Research Project Prospectus

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Professor

Dr. Ken Schmidt

[Instructions from the course Syllabus]

***Assignment 1: Exercise Submission PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION***

Write and submit to Dial in one document the following using the headings as listed, and using the prompt provided:

1. Problem and Purpose Statements (2 paragraphs) The problem is...  The purpose of this action research project is to address the problem of...  *Note: This section should be approximately 1 paragraph for each prompt. Start each paragraph with the prompt, then explain in more detail.*
2. Significance of the Problem The problem is significant because...  *Note: Start with the prompt provided, then explain in detail why the problem is significant. This should be 1 page in length.*
3. Research Question How does (intervention) affect (problem) in a (site/ organization/ community)?
4. Professional Relevance (1-2 pages) This problem is relevant to my professional context because...  Note: The prompt should be followed by a detailed explanation of why, how, when, where, and whom this problem affects.  Structure (Assignment evaluation includes the following structure below).

Download the “OGS APA Course Assignments Template 7th Ed 2021” template from the **General Helps** folder in the AA-101 The Gathering Place Course on DIAL. Using the template create the following pages.

Copy and paste the assignment instructions from the syllabus starting on a new page after the title page, adhering to APA 7th edition style (APA 7 Workshop, Formatting, and Style Guide, APA 7 Quick Guide).

Start the assignment on a new page after the copied assignment instructions.

Document all sources in APA style, 7th edition ( APA 7 Reference Example,  APA 7 Quick Guide)

1. Submit through **DIAL** to the professor.

**Introduction**

The health of an entire community depends on its volunteers. While the COVID-19 pandemic may not be fully to blame for reduced volunteerism, community volunteer recruitment efforts face challenges in a post-pandemic world because individuals are hesitant to participate in-person, and organizations fear risk in utilizing volunteers despite the great need and benefits to all. In this paper, I attempt to answer the following research questions: How can the perception of community volunteering be changed in order to increase the number of an organization’s volunteers? What role do nonprofit leaders play in retaining and recruiting community volunteers? In order to answer these research questions, I must explore why people volunteer and also why they leave or stay.

 In the post-pandemic era, it is essential for 100% volunteer-based organizations to adapt their volunteer recruitment and retention strategies in order to accommodate volunteers from the community. The public health lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically reduced community volunteer participation––particularly that of older volunteers. In order to encourage greater volunteer participation organizations must make modifications to their protocols in order to accommodate vulnerable, but otherwise willing, volunteers.

**Background**

As a candidate pursuing an action research project, I will narrow my focus of study to an organization in which I have direct access for participatory research: the Bear Valley Community Hospital Foundation––a small, all-volunteer nonprofit organization whose sole purpose and mission are to raise funds for the hospital. The scope of this project is twofold:

1) To review and evaluate the current scholarly literature addressing this topic, interpreting and weighing these strategies to ascertain which of them best align with our organization’s volunteers’ needs for social connectivity and sense of purpose.

2) To conduct an internal action research project within the Hospital Foundation, utilizing qualitative measuring instruments and evaluative strategies to measure data. An action research “cycle” will be implemented using the qualitative instrument. Data that fall short of desired goals will be reflected upon, and a revised assessment tool will be created with the intention of improving outcomes. A new cycle will then be implemented and evaluated. A total of two cycles are planned.

**Problem and Purpose Statements**

 The problem is a post-pandemic reduction in volunteerism in our Hospital Foundation.

 While the COVID-19 pandemic may not be fully to blame for reduced volunteerism, community volunteer recruitment efforts face challenges in a post-pandemic world. During the present *post*-pandemic era, our local hospital’s most dramatic public health crisis has subsided despite continued shortages. Yet the Foundation’s volunteer membership has not recovered. In order to continue helping our hospital with unfulfilled equipment needs, it is essential for membership numbers to increase. The purpose of this action research project is to address the problem of post-pandemic reduced volunteerism in our Hospital Foundation.

**Significance of the Problem**

The problem is significant because individuals are hesitant to participate in-person, and organizations are hesitant to utilize volunteers despite the need and benefits.
 As Vice President of the Foundation, I am taking it upon myself to analyze effective ways to retain volunteers, encourage former members to return, and hopefully grow our membership base as well. Based on the findings of this preliminary research, I will document the effectiveness of adaptive efforts made by the leadership of our 100% volunteer organization to recruit new members from the community in a post-pandemic era of lingering uncertain duration. Reviews of the scholarly literature serve as explorations of how other organizations have addressed their pandemic-related volunteer shortages.

 Community volunteer recruitment efforts face challenges in a post-pandemic world because vulnerable individuals––particularly older adults––have become hesitant to participate in-person, and organizations have become hesitant to utilize volunteers despite the need and benefits to all (Colibaba et al., 2022, p. 5). Community volunteers rely on nonprofit leaders to insure their safety while providing opportunities for meaningful engagement. One psychological factor that provides meaning to volunteers is “the sense of ownership one holds toward the organization” (Ainsworth, 2020, p. 2). With the feeling of ownership, one is less likely to abandon that which they own. While, as Ainsworth asserts, “the sense of ownership may be generated by those involved in volunteering” (p. 3), I maintain that the psychological perception of volunteers’ ownership must first be cultivated and overtly encouraged by a nonprofit organization’s *leadership*.

**Research Question**

How does adaptation to volunteers’ concerns affect retention in a volunteer organization?

 In the midst of the pandemic, nonprofit leaders who successfully retained volunteers did so by fostering a sense of psychological identity (Wakefield, et al., 2022, p. 909). Wakefield’s research demonstrated that a community’s perception of volunteering can be enhanced by those leaders who promote volunteer safety and identity. Leaders who failed to cultivate a culture of safety and identity risk diminished community perception of volunteering, thereby limiting their ability to retain and recruit volunteers (Wakefield, p. 917). Nonprofit leaders must embrace both safety and identity in order to successfully retain and recruit community volunteers in this post-pandemic era.

**Professional Relevance**

This problem is relevant to my professional context because our Hospital Foundation is comprised of 100% community volunteers. Our organization not only requires a member base to carry out its mission; the volunteers themselves need to feel a connectedness to our community––especially during these more socially isolated times. Bilan (2019) argues that, “…volunteer uncertainty is also related to the lack of social connections within the organization, most often with other volunteers, and is defined as volunteer isolation” (p. 14). Social connection was disrupted (and often severed completely) during the height of the pandemic, and the connection remains weak in the post-pandemic era.

 Contextually, in the case of our Hospital Foundation this disconnection resulted in the attrition of our volunteer base – 85% of whom never returned. Therefore, I have taken careful note of Bilan’s statement that “the sense of satisfaction gained from previous volunteering experiences could serve as a motive for future voluntary activities and contribute to the intention to participate in future voluntary work” (p.4).

 Yet motivation is only one piece of the puzzle for our Hospital Foundation. Prior to the pandemic, our active member base was already small (18 members). Of that pool, 5 of us were unpaid board directors. As Jackson et al., (2019) observed, inadequate staff plays a role in the failure to attract and retain volunteer members (p. 25).

 On the recruitment side, nonprofit leaders have successfully recruited new members by finding them *where they already are* instead of sitting back and hoping to be found. Arka et al., (2022) found that “Most volunteers dedicate their efforts to work that is related to their personal interests and hobbies such as sports, or cultural activities” (p. 2). Relating this to the Hospital Foundation, our community has seven service clubs, a historical society, three gyms, and a senior center. All of these entities are potential sources of new volunteers. In order to find those volunteers, our Foundation’s leaders must pursue them. Service clubs represent successful community volunteer management. Kalinka (2020) writes about Rotary International, whose motto is “Service Above Self” (p. 2). Utilizing the *Servant-Leadership Model*, Kalinka explains that, “Servant leaders dispense with positional authority and rely upon the power of persuasion. They seek to convince others rather than coerce compliance” (p. 21). Yet, while a more egalitarian approach is essential, some form of structure provides volunteers a sense of stability – preferably presented as a balance of structure and support (Mason et al., 2022).

 In order to best address the Hospital Foundation’s retention and recruitment challenges––particularly with regard to older volunteers––it was decided that an action research project would provided needed feedback upon which retention and recruitment strategies could be built.

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