

## **Volunteer Administration: Theoretical Dimensions of the Discipline**

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### **Abstract**

The focus of this paper is to provide the profession of volunteer administration (VA) a model outlining theoretical dimensions of the discipline. The dimensions provided include the (a) processes, (b) discipline, (c) foundations, and (d) theoretical base. Volunteer administration is the set of associated processes of operating a volunteer program. Included are a compilation of competencies identified by the Association for Volunteer Administration (2001) and 13 professionals that participated in a study conducted by Boyd (2002). The seven processes are Commitment to the Profession, Organizational Leadership, Systems Leadership, Accountability, Management Skills, Personal Skills, and Organizational Culture. The foundational disciplines are Leadership and Management, Community Development, and Teaching and Learning. Psychology and sociology provide the empirical evidence that supports the foundations and processes of VA. Professionals should look deeper into the theoretical base of VA, in order to develop and encourage focused research initiatives and academic curricula for volunteer administrators.

### **Introduction**

The changing status of volunteer administration (VA) has led the profession away from identifying with a specific discipline. No longer can a volunteer administrator be seen within the organization as just a manager or just an administrator. Today, that role is a combination of manager, leader, educator, supervisor, evaluator, and so on with a number of established disciplines

influencing the theoretical foundation of VA. Experts have used these theories to guide the development of pragmatic models for the profession and have included concepts of administration, leadership, and management with the goal of establishing guidelines for volunteer organizations. However, there are weak ties to the specific theoretical underpinnings that comprise VA.

Over the past decade VA has been engaged in a process of professionalization (Fisher & Cole, 1993). During this professionalization process, the “vocation” seeks to establish itself as a true and recognized profession. Houle (1980) contends there are 14 characteristics that describe a vocation in the professionalization process. The first five characterize practitioners in the vocation and the second set of nine describes the vocation as a whole. The Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA) has led the cause in developing VA as a profession. The AVA has published literature, developed networks, established an ethical code, researched competencies, developed training and certification programs, and has set the standard for ensuring that the characteristics outlined by Houle are addressed.

In a further attempt to define the vocation of VA as a profession, the AVA has developed a set of competencies determined by experts in the field and verified through surveys of practitioners. Core competencies consist of five areas: (a) commitment to the profession, (b) planning and conceptual design, (c) resource development and management, (d) accountability, and (e) perspective and responsiveness (Association of Volunteer Administrators, 2001). Additionally, a recent study by Boyd (2002) outlined competencies that would be required by volunteer coordinators in 2010, these competencies were identified by 13 professionals in the field of VA. The five main competency areas identified were: organizational leadership, systems leadership, organizational culture, personal skills, and management skills. In a comparison of the competency-sets, it becomes evident that they are equivalent in many of the associated skills.

However, the second characteristic of professionalization, the one that this paper specifically addresses is, “Master the essential information and theory that constitute its knowledge base and be knowledgeable about the theoretical disciplines that contribute to that base” (Fisher & Cole, 1993). As VA has developed, emphasis has been placed on the similarities of volunteer administration to other management and administrative careers. The field has depended heavily on the concepts and theories of business management, personnel management, and public-service administration to create a knowledge base for volunteer administrators. Yet, the discipline lacks the empirical evidence that supports the development of educational programs and curriculum for volunteer administrators based on these theories.

As models are developed, competencies and skills identified, the vocation intensifies its engagement in the professionalization process. However, the ability of researchers, curriculum developers, and educators to ensure the soundness of

their teaching and research practices hinges on further identification and exploration of the dimensions of volunteer administration.

**Purpose**

The intention of this paper is to propose a model of the dimensions of VA and to prepare a comprehensive theoretical framework for the profession to consider.

**The Dimensions of Volunteer Administration**

The model proposed provides the dimensions of VA and includes the theoretical base, foundation, and processes of the discipline. The theoretical base is in psychology and sociology, the foundation stems from Leadership and Management, Community Development, and Teaching and Learning. The processes are Organizational Leadership, Systems Leadership, Accountability, Management Skills, Personal Skills, Commitment to the Profession and Organizational Culture. Each level of the model will be explored in detail and supporting documentation offered. The researchers developed the conceptual model (see Figure 1) which depicts the dimensions of volunteer administration. Researchers adapted the model from Williams (1991) which suggested the theoretical dimensions of Agricultural Education.

*Figure 1.* Dimensions of volunteer administration.

<b>Processes</b>	Organizational Leadership	Systems Leadership	Accountability	Management Skills	Personal Skills	Organizational Culture	Commitment to the Profession
<b>Discipline</b>	Volunteer Administration						
<b>Foundation</b>	Leadership and Management	Community Development		Teaching and Learning			
<b>Theoretical Base</b>	Psychology and Sociology						

There are five key contexts which volunteer administration currently operates. The primary contexts of VA are Faith-Based Initiatives/Church Organizations and Not-for-Profits. These two contexts are the most reported sources for voluntary activity (Independent Sector, 2001). The three auxiliary contexts include, the Cooperative Extension Service, Education (K-12 and colleges/universities), and Businesses/Industry. These auxiliary contexts report lower levels of volunteer contributions than the primary contexts and may not depend solely on a volunteer staff to maintain day-to-day operations of the organization. It is these contexts, which determine the importance of certain processes over others.

Each context is unique in administering volunteer programs based on the needs of the organization, the clientele, and volunteers. Special circumstances determine the extent that each volunteer administration process is practiced. For example, a volunteer administrator working with long-term direct service volunteers may use a different management strategy than if working with short-term or episodic volunteers. Additionally, a complex organization with a hierarchal structure may desire the volunteer administrator to have a higher level of competence in skills related to organizational culture than of a simpler, less complex organization.

The model begins from the theoretical base of VA. The base builds the foundation, which disciplinarily supports volunteer administration. The processes of VA comprise the operational level of volunteer programs. Fisher and Cole (1993) describe the discipline of volunteer administration as, “the knowledge, skills, and abilities required of professional managers to effectively involve volunteers in the work of organizations” (p. xiv). The processes are the competences related to volunteer administrator, their proficiency in skills; however, to infer knowledge, the underlying foundations of the processes must be explored.

### **Theoretical Base**

The theoretical base is comprised of psychology and sociology. These major fields of study provide the strongest foundation to support the other dimensions of VA as outlined in this paper.

#### **Psychology**

Psychology, in the simplest words, is the study of the mind and mental processes. The implications of having a strong base of knowledge in psychology for volunteer administrators are endless. Theories derived from psychology and sociology provides a basis for the concepts associated with leadership and management, community development, and teaching and learning.

The concept of motivation, and the many theories that are associated with it, has continuously influenced the foundation of VA. Most texts today review Maslow’s hierarchy (Maslow, 1954) or Herzberg’s Two-Factor model (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959). Understanding motivation is one of the most studied aspects of VA and continues to be an important component of successful volunteer programs. There is no doubt that the motivational needs of individuals persuade the way that volunteer administrators recruit, train, recognize, retain, and supervise. The many theories of motivation make up an essential piece of the volunteer administrator’s role.

Psychology also enables the volunteer administrator to understand human development. The effects of the Human Ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Ages and Stages youth development (Cox, 1999), the work of Erikson and Piaget all influence many of the decisions that are made by volunteer

administrators. These theories ensure that appropriate programs are developed for clientele, that volunteers are matched appropriately to assignments, and that individuals are included in important decisions for their unique contributions.

The influences of psychology are evident in personality assessments, learning style inventories, and leadership instruments. Volunteer administrators should be familiar with all of these. The AVA supports team building. Boyd's study found that understanding and utilizing group dynamics, personality type, and team building strategies, along with relationship skills grounded in understanding motivation, inspiring commitment, people skills (developing the "total" person), and sharing power and giving up control as essential competencies of the volunteer administrator.

### **Sociology**

The second piece is sociology, that is, the study of human social behavior (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2000). Interpersonal relations, self and social identity, group behavior, prosocial behavior and multiculturalism all affect the discipline of VA in some way (Connors, 1995). The inherent understanding of how people behave greatly influences the decisions that are made everyday by volunteer administrators. Outlined AVA competencies influenced by sociology are Staff/Volunteer Relations (staff engagement), Financial Resource Management (Donor Identification), and Cultural Competence (human rights, diversity, and inclusivity). Collaborating with others, Relationship skills (the ability to motivate and work with others effectively), and Communication Skills (verbal, non-verbal, listening) are competencies identified by Boyd (2002) that the foundation of sociology supports.

The theoretical base of VA provides an origin for the discipline and for the profession. Psychology and sociology greatly influence the day-to-day operation of volunteer administration and provides an empirical basis for the models and strategies that are used. Their influence is seen throughout the dimensions of VA.

### **Foundations**

The foundations of VA are Leadership and Management, Community Development, and Teaching and Learning. These three foundational disciplines provide the basis for why the identified processes of volunteer administration are important and relevant to the profession.

#### **Leadership and Management**

The foundation discipline of leadership and management has provided volunteer administration with much of its theoretical base. As identified earlier, the dominant contributing fields to VA have been business management, personnel management, and public-service administration. This correlation is primarily due to the similarities of function in managing groups of people. Recently the addition

of leadership principles into the field of VA has extended the function of the volunteer administrator to include leader of volunteers. Often the volunteer administrator fulfills both roles of leader and manager (Fisher & Cole, 1993). The following definitions clarify management from leadership:

- *Management* – planning, organizing, staffing and human resource management, leading and influencing, and controlling (Buford, Bedeian, & Lindner, 1995).
- *Leadership* – The reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers (Burns, 1978).

Each discipline has a distinct contribution to VA, however, the field of management has long been the dominant influence. Cronk (as cited in Fisher and Cole, 1993) defines the volunteer administrator's management responsibilities as planning, organizing, staffing, directing, controlling, interpersonal roles, informational roles, and decision-maker. The dominant management philosophies within VA are personnel management and program management and each offer a unique strategy for managing volunteers. The primary distinction is that organizations that support the use of volunteers throughout depend more on the personnel management model and organizations that utilize volunteers in multiple activities depend on the program management model.

The pragmatic nature of the profession has lead to the development of management models to address the needs of volunteer administrators. These models include ISOTURE (S) (Boyce, 1971), The Bridge from Dreams to Reality (Vineyard, 1983), Volunteer Professional Model for Human Services Agencies and Counselors (Lenihan & Jackson, 1984), Volunteer Management Cycle (Lawson & Lawson, 1987), the 4-H Volunteer Development Model (Kwarteng, Smith, & Miller, 1988), LOOP (Penrod, 1991), GEMS (Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998), and Leading Volunteers for Results (Bradner, 1999). These various models all have certain characteristics creating consistency in volunteer program administration, regardless of the specific acronym offered by the author(s) of the model.

Identification of the processes associated with VA proved to be an important stepping-stone in the development of the profession. Research has shown that the models are relevant and applicable in the day-to-day management of volunteer programs. However, in the completion of management related tasks, is it unreasonable to consider and employ other management models and theories?

The application of alternative management models to the field of VA is an important consideration. The volunteer administrator as a manager must be able to effectively understand and utilize other management theories for the betterment of the profession. They should be proficient in McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y (McGregor, 1985), Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid (Blake & Mouton,

1985), Odiorne's Management-by-Objectives (Odiorne, 1965), and Fielder's (Fiedler, 1967) and Vroom and Yetten's (Vroom & Yetton, 1973) Contingency Models. These models have shown to make a significant contribution to the field of management and can provide volunteer administrators with strategies for the management of volunteer programs and volunteer personnel.

At one time the AVA's standards of competence were grounded heavily in the managerial competencies as described by Cronk. However, the AVA's standards of competence have changed since the publication of Fisher and Cole's book in 1993 and now encompass a much different standard, including leadership.

Fisher and Cole (1993) refer to Bennis' (1994) definition of leadership competencies. These competencies include focusing on commitment to a vision or an agenda, communicating and interpreting the vision so that others align themselves with it, maintaining a reliable, consistent posture, and knowing one's strengths and deploying them effectively, and advocacy as an additional leadership function. The AVA's current set of identified competencies includes knowledge of leadership theories as a skill of commitment to the profession.

Leadership in volunteer programs takes on a more significant role for educators when designing curriculum for volunteer administrators. The educational curriculum must adequately address leadership theories and their application to volunteer administration. Leadership has already exhibited influence in the discipline of Agricultural Education and educators have integrated leadership principles into established curricula. As a growing discipline within agricultural education departments, faculty have focused research on developing and implementing leadership curriculums, a next step for volunteer administration (Boyd & Murphrey, 2001; Brown & Fritz, 1994; Fritz & Brown, 1998; Townsend, 2002).

In considering a focus for leadership education for VA, the defined competencies by Bennis contend that transformational leadership and full-range leadership education curricula may be the most appropriate. However, knowledge and application of traditional and contemporary leadership theories to volunteer administration is important and necessary. If knowledge of leadership theories is an essential competence (as identified by the AVA), then educators must be prepared to further examine and expand curricula that focus solely on the management-related skills of the volunteer administrator.

### **Community Development**

Community development related theories are a second foundation of VA. The idea that individuals within society have a defined role to be citizens and participate in community-related programs and initiatives is a driving force of volunteerism. The relationship between the voluntary sector and the community is strong, due to the fact that voluntary organizations are often called upon to

respond to community needs and to use volunteers from the community (Connors, 1995). Community development theories emerge in the volunteer administrators tasks associated with understanding the role of individuals in communities and the varying perceptions of an organization by the stakeholders, the staff, board members, volunteers, and clients. A key for volunteer administrators is to understand how that varies community-to-community, rural-to-urban, and so forth. This includes knowledge of the fundamental differences in how communities react to philanthropy and the civic participation level of local residents.

This foundation includes various theories that address the community as a system and those that deal specifically with community development. Community development theory encompasses a wide-range of topics all relative to the field of VA and includes system development, defining community, holistic approaches, democracy, citizen roles, and building on diversity (Cook, 1994). For example, the system theory (Tamas, 2000) in community development provides an illustrative framework that outlines the many factors involved in community development. The focus of this theory includes assessing power and influence, understanding the dynamics of inter-group relationships, and changes in planning development activities. Additionally, concepts like Lasswell's value/institution categories (Cunningham, 2002) can provide volunteer administrators with strategies for identifying and recruiting volunteers from the community for the organization. The wheel specifies those individuals from government agencies, families and family support groups, schools (public and private), higher education, businesspersons, civic organizations, various society groups, and religious organizations be included in community development efforts and is appropriate for guiding the selection of volunteers.

Community development provides VA with much of its ability to capitalize on community structures and individuals to operate programs. The drive to assist with developing responsible voluntary activities is an important consideration for volunteer administrators. As Connors (1995) phrases it, "Responsible voluntarism is an active, spontaneous, and challenging force in society" (p. 8).

### **Teaching and Learning**

Teaching and learning is an important theoretical foundation of VA. Most literature, outside of motivation and management is on training and orientation. Are volunteer administrators doing a good job orienting the volunteer to the organization? Are they doing a good job training them for their position? Are they providing continual support to the volunteer? These questions provide the means for volunteers successfully performing their volunteer roles.

The AVA's (2001) competency of resource development and management requires the skill of volunteer performance management. Within this skill is the concept of orientation and training, which includes specific references to design



and implementation of training programs for volunteers. Additionally, the AVA included training of paid staff as an important step in staff and volunteer relationships and risk management. Boyd's (2002) study included teaching and learning under two competencies, organizational culture (creating a positive environment in which volunteers can learn and operate) and management skills (competent in orienting and training volunteers). Yet, to be competent, what does a volunteer administrator need to be able to do?

The volunteer administrator should understand the basic principles of pedagogy and andragogy and ways to ensure that volunteers are, for one being properly trained, but being trained in a manner, which complements their learning style for greatest retention of material. The concept of training and orientation for volunteers is especially important due to the growing numbers of volunteers. Understanding teaching and learning concepts can assist the volunteer administrator in knowing how much training is effective, what to expect of adults in a learning environment, and how to differentiate training for adults and youth. Volunteer administrators will need to determine expectations for volunteers and the implications for their training and orientation needs.

There are five major orientations related to adult education that should be emphasized when instructing volunteer administrators. The five are Behaviorist, Humanistic, Cognitive, Social Learning, and Critical Reflection (as cited in Birkenholz, 1999). These five orientations provide a framework for understanding the various ways that individuals learn and can prove to be an essential tool for ensuring a strong quality educational program for volunteers.

The foundation of VA comprised of theories from leadership and management, community development, and teaching and learning all derived from the same footings: psychology and sociology. The footings of psychology and sociology provide the theoretical reasoning for why people do the things they do. More importantly, they provide a firm basis for the development of VA as a profession and as an academic discipline.

## **Processes**

The processes associated with the discipline of VA are a compilation of identified competencies from the literature. The primary source was the AVA's set standard of competence, and source of content for the AVA credentialing program. The competency set was determined by a survey of experts in VA and the five main areas are to be an exhaustive list of the competencies that volunteer administrators should possess. They are commitment to the profession, planning and conceptual design, resource development and management, accountability, and perspective and responsiveness.

Commitment to the profession refers to the administrators' professional ethics and ethical decision-making. Planning and conceptual design focuses on

organizational overview, organizational resources, organizational operations, and the planning process. The third competency set emphasizes resource development and management and the skills of volunteer system management, volunteer performance management, staff and volunteer relationships, risk management, and financial resource management. The competency of accountability refers specifically to monitoring and evaluation, and reporting. The last set is perspective and responsiveness and emphasizes cultural competence, global volunteerism, managing change, and strategic relationships. These processes are common to literature published on volunteer administration (Association of Volunteer Administrators, 2001; Boyd, 2002; Bradner, 1999; Campbell & Ellis, 1995; Connors, 1995; Culp, K., III, Deppe, C. A., Catillo, J. X., & Wells, B. J., 1998).

The first process was organizational leadership with focus on commitment to vision, ability to access needs, long-range planning, articulation of volunteer efforts and accomplishments, short-range planning, needs to plans to action, articulation of organizational vision, and creative use of technology.

Second was systems leadership with understanding the system in which you operate shared leadership, understanding and utilizing group dynamics, personality type and team building strategies, willingness to share power, and collaboration with others.

The third process was organizational culture and identified skills of acting as an internal consultant, creating a positive environment, relationship skills, inspiring commitment and eagerness to learn, trusting volunteers, and positive attitude and energy. Personal skills were identified and included people skills, conflict resolution skills, communication skills, creative thinking, and the ability to predict and manage change.

Lastly, the management skill included understanding the functions and operationalization of an effective advisory system, and competence in recruiting, screening, matching, orienting and training, protecting, recognizing, and retaining. The objective of Boyd's study was to determine competencies that would be required by volunteer coordinators in 2010; however, the similarities between the two provided the foundation for the processes outlined in the model of the dimensions of volunteer administration.

The final processes included in the model were Organizational Leadership, Systems Leadership, Accountability, Management Skills, Personal Skills, Organizational Culture, and Commitment to the Profession. The identified processes all contained competencies that are either part of the current structure of volunteer administration, or per Boyd's study had a valued place in the profession for future consideration. The goal in providing the processes was to ensure that there was comprehensive set of identified pragmatic subject-matter areas.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

The implications for the dimensions of VA are (a) the profession can be grounded in theoretical disciplines that have been empirically tested, (b) strategies can be determined for focusing future research, and (c) academic curricula can be designed that enhances the pragmatic nature of the discipline.

Volunteer administration becomes the processes of administration applied to the operation of volunteer programs in a specific context. The ability for academic researchers to focus research endeavors will focus the discipline. Williams (1991) wrote of agricultural education, suggesting that a discipline is no stronger than its means for verifying current knowledge and disseminating new knowledge and its applications. Volunteer administration must be capable of accomplishing this task. It must be the goal of organizations and universities supporting the discipline of VA to develop focused strategies for empirically based research initiatives.

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