Understanding Volunteers of American Community Based Sport Delivery Systems

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A volunteer workforce is crucial to many sport industry segments including: youth sport, adult participatory sport, and community sport programs (York, 2007). According to Cuskelly, McIntyre and Boag (1998, p. 181), “volunteers are an integral part of the community-based not-for-profit sport delivery system in many countries.” The success and growth of sport organizations depends upon volunteers as they have a role in the actual delivery of sport programs across their communities. Other volunteers take part in the governance and leadership of their sport organizations, setting policy which affects the sport as a whole.

Currently, much of the existing literature focuses on the motivation of event volunteers, leaving a dearth of research on community based sport program volunteers. Therefore, this study extends this body of literature by focusing on the volunteer workforce of a large, community based, national governing body of a participatory sport. Additionally, this study extends prior research on volunteers as it examines the motivational benefits of volunteers based on previous participation in the particular sport and longevity as well as size of their community and gender. A better understanding of this population and the rewards and motivations associated with volunteering will lead organizations to better understand volunteer recruitment, retention, and satisfaction.

Volunteer motivation is a complex phenomenon which can best be explained from a functional or multi-dimensional perspective (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, et al., 1998; Omoto & Snyder, 1995, Farrell, Johnston, & Twynam, 1998; Strigas & Jackson, 2003, Caldwell & Andareck, 1994; Downward, Lumsdon, & Ralston, 2005; Fairley, Kellett, & Green, 2007) which indicates people volunteer due to a function of a number of different reasons. Studies have shown uncovering a person’s multi-dimensional motivations for volunteering can assist in recruitment, placement, and retention of volunteers (Clary, Snyder & Ridge, 1992 & 1998) as well as in the prediction of volunteer behavior (Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996) and in satisfaction (Finkelstein, 2008). As Green and Chalip (1998) indicated, there are three types of sport volunteers: event, governance, and staff. Many studies in this area focus on volunteers at sporting events which indicates a need for further research regarding those who volunteer over a period of time for a community based sport delivery system rather than at just one event.

In this study, all volunteers within an American not-for-profit sport delivery system (N = 4,000) were sent an electronic questionnaire. A total of 1,247 usable surveys were returned. The survey was developed by the researchers using themes which emerged from informal interviews and using an adapted version of the Recreation Experience Preferences (REP) scale which uses a five point Likert-type scale (Driver, et al., 1991). Underlying this instrument are four motivational benefit factors: altruism, learning, recognition, and relaxation (Driver, et al., 1991). This scale has been used in previous sport literature (Cuskelly, McIntyre, & Boag, 1998). These benefits are similar to motivational factors found in previous research. To gain a better understanding of volunteers in the delivery system, descriptive statistics were used. Additionally, MANOVA with Scheffe post-hoc tests were used to test for differences in motivation, or volunteer benefits attributable to the variables of longevity of service to the organization, participation in the sport, population size of their city, and gender.

The results of the descriptive statistics revealed two thirds of the volunteers were female and nearly half of the participants (47%) came from cities with populations greater than 100,000. Additionally, the results indicated 46.7% of the participants had volunteered with the organization for over six years. In terms of participation in the sport, 46% of respondents began playing when they were adults. When asked, the primary reasons these individuals volunteer with this particular sport were to grow the sport in their community (50.1%) and because their children were involved (19.0%). In terms of motivational benefits, the data indicated participants primarily volunteered for altruistic reasons (M = 4.1594), followed by learning (M = 3.2581), recognition (M = 2.2960), and relaxation (M = 1.7967).
The results of the between-subjects MANOVA analysis indicated there was no significant difference in motivation to volunteer which can be attributed to longevity of volunteer activity, Wilks' lambda = .996, F(4, 1137) = 1.121, p = .345, and population, Wilks' lambda = .992, F(8, 2384) = 1.249, p = .266. However, MANOVA did reveal motivational differences could be attributed to participation in the sport, or when people started playing, Wilks' lambda = .971, F(8, 2448) = 4.463, p = .000. Scheffe post hoc analysis indicated participants differed on the altruistic motivational factor between those who have never played the sport and those who started playing as a child and those who started playing as an adult. In terms of gender, there was a slight significant difference in the motivation to volunteer, Wilks' lambda = .033, F(4, 1207) = 8866.099, p = .000 where according to Scheffe post hoc analysis indicated women were less likely to volunteer for recognition or relaxation based motivations.

Results indicate females are crucial to the volunteer population. While both genders placed an importance on altruistic benefits of volunteering, we found women were less likely than men to volunteer for recognition or relaxation. While slight, these differences indicate specific needs which need to be taken into account for various demographic groups. From a practical standpoint, organizations could design volunteer opportunities tailored to the needs of specific target populations. Additionally, the volunteer workforce is highly committed to the organization as is evident by the numbers who have served with the organization for several years. Retaining the services of this group is extremely important for the continuity of the organization and meeting the motivational needs of this group should be of utmost priority. Without consistent, regular volunteers, organizations would spend unnecessary time, money and other resources in recruiting and training new volunteers.

In all, the results of this study show volunteers of community based sport delivery systems engage in helping behavior for a number of reasons, however, altruism was most important. This finding is similar to previous research which demonstrates an individual's desire to volunteer for selfless reasons and share their time and talents with something important to them. The findings also indicated over ninety percent of participants have participated in sport they volunteer for indicating the attachment and importance individuals place on this sport is extremely high. From this study, there is a motivational difference between those who have never played the sport as compared with those who have playing experience. Combined with the finding of the importance of an altruistic motive, we can deduce these individuals volunteer to share their passion for the sport and to see the sport grow.