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The Volunteer Program Assessment: Promoting Nonprofit Organizational Effectiveness

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The [Volunteer Program Assessment](#) [8] (VPA; pronounced vee-pah) is a completely free volunteer assessment system designed to promote nonprofit organizational effectiveness. This program assessment, which typically runs for about four to six weeks, provides volunteer managers and organizational leaders with a snapshot of their volunteers' attitudes and perceptions. Volunteer program managers work one-on-one with a VPA consultant throughout the process, which culminates in a detailed, aggregated report of their volunteers' responses to a wide array of important individual and organizational outcomes. The VPA results report is a valuable diagnostic tool that allows organizational leaders to better understand the current health of their volunteer program.

In 2014, VPA turns five years old. The first five years of VPA have seen significant growth in terms of internal and external membership, and the range of clients served. Since its inception, VPA has been greatly involved in the animal welfare nonprofit sector; within the last year, VPA expanded to serve arts and science, police service, and other nonprofit organizations. As a free-of-charge consulting service run by graduate students and faculty at five universities across the United States, VPA is looking to not only continue our work in these sectors, but also

expand to other sectors of nonprofits.

We begin the following article with a brief history of VPA, an overview of the process, and a summary of its success to date. Next, based on normative data from over 100 nonprofits, we describe three common areas for improvement among volunteer programs. Finally, we provide additional information for those interested in participating in VPA. By spreading the word about VPA, we seek to serve more volunteer programs with the ultimate goal of helping those who help others.

History of VPA

VPA was developed by graduate students and faculty in the Organizational Science doctoral program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte). The Organizational Science program is an interdisciplinary program that seeks to build scholars and practitioners capable of addressing a vast array of current organizational challenges. One of the key hallmarks of organizational science is that it is driven by "real world" organizational concerns and evidence-based management. Rather than focusing on research-for-research-sake, organizational scientists look to the "real world" for inspiration and direction of their research agenda.

In 2008, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) funded Dr. Steven Rogelberg - the founding faculty director of VPA - because The HSUS wanted to learn about key success drivers and derailers of nonprofits. More specifically, The HSUS generously provided a grant for Dr. Rogelberg and his graduate student team to study volunteers and volunteer management practices among animal welfare agencies.

After conducting an expansive survey of over 70 animal welfare nonprofits, Dr. Rogelberg and then-graduate students Dr. Joseph Allen and Dr. Daniel Bonilla found that volunteer perceptions and attitudes provided essential information into the health and viability of a volunteer program.

That is, understanding the volunteer perspective regarding a program provided a critical window of insight into what is working well and not so well. A healthy, well-functioning volunteer program fosters an engaged volunteer workforce (Lopina & Rogelberg, 2013), and engagement is related to several important individual and organizational outcomes. Specifically, more engaged individuals are likely to be less stressed (Halbesleben, 2010), report better overall psychological health (Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Taris, Schaufeli, & Shimazu, 2010), and feel a greater sense of commitment to the organization (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006).

In addition, the engagement of volunteers can positively impact paid employees of the organization. When volunteers are not engaged in their work, paid employees may perceive their interactions with volunteers negatively, which can result in paid employees feeling more stressed, less committed, and more likely to leave an organization (Rogelberg, Allen, Conway, Goh, Currie, & McFarland, 2010).

However, the expense of hiring an outside consultant to assess volunteer engagement would be cost-prohibitive to many nonprofits. Thus, in 2009, VPA was developed. VPA was a natural fit with the science-practice mission of Organizational Science, and it also received immediate support from the larger UNC Charlotte community especially as the University itself is committed to providing outreach to the local and national nonprofit community. Through the combined financial support of The HSUS and UNC Charlotte, VPA is offered to nonprofit groups free-of-charge through scholarships.

Overview of the VPA Process

After interested nonprofit groups have completed their application and been awarded a scholarship, the VPA process begins. This process lasts approximately four to six weeks. An experienced VPA consultant works one-on-one with a client organization, guiding them through the four-step VPA process.

In the initial step of the VPA process, the volunteer manager or coordinator receives an online screener survey, which asks the volunteer manager questions about their organization, their volunteer program, and their role as the volunteer manager. Once the screener survey has been completed, the data collection phase begins, and the volunteer survey is disseminated to the organization's volunteer base. During this step of the process, volunteer managers send an anonymous online survey link (generated by the VPA consultant) to their volunteer constituents and explain that completing the survey is completely voluntary. The VPA consultant then monitors the response rate and results. The VPA consultant is not privy to individual volunteers' contact information, and the volunteer manager is not privy to individual volunteer responses. The data collection phase typically lasts two weeks.

After the survey has been closed, the third step of the process begins in which the VPA consultant prepares a results report that will be shared with the volunteer manager. In the final step, The VPA consultant facilitates a one-on-one consultation meeting with the volunteer manager to review and interpret the results and provide recommendations for best practices. For local clients, these meetings take place in-person. Long distance clients are reached via telephone or Skype.

VPA Survey

The VPA survey is comprised of a number of dimensions suggested to be important in the current employee engagement literature (e.g., Macey, Schneider, Barbera, & Young, 2009; Mone, Eisinger, Guggenheim, Price, & Stine, 2011). The content of the VPA survey was validated through the initial study of over 70 animal welfare agencies in 2008. VPA captures volunteer attitudes and perceptions in the following principal areas:

- satisfaction with recognition
- satisfaction with communication
- perception of voice/input
- volunteer feelings of competence
- role ambiguity
- satisfaction with the nature of the work



- organizational barriers to being successful as a volunteer
- volunteer engagement
- satisfaction with paid staff
- satisfaction with other volunteers
- satisfaction with the volunteer coordinator

In addition to these principal areas, the survey captures three key volunteer outcomes:

- volunteer commitment to the organization
- burnout
- intentions to quit

Finally, to enhance the quality of results and to create a more comprehensive picture of what may be occurring within a specific organization, the VPA survey also includes a qualitative component. Volunteers are provided with the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions about the strengths and weaknesses of the volunteer program. These data allow the consultant to get a better snapshot of what is going on within the organization, leading to a better diagnosis of the current state of the volunteer program.

Report to the Client

When the survey is completed, the VPA consultant aggregates all the individual volunteer responses to create a summary report for the client. This aggregation process is handled via the online survey platform, as well as through basic statistical software. The report consists of four main components: 1) general characteristics of the respondents; 2) overall summary for each of the dimensions on the survey; 3) item summary for the items within each dimension; and, 4) the compilation of volunteers' responses to the open-ended questions. A [sample Volunteer Program Assessment Report](#) [9] can be viewed on our website.

In addition to the report documents, the VPA consultant prepares an interpretation of the organization-specific pattern of results. This interpretation integrates information gathered from the volunteer manager on the initial screener survey with the aggregated volunteer responses. The VPA consultant also provides a broader context for the report documents by sharing relevant comparisons between the client's results and the overall, average results of prior clients (see "Data-Driven Results" below). Through this oral report, we seek to provide the volunteer manager with their key strength areas as well as call attention to their main challenges. As such, the VPA consultant can help the volunteer manager identify and prioritize potential interventions. Because the volunteers are all anonymous responders to the survey, we encourage our clients to share the results of the VPA survey with their volunteer base through one or more modes of communication (e.g., volunteer newsletter, bulletin board posts, upcoming meetings, etc.).

Our Consultants

Graduate students from the Organizational Science, Industrial-Organizational Psychology, Public Policy, MBA, Sociology, and Communication Studies programs, along with undergraduate students, volunteer their time to support VPA. This multidisciplinary student group is united by their shared passion for understanding how to improve organizational effectiveness and scholarly emphasis on "real world" organizational challenges. VPA provides graduate students a unique opportunity to gain experience with the consulting process, while participating in service to the local and national community.

VPA wants to ensure that our clients receive the best service possible. To that end, VPA has designed a thorough consultant training process to prepare a consultant to work one-on-one with a client. VPA consultants progress through four stages of training. In the first stage, a new VPA member reads relevant research related to volunteers and volunteer management practices. Then, in the second stage, the new VPA member shadows an experienced VPA consultant through an entire VPA process with a client. In the third stage, the new VPA member leads a mock client VPA process in which they function as the VPA consultant and an experienced VPA team member plays the role of the client. In the final stage of training, the new VPA member works with an actual client and has an experienced VPA member shadow their process. After the formal stages of training are completed, training and developmental resources are continually available.

To reach a broader nonprofit client-base, the VPA team at UNC Charlotte provides resources and training to launch VPA consulting teams at other universities in the United States. Specifically, VPA affiliates are provided access to the online survey platform for VPA survey administration and report generation, as well as training materials (i.e., VPA process documents, instruction manuals, and white papers) and an initial client contact list. In addition, new VPA affiliates progress through the same new consultant training described above, with an experienced UNC Charlotte consultant serving as their mentor. From 2011 to 2013, VPA expanded beyond the boundaries of UNC Charlotte, and now has VPA affiliates housed at George Mason University, University of South Florida, University of Nebraska at Omaha, and Illinois State University. [Contact information for our affiliates](#) [10] can be found on our Web site.

Our clients appreciate and recognize our training efforts and have vocalized their satisfaction with our VPA consultants. For example, one client from the Central Missouri Humane Society commented:

The VPA survey was a great tool to have as I re-evaluated my volunteer program. My representative, Ben, guided me through every step and was in constant contact with me making the process very easy. I am already seeing much improvement in my volunteer program resulting from the strategies presented to me through this survey!

VPA's commitment to training is ongoing, and faculty and graduate students involved in VPA at UNC Charlotte meet regularly to share information, discuss challenges, and learn from invited speakers about consulting best practices. The affiliate teams also remain well-connected after they complete their on-boarding process. In 2013, the affiliate universities held their first annual VPA meeting at the Society for Industrial Organizational Psychology conference in Houston, TX. In addition, affiliates are linked through an e-mail listserv, through which teams can share experiences, ask questions, and broaden their consulting and volunteer management expertise.

VPA Clients and Partners

Since 2009, VPA has served over 100 clients from a variety of nonprofit sectors - animal care, arts and science, police service, homeless shelters, and hospitals - located across the United States and Canada. The HSUS was a crucial partner in establishing and maintaining VPA through grant-funding; thus, our initial client base consisted primarily of animal care organizations. More recently, VPA has also established connections with the Arts and Science Council of Charlotte (ASC) and a representative from the Volunteer in Police Service (VIPS).

The ASC partnership allowed VPA to make a local impact, and to bring together local volunteer managers and coordinators. After completing volunteer program assessments with several local ASC organizations, VPA and the ASC organized a collaborative workshop. Clients had an opportunity to work together in small groups, sharing their current strategies and brainstorming additional tactics for addressing volunteer management challenges. One organization from the ASC reflected on their experience with VPA and the benefit of the data-driven process:

The VPA program has been the best in CAST's History. We participate in many programs but VPA has been the most tangible and satisfying with real-time analysis and concrete action items we can put in place immediately!

As our local clientele grows, the ASC supports continued collaborative educational opportunities.

Recently, VPA has begun working with Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS), a national nonprofit group interested in improving the experience of volunteers in police service. Marjorie Trachtman, the Volunteer Manager at the Bellevue Police Department in Bellevue, WA, and the Washington state VIPS representative, learned of VPA through contact with The HSUS, and felt that there was an opportunity in the police service sector. Once again, VPA was thrilled to answer a real-world need and offer volunteer assessments free of charge to police service volunteer programs. To date, five police service organizations have completed the VPA, and eight additional programs are either underway or scheduled for a future assessment. VPA, along with Trachtman, are interested in expanding volunteer management education to police service leaders nationwide.

Data-Driven Results: Common Areas for Development

In addition to providing volunteer managers with information about their own volunteers' perceptions, VPA has also compiled client data from the organizations that completed the VPA

survey between August 2009 and January 2013 to create a normative database. Individual volunteer responses are aggregated to produce an overall, average response for individual items and dimensions on the VPA survey. To date, the normative database reflects averaged responses from over 9,000 volunteers from 90 different organizations (you can preview the [normative report](#) [11] on our website). In January 2014, 26 additional clients and approximately 2,000 total volunteers will be added to this ever-growing database. These averaged responses can serve as a benchmark comparison for the current client.

As such, VPA can inform volunteer managers of overall patterns of strengths and weaknesses among volunteer programs. Access to this ever-growing volunteer database is a unique feature of the VPA experience, and many of our clients greatly appreciate this aspect of VPA. VPA consultants can help clients understand their program-specific strengths and weaknesses, and also provide the broader context of how their program compares with volunteer programs in general. The normative database has also allowed us to identify areas in which volunteer programs seem to be excelling, as well as common challenge, or growth areas, faced by nonprofits.



Common Growth Areas

Although each individual program may encounter unique struggles, our examination of the aggregated volunteer responses in our normative database has allowed us to identify three common areas that pose challenges for volunteer programs across the board. Overall, volunteers are dissatisfied with: 1) a lack of voice; 2) top-down communication; and, 3) their interactions with paid staff. Even among well-functioning, healthy volunteer programs, volunteers rate these three areas lower than the other dimensions captured on the VPA survey. In this section, we will provide a brief description of each of these common challenge areas.

Perception of Voice/Input

The most common area for growth among volunteer organizations is perception of voice. Perception of voice is described as bottom-up communication in which individuals are provided opportunities and outlets to express their concerns and opinions to their leaders, especially with regards to organizational decisions (e.g., DeCrémer, Cornelis, & van Hiel, 2008).

A number of negative outcomes are related to individuals' perception of a lack of voice, including feelings of disrespect (Van den Bos et al., 2010) and decreased job satisfaction (Bane, 1999). Among volunteers, lack of voice has been shown to be related to burnout and intentions to quit (Allen & Mueller, 2013). Creating a sense of voice in volunteer programs can be particularly challenging because volunteers – and sometimes volunteer managers – often have little control over organizational decision-making. The key for volunteer managers is to create multiple avenues for volunteers to express their opinions, concerns, and suggestions. For example, volunteer managers can create an anonymous suggestion/concerns/ideas box (either physically in the organization or virtually), which gives the volunteers an opportunity to voice both positive and negative feedback. When feedback is provided, it is important that the volunteer manager close the loop and follow-up with volunteers to explain how their input was utilized, or why it could not be implemented.

Satisfaction with Communication

Satisfaction with communication is the complement to perception of voice, and reflects the perception of top-down communication (from leaders to volunteers). Communication is considered one of the essential facets underlying general job satisfaction (Muchinsky, 1977) and engagement (e.g., Macey et al., 2009). Fostering clear and consistent communication with volunteers is particularly difficult because many volunteers have inconsistent, irregular shifts that may or may not coincide with their volunteer managers' schedule. Thus, across the organizations surveyed, volunteers report greater dissatisfaction with communication than other dimensions measured on the VPA survey.

In general, communication can be improved by sharing information through multiple modalities – in-person meetings, electronically, in-print. However, *quality* of communication (e.g., clarity, timeliness, relevance, etc.) should not be sacrificed for *quantity* of modes. The most effective communication results come from matching the type of information being disseminated with the

appropriate and desirable mode of communication (Byrne & LeMay, 2006). For example, specific information that directly affects volunteers' day-to-day functioning may be best communicated through face-to-face interactions (e.g., individual or group meetings with the volunteer coordinator; Byrne & LeMay, 2006). Information regarding the organization in general is better conveyed and received through electronic or print media (e.g., e-newsletters, bulletin board postings; Byrne & LeMay, 2006). We highly encourage volunteer managers to ask their volunteers about their communication mode preferences. In addition, social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) can be utilized to communicate with and connect more volunteers.

Satisfaction with Paid Staff

Satisfaction with paid staff is another important facet of job satisfaction (Gillet & Schwab, 1975) and engagement (e.g., Macey et al., 2009). Satisfaction with paid staff captures volunteers' perceptions of staff's competence, as well as how much they like and enjoy working with the paid staff.

On the VPA screener survey, volunteer managers tend to highlight "paid-staff/volunteer dynamics" as an area of concern. The normative data support managers' intuition—in general, volunteers rate their satisfaction with paid staff lower than their satisfaction with other areas included on the VPA survey. When volunteers are having problems with paid staff, they are more likely to feel stressed and dissatisfied (Kulik, 2006). In addition, the paid staff members are a central source of information and interpersonal interaction that facilitate volunteers' integration into the organization (Lopina & Rogelberg, 2013).

To improve volunteers' satisfaction with paid staff, we recommend creating a workplace culture agreement that both paid staff and volunteers agree to follow. This agreement should outline the expectations for how paid staff and volunteers need to work together and treat each other with mutual respect. An example of a [workplace culture agreement](#) [12] is available through The HSUS website as part of the [January/February 2005 issue](#) [13] of their online *Animal Sheltering* magazine.

Data-Driven Results: Future Directions

Although an overall picture of general trends and patterns is useful, the VPA team seeks to increase the value of the normative database by segmenting the normative database. Specifically, we are planning to create sector-specific norms as the number of clients from various types of nonprofits grows (i.e., animal welfare, arts and science, police service, hospitals, etc.). Thus, clients will be able to learn about their results in the context of volunteer programs in general, as well as relative to other volunteer programs within their sector. In addition, we will be examining the normative patterns based on organizational and volunteer program size.

Getting Involved with VPA

Volunteer workers are a vital part of nonprofit organizations, and VPA can help organizational leaders better understand and leverage their volunteer workforce. Through continued training, expansion to new affiliate universities, and utilization of data to inform our recommendations, we hope to work hand-in-hand with a growing number of nonprofits to help improve the effectiveness of volunteer programs. VPA, which entails electronic (e.g., e-mail, Skype) and telephone communication, is accessible to countries throughout the world; however, at this time, we are limited to English-speaking organizations. For more information about VPA, please visit our Web site, <http://vpa.uncc.edu> [8].

If you are interested in participating in VPA, please contact us via e-mail, volprogram@uncc.edu [14], and provide the following scholarship application information:

1. The size of your volunteer program (minimum of 30 active volunteers required to ensure anonymity of responses)
2. The reason for seeking an assessment of your volunteer program
3. The contact information for the volunteer manager/coordinator

Thanks to our grant-funding from The HSUS, all of our clients are provided VPA completely free of charge. Scholarship applications are evaluated to ensure that VPA will fit the organization's needs. We are currently enrolling new clients, as well as previous clients interested in

conducting a follow-up assessment of their program. If you know an organization that you think could benefit from participating in VPA, please e-mail us your referral (please include the organization's name and contact information). We look forward to hearing from you as we continue our efforts to positively impact the nonprofit community through the use of an evidence-based volunteer assessment process.

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