

■ Volunteering within Immigrant Communities: The Perspectives of Volunteers in the Hmong, Latino, and Somali Communities of the United States

Voluntariado nas comunidades de imigrantes: Perspectivas dos voluntários nas comunidades Hmong, Latinas e Somalis dos Estados Unidos

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Abstract Minnesota has experienced dramatic changes in population diversity over the last 25 years; once primarily a state of northern European ancestry, Minnesota's diversity rate continues to be one of the highest in the United States. The annual immigration rate in Minnesota is triple that rate of 25 years ago. These statistics reveal that Minnesota's population is reflecting a more non-European population with diversity in language, thinking, and cultural practices. Within the state and across the United States, nonprofit leaders, in mainstream and immigrant communities recognize that to meet their mission and to serve a diverse constituent population, their involvement of volunteers needs to be expanded to reflect the new face of Minnesota. Yet, these leaders do not have access to the resources, the knowledge, and the information necessary to make these changes. Because there has been little research conducted on volunteerism in immigrant communities in the United States, best practices in working with these communities are limited. The combination of a rapid growth in diversity in Minnesota and the lack of resources on volunteerism in immigrant and refugee communities have left organizations ill prepared to produce the next generation of volunteers and volunteer leaders. The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of volunteerism in the Hmong, Latino, and Somali communities and how these perceptions could be useful to building nonprofit effectiveness. The findings reveal that immigrant communities perceive volunteerism as "helping out" or a social/moral obligation to one another and that creating authentic relationships is critical to the success of engaging volunteers from immigrant communities.

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Keywords immigrant, volunteers, nonprofits, Hmong, Latino, Somali, formal volunteer(ing), informal volunteer(ing)

Resumo O Minnesota tem experimentado mudanças dramáticas na diversidade populacional nos últimos 25 anos; em tempos iniciais, um estado de ascendência europeia do norte, a taxa de diversidade do Minnesota continua a ser uma das mais altas nos Estados Unidos. A taxa de imigração anual no Minnesota é o triplo de há 25 anos. Estas estatísticas revelam que a população do Estado está a reflectir uma população mais não-europeia, com diversidade na linguagem, pensamento e práticas culturais. Dentro do Estado e através dos Estados Unidos, os líderes das organizações sem fins lucrativos, das comunidades estabelecidas e das comunidades de imigrantes reconhecem que para cumprir a sua missão e para servir uma população diversificada, o envolvimento de voluntários precisa de ser expandido para reflectir a nova face do Minnesota. No entanto, esses líderes não têm acesso aos recursos, ao conhecimento e às informações necessárias para fazer essas alterações. Uma vez que tem havido pouca pesquisa realizada sobre o trabalho voluntário nas comunidades de imigrantes nos Estados Unidos, as melhores práticas no trabalho com estas comunidades são limitadas. A combinação de um rápido crescimento na diversidade do Minnesota e da falta de recursos sobre o voluntariado em comunidades de imigrantes e refugiados têm deixado as organizações mal preparadas para produzir a próxima geração de voluntários e líderes voluntários. O objectivo deste estudo foi compreender as percepções de voluntariado nas comunidades Hmong, Latina e Somali e como essas percepções podem ser úteis para a construção de eficácia sem fins lucrativos. Os resultados revelam que as comunidades imigrantes percebem o voluntariado como “ajudando” ou como uma obrigação social / moral para com o outro e que a criação de relações autênticas é fundamental para o sucesso no envolvimento de voluntários de comunidades de imigrantes.

Palavras-chave Imigrantes, voluntários, entidades sem fins lucrativos, Hmong, Latina, Somali, voluntariado formal, voluntariado informal

■ Volunteering within Immigrant Communities: The Perspectives of Volunteers in the Hmong, Latino, and Somali Communities of the United States

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Introduction

Minnesota has experienced dramatic changes in population diversity over the last 25 years. The annual immigration rate in Minnesota is triple that rate of 25 years ago. Latino and Asian populations in the state grew by over 160% between the 1990 and 2000 census reports and the African population in the Twin Cities increased by 629%. These statistics reveal that Minnesota's population is reflecting a more non-European population with diversity in language, thinking, and cultural practices.

The impact of immigration can be felt on multiple levels within non-profit organizations. Mainstream organizations in Minnesota face serious challenges in recruiting, managing, and involving volunteers from immigrant communities. While Minnesota has a significant level of volunteerism, non-profit leaders recognize that to meet their mission and to serve a diverse constituent population, their involvement of volunteers needs to be expanded to reflect the new face of Minnesota. Yet, these leaders do not have access to the resources, the knowledge, and the information necessary to make these changes. Most importantly, they are not aware of the differing perspectives of volunteerism within cultural communities.

The combination of a rapid growth in diversity in Minnesota and the lack of resources on volunteerism in immigrant communities have left organizations ill prepared to produce the next generation of volunteers and volunteer leaders. Often, their approaches are rooted in western understandings of volunteerism and organizing; thus biasing them towards a particular methodology of recruitment, training, and management of immigrant volunteers.

These results on volunteerism in ethnic/racial communities are not new. In 2002, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation released a report that illustrated the giving and volunteer patterns of four key population groups in the United States: African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, and Asian Americans. For each, the report outlined the group's different paths to volunteerism, how volunteerism practices are misunderstood by outsiders, and that a mismatch of organizational systems and practices can lead to poor engagement of ethnic communities.

In this study, we wanted to understand the ways volunteerism was perceived in immigrant communities, and how this understanding can be used to help mainstream organizations' authentic engagement of immigrant volunteers. We chose to inter-

view immigrants from the Hmong, Latino, and Somali communities because they are the largest population in the state.

Literature Review

In order to conduct a literature review of volunteerism within immigrant groups, it is first necessary to identify the immigrant groups: Hmong, Latino, and Somali. It is also important and useful to identify the difference between immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. In many instances, these terms are used interchangeably to identify ethnic groups. Most of the terms were derived from the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau. The term race is used as a social concept, not for scientific purposes, in addressing the self-identification by individuals according to the physical attributes that they mostly identified with.

Hispanics or Latinos were classified as “one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed on the Census 2000 questionnaire – ‘Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano,’ ‘Puerto Rican,’ or ‘Cuban’ – as well as those who indicate that they are ‘other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.’” The origins of those identified as ‘other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino’ are from the Spanish-speaking countries of Central or South America, and the Dominican Republic (Jalandoni and Hume, 2001). Asians were defined as those originating from the Far East, Southeast Asia, or India. This also includes countries such as Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam. The Hmong were acknowledged in the Census 2000 as being peoples who inhabit the mountainous regions of China and Southeast Asia. Somalis were categorized as Muslim people originating from Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti.

Immigrant Group: Hmong

The Hmong in the United States came mainly from Northern Laos as refugees after the Vietnam War. An agrarian minority group, they fought alongside American soldiers during the war. The CIA recruited the Hmong as its “secret army” in Laos—rescuing downed American pilots, and gathering intelligence for bombing missions along the Ho Chi Minh trail. After the communist takeover of Laos in 1975, many Hmong fled to Thailand. From Thailand they came to the United States as refugees. When the Lao government marked the Hmong for genocidal extinction, the Hmong fought bravely although they suffered many casualties. In 1975 the first Hmong family arrived in the United States. Since then, an estimated 150,000 Hmong have resettled in the U.S. and call it “home.” The 2000 Census reports there are over 200,000 Hmong-Americans residing in 49 states with the largest populations in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, respectively.

In America, the Hmong have discovered that the color of their skin is also a hindrance to their advancement in educational institutions, social services, and the work force. In fact, among the Asian immigrant groups, the Hmong has the lowest per capita income at \$2,692 in 1990, the largest family size with 6.6 persons in 1990, and the highest poverty rate for Asian groups at 63.6 percent in 1989 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993). Hmong, along with Cambodian and Laotians, also have the lowest educational attainment rates with less than half finishing high school and only 3 to 4% with a bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993). These statistics have improved significantly during the 2000 census records, where the rate for Hmong high school graduates increased to 60.3% and 10.4% for bachelor’s degree or higher (American Community Survey, 2006).

Immigrant Group: Latino

The Latino population exists as the largest ethnic group in the United States. Whether documented or undocumented, Latinos are making their homes in the United States and seeking new opportunities for education, employment, and political activism. Immigration from Mexico, Central and South America were based on employment, where male laborers were especially needed for the manual labor of a growing United States (Census, 2000). These positions often took the forms of construction labor, assembly lines, and even agricultural jobs, such as picking sugar beets (Triplett, 2004). The most well-known employment contract is the Bracero Program in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution where Mexican farmers left their impoverished rural communities to become laborers for independent farmer associations in the United States (Heisler, 2008). Jobs performed by the braceros include picking cucumbers and tomatoes, picking and weeding cotton, and other various jobs in the sugar industry (Triplett, 2004).

Workers often suffered from poor work conditions and retaliation from racist groups because of their “illegal” employment status (Heisler, 2008). After worker contracts expired, the braceros would return home but being unable to support their families, they continue to cross the borders and labor as chili pickers (Triplett, 2004). Latinos are also one of the most active groups fighting for labor rights and improved working conditions.

Immigrant Group: Somali

Somali refugees arrived in large numbers to the United States in 1999 when civil war broke out in Somali. An estimated 800,000 Somalis fled the country during this time with at least 30,000 settling in the United States.¹ The states with the largest Somali settlements are Minnesota and Wisconsin, where thousands of Somalis found employment, education and social services to refugees (Condon, 2006). In these two states, Somali refugees, as with Hispanic immigrants, are also more willing than

other groups of refugees or immigrants to move to the suburbs for employment opportunities. As more and more immigrants and refugees settle in these states and with a large percentage of these groups not knowing English, the competition for low-wage jobs increases. Some obstacles Somalis have faced in the United States are aimed at their cultural and religious practices, especially after the attack of 9/11. Due to their religious identity, many Somalis were targeted in terrorist raids, despite the fact that they had nothing to do with 9/11. As a result, Somalis are often assaulted by the wider community and the government. Similar to the experiences of Hispanic immigrants, Somalis have been denied settlement in specific states, but like other ethnic minority groups, they are building communities and developing social networks to inform their communities about who they are and fighting for their rights.²

Volunteerism and Immigrants

In the literature review of volunteerism among recent immigrant communities, immigrant volunteering is typically seen as a way to integrate and immerse immigrant communities into a wider mainstream community (Bowdenleigh, 2006; Howlett, 2005). Volunteer work becomes increasingly seen as a way to enhance the economic, social, and political engagement of immigrants (Jantzi, 2008; Safrit and Lopez, 2001). There have been multiple programs initiated both in the United States and Europe that address the need to facilitate integration within immigrant groups.

In his review of MEM-VOL, a program created to promote volunteerism within minority ethnic groups, Howlett (2005) writes that the *"effects of MEM volunteering as a means of integration - societal, cultural and on the labour market - and as a means of empowerment and development of civil society is highly underestimated and disregarded"* (para. 3-4). Rather than sweeping immigrant volunteerism into the margins, Howlett argues how the presence of volunteer activities allow ethnic and immigrant groups to work together and maintain unification because disenfranchised communities become socially and politically involved in responding to the challenges and injustices their communities face. Volunteerism can bring in social inclusion by increasing the self-esteem and trust in immigrants from being provided the opportunity to help out and change the community. Nonetheless, this process can only be made possible by immigrants first volunteering in their own communities before engaging in volunteer work within mainstream organizations. This is contributed to the fact that immigrants are most attracted to organizations that serve their communities.

In another report reviewed by Howlett (2006) on refugee and asylum seekers volunteerism, he supported that volunteers will habitually turn to their own community or *"a refugee organization - far fewer go on to volunteer in other non-refugee organizations"* (para. 5). They often look for organizations that deliver services that *"will*

help support them in their quest to practice skills, practice English, and learn about the local community—and that these are as important as the particular cause the organization is addressing" (para. 10).

Similar to the effects perceived under the MEM-VOL program in Europe, other research elaborate on the opportunities that volunteerism provide for ethnic and immigrant communities in familiarizing with other communities. In their study of Hispanic American volunteerism, Safrit and Lopez (2001) observed that volunteers *"have had personal needs met by their participation in volunteer activities. The study of participants also indicated that volunteering is an important duty, obligation, and social responsibility"* (para. 65). Dudley (2007) also shares this view of volunteering within the wider community to enhance ethnic/immigrant groups' exposure to mainstream customs and habits, arguing that *"volunteering allows you to be part of cultures, issues and activities, and lifestyles you might never experience' and allows for social contact that is of great value"* (2007: 542). This "social contact" then can also increase a communal confidence and creates a welcoming environment where integration can take place.

In immigrant communities, volunteerism is increasingly seen as a vehicle for communities to tap into resources, services, and networks. It serves as a way to discover and understand the needs of their own communities while allowing them to be part of another culture and lifestyle. In many ways, formal volunteerism provides increase social contact and relationships making the acculturation process easier to handle. Formal volunteerism in the United States allows these volunteers to build social relationships with community organizers, staff and supervisors of the organizations they volunteer for, and it increases their social network and capital. Immigrant volunteering, whether formal or informal, is heavily influenced by family and friends. Generally, immigrants first volunteer in their own communities before engaging in volunteer work within mainstream organizations. This is due to the fact that immigrants are most attracted to organizations that serve and speak to the needs of their communities.

Volunteer levels among immigrant groups can be overlooked depending on how "volunteerism" is defined. Studies have shown that volunteerism within these communities is seen as reciprocity which is common within communities that are family/collective-oriented. As a result, when these communities are asked about their volunteer participation, they do not often acknowledge it as volunteering. Informal volunteering can also imply social or religious obligations to either the family, community, or the larger society. Some social obligations that are common among immigrant groups are the use of children as cultural brokers for their parents and friends and neighbors serving in the role of a day-care provider. This is not acknowledged as being volunteer work even though many of these positions are considered paid positions when taken by outside members. Negligence to consider the signifi-

cance of informal volunteering will greatly undermine the voluntary participation of immigrant groups.

Religious networks are exceedingly important to community participation and volunteer work. For many groups, religion is a central and daily part of people's lives and they abide to these values. Volunteering for some immigrant communities is sustained by religious beliefs. Religions such as Islam and Buddhism see the commitment to help others. Immigrant groups who are religiously inspired by such a mandate will carry out this practice among family and outsiders.

Research has indicated that immigrant and ethnic volunteerism has been limited because there has been a lack of interest within institutions and policies to address the needs and concerns in extending voluntary opportunities for immigrants (Lopez and Safrit, 2002; Howlett, 2006). Sometimes efforts to acquire ethnic/immigrant volunteers are inattentive and not expendable. Ethnic and immigrant groups are not asked to volunteer as much as whites. Communities of color are often perceived to be the recipients of voluntary services; hence, this may be why they are often not asked to volunteer as much. Certain groups also hesitate to volunteer because they feel their help is not needed or valued. This also causes these groups to be less involved in mainstream organizations or engage in formal volunteering.

Studies reveal that there is a lack of commitment in recruiting and retaining ethnic/immigrant volunteers, as well as inappropriate measures to include non-white volunteers. Cultural sensitivity on the part of mainstream organizations remains a huge barrier for immigrant groups in seeking out mainstream voluntary organizations. Research findings have also indicated that in order for recruitment of black and minority ethnic groups to be successful, the structures within the organization have to change. In order to attract a certain group in volunteerism, organizations have to structure their policies in ways that are responsive to the beliefs and experiences of the group. Organizations will need to respond to the barriers that keep these groups from becoming involved.

Methods

We interviewed twenty nine (29) individuals from the Hmong, Latino, and Somali communities of Minnesota for this study. First we identified gatekeepers and informants and then we used a snow ball sampling. As a result, we interviewed nine Hmong persons of which six resided in the Twin Cities metro area and three were residents of the Saint Cloud area. Of the six in the Twin Cities, four were in the 20s, one in her 30s, and two were in their 40s. The three from Saint Cloud were recent graduates of the local university in their area, and all were in their early 20s. 80% of those interviewed were first generation immigrants. For the Latino group, we interviewed twelve individuals in the Twin Cities of which 50% were first generation

and the other 50% were second generation Latino; all recorded their background from the following regions: Mexico, Central America, and South America. Seven of the twelve were women. Because of the challenges recruiting participants from the Saint Cloud area, no interviews were conducted from that area. For the Somali group, eight individuals were interviewed, of which three were in the Twin Cities and five were residents of the Saint Cloud, Minnesota area. All participants were men and first generation Somali in the United States, having recently immigrated in the early 1990s. A focus group was also conducted in the summer of 2009 with 15 Somali participants from Volunteers of America located in Minneapolis.

The research questions in our study included the following:

1. What is the perception of volunteerism within immigrant communities?
2. How can different perspectives of volunteerism be helpful to building nonprofit organizational effectiveness?
3. What cross cultural issues/challenges do immigrant volunteers face in their volunteer work?

Study Findings

Building relationships and trust, as it is seen in a western world, often reflects an "ends" or "outcome-based" result. This ends or outcome-based result can be seen in organizations as "making quotas" or as one participant noted, "*I feel that sometimes I am expected to connect them [the organization] with my community and its resources [as a result of volunteering].*" These types of outcomes are derived from a need and sometimes a pressure for organizations to "reflect" the people they serve. Relationships and trust in these communities are not based on an "end result." Rather, it is individuals working together to secure the sanctity of the relationship. It is the relationship that is at stake, not the end result. For the Hmong community, relationships are kinship, tribal and clan-based. As one participant noted:

"In the Hmong community, [there] is a huge volunteer commitment that the Hmong people are doing....if someone passes away, and there is a funeral service, a lot of Hmong people will come together to help with cooking, rituals; even if they have to spend 24 hours. I see a lot of volunteers (right there) that have been helping each other; they have been comforting each other. This is volunteer work, but they did not document or record it...I just feel like because we have the habit back in our homeland when someone needs help with harvesting their crops we help them out and then they come and help you out. That support system has been present for a long time in the Hmong community."

For the Latino community, the family and community is core to relationship building and trust. One person noted:

"My family was brought up to help, raised with the expectation to help out where you can.... I don't know if it's considered volunteering, it's just helping out. It's not how it's thought of – hey, this is what's going on and can you help. It's seen as "helping out" not volunteering".

Within the Somali community, tribal and religious values influence relationship norms. One person spoke to this by saying:

"I guess the number one [reason] would be their [Somali] spiritual belief. That is the driving force...that's telling them to do volunteerism for communities that they live in for the greater good of that community."

As noted by many interviewees, there is a large need for organizations and members of the dominant society to build authentic relationships with immigrant communities and their members. A Somali man responded that it's important for nonprofits and county agencies to:

"know the culture and the people. The community has to trust them."

Additionally, he added:

"[they] need to work with the community so they better understand the needs and to respond appropriately."

Similarly, a participant from the Hmong community said:

"To the Hmong community, sometimes if they don't know an agency or a person, they may not trust it. Trust is very important. One idea is they want the Hmong to be recognized [valued] so that is also important. It has to be an agency they know because that agency will know who they are and what kind of help they need."

What does this mean for organizations that recruit and engage immigrant volunteers? It means that organizations need to understand how relationships are created and why they are created in the Hmong, Latino and Somali communities. One way is for organizations to understand how a group's culture can impact volunteerism. For example, a Latina participant said this about understanding the workings of the Latino culture and volunteerism:

"Traditionally, our cultural community is collective and interdependent. We have a collectivist spirit and independence is not valued highly."

A Hmong participant noted the following about culture's impact on volunteerism:

"Volunteerism that has a cultural attachment is more important than volunteerism that does not have attachment with culture. For example, at a funeral we would go and spend time, we would give money to family we don't even know, we stay there many hours to fill up the room. We cook food and it's not a big deal, but that's because it's part of the culture. [We learned] that when you have a funeral, [it's expected that] people will come and help you out."

And, one Somali interviewee said:

"Somalis mainly don't volunteer to build or advance their career....They mainly look at the volunteerism from its humanitarian angle, which is helping others to improve the life of the whole."

Certain groups are hesitant to volunteer because they feel their help is not needed or valued; this was connected to building trust and relationships. This was expressed by participants as, "our community doesn't understand the concept of volunteerism" or "there is too much paper work and record-keeping which is an obstacle to helping." And, related to this, the notion of credibility was prevalent and speaks to the value of experiences and skills many immigrant volunteers bring with them to more formalized volunteer opportunities. For example, a Somali man noted that he was a doctor in his country, and in the United States, he is asked to accompany others to their appointments because many individuals in the community do not trust the medical system. Organizations that pay attention to the cultural dynamics of any group/culture will do better at building relationships and trust.

Participants in the study noted that their perception of volunteerism comes from a place of social obligation. These were commonly expressed among immigrant groups as the use of themselves or their children as cultural brokers. This included oral and written translations, filling out forms, or attending school or meetings. For example, one Hmong participant noted:

"I have done a lot of interpretation for parent teacher conferences. Last Friday we had a community engagement public forum that the school needed moderators for [in order to] talk with parents about the changes that are needed. I don't work there but I will do it for the parents."

Another way that obligation was seen was through the use of one's skills to help improve one's community or ensure one's status in the community. Generally, this is

seen not as a benefit to oneself, but rather a benefit to the larger collective, and in the example below from a Somali participant, a way to keep social identity in place.

“Girls stay with their family and don’t go out. They stay home and clean the house. They will go out to help with the neighbors, like other moms or new moms and help with kids like babysitting. They help people so that they can go to work so they don’t have to worry about a babysitter.”

These types of informal volunteerism are not acknowledged as being volunteer work, and even more importantly not considered as skills for employment. For example, a Latino trained attorney in her home country said that her licensure as an attorney was not credible enough in mainstream organizations. She ended up in a volunteer position that did not utilize her skills as an attorney and working with children. The volunteer position she received: cleaning windows.

Because families, villages and kin are part of the social norm for these three immigrant populations, relationships become a way to cultivate a sense of belonging, a social identity. Within informal structures (e.g. helping one’s neighbor with a sick child or taking time to cook for guests at a funeral), volunteer opportunities help to solidify one’s social identity. These events seal the relationships and, in many cases, uphold the social norms that support the relationships. As an example, a Hmong man said this in response to informally volunteering time for family and friends:

“I give great advice to my siblings, niece, and nephews who are off to work and school. I don’t think that’s volunteerism to help family out, it’s just what I do. In the Hmong culture it’s just expected you do it all the time. You go out to family functions and help out (wedding funeral); that’s just a cultural thing.”

A Hmong woman interviewee noted similarly the importance of family and volunteerism on one’s social identity. She said:

“The value of family is really being connected to your family and being able to help each other out when necessary. [We have a] responsibility and there is a deep sense of responsibility that is instilled within our families and the community.”

A Somali man from the Saint Cloud region, in reflection of social obligation, noted the following:

“Informal volunteering is well known in the Somali community. In the town where I grew up, we had this “goob” concept. How it works is that we were farming community. During the harvesting season, all farmers used to come together

and help each member of the community to harvest the crops. They would work on each member’s farm at a time.”

Additionally, many spoke about the importance of their own political history, and how these histories shape social identity. For example, banding together as a village or utilizing kinship networks to collectively take action against a political dictator or leader.

Finally, the research shows that collective systems are critical factors to consider within informal volunteerism. Overall, participants noted that the assistance and help they provide is often for a greater good for the community, not to a specific organization. This is why many of the immigrant participants volunteered for organizations that are part of their community such as a Hmong American Partnership or a local mosque or church.

Discussion of Findings

Based on the research, there are a few things non-profit organizations can do to engage volunteers from immigrant communities more intentionally. This study revealed that immigrant volunteers want organizations to recognize and honor a more authentic relationship that goes beyond “end results” and “outcomes.” They want organizations to understand that relationships within their communities are not short-term; that there is a long-term investment that includes understanding the deeper reason for why relationships are created and how trust is formed. Thus, organizations need to ask the following:

- (1) Who is important in relationships, and why?
- (2) What forms of relationships exist in this community?
- (3) What do relationships mean within this community?
- (4) How do people in this community work together?

Because participants stated that building relationship and trust is key, asking these questions enable an organization to be more authentic in their engagement of volunteers. They drive at the heart of how relationships are perceived in any community.

Secondly, organizations must explore their reasons and identify their intentions for engaging immigrant volunteers. Why is this important? It is suggested that organizations ask themselves the following questions when taking on this initiative:

- (1) Why do we want to engage immigrant volunteers?
- (2) What do we know about this community?
- (3) What values or beliefs do we hold about this community?

- (4) What issues or challenges might we face?
- (5) What type of relationship do we want to have?

These questions will help an organization to assess its readiness in working with immigrant communities.

Organizations need to strategically and intentionally have periodic conversations about changes in volunteerism and the impact this has in their organizational practices. Many immigrant participants in this study indicated that organizations do not do enough to hold meaningful strategy sessions on immigrant volunteerism. It is recommended that these conversations should include and begin with board and organizational leadership/management. Questions should include the following:

- (1) What changes do we see in volunteerism, particularly with immigrant volunteers?
- (2) What is (or will be) the impact of these changes to our organization? To our mission? To how we deliver our programs?
- (3) How can our organizations adapt to meet these changes?
- (4) Are we willing to change? If so, how far are we willing to change? If not, why not?

Third, it is clear from the participant responses that cultural competency and proficiency of staff and the organization are critical to have when working with immigrant volunteers. Organizations need to feel that they are successfully involving immigrant volunteers in order to create environments where volunteers thrive. Ensuring the relationship is authentic and maintaining a relationship where both individuals learn from one another is central to cross cultural learning.

Conclusion

Volunteers from immigrant communities are part of an untapped generation of volunteer workers. With solid values that speak to community and family, an unwavering dedication towards a collective good, and carrying with them strong ethics of responsibility for community, volunteers from immigrant communities are a mine of potential. Their talents and skills can be put to great use, furthering civic engagement, public participation, and philanthropy. This study looked at the perceptions of volunteers from three immigrant communities: Hmong, Latino, and Somali within the state of Minnesota in the United States. The results demonstrate that immigrant volunteers perceive volunteerism in an informal manner, often called "helping out" and that their cultural identity plays a large role in their successful engagement in organizations and groups.

Notes

¹ www.minneapolisfoundation.org

² www.minneapolisfoundation.org

³ www.minneapolisfoundation.org

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