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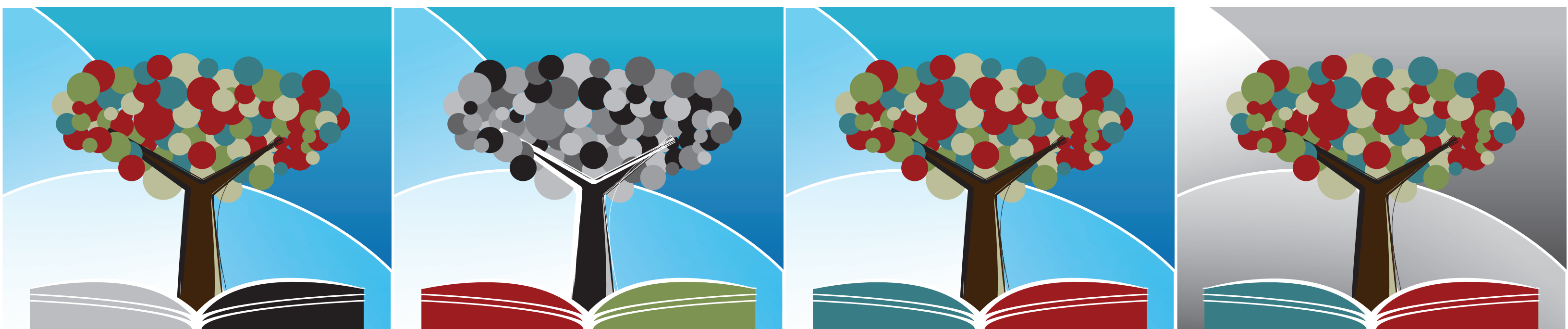

Volunteerism in Aboriginal Communities: Volunteer – who me?

Report

Brandy Mowatt and Jacqueline Young
Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW)

Knowledge Development
Canada Volunteerism Initiative
Développement des connaissances
Initiative canadienne sur le bénévolat

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Knowledge Development Centre
Imagine Canada
425 University Avenue, Suite 900
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M5G 1T6
Tel: 416.597.2293
Fax: 416.597.2294
e-mail: kdc@imaginecanada.ca

www.imaginecanada.ca

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Word From Muriel Stanley Venne C.M.

The Volunteer – Who Me? The study has given us an opportunity to meet with Aboriginal women and discover the important role they play as volunteers in all aspects of their community life. This report outlines the key elements of successful volunteering and acknowledges the Aboriginal woman's cultural viewpoint of duty and responsibility.

The Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW) is grateful for the excellent research done by Brandy Mowatt and Jacqueline Young during this project. Special thanks to Doreen Crapeau, who helped 'break the ice' in the Northwest Territories, and to the many women who contributed to this study. We trust this report will be useful for many volunteer activities within our community.

Acknowledgements

Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW)

The IAAW is a nonprofit organization composed of Aboriginal women dedicated to self-promotion, improvement, and fulfilment through self-government and their own community.

Our thanks to the 99 women who participated in our gathering sessions, case studies, and focus group. Your wisdom and guidance were integral in creating this report and our handbook. We also thank the following organizations for providing facilities for the gathering sessions and focus group: Mission Indian Friendship Centre (Mission, British Columbia), Empowerment Consulting (Vancouver, British Columbia), Miywasin Centre (Medicine Hat, Alberta), Native Network (Calgary, Alberta), Northern United Place (Yellowknife, Northwest Territories), Rae-Edzo Friendship Centre (Rae, Northwest Territories), Mother of Red Nations (Winnipeg, Manitoba), Micmac Native Friendship Centre (Halifax, Nova Scotia), Millbrook Seniors Centre (Millbrook, Nova Scotia).

Volunteerism in Aboriginal communities: Volunteer – who me?

Introduction: Aboriginal women's roles as volunteers in their community

Unity, participation, and drive – these are the keys to community progress. These values are also central in Canada's Aboriginal communities, helping to keep them strong.

Through planning and giving of their time, Aboriginal people volunteer without seeing their actions as such. In fact, the idea of volunteerism within Aboriginal communities is not outwardly acknowledged or defined. Instead it is reflected in the actions and philosophy of the people. Their involvement in activities to help others within and outside of their community is a selfless duty. This is particularly true of Aboriginal women, who are essential to the balance and harmony of their families and communities. Aboriginal people have had to work hard at preserving their culture and instilling pride in their youth to ensure that their culture lives on. Time, kindness, patience, and wisdom are imparted freely by parents and Elders to their community of family and friends in order to maintain their lifestyle, culture, values and morals. This is especially true of the women in the community, the life givers who must nourish their children and start them out on the right path. But ignorance and indifference toward Aboriginal people from communities outside their culture is common.

Aboriginal women nurture strength, pride, and assurance among the children to ensure that the future of their youth and culture will be promising and brilliant. Their knowledge, guidance, and naturally helpful spirit can help to teach others from outside their culture how to adopt and live by this spirit. And it was this spirit that inspired our research project.

Research objectives

Our report presents the research framework we used to look at volunteerism among Aboriginal women as well as our findings. We considered the following questions:

- What types of volunteerism are specific to Aboriginal women and why?
- What are the skills Aboriginal women acquire from their volunteerism roles?
- How are the volunteerism efforts of Aboriginal women recognized?

Our goal was to produce a handbook that encourages and helps Canada's charitable and nonprofit organizations to engage these women as volunteers. The handbook should contribute to success in recruiting, recognizing, and retaining Aboriginal women volunteers based on the advantages and benefits they have to offer. We also hope our research will counter negative attitudes about Aboriginal communities and highlight the value their members, particularly women, can bring to volunteerism across Canada.[1]

1 The handbook, called *Guidelines for recruitment and retention of Aboriginal women volunteers*, is available at www.kdc-cdc.ca.

As one research participant pointed out:

> *"We operate from a holistic community perspective and women are an integral part of our family and are seen as assets and highly regarded. By providing opportunities for Aboriginal women to volunteer, we become part of the family; we take ownership in what services or programs are being delivered in our Aboriginal communities or organizations."*

This sentiment was echoed by another participant, who said it is *"taboo in our nation if someone asks you for help, not to help."* Clearly, helping out family and community is both culturally and personally important for Aboriginal women.

Many of the Aboriginal women we spoke with felt the need to give their time and knowledge as a show of respect for their traditions, and to fulfill community obligations. It is important for charitable and nonprofit organizations to respect and foster this obligation when recruiting Aboriginal women as volunteers. These women can also teach others the significance of sharing and giving that is part of Aboriginal culture.

It is also worth noting that the women we spoke with related more to the idea of giving their time than with the term volunteerism. This idea of giving time covered both formal and informal volunteering situations. Formal volunteering is usually a structured activity to assist the community, often done under supervision and on behalf of a registered charitable or nonprofit organization. Informal volunteering is often an unstructured activity where people assist others or contribute to their community as needed.

Research methods

We began our research by observing Aboriginal women at community events to gain basic insights into volunteer experiences and practices. We then developed and held gathering sessions with diverse groups in equally diverse settings in four provinces and one territory. These sessions were chosen as our method of research because they are natural to the Aboriginal way of life. We provided a meal and beverages, sat in a circle, and allowed everyone to speak and be heard. The only criterion for attending these sessions was that the participant must be a female Aboriginal volunteer. Each participant also completed a survey covering demographics and their volunteering history.

Next we conducted a series of informal case studies with Aboriginal women who were currently holding or had held positions where they recruited Aboriginal women volunteers, asking them questions based on issues raised in the gathering sessions. Finally, we held a focus group with 16 Aboriginal women to review the final handbook and provide feedback on its content, usefulness, relevance, and value. These suggestions were then used to fine tune the final product.

We used a qualitative approach within an action-based research framework to develop the handbook. Simply put, this resulted in a partnership with participants that allowed Aboriginal women to help create the guidelines for recruiting, recognizing, and retaining Aboriginal women volunteers.

In forging these partnerships, our approach was based on the Action-Based Research approach of Hart and Bond (1998):

1. Our research was founded on collaborative learning and sharing of knowledge between our Aboriginal women participants and us, the researchers.

2. We focused our research on a particular social group (i.e., Aboriginal women who gave their time to help out both within and outside of their community).

3. Our research was problem-focused, context specific, and future oriented. (i.e., our research focused on the barriers Aboriginal women faced when giving their time and what they had to offer as volunteers, resulting in a handbook to showcase the value of their knowledge and experiences).

4. Our research also involved initiating change (i.e., our research focused on the topic of Aboriginal women volunteers in order to increase the knowledge base and awareness of nonprofit organizations and so spark their interest in the advantages of engaging Aboriginal women in their volunteer activities).

5. Our research also aimed at improving the volunteer environment for Aboriginal women through the information provided in this report and particularly the handbook. Our aim was to involve Aboriginal women across Canada in our research so they could ultimately benefit as volunteers from the results of our study.

6. Our research embraced the concept of cyclic learning and action. By running several gathering sessions during the implementation of the research, we could follow a repeated cycle of research, action, evaluation, and reflection. So each gathering session was, in effect, a cycle and thus a learning event which would inform our actions for the next gathering.

7. We ensured our research partnership with Aboriginal women volunteers enabled them to contribute effectively to the field research and the content of the information resources produced from our study. This would ensure that the information resources reflected their current position and interests within the nonprofit and voluntary sector.

The starting point: understanding the Aboriginal volunteer environment

We began our research with direct observations of Aboriginal women volunteers at community events in August 2005, gathering first-hand insights into the types of activities they do, and the types of environments in which they volunteer. These insights formed the basis for the development of our gathering sessions and questionnaire. We attended the Siksika Contest Powwow in Siksika Nation, Alberta on August 13, 2005 and the Alberta Métis National Assembly in Peace River, Alberta from August 10 to 13, 2005.

At each event, we observed and selected the first person we spotted who met our criteria for an Aboriginal volunteer. Sampling continued until we had a broad representation of Aboriginal women nationwide. Our goal was not to collect quantitative standardized information, but to notice things we had not thought of before. For example, when observing a powwow, we were surprised by the spontaneous support offered by bystanders. An Elder would call on campers, via a loudspeaker, to help with the ceremonies and people always came, en masse, to assist. We observed these helpers, the designated volunteers, volunteer activities, and the accompanying physical surroundings (Taylor-Powell, 1996, p. 3). This unstructured qualitative method allowed us to observe freely and keep an open mind. If we had developed criteria beforehand, we may have limited our observations to predetermined notions and questions that would have biased and restricted our progress.

After each event, we entered our observations into a general form to help organize our thoughts and findings. Points of interest included: physical surroundings, general climate, non-identifying physical characteristics of participants, attitudes, skills and knowledge, participation and interest, support and cooperation, nonverbal behaviour, and interaction.

As stated previously, we used our observations to develop questions for the gathering sessions and related questionnaire. For example, during the powwow, we wondered how people were contacted for the event, and by whom. Were help-wanted signs posted for the powwow, or was the powwow common knowledge? We also asked about the incentive for volunteering – why were so many people helping out, and what were the benefits?

Measures taken to keep the research sound and on track

Based on these observations, we began planning the questions and format for our gathering sessions and our questionnaire. Assisting us in this effort were the five members of the team circle that we established to review our research objectives and procedures.[2]

Our first meeting with the team circle took place at the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW) in Edmonton, Alberta on December 14, 2005. This two-hour meeting focused on the gathering sessions, specifically the questions to be discussed, how we would contact participants, and session locations. The team circle helped us to better define our idea of what volunteerism means in the Aboriginal community. They evaluated each gathering session question for clarity and relevance, thus bolstering the validity of our research. Finally, they stressed the importance of both reaching remote communities and maintaining diversity in our research.

The team circle also reviewed the questionnaire and its guidelines, helping us confirm that the questions were logical, flowed well, were appropriate for all Aboriginal women across Canada, and were relevant to our research goals.

Following this meeting, we held a trial for our gathering session format and related questionnaire with ten friends and acquaintances – all of whom were Aboriginal women. Upon completion, we conducted test evaluations to collect their comments and suggestions for changes.

Concerns and issues identified in this trial included repetition of questions and confusion as to what the questions were asking. Participants felt that some of the questions were too close in meaning and thus redundant. There were also concerns regarding the tone of some questions. Participants felt that several of the questions should be reworded into plain conversational language to increase clarity of meaning and facilitate willingness to speak by the respondent.

A second team circle meeting, lasting two hours, took place at the School of Native Studies in Edmonton, Alberta on January 17, 2006, to discuss our results from the gathering session trial and the changes we had made as a result. We also discussed the problems with biased research and what steps we could take to avoid this. For example, we had shown a film called “Our Way” about Aboriginal people and volunteering and we were concerned that the film may have influenced the respondents’ viewpoints with regard to volunteering. However, we came to the conclusion that the viewpoints in the film were already commonplace among Aboriginal people. Therefore the use of the video in the gathering sessions was determined to be a good way for getting everyone to start thinking about the research and the questions it would explore. During the meeting, we also discussed our preparations and expectations for a pilot session of our gathering sessions and questionnaire that we had scheduled for the following day.

2 The members, drawn from the staff of the School of Native Studies at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, were: Dr. Ellen Bielawski (Dean); Dr. Nathalie Kermoal (Assistant Professor); Valerie Napoleon (Assistant Professor); Brenda Parlee (Assistant Professor); and Beverly Findlay (Administrative Assistant).

The pilot session took place at the IAAW offices on January 18, 2006. Eight women who volunteer with the IAAW participated in this session. Although scheduled to run for a maximum of three hours, it ran for three and a half hours, but even so, some questions were not discussed. The goal of this pilot session was to ensure that the gathering session questions were clear and relevant to our agenda, the atmosphere was comfortable, and the participants felt valued and respected. Throughout the session, participants were encouraged to discuss any problems they had with the content of the questions, the order of questions, and whether they felt they were receiving equal opportunity and time to speak. The first obstacle we encountered was that reading materials, such as our questionnaire, had to be read aloud to accommodate participants with literacy issues. Next, we found that the introductory video we were using on volunteerism in Aboriginal communities made some of our introductory questions redundant. We were able to replace them with more transitional questions related to our main topic of discussion – the content of our handbook. Finally, participants suggested that we should focus on only some of the questions in order to shorten the discussion time.

We held a final meeting with our team circle on April 20, 2006 to recap our gathering sessions, provide circle members with an outline for our handbook, and discuss plans for our case studies, which were underway at the time.

Sampling: How participants were found

Through qualitative data collection, we used purposeful sampling to find participants for the gathering sessions and questionnaire. Simply put, the individuals selected had been or were currently volunteers. We began by developing a list of contacts based on personal and working relationships, as well as Aboriginal community networks (e.g., Friendship, Métis, healing, volunteering and training centres, and university faculties). We called our contacts to ask if they knew any potential participants. Next, we called these candidates, confirmed that they met our criteria, and invited them to participate in the sessions. We also asked each participant to help us identify other candidates so we could reach our quota of nine to twelve people per session. We set these limits on participation because larger sessions are more difficult to control and may hinder opportunities for everyone to share their insights and observations (Krueger et al., 2000, p. 73).

Participants in our case studies came from contacts suggested during the gathering sessions. We were looking for women with experience in recruiting volunteers so we could cover all of the roles Aboriginal women play in volunteering.

For our handbook focus group, we used the same methods employed for our gathering sessions. A contact who had been recommended from a previous gathering session recruited 16 female Aboriginal community volunteers for this session.

Before beginning the gathering sessions, questionnaire, case studies, and focus group, each participant was ensured that she would not be identified in the results of the research. Each participant signed a consent form that was also signed by a witness and an IAAW representative, and we provided everyone with a copy for their records. For the case study participants, we sent a copy of this agreement by mail.

Gathering sessions

Between January and March of 2006, nine gathering sessions were held with 77 participants. This number was necessary in order to represent the broad spectrum of Aboriginal women, their experiences, and communities (e.g., Métis settlements, First Nations communities (reservation setting), urban Aboriginal communities and so on). The gathering sessions were held in the following locations:

- Edmonton, AB – January 18, 2006
- Calgary, AB – February 15, 2006
- Vancouver, BC – February 27, 2006
- Mission, BC – February 28, 2006
- Rae, NWT – March 5, 2006
- Yellowknife, NWT – March 6, 2006
- Winnipeg, MB – March 7, 2006
- Halifax, NS – March 13, 2006
- Millbrook, NS – March 14, 2006

To ensure reliability, we determined that questions and instructions would be identical for all gathering sessions, and that the same moderator would guide all sessions for consistency in approach (Babbie, 1995, p. 126).

The time allotted for each session was three hours. We arranged, where possible, to have an Elder present to say an opening prayer to help make participants comfortable in sharing their knowledge. Before giving the prayer, a shawl was placed on the Elder's shoulders in honour of her presence. Next, we led an icebreaker activity, where everyone got to know and get comfortable with one another. We followed this with an in-depth introduction from the IAAW, which provided background information, an agenda for the session, and an overview of the research

project. Next, we showed participants the 20-minute video on volunteerism (*Our Way*), which was followed by a 10-minute break. After the break, we distributed the confidentiality agreements and once these were understood and signed we began asking our gathering session questions.

Through the pilot sessions and consultation with our team circle, we had developed six key questions focused on four topics: recruitment, training, skills, and protocol. They were:

1. What do you consider the most effective methods for recruiting Aboriginal women volunteers?
2. What do you consider the most effective methods for training Aboriginal women volunteers?
3. What skills do you bring to your volunteering?
4. What skills have you gained from volunteering?
5. What guidelines for protocol are essential for a good working relationship with Aboriginal women?
6. What are some topics or issues that need to be addressed in the handbook that have not been discussed?
7. All things considered, which four topics would be most beneficial to the handbook?
8. Have we missed anything?

We focused on clear, conversational, and open-ended questions to maintain flow, encourage discussion, and create a natural and comfortable atmosphere. We also developed clear directions for participants to keep the session running smoothly and promote a sense of understanding, order, and productivity (Krueger et al., 2000, pp. 40-42). For example, we stressed the importance of their participation and asked for their guidance, emphasizing that we were there to encourage discussion and record their concerns, stories, and insights. We wrote every comment down on flip charts so that participants could see what we were recording and ensure that we understood their meaning.

Case studies

Following the gathering sessions, we held six case studies with individual participants between April 19 and April 26, 2006, each lasting about 30 minutes. The purpose of these studies was twofold. First, we wanted to gather a broader range of experiences and perspectives about volunteerism, specifically from Aboriginal women who were currently or had held positions where they recruited Aboriginal women as volunteers. Second, it provided us an opportunity to ask questions participants raised in our gathering sessions and during our review of the data from those sessions. The questions focused on three issues: best practices for recruiting Aboriginal women to volunteer, Elder protocol, and conflict resolution. They were:

1. Most of the Aboriginal women we spoke with related better with the notion of *giving their time* than with the term volunteering. Do you think this is representative of both informal and formal volunteering situations?

2. What are the benefits for bringing on Aboriginal women to volunteer for your organization?

3. What protocol do you follow when bringing Elders on to volunteer?

4. What types of things would you like to see on a resource list?

5. What type of literature would you like to see included?

6. What are some of the recruitment methods that you have used that you've found effective?

7. What do you wish you had the answers to when people ask you questions?

8. What are some conflict resolution strategies that you have used that worked well for you?

9. What are some of your concerns with the handbook at this point?

10. Is there anything else you would like to see in the handbook?

The interviewer for the case studies was responsible for listening to and recording responses to these questions, and developing an understanding based on these discussions as opposed to testing a preconceived theory (Krueger et al., 2000, pp. 11-12).

Focus Group

On May 17, 2006 we held a focus group for our handbook at the Miywasin Centre in Medicine Hat, Alberta. We brought together 16 women to review and edit a complete copy of the handbook. Each person was given the choice to work alone or in groups of two. They were assigned two sections of the handbook, and given instructions and questions to help in the editing process, which we established as follows:

1. Read over assigned section in the handbook.

2. While reading this section, make a note within the handbook of any spelling or grammatical errors or awkward sentences you may find.

3. Please answer the following questions for your assigned section
   - i) Do you feel this section is relevant, if not, why?
   - ii) Do you feel this section is misinformed, if so, how?
   - iii) Did you find anything in this section offensive?
   - iv) Is there anything else you would like to say about this section?

The atmosphere was relaxed and very informal. We encouraged everyone to speak freely, ask questions, or ask for clarification if need be. Recommended changes were made following a review of their suggestions. This was the final stage in our research process and was fundamental in that it gave the people who might use this handbook an opportunity to have the final say on its contents and how it had been put together.

Results from the questionnaires and gathering sessions

Although 77 questionnaires were distributed, only 66 were analysed.

Profile of participants

Table 1 (p.11) shows that for the individual age categories, the category of 49-55 years old formed the highest percentage of participants at 24%. However, the majority of the participants (65%) were between 26 and 55 years of age with 55% being 45 years or younger. Eighty-five percent (85%) of the women had Indian status (i.e., they are entitled under the Canadian Indian Act to be registered in the Federal government Indian Register). With regard to marital status, it was very diverse; and 80% of the women had children.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents completing the survey

Volunteerism survey, 2006, Demographics (N=66)					
	Mentions	Percentage		Mentions	Percentage
Age:			**Children:**		
18 – 25 years	9	14%	Yes	53	80%
26 – 35 years	12	18%	Children living with you now	31	47%
36 – 45 years	15	23%	**Province or territory of residence:**		
46 – 55 years	16	24%	Northwest Territories	10	15%
56 – 65 years	10	15%	British Columbia	13	20%
65 and over	2	3%	Alberta	15	23%
Don’t know / Not stated	2	3%	Manitoba	8	12%
Aboriginal status:			Ontario	1	2%
Status Indian	56	85%	Nova Scotia	19	29%
Non-Status Indian	2	3%	**Home Area:**		
Métis	5	8%	Reserve / Band	12	18%
Inuit	1	2%	Town	7	11%
Innu	0	0%	Village	2	3%
Other	1	2%	Hamlet	2	3%
Don’t know / Not stated	1	2%	City	39	59%
Marital status:			Don’t know / Not stated	4	6%
Now married	15	23%			
Common-law	15	23%			
Widowed	2	3%			
Separated	4	6%			
Divorced	8	12%			
Single	20	30%			
Don’t know / Not stated	2	3%			

Education

Figure 1 shows a wide range of educational achievement with approximately half of respondents (48%) achieving a grade-12 diploma or more.

Although the results appear to be somewhat inconsistent with the level of elementary and secondary education indicated above, 45 respondents (68%) said they did receive some post-secondary education. Of those 45 respondents, 33 said they had earned a post-secondary diploma, certificate, or degree. A breakdown for these 33 respondents follows in Figure 2.

Figure 1: Educational attainment achieved by respondents at school

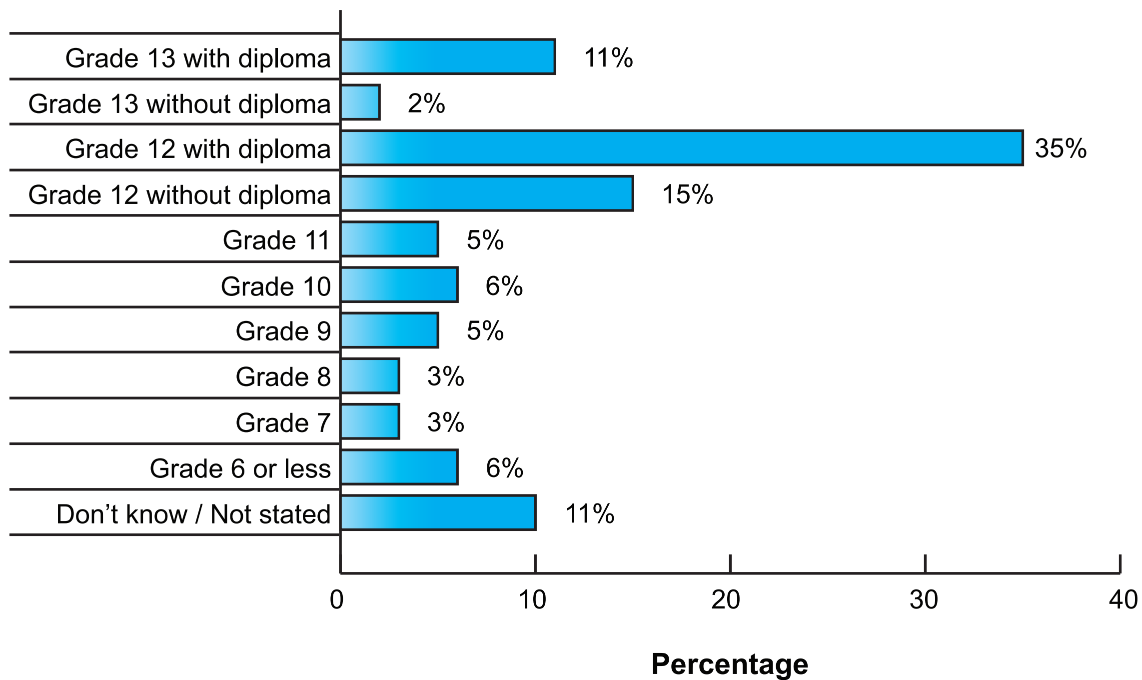
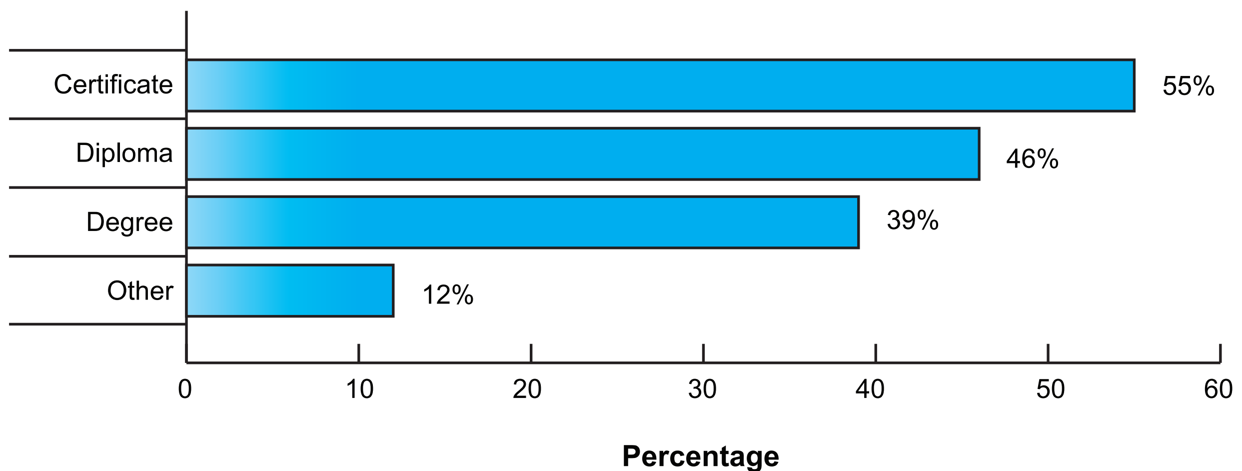


Figure: 2 Post-secondary level of attainment of respondents



Notes: The percentages on the charts are based on the 33 respondents who said they were a graduate from a post-secondary institution. Each respondent indicated more than one post-secondary graduating certificate so the percentages do not add up to 100%.

Transportation[3]

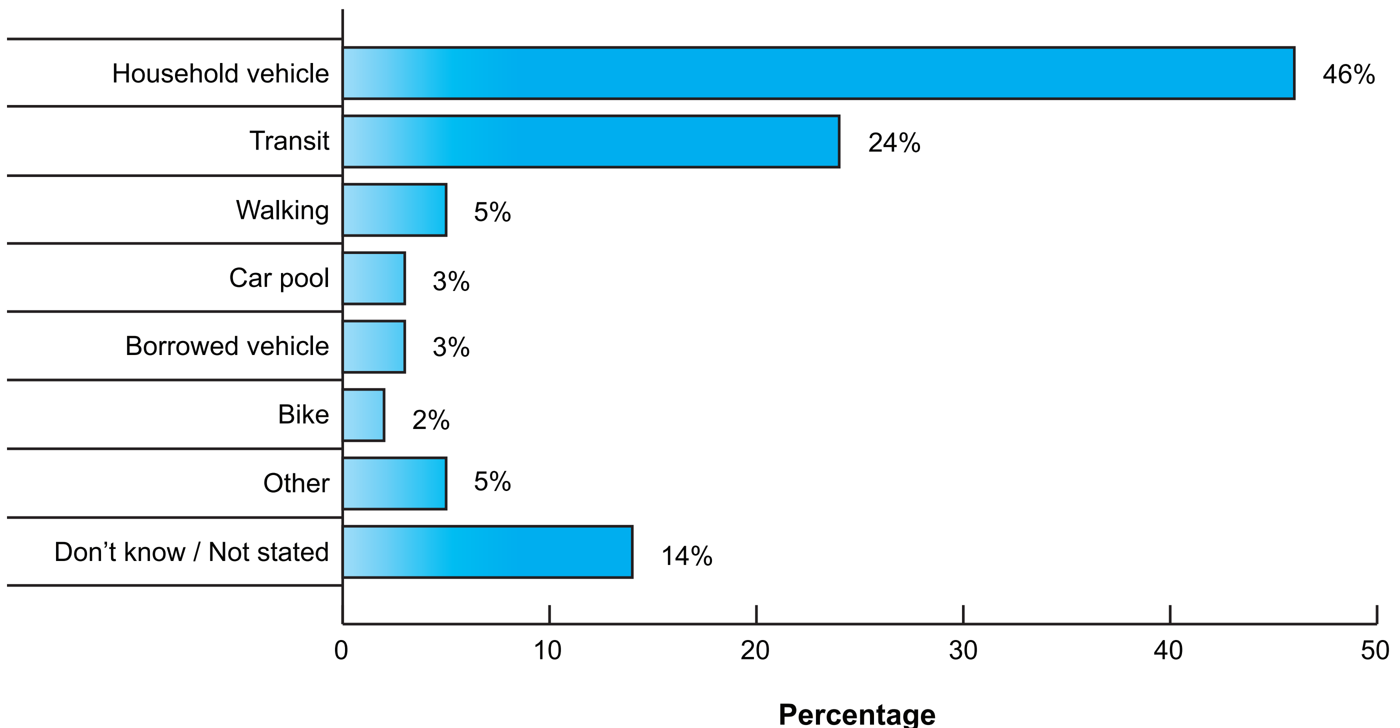
Almost half of participants (46%) had a household vehicle. Nearly one quarter (24%) primarily used public transit (Figure 3). Other means of transportation (e.g., biking, walking) were mentioned by very small percentages.

When the 66 respondents in our questionnaire sample were asked *"Are there times when you are unable to access transportation?"* one third (22 respondents) said there were. Of these 22 respondents, two said they are unable to access transportation on a daily basis, while seven said the problem happens less than monthly, as reflected in Table 2.[4]

Table 2: Frequency with which respondents were unable to access transportation (from 22 respondents)

Frequency of being unable to access transport	Number
Daily	2
Every other day	4
Weekly	4
Bi-weekly	1
Monthly	2
Less than monthly (very infrequently	1
Don't know / Not stated	2

Figure 3: Respondents' primary mode of transportation



3 Primary mode of transportation is an important factor when looking at barriers to recruitment of volunteers.

4 Less than monthly could mean every other month, or every few months, thus not often.

Employment and income

Twenty-eight of the 66 respondents (42%) indicated that they were employed, 53% said they were unemployed, and the balance did not state their employment status (Figure 4).

Of the 28 respondents who said they were employed, 19 were employed full-time, six part-time, one was temporarily employed; and two indicated some other type of arrangement. Such arrangements might be pay for seasonal work or by piecework as part of a bartering system, etc. Seventeen of the respondents who were not employed said they were receiving some form of income such as a pension or Employment Insurance.

Respondents were then asked to indicate their total household income. The graph below shows just under half (45%) had a household income of less than $25,000 annually.

Community involvement

Figure 5, p.15, shows a wide range in the length of time that the 66 participants have been volunteering – from about 8% who have been doing it for less than a year, to nearly a third (30%) who have been volunteering 21 years or more.

Participants were also asked about their preferred level of volunteer involvement. Nearly half (48%) preferred to volunteer occasionally, 36% liked to do it part-time, and 5% said full-time. The remaining 11% responded that they did not know or just did not respond.

Just over half of the participants (55%) preferred to volunteer during the week and approximately one third (30%) preferred weekends (5% responded don't know or did not).

Figure 4: Total household income of respondents

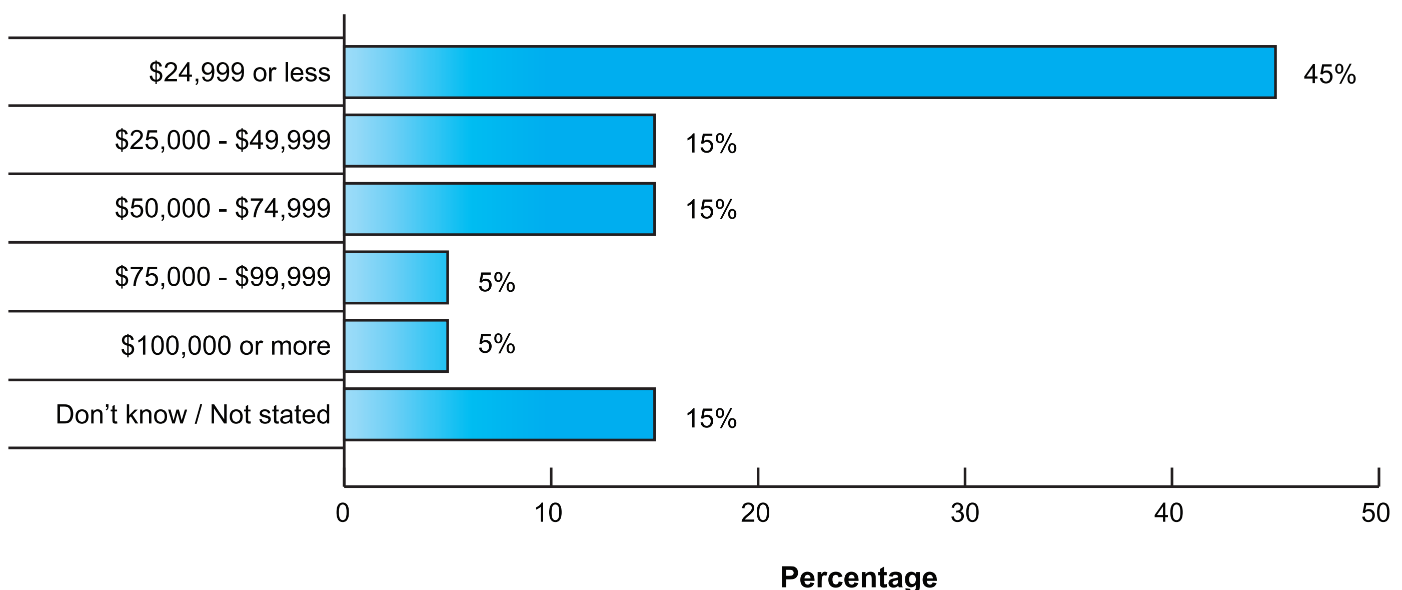


Figure 5: Length of time respondents had been volunteering

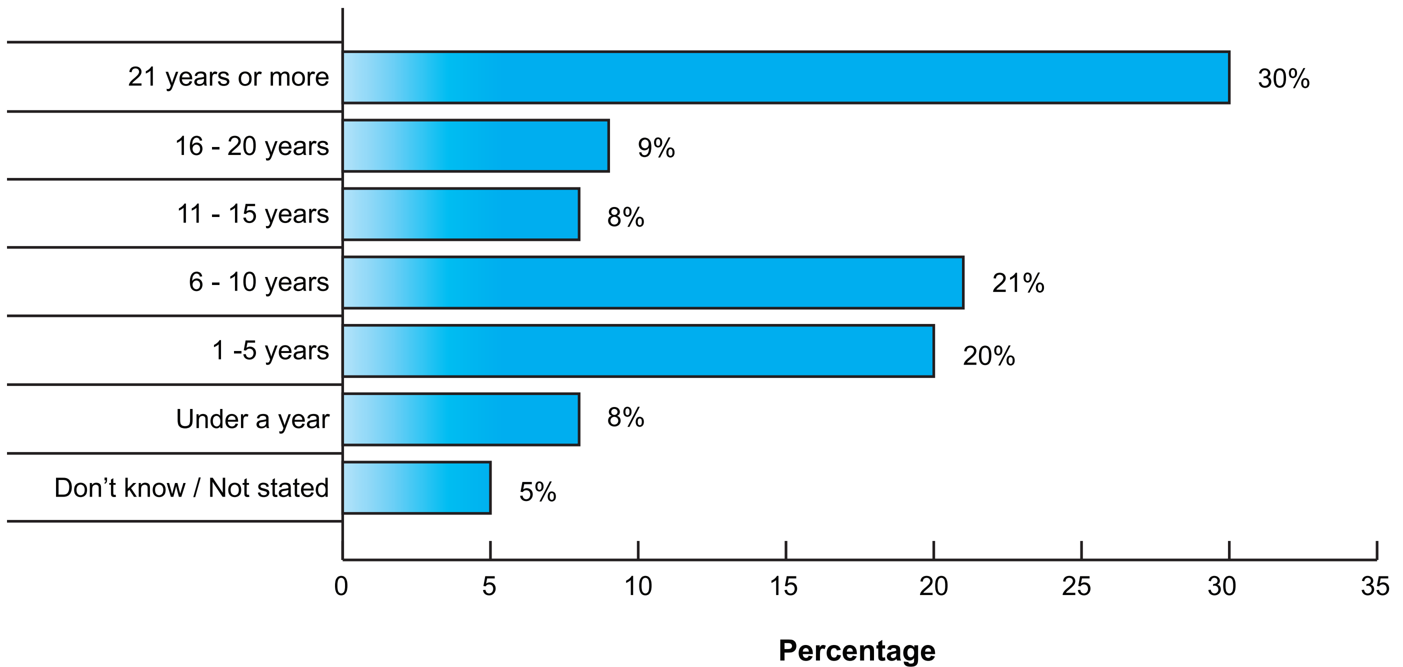
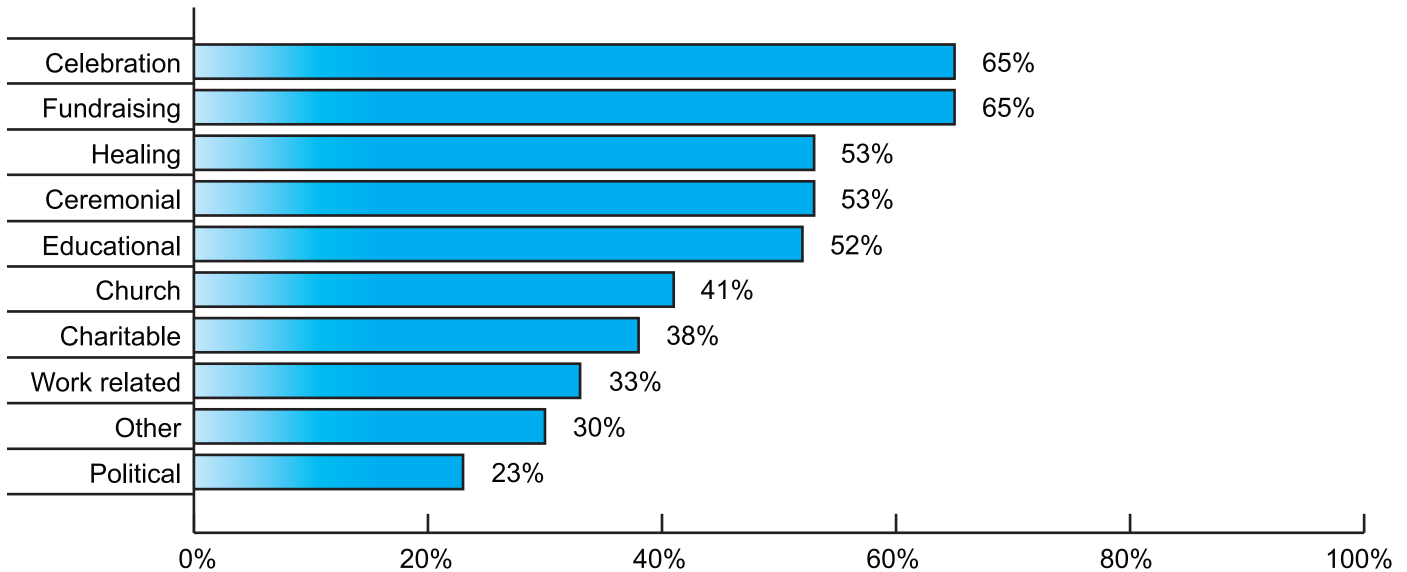


Figure 6: Volunteer activities to which respondents devote most of their effort[5]



Note: Respondents indicated more than one activity because many devoted a large part of their volunteer time to several activities in their community.

5 This survey consisted of close-ended questions to allow the respondents to answer quickly and with a category "Other." The category "Other" was not explained.

When asked what type of events they volunteer at the most, many indicated celebrations or fundraising (65% for each). These were followed closely by healing or ceremonial events (53% each), and educational events (52%). Political events (23%) are at the bottom of the list (Figure 6).

With regard to the volunteer roles Aboriginal women undertake, half of the respondents said they usually take a “supportive” role as volunteers, and one in five (21%) said they take a leadership role (Figure 7).

Participants were then asked two questions – what type of volunteer training they usually receive and what type they prefer. Figure 8 shows responses to both questions. Although 41% of respondents said they are usually self-taught as volunteers, only 17% actually preferred it that way. On the other hand, a third (33%) of participants would prefer to get pre-session training, but only 14% actually had been given such a session.

Participants were then asked how often they felt that their volunteer efforts were not appreciated by the community or an organization. Figure 9 shows that a majority (62%) never or not very often felt unappreciated; however, 9% said they always felt unappreciated, and 9% said they often felt that way.

Asked to rate their personal fulfilment from volunteering, a substantial majority (70%) rated it as very good, and 21% said good. Just 6% rated it average, and no participants selected either poor or very poor, even though those were presented as response options. These results, reflected in Figure 10, suggest that, even though some respondents feel unappreciated (see Figure 9, p.17), they still get a feeling of fulfilment through their volunteer efforts.

Figure 7: Volunteer roles undertaken by respondents

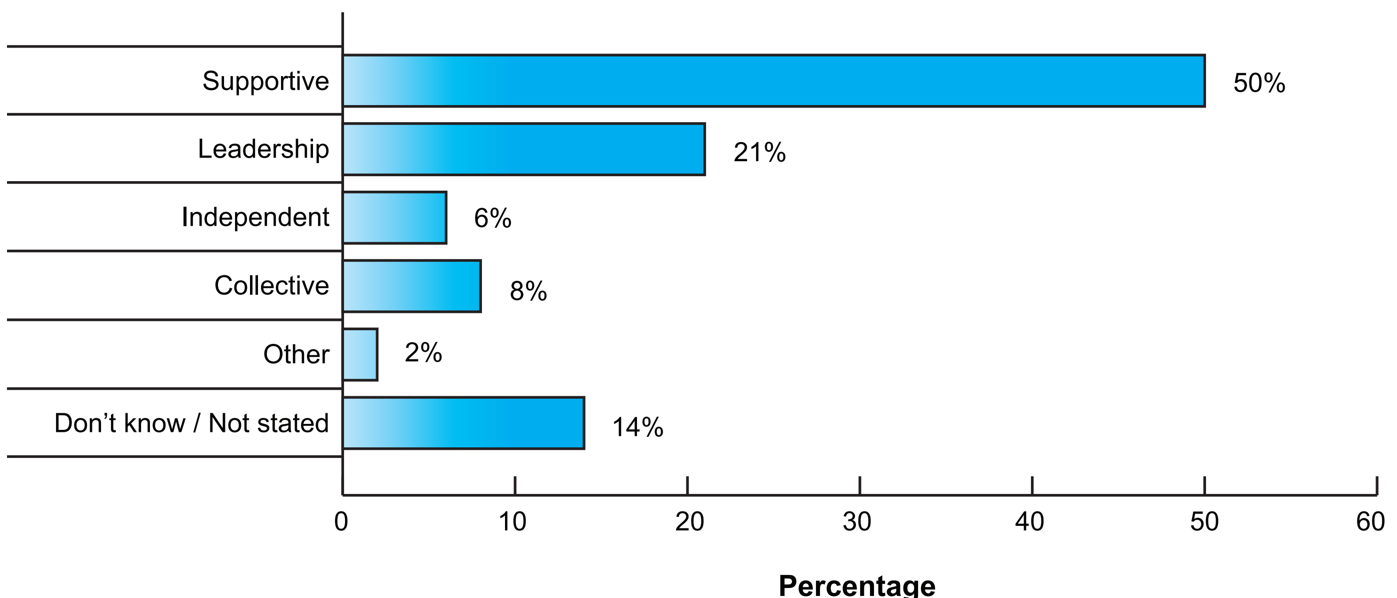


Figure 8: Volunteer training received by respondents and training they would prefer to receive in the future

	Training preferred	Training usually received
Pre-session training	33 %	14 %
On the job training	27 %	29 %
Self-taught	17 %	41 %
Other	8 %	5 %
Don’t know / Not stated	33 %	12 %

Percentage (axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50)

■ Training usually received ■ Training preferred

Figure 9: Respondents’ perception of how much their volunteer roles were appreciated

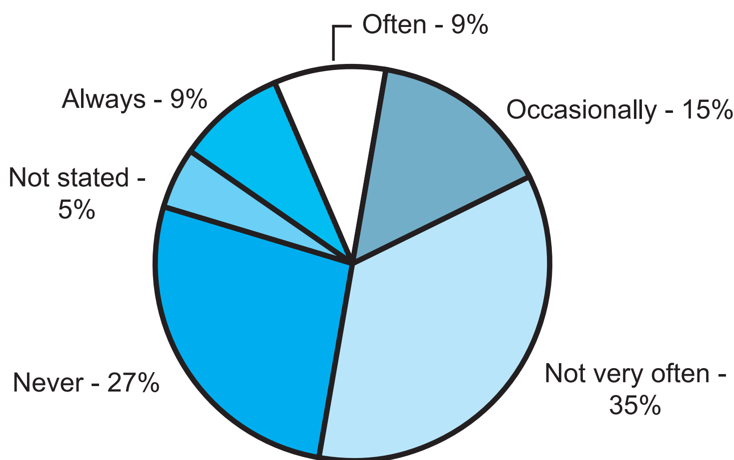
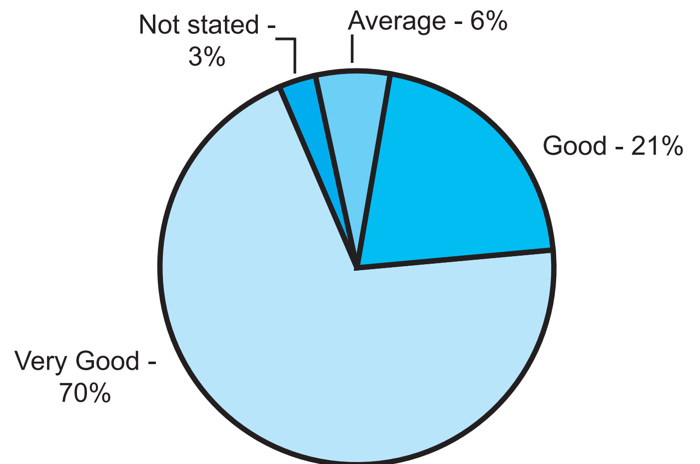


Figure 10: Respondents’ level of personal fulfilment through volunteering



Obstacles to Volunteering

In the final, evaluative, section of the questionnaire which consisted of 14 questions, 12 questions asked participants about potential obstacles to volunteering. For each one, they were asked to either rank their evaluation or put a check mark against a qualitative category.

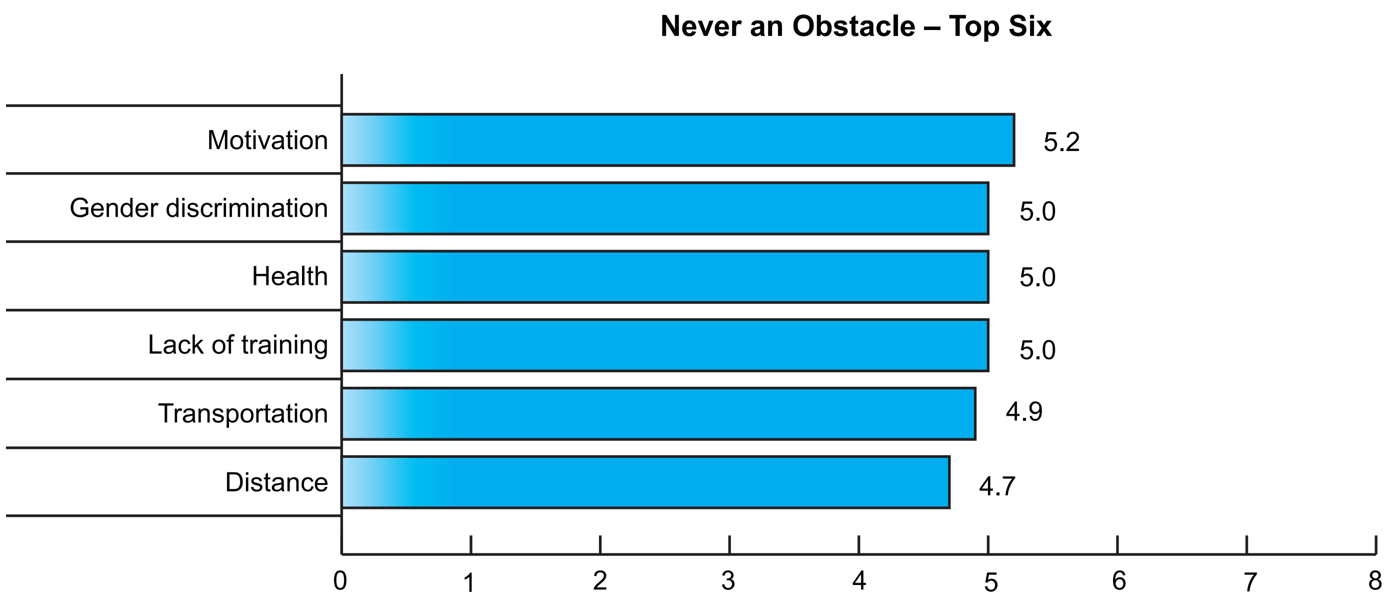
For the questions that had a ranking scale, the 66 participants rated the statements using a seven-point scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree with the statement presented to them. A mean rating of 3.5 indicates a respondent neither agrees nor disagrees with a question or statement. Ratings above 3.5 indicate a participant tends to agree that the issue is never a barrier to volunteering.

Figures 11 and 12 show the average ratings for each statement. They are shown in descending order, based on level of agreement.

Figure 11 strongly suggests that motivation is not a large barrier to volunteering for most respondents (average rating = 5.2), nor are gender discrimination, participants' health, or a lack of training (all with an average rating of 5).

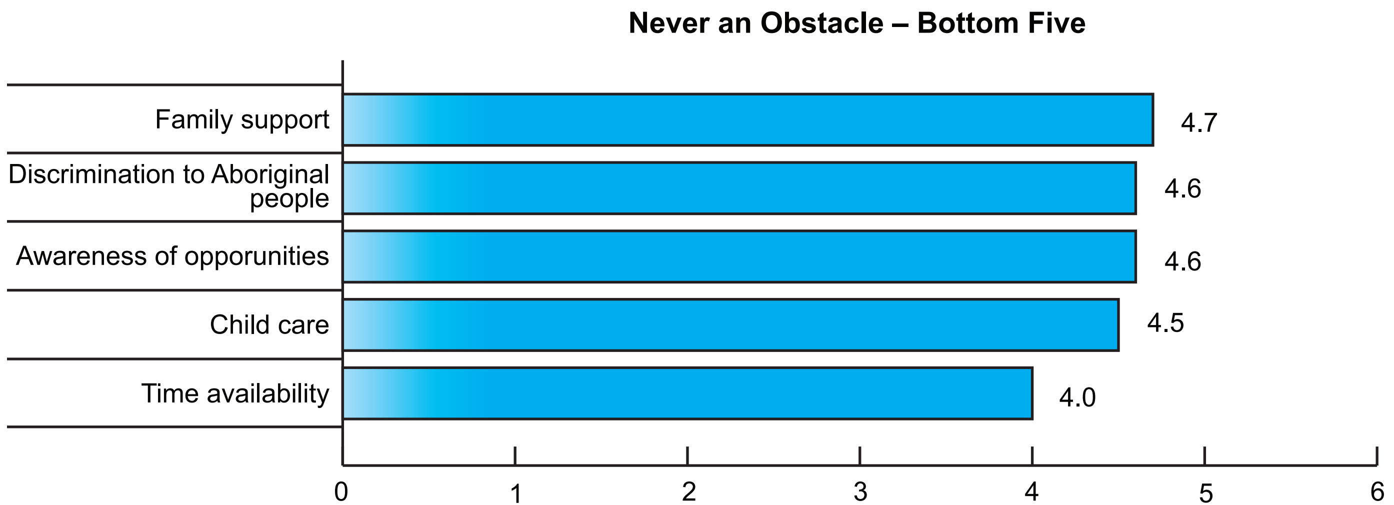
Figure 12 shows the five potential obstacles that participants were more likely to see as barriers to volunteering. Time availability emerged as the greatest potential obstacle for the participants, with a mean rating of 4.

Figure 11: Respondent' ratings for the degree to which different factors might be a barrier to their volunteering



Notes: Scale for ratings is from 1= strongly agree it is a barrier to 7= strongly disagree it is a barrier. Mean ratings over 4 indicate respondents did not consider the factor a serious barrier.

Figure 12: Respondent's ratings for the degree to which different factors might be a barrier to their volunteering



Notes: Scale for ratings is from 1= strongly agree it is a barrier to 7= strongly disagree it is a barrier. Mean ratings over 4 indicate respondents did not consider the factor a serious barrier.

Findings and recommendations

The questionnaire not only provided us with the demographics of our participants but it allowed us to see what we may have missed and what questions were not answered. Most importantly, the questionnaire served as a means for building a foundation of knowledge as we moved from one gathering session to the next. For example, it shows us who these women are, their volunteering roles, and past experiences, thus lending credibility to their input and recommendations at the gathering sessions. What is most striking from the findings is that 71% of the women volunteer within their community. Forty-six percent (46%) have an annual household income of less than $25,000. In addition, 74% said that their personal fulfilment from volunteering was very good – the highest percentage for any of the benefits arising from volunteering. So what does all of this tell us? Well, it for sure tells us that despite their generally low annual family income, Aboriginal volunteers are hard working, and their commitment to helping out in their community is very strong. Furthermore, they feel good about what they are doing. This is a valuable message for nonprofit organizations addressing community issues. Aboriginal women would be a very important and valuable asset as volunteers and are likely to form long-lasting bonds and relationships with organizations that respect their input and help.

Our findings seem to raise more questions than answers – questions that we hope will inspire further research. For example, we noted that most women who volunteered ranged in age from their late twenties to early sixties and that youth, young adults, and seniors were missing or poorly represented in our sample. Is this a reflection of our sample frame of organizations or does it truly reflects who is volunteering?

We also found that most of our respondents were status Indians. We assumed that a more diverse population would be found in the cities, and we even targeted a Métis organization for participants to ensure representation of non-status Indians. Why did we have so few non-status and Métis women involved? Do they volunteer less than women with Indian status, if so, why? Or perhaps Aboriginal women with status are more likely to be affiliated with Aboriginal organizations (which we targeted) than non-status or Métis women. If so, what would be a better method for reaching these other women?

Another intriguing finding was the high percentage of women among the participants who were high school graduates and went on to post-secondary education. This is perhaps surprising given that a high percentage of these women were also unemployed or had a household annual income of $25,000 or less. This finding is even more intriguing when one considers that most of these respondents had been volunteering for 21 years or more. What are these findings telling us? Are these women getting something out of volunteering that they cannot achieve in the workforce – recognition, validation, or respect? After all, the need for respect came up at every gathering session. It could be that volunteering is a means for socializing much like that in places frequented by people with a higher disposable income (e.g., cafés, bars, malls). Or, it could be a means for experiencing the kind of socializing one would normally enjoy at work. If so, are women choosing volunteering over work, or is it the next best thing because they can't get work? Given the importance of community in the lives of Aboriginal women, perhaps their natural sense of public duty is the answer. After all, these women are clearly ambitious, dedicated, and well educated. Maybe volunteering allows them to be more actively involved in their communities than is possible through paid work. This is reflected by the fact that celebrations and fundraising topped the list of events where participants often helped out, which are more central to the integrity of a community.

Finally, respondents rated obstacles to volunteering as relatively few judging from the responses shown in Figures 11 and 12. Does this suggest that their dedication and determination to give time to their communities overcame the obstacles that may have come their way? Whatever the answers to these questions, it is clear that these women have freely given their time for many years and such devotion is not only admirable but also very inspiring.

Findings from the gathering sessions

The responses from our gathering sessions were provided in relation to the development of the handbook. Therefore, our findings and recommendations are more focused and applicable.

What follows are the most common responses from participants to our gathering session questions. These insights were essential in the development of our handbook, and may prove beneficial for organizations in recruiting, retaining, and recognizing Aboriginal women volunteers:

Why do you volunteer?

- to socialize and make contacts;
- to participate in and contribute to the community; to get to know the community better and to share with the community;
- to build experience, knowledge and skills;
- to give by sharing knowledge and skills;
- to be helpful and to help each other;
- to obtain work experience and to enhance résumé; and
- to do the right thing; to help others is to do what comes naturally and is a traditional value.

What do you consider the most effective methods for recruiting Aboriginal women volunteers?

- through the media and especially the Internet;
- by directly asking for help;
- through word of mouth; and
- by allowing children to either help out or be on-site or providing child care.

What are the most effective methods for training Aboriginal women volunteers?

- Provide hands-on experience to people to learn by doing;
- encourage and acknowledge the work and efforts of your volunteers to foster a pleasant learning experience and will boost their efforts and productivity; and
- be respectful of helpers by treating them with dignity to bring about mutual respect.

What skills do you bring to your volunteering?

- knowledge and experience;
- time management, organizational skills, discipline; and
- open-mindedness.

What guidelines for protocol are essential for a good working relationship with Aboriginal women?

- respect our culture, heritage, and traditions;
- don't be judgemental; and
- treat us with respect and dignity.

One important topic that was raised repeatedly at every stage of this project, and in every gathering session, was respect. It was stressed in every area of discussion from making contact and recruiting volunteers, to retention, training, and protocol. This idea of respect also means that charitable and nonprofit organizations must recognize differences in community, tradition, history, culture, spirituality, language, and protocols among Aboriginal women nationwide. Given these differences it is imperative that, when recruiting and working with Aboriginal women volunteers, organizations do the following:

- Keep an open mind and remain non-judgemental.
- Be genuine and approachable.
- Be aware of gender, race, and culture.
- Treat each individual with esteem and respect. (Participants)

By respecting these differences, organizations can foster a safe, friendly environment, and set standards for behaviour for all members. Furthermore, respect allows Aboriginal women to feel proud of their differences and unique perspectives. This will provide them with the encouragement and opportunity to share their knowledge and experiences, teach others about their own culture, and show how it is distinct from other cultures (including other Aboriginal cultures). As one Elder declared in our case studies, *"Wisdom isn't wisdom unless you share it."*

Although recognizing differences among Aboriginal people is critical, understanding what these differences are and how to deal with them is easier said than done. In fact, this issue reared its head in every aspect of our research. We constantly struggled with questions such as how do we recognize differences when our research is 'lumping' Aboriginal women across Canada together? However, designing a separate handbook for every community, nation, reserve, and settlement is not practical. We faced the same issue in our research design: every community we visited was different, yet our questions and agenda remained the same. Again, we were left asking ourselves how our approach acknowledges diversity, and what changes we could make without upsetting the reliability and integrity of our research. Ultimately, we determined that addressing these issues of diversity in detail would have gone beyond the scope of our research, time, and funding.

Although the differences among Aboriginal communities range across Canada, learning what these differences are is a fascinating journey. In our research, travelling across Canada and meeting with the women who worked with us on the handbook earnestly and selflessly was both interesting and a delight. Although their customs were different, as were their communities and heritage, their zeal was ubiquitous. The information and ideas put forth in our gathering sessions, focus group, and case studies was immense. There were times when we could hardly write fast enough to keep up, and the volume in the room would be getting louder and louder in the excitement; having said that, we also have to mention that getting all of these women together was not always that easy. Mistrust of outsiders does exist and rightly so given Canada's Aboriginal history. However, putting forth the effort to engage with these women was without question rewarding. These women have much to offer as their wisdom and integrity is rich. Faced with many challenges, these women have grown stronger and their strength is a resource that should be tapped – to inspire and help others. It is time to overcome the discord that continues to harm Canada's relationship with Aboriginal people. It is time to learn, share, and instill mutual respect and pride. Asking for their help in any capacity is a step in the right direction.

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