

Outreach to Nonprofit Volunteer Programs: Opportunity for Impact, Improving Graduate Education, and an Invitation to Become a Part of the Volunteer Program Assessment

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Nonprofit organizations, tasked with improving the quality of life both within our national borders and abroad, can benefit enormously from the skills and knowledge of organizational scientists (Berry et al., 2011). The University of North Carolina at Charlotte's *Volunteer Program Assessment* (VPA; pronounced *vee-pah*) offers nonprofit organizational leaders a "helping hand" by giving them access to the skills and expertise of graduate students and faculty. Specifically, to facilitate organizational effectiveness, VPA provides nonprofit organizations with volunteer program assessment services at no cost.

The VPA assessment focuses on evaluating and understanding a key stakeholder group that can sometimes be overlooked within nonprofit organizations:

the volunteers. The VPA survey provides organizational leaders with information regarding their volunteers' perceptions of: (a) their volunteer organization, (b) their volunteer work, (c) their interpersonal relationships, and (d) their organizational constraints. A complete list of the dimensions captured with the VPA survey can be downloaded [here](#). The VPA survey also includes a qualitative component, in which volunteers provide information regarding perceptions of their volunteer program's greatest strengths and areas for growth. Together, these quantitative and qualitative data give nonprofit organizational leaders a snapshot of the current health of their volunteer program.

The primary goal of VPA is to promote nonprofit organizational effectiveness through the collection of volunteer attitude, perception, and engagement data so that volunteer management programs can be better leveraged and more impactful. At the same time, VPA creates a context that engenders graduate student outreach and service learning.

Service learning allows graduate students to test and develop their consulting skills while also providing students the opportunity to give back to their community (Thomas, 2002). Although doctoral programs must focus heavily on building the scientific competencies of students (O'Connor & Ryan, 1996), VPA addresses the development of consulting skills by providing graduate students with structured, collaborative, hands-on learning experiences that bridge both science and practice. In the following paper we provide an overview of VPA, discuss VPA's impact in the nonprofit community, describe graduate student learning and training experiences, and briefly review ongoing VPA-related research. Finally, we provide information regarding how you, your graduate program, or company can become involved in VPA.

The Volunteer Program Assessment

What Is VPA?

VPA is a grant-funded volunteer assessment system. VPA consultants work one-on-one with volunteer coordinators to guide them through the administration of the assessment and provide the nonprofit organization with various survey materials and sample communications. The VPA survey, which takes approximately 10 minutes to complete, is administered through an anonymous

online survey link. Although the quantitative component of the VPA survey is standardized, nonprofit organizations are invited to customize one to two open-ended questions to fit their needs.

At the end of the VPA process, which typically lasts between 4 to 6 weeks, consultants provide each nonprofit organization with a detailed report that speaks to a wide array of individual and organizational outcomes. This report includes item and scale summaries for all dimensions, along with information on respondent characteristics (e.g., volunteer tenure and frequency of volunteering). A sample of the VPA report can be downloaded [here](#). This report is discussed during a final consultation that takes place between a VPA consultant, a volunteer manager, and any other interested stakeholders in the nonprofit organization. This consultation occurs either over the phone or in person, depending on the location of both the consultant and the nonprofit organization.

The VPA consultation, which averages an hour in length, involves the discussion of a volunteer program's strengths and weaknesses. In addition to discussing the quantitative and qualitative survey data, VPA consultants also work with clients to develop potential interventions. At the end of the consultation, all nonprofit organizations are in-

vited to evaluate their program again in the future. Clients interested in a repeat assessment are asked to reapply to VPA a year after their initial consultation. At this time, there is no limit to the number of times a client can participate in VPA.

Finally, VPA also provides clients with a normative report that is based on the results of over 100 volunteer program assessments completed since the establishment of VPA in 2009. This normative report provides insights into the common strength areas and challenges experienced by volunteer programs. Taken together, the client-specific data and normative report function as a diagnostic tool that can be employed by organizational leaders to facilitate nonprofit effectiveness.

VPA's History

The creation of VPA was prompted by findings from a large-scale national survey of volunteer programs. This 2008 survey, funded by The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) grant received by Dr. Steven Rogelberg, identified key drivers of volunteer engagement and commitment. In addition to the identification of these drivers, findings from this survey also revealed the current state of volunteer management practices and volunteer engagement within nonprofit organizations. These findings highlighted the need for accessible volunteer pro-

gram assessment systems that could provide insights into the strategic management of volunteer resources. One year after this initial survey, students and faculty at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte launched the Volunteer Program Assessment. Dr. Daniel Bonilla and **Dr. Joseph Allen**, who at the time were doctoral students in UNC Charlotte's Organizational Science program, played key roles in the establishment of VPA. Since its inception in 2009, VPA has supported the nonprofit community by providing scholarships for volunteer assessment services to volunteer programs operating both in the United States and in Canada.

VPA Clients

To date, VPA has worked with over 100 organizations. This client base has been geographically diverse, with nonprofits from over 20 states participating in VPA. From coast to coast, VPA consultants have worked with clients located in, but not limited to, Florida, Massachusetts, Missouri, Hawaii, California, Oregon, Nevada, New York, Alaska, Colorado, Texas, Louisiana, and Alberta. The types of organizations that VPA serves are also continuing to diversify. Although many clients have been and continue to be animal shelters, VPA has also worked with a growing number of arts and science organizations, police volunteer organizations, homeless shelters, and hospitals. Recently, an article featuring VPA's work

(Lopina, Dunn, Olien, & Rogelberg, 2014) has attracted even more diverse clientele located both within the United States and internationally.

Client reactions to VPA services have been overwhelmingly positive. For example, Marcie Williams, the community relations manager at the Larimer Humane Society, stated that, “The VPA allowed us to gain tremendous insight into our volunteer program, providing us a snapshot of things we’re doing successfully and areas where we can improve. Since we administered the VPA, we’ve improved communication with our existing volunteers, put additional training programs in place, and generated a host of new ideas that will keep our volunteer program buzzing for months, and even years, to come.” In a similar vein, Sarah Fallin, the program coordinator at Orange County Animal Services, said that, “The VPA team impressed me with their efficient, professional manner—an approach that not only inspired confidence but generated the results I was looking for. I have been able to make program improvements and get to know our volunteers’ needs all at the same time.” Finally, Celia Gregory, the volunteer coordinator at the Nashville Humane Association commented that, “From the instant our VPA representative established contact with me last

summer, I felt genuinely engaged and supported. Our representative’s professionalism and expertise, coupled with our instant rapport on the phone, made for an enlightening several weeks as the VPA results unfolded.”

VPA Partners: University Affiliates

As VPA grew from 2009 to 2011 and more clients became interested in the program, VPA began partnering with other universities around the United States in the hopes of reaching a broader nonprofit client base and expanding its prosocial efforts. In August 2011, Dr. Joseph Allen, a graduate of UNC Charlotte’s Organizational Science Doctoral Program, began VPA at Creighton University using an undergraduate student team. Later, Dr. Allen brought the VPA program with him to the graduate program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. In early 2012, VPA also partnered with George Mason University (GMU). The inaugural GMU-VPA team, led by **Dr. Eden King**, included 10 graduate student members. Later in 2012, VPA also partnered with Illinois State University, which is led by Dr. Kim Schneider and comprises of two master’s students. Most recently, in June 2013, VPA partnered with the University of South Florida (USF). USF’s VPA team, led by **Dr. Tammy Allen** and **Dr. Mark Poteet**, includes four doctoral stu-

dents. With consultants at all four affiliate universities actively working with both national clients and volunteer organizations situated within their local communities, the number of organizations concurrently participating in VPA is at an all-time high.

Affiliate Support

To help facilitate the expansion of this program to other universities, VPA provides affiliates access to the online survey platform used for survey administration and report generation, training materials for VPA consultants, the normative database report for the VPA survey (collected from 2009–present), and instructions for customizing the online survey for new clients and generating survey reports. In addition to these materials, VPA also assists affiliates with both the initial training of their consultants and with finding their first VPA clients. Introducing affiliates to clients helps them gain VPA consulting experience without the added pressure of locating interested nonprofit organizations. These first clients can also recommend and connect the affiliate with other nonprofit organizations, leading to the creation of a growing client base. Finally, all new affiliates are paired with an active and experienced VPA member who walks the new member through a step-by-step training program. This training allows the new member to be-

come familiar and comfortable with the VPA process and provides them with one-on-one feedback sessions. To facilitate ongoing training and skill development, VPA created a listserv that provides all VPA members with an easy way to communicate between affiliate universities, share successes, and pose challenging questions to the wider VPA community. All of these resources and one-on-one support are provided free of charge to new affiliates.

Learning Through Service

Graduate Student Consulting

Beyond its overarching mission to support the nonprofit community, VPA serves as a formal mechanism through which graduate students, working alongside faculty, can develop, test, and hone their practitioner-related skills and enact evidence-based consulting. Through their efforts to provide valuable volunteer assessment services, graduate students active in VPA attend to the needs of the larger nonprofit community while engaging in reciprocal service learning. All VPA student members are volunteers who donate their time, knowledge, and growing expertise to support the nonprofit community. Since 2009, approximately 30 different students have donated their time to VPA. The 2013–2014 academic year has seen the largest membership to date, with over 20 active

VPA consultants spanning UNC Charlotte and its four university affiliates.

Consulting Skill-Building

Graduate student involvement in VPA is conducive for the development of a wide range of consulting skills. VPA allows students to build their communication, client management, presentation, and analytic skills. Brendan Hunt, a graduate from George Mason University's I-O program, explained how his experiences as a VPA consultant transferred to his current role working for an applied consulting organization. Hunt stated that, "The experiences I had with VPA were perfect preparation for actual client interactions and presentations in my current consulting position. VPA provided a safe and nonthreatening opportunity for me to bring what I had learned in the classroom to a real-life consulting situation." The discussion of potential interventions also familiarizes students with collaborative, organization-specific problem diagnosis while giving them the opportunity to develop, test, and refine their problem-solving skills. Zoa Ordoñez, a current Organizational Science doctoral student at UNC Charlotte, recently recounted how VPA has shaped her consulting skills over the past 3 years. Ordoñez stated that, "As a student who will soon be joining the applied world, I have to say that the consulting skills gained from VPA are invaluable.

The client-facing experience that I have had through VPA has trained me to develop and manage relationships, from building rapport to understanding clients' needs and tailoring our tools to meet those." Ordoñez further explained, "Most importantly, when it comes to organizational issues, I can think on my feet. During consultation calls, clients ask unexpected and often difficult questions, but the knowledge and experience gained throughout the years has prepared me to respond eloquently."

VPA provides a context in which practical problem solving, which requires both knowledge of relevant content and creative thinking, can be fostered in real-time with the support of knowledgeable senior students and faculty. Although graduate students work with clients one-on-one, they always have access to the support and know-how of the larger VPA team. Oftentimes challenging problems can be discussed and workshopped at VPA meetings or through the VPA listserv, where students pool their experiences and proactively examine problems under the guidance of faculty members.

Graduate students at UNC Charlotte also recently piloted a new VPA course designed to supplement their existing consultation activities with a combination of structured classroom learning and hands-on projects. Class activities included consultation roleplay; the analysis and

presentation of normative data; and sessions reviewing survey response rate, the management of client relationships, and strategies for addressing interpersonal conflict between volunteers and paid staff. During the semester, guest speakers also visited to discuss relevant topics that were of interest to students in the class. **Dr. Scott Tonidandel** led a session focused on the use of relative weights analyses in consulting, and **Dr. John Kello** ran an organizational development workshop. Student reactions to this pilot were very positive, leading the VPA course to be offered again in the spring of 2014.

VPA Consultant Training

Before engaging with clients one-on-one, all graduate students are required to complete a training program. On average, the training program takes 6 months to complete. Due to the length of training, consultants are asked to commit to a minimum of 1 academic year in VPA. This ensures that all new consultants have time to both complete the training program and engage in one-on-one client work. Before beginning the training process, graduate students interested in participating in VPA are asked to familiarize themselves with a number of pre-selected research articles and white papers. These readings cover an array of volunteer topics, ranging from volunteer management and strategies for effective volunteer communica-

tion to employee experiences with volunteers and volunteer retention. After completing the required readings, incoming VPA consultants complete the following steps: (a) the VPA shadow, (b) the mock VPA, (c) the reverse VPA shadow. On average, 2 to 4 weeks elapse between each phase of training. This amount of time depends on current client load, trainer availability, and the trainees' schedule. The VPA training process has been carefully designed to allow students to become increasingly independent and comfortable working one on one with clients.

During the first step of training, new trainees shadow an experienced student consultant. This step allows trainees to take a "back seat" and learn about the VPA process without the added pressure of engaging with a client. New trainees are included on all emails and calls with clients and are shown how to collect data, create reports, and prepare for consultations. Because trainees will be walked through the entire VPA process, the VPA shadow typically takes 4 to 6 weeks to complete. When asked about her initial shadowing experiences, **Haley Myers**, an Organizational Science doctoral student at UNC Charlotte, stated that, "Getting feedback from the seasoned VPA members, and shadowing them at first, was important for knowing what type of things the organizations look for and how we may answer questions that will come up."

For the second step in the VPA training process, known as the mock VPA, new trainees work with another VPA member who poses as a volunteer coordinator. This process replicates a VPA and gives trainees the opportunity to test out the knowledge they gained when shadowing a real assessment without having to interact with an actual client. This step in the VPA training process can take as little as one week to complete.

Leann Caudill, an Organizational Science doctoral student who recently completed her VPA training, commented that, “The mock consult call was the most beneficial. Because even though you may read FAQs or go over potential client questions by yourself, it doesn't feel real until you are put on the spot,” Caudill continued, stating, “The fact that you are paired with an experienced VPA consultant is great because you get to hear about the hard questions he or she has had and learn the tricks they have picked up along the way.”

During the third step of training, known as the VPA reverse shadow, new trainees lead their first VPA. Working with the support of an experienced VPA consultant, the trainee assumes the lead role and is in complete control of the VPA process. In this stage, the trainee solidifies their knowledge of the VPA process while still receiving direct support, guidance, and feedback from an experienced VPA consultant. Similar to the VPA shadow, this stage in the train-

ing process takes 4 to 6 weeks to complete. When reflecting on her training experiences, **Stephanie Andel**, an I-O doctoral student at the University of South Florida commented, “I definitely feel like the VPA training process helped me to feel prepared and capable of completing my first solo consulting experience. The training made learning the VPA process very manageable. For example, by shadowing other VPA consultants, I was able to see the entire process without having to worry about participating and making a mistake. Then, by the time that I completed my own mock VPA, I felt equipped with the basic skills to run the VPA.”

Student feedback like this reflects the core mission of the training program: to introduce students to consulting in a comprehensive yet easy to manage way. To make sure that all students have access to this training program, experienced consultants are paired with each new affiliate. Consultants guide affiliates through all three stages of the training process. Consultants and affiliates regularly communicate through both email and phone to guarantee that all new student members, regardless of location, are exposed to the same training program. This rigorous training process ensures that VPA consultants are fulfilling the mission of VPA by delivering quality results that will ultimately enhance volunteer program effectiveness.

Research

Through hands-on client work, graduate students involved in VPA are also uniquely positioned to identify and generate problem-focused research questions. Graduate students interested in pursuing questions related to volunteers and volunteer management are encouraged to use a large, multilevel research database generated from VPA data for research purposes. This database is securely stored at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. All identifying information is removed, as the confidentiality of both VPA's clients and their volunteers is essential. This database is accessible to all VPA members who are interested in pursuing questions related to volunteer program effectiveness. Current and future VPA research projects include investigations of: (a) how the use of talent management practices influences volunteer outcomes, such as volunteer engagement, commitment, and retention; (b) structural and leadership characteristics that influence volunteers' perceptions of their organization; and (c) the role of social media in the nonprofit context.

Becoming Involved

To continue its mission of supporting nonprofit organizational effectiveness, VPA is focused on building strong relationships within the academic and nonprofit communities. By having an active presence within the SIOP community,

VPA hopes that its affiliated groups will continue to grow. VPA members have also made efforts to spread the word about the services through features on the SIOP prosocial website, writing articles for peer-reviewed journals with volunteer manager audiences, attending volunteer management conferences, and asking previous clients to "pay it forward" by recommending other organizations they think would benefit from VPA services. By spreading the word about VPA services and expanding its affiliate base, VPA can keep up with client demands and meet the needs of all organizations that are interested in volunteer assessment services.

VPA is always interested in hearing from students, faculty, volunteer managers, and organizational leaders who would like to become involved in the program. If you are interested in your graduate program or organization becoming our newest VPA affiliate, want to recommend a nonprofit organization that you have worked with for VPA services, or want to learn more about VPA in general, please email volpro-gram@uncc.edu. If you would like to read more about the VPA process, our current consultants and partners, or our past clients' experiences, please visit our website at <http://vpa.uncc.edu/>. We look forward to hearing from you and continuing to increase the SIOP community's involvement in VPA.

Additional Resources

More details about the VPA survey can be found at our website. Here you can download a [sample of the VPA survey](#), information on the [dimensions measured](#), a [sample of the VPA report](#), and a [preview of the VPA norms report](#).

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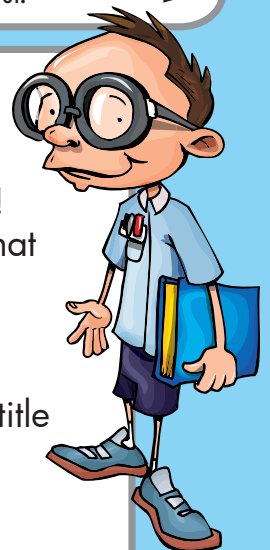
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