Volunteer Program Assessment: Engaging Students in their Communities through Service

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## What is Volunteer Program Assessment?

Volunteers provide organizations with additional manpower to offer more services without additional cost to the organization (Brudney & Kellough, 2000). In 2012 alone, volunteers contributed 15.2 billion hours of work and saved $296.2 billion to nonprofits (Blackwood, Roeger, & Pettijohn, 2012).

Nevertheless, volunteering is at the lowest rate since 2002 and continues to decline (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Volunteer attrition across the United States averages 34 percent (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2013). Volunteers are a valuable resource and recognizing the need to retain volunteers may not be enough. Nonprofit organizations must assess the experiences of volunteers in order to ultimately improve volunteer satisfaction, performance and retention. Gaining insight from volunteers enables nonprofit organizations to use data driven business intelligence to better serve their volunteers and clients by targeting the most effective improvement initiatives.

Volunteer Program Assessment (VPA-UNO) is a nonprofit outreach initiative at the University of Nebraska at Omaha developed to provide nonprofits with capacity building insights into volunteers' experiences within their organizations. Faculty sponsored and led, graduate and undergraduate students volunteer their time to engage in the VPA assessment process thereby learning the consulting processes that build nonprofit volunteer program capacity and effectiveness. VPA-UNO uses surveys completed by volunteers in nonprofit organizations to examine a variety of individual and organizational outcomes including organizational commitment, perception of voice, burnout, satisfaction with colleagues and paid staff, and turnover intentions. Using the results of the survey, student analysts develop comprehensive diagnostic reports, prepare interpretations of these reports, and meeting with leaders from the nonprofit organizations to provide consultation and guidance for improving volunteer experiences and building volunteer program capacity.

If these services were provided at market value, organizations might pay as much as $15,000 for the survey alone, excluding interpretation and consultation; however, VPA-UNO provides these services completely free of charge as a community service and because of the educational benefit to students.
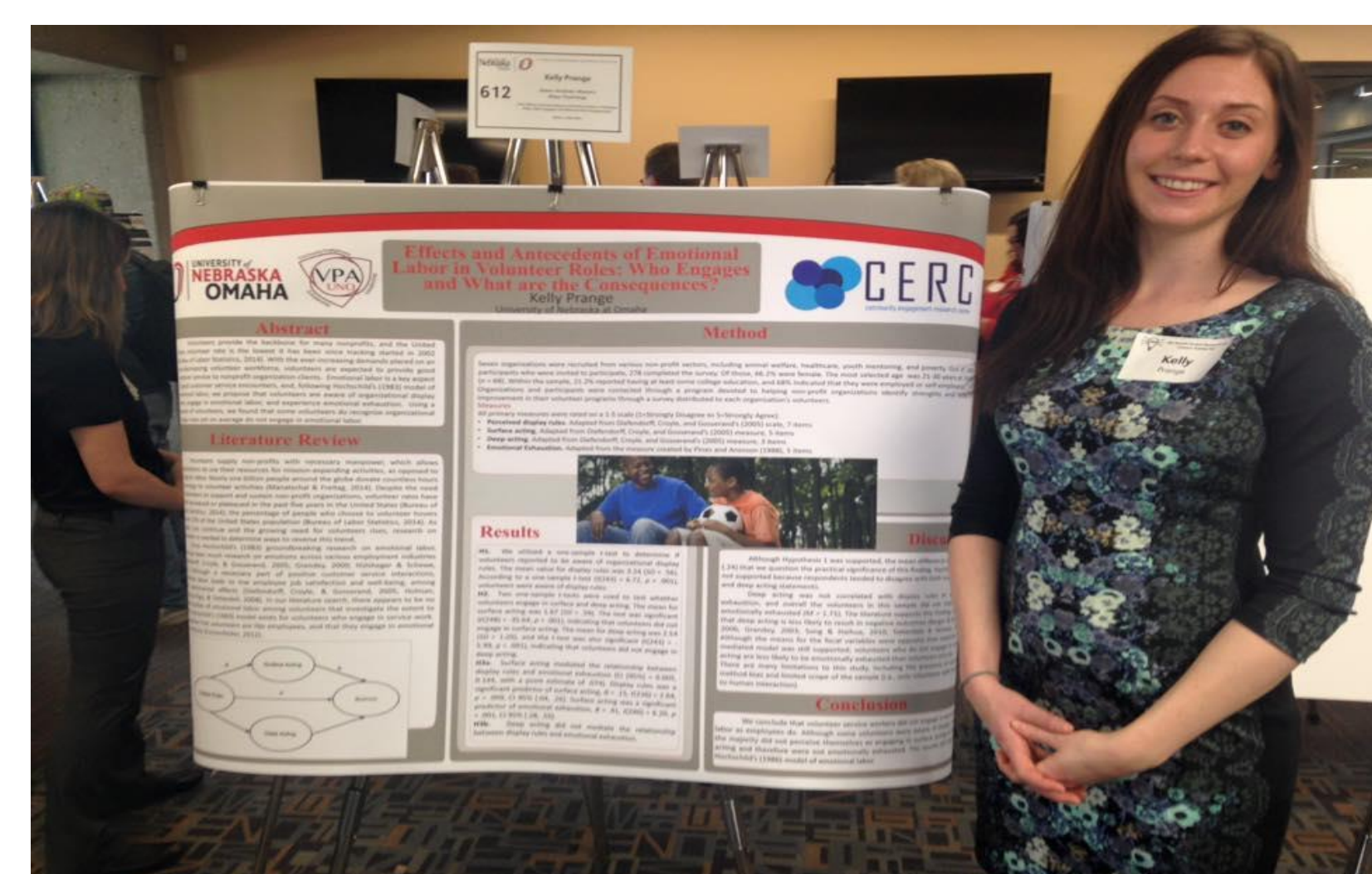
Student & Community Engagement

Although there are many opportunities for students to volunteer on college campuses, fewer opportunities exist that allow students to integrate knowledge learned in the classroom into their volunteer experiences. One opportunity connecting college students with nonprofit organizations in the community is Volunteer Program Assessment. The Volunteer Program Assessment at UNO (VPA-UNO) is an innovative, cutting-edge, and completely free feedback and assessment system designed to enhance nonprofit organizational effectiveness. The program, led by a faculty director, utilizes graduate and undergraduate student analysts who volunteer their time to administer and facilitate the VPA survey to organizations with volunteers throughout the United States. Fostering ties between students and the community is beneficial for both student analysts, who receive positive outcomes through their volunteer work, and for the nonprofits they serve.

On average, student analysts volunteer three hours per week. Although VPA-UNO represents a unique opportunity for students to obtain applied consulting experience, they also receive a variety of other benefits from engaging in service. Studies show that students who volunteer display greater self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem than those who do not (Primavera, 1999). Other practical outcomes for students have included presentations at local and national conferences, progress toward theses, and the fulfillment of practicum requirements. Experiences gained through VPA-UNO have aided alumni in securing employment, pursuing graduate education, and affirming their commitment to serve others.

Over the past three years, students and faculty in VPA-UNO have been able to provide over 80 nonprofit organizations with feedback from their volunteers, structured reports highlighting strengths and growth areas from the survey, and recommendations for improvement based upon best practices in the literature. This allows nonprofits to better target their efforts to improve programming, and provides a mechanism through which nonprofits can engage and invest in their volunteers, subsequently increasing their capacity to serve target populations.

Impact

- **Increased Volunteer Program Capacity of Partner Organizations**
  Of the 35 organizations served by VPA in the last program year, 24 were follow-up assessments. Of the follow-up assessments, positive feedback regarding program capacity since the previous year was received from volunteer managers.

- **Enhanced Satisfaction and Retention of Volunteers at Partner Organizations**
  Year over year comparisons show that the majority of programs showed improvements in one or more of the following areas: (a) volunteer engagement, (b) organizational commitment, (c) volunteer intentions to quit, (d) satisfaction with volunteer manager, (e) satisfaction with volunteer work, (f) satisfaction with volunteer colleagues, (g) volunteer burnout, (h) constraints, (i) competence, (j) perception of recognition, (k) perception of voice, (l) satisfaction with communication, or (m) satisfaction with contribution.

- **Development of Community-Engaged Student Leaders**
  Eleven students have chosen to focus heavily on research topics centering around volunteerism, nonprofit organizations, or community engagement, resulting in 29 research projects presented at local, regional, and national conferences since VPA-UNO was founded in 2013. Additionally, VPA alumni have been accepted into competitive graduate programs and several have gone on to seek employment in the nonprofit sector.