FOCUS ON NATURE PROGRAM
VOLUNTEER EVALUATION
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Rebecca Pereira*, Aarabhi Rajendiran**, Hannah Hutchinson*
*Graduate Research Assistant
**Research Shop Project Manager

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FOCUS ON NATURE PROGRAM VOLUNTEER EVALUATION

SUMMARY

This report summarizes a collaborative project involving the Research Shop, part of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) at the University of Guelph, and Focus on Nature (FoN). This project is Part Two of a process and outcome evaluation of the FoN program that runs in Guelph and Wellington County. This phase of the project was conducted in the Fall of 2018 and Winter of 2019. The objectives of this project included:

1. Identifying what volunteers get out of the program, why they continue to be involved, how they stay engaged, and whether any improvements can be made to the program.

2. Gathering information as to possible reasons why volunteers might discontinue their volunteering commitment.

3. Determining if there are differences in volunteering motivations between Program Volunteers and Board Member Volunteers.

Two focus groups were held: one for Program Volunteers and one for Board Member Volunteers. An online survey was also distributed to FoN Board Members. Highlights of the results include:

- Establishing “friendly” recruitment practices
- Setting boundaries for involvement
- Updating volunteer training and considering behavioural challenges in the classroom
- Updating the vision and mission statements

FoN intends to review the results of this project in order to make improvements within their organization and program.

1 For more information on Part One: https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/handle/10214/14352
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INTRODUCTION

The following report presents the results from the second phase of a process and outcome evaluation (Part Two) of the Focus on Nature (FoN) program in Guelph and Wellington County. This evaluation was completed during the Fall of 2018 and Winter of 2019 in Guelph, Ontario. It has been carried out at the request of, and in collaboration with, Focus on Nature, a volunteer-based non-profit organization that aims to foster youth’s connection with nature through photography (FoN, 2016). This project seeks to help FoN better understand what volunteers enjoy about the program, why they continue to be involved, and why they might discontinue volunteering. Both phases of the evaluation will help provide formal documentation of the impacts of the program and recommendations for improving the program.

Two focus groups were conducted, one specifically for FoN Program Volunteers (referred to as ‘Program Volunteers’), and one for FoN Board Member Volunteers (referred to as ‘Board Members’). Additionally, FoN Board Members who were unable to attend the focus group were given the opportunity to answer the focus group questions through an online survey. The first part of this report outlines the aims, main goals, background information and rationale for the program evaluation. This is followed by a discussion of the research methods and analysis of the main findings. Finally, the report concludes with a summary of the implications of the program evaluation.

Background

The FoN program was established in 2008, for the purpose of improving children’s relationship to nature through photography (PIN, 2019; FoN, 2016). The program strives to inspire in it’s participants a long-term interest in protecting local ecosystems by running workshops in schools and day camps during school breaks (FoN, 2016). Importantly, FoN is a volunteer driven organization (PIN, 2019). During the workshops, Program Volunteers teach creative and technical photography skills, nature and sensory awareness activities, and photography editing.

The FoN vision and mission are:

Vision: We envision a world where our connections to nature create a healthy, flourishing planet. We see a critical role for the arts in fostering these connections (FoN, 2016).
Mission: We inspire young people to explore and connect with the natural world through photography (FoN, 2016).

As an existing community partner of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI), FoN approached the Research Shop to carry out a two-part evaluation of their program. The second part of the evaluation seeks to understand the motivations of Program Volunteers and Board Members for getting involved in the program, and includes an exploration of factors that might lead volunteers to discontinue their participation.

Research Goals

This project aims to assist FoN as they investigate what volunteers enjoy about the program, why they continue to take part, and why they may discontinue volunteering. Additionally, it explores the Board Members’ views on the program, it’s effectiveness, and explores volunteer recruitment and factors leading to retention. To achieve these objectives, the research team conducted qualitative research by means of two focus groups, one with Program Volunteers and one with Board Members. An online survey using the program Qualtrics was sent to Board Members who were unable to attend the focus group.

The goals of this project, as identified by FoN, include:

1. Identifying what volunteers get out of the program, why they continue to be involved, how they stay engaged, and whether any improvements can be made to the program.

2. Gathering information as to possible reasons why volunteers might discontinue their volunteering commitment.

3. Determining if there are differences in volunteering motivations and challenges experienced between Program Volunteers and Board Members.

This report discusses what aspects of the program are working well for the Program Volunteers and Board Members, as well as the challenges they experience and the factors that might lead them to discontinue their participation. It is hoped that the feedback that is provided through this report will help FoN to better retain current volunteers as well as to recruit higher numbers of new volunteers to the program.
METHODS

Program Volunteer and Board Member Focus Groups

Measures

This program evaluation targeted Program Volunteers and Board Members who facilitate FoN programming. To gather feedback from FoN volunteers two separate Focus Groups Discussions (FGD) were held, one with Program Volunteers and one with Board Members. The research team amended a pre-existing focus group question guide that was produced during the first phase of this project. The volunteer FGD followed a semi-structured format, where a guide of eight previously determined questions were asked. The format was flexible and discussion could diverge from the specific questions if necessary. The Board Member FGD was unstructured, and while the group was encouraged to answer the questions on the pre-determined guide they were also able to explore new topics and concerns as the discussion unfolded. Topics covered included program participation, positive and negative experiences (including potential barriers), and suggestions for improving volunteer experiences moving forward.

Prior to data collection, the project received ethics approval through the Research Ethics Board at the University of Guelph. Ethics approval had been previously granted for Part One of the project and was amended again throughout the course of the research to add in the Board Member specific focus group.

Recruitment

Recruitment for participation for both FGD’s took place using emails. The Executive Director\(^2\) of FoN sent the recruitment materials to predetermined Program Volunteer and Board Member lists. Three separate emails were sent to the Program Volunteers that explained the need for focus group participants for the purpose of program feedback. The volunteers were asked to fill out a doodle poll and were contacted by the research team with a date that was best for most people. Similarly, Board Members were given the opportunity to select their availability for the focus group on a Doodle poll, and a date was chosen that worked best for the most people.

\(^2\) The ED did not participate in the focus groups to avoid any conflict of interest.
Procedure

Before both FGD’s began participants were given the opportunity to consent to their participation. Participants were notified that their responses could not be anonymous because of the public nature of an FGD.

The Program Volunteer FGD took place at 10C, a shared space used by CESI, in downtown Guelph in early November 2018. In total there were nine participants. The Board Member FGD was hosted in the CESI boardroom in late November 2018 and had three participants.

Both FGD’s lasted two hours, during which the participants were encouraged to provide their responses orally but were also given the option to submit written feedback or questions directly to the research team. During both FGD’s, extensive hand-written notes were taken by the research team to record the participants responses to the questions. Notes were then typed and thematically analyzed by research team members.

Board Member Volunteer Online Survey

Measures

As many of the FoN Board Members were unable to attend the FGD, the research team developed an additional method for data collection in order to give all the Board Members an opportunity to have their voices heard. An online Qualtrics survey was created which posed similar questions to those which were asked during the FoN Board Member FGD. As the FGD was unstructured, it was difficult to replicate the discussions that took place. However, all of the questions that were asked in the online survey were open-ended and were based off of the initial questions and prompts that were prepared for the FoN Board Members FGD.

Recruitment

Recruitment for participation for this survey was sent to participants by the Executive Director. Two separate emails were sent to the Board Members requesting they fill out the online survey.
Procedure

Before being able to complete the survey, participants were provided with a consent form. Participants were notified that their responses would be anonymized.

The survey was active for two weeks, and Board Members were sent an email reminder to complete the survey before it closed. The survey consisted of 17 open-ended questions and took an average of 20 minutes to complete. In total four Board Members completed the survey. Once the survey was closed the data was thematically analyzed and compared to the other data collected from the focus groups.

FINDINGS

Data obtained from each method was analysed and comparisons and differences were drawn. The results speak to the factors that motivate participants to volunteer their time with the FoN program, why they continue to volunteer and why they may discontinue their service. The data echoes the documented challenges that are faced by many volunteer dependent organizations (PIN, 2019). While participants discussed factors that were holding them back from volunteering, they also identified potential strategies for gaining new volunteers and for FoN to better support current volunteers. Data from each method was thematically analysed and implications and conclusions have been drawn.

Thematic Analysis

The following section breaks down the data obtained from all three methods into six common themes that arose from the participants contributions. By grouping the data into themes, the intent is to create six areas for FoN to consider when looking to make improvements to their program.

Learning:

Volunteers came from diverse employment backgrounds, including those working in the fields of education, art and/or photography, and in the field of nature. Volunteers with a background in education generally cited a desire to interact with children in a learning environment as their primary motivation for volunteering. The nature focus was often noted as an important pull for volunteer’s participation and the overall importance of the program. Volunteers who were a part of the day workshops noted seeing children overcome their fears as a result of the opportunity Focus on Nature provides to explore
nature. Volunteers appreciated the hands-on and adaptive nature of the program that allowed for both planned and unplanned education opportunities, as children learned about snakes, bugs and different specimens.

The majority of Board Members participants had a background in education and had the desire to teach others and learn from one another. Board Members felt that their background in education was the reason they did not participate in program volunteering but instead served on the Board. They felt that they had been in a classroom environment for much of their career and wanted to use their abilities in different ways to help children.

**Growth:**

Children’s growth within the program was a central theme and was identified as a positive experience for all volunteers. Seeing children change, grow, connect with groups, overcome obstacles, and socialize as a result of the program were all noted as motivating factors for volunteer’s continued participation. Additionally, volunteers explained that one-on-one and special attention from volunteers, even if brief, seemed to be beneficial to children. Volunteers noted that children seemed to feel a sense of accomplishment from their learning, art-creation, and photography, as well as from the recognition they obtained for this. Volunteers would encourage children to explore and take pictures which in turn would help them to successfully achieve their goals such as, taking meaningful pictures and spending more time outdoors. When volunteers had more resources and support from other volunteers and teachers, they were more able to create positive learning environments that lead to children’s success.

Board Members explained that the main reason they continued to volunteer was because they enjoyed seeing the students grow and experience nature for the first time. For example, volunteers shared stories of children laying on the floor, getting dirty and sharing new experiences. They explained that it was gratifying to see this type of growth in the children they volunteered with.

**Recruitment:**

Volunteers generally joined or were recruitment to FoN through the website and brochures, word-of-mouth, and the annual garden party. Volunteers suggested additional recruitment strategies, including advertising at volunteer fairs, local arts-based centers and outreach programs run by artists in the local community. It was suggested that FoN analyze current volunteer demographics and Board memberships
to target these spaces. Volunteers also suggested that FoN make it clear that no previous photography experience is necessary when recruiting so as not to discourage potential volunteers.

Current Board Members felt that in general it was challenging to recruit new Board Members as potential applicants were intimidated by the posting. This led to a discussion about how recruitment could be improved. The Board Members thought that FoN should make their posting less intimidating and more descriptive, as there were some misconceptions about FoN Board Member responsibilities. Unlike other community organization boards, the Focus on Nature Board is unique as they are defined as a “working board”, which entails having day-to-day responsibilities, and a long-term commitment, in addition to regular board meetings. Some also felt that as the Board becomes more developed and engages with more policy work, it might be efficient to have modified positions and roles so that people with specialized skills are able to use them. This would avoid a situation where Board Members feel like they are being assigned roles that do not fit their skill set.

**Time and Balance:**

The scheduling and structure of the program was a central theme in discussions with volunteers. Most of the volunteers were retired from full-time paid work and expressed that the flexibility of the schedule and time commitment was compatible to similar volunteer commitments. On the other hand, scheduling issues were also noted regarding the full-day commitment, which volunteers expressed could be taxing both in terms of time and energy. It was suggested that two half-day sessions be developed to address exhaustion and increase flexibility without impacting the experiences of children, although volunteers noted that this changed might be difficult to coordinate. Volunteers also suggested the use of more indoor activities when the weather is poor, especially for volunteers who are unable to be outside for long periods of time. It may be easier for the volunteers to commit to a full day workshop if they can stay inside.

Volunteers were quick to provide recommendations for improving volunteer engagement and long-term commitment. They wanted to provide their expertise on how best to solve the challenge of volunteer disengagement as they recognize and value the importance of FoN. One strategy that was suggested was to ask parents to volunteer, although this was met with mixed opinions. Volunteers expressed concern that this might create challenges both with increased volunteer numbers and with parental over-involvement. Additionally, volunteers noted the issue of time as it relates to the daily
structure of the program. For instance, children do not have enough time to edit or fully engage with software. Many of the program volunteers mentioned the slideshow presented at the workshop takes up too much time and also leads to a lack of attention. On the other hand, having a set amount of time helps students stay on task by choosing one photo to edit and complete. In order to maintain the workshop schedule but also increase time for children to edit their pictures, volunteers recommended shortening the slideshow.

For Board Members, time was an important theme of the discussion. The Board Members discussed that they were able to commit to the FoN Board as they were mostly retired and had plenty of free time. They also explained that they often have to limit the amount of time that they volunteer with FoN, as they have pastimes and other organizations that they want to be involved with. Additionally, they explained that they have to remember to take time for their families, particularly those who have older parents in need of care. Board Members discussed how they need to set boundaries for themselves in terms of the time that they spend volunteering with FoN.

**Vision and Mission:**

The Board Members felt that the vision and mission of FoN resonated with them, and that it was one reason why people volunteer for day programs and Board positions. They expressed that the FoN program and spending time being in nature gave them a different appreciation of life. Additionally, they felt that increasing children’s connections to nature at a young age would help them grow into people who were conscious about the environment and wanted to create positive change.

Volunteers felt that the mission of inspiring children to explore and connect with the natural world through photography was accomplished through FoN. However, the role of the arts in fostering these connections was met with some concerns. Several volunteers felt the vision could be extended beyond the arts, to speak to science and environmental education curriculums. Volunteers noted that while the focus on arts-based activities is important to the mission of Focus on Nature, it should also include science and environment-based activities as follow up to the outdoor experience. They also noted that the stated mission should include reference to the important contributions that the program makes to local community-building.
Training:

Board Members identified some aspects of the program that could be improved, including communications with the teachers and how technology is used in the program. They acknowledged that the expectations of teachers and the follow through of complementary activities did not always happen as expected. Additionally, Board Members had concerns that it would be harder to engage students as technology changes. They worried that students would not want to be engaged if the cameras were not as modern as the technology that they were used to taking photos with.

Teachers and the education system were noted as playing an important role in the overall program experience. Teacher involvement and enthusiasm impact the experiences of the children, including level of teacher engagement and the extent to which they follow up with complementary activities during class time. Several volunteers noted inconsistencies with individual teachers regarding their degree of engagement, with absent teachers leaving volunteers responsible for behavior management. It was suggested that to create an ‘ideal learning environment’ teachers should strive to get children excited and involved in the program. Additionally, teachers could be provided with a list of complementary activities they can use in class outside of the program, including a diverse portfolio of past projects.

Volunteers noted that at times, behavioural challenges with children – such as an inability to focus – could be a disheartening experience for volunteers, and especially long-term volunteers. It was noted that these challenges were infrequent, and that “even on the bad days there are good kids.” To address these challenges, volunteers suggested that training be provided in behavioural management and adaptation. It was suggested that addressing these challenges was primarily the responsibility of the school and teacher’s, and that checking in with the teacher regarding the classroom environment could be helpful. Additionally, volunteers wanted to be aware of any allergies or health conditions that children might have.

IMPLICATIONS

During this evaluation, multiple perspectives and experiences were discussed to gain a better understanding of the needs of not only the students participating in the workshops, but also teachers, Program Volunteers, and Board Members. It is hoped that this report will help FoN when designing training, program workshops, resources, and social events to continue creating positive learning environments for all.
Upon gaining the insights of Board Members and Program Volunteers, there are key takeaway messages that are important to consider in future decision-making for FoN.

**Take Away Messages:**

1. **“Friendly” Recruitment**
   
   a. In recruitment materials it should be made clear that volunteer opportunities do not require photography or arts-based experience.
   
   b. When recruiting volunteers for the Board of Directors, the roles and responsibilities of Board Members should be expressed more clearly.

2. **Setting Boundaries for Involvement**
   
   a. In both Board Member and Program Volunteer focus group discussions, many volunteers expressed that they felt stretched too thin. Due to their passion for the organization, they felt it was hard to say no to new tasks, which may lead to imbalances in their day-to-day lives or cause stress. It is important to regularly check in with volunteers to make sure they do not feel overbooked for workshops. Boundaries should be set to ensure volunteers are not feeling overburdened.

3. **Volunteer Training and Behavioural Challenges in the Classroom**
   
   a. Program Volunteers expressed that they would like to learn methods to mitigate behavioural challenges that might emerge with the students they are working with. They would especially like to learn how to increase communication and dialogue with the teachers. In doing so it is hoped that teachers will be more engaged during the workshops and will help to create a positive learning space for all.
   
   b. Program Volunteers mentioned the idea of having a mandatory check-in with teachers prior to the workshops.

4. **Update the Vision and Mission Statements**
   
   a. Program Volunteers would like to see the statements include the concepts of connection with nature, science, and environmentalism and not just arts-based learning. They can see first-hand that the program is
interdisciplinary, incorporates science and environmentalism curriculum, and that students are learning to “see beyond the camera”.

CONCLUSIONS

Focus on Nature continues to expand their program in Guelph and the greater Southwestern Ontario region. As such, it becomes increasingly important to understand the motivations, challenges, needs, and strengths of the Program Volunteers and Board Members, who are recognized as the backbone of the organization.

The focus groups and online survey discussions held with both Program Volunteers and Board Members provided valuable insights and knowledge regarding the student workshops, volunteer training, and recruitment processes.

Program Volunteers not only described the challenges they are faced with, but also offered meaningful strategies that can be used to resolve them including:

- Using more indoor activities when the weather is poor, especially for volunteers who are unable to be outside for long periods of time
- Having the option to volunteer half-days
- Creating social events to share experiences and learn from one another
- Increasing communication with the teachers
- Program Volunteers not only described the challenges they are faced with, but also offered meaningful strategies that can be used to resolve them including:

Board Members also provided valuable insights as their roles and responsibilities include both creating curriculum activities for the Focus on Nature program as well as manage the day-to-day operations of the organization. As such, they also provided meaningful strategies to resolve challenges in a way that meets the needs of both program volunteers and Board members. They include;

- Creating “friendly recruitment messaging” to use when looking for individuals to join the Board Member Committee. Program Volunteers who would like to contribute to the Board may feel more open to applying for the Board when they understand the exact roles and responsibilities it would entail. At the same time,
Board Members would be better able to recruit volunteers who best fit the needs of the committee.

- Including Program Volunteers in the planning and organizing of social events. Board members were receptive to hear program volunteers wanted to be a part of the Social Events Planning Committee. It is hoped that with the inclusion of program volunteers, there will be a better understanding of how to increase participation at social events and how to create networking spaces for all types of volunteers.

- Setting boundaries with time commitments at Focus on Nature to ensure there is a positive volunteer and personal life balance.

- Creating curriculum to include more indoor activities to alleviate challenges faced by the program volunteers

What was most evident amongst all the volunteers was their genuine passion for learning and nature. It is what motivates their dedication and commitment to Focus on Nature, and many volunteers expressed that their favourite moments of volunteering happen when witnessing children as they really “see” nature for the first time.

REFERENCES
