


COMMENTARY

## Enhancing graduate student education through meaningful volunteer efforts

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Tippins et al. (2023) illustrate the importance of experienced industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists volunteering their expertise to benefit nonprofit and charitable organizations in numerous ways. Yet, we propose that engaging more *inexperienced* members of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) and I-O psychology community, specifically graduate students, in volunteer efforts is necessary to further contribute to our field. Encouraging volunteerism within this overlooked population can expand our community's influence upon the health and effectiveness of nonprofit organizations while simultaneously serving as training for future I-O psychologists. Furthermore, fostering a desire to serve within our community during the formative years of graduate school is critical to developing a sustainable model of volunteerism.

In this commentary, we highlight a specific program—the Volunteer Program Assessment (or VPA; pronounced vee-pah)—that has engaged graduate students in meaningful volunteer consulting efforts for 15 years. Approximately 230 graduate students have served as VPA consultants in that time, totaling a collective impact of 787 VPA surveys administered to volunteer programs. We extend the arguments from Tippins et al., to show how applying I-O knowledge and skills by volunteering during graduate school, through programs such as VPA, enhances graduate student education through the development of professional skills, training skills, and networking opportunities. To promote the continued mobilization of volunteerism among graduate students, we provide information on how other graduate programs and professional organizations can initiate these efforts.

### What is VPA?

VPA is a graduate student volunteer program that provides free consulting services to nonprofit organizations. Founded in 2009 through a partnership between Dr. Steven Rogelberg and the Organizational Science (OS) doctoral program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (Charlotte) and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), the idea for VPA initially stemmed from research suggesting that volunteer programs impact organizational effectiveness through relationships/interactions between volunteers and paid staff (Rogelberg et al., 2010). Since its inception, VPA has spawned affiliate programs at eight other universities across the United States, exposing more graduate students to the VPA volunteer experience.

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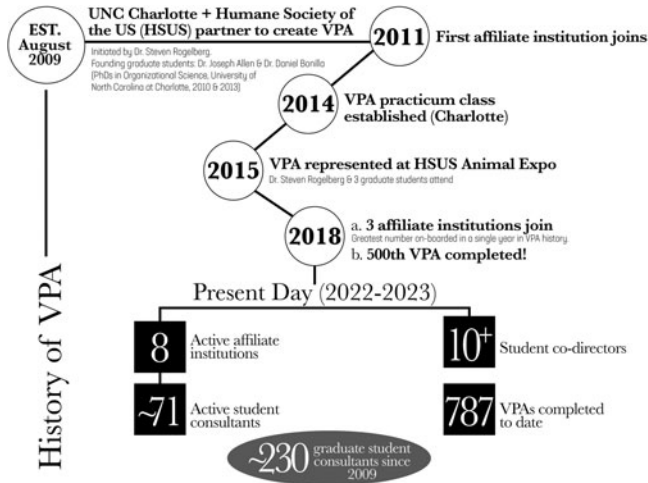


Figure 1. VPA History and Current Metrics Title.

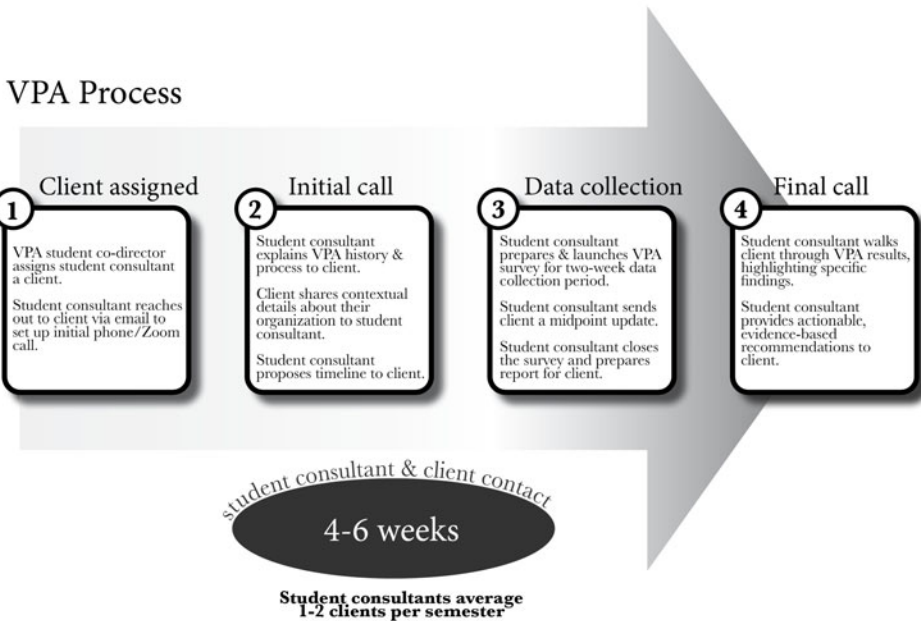


Figure 2. VPA Process With a Client.

Figure 1 illustrates a timeline of major milestones in the history of VPA, as well as current metrics for the program.

From the outset, VPA’s mission has been to promote the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations by measuring relevant constructs through validated assessments and sharing evidence-based recommendations. Though it began as an effort to improve the volunteer programs of animal welfare organizations, VPA has since diversified its nonprofit client base to serve health and human service organizations, as well as arts, sciences, and cultural organizations, and more. The VPA process (illustrated in Figure 2) has evolved into an organized (roughly 4-step) consulting experience guided by graduate students.

Graduate students who volunteer as VPA consultants receive unparalleled experience working as lead consultants with nonprofit client organizations. VPA consultants (mostly graduate students, though some consultants continue volunteering for the program postgraduation) are responsible for driving the entire VPA process with their clients, from initiating client communication to scheduling assessment plans and following up with clients, running the survey and analysis process, and interpreting results for their clients. Upon receiving a client, consultants initiate the VPA process, which mirrors consulting behaviors of career I-Os (i.e., “get-to-know-you” calls, survey administration, data analysis, and sharing of best-practice recommendations). More tenured VPA consultants also have the opportunity to serve as a VPA codirector. VPA codirectors have additional administrative responsibility, like screening applications and connecting clients with consultants. In the subsequent sections, we illustrate how these responsibilities enhance graduate student education, provide professional development, and build a foundation of volunteerism that can evolve into a lifetime commitment.

### **Benefits to graduate students**

Volunteering during graduate school, through organizations such as VPA, promotes and enhances graduate student education by providing hands-on applied experiences that are critical to future career success. Research on volunteerism has emphasized that a key motivation for volunteering, aside from altruism, is the opportunity to build career-related skills (Cnaan et al., 2010). Programs such as VPA allow graduate students to meaningfully apply what they have learned in the classroom by deepening their understanding of core content while also developing evidence-based consulting skills. Such experiences are critical to supporting graduate students’ future career development, especially in a world where employers tend to value experience and skills over education (Goldberg, 2023). We contend that volunteer opportunities enhance graduate student education in two specific ways: through the development of professional skills and through networking with others in the I-O field and beyond.

### **Professional development**

Graduate student volunteer opportunities like VPA support the development of professional skills such as client management, teamwork, and communication. VPA consultants exercise client management through the process of initiating contact with their clients, collecting and analyzing data from the organization, and translating results in ways that are accessible to clients outside of the I-O field. They also practice teamwork skills by collaborating with clients to develop unique implementation plans for incorporating best-practice recommendations within each organization, as depicted in the VPA process illustrated in Figure 2. In organized programs like VPA, volunteer consultants are encouraged to open dialog with their peers when navigating challenging situations, further emphasizing the importance of teamwork and sharing ideas in order to solve complex problems.

In addition to the refinement of interpersonal communication skills that naturally occurs with continued practice in consulting, volunteer efforts can provide fodder for developing other professional communication skills. Graduate students can capitalize on opportunities to write about their experiences for a variety of audiences. VPA consultants, for example, have leveraged blog posts (e.g., Olien et al., 2014 in SIOP’s *TIP* newsletter; Myers, 2015 on VolunteerMatch.com), which encourage the development of marketing and writing skills as they often target broader, lay audiences and serve to share information about individual- (a consultant’s) and/or program-level services (in the case of VPA) to potential partners. Further, volunteer efforts can provide exciting opportunities for empirical research. VPA consultants have published within scientific journals (e.g., Dunn et al., 2014; Trent et al., 2017) on (or inspired by: see Baran et al., 2012) their work in volunteer organizations. These efforts broaden our science and benefit the academic community.

Thus, volunteering can contribute to graduate student professional development by providing opportunities to enhance communication skills through sharing experiences to others both within the I-O community and beyond.

Through volunteer work, graduate students can also hone mentorship and training skills. More tenured VPA consultants take an active role in training new consultants, guiding them through the (approximately) 6-month onboarding process. Discussing assigned empirical articles, walking new consultants through the VPA process via shadowing experiences, overseeing new volunteers' "mock VPA" (in which new consultants practice with a mock client), and supervising new volunteers' first real client experience—the required steps of training a new volunteer—reinforce the evidenced-based foundation upon which the volunteer efforts of VPA were built. VPA codirectors further refine their professional development skills when affiliate institutions join our program: The codirector is responsible for strategically coordinating the training of all student volunteers at these institutions. Thus, training activities in volunteer programs can serve to reinforce students' knowledge, skills, and abilities, and act as a mechanism for spreading meaningful volunteer efforts.

Organized volunteer efforts like VPA offer additional professional development opportunities. At Charlotte, VPA graduate student consultants have access to a practicum course (see Figure 1) within the OS doctoral program, which supplements the real-world consulting experience gained through VPA. Restricted to VPA volunteers, this practicum exposes students to leading industry experts and allows them to participate in curated skill-building workshops on such topics as job analysis, volunteer management best practices, organizational finances, proposal writing, "sticky situations" that consultants may encounter, and more. Students are able to network with internal (e.g., university professors and staff professionals with relevant expertise) and external (e.g., consultants, nonprofit leaders) speakers on a variety of topics relevant to both I-O psychology and nonprofit organizations. This additional experience enriches graduate student education as learning about how nonprofits work does not simply help students work in or with nonprofits alone; rather, it broadens student perspectives on *all* organizations, furthering their understanding of nuances that transcend nonprofit/for-profit distinctions, as well as those that are strictly held within these boundaries.

Volunteerism in graduate school can also further students' professional development by instilling connections within local communities. For example, some VPA affiliate programs have marketed their services locally and worked with community-based clients. In doing so, these volunteers have been able to see the direct impact of their work, which has sparked a desire to continue giving back.

### **Networking opportunities**

Finally, graduate student volunteering activities such as VPA create valuable opportunities to network with other students, scholars in the I-O field, and beyond. For example, VPA has sought out partnerships and facilitated relationships with key stakeholders in the nonprofit sector. VPA maintains a consistent presence at conferences such as the Metrolina Association of Volunteer Administrators and the HSUS Animal Expo. VPA consultants attend these conferences regularly to present on the VPA process and volunteer engagement. In doing so, they gain insight from volunteer coordinators about the present challenges and considerations of volunteer programs and their workforces. Furthermore, volunteer opportunities can foster relationships among scholars within the I-O community. Through VPA, graduate students meet with consultants from affiliate institutions and alumni of the program via our growing LinkedIn group for current and alumni consultants, as well as an annual meet-up at the SIOP Annual Conference. Thus, volunteer opportunities, like VPA, offer numerous avenues to expand a graduate student's network, which in turn enhances their education and career prospects.

### Actionable avenues to support graduate student volunteer efforts

We recognize the many challenges of enacting volunteerism in our community as highlighted by Tippins *et al.*, Challenges surrounding funding, communications, and networking are potentially heightened when mobilizing inexperienced volunteers such as students because of the limited amount of time and resources accessible to them, along with their positions as emerging professionals, in which they may lack the experience and credibility necessary for navigating such initiatives. Below we explain actionable ways that VPA has tackled these challenges, in an effort to provide a model for others.

In addition to leveraging funds from the SIOP Foundation (Tippins *et al.*), existing organizations can also serve as partners and sponsors for volunteer efforts. Much of the growth and success of VPA would not exist without the funding partnerships between VPA and HSUS and Maddie's Fund. The generosity of these organizations has been fundamental to developing and sustaining our program. Through their funding, the scholarship model of VPA allows us to volunteer our services to organizations who would otherwise be unable to afford them. The time and financial resources that they have invested to market and communicate our services to their community partners has been invaluable.

Sharing our volunteer efforts with others in the community can help to advance our science and inspire others. Furthering suggestions in Tippins *et al.*, we note that sites like LinkedIn are excellent places to share blog posts and other communications with I-O community members about volunteer work. Graduate students in the I-O community have other shared resources such as discussion groups about the job market and related opportunities where they could share their experiences. VPA is also heavily featured during the OS program applicant recruitment process, which promotes our volunteer efforts to aspiring members of our community before they formally join. This early introduction to VPA is key; we demonstrate the fundamental commitment and core belief of volunteerism held by our graduate program, which may serve as a magnet, attracting prospective students who hold similar beliefs.

Tippins *et al.*, broadly propose a network to bridge needs between charitable organizations and I-O psychologists. In addition, we want to recognize opportunities available within local communities. We encourage those interested in volunteer efforts to consider reaching out to local chambers of commerce, town halls, or other area centers/programs that can help connect graduate students to organizations in need of volunteer consulting services. Many of these outlets house incubators or provide shared office space for startups and nonprofit organizations serving the community. Local professional conferences and meetups offer opportunities to build relationships with organizations and/or for graduate students to present work that could ultimately help to bridge the science–practice gap.

### Conclusion

Through this commentary, we echo Tippins and colleagues' call for volunteerism among I-O psychologists and expand it, prodding graduate students to join these efforts. We illustrate how conduits such as VPA encourage graduate student volunteerism, strengthen student understanding of the inner workings of nonprofit organizations, and allow graduate students to practice their consulting skills while benefiting these organizations. We hope this commentary serves as an example for how graduate students can engage in meaningful volunteer efforts. We also welcome members of the SIOP community who are interested in learning more about VPA, our process, current affiliates, and partners to please visit our website at <http://vpa.uncc.edu/>. If any students, faculty, or graduate programs would like more information about VPA, please email [volprogram@charlotte.edu](mailto:volprogram@charlotte.edu).

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