

Numbers Game

It's time to start counting volunteers seriously

One of the praiseworthy accomplishments of the USA Freedom Corps has been to return the federal government to its role in collecting data on volunteering in the United States. Since 2002, the U.S. Department of Labor has released an annual report on volunteer statistics as a supplement to the Current Population Survey (the 2004 report can be downloaded at no charge at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/volun.pdf>).

The very first study on volunteering (and for almost two decades the *only* available data) had been done in 1970 by the U.S. Census Bureau. Independent Sector picked up the ball during the 1990s, issuing its *Giving and Volunteering in the United States* reports through 2001. As appreciated as this information was, it entwined volunteering with a primary focus on financial donations and no study can cover these two broad topics well at the same time. So, the new Department of Labor material will build a better base of data for measuring volunteering.

But all studies to date basically rely on asking individuals, "do you volunteer?" There is no way to correlate these responses to any data provided by the recipient organizations. When we ask people "do you give money?" we can compare those responses to the financial and tax reports of those organizations receiving donations. Why can't we get some data about volunteering from the organizations that benefit from the services of volunteers?

If we genuinely care about the amount and scope of contributed services, we need to get serious about collecting solid information. Following are some examples.

Annual reports and 990s

How many annual reports of nonprofit organizations include data about the quantity and quality of volunteer involvement? For too long accountants have been allowed to dictate this whole issue, as if the only meaningful way to "account" for volunteers is the dollar value of their service.

This is a red herring. It ought to be possible for organizations to provide some basic numbers about how many people volunteered in a year and perhaps information about their ages, gender, race, etc.

The federal Form 990 continues this neglect. Information about volunteers may be provided as *optional* data and, in fact, is discouraged within financial statements. It comes as no surprise, given the already complex reporting requirements, that precious few organizations bother to complete the optional question.

If the argument is that information about volunteer involvement is too difficult to collect, the response ought to be that maybe no one cares. Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Girl Scouts, literacy councils, hospitals, and the vast majority of formal settings surely *ought* to know how many people they are involving. They count employees. They count clients. Why not count – and report – volunteers?

Annual reports and 990s allow

prospective donors to compare organization to organization in terms of the ways they spend their money or the amount of excess revenue over expenses. Why not make it possible to assess and compare the involvement of volunteers?

Further, most annual reports contain much more than financial statements. There are always essays and photographs produced for the purpose of informing the public and funders about the accomplishments of the organization in a more anecdotal way. Why are volunteers so rarely highlighted or

seem tacked on as an afterthought?

It's a mystery why foundations and other major funders do not ask some simple, yet powerful, questions in their applications and in end-of-grant reporting. Here are a few that would force money-seeking organizations to take time to think about volunteers in a substantive way:

Application for funds: How will volunteers be incorporated into the delivery of the funded service? How will these volunteers be recruited and coordi-

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nated? What special expertise will be donated vs. skills expected to be provided by paid staff?

Final report: How many volunteers were involved (as compared to expectations) and how did they participate? What did they add to the project to complement the work of paid staff? How will community engagement be maintained after the funding ends?

If a funder thinks it's important to ask for such information, wouldn't it make a difference?

There are other sources of a wealth of additional information about what is being done by members of the community in unpaid support of social causes.

Where are reports about community service organized by schools? Given the official nature of school settings and the type of data gathering that is done there routinely on other subjects, why can't we expect to learn what students are doing in the community, how many hours they are doing it, whether or not they stay active beyond minimum requirements, and what impact they may have had?

All-volunteer associations are equally liable for lack of reporting. We have heard a great deal about the reduced level of membership in civic clubs, fraternal groups, and other membership organizations. But what about the members they still have? The real question here is distinguishing between people who join a group and those who actually do volunteer work for and through it! Some honest disclosure, while potentially embarrassing, might actually help these organizations to improve their recruitment of new members.

Why can't youth-involving organizations report on the accomplishments of their participants? It is more than folklore that Boy and Girl Scouts do community service, as do faith-based

youth groups, sororities and fraternities, etc. Would it be so very hard to agree on a few basic pieces of information that all these groups would collect and report?

All of the above speaks purely to counting heads. Unfortunately, most assessments of volunteer engagement focus on tallying the number of hours served, though this is relatively meaningless as a measure of *quality* of service. The older Independent Sector reports reveal that the number of volunteers has gone up but the average number of hours served has gone down. How should this finding be interpreted?

Rather than some sort of warning sign, perhaps it means that volunteers have grown so effective in their service (or are so well managed by staff who understand volunteer administration principles) that they can accomplish more in less time.

This discussion of statistics is critically connected to the debate about the vocabulary of service. If we are going to count volunteers, whom do we mean? Do we count board members? Stipended AmeriCorps participants? Student "interns"? Now add faith-based service into the mix and you can see why getting a handle on the true scope of the field is so hard.

Any community in the world where there is a volunteer center or similar body, or where there is a DOVIA or other professional network of volunteer program managers, can decide – on its own – to collect and report "The State of Volunteering Here." It simply takes will. *NPT*

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