



**Junior  
Achievement**  
A Member of JA Worldwide **USA**<sup>®</sup>

Executive Summary

# JA Volunteer Forum Presentation

From the

**Junior Achievement Volunteer Summit**

New York • March 10, 2015



## Introduction

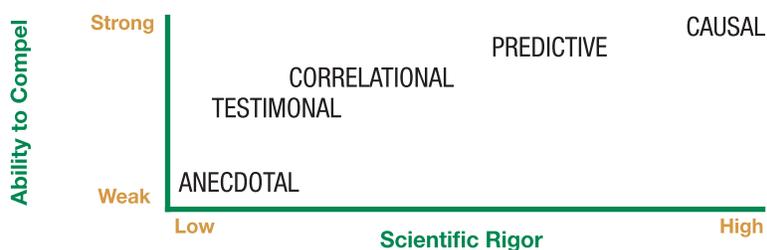
In March 2015, Junior Achievement USA® (JA USA) unveiled the results of a six-month research study about the impact of volunteers delivering education-oriented youth development programs. The study was sponsored by JA USA and employed a neutral, third-party contracted researcher. The purpose of the study was to explore and quantify the value of using volunteers in JA USA programs by examining the most scientifically rigorous data and research available in the public domain. However, it was also deemed important to explore research that met other levels of scientific objectivity...studies that yielded results that could be characterized as providing important information and potentially guiding principles for working with volunteers.

JA USA interacts with students in a unique way that differentiates it from other organizations that provide youth development activities. The use of volunteers to deliver the programs, to mentor students, and generally to serve as role models for our students results in complex interactions and impacts. Comprehensive evaluation methodologies, yielding different levels of evidence, are required to understand these complex interactions. Consequently, an understanding of evidence types is essential for communicating the nature and value of our evaluation studies to our stakeholders.

The Summit presentation reviewed five levels of evidence that can be used to describe research results. The discussion of levels of evidence is replicated here to frame the Summit research results that follow.

## A Hierarchical Framework for Increasing Levels of Evidence

Scientific evidence for a particular position or in support of an assertion or theory, not unlike legal evidence, can be described simultaneously on two continua: Ability to Compel and Level of Scientific Rigor. We have found it useful to define five levels of evidence that describe results of research about the impact of JA USA programs based on types of research conducted on the topic of volunteer impact. Two of these levels of evidence (correlational and predictive) will be cited later in this summary to provide context for our meta-analysis results. For comparison, the levels of evidence are as follows:



<b>Anecdotal</b>	Information gathered in an informal or casual way
<b>Testimonial</b>	Declaration about personal experience or knowledge
<b>Correlational</b>	Statistical relationship between two variables that indicates association
<b>Predictive</b>	Quantitative statement that forecasts what will happen under certain circumstances
<b>Causal</b>	Explanation of a relationship between variables that describes cause and effect

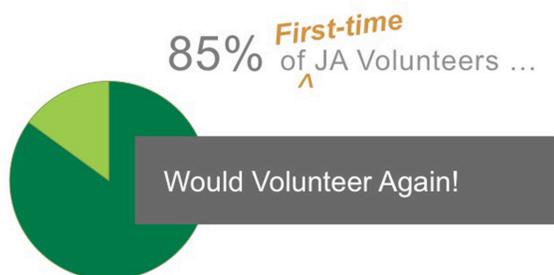
## Research Results

The impetus for the meta-analysis research stems from the *Junior Achievement USA 2013 Volunteer Engagement Study*, a survey of approximately 10,000 volunteers that set a new benchmark for understanding our volunteers. In addition to being insightful in its own right, it served as foundation for framing up questions about who our volunteers are, what motivates them, why are they committed to JA's mission, and what are the mechanisms that contribute to the impact of the volunteer on our students. Highlights of the 2013 study that are relevant to the current line of research about volunteer impact follow.

### Level of Previous Experience with JA.

Sixty-eight percent of our volunteers indicate that they have at some time in the past volunteered with JA.

Volunteers are notorious for shopping around for volunteer activities. Retaining volunteers is generally a challenge for many non-profits for a number of reasons. However, JA volunteers say otherwise. They are committed to our mission, want to work with students, and most importantly, want to make a lasting impact on our youth. That's what they tell us.



### First-Timers Want to Volunteer Again.

The majority of our volunteers who are first-timers tell us they would come back and volunteer again.

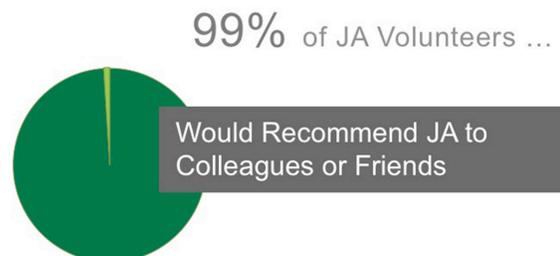
This is an important finding because research indicates that one of the best predictors of willingness to volunteer is tied directly to the level of impact a volunteer believes they are

having on a program participant. In spite of the training that's required, in spite of the time commitment, JA USA volunteers believe they are having an impact on students.

### Ninety-nine Percent of JA Volunteers Would Recommend the Experience.

An unprecedented number of JA volunteers would recommend the experience to others.

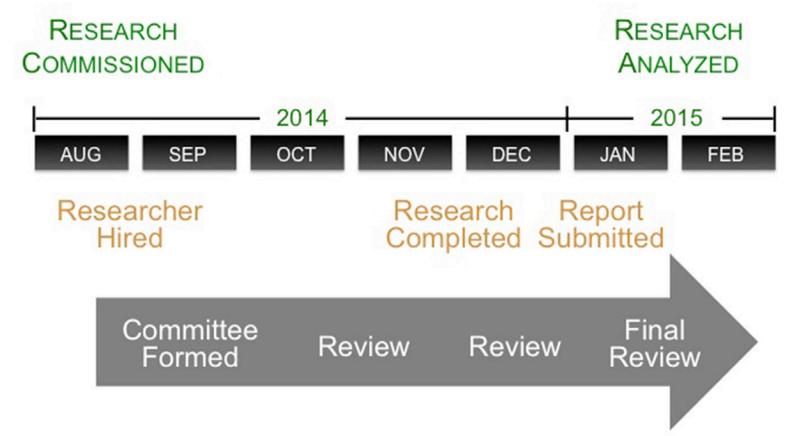
Across all industries, the Net Promoter Score (NPS) is the gold standard for interpreting customer experiences. It's one of the best-researched indices because of its value for predicting loyalty, intent to purchase, and likelihood of speaking favorably about an organization. Our NPS results confirm that we are providing an opportunity that volunteers believe is important, impactful, and an excellent use of their volunteer time.



## Implementation of Meta-Analysis Study

The *Junior Achievement USA 2013 Volunteer Engagement Study* motivated us to study the value and importance of the volunteer more closely. We wanted to know if we could quantify the value of our volunteers with scientific evidence. The best way to answer that question was to conduct a meta-analysis of the available academic and scientific literature in peer-reviewed social science journals for the last 15 years. A meta-analysis is a systematic compilation of all of the relevant research on a particular topic—with the caveat that the research has to meet the very highest levels of scientific scrutiny.

### Research Calendar - Commissioning to Report



In August 2014, JA USA commissioned the meta-analysis. We engaged a researcher who had extensive experience with this type of research but who was neutral as to the outcomes. We also engaged an oversight committee of JA Associates who had research experience or knowledge of our previous research on volunteerism. After a number of discussions, the oversight committee developed a set of three questions they believed met the purpose of the research:

1. *What types of missions (e.g., youth development, critical human needs, health, and education) do organizations want to support when they dedicate volunteer hours?*
2. *What is the overall value/benefit of a volunteer to the delivery of an educational program?*
  - a. *What are the benefits/impacts/outcomes for organizations?*
  - b. *What are the benefits/impacts/outcomes for volunteers?*
  - c. *What are the benefits/impacts/outcomes for program participants?*
3. *What variables explain the impacts of volunteering?*

These questions served to guide the review of the existing scientific literature and provide boundaries on the types of potential research that should be considered in support of our original research intent.

## Correlational and Predictive Research Supporting our Meta-Analysis

To best understand the results of the meta-analysis about the impact of volunteerism on our program outcomes, a context for understanding volunteerism comprehensively was developed by exploring other types of volunteerism research that was built on correlational and predictive evidence, two of the five levels of evidence introduced previously.

We first reviewed research developed around evidence that there are relationships between variables of interest (correlational). Key findings note that volunteer activities:

- Improve employee recruitment and retention – especially among Millennials
- Increase volunteers' perception of their own company and the company's leadership team
- Help employees feel healthier in terms of lowered job stress, increased sense of purpose, and a sense of life enrichment
- Increase employee engagement as measured by workplace satisfaction and corporate loyalty

Secondly, we reviewed research that employed statistical methods that projected outcomes (predictive) based on known relationships between variables of interest to the study of volunteerism. This type of research represents the first step in moving from exploratory evidence to confirmatory evidence, and is an important step in the progress to being able to make the strongest links in the cause-and-effect chain. It can be predicted with a certain level of probability that volunteerism contributes to:

- Enhanced professional skills such as time management and ability to work in teams
- Increased levels of productivity and team cohesion, especially following a cooperative volunteer experience
- Reported increases in job satisfaction, which in turn leads to higher levels of job performance
- Increased intra-group communication and relationship building

Both types of research, correlational and predictive, and the specific results noted above, served as a foundation for understanding the results of our meta-analysis of volunteerism research. By building on previous research, we were able to define what it meant to “raise the bar” on the types of research we would accept as evidence, as proof that our programs are impactful because they use volunteers to deliver instruction as they simultaneously act as mentors and role models to participating students.

## Interpreting the Results of the Meta-Analysis Research

Much of the research about volunteerism conducted in the last 15 years confirms that volunteers make a significant and meaningful difference in the delivery of instructional programs to youth. The general research described above support that thesis, and our students, volunteers and teachers have also affirmed that conclusion many times. The meta-analysis research we conducted sought to narrow the breadth of possible topics associated with volunteerism and to answer specific questions about impact on students by volunteers as well as the actual mechanisms involved that increase student impact. Interestingly, the academic research that met the standards of the meta-analysis criteria for inclusion disproportionately focused on best practices for working with volunteers to get maximum benefit from their contributions rather than on mechanisms that enhance impact.

The key findings from the meta-analysis can be summarized as follows:

1. Organizations can maximize the benefits of volunteerism by adopting known best practices.
2. Instructional effectiveness of volunteers can be enhanced by concentrating resources on training, monitoring, and intensive instruction.
3. Highly-structured, instructional programs are most effective; small group and one-on-one programs can be equally effective.
4. Using volunteers in an instructional role generally results in a “small-to-moderate” impact.

## Effect Size as the Measurement Index for Impact

Impact in the research literature is often quantified using an “effect size” statistic. Effect size is a mathematical calculation that describes the measure of strength of the impact of a program. The calculation of effect size has been standardized so that the results of similar programs can be compared directly using the same units of measure. Only by standardizing the quantitative results may an evaluator make a side-by-side comparisons of similar programs to determine which of several programs better fulfills the mission of a sponsoring organization.

It is reassuring to have discovered cumulative evidence that the use of volunteers in general makes a difference in how students receive instruction. The ability to standardize the measurement of impact to make comparisons between studies and to scientifically contrast the processes under study is also encouraging because it supports our efforts to evaluate different program content and delivery processes.

It is in the context of program comparisons that a related finding should be heralded and noted in conversations with stakeholders regarding the impact of our programs. Summative evaluations conducted in our most recent calendar year (2014) indicate that, on the average, JA USA programs result in effect sizes that can be characterized as “moderate to large.” This is in contrast to the “small to moderate” effect size

calculations that are being reported in the research literature for programs conducted by other youth development organization<sup>1</sup> programs. Variables of interest that demonstrate this comparatively greater impact include: topical knowledge gain; increase in positive inclinations on desirable attitudes; and students' perceptions about the real-world application of JA USA programs.

This last point provides an exciting conclusion to our current research. When compared to other organizations operating in a similar space as JA USA—and the field is broad and varied—research shows that on an important measure of impact, JA USA programs demonstrate a greater measurable change than other youth development programs. While the mechanism that leads to this stronger impact is not fully understood, it is not unreasonable to account for much of that impact as a function of JA USA's unique program design and delivery methods and practices. Our volunteers—the role they play and the manner in which they interact with students—are a major part of the equation in what makes JA USA different from other programs that deliver important services to students and youth in general. More research should be conducted to explore the actual mechanisms that are operating to induce change in the target audiences, but any future research should build on this body of study and expand it because of the solid scientific foundation that has already been laid.

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<sup>1</sup> Comparison organizations are those reviewed as part of the meta-analysis whose results contain an effect size measurement.