

Volunteer Administration in the 21st Century

Orientation of Volunteers

As volunteer administrators, county Extension agents need to manage volunteers systematically to enable them to be more effective. A key element of successful volunteer management is a three-step orientation process that familiarizes the volunteers with their duties, the local Extension office and the overall Cooperative Extension system.

The Texas AgriLife Extension Service involves about 90,000 volunteers who lead, deliver and support educational programs for the citizens of Texas. These volunteers also help Extension agents by ensuring that the programs are relevant and by serving as advocates for Extension.

One tool that the Texas AgriLife Extension Service has adopted for managing volunteers is the ISOTURE model. It was introduced in 1971 by Milton Boyce, the national program leader for 4-H Youth Development. The ISOTURE model is a set of seven steps that a manager can use to help volunteers become more involved and effective. The steps are identification, selection, orientation, training, utilization, recognition and evaluation.

The orientation step is key to getting the best and most from Extension volunteers. County agents should never assume that

volunteers fully understand the Extension program and the roles they play to support its mission. Instead, agents should take steps to ensure that all volunteers understand the agency, its educational programs and the volunteers' contributions to Extension activities.

According to *Best of All: The Quick Reference Guide to Effective Volunteer Involvement* by Linda L. Graff, new volunteers need to complete three types, or phases, of orientation:

- Social orientation
- Position orientation
- System orientation

Social orientation

The goal of social orientation is to help the new volunteers find a social comfort zone as quickly as possible in their new work environment. This type of orientation is like that of a new employee on the first day of work; such orientations can include introductions to the office staff, an explanation of the dress code and directions to the break room.

Social orientation is the simplest of the three phases of orientation, and it takes the least amount of time and preparation. In Extension, a social orientation should include

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the county Extension agent introducing the volunteer to Extension staff members, such as other county Extension agents and support staff. These introductions help the volunteers feel more at ease working in their new roles and interacting with other staff members.

Volunteers will also become more comfortable in the new environment after they are introduced to the office setting and procedures—such as how to operate the equipment in the workroom, how to access computers and where to store personal belongings.

Position orientation

The goal of position orientation is that the volunteers understand their roles and responsibilities. The agent needs to provide an overview of the volunteer's position description, outlining specific details and expectations of the job, including:

- **Title:** What is the title of the volunteer position?
- **Advisor:** Who is the volunteer's supervisor? To whom can the volunteers turn when they have questions or need help?
- **Purpose of the position:** What is the purpose of the volunteer position and/or the committee/task force on which the volunteer will serve? Emphasize the importance of the volunteers, their positions and the benefits they bring to Extension programs.
- **Benefits to the volunteer:** What are the benefits of volunteering? For example, volunteers can:
 - Gain and/or enhance knowledge and skills in a specific subject-matter area
 - Play a significant role in the educational process

- See a positive change in program participants
- Learn of the impact the Extension program has in the county
- Experience personal growth by serving as a volunteer

- **Responsibilities:** What are the specific responsibilities of the volunteer? What are the boundaries of the volunteer position? Volunteers have a responsibility to fulfill the duties outlined in the position description. They should also try to attend trainings and obtain resources that will help them fulfill their responsibilities.

County Extension agents need to stay abreast of the volunteers' work and accomplishments; likewise, the volunteers should keep Extension faculty informed about the results and impacts of their contributions.

By understanding Extension and helping provide high-quality educational programs, volunteers also can serve as advocates for Extension and better understand how their collective work benefits the entire agency.

- **Qualifications and special skills:** What specific knowledge and skills are needed to fulfill the volunteer role?
- **Time commitment:** To be successful, how much time is the volunteer expected to devote to the position? Is the volunteer committing to a short-term or a long-term position?
- **Resources and support available:** What resources and materials are available for the volunteers to use in fulfilling their responsibilities? Who provides support to the volunteers?

The position orientation should take place early in the volunteer's time of service. Often, volunteer managers worry about overwhelming volunteers early on with high

expectations; however, this orientation is crucial to the volunteers' effectiveness. They cannot fulfill their duties if they do not know what is expected of them.

Volunteers should also understand how they benefit Extension and how important they are to the agency's success. Volunteers are valuable assets, helping the agency:

- Reach more people in Texas
- Ensure that its programs are relevant
- Deliver Extension education
- Interpret the value of Extension to others

System orientation

The third type of volunteer orientation is a system orientation. Often overlooked, this phase gives information to new volunteers about the organization they are serving and their roles in it.

System orientation should occur soon after a volunteer begins work with the agency. Without a system orientation, volunteers can feel lost and unsure about the organization they work for, which can diminish their motivation and enthusiasm. Although sometimes this orientation is held in a group setting because of a large number of new volunteers, at other times the orientation must take place one-on-one or in small groups.

When orienting volunteers to the system, county Extension agents should explain the structure of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. This includes a review of Extension's mission, the definition of Cooperative Extension and the legislation that created Cooperative Extension:

- **Mission:** To provide quality, relevant outreach and continuing educational programs and services to the people of Texas.

- **Definition of Cooperative Extension:** An organizational entity of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Land Grant University System; it was created in each state to interpret, disseminate and promote practical use of knowledge to improve the quality of life for all citizens.
- **Legislation** that created and defined Cooperative Extension:
 - Morrill Act (1862)
 - Hatch Act (1887)
 - Second Morrill Act (1890)
 - Smith-Lever Act (1914)

For more information on the definition, mission and legislation of Cooperative Extension, please see Texas AgriLife Extension Service publication E-452, *Preparing the Leadership Advisory Board for Success: Visioning*.

Volunteers should understand the program area they serve. Although some volunteers may serve in only one program area, all need to know about all the base program areas within Extension:

- Agriculture, natural resources and environment
- Family and consumer sciences
- 4-H and youth development
- Community development

Although people usually volunteer with particular interests or are recruited for specific purposes, they also need to understand the many other roles and opportunities available to them. As some volunteers continue serving and become more familiar with the agency, they may want to advance or expand their level of involvement. Others are content to maintain their current activities.

Throughout the system orientation process, volunteers should be given an overview

of such opportunities as participating in a volunteer association or group, becoming a certified Master Volunteer or serving on a leadership advisory board, program area committee, task force or youth board. This overview can also include an explanation of the purpose of random, or episodic, volunteers and the roles that youths can play as volunteers.

During the system orientation, volunteers should also be given an outline of Extension's policies and procedures as it applies to the volunteers and their positions. Policies that should be covered include program area guidelines, such as 4-H membership guidelines; reporting guidelines, such as reporting of service and education hours for Master Volunteer candidates; youth protection standards training, such as training on types of child abuse and recognizing signs of abuse; and financial resource management training.

Training on policies relevant to the volunteers' work will give them a clear picture of the expectations and guidelines they should operate within.

Summary

Extension is committed to helping volunteers develop the competencies they need to fulfill their responsibilities. One facet of that development is an orientation that familiarizes the volunteers with Extension,

the agency's staff and other volunteers, and their specific responsibilities.

If volunteers clearly understand Extension and the expectations for their positions, they are more likely to be confident and motivated to fulfill their job responsibilities and represent Extension in the community. They also will be able to serve as advocates for Extension.

For more information on volunteer management in the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, please visit: <http://texasvolunteer.tamu.edu/>.

Resources

- Boleman, C. and Burkham, A. (2005). *Volunteer Administration in the 21st Century: Roles Volunteers Play in Texas Extension*. Publication D-1451.
- Boyce, V. Milton. "A Systematic Approach to Leadership Development." Presented to county and area 4-H youth agents conference (PA and MO). Publication: Extension Service, USDA (4-H-5), 1971.
- Graff, Linda L. *Best of All: The Quick Reference Guide to Effective Volunteer Involvement*. Linda Graff and Associates Inc., 2005.
- National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, *Development of the Land-Grant System: 1862-1994*, retrieved from <http://www.nasulgc.org> on September 5, 2005.

Volunteer Orientation Checklist

Use this checklist as a guide in providing an adequate and complete orientation for new volunteers.

Social orientation

- Introduce the new volunteers to other Extension volunteers they will work with.
- Introduce the volunteers to Extension staff, including Extension agents, program assistants and support staff.
- Give them a tour of the Extension office and facilities, showing them the equipment and supplies they can use.

Position orientation

- Define the expectations of the volunteer position, giving an overview of the position description, including the:
 - o Benefits of volunteering
 - o Purpose of the volunteer position
 - o Specific volunteer responsibilities
 - o Time commitment for the position
 - o Resources and support available to the volunteer
- Explain how volunteers fit in the Extension program and the critical role they play in Extension's success.

System orientation

- Review the structure and design of Extension, including the:
 - o Mission of Texas AgriLife Extension Service
 - o Definition of Cooperative Extension
 - o Legislation that created and defined Cooperative Extension
- Explain the base program areas of Extension, targeting the program area for which they are volunteering.
- Outline the various volunteer roles and opportunities within Extension.
- Provide an overview of Extension policies and procedures as it relates to their volunteer roles and responsibilities.

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