

Using an Advisory Group to Obtain Volunteer Perspective for Regional Programming

Abstract

The study reported here sought to identify problems, issues, needs, concerns, and contemporary trends that will serve as a basis for programming and the development of tools and resources for 4-H volunteers across the southern region. A mixed methods research approach was used to gather input from volunteers and specialists and engage them in needs assessment. The study found that while specialists and volunteers had similar rankings of volunteer resources, problems, issues, trends, and tools, they disagreed on the prioritization of needs and concerns. The needs assessment result was the identification and development of a regional 4-H volunteer handbook.

Ken Culp, III

Principal Specialist for
Volunteerism
Department of 4-H
Youth Development
Adjunct Associate
Professor
Department of Family
Sciences
University of
Kentucky
Lexington, Kentucky
ken.culp@uky.edu

Harriett C. Edwards

Associate Professor &
Extension Specialist
Department of Youth,
Family and
Community Sciences
North Carolina State
University
Raleigh, North
Carolina
haedward@ncsu.edu

Jenny W. Jordan

Leadership Specialist
J.W. Fanning Institute
for Leadership
University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia
jenny.jordan@fanning.uga.edu

Introduction & Review of Literature

Extension has used the input and assistance of volunteers in developing educational events and programs since its inception (Ripley, Cummings, & Lockett, 2012). Extension's approach of involving clientele in charting the course of developing and offering educational programs is uniquely different from other organizations (Ripley, 2011). One of the greatest strengths of Extension has been its ability to help people adjust to needs imposed by a changing environment (Leagans, 1964). In order to develop and deliver an effective program, needs must be recognized and identified (Leagans, 1964). The role of an Extension Advisory Board is to help in planning and conducting effective educational programs and lend guidance to assessing needs and determining program emphasis (Ebling, 1985).

Programs are only successful if they focus on and help meet recognized personal, family, group, or community needs (Leagans, 1964). Therefore, program participation will be directly related to serving the needs of clientele. Effective programs are developed by identifying individual interests and group

needs and by implementing actions that help meet those needs. Identifying needs serves as the basis for Extension programs (Leagans, 1964). Needs assessment is a critical element in program planning for adult audiences (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002; Witkin, 1984).

The Southern Region 4-H Volunteer Advisory Group (SR4-HVAG) was developed to provide input and a volunteer perspective on identifying needs, problems, issues, and trends, and developing resources, tools, and strategies to address them. In short, the SR4-HVAG would engage in program planning to identify and set priorities for regional programming. Serving as a think tank for volunteer development issues and challenges, the SR4-HVAG also is positioned to serve as advocates for the organization as programs are designed and implemented (Merrill, 2003).

Program planning is an organized, systematic approach for transforming ideas into actions. Effective program planning involves seven essential steps, including: a) identifying issues, b) determining needs, c) setting goals and objectives, d) assessing resources, e) forming a plan, f) implementing the plan, and g) evaluating results (Needs Assessment, 1995).

Identifying issues is a critical first step in program development. Involving volunteer leaders, either in person or electronically, is essential to maintain Extension's relevance (Ripley, 2011). The identification of issues, concerns, needs, capacities, and assets in the community should be an ongoing process (Nieto, Schaffner, & Henderson, 1997). The study reported here began with an in-depth discussion of the programming and resource needs of volunteers across the region. This discussion, involving volunteer representatives from states across the region, formed the basis of issue identification.

The second step involves determining needs. Needs assessment is a systematic approach to identifying educational deficiencies. Both the needs of the individual and organization should be assessed. It focuses not on solutions but on identifying the major educational problem areas facing Extension staff, volunteer leaders, and clientele. The process of conducting the needs assessment includes collecting and analyzing data as well as priority setting and action planning (Caffarella, 1982). Needs assessments are critical elements of effective Extension programming and a key component of Extension work (Phibbs, Relf, & Hunnings, 2005). It is, therefore, important to involve adult volunteer audiences in assessing needs as the first step in program planning for adult volunteers.

Pesson (1966) identified useful functions of Extension advisory groups, including: advising Extension professionals on programs, analyzing and interpreting local situations to identify needs and problems, and legitimizing and communicating program decisions among the community. A primary function of the SR4-HVAG is to provide a mechanism for volunteer input and perspective regarding the educational, programmatic and developmental needs of 4-H volunteers in the region.

Extension specialists hear competing and conflicting messages about program needs and priorities from local, county, state, and national sources (Burcalow, Copeland, & Fisher, 1981). Additionally, professionals at various levels of a system will recognize different needs (Mattson, 1995). In order to aid specialists in identifying needs that would serve as a basis for programming, the SR4-HVAG was created.

The SR4-HVAG consists of two volunteers per state and is diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, age,

experience, and volunteer role. Members serve a 2-year term and may be reappointed for a second consecutive term. The SR4-HVAG is facilitated by a state volunteerism specialist serving a 2-year term. A second volunteerism specialist acts as co-facilitator and assumes the role at the conclusion of the facilitator's term.

The SR4-HVAG combines the efforts of southern states in providing quality educational programming for volunteers and Extension professionals using an advisory group system. The act of examining a need from different reference points separates high and low priorities (Forest, 1973).

The educational value of Extension programs lies in both the program's content and the process used to develop those programs (Cole, 1980). Some members of the regional advisory group suggested adopting the needs as identified by other states or regions (particularly the North Central or West regions, which routinely develop a regional plan of work). However, it was pointed out that the findings of Culp, McKee, and Nestor (2007) identified that 4-H volunteers are uniquely different in the South, due, in part, to the greater emphasis on school-based and agent-delivered programming. Therefore, it was imperative to proceed with the research, based on the unique audiences in the southern region.

Methods

In order to develop the most meaningful educational programs across the Southern Region, a mixed methods research approach was utilized including focus group, on-line questionnaire and nominal group process to conduct the study. An initial conference call of the SR4-HVAG was held to collect open-ended responses to four "futuring questions." These questions included the following.

- What resources would be helpful for 4-H volunteers?
- What are the problems that will serve as a basis for programming and the development of resources for 4-H volunteers in the southern region?
- What are the issues that will serve as a basis for programming and the development of resources for 4-H volunteers in the southern region?
- What are the needs and concerns that will serve as a basis for programming and the development of resources for 4-H volunteers in the southern region?
- What are the contemporary trends that will serve as a basis for programming and the development of resources for 4-H volunteers in the southern region?
- What resources can be provided to conference participants that they can only receive by attending a regional volunteer forum?
- What tools are needed in order to promote participation in a regional volunteer forum?

Following the conference call, a quantitative questionnaire using Survey Monkey was developed to prioritize the input gathered on the conference call. An invitation to participate in the survey was

emailed to the SR4-HVAG (n=18) and the state volunteerism specialists in the Southern Region (n=11). Each group was directed to a different site. Each site used the same questionnaire but separated responses in order to compare groups. The response rate was 66.67% for volunteers and 54.54% for specialists. (Note: As there are 13 states in the Southern Region, the population should have included 26 volunteers. However, three states chose not to participate in the SR4-HVAG, and two states identified only one volunteer. Additionally, two of the 13 states in the region had vacancies in the volunteerism specialist position at the time of the study.)

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Results were summarized and shared with both groups individually via a PowerPoint presentation on a webinar. Results were reviewed again at a face-to-face meeting of the SR4-HVAG. To further refine the findings of the study, nominal group process was used, research findings were reported, shared, and discussed in small groups (Etling & Maloney, 1995). During the face-to-face meeting, SR4-HVAG members ranked their highest priority needs through nominal group process to identify the single highest priority for the advisory group.

Results and Discussion

The first question asked respondents to rank order the resources used by volunteers, in their order of importance, with 1 being the most important and 15 being least important. The two groups (volunteers and state specialists) ranked the same four items as most important (although in slightly different orders) and agreed on the least important. As identified by the two groups, the most important resources for volunteers included a 4-H Volunteer Handbook, Resources to use when mentoring new volunteers, networking and training opportunities at all levels, and new methods for teaching youth. The least important resources included offering workshops on grant writing and fundraising and understanding USDA, NIFA, and National 4-H relationships. The development of a Southern Region 4-H Volunteer Handbook became the programming priority for the group (Table 1).

Table 1.
Important Resources for Volunteers. (Mean Rating and Rank)

	Voltrs	Rank	Spec	Rank
4-H Volunteer Handbook	3.58	1	3.67	2
Resources for volunteers mentoring new volunteers	4.75	2	5.33	4t
Networking & Training opportunities: (local, st, reg)	5.50	3	5.00	3
New methods of teaching youth	5.92	4	2.67	1
4-H 101: Fundamentals of 4-H	6.08	5	5.33	4t
Volunteers receive training then return and teach	6.25	6	9.17	7
PowerPoint presentations for volunteers to use	7.33	7	8.33	6
Workshops on using technology	8.83	8	10.5	12
Directory of resources by category or type	9.33	9t	9.50	8t

YouTube resources to share information	9.33	9t	10.33	11
Group dynamics & behavior management	9.83	11	5.67	10
Online Forums	10.17	12	11.17	13
Using Social Media	10.75	13	9.50	8t
Workshops on grant writing and fundraising	11.33	14	11.50	14
Understanding USDA, NIFA, Nat'l. 4-H relationships	12.00	15	12.33	15
1 = Most Important, 15 = Least Important t = tied Voltrs = Volunteers, Spec = Specialists st = State; reg = Region				

The second question asked respondents to rank the problems that should serve as a basis for programming and the development of resources in the Southern Region. A 5-point Likert-type scale was used, with 1 being a very serious problem and a 5 rating given to issues that were not deemed a problem. Both groups were in identified the most serious problem by rating "Reaching un-served audiences more effectively" as the most serious problem. However, the problem of "inconsistency between states for national competitions" was seen as the second most serious problem by volunteers but the least important by specialists. Volunteers tended to rate problems as more serious in comparison to specialists. Volunteers rated "reaching un-served and under-served audiences more effectively," "tailoring programs to meet the needs of local youth," and "inconsistency between states for national competition" as serious problems. Conversely, specialists rated all problems with a lower level of seriousness, as compared to volunteers (Table 2).

Table 2.
 Problems That Should Serve as a Basis for Programming and Development.
 (Mean Rating and Rank)

	Voltrs	Rank	Spec	Rank
Reaching un-served audiences more effectively	2.33	1	3.00	1
Tailoring programs to meet the needs of local youth	2.36	2	4.00	4t
Inconsistency between states for national competition	2.58	3	4.40	7
Need for training on recognizing & reporting child abuse	3.00	4t	3.50	2

Inconsistency between states of volunteer screening	3.00	4t	4.00	4t
Need for record books to be on-line	3.08	6t	3.83	3
Helping kids complete record books	3.08	6t	4.00	4t
<p>1=This is a very serious problem</p> <p>2=This is a serious problem</p> <p>3=This is a problem</p> <p>4=This problem is being resolved</p> <p>5=This is not a problem</p> <p>t = tied</p> <p>Voltrs = Volunteers, Spec = Specialists</p>				

The third question asked respondents to rank the issues that should serve as a basis for programming and the development of resources in the Southern Region. A 5-point Likert-type scale was used, with 1 being a very serious problem and a 5 rating given to issues that were not deemed a problem. While all issues were ranked by volunteers as "a serious problem," childhood obesity was ranked as the most important issue for both groups. "Developing financial resources for 4-H clubs" was rated as "a problem" by the volunteer specialists and was given the lowest priority ranking of all programming issues (Table 3).

Table 3.

Issues That Should Serve as a Basis for Programming and Development. (Mean Rating and Rank)

	Voltrs	Rank	Spec	Rank
Childhood Obesity	2.00	1	2.33	1
The effects of the poor economy	2.17	2	2.60	2t
Developing financial resources for 4-H clubs	2.33	3	3.33	4
Reaching diverse populations that have not traditionally been 4-H audiences	2.42	4	2.60	2t
<p>1=This is a very serious problem</p> <p>2=This is a serious problem</p> <p>3=This is a problem</p> <p>4=This problem is being resolved</p>				

5=This is not a problem

t = tied

Voltrs = Volunteers, Spec = Specialists

The fourth question asked respondents to rate the needs and concerns that should serve as a basis for programming and the development of resources in the Southern Region. Rankings from the two groups were markedly different, with "creating a regional volunteer database of expertise" and "how to write a grant request" ranked first and second respectively by the volunteers. Conversely, these same two items were ranked sixth and seventh by specialists, with a significantly lower rating (Table 4).

Table 4.
Needs and Concerns that Should Serve as a Basis for Programming and Development. (Mean Rating and Rank)

	Voltrs	Rank	Spec	Rank
Regional volunteer database of expertise	2.00	1	3.67	6
How to write a grant request	2.33	2	3.80	7
Getting all states in the SR engaged with regional volunteer opportunities	2.50	3t	2.60	2
Teaching a variety of topics to multiple age groups	2.50	3t	3.00	3t
Online courses and volunteer education	2.50	3t	3.00	3t
How to properly handle money	3.00	6	2.40	1
How to coordinate and conduct a fundraiser	3.25	7	3.20	5

1=This is a very serious problem

2=This is a serious problem

3=This is a problem

4=This problem is being resolved

5=This is not a problem

t = tied

Voltrs = Volunteers, Spec = Specialists

The fifth question asked respondents to rate the contemporary trends that should serve as a basis for programming and the development of resources in the Southern Region. With the exception of one trend ("kids helping kids"), both groups gave similar rankings to the eight items. Interestingly,

specialists assigned a wider range of ratings (1.17 – 3.33) to the eight items as compared to the volunteers (1.75 – 2.08). The trend "impact data" was ranked first by both groups with a "high importance" rating. Interestingly, the trends "developing master volunteer and volunteer certification programs" and "train the trainer programs" were all rated second by both groups, with an identical rating of 1.83 for each (Table 5).

Table 5.
 Contemporary Trends That Should Serve as a Basis for Programming and the
 Development of Resources. (Mean Rating and Rank)

	Voltrs	Rank	Spec	Rank
Impact data. Evidence that we're making a difference	1.75		1.17	1
Developing Master Volunteer & Volunteer Certification programs	1.83	2t	1.83	2t
Train – the – Trainer programs	1.83	2t	1.83	2t
Online educational opportunities	1.83	2t	2.00	5t
Kids helping kids	1.83	2t	2.40	7
Family volunteer opportunities	1.92		2.17	4
Entrepreneurship programs	2.00		3.33	8
Self-study guides (CD, DVD, online, etc.)	2.08		2.00	5t
1=High Importance 2=Important 3=Neutral 4=Not Important 5=Highly Unimportant t = tied Voltrs = Volunteers, Spec = Specialists				

The sixth question sought to identify public value in resources. In short, this question focused on identifying the resources that could be provided to attendees that could only be obtained by attending the upcoming regional volunteer forum. What could be given, provided, distributed, or received at the conference that would generate a public value great enough as to make it seem imperative to prospective attendees?

Both groups were fairly similar in their evaluation of these nine items, with "networking opportunities" being seen as most important. However, the researchers would point out that although "networking

opportunities" was identified by the Volunteer Advisory Group, it is not a tangible resource (Table 6).

Table 6.

What Resources Can Be Provided to Participants That They Can Only Receive by Attending the 4-H Volunteer Conference of Southern States? (Mean Rating and Rank)

	Voltrs	Rank	Spec	Rank
Overview of innovative programs from other states	83.30%	1	66.70%	3t
Networking Opportunities	75.00%	2t	100.00%	1
Motivational Speakers with a national reputation	75.00%	2t	83.30%	2
Learning about what is working in other states	75.00%	2t	66.70%	3t
Provide a flash drive with all conference proceedings / handouts	66.70%	5	50.00%	5
National Update (Headquarters and Council)	58.30%	6	16.70%	8t
Grant writing / resource development track	50.00%	7	16.70%	8t
Achievement Awards	25.00%	8	33.30%	6t
4-H Curriculum	8.30%	9	33.30%	6t
(Check all that apply)				
t = tied				
Voltrs = Volunteers, Spec = Specialists				

The final question focused on the identification of tools that would be useful to Extension professionals and volunteers in promoting participation in the inaugural 4-H Volunteer Conference of Southern States. Respondents were instructed to select all that were applicable and useful to them. Both groups were fairly similar in their choices, although specialists placed much greater value on using social media to promote the conference as compared to volunteers. It is interesting to note that while volunteers ranked an updated website as the most important tool (83.30%), social media ranked fourth at 66.70% and a Facebook site was ranked fifth at 58.30%. Conversely, specialists assigned these technological tools a higher rating (Table 7).

Table 7.

What Tools Are Needed to Promote Participation in the 4-H Volunteer Conference of Southern States? (Mean Rating and Rank)

	Voltrs	Rank	Spec	Rank

Updated website	83.30%	1	100.00%	1t
Scholarships	75.00%	2t	83.30%	3
E-mail listserv	75.00%	2t	66.70%	4t
Social media presence	66.70%	4	100.00%	1t
Facebook site	58.30%	5	66.70%	4t
Quarterly newsletter and marketing information	50.00%	6	66.70%	4t
<p>(Check all that apply)</p> <p>t = tied</p> <p>Voltrs = Volunteers, Spec = Specialists</p>				

At their follow-up face-to-face meeting, the SR4-HVAG reviewed the results of the study and participated in a priority-setting activity involving nominal group process. Based upon the findings of both the volunteers and the specialists, they determined that their highest priority was to develop a 4-H Volunteer Handbook that could be used across the region. Each of the volunteers agreed to participate in the process and volunteered to collaborate with their state specialist to develop learning objectives and a fact sheet for two different topics in the handbook.

Conclusions and Implications

The SR4-HVAG provided important data for faculty, specialists, and staff at all levels concerning the needs and wants of volunteers. The use of a comprehensive needs assessment made it possible to target areas for growth to meet recognized needs and develop a list of strategies designed to meet those needs (Phibbs, Relf, & Hunnings, 2005). This mixed methods research used focus group, on-line survey, and nominal group process to conduct the study.

The study found that while specialists and volunteers had similar rankings of volunteer resources, problems, issues, trends, and tools, they disagreed on the prioritization of needs and concerns. The perspective of both specialists and volunteers is different and important to the 4-H Program. Extension professionals should use volunteer input to better equip and support both their professional and volunteer staff to address identified needs, problems, issues, trends, resources, and tools.

Through their participation in the program development process, members of the SR4-HVAG developed a sense of ownership in the project (Hinton, 1994) and affirmed their sense of belonging (Kress, 2005). This is critically important because the next step of the SR4-HVAG is to support those needs through the development of tools and resources available region-wide. The group continues to meet quarterly, one 2-day, face-to-face meeting in the fall and three additional conference calls. As volunteers are called into action, their commitment to the program is higher when the action is a priority to the volunteer. Had specialists selected a lower priority project for the VAG, the volunteers may not have engaged in the work necessary to complete the task. Sheffer (2002) suggests that

implementing the recommendations of advisory groups helps members feel valued and respected. Merrill (2003) adds that retention of advisory group members increases when members see their ideas being implemented. This project corroborated and upheld the findings of both Sheffer and Merrill.

Additionally, engaging volunteers to serve at the regional level builds capacity and enhances leadership experiences, which strengthen ties to the organization (Edwards, 2008). This engagement contributes to the ongoing success of regional programming and ensures continuity of volunteer development quality for the region. Using the Volunteer Advisory Group for input creates an opportunity for the continuous renewal necessary for programs to remain relevant and responsive to the public (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002). Additionally, this process could also be implemented to gather programming input for multiple Extension areas, districts, or regions within a state.

There are, however, challenges to address with this newly formed advisory group. Virtual meetings can be an obstacle with volunteers who greatly prefer face-to-face interaction. Specialists must create opportunities for interaction during the year to encourage VAG members to communicate in alternative ways to remain connected and focused on goals (Watkins, 2013). Considering the membership of the VAG now and in the future will require specialists to examine contemporary trends in how various generations engage and interact with each other. For the regional approach to succeed, it is necessary that the advisory membership include not only those who have traditionally been involved in regional events and activities, but also recruit new members who have not previously participated. Generating strategies to ensure diversity of group members will be a key to success for the VAG as well as for regional programming.

As faculty, specialists, staff, and volunteers navigate the conflicting messages of needs and concerns, the SR4-HVAG serves as a model for involving both groups in program planning. Needs assessment may come in a variety of forms, but as evidenced in the study reported here, the involvement of and input from volunteers is crucial in planning for adult audiences.

Sharing these findings with volunteer specialists in the region could begin a process for strengthening resource development across the regional program. By using an interstate data collection mechanism and by engaging volunteers directly in the process, specialists have an opportunity to renew programs to more exactly meet the identified needs of volunteers in the southern states. The hope is that a more concerted effort will be made to cooperatively develop resources and to create strategies for sharing ideas and materials among the states in the region.

An opportunity exists for a win-win outcome as volunteer systems in the Southern Region gain information as to what volunteers value, and the volunteers, by engaging in the process, gain knowledge and skills to help further their professional and personal development.

Finally, the purpose of the study and the impetus behind the development of the SR4-HVAG was to improve communication and strengthen programming across the Southern Region. In this case, "region" was defined by national Extension guidelines and includes the 13 states that comprise the Southern Region. However, this process could easily be replicated in any of the other three regions in any Extension program area. Additionally, "region" could also be defined as an intra-state group. The process could be applied across areas, districts, or regions within a state or program area with the

same objective of strengthening programming. It would be interesting and illuminating to replicate the study reported here in another Extension region and compare the results. Further research is needed in this area.

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