

Charting volunteer value changed organization's self- perception

After participating in workshops on social accounting – the value added to an organization by its volunteer's contributions – the director of finance for a national literacy non-profit says the organization "has more tools to tell its story."

"Telling its story" isn't about finding ways to advertise, however. According to Eric Plato, the director of finance for [Frontier College](#), the series of workshops showed staff, management and board how its mission was being fulfilled. It also provided a new way of describing - and documenting - the seeming intangibles not collected in typical financial data.

"There is a new recognition among board and staff about what we are doing," says Plato, who first participated in the workshops, presented by Laurie Mook, a doctoral candidate at OISE, two years ago.

The workshops were a practical applied component of the "Creating a Framework for Valuing Volunteer Project," which Mook began in 2003 along with Drs. Jack Quarter and Femida Handy.

The projects' goal was to determine if non-profits include a value for volunteer contribution, how this substitutes or supplements paid labour, and to apply mechanisms to identify and measure these contributions.

"It showed where we are providing skills development for staff, how we network, and what impact our community training has had. It's become part of our everyday communication and part of our thinking," says Plato.

Plato, who now speaks at workshops about the impact the volunteer value added accounting system has had on Frontier College, was initially amazed at the college's

own results.

“It showed a total picture of the organization,” he says. “It bridged the gap between the financial bottom line and our mission and ideals. We do a huge amount of work on a small budget.”

More importantly, adds Plato, is that it provided insight into how to tackle a persistent problem faced by the organization: how to explain its identity and function to the public.

With its title Frontier College is often immediately assumed to be a private college, not a non-profit literacy organization that distributes 20,000 books a year across Canada, has over 200 community partners and focuses on its connections with low-income neighborhoods and marginalized individuals.

“How we present ourselves to the public who don’t know what we do was a problem,” says Plato, “and through identifying this it has improved communications and been good for fundraising. As an accountant I found it very interesting – we measured our volunteer contributions as roughly \$1.9 million.”

“Our volunteers are probably our most important resource.”