

Master Volunteer Life Cycle: A Wide Angle Lens on the Volunteer Experience

Abstract

Extension master volunteer programs, such as master naturalist and master gardener, often focus heavily on volunteer education. The model presented here describes the full life cycle of a master volunteer's experience in the program, putting education in the context of other essential program components. By zooming out to a wide-angle view of the master volunteer experience, the model provides guidance for improving the program by highlighting the many points in the cycle at which program managers can support volunteers so that they can be successful and sustain their volunteer service.

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Introduction

Master volunteers are critical partners in helping advance the mission of Extension (e.g., Feather, 1990). Extension master volunteer programs include master naturalist, master gardener, master composter, master food volunteer, master family and consumer sciences volunteer, and master clothing volunteer, to name a few. Master volunteers receive specific and detailed education in a content area that prepares them for directed and often specialized volunteer opportunities, sometimes on behalf of Extension and often embedded within other agencies and organizations.

Extension training and support for volunteers can be complicated. In prior studies, researchers have explored volunteer motivations and attractors (Wilson & Newman, 2011; Wolford, Cox, & Culp, 2001), strategies for assessing the need for programs (Savanick & Blair, 2005), and ways to connect volunteers to communities (Bennett, 2012). No matter the motivation to serve, a volunteer may have trouble finding and/or getting involved in rewarding opportunities (Sheier, 1981). The volunteer also is likely to face challenges in service, ranging from following procedures such as registrations and background checks to burnout (Coles, 1993). In spite of research addressing the volunteer experience, there has been no model that effectively prescribes a full life cycle for Extension master volunteers. Extension program managers could use such a model as a basis for expanding programming beyond preparatory training to efforts that would support and inspire master volunteers throughout their involvement in a program.

Master Volunteer Life Cycle Model

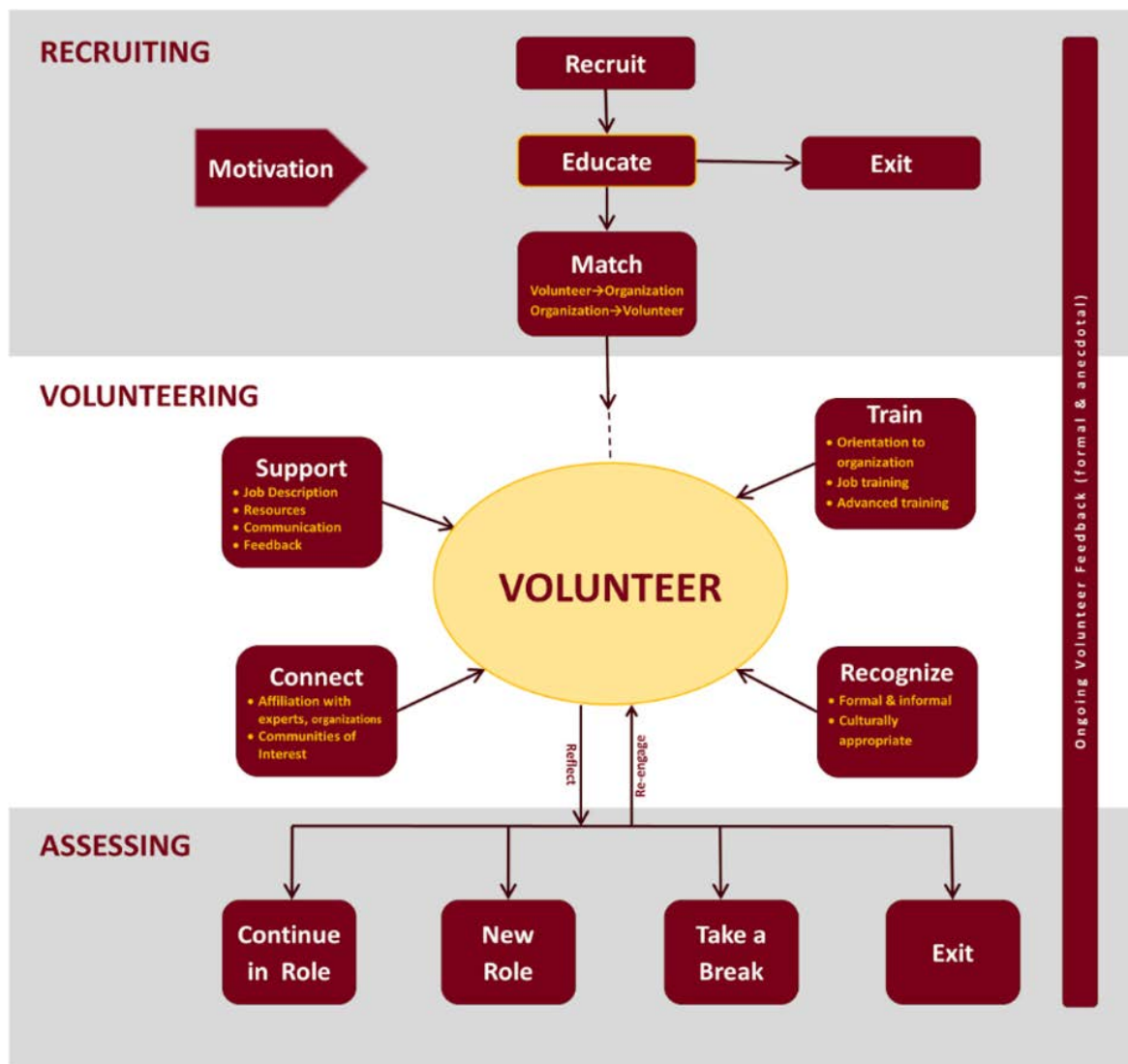
The master volunteer life cycle model presented here describes the ideal scenario of what happens across three phases of a volunteer's experience in the Minnesota Master Naturalist Program, a natural resources–focused master volunteer program. We created the model to provide program managers with a tool for improving ongoing programming so that it prepares, retains, and motivates volunteers across the span of their experiences with the program. Development of the model was grounded in our experience with more than 2,000 Minnesota Master Naturalist Program volunteers, supported with a literature review, and refined through extensive peer feedback from leaders of similar volunteer programs across the country.

Many master volunteer programs are focused heavily on the initial education component of the program and only slightly, if at all, on factors that contribute to the success or failure of the participants' volunteer experiences. With our model, we attempt to zoom out from that micro view on the volunteers' preparation and focus on larger outputs and outcomes of the program, putting each aspect of the total experience in the context of the whole.

An effective, comprehensive master volunteer program includes the components that are depicted in Figure 1 and explained in detail in the paragraphs following the figure.

Figure 1.

Master Volunteer Life Cycle Model



Recruiting Phase

Prospective volunteers enter a master volunteer program with a variety of personal *motivations*. Some motivations are intrinsic, such as the drive to make a difference (Pink, 2009); other motivations are extrinsic, such as the goal of earning a title or certification (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953). When Extension personnel *recruit* for a program, they can appeal to these motivations when encouraging potential master volunteers to join the program by taking a course. Participants take a 40-hr *educational* course in which they experience active hands-on learning, exposure to content experts, network building with like-minded peers, and a capstone service project. After completing the course, some participants choose to *exit* the program and discontinue participation; others seek to identify a *match* for their volunteering skills and interests. In some cases, volunteers approach an agency or organization with a service project in mind. In other cases, organizations advertise their volunteer needs for any master volunteer to fill. Note that in Figure 1 the arrow between "Match" and "Volunteer" includes a partial dotted line. This dotted line represents the idea that the Extension program prepares a volunteer for service and even helps connect the volunteer with community needs but that the volunteer must recognize his or her own capabilities, confidence, and competence (or, self-efficacy, as described by Bandura in 1990) and take the initiative to begin a volunteer role. Extension program managers can help volunteers gain confidence in recognizing where their skills might meet community needs.

Volunteering Phase

The core program outcome is participant *volunteerism* that supports the mission of the master volunteer program. Volunteer tasks might be episodic or long term and may include activities such as conducting educational programs or staffing information booths. Extension program managers *support* volunteers by

- providing a clear job description,
- allocating resources necessary to implement the project,
- communicating frequently with volunteers, and
- providing constructive feedback to volunteers (Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration, 2010).

Volunteers are more likely to sustain their volunteer service when they feel *connected* to the organization for which they are volunteering and to content experts. Many volunteers find a community of others with whom they share interests and specialized volunteer roles. After the initial preparation course, volunteers benefit from more focused *training* that orients them to the goals and culture of the organization for which they are volunteering and provides specific guidance related to the job they will be doing. Additional advanced training often is beneficial to and desired by master volunteers for both continuing their educations and strengthening their social connections. Such in-depth training allows these individuals the opportunity to learn more about a desired topic, moving that person toward self-actualization (Maslow, 1954). Volunteer *recognition* conveys appreciation for and knowledge of work contributed by volunteers and should be suited to the culture of the master volunteer program and preferences of the volunteer (Culp & Schwartz, 1998).

Assessing Phase

Program managers should *reflect* on whether a volunteer's work continues to meet the needs of the program and at the same time encourage participants to *reflect* on their personal volunteer service needs. Volunteers who are meeting these mutual needs may *continue* in their chosen volunteer roles. In some cases, volunteers look for *new roles* to learn new skills or meet new people. Some volunteers *take a break* from volunteering due to changing personal circumstances and *re-engage* with the program when they can. Some participants volunteer for a while and then *exit*, or drop, from the program to pursue other interests.

Throughout all phases of the volunteer cycle, program managers solicit *feedback from volunteers* and apply this input toward improving the program. Managers conduct formal evaluations after each educational offering and when specialized questions arise, and they also may receive and consider anecdotal input and observations.

Conclusion

The processes of developing and managing Extension volunteer programs typically involve much attention on the initial volunteer education component. The model presented here helps put that education in the context of the larger program and places due emphasis on the program's most important outcome: the volunteer service. Master volunteer program managers can use this model to guide program improvement by refocusing their

attention on the many factors that contribute to successful volunteer experiences. Zooming out the focus to a wide-angle view of the full master volunteer life cycle highlights points in each phase of the cycle (recruiting, volunteering, and assessing) when program managers should support volunteers so that they can be successful and sustain their volunteer service.

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