

Net Benefits: Weighing the Challenges and Benefits of Volunteers

Mark A. Hager, Washington, DC

Jeffrey L. Brudney, University of Georgia

Outcomes measurement and program evaluation are making inroads in the nonprofit sector (Poister, 2003; Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2004). Both individuals and institutional donors, such as foundations and government, demand that nonprofit organizations document their effectiveness, and evaluations are a means toward documenting outcomes. Nonprofit managers and trustees also stand to gain from program evaluation, since knowledge of the effectiveness of programs and practices can help them do their jobs better. Consequently, more nonprofits are spending time defining and measuring their activities.

While individual volunteer duties defy direct comparison across different organizations, common elements in volunteer administration and the benefits that volunteers bring to nonprofits lend themselves to measurement and comparison. Systematic measurement and comparison are valuable both for gauging progress over time and for determining where volunteer programs stand in relation to peer organizations.

In this article, we introduce a measure that seeks to account for both the challenges of volunteer administration and the benefits that volunteers bring to the organization. We call this measure the "net benefit" of volunteer involvement because it takes into account both the benefits and challenges that volunteer programs encounter. Typically, process

evaluations focus only on benefits of volunteer involvement, while challenges do not receive equal consideration. We believe that a composite measure better reflects both the needs and progress of volunteer programs.

EVALUATION OF VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

Despite widespread endorsement of evaluation, few volunteer programs actively evaluate their progress. In a national (U.S.) sample of cities that used volunteers in service delivery, only one in nine programs had conducted an evaluation (Duncombe, 1985). More recently, Brudney and Brown (1993) report that only five percent of Georgia cities and counties with volunteer programs had conducted an evaluation. Still more recently, a survey of county volunteer programs (Lane and Shultz, 1996) reports that evaluation was the least widely adopted of a listing of eleven administrative practices. Fewer than one in five programs had conducted an evaluation, and only about three in ten had prepared an annual report summarizing volunteer efforts.

When volunteer programs do conduct evaluations, they generally fall into one of two camps: economic evaluations or program assessments. Economic evaluations are based on dollar valuation methods that estimate the financial value of volunteers to organizations or communities. Anderson and Zimmerer (2003) present five ways to estimate the dol-

Mark A. Hager, PhD, is a Senior Research Associate in the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy at the Urban Institute, a social policy research organization in Washington, DC. His work on the behavior of nonprofit organizations focuses on volunteer management, administrative and fundraising cost reporting, and financial stability.

Jeffrey L. Brudney, PhD, is Professor of Public Administration, adjunct Professor of Social Work, a member of the Nonprofit and Community Service faculty in the College of Business, and co-director of the Georgia Institute for Nonprofit Organizations at the University of Georgia. He has published extensively in the area of volunteer involvement.

lar value of volunteer work. Critics contend that financial estimates are more attuned to the inputs or supports of a volunteer program rather than its results. Recent economic evaluations include Gaskin's (2003) Volunteer Investment and Value Audit; Quarter, Mook, and Richmond's (2003) applications of "social accounting;" and Handy and Srinivasan's (2004) cost-benefit analysis of hospital volunteers. As valuable as these approaches may be, they place a premium on careful collection and analysis of data that is likely beyond the capacity of most nonprofit organizations. As a consequence, individual organizations are unlikely to use economic valuations for internal evaluation or benchmarking purposes.

A second method for evaluation of volunteer programs, which we call the program assessment model, consists of assessments of the common characteristics of volunteer program performance, such as degree of success in delivery of services or the kinds of benefits that volunteers bring to the organization. Services or benefits achieved are taken as indicators of program results (Brudney, 1999b; Duncombe, 1985). The program assessment model places fewer demands on data gathering and analysis than do economic evaluations. In this article we advocate a program assessment measure that is both easily gauged and compared across organizations.

A SURVEY OF VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT CAPACITY

The data to undertake the development of this measure were generated from a national survey of U.S. public charities (Urban Institute, 2004; Hager and Brudney, 2004). We drew a sample of 2,993 of the 214,995 organizations that filed Form 990 with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in 2000. Since charities with less than \$25,000 in annual gross receipts are not required to file with the IRS, these small organizations are not part of our sampling frame. We selected our sample within annual expenditures strata and major subsector of operation, such as health, social services, and the arts.

We conducted telephone interviews with volunteer administrators or executive

managers in sampled charities during the fall of 2003. We called all organizations to verify their existence, and to obtain the name of a volunteer administrator or someone else who could speak authoritatively about the organization's operations. We mailed an information letter to the 80 percent of sampled organizations with which we completed the initial call. We then called named representatives up to 30 times to collect study information. Interviews averaged 20 minutes. Adjusting for organizations that were defunct or could not be verified as working organizations in the initial call, the response rate was 69 percent. Because of the application of appropriate weights, the results can be used to describe overall conditions in the working population of public charities with at least \$25,000 in gross receipts.

For the purposes of our study, a *volunteer* is any person who works on a regular, short-term, or occasional basis to provide services to the charities we studied, or to those the charity serves. Volunteers are not paid as staff members or consultants. So that the study would not confuse the activities of board and non-board volunteers, we asked respondents to exclude board members when answering our questions about volunteers and volunteer management. We also asked respondents not to count special events participants as volunteers unless the participants were organizers or workers at the events. Study results are based on those charities that engage volunteers, excluding charities that engage no one who fit our definition of a volunteer.

CHALLENGES OF VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Nonprofit organizations with very different missions can nevertheless compare their relative success and challenges in recruiting volunteers and engaging them in a well-designed management program. We asked our survey respondents about nine common problems in volunteer administration that had been identified by prior research and field experts (Ellis, 1996; Environics Research Group, 2003; McCurly and Lynch, 1996). We asked whether each issue presented a "big problem," a "small problem," or "not a problem."

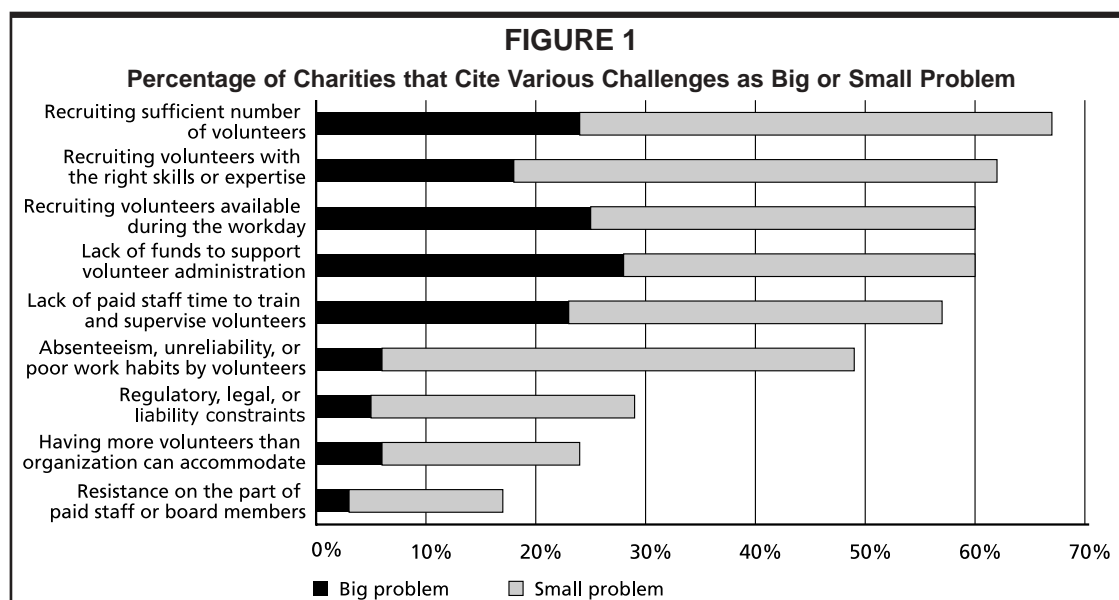


Figure 1 shows the nine issues and the extent to which charities identified them as a big problem or a small problem.

Despite recent concerns that efforts to increase volunteerism might overwhelm the capacity of the nonprofit sector to accept volunteers (Brudney, 1999a; Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service, 2003), three of the most frequently cited challenges concern recruitment of volunteers. Mentioned most often is the problem of recruiting a sufficient number of volunteers, followed by recruiting volunteers with the right skills or expertise and recruiting volunteers available during the workday.

The prevalence of recruitment as a problem for charities strongly suggests that charities more commonly experience the problem of having too few volunteers. By way of confirmation, when asked directly whether having more volunteers than the organization can accommodate was a challenge, relatively few charities responded that an over-supply of volunteers was a problem. The high percentages of charities that report recruiting problems is consistent with past research and observation (Ellis, 1994; Brudney, 1999b) that similarly document the seriousness of this issue.

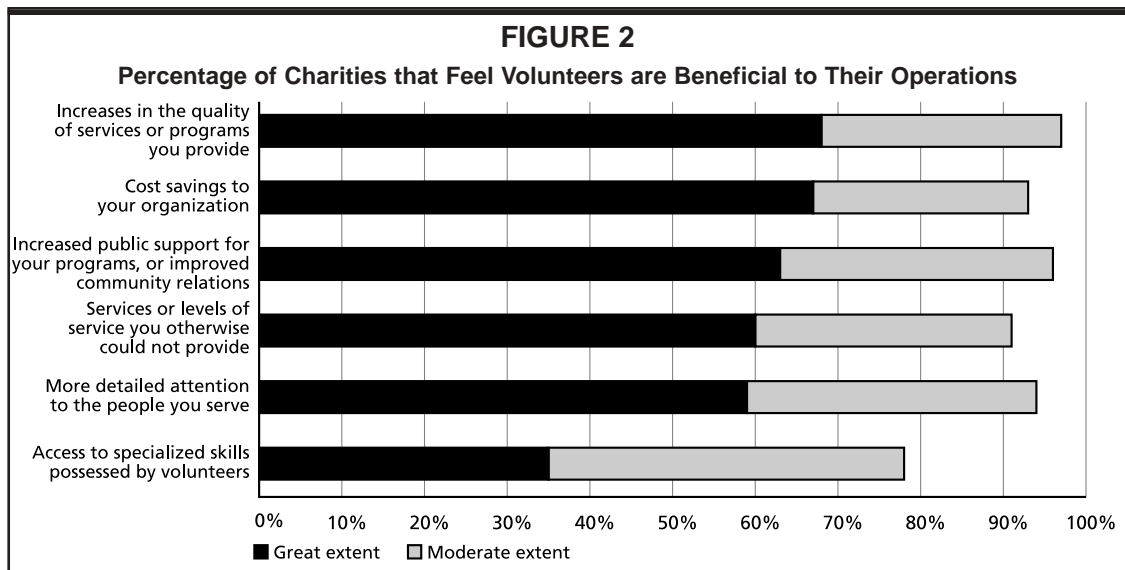
Two other frequently cited challenges pertain to organizational capacity to accommodate volunteers. Of the challenges presented in the study, the lack of funds to support vol-

unteer administration was a big problem to the greatest percentage of charities. Lack of paid staff time to train and supervise volunteers is a big problem for a similar proportion of respondents. Although cited by a smaller number, absenteeism, unreliability, or poor work habits of volunteers are also indicative of a lack of volunteer management capacity.

BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEER INVOLVEMENT

Challenges represent issues that volunteer administrators face in their management of volunteers. A separate dimension of volunteer involvement is the benefits that volunteers bring to the organization. Just as specific volunteer management challenges are directly comparable across different charities, so are various benefits that volunteers bring to operations and service delivery. Therefore, we also asked about the extent to which charities felt that volunteers are beneficial to their image and operations. The results are presented in Figure 2, which documents the extent to which charities cite benefits from having volunteers to a "great extent" or to a "moderate extent." The remaining charities are those that involve volunteers but say that they experience these benefits to "no extent."

Clearly, volunteers are valuable to these organizations: a majority of charities cited five of the six items as beneficial to a great extent. When including those charities that claimed



benefits at only a moderate level, more than nine out of ten charities extolled the benefits of their volunteers in increasing quality of service, public support, and level of attention to those served; helping to save on costs; and providing services that the organization otherwise could not provide. Fewer charities say they benefit from specialized skills possessed by volunteers, such as pro bono legal, financial, management, or computer expertise. Nevertheless, one-third feel that specialized volunteers offer a large benefit, while over three-quarters feel that specialized volunteers provide at least a moderate benefit to their operations.

NET BENEFITS

Looking at challenges and benefits of volunteers separately gives important information about volunteer management capacity and the value of volunteers to organizational operations. Putting both dimensions of volunteer programs into a single measure helps put each into better perspective (Kushner, 2004). The best possible situation for a volunteer-oriented charity is a minimum of challenges in volunteer administration and greatest possible benefits from volunteers. The worst situation is when a charity experiences a full array of problems and gets no benefits in return for its efforts. We expect that most charities fall somewhere in between, and that their relative positions on the scale provide a useful point of comparison.

Therefore, based on the data and questions described above, we created a new measure of volunteer program performance called “net benefits.” Net benefits is the difference between benefits of volunteers and challenges in volunteer administration. First we calculated a sum for eight of the challenges, with a “big problem” contributing a value of 2 and a “small problem” contributing a value of 1. We did not include the challenge of “too many volunteers” because this is a qualitatively different problem that many charities would like to have. We calculated a similar sum for benefits. However, since the survey contained eight challenges items and only six benefits items, we multiplied the sum of the benefits by $1\frac{1}{3}$ so that the benefits would have as much weight as the challenges in the net benefits measure. Finally, we subtracted the challenges sum from the benefits sum, resulting in a single measure of net benefits of volunteer involvement that potentially ranges from values of -16 to +16. Figure 3 is a worksheet that helps demonstrate how the net benefits value is calculated.

On the net benefits measure, positive scores indicate a surplus of benefits over challenges, and negative scores indicate more challenges than benefits. Only eight percent of the charities in the sample have negative net benefits, with challenges outweighing the benefits of volunteers. Twenty-six percent have low positive values falling between 0 and 5. The majority, 42 percent, have moderate

FIGURE 3

Net Benefits Worksheet

To what extent do volunteers provide benefits to your organization? (Check the appropriate box)

	Great extent	Moderate extent	Not at all
Cost savings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
More detailed attention to the people you serve	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased public support for your programs, or improved community relations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased quality of services or programs you provide	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Capability to provide services or levels of services you otherwise could not provide	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Access to specialized skills possessed by volunteers, such as legal, financial, management, or computer expertise	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Add up number of checks:	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
(get out your calculator!)	x2.666	x1.333	x0

Benefits Index: = + +

Box A

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Box A: Benefits	Box B: Challenges	Net Benefits

To what extent are the following issues a problem for your organization? (Check the appropriate box)

	Big problem	Small problem	Not a problem
Recruiting sufficient number of volunteers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recruiting volunteers with the right skills or expertise	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recruiting volunteers available during the workday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Indifference or resistance on the part of paid staff or board members toward volunteers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of paid staff time to properly train and supervise volunteers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of adequate funds for supporting volunteer involvement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Regulatory, legal, liability constraints on volunteer involvement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Volunteers' absenteeism, unreliability, poor work habits or work quality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Add up number of checks:

x2 x1 x0

Challenges Index: = + +

Box B

positive values between 5 and 10. The remaining 24 percent have high positive values between 10 and 16.

THE BENEFITS OF NET BENEFITS

In this article we have introduced a summary measure of "net benefits" of a volunteer program, one that gauges multiple dimensions of organizational capacity and performance. In contrast to many other measures of performance, it combines benefits and challenges into a single barometer of volunteer program evaluation. The value of this measure lies not only in its ascertaining the balance of benefits over problems, but also in the ease with which it is calculated and the potential it offers to compare the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations and programs with different characteristics. For example, further research with the study sample reveals that

net benefits of volunteer programs vary in predictable ways by organizational size, the scope or extent of volunteer involvement, the number of different volunteer assignments, the adoption of recommended practices in volunteer management, and the presence of a volunteer coordinator, especially one who devotes considerable time to the volunteer program.

Were managers to consistently calculate the net benefits of their volunteer programs, they could monitor their own performance over time and benchmark their program against other programs of comparable size, volunteer involvement, and other similar characteristics. Such monitoring and benchmarking offer substantial opportunity for recognizing and improving volunteer program performance.

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AUTHOR NOTE

This research was funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service and the UPS Foundation, and supported by the USA Freedom Corps. This article includes content from an Urban Institute brief by Hager and Brudney titled *Balancing Act: The Challenges and Benefits of Volunteers*.