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Hillary Knepper
Pace University

Maria J. D'Agostino
John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY

Helisse Levine
Long Island University

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Volunteer Management Practices during Challenging Economic Times

Hillary Knepper
Pace University

Maria J. D'Agostino
John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY

Helisse Levine
Long Island University

Nonprofit organizations rely upon volunteers to facilitate their missions of meeting critical community needs. Since 2006, on average, 61.9 million Americans or 26.4 percent of the adult population volunteered every year through organizations delivering 8.1 billion hours of service worth approximately \$162 billion to America's communities (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012; Corporation for National and Community Service 2010). Most recent data released by The Bureau of Labor in 2013 further suggest between September 2011 and September 2012 approximately 64.5 million people volunteered via an organization at least once. In light of high unemployment, donor fatigue, and slow economic growth, it is also anticipated that nonprofit reliance on volunteers will continue to increase (Salamon and Spence 2009). As cautioned by Doherty and Mayer (2003) when revenue sources are compromised as a result of an ailing economy, continued devolution, and severe budget cuts at all levels of government, nonprofits will increasingly be compelled to cope in new ways to achieve their missions. Therefore, as nonprofit organizations continue to face compromised revenue sources due to severe federal funding cuts and reduced donor support, managers will be compelled more than ever before to utilize their volunteers with fewer resources. However, the words of Lipsky and Smith (1989/90) and again by Brudney and Duncombe (1992) still ring true today: volunteers are not free, nor are nonprofit managers always equipped to make the most of their volunteers (Urban Institute 2004; Yanay and Yanay 2008). Furthering the findings of prior research (Levine and D'Agostino 2012), the purpose of this study is to identify the specific practices that emerge among volunteer managers in human service organizations during challenging economic times. Given that volunteer management encompasses a range of complex activities, such as recruiting, coordinating, leading, supporting, administering and organizing volunteers as well as strategic oversight and management of volunteer programs this study introduces complexity theory as a lens for understanding volunteer management capacity during challenging economic times. Although business (Curley 2012) and legal studies (Hornstein 2005) have utilized

complexity as a guiding theory, the framework used in this study is a unique and important contribution to the nonprofit volunteer management literature. This study incorporates complexity theory as a means to frame a model of volunteer management that offers nonprofit chief executives, managers and funders a new perspective on how to successfully cope with volunteers and strengthen capacity during these challenging times. First, literature reviewing nonprofit and volunteer management capacity building is examined. The paper then introduces complexity theory as a basis for understanding volunteer management capacity. We then proceed with the methods section and discussion of key findings. We conclude with study limitations and areas for future research.

Nonprofit organizations play a critical role in providing a social safety net by administering services such as child care, adult education and job training, mental health counseling, and substance abuse treatment (Sobeck 2008; Allard 2009a, 2009b). The perception of nonprofit organizations as accessible to individuals reluctant to seek help from large, unfamiliar public agencies as well as their image as trusted and respected community institutions increases their approachability to individuals from vulnerable populations (Minzer, et. al 2013). As a result, there is an ongoing interest among local, state, and federal governments to collaborate with nonprofit organizations to deliver services to reach a broader and wider population of those in need (Sherman and Stanakis 2002).

However, many nonprofits have gaps in organizational capacity, such as financial tracking systems and limited fundraising experience, which compromise their effectiveness (Letts, Ryan, and Grossman 1999; De Vita, Fleming, and Twombly 2001; Blumenthal 2003; Light 2004), and many funders invest in nonprofit capacity with the goal of improving participant and program outcomes (Letts et al. 1999; De Vita et al. 2001; McKinsey and Company 2001; Light 2004; Minzer, et. al. 2013). Several studies illustrate capacity building does make nonprofits more effective at serving their clients (Elliott 2002; Doherty and Mayer 2003; Glickman and Servon 2003; Patrizi et al. 2006; Abet Associates 2007; Leake et al. 2007; Millesen and Bies 2007; Sobeck and Agius 2007; Abet Associates and Branch Associates 2008; Brown 2008; Markovitz and Magged 2008; Sobeck 2008; Klein, et al. 2009; Popescu and Dewan 2009; Kapucu et al. 2011). Unfortunately, the economic crisis has resulted in financial distress for social service nonprofit organizations due partly to declines in charitable donations and state and local governments scaling back in response to their own fiscal challenges (Bridgeland and Reed 2009) while the demand for social services has increased (Bridgeland and Reed 2009). For these reasons, vulnerable nonprofits are likely to cut back on their services offerings (Tuckman and Chang 1991; Greenlee and Trussel 2000).

Nonprofit Capacity: Challenges

A number of studies have focused on challenges to nonprofit capacity building. Three major empirical studies to date have extensively examined nonprofit capacity (Theisen, Paine, Cobb, Lyons-Mayer and Pope 2003; Backer and Oshima 2004; Millesen and Bies 2005). From these studies several common themes emerge about the challenges and issues of nonprofit capacity building: (1) that nonprofits needed better, more centralized access to resources; (2) that nonprofits benefited from sharing resources and interacting with their peer organizations; and (3) that much more research needed to be undertaken to document

the impact of and, ongoing need for, capacity building in nonprofits. Other findings included that funders played an integral role in the success of capacity-building initiatives (Backer and Oshima 2004; Millesen and Bies 2004); that capacity building needs varied significantly between rural versus urban nonprofits (Theisen et. al. 2003); that financial planning represented an area for capacity improvement in most organizations (Backer and Oshima 2004); and that diagnostic tools to help nonprofits self-identify their capacity building needs might be warranted (Millesen and Bies 2004).

As a result of the importance and reliance on volunteers by nonprofit organizations, especially during challenging economic times (Luksetich 2008; Cerrini and Associates 2009), a growing body of literature has developed inquiring how nonprofits can build organizational capacity as a means to combat challenges and operate more effectively (e.g., Backer 2000; McKinsey and Company 2001; Theisen, et.al. 2003; Kapucu, Augustin, and Krause 2005; Millesen and Bies 2005; Bishop 2007; Yung et al. 2008). To a lesser extent, focus on capacity building aimed specifically at volunteer management has only recently begun to take interest. Exceptions include the 2006 Central Texas Nonprofit Capacity Study (RGK) based on collaborative efforts of the LBJ School of Public Affairs and the Bush School of Government and Public Service (RGK, 2006), and Hager's (2004) volunteer management study conducted by the Urban Institute in collaboration with the Corporation for National and Community Service (2006). Only nominal research specifically examines nonprofit volunteer management during times of fiscal stress (e.g. Salamon, and Spence 2009; Kapucu 2011; Levine and D'Agostino 2012).

Volunteer Management Capacity

Volunteer management is one area of nonprofit organizational capacity that has become an increasingly essential issue (RGK 2006). Volunteer management encompasses a range of complex activities, such as recruiting, coordinating, leading, supporting, administering and organizing volunteers as well as strategic oversight and management of volunteer programs. Due to the sector's unique dependence on volunteers, nonprofit organizations have had to develop protocols concerning volunteer management. Past research has indicated that poor management practices result in losing volunteers (United Parcel Service Foundation 1988). A well-managed volunteer labor resource (Brudney and Meijs 2009) goes beyond recruitment and also focuses on retention. Under-resourced volunteer programs, along with minimally trained and over extended volunteer managers, limit the capacity of nonprofit organizations to capitalize on the contributions of volunteers and further limit the ability of volunteers to impact organizational capacity (RGK 2006). Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the importance of the volunteer management role and the need to deliver adequate support for, and investment in, volunteer management capacity.

Many studies and volunteer management guides offer lists of best practices for managing volunteer programs (Ellis 1996). Among these, having a paid volunteer manager and providing training to all staff who work with volunteers are the practices most directly related to capacity building. Research on the relationship between nonprofit capacity building and volunteer management has revealed that success in maximizing volunteer engagement results from training staff in best management practices and volunteer protocols (Ellis 1996; Brudney and Kellough 2000; Rehnborg, Fallon, and Hinerfeld 2002). Nonetheless, internal and external barriers frequently hamper the attempts of nonprofits to implement these best practices. For example, the realities of limited funding, time constraints, and a lack of understanding of volunteer management (Hange, Seevers, and

Van Leeuwen 2001; Hager 2004; Hager and Brudney 2004). Furthermore, few offerings in subject matters other than fundraising were available in professional development for nonprofit employees, including those working with volunteers.

The present study presents a more practical approach to volunteer management capacity in nonprofit organizations by surveying the nonprofit manager faced with (fewer funding streams *and*) an increasing number of volunteers during challenging economic times. This practical approach embraces and engages the turbulent economic environment and its impact on the complexities of volunteer management capacity.

Building a Complexity Model of Volunteer Management Capacity

Complexity theory has its roots in Bertalanffy's 1940s general systems theory, and later grew out of the 1960s systems theory discussions (Anderson 1999) when Katz and Kahn posited exploration of the environmental context in which organizations function (1966). Systems theory largely explores the connections among organizational inputs, processes, and outputs. Subsequently, complexity theory describes these myriad connections as nonlinear relationships (Lewin 1999). Further, complexity describes the instability that leads organizations to affect positive adaptations across a dynamic service environment (Kiel 1994). Johnson (2007) notes a complex system is a "complicated mix of ordered and disordered behavior" (pg. 15) while Pollack, Adler and Sankaran (2014) note that complexity theory provides for "interpreting and understanding management activity" (pg.88).

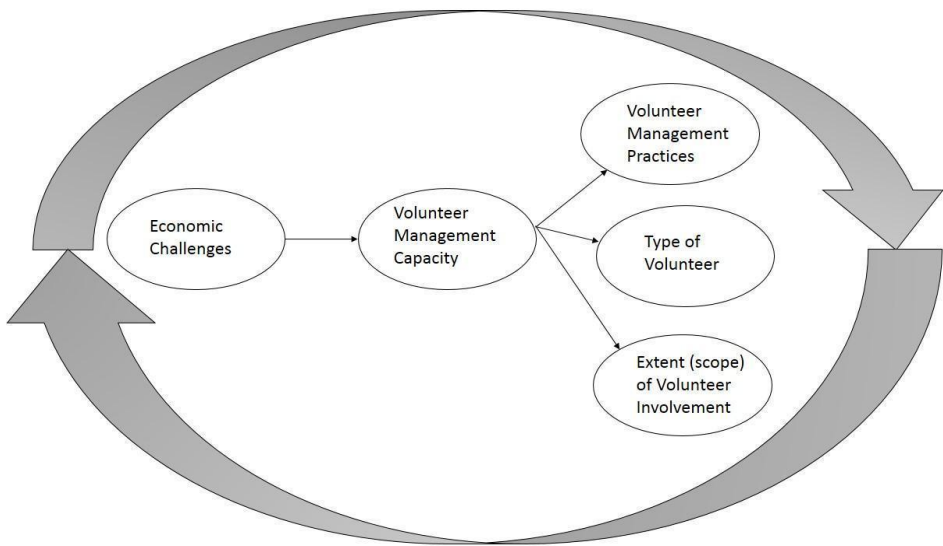
Consequently, complexity theory is applied in this study to the frequently unstable world of volunteer management. As noted previously, volunteer management is a particularly complex activity, comprised of a range of management practices. In particular, complexity exists across volunteer management practices (e.g. training, paid staff, volunteer coordinator), the types of volunteers (e.g. episodic, youth, skilled), the scope of volunteer involvement (e.g. assigned to functional support, average number of hours worked), and economic challenges (e.g. unemployment rate, charitable donations, median income). Each of these constructs (volunteer management practices, types of volunteers, scope of volunteer involvement and economic environment) provides context for the instability in which organizations function (Kiel 1994; Anderson 1999). As a result of this instability and complexity, nonprofits may seek new knowledge and practices across disciplines (Anderson 1999; Lewandowski and GlenMaye 2002; Davis, Eisenhardt, Bingham 2007).

Historically, the complexity of managing *across* health and human service networks has been documented (Agranoff 1991; O'Toole 1997; Jennings and Ewalt 1998; Provan and Milward 2001; 2003; van Bueren, Klijn, and Koppenhjan 2003; Baker and Porter 2005; Huang and Provan 2006). However, complexity *within* organizations has not been thoroughly examined. Recent application of complexity theory in nonprofit studies includes disaster response among NGOs (Kapucu 2005, 2006; Kapucu, Augustin, Garayev 2009; Gajewski, Bell, Lein, and Angel 2011), the impact of environmental uncertainty on boards (Brown and Guo 2009), and the complexity of human change processes in human services performance measurement (Carnochan, Samples, Myers, Austin 2013). Subsequently, the model adapted here uses complexity theory to frame volunteer management capacity from within organizations.

Complexity theory is used here to frame a model of key volunteer management capacity indicators during challenging economic times. The conceptual framework (See Figure 1) used for this study expands Hager and Brudney's (2004) challenges and benefits model and incorporates the results of D'Agostino and Levine's (2012) interview research of

New York City nonprofit administrators. Three constructs of challenges to volunteer management capacity were identified: volunteer management practices, types of volunteers, and extent of volunteer involvement. Ultimately, what specific practices emerge among volunteer managers in human service organizations as a result of this complexity and challenging times? To answer this question, the major constructs identified in the model represent an opportunity to apply complexity theory in the exploration of innovative patterns and practices that may emerge (Morel and Ramanujam 2007). The three constructs used to describe volunteer management capacity are defined here.

Figure 1: Complexity Model of Volunteer Management Capacity



Volunteer management practices is defined as those management practices adopted including: regular supervision and communication with volunteers, liability coverage or insurance protection for volunteers, regular collection of information on volunteer numbers and hours, screening and matching of volunteers to assignments, written policies and job description for volunteers, recognition activities, annual measurement of impacts of volunteers, training and professional development opportunities for volunteers, and training for paid staff working with volunteers; and the utilization of a volunteer coordinator, including a paid staff person who can spend a substantial portion of their time on volunteer management duties.

Extent (scope) of volunteer involvement is defined as the depth of volunteer involvement including the number of volunteers that charities engaged in the past year, the number of hours that volunteers worked in a typical week; and the number of different volunteer assignments in six functional areas: delivering of services, fundraising, providing general office services, legal/financial activities, management and advocacy.

Types of volunteer involvement is defined as the primary use of volunteers in internal administrative tasks including direct services, indirect services, internal

administrative tasks, external administrative tasks; and the percentage of volunteers under age 24.

Method

Because the main purpose of this research was to seek a deeper understanding of how managers approach volunteer management during challenging economic periods, surveys and interviews were conducted. The National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCSS) was initially used to identify our sampling frame of human service organizations. Given the correlation between the number of nonprofits in a community and its volunteer rate we purposively sampled only those metropolitan cities in the U.S. with the highest volunteer rate per capita as provided by Volunteering in America.org. Because people depend upon critical community support services to meet basic health and human service needs during times of economic instability (Chikoto and Neely 2013), human service organizations were chosen as the target nonprofit organizations for our study.¹

In addition, as Alexander (1999) noted, human service nonprofits, in particular, continually face new challenges including increased accountability to bring about organizational efficiency and effectiveness, and historical dependence on government funding. Selection criteria included those 501(c) (3) organizations that perform a wide range of human service functions and had readily accessible contact information (telephone number, email or contact person) for a final sample frame of 200 nonprofit organizations. Psychdata (an Internet based research tool) was used to administer the e-survey in two waves during the summer and fall of 2011 followed by telephone interviews to the non-respondents. Responses from e-surveys and telephone interviews from 32 human service nonprofit managers were used to examine our research question: What particular practices emerge among volunteer managers in human service organizations as a result of this complexity during challenging times? (See Table 1: Research Sample).

Table 1. Research Sample

Large-Size Cities	Volunteer Rate	Nonprofits per Capita (residents)*	Mid-Size Cities	Volunteer Rate	Nonprofits per Capita (residents)*
Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN	37.40%	4.85	Iowa City, IA	50.00%	6.00
Portland, OR	37.10%	4.46	Fort Collins, CO	40.70%	7.44
Seattle, WA	34.90%	4.75	Madison, WI	40.00%	7.16
Hartford, CT	33.10%	5.25	Des Moines, IA	39.70%	16.8
Kansas City, MO	32.00%	5.76	Topeka, KS	38.50%	6.62
Columbus City, OH	31.90%	5.34	Boulder, CO	38.20%	6.35

¹ Human service providers did not include public advocacy, professional associations, research institutes or fundraising institutes (e.g. foundations)

Washington, DC	31.10%	7.00	Burlington, VT	37.60%	7.75
St. Louis, MO	30.50%	4.77	Sioux Falls, SD	36.90%	5.13
Milwaukee, WI	30.00%	5.72	Asheville, NC	36.50%	5.19
San Francisco, CA	29.90%	5.44	Waterloo, IA	36.40%	5.88

*At a national level there is an average of 4.45 nonprofit organizations per 1,000 residents.

Participants were asked questions on three main constructs of volunteer management capacity: 1) volunteer management practices, 2) extent of volunteer involvement and 3) type of volunteer (see Appendix I). To best elicit the challenges and practices implemented by nonprofit managers, survey participants were asked to respond to each construct of volunteer management capacity in two parts. In the first part, respondents were asked to identify the degree of challenge measured on a scale of 1 (not a challenge) to 4 (an extreme challenge). If a challenge was identified, respondents were then asked to indicate all measures, if any, that were taken to address the challenge, with the first option being ‘did not address challenge’. Because the purpose of this research was to identify practices that emerged among volunteer managers in human service organizations as a result of complexity and challenging economic times we also included an option to choose ‘other’ to represent those practices that had not previously appeared in the literature or identified in prior research (Levine and D’Agostino 2012). Reported responses were then used to identify approaches to volunteer management within the complexity model.

Findings

Responses from the survey questions and interviews identified 1) challenges and 2) specific practices among volunteer managers in human service organizations during challenging economic times. For this study, the theory of complexity frames three constructs of volunteer management capacity within a challenging economic period: volunteer management practices, types of volunteers, scope of volunteer involvement. The conceptual model suggests that nonprofits, and in particular volunteer management capacity, are enveloped in an unstable and complex environment seeking new knowledge and organizational practices to achieve organizational capacity.

Volunteer Management Capacity: Identified Challenges

The respondents were asked to identify the greatest challenges in three categories of volunteer management capacity: “Volunteer Management,” “Type of Volunteer Involvement” and “Extent of Volunteer Involvement.”² Eighty-one percent of respondents that identified “Volunteer Management” as a challenge indicated *training and professional development* as the greatest problem followed by *training for paid staff working with volunteers*. Forty-four percent of respondents noted that *screening and matching volunteers to assignments* posed the greatest difficulties followed closely by *availability of volunteer coordinator* (e.g. forty-one percent). Findings from the second category, “Type of Volunteer Involvement” illustrated challenges across all three volunteer types (e.g. *episodic, skilled* and *youth volunteers*). However, over two-fifths (44%) of respondents noted *episodic volunteers* as the greatest challenge while only one-third (30%) of volunteer

² Survey Questions 1-11 (See Appendix A)

managers identified the other two categories, *skilled and youth volunteers* as the greatest challenge.

On the whole, the respondents were equally divided among the challenges in the third category "Extent of Volunteer Involvement." While *twenty-two percent of respondents said that number of volunteers organization has engaged in past three years and assigning volunteers to functional areas* presented the greatest challenges, a slightly fewer (eighteen-percent) number of respondents reported *average number of hours volunteers work (collectively) during a given week* as problematic.

Volunteer Management Capacity: Practices

Nonprofit managers reported the need to employ a number of practices to address identified challenges across the study's three constructs of volunteer management capacity: Volunteer Management Practices, Type of Volunteer and Extent of Volunteer Management.³ To identify the practices implemented by survey respondents pertaining to "Volunteer Management" survey responses were grouped into four dimensions: 1) Training and Professional Development, 2) Training for Paid Staff Working with Volunteers, 3) Screening and Matching Volunteers to Assignments and 4) Availability of Volunteer Coordinator (see Table 3). The highest proportion (thirty-two percent) of survey respondents reported *creating volunteer position descriptions* followed by thirty-one percent of them who reported *placing an existing volunteer in the position of unpaid coordinator*. To a smaller degree, about one quarter (e.g. twenty five percent) of nonprofit managers *provided feedback and performance assessment to volunteers*, nearly twenty two percent reported *involving volunteers in staff meetings* and close to sixteen percent of them reported they used *skilled volunteers to train volunteers*. Whereas only six percent of the nonprofit managers in this study *utilized skilled volunteers to train paid workers in areas of potential service expansion*, to an even lesser extent, only three percent *utilized skilled volunteers to train workers in areas where skills have been lacking*.

In addition, several respondents shared "other" practices addressing challenges to "Volunteer Management" across all of the four dimensions.⁴ For example, under the *Training Paid Staff Working with Volunteers* practices, (twenty-nine percent of respondents selected "other") respondents informed us that they either personally trained paid staff themselves, sent staff to trainings, and/or continually coached staff to work with volunteers to accomplish goals instead of continually asking the volunteer coordinator to train and work with volunteers.

Several new practices were also disclosed as a result of respondents (seventeen percent) that identified "other" under the *Training and Professional Development* practice dimension. These "other" practices included offering a variety of different training opportunities at different times/locations to meet volunteer's schedules, matching professional volunteers with greatest skill sets to accomplish organizational goals, and encouraging and training paid staff on how to utilize volunteers. Among the "other" practices identified across Screening and Matching (nine percent) and Availability of Volunteer Coordinator (twenty two percent) we learned that respondents spent more time than usual getting to know volunteers better because their interests didn't always support their abilities, and partnered new volunteers with experienced volunteers who provided

³ Survey Question 23 (See Appendix A)

⁴ Survey Questions #2a, 3a, 4a, 5a, 6a, 7a, 8a, 9a, 10a, 11a (See Appendix A)

feedback to managers to enable tweaking assignments with interests and abilities.

Table 2. Addressing Challenges: Volunteer Management Practices

Training & Professional Development	Percent
Did not address Challenge	12.5%
Involved volunteers in staff meetings	21.8%
Utilized skilled volunteers to train volunteers & paid staff in areas of potential growth	15.6%
Provided feedback & performance assessment to volunteers	25.0%
Utilized skilled volunteers to train paid workers in areas of potential service expansion	6.3%
Utilized skilled volunteers to train paid workers in areas where skills have been lacking	3.1%
Other	15.6%
Training for paid staff working with volunteers	
Did not address challenge	21.8%
Utilized volunteers in supervisory roles instead of training volunteers	12.5%
Utilized skilled volunteers in supervisory roles instead of hiring new paid position	6.3%
Utilized skilled volunteers to train paid staff in supervisory capacity	12.5%
Utilized skilled volunteers to develop & organize volunteer & paid staff recognition activities	12.5%
Other	28.1%
Screening & matching volunteers to assignments	
Did not address challenge	6.3%
Developed a project to utilize skills, education & experience of volunteer(s)	28.1%
Conducted an assessment and inventory of tasks to match volunteers to tasks	28.1%
Created volunteer position descriptions	31.3%
Other	6.3%
Availability of volunteer coordinator	
Did not address challenge	31.3%
Hired a full time volunteer coordinator	0.0%
Hired a part time volunteer coordinator	15.6%
Placed an existing volunteer (f/t or p/t) in the position of unpaid coordinator	31.3%
Other	21.8%

Table 3. Addressing Challenges: Type of Volunteer Involvement

Episodic Volunteers	Percent
Did not address the challenge	12.5%
Recruited only long term volunteers	0.0%
Placed episodic volunteers in non-administrative tasks (i.e. public relations)	15.6%
Created short term assignments	62.5%
Other	11.0%
Skilled Volunteers	
Did not address challenge	14.2%
Placed in non-administrative tasks (e.g. direct contact with the organization serves)	14.2%
Placed in administrative tasks (e.g. general office work)	19.0%
Placed in areas of potential growth (service expansion)	14.2%
Created Special Projects	14.2%
Other	14.2%
Youth Volunteers	
Did not address the challenge	0.0%
Did not recruit volunteers under the age of 24	0.0%
Placed young volunteers in internal administrative tasks (i.e. general office work)	0.0%
Placed young volunteers in non-administrative tasks (i.e. public relations)	7.4%
Co-placed with experienced/skilled volunteer	38.5%
Provided training	38.5%
Other	7.4%

Practices applied to address challenges pertaining to the “Type of Volunteer Involvement” construct, varied across *Episodic*, *Skilled* and *Youth Volunteer* dimensions. Of the eighty-eight percent of managers who addressed *Episodic Volunteers* as a challenge, the majority (sixty-three percent) said they created short term assignments and fifteen percent placed episodic volunteers in non-administrative tasks (i.e. public relations). Not one of our respondents chose to only recruit long term volunteers. Ten percent identified “other” practices including limiting the number of episodic volunteers to match workload. Practices utilized as a result of challenges to *Skilled Volunteers*, were relatively alike among survey respondents. Of the four selections given under this dimension, twenty one percent of managers placed skilled volunteers in administrative tasks, a slightly fewer number of respondents (twenty one percent) noted placing them in non-administrative tasks. In addition, managers placed skilled volunteers in areas of potential growth (eighteen percent) or created

new projects to accommodate them (sixteen percent). Several respondents (twelve percent) informed us they encouraged staff to manage volunteers and utilize their skills as best they could (“other”). In terms of *Youth Volunteer* almost half (forty-four percent) of respondents acknowledged they provided training to volunteers under 24 years of age, thirty-eight percent co-placed the youth volunteers with experienced/skilled volunteers and only eight percent placed young volunteers in non-administrative tasks (i.e. public relations). No one recognized not recruiting youth volunteers as a practice. In the “other” selection, managers emphasized the importance of integrity as an organization and a volunteer - the importance of showing up, walking one's talk. Although several respondents (ten percent) selected “other” in this category, they failed to identify the specific volunteer management practice.

Table 4. Addressing Challenges: Extent of Volunteer Involvement Practices

Volunteer time worked	Percent
Did not address challenge	20%
Hired/Placed/Recruited volunteers that could not commit many hours	32%
Hired/Placed/Recruited volunteers that could commit few hours	40%
Other	18%
Volunteer recruitment in past three years	
Did not address the challenge	12%
Recruited more volunteers	7%
Stopped recruiting volunteers	0
Other	25%
Assigning volunteers to functional areas	
Did not address the challenge	10%
Matched tasks and projects in functional areas to volunteers on staff	31%
Recruited new volunteers to match tasks and projects in functional areas	7%
Assigned skilled volunteers to multiple functional areas	16%
Trained volunteers to specific functional areas regardless of skills/experience	9%
Other	9%

When asked about practices applied to address challenges relating to the “Extent of Volunteer Involvement” respondents noted they hired/placed/recruited volunteers that could commit to many hours (forty percent) and/or few hours (thirty percent) while only seven percent of respondents actually recruited more volunteers. When asked about assigning volunteers to functional areas, thirty-one percent of respondents matched tasks and projects in functional areas to volunteers on staff, twenty-five percent recruited new volunteers to

match tasks and projects to these areas, and sixteen percent assigned skilled volunteers to multiple functional areas. A small amount, nine percent, trained volunteers for specific functional areas regardless of skills/experience.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to identify volunteer management practices that emerge among volunteer managers in human service nonprofits during challenging economic conditions. Complexity theory was used to frame a model that identified the environment in which volunteer managers are operating. The conceptual model suggests that nonprofits are enveloped in unstable and complex environments that demand new knowledge and organizational practices. This study not only shed light on factors which had been previously defined in the literature as contributing to volunteer management capacity, but also on practices that emerged as a result of challenging economic times. For example, the Central Texas Nonprofit Capacity Study (RGK 2006) established that at the core of volunteer management capacity was the need to train volunteers, which supports volunteer involvement and commitment to providing services. Previous research had also suggested that during adverse conditions, there is an influx of highly skilled volunteers (Levine and D'Agostino 2012). The question became, not how to train volunteers, but rather, whether the organization had the capacity to use skilled volunteers effectively. Along this path the question of managerial discretion must be considered in terms of effective volunteer utilization.

Montanari (1978) identified the importance of context and its impact on managerial discretion and we subsequently suggest that context, managerial discretion, and complexity affect volunteer management capacity. Dover (2010) further contributes the impact of institutional design on volunteer managerial discretion. Ultimately, the potential influence of managerial discretion on performance is noted (Xi-Ping, Po-Young, and Chia-Yi 2010) and must be considered in developing capacity among volunteer management programs. The FAIR Model, developed in this study, provides a structure for building capacity through its identification of opportunities for volunteer managers. These opportunities are divided into constructs that relate to types of volunteers, extent of volunteer involvement, and volunteer management.

Respondents' description of how organizational and managerial challenges were addressed extended beyond the practices identified in the literature. These practices were gleaned from the open ended survey questions as noted in the "other" category. Faced with unique and complex economic environments, organizational needs, volunteer skills and availability, the ability of nonprofit managers to remain FAIR (Flexible, Adaptable, Innovative and Relationship Builders), emerged as key practices (see Table 5). In this discussion, flexible is used for short term, smaller scale change while adaptive is applied to larger, longer term change. Table 5 explores the application of FAIR to the theoretical constructs identified in the conceptual model (Figure 1). FAIR study details are further elaborated here.

Table 5. *FAIR & the Complexity Model of Volunteer Management Practices*

Practice	Construct	Flexibility	Adaptability	Innovation	Relationship Building
Offer different training opportunities at times and locations convenient to volunteers	Volunteer Management		*	*	
Encourage and train paid staff on how to use volunteers	Volunteer Management		*	*	*
Individualize Feedback	Volunteer Management	*		*	*
Episodic volunteer utilization	Types of Volunteers	*	*	*	*
Place volunteers for personal growth and development	Extent of Volunteer Involvement		*	*	*
Encourage staff to use skilled volunteers "as best they can"	Types of Volunteers	*			
Train volunteers for functional areas, regardless of current skills	Extent of Volunteer Involvement	*		*	

First, flexibility materialized as a recurrent theme in the sense that there is no “one size fits all” model of volunteer management that best effectuates organizational capacity building. As shown in Table 5, volunteer managers have responded to the complex environment facing volunteer management in nonprofit human service organizations with adaptive, flexible and innovative management practices that also enhance relationship building between volunteer and organizational staff; for example, as noted in Table 5, providing feedback to their volunteers as appropriate for the situation and person. Although the need for flexibility bears out the research of Vita and Fleming (2001) and Light (2000), particular to this study was the need to offer different training opportunities at different times/locations to meet volunteer’s schedules and length of employment, and especially to tweak assignments with interests and abilities.

Key findings also suggest nonprofit managers need to be adaptable and innovative in considering solutions that work specifically for their unique economic environment and organizational needs. For example, although survey respondents informed us that one of their greatest challenges was the prevalence of *episodic volunteers*, it was necessary to be innovative and willing to accommodate volunteers’ availability particularly for training and service opportunities. On the other hand, it should also be noted that there were some managers who chose to limit the number of episodic volunteers while focusing on recruiting those who could commit many hours only.

We also learned that the choice of how to address the influx of episodic volunteers was dependent on individual organizational needs. These findings contribute to the literature in that traditionally volunteer managers seek a standardized protocol of best practices with which to manage volunteer programs. However, during challenging economic times, and in alignment with complexity theory, this study identifies that volunteer managers must adapt these practices to suit the needs of the organization as well as the needs of the volunteer. This finding is of particular interest for several reasons. First, as Grantmaker (2003) noted, episodic volunteers tend to be younger and seek shorter

assignments. Indeed, several of our study respondents noted the difficulty in involving youth during times of fiscal constraint. However, we also gained insight into how younger volunteers, usually episodic volunteers, can be involved and not ‘squeezed’ out such as placing them in non-administrative tasks as well as short term assignments.

Adding to the current literature on nonprofit volunteer management capacity we learned that those managers in our survey, who were able to successfully utilize the highly skilled volunteers, had them train and guide both the novice volunteers and employees. Skilled volunteers were also utilized to further the goals of the agency by placing them in areas of potential growth and development. However, the number of managers reporting this practice was very small. Only a small amount (6.3 percent) of the nonprofit managers in this study utilized skilled volunteers to train paid workers in areas of potential service expansion, and to an even lesser extent, only 3 percent utilized skilled volunteers to train workers in areas where skills have been lacking. This finding confirms Kapacu et al.’s (2011) work that an agency’s ability to utilize the knowledge and skills gained via capacity building may not be present.

We also learned the importance of relationship building and the importance of taking the time, despite busy schedules, to provide feedback and performance assessment to volunteers. Perhaps as suggested by Brudney and Meijs (2009) a paradigm shift in how volunteers are perceived must first occur, otherwise we risk depleting our volunteer resource. This finding not only confirms Brudney and Meijs’ (2009) suggestion that volunteer managers need to consider retention, but indicates the importance of getting to know volunteers better to support their interests with assignments, and encouraging staff to utilize their skills as best they could. The findings also support the complexity model that was developed. The varieties of adaptive, flexible, and innovative practices identified are likely the result of complexity intrinsic to nonprofit human service volunteer management capacity.

Conclusion

The study findings reflect how complexity theory frames the impact of complex interactions on positive organizational adaptations (Kiel 1994). Although we should be cautious about generalizing too broadly from these results, this study moves us one step further in knowing about nonprofit volunteer management during challenging economic times. As noted by Luksetich (2008) and Cerrini and Associates (2009) volunteers can provide significant benefits for nonprofits and service delivery.

Further, the model developed here engages complexity theory to frame volunteer management in human service organizations as a result of complex and challenging economic times. The application of complexity theory is grounded in the findings of this research. In other words, the benefits volunteers may bring to nonprofits may only be realized with a true investment in volunteer management capacity. As our research found, volunteer managers must develop an understanding of the inherent complexity of recruiting, training, deploying, evaluating, and retaining volunteers, particularly within the economic uncertainty within which many nonprofits are operating.

Returning to the proposed research purpose of identifying volunteer management practices in human service nonprofits during challenging economic conditions, the most important findings to emerge from our survey were those responses to the “other” category. We learned that faced with unique and complex economic environments, the ability of

nonprofit managers to remain FAIR (Flexible, Adaptable, Innovative and Relationship Builders), emerged as key volunteer management practices. For example, flexibility was identified as the need to offer different training opportunities at different times/locations to meet volunteer's schedules and length of employment; adaptability materialized as the ability to tweak assignments based on interests and abilities; innovative practices were recognized as the willingness to accommodate volunteers' availability particularly for training and service opportunities; and taking the time, despite busy schedules, to provide feedback and performance assessment to volunteers emerged as key practices that strengthened volunteer management capacity in terms of relationship building.

Although our volunteer management framework produced some new insights and offers some avenues for further investigation, our study is not without limitations. While there are benefits of an online survey, there are also drawbacks. Perhaps most obvious is the low response rate. One plausible explanation may be that several of the human service organizations we surveyed were small and understaffed and did not have a formal volunteer program or coordinator designated to respond to the survey. Given these circumstances, those responding to the survey may have had more resources. Due however, to the small sample size, the authors acknowledge the limitation of the generalizability of this study and recommend further research to target the nonprofits that did not respond. Another limitation is the high number of managers that did not specifically identify the 'other' practices employed to address the identified challenges.

We suggest one area of future study may be to examine the implications of limiting episodic volunteers as a renewable resource (Brudney and Meijs 2009). Another suggestion is to help nonprofit human service volunteer managers be prepared to address individualized organizational needs and unique volunteer skills and availability within the FAIR (Flexible, Adaptable, Innovative and Relationship Builders) conceptualization (See Table 5). Best practices in volunteer management establish the ground work for effective utilization of a much needed resource. However, using FAIR to meet the needs of individual organizations during challenging economic periods may lead to more sustainable practices.

Hillary Knepper, PhD holds a doctorate in Public Affairs from the University of Central Florida. Dr. Knepper is an assistant professor in the Department of Public Administration at Pace University in New York where she teaches health policy, public administration, and nonprofit management courses. Dr. Knepper spent more than 20 years working in the nonprofit and public sectors before returning to school for her PhD. Research interests: Health policy with particular attention to underserved and vulnerable populations, nonprofit management, and local government.

Maria J. D'Agostino, PhD is an associate professor in the Department of Public Management at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY. D'Agostino's research has focused on women in public service including a co-edited book, *Women and Public Administration: Theory and Practice*. Her most recent article, *The Difference that Women Make: Government Performance and Women-Led Agencies*, appears in *Administration & Society*. Maria D'Agostino is the current recipient of the Section for Women in Public Administration Rita Mae Kelly Distinguished Research Award.

Helisse Levine, MA, PhD is associate professor and Director of the MPA Program Long Island University, School of Business, Public Administration and Information Sciences. She

earned her PhD in public administration from the School of Public Affairs and Administration, Rutgers University, Newark, N.J. Research interests: The role of fiscal constraints on government and healthcare organizations and gender inequities in government. Since entering academe she has contributed to many public administration and finance journals and is co-editor of the Handbook of Local Government Fiscal Health and Women in Public Administration: Theory and Practice.

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