

The great debate of community service vocabulary continues

A few weeks ago, one of my staff members was talking with a class of fourth graders about volunteering. Knowing that it is in vogue to refer to school-based volunteering as "community service," she asked these students what they thought of when they heard this terminology. One boy, in all seriousness, responded, "Community service is when you order a pizza and they deliver it to your house."

Although everyone who has heard this anecdote gets a chuckle from it, it does highlight the fact that vocabulary debates tend to be irrelevant to those directly involved in doing the activities being labelled. The fourth grader was not wrong in his definition. He simply heard the words "community service" from one point of view.

The question of "What is volunteering?" has been posed for a long time. Quite a long list of words and phrases have been used somewhat interchangeably with volunteerism: service learning; citizen participation; pro bono publico work; community service; public service; community involvement; points of light; lay ministry; internships; corporate social responsibility; neighborliness; and self help.

Some of these terms were developed in specific contexts and mean something special in certain fields or settings. But the most controversy has been over the word "volunteer."

Some relevant history

In the 1970s, the hot topic was whether or not someone could truly be a volunteer if any form of payment was received—academic credit, reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses, a living allowance such as the stipends given to those in the Peace Corps. A great division was perceived between the pure volunteer (no reimbursement whatsoever) and the person who was enabled to volunteer (an impure volunteer?). The debate cooled as formal volunteer programs found that enabling funds encourage participation by more diverse people.

In the 1980s, court-referred volunteers became the contested issue. Is someone who works for a set number of hours in an agency as an alternative to jail or a fine a volunteer? Can anyone who is mandated to do something ever be a voluntary worker? What are pure volunteers suppose to feel when a lawbreaker is working side by side with them in the same program? A significant number of alternative-sentencing projects adopted the terminology "community service" and sidestepped these questions.

Today's issue

In the 1990s, we are seeing an increase in the mandating of community work by students as a requirement of high school graduation. From the perspective of the recipient agency, such students are volunteers. They are not on the payroll. The work they will do must be defined to match their schedules and skill level. They need to be interviewed, trained, and supervised just as any other part-time volunteer needs to be. However, educa-

tors are seriously resisting the word "volunteer" for several reasons.

Educators want to emphasize that students who receive academic credit for their participation need to have a thoughtful, educational experience. They see too much vol-

unteer work that is busy work or nonskilled in nature and want to separate themselves from that image. Also, the word "volunteer" is mired in unpopular stereotypes: nonfeminist women's work; wealthy people with time on their hands; paternalistic charity; lowest on the totem pole of clout and influence (which is why board members often do not relate to the word volunteer for themselves).

If students of all backgrounds and both sexes are going to be enthused about giving their time, it must be labelled to invoke pride. Many educators prefer the terminology "community service" even though it has already been adopted by the justice field for alternative sentencing.

Does it matter?

Why is terminology so important? Vocabulary is both a communicator and a bar-

rier. When people in various fields do not agree on their terminology, collaboration becomes difficult, if not impossible. Right now the educators espousing "community service" do not see that they have a connection to the "volunteer management" field. They spend time explaining that students receiving academic credit are different from volunteers, without understanding that the similarities are even greater and that volunteer program leaders are the schools' conduit to meaningful work assignments for students.

The volunteer field, attuned to seeing its familiar vocabulary, also assumes that "community service" must be something different. Directors of volunteers often react defensively to the way volunteers are categorized and too few seek out a partnership with educators.

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The goal is not to adopt the word "volunteer" as the most universal term, but rather to recognize that it is the umbrella concept connecting all of the other words. What we all want is to tap the widest variety of people resources in our communities to solve problems. The common denominator is that these people serve without cash profit. If they derive a personal benefit (intangible or credit of some sort), so much the better. **NPT**