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County-Level Extension Leadership: Understanding Volunteer Board Member Motivation

Ed Farris

Extension Educator, Huntington County
emfarris@purdue.edu

Steve McKinley

4-H Extension Specialist
Department of Youth Development and Agricultural Education
mckinles@purdue.edu

Janet Ayres

Professor and Extension Specialist Leadership Development
Department of Agricultural Economics
ayres@purdue.edu

Jerry Peters

Professor
Department of Youth Development and Agricultural Education
peters@purdue.edu

Colleen Brady

Associate Professor
Department of Youth Development and Agricultural Education
bradyc@purdue.edu

Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana

Abstract: This article examines the motivation of Extension volunteers to serve on county-level boards. A survey was administered to board members to gain understanding of their perceptions of motivation and overall board effectiveness. As supported by prior research, volunteer leaders were motivated by the community-related aspects of their service. Additionally, the study reported here found that most respondents had prior board experience. However, less than a fourth of the survey participants were willing to commit to new roles as part of their board service. The article offers suggestions on board member recruitment and engagement methods for county Extension staff.

Introduction

Programming in Extension is based on local needs and resources. Therefore, volunteers serve on county-level boards to help develop, implement, and evaluate programs. Board members must effectively communicate with local Extension staff and community leaders. Many Extension professionals are involved with the recruitment of these board members. Understanding the motivating factors for individuals who typically volunteer as board members can help Extension staff more effectively recruit and train these individuals.

Prior studies of volunteers have focused on underlying motivational processes. Clary et al. (1998) postulated that volunteerism serves six functions for volunteers: Values, altruistic and humanitarian concerns for others; Understanding, opportunities for new learning experiences; Social, relationships with others; Career, benefits related to career from volunteer participation; Protective, protection of ego by reduction of guilt over being more fortunate than others; and Enhancement, improvement of self-esteem. In a descriptive study of volunteers in Ohio, Schmiesing, Soder, & Russell (2005) used Clary's functions to develop a survey and found that individuals were more motivated by their altruistic values than by other aspects of volunteerism. Thus, the researchers recommended volunteer recruitment methods that support the value function.

Inglis and Cleave (2006) conducted a study assessing motivation in the context of volunteer boards. The researchers found that the motivations rated most highly by volunteer board members were those with a community focus. Members of volunteer boards were more motivated by the understanding that their efforts would help others rather than by improving their own self worth.

Satisfaction with performing community volunteer roles can also influence motivation. Galindo-Kuhn & Guzley (2001) proposed and tested a Volunteer Satisfaction Index (VSI). The volunteers in this study reported high levels of satisfaction with "participation efficacy" and "group integration" as predictors of "intent to remain." Volunteers will remain with an organization if the organizations fulfill their expectations that their participation will benefit someone other than themselves. Further, volunteers who work together are generally more satisfied in their role.

The previous studies of motivation have important implications for volunteer Extension Board members. Boards that work together and truly understand how Extension programming is affecting their area should have stability. Members of Extension Boards, therefore, will likely be motivated to continue serving if they understand the value of their service to their communities.

Purpose and Methodology

Though several previous studies have focused on the motivation of volunteers, there has been limited research to understand the motivation of volunteer county-level board members. Each county in Indiana has a County Extension Board that helps formulate and carry out Extension programs and policies. A survey was prepared with the assistance of Purdue University researchers as part of a board effectiveness study. Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from the survey.

The quantitative portion involved statements to which respondents were asked to provide ratings regarding competencies, board/staff relations, and board effectiveness. Qualitative data were obtained through use of six open-ended questions to uncover the motivation of board members. Coding was completed to determine the themes for each motivation question found in the responses. Response frequencies for each theme were then calculated based on the total number of responses.

Fifteen counties were randomly chosen for this study by stratification of the 92 Indiana counties into groups

according to geographic district and population size. Note that Purdue Extension divides Indiana into five geographic districts and three population classifications. The total sample size was 212 board members from the 15 selected counties.

Salant and Dillman's (1994) basic survey mailing procedure was used to achieve a high response rate from survey participants. County Extension Board members from the selected counties were also given the option to complete the survey using a Web-based program. In the 15 participating counties, 147 board members returned the surveys, for an overall response rate of 69.3%. There were 95 surveys received by regular mail (64.6% of total returned), and 52 surveys were received on-line (35.4% of total returned).

Findings

There were nearly equal numbers of males (73) and females (72) who responded to the survey. They were primarily Caucasian/White (95%), and the majority of the survey participants were over 50 years old (63%). In addition, 44% of the respondents reported having earned a bachelor's degree or higher. The top four occupations of the survey participants were farmer (19%), executive or managerial (16%), retired (13%), and homemaker (10%). Eighty-eight percent noted living in their county over 10 years.

The first survey question was, "Why were you recruited to serve on the County Extension Board?" Many respondents discussed being an Extension program supporter/community leader (46%). Others mentioned that they provided needed skills for the board due to current/prior work experience in areas such as education and agriculture (22%). Another theme was that the board members were providing representation for a geographic area in the county, Extension-supported organization, and/or a demographic group (16%). To a lesser extent, respondents discussed a working (or professional) relationship with an Extension Board member or Extension Staff member (6%).

In regards to the question, "What motivated you to serve on the County Extension Board?" the most common themes involved perceptions that volunteer work was benefiting others in the community (67%). The respondents noted that they understood the importance of Extension programming in strengthening their communities. There were also some responses in regards to individual needs to gain knowledge and/or interact with people (13%). A less prevalent theme involved agreeing to serve because a board and/or a staff member asked (10%). Only a few discussed serving on the board because they were obligated to do so (4%).

Survey participants were asked to provide details of any prior experiences with serving on other boards. The most common theme found among the respondents was prior service on community boards, including those involving Extension programs (64%). Some specifically mentioned community boards involving agriculture and youth. To a lesser extent, respondents noted service on corporate boards (11%) or that they had not been involved with any other boards prior to serving on the County Extension Board (14%).

Another survey question was, "What training opportunities have you participated in to assist you in your role as an Extension Board member?" The most prevalent response was "None" for this question (39%). For those respondents who noted receiving some form of training, there were varied themes found in the responses. The first theme involved training that was received from the Cooperative Extension Service. Some reported receiving training specific to the County Extension Board (22%), while others mentioned attending leadership training conducted by the Cooperative Extension Service (12%). Another theme included training that was received from involvement in another board or through work experiences (12%).

For the question, "How have you personally benefited from your participation as an Extension Board member?" the most common theme involved an increased knowledge and/or appreciation of the work of Extension in the county (41%). The second most common theme involved an opportunity to build

relationships with people in the county (21%). A less frequent theme found was an increased level of personal satisfaction from helping people and/or learning new skills (14%). A small number of respondents (7%) reported that they had not personally benefited from their board participation.

The final survey question regarding motivation was, "What additional roles would you like to assume as an Extension Board member?" The most prevalent theme in the responses to this question was that survey participants did not want to assume additional roles (50%). The reasons noted for their inability to take on new roles involved many existing responsibilities within the board and/or other work and family commitments. Others mentioned that they were nearing the end of their term on the board. Some respondents did feel that they could assume new roles (24%) in the areas of promotional activities, Extension program assistance, and committee participation.

Conclusions

Overall, respondents of this survey were diverse in terms of gender, education, and occupation. The survey participants, however, were not diverse in terms of age (63% were over 50 years old) and ethnic background (95% Caucasian/White). Most of the board members who participated in this survey perceived themselves as experienced community leaders or skilled professionals. Three quarters of the respondents also noted prior experience with serving on either community or corporate boards, while less than half discussed attending training opportunities for board members.

An important finding of the study was that two-thirds of respondents described their motivation to serve on the county-level board as an understanding that their service was benefiting the community. The prior study of volunteer board members from various non-profit agencies by Inglis and Cleave (2006) also found that motivations were higher when related to a community-improvement focus rather than a self-worth improvement focus. It should be noted, however, that over 75% of board members in the study perceived personal benefits from their volunteer service. These personal benefits were generally described as increased knowledge, greater awareness, more satisfaction, and enhanced relationships.

Only 24% of the survey participants responded positively to assuming additional roles associated with their county-level boards. The remaining respondents either did not respond or mentioned that they were unable to commit to new roles based on other responsibilities. An evaluation of the positive responses found that most board members would only accept an additional role if they were asked by an Extension staff member.

Recommendations

The findings of the research reported here suggest that Extension professionals who wish to attract committed volunteers as county-level board members can promote the value function (i.e., humanitarian concern for others) as defined by Clary (1998) in recruitment and orientation activities. Note that similar results were found in the research of volunteers by Schmiesing, Soder, and Russell (2005). It should be mentioned that the demographic of the study was mainly Caucasians who were over 50 years old, and a different demographic may be motivated by other factors.

The study results also suggest that county-level board members may not be fully aware of the scope of the Cooperative Extension Service in their communities when they initially assume board duties. Over 40% of the respondents in the study reported increased knowledge/appreciation of the work of Extension as a result of their board service. This highlights the need for recruitment and orientation activities that educate board members on the diverse nature of Extension programming.

Furthermore, board members may not understand how their efforts can benefit the community without county-level staff suggestions and encouragement. As found in the study, less than a quarter of the respondents were willing to accept new board roles. Extension professionals, therefore, may need to be creative in board member discussions. The interactions should be focused on how the individual board member might be able to focus his/her time and talents in helping the organization.

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