Engaging Volunteers: A Comprehensive Literature Review

ICF   AmeriCorps

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Introduction

Volunteering brings out the best of America (AmeriCorps, 2021). According to a federal study, 1 in 4 Americans volunteered through an organization and 3 in 5 Americans helped their neighbors.[1] The data show that service to others continues to be a priority for millions of Americans, and organizations need to be ready to engage those who want to give back (AmeriCorps, 2021).

Volunteer management spans many contexts in which volunteers mobilize, from large volunteer mobilization organizations (i.e., volunteer connector organizations such as Points of Light or United Ways), to nonprofit organizations, to faith-based or community-based entities, to institutes of higher education. Volunteer management can also require vastly different practices depending on whether volunteers are episodic (such as those responding to a crisis or volunteering for an event) compared to those who are continuing or permanent.

As an independent federal agency, AmeriCorps[2] plays a vital role in supporting the American culture of citizenship, service, and responsibility and is the nation's largest grantmaker in support of many forms of service and volunteering. AmeriCorps engages more than five million Americans in service through its AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps Seniors, and Volunteer Generation Fund (VGF) programs.

Funded by the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation as part of the Life Cycle Evaluation project, ICF conducted a comprehensive literature review of volunteer recruitment and management practices identified in external literature. We reviewed recent literature and research about volunteer management models and strategies and examined the evidence (e.g., relationships to volunteer outcomes) that support them. While there is exhaustive literature on the individual characteristics of volunteers and their relationship to volunteer outcomes, the literature on how organization-level factors impact volunteer outcomes is more limited, with fewer studies examining how volunteer recruitment and management practices expand and strengthen volunteering mechanisms, and even fewer of these studies taking place in the U.S. The purpose of this literature review is to update the knowledge and evidence base for volunteer management practices.

Method

The following research questions guide the literature review:

> What does the current literature and research tell us about volunteer management models/volunteer programs and the evidence base behind them?
> a. What are volunteer management (including recruitment, support, and retention) models, and what are the characteristics and components of these models?
> b. What are the different volunteer recruitment strategies? What evidence or outcomes on volunteers support these strategies?

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[1] See https://americorps.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/new-report-1-4-americans-volunteer-3-5-help-neighbors. The data for this report were collected through two supplements to the Current Population Survey (CPS): the Volunteer Supplement and the Civic Engagement Supplement. The CPS is a monthly survey of about 60,000 households (approximately 100,000 adults), conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau on behalf of the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

[2] AmeriCorps is the operating name of the Corporation for National and Community Service, or CNCS.

c. What are the different volunteer management, support, and retention strategies? What evidence or outcomes on volunteers support these strategies?

We scanned literature from the past eleven years (2010–present), to identify any scholarly research on volunteer management models or approaches of volunteer management practices. Our inclusion criteria are that literature be recent (2010–present) and include literature relevant to AmeriCorps, such as evaluations of AmeriCorps-funded programs that examine organization-level factors and their effects on volunteer outcomes.[3] External literature was identified using the EBSCO online library database, Google search, and the AmeriCorps Evidence Exchange as well as recommendations from practitioners.[4]

A 2018 literature review by Einolf (2018) identifies evidence-based volunteer management strategies. While we include some of the same studies in our review, our inclusion criteria typically excluded older studies (prior to 2010). However, because the literature on empirically supported strategies in volunteer recruitment was scarce, three studies predating the years set for our inclusion criteria have also been included in this review.[5] In total, our review includes theoretical and empirical work from 18 publications.

We also searched for literature on the Points of Light Service Enterprise Program (or the Service Enterprise Initiative (SEI)), a program model for volunteer engagement and management, often used by VGF grantees. In addition, we reviewed other documents that include volunteer management best practices, including Volunteer Management Training for AmeriCorps VISTA grantees on the foundations of volunteer management[6] and best practices in volunteer management, included in a national survey of nonprofits (Hager & Brudney, 2021).[7]

In the following sections, we first present the models of volunteer management that has been used in practice and research to understand how volunteer management strategies impact volunteer outcomes. We discuss volunteer management strategies as categorized into two separate categories: strategies pertaining to volunteer recruitment, and strategies pertaining to volunteer retention. Each strategy will

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[3] Literature relevant to AmeriCorps was included in this literature review because the purpose of the review is to guide an evaluation of AmeriCorps VGF grants. It is important to note that AmeriCorps service resembles volunteer activities but is distinct from volunteerism. See Maki, A., Dwyer, P. C., & Snyder, M. (2015). Understanding AmeriCorps service: Perspectives from psychological theory and research on volunteerism. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, 15*(1), 253-281.

[4] Searches were conducted using Google Scholar. A majority of article abstracts indicated that studies examined individual characteristics of volunteers and their relationships to volunteer outcomes and were thus excluded from our review. Additional resources were found on the AmeriCorps Evidence Exchange by reviewing publications in the CNCS focus area "Capacity Building." Finally, AmeriCorps provided several additional resources for this review.

[5] Searches were conducted using Google Scholar and combinations of the terms "volunteer," "AmeriCorps," and "Corporation for National and Community Service" or "CNCS" with terms such as "management," "recruitment," "retention," "support," "engagement," or "satisfaction." A majority of article abstracts indicated that studies examined individual characteristics of volunteers and their relationships to volunteer outcomes and were thus excluded from our review. Additional resources were found on the AmeriCorps Evidence Exchange by reviewing publications in the CNCS focus area "Capacity Building". Finally, AmeriCorps provided several additional resources for this review.

[6] The foundations provided in this training are adapted from Volunteer Management: All the Resources of the Community, 3rd Edition (2011) by Steve Mc Curley and Rick Lynch.

[7] The survey asked nonprofits to identify their adoption of volunteer management best practices. However, the survey did not examine the relationship of these best practices to volunteer recruitment or retention outcomes.

be presented with recent research and findings supporting researchers' claims for the effectiveness of each strategy.

Review Findings

Volunteer Management Models

Human Resources Management (HRM) Model

The HRM model of volunteer management applies classic human resource management workplace practices to the volunteer work environment (Brudney & Meijs, 2014). According to a literature review of volunteer management practices by Einolf (2018), most literature from both academic and practitioner perspectives on volunteer management models focus on this model, which treats volunteers as unpaid employees.

HRM is considered a top-down, "business-based" approach, and many of the components of the model for managing volunteers are similar to those for managing employees in a company or other organization of paid employees. The characteristic components of the HRM model include successive, functional phases of planning, recruitment, orientation, training, supervision/monitoring, recognition, and separation, and the recommended practices for volunteer management align with employee management.

This model is often discussed as having two different approaches to engaging in practices: 1) a universal, or "one-size-fits-all," approach in which practices are meant to be applied to volunteer management across diverse contexts and organizations, regardless of the type of organization, and 2) a contingency approach, in which some practices that are part of the HRM model should be applied depending on contextual factors such as the presence of paid staff and organization size.

Brudney and Meijs' (2014) review of volunteer management models determined that much of the literature on HRM models forwards a universalistic approach. Although empirical evidence is limited, the researchers argue that theoretically, contingency approaches to implementing the practices of HRM may be better for responding to the uniqueness of organizations, volunteers, and their relationships, particularly for situations in which volunteers do not perform the same or similar tasks as paid staff. These approaches focus on characteristics such as volunteer relationships with paid staff or organization goals to determine which practices might be most effective in these settings.

A quasi-experimental study of the AmeriCorps Volunteer Infrastructure Program (VIP) examined the effects of implementing volunteer management practices by analyzing differences in the volunteer management capacity of VIP and non-VIP programs (which did not implement any specific management practices) (JBS International, 2012). The VIP program model includes implementing many volunteer management practices recommended as part of HRM, including developing volunteer roles/position descriptions, developing systems for recruitment and placement, providing training and curriculum, providing supervision, developing and implementing recognition and reward systems, and clarifying and promoting the role of volunteers within the organization. Researchers examined the management capacity of VIP and non-VIP programs before and after these management practices were implemented by VIP programs. The researchers found that, compared to non-VIP programs, implementation of these volunteer management practices had a positive impact on the organizational capacity of VIP programs.

However, research on volunteers has shown that not all HRM practices are appropriate for volunteer management (Studer, 2016). In a study of the adaptation of HRM to volunteer management, Studer (2016) examined the extent to which HRM practices apply to volunteers, how unique volunteers are from paid staff, and how management can respond to this uniqueness. Studer's (2016) examination of HRM showed that several principles of the model do contribute toward effective volunteer management (e.g., a statistically significant relationship with a volunteer outcome), but that desired outcomes could be improved by focusing on aspects such as the relationship between the volunteer and the volunteer manager (e.g., through the application of psychological theories). Einolf (2018) notes that using the HRM model of volunteer management and other theoretically and empirically supported practices are not mutually exclusive, and that organizations can integrate all of these practices for effective volunteer administration.

Service Enterprise Program

The Points of Light Service Enterprise Program (or the Service Enterprise Initiative (SEI)), is a program model for organizational change and strengthening organizational capacity through strategic use of volunteers (Points of Light, n.d.). While we did not find any publicly available information on Points of Light 's website regarding their capacity building curriculum, they note that their program is evidence-based (Points of Light, n.d.). A review of the website includes several key components to SEI's model for training and implementing volunteer management best practices, as follows:[8]

- **Service Enterprises: Characteristics**. The Service Enterprise program (Points of Light, n.d.) is built on the research and work by Deloitte, TCC, and Reimagining Service.[9] Organizations operating as Services Enterprises exhibit the following characteristics:[10]
    - **Planning and development:** Develop strategies and infrastructure for mission-driven volunteer engagement.
    - **Leadership suppor**t: Demonstrate executive commitment to volunteer engagement.
    - **Resource allocation**: Allocate sufficient resources (time, money, people, tools) to volunteer engagement.
    - **Tracking and evaluation:** Track the outputs and outcomes of volunteer contributions and monitor the quality of the volunteer experience.
    - **Outreach:** Conduct outreach and volunteer recruitment to sustain ongoing volunteer engagement.
    - **Effective training:** Train volunteers and staff on their respective roles and equip them to work with each other.
    - **Onboarding and supervision:** Match volunteers to appropriate positions, clarify their roles, and orient and support them throughout their service tenure.
    - **Funding**: Raise funds to support volunteer engagement.

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[8] Due to limited access to SEI materials, this review of key components may be incomplete.

[9] https://s3.amazonaws.com/pol-website/media/reimaginingservice/u17/Researchsummary_Deloitte_2010.pdf

[10] Points of Light no longer provides the list of ten practices on their website. They do, however, provide an older list of eight practices. It is possible that the Service Enterprise Program currently uses a revised list of best practices from the one provided in this review. Massachusetts Service Alliance has included the 10 Characteristics on their website: https://www.mass-service.org/resources/service-enterprise/characteristics

- o **Technology and communication:** Implement supportive technology, invite dialogue with volunteers, and articulate volunteer contributions and impact.
- o **Partnering to extend reach:** Cultivate a mutually beneficial relationship with the community to increase engagement and reach.

AmeriCorps VISTA In-Service Training

One component of AmeriCorps VISTA training is a focus on volunteer management. The framework is adapted from McCurley and Lynch (2011)'s model of the volunteer management cycle.[11]

Volunteer Management Cycle
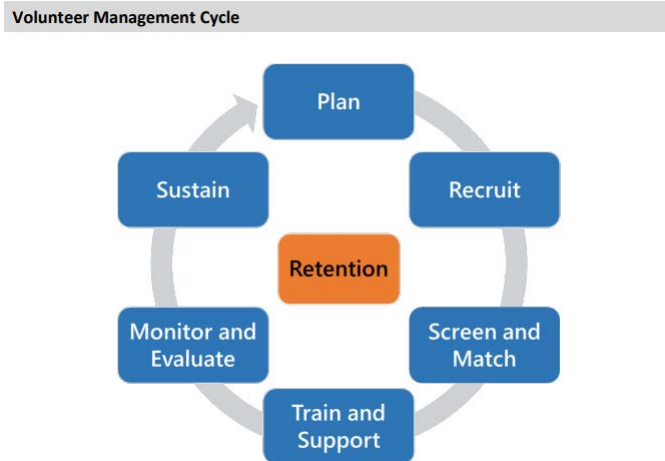
The key activities include:

- **Plan**. Research trends in the use of volunteers, identify clear volunteer needs, establish clear internal processes for how volunteers will be guided, evaluated, and recognized.
- **Recruit.** Create positions descriptions that identify qualifications, activities, benefits, time commitment and other expectations. Develop a targeted recruitment plan and market volunteer opportunities to targeted volunteers.
- **Screen and Match.** Use volunteer applications to gather information needed to place volunteers, used a standards process to determine whether volunteers are a good fit, interview volunteers and match volunteers with opportunities that fit their motivations, interest, and skills.
- **Train and Support.** Orient volunteers to organization and train volunteers on specific tasks they need to be able to perform. Ensure volunteers have ongoing guidance and support and create ways to recognized volunteer efforts. Train staff on how to effectively work with volunteers.
- **Monitor and Evaluate.** Implement record-keeping and communication to assess how things are going. Gather input on volunteer performance and outcomes and provide volunteers feedback. Implement a process for reviewing and responding to input from volunteers.
- **Sustain.** Identify ways to keep volunteers involved, secure staff or volunteer resources to continue program and revised and document processes, policies procedures, communication systems, and evaluation data.

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[11] The written training materials did not include evidence associated with each of these practices.

Best Practices in Volunteer Management

Hager and Brudney (2021) identify the following of best practices in volunteer management[12]:

- **Recruitment and Placement**
    - Matching of volunteers to appropriate tasks or jobs
    - Screening procedures to identify suitable volunteers
    - Written policies and job positions descriptions for volunteer involvement
- **Support**
    - Regular supervision of volunteers
    - Liability coverage or insurance protection for volunteers
    - Recognition activities, such as award ceremonies for volunteers
    - Training and professional development opportunities for volunteers
    - Training for paid staff in working with volunteers
- **Communication**
    - Communication of value to volunteers to volunteers
    - Regular in-person communication with volunteers
    - Communication of value of volunteers to the board of directors Regular technology-mediated communication with volunteers
    - Communication of value of volunteers to funders Communication of value of volunteers to the general public
- **Assessment**
    - Regular collection of information on volunteer numbers and hours
    - Annual measurement of the impacts volunteers have
    - Calculation and communication of organization's return on investment in volunteers
    - Regular review of volunteer experience or performance with individual volunteers

Evidence on Volunteer Management Practices

The 2018 literature review by Einolf (2018) identifies evidence-based volunteer management practices. For this external literature review, we examined those empirical articles included in Einolf (2018) and published in the past eleven years (2010–present), as well as original research published since Einolf (2018) on volunteer management practices.

Volunteer Recruitment Practices

The literature search yielded no empirical studies on the relationship between an organization's volunteer recruitment practices and an individual's actual decision to volunteer. The studies included in this review that have examined recruitment practices for volunteer organizations include presenting marketing materials for hypothetical volunteer organizations to assess whether participants would join the organization using proxy measures for recruitment. These measures include perceptions of the organization as being attractive to volunteer for and interest in volunteering for the organization. The subsequent sections list recruitment practices and the findings from studies supporting each of them.

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[12] This research focused on the adoption of these volunteer management practices across nonprofit organizations surveyed. However, this research did not look at how these practices were associated with these organizations' outcomes (e.g., volunteer recruitment and retention).

Communicate the Organization's Investment in Volunteers. A series of experiments conducted by Boezeman and Ellemers (2008) in the Netherlands demonstrated that using marketing materials to convey that an organization invests in, and cares for, its volunteers impact participants' perceptions of the volunteer organization's attractiveness. Researchers created leaflets that did or did not describe organizations that would provide support for its volunteers. Results indicated that marketing materials intended to induce participants' anticipation of respect as a volunteer led to participants' judgments that volunteering for the organization would be attractive. The researchers suggested that based on these findings, volunteer organizations may be able to effectively recruit volunteers by communicating both task-oriented and emotion-oriented support for volunteers in recruitment materials.

Match Volunteers' Motivations to Volunteer. Two studies listed in Einolf's (2018) review of volunteer management practices found that matching recruitment messages to potential volunteers' motives made them more likely to volunteer with a hypothetical organization. In the first experiment, Clary et al. (1994) assessed participants for their self-rated importance of reasons to volunteer; after these assessments were subtly scored, participants were presented with videotaped public service advertisements that either matched or didn't match what they indicated they valued in their assessment as reasons to volunteer. Participants then answered questions about the advertisement's appeal, such as how appealing, effective, influential, and good it was. Overall, participants who saw matched and mismatched messages did not differ in their perceptions of the advertisement messages themselves, but there was a positive, significant difference in the number of participants in the matched condition who said they would volunteer for the organization compared to the mismatched condition.[13]

In the second study, Clary et al. (1998) developed and tested an inventory of volunteer motivations and, through a series of studies, examined whether matching these motivations to volunteer opportunity messaging predicted participants' evaluation of the message's effectiveness to get them to volunteer with a hypothetical organization. Volunteers were more likely to say that the message was effective at motivating them to volunteer when the message matched their motivations, as measured by the inventory.

Explicitly Invite Different Populations of Interest. Another practice for recruiting volunteers involves explicitly signifying a desire to recruit from specific populations in recruitment materials. In one experiment conducted in the Netherlands, Boezeman and Ellemers (2014) tested emphasizing the need for young male volunteers at a childcare center, compared to a control condition (that did not emphasize the need for young male volunteers) on a group of young male participants.[14] Both recruitment materials noted that current staff were mostly comprised of older women; however, the experimental condition noted that young male volunteers would complement women as important role models to the children. Emphasizing this need for young men in recruiting materials caused more young male participants to perceive the hypothetical nonprofit organization as an attractive place to work and to be more inclined to indicate their interest to volunteer for the organization. The researchers argue that these findings show that potential volunteers of a different demographic (in this study, young males) are more interested in joining an organization when its recruitment messages emphasize that the

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[13] This research did not include examining actual increases in volunteers based on the advertisements.
[14] This study has not been published. Details were obtained via email with Dr. Boezeman.

demographic groups have a unique added value for the organization, and that volunteer organizations may want to consider using such messaging in recruitment materials.

Volunteer Management Practices

The research on volunteer management shows several different organization-level factors that are associated with volunteer outcomes; those factors associated with positive volunteer outcomes may promote the likelihood that volunteers remain with an organization. In the following subsections, we discuss volunteer management practices and how these practices are associated with volunteer outcomes.

While one goal of prior research on volunteerism has been to understand volunteer retention, we only identified two studies that met our inclusion criteria, focused on the impacts of organization-level factors (and not individual characteristics of volunteers), and used a longitudinal survey design to measure the relationship between an organization's management practices and participant retention (McBride & Lee, 2012; Tang et al., 2010). Many of the studies described below used proxy measures to understand retention through questions about volunteer intent to remain, volunteer intent to quit, volunteer engagement, and volunteer satisfaction.[15,16] Therefore, studies that used one or more of these variables as volunteer outcome variables of interest have been included in our evidence base of practices described below.

Match Volunteers to Roles Based on Interest. Matching volunteers to their roles based on career goals has been empirically supported as a best practice for volunteer management. In a longitudinal examination of AmeriCorps members, McBride and Lee (2012) found that members who perceived their AmeriCorps activities to be aligned with their long-term career or job interests were more likely to complete their service term. Based on these findings, the researchers suggested that organizations survey new volunteers to understand their interests at the beginning of the volunteer-organization relationship to best match volunteers with roles based on those interests.

Support Volunteers Professionally and Emotionally. Several studies on the impact of organizational support show that volunteers' perceptions of both task-oriented (i.e., concrete forms of support to assist volunteers during the performance of volunteer work) and emotion-oriented organizational support (i.e., forms of support that elicit positive feelings and are not already included among task-oriented supports) were related to positive volunteer outcomes. In an examination of volunteers' general perceptions of task-oriented and emotion-oriented organization support by a wildlife charity in the United Kingdom, Alfes et al. (2016) discovered that volunteers' perceptions of each type of support equally enhanced volunteer engagement with their voluntary work. This, in turn, was positively correlated with volunteers' happiness and perceived social worth (or how one sees oneself as valued in interpersonal relationships) and negatively correlated with volunteers' intent to leave.

Clearly Define Volunteers' Roles. One practice for volunteer management is to clearly define volunteers' roles. A study by Allen and Mueller (2013) investigated how feelings of burnout by volunteers at an animal shelter can help explain volunteers' intention to quit. Role ambiguity, which was

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[15] Einolf (2018) provides a brief review of correlations among several of these variables, including the correlation between satisfaction and intent to remain.

[16] An evaluation of the AmeriCorps Foster Grandparent and Senior Companion Programs showed that dissatisfaction drives members to leave programs.

used as one of the antecedents to burnout, was found to be related to feelings of burnout and increased endorsement of intentions to quit. Based on these findings, the researchers suggest using practices such as forming written guidelines formally outlining volunteers' roles to decrease the likelihood that volunteers will feel burnout and therefore want to quit.

Train Volunteers and Provide Learning Opportunities. Another practice for volunteer management is providing orientation and training for volunteers, which not only prepares volunteers for their role but has been correlated with volunteers' sense of belonging in volunteer organizations. In a longitudinal examination of older adult volunteers at 14 programs, Tang et al. (2010) discovered that those volunteers who felt they had adequate training and support from their organization were more likely to stay. In another study conducted by Huynh et al. (2012) in Australia, volunteer access to training provided by the organization related to volunteers' feelings of connectedness, defined as a positive emotional sense of wellbeing that results from a strong sense of belonging with other workers and the recipients of one's service, which correlated with positive volunteer outcomes including volunteer satisfaction and determination to continue. And yet in another study by Newton et al. (2014) of more than two thousand volunteers from five non-profit organizations in Australia showed that volunteer perceptions of learning and development opportunities are significantly related to organizational commitment (feeling a strong sense of belonging to an organization) and an intention to stay in the organization.

Encourage Volunteers to Voice their Opinions. Research has also shown that volunteers who perceive that they can provide input into volunteer decision-making processes is associated with positive volunteer outcomes. Allen and Mueller's (2013) study of volunteers at an animal shelter showed how a lack of voice, or the lack of ability to provide input in decision-making processes is associated with greater feelings of burnout (through depleting volunteers' cognitive and emotional resources); burnout was associated with an increased likelihood to endorse an intention to quit volunteering. According to the researchers, an implication of these findings is that volunteer organizations that promote ways for volunteers to voice their opinions to leadership may promote retention and mitigate any intentions of quitting.

Promote Volunteer Autonomy within the Organization. Some studies have found that volunteer autonomy and decision-making are related to volunteer service completion and retention. In the longitudinal examination of AmeriCorps members conducted by McBride and Lee (2012), researchers found that members who are highly involved in planning volunteer service activities were more likely to complete their service term. In a recent survey of volunteers in China by Cho et al. (2020), volunteer perceptions of empowerment (ability to engage in leadership opportunities) and schedule flexibility (ability to be flexible with volunteering hours) both related positively to volunteer satisfaction and intent to continue volunteering. Another survey of active volunteers with a large volunteer connector organization by Dwyer et al. (2013) found that volunteers were more satisfied when their volunteer team leaders involved them in decisions, although this was not linked to volunteer retention measures. These studies show that for volunteers, decision-making correlates to measures of retention and that volunteer management practices that promote volunteer autonomy could promote volunteer retention.

Strengthen Volunteer Relationships with Others in the Organization. Research has shown a positive correlation between volunteer relationships with their peers, mentors, and supervisors, and other positive volunteer outcomes (e.g., intent to remain, satisfaction). In a study by Garner and Garner

(2011), volunteers' self-reported satisfaction with integration into the organization, or how happy volunteers were with the relationships they formed as a result of their volunteer work, was positively related to their intention to remain. In the longitudinal examination of AmeriCorps members by McBride and Lee (2012), researchers found that members who developed a relationship with a mentor were more likely to complete their service term. In the study by Huynh et al. (2012), volunteers' access to social support related to volunteers' feelings of connectedness, which was also correlated with positive volunteer outcomes including volunteer satisfaction and determination to continue. Another study by Nencini et al. (2016) of volunteers at four different non-profit organizations in Italy showed that relational bonds created with other volunteers in an organization have an important role in sustaining motivation and volunteer retention. Therefore, to improve the retention rate of volunteers, the researchers across these studies have suggested that organizations promote activities that reinforce bonds among volunteers and between volunteers and management.

Provide Volunteers with Feedback and Recognition. Research shows that volunteers who perceive that their organizations provide them with feedback and show them appreciation are more likely to endorse an intent to continue volunteering with an organization. In the study by Cho et al. (2020) of street parade volunteers, volunteers' responses to survey items showed that rewards and recognition positively and significantly related to volunteer satisfaction and intent to continue volunteering. In the study by Huynh et al. (2012), volunteers who receive performance feedback were associated with a greater sense of connection to the organization; connection to the organization was associated with volunteer satisfaction and determination to continue volunteering. Huynh et al. (2012) argue that volunteer managers should support individual volunteers through co-volunteer and supervisor support in order to promote connectedness in the workplace, which may then lead to positive volunteer outcomes.

Conclusion

While there is scholarly literature that supports specific volunteer recruitment and management practices, we identified very few research or evaluation studies that are randomized controlled trials or have a quasi-experimental design. Additionally, we were only able to identify a limited number of evaluation studies of AmeriCorps programs that include different recruitment and management practices. Nevertheless, volunteer management practices such as matching volunteers to roles based on interest, supporting volunteers, and providing training opportunities are positively associated with retention and other positive volunteer outcomes (e.g., volunteers' happiness).

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