

Volunteer Needs Assessment of Extension Professionals in Florida

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In 1999, the Florida Cooperative Extension Service estimated that 42,000 volunteers contributed nearly 2 million hours of service to Extension-related programs. Until recently, there has been no comprehensive long-term support offered to Extension Agents who supervise volunteers, nevertheless, most Agents are expected to recruit, train, and manage volunteers to extend their educational programs.

A needs assessment was conducted to determine the knowledge and expertise of professionals who supervise Extension Service volunteers. The Center for Volunteer Leadership in the College of Agriculture Education and Communication at the University of Florida developed a survey in accordance with the National Standards for Volunteer Managers established by the Association for Volunteer Administration.

A letter requesting participation in the needs assessment was sent to Extension faculty with volunteer responsibilities as a major portion of their job description. Surveys were sent to the people who responded to the request. Survey questions covered a variety of tasks supervisors routinely face, these include: program planning and organization, staffing and directing, monitoring and evaluation, and organizational behavior. A comparative Likert-scale format was used to gauge the respondents level of agreement with the importance of each statement and the extent to which they possessed the trait described in the statement.

Forty university and county faculty completed the survey. Respondents indicated that they work with volunteers in the areas of plant science (30%), family, youth, and consumer sciences (22%) and youth development (19%). Sixty-two percent of the respondents have Masters degree, 24% Bachelors, and 13% doctoral degrees. The majority (54%) of respondents indicated that they have no formal volunteer training, 36% have been to at least one Extension in-service training, and less than 10% indicated that they were trained on the job or through county offered programs.

Respondents agreed (45%) or strongly agreed (50%) that it is essential to know the importance of volunteer involvement,

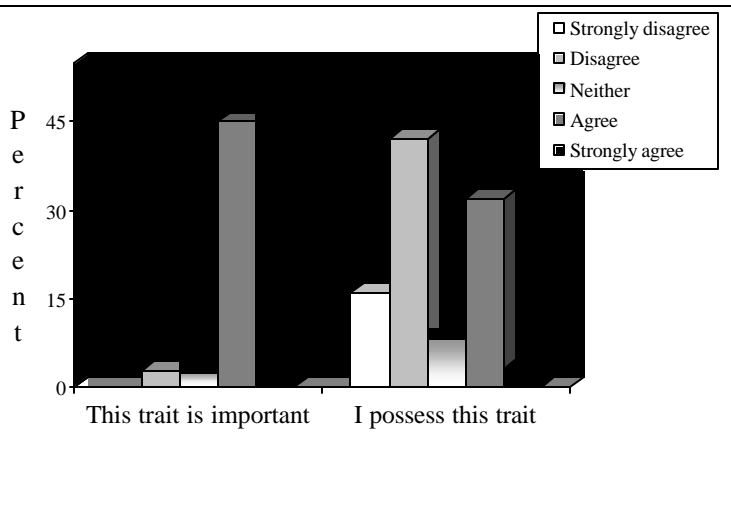


Figure 1. Perceived importance of volunteers role in Florida Extension and the extent to which respondent's possess this trait (n=40).

however, they were not as confident in their knowledge of the importance of volunteers in their organization (Figure 1).

Throughout the survey, respondents recognized the importance of the constructs that constitute good volunteer programs, such as motivating, recruitment, training, recognition, and evaluation, all the same, they disagreed that they possess these traits (Table 1). The largest mean difference between knowing the importance of and practicing a behavior were found in the respondents ability to describe the role of the volunteer in the organization (1.63), knowing the volunteer’s role in the history and mission of the organization (1.61), and knowing how volunteers fit into the current operational structure of the organization (1.55).

Table 1. Mean perceived importance of constructs that constitute good volunteer programs and their ability to perform those actions (n=40).

	This trait is important	I possess this trait	Mean Difference
I can describe the role of volunteers in the organization.	4.50	2.86	1.64
I can write volunteers job descriptions.	4.35	3.47	0.88
I provide adequate volunteer supervision.	4.50	3.68	0.82
I can motivate my volunteers.	4.62	3.89	0.73
I can help volunteers identify areas where change is needed.	4.17	3.47	0.70
I recognize volunteer accomplishments.	4.30	3.66	0.64
I can recruit volunteers effectively.	4.62	4.00	0.62
I can assess the success of the volunteer program.	4.10	3.56	0.54

The survey revealed valuable information on the needs of Extension professionals who supervise volunteers. Respondents consistently perceived a lack of the knowledge and expertise needed for a successful volunteer program. The Center is using this information to develop a comprehensive series of teaching modules geared toward national constructs and standards.