexibility and innovative spirit?

One might conceivably argue that there is no need to address any of these questions. Afterall, we have functioned reasonably well to date, why formalize (and seemingly rigidify) something as natural as the desire to voluntarily provide services to others and to contribute to our community?

However, a cursory scan of the literature in the field of volunteer administration, the public press, and in many cases, our own programs tell us that we are facing a crisis in the human resources available to perform services. We can no longer afford to operate our programs on good intentions and nice people alone--we must begin to look at the skills that are required to perform our jobs, at the way we organize and administer our programs, and to set the direction for the educational programs that will develop and enhance the skills of the practitioners. If the practitioners, and the associations which represent them do not initiate this process, you can be assured that others will intervene on our behalf. If we do not address and begin to manage our own growth, we will be forced to live with the solutions provided for us by well intended, but frequently ill informed observers.

It was precisely these concerns that prompted the Association for Administration of Volunteer Services to review and revamp its Certification program. This article reflects the outcome of very extensive study that has taken place over the last year and a half, on the issue of professional certification. The study has culminated in a new professional Certification program for volunteer administrators based on the competencies necessary to perform the tasks of administering volunteers in a wide variety of settings. It represents only the first of many steps in the definition, description, and formal recognition of the field.

Certification: What is it?

Certification is:
The process by which a nongovernmental agency or association grants recognition to an individual who has met certain predetermined qualifications specified by that agency or association. (HEW, 1977, p. 4)

It is a voluntary practice whereby the professional chooses to subject his or her credentials and experiences to the review of a body of peers in order to achieve certain recognition for professional accomplishments. It is also one of the most powerful tools of any organized occupational group in attaining and maintaining the professional status of its members. (Eboch, 1969).

The practice of credentialing professionals through certification is not new. While its origins stem back to the early apprenticeship programs where young men acquired skilled trades, its dominance is a 20th Century phenomenon. Medical licensure* in the early 1900's set the stage for professional credentialing practices; however, the real growth of professional credentialing is much more recent.

Many explanations have been offered to explain the growth of credentialing practices. The need to protect the public from incompetent practitioners and the desire to implement uniform standards of acceptable job performance lead the arguments for credentialing professionals. (Eboch, 1969; HEW, 1977; Roemer, 1974; Shimberg, 1977; Shimberg, Esser and Kruger, 1973). This argument also contends that credentialing professionals helps "to protect the members of professional groups against improper and undue interference in professional activities by people who are not properly trained [in the practice]" (Grad, 1974, p. 39).

The transition from a goods-producing to a service producing economy provides another rationale for the boom in certification practices. (Rockhill, 1976) Where the "Good

Housekeeping" seal of approval was the mark of a well produced and useful product, now certification and other professional credentials are the mark of the well trained and competent service provider.

"Professional obsolescence" provides a persuasive argument for the practice. (Lindsay, Morrison and Kelly, 1974) The rate of change in society, the explosion of information and technological advancements readily makes the formal education of a practicing professional "obsolete" in a very short period of time. Certifying the professional, and then demanding periodic checks on methods of practice through validation of certification, assures the public that they are receiving first rate services.

A more fatalistic viewpoint offers an additional rationale for certification. Man's basic propensity to reward achievement, to categorize information and to classify and certify excellence is basic to his very nature. To resist this human quality is tantamount to an exercise in futility. Therefore, it behoves us to employ the best of our collective knowledge to ensure fairness and validity in setting standards and measuring performance. (Mattran, 1976)

The theories describing the evolution of the practice are not without merit. Man does in fact reward achievement and recognize accomplishment. A rapidly changing contemporary society needs to assure the continued competence of its professionals. Statistics verify the transition to a service providing society and some form of assurance about the competence of the service provider seems to be necessary. Each of these rationales speaks to the need to protect the public from incompetent professionals. To provide this protection minimum standards of professional practice must be determined and methods need to be established to assure that professionals meet these standards.

Less laudatory however, has been the way the practice of certification has been implemented. The critics contend that the credentialing process is largely meaningless, as practiced, as it tends to discriminate along social status and racial lines rather than according to differences in level of performance, skill or competence. (Rockhill, 1976) Standards for certification are frequently based on educational levels, hours of continuing education, longevity of professional practice and membership in professional associations. Although

competence is the stated outcome of such measures, technical knowledge is usually the only criteria on which examinations are based. Certification is considered a measure of a professional's "standard of perseverance" and unrelated to issues of service delivery or client interaction.

These criticisms are not ill founded, nor have they been leveled without a great deal of investigation. However, to disregard or discontinue the practice because of poor methods of implementation is also not warranted. Rather, we should learn from our collective mistakes and attempts to revise certification standards in ways that address the basic philosophy behind the practice: protecting the public from the incompetent practitioner through the development and implementation of standards of practice.

It was with this understanding that AAVS pursued the project of revising its current certification program.

A PERFORMANCE-BASED CERTIFICATION PROGRAM FOR VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATORS

Competence and the Ability to Perform

The dictionary defines competence as being capable, sufficient and able: having the requisite skills, abilities or qualities. The competence of a professional is judged by his/her ability to perform the functions and tasks of the job. If the person can meet or surpass the performance standards for a particular position, the person is generally considered to be competent. (Klemp, 1979)

Historically, competence on a job was determined by the individual's ability to meet certain performance standards. Apprenticeship programs were designed to teach the student particular skills under the watchful eye of a master until some criterion of performance was attained. More recently, competence began to be attributed to how much a person knew and accumulated knowledge was taken as an indication of a person's ability as a professional. For example, an honors graduate from business school was automatically deemed competent as a manager by a perspective employer. While knowledge is, of course a key element of an individual's ability to perform, it is far from the whole picture. Knowing or knowledge, can help in the perfor-

mance of doing, but it cannot be substituted for the action (the doing) of performance itself.

Today's emphasis on accountability has prompted a return of attention to the actual performance of the professional. The demand for "relevance" in education in the 60's coupled with affirmative action programs for women, and for minorities accentuated the focus on performance and helped to decrease the emphasis on accumulated knowledge. A more balanced perspective is emerging harmonizing knowledge (content) with use (process). (Klemp, 1979)

The focus on competencies and performance-based assessment programs is a result of these recent developments. Competencies are the composite skills, behaviors or knowledge that the individual possesses that can be demonstrated in the performance of one's responsibilities: that demonstration is observable with objectives that demand "write", "do", "describe", as opposed to objectives requiring "understand" or "perceive" which is unobservable. (Hall and Jones, 1976) Overt action and demonstrable events are important keys in any performance-based programs.

If assessment is then placed on the doing--the demonstrating--one might ask what becomes of the knowing. Clearly it remains important. While persons can perform correctly without fully understanding the reasons for their actions, the chance occurrence of correct actions is radically reduced when the person knows the reasons for performing certain actions. The synergy between knowing and doing is succintly captured by Harriet Naylor when she said

> Analysis of the theoretical and philosophical basis must come at an early stage. Otherwise training is likely to be limited to meeting urgent but recurrent needs for operational demands. I believe if we give people at every educational level understanding of the "Why's", the "How to's" come more easily. Without a valuable system of "Why's" administrative decisions are subject to whim and personal ideosyncracy to a devastating degree, even while technical knowledge is improved.
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> We need professionals, not mere technicians, people with wide and forward vision, to coordinate other-

wise unrelated factors into a functioning administrative whole. (1973, pp. 2-3)

The significance of knowing is indisputable, but when assessment focuses on evidence of the ability to do, how one has learned--or comes to know--assumes a new dimension. Emphasis is no longer placed only on the accumulation of knowledge acquired in formal educational structures where years of attendance are automatically equated with competence. The assessment of performance alters acceptable methods of learning--knowing.

Values Underlying Competency-Based Programs

To change our perceptions of the learning--knowing process means the acceptance of a new set of values about education and professional preparation. I am indebted to Dr. Theodore E. Andrews (1971), for work he did on a competency-based teachers certification program devised for the State of Washington. With only moderate revisions, to make the value applicable to volunteer administration, his assumptions appear below:

1. Every individual is unique and has a unique learning style.

    [Adults should have the freedom to select learning experiences conducive to their self-development and professional growth.]

2. Professional preparation should continue throughout the career of the practitioner.

    [We live in a society characterized by change. We must expect that the roles as well as the areas of competencies demanded of volunteer administrators will change. Preparation must be seen a a continuing and career-long process. In addition it is unrealistic and inappropriate to expect the beginning professional to demonstrate all of the abilities expected of the experienced professional. Therefore, continuing learning experiences must be available to all persons practicing in the field.]

3. Life experiences, local agencies and institutions, and professional associations, as well as colleges and universities should be recognized viable avenues for professional preparation.

[If preparation programs are to be relevant, representatives of all agencies and agents which are affected by or which affect education should participate in isolating areas of competence and professional standards.]

4. Preparation should be based upon performance; performance in relation to stated objectives in the world of the practitioner.

[Since it is on-the-job performance which separates the effective from the ineffective professional, preparation experiences should be designed around, or be based upon, performance objectives and behavioral outcomes.]

5. Preparation and career development programs should be individualized.

[If preparation programs for volunteer services administrators are to be consistent with what is known about learning and about the individual, preparation programs must permit a person to progress at his own rate and in a manner consistent with his unique learning style and personal characteristics.]

(Items 2, 3, 4, and 5 are borrowed from Andrews, 1972, p. 4)

These values and assumptions represent significant departures from previously accepted methods of professional preparation and from most standard practices of certifying professionals. Let's examine them more closely. These tenents hold that the professional is responsible for guiding and directing his/her own career preparation. Hours of attendance in continuing education programs, and formal degrees held, are no longer sufficient, in and of themselves, to constitute competence on the job. Furthermore they suggest that the individual has the freedom to determine his/her own learning needs and, the corresponding responsibility to follow through on a self-designed learning program. The professional may select to attend formal educational programs, to participate in agency related or professional association meetings, or to design a self-study program (or any combination of these methods) to learn the skills needed for the position of volunteer administration. The bottom line in the professional preparation program is the individual's ability

to perform effectively on the job. It is on the basis of the evidence of the ability to perform that the professional is judged in a performance-based certification program.

Determining What One Needs to "Know" and to "Do"

The specification of the competencies to be learned and the performances to be demonstrated are the keystone of a performance-based certification program. And like any keystone, it is the most vulnerable point in the structure (Hall and Jones, 1976). To criticize the competencies and performance criteria once established on the lack of baseline data is not sufficient to abandon the process. Similar criticism is no less deserved in other traditional learning forms, and yet one has not witnessed a mass exodus from formal educational programs on the basis of such accusations. Formal education preparation programs have the luxury of relying on tradition, but tradition holds no corner on the market of acceptable performance on the job. In fact, it is largely because traditional measures have been tried and found wanting that competencies and performance measures have surfaced a viable and necessary approach to professional certification.

Multiple methods have been suggested for the identificaiton of competencies and performance standards--the apex of a performance-based certification program (Hall and Jones, 1976). Existing curriculums can be analyzed, competencies identified and lists compiled. One can also refer to lists of competencies used by similar occupational groups and isolate relevant knowledge area.

A job analysis, performed to isolate the tasks performed by the professional on a daily basis offers another alternative. This approach is most appropriate when viewing the job of a technician. But, when one views the job of a professional, it becomes quickly apparent that what separates a professional from a skilled technician is that the professional must carefully, and effectively apply theory--the knowing of what and when--to the actual application of the how. Identifying only the visible applications of the knowledge disguises the important rationale that determines the why of performing a particular task.

Input from the client who receives or benefits from the professional's skills represents another approach to the identification of competencies. The merit of this approach is

readily evident, but not so clear is the identification of who the client actually is for many professional groups. Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to control the experiences of a client to adequately separate the effects of the professional from other variables impacting the life of the client. In the case of volunteer services administration one would be left with the job of determining if the "client" is the volunteer, or if the "client" is the person receiving the services of the volunteer. Furthermore, the programs and agencies using volunteer services, and the volunteers themselves, are so radically diverse as to make this approach not only cumbersome, but nearly impossible.

The professionals themselves can be quiered to identify the competencies they need and the tasks they perform in executing their resposibilities. Information can be gathered from three vantage points. The professional can be asked what preparation they wished they had had prior to assuming their responsibilities. Information can be gathered from three vantage points. The professional can be asked what preparation they wished they had had prior to assuming their responsibilities. They can be asked what information they need to fulfill their responsibilities on a daily basis. Finally, they can be requested to project the future needs of the professional and corresponding preparation requirements. If one allows for, and attempts to correct for, bias as well as potentially inflated expectations, this approach has considerable merit. The practitioner him/herself is on the front line and can identify important areas for consideration.

A final approach to competency identification is based on theoretical construct development. Theories important to the profession in question are identified. Competencies and performance expectations derived from the theories form the basis of the program. Curriculum building is often handled in this fashion. This approach is somewhat analogous to involving "experts" in a competency-based program. Experts usually schooled in underlying theories determine the competencies and performances which would eminate from the theories. Though meritorious this approach is not without its drawbacks. An excessive reliance on theory tends to equate competence with teh acquisition of knowledge and less with its application. The knowing/doing balance must be carefully guarded.

What the Volunteer Administrator Needs to Know and to Do

A mixture of these methods was employed in arriving at the competencies which comprise AAVS's Performance-Based Certification Program in Volunteer Administration. A thorough review of management theory enlarged to include the contemporary problems in service institution management and volunteer administration identified the constructs underlying the administrative function. A review of learning needs surveys and existing curriculum in the field of volunteer administration helped to refine the list of management compentencies and to add additional ones germane to the field of practice. A survey of 50 persons was then employed to determine the accuracy of the compentencies. Performance criteria, were added to the list of competencies used in the survey. The performance criteria are the actual measures that would be used to determine if the applicant possesses the stated competencies. The final draft of competencies and performance criteria for Certification emerged from the survey results.

The competencies and performance criteria for certification in volunteer administration fall within four major categories. Those categories are:

Program Planning and Organization

Staffing and Directing

Controlling (Evaluation)

Agency, Community and Professional Relations

A total of 19 competencies with nearly 100 possible performance criteria comprise the Performance-Based Certification Program in Volunteer Administration.

What Really Matters: The Value of a Performance-Based Certification Program to the Applicant

In an analysis of several occupational groups to determine what makes a competent professional Klemp (1977) identified several interesting findings. The ability to be willing and able to learn was more important to competent professional performance than the actual amount of knowledge held by the professional!

It is not the acquisition of knowledge or even the use of knowledge that distinguishes the outstanding performer, but rather the cognitive skills that are exercised and developed in the process of knowledge acquisition and use that constitute occupational competence. In other words, the information processing skills related to learning, recall, and forgetting are not so important to success as the conceptual skills that enable one to bring order to information chaos that characterizes one's everyday environment. (p. 2)

Three main cognitive skills related to competent performance in a wide array of occupations (Klemp, 1977):

1. The ability to see broad thematic consistencies in diverse information and the ability to organize and communicate those differences.

2. The ability to conceptualize the many sides of a controversial issue: the ability to understand the underlying issues and the many perspectives on it and to resolve the conflict for him/herself and other people.

3. The ability to learn from experience.

Klemp's findings are critical to all professionals, not only to volunteer administrators. He has experimentally verified what has long seemed intuitively apparent to the astute observer: the competent professional is one who can make sense out of information, conceptualize, and learn from experience. But the progression from the identification of the "true" marks of a competent professional, to ways to assess an individual's relative abilities in these cognitive areas has only just begun.

Paper and pencil tests have long been criticized as they so inadequately measure the richness of thinking and behaving. Direct observation is difficult to implement due to expense and control factor. The subjective qualities of "common sense", "ability to relate well to people" to "conceptualize" and "to learn from experience" are commonly outside of the range of currently available testing devices.

Yet, because our technology of ability measurement is not yet refined enough to get at these larger, more consequential characteristics of people functioning in their professional environment does not mean we must abandon all attempts to evaluate performance. Until more refined techniques are available, the compilation of a portfolio documenting skills is one alternative currently available. It requires the applicant to show evidence of a skill through the production of actual working materials that have exercised that skill.

Analyzing one's skills, compiling documentation to verify the application of these abilities is a key ingredient to learning from experience. The Performance-Based Certification Program offers the applicant a structured format for this very vital learning process. It encourages and enables an individual to assess his/her experience and to learn from that experience. The Performance-Based Certification Program assists the development of the conceptual skills essential to competent professional performance. Developing a portfolio that compiles and verifies the learning that has resulted from the experiences is no doubt more valuable to the applicant who must do the compiling than to the evaluator who must review the material. The importance of assessing job related knowledge and skills through portfolio documentation is especially critical for professionals who have acquired job-knowledge in non-traditional ways. It is the process of compiling the portfolio around key competencies in volunteer services administration that is the crux of this Certification Program.

For more information about the AAVS Performance-Based Certification Program for Volunteer Administrators, write AAVS c/o Martha Martin, Executive Secretary, P.O. Box 4584, Boulder, CO 80306.

Footnotes

*Licensure is the process whereby a governmental agency grants permission to an individual to engage in an occupational practice. It is generally not a voluntary practice. Both licensure and certification are considered credentialing practices.

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