

THE NEED FOR EDUCATION IN VOLUNTEERISM

Americans have a tendency to depend upon individual charisma and initiative for solutions to community problems. Some of the cynics say "Let George do it." But most of us hope a prophet will point the way, and then we are willing to pitch in and do our part to get the job done. Too long serene in faith that appropriate able leadership always spontaneously springs up to solve new problems, we are now nearing a paralysing low morale of cynicism or panic as we recognize through modern media the human limitations of current individual leaders. It seems they don't understand the problems, or their focus seems limited to special interests. Some have a fanatic singleness of purpose on behalf of one constituency which threatens the general welfare. Myths of infallibility no longer reassure us. We must save ourselves.

One brighter spot on the scene is the growth of volunteering which demonstrates the positive side of the nature of ordinary men and women. There is a lot of real concern and desire to help, especially for the victim of catastrophe, illness, old age, economic disaster, or the accident of a disadvantaged birth. People do want to help people. They do want their help to count, to make a significant difference. In our segmented and stratified society, it is hard for helpers to reach those who most need help unless the problems have reached crisis proportions. Volunteers would like to prevent

crisis, and to help not only during crisis but afterward, in the less dramatic but most important steps in overcoming damage or disadvantage through rehabilitation.

Trained professional help, and the money to pay for it, always seems to be in short supply. Inflation and recession compound the shortages. Volunteer person power is ready and willing, but not always able. Education and training are needed not only for the volunteers themselves but for the trained paid helpers on how to plug in the effort, skills and time which volunteers offer. A special function, volunteer administration, is a new career option attracting altruistic, able people who need professional level education to perfect a philosophy, a body of knowledge and discipline to apply skills effectively and ethically.

"Intelligence is not something possessed once and for all. It is in a constant process of forming, and its retention requires constant alertness in observing consequences - an open minded will to learn and courage in readjustment."
- John Dewey

Most people in leadership for volunteerism must meet John Dewey's standard for intelligence, or they do not long survive in leadership roles at the forefront of social change. Constantly confronted with crisis about program support, they also face consumer demands for immediately responsive human services in ever new combinations of resources and delivery patterns. No field of human activity changes

more rapidly in dynamic response to economic turns, new legislation or technological discoveries.

Volunteers, whom I define as givers of gratuitous service who may need some enabling funding in order to serve, deserve a wide range of choice about where and how. Most are seeking to improve their own and others' lives, quick to react to new interests, they can experiment and move about with far less risk than established agencies or professional disciplines can. People elected to unpaid leadership of boards or committees are under tremendous pressures to keep their organization au courant with new trends. Other leaders, paid and appointed as Directors of Volunteer Services, suffer the same pressures even more intensely, and they have a career at stake, as well, to heighten their anxiety.

Both paid and unpaid leaders are begging for learning opportunities at the top of every list of needs for help, on all the surveys we see. People are traveling thousands of miles to events of good reputation, often at their own personal expense, and almost any event which is well publicized is well subscribed. There is no question about the need and the desire for more and better training across the country: several studies have come up with parallel findings. There is question about the quality, and faddism which distorts much effort. Not all events justify enthusiasm, although simply the

opportunity to get together, to share common worries and reduce the ineffable sense of loneliness people feel in most volunteer administration career positions makes the sacrifice worthwhile.

Many short term non-accredited events suffer from what some of us as educators have identified as the Goldilocks - Three Bears syndrome: the bed of knowledge offered is too hard for some, too soft for others, and only a part of any event is "just right" for any one person.

Another phenomenon observed over a long period in volunteerism across the U.S.A. is the emergence of a few chronic students who attend everything possible, not always to observe consequences or readjust their practice to new concepts, but sometimes simply to renew friendships and to be identified with the small experienced "in" group who get around to the more significant regional and national opportunities. Adult educators have demonstrated that the more education persons have, the more they seek. For these people, the current, chaotic, uneven supply of learning opportunities may be minimally adequate. But educational needs for volunteerism are much broader than theirs.

Among learning needs which must be addressed is the much more widely felt sense of inadequacy to solve current social problems. New program, grass roots and academic realists brush aside sentimentality about volunteering being virtuous and fine, and seek to grapple with the tough realities of our depressed society. Many are dubious about the capacity

of government adequately to cope with people's needs and the abilities of people to cope with government. The relatively recent national government sponsorship of volunteering is also viewed with some skepticism as national efforts prove much more expensive than local ones, and not that much more effective in fighting poverty, drug abuse, family disintegration and other chronic problems like juvenile delinquency. The urgency of government and people problem solving capabilities grows with every new issue. Revenue-sharing and the rest of the new federalism are forcing states and local general purpose governments to use national monies to solve local problems. Like a poorly administered volunteer program, in which volunteers are mobilized before their functions are defined, local revenue-sharing has dispersed to more than 37,000 units of government vast sums of federal tax revenues with very little help about how to use it effectively or meet accountability expectations. The most ubiquitous learning need in the U.S.A. today is for citizens to understand their own community needs, how to prioritize and plan to meet the most important and urgent ones, and monitor the process to hold the "experts" accountable for solutions.

Why is only a fourth of our population involved in volunteering? Because citizenship education has ignored the subject. The potential of volunteerism in our pluralistic, democratic, dynamic society is simply not being realized. Recent legislation and popularization has opened volunteering to new constituencies of volunteers. Two studies done nine years apart

by the U.S. Census Bureau show a growth from 21.7 million volunteers in 1965 to over 37 million, only 59% of whom are women, in 1974. Old learning designs are totally inadequate for the new volunteers themselves and for the staff who work with them. Yet many so-called helping professions have preparatory educational programs which are still grinding out graduates to whom work supervising or in teamwork with volunteers comes as a rude surprise on their first jobs.

Most unprepared for these new needs of all the leadership people are those who organize voluntary helpers. The Director of Volunteers or of a voluntary recruitment center can no longer be passive, pleasant and a pink tea manager. It takes a great deal of knowledge about human growth and behavior, about human aspirations, about personnel administration with intangible (non salary) reward systems, about orientation and training, about communication through groups, publications and the media, about managing an office, about accountability for work records, references, fiscal controls, and the cost/benefit relationships regarding contributed community effort and resources. One major function, counselling people, means that the needs of the client or consumer, those of the agency and of its staff must be matched to needs of volunteers themselves. Certain basics are essential in any field of volunteer placement. Much earlier training was concerned only with techniques. We have evolved a teachable technology, but we will have real professional level competence when we deal with the "whys" as well as the "how to's" in all our educational efforts.

A most striking example of the varieties of education required is drawn from the field of education which shows the complexities involved. Take a child with special learning needs in a short staffed school (and what school can truly individualize every study program without volunteers?) and as tutor a lonesome grandparent whose own family lives too far away. Here needs of the child, the teacher, the school and the volunteer are all being met in one mutually satisfying voluntary relationship.

In order to maintain such complex mutually satisfactory situations, the teacher needs learning in basic or continuing professional education about how to delegate manageable parts of the teaching process to volunteers: how to divide the work into feasible units for an amateur to handle; how to guide the tutor toward greater independency; how to nurture an affectionate relationship which can do so much to motivate and enhance the teaching-learning process.

The volunteer coordinator or director needs considerable learning about analysing people, identifying and matching the needs of clients (tutee's) and teachers, to one tutor chosen from all the kinds of people who may think they want to be tutors, of whom not all would be appropriate.

Under 1974 Elementary and Secondary Education Act Amendments, every school is to have a Parent Advisory Committee. These members may not think of themselves as volunteers, but they probably will work

with no compensation and use the resources of the Volunteer Director's office to accomplish their work. This new law suddenly requires a new set of duties and relationships within every elementary and secondary school in the land. It is likely to increase pressures for individualized teaching and new curriculum experiences which will require volunteers in classrooms or other helping roles. Such is the relationship of volunteer administration to today's public schools where two million volunteers were active in 1973.

One State Teacher's Union voted against having volunteers in local school systems, but not one local union in that state adopted the policy. The reason given was that no school system which had volunteers (for tutoring, classroom assistance or advisory committees, etc.) had failed to get its school bond issue passed -- volunteers were worth the investment!

Teachers have come to value volunteers as advocates for educational goals more quickly than some other helping professions which still resist having volunteers. We should tell the teacher's story, to social workers, recreationists, speech therapists and other new disciplines which could use some salesmen for their function, too, as all community budgets get tighter. The professional education for each of these disciplines should prepare people for volunteering and working with volunteers.

The trend toward using volunteering to facilitate education has been

rapid and venturesome, taking many forms. Seeing and even being volunteers is good for the students as part of their citizenship and humanistic development. Students serve within their own schools and in appropriate community programs. For them, such field experience volunteering is career exploration and a way to improve their feelings about themselves: anyone feels better when he knows he helped someone! Now older students with learning problems are teaching younger ones, and improving their own performance as much as that of the youngsters with whom they work. In a tight job market, paid work study opportunities are getting more scarce, but more volunteer opportunities are opening all the time. Field experience education through volunteering is enhancing the human service programs in communities just as work-study programs are benefiting unions and businesses. Both consider such arrangements effective upstream recruitment. Educational administrators need to see and to communicate the difference in philosophy and methodology with students in a classroom from helping them maximize learning in actual work situations, paid or unpaid. Agency staff training can be greatly enhanced by faculty knowledge of research and active participation, with actual application of theory to practice. Collaboration deepens the mutual understanding of faculties and practitioners of one another, and helps to build knowledge for both.

The linkage of researchers and practitioners is promoted through

volunteerism in many fields of human services. Education has been used as an example because it is not only a field of activity replete with volunteering, but as a discipline it is in great need of observation and field-testing opportunities in order to keep up to date with societal needs and evolving solutions.

Educators in their search for relevance to meet current criticism of their programs, urgently need citizen advocates who will develop conviction and commitment by participation with educators in the program planning process. This is an age of skepticism about experts and increasingly articulate consumer dissatisfaction with government services or those of voluntary agencies in proportion to their costs. More citizen participation in goal setting and planning is essential to build community support for needed services and keep them focussed on their basic purposes. All agencies have a tremendous public education job to do, and cannot do it alone or through public relations methods. More citizens need to be active in programs in order to take up the cause.

Some organizations have lost sight of their original purposes in their struggle to survive because not enough volunteers know what they were trying to do. Their structures became ends instead of means toward altruistic ends. Dee Chardin has said, "Tender beginnings are lost in the woody growth which follows." Human

organizations need constant new blood and fresh perspectives to keep them flexible and responsive to changing needs. Board and committee training must preserve the spontaneity, the altruism, the humane, non-technical approach which will preserve the tenderness of original purpose and prevent the rigidity, "woody growth". To retain credibility, management training must stress accountability.

A learner for voluntarism is doubly a volunteer, for the education as well as for the work that is undertaken voluntarily. To maintain and build interest and commitment, the learner must be deeply involved in planning his learning and maintaining a searching, seeking climate for everyone involved. There are reliable cookbooks or road maps for the simple techniques of recruiting, finance accountability, etc. There are experienced experts to teach in these areas. Learning leadership is sorely needed however, which can stimulate and nurture originality and creative combinations of prior knowledge to be applied to new problems. The androgogy of Dr. Malcolm S. Knowles is far preferable to a pedagogical, authoritarian teaching style, but the competence and knowledge of the teacher and use of life learned wisdom among the students outweigh teaching gimmicks. We tread a fine line between totally process-centered teaching and task-oriented heavy technical instruction. Fads in methods come and go, and it is increasingly clear that we need a wide range of learning opportunities for all sorts of people. Schedules must accommodate personal obligations to families and to jobs. Costs

must be kept reasonable and scholarship resources must be developed. Those most in need of learning opportunities may well be those least able to pay for them. Our geography is vast, and travel expensive. Learning opportunities must be created by the learners and the teaching resources most conveniently available, with advice from national experts. Continuing education has become a necessity for everyone who wants to survive in today's world, as volunteer, board member, volunteer director or just plain concerned citizen. Volunteerism may be the last bastion of compassion in our society. To be really effective, it requires competencies and confidence in ordinary people to assume leadership and the grace to work collaboratively with all sorts of other leadership as well. It could well be that democracy depends on it.

Much thought about current problems is based on untested assumptions or obsolete facts. Education for volunteerism has to help people to think for themselves, to collaborate, share perspectives and build on common interests. Learning only happens in a climate in which it is safe to ask questions and give opinions -- tomorrow's problems require a mind not only open to new ideas, but with courage to readjust and apply them -- as John Dewey reminded us!

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