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CENTER FOR VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT
EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT #4

"Experiences and Perceptions of Cooperating Extension Agents"

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CENTER FOR VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT
EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT #4

Introduction

This is the fourth in a continuing series of reports of the external evaluation of the Center for Volunteer Development (CVD). This report presents the results of the second of four planned surveys of Cooperative Extension agents who are involved in the delivery of the CVD program. The first of these surveys, described in External Evaluation Report #1, was administered in May 1981. The survey described in the present report was administered in May and June 1982. The remaining two surveys are scheduled for 1983 and 1984.¹

Specifically, the purposes of the surveys are to: (1) determine whether the agents' involvement in the CVD program is being carried out as planned; (2) assess the impact of CVD involvement on the agents' job performance and skills; (3) determine whether the agents support the CVD concept; and (4) ascertain the agents' judgments about the effectiveness of the CVD program.

The 1982 survey reported herein included all Extension agents associated with the CVD program at the time of the survey. Length of association with the CVD among these agents varied from less than one

¹These surveys are one element of a comprehensive external evaluation of the CVD program. The overall external evaluation is scheduled for completion in 1984. (See External Evaluation Report #1 for discussion of other elements of the evaluation).

month (new or beginning CVD agents) to 24 months (the most experienced CVD agents).² Agents with more than 12 months of CVD experience had previously served as subjects of the 1981 survey; thus, their responses provide a basis for assessing changes in the actions and perceptions of cooperating agents over time. The difference between these agents and the beginning CVD agents provides, in addition, a basis for comparing the perceptions of experienced and inexperienced CVD agents at the same point in time.

Methodology

A questionnaire designed for the experienced CVD agents was administered in Blacksburg, Virginia, on May 23, 1982 to agents attending a CVD in-service training session. A similar questionnaire designed for the inexperienced agents was administered to beginning CVD agents during their orientation training in June 1982 at regional training sites. These questionnaires were, with slight modifications, identical to the questionnaires used in the 1981 agent surveys. In order to encourage objective responses, respondents were instructed not to sign their questionnaires.

For purposes of analysis, the respondents were considered to be three separate groups. These were: experienced agents with 20 months or more affiliation with the CVD program (1980 agents); exper-

²The CVD concept, as outlined in the original proposal to the Kellogg Foundation, anticipated that cooperating Extension agents would play a key role in the delivery of CVD programs. The expected role included: maintaining contact with local volunteers and volunteer organizations; assisting these volunteers and organizations to identify problems or needs for assistance; referring these problems to the CVD to obtain campus-based problem solving assistance; and bringing their own skills and available community resources to bear on identified problems of volunteer development. (See External Evaluation Report #1.)

perienced agents with less than 20 months affiliation with the CVD (1981 agents); and experienced agents just beginning their affiliation with the CVD (1982 agents). The 1980 and 1981 agents were those agents included in the in-service training, while the 1982 agents were those included in orientation training.

Twenty-eight completed questionnaires were obtained from the 1980 agents, 21 were obtained from the 1981 agents, and 37 from the 1982 agents. The total of 86 completed questionnaires represents a 90% rate of response from the agents cooperating with the CVD.

Analysis of the data was based on: examination of simple frequencies and percentages of the responses to the 1982 survey questions; comparisons of the responses of the three separate groups of agents to the 1982 survey; comparison of the 1982 survey responses of the experienced CVD agents to the 1981 responses of these agents; and cross-tabular analysis of the experienced agents' responses to selected 1982 survey questions. The comparison of the 1982 survey responses of the experienced and beginning CVD agents provides a basis for some estimate of the impact of CVD experience on agents. A further estimate of such impact is provided by comparison of the 1981 and 1982 survey responses of the experienced agents. Tests of statistical significance have not been applied to these data at this time.

Findings

The findings of the 1982 survey focus primarily on the CVD Extension agents' actions and perceptions associated with conduct of their CVD role. Information about the agents' previous experience with volunteers and volunteering helps to put these findings into context.

As reported in External Evaluation Report #1 most (80%) of the 1980 and 1981 agents indicated that they were currently serving (in 1981) as a volunteer in one or more community service organizations. A similar percentage (85%) of these agents reported in 1982 that they were serving as a volunteer, and a comparable percentage (78%) of 1982 agents reported such service. Moreover, 85% or more of each of the three agent groups reported in 1982 that their own past involvement in volunteer activities was "moderate" or "heavy" as opposed to "light." All agents also reported extensive involvement in managing volunteers in connection with their own Cooperative Extension programs. Thus, the CVD agents bring considerable personal and professional experience with volunteerism into their CVD roles.

Agents' Involvement in the CVD Program Delivery Process

The 1980 and 1981 agents, all of whom have worked with the CVD for a year or more, reported on the average spending nine percent of their professional time in connection with their efforts to carry out the CVD program. A portion of this time was reported spent making contact with volunteer organizations or community service organizations with which the agents have not previously worked. The median tendency among the 1980 agents was to report initiating new contact with four such organizations during the 12 months previous to the survey, while the median tendency of the 1981 agents was to report initiating contact with five organizations. Although approximately one-quarter of the agents reported initiating only one or two contacts with such organizations, several agents from both groups reported initiating ten or more contacts. When asked how many of these newly contacted organizations requested problem solving assistance, the median tendency among the

1980 agents was to report that two organizations had made such requests, and among the 1981 agents to report that three had made requests.

With respect to action taken on requests from problem solving assistance, the median tendency among the 1980 and 1981 agents was to report having referred two problems to the CVD during the previous 12 months. However, almost half of the agents reported, in addition, resolving one or more problems of the organizations they had contacted using only local services, and approximately one-third reported using a combination of CVD and local resources to help resolve one or more additional problems.

These findings suggest that the agents associated with the CVD program are endeavoring, as envisioned in the CVD model, to develop working relationships with volunteer organizations. However, the amount of time the agents reported spending on CVD related work would seem to represent a modest effort, even though it may be within what was originally expected in the CVD program design. Furthermore, the quality of the agents' efforts are not well revealed in these data. Findings of interviews with representatives of volunteer organizations indicate, however, that these persons rate the quality of the agents' assistance rather highly. (A presentation of the results of these interviews will be made in a subsequent report.)

Impact of CVD Involvement on Agents' Professional Skills

Involvement in CVD programs could be expected to have an impact on the professional skills that agents use to carry out their other Extension program responsibilities. The findings tend to bear out the expectation. When asked specifically to estimate the impact of CVD involvement on their professional skills, approximately 40% of the 1980

and 1981 agents reported that their skills had been increased by a "moderate" extent (see Table 1). An additional 42% of the 1980 agents and 24% of the 1981 agents reported their skills had been increased by a "great" or "very great" extent. Furthermore, the 1980 agents, who were asked the same question on the 1981 survey, revealed a strong consistency over time to rate positively the benefits of CVD involvement (Table 1). At the time of the 1981 survey, this group of agents had one full year of experience working with the CVD; when the 1982 survey was given the group had two years of experience. (The 1981 agents were not asked this question on the 1981 survey since they had no CVD experience at that time.)

Table 1

Agents' Ratings of the Extent to Which
Involvement in Programs of the CVD has
Increased the Professional Skills They Use to
Carry out Other Programs (In Percent)

	1980 Agents	1981 Agents
1982 Survey	(N=28)*	(N=21)
Very Great Extent	4	14
Great Extent	38	10
Moderate Extent	38	43
Slight Extent	19	29
No Extent	0	4
1981 Survey	(N=21)	
Very Great Extent	0	
Great Extent	38	
Moderate Extent	43	
Slight Extent	19	
No Extent	0	

*Percentages do not total to 100 because of rounding.

The data also suggest that involvement with the CVD draws agents into new experiences associated with the CVD role. In response to a question that asked whether they had ever been involved in various activities in connection with serving community and volunteer organizations, larger percentages of the experienced CVD agents (1980 and 1981 agents) answered affirmatively than did the inexperienced CVD agents (1982 agents) beginning their association with the CVD (see Table 2).

Further evidence that CVD involvement leads to new experiences is found in the increase from 1981 to 1982 in the percentage of 1981 agents reporting that they had engaged in these activities (Table 2). (At the time of the 1981 survey, these agents were just beginning their CVD involvement; at the time of the 1982 survey they had been involved for one year.) The influence of CVD involvement seems especially apparent in the CVD role-related activities of interviewing organizational representatives, helping identify organizational problems, documenting problems, and working with specialists to help organizations. The only exception to the evidence supporting the existence of this influence is found in the decline from 1981 to 1982 in the percentage of 1980 agents reporting they had interviewed an organizational representative. Reasons for this decline are not apparent.

Responses to a survey question that asked agents to estimate their competence in these same activities suggests that CVD involvement also leads to increased feelings of competency. Thus, whereas 63% of the experienced 1980 and 1981 agents indicated they feel competent to a "very great extent" or "great extent" in interviewing organizational representatives, only 41% of the beginning 1982 agents reported similar competence. And, whereas 80% of the 1980 and 1981 agents indicated

Table 2

Percentages of Agents Answering "Yes" When
 Asked if They Had Engaged in Various Activities
 Associated with Serving Organizations That
 Use Volunteers

	1980 Agents	1981 Agents	1982 Agents
1982 Survey	(N=28)	(N=21)	(N=40)
Interviewed an Organizational Representative	75	95	43
Helped Identify/Diagnose a Problem	100	95	70
Documented a Problem for Record Keeping	68	76	33
Helped Organization Resolve Problem	96	95	70
Worked with Specialist to Help Organization	89	67	55
Obtained help for Organization From Elsewhere	93	81	58
Have Not Done Any of These Things	0	0	0
1981 Survey	(N=21)	(N=24)	
Interviewed an Organizational Representative	90	75	
Helped Identify/Diagnose a Problem	86	58	
Documented a Problem for Record Keeping	71	25	
Helped Organization Resolve Problem	100	79	
Worked with Specialist to Help Organization	90	42	
Obtained help for Organization From Elsewhere	76	71	
Have Not Done Any of These Things	0	0	

competence to a "very great extent" or "great extent" in helping resolve organizational problems, only 40% of the 1982 agents reported feeling such competence. Similar but somewhat small differences between experienced and inexperienced agents in estimates of competence exist for the other activities listed. Comparison of the 1981 and 1982 responses of the 1981 agents to this same question reinforces these findings. In 1982, after one year's experience in CVD work, these agents reported feeling more competent in these activities than they did in 1981 when just beginning their CVD affiliation.

The data also suggest that experience in working with the CVD influences the intent of the agents to work with volunteer and community service organizations. More than 80% of the experienced 1980 and 1981 agents indicated that they have plans for working with organizations that they are not currently assisting or in contact with. In contrast, 50% of the new 1982 agents indicated they have such plans, while 40% reported being uncertain. Again, a comparison of the 1981 agents' responses to this question at the beginning of their CVD experience to their responses after one year's experience reinforces these findings. In 1981, 50% of these agents reported they were planning to work with new organizations, while 42% were uncertain. In 1982, as indicated above, after a year's CVD experience almost 80% reported planning such work.

The activities that the CVD agents are engaging in, as revealed in these data, are consistent with the activities for cooperating agents that were outlined in the original CVD proposal. These data, combined with the findings about the agents' expenditure of time on CVD activity, suggest that some progress had been made toward the CVD goal of involving

the Cooperative Extension organization in new activity directed toward assistance to the volunteering community in Virginia. The data also reveal the possibility that benefit may be accruing to the agents in the form of a general increase of professional skills that may be applied to other program responsibilities.

While there is some evidence of benefits associated with CVD work, the findings do not reveal a spin-off benefit in some areas of agent responsibility where it might be expected. Thus, it might be expected that CVD experience would positively influence the agents' effectiveness in organizing and managing volunteer efforts that are involved in delivery of their own Extension programs. However, answers to survey questions aimed at assessing this possibility reveal little apparent influence. There are essentially no differences between experienced and inexperienced CVD agents in estimates of professional time spent in managing volunteer efforts associated with their Extension programs, and only slight differences exist in estimates of the effectiveness of these efforts. Similarly, there is little difference in the way experienced and inexperienced agents reported using volunteers, or in their estimates of whether their volunteers were doing the "right" jobs. Possible explanations of the apparent lack of CVD impact in this area are that the margin for agent change in the use of volunteers may be small, the time required to effect change may be great, or the CVD experience may be less relevant to this aspect of the agent role than it would seem.

Agents' Understanding and Support of the CVD Concept

It is reasonable to assume that the CVD's success in achieving its goals will depend to a significant degree upon the support of cooperating

Extension agents. The agent survey included questions intended to gauge the extent of such support. The findings indicate that cooperating agents generally feel that they understand the CVD role. A large majority also have a generally positive view of the CVD's mission and anticipated impact.

As indicated in Table 3, approximately two-thirds of the 1980 and 1981 agents reported that they understand the role of the CVD to a "very great extent" or "great extent." Almost all of the remainder of these agents reported that they understand the role to "some extent." In contrast, only one-quarter of the new 1982 agents reported understanding the CVD role to a "very great extent" or "great extent," while almost two-thirds reported understanding the role to "some extent."

Table 3
Agents' Estimates of How Well They
Understand the CVD Role (In Percent)

	1980 Agents	1981 Agents	1982 Agents
1982 Survey	(N=28)	(N=21)	(N=37)
Very Great Extent	25	9	6
Great Extent	43	57	20
Some Extent	32	29	62
Small Extent	0	5	9
Very Small Extent	0	0	3
1981 Survey	(N=21)	(N=24)*	
Very Great Extent	14	8	
Great Extent	62	33	
Some Extent	19	54	
Small Extent	0	4	
Very Small Extent	5	0	

*Percentages do not total to 100 because of rounding.

The agents' view of the CVD mission and role was assessed with several questions which asked the agents to estimate the effect that the CVD would have on Extension and volunteer organizations. Sixty-three percent of the experienced agents indicated that they think: the CVD fits the mission of Extension to a "very great extent" or "great extent;" 59% indicated the CVD will strengthen the programming effort of Extension in Virginia to a "very great extent" or "great extent;" and 71% indicated the CVD will address the problem-solving needs of volunteer organizations in their counties "very effectively" or "effectively." Cross-tabular analysis of the responses of the experienced agents suggests that there is a strong tendency for agents who say they understand the CVD well to be more likely than other agents to believe that the CVD fits the mission of Extension and will strengthen Extension.

In comparison to the experienced agents, a smaller percentage of the inexperienced 1982 agents indicated as high a degree of confidence in the CVD. The findings presented in Table 4 illustrate the difference between the assessments of the experienced and inexperienced agents on these questions. Note that 57% of the 1980 agents and 62% of the 1981 agents indicated that they think the CVD will strengthen the programming effort of Extension to a "very great extent" or "great extent," whereas only 38% of the 1982 agents indicated that they think the CVD will have that much impact. There is a suggestion in these data that understanding of the CVD concept and confidence in its impact may increase with experience in working with the CVD. Findings comparing the 1981 and 1982 responses of the experienced agents to these questions generally support the suggestion; except that the 1980

Table 4

The Extent to Which Agents Think the CVD
Will Strengthen the Programming Effort of
Extension in Virginia (In Percent)

	1980 Agents	1981 Agents	1982 Agents
1982 Survey	(N=28)	(N=21)	(N=37)
Very Great Extent	18	19	5
Great Extent	39	43	33
Some Extent	43	29	45
Small Extent	0	9	15
No Extent	0	0	2
1981 Survey	(N=28)	(N=21)	(N=37)
Very Great Extent	5	17	
Great Extent	33	37	
Some Extent	57	33	
Small Extent	5	13	
No Extent	0	0	

agents were somewhat less likely to indicate as great a degree of understanding of the CVD role in 1982 as in 1981. Such a change in reported understanding could result from increased familiarity with the role, changed role expectations, or new perceptions of the role required in training sessions.

These findings suggest there is a good possibility that the CVD will be able to sustain the support needed from cooperating agents to accomplish its long-range objectives. On the other hand, as shown in Table 5, approximately 20% of the experienced agents indicated that they think the CVD will have "little effect" or "no effect" on volunteer organizations, suggesting that the CVD faces a continuing challenge to achieve credibility among a sizeable minority of agents.

Table 5

The Extent to Which Agents Think the CVD
Will Effectively Address Problem Solving Needs
of Volunteer Organizations (In Percent)

	1980 Agents	1981 Agents	1982 Agents
1982 Survey	(N=28)	(N=21)	(N=37)
Very Effectively	4	14	2
Effectively	71	52	58
Little Effect	14	24	18
No Effect	4	0	2
Unsure	7	10	20
1981 Survey	(N=21)	(N=24)	
Very Effectively	0	12	
Effectively	43	63	
Little Effect	52	17	
No Effect	0	0	
Unsure	5	8	

Agents' Assessment of CVD Program Effectiveness

The experienced CVD agents (1980 and 1981 agents) were asked a series of questions intended to elicit their perception of the usefulness of the attempts made by the CVD to assist "all volunteer" organizations and community service organizations that use volunteers. Forty-two percent of these agents reported that they perceive the responses of faculty and CVD staff to have been "very useful" or "extremely useful" to the organizations that requested assistance. An additional 45% perceived the responses to have been "useful." Forty-five percent of the agents reported believing that "most" or "all" of these organizations would again seek CVD assistance. An additional 45% reported that "some" would again seek assistance.

When asked how useful to these organizations were local attempts at problem solution, a substantial majority (80%) of 1980 agents perceived such attempts to have been useful. However, the 1981 agents' perception of local attempts at problem solution was much less positive, with 56% viewing local attempts as being of "little use." There is no obvious explanation for this difference in perception between the two groups of agents, with the possible exception of the 1980 agents' added experience.

The agents' ratings of various aspects of the response of campus faculty to the problems that were referred to the CVD for solution were generally positive with the exception of ratings of "timeliness" (see Table 6). These ratings of the response of the campus faculty were quite similar to those given by the 1980 agents in response to the 1981 survey. It should be noted that a concern with "timeliness" was expressed both in 1981 and 1982. The concern is apparently related to a perception that too much time elapses between referral of a problem to the CVD and delivery of a response. The extent to which this concern may reflect an important problem is unclear, however, in the light of the findings of interviews with representatives of volunteer organizations that have requested CVD assistance. These findings, which will be presented in a subsequent report, suggest that the time taken for the CVD response was not a major concern of most of these representatives, although a few did identify it as a problem.

Finally, the agents generally rated the training, materials, and specialist assistance they have received from the CVD as being effective in assisting them in implementing the CVD program. Forty-six percent of the agents rated the orientation training they received as being

Table 6

Agents' Ratings of Various Aspects of Faculty
Faculty Response to Requests for Assistance (In Percent)

Aspect of Response	1980 Agents (N=28)	1981 Agents (N=21)
<u>Clarity</u>		
Very Good	24	31
Good	16	31
Satisfactory	52	31
Poor	8	7
Very Poor	0	0
<u>Timeliness</u>		
Very Good	12	25
Good	32	19
Satisfactory	12	12
Poor	28	25
Very Poor	16	19
<u>Completeness</u>		
Very Good	21	19
Good	25	31
Satisfactory	25	38
Poor	29	12
Very Poor	0	0
<u>Relevance to Problem</u>		
Very Good	12	38
Good	44	31
Satisfactory	32	31
Poor	12	0
Very Poor	0	0
<u>Ease of Application</u>		
Very Good	13	13
Good	25	33
Satisfactory	33	47
Poor	29	7
Very Poor	0	0

"very good" or "excellent," while 44% rated it as being "good." In-service training received similar ratings from a slightly greater percentage of agents. Over 80% of the agents indicated they have received

useful reference materials for either some or all of the problems they submitted to the CVD. And, more than 80% reported that the assistance of the CVD program specialist in their area has been "very helpful" or "extremely helpful" in implementing the CVD intake-problem solving process (see Table 7).

Table 7
Agents' Ratings of Assistance Received From
CVD Program Specialists (In Percent)

Rating	1980 Agents (N=28)	1981 Agents (N=21)
Extremely Helpful	37	52
Very Helpful	44	29
Moderately Helpful	19	14
Little Help	0	5
No Help	0	0

Although approximately 60% of the agents said they have faced obstacles in attempting to carry out the program of the CVD, the findings presented in this section suggest in general that the agents are positive in their estimates of CVD program effectiveness. The agents' view of the CVD from a community-level perspective provides one estimate of CVD progress. Although the agents cannot be considered unbiased observers, their judgment overall is that the CVD is providing a useful service to volunteers and volunteer organizations. However, the findings also indicate the agents believe there is room for improvement both in the quality of CVD responses to requests for assistance and in the support being provided by the CVD to agents.

Summary of Major Findings

1. Extension agents cooperating with the CVD indicated that they are performing the tasks specified in the CVD program delivery model. However, the data do not provide a basis for assessing the quality of the agents' efforts. (Results of interviews with volunteers and representatives of volunteer organizations, to be presented in a subsequent report, will address the issue of quality.)
2. The findings suggest that cooperating agents are acquiring new experience in carrying out CVD work. Agents tend to believe that CVD experience adds to their professional skills. However, there is no indication that CVD experience changes the way that agents manage volunteers in their own programs.
3. Cooperating agents generally believe the CVD fits the mission of Extension and will effectively address problem solving needs of "all-volunteer" organizations. Understanding the CVD and confidence in its influence seems to grow with experience in working with it. Nevertheless, approximately 20% of the experienced agents believe that CVD will have little or no effect on the needs of "all-volunteer" organizations.
4. A majority of cooperating agents perceive that the responses of faculty and CVD staff have been useful to organizations requesting assistance, and most believe that some or all of the organizations would again seek CVD assistance. Agents' ratings of various aspects of the responses provided by campus faculty are generally positive.
5. Experienced agents rated CVD training "good" to "excellent" and indicated that support from CVD specialists is "very helpful" to "extremely helpful."