Measuring Volunteering

Committee Report

Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation

POINTS OF LIGHT FOUNDATION & VOLUNTEER CENTER NATIONAL NETWORK

MEASURING VOLUNTEERING

COMMITTEE REPORT

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MEASURING VOLUNTEERING COMMITTEE REPORT

On March 15 of 2006, the Points of Light Foundation (POLF) hosted a meeting of many of the leading scholars who study volunteering, and of leading practioners who are consumers of such research. The meeting was sponsored by IBM, which also provided a corporate perspective for the discussions.

The background of the meeting was a paper Chris Toppe, Senior Social Scientist at the Points of Light Foundation, wrote raising concerns that current research methodologies underestimate volunteering. That paper presented the results of studying two different forms of probing about volunteering. One was the standard perceptual approach used by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in which respondents were asked if they volunteered. The other was a behavioral approach that uses behavioral prompts in which respondents are asked if they did certain things or performed certain behaviors, following a methodology first started by Michael Hall of Imagine Canada. These two sets of questions were asked of the same respondents in the same survey, using the same data collection organization (the US Bureau of the Census) that conducts the annual BLS survey of volunteering, thus eliminating many of the common sources of measurement error. The results show that behavioral prompts are more accurate than perceptual prompts in identifying who is and isn't a volunteer. Behavioral prompts resulted in higher estimates of volunteer engagement (more are classified as volunteers) and higher levels of commitment (more volunteer hours are captured). In Toppe's study, he concluded that the standard approach, which is widely used, may underestimate volunteering. The purpose of this meeting was to examine this finding and its implications for future research.

The basic idea was framed as a problem of respondent recall and definitional ambiguity. People need memory prompts to help them recall things they have done that we, as experts in the field, consider volunteering. Further, the problem was defined as getting respondents to use the researcher's social construction of volunteerism rather then their own, which is inherently ambiguous: if a researcher does not know what a respondent means when claming to be or not be a volunteer, how can the researcher draw conclusions about that person. The basic problem is how to get people correctly classified as being or not being volunteers.

A serious discussion ensued about a number of issues surrounding this effort dealing with "What is a volunteer?" or "What is volunteering?". There seemed to be two alternative frameworks with general support. One is the psychological approach; the other is the managerial or administrative approach.

From the psychological approach perspective, you look to see what people are doing and you use scholar-imposed criteria to code that behavior as "volunteering" or not. The focus is all on coding a person's behavior. Michael Hall advocates this approach. He said that the behavior cannot involve pay, and that it had to be done freely. Joe Galaskiewicz countered with an altruism argument, contending that you had to consider the benefit to the individual before you could classify a person as being a volunteer. Galaskiewicz posited the idea that the volunteering behavior could not have a substantial benefit to the volunteer if it were to be considered volunteering as opposed to something self-serving. Others disagreed, saying that things such as psychic rewards (a sense of self satisfaction) or social benefits (spending time with friends) or even personal gain (a story for a college application) did not detract from the value of that volunteering in the eyes of the recipient person or organization. For example, it should not matter to the Boys and Girls Club why you are a coach or what you get out of it. What matters to them is that they have someone to coach the team. In the end, everyone seemed to agree that getting into the heads of volunteers to measure their personal outcomes was a futile approach and is beyond what anyone can do. We all seemed to agree that all volunteering has some kind of personal payoff, even it's just making a person feel good, so why bother trying to say that some payoffs were okay and others were not? However, we did agree that paid volunteering, such as AmeriCorps (even if the volunteer is paid at a less-than-market rate), or required service (such as court ordered community service) is not volunteering.

The alternative framework is the managerial or administrative approach. Here the question is: how many jobs are being done in an organization or in society, and particularly jobs that benefit the collective good rather than private interests, which are done for free. That is, how much is society getting at no cost? Here the focus shifts from individual actions to workforce issues. Thus the task is to count up the number of jobs in nonprofits (which we assume are serving the collective good) that are being performed by "volunteers," i.e., people who work for less than market value or for free. It's more about the capacity and cost effectiveness of a delivery system than about people's character or moral fiber. That is the main reason why folks who pay for these surveys, e.g., foundations and the Department of Labor, almost always favor questions that relate to formal rather than informal volunteering. This ignited a discussion about the differences between formal and informal volunteering and whether or not both had a place in studies of volunteering.

The argument in favor of only focusing on formal volunteering is that survey items are easier to construct and administer, e.g., you simply describe volunteer roles in an organization, and count up people who perform those roles. The argument against using only formal volunteering is that the absence of certain populations from these organizational roles suggests that these people are not very nice or civic minded: the results of these studies often are used to say something about people's character. The problem is that the term "volunteering" is thought not to resonate within some sub-populations, especially low-income and minority communities, so they come off as looking bad when the problem is with the perceptual term not the particular behaviors. Michael Hall made an impassioned plea that the mother watching children in her home after school was just as valuable as one who does the same task at a day-care center down the street. That one is informal and one is formal should not detract from the value of the service she is providing. Hall suggested that we call this "helping" rather than volunteering; that formal volunteering is one aspect of helping, but not the only one that deserves our attention. Mark Lopez added in political engagement as another example of things people do to help that is not normally considered volunteering, and the door was opened to the broader topic of civic engagement.

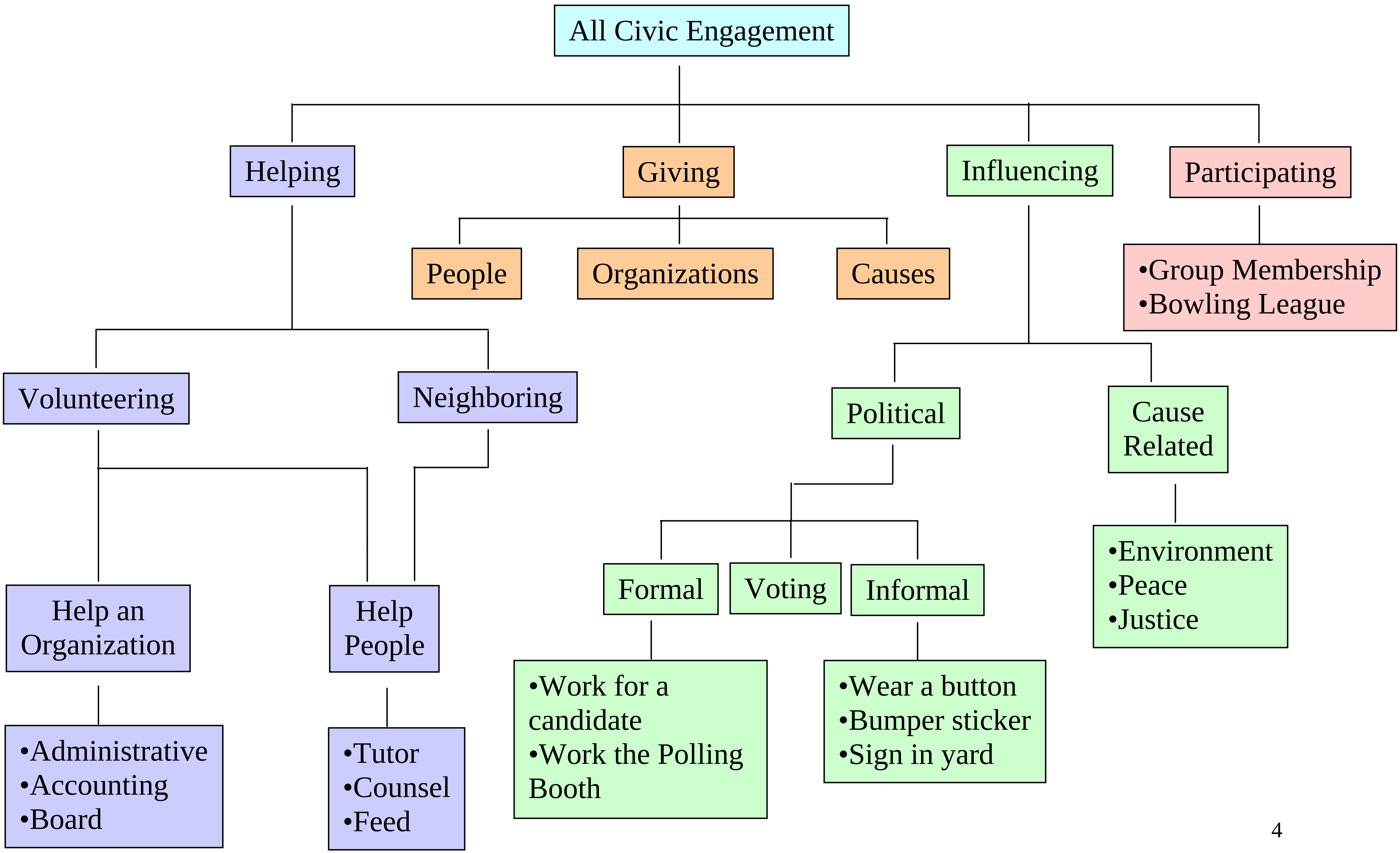
Measuring informal volunteerism is very difficult. The folks in Canada have separate items asking about this kind of thing. They are positioned in a separate section of the questionnaire. Michael Hall calls this “helping behaviors” in contrast to volunteering. The focus is on people helping people outside the household and outside of an organizational (even church) context. In the end, almost everyone in the room felt that the distinction between formal volunteering and informal helping was an important one and items on both should be included in any survey.

In the course of the discussion there were a number of questions raised about what would constitute volunteering within an organizational context. The distinction between volunteering for an organization so as to further its administrative ends (e.g., serving as a board member, doing pro bono legal work for the organization, keeping the books, fundraising, etc.) and helping to deliver services to people (e.g., being a coach, driving a van, delivering meals on wheels, etc.) came up over and over again.

One result of this discussion was the formulation of a framework for conceptualizing civic engagement (see next page) in which formal volunteering is shown to be but a piece of the overall picture. In this, civic engagement is conceptualized as having four main components: helping, giving, influencing, and participating (note the continued emphasis on verbs). There are two kinds of helping: volunteering (formal volunteering) and neighboring (informal volunteering). Under volunteering, there are two things people do: help an organization (serve on a board, do administrative work) and help people. Under neighboring, there is helping people. This, then, subsumes volunteering and neighboring into one category – helping – giving those of us who want to take the broader approach a way to do so. The other categories work the same way.

A Paradigm for Studying Civic Engagement©

Any one person can fit into any box such that the total in the top box does not double count



There are people working in each aspect of the elements of the chart, but no one working on the entire picture. For example, Patrick Rooney and his colleagues study giving and volunteering, but not neighboring and participation; Mark Lopez studies volunteering and political engagement, but not giving; NORC (not in attendance in Phoenix) with its General Social Survey studies participation and volunteering, but none of the others.

There are pieces to this puzzle, but they are not yet joined into a unified picture. The problem is how to get people into the right buckets without double counting. To do this would require a comprehensive survey that would be, by default, lengthy and expensive.

Lengthy surveys raise the issue of social pressure or social desirability, or as Hall puts it: "how many times can you ask a guy if he's a jerk". Concern was expressed that too many questions will lead respondents to give the socially acceptable answer rather than risk looking bad. How many is too many? We didn't have an answer.

This paradigm relates back to an earlier discussion about why we measure volunteering and what uses we have for the results. The practioners were much more attuned to the utilitarian value of our research. Both Wendy Spencer and Marsha Meeks Kelly made the point that they really wanted to know how many people volunteer and is the number increasing or not: Just the facts, so to speak. They had little interest in things such as where and why people volunteer, as opposed to, say, Mark Hager, who felt this kind of limited approach was shortsighted. The practioners really want something quick and easy (read: inexpensive) as opposed to something complex and comprehensive. So not only are there different opinions as to what we should study, there are also different opinions as to why and to what end. For practioners, then, the simplest approach might be a one-and-out design in which any one respondent is asked about their behaviors only until they give a yes answer. Once a yes is given, the person can be properly classified and further questions become unnecessary. While this approach would not satisfy the research community, it would meet the needs of the practioner community, who want a survey to explore the motivations, attitudes, and life experiences associated with volunteering.

Finally, Bob Groves presented some research on things that influence survey participation which have enormous implications for how we do our research. He showed evidence that people react to the topic you're researching, the sponsor, and incentives. If people are not interested in the topic, they often will not respond to the survey. For us this means that when we say at the start that we are doing a survey on giving and volunteering, people who are interested in these topics are likely to continue with the interview while those who aren't hang up the phone. If so, this is bad news, because our instrument will then overestimate volunteering in the general population. We probably have too many true believers in our survey, biasing our results. (This may be the reason that IS got volunteer rates around 50% while more neutral agencies such as BLS gets rates around 30%.)

It was suggested that one could compare the demographics of participants in our surveys to those in surveys in general and "correct" by weighting cases. Groves said maybe. Often the demographics will match, but it is people with certain dispositions or attitudes, which are uncorrelated with demographic characteristics, who are being lost. He said that a further concern for us is that the people who are likely to answer a survey at all are likely to be the same ones who vote, read the newspaper, and volunteer. Maybe there is a "participatory gene."

He suggested that one way to get disinterested respondents to participant is to offer monetary incentives and there is some evidence that this works. This gets the non-volunteers back into the survey. Finally, the sponsor of the survey is important. It seems that poor people are much more likely to respond to a government sponsored survey, maybe because the government is the one that is responsible for income transfers. Groves said that we should never underestimate the importance of sponsorship effects. Investigation of these issues is underway, as described below.

In the end, having a survey methodologist as part of the group was a good addition to the subject-matter expertise represented by the other participants. Making progress on how we measure volunteering – behavioral v. perceptual, the initial reason for calling this meeting – seemed premature given the issues raised by Groves. There seem to be basic survey methodology issues that need to be addressed if we are to strengthen studies of not only volunteering, but also of the broader area of civic engagement. To this end, the Points of Light Foundation and the Survey Research Center have embarked on several new research projects to address these basic methodological concerns. Details are attached.

Given all the above, we are prepared to offer some preliminary recommendations to members of the Measuring Volunteering Committee and to others interested in volunteering research.

1. Practioners and researchers would benefit from a standardized methodology for measuring volunteering. However, they have different needs. Practioners need a simple way to correctly classify people as being volunteers. The survey methodology should allow for this kind of counting. Once people are correctly classified, researchers can re-probe about number of organizations, number of hours, motivations, attitudes, and other factors that influence volunteering.

2. We need to take steps to avoid salience bias, especially telling people in the invitation that the survey topic is volunteering. This kind of invitation, as used in the past by Independent Sector and others, may cause volunteer to self-select into the survey and non-volunteers to self-select out, inadvertently causing over-estimates of volunteering. Understanding this effect is of prime importance.

3. Volunteering can be formal or informal, can benefit organizations or people, and can or cannot include other forms of civic engagement such as influencing public opinion. It is important for researchers to define which aspects they are studying, and to measure those aspects in methodologically similar ways.

4. In using behavioral questions there are many things to consider:

a. First, how many behaviors? Beware of forcing people into giving a socially acceptable answer by asking them again, again, and again about their behaviors.

b. Second, there is some debate about the order of items. On the one hand, you should look at Hall's results and see which items are the most popular volunteering opportunities among his respondents. This item will elicit the most responses in your survey, then take the second most popular and so on. If survey length is an issue, at least the best prompts will be up front. On the other hand, some suggested that the researcher scramble the order for each respondent. That way, it should become clear if people are capitulating at some point in the exercise, e.g., if people who said they were not volunteers say, on average, that they volunteered for the fifth option then you can presume that you have a capitulation effect. Research will have to be conducted on order effects.

c. Third, the behavioral items that Hall has already used should be considered as the starting point for the behavioral measurement of volunteering. The cardinal rule of survey research is that if the item you are borrowing is "good enough," don't change it. You forfeit your ability to make comparisons. Thus don't tinker too much with his items. However, it doesn't mean that you cannot add items or delete some of his. For example, we need to include activities that are related to church/mosque/synagogue participation.

In conclusion, there is much work to be done if we are to realize the full potential that studying volunteering offers. First, however, we need to deal with some basic methodological issues. We need to address these before we can make an informed recommendation as to how best to conduct studies of volunteering. To that end, the following section presents new research that is now underway.

New Research Projects

Prior research by Independent Sector and others may have had methodological problems that supersede the other issues discussed in Phoenix: are we getting a good sample from which to draw meaningful conclusions, and are the responses we get accurate?

In this regard, Bob Groves, who heads the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, and the Points of Light Foundation, have begun several collaborative research projects. As we learned from Bob's presentation, he has a deep interest in the salience effect. He presented some of his research that showed there was a strong tendency for people with high interest in the survey topic to participate in a survey on that topic. His theories have three areas of interest to us:

- Topic salience
  - Does the topic of the survey, such as a survey on giving and volunteering, effect survey participation to such an extent that the results are skewed? Does topic salience lead to an over-estimate of the extent to which people give and volunteer? Could this be the reason research using other methodologies, especially BLS and PSID, report such lower rates of volunteering than found by IS? If so, then much of the Independent Sector research, and perhaps by extension research done by others that used the same methodology, may be seriously flawed.

- Sponsor salience
  - Does identification with the survey sponsor have a similar effect? Does the survey sponsor lead people with strong ties to the sponsor make them more likely to participate, hence skewing the results? Since Independent Sector has always been a relatively unknown organization to the general public, it is unlikely that IS research was influenced much by sponsor salience except that people may have opted out of a survey sponsored by an unknown organization.

- Civic responsibility
  - Bob thinks that it may be possible that there is just something about some people that makes them more likely to participate in surveys regardless of topic or sponsor salience. He is aware of some research that supports this idea. He proposes a theory that survey participation is just another form or civic engagement, the idea that some people participate because they have a predisposition to help.

In addition to Bob's interests, there are areas of interest to POLF and perhaps all of us engaged in studying giving and volunteering. These include:

- Recall accuracy -- giving
  - What is the relationship between what a person reports they gave and how much they really gave? Is accuracy a function of total amount given (do

high givers remember better than low givers), by giving frequency (how often they give), or by gift proximity (time since last gift)? How is this willingness to share this information influenced by salience issues? What lessons are in these data for surveys based on the IS methodology?

- Recall accuracy – volunteering
  - How can we get known volunteers to say they are volunteers? How well do they recall what they did, how often, and how much time they gave? As above, what influences recall accuracy? What lessons are in these data for surveys based on existing methodologies?

Data Sources

For this research we will be surveying samples from two major sources. The first source is national nonprofit organization (NPO) who has asked that their name not be used at this time; the second is the Points of Light Foundation (POLF). NPO has agreed to give us access to their member, donor, volunteer, and prospect databases for this research project. They are, in their words, one of the leading nonprofits in database marketing and keeps what they call very comprehensive databases. They have more 600,000 active donors, volunteers, members, and prospects in their various databases, with a "huge amount" of data on each. For example, they say they have data elements on donor wealth. They have made their entire database available to us for sampling and analysis, excluding data that would allow personal identification.

A second data source is from POLF, which administers the Daily Points of Light Award for the White House. Winners of this award are volunteers who were nominated because of their dedication to helping address serious social problems in their communities through volunteering. For the purposes of this study, we will call these people Super Volunteers to distinguish them from NPO volunteers. These super volunteers likely have done different things that the NPO volunteers and have an unknown affiliation to NPO, so their topic salience for a volunteering survey should be high while their sponsor salience should be low.

It is from these data that samples will be drawn. At this time, we anticipate having an overall sample size of between 3,000 and 5,000. There will be four main sampling categories: known givers (NPO), known volunteers (NPO and POLF), people who are both givers and volunteers (NPO), and people of unknown status (NPO prospects). For those from NPO, we will additionally know their connection to their cause, but we are not sure if we will use this in our sampling design.

Methodology

The survey will be administered by mail. The preliminary protocol calls for the following:

- Advance letter (sent a week before we mail questionnaire packages)
- Cover letter (included w/ the questionnaire)

- Postcard reminder (sent to non-respondents a couple weeks after we mailed the first questionnaire package)
- Follow-up cover letter (included with second questionnaire package sent to non-respondents)

Multivariate analysis will be used for the analyses. This project is just now getting underway (mid-May, 2006). We do not yet have a timeline for releasing the results. We think these data will allow us to address the issues identified above and help us make informed recommendations on future giving and volunteering research methodology.

Finally, we are also planning a second research project that will entail two small national samples (n=400) through which we will test some of the behavioral prompting issues that were discussed at the Phoenix meeting. Details of this study will be available in the near future, and will rely on the results of the bigger study described above.

Committee Members

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	Deb Levy	Points of Light Foundation
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	Jeff Brudney	University of Georgia
	Joe Galaskiewicz	University of Arizona
	Ken Kaplan	US Bureau of the Census
	Lorna Baillie	Statistics Canada
	Mark Hager	University of Texas San Antonio
	Mark Lopez	University of Maryland CIRCLE
	Michael Hall	Imagine Canada
	Michael O'Neill	University of San Francisco
	Patrick Rooney	Indiana University
	Paul Schervish	Boston College
	Rennie Dutton	Points of Light Foundation
	Robert Ashcraft	Arizona State University
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	Bryan Guiot	Nevada State Commission
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