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MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE:
CAPTURING THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL VALUE
OF VOLUNTEERISM IN NONPROFITS

by

Sue Carter Kahl

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2019

Dissertation Committee

Robert Donmoyer, PhD
Zachary G. Green, PhD
Jeffrey L. Brudney, PhD

University of San Diego

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University of San Diego
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TITLE OF DISSERTATION: MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: CAPTURING
THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL VALUE OF VOLUNTEERISM TO NONPROFIT
ORGANIZATIONS

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DATE: April 12, 2019

ABSTRACT

Volunteers represent an important part of the nonprofit labor pool, and their contributions are diverse and significant. Yet, the assessment of the value that they bring to nonprofit organizations often is reduced to a few numbers and understood to be an economic decision based on their absence of wages. This value is traditionally reported as volunteer numbers, hours, and an hourly financial value assigned to volunteer time. These data are important tools for articulating volunteer contributions. However, the emphasis on numbers and economic value sometimes obscures important dimensions of service. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation was to reveal more dimensions of volunteer value by assessing perceptions of the traditional metrics and introducing new lenses for interpreting volunteer value. It was written using the three-paper format.

The first paper used Q methodology to study the perceptions of funders, nonprofit executives, and volunteer administrators. Thirty participants ranked their preferences for 41 diverse indicators of volunteer value in a Q sort and discussed how they made meaning of their sorts. Factor and qualitative analyses of the data revealed that participants gave the traditional volunteer numbers, hours, and financial value metrics mixed reviews. Their preferences did not align by stakeholder group. However, all participants demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of service than is found in traditional volunteer value measures.

The second paper introduced the gift economy as a companion framework for the economic model that undergirds the common measures of volunteer value. It named and integrated additional dimensions of service (e.g., spiritual, social, meaning making) with notions of economic value.

The third paper combined the Q data with interview data from 10 experts on volunteer value. The analysis showed two value propositions of volunteers: volunteers as cost savings or as mission support/value add. The paper concluded with adaptive leadership principles that can support nonprofit leaders in blending both value propositions.

Collectively, the papers demonstrate dimensions of volunteer service that are important but overlooked by those who rely on traditional volunteer metrics. Identifying and studying these dimensions can contribute to a holistic understanding of volunteerism that supports more strategic volunteer practices and more robust explanations of volunteer value.

DEDICATION

*To all those who transform the good intentions, time, and talent of volunteers
into actions and relationships that improve our communities*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Three years ago, I was introduced to the tradition of pilgrimage, and it became an apt metaphor for the doctoral journey. In pilgrimage, the people with whom you travel are an essential component to how the path unfolds. I am grateful to those who have accompanied me along the way, both near and far.

Mom and Dad, I am grateful to you for planting and cultivating the seeds of volunteerism in me and giving me the space to discover how they might bloom in my own life.

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DISSERTATION INTRODUCTION

The Way It Is

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

(Stafford, 1998, p. 42)

The thread in my life is volunteerism. As a child, my mom took me door to door with her as she collected for March of Dimes. I witnessed my parents serving at school, church, Girl Scouts, and sports leagues for our family before experimenting with and growing into service on my own. Later, my nonprofit career included experiences working and serving alongside volunteers and eventually running a volunteer center and serving on a state commission dedicated to volunteerism.

These diverse experiences allowed me to see the good, bad, and ugly of volunteerism. They exposed me to the glowing rhetoric from agency executives about volunteers being the heart of their organizations. They gave me front-row seats for hearing stories about how service had been transformational for beneficiaries and volunteers alike. However, behind the scenes and off the record, I also heard rumblings that volunteers were unreliable and more trouble than they were worth. Volunteer administrators talked about the struggles that came with being chronically underfunded. They frequently used the word *afterthought* to describe how volunteers were treated in their organizations. The discrepancy between rhetoric and reality was widespread and

jarring—and with few exceptions, it seemed to be largely overlooked in volunteer research and popular news coverage.

The questions I held about this discrepancy and so many other volunteer-related issues were what compelled me to return to graduate school. The coursework and research combined with my consulting to further deepen my awareness and curiosity about the richness of volunteerism. As a result, I could not help but notice more of the tensions and paradox inherent in service that make it so challenging, nor could I ignore the ways that the narrative about service does it a dis-service.

My doctoral journey began with the desire to discover ways to capture and articulate the dynamic, rich, nuanced, and messy volunteerism that I had experienced. It is concluding with a bolder goal: to be a voice and witness to that volunteerism. This dissertation is one step toward that goal. My hope is that this work contributes to a new narrative about service—one that is more honest and productive than the current stories would have us believe, and one that is inclusive of its pitfalls as well as its promise.

Background to the Study

Volunteerism is a complex and dynamic phenomenon with a deceptively familiar façade. As Zimmeck (2000) observed, “Familiarity is *the* problem” (para. 2), because so many people have served as or know volunteers and have a sense of knowing what is needed to support volunteerism.

Yet, familiarity does not equate to understanding. The very definition of volunteering is amorphous and depends on context as well as the volunteer’s perception of the work (Musick & Wilson, 2008). The classic definition of volunteering is better described as a system of definitions along four dimensions: free choice, remuneration,

structure, and intended beneficiaries (Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996). Each dimension has at least two categories that occur along a continuum. Yet, even this hybrid approach to definition is problematic, according to Overgaard (2019), who contends that some of its assumptions are inaccurate.

This renewed examination of the definition of volunteer service is part of a broader trend of challenging assumptions in the field of volunteer management. In 1999, Rochester disputed the merit of the one-size-fits-all, human-resource management (HRM) approach to working with volunteers that dominated practice and the literature, a position receiving later support by research from Hager and Brudney (2015). Studer (2015) further contested HRM models with her argument that the differences between volunteers and paid staff were sufficiently important to require distinct approaches to management. Even the conception of the volunteer field has been reimaged using principles for managing the commons (Brudney & Meijs, 2009). Other scholars have determined that the decision to involve volunteers in nonprofit organizations involves more complexity and nuance than originally understood (Russell, Mook, & Handy, 2017). To capture this complexity, Haski-Leventhal, Hustinx, and Handy (2011) recommended engaging in qualitative research and studying different stakeholder perspectives.

This dissertation continues in that vein of questioning assumptions. It combines mixed-methods research, multiple stakeholder views, and new conceptual frameworks to introduce different lenses for volunteerism. The research focus is on the service that occurs in nonprofit organizations in the United States that have paid staff and volunteers. The unit of analysis is the organization. I selected nonprofits because they are uniquely

linked to service. Most nonprofits begin as all-volunteer organizations, and service and community oversight are built into their design in the form of boards of directors comprised of community leaders (Ellis, 2010). In addition, 81% of nonprofits report involving (non-board) volunteers (Urban Institute, 2004). Nonprofits with paid staff represent a smaller percentage of the total nonprofit sector than all-volunteer organizations (Smith, 1997). However, once nonprofit organizations begin to add paid staff, they have an increased need to justify the ongoing inclusion of volunteers, especially as the nonprofit sector professionalizes and is pressured to run like a business (Hwang & Powell, 2009; Safrit, 2013).

The language about volunteers used in the dissertation is intended to align with terminology being used in practice. For example, there has been a shift from *volunteer management* to *volunteer engagement* or *involvement*. I avoid pairing the verb *using* with volunteers since it can devalue those who serve. Additionally, there has been a move away from *volunteer program* since referring to it as such can inadvertently set it up to be in competition with other programs. Instead, I refer to the volunteer *department, function, effort, or strategies*. The professionals who oversee volunteers are designated as *volunteer administrators*.

Capturing the Multidimensional Value of Volunteerism in Nonprofits

“Our lot as human beings dealing with a complex, multi-dimensional and paradoxical world, is that our knowledge can do no more than create a weak and rather uni-dimensional representation of that world” (Morgan 1988, p. 480).

Service within nonprofits is diverse and complex. It occurs at the intersection of multiple dimensions, including the organization, volunteers, clients or participants, and

the community at large (Brudney, 2010). Moreover, each of these dimensions has many components. For example, within organizations, service can be viewed as contributing to human, economic, social, cultural, and physical capital (Rochester, Paine, & Howell, 2010). In addition, volunteers are both an output of the volunteer function and an input for the rest of the organization.

Despite the complexity of volunteerism in organizations, however, the primary metrics for communicating the value of volunteerism are unidimensional. These metrics include the number of volunteers, volunteer hours, and an hourly financial value, typically calculated by the Independent Sector (IS, 2019) and currently estimated at \$24.69. These metrics form the de facto standard of volunteer value as observed or used by national organizations, practitioners, and scholars alike.

For example, Independent Sector (2019) claims that nonprofits “frequently use this estimate” of an hourly financial value for volunteer time to “quantify the enormous value volunteers provide.” Fryar (Fryar, Mook, Brummel, & Jalandoni, 2003) provided validation for this claim when he suggested that agency leaders, under pressure to demonstrate results, have:

. . . been only too willing to accept this formula as being a sound one. So successful has this approach been that, in the United States, one of the most anticipated “events” in volunteerism is the annual announcement by the Independent Sector of the newly-calculated “accepted” hourly dollar rate for volunteer time. (Introduction section)

Furthermore, the Corporation for National and Community Service issues an annual report on the number of United States volunteers, their hours, and the economic value of

volunteer time using the Independent Sector hourly rate along with an overview of the roles volunteer play (Corporation for National and Community Service, [CNCS], n.d.) These data points, in turn, have been reported as the primary volunteer metrics in a national overview of the nonprofit sector in the U.S. (McKeever, 2015).

Practitioner leaders, including Bisbee and Wisniewski (2017), Ellis (2010), Burych, Caird, Schwebel, Fliess, and Hardie (2016), and Cravens (2016), have noted the predominance of volunteer value reported in terms of volunteer numbers, hours, and an hourly financial rate. Likewise, scholars have indicated that volunteer impact is difficult to assess, and therefore, they commonly use volunteer hours and/or economic measures, such as wage replacement rates, as proxies for impact (Brudney & Nezhina, 2011; Handy & Srinivasan, 2004; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2011; Salamon, Sokolowski, & Haddock., 2011).

Nearly all of these organizations, leaders, and scholars acknowledge that volunteer numbers, hours, and/or hourly financial rate do not represent the full value that volunteers contribute to an organization. Some go on to identify other indicators of volunteer value such as program or organizational outputs, sophisticated economic modeling of value, or qualitative benefits of service (Brudney & Nezhina, 2011; Burych et al., 2016; Cravens, 2016; Ellis, 2010; Handy & Srinivasan, 2004; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2011). Yet, the availability of these other approaches, even when superior to the standard measures, does not seem to translate into their widespread adoption and use. For example, in several blogs and a Twitter exchange with Independent Sector, Cravens (2011, 2014, 2016) pointed out that, despite the many ways to capture volunteer value, nonprofits often rely on the Independent Sector rate as the exclusive value reference. Her

experience (and that of her blog commenters) echo what I frequently see in my consulting and teaching: a default to reporting volunteer value in numbers and dollars. Fryar's contention in 2003 that "the most enduring and controversial question within the field of volunteerism is the one that relates to the 'value' of volunteers and the hours they contribute" (Fryar et al., 2003, para. 1) seems to be just as accurate today.

Just as there is acknowledgment that there are many ways to capture volunteer value, there is recognition that there is a time and place for the traditional measures, which have many benefits. Nonprofits are increasingly required to demonstrate their impact and encouraged to make data-driven decisions, and these statistics can support those efforts. For example, the numbers and hours provide information about how much people power it takes to operate the organization. In addition, volunteer numbers reflect how many people have been exposed to the organization and its work (Ellis, 2010). The hourly financial value helps establish volunteers as a significant resource of the organization and can help garner attention of internal and external audiences (Fryar et al., 2003, Mook section). It also can be used to show volunteer value as part of an organization's in-kind match for grants.

Volunteer volume and financial value offer an intuitive logic as well. If involving volunteers in an organization is useful, then it seems valuable to have more people contributing more time. Moreover, if these volunteers are contributing service that has some value, then it seems reasonable to articulate that value in financial terms. The logic is further enhanced by the relative ease of tracking hours and calculating a financial value of volunteer time, which makes it feasible for many organizations that host volunteers.

In summary, although numerous data points are available to tell the volunteer story, the traditional metrics dominate the volunteer landscape. Their predominance has risks and consequences that can compromise a more holistic understanding of the complex nature of service.

Potential Risks of Unidimensional Metrics

Focusing on one dimension of an issue tends to diminish awareness of other important dimensions (Kahneman, 2011; Morgan, 1998). This is particularly true when the emphasized dimensions are quantitative in nature because quantitative data contribute to a perception of objectivity and legitimacy, according to critical accounting theorists (Morgan, 1998). In addition, data points that support instrumental purposes have the added effect of “crowding out” other indicators of success along the more expressive and symbolic lines of nonprofit work (Knutsen & Brower, 2010, p. 609).

Using unidimensional measures can also lead to their misapplication. For example, there is a tendency to substitute questions that are fairly easy to answer (i.e., how many volunteers do we have?) for more important and more difficult questions (i.e., what impact did our volunteers make on our clients and agency?). It is not a productive trade, but a common one. In fact, our brains seem hardwired toward this cognitive bias (Kahneman, 2011), which perhaps leads organizations and communities to follow suit (Heifetz, 1994).

Taken together, critical accounting theory, research on nonprofit instrumental and expressive roles, and cognitive bias studies offer more theoretical ways to say that when all one has is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. They suggest that the presence and predominance of quantitative metrics can serve as blinders to other indicators. As a

result, their familiarity and frequent use increase the likelihood they will be used again and decrease the likelihood that other metrics will be used.

Potential Consequences of Unidimensional Metrics

The narrow perspective created by unidimensional metrics can limit understanding and even misdirect the practice of volunteerism. For example, an emphasis on numbers and dollars tends to lead to success being defined primarily in quantitative terms (Burych et al., 2016). This can be problematic for an activity that is influenced by meaning and purpose as well as financials.

Another consequence of the quantitative focus is that it can confuse volunteer labor as an end rather than as a means *and* an end. Volunteers occupy multiple positions in the logic model continuum. They are an output for the volunteer department, but they also are an input for the organization's programs or operations (Adams, Mazzella, Renfro, Schilling, & Hager, 2016). However, this dual position is nuanced and often overlooked. Nonprofit organizations tend to report volunteer numbers as an output in annual reports and on their websites (McCurley & Lynch, 2011). Unfortunately, doing so omits the results of the volunteers' work and treats volunteer activity as an end in and of itself, rather than as a means to accomplish the agency's mission (Burych et al., 2016).

A consequence related to the means/end confusion is that volunteer volume is sometimes mischaracterized as volunteer impact rather than as measure of volunteer activity that helps produce impact. In other cases, volunteer volume is intentionally used as a proxy for volunteer impact (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2011). This use of the terms can lead to the belief that merely having volunteers is good and put the emphasis on volunteer activity instead of volunteer results.

In addition, the focus on traditional metrics may combine with institutional forces and time constraints to limit the identification and collection of other volunteer value indicators. Hours, numbers, and an hourly dollar value constitute the industry standard for reporting about volunteers (Brudney & Nezhina, 2011; Ellis, 2010), which can lend nonprofits legitimacy, according to institutionalist thinking (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Yet, unless an organization's purpose is to increase volunteerism, the traditional measures do not reveal how volunteers advance the agency's mission. Even more problematic is the fact that focusing on the traditional measures alone may lead organizations to manage toward the data rather than manage toward the mission (Burych et al., 2016). The data tail starts to wag the mission dog in the volunteer version of mission drift.

Additionally, the predominance of volunteer volume and value have implications beyond individual nonprofits: they influence the nonprofit sector at large. Focusing on one dimension of volunteerism contributes to an illusion of generalizability between organizations and service opportunities. Nonprofits and the volunteer roles they host are incredibly rich and diverse, but the traditional volunteer measures reduce these differences to three common denominators of numbers, hours, and dollars. They imply standardization of a sector and activity that are anything but standard.

In summary, volunteerism within nonprofit organizations is a dynamic and complex activity. Numerical and financial data are important tools for articulating aspects of volunteer contributions to nonprofit agencies. However, they do not tell the full story, and they may even hide or misrepresent important parts of that story. As a result, they can

negatively influence the understanding and practice of volunteerism and limit volunteer effectiveness in the organizations they serve.

Purpose and Research Questions

Therefore, the purpose of the research being reported here was to name, reveal, and reclaim more of the complexity of volunteerism. The research questions were:

- How do stakeholders (funders, nonprofit executives, and volunteer administrators) perceive the traditional indicators of volunteer value (volunteer numbers, hours, and hourly value)?
- What other interpretations of volunteerism may expand understanding of service beyond what the traditional indicators and economic model offer?
- What do the key stakeholders' preferences for volunteer numbers, hours, and hourly value reveal about their perceptions of volunteer value?

This dissertation uses the three-paper format. Each research question is the topic of one paper.

Link to Leadership

This degree is part of the Leadership Studies program at the University of San Diego (USD). I chose to study volunteerism because it has been the thread woven throughout my life and career. However, I also selected it because volunteers tend to be invisible influences in the nonprofits they serve (Ellis, 2010; Fryer et al., 2003). For example, despite their significant numbers and the critical roles that volunteers play, the aspects of nonprofit effectiveness studied most often in the literature include programs (Herman & Renz, 2004; Sowa, Selden, & Sandfort, 2004), boards (Herman & Renz, 2008), or paid staff (Packard, 2010). In addition, there is a disparity between the espoused

and lived values about involving volunteers in nonprofits. Volunteers are positioned as the solution for everything from cultivating civic skills to meeting the needs of the underserved (Overgaard, 2019). Yet, they also are perceived to be unreliable amateurs who provide limited hours of service and are a drain on organization resources of time and money (Pearce, 1993).

As such, volunteerism is a rich topic for exploration to better understand its impact on nonprofits and the dynamics that influence this impact. The nature of volunteer work in and with nonprofits also makes it a good topic for the application of adaptive leadership principles. Adaptive leaders facilitate efforts to acknowledge and diminish gaps between what we say and what we do (Heifetz, 1994). Doing so requires that relevant stakeholders are involved in finding and implementing solutions. This has significance for leadership on two levels.

First, nonprofit organizations often address complex issues that demand more labor than the paid staff can provide. They require collective community action that has as much to do with winning hearts and minds and reconciling diverse values as completing instrumental tasks. As such, volunteerism is uniquely suited as a vehicle to involve the community in advancing nonprofit missions.

Second, there is a need to expand the types of stakeholders engaged in the work of volunteerism. Many of the issues identified in this dissertation have been the subject of debate and education by practitioner and scholarly leaders for decades. However, this conversation has occurred largely among volunteer administrators (who tend to have limited authority, Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration, 2017) and a handful of scholars whose work has had limited dissemination in practitioner circles. The

adaptive work for the volunteer field is to begin to meaningfully engage the nonprofit executives, government leaders, board members, funders, and national volunteer organizations who have authority and drive the data collection (and rhetoric). They are critical partners in this effort (Reimagining Service, 2013).

One of the most fundamental questions of leadership is whether an organization is accomplishing what it set out to do. This dissertation reveals more of the ways that volunteers support nonprofit organizations in achieving what they set out to do. It brings much needed visibility to the often overlooked and underutilized roles that volunteers play.

Justification for the Three-Paper Dissertation Format

This dissertation is the first to employ the three-paper format at the USD. The traditional five-chapter format provides a comprehensive treatment of the statement of the problem, review of the literature, methodology, results, and concluding discussion. By contrast, the three-paper format includes: (a) an introduction to the problem, (b) three papers of publishable quality that could serve as stand-alone articles in relevant journals, and (c) a conclusion that ties the three papers together and outlines next steps for research. Because the three papers are intended for publishing, they each include the relevant background, literature, methods, findings, and discussion (as applicable) that are appropriate to the targeted journal and audience.

I initially decided to pursue this format because of my dual roles as a practitioner and scholar. One of my professional goals is to help bridge research and practice. The three-paper format seemed like an effective way to conduct rigorous research and share the results in academic and practitioner-friendly articles.

Additionally, I did not formally publish during school. Instead, I shared my work in more real-time ways through practitioner workshops, academic conferences, and informal blogs. However, I began to appreciate the value of academic publishing more as school progressed. The three-paper format gave me the freedom to use the dissertation process to write articles that were (more) ready for publication and did not require the significant rewriting that a traditional format entails.

A somewhat more elegant reason for the three-paper format emerged as I concluded the dissertation process. It occurred to me that the three-paper format also reflected my thesis that volunteerism is a complex and multidimensional activity. The three papers provided a way to explore multiple dimensions independently, yet as part of a unified whole. It helped me produce work that is relevant for practitioner and academic audiences. Finally, it allowed me to express the multidimensionality of my roles and relationships with volunteerism: student, scholar, researcher, facilitator, writer, professor, consultant, and volunteer. I am grateful to the USD faculty who approved the format and my dissertation committee for supporting my pursuit of it.

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PAPER 1

VOLUNTEER VALUE: BEYOND HEAD COUNTS AND
WAGE REPLACEMENT RATES

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Abstract

The industry standard for calculating and reporting volunteer value includes the number of volunteers, their hours served, and an hourly wage replacement rate. However, these unidimensional measures omit essential elements of volunteer value. This research study identified and assembled other volunteer value data and examined key stakeholders' preferences for these indicators using Q methodology. The stakeholders included funders, nonprofit executives, and administrators in charge of volunteers in social service organizations. The results indicated that stakeholders had a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of volunteerism than the standard metrics provide and an appetite for expansive data points to capture volunteer value.

This paper is written for an academic audience. The target publications are *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, or *Voluntas*.

The volunteer coordinator whispered in hushed tones as if making a confession, “I don’t really care about volunteer hours.” She said she had to track them for her board and executives. Yet when asked about volunteer head counts and hours, one of those executives replied:

So what? You had 650 volunteers and they gave . . . 1000 hours. But were they just taking from staff’s ability to focus on what they needed to focus on, or were they in fact actually helping you with these impact changes? Actual change?

Although these comments generated during a study conflicted with the conventional wisdom about the importance of tracking volunteer hours, they were not surprising. As a consultant, I had heard these types of concerns for years, so I designed a pilot study to learn more. In it, volunteers, volunteer administrators, a program director, and two executives in a large social service agency observed that counting volunteer numbers or hours was common, but not necessarily useful from their perspectives. They shared that the reason they tracked or reported these statistics was because it seemed to be a best practice endorsed by Independent Sector (2019), a national organization that calculates an hourly financial value for volunteers. Alternatively, they suggested that funders or board members wanted these data points. In these interviews, as well as in other interactions with practitioners, there was a disparity between what people said was meaningful information and the information they felt compelled to collect.

This disparity aligns with a trend in the volunteer literature in which scholars and practitioners have been challenging assumptions and established models and practices of volunteerism. For example, Hager and Brudney (2015) found that it was more effective to select and apply volunteer management practices that were relevant to an

organization's unique context than to implement a universal set of volunteer management practices. Their study provided support for Rochester's (1999) contention that the type of organization and its volunteer roles should inform the selection and deployment of volunteer management practices. Furthermore, scholars have challenged the application of employee human resource models to volunteer management by demonstrating that paid staff and volunteers are different from each other (Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013).

Review of the Literature

Despite these new and more nuanced ways of thinking, the assessment of volunteer value continues to be rooted in quantification. There is a particular emphasis on calculating financial measures. The most advanced valuations involve proxy values and formulas for calculating different types of value. For example, social accounting provides a sophisticated accounting tool to estimate and track the estimated financial value of volunteering to the client, volunteer, and staff (Quarter, Mook, & Richmond, 2003). Additionally, models such as the Volunteer Investment and Value Audit, Better Impact, and the Return on Volunteer Investment, provide formulas to compare financial and volunteer inputs to their financial outputs (Gaskin, 2011; Goodrow, 2014; Verified Volunteers, 2018).

In contrast to these complex measures, the most commonly used indicators of volunteer value continue to be volunteer numbers, hours, and an assigned hourly financial value (Brudney, 2010; Ellis, 2010). Many nonprofit and governmental agencies report volunteer activity with these three quantitative data points, which are used so frequently that they represent the industry standard.

There are many reasons why these measures are used to assess volunteer value. First, these figures offer ease and legitimacy. Counting volunteers and hours served is a relatively simple task that does not require knowledge or computation of complex formulas. Likewise, multiplying total volunteer hours served by a predetermined hourly financial value rate provides a straightforward method to translate volunteer volume into economic terms. Moreover, because the hourly value measure is endorsed by Independent Sector, an established and esteemed national organization, its usage provides a legitimizing function for the organizations that employ it.

Additionally, tracking volunteer numbers, hours, and hourly value is a valuable way to learn about and account for volunteer activity. Organization leaders can observe volunteer activity periodically, noting trends and changes over time or between programs. They may report the financial value of volunteers to demonstrate an in-kind match for grants or contract requirements.

Furthermore, nonprofit and government agencies increasingly are required to demonstrate their impact and encouraged to operate more like businesses (Hwang & Powell, 2009). In response, many of these agencies use logic models or similar tools to show how they translate resources into outputs and outcomes. These models and tools contain an implicit preference for quantitative and standardized data. The traditional volunteer measures appear to align with this drive toward quantification and standardization while also offering the perceived ability to compare agencies. This may explain why these measures are featured prominently in publications ranging from organizational annual reports to national statistics compared globally and year to year

(Corporation for National and Community Service [CNCS], 2018; Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, n.d).

Finally, these measures exhibit face validity. If involving volunteers in an organization is useful, then it would seem valuable to have more people contributing more time. And if these volunteers are contributing some service that has value, there must be a way to articulate that value in financial terms.

However, there are drawbacks to using head counts and financial valuations exclusively. For example, Ellis (2010) argued that these metrics are limited because they do not address what volunteers achieve with their time or how well they performed. This limitation is significant because assessing outcomes and service quality are increasingly important for nonprofit leaders who need to demonstrate how their organizations' interventions improve client lives. Likewise, a leading motivation for volunteers is to make a difference (Brudney, 2010; Musick & Wilson, 2008), yet the typical measures yield more information about the size of the volunteer corps and its financial value than the amount of change it produces in the organization or community. Even the more sophisticated approaches to volunteer value omit the extent to which volunteers help advance the organization's mission.

There are consequences to exclusively reporting volunteer head counts, hours, and financial values. First, doing so encourages an emphasis on the quantity of volunteers. Focusing on quantity assumes that having more volunteers is better and this assumption can diminish the importance of the unique value proposition or quality that volunteers provide. Additionally, using only quantitative measures may contribute to managing to increase numbers rather than to achieve mission. The question becomes, "How do we

enlist more volunteers or increase their hours?” rather than “How do volunteers help the organization advance its mission?” Indeed, most organizations do not exist to generate community volunteers; they rely on volunteers as a substitute or supplemental labor supply that exist to achieve some organizational goal (Russell, Mook, & Handy, 2017). Finally, the standards reinforce an economic or rational understanding of service. This understanding is prominent in the literature (Handy & Srinivasan, 2004; Russell et al., 2017; Salamon, Sokolowski, & Haddock., 2011), but is only one element of volunteer value.

In addition, the standard measures are not consistent with recommendations from the organizational effectiveness literature or nonprofit practice. Many scholars advocate using multidimensional methods to assess organizational effectiveness (Lecy, Schmitz, & Swedlund, 2012; Packard, 2010; Sowa, Selden, & Sandfort, 2004). These methods include assessing organizational goal attainment, stakeholder perspectives, and resource procurement by studying multiple levels or units of analysis, or stages of the logic model. To date, only the Volunteer Resources Balanced Scorecard (VRBSc) and Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit (VIAT) begin to address multiple dimensions and stakeholders (Burych, Caird, Schwebel, Fliess, & Hardie, 2016; Davis Smith, Ellis, Gaskin, Howlett, & Stuart, 2015). Scholars also provide suggestions for what measures to use with which audiences (Adams, Mazzella, Renfro, Schilling, & Hager, 2016; Brudney & Nezhina, 2011; Safrit, 2013); yet, there is little empirical data to support these recommendations.

Purpose of this Study and Research Question

Thus, the industry standards of volunteer numbers, hours, and hourly financial value seem to represent only a small fraction of volunteer *value*, may be misleading, are inconsistent with recommendations for assessment, and have limited empirical support. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to assess whether these industry standards are meaningful and relevant to key nonprofit stakeholders, particularly those who are the primary drivers of volunteer data collection: funders, senior leaders, and volunteer administrators. More specifically, this study addresses the following research question: How do key stakeholders perceive the standard volunteer value measures of volunteer numbers, hours, and hourly financial value?

Study Design

The research question was answered using Q methodology, which is a systematic way to measure subjective preferences of participants by identifying and comparing patterns in their viewpoints (Brown, 1980). Q methodology is a useful tool for better understanding topics that are complex and where viewpoints of stakeholders may vary—as they do regarding volunteerism and volunteer value (Ellis, 2010; Watts & Stenner, 2012). It provides a systematic and rigorous approach to access stakeholder views and construct typologies of these views (McKeown & Thomas, 2013; Steelman & Maguire, 1999). The typologies are constructed by correlating all participant responses and then using factor analysis to identify the common perspectives in the group (Brown, 1980).

Q methodology is a departure from traditional research methods. Researchers using traditional methods show respondent patterns among objective variables or traits and then generalize these patterns to a broader population. By contrast, Q methodology

reveals patterns among individual stakeholders after each respondent shares his or her personal views about a topic. The goal of Q is not to produce generalizable results but to generate more in-depth insight into the clusters of viewpoints that emerge (Brown, 1980). As such, Q methodology is not designed to address the number of people who believe something but rather “why and how they believe what they do” (McKeown & Thomas, 1988, p. 45). It does so through the use of Q sorts, or forced rankings, of a researcher-developed deck of items that includes a variety of viewpoints (Watts & Stenner, 2012). In this study participants ranked and discussed their preferences for diverse volunteer value data points. The data included quantitative indicators such as numbers of volunteers, the dollar amount of volunteer donations, and number of clients served by volunteers. There also were qualitative items that addressed volunteer satisfaction or community perceptions about the organization.

Q methodology is a better fit for this study than traditional research methods. For example, Likert-type survey responses about volunteer measures would not be helpful for this study since respondents could select many (or few) indicators as being important, thus revealing little about a particular indicator’s relative importance to respondents. In addition, forced-ranking questions in a survey require a fairly small number of items for the ranking to be manageable and completed accurately (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014), thereby limiting the ability to assess a comprehensive list of volunteer effectiveness indicators. Likewise, qualitative methods tend to provide deep insight about a handful of factors (Patton, 2015) without a mechanism to rank a large number of items. By contrast, Q provides a method for systematically ranking a large set of items and conducting statistical analysis on the results, while also eliciting the reasons and meaning

behind respondents' rankings. As such, it offers a unique blend of quantitative and qualitative methodological assets (Dennis & Goldberg, 1996).

Sample

Q methodologists recommend that the sample in a Q study should include participants who have viewpoints about the topic being studied and whose viewpoints are influential in some way (Watts & Stenner, 2012). The respondents in this Q study included nonprofit stakeholders that help influence which volunteer data are tracked and reported, such as funders, executive-level staff members, and volunteer administrators. The study focuses on nonprofit organizations since they host the largest percentage of volunteers (Brudney, 1999). The stakeholder types were selected because they tend to be the groups that influence or drive if and what kind of volunteer data are collected in nonprofit organizations. For example, in a pilot study about volunteer impact measures, paid staff and volunteers all thought traditional measures of volunteer numbers and financial valuation had to be collected to satisfy executive staff and funders even though the respondents did not value those measures themselves. The opinions of study participants who shape volunteer data tracking behavior are more likely to matter than the opinions of constituents who consume the data, a perspective that is aligned with multiconstituency models of organizational effectiveness that emphasize power relationships (Pennings & Goodman, 1977).

Data were collected from stakeholders of nonprofit human service organizations that have paid staff members and a minimum of 50 volunteers. These criteria were used because human services organizations represent the largest subsector of nonprofit organizations as determined by number of agencies (McKeever, 2015). In addition,

nonprofit organizations with paid staff are more likely to have the staffing and systems needed to track volunteer data (Urban Institute, 2004) as well as the impetus to collect volunteer data.

There were 30 participants in the sample: 10 funders, 11 senior staff, and nine volunteer administrators. The funders included representatives from three family foundations, two community-based funders, and five corporate foundations. The senior staff members were executive directors, development and/or finance directors, and operations directors. The remaining nine participants were volunteer administrators. None of the volunteer administrator positions was considered to be an executive-level role.

The nonprofit staff members served at a range of human services organizations. They included large social service agencies with multi-million-dollar budgets primarily funded through government contracts and midsize agencies with budgets of \$1-4 million funded mainly by foundation and corporate grants, event proceeds, and individual donations. The organizations engaged volunteers in a variety of roles that supported programs, fundraising, events, committees, and operations. Many agencies also hosted clinical interns.

The study participants were recruited through a variety of methods. Targeted recruitment invitations were made after searching GuideStar for organizations that met the selection criteria within San Diego County. The study recruitment information also was shared through email messages to organizations in San Diego that had indicated interest in regional volunteer resources. Additionally, recruitment was conducted through snowball sampling based on the author's relationships with local colleagues and

consultants, social media such as LinkedIn, and recommendations made by participants. The participants were selected based on their alignment with the study criteria and willingness to participate in the Q sort.

A sample size of 30 participants was adequate and acceptable because the purpose of this research was to establish whether and which different viewpoints existed rather than to generalize these viewpoints among a broader population (Brown, 1980). In Q methodology the key variables are the participant viewpoints. As such, the heterogeneity of the participants and subsequent likelihood of completing divergent Q sorts that represent a variety of views were more important than the number of participants (Brown, 1980).

Instruments

The instruments in the Q study included the pre-sort survey, the Q-sort instructions, the Q-sort items, and the post-sort interview guide. All instruments were developed by the researcher and designed to identify stakeholder roles and preferences for volunteer measures. The pre-sort survey included nine closed-ended questions to track the participants' current and prior roles related to volunteerism, experience working with or serving as a volunteer, education level, and age group (see Appendix A). The Q-sort instructions provided directions on how to complete the Q sort and were delivered verbally and with printed cues to serve as guides (see Appendix B).

The materials for the Q sort included 41 cards that were numbered and included one volunteer indicator per card (see Appendix C). The indicators were derived from a literature review and qualitative interviews with 10 experts in volunteerism. The semi-structured post-sort interview protocol included 11 open-ended questions (see Appendix

D). The questions addressed how the participants made decisions about ranking the 41 items in general and their preferences for traditional items, including the number of volunteers, volunteer hours, and the financial value of a volunteer hour using the Independent Sector rate of \$24.69 (Independent Sector, 2019).

The instrument was piloted in multiple steps to improve the content validity and usability of the instruments. The first stage of piloting included a review of the indicators by 10 volunteerism experts. These reviewers evaluated a list of volunteer measures and identified omissions or rephrasing that could enhance the clarity and comprehensiveness of the deck of measures.

Next, the Q-sort process was pilot-tested by five laypeople who were familiar with the nonprofit sector and had experience working with and/or serving as a volunteer. Three of the pilot testers participated in a Q sort with 61 items to evaluate the instrument content, process, and timing. These testers commented on item phrasing, omissions, confusing items, and other observations about the content and process. The testers reported feeling overwhelmed by the quantity and similarity of the items and required more than an hour to complete the full sort and discussion.

To address these issues, the concourse was reduced to 41 items by combining items that were the most similar. Two more pilot participants tested the new instrument. They confirmed that these adjustments improved item clarity and made it possible to complete the sort and answer interview questions within 1 hour.

Data Collection

The Q study was conducted in person and included a pre-sort survey, the Q sort, and a post-sort interview. The Q sort consisted of five steps and took about 60 minutes to

complete. First, each respondent reviewed and completed a consent form and brief survey. Second, the respondents received a shuffled deck of 41 numbered cards with one volunteer value indicator per card and were read the conditions of instruction. Third, the respondents read through and sorted the cards into three piles according to whether they agreed, disagreed, or were neutral about the item's meaning and relevance to them. Specifically, they were asked, "Based on your role as a {insert role}, which items do you think are the most meaningful and relevant measures of volunteer value for an organization?" Participants were able to ask clarifying questions or make comments while they sorted. Fourth, the respondents completed a forced ranking of the measures along a normal distribution curve so that the cards with the highest levels of agreement and disagreement were at the edges and the most neutral measures were in the middle as illustrated in Figure 1 (Brown, 1980). Finally, the respondents participated in a semi-structured interview about how they completed the Q sort.

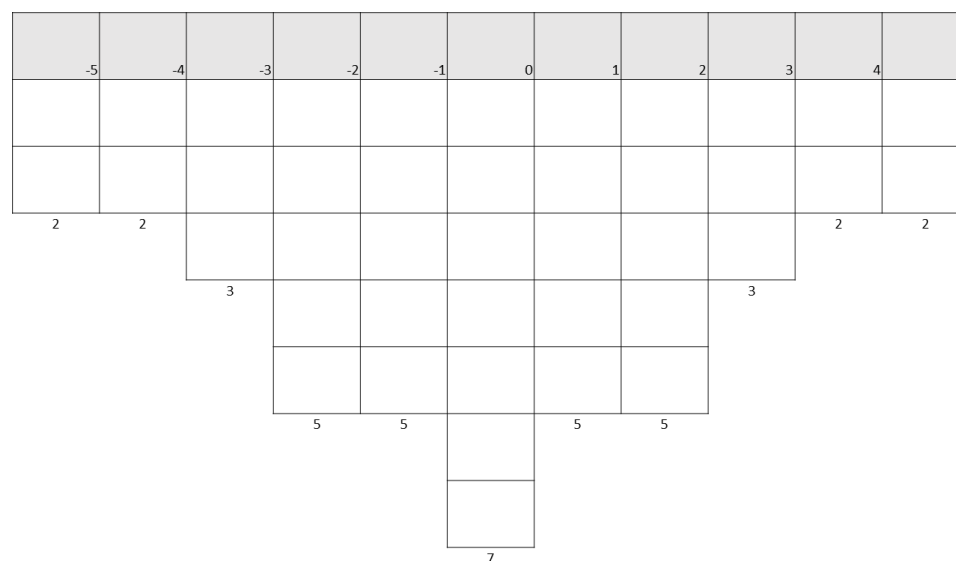


Figure 1. Q-sort distribution curve. The Q-sort includes one space for each of the 41 volunteer value indicators. The numbers at the bottom of each column indicate how many items were included for that score, i.e., participants could select two items to rank as a -5.

The completed Q-sort configurations were photographed, entered on a blank normal distribution curve, and coded with a participant number. The interview audio and researcher notes were recorded using a smart pen and then transcribed by a transcription professional. Each transcription draft was then edited for accuracy and updated with references to item numbers and their locations on the curve. The Q sorts were conducted October through December 2017.

Analysis

Following the Q sort, the data from each sort were entered into PQMethod, a software platform designed for Q analysis. The first step in the analysis was to correlate each of the 30 Q sorts, according to McKeown and Thomas (1988). Next, the factors were extracted using centroid factor analysis to identify how responses loaded by viewpoints (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Factor loadings of ± 0.40 or above were significant at the $p < .01$ level.

Once the factors were extracted, they were rotated to facilitate interpretation. Varimax rotation was employed to enhance the distinctiveness and interpretability of the factors (Watts & Stenner, 2012). It provided a mathematical solution to explain the maximum amount of study variance. After the factors were rotated, they explained 38% of the variance. Twenty-one of the 30 sorts were significant based on a factor loading of ± 0.40 or above. Nine respondents loaded on Factor 1, and six respondents each loaded on Factors 2 and 3. Of the remaining nine respondents, five respondents were confounded (loaded on two factors), and four respondents were nonsignificant or did not meet the above criteria to be included on any factor. Based on recommendations from the Q literature, the respondents who were confounded and nonsignificant were not included in

the development of the factor arrays to improve the clarity of the factors (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

The meaning of each factor was interpreted using numerical factor array worksheets and the qualitative interview data. A factor array is a model Q sort based on the weighted averages of each significant respondent (Watts & Stenner, 2012). An overview worksheet for each factor included the model Q sort with items listed from +5 to -5 (see Appendices E-G). Additionally, each factor's items were organized to highlight their preferences relative to the other two factors, according to recommendations by Watts and Stenner (2012). Thus, each worksheet included the highest and lowest rankings (+5 and -5) along with each individual item that ranked higher or lower than the other factors. For example, Factor 1 respondents rated item 17, "the extent to which volunteers reflect the community served" as a +5, and item 15, "the range of roles performed by volunteers" as a 0, both of which were higher than those items ranked in either of the other arrays. All remaining items were then listed to support a holistic interpretation of the factor. A review of each factor array produced an initial interpretation of the factor's views and priorities.

For the next level of interpretation, the transcripts of significant sorts were coded in MAXQDA. The first cycle coding included structural, descriptive, and in vivo coding. The structural codes were assigned to how participants made meaning of their sorts overall; the factors that influenced their decisions to rank items as agree, neutral, and disagree; explanations of their ranking of volunteer numbers, hours, and financial value; and noteworthy items. Descriptive codes were given to respondent roles (e.g., funder, executive staff, or volunteer administrator), answers that respondents speculated other

roles would give (e.g., board member, community members), and each of the 41 Q-sort items. Finally, in vivo codes helped ensure that participants' voices were used to describe their preferences (Saldaña, 2016).

Interpretations of the numerical factor array data were compared against the interview codes to develop overall themes and categories. The themes were refined throughout the coding process as they were validated or disconfirmed by additional data. The second cycle of coding employed pattern and axial coding methods to identify patterns that emerged in the categories and to name the properties and dimensions of categories (Saldaña, 2016). These coding processes led to conclusions about how traditional head counts and financial valuation of volunteer time were perceived by respondents.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to articulate how nonprofit stakeholders—e.g., funders, senior leaders, and volunteer administrators—perceived standard measures of volunteer value. Many participants reported that all the volunteer value indicators were important and had merit, but distinct patterns emerged in how participants prioritized the indicators. More specifically, of the 30 completed sorts, 21 loaded significantly on one of three factors. These factors can be thought of as distinct viewpoints for each group of respondents. The study revealed that:

- perceptions of standard measures were mixed and wide-ranging,
- there were three significant factors about volunteer value,
- these three factors did not align by stakeholder,
- context and role were important influences on volunteer value assessment.

The findings are outlined below beginning with an overview of how each group rated the standard measures of volunteer value. The numbers in parentheses represent the average rating given to an item by the group's respondents and could range from -5 to +5 (see Appendix C for a list of all 41 items).

Views of Standard Volunteer Value Measures Were Mixed

The Q sorts and post-sort interviews revealed how the stakeholders viewed the standard measures of volunteer numbers, hours, and hourly financial value. Table 1 displays the average aggregated rating for each measure according to the respondents in that factor group. Responses about the number of volunteers exhibited the broadest range: from -5 to +2. For number of volunteer hours, the ratings ranged from -2 to +3. Finally, ratings for the hourly financial value as determined by Independent Sector ranged from -4 to 0. The next section outlines how each group of respondents viewed these measures.

Table 1

Rankings of Standard Measures of Volunteer Value

Factor	Number of Volunteers	Number of Hours	Hourly Financial Value
1	-5	-2	-4
2	+2	+1	0
3a	+1	+2	-3
3b	+2	+3	0
Range	-5 to +2	-2 to +3	-4 to 0

Note. Scores of -5 indicated that the Q sorter strongly disagreed that the item was meaningful and relevant. Scores of +5 indicated strong agreement that the item was meaningful and relevant.

Factor 1. The first group included nine respondents who loaded significantly and explained 16% of the variance. The respondents included three funders (one family foundation and two corporate foundations with employee volunteer programs), three

senior leaders (one executive director, one operations officer, and a program executive), and three volunteer administrators.

This group of respondents had reservations about traditional forms of quantifying and monetizing volunteer value and rated the number of volunteers as (-5), the number of hours (-2), and the hourly value (-4). Of all the factor groups, Group 1 participants rated these measures the lowest, one of whom pointed out that “what (volunteers) do is more important than how many you have.” Another respondent noted that reporting volunteer hours is a “very standard measurement and a lot of people love to throw ‘this person’s got 1,000 hours,’” but that the hours are not a useful measure if the volunteer was not productive during that time. Still another respondent observed that organization size influenced volunteer numbers, particularly for smaller organizations that may need fewer volunteers.

Regarding the placement of an hourly value on volunteer time, a senior nonprofit leader warned, “I don’t think it’s a good way to frame” volunteer time and contributions. A funder further clarified that it was “limiting” to apply “an economic model” to volunteerism since the model was ill-suited to capture the diverse contributions that volunteers make. Other Group 1 responses regarding the stipulated hourly value ranged from “skewed” and “insulting” (since it was higher than most staff hourly wages) to “I don’t care.”

Despite these concerns, one volunteer administrator indicated that she understood “the madness” of quantifying volunteer efforts and went on to share,

Unfortunately, we do have to advocate for volunteerism and one way to do that is to put a dollar sign on it. So, I understand that right now it’s important for us to do, but I wish we didn’t have to.

A funder summed it up by suggesting that capturing volunteer value needs to be about “quality *and* quantity.”

Factor 2. The second group included six respondents who loaded significantly, and their sorts explained 12% of the variance. There were three funders (all in corporate foundations with employee volunteer programs), one executive, and two volunteer administrators in this group.

Group 2 respondents gave neutral to low positive ratings to the traditional quantitative measures of volunteer numbers (+2), hours (+1), and hourly financial value (0). Two respondents observed that volunteer value “is hard to quantify.” One participant who oversaw a corporate foundation made a distinction between these measures and impact and noted: “The things that we do track and measure really have no meaning when you talk about impact.” However, all three funders indicated that their boards or bosses were “number crunchers” who liked the quantification of service. Alternatively, the nonprofit respondents could see value in having higher numbers of volunteers as a good way to “get our name out” and track “how many people are doing” the work that needs to get done.

Regarding the hourly value of volunteer time, the Group 2 respondents thought the figure was useful in certain situations, especially for boards and financial officers who

would “get it” if volunteer value was translated into dollars. A volunteer administrator who was used to tracking the hourly rate in prior positions but was not expected to do this in her current role still tabulated the cumulative hourly value for her own purposes or to share with staff who think it is “pretty incredible.” She also acknowledged that “a lot of people may feel it’s really inflated” since the employees are not paid at the rate used to calculate volunteer value. The nonprofit executive said, “It’s nice to have something to quantify,” but was not sure “if anybody really pays attention to it” or “that if we didn’t have it, I’m not sure it would make a huge difference.”

Factors 3a and 3b. Six respondents loaded significantly in the third group, and their sorts explained 10% of the variance. The respondents included one funder, two executive directors, and three volunteer administrators. However, one of the executive directors had a negative loading indicating that his Q sort was nearly the reverse of the other respondents. To maintain all views represented in this factor while reflecting the negative loading, this factor description is split into 3a and 3b. In other words, the items that five respondents rated high (Group 3a), he rated as low, and vice versa. His views are presented at the end of this section as Group 3b.

The Group 3a respondent observations about volunteer numbers and hours were summed up by an executive who confirmed the popularity of these indicators when he observed that “everyone uses them.” A volunteer administrator deemed them “good to have.” Total number of volunteer hours rated higher (+2) than total number of volunteers (+1). However, the respondents pointed out the need for context when reporting numbers since raw figures could be misleading. For example, low volunteer numbers might be good if they reflected tasks being completed better and more efficiently with fewer

volunteers, according to one of the volunteer administrators. A funder suggested that high numbers of volunteers might not be a positive outcome if it was indicative of frequent turnover. The executive shared that when it came to volunteer numbers, “people don’t get them because they don’t have anything to compare it to.” To help clarify the statistics, he paired the number of volunteers with the number of staff to give the numbers more meaning.

For the Group 3a respondents, use of an hourly value of volunteer time met with negative reactions overall (-3). It’s “nice to throw it out there” according to a volunteer administrator, but overall, it was tracked and reported on a limited basis by the group. The funder had the strongest opinion about the Independent Sector rate calling it an “arbitrary” and “useless metric” that lent itself to the nonprofit “starvation mode of thinking,” a mode in which nonprofit leaders focus on not having to “pay somebody” rather than what volunteers can contribute. He went on to say, “If you have volunteers doing good work, and they’re happy with the work (volunteer satisfaction +4) and your staff is happy to have them (paid staff satisfaction +4), then it’s not a budget item. It’s a different sort of thing.”

Alternatively, the one Viewpoint 3b respondent saw slightly more merit in numbers of hours (+3) and numbers of volunteers (+2). Unlike the 3a respondents who seemed to perceive numbers as primarily descriptive, this executive director used volunteer data in a summative fashion. He viewed these data points as tools with which to “maximize the management of volunteers” and drive other important organizational metrics such as the number of services provided (+5) or number of clients served (+4). He also said that his organization funders requested these figures. He rated the hourly

dollar value (0) as a less valuable, or a “second-stage analysis” tool that would be valuable mainly to garner financial support for volunteer involvement.

Preferences for Volunteer Value Items in Light of Role and Context

In addition to the perceptions about traditional measures, two other findings emerged that were related to participants’ preferences: stakeholder role and organizational context. This section provides a brief overview of these data.

Patterns for preferences existed, but not by stakeholder role. Another finding from the study was that there were patterns in how respondents prioritized the volunteer value indicators but that these patterns did not align by stakeholder groups. There was at least one funder, executive, and volunteer administrator represented in all three factor groups and among the sorts that were excluded for being confounded or nonsignificant.

Context matters. Respondents observed that the type of organization, its size, and the nature of its volunteer roles would affect whether an item was valuable to track and report. For example, one of the funders explained why an item rated lower for her: “There’s just too many different kinds of organizations. . . . This one (item) probably does matter in some places . . . for me, it’s not high up in how I evaluate them.” A volunteer administrator explained that for her organization, getting high numbers of volunteers and hours was not a priority since most of their programs did not involve volunteers: “If we were handing out food at a soup kitchen, we can train volunteers to do that, but we do counseling and case management, so our volunteers are more supplementary” and serve in smaller numbers.

Discussion

This study was designed to reveal how funders, nonprofit senior leaders, and volunteer administrators perceive standard measures of volunteer value. Although the findings of Q studies are not generalizable in the way that social scientists have traditionally defined that term, they often help identify new or diverse viewpoints of relevance, according to Watts and Stenner (2012). These authors further maintain that Q can be especially valuable in revealing a perspective that “undermines established preconceptions [or] questions our current treatment or professional practice” (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 73). The findings of this study both challenge assumptions about volunteer value and how it is conceptualized in the nonprofit sector and broaden understanding of volunteer value. The next section explicates these claims and discusses their implications.

“Necessary, But Not Sufficient”: Perceptions of Standard Measures of Volunteer Value

Despite (and, at least to some extent, because of) pressure on the nonprofit sector to quantify and monetize its impact, the quantified and monetized measures of volunteer numbers, hours, and hourly value were judged “necessary, but not sufficient” by participants in this study. Most participants saw at least some merit in the traditional measures but did not rate them as the most preferred indicators of volunteer value in terms of meaning and relevance. The respondents who most appreciated traditional statistics were also the ones who described the value that volunteers bring to an organization as “hard to quantify.” Other respondents described these data points as “limiting,” “superficial,” “misleading,” or “skewed,” particularly when they were

reported without any context. Still others pointed out that volunteer numbers and hours reflected volunteer activity, not impact, and that both were important.

In summary, volunteer numbers, hours, and hourly value received mixed reviews suggesting that they may not be the strongest indicators to serve as a proxy for impact and that they should not be used exclusively. The findings indicate that, at least among the participants in this study, there is an appetite for a more expansive approach to volunteer value data selection. Thus, there is an opportunity for nonprofit leaders (and scholars studying volunteerism) to expand their data collection and reporting beyond volunteer numbers, hours, and hourly value; to align data with organization context and purpose; and to distinguish between volunteer activity and volunteer results.

The Importance of Role: One Size Does Not Appear to Fit All Stakeholders

The findings also challenged the notion that stakeholder groups desire similar indicators of volunteer value. Stakeholder theory proponents assert the importance of addressing stakeholder preferences for indicators of organizational effectiveness (Phillips, Freeman, & Wicks, 2003), a position that also is borne out in the nonprofit and volunteer literature (Adams et al., 2016; Herman & Renz, 2008; Safrit, 2013). These recommendations tacitly imply that stakeholder groups are sufficiently similar and that, consequently, they will share data preferences. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, many respondents speculated that senior nonprofit leaders, financial officers, board members, or funders wanted volunteer numbers and financial data and attributed their preferences to the roles they played, which often involve providing financial oversight. This speculation was true among all types of participants, even though some of the funder and executive Q sorters did not highly value numerical and economic data themselves.

Even though the Q-sort quantitative data confirmed that there was interest in some types of quantitative data from some stakeholders, volunteer numbers and dollars were not their only interests. There were senior leaders, funders, and volunteer administrators represented in each factor (and among the nonsignificant and confounded sorts). While the presence of each kind of stakeholder in all groups may be a function of sample size, it reveals a potential weakness of stakeholder theory: It can be difficult to determine which stakeholders will hold a particular view or even which stakeholder “hat” a person is wearing at a given time. Additionally, the Q-sort qualitative data suggested that all stakeholders had a more complex understanding of volunteer value than could be addressed with only two or three data points.

In summary, participant speculation about which stakeholders would prefer which data points reaffirmed that there is a need to match volunteer value indicators to audience. However, the factor analysis results challenged the idea that it is possible to accurately predict which audiences will want which metrics. These findings serve as an invitation for practitioners and scholars to check their assumptions about who wants what data and generate dialogue about what data points are meaningful as well as commonly used.

Volunteer Value – An Expanded Reality

It was curious that even though some respondents did not personally value the traditional volunteer metrics, they still used these measures nearly exclusively in their grant applications or annual reports. Their prevalent use may be a function of the legitimacy that is gained from using industry standards. However, critical accounting theory suggests other factors may be at work, too.

Critical accounting scholars argue that the use of common measures can trap people into artificial or limited ideas about what constitutes value. Furthermore, these ideas serve as blinders that obscure consideration of other measures. The blinders lead to actions that align with the limited view, which further narrows the perception of reality and creates a reinforcing loop between behaviors and beliefs (Hines, 1988). In addition, the presence of a dominant approach, particularly when it is quantitative, diminishes awareness that other important views or approaches exist (Morgan, 1988). Morgan (1988) observed that even a discipline as rooted in quantification as accounting omits other important organizational realities when only numbers are used to represent value. If this is true for accounting, then there is an opportunity to think critically about using primarily quantitative data for volunteerism, an activity that needs to be inclusive of meaning, purpose, and qualitative elements for assessing success (Adams et al., 2016).

To counteract the reliance on dominant measures, Morgan (1988) recommended clearly stating that quantitative data points represent just one of many perspectives and acknowledging that other dimensions of service exist and have merit. Furthermore, he suggested taking a more interpretative approach to assessment and engaging in a dialogue about how to capture diverse aspects more holistically.

The language used to talk about volunteer contributions is an area ripe for this approach. As the research progressed, it was clear that words like *value*, *measures*, and *metrics* tend to be associated with economic and quantitative indicators. Expanding these terms to include *data*, *information*, *evidence*, or *proof* may be more generative, as would shifting from an emphasis on measuring to one of revealing, capturing, or demonstrating volunteer contributions.

Fryar observed that “the most enduring and controversial question within the field of volunteerism is the one that relates to the ‘value’ of volunteers and the hours they contribute” (Fryar, Mook, Brummel, & Jalandoni, 2003, para. 1). This research study is a first step in empirically studying key stakeholders’ preferences for measures of volunteerism that might address this enduring question. The use of Q methodology helped expose a more expansive experience and understanding of volunteer value than is currently espoused or practiced. It also helped identify underlying beliefs about traditional measures. This line of research provides an invitation to expand beyond the traditional use of familiar, but narrow, measures of volunteer value to the intentional and broader selection of meaningful data that reveal a fuller value and vitality of volunteerism.

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Appendix A – Pre Q-Sort Survey

Meaningful and Relevant Measures of Volunteerism Survey

Experience and Demographics

1. Have you ever served as a volunteer in a nonprofit agency? Yes No
 1a. If yes, on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent, how would you rate your experiences as a volunteer in general? 1 2 3 4 5
2. Have you worked as a paid staff member in a nonprofit agency? Yes No
3. Have you supervised volunteers as a paid staff member or volunteer? Yes No
 3a. If yes, for how many years? _____ Less than 2 years
 _____ 2 – 5 years
 _____ 6 – 10 years
 _____ 11 years +
 3b. If yes, on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent, how would you rate your experiences working with volunteers in general? 1 2 3 4 5
4. Have you served as a board member for a nonprofit agency? Yes No
5. Education level
 - a. High school diploma or equivalent
 - b. Some college, no degree
 - c. Associate's degree
 - d. Bachelor's degree
 - e. Some graduate work
 - f. Master's degree
 - g. Doctoral or professional degree
6. Age range
 - a. 17 – 36
 - b. 37 - 52
 - c. 53 - 71
 - d. 72 – 91
 - e. 92 +

Appendix B – Q-Sort Conditions of Instruction

Research Question

Based on your primary role in working at or funding organizations that engage volunteers, which items do you think are the most meaningful and relevant measures of volunteer value for a nonprofit organization?

Conditions of Instruction

This study is designed to discover different stakeholders' preferences for various responses about how nonprofit organizations can capture the value of volunteers to the organization. The term *value* is used in broad terms. There are 41 cards in this pile with responses to this question. The statements have been collected from academic and practitioner literature and through interviews with leaders in the volunteer sector. They are comprehensive, but not exhaustive.

The Q-sort process entails placing each one of these measures in a position based on your level of agreement or disagreement with the item as a meaningful and relevant measure of volunteer value for a nonprofit organization.

The first step is to read each card and sort them into one of three piles, based on your primary role in working with or funding organizations that engage volunteers.

- The first pile goes on the right and should include the measures with which you agree. In other words, if you agree that an item is a meaningful and relevant measure of volunteer value from your perspective, put the card in the right pile.
- The second pile goes on the left and should include the measures with which you disagree. In other words, if you disagree that an item is a meaningful and relevant measure of volunteer value from your perspective, put the card in the left pile.
- The third pile should include items about which you are indifferent, unsure, or have mixed feelings about whether it is a meaningful and relevant measure of volunteer value. Put these cards in a pile directly in front of you.

There are no limits to the number of items that can be placed in each pile, and the piles do not have to be equal. Also, there are no right or wrong answers. This study is all about your preferences. If you have any questions as you go, please feel free to ask them.

[allow time for pre-sorting into three piles]

Now that you have three piles, set aside the disagree and indifferent piles. Take the agree pile and spread out the cards so you can see them all at once. The next step is to allocate each of these items to a ranking position within the shape provided. It is very important to place your cards in the same shape as the distribution. Again, the ranking you give should be decided based on your primary role in working with volunteers. The highest rankings

should be given to the measures with which you agree most strongly. For example, the two items you agree with most strongly should be given a ranking of +5. Once you've identified these items, physically move them under the +5. The next two most agreeable cards should be placed under +4, and so on. As you go, continue to physically place the cards below the appropriate ranking value. You are welcome to make adjustments to their locations throughout.

As you go, note that the numbers at the top of the shape are not as important as ranking the items relative to each other.

[allow time for sorting the agree pile] → NOTE WHERE THE AGREE PILE ENDS

To continue sorting, you will follow the same procedure with the cards in the disagree pile. Spread them out so you can see them all at once. In this case, the item that you most strongly disagree with will be physically placed under the -5. The next two measures that are most disagreeable will be placed under -4, and so on.

[allow time for sorting the disagree pile] → NOTE WHERE THE DISAGREE PILE ENDS

The final sorting step is to add the measures that remain in the indifferent pile. Spread the cards out so you can see them all, and then allocate the highest rankings to the measures with which you feel most agreement and the lowest rankings to the measures with which you feel most disagreement. Keep going until all the indifferent items have been sorted.

[allow time for sorting the indifferent pile] → NOTE WHERE THE NEUTRAL PILE ENDS

Now you have completed the sorting process. Have one final look at the whole Q sort and feel free to make any adjustments you wish. Be sure that all 41 items are included and ranked as you would like them to be.

[allow time for any final adjustments]

- MAKE ANY EDITS TO WHERE ONE PILE ENDS AND NEXT STARTS
- TAKE A PICTURE – RIGHT/AGREE to LEFT/DISAGREE
- ENTER DATA ON BLANK

Length of time of sort: 3 piles

Length of time of sort: full sort_____

Appendix C – List of Q-Sort Items

1. Number of clients or participants served by volunteers
2. Number of services provided by volunteers (rides given, meals delivered, youth mentored)
3. Quality of service/level of attention provided by volunteers
4. Amount of change achieved by volunteers (i.e., number of seniors able to live independently)
5. Percent of need met by volunteers (number of hours filled/number of hours needed)
6. Ratio of time invested in volunteer management to volunteer time contributed to organization
7. Number of volunteers supervising or training other volunteers or staff
8. Volunteer ratios (volunteers to paid staff, volunteers to volunteer administrators)
9. Volunteer time converted to full-time equivalents (FTE) (i.e., volunteer who works 10 hours/week = .25 FTE)
10. Total number of volunteers engaged at the organization annually
11. Total number of volunteer hours contributed to the organization annually
12. Number of hours per volunteer
13. Volunteer retention (how long volunteer stays compared to expected length of stay)
14. Volunteer engagement rate (number of active volunteers/number of enrolled volunteers)
15. Range of roles performed by volunteers
16. Percent of volunteer positions or slots filled
17. Extent to which volunteers reflect the community served (language spoken, race/ethnicity, age, gender)
18. Number of volunteers or volunteer hours by program or department
19. Program or process improvement suggestions made by volunteers
20. Number of organizational goals met through volunteer support
21. Type of organizational goals met through volunteer support
22. Number of people referred to organization by a volunteer (volunteers, board members, clients)
23. Number of volunteers participating in other organizational roles (program participant, donor)
24. Perception of organization
25. Volunteer satisfaction rate
26. Paid staff's level of satisfaction with volunteers
27. Clients' level of satisfaction with volunteers
28. Stories about the impact of service
29. Stories about the volunteers
30. Amount of money/in-kind gifts raised or donated by volunteers
31. Cost savings to the organization (funds not expended because of volunteer support)
32. Extension of budget achieved by engaging volunteers (additional services provided by volunteers)

33. Social Accounting (estimated financial value of volunteering to the client, volunteer, and staff)
34. Value of volunteer hour (Independent Sector rate = \$24.69/hour)
35. Organization cost (what the hour would be worth if the organization had to pay staff for comparable work)
36. Cost-benefit analysis/ROI (ratio comparing the benefits and costs of volunteer engagement)
37. Volunteer Net-Benefit Analysis (tool to assess if challenges of volunteer management outweigh benefits)
38. Traditional volunteer management practices (recruit, screen, orient, train, supervise, evaluate, recognize)
39. Organizational practices that support volunteerism (leader buy-in, planning, resourcing, data collection, technology)
40. Extent to which volunteers are integrated into the organization
41. High-caliber staff member or volunteer dedicated to involving volunteers in the organization

Appendix D – Post Q-Sort Interview Guide

1. Was there anything that didn't make sense in the Q-sort process? Would you make any changes based on your new knowledge?
2. Was there anything missing from the list of measures? If so, what? Where would you have sorted it? Is there anything you would have re-worded? If so, how?
3. What was particularly meaningful about the items that you gave high agreement ratings? Why do you feel so strongly about them?
4. What was particularly meaningful about the items that you gave high disagreement ratings? Why do you feel so strongly about them?
5. What did items in the neutral space represent? How did you decide what to put there?
6. Tell me about your rating of head counts (number of volunteers, number of volunteer hours).
7. Tell me about your rating of volunteer value (IS rate).
8. Tell me about your rating of 31 and 32 (cost savings v extension of bdgt). What do they mean to you? How do you feel about them?
9. Do you think your sort would match the sorts of other stakeholders such as funders, EDs, etc.? Why or why not?
[if time]
10. *What did you like about the process of sorting? What didn't you like about the process of sorting? How easy or difficult was it for you to rank items? Why?*
11. *How did participating in the Q-sort compare to more traditional surveys that you have taken?*

Appendix E – Factor Array for Factor 1

No.	Statement	
4	Amount of change achieved by volunteers	5
17	Extent to which vols reflect community	5
25	Volunteer satisfaction rate	4
39	OD practices that support volism	4
28	Stories about the impact of service	3
40	Extent of vol integration	3
41	High-caliber vol mgr	3
2	# services provided by vols	2
3	Qual of service provided by vols	2
19	Program/process suggestions from vols	2
20	# of org goals met through vol support	2
27	Clients' satisfaction with vols	2
13	Vol retention (tenure v expected stay)	1
21	Type of org goals met through vol support	1
26	Paid staff's satisfaction w vols	1
33	Social Accounting	1
38	Traditional VM	1
1	# clts served by vols	0
7	# of vol supervising other vols or staff	0
15	Range of roles performed by vols	0
22	# of ppl referred to org by a vol	0
24	Perception of organization	0
29	Stories about the volunteers	0
32	Ext of bdgt achieved by engaging vols	0
5	Percent of need met by volunteers	-1
6	Ratio of time invested in VM: vol time given	-1
9	Vol time to FTEs	-1
30	\$/GIK raised or donated by volunteers	-1
35	Org cost of time contrib by vols	-1
11	# of volunteer hours annually	-2
14	Vol eng rate (active vols/enrolled vols)	-2
23	# of vols in other org roles	-2
36	Cost-benefit analysis/ROI	-2
37	Volunteer Net-Benefit Analysis	-2
16	Percent of vol positions or slots filled	-3
18	# of vols or vol hrs by prog or dept	-3
31	Cost savings to the org	-3
8	Vol ratios (vols:staff)	-4
34	Value of vol hr IS rate	-4
10	# of volunteers annually	-5
12	# of hours per volunteer	-5

Appendix F – Factor Array for Factor 2

No.	Statement	
1	# clts served by vols	5
4	Amount of change achieved by volunteers	5
20	# of org goals met through vol support	4
31	Cost savings to the org	4
2	# services provided by vols	3
9	Vol time to FTEs	3
28	Stories about the impact of service	3
10	# of volunteers annually	2
21	Type of org goals met through vol support	2
25	Volunteer satisfaction rate	2
32	Ext of bdgt achieved by engaging vols	2
35	Org cost of time contrib by vols	2
3	Qual of service provided by vols	1
5	Percent of need met by volunteers	1
11	# of volunteer hours annually	1
27	Clients' satisfaction with vols	1
29	Stories about the volunteers	1
13	Vol retention (tenure v expected stay)	0
14	Vol eng rate (active vols/enrolled vols)	0
18	# of vols or vol hrs by prog or dept	0
30	\$/GIK raised or donated by volunteers	0
33	Social Accounting	0
34	Value of vol hr IS rate	0
36	Cost-benefit analysis/ROI	0
16	Percent of vol positions or slots filled	-1
23	# of vols in other org roles	-1
24	Perception of organization	-1
26	Paid staff's satisfaction w vols	-1
38	Traditional VM	-1
12	# of hours per volunteer	-2
15	Range of roles performed by vols	-2
22	# of ppl referred to org by a vol	-2
37	Volunteer Net-Benefit Analysis	-2
40	Extent of vol integration	-2
17	Extent to which vols reflect community	-3
39	OD practices that support volism	-3
41	High-caliber vol mgr	-3
6	Ratio of time invested in VM: vol time given	-4
7	# of vol supervising other vols or staff	-4
8	Vol ratios (vols:staff)	-5
19	Program/process suggestions from vols	-5

Appendix G – Factor Array for Factor 3

No.	Statement	
24	Perception of organization	5
27	Clients' satisfaction with vols	5
25	Volunteer satisfaction rate	4
26	Paid staff's satisfaction w vols	4
3	Qual of service provided by vols	3
31	Cost savings to the org	3
32	Ext of bdgt achieved by engaging vols	3
6	Ratio of time invested in VM: vol time given	2
11	# of volunteer hours annually	2
13	Vol retention (tenure v expected stay)	2
28	Stories about the impact of service	2
36	Cost-benefit analysis/ROI	2
10	# of volunteers annually	1
20	# of org goals met through vol support	1
30	\$/GIK raised or donated by volunteers	1
38	Traditional VM	1
40	Extent of vol integration	1
5	Percent of need met by volunteers	0
14	Vol eng rate (active vols/enrolled vols)	0
16	Percent of vol positions or slots filled	0
22	# of ppl referred to org by a vol	0
29	Stories about the volunteers	0
35	Org cost of time contrib by vols	0
41	High-caliber vol mgr	0
1	# clts served by vols	-1
8	Vol ratios (vols:staff)	-1
21	Type of org goals met through vol support	-1
23	# of vols in other org roles	-1
39	OD practices that support volism	-1
2	# services provided by vols	-2
4	Amount of change achieved by volunteers	-2
15	Range of roles performed by vols	-2
17	Extent to which vols reflect community	-2
18	# of vols or vol hrs by prog or dept	-2
12	# of hours per volunteer	-3
19	Program/process suggestions from vols	-3
34	Value of vol hr IS rate	-3
7	# of vol supervising other vols or staff	-4
37	Volunteer Net-Benefit Analysis	-4
9	Vol time to FTEs	-5
33	Social Accounting	-5

PAPER 2

INTEGRATING MARKET AND GIFT ECONOMIES FOR A MORE HOLISTIC
UNDERSTANDING OF VOLUNTEERING

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Abstract

Volunteer value has traditionally been reported using quantitative measures that align with the market economy, such as volunteer numbers, hours, and wage replacement rates. While valuable for some purposes, the market mindset omits important dimensions of service. This paper introduces the gift economy as a complementary framework to the market economy to support a more holistic understanding of service. It outlines the strengths and limitations of market and gift economies and suggests ways to integrate them to better reflect the multidimensional nature of volunteerism.

This paper is written for an academic audience. The target publications are *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, or *Voluntas*.

In 2003, Fryar observed, “The most enduring and controversial question within the field of volunteerism is the one that relates to the ‘value’ of volunteers and the hours they contribute” (Fryar, Mook, Brummel, & Jalandoni, 2003, para. 1). Sixteen years after these words were written, his reflection about volunteer valuation still rings true. The primary ways to communicate volunteer value are through volunteer numbers, hours, and an aggregated hourly wage replacement value. Proponents contend that quantifying and monetizing volunteer time is a way to help elevate the value of volunteers and gain the attention of decision makers who control resources (Fryar et al., 2003, see Mook; Salamon, Sokolowski, & Haddock, 2011; Verified Volunteers, 2019). Critics have argued just the opposite: that placing a dollar value on service demeans and diminishes it (Burych, Caird, Schwebel, Fliess, & Hardie, 2016; Fryar et al., 2003, see Brummel).

Despite criticism about placing a financial value on volunteer service, techniques to monetize volunteer value have proliferated. There are several approaches to assigning wage replacement values to service (Brudney & Nezhina, 2011; Handy & Srinivasan, 2004; Safrit, 2013). They are joined by a host of other models that calculate the social value or return on investment of volunteerism (Goodrow, 2014; Quarter, Mook, & Richmond, 2003; Verified Volunteers, 2018). Although these tools are widely available, a study found that 93% of nonprofit organizations in Canada were not estimating the financial value of volunteers at all (Mook, Sousa, Elgie, & Quarter, 2005). Authors in the United States have suggested that most organizations are not tracking the financial volunteer value either (Eisner, Grimm, Maynard, & Washburn, 2009).

Further complicating the matter, Brudney and Nezhina (2011) observed that economic approaches may be ill suited for the task of valuing volunteers:

The value produced by volunteers . . . is hard to measure in economic terms because it is neither bought nor sold in the marketplace. To the contrary, it is given, which renders its price beyond economic or monetary value. Goods produced by volunteers surpass market price for comparable goods because these goods are infused with value added, such as good intentions; they are given wholeheartedly, which makes them “priceless.” They are in sharp contrast to goods and services sold in the market for the purpose of gaining profit. (p. 367)

This observation supports Ellis’ (2010) contention that the value volunteers contribute to their organizations is not economic in nature. Scholars are increasingly coming to a similar conclusion. They have found volunteers’ value-add comes in a variety of forms including improved program quality, a more diverse workforce, and increased perceptions of trust and transparency to name but a few (Brudney & Nezhina, 2011; Haski-Leventhal, Hustinx, & Handy, 2011; Rochester, Paine, & Howlett, 2010).

These arguments and the research findings that support them reveal a tension in applying market economy principles to an activity that does not fully play by market economy rules. Yet, alternatives have been few and far between. One candidate for a new model is the commons perspective proposed by Brudney and Meijs (2009). Commons principles apply to shared natural resources in a community such as water or air. The resource is maintained when each community member uses only his or her fair share and commits to sustaining the resource’s quality for the common good. Brudney and Meijs (2009) reconceptualize volunteer energy as a natural resource that organizations can cultivate by treating volunteers well and not overexerting them in one role or organization. This paper continues in the vein of applying a new lens to volunteerism. It

introduces the gift economy as an extension of the commons model and a complement to the market economy model that predominates the volunteer value landscape.

The article begins with an overview of volunteerism as interpreted through the lens of the market economy followed by a discussion of the strengths and limitations of this approach. The next section makes a case for a new perspective—the gift economy—and describes its features. The gift economy lens is then applied to volunteerism. Finally, the paper concludes with the implications of integrating the gift and market economies as they relate to volunteerism.

For purposes of this paper, the focus will be on volunteering in the United States, and more specifically, the volunteering that takes place in organizations that have paid staff. The words *volunteering* and *volunteerism* are used interchangeably with *service*.

Volunteerism Through an Economic Lens

The market economy has been the predominant lens on determining the value of volunteers to their host organizations (Brown, 1999; Brudney & Nezhina, 2011; Handy & Srinivasan, 2004; Salamon et al., 2011). These economic influences on volunteerism manifest in a variety of ways. First, the literature indicates that volunteers are a way for organization leaders to bridge financial gaps (Handy, Mook, & Quarter, 2008; Russell, Mook, & Handy, 2017), which is consistent with economics' focus on maximizing utility and profit (Goodwin et al., 2018). Today, there is a growing acknowledgement that volunteers bring value beyond their low-wage labor (Haski-Leventhal et al, 2011). However, historically, and even more recently, the decision to involve volunteers is understood to be ultimately economic in nature (Russell et al., 2017).

Other evidence of an economic predisposition for volunteer valuation can be found in the quantitative tools used to assign value to volunteer time and support data-driven decision making. The basic data tracked are volunteer head counts and hours served (Brudney, 2010; Ellis, 2010). The hours served then can be used to assign a cumulative financial value to volunteer time by multiplying the hourly wage replacement rate by number of hours served. The industry standard for wage-replacement formulas is determined by the Independent Sector (IS), which currently sets the value of a volunteer hour at \$24.69 (Brudney & Nezhina, 2011; Independent Sector, 2019). More sophisticated financial models, such as social accounting, return on volunteer investment (ROVI), the volunteer investment and value audit, and relative impact models, incorporate additional volunteer-related financial data, such as volunteer management expenses (Gaskin, 2011; Goodrow, 2014; Quarter, Mook, & Richmond, 2007; Verified Volunteers, 2019). These models can be used to calculate a return on investment (ROI), cost-benefit analysis, and other economic assessments of volunteerism. They provide insight into the various dimensions of service but still articulate these dimensions in financial terms.

Another less obvious influence of economics can be seen in trends toward episodic service (e.g., one-time and short-term volunteering), virtual service (i.e., volunteering undertaken online), and corporate days of service that operate on a fee-for-service basis. To some degree, the shift toward episodic and virtual service has been a volunteer form of the gig economy where paid labor is mediated through online tools and exchanged for convenience, flexibility, and short-term interactions (DeStefano, 2016; McKinsey Global Institute, 2016). The capabilities of web-based applications and

communication have contributed to growth in episodic and virtual volunteering by streamlining the process of matching volunteer supply with organizational demand. For example, online volunteer connectors—like VolunteerMatch and Catchafire, and technology platforms used by volunteer centers and host organizations—help volunteers register directly for service projects or streamline the process for connecting them with opportunities. In addition, corporations with Employee Volunteer Programs sometimes refer interested employees to these sites. However, they also can pay a fee to an organization to help set up a day of service for their workforce (Points of Light, 2018). Taken together, these practices represent a commodification of service.

Strengths of Market Economy Models

Using an economic lens to understand volunteerism makes logical and intuitive sense for many reasons. For example, market principles govern every sector and type of organization where volunteers serve, volunteer prospects are influenced by mounting financial and time constraints, and tracking hours and assigning a dollar figure are feasible ways to quantify volunteer value. The remainder of this section elaborates on each of these reasons to apply a market economy framework to volunteerism.

First, the organizations involving volunteers are operating in the market economy and are heavily influenced by market principles. Nonprofit agencies are increasingly encouraged to run like businesses and to demonstrate their effectiveness using quantitative measures and methods (Hwang & Powell, 2009). These organizations rely on a variety of forms of capital to be successful (Castillo, 2016), yet financial capital tends to be regarded most highly (Costello, 2019). Moreover, although mission achievement may take years or decades for these organizations, funders and partners want to see short-

term results. Thus, nonprofit agencies are not able to operate outside of the market economy or its conventions.

Additionally, market pressures in the form of money and time affect the supply of would-be volunteers. For example, when women began to enter the workforce in larger numbers, it influenced the amount and availability of volunteers (Silver, 1988). Today, men and women need to manage professional and family needs, which decreases time available for service, or at least service that occurs outside of those domains. Those whose lives are transient due to education or military service also have limitations on their availability. In response, some organizations offer episodic and virtual volunteering to help busy people serve. They are supported by volunteer-connecting technology and intermediaries, like volunteer centers, that streamline the process for finding and registering for one-time or short-term service. These shifts in how people serve reflect economic constraints in their lives.

Finally, tracking volunteer value with head counts, numbers of hours, and an hourly financial rate has face validity. If involving volunteers in an organization is useful, then it seems valuable to have more people contributing more time. Furthermore, if these volunteers are contributing some service that has value, then it seems reasonable to articulate that value in financial terms. This intuitive logic is further enhanced by the relative ease of tracking hours and calculating a financial value of volunteer time, which makes it feasible for many organizations that host volunteers.

Limitations of Market Economy Models

Clearly, the market economy is a critical influence on volunteerism. However, volunteer service includes dimensions that cannot be addressed entirely by economic

models. This section provides an overview of the limitations of using an economic-dominant lens for volunteerism.

Market economies are based on assumptions that do not translate fully to the nonprofit contexts where volunteers serve. In particular, the economic assumptions that (a) services can be traded for currency in the marketplace, and (b) a standard value can be assigned to all time given are not well suited for organizations that host volunteers. As the earlier Brudney and Nezhina (2011) quote demonstrated, volunteer time is not bought or sold in the market, does not possess a comparable market price, does not contribute to profit generation, and can have legitimate value-add from something as intangible as “good intentions.” Thus, many market principles are misaligned with volunteer value.

Despite this misalignment, some leaders and organizations in volunteerism advocate that quantifying and applying dollar values to volunteer time demonstrates the importance of volunteerism and makes a case for supporting volunteer involvement in the organization (Bisbee & Wisniewski, 2017; Independent Sector, 2019; Verified Volunteers, 2019). Yet, that claim does not always bear out in practice, particularly if those measures are reported without context. Counting volunteers, hours, and financial value omits the results of volunteer labor and can privilege quantity over quality, celebrate inefficient volunteers, and inadvertently substitute volume for impact (Burych et al., 2017; Ellis, 2010). Cravens (2016) has been especially critical of the IS hourly rate because it contributes to the belief that volunteers are free or save money and positions economic values as the “best measure of volunteer program success” (para. 3). Moreover, the use of return-on-investment formulas has brought undesirable attention and criticism to volunteer-related expenses in some settings and often goes down in the short term

before the investments begin to pay off (C. Phallen, personal communication, April 13, 2017). This reality can be problematic for organizations making decisions based on short-term returns. Lastly, applying a market framework to volunteerism may promote a transactional quality to service. It emphasizes time and financial value as the most important forms of currency and overlooks mission and purpose, which are a critical form of currency in service (Adams, Mazzella, Renfro, Schilling, & Hager, 2016).

Another issue with the economic lens on volunteer service is the mismatch between the supply (what volunteers want in terms of service opportunities) and demand (what organizations need). Although volunteer interest in and availability for long-term service have decreased, many organizations still need volunteers who will serve for an extended period of time (Deitrick, Carter Kahl, & Hunt, 2013). For instance, roles requiring deep knowledge, such as docents, or serving vulnerable clientele require significant training to equip the volunteer to be successful. The length of service needs to match the needs of the client and the volunteer role, and not every volunteer position can be reduced to episodic timeframes. Traditional economic views of and solutions to addressing supply and demand do not always transfer well to the nonprofit setting.

Finally, the application of market economy principles to volunteerism can mischaracterize service and its nonprofit hosts as homogeneous. Placing one hourly value, such as the Independent Sector rate, on volunteer time reduces all service, from tree planting to pro bono surgery, to one rate. Even assigning multiple values for different volunteer roles within an organization can create issues because they are so often used as a comparison device internally or between organizations. For example, comparing the total dollar value of volunteers who provide surgery to those who offer translation or

post-operative care can create a volunteer hierarchy rather than demonstrate a continuum of service designed to serve patients at all stages of their medical intervention. Additionally, comparing the surgeons with the volunteers in the tree-planting organization does not provide a meaningful way to assess the volunteer work in their host agencies. The missions, roles, geographic locations, engagement strategies, and a host of other critical factors that influence volunteer value are omitted with one-size-fits-all economic measures. It creates the illusion of a common denominator in a field and activity that are incredibly diverse.

Summary

There are many limitations for applying economic models to volunteerism. However, these models may prevail because of their familiarity and the perceived legitimacy that come from using quantitative and seemingly objective economic measures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Morgan, 1988; Salamon et al., 2011). Likewise, the dominance of the economic framework may diminish the value of other models and contribute to these perspectives being overlooked entirely (Morgan, 1988). As a result, the economic mindset contributes to behaviors that reinforce its importance and predispose participants to interpret reality in accordance with economic standards, thereby perpetuating their use (Hines, 1988).

Alternatives to the Market Economy

Given the limitations of an economic-dominant approach to understanding volunteer valuation, it is helpful to explore what other perspectives might provide insight into the contributions of volunteers and help reclaim what is neglected by economic models. Brudney and Meijs (2009) offer a fresh lens on volunteerism by

reconceptualizing volunteer energy as a natural resource that can be managed and regenerated. The authors reimagine volunteer time as a long-term resource to be stewarded among a constellation of stakeholders within and beyond the organization and over the lifetime of the volunteer (Brudney & Meijs, 2009). This perspective stands in stark contrast to traditional market economy-based models that emphasize short-term volunteer influence on the host organization's immediate needs (Brudney & Meijs, 2009).

This natural resource model is not a mere refining of current thinking; it invites a different kind of model entirely for conceptualizing volunteerism, a different paradigm for understanding service. The gift economy is one possible response to this invitation. It offers a logical extension of the natural resource and commons model. Gift economies operate on rules that are fundamentally different than those of the market economy and, more importantly, are inclusive of many features of service that are omitted or discounted in the market economy model of volunteerism.

Gift Economy Overview and Comparison to the Market Economy

As noted, a gift economy operates on different principles than the market economy. Its multidimensionality also affords a more holistic understanding of the complexities of service. Table 1 provides a comparison of the market and gift economies.

A gift exchange may occur between two or more people, but it is not restricted to humans, services, or material goods as in market economies. Instead, it can occur between a person (or group) and the natural environment or a spiritual entity (Mauss, 1950/1990). As such, Mauss (1950/1990) observed that the subject of the exchange could be material, social, and/or spiritual in nature.

Table 1

Comparison of Market and Gift Economies

Dimension	Market Economy	Gift Economy
Nature of Exchange:	Material	Material, social, spiritual
Essence of Exchange:	Value	Worth
Exchange:	Transaction-based	Relationship-based
Driven by:	Customer needs	Community needs
Assessment:	Quantitative	Meaning-laden
Boundaries:	Exchange establishes boundaries	Exchange diminishes boundaries
Status Achieved By:	Possession – collecting	Stewardship – movement
Authority:	Top-down	Distributed
Consequences:	Independence – freedom	Interdependence – responsibility
Supports:	Individual	Individual in community
Time Focus:	Short term – present	Long term – historical

Moreover, gifts are not bartered or traded like commodities in a market economy (Mauss, 1950/1990). Rather, they are exchanged and may not have comparative value (Hyde, 2007). In fact, the concept of value is different in a gift economy. Market value is a price that is set based on market demands. In a gift economy, however, worth is a more accurate and inclusive concept than value (Hyde, 2007). Worth may include material value, but it is not driven by a fixed rate determined by external factors. Instead, the gift's worth is likely to be imbued with meaning, sentiment, tradition, spiritual essence, or uniqueness that is derived not only from the gift but also from the exchanging parties and their emotional ties (Mauss 1950/1990). Thus, worth is a multidimensional construct that can be inclusive of value. However, the economic and quantitative nature of value does not accommodate the meaning-laden and qualitative nature of worth.

Consequently, gratitude for the gift is essential as is its ongoing movement between the exchange parties or their broader communities. For example, the bones of the first catch from the salmon run would be returned to the river in thanks to and for the fish that would nourish the tribe throughout the season (Hyde, 2007). Likewise, a gift received by a person living in an intentional community would be shared with many members of that community (Hyde, 2007). By contrast, market economies do not rely on gratitude; nor do they require movement in the form of repeat transactions.

Relationships, boundaries, status, and authority also are different in the gift and market economies. Within a gift economy, exchange serves to establish or fortify reciprocal relationships between and beyond the parties involved (Kimmerer, 2013). It fosters bonds through the material exchange, and often nurtures social and spiritual bonds as well, thereby diminishing boundaries between parties (Hyde, 2007; Mauss, 1950/1990). As a result, gift exchange tends to occur at multiple levels. At the micro-level, there is an exchange of items between parties; at the macrolevel, the exchange signifies the reciprocal nature of life within a community. Thus, the gift economy cultivates a sense of interdependence between the parties and contributes to the collective survival of the group (Mauss, 1950/1990). Perhaps as a result, status or authority within a gift economy comes from the stewardship and distribution of gifts among the group rather than the possession and collection of goods (as in market economies; Hyde, 2007). This multidimensional and multilevel nature of the gift economy further inhibits assigning comparative value to the items that are exchanged.

By contrast, the market economy serves to establish boundaries and diminish bonds between the parties. The purchase of a product does not link the buyer with the

seller beyond the completion of the transaction (Kimmerer, 2013). As such, the market economy contributes to independence between parties. In addition, status and authority in market economies typically come from possession of goods and give decision-making power to the individual possessor rather than the group (Hyde, 2007).

Gift economies are often associated with indigenous tribes and early society, but the applications are broader and inclusive of modern communities. In-person and virtual gift economies can be found in diverse locations. For instance, scholarly communities rely on a collective commitment to the commons of knowledge and data. Academic conferences, peer-reviewed journals, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) are examples of gift economies.

Gift Economy Application to Volunteerism

The gift economy lens is well suited for application to volunteerism. It provides a fresh way to interpret and view the volunteer experience and a more expansive language to capture the multidimensional dynamics of service. It begins to offer a more complex and holistic approach to understanding service. This section provides an overview of the strengths and limitations of gift economies.

Strengths of the Gift Economy

It is difficult to assign a meaningful price to volunteer service since it is not bought or sold in the marketplace. Therefore, the gift economy's concept of worth is more comprehensive and applicable than value. Worth is inclusive of the economic value as well as the multidimensional value-add that can occur in service (e.g., meaning, connection, learning) since volunteering is about more than the task completed or service delivered (Brudney & Nezhina, 2011; Russell et al., 2017).

For example, a volunteer delivering meals to home-bound seniors provides a direct benefit of a healthy and timely meal. In addition, the meal recipient benefits from the social interaction in the short term as well as the ability to live independently and the sense of dignity that accompanies independence in the long term. The interaction also provides an opportunity to monitor the recipient's well-being, particularly when it is completed by the same volunteer over time. Furthermore, the volunteer may learn more about the issues that seniors face and the programs provided by the organization. He or she may educate others about the work, make a monetary donation, or refer friends and family to volunteer as well. Lastly, there are societal benefits in the cost savings achieved by the senior continuing to live at home instead of more expensive assisted living options.

Although there are mechanisms for assigning dollar values to many of these aspects of service (Quarter et al., 2003), it is difficult to precisely determine the value of dignity, early intervention in quality-of-life issues, or the opportunity to make a difference in one's community. Worth provides a better language for these aspects of the volunteer experience.

Additionally, the nature of the exchange in a gift economy is social and spiritual as well as material. Accordingly, it is a good fit for volunteerism, which is more likely to include social or spiritual motivations than material elements. Economic approaches to service frame the decision to serve as a financial or rational decision made by weighing tangible costs and benefits (Handy & Srinivasan, 2004; Russell et al., 2017). However, hospital CEOs in one study indicated they would not trade volunteers for staff even if they could because of the unique contributions that volunteers make (Haski-Leventhal et

al., 2011). Research on volunteers indicates that there are multiple motivations for service, many of which are not rational or self-serving (Chacon, Gutierrez, Sauto, Vecina, & Perez, 2017; Clary et al., 1998). The gift economy provides a language and frame for understanding and addressing these drivers of service.

The gift economy also incorporates the multiple levels where service occurs and the interdependence among the participants. Volunteering rarely involves a discrete transaction between two people, even when it is episodic. Rather, volunteer work often supports clients or program participants, is overseen by paid staff or lead volunteers, happens in concert with other volunteers, and occurs within a larger organizational or community setting. Moreover, although the volunteers may serve in a role as giver, they accrue benefits through their service (United Nations Volunteers, 2011). Furthermore, while service offers benefits to the volunteers, it also is critical for the organizations that host volunteers, many of which depend on that service to fulfill their missions (Urban Institute, 2004). The act of service links and cultivates interdependence between the participants.

In addition, the multilevel and interdependent nature of service can increase the bond between people while decreasing the boundaries between them. The act of serving, especially over time, cultivates relationships and exposure to diverse stakeholder roles. The volunteer may be a member of the local community, a program participant, a family member or friend of a participant, a donor, or a board member—or all of the above. The volunteer's time investment does not usually reflect that of employees but still distinguishes them from other stakeholders through access to inside information or a deeper understanding of the cause. By virtue of their boundary spanning and gifts of time

and expertise, volunteers diminish some of the boundaries that exist between the organization and other stakeholders. This boundary reduction is more consistent with the gift economy than a market economy where the transactional and monetary nature of the exchange establishes a level of separation between the participants.

Limitations of the Gift Economy

The gift economy lens provides a more expansive way to understand volunteerism than the market economy alone. However, it has limitations, too. For example, host organizations operate in a market economy, which privileges quantitative, and especially financial, data (Salamon et al., 2011). Given the limited time and evaluation capacity that many volunteer managers have at their disposal, priority may be given to the narrower, quantitative measures that are required for compliance rather than to a holistic and multidimensional set of indicators and stories. The multidimensional nature of gift economies and indicators of their success take time to track, which is in short supply in organizations of all types.

The gift economy also is at odds with the bureaucratized environments and increasingly professionalized nature of nonprofits. Though volunteers may span boundaries and roles within an organization, the organization staff tend to operate primarily in one function or role and may be siloed from other departments. Volunteers may concurrently be donors, board members, or program participants, yet large organizations typically treat each of these stakeholders differently, and the staff may not know or have the capability to track these roles across separate data systems. The consequence may be that the unique insight and experience of these boundary-spanning volunteers get lost and/or that the treatment they receive demonstrates the differing value

of their roles (i.e., donors usually receive better treatment than volunteers). Gift economies tend to benefit from a big-picture view that spans boundaries and values diverse resources, which is inconsistent with how many organizations are organized.

Good matches between volunteers and their roles tend to produce the strongest benefits for volunteers and the nonprofits. However, these matches take time, especially in the initial stages of the volunteer connecting to the organization. Unfortunately, the very steps that contribute to good matches are time consuming for the organization and volunteer prospects alike and may reduce the likelihood of a proper matchmaking process. Again, the relationships inherent in gift economies take time to cultivate.

In addition, there are risks that accompany the diminished boundaries within the gift economy. While it may be valuable for volunteers to foster relationships with clients or program participants, there can be problems that arise from these relationships, too. In many cases, organizations establish and attempt to enforce boundaries as a way to protect the clients and volunteers from being harmed or taken advantage of and to mitigate the organization's liability. Ironically, the authentic bonds that form through volunteer service may be the best intervention for volunteer and client, but the concurrent risk it entails means that many organization leaders attempt to establish and maintain firm boundaries.

The bonds that form between parties in gift economies and volunteer organizations may have other consequences as well. Bonds between people are not always healthy and productive. For instance, volunteers are subject to cliques as much as other communities are. These in-groups can be intimidating or unwelcoming to new or less active volunteers, which can negatively influence recruiting and retention efforts.

Managing these relationship dynamics may distract from the mission-related work of volunteers and staff. On the flip side, some volunteers or staff may not want to establish social bonds with each other or may want to limit the depth of those bonds (McNamee & Peterson, 2014). Interest in bonding can vary widely.

Another limitation of the gift economy is the sense of shared ownership for the agency's work among volunteers and staff. Of course, this can be a valuable outcome since so many missions require more human capital than is found on the paid staff teams. The downside of shared ownership, however, is that it can lead to a feeling of obligation and burden among volunteers. These volunteers may find it difficult to step away from their service role to take a break or create space for new volunteers to get involved. This can lead to burnout among the volunteers and stagnation for the organization.

In summary, the gift economy is subject to strengths and limitations, just as the market economy is. Its value does not come as a replacement for the market economy though. Instead, its value is as a complement and companion to market economy principles. As such, the benefits of both approaches can be realized while mitigating some of their limitations. The next section introduces ways to integrate the two models and offer the expanded "vocabulary of efficiency, effectiveness, and social impact" (Adams et al., 2016, p. 28).

Integrating the Market and Gift Economies in Volunteerism

The gift economy offers a useful companion framework to address some of the shortcomings of an economic-dominant lens of volunteering. The challenge lies in integrating and more fully adopting the two approaches. Hyde's (2007) attempt to reconcile the market and gift economies when applied to artistic endeavors provides

insight into the possibilities. He recommended that artists shift between the two perspectives without trying to occupy them at the same time (Hyde, 2007). For example, an artist might create while in the openness and sacred space of a gift mentality and once the art work is complete, place it for sale on the market. In volunteerism, organization leaders do not have the luxury of dividing the market and gift economies into such neat and discrete compartments. Therefore, it may be useful to take on the mindful examination called for by Adams et al. (2016, p. 29) and consider whether and when organizational practices reflect a market economy ethos, gift economy ethos, or both. The market mindset is one that lends itself toward counting, pricing, efficiencies, and transactional exchanges whereas a gift mindset is inclusive of the quality of service and experiences, the relations between participants, and the meaning and purpose motivating the service.

One way to integrate market and gift economies into volunteer engagement is in the way that volunteer work is tracked and shared. Certainly, there is a need to address market economy sensibilities through quantitative data collection and reporting. However, applying a gift economy mindset allows for a more expansive understanding of the contributions that volunteers make to the organization and the community. For example, a report about volunteerism might indicate that 20 volunteers served 750 hours to mentor 25 youth in a year. It also could include narrative about how the youth experienced being respected and cared for, the mentee family members' gratitude for another positive adult role model in the youth's life, and how the volunteer mentors found a sense of purpose.

Combining quantitative and qualitative data enlarges and protects the gift of service. Hyde (2007) used fairy tales to illustrate the consequences of a quantitative-only approach; the counting and pricing of a gift often led to its loss. In volunteerism, exclusively focusing on numbers and dollars can lead to the loss of the vitality and power of service. The gift economy lens invites (and gives permission to) organization leaders to look beyond quantitative and even qualitative data to the stories of service that can only be witnessed and revealed. As Hyde (2007) observes: What is treated as living takes on and can bestow life.

A gift economy ethos also enables leaders to consider the worth of volunteers in addition to their value. Logic models and cost-benefit analysis offer analytic insight into the microlevels and short-term components of volunteer engagement. These tools yield valuable information on the number of volunteers it takes to deliver a service, the amount of money it takes to invest in volunteer management, and the amount of change that volunteers effect through their service. These forms of analysis can lead to stronger decision making by organization leaders.

However, the time and energy spent on analysis can sometimes overshadow or even impede the mission and community need that drive it. Gift economy principles help leaders name and re-synthesize the organization's purpose, its place in the community, the unique worth of volunteer participation, and the long-term impact sought. The multidimensional and boundary-spanning nature of host organizations requires them to concurrently address the needs, strengths, and limitations of the client, organization, and volunteer. The gift economy lens helps them do this by illuminating the task accomplished, the meaning behind the accomplishment of the task, the relationships that

formed through the task, and the long-term and subtle ways that service influences an organization's success.

The market economy approach to service emphasizes transactional, episodic volunteer opportunities that are heavily influenced by the volunteers' needs. A gift economy approach uses episodic volunteer opportunities as entry points into longer term organizational support. This is accomplished with practices that address technical logistics for volunteer tasks *and* attend to the quality of the experience, cultivate meaning making, and introduce other ways to be involved in or support the agency. In this way, short-term volunteer projects can be treated as a way to convert one-time volunteers into ongoing mission supporters who meet a variety of organizational or client needs, such as talking positively about their experience, educating others about the organization, serving again, referring others to serve, making a financial donation, or taking other action that supports the host organization.

Of course, the nature of these suggestions is not new. Practitioners and scholars have been promoting many of these practices for years. My experience in the field, however, suggests that day-to-day practice has not kept up with these suggestions that integrate the best of gift and market economy thinking. Instead, as Knutsen and Brower (2015) revealed, the instrumental tends to crowd out the expressive in nonprofits.

There are plenty of reasons for nonprofit leaders to pursue efficiencies and report numbers and dollars, not the least of which is that funders and other stakeholders with power require it. It can be harder to make a case for investing in practices that take up valuable time and money and do not contribute to the bottom line in ways that are tangible and visible. The gift economy provides a framework and language to support

nonprofit leaders in pursuing the expressive nature of their missions and the effective volunteer engagement that sustains it.

Conclusion

The trend in volunteer research points to a greater appreciation and understanding of the complex and dynamic qualities of service—and a call to further this line of study (Brudney & Meijs, 2009; Hager & Brudney, 2015; Hustinx et al., 2010; Russell et al., 2017). This paper builds on these efforts to capture the complexity of volunteerism more fully by proposing the gift economy as another lens for understanding the multidimensional interplay of volunteerism in organizations with paid staff. It introduces an integrated market and gift economy framework and its practical implications for the study of and work with volunteers.

Perhaps more importantly though, this paper introduces a companion language that more closely aligns with the vitality, promise, and production of volunteering. To be sure, there are poorly managed volunteer projects that do not reach their potential and are a poor use of time for volunteers and staff alike. But there are also volunteer experiences that enliven and animate, that contribute to the well-being of volunteers and those they serve. Volunteers want their service to have meaning, and organizational leaders need a language that reflects the common purpose, shared humanity, and enormous work that are revealed through service. Integrating the language and ethos of the gift economy with more traditional, economic understandings of service equips volunteers and nonprofit leaders with meaning and metrics.

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PAPER 3

THE VOLUNTEER VALUE PROPOSITIONS: MONEY AND MISSION

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Abstract

Despite admonitions that “volunteers are not free” and “volunteers do not save money,” many scholars and practitioners frame the involvement of volunteers in nonprofit organizations as a money-saving strategy. However, this position omits the unique value-add that volunteers contribute beyond being a source of low-cost labor. This article compares the money and mission value propositions of volunteers and the consequences of both. It then draws on adaptive leadership principles to help shift the narrative about volunteer value to a more inclusive approach that integrates mission and money.

This paper is written for a practitioner audience. The target publications are *Nonprofit Quarterly* or *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

Volunteers are a prevalent and critical part of community life. They are a significant component of the workforce in the United States, particularly in the nonprofit sector. The Urban Institute (2004) reported that 81% of nonprofit organizations engaged volunteers in some capacity. Volunteers serve in core roles such as program delivery as well as operational functions such as fundraising and communications. Service is a fundamental part of the civic fabric and narrative within the United States, and volunteers enjoy an almost hallowed status (Eliasoph, 2013). Indeed, many organization leaders hail volunteers as the heart of their organizations and assert that their agencies could not do what they do without them.

Yet, for all the rhetoric that venerates volunteers, the volunteer function within nonprofits is often under-resourced (Urban Institute, 2004). It tends to operate without a dedicated budget and with staff leads who have little training, are responsible for collateral duties, and may be in their roles “inadvertently” (Nesbit, Rimes, Christensen, & Brudney, 2016; Urban Institute, 2004; VolunteerPro, 2018). A 2018 study revealed that volunteer engagement professionals receive less pay and have less authority than their peers who work in fundraising, program, and human resources (Minnesota Association of Volunteer Administration, [MAVA], 2018). Volunteers themselves are often overlooked and invisible to their host organizations (Ellis, 2010).

If volunteers are so integral to the organizations they serve, why is there such a discrepancy between the rhetoric about volunteerism and the reality in the organizational trenches where they serve?

This article examines the conventional wisdom about the value that volunteers bring to the nonprofit organizations that host them. It introduces the concept of *value*

proposition to understand the gap between what is said and what is done about volunteers. The paper concludes with recommendations on how to enhance the value proposition of volunteers and volunteerism using guiding questions informed by adaptive leadership principles.

Volunteer Value or Volunteer Value Proposition?

This article was inspired and influenced by dissertation research that began as a study of the ways volunteer value is defined and measured by nonprofit leaders. The original plan was to identify a diverse array of volunteer value indicators. These indicators would then be organized into groups customized to meet stakeholders' preferences, including funders, nonprofit executives, and volunteer administrators.

However, the data did not cooperate. It turned out that many of the 10 practitioners, consultants, and researchers I asked to define the value that volunteers bring to agencies turned the question back to me: "How *do* agencies define volunteer value, or how *should* they?" Then, the 32 executives, funders, and volunteer administrators who were asked to rank and explain their preferences for diverse indicators did not behave as expected. There were patterns in their preferences for indicators, but not by stakeholder group. Plus, they had mixed (and sometimes negative) feelings about the traditional metrics of volunteer numbers, hours, and hourly financial value. To complicate matters further, the respondents did not interpret the indicators consistently or according to the given definitions. For instance, some respondents agreed with using return on investment (ROI) to articulate volunteer value—but by no means were they running any numbers. Instead, they were acting from a perceived sense of ROI.

The distinctions respondents made, the questions they asked, the nuance they introduced, and their wide-ranging interpretations and beliefs about volunteerism prompted a reassessment of volunteer value and reconsideration of my next steps. I was feeling stuck when a colleague shared workshop notes from the late marketing expert Clyde Taylor that offered tips on developing a value proposition for the volunteer department. It led me to the value proposition literature and a new way to interpret the data.

Value Proposition and Volunteerism

The concept of value proposition is borrowed from the marketing literature and defined in this paper as the (a) promise to be delivered by a service, and (b) unique value-add of that service in relation to a perceived substitute (Payne, Frow, & Eggert, 2017). A key distinction between value and value proposition is that *value* is determined by the market (see Figure 1). *Value proposition*, on the other hand, is influenced by the prospective buyer's perceptions of value, quality, and price (Zeithaml, 1988). With value proposition, *perception* of value is what matters, and it matters more than objective measures of value. In addition, value proposition can be used to predict buying behavior: high value propositions increase the likelihood of a purchase, and low value propositions decrease those chances.

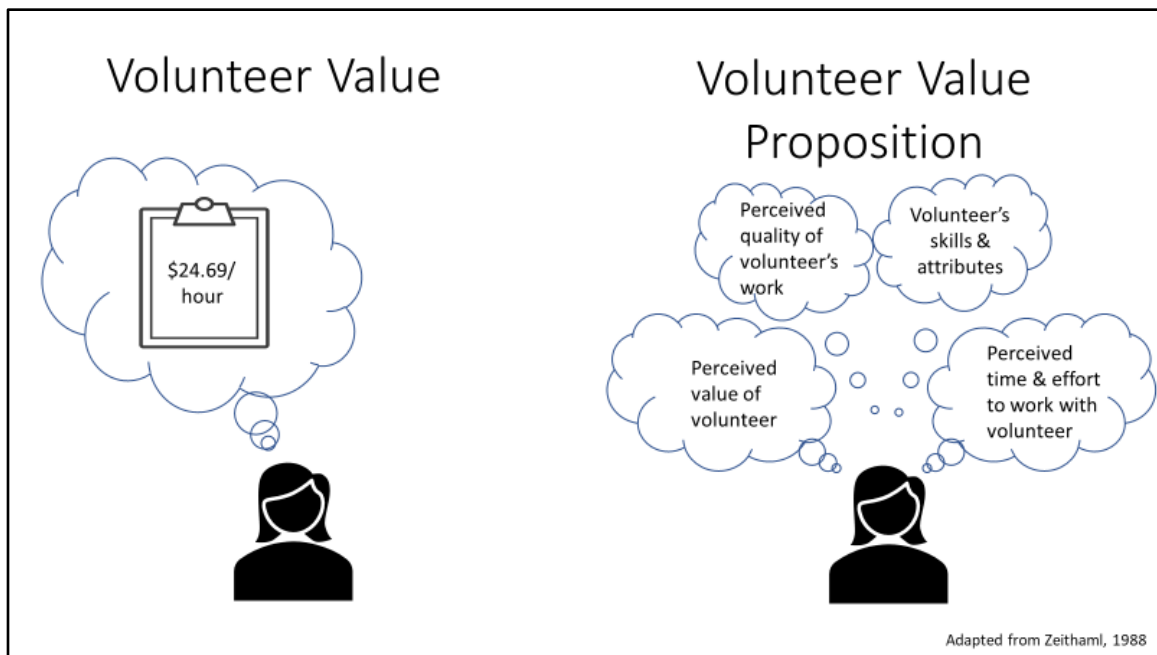


Figure 1. Distinctions between value and value proposition. Volunteer value may be assigned using a wage replacement rate like the one established annually by the Independent Sector. The volunteer value proposition is determined by the user's perceptions about the volunteer prospect's value, work quality, skills, and the time it would take to engage the volunteer.

To apply the value proposition concept to volunteerism then requires acknowledgement that perceptions of volunteer value are crucial. In fact, they are so important that perceptions of volunteer value surpass objective notions of volunteer value such as the hourly rate of \$24.69 calculated by Independent Sector (2019). In other words, the volunteer value proposition is influenced by the perceived value and quality of volunteer work, the perceived price of engaging volunteers, and the perceived amount of effort needed to work with volunteers. In practice, that means that if the perceived price and effort are high and the perceived quality is low, the time and effort required to recruit and retain volunteers will not look like a wise investment.

In addition, volunteers will be evaluated in comparison to their perceived substitutes. In staffed nonprofits, the substitute might be a paid staff member.

Alternatively, the substitute for not having a volunteer complete a task may be that the task goes undone if there are no paid staff available to take on the work.

It was clear from the research interviews that the distinction between value and value proposition was more than a semantic one. The ways participants talked about how they perceived volunteer value seemed to matter more than estimated dollar values of volunteer time. Two volunteer value propositions emerged from the data: volunteers as a money-driven or a mission-driven value proposition. Each perspective is outlined below.

Volunteers as a Money-Driven Value Proposition

The dominant perception or value proposition about volunteers is that their primary value is as a cost-saving mechanism for the host organization. Though this perception has been contested by practitioner leaders (for decades in some cases), it prevails to varying degrees as evidenced by the data in this research as well as in my own work as a consultant and professor.

Volunteers are often positioned as a cost-saving mechanism because organizations do not incur the same expenses for volunteer labor that they would for a paid staff member. As one volunteer administrator put it, “Everyone would say, ‘Yes, of course, volunteers save an organization money.’” Indeed, when times get tight in nonprofits, one of the go-to solutions is to find a volunteer—or many of them. An agency executive observed that many of his donors are fiscally conservative and that these donors like the message that having volunteers sends about the organization’s thriftiness.

Moreover, it makes sense intuitively that if volunteers have value, then that value can be monetized. The industry standard for determining the value of volunteer time is Independent Sector’s (2019) hourly wage replacement rate of \$24.69. Organizations

multiply this rate (or another, such as minimum wage) by the number of volunteer hours to calculate a cumulative volunteer value. These figures can be beneficial. They provide valuable information about the volume of volunteers it takes to meet their missions. Likewise, the monetary value can be used in financial reports and to demonstrate in-contributions for grants. However, this emphasis on numbers also subtly implies that having volunteers is good and that having more volunteers and hours (and thus a higher dollar value) is better.

Unintended Consequences

Though well intended, the narrative about the dominant volunteer value proposition being economic in nature has had unintended consequences. For example, a consultant warned that promoting volunteer involvement as a form of inexpensive labor sends a message to volunteers (and paid staff) that “just because we don’t have money, we have [volunteers]. If we have money, we wouldn’t have [volunteers].” In value proposition terms, it positions volunteers as less valuable than staff but better than nothing—or “second-choice” labor as Ellis (2010) puts it. Additionally, viewing volunteers as free, or even cheap, labor may lead organizations to underinvest in the volunteer function. Since volunteers are supposed to be a vehicle to save costs, it seems counterintuitive to spend money to support them.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, poor investment in volunteerism leads to fewer benefits reaped by the host organization and less satisfaction for the staff and the volunteers (Hager & Searing, 2015). It contributes to a vicious cycle. If the organization leadership and line staff do not believe that volunteers can contribute much, they are less likely to resource it adequately, invest time in engaging volunteers well, or give volunteers

meaningful tasks. Of course, if the volunteers are not resourced or engaged well and meaningfully, they are less likely to be valuable contributors to the organization. Thus, the cycle continues.

Another set of unintended consequences proceeds from the emphasis on numbers and dollars as the industry standards for volunteer measures. First, the numbers and volunteer hours omit volunteer results. They also can shift the emphasis from how volunteers impact the mission to how the organization can attract more volunteers. A former senior leader at a national organization further described implications of reporting volunteer numbers exclusively: “We have this many volunteers with these many hours. And then separately, we talk about what the organization has achieved, and it makes me cuckoo. I think we’re missing huge opportunities to tell the story when [we only] use simplified statistics.” Finally, highlighting quantitative data may deflect attention from the less visible, but still critical, qualitative aspects of volunteers’ contributions (Knutsen & Brower, 2010).

These unintended consequences of the dominant narrative may help explain part of the confusing discrepancy about volunteerism. If volunteers are such a viable solution for saving money and realizing financial efficiencies for organizations, then it seems odd that they are so often perceived as “nice, but not necessary” (Eisner, Grimm, Maynard, & Washburn, 2009, p. 35). An effective cost-saving mechanism would be critical to a nonprofit’s success. Yet, even a senior leader who oversaw volunteers at a national organization that invests in and relies on volunteers to play substantial roles in its work observed other executives talking about the volunteer function as a “nice, feel-good type of thing . . . you and your little volunteers.” Her organization was not an anomaly

according to a 2018 study that revealed that nonprofit executives valued fundraising, human resource, and program positions more than volunteerism roles (MAVA, 2018).

Again, the scholars of value proposition assert that beliefs matter, and the perception that volunteers are nice, but not necessary makes more sense if volunteers are seen as less valuable than paid staff. Especially as the nonprofit sector professionalizes, the paid staff may be hesitant to take on the unpaid amateurs who say they want to volunteer—after all, one gets what one pays for! (Pearce, 1993, p. 10). In addition, organizations have a history of under-resourcing the volunteer function in terms of staff, experience, training, money, and authority—after all, volunteers are supposed to help save money! (MAVA, 2018; Urban Institute, 2004). As a result, volunteers may be relegated to menial tasks at the margins of the organizations (after all, we count numbers, not results!).

An Alternative Value Proposition

In addition, the research described earlier yielded an alternative volunteer value proposition that was not framed in monetary terms. One consultant argued, “The value of what volunteers bring in to an organization . . . is not associated with money really.” A funder agreed and pushed back against the traditional financial focus of volunteer value and outlined a broader vision for service:

If volunteerism is only a cost savings, that’s not enough of a motivation [to have volunteers]. Having an entire volunteer department should be advancing whatever our strategic goals are in various ways. The goal of really using volunteers is that progression and conversion and network effect. Those things are really hard to measure. But did we raise more money? Did we achieve more network? Are we

finding employees [and board members] because of our volunteer network? All the things that end up shifting the path of an organization or allowing for growth. If you have volunteers doing good work, and they're happy with the work, and your staff is happy to have them, then [volunteers] are not a budget item.

Volunteers as a Mission-Driven Value Proposition

The alternative volunteer value proposition frames volunteers as a mission critical and value-add form of labor. In this volunteer value proposition, the promise of engaging volunteers is that they will support and sustain mission-driven activities. Additionally, volunteers are perceived to have unique attributes that complement what the staff can offer, instead of being positioned as a less-expensive substitute for staff. This section draws on observations from the research to illustrate a different volunteer value proposition.

Mission Achievement

Interviewees indicated that the primary value proposition of volunteers is “mission achievement.” Rather than finances driving the decision to involve volunteers, they asserted that the mission, vision, and goals of the organization should drive if and how volunteers are deployed. This might seem so fundamental as to go without saying. Yet, many interviewees indicated that it was not an obvious position. As one remarked, “It seems so basic . . . but it’s amazing how much we’re not getting there.” The consequence of not aligning volunteers with mission is that volunteers end up being a drain and distraction from what is perceived to be the real work of the organization. Non-mission-focused volunteers impact the staff who are strapped for time, the volunteers

who do not feel meaningfully engaged, and the collective organization's ability to be effective.

Volunteers as a Unique Value-Add from Paid Staff

Part of volunteers' value is the direct result of not being paid for their work, or as Haski-Leventhal et al. (2011) observed, volunteers offer "what money cannot buy." In fact, they often provide what can only be given or earned. The respondents identified several unique outcomes of engaging volunteers. They emphasized that these outcomes are likely to be positive when volunteers are engaged well but that poor engagement of volunteers might lead to negative outcomes.

Authenticity. Because volunteers do not receive financial compensation for their work, their efforts are often perceived differently and more authentically than paid staff. Volunteers in fundraising, advocacy, or program roles are "heard differently" than paid staff members because they do not "have that immediate [financial] vested interest." Someone who volunteers to raise money or serve as a tutor is seen as having more pure motives than staff members who are paid to do the same thing.

Presence. Likewise, volunteers have a different relationship with time than staff do. Volunteers often have a "luxury of focus"; they can provide a longer or deeper amount of attention to a single task or client than staff can give. This luxury may positively influence the client and even the staff. For example, hospital nurses indicated that having volunteers active in the unit enabled them to be more effective with their time.

Community witness and voice. A volunteer administrator observed that “when we engage volunteers, we’re engaging the community.” Direct engagement of the community through volunteerism has many benefits. Volunteers can offer insight into community needs as well as new ideas and process improvements. They can be especially effective ambassadors and advocates as well because they experience the organization’s impact first-hand. A respondent with experience in the animal field observed that “shelters who are really good at engaging volunteers tend to have a really core group of people who have their back” and who will speak up on the organization’s behalf when issues arise. Their roles as volunteers and community members afford them a great deal of credibility.

Trust, transparency, and ownership. Another volunteer administrator remarked that the very process of engagement is core to “the purpose of a nonprofit” and relates to “how much ownership [the volunteers] feel for the success of the organization.” She went on to say, “We’re stewards of public trust. And to me you can’t do that in isolation. You can’t do that without involvement of the community, specifically the community that you’re trying to support.” Respondents also pointed out that volunteerism is a positive signal to the community about the organization. As a volunteer administrator put it, “It holds more weight to somebody to be able to say that people are choosing to give their time to this organization versus we employ X number of people. It’s a marker of trust by the community . . . that they’re giving us their only non-renewable resource, their time.”

In summary, volunteers take on a different value proposition when they advance the mission and provide unique value to the organization.

A Third Way – An Enhanced Volunteer Value Proposition

Most of the research participants seemed to frame volunteers as either a money-saving or mission-advancing value proposition. However, there were a few respondents whose views encompassed both value propositions. These respondents maintained that volunteers should primarily advance the mission—and that a by-product of their service was its contribution to extending the organization's budget.

These respondents were quick to point out that *extending the budget* was different than *saving money*. It was a nuanced, but critical distinction. To them, *saving money* meant treating and resourcing volunteers as low-wage labor and spending as little as possible on the volunteer function. By contrast, they used the phrase *extending the budget* to describe a value-added quality to services that was possible because of volunteer support. The value-add meant that the services were qualitatively and/or quantitatively better than what the staff could have provided alone. In addition, the value-add was possible because the organization invested resources in making the volunteer and staff partnership effective.

This enhanced value proposition of volunteers as a value-add and budget extension offered a healthy and strong combination. The question remained though of how interested nonprofit leaders might shift and adopt this enhanced volunteer value proposition. Enter adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership principles include prioritizing purpose and reframing issues in alignment with that purpose (Heifetz, 1994). For nonprofit organizations, this means starting with the mission and maintaining mission alignment with all activities, including volunteerism.

Aligning and Pursuing an Enhanced Volunteer Value Proposition

There is no one-size-fits-all prescription for adopting the enhanced volunteer value proposition given the diversity of nonprofits and volunteer roles. However, guiding principles and questions can support leaders in adapting this work to their unique contexts. Therefore, the remainder of the paper provides an overview of how to use the volunteer value proposition model in Figure 2 and guiding questions in Figure 3 for focusing on the mission and harnessing the unique value-add and budget-extending power of volunteers to support the mission. It incorporates principles from adaptive leadership to help advance the work.

The following model and questions are intended to be used by a cross section of staff, volunteers, executives, and board members. Each stakeholder group has something unique to contribute to the work. Just as importantly, their beliefs and actions need to be aligned to avoid confusion and working at cross purposes.

The Volunteer Value Proposition Model

In the volunteer value proposition model (see Figure 2), the nonprofit agency's boundaries are created and maintained by its purpose (mission) and principles (values). It is guided, but not driven, by its people (stakeholders) since their perspectives are important but may conflict with each other or the purpose. Next, organization leaders identify what the promise or value proposition of volunteers is to advance the agency's mission. From there, they determine and implement practices to achieve effective volunteer engagement and develop proof (data) to assess whether the promise is realized.

The sequence and attention to each step matter. For example, the process starts with purpose, principles, and people and then proceeds to promise. Too often, there is a

temptation to start with proof, such as focusing on data points selected or driven by funders. Starting with proof may lead a team to manage to data rather than purpose and promise, thereby putting the organization at risk for mission drift. In addition, the process requires an intentional approach to practice. The full potential of volunteers will remain latent without thoughtfully crafted and implemented practices to release it.

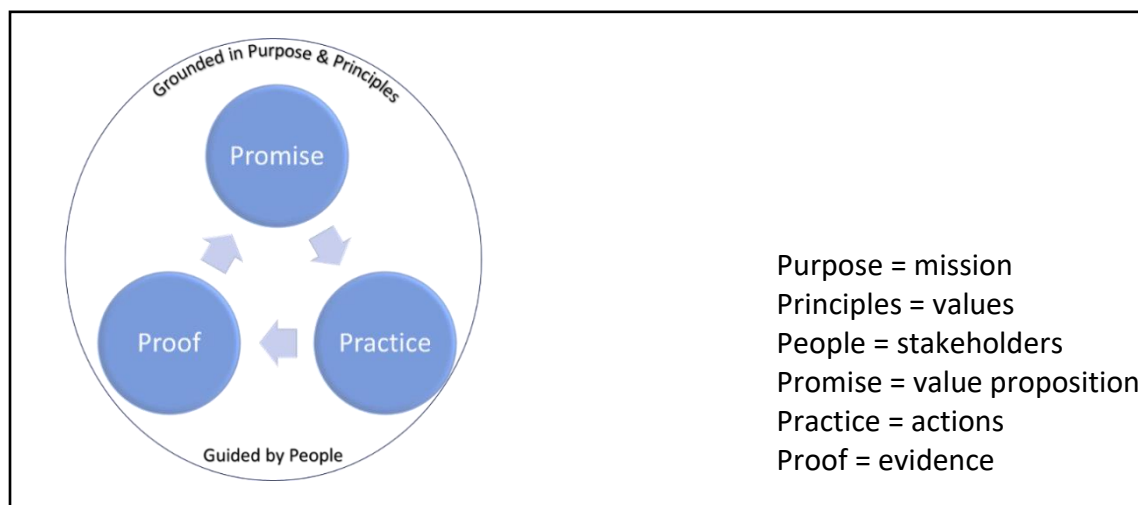


Figure 2. Volunteer value proposition model. The volunteer value proposition or promise is grounded in the organization’s purpose and principles and guided by key people. The promise helps define volunteer engagement practices, which informs which proof to collect to determine if the promise is realized.

The Volunteer Value Proposition Guiding Questions

Guiding questions provide a useful companion for working through the model and focusing attention on the right issues (see Figure 3). This section provides context for why each group of guiding questions is important.

Purpose, principles, and people. The first set of questions helps organizational leaders revisit the mission and determine if volunteers are a crucial element in advancing it. As organizations grow and evolve, volunteer roles shift and may do so without much discussion or intention. As one respondent explained, “People just haven’t really thought about it.” The purpose of this exercise then is to make an intentional decision about if

volunteers should be engaged in an organization and to act in alignment with that decision rather than involve volunteers by default. If the intention to involve volunteers and engage them well does not align with agency actions, it may turn out that the consequences of not engaging volunteers are preferable to the consequences of involving volunteers poorly.

Value proposition or promise. The purpose of these questions is to identify and align beliefs about the value proposition of volunteers. Respondents observed that coming to agreement about the roles, value, and vision for volunteers in an agency's work was significant. For instance, a promise of cost savings is distinct from a promise of value add and budget extension. Therefore, it is valuable to name and discuss volunteer value proposition beliefs and explore if and how those beliefs align, especially between executives, program staff, volunteer administrators, and board members.

Practices. The value proposition of engaging volunteers is their promise, but that promise cannot be realized without strategic actions to support it. Moreover, these actions are not limited to the volunteer administrator. Instead, respondents discussed the importance of volunteer engagement buy-in and skills from all paid staff, so volunteers are "infused in the organization in a meaningful and in-depth way" with practices that support and reflect this infusion.

The respondents noted that it can be tempting to focus on the technical aspects of volunteer management practices such as coordinating logistics, data systems, handbooks, and procedures. They saw merit in these activities but observed that it was essential that these tasks were in service of addressing how the organization engaged volunteers in mission achievement rather than checking a box that the organization had volunteers.

Proof. Once the promise and practices are identified, the next step is to determine what proof will indicate if the practices are meeting the intended promise and purpose. Respondents emphasized the need to align volunteer engagement goals with the overall organizational goals so that the volunteer department did not appear to be a separate, or even competing, function. They also pointed out that stakeholder opinions matter, but they sometimes have conflicting priorities. Therefore, it is valuable to convene stakeholders to discuss program results, how volunteers influence those results, and which measures are meaningful and important.

Volunteer Value Proposition Guiding Questions

Purpose, Principles, and People

- What is our organization's mission?
- What are our values?
- Who are our stakeholders?
- Do we need to engage the community as volunteers in our work?
- What are the consequences of: doing nothing with volunteers, involving volunteers poorly, or engaging volunteers well?

Value Proposition (Promise)

- What value proposition do we hope for by engaging volunteers in our mission?
- What can volunteers do to advance our work that is unique and complementary to what the paid staff are doing?
- What beliefs do we have about volunteers?
- In what ways do these beliefs help or hinder efforts to advance our mission?
- What beliefs need to change?
- Who needs to be part of these conversations?

Practices

- What practices do we need to implement to realize the hoped-for promise?
- What current behaviors need to change?
- What new behaviors do we need to try?
- Whose buy-in or involvement is needed to advance our practices?

Proof

- What proof will provide evidence of our success in realizing the mission and promise?
- What indicators are meaningful and relevant?
- Are indicators used for compliance, learning, and/or education/storytelling?
- Who needs to help select and evaluate indicators?

Figure 3. Volunteer value proposition model guiding questions. These questions can help organization leaders develop a volunteer value proposition that aligns with mission and informs practices and assessment.

Conclusion

This paper represents a shift away from the conventional wisdom that the primary value of volunteers is as an economic and money-saving mechanism. Instead, it offers an enhanced value proposition for volunteers that emphasizes the unique value-add and budget-extending possibilities that volunteers offer when combined strategically with paid staff. As such, it helps realign volunteer engagement with organization mission, which may help decrease the gap between how organizations talk about volunteerism and how they resource it.

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CONCLUSION TO THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation continues in the vein of recent research that is reexamining the assumptions about volunteerism including its definition, management, and conceptualization. Specifically, it focuses on the topic of volunteer value and how methods of assessing that value reflect or reduce the multidimensionality of service. The research and conceptual analysis help reveal new insights into the complexity of service. They provide a way to make the often invisible elements of nonprofit volunteerism a visible—and important—topic of discussion.

The first study used Q methodology to study the perceptions of funders, nonprofit executives, and volunteer administrators. The participants rank ordered their preferences for 41 diverse indicators of volunteer value in a Q sort and discussed how they made meaning of their sort. They gave the traditional indicators of volunteer numbers, hours, and financial value mixed reviews, and their preferences did not align by stakeholder group. In addition, they demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of and appetite for the complexity of service than is found in the traditional measures of volunteer value. The second paper introduced the gift economy as a companion framework for the economic model that undergirds the common measures of volunteer value. It helped name and integrate important dimensions of service such as the social and spiritual, meaning and interdependence, and gratitude and worth with notions of economic value. Finally, the third paper helped articulate beliefs about volunteer value and how those beliefs enlarge or diminish the perceived benefits of volunteerism to the organization. It offered adaptive leadership principles as a way to shift the value proposition of volunteers from cost savings to mission support and value-add. Taken together, these

papers help uncover the complex, dynamic, and multidimensional service that occurs in nonprofit organizations.

Importance of the Research

This research is important because it sheds light on aspects of the multidimensional and complex nature of volunteerism. It reveals a more holistic and nuanced understanding of service that does not reduce it to the lowest common denominators of volume and financial value.

First, this research helps illuminate aspects of volunteerism that have been present all along but tend to get overlooked as nonprofits add paid staff members and respond to pressure to quantify their work and impact. The emphasis on demonstrating impact is important for ensuring that agencies are using their time and money wisely. However, without great attention and intention, it is easy to focus on compliance and counting instead of mission and meaning. This research is a call to reground nonprofit work in mission.

More specifically, this collective work is an appeal to resynthesize volunteer participation and data selection with the organization's purpose. Unfortunately, it appears that the push for quantitative data has led leaders to start with data and then back into practices and purpose rather than the other way around. The instrumental metrics tend to crowd out the symbolic and meaningful drivers in nonprofit work (Knutsen & Brower, 2010). By contrast, starting with purpose ensures that volunteers are positioned as a partner to and strategy for advancing an organization's mission rather than a distraction from it. It also infuses agency purpose with the unique community energy that volunteers bring.

This research also highlights the diversity that makes up service in nonprofits. So often, nonprofits and volunteerism are referenced as homogeneous agencies or activity. The uniqueness of their missions, roles, communities, and strategies are sometimes sacrificed in the push for generalizability and standardized measures. The respondents were clear that context matters and diverse data points help provide that context.

Additionally, this dissertation is an attempt to reclaim the uncountable and ineffable elements of service. Many respondents and workshop participants shared stories about volunteerism that were moving and powerful. Invariably, they were followed by the question: “How do I measure that?!” We sometimes tried to come up with creative ways to break the story down into components that could be measured, but we lost the data whole when we focused on the data points. My current response to “how we measure that” is: We don’t. We witness. We tell stories, but we do not measure it—and we do not have to apologize for the inability to quantify every important part of nonprofit work. We embrace that some of the work is quantitative in nature and some of it is qualitative.

Finally, the importance of this study is that it focuses attention on more of the dimensions that are present in volunteerism. At the organizational level, it gives agency leaders permission and language to take a more expansive approach to volunteerism and to reestablish volunteers as important partners in the instrumental and expressive elements of nonprofit work. For funders and intermediary organizations, it highlights the need to consider which data can support a more holistic understanding of value and how to communicate volunteer value in more complex ways. At the sector level and beyond, it

is a step toward rewriting the narrative about volunteer value to one that is holistic and purpose driven rather than unidimensional and economically driven.

Possibilities and Next Steps for The Dissertation Data

One of the initial intents of this research was to create a taxonomy of indicators of volunteer value. Although deferred, this is an important next step. The taxonomy will likely include two products: one that is user friendly for practitioners and another that is focused on the scholarly community. Both efforts will use the dissertation data to build on and extend what is available in existing tools and articles (Adams, Mazzella, Renfro, Schilling & Hager, 2016; Brudney & Nezhina, 2011; Ellis, 2010; McCurley & Lynch, 2011; Safrit, 2013). It also will include guiding questions and principles to support data selection that is aligned with purpose and context.

Additionally, the data from the Q sorts yielded incredible insights beyond perceptions of the traditional volunteer value metrics. Each of the three factors also could be interpreted as a worldview or philosophy for how participants made meaning of the indicators and their Q sorts. There are opportunities to further refine and explore how these philosophies contribute to the understanding of volunteer value and the volunteer value proposition.

Finally, this research contains seeds for a more comprehensive conceptualization of volunteerism that draws on the commons and volunteer energy as a natural resource conceptualization by Brudney and Meijs (2009), the gift economy, value proposition, and adaptive leadership. This is the more aspirational thread that is woven into my ongoing research agenda.

Next Steps for Additional Research

This research begins to respond to the call by Haski-Leventhal, Hustinx, and Handy (2011) for research that employs qualitative methods and includes multiple stakeholders to understand how organizations make decisions about volunteer involvement. I endorse their recommendation and encourage others to respond with their own qualitative research, audiences, and conceptual frameworks.

The research in this dissertation just begins to scratch the surface of how stakeholders perceive and use volunteer value data. It would be valuable to conduct research with a more diverse sample of stakeholders, such as board members, program directors, and volunteers, and in other subsectors of nonprofits and government agencies. In addition, it would be intriguing to study the diverse perspectives that exist in one organization and how that influences the engagement and resourcing of volunteers.

There also is opportunity to apply diverse methods to questions of volunteer value, especially since perceptions seem to be influential. Q methodology is an older and less familiar method, but it proved to be a generative tool for understanding individual perspectives about traditional and nontraditional metrics. It demonstrated how people interpret seemingly objective and straightforward indicators in very diverse ways. There are many possible uses for Q and other qualitative methods to further discover how stakeholders are making sense of volunteer value. For instance, a modified version of Q methodology could be a great research or consulting tool to study volunteer value or stimulate dialogue about it in one organization or within a group.

Additionally, there is an opportunity to refine, expand, or refute the conceptualizations of the integrated gift and market economy or value proposition

frameworks as applied to volunteerism. In particular, it would be interesting to conduct a study testing the relationship between an organization's perceptions of volunteer value and their level of resourcing for the volunteer function.

Next Steps for Practice

The value proposition paper begins to synthesize some of the lessons learned from this research and translate it into recommendations for practice. Specifically, it includes guiding questions to support practitioners in establishing the purpose and roles of volunteers in the agency. These questions address if and why agencies should engage volunteers, the benefits and consequences of (not) doing so, the value proposition of volunteers, support of volunteer engagement practices, and selection of proof to determine if goals have been met. It is valuable to include leadership and line staff as well as traditional volunteers and board members in these conversations to identify where alignment is lacking and ways to move forward as a team.

There are also opportunities to shift practices around collecting volunteer proof, too. As one of the respondents noted, there is a tendency for nonprofits to track one set of data points about programs and a separate set for volunteers. Volunteers support the delivery and success of programs (and operations). Therefore, the volunteer data should be linked with and flow from the programmatic or operational data.

Lastly, the research indicated that there is a greater appetite for diverse measures of volunteer value and that it is hard to predict what a stakeholder will find valuable. As a result, it is useful to engage different audiences in conversation about what data are meaningful and relevant to them and also to educate them about what data are meaningful

to the organization or program. Sharing new data points may help increase awareness and appreciation for the different ways that volunteer value takes shape and can be captured.

Concluding Comments

Volunteerism in nonprofit organizations is a dynamic, complex, and multidimensional activity. Yet, it is often reduced to unidimensional measures and perceived to be driven by economic motives. This narrow view of service has important implications. As economist Joseph Stiglitz (2008) observed, “What we measure informs what we do. And if we’re measuring the wrong thing, we’re going to do the wrong thing” (para. 3). The current measures are not wrong, but they are limiting. This dissertation is an invitation and challenge to identify and capture more of the right things about volunteerism, difficult as that may be. Volunteers and the nonprofits and communities they serve deserve measures that reflect and communicate their important work in all its richness.

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