

Am I a Virginia Master Naturalist or Not?

*Important VMN Program
Misunderstandings*



Virginia Master Naturalist Leadership Training 2020





- Ever wonder why some of what seemed like excited Basic Training Course graduates, disappeared into the woodwork after a year or so?
- Why it's so difficult to get volunteers to record their hard-earned volunteer hours? (We'll look at one of the major reasons that's been brought to the forefront.)
- Certified, not certified? Transferring? Active, inactive? Members are asking "am I a VMN or not?"

Throughout this past year, we at the VMN state office and your chapters have discovered many incorrect assumptions about our fundamental VMN program logistics from both volunteers and Board members in all of our Chapters. Many of these misunderstandings especially came to light during the Roster Status Clean-up Project that the Chapters did this year, where you all got to talk to many of your lapsed members and those not reporting their earned hours.

Also, these confusions about how the VMN program works has affected the retention and activity of chapter volunteers all across the state, as we all discovered this past year during your member conversations.

We feel it very important, therefore, to correct and clarify the many

misunderstandings going forward, and need your assistance to help us resolve this. We will look at some of the most common ones here.

These foundations of the VMN program may sound so simple to most of us, but remember, not everyone in your chapter hears/reads/understands the same way.

So, as you all are reading this today, I ask you to be thinking about how you will want to reach out to all your members to review these simple fundamentals with them – don't assume everyone understands it correctly. And they may not even realize that they've misunderstood. This clarification to your members will hopefully help make your chapter more dynamic and may actually keep some of your members more engaged.

Confused/Lost photo: http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/lost_confused_sign_mega1.jpeg

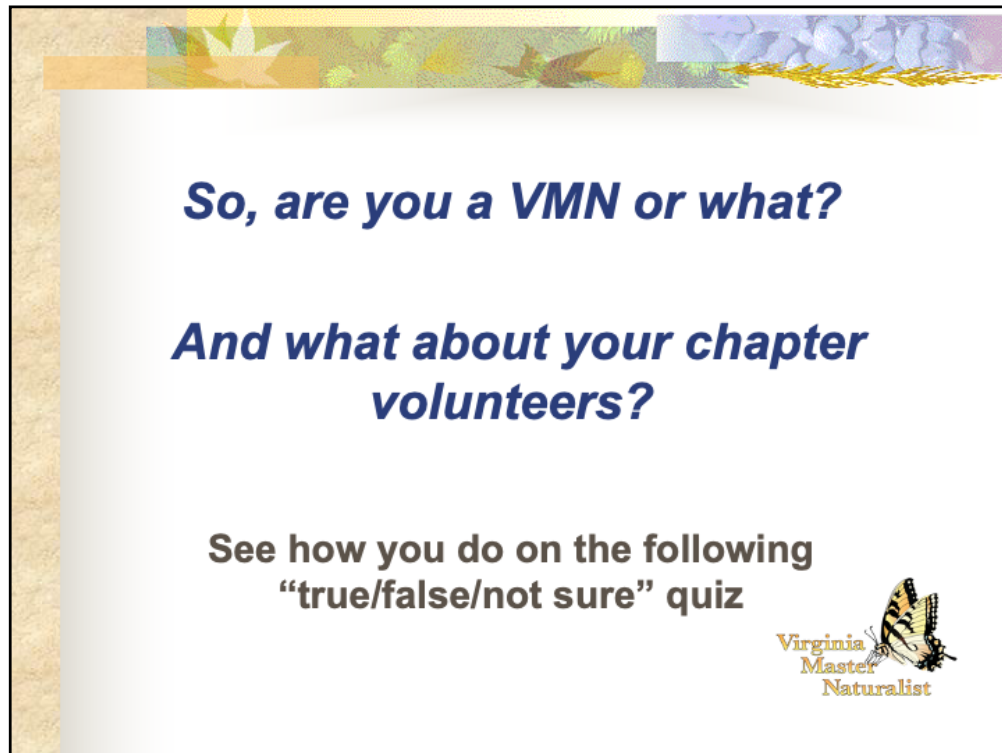
Today we will...

- Clarify commonly misunderstood VMN fundamental concepts
- Try to identify why these confusions are happening
- How we can rectify them



Today's goals:

1. Clarify some of the common confusions and misunderstood concepts about what a VMN volunteer is. You can quiz yourself as we go, to see how YOU do. *[You can do this on Zoom, as we did, using the polls tool. It's anonymous and the results can be shown to all.]*
2. We'll look at some thoughts on why these confusions might be happening
3. I'll be asking you to share what you know or think may be confusing to your members
4. I'll then ask for your input on some ways to better clarify these going forward



So, are you a VMN or what? And what about your chapter volunteers?

The answer, for you Board members participating here today, is, of course, YES! And most of you are probably Certified VMNs, having so generously given your time to be on the Board or lead a Committee. (Thank you so much for that!) But what about everyone else in your chapter?

I'll address many of the confusions that we found members have regarding this and other fundamentals as a poll: I'll give you "true, false, or not sure" questions one at a time and then review the correct answers to each.

**A huge caveat – I'm asking questions and talking today about our
NORMAL program logistics, not this unique year.
Please don't answer based on THIS year's exceptions (2020).**

[If using Zoom polls:] The question should pop up on your screen in a box. Simply mark the box next to the answer you think is correct and press 'submit'. Your answers are anonymous, so no worries.

A VMN volunteer is required to report, at a minimum, 40 hours of chapter-approved volunteer service + 8 hours of chapter-approved continuing education every year or they will no longer be considered a VMN



T Keffert @2020

FALSE

True, false or not sure:

1. **A VMN volunteer is required to report, at a minimum, 40 hours of chapter-approved volunteer service + 8 hours of chapter-approved continuing education every year or they will no longer be considered a VMN**

[On Zoom: If using polls, you can see the results coming in. You can also choose to show the poll results.]

[POLL RESULTS from Leadership Day were: 15% true, 80% false, 5% not sure (n=54)]

[CLICK SLIDE FOR ANSWER]

- a. **FALSE.** They do NOT have to be certified every year to be considered an active VMN volunteer. (That is what a volunteer becomes when reporting their earned 40 + 8 hours). That question should have been easy, I hope. **But** this is one of the biggest misunderstandings we have heard from members!

This is important for all volunteers to understand.

We found from most of your chapters that many volunteers thought that they HAD to get enough hours to certify every year or it didn't count at all or matter. So, even though they performed some

volunteer hours on approved projects, they didn't feel the need to report them. (And I'll speak to this more shortly.)

Not to mention that many of those volunteers just stopped volunteering if they didn't perform enough hours to be certified, for that same reason. Whether from guilt, embarrassment, or thinking that they didn't qualify as a VMN member anymore. We need to remedy this incorrect assumption amongst our members.

[refer to slide]

Like the trees from which these nuts came from, which are all part of the same forest, all the active volunteers (and trainees) in your chapter are part of the VMN program family, not just the ones who earned their certification for that year.

**A person with the status of
“inactive” is not an enrolled VMN
volunteer and may not volunteer
nor identify as one.**



TRUE

2. A person with the status of “inactive” is not an enrolled VMN volunteer and may not volunteer nor identify as one.
[POLL RESULTS from Leadership Day were: **41% true**, 48% false, 11% not sure (n=56)]

[CLICK SLIDE FOR ANSWER]

- a. TRUE: If their status is changed to "inactive", that means...**
1. They can no longer represent themselves as a Virginia Master Naturalist in public or while doing chapter-approved volunteer service.
 2. They should not be participating in any of the VMN-only activities or projects, including any projects that they were working on as a VMN unless it is open to public volunteers
 3. They are not covered by Virginia Tech liability insurance in the case of an incident.
 4. They will no longer be able to access their records or profile on the Volunteer Management System at the present time.

And it's very important to explain all of this, ie what this means to them as a former member if they are reclassified as 'inactive', so they are fully aware.

There are many reasons why someone might be reclassified as 'inactive'. One common reason has been that VMN chapter rosters were filled with people who were no longer connected with the program anymore and had no intention of volunteering as a VMN in the near future.

- a. But it's **easy to reactivate them** if they later let you know they plan to volunteer with VMN again. Then you can review current chapter procedures, approved project opportunities, and any changes in policies with them at that time. And because we never delete inactive members from our records, they can pick up where they left off, such as with their milestone hours.

Free photo: <https://www.maxpixels.net/static/photo/1x/The-Monkey-Surprise-Animal-Zoo-The-Surprise-409407.jpg>

The VMN state office requires a person to pay dues to their chapter to be considered an enrolled VMN volunteer



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FALSE

3. **The VMN state office requires a person to pay dues to their chapter to be considered an enrolled VMN**

[POLL RESULTS from Leadership Day were: 25% true, 72% false, 3% not sure (n=57)]

[CLICK SLIDE FOR ANSWER]

- a. **FALSE.** The state program does not require dues at the state level, and we don't require chapters to have dues or to enforce dues payment in any particular way.

Some chapters (not all) do collect dues, and some (not all) require payment of those dues for a volunteer to remain enrolled. The VMN state office does understand that dues are important for the sustainability of some chapters, but we don't want dues to be a barrier to volunteering, which is our program's mission. What we want to avoid are situations where someone is actively involved in the VMN program and volunteering as a VMN, but then is made inactive and thus no longer able to volunteer solely because they didn't pay their dues.

If this situation commonly occurs in your chapter, please contact the

VMN state office so that we can talk about how to reduce the barriers for someone to remain an active, enrolled VMN volunteer.

Just to also mention (since many Board members don't realize this) and it may help you better understand:

- At this point, no chapter is required to pay any dues **to the state office to support the overall VMN program.** (We have a few chapters who generously have given the state program a donation. Thank you!)

Photo: Free per bing ppt sources (<https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-gHH-9HR4cog/WPpJWLnlpuI/AAAAAAAAAuuA/IvFL-T27L1wxOYSMQOp8M-kNKt8tpjgwGCLcB/s1600/nps%2Bcitizen%2Bscience.jpg>)

**As long as a person is
paying the chapter dues,
they can remain an
enrolled VMN forever,
even if they are no longer
volunteering**

FALSE



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4. As long as a person is paying the chapter dues, they can remain an enrolled VMN forever, even if they are no longer volunteering.
[POLL RESULTS from Leadership Day were: 15% true, 77% false, 8% not sure (n=60)]

[CLICK SLIDE FOR ANSWER]

- a. **FALSE:** Again, it's about the volunteering. We know! Many past active volunteers who no longer are volunteering may still want to support their local chapters with funding. This is admirable. Or they just want to still be considered part of your wonderful community without putting in volunteer service hours.

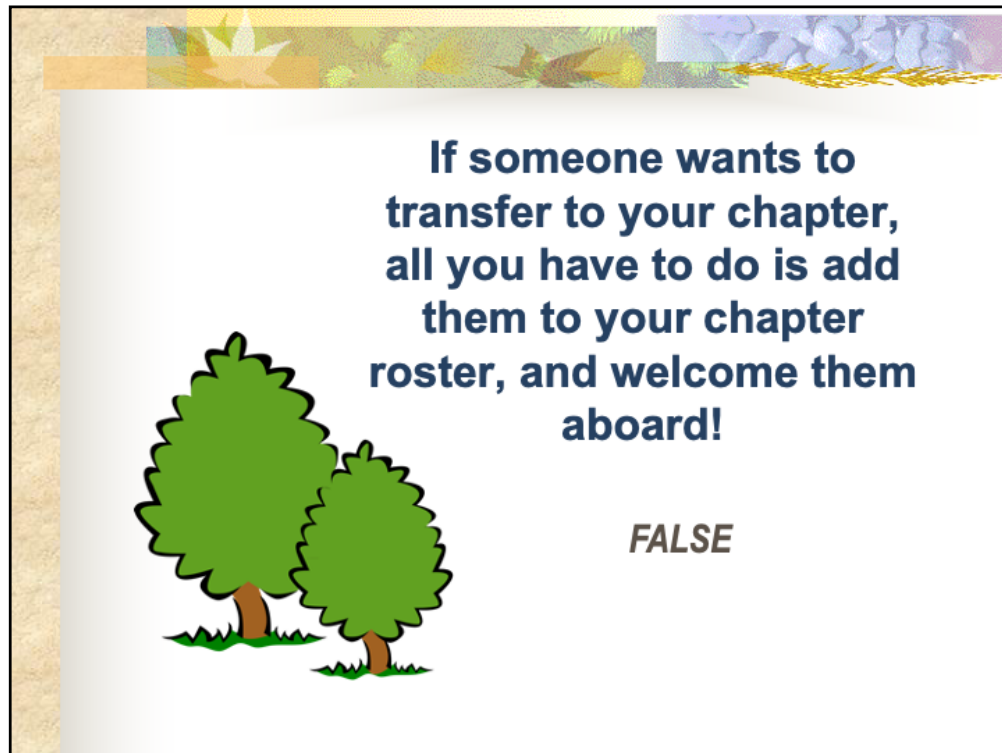
But dues payment alone does not constitute an 'Active' status or being an enrolled VMN volunteer. This is where there is a misunderstanding of what type of program we are.

VMN is not a club or membership organization, like, say, Virginia Native Plant Society, where you pay yearly dues/membership fees. VMN program is a volunteer program of Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) – where we train volunteers and then offer our assistance to those agencies, partners, and other organizations that

expect our help conserving and maintaining our natural resources.

I think many of those who only pay dues may be confused with what our program's purpose is. Maybe it's even because of the word 'member? (We'll talk about that shortly.) We found that a lot of our volunteers do think of the VMN program as an organization like bird clubs, Sierra Club, or other similar clubs... those who meet, have local chapters, activities, etc and call their dues-paying community 'members'. We are very similar looking from an outsider's viewpoint. But the VMN program is unique. Which is why we need your help to make sure to remind your volunteers of our program's true role and mission. So all of our volunteers realize how important their time and efforts are, not just money!

If a now inactive member who doesn't want to volunteer anymore still wants to support your chapter or our state program with funding, please suggest they call it a 'donation', and explain to them the importance of them putting in volunteer hours if they wish to remain an enrolled VMN volunteer. Otherwise, please let them know what it means to be 'inactive'. (As was recently reviewed.)



5. If someone wants to transfer to your chapter, all you have to do is add them to your chapter roster, and welcome them aboard!

[POLL RESULTS from Leadership Day were: 2% true, 88% false, 10% not sure (n=57)]

[CLICK SLIDE FOR ANSWER]

A person comes up to one of you and says they are a VMN in a different chapter. They have just moved and want to be a part of your chapter now. Do you just welcome them with open arms, add them to the chapter roster, and move on?

- a. **FALSE.** First off – how lucky for you and the program! This relocated member is making the effort to transfer to your chapter when they could so easily step away from the program after their move! To continue volunteering to help nature, or to start volunteering again (if they've been inactive). To want to be a part of your wonderful community. Yes, please, welcome them in!

But remember that we all are trained volunteers, each of us with responsibilities and protocols to uphold, as unsupervised, trusted representatives and leaders of VMN and by extension, VCE. (no pun

intended)

It's important that we in the state office (and your chapter) know who this person is.

- In particular, we need to know that they left their old chapter 'in good standing' – that doesn't mean that the transferee is an active volunteer at the moment, has 'certified' status, or is up to date on their dues payments. 'In good standing' means that they were not dismissed, suspended, or put on probation from the VMN program. This is rare but it happens.
- The official transfer protocols and paperwork also tell us all that they were already screened, graduated from the BTC, and have signed an VMN program agreement.

It's usually the Membership Chair or VMS Administrator, and probably the President, who will facilitate the passing of the required documents and contact the VMN state office to make the official transfer. But it's good for the rest of you to know generally about this, since it may be you who the transferee talks to first to share their desire to join your chapter. Please refer them to these folks on your Board or to us at the state office.

And of course, continue to show your warm welcome to these excited transferring MN members, as you do so well now!



A bonus – one that you all have been struggling with! (I won't quiz you on this one.)

You've probably heard a member say: "Reporting my hours only counts toward my certification. I don't care about that – I just want to help the environment. I don't need the award or recognition, so I don't need to record my hours. It's not important." And so they don't report them.

You've heard this so many times, I'm sure. What do you tell them? How do we change this belief?

What they don't understand (besides their own liability protection that is offered by VT for what they are doing but only if they report it,) is the holistic picture of our VMN program and what reporting their hours does for the whole group and larger, for the collective-whole, which includes our sponsoring agencies, partners, etc. The member's projects and volunteer service hours - even if just a few hours, combined with everyone else's, add up and help to show that our program is successful, that we're accomplishing our mission that we promised to do. And this then can help our program and the other environmental organizations we assist get the funding we all need to continue doing our good works for our natural resources. It shows to those at the state and federal level that our collective efforts are meaningful and essential.

I know - that's the 'big picture' but it's true. Our VMN program and other organizations all suffered this past years when natural resource funding was cut. (The VMN program was a victim of that this year as you heard.) Maybe explain this 'bigger picture' way to those members who are not reporting their earned hours. Perhaps if they realize that reporting hours is not just for their benefit, they might have a whole different mindset about how crucial their wonderful efforts really are.

It also may help retain that member, since they may leave the program sooner if they don't realize their own value to the actual program itself AND the big picture. They may think they will just go out and help nature in their own way, which is great. But if they realize that reporting their efforts actually supports our program's and others' future success, they may more willingly do that. And stick around longer because they will feel needed in another way.

So, it's important that they know why this does matter. To let them know they are an essential part of our mission and a piece of the 'big' picture.

That said, please also clarify to your members that we are not just an hours-documentation organization where people should report all their environmental volunteer service. That's not the message we want them to think.

And please, all of you, remember that you are a representative of our VMN program and volunteering your service as such, even if it is on a project of another organization (and, of course, approved in your chapter.) It's important not to forget this when you are giving your time as a VMN to our agencies and partners.

Photo: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f5/RobGrindes-shrug-143px.png>

To review...

- An active enrolled VMN volunteer does not have to recertify any given year to remain as such
- **The VMN program is not a club type of organization but rather a volunteer program of VCE (Important!)**
- Dues payment alone does not constitute an 'active' status as a VMN volunteer
- A former volunteer categorized as 'inactive' is no longer able to volunteer as a VMN or identify as one, and should be informed as such



[CLICK SLIDE FOR EACH POINT ONE AT A TIME]

So to review:

1. To be considered an 'enrolled active VMN volunteer', they don't have to earn certified/recertified status (ie report earning 40 + 8 hours) in any given year in order to remain classified as an enrolled active volunteer.
2. **KEY to remember and share: the VMN program is not a club** (like bird clubs, Native Plant Society, etc (all admirable organizations). The VMN program's success, mission, and promise rely on our well-trained volunteers to volunteer their time and efforts to our sponsoring agencies, partners, and others to conserve and maintain our natural resources. It's about the volunteering.
3. Dues payment alone does not constitute an 'active' status as a VMN volunteer, for the reasons mentioned above.
4. A former VMN volunteer categorized as 'inactive' is no longer able to volunteer as a VMN nor identify as one, and should be informed about what that means for them.

To review...

- Non-payment of chapter dues should not be a barrier to volunteering
- When transferring a member, proper protocol must be followed by both old/new chapters and the state office before officially accepting them
- Reporting volunteer service hours, even a few, does matter, to our program, our sponsoring agencies and partners, and all those who support our important missions. Please share this 'bigger picture'.



[CLICK SLIDE FOR EACH POINT ONE AT A TIME]

So to review:

5. Non-payment of chapter dues should not be a barrier to volunteering. If a member is actively volunteering as a VMN and hasn't paid their chapter dues, reclassifying them as 'inactive' should be avoided, as it prevents the volunteer from continuing their good works of helping our natural resources, and thus the mission of our VMN program.
6. If someone says they want to transfer to your chapter, you will need to follow the protocol to make that happen, which involves the old and new chapters and the state office.
7. Reporting hours, even a few, does matter. It's terrific what the volunteer does for nature individually, but reporting it matters very much to 'the bigger picture' - to the success of our program, our sponsoring agencies/partners and all those who support our abilities to help our natural resources continue to survive. Members need to realize that, especially those who aren't reporting their earned hours.

And I **thank all of you** for giving so much of your time toward our mission!

So, these are just a few of the misunderstandings we have found that many

VMN volunteers don't quite 'get'. And it does hurt your chapter and the program.

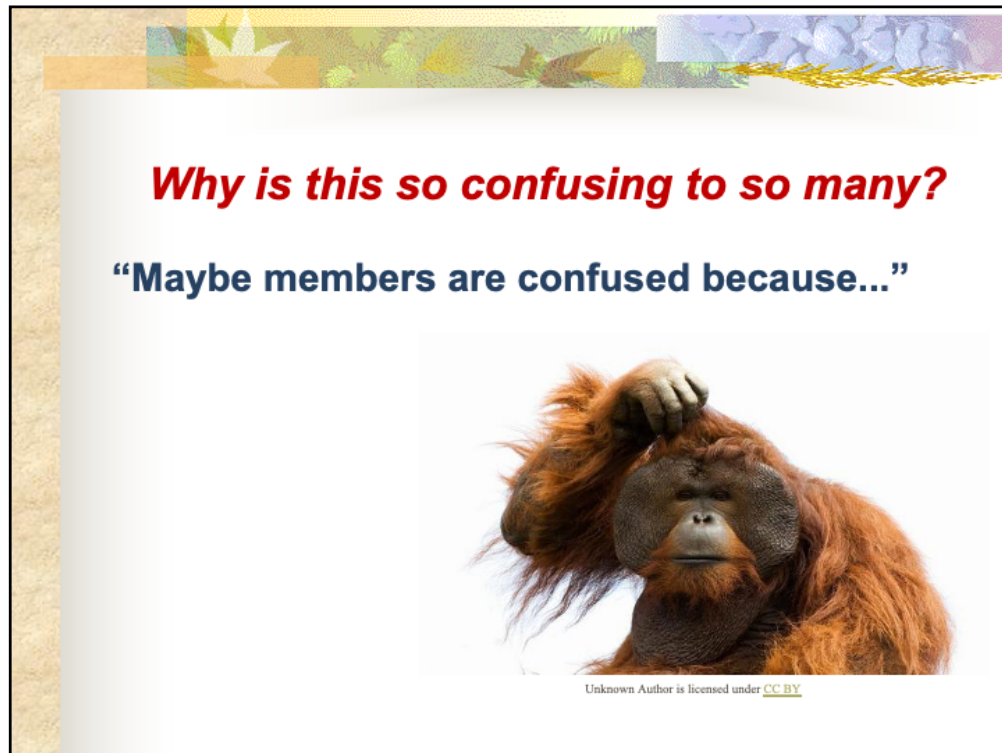


Next, we'll talk about what might be causing these misunderstandings to happen and ask for your input.

But first –

ANY Quick QUESTIONS?: *add to chat box.*

**----- OK – STRETCH -- DON'T GO AWAY.... STAND UP – SIT
DOWN -----**



Why is this confusing to many? Let's look at possibilities and see how they can be resolved.

It seems so logical. But one – two – many of these misunderstandings have been messing different people up. The VMN program logistics aren't getting across. Why?

Maybe volunteers are confused because... *(and I want you to finish that phrase by adding your thoughts or what you've heard in your chapter from your confused members - in the chat box)*

For example:

- Regarding the incorrect assumption that volunteers need to be recertified every year to remain a member may come from the Extension Master Gardener program, which does require yearly recertification (completion of hours requirements) in order to stay a current member, I believe

Maybe terminology is confusing people:

- Certified vs certificate: graduates of the Basic Training Course have always gotten a 'certificate', with some now thinking that they are 'certified' members, as we've been told (it doesn't happen often, but just this year, I've had two BTC graduates tell me that.) A terminology issue? (This has now been changed to "diploma")

- Other non-volunteering organizations, like bird clubs, have people pay yearly dues/membership fees to be considered a 'member'. So maybe the word 'member' is a problem?

[read out some of what has been entered in chat box]

What else may be causing confusions among YOUR chapter members, or things you have come across?

What can we do to help rectify these misunderstandings?

Some specific questions about terminology first. What could we call...

- A volunteer who has earned his/her 40+8 hours, instead of the word 'certified'? Or is that term okay?
- An active volunteer who isn't certified?
- Our volunteers in general, instead of 'member'?
 - What do you think of using '**enrolled volunteer**' instead, for a member

Other confusing terminology that you have ideas for?

[CLICK SLIDE FOR EACH POINT ONE AT A TIME]

What can we do to help rectify these? But first I want to ask you some specific questions about terminology (*Put replies in chat box*)

Regarding terms that would be less confusing...

What would you think we might use instead? EG:

- What to use for a volunteer who has earned his/her 40 hours of chapter-approved volunteer service + 8 hours of chapter-approved continuing education instead of the word 'certified'? Or is that classification okay?
- How would you term an active volunteer who isn't certified (hasn't completed 40+8 hours)?
- The word 'member' (which sounds like a 'club' or organizational term)? Any other term that you think fits? What can we broadly term the people who belong to our program?
 - **What do you think of using 'enrolled volunteer' instead, for a member**

- **Other confusing terminology that you have ideas for?**

[read out some of chat box responses]

Please share with the VMN state office the ideas you or your members have come up with during these exercises. tkeffert@vt.edu

As we move forward to better our program, and especially since we will be using a new VMS system that we have the ability to customize, we'd like to see what can be done to create more clarity and less misunderstandings.

Actions to Work On



- Please reach out to all the members and trainees and review program fundamentals with them. Don't assume that they all understand.
- Share the 'bigger picture' to members. Bring attention to their role in this for those who are reluctant to record their earned hours.
- Clarify to members what the VMN program is (a volunteer program) and isn't (a club)
- Remember to share the 'whys' when explaining
- Email state office with clarification suggestions (tkeffert@vt.edu)

ACTIONS I HOPE YOU ALL WILL TAKE AWAY WITH YOU TODAY AND WORK ON:

- Please reach out to all the members and review these fundamentals with them. **Many** members don't even realize that they have misunderstood the logistics. Please don't assume that they do understand.
- You'll especially want to review these with new trainees and any new Board members and Chairs as they come onboard. Tell them to think of it as a review for the whole Board, a good thing to do, given our realization of so many misunderstandings.
- Share the 'bigger picture' with your members as well. For those who are reluctant to record their earned hours, you might bring attention to their role in this for the support of our program and other organizations. That it's not just about rewarding them. Their volunteer hours reporting, and thus the individual volunteer, are needed by all the programs that help our natural resources.
- Clarify what the VMN program is (a volunteer program) and isn't (a club) to members and thus their responsibilities as a (hopefully) proud program representative and volunteer
- Remember to share the 'whys' when explaining so members will better understand and retain it.
- Email the VMN state office with confusing program fundamentals and

terminology and/or clarification suggestions (tkeffert@vt.edu) that you hear or think about.

Many of these confusions are affecting the volunteer hours and **volunteer retention**, I know that's something that you all work on and care about. So as you think about how to retain your members or how to get them to report their hours, remember that one of the reasons may be that they might be assuming these VMN program fundamentals incorrectly.

Hopefully, there will be some 'ah ha' moments as you clarify the program logistics and you will engage even a few to reconnect with your chapter, the VMN program and mission. And, in the process, inspire more of their time and efforts toward helping nature.

Bonus to that is: I think you will find that volunteers will enter their volunteer hours more willingly once they understand how needed these are.



Many thanks for your attention, and **for your help** at resolving these misunderstandings among your members. We'll look forward to seeing what other ideas you come up with. We'll be considering all that you've shared with us, moving forward.

I know that you'll find it helps your chapter in many ways.

Thank you for all that **you** do to keep our VMN program and our mission strong!

Any other questions?