



Monitoring the Experiences of OST Volunteers

The Mixed-Method, Open-Ended Volunteer Experiences (MOVE)

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In many applied youth development settings, including out-of-school time (OST) programs, volunteers play essential roles (Brennan, 2005). In some, volunteers are integral to service delivery — for example, serving as mentors. In others, volunteers help link youth-serving organizations or their participants with needed resources, assets, or opportunities (Brennan, 2007).

Interacting with volunteers can promote a variety of strengths and assets among youth (Durlak et al., 2010; Mahoney et al., 2010). The relationship between a young person and a caring adult may be key among these. Youth involved in safe and supportive relationships with adult mentors are more likely than others to develop traits that foster successful

development, including independence, resilience, and adaptability (Herrera et al., 2011).

Research about the experiences of volunteers in OST and other youth-serving settings is limited. However, research in other settings provides important insights. One is that organizations that undertake careful, intentional, data-informed volunteer management are more likely to experience full, positive contributions from volunteers

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(Brennan, 2007; Smith, 2016; Wilson et al., 2016). Poor volunteer management and limited recognition lead to high volunteer dropout. Across settings, over a third of volunteers donate their time for a year or less (Eisner et al., 2009). Although poor volunteer management can have adverse effects, volunteering under well-managed conditions can foster a wide array of benefits to the volunteers themselves (Wilson et al., 2016). Furthermore, quality volunteer management is a crucial component of volunteer retention (Brennan, 2007; Eisner et al., 2009).

In order to support youth-serving organizations' efforts to engage volunteers sustainably, we developed and tested the Mixed-Method, Open-Ended Volunteer Experiences (MOVE) Assessment, a two-phase approach to identifying and monitoring the benefits volunteers associate with their service in OST programs. Building on traditional sequential exploratory mixed-method designs (Creswell et al., 2003), MOVE begins by qualitatively exploring and documenting volunteer experiences. Findings then guide design and implementation of a recurring quantitative assessment that can become the foundation for continuous improvement in volunteer management. This paper introduces MOVE by describing its application in ANYTOWN, an OST program sponsored by Community Tampa Bay that focuses on promoting inclusiveness, community involvement, and social responsibility among high school students.

The Program: ANYTOWN

ANYTOWN is a week-long residential program that is offered several times during a typical summer. During the program, high-school-age participants are assigned to dorms and small discussion groups that expose them to participants whose race, ethnicity, faith, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, sex, ability, age, or nationality differ from their own (Acevedo-Polakovich et al., 2016). They participate in large-group workshops that discuss systems of injustice, including sexism, racism, heterosexism, and systemic oppression, and that outline the foundations of community action. They then discuss the personal relevance of these workshops in small groups (Acevedo-Polakovich et al., 2016).

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Most of the individuals who facilitate ANYTOWN are trained volunteers; they range in age from 16 to over 70. All volunteers under age 18 must have previously participated in the program. New volunteers are required to attend two volunteer training workshops. The first workshop is for new volunteers only, and the second is for both new and returning volunteers. Both workshops focus on key volunteer competencies. After an overview of volunteer responsibilities, the workshops cover core concepts, facilitation skills, participant engagement, physical and emotional safety for youth, and mandatory reporting. In addition to these workshops, volunteers attend a social networking event before they serve. During ANYTOWN's implementation, all volunteers serve for the whole week. Immediately after the program ends, they participate in a debriefing session. They then have access to several professional development opportunities including additional training, service on the organization's board, and participation in community-building and networking events.

Like many other OST programs, ANYTOWN has a long history of systematically evaluating its effects on participants (e.g., Acevedo-Polakovich et al., 2016), but it has given little attention to formally exploring the experiences of volunteers. Its administrators therefore asked their university-affiliated evaluators to collaborate on developing an approach to documenting the experience of volunteers. This request led to our joint development of the MOVE assessment, a two-phase mixed-method approach where we first explored volunteers' experiences using qualitative methods and then tested the insights we gained using a quantitative approach. We designed the MOVE assessment to be an open-source tool that any OST program can use.

MOVE Phase 1: Exploring Volunteer Experiences

Phase 1, conducted in summer 2018, was a qualitative assessment of the experience of ANYTOWN volunteers.

Participants

Twenty-seven volunteers who served in at least one implementation of ANYTOWN in both summer 2017 and summer 2018 provided the data for Phase 1. The demographic information we obtained from these

volunteers could not be linked to their questionnaire answers. Of the 27 volunteers, 62 percent identified as cisgender women, 35 percent as cisgender men, 1 percent as transgender men, and 1 percent as transgender women. Ethnic identifications were 41 percent European American, 26 percent African American, 16 percent Latinx, 11 percent multiethnic, and 3 percent Asian American. The demographic background of these volunteers does not differ notably from that of volunteers in other programming years for which we have information. Put simply, this group seems to be a good representation of typical ANYTOWN volunteers.

Methods

Volunteers were asked to answer a questionnaire, created by ANYTOWN staff, comprising 12 open-ended questions and three multiple-choice questions. Some questions focused on volunteers' perceptions of their experience, for example, "Overall, how would you describe your ANYTOWN experience as a volunteer?" Others asked about respondents' interest in continued service to the program in, for example, year-round follow-up programs or future residential sessions.

Participants completed the questionnaire after their volunteer stint at the OST program. We analyzed the open-ended responses using Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) four-step qualitative content analysis method: We first identified meaning units, which we then compared and grouped into tentative subcategories. After reorganizing subcategories based on observed patterns, we established the final set of analytical categories.

Phase 1 Results

We identified three analytical categories in volunteers' responses:

- Personal growth
- Specific skills
- Professional development

The *personal growth* category included descriptions of *self-improvement or personal insight* from the volunteer experience. For example, one respondent

said that volunteering "pushed me to be more aware of my strengths alongside my areas for continued growth. It challenged me to be not just a better youth mentor and workshop facilitator, but also a better person." Another theme was *critical transformation*: "My experience was life-changing. I was not expecting to love the program and the people as much as I did. It was very eye-opening." The personal growth category also included *emotional benefits*; for example, one respondent wrote, "It was very rewarding as well as emotional. I learned quite a bit especially about myself that I can use going forward." Some respondents observed development of *cross-cultural empathy*: "It just helped me understand others more, especially when it comes to stereotypes and how people feel about them."

The *specific skills* category included volunteers' descriptions of increased abilities in three areas. Growth in *leadership* skills is represented by this response: "ANYTOWN offered numerous platforms and opportunities for me to develop my facilitation, planning, and public speaking skills." A second area was *communication* skills, for example, "I've learned about dialogue, inclusive language, and truly how to live a different life." The third area, *cultural responsiveness*, is exemplified in this volunteer response: "I believe that ANYTOWN has provided me with the skills and tools to bridge conversations that may be a little heated. I think it's given me a new understanding and appreciation for diversity."

The *professional development* category primarily included volunteers' descriptions of enhanced opportunities and skills associated with work-related networking. For example, one participant stated, "I can now connect with others better and more efficiently."

With relatively little resource expenditure, Phase 1 provided important insights into the experiences of volunteers. Understanding these experiences is a key first step in effective volunteer management and recognition, which in turn are crucial components of volunteer retention and, ultimately, of the success of volunteer involvement (Brennan, 2007; Eisner et al., 2009). Moreover, using the volunteers' perspectives and insights to guide the design of subsequent evaluation

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was consistent with the values of the OST program, which emphasize engagement and full participation.

MOVE Phase 2: Assessing Volunteer Change

The next step was to establish a quantitative approach to evaluating volunteer experiences over time so we could assess the effects of changes in volunteer management strategies. After ANYTOWN staff and the university-based evaluators discussed Phase 1 results, we collaborated on quantitative measures of the three key categories of volunteer experiences: personal growth, specific skills, and professional development. The university evaluators identified or developed potentially relevant measures and then presented them to the OST staff, who assessed their suitability. After reaching consensus on the measures that were most likely to be useful in assessing volunteer experiences, we administered these measures in Phase 2.

Participants

Fourteen volunteers who served in summer 2019, the year after Phase 1, provided the data for Phase 2. Table 1 summarizes participants' responses to open-ended demographic questions.

Methods

ANYTOWN staff asked volunteers to complete pre-test measures after a volunteer training session but before volunteering. The post-test was administered after volunteers completed their stint at ANYTOWN. We conducted a paired-samples *t*-test to compare differences in scores for pre- and post-test measures and calculated descriptive statistics for post-test measures.

Personal Growth

We selected four measures to assess participants' perceived personal growth resulting from volunteering, using the four categories from the Phase 1 results.

At post-test only, we asked volunteers to use a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," to respond to six items assessing the amount of *self-improvement or personal insight* they experienced as a result of volunteering in the OST program. For example, one item was "I gained new insights about my life." We developed these face-valid items specifically for this assessment.

To measure *critical transformation*, at both pre- and post-test volunteers used the five-point Likert scale to respond to the critical agency subscale of the Measure of Adolescent Critical Consciousness (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2015). The seven items ask participants to rate their belief in their ability and responsibility to contribute to their community and pursue justice, for example, "I can make a difference in my community."

For *emotional benefits*, we asked volunteers at post-test only to use the five-point Likert scale to respond to four items we

Table 1. Phase 2 Participant Demographic Characteristics

| Characteristic | Number (N = 14) | Percentage* |
|---|-----------------|-------------|
| Gender | | |
| Women | 9 | 64% |
| Men | 5 | 36% |
| Other/not reported | 0 | 0% |
| Race | | |
| Multiracial | 4 | 29% |
| European American | 3 | 21% |
| U.S. Latinx | 2 | 14% |
| African American/Black | 2 | 14% |
| Middle Eastern | 2 | 14% |
| Asian American/Pacific Islander | 1 | 7% |
| Highest level of education completed | | |
| High school diploma | 6 | 43% |
| Bachelor's degree | 5 | 36% |
| Master's degree | 2 | 14% |
| Doctoral degree | 1 | 7% |
| Sexual orientation | | |
| Heterosexual | 6 | 43% |
| Other/no answer | 4 | 29% |
| Queer | 2 | 14% |
| Bisexual | 1 | 7% |

* Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

developed about the emotional benefits of volunteering, for example, “I am better able to express my emotions.”

At both pre-test and post-test, participants used the five-point Likert scale to respond to the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (Wang et al., 2003). The seven items ask participants to assess their *cross-cultural empathy*, for example, “I know what it feels like to be the only person of a certain race or ethnicity in a group of people.”

Specific Skills

We selected four measures to use at both pre-test and post-test to assess the effect of volunteering on participants’ skills, using the three categories that emerged in Phase 1.

To assess *leadership* skills, we asked volunteers to use a five-point Likert scale to respond the Sociopolitical Control Scale for Youth (Peterson et al., 2011). The eight items on this scale ask participants to rate statements about their leadership competence, such as, “I can usually organize people to get things done.”

We chose two measures to assess change in participants’ *communication* skills: the eight-item perspective-taking subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983) and the four-item Comfort in Communicating Across Differences scale (Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003). The first asks participants to rate their ability to adopt the perspective of others, for example, “I sometimes find it difficult to see the point from another person’s view.” The second asks participants to rate their ability to communicate across differences, using such statements as “I am able to express myself when discussing controversial issues.”

To assess *cultural responsiveness*, we used the Short Form Measure of Cultural Intelligence (Thomas et al., 2015). The 10 items on this measure ask participants to assess their knowledge of, and responsiveness to, their own culture and the cultures

of others. For example, one item says, “I can change my behavior to suit different cultural situations and people.”

Professional Development

We developed three Likert-scale items to assess the networking opportunities respondents encountered while volunteering at ANYTOWN. For example, one item was, “I built relationships that can be useful in my professional life.” We also asked one open-ended question: “I met ____ people who I can connect with for professional development.” This measure was used only at post-test.

Phase 2 Results

The results of the measures of volunteers’ personal growth, specific skills, and professional development are summarized in Table 2, which notes statistically significant differences between pre-test and post-test average scores.

Personal Growth

Average responses to the two personal growth categories measured only at post-test suggest that volunteers believed that their service facilitated their self-improvement or personal insight and brought them emotional benefits. For the two categories measured at both pre-test and post-test, we observed a trend toward

Table 2. Phase 2 Quantitative Results

| Category | Pre-Test Mean | Post-Test Mean |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Personal growth | | |
| Self-improvement or personal insight | – | 4.61 |
| Critical transformation | 4.90 | 4.97 ⁺ |
| Emotional benefit | – | 4.20 |
| Cross-cultural empathy | 4.24 | 4.30 |
| Specific skills | | |
| Leadership | 3.90 | 3.97 |
| Communication perspective taking | 4.25 | 4.41 [*] |
| Communication across differences | 4.32 | 4.55 ⁺ |
| Cultural responsiveness | 4.44 | 4.56 ⁺ |
| Professional development | | |
| Networking opportunities | – | 4.34 |
| Number of connections made | – | 10.21 |

N = 14

⁺ p < .10, ^{*} p < .05 in t-test results. A lower p-value indicates greater statistical significance.

a statistically significant increase in average responses on critical transformation but no significant increase in the average score in cross-cultural empathy.

Specific Skills

Average responses increased significantly between pre-test and post-test for perspective taking, one of the two measures of communication skills. Differences between pre-test and post-test scores in two other areas trended toward significance: comfort in communicating across differences and cultural intelligence. Average responses on the leadership measure did not significantly increase from pre-test to post-test.

Professional Development

Average post-test responses on the professional development measure suggest that volunteers agreed that their service provided networking opportunities. They reported meeting an average of 10.21 people with whom they could connect for professional development.

Discussion

The Phase 2 quasi-experimental quantitative design aimed to advance our understanding of volunteer experiences and establish an approach to tracking these experiences over time. With limited exceptions, results confirmed the insights that emerged from Phase 1. Volunteers reported experiencing personal growth, developing specific skills, and having professional networking opportunities.

Measures of cross-cultural empathy and of leadership skills did not increase significantly from pre-test to post-test. One possible explanation is selection bias: ANYTOWN volunteers are selected based on their experience and ability. Evidence for this explanation includes the fact that the volunteers' scores on these and other measures started high at pre-test. Also, average scores on all measures increased from pre-test to post-test, though some increases were not significant. Another possibility is that the measures we selected were not the best ones to assess the constructs of interest.

Limitations

The MOVE assessment as applied in our study has its limitations. For one, the assessment provided information on the effects of volunteering but could not identify what drove these effects. That said, ongoing implementation of MOVE pre- and post- participation measurement with future volunteer cohorts would allow practitioners and evaluators to observe whether changes in volunteer management are associated with changes in volunteering outcomes.

Another limitation has to do with possible bias in the use of post-test-only measures. In the ANYTOWN assessment, we administered three of the quantitative scales only after volunteers had completed their service. Volunteers' perceptions after service can be subject to bias. For instance, if volunteers enjoyed their experience, they may be more likely to report that they experienced specific impacts even when they did not. To counter this bias, practitioners who use the MOVE assessment can use measures that

can assess change both before and after volunteering, as we did with other scales in Phase 2 testing.

Another limitation is associated with the small number of volunteers we assessed in Phase 2. When using traditional parametric statistics to compare changes in some outcome over time, small participant numbers decrease the likelihood of identifying changes, especially small ones. Our sample size may have been too small to enable us to detect changes that took place among volunteers. Ideally, future applications of the MOVE assessment quantitative phase would involve larger samples with greater statistical power. Alternatively, evaluators may wish to consider the use of nonparametric statistics, which can, in some cases, assess change in smaller samples. This solution may be preferable in organizations like ANYTOWN whose typical volunteer numbers result in underpowered samples.

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For a free guide on implementing MOVE in your program, contact Ignacio D. Acevedo-Polakovich at idad@msu.edu.

Improving the Volunteer Experience

Results of the two-phase MOVE assessment have helped ANYTOWN program administrators manage volunteer training and support to target the experiences volunteers find useful. For instance, volunteer management and support that once focused solely on supporting volunteers' work with youth now also highlight opportunities for volunteers to network and connect with each other.

Although our findings are specific to ANYTOWN, the MOVE assessment can be helpful to other OST programs who wish to better understand and support their volunteers. We designed the MOVE assessment to be replicated in other OST settings. Phase 1 of MOVE, in particular, is readily replicable with the resources available in many OST settings. We did leverage resources available to our university-affiliated evaluators to conduct formal qualitative analyses. However, OST practitioners without university support can use other less formal—yet still rigorous—qualitative methods. For example, Stacy and colleagues (2018) have described Youth Generate and Organize (Youth GO), a structured participatory process that engages participants in data collection and analysis. This process, which can be implemented with the resources available in most OST programs, can be adapted to document volunteers' perspectives on their experiences.

MOVE's quantitative Phase 2 may be more accessible to OST programs that have internal or external evaluation capacity. Programs that are developing this capacity have many tools at their disposal. For example, OST practitioners can use such online tools as QuestionPro or SurveyLegend to develop their own pre- and post-test surveys of volunteer experiences. Then they can use the data they collect to improve the quality of the volunteer experience.

One caution for practitioners and evaluators who might want to adopt MOVE is to avoid watering down the process. The demands of running OST programs can lead staff to modify evaluation strategies in ways that compromise their utility. For MOVE to render useful results, program staff must understand how its strategies are tied to the utility of the findings, which in turn is tied to program improvement—in this case, better experiences for volunteers.

Despite the fact that volunteers are crucial to the success of many OST programs, little research or evaluation has examined their experiences. Monitoring the experiences of volunteers using MOVE or a process

like it is a key first step in empowering their success with the program and their impact on participants. Programs that understand the experiences of their volunteers can use this understanding to improve their volunteer management, which can in turn significantly improve the experiences of participating youth.

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