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**OPIRG's Volunteer Services:
Exploring Issues of Structure, Inclusiveness and
Self-Definition**

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Executive Summary

This report is the result of an evaluation conducted as a practical learning experience facilitated by the Trent Centre for Community-Based Education (TCCBE) and the International Development Studies (IDST) 422 Course “Assessment of Development Projects,” at Trent University. The report explores the relationship between the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) in Peterborough and its volunteers. Our report aims to present and reflect on the main findings and recommendations of a research undertaken during the second semester of the 2004-2005 academic year. This research was called by last years OPIRG’s Board of Directors.

Our main research question was: Do OPIRG Volunteer Services Meet Volunteers’ expectations and Needs? We sought an answer to this inquiry by investigating the five following questions:

- ❖ How do board and staff define what volunteer services should be?
- ❖ How do volunteers see themselves in relationship to OPIRG?
- ❖ How do OPIRG volunteer services and activities reflect and accomplish OPIRG’s mission statement and general policy?
- ❖ What are the main issues that the organization is facing in relation to its volunteer services?
- ❖ How are these issues to be addressed?

We decided to respond the questions above through different research means that included nine in-depth interviews, a questionnaire, participant observation and literature review. The interviews and questionnaires incorporated volunteers, staff, board members and people who had been related with OPIRG in the past. We carried out our participant observation in different settings such as the OPIRG office, meetings and events. In this way we integrated different views into our research and findings.

One of our main findings relate to OPIRG’s structure and the way it affects its relationship with its volunteers. The organization has the possibility to recreate itself according to its volunteers and staff’s needs and projects. We found that while OPIRG’s decentralized structure has a great potential for independent projects and autonomous volunteers, this flexible structure is a barrier for some members and prospective volunteers. Hence we found that OPIRG’s structure determines the kind of volunteer opportunities available, just as it impacts volunteer enrollment levels and profile.

Another key finding is related to issues of inclusiveness. We found that OPIRG’s image is perceived as exclusive and linked to a restricted set of activities and social relations. This affects volunteer enrollment, cultural and social diversity, as well as the public’s reception of OPIRG’s activities. Moreover, this was of great relevance to our research, and for the organization at large, for it raises important questions about the organization’s mandate and place in the Trent and Peterborough community.

Other issues and concerns affecting OPIRG’s relationship with its volunteers are related to the following categories: Communication, Resources and Outreach. All findings

are closely interrelated and have an effect on the organization's inner dynamics and its relationship to the outside.

Our recommendations are focused on structural changes affecting the organizations' inner dynamics. We discuss issues relating to OPIRG's relationship with its current volunteers. Our recommendations, also call for new outreach, participation and communication strategies incorporating concerns regarding OPIRG's relationship with its members at large. This is connected to our main research question since it affects volunteer enrollment levels and profile. The following are our main recommendations:

❖ **Creation of Communication Channels**

- Clearer job descriptions
- Longer periods of staff and board training
- Staff, volunteer and board assemblies and forums;

❖ **New Forms of Volunteering**

- Short term
- Task-oriented
- Research Based
- Continue with Working Groups Structure

❖ **More Spaces to Participate**

- Inclusion of International Students
- Wheelchair accessibility
- Further networking with local NGOs and student groups
- Creation of plural forums that integrate professors, University staff, students and other community members

❖ **Alternative Outreach Methods**

- Use of arts: theater, music, etc.
- New posters
- Emphasis on first year and on-campus residents
- Advertisement in academic departments and activities

❖ **Suggestions for Further Research**

- Further research can explore the perceptions of OPIRG in Trent and Peterborough.
- We consider that a “responsive approach” to evaluation research is an appropriate means that can be used for further studies on OPIRG.
- Research on new partnerships for OPIRG with organizations in Trent and Peterborough.
- Research on relationship between OPIRG Peterborough and other PIRGs in the region.
- We encourage that the research aspect of the organization be revitalized.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Methodology

*“The purpose of practice is not to produce or control anything
but to discover through mutual discussion and reflection
between free citizens the most appropriate ways
under present conditions, of living the ethically good life”
(Bellah 1983: 55).*

The Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) is known in the Peterborough and Trent community for carrying out a number of research projects every year. Usually, these projects involve critical issues regarding social/environmental concerns. OPIRG is also known for its progressive practices and mandate, as reflected in its organizational structure, policies and events.

Although in its many years of existence OPIRG has called for many research projects, this is the first OPIRG evaluation that has ever been done. It is the first time an OPIRG research project is looking ‘inward’ and seeking to come up with insights about OPIRG itself. Having been called by last year’s OPIRG Board of Directors (2003-2004), this evaluation aims to explore the effectiveness of OPIRG’s volunteer services. This evaluation attempts to answer some of the concerns that OPIRG volunteers, staff and members had in recent years. This evaluation, carried out as part of a TCCBE and IDST 422 project, intends to examine OPIRG and its relationship with its volunteers. This research also aims to find ways in which OPIRG’s volunteer services could be further developed.

Our main research question is: Do OPIRG Volunteer Services Meet Volunteers’ Expectations and Needs?

This question was further explored in the following subsidiary questions:

- ❖ How do board and staff define what volunteer services should be?
- ❖ How do volunteers see themselves in relationship to OPIRG?
- ❖ How do OPIRG volunteer services and activities reflect and accomplish OPIRG’s mission statement and general policy?
- ❖ What are the main issues that the organization is facing in relation to its volunteer services?
- ❖ How these issues to be addressed?

This report begins with an executive summary that condenses the content of the evaluation. The report is divided into two chapters. The initial chapter includes this introduction, OPIRG’s organizational profile and the methodology. The second chapter integrates all our results in three different sections.

Our evaluation process was highly affected by OPIRG’s flexible organizational nature. Its decentralized and anti-institutional outlook challenged our original conceptions

on how to gather information and do research. Most importantly, it obliged us to constantly reflect on the nature of the evaluation itself.

In the Results chapter we categorize findings in three different sections, which are divided chronologically. First, in the 'Past' section we provide a historical perspective. In the 'Present' section we focus on current concerns and positive experiences. Last, in the 'Future' section we outline a series of recommendations to the organization.

This report aims to create and expand spaces for debate. In no way does it attempt to be prescriptive; its objective is to channel the concerns, suggestions, expectation and visions of those who were involved in this project.

Organizational Profile

Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) is part of a large structure of PIRGs in North America, nineteen of which are in Canada. Its Peterborough chapter was founded by a campus-wide referendum at Trent University in 1976. Like other PIRGs, OPIRG is “a student-funded non-profit organization dedicated to research, education and action on social justice issues” (OPIRG 2004a). According to OPIRG, environmental and human rights issues (i.e. racism, homophobia, gender-based oppression, etc.) are incorporated in the definition of social justice. By providing a space for research, activism and awareness on social justice issues, OPIRG aims to appeal to the Trent University students as its main audience and participants. OPIRG also intends to include Peterborough’s community in its programs and activities. As a volunteer-driven group, OPIRG-Peterborough is committed to facilitating funding and other resources to volunteers willing to develop different projects in accordance with OPIRG’s mission statement. OPIRG also coordinates and promotes different events for its large membership (OPIRG 2004b).

OPIRG’s Structure

OPIRG-Peterborough’s structure is composed of individuals at various levels of involvement. All full-time undergraduate students at Trent are members of OPIRG (by paying an annual levy). Non-students can also become members by paying a \$9 fee.

OPIRG-Peterborough’s permanent staff is hired every September (except the coordinator position, which is continuous). There are four positions at OPIRG besides the Coordinator: radio show, outreach, volunteer and research project¹. The staff carries out critical basic tasks that maintain the integrity of the organization (like bookkeeping and training). Furthermore they are in charge of assisting volunteers in their activism by providing them with necessary resources (i.e. computers, photocopying, library resources, meeting space, etc.), and expertise (capacity-building, activist tools, workshops, etc.), as well as of providing them with connections to other activists and their organizations. Any Trent student who is eligible for the Ontario Work Study Program can apply for an OPIRG position.

Volunteering at OPIRG is open to those members who choose to take an active role in the organization by working either with Working Groups (WGs), joining the Board of Directors, or participating on a special project. Volunteers form a WG towards achieving a common goal sharing responsibilities and decisions equally. Each working group is given a stipend at the beginning of the year that they can use for their events, to buy supplies, print materials, or whatever the group deems necessary to be successful. While WG must reflect OPIRG’s mission statement in their work and practices, OPIRG’s Board and Staff assist WGs in any possible way (OPIRG 2004c). Volunteers can also work on specific issues through grant projects and research-for-credit projects.

¹ According to the OPIRG Mission Statement 2004-2005, the position of research project coordinator was altered this year to allow OPIRG to hire a graduate student, rather than an OWSP student, to create the position of Zine/Publication coordinator.

The Board of Directors, composed of volunteers, is the body in charge of overlooking the organization. The Board of Directors makes decisions surrounding the general direction of OPIRG and makes sure that OPIRG, as an organization, is stable and viable in the long-term. Moreover, it looks after approving funding, helps the working groups, hires staff, and is in charge of finances and large events. These large events are offered to the volunteers, members and community and are arranged to meet the organization's goals. These events include speakers, conferences, anti-racism training, skills development workshops and transportation to events in other communities (OPIRG 2004b)

There is also a Provincial Board of Directors, consisting of two representatives from each local PIRG. This Board is in charge of dealing with PIRG networking issues, provincial training schools and responding to students interested in creating a PIRG in their university (PIRG Waterloo 2001).

Resources for Working Groups/Volunteers

OPIRG contains an ample number of resources useful to its Working Groups/volunteers:

- ❖ The OPIRG office, located at Sadleir House since this year, provides volunteers with office workspace (blue room), meeting space (yellow room), two computers, fax machine and photocopying machine that are used by volunteers to plan events, produce written materials and network with other organizations.
- ❖ The Alternative Resource Library, co-managed by the Women's Centre and OPIRG, is a free library open to everyone in the community, containing literature on a number of social and environmental issues.
- ❖ The Emergency Food Cupboard, located in the Alternative Resource Library, is a food bank supplied by Kawartha Food Share of which OPIRG is a member agency.
- ❖ OPIRG also provides educational workshops on subjects like consensus and facilitation, poster design and event promotion, and planning inclusive and successful events.

Working Groups 2004-2005

The following are the Working Groups during the 2004 - 2005 year:

- ❖ Zine Working Group
- ❖ Trent Students with Disabilities and their Allies
- ❖ Revolutionary Knitting Circle
- ❖ Non Profit Student Co-operative Bookstore
- ❖ Fair Trade not Free Trade

Methodology²

Our first step, before setting out to evaluate OPIRG's services to its volunteers, was to familiarize ourselves with the organization. We spent a substantial amount of time reviewing literature that gave us an initial idea of OPIRG's goals, activities and structure. This literature review contributed to our understanding of OPIRG's values and principles. We then moved on to gather data in the field.

Our method closely followed Stetcher and Davis' (1987:ch3) "responsive approach". One of our main objectives was to understand OPIRG from the various points of views of its volunteers and staff. Rather than intending to follow preestablished methods, we left our evaluation open to change and able to respond to issues and concerns identified by our informants.

Nonetheless, we did elaborate an original plan for gathering information and effective time-use based on the ideas and techniques that we had learned in our class (IDST 422). This plan comprised mainly qualitative research methods. We planned to conduct a first questionnaire to be distributed amongst OPIRG's staff and board; a second questionnaire to be distributed amongst OPIRG's volunteers; and participant observation in different OPIRG's activities. We also planned to conduct selective interviews following up on our previous data collected.

We considered that delivering a questionnaire would be a good way to start our research and make our first direct contact with informants (See questionnaire model in Appendix 2). This first questionnaire was designed with the intention of determining common definitions on specific concepts and obtaining data on staff and board member's views on OPIRG's volunteer activities and their expectations of this evaluation. We lacked concrete knowledge on the perceptions OPIRG's staff and board members had of social practice and research methods, and we assumed that a questionnaire would serve as a useful method for data gathering. Problems with its delivery would eventually prove our assumption wrong.

The questionnaire was filled out by all the board members and two out of the four staff members we had sampled (we excluded the general coordinator and research coordinators because they were working closely with us in the evaluation process). However, we had logistical difficulties distributing and getting them back even though we counted with the support of OPIRG's general coordinator. Once questionnaires had been delivered, respondents took three weeks to return them instead of the one-week period we had planned.

The quantitative and qualitative information we gathered from the questionnaire was indeed useful. Firstly, the multiple-choice section provided us with quantifiable factual information that expanded our knowledge of the staff and board relation with OPIRG's volunteers. Secondly, the analysis of the open-ended questions provided us with categories of common problems and issues that we would include in our interview questions.

² As part of a research methodology course, this report places a special emphasis on this section.

Nevertheless, when reflecting on the timing and format problems that we encountered, we considered that questionnaires were not an appropriate method to our organizational context. Thus, we decided to shift to a ‘new methodological plan’ in which OPIRG’s decentralized and non-institutional outlook would be taken into account. This ‘new plan’ discarded further questionnaires and consisted primarily of participant observation and qualitative in-depth interviewing.

To some extent, our participant observation methods allowed us to capture the so-called “emic perspective,” or insider’s perspective on reality (Fetterman as quoted in Patton 1990:241). Throughout the semester, we participated in a number of OPIRG’s events and meetings. As overt evaluators, we alternated between actively engaging in the activities and merely observing the particular situation (Patton 1990).

As described by Patton (ibid: 244-45), the quality of our observational data was constrained by the limited sample of program activities we actually observed. The information that we gathered was mainly obtained from one of the WGs that was still functioning and the board and staff members that responded to our requests. The data obtained thus did not represent the full diversity of OPIRG’s volunteer experiences. At the same time, participant observation provided us with valuable insight into OPIRG’s environment and the priorities of the people who were engaged in it. Participant observation allowed us to check data we had previously gathered through other means.

Aware that our assessment of OPIRG’s services, based only on observations made in one semester, would be limited in scope, we decided to incorporate a historical perspective. In this way, our two-month ‘snapshot’ on OPIRG would be substantially complemented with a longer history of previous OPIRG’s experiences. Therefore, following professor Chris Beyers’ suggestions, we gathered information from people that had been previously involved with OPIRG. Finding out about previous OPIRG’s experiences turned out to be fundamental for our evaluation’s results for two reasons: first, it shed a light into OPIRG’s current problems and second, it provided concrete examples about the organization’s potential.

Informed by the data gathered through the previous research methods and having sharpened our methodological plan, our in-depth interviews were effectively geared towards the organizational context. In total, we designed different interview guides for three types of informants (3 current WGs leaders, 3 current staff and board members and 3 previously OPIRG-related individuals). These interview guides (see Appendix 1) served as basic checklists during the interviews, which usually took an informal and interactive approach (Patton 1990:111; Silverman 1993: 94). Ranging from twenty minutes to one hour and a half, most interviews were carried out in person and for the most part by the two of us.

The representativeness of the data gathered from the interviews was significantly limited by our arbitrary sampling methods. The choice of our interviewees was simply based on the contacts that we were able to make and on the people that responded to our requests. While this reduced representativeness may obscure possible variations and undermine the ability to identify “causal relationships”, the information obtained from the interviews was essential for our evaluation in three principal ways: first, it generated data which gave insight into various informants’ perspectives; second, it contributed to a holistic understanding of

our evaluation; and third, it provided substance and validation to the data previously encountered (Silverman 1993:ch5-6; Patton 1990:ch5).

When put together our interview data constituted an extensive body of information regarding OPIRG's past, present and future that would provide important input into our main findings and recommendations' section. We decided to classify the information gathered through these means, together with the results obtained from the open-ended section of our questionnaires, under a series of categories found throughout the data collection process. These categories were, for the most part, brought up by our informants.

Moreover, the data gathered enabled us to associate recent concerns informants had with informed and relevant generalizations. As this data deepened our understanding of the current phase of OPIRG's history, the role of our evaluation became clear.

We used the "data triangulation method" (Patton 1990:108). The interviews were useful for comparing the data gathered through the previous research methods (literature review, questionnaire, participant observation) and filling up some of the gaps left by them. Qualitative and quantitative data (e.g. observations and questionnaires) were compared and corroborated. We used "respondent validation" to verify our findings with our informants (Silverman 1993:156-57). Additionally, some of the issues found in the questionnaire were personally discussed in the interviews. This further expanded our qualitative data and provided us with inside perspectives that moved beyond mere superficial observations.

There were limitations in our data gathering and data analysis processes. We hope that on the one hand, our methods were deemed useful and effective in the particular organizational setting. On the other, we believe that our methods kept their validity and reliability within our responsive approach (Stetcher and Davis 1987; Silverman 1993:ch7).

Reflecting and moving along OPIRG's approach to social practice, the methods and outcomes of this evaluation are not supposed to be read as results of a study that dictates knowledge that should be incorporated into improving human practices. All the contrary, this evaluation should be understood as complementary knowledge that emerged from a process characterized by "engaged democratic dialogue" with the people who are supposed to benefit from it (Schwandt 1997). Thus, we expect that the final outcome of this research will certainly serve to promote future debate, encouraging critical reflection and fostering discussion within and about OPIRG.

Chapter 2: Results

Introduction

Our main research questions were explored through different lenses. We found that we could not produce a straightforward response to the question of whether OPIRG's services meet the expectations and needs of its volunteers. This was mainly due to the organization's decentralized structure and its flexible approach to volunteering and social action. OPIRG's support for independent projects as well as its "hands-off approach" to volunteering provides multiple definitions of volunteering and varying outcomes. This multiplicity of definitions leads into diverse kinds of volunteer experiences thus problematizing our main research question.

Given this complexity, we have decided to approach the primary concern of volunteers' expectations and needs by observing past and present experiences. In this chapter we incorporate the perspectives of staff members and different volunteers, such as WG and Board members. Lastly, we channel informants' views, recommendations, expectations and concerns in a separate section devoted to OPIRG's future.

The "Past" section includes the findings obtained through literary reviews and three interviews carried with individuals who were closely related to OPIRG in the past. This section addresses our main research question by looking into OPIRG's volunteer activities and services in the past. What were they? How successful were they? How was volunteering defined? And finally, how could past experiences address today's concerns and projects regarding OPIRG and its volunteer body?

The "Present" section integrates quantitative and qualitative data looking into current concerns regarding OPIRG's volunteer services. It discusses current staff and volunteers' definition of 'an OPIRG volunteer.' It observes the relation between volunteers and OPIRG by exploring internal dynamics in the organization. This section also analyzes the relationship between volunteers, staff and the organization's mandate.

The "Future" section of this chapter responds to our last research questions, which are: What are the main issues that the organization is facing in relation to its volunteer services, and how can these issues be addressed? We answer these questions by merging different views, suggestions and concerns put forward by respondents. Moreover, we include our own perspectives and observations on potential directions that the organization might take by proposing concrete ideas and solutions.

Past: Learning from the Past

Interviews with people who were closely related with OPIRG in the past were a fundamental component of our research process since they allowed us to differentiate between situations that are particular to this year's experience and those that have been part of OPIRG since its early years. We were able to interview three individuals. One of them, Clifford Maines, was OPIRG's general coordinator for five years in the 1980s. Another was Linda Slavin, who worked in the Kawartha World Issues Centre (KWIC), a local NGO that has worked closely with OPIRG since the 1980s. Our third interviewee was Jessi Dobyns, a Trent graduate who was recently an active OPIRG volunteer for approximately three years through the Food Issues WG.

This section of our results compiles our interviewees' past experiences, issues and concerns regarding OPIRG's relationship with its volunteer body. It presents them in the following categories: issues related to the organization's structure (WGs, board, staff, etc.); issues related to OPIRG's volunteers resources; past outreach initiatives; and campaigns and the focus of various WGs. The last category is devoted to a brief overview of past programs and projects undertaken by the organization.

We found a number of common patterns regarding the WG structure and organization as a whole. In addition, we were able to learn about previous OPIRG projects that had been successful in the past. This allowed us to see similarities and differences between current and past situations. We also learnt about the situations that led our interviewees into working and volunteering with OPIRG.

All three of our interviewees had been involved in social movements and the NGO community before getting involved with the organization. Judging from their experiences, we found that OPIRG attracted people who were already interested in social and environmental justice; out of our three interviewees none of them were new to this sort of organization.

Organization's Structure

One of the major themes that appeared throughout our interviews was related to OPIRG's structure. The volunteer activities available in OPIRG were a recurrent theme in this set of interviews. In particular, interviewees referred to the WG structure as a big commitment for first year students, and those who do not feel prepared to take a leadership role. At the same time, informants considered WGs to be a training ground for NGO work and an educational experience.

Another issue related to the WGs' structure and volunteering in OPIRG is lack of continuity. One informant said that "there isn't a lot of continuity and it takes a lot of energy to start things from scratch." This relates to the fact that WGs are year-long projects that depend on the group's creativity and energy to start functioning and carry on. It appeared to all three respondents that WGs needed a lot of determination, energy and drive in order to function since there was not much information available about past projects. This was recognized as a potential barrier for interested first year students.

On the other hand, one interviewee added that once WGs got on their feet, OPIRG staff members were very resourceful. The same informant also said that “once you began looking for information you found that there was a lot.” According to our findings, WGs have always been fruitful means for acquiring grassroots know-how. However, they have always relied on strong leadership capacities of members, and thus have been perceived as difficult tasks. Although OPIRG has an abundance of information that can be used by volunteers and other individuals, this appears to not be well known by volunteers and OPIRG members.

Working Groups

Referring to past WGs, one respondent suggested that they “worked well, yet irregularly as it is normal in their kind of structure.” In this case, s/he emphasized that staff should be in charge of core activities in order to avoid tensions and overlapping tasks with volunteers.

Board of Directors

Apart from WGs, board membership appeared to be the other main mechanism through which to volunteer with OPIRG. One informant explained that in the past, the board used to have office hours, each member had 2 office hours per week. This was a way in which volunteers, staff and board were able to keep in touch and informed.

According to an interviewee, being part of the board is an educational experience, especially for students. Moreover, s/he said that “board training should be a priority,” and has a great potential for providing continuity for the organization. For this reason, s/he added, “they should pass on recommendations for other groups (...) and consider strategic planning for periods longer than a year.”

Regional PIRG Structure

Another interviewee emphasized that OPIRG’s major problems during his/her time were inexperience, the organization’s lack of a clear definition of itself, and weak volunteer turnover. However, s/he added, “this appeared to be typical for all Ontario PIRGs.” Being student-based groups, PIRGs often seemed to face similar problems related to self-definition, management and focus. Inexperience was thus presented as a problem for the organization as well as a potential source of education. Moreover, when referring to the rest of the Ontario PIRGs, an interviewee said that they lacked structural cohesion. This phenomenon shows that loose structure is not only a part of current OPIRG Peterborough problem, but also one that comes from the past and from the larger provincial system.

Staff and Other Forms of Volunteering

Besides board membership, one of our interviewees mentioned that people used to volunteer in OPIRG’s library, helping with specific events or campaigns. S/he mentioned that the organization had a very small budget when s/he was involved, which translated into having a very reduced staff. S/he added that general coordinators were laid-off every summer, which generated economic uncertainty for him/her and other staff. In this context, the organization’s ability to facilitate volunteers’ projects was limited since, as said by another of our interviewees “core staff are necessary to be there for the WGs (...), they provide knowledge and continuity.” In this context, an interviewee mentioned that the general

coordinator was the main asset that OPIRG provided volunteers with. The volunteer coordinator position was also referred to as a fundamental linkage between volunteers and the organization.

Important resources

All interviewees referred to OPIRG's human resources as the main asset that it provided to its volunteers. All interviewees emphasized the importance of the general coordinator, as well as volunteers' support to the organization and their availability. No respondent mentioned physical resources as OPIRG's main asset.

Outreach

All of our interviewees viewed unstable volunteer involvement as a key problem while working with the organization. In this sense, irregular volunteer participation and WGs' commitment have been constant in OPIRG since its early years. In the past, most outreach was generally done through postering and OPIRG-related events.

For one interviewee, the organization was well advertised and held an open house at the beginning of the year. S/he added that she got to know about the organization through its table at the Clubs and Groups day at the beginning of the school year. Also, s/he knew people that were already involved with the organization before s/he joined, thus evidencing that usually people who became part of OPIRG were not completely new to it.

In the past, outreach was mostly done through conventional means. According to one interviewee, "OPIRG encouraged WGs to advertise well and to let things be known through the OPIRG calendar." Furthermore, knowing people involved with the organization, as well as having a certain background on social/environmental issues, attracted people to OPIRG. According to one interviewee, OPIRG volunteers and staff were predominantly "white middle class." In other words, OPIRG has lacked international staff and volunteers from its inception.

Focus

One of our interviewees commented that the focus of WGs and campaigns were "much the same than today (...) having a local-global approach." In this sense, the organization acted on local issues while reflecting on their global scope.

It was mentioned that in the past there was more interest on environmental and local issues. The latter, an informant added, have been replaced by a broad critique of globalization and corporate power. For another respondent, having a concrete WG focus was an asset, for it allowed people to do a wide diversity of concrete actions from which they could see relatively immediate results.

Past projects

Nuclear Free Press

Issues related to nuclear energy were OPIRG's main focus for a long time. From 1975 to 1985, OPIRG housed the offices of the "Nuclear Free Press," a national publication, which commented on nuclear energy and weapon escalation (OPIRG, Board Kit 2004-2005, p. 5). The issue is of confirming relevance, however; according to one

informant “nuclear power is coming around again (...) and there needs to be young people out there who know about these issues.”

NYPIRG

During the 1980s there was a need for more stability within OPIRG. In this context, the idea of having a stronger provincial board was raised. “We heard about the U.S model at the time. I think it was NYPIRG which was relatively centralized at the state level,” an interviewee said. “This was not considered to be as democratic as the decentralized model we were familiar with in Ontario, but it was very organized. There was lots happening for students to plug into, there was a focus on achievable political objectives,” s/he added. This model was looked into by OPIRG, yet it was not implemented. One of our interviewees said that her/his guess was that “staff as much as board and volunteers blocked it, because it would lead to less flexibility and independence for them.” The provincial structures have not been explored in this evaluation, however, we thought that this debate could be taken into account today.

The Seasoned Spoon

As a result of the Food Issues WG 2001-2002’s activities, the Seasoned Spoon Café opened in February 2003. OPIRG’s support was a key factor in the success of this ongoing project (OPIRG 2004b: 5-6).

According to Jessie Dobyns, one of the Spoon’s founders, “OPIRG was indispensable” for the creation of the café. The Food Issues WG began by giving soup by donation on campus. They used OPIRG funding to buy a warm plate. OPIRG allowed them to gain experience by asking the WG to cook for its events and expose them to other local organizations. Also, the Food Issues WG was on OPIRG’s insurance and supervised the TCCBE project that led to the Spoon’s creation. Moreover, the organization gave a \$1,000 grant to the WG with which the café started. “At that point we found that we were growing out of the WG structure (...) we designed our board so that a seat would be reserved to an OPIRG person, which gave us a charitable tax status provincially. We continued to work with OPIRG, but in new terms,” stressed Dobyns.

Currently, there is no OPIRG position in the Café’s Board, yet both organizations continue to work closely together.

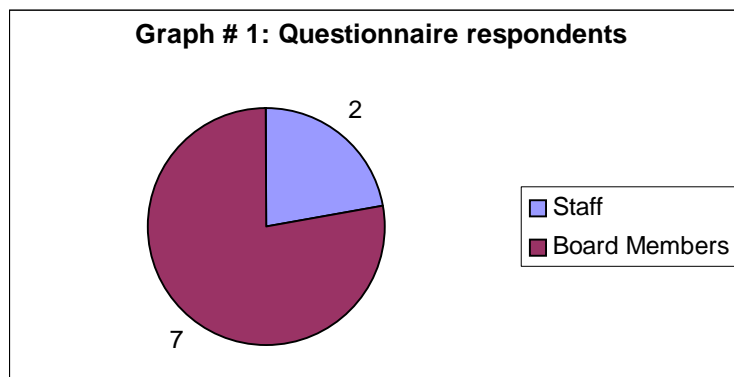
**Present:
Current Challenges and Experiences**

This section is divided in two different subsections. The first one presents and analyzes the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires. It also contains a series of more qualitative results that have been categorized in lists that are presented quantitatively. The second one compiles the information from the open-ended segment of the questionnaire (questions 11 to 17); participant observation and the in-depth interviews carried out with the current WGs leaders, and the board and staff members. In this section, we intend to provide the reader with an integral picture of OPIRG’s current concerns, problems and achievements. Models of questionnaires and interviews can be found in the appendix section.

Quantitative Results: Questionnaire

We distributed the questionnaire on the last week of January, expecting that respondents would complete them in a week. The questionnaire was geared towards staff members (excluding OPIRG’s General Coordinator and Research Coordinator, who were somewhat involved in our research process) and all board members. This questionnaire was designed in order for us to understand staff and board’s ideas about the organization and its relationship with volunteers. We also expected that the respondents would further guide our choices regarding categories of analysis and research, as explained in the methodology section.

The questionnaire was mostly composed of open-ended questions and a few multiple choice ones. The responses to the first eleven questions are quantifiable and are presented in either lists or graphics. The results of the last six questions have been incorporated in the interviews analysis presented in the next subsection on qualitative results.



As shown in graph # 1, only two out of four staff members responded to our questionnaire. In contrast, all Board members responded the questionnaire. In total, nine individuals responded our questionnaire. As shown in table # 1, six out of our nine respondents were involved with OPIRG for one year or less, three of them had been involved with the organization for approximately three years.

Table # 1

Number of years involved with OPIRG	Respondents
1 school year	6
3 years	3

In question number five, “In which ways do you think an OPIRG member can become an OPIRG volunteer?”, respondents were asked to list as many ways as they could remember. The majority of respondents mentioned the creation of and participation in Working Groups as well as organizing events, becoming a Board Member and helping with office tasks. They also listed the following ways:

- ❖ Participate in a TCCBE-OPIRG research project
- ❖ Attend Board Meetings
- ❖ Attend Workshops
- ❖ Help doing poster for OPIRG-related activities and events
- ❖ Contribute to OPIRG’s Zine
- ❖ Attend OPIRG activities

Responses to question number five indicate that respondents have broad definitions of what an OPIRG volunteer is. According to some respondents participating in any OPIRG event as well as attending OPIRG Board Meetings could be forms of volunteering. The loose definition of volunteer activities in OPIRG was evident at all levels of the organization.

In question number six, “What do you think are the facilities and physical resources that OPIRG provides to its volunteers?”, respondents listed the following physical resources (the order corresponds with the number of times that these options were mentioned):

- ❖ Access to Office resources (computers, photocopier, etc.)
- ❖ Meeting Space
- ❖ Library resources
- ❖ Events’ space
- ❖ Community network capacity
- ❖ Economic support through funding to different WGs activities and other sort of events or projects
- ❖ Good reputation for its volunteers (one respondent)
- ❖ Publication and informational kits (one respondent)
- ❖ Access to archives and files (one respondent)

Responses indicate that office space and resources and meeting space are considered OPIRG’s most valid physical assets for its volunteers. This appears to deviate from OPIRG’s previous experiences (which are found in the “Past” section) did not include OPIRG’s physical resources as one of its main features. Rather, they focused more on the human resources that OPIRG provided.

In question number seven, “What do you think are the skills, tools and capacities that OPIRG facilitates to its volunteers through its various educational and training activities and resources?”, the majority of respondents (eight out of nine) referred to anti-oppression skills provided by OPIRG to volunteers. Six respondents mentioned that volunteers in OPIRG also acquire event-planning skills. Five respondents mentioned bookkeeping that and financial planning are also considered skills that volunteers gain in OPIRG.

The following are the rest of the skills that volunteers can gain in OPIRG, as listed by respondents:

- ❖ Antiracism Skills
- ❖ Consensus-building skills
- ❖ Social and environmental justice awareness
- ❖ Respondents also mentioned that volunteers can also learn from action in OPIRG
- ❖ Team-work and leadership skills
- ❖ Facilitation skills
- ❖ Tool-box skills such as knitting and producing a zine
- ❖ Time-management skills
- ❖ Networking skills
- ❖ Researching skills

Respondents indicated that volunteers can acquire a diverse set of skills by collaborating with OPIRG. In this way, staff and board expectations about what skills are available are broad in nature and reflect the organization’s flexible definition of what an OPIRG volunteer is, thus reiterating the tendency found in question number five.

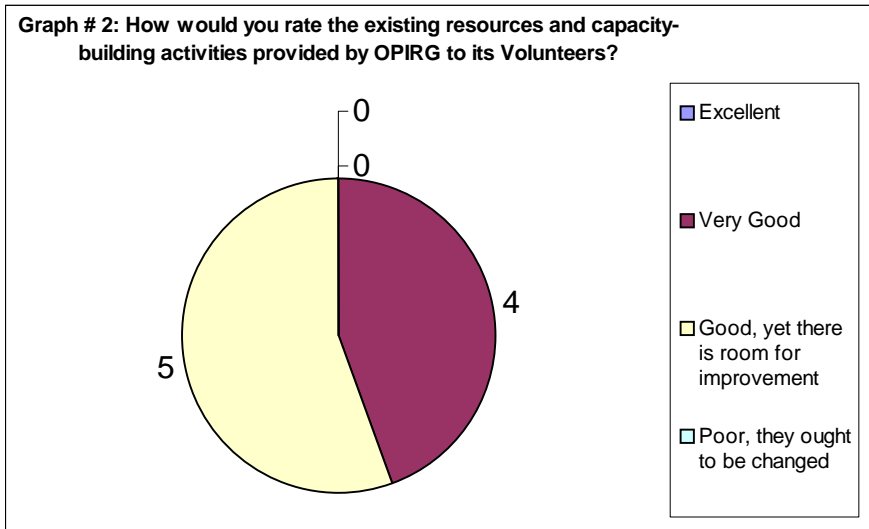
Question number eight asked the following: “In order of relevance (1 being the most relevant and 5 the least relevant), list the means through which OPIRG facilitates skills to its volunteers (i.e. workshops).” The majority of respondents established that the following means were the most relevant:

- ❖ OPIRG-sponsored workshops
- ❖ Anti-Oppression training
- ❖ All OPIRG events
- ❖ Informational resources such as the library, OPIRG archives, newsletter, website and kits.
- ❖ Staff and Board expertise

Other means cited were the following:

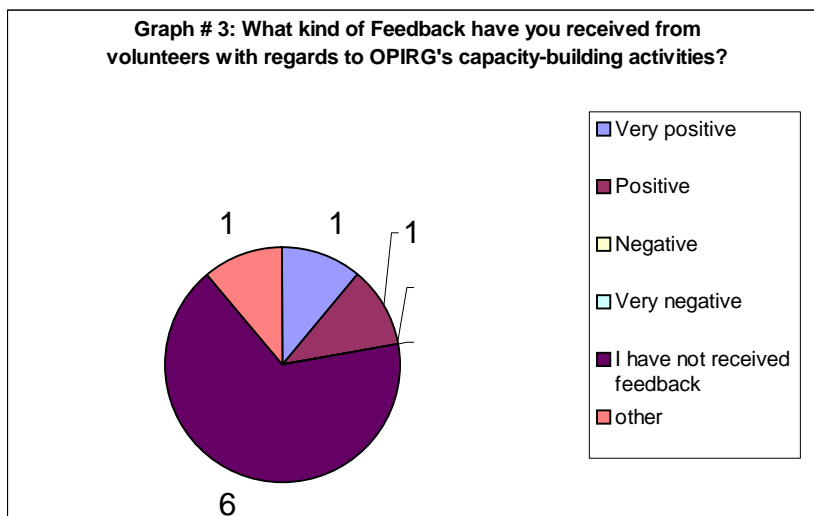
- ❖ Volunteering in the office
- ❖ Being active in a WG
- ❖ Facilitating office space
- ❖ Providing funding for different projects
- ❖ Producing TCCBE research projects

Question number nine asked the following: How would you rate the existing resources and capacity-building activities provided by OPIRG to its volunteers? Responses to this question are presented in graphic number two below.



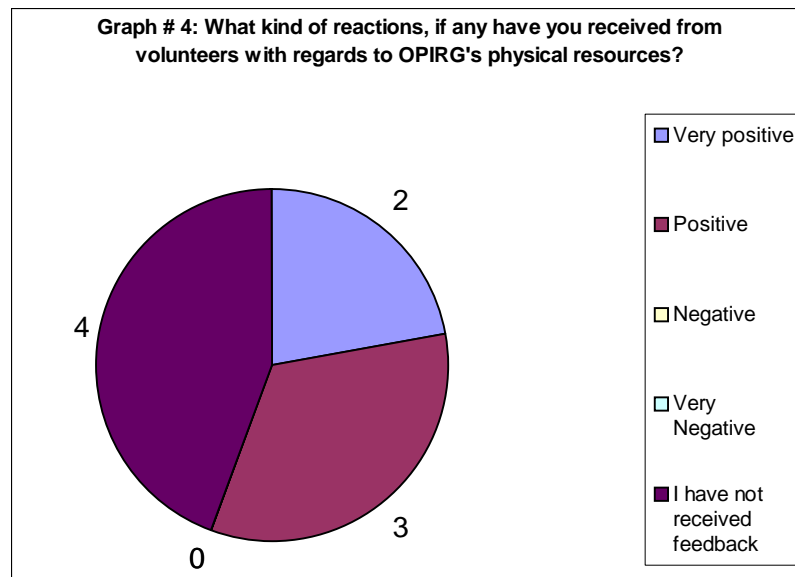
Graph number two clearly shows a tendency in which respondents considered that there is room for improvement in activities and resources provided by the organization to its volunteers. This opinion appeared repeatedly throughout the development of this evaluation research. Most questionnaire respondents and interviewees expressed their interest in seeing OPIRG volunteer activities and resources improved in the future. Furthermore, respondents (and interviewees, as will be shown in the next subsection) suggested different ways in which these could be further developed. These suggestions are included later on in the “Future” section.

Question number ten asked the following: “What kind of feedback have you received from volunteers with regards to OPIRG’s capacity-building activities?” Results gathered from this question opened an important category of analysis in our research process: Communication.



Graph number three shows that most respondents had not received any feedback regarding OPIRG’s capacity-building activities. Those who responded that have received feedback presented varied answers. No generalization could be made about their answers other than the fact that none of those who had received feedback had received negative or very negative reactions. One of the respondents did not tick any of the options provided by the questionnaire. Her/his comment was quantified as ‘other’ in the graph above. S/He wrote that “many [students?] are confused about OPIRG.” Her/his comment signals a problem about the perception that some people have of OPIRG. This problem appeared in other sections of the questionnaire as well as in the interview process and will be addressed later in the qualitative subsection.

Question number eleven asked: “What kind of reactions, if any, have you received from volunteers, with regards to OPIRG’s physical resources?” The communication problem appeared in this question again, yet to a lesser degree than in question ten, as shown in graph number four.



Similar to responses to question ten, responses to question number eleven show that a large portion of respondents have received no feedback from volunteers, this time regarding OPIRG’s physical resources. Those who have received feedback affirm that they had received very positive or positive feedback in this regard, no respondent claimed to have received negative or very negative feedback. One respondent added a comment that reflects a problem that OPIRG has had throughout the current academic year: Wheelchair accessibility. After answering that s/he had received positive feedback s/he added: “except that the office is not wheelchair accessible.” This problem appeared in different stages of the data collection process and is new to OPIRG, for the organization just moved to its new location less than a year ago.

Qualitative Findings: Integrating Questionnaire's Open-ended Section and Interviews

This section integrates the results obtained through the questionnaire's open-ended questions (questions 11 to 17) as well as through the in-depth interviews. Our interviewees were three current OPIRG volunteers related to three distinct WGs; two staff members; and one board member. We classify, analyze and present these findings through the following categories: resources, outreach, inclusiveness, communication and organization's structure. All of these categories of analysis appeared throughout the interviews. In other words, categories directly reflect informants' contributions.

Resources

Most informants emphasized the importance of the educational activities and resources provided by OPIRG. Most informants appreciated OPIRG's publications and staff expertise, in particular the General Coordinator's. Regarding publications, an informant referred to past WGs' material as being useful. Although workshops were seen positively, a significant number of informants had not participated in any workshop during the year. Also, some informants said that they would prefer if the organization provided more hands-on educational activities that would diverge from more traditional ways of training and raising awareness.

In terms of physical facilities, the photocopy machine and office space in general were seen as key resources. In this regard, one of our interviewees referred to the fact that access to the office was limited to office hours or the availability of keys. Also, it appeared that office computers and Internet access were not widely used by OPIRG's staff, members and volunteers. One of our questionnaire respondents mentioned (in question #14) that OPIRG's location was convenient and easy to find since it is in between downtown and Trent. This was contrasted by opinions that considered that OPIRG is too isolated from campus life. There was no general agreement among interviewees in this regard since some emphasized that OPIRG should focus more on the Peterborough community.

Another important resource was funding since it allowed WGs to carry on their projects. This could be related to our findings in the "Past" section, which discussed the critical role that funding played at supporting the Seasoned Spoon Café.

Outreach

Many of our informants converged in saying that OPIRG's outreach and activities have to be improved and renovated. One of our informants mentioned that as the main outreach was just done at the beginning of the year, it was hard for people who did not participate in them to find out about OPIRG. Although an outreach activity occurred in January, calling for people interested in the organization and WGs to meet on campus, no volunteer or OPIRG member attended beyond ourselves and two OPIRG staff. This event, however, had been publicized through posterage. The Annual General Meeting (AGM) is another opportunity for the organization to expand its volunteer base. For example, in this year's AGM a few new volunteers participated in the meeting, some of whom became board members. Yet the Board's positions were not contested (there were the same number of candidates as number of positions available). The fact that outreach activities have been

planned, demonstrates that staff is interested in attracting new people. Nonetheless we have observed, and some interviewees mentioned, that the design of outreach initiatives should be a topic for discussion and reflection in the organization.

Similar to opinions found in the “Past” section, most informants joined OPIRG after having been involved in social and environmental justice work and/or knew people in the organization. This reflects that the organization tends to attract people who are already interested in issues covered by OPIRG. As said by an interviewee, this may be related to the fact that the organization is political in nature, and attracts those who share its priorities. Hence, OPIRG’s outreach mechanisms have a limited scope.

According to various sources, the organization is associated with a particular image that influences peoples’ perception about it as well as their desire to join. As stated by an interviewee: “[In OPIRG] we have been talking about an image problem. Some people think that we are too radical. We think that there are people sympathetic to social justice that do not feel so radical.” Another informant said: “I was skeptical [about OPIRG] in the beginning, as there are certain stereotypes regarding people that join OPIRG and I was not part of them.”

It was established by different informants that there is a concern with the way in which the organization portrays itself. Some people do not identify with OPIRG’s image. As we will see in the organizational structure subsection below, our informants emphasize that volunteers can make OPIRG fit their needs and adapt to their projects. It appears that although the organization’s structure is flexible by nature, the image that it projects is static and/or restrictive for new members. In this sense, one interviewee said that increasing focus on environmental and local issues would expand OPIRG’s image. This comment echoes our findings in the “Past” section in which it was found that focus on environmental justice has decreased.

Although different individuals have shown concern regarding the organization’s image, outreach means such as zines, protest, email, radio show, e-newsletter and newspaper articles (e.g. Arthur and The Examiner), were seen positively.

Several informants asserted that having a defined list of volunteer opportunities would attract more people since they would have a clear idea of what they can do in the organization. Furthermore, having concrete topics and projects in which participants can produce tangible results would be an incentive for new people to participate. Some informants think that this relates to the fact that abstract issues such as globalization have replaced local and environmental issues. The relationship between local and global phenomena seems to have been lost in the scope of some WGs’ activities.

Most informants considered that networking with other local NGOs and student groups should be an outreach priority for OPIRG. This year’s partnership with the Youth Emergency Shelter can be seen as a step in that direction. Informants mentioned the following organizations as potential OPIRG partners: Trent Queer Collective, Trent International Students Association, TCSA, Arthur and the Kawartha World Issues Centre. At the same time it was emphasized that the networking should be expanded to other organizations.

Inclusiveness

One clear problem of inclusiveness that OPIRG is facing is its lack of wheelchair accessibility. This limits the participation of members with physical disabilities. This is recognized by all informants and is considered one of the organization's main concerns. It has to be acknowledged that OPIRG has been in its current location for less than a year.

Most informants concurred that OPIRG is a predominantly white-Canadian organization. Informants presented this as a concern since it indicated to them that the organization had a cultural inclusiveness problem. An informant commented that, "one woman said that our [OPIRG's] ways of organizing are very western." Another informant who said, "for many international students volunteering is a new concept," echoed this concern. We observed that this issue has been addressed by the organization as this year's board included an international student. Yet, informants are also concerned with the fact that all OPIRG documents are produced in English only, which reduces the organization's ability to reach Peterborough's immigrant and international students. This is also the case in most, but not all, OPIRG's events.

Several informants mentioned that OPIRG's presence on campus, and its relationship with first year students should be improved. Many asserted that the organization is isolated from campus life as well as university and college/residence politics.

One informant stated that "levels of activism at Trent have declined in the last two of three years." This opinion appeared in different ways throughout the questionnaires and interviews. Moreover, this was an observation made by one of our interviewees in the "Past" section. This is often linked to what was presented by an informant as "a clear divide of cultures at Trent." This debate became relevant in February this year, when a university newspaper brought it up in its editorial page (see Appendix 3). This article referred to the divide as being between 'OPIRG types' and the rest of the student body. In consequence, inclusion, image and outreach issues became a topic for debate amongst staff, volunteers and Board members. We observed that addressing the issue of inclusiveness has become one of OPIRG's main objectives, as it is part of its mandate as well as something that staff and volunteers are concerned about. OPIRG has the potential to encourage students and groups' initiatives. As expressed by an informant, once somebody has moved beyond the image debate, "that person can pursue its own vision within the organization."

Communication

Communication appeared as a critical finding in our quantitative analysis. It became evident in our quantitative results that the organization lacks clearly defined feedback mechanisms and communication channels. Although all our informants claimed to be interested in engaging in debates, discussions and dialogues regarding OPIRG as whole, there seemed to be a lack of spaces to articulate and exchange these views. We are aware that the organization has a diversity of communication channels such as the zine, e-newsletter and the webpage. Nonetheless they are not used to voice this debate. Based on the data gathered, we have observed that there is an absence of internal communication channels that could be utilized at this point of the organization's history.

Most volunteers interviewed said that they did not have any relationship with OPIRG's staff other than the General Coordinator. According to some informants, the communication problem was also present amongst volunteers. This is also the case regarding

volunteers' relationship with the board. As mentioned by a respondent "there seems to be a big divide between people working at OPIRG and the board." S/he added, however, that this was the case in other organizations similar to OPIRG. Another interviewee said that "board members that are not in a WG are not aware about what is going on at OPIRG, the only channel of communication is the [General] Coordinator." According to our findings, the General Coordinator seems to be the main channel and recipient of communication in the organization. This translates into an unbalanced distribution of tasks that will be explored in the "Organization's Structure" subsection.

Communication appears to be a concern regarding staff members' job description. Some respondents found that they had to define their own tasks, and learn about their job description as they worked with the organization. This created confusion and overlapping of tasks between staff members.

Organization's Structure: "Do we have volunteers?" (OPIRG volunteer)

OPIRG's structure became a fundamental category in our analysis as we proceeded deeper into research. The organization's loose nature affects its relationship with volunteers, internal dynamics as well as its self-definition and image. OPIRG's greatly decentralized and flexible structure determines its obstacles as well as its potential.

Defining what an 'OPIRG volunteer' is was a constant concern in our research. As a volunteer-based organization, it was always difficult to distinguish between the various kinds of volunteers that sustain the organization. For example, volunteers constitute OPIRG's board of directors, in charge of policy-making and other important administrative tasks such as overseeing the organization's financial management. Some OPIRG volunteers appeared to be critical of the word 'volunteer,' since according to them volunteer connotes charity and conservative approaches to social change. One volunteer said that s/he would rather be called a 'member.' In fact, when we asked another interviewee about OPIRG volunteers, s/he asked us back if OPIRG had volunteers at all. OPIRG's loose definition of 'volunteer' affects the ways in which people perceive the organization as well as the ways in which they can get involved with it.

A respondent talked about what s/he called "OPIRG's hands-off approach," which allows WGs to function independently. According to various informants, this provided volunteers with great autonomy and space for creativity. For others, however, this represented a barrier for students who do not feel as certain about given causes. It was also established that students might be intimidated by the independence provided by the WG structure, as they may feel unprepared for such commitment. This is particularly seen to be the case amongst first year students who are often new to Peterborough as a whole. Moreover, it was found that WGs' success and continuity depend on a "leader making sure that everyone is 'coming out' until the group is set." Although consensus-based, WGs' continuity is often determined by a few members that have clear objectives and priorities. In this sense, WGs are a great educational tool for they provide space to experiment and acquire experience for those who are prepared for it. However, those who want to participate and do not feel so confident about their abilities "get scared off," as said by an interviewee.

According to one interviewee, “the structure of WGs is good, yet the structure outside the WGs does not encourage that much volunteering.” Most informants thought that new forms of volunteering should be developed in order to increase OPIRG’s appeal and vitality. As put by another interviewee, “WGs are a really good opportunity yet they seem to be a problem if they are the only way to become a volunteer at OPIRG.” Although helping in the office was often mentioned as a volunteer activity, it scarcely occurs. Furthermore, if office work were to become a volunteer activity, this would create a new burden to the General Coordinator who carries out most of the organization’s administrative tasks, since volunteers would require training.

Another structural problem is weak staff training and job definitions. This appeared to be particular to this year since most staff members, including the General Coordinator, are new to the organization. This year’s employees had to spend a long time getting used to the organization, its structure and their tasks without much guidance. This also affected board members, many of whom were new to OPIRG as a whole, and whose training was provided ‘on the go.’ This phenomenon had further implications since it affected inter-staff relations and staff-board-WGs relations. Some staff members did not know most of the Board members, which translated in weak communication. Moreover, the General Coordinator had a large amount of responsibility that could be shared amongst other staff members. Clear training mechanisms and job descriptions should be prepared for future generations.

Since the beginning of this evaluation research, we found that our interviewees and respondents were concerned about OPIRG’s lack of continuity. In fact, many wondered about the organization’s experiences in the past and worried about giving continuity to current projects for more than their year-long structures. This concern was addressed by three different WGs this year (Fair Trade, Student Space and Students with Disabilities and their Allies) since they were carrying on with projects initiated before this academic year. It was found that at first, volunteers thought that there was not much information on which to build up new projects or the continuation of previous ones. However, most respondents affirmed that once in the organization, they realized that there was a great wealth of knowledge available. We consider that this wealth of information should be made more clearly available to members in order to attract them into volunteering with OPIRG and facilitating the development of their projects.

OPIRG’s decentralized and dynamic structure can translate into a feeling of instability for staff and or volunteers. At the same time it provides the possibility of constant self-definition and diversity of perspectives. It is this structure which allows volunteers to make “OPIRG fit their needs,” as said by a respondent. Also, its decentralized nature invites staff and volunteers to undertake the educational experience that the organization offers. Facilitating this educational experience is one of OPIRG’s essential purposes.

The question according to one interviewee is how to measure WGs’ success, whether in terms of their continuity, their outreach, or only in terms of their ability to achieve their objectives. It has been found that being such a diverse ‘crowd’, WGs’ success should be measured on their own terms and through different perspectives such as their own as well as the board’s and staff’s. The diversity available through OPIRG’s WGs provides the organization with a wealth of approaches to widely different issues, which in turn influences

how the organization sees itself. Moreover, this diversity and flexibility reflects OPIRG's own structure. It is through this structure that those interested are able to materialize their initiatives and projects.

The Future: Fostering Debate and Proposing Directions

*“This evaluation should give us a map of how to proceed.
As an organization we are at a point where we have to invest time
and energy to change some things and this is a good time to start.”*
(Interviewee)

This last section of the Results' chapter intends to compile all recommendations provided by interviewees and questionnaire respondents in an orderly manner. It also includes our own suggestions and observations about the potential ways in which OPIRG can improve its relationship with its volunteers. Our recommendations comprise diverse factors that determine, directly and indirectly, volunteers' experiences within the organization as well as their ability to develop projects and visions. OPIRG's WG volunteers, Board members and staff, as well as people who have been related to the organization in the past, have proposed most suggestions that we are integrating in this section. We hope to make a fair representation of such multiplicity of voices. Overall, we hope that these recommendations are taken into account and provide empowering grounds for further debate.

We have classified our recommendations through the following categories: Communication Channels, New Forms of Volunteering, More Spaces to Participate and Alternative Outreach Methods, and Suggestions for Further Research.

Creation of Communication Channels

- ❖ Creation of WG Assemblies: In order to address the lack of communication between different WGs as well as to foster interaction and partnerships, we recommend the creation of WG and Volunteer Assemblies where volunteers could share visions, experiences and projects. Such assemblies would give an opportunity to volunteers to get to know each other. Also, these meetings could serve as pools of knowledge through which volunteers could help themselves in achieving their goals. These meetings could take place bi-monthly, or twice per academic term.

- ❖ WGs-Board of Directors Relationship: It would be positive to foster direct communication between volunteers (especially in WGs) and the board of directors. This could be done by encouraging WGs to present their proposals directly to the board (not through the General Coordinator or the Volunteer Coordinator). Board meetings could also be more promoted and publicized. The promotion of Board meetings would allow people to be aware of the board's existence and activities. It would also increase the board's accountability to volunteers and members in general. WGs and volunteers should be aware of the feedback channels available to them in OPIRG. Staff, board and WG evaluations, as well as self-evaluations, could be implemented in order to provide more formal feedback channels. Currently evaluations are only carried out regarding the General Coordinator.

- ❖ Board of Directors-Staff Relationship: Channels that encourage interaction (recreational and work-related) between staff and board would be very beneficial for the organization as a whole because they would allow communication to flow. Especially, these channels could encourage further partnership between the two bodies, potentially generating new and creative projects. Board-Staff channels of communication could include a diversity of activities such as parties, field trips, assemblies, etc.
- ❖ Clearer Job Descriptions/Board and Staff training: Unclear job descriptions and very short training periods appear to be common for OPIRG, especially this year when most staff and board members have been somewhat new to the organization. This situation could be avoided by creating training kits for staff, similar to those existing for the board, as well as by allowing new staff, in particular general coordinators, to have a one-week training period with the person leaving the position. It would be ideal if Board members could undergo a longer training period before the beginning of the school year. This would allow more continuity and stability in the organization.
- ❖ Provincial Structure: Ontario's PIRGs have a great partnership and networking potential. Some of it has been utilized when training new personnel as well as in attempts to create common projects and policies. The provincial structure has a great potential for further development. For this reason, OPIRG Peterborough's communication with other provincial PIRGs could be further developed.

New Forms of Volunteering

- ❖ New short-term forms of volunteering have the potential of inviting a great number of students and members into OPIRG. They could be limited to activities such as planning an event or producing posters and outreach tools for the organization's core activities.
- ❖ Alternative task-oriented forms of volunteering: New volunteering activities classified by topics and or abilities could be created. Task-oriented volunteering could be organized through categories such as planning, publicity, arts, environment, science, networking, etc. In this way, people with particular abilities and or interests could participate in OPIRG without the defined and clear-cut structure of the WG.
- ❖ Research: One of our interviewees claimed to have been attracted by OPIRG during her/his first year at Trent because it was research related. However s/he claims to have been disappointed to find that research was not such an important priority for the organization as she expected. The opportunity to carry out research projects through OPIRG and the TCCBE (like this one!) could be further encouraged and promoted.

More Spaces to Participate

- ❖ Inclusion of International Students: Creating an international student board position could be a way to integrate and invite Trent's international student body into

- OPIRG. Such integration would enrich both parties (OPIRG and international students) and allow the organization to increase its volunteer base as well as its pool of knowledge. Such exchange could further be promoted through the creation of an international student position in the staff.
- ❖ Wheelchair Accessibility is a current OPIRG concern that should be addressed soon in order to enrich dialogue and further incorporate the organization's mandate into its actions.
 - ❖ New Networking Partners: One of the points more widely made by our respondents is that OPIRG should increase and promote its partnership with local student and non-student organizations. Increasing partnership with new organizations should serve as ways of addressing OPIRG's inclusiveness concerns. Other groups with which OPIRG could create new ties or strengthen already-existing ones are the New Canadian Centre (NCC), Trent International Student's Association (TISA), African Council at Trent (ACT), Peterborough Coalition Against Poverty (PCAP), Kawartha's World Issues Centre (KWIC) and Youth Emergency Shelter (YES). As said above, OPIRG already has ties with some of these organizations (i.e. YES and PCAP); however, these partnerships could be further promoted and publicized.
 - ❖ Plural Forums, including university professors, staff and students, as well as Peterborough citizens could be created in order to discuss common issues and create common responses to them. Popular policy-making, knowledge sharing, networking and common campaigns could be achieved in this type of forums. They could take place once per term or as many times as necessary in order to provide, continue and nurture debate, partnerships and actions.

Alternative Outreach Methods

- ❖ First Year Students are seen as a priority by many of our respondents. New outreach activities and means should be geared towards first year students in order to increase their awareness and participation in OPIRG.
- ❖ Creative Outreach: Workshops, presentations and posterings are often seen by potential volunteers as highly conventional and not attractive outreach tools. Theatre, miming and music all have the potential to attract new volunteers and increase awareness about OPIRG. Having a more creative outlook would also provide new grounds for the relationship between OPIRG and its volunteers for it would increase space for volunteers' abilities and knowledge to be utilized.
- ❖ Posters should provide a broader view of OPIRG. This was suggested in an interview in which the respondent emphasized that people should be made more aware of the large space that OPIRG can provide to develop personal and collective projects. According to her/him, current posters did not do justice to OPIRG's large number of possibilities.
- ❖ Announcing OPIRG's events in classes and academic departments was a suggestion made by one of our interviewees. Considering that OPIRG seeks to reach the wider

student body at Trent, promoting its events and activities at the different academic departments in which concerns of social justice figure prominently would be useful (e.g. International Development Studies, Political Studies, Environmental Sciences, Women's Studies, Sociology, etc.).

Suggestions for Further Research

- ❖ This report is focusing on inner dynamics within OPIRG, integrating the views and concerns of people who are currently working with the organization. We think that further research can explore the perceptions of OPIRG in Trent and Peterborough. This would address inclusiveness issues observed in our report.
- ❖ Methodologically, we consider a “responsive approach” to evaluation research to be an appropriate means that can be used for further studies on OPIRG.
- ❖ Research also could be done on new partnerships for OPIRG with organizations in Trent and Peterborough in order to enhance the organization's networking and coalition-building capabilities.
- ❖ To explore the relationship between OPIRG Peterborough and other PIRGs in the region is another research topic that has the potential to increase the organization's networking and coalition-building capabilities. This research topic could also enhance OPIRG-Peterborough training and job description capacities.
- ❖ We encourage the research aspect of the organization to be revitalized.

Epilogue

Our experience in this research project was marked by a constant process of self-evaluation as well as a questioning of our approaches to social inquiry. We found that evaluation research is a highly politicized process that often requires the evaluators' immersion into a series of power dynamics, social codes and group routines. It was in this immersion that we reflected about our place within the evaluation practice as well as on our influence on the process of knowledge generation.

According to our experience, evaluation research provides fertile grounds for debate and dialogue. We find that this research took place in an important moment for OPIRG since it is undergoing a transitional phase. New staff, board member and volunteers have to come to make up the organization, leading it into a process of self-definition and change. We hope that his research project may serve as a useful reference during this process.

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Appendixes

1. Interview Guides

1.A. Interview guide model for Historical Perspective

1. What was your relation with OPIRG in the past? For how long were you involved with OPIRG?
2. How did you become involved with OPIRG?
3. What were the main issues that you worked on through OPIRG during your involvement with the organization?
4. Where were you located?
5. What kind of physical resources did OPIRG have at the time?
6. Do you know how was the organization's structure when you were involved with it? Did you face any problems related to the organization structure? If so, how did you solve it? (Compare with Current Board, coordinator, part-time staff, volunteers and WGs)
7. How did the WG structure function at the time? Were there many WGs functioning?
8. Did you offer workshops or other training activities? If so, what kind?
9. Did you have paid-staff?
10. What were the ways through which people got involved with OPIRG?
11. To what extent did you rely on volunteer work? If so, what kind of volunteer opportunities you provided?
12. What kind of outreach activities did OPIRG have at the time?
13. What were the profiles in terms of culture, religion and mother tongue, of the people involved with OPIRG at the time?
14. What kind of problems did OPIRG have at the time as an organization (volunteering, funding, infrastructure)?
15. Throughout the years, what changes have you noted in terms of the organization in general, and volunteer participation in particular?

1.B. Interview Guide Model for Previous WGs Experiences: The Seasoned Spoon Café

1. How did you become involved with OPIRG?
2. How are you related to the Seasoned Spoon?
3. How was the SP created?
4. What role did OPIRG play in the creation of the SP?
5. How did OPIRG support the SP's initiative?
6. In what ways did OPIRG facilitate the development and success of the SP?
7. What volunteer opportunities were available at OPIRG when you became involved with it?
8. How many paid staff did OPIRG have then?
9. Which of the resources provided by OPIRG were the most valuable for the development of the SP?
10. What kind of outreach activities did OPIRG have at the time?
11. How was the relationship between the food issues WG, from which the SP arose, with OPIRG's board?
12. How was the relationship between the food issues WG, from which the SP arose, with OPIRG's staff?

1.C. Interview Guide models for Current WGs

1. When and in what way did you become involved with OPIRG?
2. What made you become involved with the organization?
3. What are the focus and goals of your WG? Please describe some of the activities and actions that you have endorsed, promoted, carried out.
4. What made you initiate a WG? Why did you decide to address your (social, environmental, etc.) issue within OPIRG? Do you think that your WG goals, actions and activities reflect OPIRG's mandate? (Here we will provide the interviewees with a summary of OPIRG's summary)
5. How many people are involved in your WG?
6. How did the WG members become involved in it?
7. Which of the resources provided by OPIRG are the most valuable for your WG projects?
8. How would you describe the relationship between your WG and OPIRG's staff? (Do they have any relation with staff other than Jessie?)
9. How would you describe the relationship between your WG and OPIRG's board?
10. What kind of outreach activities do you think have been effective at attracting volunteers to the organization?
11. What do you think have been the successes and failures of your WG?
12. What problems have you encountered so far? Have you been able to address them?
13. How has your WG been able to attract new participants?
14. Would you consider participation in a WG as a volunteer activity? If so, what do you think about OPIRG's WG system of volunteering?
15. If you were to change this system, in what ways would you do it?
16. What ways of volunteering at OPIRG, other than participating in WGs, would you highlight, develop and/or promote?

1.D. Interview Guide model for Staff

1. How long have you been involved with OPIRG?
2. How did you learn about it?
3. How and why did you become part of OPIRG staff? What is your role as...(position)? How was your training?
4. Does your work entail to work with other OPIRG staff?
5. How do you define an OPIRG volunteer?
6. How do you perceive the current levels of volunteer involvement?
7. What are the means for people willing to get involved with OPIRG to get in touch with you and/or other OPIRG staff?
8. What kind of relationship do you keep with the existing WGs?
9. Do you think that OPIRG's structure (Board, staff, volunteers, WGs) facilitates volunteers' initiatives?
10. What do you think are the resources and facilities that volunteers find to be the most important?
11. What have been the volunteer-outreach activities this year? How have they worked out?
12. What are the means through which volunteers and members provide feedback to OPIRG? What are the spaces available to discuss this feedback? What kind of feedback have you received from volunteers?
13. What do you think are the factors that determine the levels of activeness of WGs? What role does OPIRG play in this?
14. In what ways do you think that OPIRG achieves its goal of being inclusive?
15. What kind problems have you encountered in your position? In what ways if any do you think OPIRG can improve in terms of inclusiveness, effectiveness, participation and reliability?
16. What kind of effect, if any, do you expect this evaluation to have?

2. Questionnaire Model

Dear Board of Director or staff member,

We invite you to complete this questionnaire that is part of a larger research project that aims to evaluate the services that OPIRG provides to its volunteers. Also, this research aims to examine the extent to which OPIRG services reflect OPIRG's mandate. Please feel free to contact us for any question, suggestion and criticism. We really appreciate that you take the time to answer this questionnaire. It should take you approx. 25 minutes to fill it up. We hope that the results gathered through our research will enrich OPIRG with knowledge about itself as an organization as well as with recommendations for improvement.

Thank you!

Masaya and Andres

(tel. 743 38 44)

1. Are you part of OPIRG's Board of Directors?

Yes__

No__

2. Are you part/full time OPIRG's staff?

Yes__

No__

3. What is your position at OPIRG?

4. How long have you been involved with OPIRG (either as paid staff or as a volunteer)?

5. In which ways do you think an OPIRG member can become an OPIRG volunteer? Please list them below.

6. What do you think are the facilities and physical resources that OPIRG provides to its volunteers?

7. What do you think are the skills, tools and capacities that OPIRG facilitates to its volunteers through its various educational and training activities and resources?

8. In order of relevance (1 being the most relevant and 5 being the least relevant), list the means through which OPIRG facilitates skills to its volunteers (i.e. workshops, etc.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

9. How would you rate the existing resources and capacity-building activities provided by OPIRG to its volunteers?

- Excellent ____
- Very good ____
- Good, yet there is room for improvement ____
- Poor, they ought to be changed ____

10. What kind of feedback have you received from volunteers with regards to OPIRG's capacity-building activities?

- Very positive ____
- Positive ____
- Negative ____
- Very negative ____
- I have NOT received feedback ____

11. What kind of reactions, if any, have you received from volunteers with regards to OPIRG's physical resources?

- Very positive ____
- Positive ____
- Negative ____

Very negative ____
I have NOT received feedback ____

12. Do you think that OPIRG's existing services for its volunteers ought to be changed in any way, or that new services ought to be incorporated? If so, please elaborate.

13. What do you think are the benefits that volunteers can obtain by volunteering at OPIRG?

14. OPIRG "sees all forms of human oppression (i.e. racism, homophobia, and the subjugation of women) and environmental destruction as interconnected issues which are mutually reinforced." It aims to facilitate skills to its members, enabling them to use their academic knowledge for social change. One of OPIRG's tenets is accountability to its members, as well as accessibility, consensus building and inclusiveness to members, volunteers and the Peterborough community at large. (OPIRG-Peterborough Mission Statement)

After critically reading the above extract of OPIRG's mandate, do you think that the facilities, skills and activities that OPIRG provides to its volunteers reflect the organization's mandate? In what ways do OPIRG services to its volunteers reflect OPIRG's mandate? In what ways, if any, do you think that they DO NOT reflect it?

15. In your opinion, what are the main ways in which volunteers contribute to OPIRG as an organization?

16. In your opinion, how strong has volunteer participation been this year compared to previous years? And why?

17. In what ways, if any, do you think that this evaluation research will be useful for OPIRG?

Thank you very much, your time is appreciated!!!
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3. Arthur's Editorial

FEBRUARY 07, 2005

Unclouding the Java myth

Last week, students, faculty and staff at Trent were either excited or enraged by the prospects of a Starbucks on campus. For better or for worse, our blatantly sensationalist cover was effective in raising awareness. But as often happens, the hype of the moment has led many to miss a number of important details while either proclaiming the benefits of “good coffee” or protesting the forthcoming “corporate intrusion” into university life. Let's clear up some common misconceptions.

First of all, this is not about new corporate intrusion on campus. That intrusion is already here: it's called Aramark. What's new is that Aramark is proposing to open a coffee shop using the Starbucks logo. This means that it will be run by Aramark employees, who will not benefit from Starbucks' wages or benefits. And strictly speaking, this is no different from any other corporate presence on campus (Tim Hortons, Pizza Pizza, etc). Second, “the evil American corporation” is not trying to invade student space. The main push for its presence on campus has emerged from two campus sources: faculty and staff at Gzowski and the Conference Centre.

That being said, the other camp is getting its story wrong too. There will be no Starbucks on campus: all you will get, if the proposal goes through, is some lousy dripped coffee and the same old Aramark sandwiches. No decadent pumpkin lattes. No triple spiced espressos. Just coffee, in a styrofoam Starbucks cup. This is all the proposal involves. What you're being sold is merely an empty brand that will lack the very product you're after. After all, what is the point of a Starbucks that has no espresso machine? The Conference Centre is probably the only beneficiary of a pseudo-Starbucks on campus, but their interests should not be taken into consideration. So what if we can attract more and better conferences? This is a University, not a Hilton.

As I see it, the controversy over Starbucks is at the core a question of aesthetics. This is particularly so, if seen in conjunction with calls for an OPIRG-run fair trade alternative (OPIRG is the Ontario Public Interest Research Group). This is not to say that their claims have no merit, but rather that each camp's opposition to the other is ultimately based on non-negotiable distinctions. For the Seasoned Spoon/OPIRG/activist/socially-aware types, Starbucks is a symbol of everything we should stand against, and the mere possibility of its logo on campus embodies a deeper meaning than simply expensive coffee from a big corporation. There are many dimensions to their concerns (social, political, environmental) but, basically, this is an argument about lifestyle. Or, at least, the argument on lifestyle takes over the multiplicity of concerns over Starbucks.

For the others (whose specific characteristics are hard to label), the idea of an OPIRG-run Seasoned Spoon type setting is a relatively unfriendly option. This is so not because the organizations are themselves unfriendly. Not at all. But their clear political and social orientations are by definition exclusive. Whether they intend to or not (I strongly think

they don't), these environments exclude those who do not identify themselves as activist, leftist, anti-capitalist and so on. Because of these implications, OPIRG has very little chance of 1) running an inclusive and efficient coffee shop, and 2) convincing both Gzowski Cabinet and the Colleges and Student Services Committee (CaSSC). This does not mean that CaSSC, the student-dominated committee that has the most important say on this question, must choose Starbucks. Absolutely not. There is an alternative.

Where there is conflict, there is opportunity. The current controversy is an excellent opportunity for Trent, and particularly for the Business department, to innovate. This department and its students have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to innovate successfully and responsibly. Last term, a group of four students in Ray Dart's Entrepreneurship and New Venture course made \$2,150 in an 'experiential learning' assignment that started off with only \$5. Joel Bakan's talk last week was a clear example of the department's commitment to social responsibility and humanistic business practices. Why not have the Business department or its student organization run a coffee shop that follows the model of the Seasoned Spoon? Why not use this opportunity to provide a chance for experiential learning alongside serving the needs of the college community? After all, the entrepreneurial spirit of the Seasoned Spoon is admirable independent of its aesthetic preferences.