



Research Corner: *Strategies for Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers*

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From Intention To Action: Strategies For Recruiting And Retaining Today's Volunteers

"No one has a right to consume happiness without producing it." - Helen Keller

Although most people view mentoring as a worthwhile pursuit, far fewer actually step forward and volunteer. Consequently, despite strenuous efforts, many programs struggle to recruit enough volunteers for all of the children who need them. It is not uncommon for a child to spend a year or more on a waiting list to get a mentor.

A major barrier is the fact that, unlike other forms of volunteering, mentoring requires a sustained and relatively intensive commitment. In community-based mentoring programs, for example, volunteers are often required to meet with their mentees several hours a week for a year. Newer forms of mentoring (i.e., school-based) have reduced such requirements. In addition, many agencies have taken steps to further minimize demands on volunteer time. Such steps include requiring minimal training, providing e-mail options and allowing mentoring pairs to meet every other week rather than weekly. Of course, such steps must be balanced against the need to maintain sufficient levels of quality, intensity and duration in relationships.

In this Research Corner, I will discuss promising strategies for recruiting adults into programs and keeping them engaged. The themes are the subject of a newly edited volume, *Mobilizing Adults for Positive Youth Development: Strategies for Closing the Gap between Beliefs and Behaviors* (Clary & Rhodes, Editors). I draw on several chapters, with particular focus on the very interesting work of Arthur Stukas, Maree Daly and Gil Clary.

Background

According to the 2002 National Poll on Mentoring conducted by MENTOR and AOL Time Warner, far more Americans are willing to mentor – both formally and informally – than actually do. The survey found that 42 percent of adults were not mentoring (either formally or informally) but said that they would be interested in doing so. This represents 57 million potential volunteers – a huge untapped resource that could be mobilized to redress the long waiting lists in many mentoring programs. Although the survey findings are encouraging, they also highlight the vital need to translate good intentions into action on behalf of youth. In the following sections, I will review what is known about recruiting and retaining volunteer mentors.

Recruitment

Different mentoring programs use different strategies to recruit mentors. Some emphasize the enjoyment that the volunteer will have; others highlight the unmet needs of youth.

Gil Clary and colleagues would argue that programs should take a “functional” approach to volunteer recruitment. Different people may have very different, underlying motivations for deciding to volunteer. Therefore, recruitment messages that address these motivations should be more persuasive than more generic messages.

With this in mind, the researchers began to identify the major functions that volunteerism can serve. They developed a questionnaire, the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), which asks potential volunteers to rate the importance of 30 different reasons for volunteering. They found that the VFI tapped into six major reasons why people volunteer:

- Values – to put their values into action (e.g., I am genuinely concerned about the particular group I am serving);
- Career – to explore career options, increase the likelihood of pursuing particular career paths (e.g., Mentoring allows me to visibly demonstrate my interest in youth, to explore different career options);
- Understanding – to gain a greater understanding of the world, the people in it (including their own children) and themselves (e.g., Mentoring allows me to gain a new perspective on things);
- Enhancement – to feel important, to form new friendships, and to boost their own self-esteem (e.g., Mentoring a child makes me feel needed);
- Protective – to distract themselves from work or personal problems (e.g., Mentoring relieves me of some of the guilt over being more fortunate than others); and
- Social – to satisfy expectation of friends, spouse or others who are close to them. (e.g., Others with whom I am close place a high value on mentoring).

Omoto and Snyder developed a similar questionnaire, which includes an additional reason:

- Community Concern (e.g., I volunteer because of my sense of obligation to the community).

Matching Message to Motivation

A 1992 national US Gallup poll that included a subset of VFI items found interesting differences between what motivated most volunteers and what motivated those working on youth-development issues. In that study, adult volunteers who work on youth-development issues tended to be more motivated by understanding.

Similarly, in a survey of 1,388 volunteers, Clary found that those who were involved in youth-development organizations, tended to rank understanding as the most important reason. The next most important reasons were enhancement, social, protective and career.

Clary and colleagues have also conducted a series of studies in which they first assessed participants' motivations and then showed them a series of messages in recruitment videos and

brochures. Study participants rated messages that matched their motivations as significantly more persuasive.

Other studies shed light onto how organizations can tailor messages for specific volunteer audiences. For example, Okun & Schultz (2003) found that older people have lower career and understanding motives and higher social motives than younger volunteers. With this in mind:

- Recruitment events that are targeted to retired adults might enlist current volunteers to persuade their loved ones and friends to volunteer.
- Efforts to recruit college students might highlight the secondary benefits of mentoring, including increased perspective on youth and career benefits.

Consider the Context

Ajzen (1991) has suggested that behavior is affected not only by one's attitudes or intentions, but also by one's perceptions of social norms (e.g., People that I am close to want me to mentor) and on the physical context (I can successfully enact the behavior).

This was exemplified in a recent e-mail (identifiers removed) in which a new mentor was seeking to encourage her boyfriend to become a mentor by making it easier for him to volunteer. She wrote:

I just wanted to say that I think you did a great job matching Julia and me. She is such a sweet girl and I'm so excited about being her mentor, so thank you! I actually also have a question for you – do you happen to know whether there are any schools that participate in the mentoring program by Government Plaza. My boyfriend, Tim, works right across from it and he loves kids – I'm trying to convince him to join. Thanks again for a great match.

Social Norms

Research by Piliavin and Callero (1991) has shown that the perceived expectations of significant others can influence both self-concept (e.g., I am the type of person who could be a mentor) and sustained commitment.

Given that finding, Tim (from the example above) would probably be less likely to terminate his mentoring relationship, so long as his girlfriend was still mentoring and expected him to do the same.

Building on this notion is Search Institute researcher, Peter Scales. In his book, *Other People's Kids: Social Expectations and American Adults' Involvement with Children and Adolescents*, Scales argues that adults are more likely to get deeply involved if they believe that society puts a high value on such involvement, and if they perceive society expects them to get involved.

Behavioral control

Ajzen suggests that when people perceive that they can actually do what is needed (i.e, get to and from the mentoring site or their mentee's home, find time in their schedule, negotiate the logistics of enrolling) their perception may significantly influence their intentions (Ajzen, 1991).

Okun (2002) found that perceived behavioral control was the strongest predictor in intentions to enroll in a college volunteer program. Attitudes and subjective norms were also significant predictors.

Referring back to the earlier example, Tim may feel emboldened to take the next step and sign up to be a mentor if he finds that: the mentoring program only requires him to volunteer one hour a week, a school is within walking distance of his office, and that the mentoring program can facilitate the relationship. The additional information that his girlfriend provided – about how mentoring works and where to volunteer – may give him the needed sense of self-efficacy. If he believes that he can accomplish the task, he may be motivated enough to take action.

Indeed, self-efficacy has been found to be a key predictor of mentor and youth contact and closeness and even youth outcomes (DuBois et al.).

Retention of volunteers

Programs put considerable effort into recruiting volunteers, matching them with young people and monitoring their mentoring relationships. Despite those efforts, as many as half of volunteer mentoring relationships terminate within the first few months.

Volunteers have many reasons for dropping out of mentoring programs. For instance, volunteers may:

- Fear that they are being ineffective and do not want to risk failure;
- Perceive that their mentees show a lack of effort or appreciation;
- Find that the personal investment required to work with troubled adolescents exceeds their expectations;
- Feel burdened by their youths' issues and not be aware of the many resources that are available to help them through services in the community-at-large (e.g., Mentoring.org) or through the mentoring program that matched them;
- Feel overwhelmed by the difficult circumstances or neediness of their mentees, which ignite the mentors' own painful or unwelcome memories.

No matter why early terminations occur, mentoring programs should take the terminations seriously and handle them with care.³ Indeed, when relationships don't thrive, both the mentees and the programs can suffer negative effects.

Effects on youth

Jean Grossman and I analyzed data from the national Big Brothers Big Sisters study, examining whether the effects of mentoring relationships varied as a function of their duration. First, we categorized the mentored youth into two groups, depending on how long their matches lasted.

- On group consisted of youth who were in matches that terminated within the first six months. The youth in this group suffered larger drops in feelings of self-worth and perceived scholastic competence than youth who had never been matched with a mentor (controls).
- The other group consisted of youth who were in matches that lasted more than 12 months. The young people in this group reported significantly higher levels of self-worth, social acceptance and scholastic competence. They also reported that their relationships with their parents had improved, school had become more rewarding and their drug and alcohol use had declined!

Along similar lines, Ellen Slicker and Douglas Palmer found that students who were "effectively mentored" (as measured by the quality and length of their relationships) had better academic outcomes than controls. By contrast, young people whose relationships terminated prematurely experienced a significant decline in self-concept when compared with students who were not mentored at all.⁵

David DuBois and colleagues' research also supports this pattern. They used a meta-analysis to review 55 evaluations of youth mentoring programs. Stronger effects emerged among those youth who had closer, more enduring mentoring relationships: they derived more benefits.

These and related findings have underscored the potentially disruptive effects of early terminations.

Effect on organization

Termination is not only disruptive to mentees, it can take a toll on mentoring programs. Recruiting and training new volunteers is expensive and can drain an organization's limited budget.

A functional approach to retention

As discussed earlier, people often are attracted to volunteerism as a means of addressing their own needs, goals and motives. Volunteers will be more satisfied and more apt to continue volunteering so long as their needs are met. Thus, mentoring programs should take steps to ensure that mentors' experiences align with their expectations.

Clary found that elderly and college student volunteers who received benefits that matched their initial motivations (as measured on the VFI) were more satisfied. These volunteers also indicated greater intentions to continue in both the short- and long-term future. This suggests that programs should not misrepresent the mentoring experience in their marketing (e.g., oversell the fun and minimize the challenges of mentoring). Ultimately, if the actual experience fails to align with their motivation, volunteers will be at-risk for dropping out.

Altruism vs. Egoistic motivations

As suggested above, motivations to volunteer tend to fall on a continuum from the more altruistic (selfless concern for others) to the more egoistic (self-interested). Volunteering to express one's values or to give back to one's community is more altruistic in nature, whereas volunteering to learn about oneself or children, or to advance one's career is more egoistic.

- Karcher, Nakkula and Harris have found that mentors are more likely to perceive their mentoring relationships as positive if they are motivated by altruistic motivations as opposed to egoistic motivations.
- Similarly, Rubin & Thorelli (1984) found that the number of egoistic motives indicated by volunteers was inversely related to their longevity of participation.
- Davis et al. (2003) looked at motives and their fulfillment in actual volunteer activities as predictors of satisfaction in a sample of community volunteers recruited from a range of volunteer agencies. Altruistic vs. egoistic motives were measured at the beginning of the volunteer service. Satisfaction and motive fulfillment were measured every three months for a year. Results were interesting – associations between motive fulfillment and satisfaction were found, but only at the first two time points. As time went on, fulfillment of original motives became less relevant. The authors speculated that perhaps, as time went on, the more egoistic goals that led volunteers to initially participate were fulfilled, and the motivations to continue became more altruistic.

Role identity

Other researchers have looked at the importance of a "role identity" and the extent to which adults' volunteer roles become important to their sense of who they are.

Organizations that encourage volunteers to attend mentor support groups, hold events for volunteers or send out newsletters and group e-mails to all volunteers may help those individuals to internalize their identities as volunteers. This, in turn, may go a long way toward retaining volunteers and facilitating longer-lasting mentoring relationships (McClanahan, 1998).

Carrot and Stick

Some programs have sought to increase mentor retention by providing rewards for mentors' sustained efforts (i.e., by offering course credits, repaying debts, even offering hourly wages) and by withholding such rewards if mentors terminate relationships.

Although such tactics may seem promising, some fear that it might reduce individuals' interest in an activity and undermine its intrinsic value. This appears to be the case in studies where children are paid for good grades or when adults are paid to shed pounds or give blood. The external motivation appears to undermine the belief that individuals should do something because they will enjoy it. Often, when the reward goes, these individuals consider their work less worthwhile. Psychologists call this the "over-justification effect." (Sharpe, 200)

Such an undermining effect has been demonstrated as a result of required community service, which have become a common feature of many high schools and colleges (Stukas, Snyder, & Clary). As the researchers argue, "limiting an individual's freedom to act may lead to desires to reestablish that freedom, which can be accomplished by derogating the forced activity and by refusing to perform it once the mandate has been lifted."

Moreover, as discussed above, volunteers who are more motivated by internal factors (i.e., wanting to give back) are more likely to complete their volunteer assignments than those motivated by external factors (i.e., building their résumés).

Nonetheless, extrinsic rewards can be effective, particularly when coupled with intrinsic motivations. Friends of the Children (<http://www.friendsofthechildren.com/>) successfully employs paid professional mentors to work with vulnerable youth from kindergarten through high school.

Additionally, externally motivated volunteers who went through intensive training were just as likely to complete their assignments as were internally motivated volunteers. This suggests that careful attention to the quality of training can override individual differences that otherwise might have led to early terminations. Indeed, researchers have underscored the importance of training in youth mentoring .⁵

The Bottom Line

To summarize the research, adults are more likely to be mobilized into sustained mentoring relationships when they:

- Perceive that the experience is addressing their underlying expectations and needs;
- Are made more aware of the potential benefits mentoring offers to themselves (particularly enhanced understanding), their mentees and to the community;
- Feel a connection with other volunteers or the with the community in which the mentoring will occur;
- Feel confident that they can master logistics of the mentoring experience and can both find the time and energy to volunteer;
- Are provided with opportunities to internalize their role as volunteers; and
- Feel greater social norms and pressure to authentically engage in the lives of today's youth.

Taken together, these findings suggest that mentoring programs can enhance their mentor recruitment and retention efforts by understanding what motivates their volunteer pool and tailor their recruitment messages and experiences accordingly.

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