

# Agency Volunteer Directors Voice Issues, Concerns, New Project Ideas

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THE PERSON RESPONSIBLE for the entry of college and high school student volunteers into a community service agency often holds the title of "Director of Volunteers." These administrators can aid your student volunteer program in many ways. They have experience in placing and scheduling part-time volunteers with a variety of backgrounds and skills. Because they have an overview of the agency, they can match your students to openings commensurate with their individual skills and interests, and they can arrange for your students to participate in ongoing orientation and training programs. In addition, they can provide new assignments for students who continue to volunteer at one agency over a long period of time, and they can "promote" your students into more complex assignments over time. A director of volunteers, usually the only person in an agency responsible for non-salaried staff, can be an important advocate for your students.

I teach a new course at a branch campus of the Pennsylvania State University. Called "Administration and Management of Volunteer Programs: Advanced Techniques," it is designed for experienced directors of volunteers who wish to upgrade their administrative skills. Since there are 45 colleges and universities in the greater Philadelphia area, not to mention a far greater number of high schools, I devote substantial class time to the topic of administering student volunteers. During class discussions, directors' attitudes and concerns have come to light. College and high school administrators of student volunteer programs should be aware of their concerns because they influence the development of service-learning experiences.

## Directors' Concerns

Directors of volunteers express dismay at the confusing terminology used by educators, such as "field work," "service-learning," "practicum," "internship," and "independent study." Not only do different colleges define such terms arbitrarily, but also individuals within one college or high school will use certain words without agreeing on their definition.

To muddy the waters further, there are vast disparities in the way that credit is or is not assigned. There are numerous options between the one extreme of "pure" voluntarism, with no classroom support and no credit, and the other extreme of a full semester's credit for classroom work related to community service. Again, students from one college or high school can come to an agency with schedules ranging from three hours a week to 40 hours a week, and from five weeks duration to two full semesters of work. It is helpful for the campus director to recognize that agency directors of volunteers have to juggle the demands and requirements of a variety of service-learning programs for college and high school student volunteers from many educational institutions.

Directors have also voiced concerns about the stu-

dents. The hippie stereotypes of the 1960's have changed into new stereotypes about apathetic students who are motivated only by the wish for a passing grade, graduation, and a job. Naturally, any set of pre-conceived notions misses the truth, but you may be in the position of having to interpret the more positive values and motivations of your students to directors of volunteers. Try to support your position by asking one who is enthusiastic about the students assigned to his or her agency to speak to others to encourage them to use student volunteers.

Another issue raised by directors is the growing number of college and high school students without good speaking and writing skills. Many service-learning assignments include tasks that require strong communication skills: telephone contacts, presentations at meetings, reports of all kinds. You should be aware of those job descriptions that require more oral or written work than others, and take this factor into account when pre-screening and matching students.

### **The Poor Job Market**

Directors are well aware of the poor job market. They may hesitate to accept students, especially seniors, unless it is made clear that a field placement is not a promise of employment after graduation. There are instances where a job is offered to an exceptionally competent student who is lucky enough to graduate just as a vacancy occurs in an agency. But it is unfair to everyone concerned if job-seeking expectations are not clarified at the outset. There are unique learning opportunities open to students who do not weigh every act as a test of their potential worth as an employee. A student who feels that he or she is under consideration for a future paid position may be reluctant to experiment or to criticize.

However, there are several concrete ways that a service-learning experience can aid future job hunters. One is that a student has the opportunity to meet people in a career field and to make contacts in a variety of organizations. Another is that the field supervisor can provide meaningful references based on first-hand knowledge. In addition, a service-learning experience can be highlighted in a resume.

Writing resumes is an art. In most cases, graduating seniors have similar resumes, with few entries under the heading "Work Experience." However, as service-learning assignments become more complex, prospective employers are beginning to accept practicum work as valuable pre-employment experience. It therefore becomes important to describe the service-learning assignment in a way that demonstrates its relevance to a full-time job. The agency supervisor and the instructor can help the student to describe the service-learning assignment by stressing responsibilities held, skills mastered, reports or other written material produced independently, and agency projects with which the stu-

dent assisted. Accomplishments on the job should be emphasized rather than their relationship to academic courses. This approach puts the student's field work into a pre-professional perspective.

### **Administrative Assignments**

One area of student volunteer service that directors frequently suggest is that of administrative assignments. An administrative assignment is work directly supporting the behind-the-scenes functioning of an agency. In order to perform administrative tasks, a student must learn how the agency works: its procedures, activities, goals. The student sees the agency in its community context and gains an understanding of what it takes to provide service to clients.

There are several approaches to administrative assignments. One is for the student to assist an administrator. This kind of assignment would involve working closely with one or more agency personnel with managerial responsibilities. These administrators frequently need an assistant to attend community meetings, report on them, follow up directives, etc. Usually an administrator can work with only one student at a time, but this special contact gives that student an invaluable chance to see managers at work.

A second approach is for the student to assist the director of volunteers. This is a variation on the first approach, but introduces the student to the complexities of running a volunteer program. Tasks might include writing manuals, running orientation and pre-service training workshops, or working to develop new jobs for volunteers. As many organizations now employ a staff member to direct a volunteer component,

#### **SAMPLE RESUME ENTRIES FOR SERVICE-LEARNING ASSIGNMENTS**

Note that these examples emphasize responsibilities held and skills practiced on the job.

**Hospital Volunteer Program Assistant**—Assisted the Director of Volunteers to coordinate 156 volunteers who offered a variety of part-time support services. Responsibilities included interviewing 50 volunteers to assess in-service training needs, developing a new scheduling system for staffing the reception desk, writing articles for the monthly newsletter. Attended two-day, city-wide workshop on supervision of volunteers.

For high school students, the same principles apply:  
**Junior Counselor**—Assisted camp counselors at inner-city day camp for underprivileged children. Supervised games and handicrafts. Distributed lunches and snacks. Escorted three children home every day. Read stories to youngest group.

this kind of assignment can introduce the student to a new career field.

A third approach is to assign the student to a special project that matches the agency's need and the student's skills. The project can either be small enough to be completed within one semester or it can be a large project with several manageable components. In the latter case, the student would know that his or her work would contribute to the larger project and that another student would take over the following term. Also, if one class is assigned to the same agency, that class could adopt a project and each student could take part in it. Some sample projects are:

- Follow-up studies on past clients
- Needs assessments/surveys of staff or clients
- Research on funding sources
- Evaluation of programs
- Setting up a resource file or library
- Writing an annual report
- Surveying community services.

Even from this short list, it is evident that administrative assignments can be challenging, productive, and educational. They are also the perfect way to blend classroom requirements and agency needs. With a little cooperative planning, students can write their term papers as part of their administrative assignment. Outside research is often necessary, as well as a chance to try out techniques such as developing questionnaires, conducting interviews, etc. Students gain surprising insight into how agencies function and also into the needs of the agencies' clients. At the same time, they make the most of their limited time and feel that they have achieved something useful for the organization.

### Specialized Majors and Schedules

The administration area is also ideal for students with specialized academic majors. Directors of volunteers may only be experienced in accepting students with course work in related fields, such as social work, sociology, psychology, human development, and education. However, an increasing number of college departments are discovering the value of service-learning and are fielding students enrolled in courses such as political science, geography, urban studies, and business administration. Projects related to the business management of an agency or demographic studies of the client population it serves are examples of how to match specialized academic backgrounds with agency needs. Also, freshmen and sophomores are now exploring career interests. These students can be of immense service if placed in the right assignment.

As to the problem of student schedules, you might seek out organizations that have evening and weekend hours during which it may be hard to find community volunteers due to family commitments. Hotlines are especially appreciative of help during odd hours. This use of available but limited time often ends up intro-

ducing students to previously unknown aspects of human services.

The relationship between directors of volunteers and students is quite different from the relationship between teachers and students. This is an area of which both the school and the agency need to be more aware because often it is the root of unmet expectations on all sides. One of the most important affects of service-learning is the growing self-awareness of students as contributing pre-professionals in a setting where rewards come from visible results achieved by a group of people working together. Students must understand the following principles:

- Common sense and responsible actions hold more weight in an organization than strict adherence to a particular policy or theory;
- New ideas and suggestions will be assessed on their merits rather than on the strength of who—the student or a paid staff member—initiates them. Teamwork is the name of the game.
- A student's written work for an agency has a general, broader purpose and will probably be read by many other people outside the agency;
- Learning requires the student to test ideas and information through practice;
- Tasks begun before the student came on site and work accomplished during the term will affect the continuing operations of the organization.

In other words, a field placement is not a classroom simulation project. In many cases, students are exposed to these principles for the first time in an off-campus agency setting.

It is symptomatic of classroom learning that students generally feel powerless: they cannot change the syllabus, they cannot alter the teaching methods, and they must accept a prescribed timetable. Generally, if a course turns out to be "poor," students simply suffer through it. Perhaps they vow never to sign up for that teacher again. Such a passive response to problems in an agency is unacceptable, however. Though some things really cannot be changed, students need to be shown that they can have a significant input in how they are treated, what training they receive, and how they can do their work best. Adopting this attitude requires a student to change his or her self-image from that of student to that of volunteer staff member.

Most directors of volunteers who have worked with students enjoy the experience because, in their opinion, students are enthusiastic, challenging, and questioning. These directors say that students are usually determined to do the best possible job. At first, directors of volunteers feel uncomfortable with the idea that some campus representatives perceive them as "educators." But once they realize that this role is different from that of professor or classroom teacher, most of them welcome the chance to prepare young people for future careers and responsible citizenship. □