

Volunteer Appreciation Research Project

Volunteer Leadership Council

March, 2021



Forward

Why do we appreciate?

There was a time before the 10 Principles existed when Burning Man was not so kind an organization. We valued hard work over being in the moment, critical feedback over empathy and diplomacy, and speaking over listening. We developed a culture of workaholism and fiefdoms. There was rarely a kind word to someone on another team and moving from team to team was actively discouraged. We had a “no poaching” of staff rule. It made for very difficult meetings, hard decision-making, many people leaving feeling burned out and used, and much unnecessary stress.

Thankful were we the day we started to appreciate each other.

If what we are creating are real communities the people will be in them for a long time, and the time we are spending making them are hours, days, years of our own lives. We found out the hard way that appreciation was the key to creating understanding, cooperation, and sound compromise, making the hours of our lives more rich and meaningful.

How do you appreciate?

Harley K. Dubois, Burning Man Co-Founder

1 Introduction

1.1 Volunteer Leadership Council

The Volunteer Leadership Council (VLC) was initiated by Burning Man Co-founder Harley K. Dubois in 2015, and exists “*to champion the human spirit of Volunteerism, creating a foundation for a culture of appreciation and empowerment within the Burning Man community and beyond.*” The VLC is an advisory body, grounded in Burning Man’s 10 Principles, that supports the greater Burning Man community by providing guidance, resource sharing, and by identifying and sharing best practices in volunteer leadership.

1.2 Volunteer Appreciation Research Project

The Volunteer Appreciation Research Project is an undertaking of the Volunteer Leadership Council. Over the course of one year, the project team interviewed volunteer leaders to explore team practices and cultures across the landscape of the global Burning Man community, to learn more about how they work, particularly in regard to volunteer appreciation.

1.3 Methodology

A wide variety of team managers and volunteer coordinators were chosen to be interviewed for this project. Interviewees were chosen from 36 Black Rock City teams. We also emailed 51 Regional Network event team representatives and all regional contacts requesting interviews, resulting in interviews with 20 respondents hailing from 8 different countries, from the United States to as far as South Africa. So in all, the pool of respondents consisted of 56 team leaders from 54 Black Rock City and official Regional Event volunteer groups. The full list of teams surveyed is shown in Appendix A.1.

The Volunteer Appreciation Survey comprised 28 mostly qualitative questions on the topic of volunteer appreciation. A full list of questions with the original wording can be found in Appendix A.2. Respondents were identified by their role in the global Burning Man Regional Network events and Black Rock City. Survey interviews were carried out via live one-on-one phone call or video conference by nine interviewers, and responses were captured by the interviewers in a survey form.

Analysis of the survey results uses simple graphical and numerical summaries to report this mostly qualitative data. All analyses and graphics were created using R version 4.0.2 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, 2020).

2 Results

2.1 Description of Survey Respondents

As noted above, interviews were conducted with 36 Black Rock City volunteer team leads and 20 Regional Network event teams, and the full list of teams surveyed is shown in Appendix A.1. A scatterplot of the years of experience of the team manager by the approximated size of the team is shown in Figure 1. Approximate team sizes ranged from just 4 people up to 4,000 people, with a median team size of 120. The years of experience for team managers varied from 1 year to 22 years, with an average of 5 years. For Black Rock City team managers the median years of experience was 5 years, while the average for Regional event team managers was three and a half years. There was no significant correlation between the years of experience and the size of the team.

2.2 Types of Appreciation

The central aim of the study was to identify common types of appreciation, and thus several questions asked about the subject directly. One question asked respondents to share the most “meaningful and effective” acknowledgement, and responses were categorized into nine types.



Figure 1: The team size, as approximated by the team manager, is given by the years of experience of the team manager. The number of volunteers is shown on a \log_{10} scale.

As shown in Figure 2, the most common response category was patches, with nearly 60% of respondents mentioning the category. This was true for both Black Rock City teams as well as Regional teams. Clothing was mentioned by about 50% of the respondents, making it the second most frequently mentioned acknowledgment.

2.3 Schwag and Events

All but one team manager reported offering team-affiliated schwag. Among the most popular items offered were clothing, mentioned in 60% of responses; patches, mentioned in 53% of responses; and access to gifted or discounted admission or tickets, mentioned in 47% of responses. Additionally, thank you cards or notes were mentioned in 25% of responses and stickers were mentioned in 22% of responses.

Events were another important way teams showed appreciation for their volunteers, with 83% of respondents

What are the ways you acknowledge your volunteer that are most meaningful and effective to them?

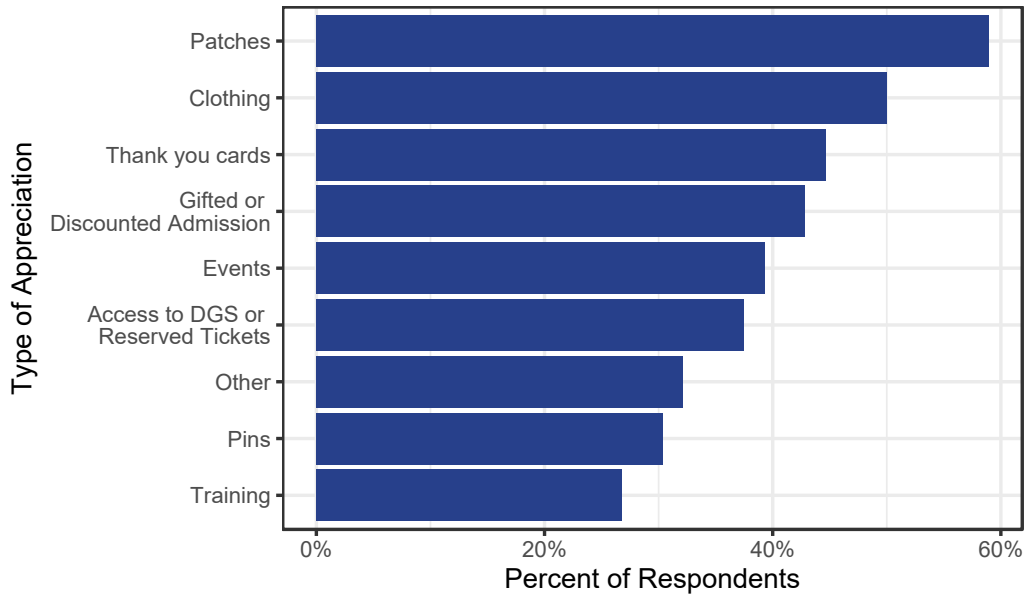


Figure 2: The proportion of surveys that mentioned each category of appreciation in response to the question posed in the title. Categories for respondents' answers were determined after the survey and answers may have fallen into multiple categories.

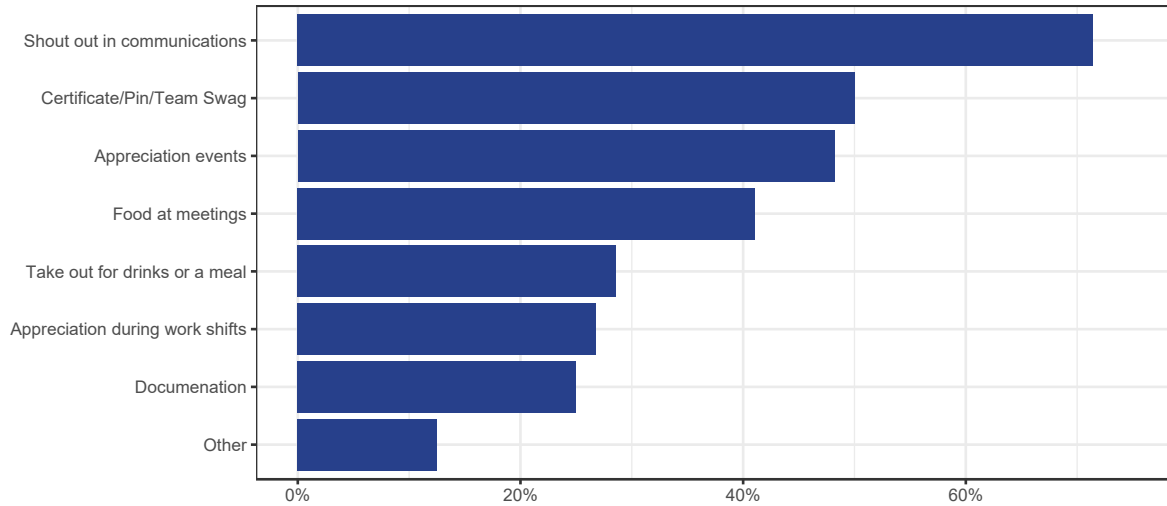
reporting hosting an event. Events varied greatly, involving everything from happy hours to parades. The word cloud in Figure 3 illustrates keywords that showed up in descriptions of events. Respondents were also asked to score how effective the events were on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most effective. Of those who answered the question, 50% of respondents scored their events as 8 or higher, with 30% giving their events a perfect 10. One respondent gave their event a rating of 1 (they did not describe the event). Finally, we asked if team managers collaborated on events, and 47% of respondents mentioned working with another team.

2.4 Public and One-On-One Appreciation

In some situations it may be more appropriate to show appreciation for volunteers in a celebratory public setting, and in other situations it would be more appropriate to encourage a volunteer in a more personal one-on-one setting. Figure 4 shows the responses given when interviewees were asked about forms of public appreciation and one-on-one appreciation, respectively.

In terms of public acknowledgment, 71% of respondents said that they acknowledged volunteers by giving them shout-outs in their communications. Other common public appreciations were schwag, such as certificates and pins, mentioned by 50% of respondents, and events, mentioned by 48% of respondents. The least common specific category of public appreciation was documentation via posted photos and videos, mentioned by 25% of respondents. In terms of one-on-one appreciation, personally giving feedback in a one-on-one setting was mentioned most often, by 57% of respondents. Regardless of the environment, the most common appreciation mentioned by respondents was the act of telling the volunteer that they are doing well.

What does public acknowledgement and appreciation look like on your team?



What does one-on-one acknowledgement and appreciation look like on your team?

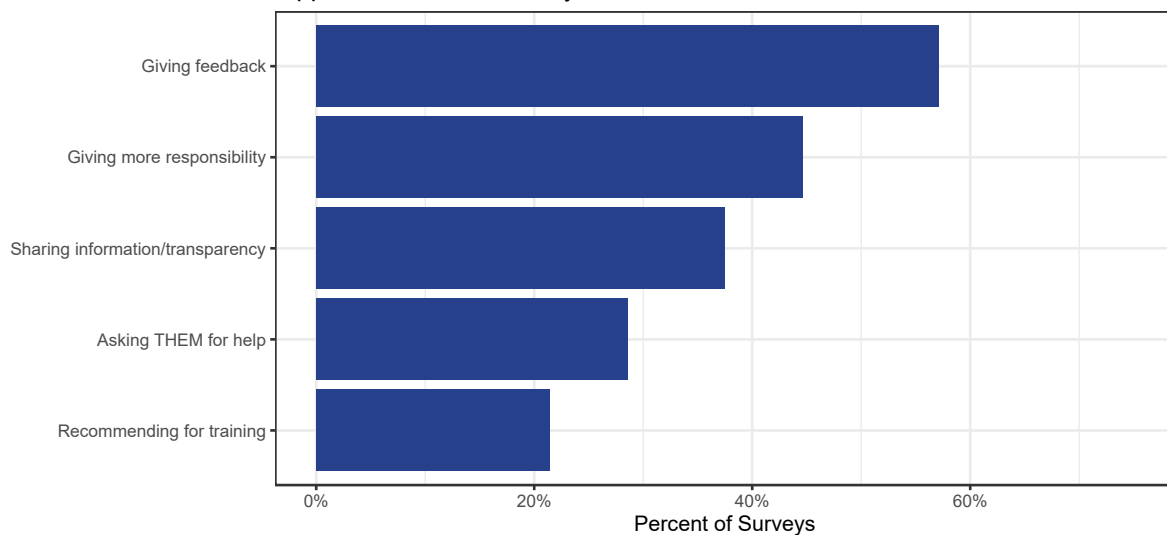


Figure 4: Types of public and one-on-one appreciation.

mentioned category, mentioned by 31% of respondents. Participation captures responses that mentioned passing the culture on through events, actions, or involvement in team duties. Team Role/Training, mentioned by 27% of respondents, referred to a specific role within a team to oversee the culture of appreciation and training new members to carry out that role. Documentation, mentioned by 13% of respondents, is the practice of passing on the culture through instructions or guides. And finally oral tradition, mentioned by 13% of respondents, indicates passing down the culture through verbal instructions. 27% of respondents said that they did not currently have any practice of passing on a culture of appreciation.

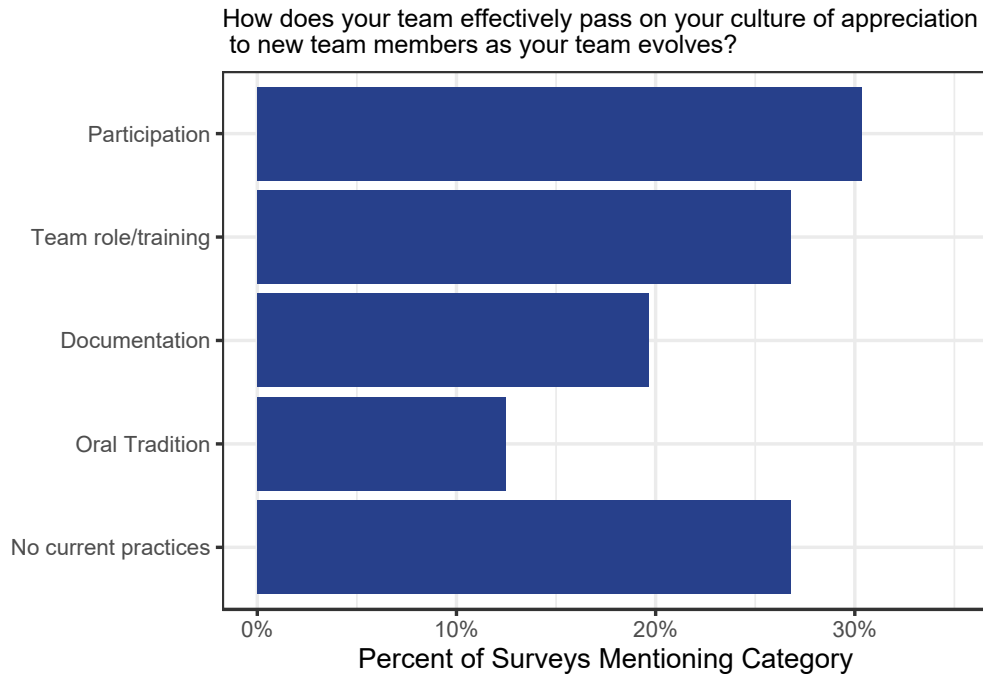


Figure 5: Methods of passing on a team’s culture of appreciation. Responses were parsed for discussion of one of four categories: participation (events, actions, or involvement in team duties), team role/training (a specific role within a team to oversee the culture of appreciation and training new members to carry out that role), documentation, and oral tradition. A response may fall into multiple categories.

2.6 How appreciation at Regional Events compares to Black Rock City

By the numbers, regional team size and regional team managers look different than their Black Rock City counterparts. Regional teams tended to be larger, with a median of 271 volunteers, compared to Black Rock City teams, with a median of 75 volunteers; and regional team managers had a median of 3.5 years of experience, 1.5 years less than the median of 5 years of experience for Black Rock City team managers. Appreciation for volunteers was seen to be important both at Regional Events and at Black Rock City; however, some distinctions between the two became apparent, as shown in Figure 6, which breaks down one question based on the two different types of respondent.

This question, which is slightly different from the questions discussed above, asks respondents which acknowledgment methods they think their volunteers find to be most meaningful and effective. Acknowledgment through material gifts, such as clothing and patches, were mentioned less by team managers at regionals (40% vs 56% for clothing and 50% vs 64% for patches), but public acknowledgements of shout-outs in communications were mentioned by 80% of Regional respondents and just 67% of Black Rock City respondents. Black Rock City respondents were also 3.5 times more likely to celebrate volunteer milestones (72% versus 20%), as well as 1.5 times more likely to document and pass on team appreciation practices (69% versus 45%).

3 Discussion

The use of social media has become more prevalent with volunteer groups/affiliations in recent years. Appreciations posted to social media, with its broad reach, were cited in every interview with Regional event contacts. It is likely that the fact that shout-outs are easy to do and affordable makes them popular. Live events and parties show appreciation to many volunteers at once, and seem to be perceived as being effective as long as they don’t

become stagnant. One-on-one acknowledgements also scored highly across all interviews as one of the most common and effective forms of appreciation. Checking in to find out whether a specific volunteer prefers public vs private acknowledgement keeps these practices from misfiring.

The following method was recorded as a way to make the appreciation more meaningful:

We know that failure is often a great teacher. Because he received the feedback that always just saying “thanks” sounded disingenuous, BRC Fire Art Safety Team manager DaveX developed this formal thank you practice:

1. Say thanks.
2. Mention the **specific** thing.
3. Why the specific thing is important to **you**.
4. Why the specific thing is important to **the organization**.
5. End with final thanks.

In the category of gifts, those mentioned often and considered most effective were patches, thank you cards, team-affiliated clothing, and tickets.

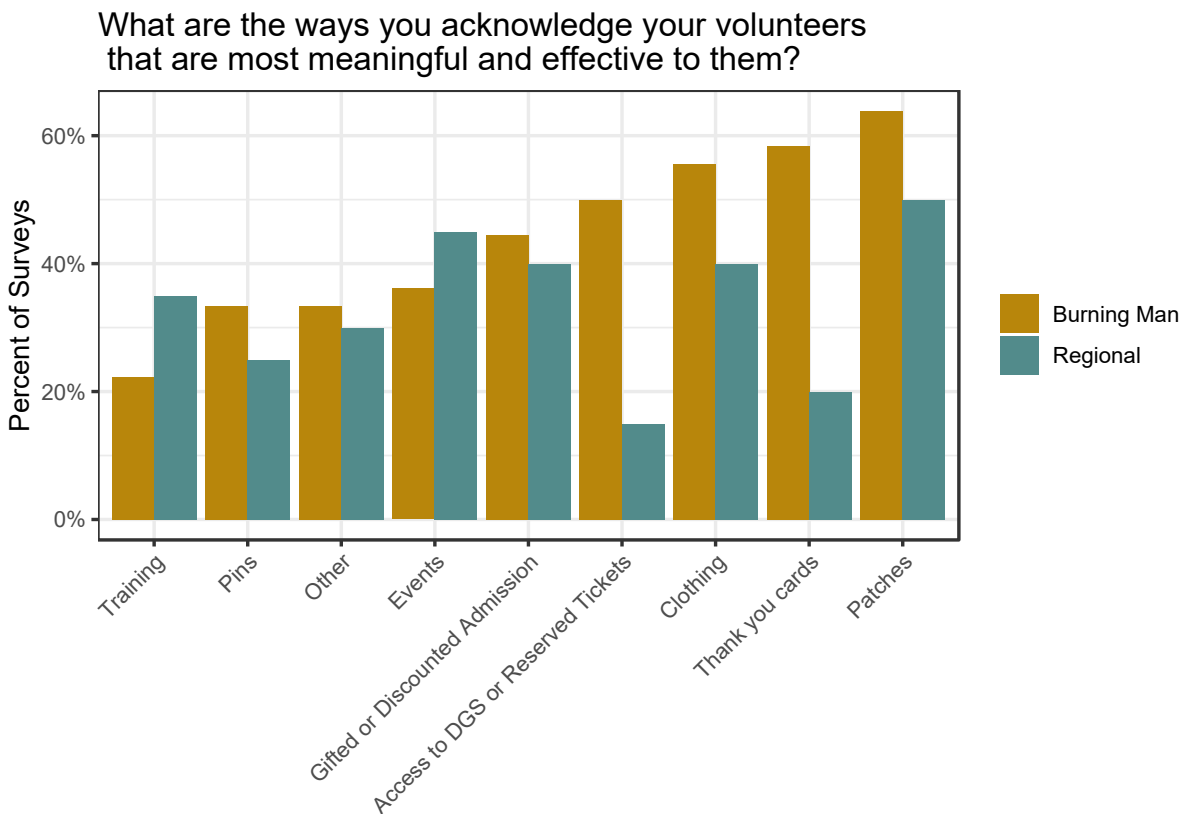


Figure 6: Differences in the ways volunteers are acknowledged that are most meaningful between Burning Man teams and Regional teams.

“Team schwag” (patches, pins, hoodies, etc.), those tangible momentos of affiliation and participation in our community, were frequently mentioned as an emblem of pride and a way to signal to others that the volunteer is a part of Burning Man culture. It is interesting to note that in a number of instances (including BRC teams), a premium team hoodie sweatshirt is paid for by the individual receiving it, as opposed to t-shirts, pins, and patches, which tend to be funded by the organizational entity. This practice may provide a useful example for teams lacking funds for such items.

The use of gift tickets is one of the points where responses from Black Rock City versus Regional Network respondents starkly differed. At most young regional events, volunteering does not come with access to an event ticket. (Note that this was also the case in the early years of Black Rock City.) With lower budget margins, it just is not economically feasible. One of the most striking observations from the study is the number of teams that lack documentation of appreciation practices, whether that is due to lack of awareness, time constraints, or other factors.

3.1 Survey Limitations

The most significant limitation from this survey process was the lower-than-hoped-for number of responses from our global Regional Network of event leads. In order to counteract this limitation, we hope that once this report is distributed we can still continue to collect data across the U.S. and internationally. A key commitment we made to the survey respondents was to collate, analyze and disseminate survey findings to them in a timely fashion, which we have done here. If you are a leader of volunteers at Black Rock City or a regional event who is interested in contributing to these findings, please complete our survey [here](#) or reach out to vlc@burningman.org.

4 Conclusion

The Volunteer Appreciation Research Project team interviewed a wide range of leaders in Black Rock City and across our global Regional Network events to document their appreciation commonalities, their most effective and unique ideas, and their low- or no-cost appreciation practices. These findings are not only for internal leadership. Our entire community—including theme camps and art projects—are dependent upon people volunteering time and effort. The findings described here should be made available to our larger community as tips, tools, and best practices for appreciating all volunteer members of group endeavors throughout our global community. We believe appreciating volunteers is a ‘best practice’: primarily it’s the right thing to do, and it most likely promotes retention.

5 Contributions and Acknowledgments

Volunteer Leadership Council

- Affinity Mingle – VLC Founding Member Emeritus, RIP
- Diana Jimènez Quintana (Patches) – VLC / Peer Support VC / Finance Coordinator & Fiscal Representative, Nowhere (Spain)
- Dove Russo (Starfish) – Co-founder POrtal Burn, Upstate New York Regional Contact 2012-2016, Playa del Fuego Board Member 2013-2016
- Erica Williams (Nipps) – VLC / DPW Fluffers Manager
- Harley K. Dubois – VLC Founding Member / Burning Man Co-Founder and Chief Culture Officer
- Helen Hickman – VLC Founding Member / BRC Art Support Services VC
- John Magadini (Jocko) – VLC Founding Member 2015-2019 / Volunteer Resource Team

- Kez Quin – VLC / Volunteerism Program Manager, 2017-2020
- Kristy Hilands – VLC / Head of Participatory Culture, Volunteerism Dept lead
- Marcia Crosby – VLC Founding Member / Community Services Manager for Cafe, Arctica (2004 - 2020) Temple Guardians (2015 - 2020)
- Maryann Hulsman (orange) – VLC Founding Member / former Everywhere VC, current Gate Manager for Community Events
- Misa Rygrova – VLC / Regional Contact for Czech Republic Eastern Europe, Gate Perimeter & Exodus Lead / Meta Regional (International) Alumni / Burning Man Fellow Emeritus
- Shannon Kelly – VLC Admin support / Admin to Harley K. Dubois
- Terry Schoop – VLC / Community Services Manager for Dept of Mutant Vehicles, Earth Guardians, Greeters, Lamplighters, Playa Info, Recycle Camp, and Volunteer Resource Team.

Data analysis, graphics, and additional editing:
Aaron Shev (Murrs) – Black Rock City Census.

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A Appendices

A.1 List of Teams Surveyed

Burning Man Teams

- Airport
- Arctica
- A-Team/Artist Appreciation
- Arterians/Art Dept.
- ASS/Art Support Services
- BMIR/Burning Man Information Radio
- Box Office/Ticketing
- Burner Express Air
- Burner Express Bus
- Burning Man Tech Team
- BWB Burners Without Borders
- Center Camp Cafe
- Census

- Comms/Media Mecca
- Community Events (off-playa)
- Documentation Team
- DMV/Dept of Mutant Vehicles
- DPW/Dept of Public Works
- Earth Guardians
- ESD/Emergency Services Dept
- Everywhere Pavilion
- Eyes on Art
- FAST/Fire Art Safety Team
- Fire Conclave
- GP&E/Gate, Perimeter & Exodus
- Greeters
- Lamplighters
- Placement
- Playa Info
- Playa Restoration
- Rangers
- Recycle Camp
- Temple Guardians
- VRT/Volunteer Resource Team

Regionals

- AfrikaBurn
- BE: Transformations
- BEquinox
- Blazing Swan
- Burn in the Forest (BitF)
- Crème Brûlée
- Critical Northwest
- Dragon Burn
- Element 11

- Firefly
- Freezer Burn
- Love Burn
- Melting Man
- Modifyre
- MPYRE Strikes Back!
- Nest
- Nowhere
- POrtal Burn
- Saguaro Man
- Southern Nevada Regional Gathering (SNRG)
- Transformus
- UnSCruz
- YOUtopia

A.2 Survey Questions

1. Name (of Interviewee)
2. What's your role?
3. What team?
4. How many volunteers on team?
5. How long have you been doing it?
6. What are the ways you acknowledge your volunteers that are most meaningful and effective to them?
7. Do you have team-affiliated swag/rewards for your team?
8. Do you host volunteer appreciation events?
 - If yes, description of events
 - If yes, on a scale from 1 to 10, how effective do you think these events have been?
9. What does public acknowledgement and appreciation look like on your team?
10. What does one-on-one acknowledgement and appreciation look like on your team?
11. What appreciations have you discovered or devised that you think are unique to your team?
12. Do you collaborate with other teams or events on appreciation efforts?
 - If yes, describe
13. Do you celebrate volunteer milestones and anniversaries?

- If yes, how do you celebrate volunteer milestones and anniversaries?
14. Are there any other expressions of appreciation that haven't come up in this interview yet?
 15. Have you gathered or received feedback from your team members about their appreciation preferences?
 16. What types of appreciation do you do that you get the most positive feedback about? Why?
 17. Have your appreciations ever backfired?
 - If your appreciations have backfired, how?
 18. What appreciations, if any, do you feel have become redundant or "played out"?
 19. In your experience are there cultural norms that don't cross over? (What's great for one team culture might not be good for another team).
 20. Have you noticed/are you concerned about any inequities between team appreciations across your event or organization?
 21. Do you document and pass along your team appreciation practices?
 22. How does your team effectively pass on your culture of appreciation to new team members as your team evolves?
 23. Does your team show special appreciation to exiting/transitioning team members? If so, how?
 24. Do you manage volunteers at any other events?
 - If yes, what different appreciations have you experienced at the those other events?
 25. When have you most felt appreciated in your Burning Man career?
 26. Do you want to say anything else on the topic of team appreciation?