



Executive Summary: Building a Resilient Volunteer Tutor Program to Serve Refugees

Solutions Lab Grantee, Dr. Katherine R. Cooper

DePaul Migration Collaborative, DePaul University

Community Partner, Forging Opportunities for Refugees in America (FORA)

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About the DePaul Migration Collaborative

The DePaul Migration Collaborative (DMC) is born from DePaul University's commitment to immigrant communities. In 1996, the College of Law founded its nationally recognized Asylum & Immigration Law Clinic. In 2015, the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences introduced the first U.S. graduate program in Refugee & Forced Migration Studies. The DMC, a joint venture of the College of Law and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, embodies DePaul's continued dedication to interdisciplinary research and advocacy in migration and human rights, seeking systemic change through education and collective action, reinforcing DePaul's legacy as an immigrant-serving institution.

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Learn more at: <https://law.depaul.edu/academics/centers-institutes-initiatives/depaul-migration-collaborative/Pages/default.aspx>

About the Researcher, Dr. Katherine R. Cooper

Katherine R. Cooper (Ph.D.), University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) is an associate professor of communication studies at DePaul University. Kate is an award-winning teacher and researcher who focuses on nonprofit organizations and how nonprofits work with other organizations and communities to scale up their response to social issues. She is the co-author of *Networks for Social Impact* (2022; Oxford University Press). Kate's research has appeared in leading journals focused on communication (*Communication Research*, *Journal of Communication*), business and management (*Business & Society*, *Journal of Business Ethics*), and nonprofits (*Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*). She also writes for practitioners in such outlets as *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and *Nonprofit Quarterly*.

About FORA

Forging Opportunities for America (FORA) maintains an in-person and remote volunteer program to provide high-dosage tutoring to K-12 refugee students who fall under the category of SLIFE (Students with Limited and Interrupted Formal Education) or who reside in pre-literate families. When refugee families are resettled and children begin school in Chicago, they are frequently years behind their peers; however, the Chicago Public School system places them in grades by age-level rather than academic-level and socially promotes them up and out of the school system, positioning them for failure. FORA's tutoring program steps in to provide a foundational education to SLIFE refugee children in the West Ridge neighborhood—a center of refugee resettlement in Chicago—focusing on English literacy and math. The success of the program relies on a consistent low student: tutor ratio that enables students to receive individualized attention.

Introduction

FORA's tutoring program is heavily comprised of Loyola and DePaul university students and consequently has high rates of turnover and specific calendar periods with low tutor turn-out during university breaks. FORA's goal was to recruit more volunteers from the West Ridge neighborhood and greater Chicagoland community who could provide consistency. This research was guided by the following questions: *How can a nonprofit improve its volunteer program? How can a nonprofit sustain a resilient tutoring program amidst volunteer turnovers?*

Methodology

To answer these questions, we drew on the following data:

- Focus groups conducted in the Fall of 2023 with FORA volunteers ($n = 5$).
- Surveys completed by past and present FORA volunteers ($n = 18/130$; 13.8% response rate).
- Pre- ($n = 14/110$; 13.6% response rate) and post- ($n = 13/110$; 11.8% response rate) surveys completed by Summer 2024 volunteers.

- Interviews conducted with FORA staff ($n = 2$).

In addition, students enrolled in the Fall 2023 Communication Consulting course provided additional materials to help recruit individual and community partners. These included the creation of a social media outreach program, calendar, templates for social media posts, and resources for recruiting organizational partners.

Summary of Findings

The research team compiled findings from FORA focus groups and surveys into a detailed report. In addition, we compiled best practices from peer-reviewed research that focused on the effectiveness of volunteering programs. The complete 24-page report is available online, with summarized findings below.

Question 1: How can a nonprofit improve its volunteer program?

We compiled detailed results on the following sections in the final report: volunteer recruitment, volunteer training, volunteer retention, cross-cultural programming, and special considerations for different types of volunteers on which FORA is likely to rely, such as students, senior citizens, and remote volunteers.

Question 2: How can a nonprofit sustain a resilient tutoring program amidst volunteer turnovers?

The term “resilience” is often used to refer to how individuals overcome adversity but has been increasingly used to explore how organizations recover from crisis or adapt to disruptions in their environment. For nonprofits, resilience is relevant in that organizations are typically expected to meet high expectations for services while dealing with financial or human resources constraints. Additionally, nonprofits are “bouncing back” from service disruptions, decreased funding, and volunteer shortages following the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonprofits serving refugees are adjusting to other adversity, such as a limited federal infrastructure to support refugees and migrants, a hostile socio-political climate, and an influx of migrants to the greater Chicago area.

Throughout this project, we referred to scholar Patrice Buzzanell’s definition, which suggests that resilience is not a trait or characteristic inherent to individuals or organizations. Instead, resilience is a process by which individuals, groups, and actors foster productive change through rituals, routines, interactions, networks, technologies, etc. Specifically, Buzzanell highlights five processes through which organizational stakeholders enact resilience: creating a “new normal,” affirming identity anchors in which organizations (re)affirm certain identities and/or values, using and/or maintaining networks/ties, looking beyond conventional ways of thinking, and foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative emotions and behaviors.

Given FORA’s need to continue tutoring programs during college students’ winter and summer breaks, we offered suggestions for making more resilient programming. Piloting a new, remote program in partnership with senior citizens outside the Chicago area offers a new frontier that

may enable more resilient programming. We offered some final thoughts reflective more of aspirational or innovative thinking should FORA wish to pursue and pilot this new programming in addition to its ongoing initiatives:

- 1) Create a new normal.
 - a. Normalize FORA remote programming by adding a position that specifically recruits, trains, and manages remote volunteers as the program grows.
- 2) Affirm identity anchors.
 - a. Lean into FORA's diversity by publicly representing the organization as comprised of diverse volunteers (e.g., age/life stage, educational status, location) and tailoring social media and traditional media outreach to seek out more diverse volunteers.
 - b. Position grant applications or funding opportunities for new remote locations as part of FORA's stated desire to represent "fora" or multiple locations in order to meet people where they are.
- 3) Using and/or maintaining networks/ties or building new ties to acquire resources.
 - a. Initiate partnerships with national or regional residential centers for active living (e.g., Mather, Covenant Living communities, The Villages), or associations (e.g., AARP, National Council on Aging), as well as individual organizations targeted to specific affiliations (e.g., retired educators, religious persons, etc). (See Appendix B).
 - b. Look to any prior models as a template; for example, the United Way Netherlands offered a program that paired refugees with elderly citizens. (<https://www.unitedway.org/blog/refugees-joining-forces-with-the-elderly>).
- 4) Looking beyond convention.
 - a. To the extent that FORA capacity and partner capacity allows, seek out opportunities that correspond with new areas of funding beyond educational outcomes. For example:
 - i. Nonprofit use of artificial intelligence (AI). Though FORA's approach focuses primarily on the importance of interaction and friendship, FORA may consider the use of AI (or funding to explore the possibilities of using AI) as a stop-gap to provide continuity in the event of volunteer no-shows or seasons of low volunteer participation.
 - ii. Social isolation. As an increasing amount of research points to a pandemic of loneliness or social isolation (including among the elderly and within immigrant communities), research funding may be available for programming that explores intergenerational partnerships or tutoring as a means of promoting relationships.
- 5) Foregrounding productive action.
 - a. Seek external funding to underwrite expenses associated with remote volunteering. This might include infrastructure (e.g., hardware and software),

training expenses, travel vouchers for seniors to travel to remote sites, if needed.

- b. Celebrate the creation and continuation of volunteer programming, with recommendations for appreciating and retaining volunteers included in the final report.

Access Materials

The complete 24-page report and appendices can be accessed [here](#) or via request from the lead researcher (kcooperm@depaul.edu).