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Philanthropy, Civic Engagement, and the Lessons of Volunteering

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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All at once a flurry of press releases have surfaced announcing the October 22 *White House Conference on Philanthropy: Gifts to the Future*. As always, there is little evidence that the organizers of this event considered the subject of volunteering in the planning nor intend to deal with it in the program. I wish that such events were more honest in their rhetoric. If they mean "giving money," say so. But how one obtains financial donations without first involving people is a mystery to me.

My surprise at learning of the Conference led me to ruminating about other recent activities that I think fall well within the volunteer world's interest, yet in which we are absent from the table. All the discussion about "civic engagement" and a "civil society"--terms coined by academics--begins from the premise that Americans are becoming increasingly uncaring and uninvolved. If you are reading this from another country, rest assured your political leaders worry about this, too! Several factors are cited as evidence of un-civil behavior, among them:

- The decreasing number of people who vote in elections, particularly those under age 30.
- The decreasing membership in traditional civic organizations such as service clubs and fraternal organizations.
- Less participation in adult team sports and leagues (Robert Putnam's now infamous "Bowling Alone" article) in favor of individual recreational activities.
- Reduced expectations of longevity in where we live, for whom we work, and even for our marriages--all of which tend to lessen community loyalty.

While I probably agree with some of these indicators of major social change, it puzzles me that volunteering has not been more closely examined as a counter trend. After all, how can one reconcile the thousands of volunteers working on behalf of the environment, people with AIDS, or Habitat for Humanity (just to name three relatively-new causes) with the "doom and gloom" scenarios?

Further, the discussions about civic engagement tend to place blame on citizens. It's the familiar "people are apathetic" attitude. As so often happens, the same data can be interpreted in different ways. Maybe conclusions drawn from the list of social factors above ought to scrutinize the institutions people seem to be avoiding. Consider:

- Has the behavior of government officials in the last decades elicited trust? When publicity highlights the disproportionate influence of PACs and major financial donors on candidates, can we blame voters for doubting the effect of their one vote?
- Have venerable organizations kept up with changes in society or have they prided themselves in being bastions of tradition? With time at a premium for everyone these days, why is it a mystery that people avoid "joining" an organization or even a sports league in which the internal politics or the (useless) meetings become an obstacle to the more important goals of service and fun?
- If we keep honoring volunteers for 25 years of service, without also finding ways to acknowledge the contributions of those who accomplish an important task in short-term service, why is it surprising that people view "traditional" volunteering as a bottomless pit of commitment that doesn't match their lifestyle?

We in the volunteer community have some important things to say about why and how citizens get involved. We've had to adapt to volunteers' time pressures, family demands, need for lifelong learning, desire for safe social contacts. Institutions unable to adapt will die. But new forms of interaction will replace them. Despite the hot debate about potential evils of the Internet, most devotees will tell you that they do feel "community" online--and who are we to question that feeling? City Cares programs and other one-time volunteering sponsors have discovered a strong need of people to take action together. Is this necessarily any less meaningful than a routine, every-week-for-years shift by volunteers elsewhere?

Every time someone volunteers in your program it is evidence that "engagement" happens when the service opportunity is visibly meaningful and meets the needs of the giver as well as the beneficiary. True "community" occurs when citizens perceive themselves as equals--when "helping" isn't charity, but mutual exchange. Isn't that what we, as leaders of volunteers, have been trying to facilitate for a long time?

So...how can we participate in the public discussion of creating a civil society? Can we offer our services to those politicians using this rhetoric in their election campaigns? Can we work with academic researchers to study the links between volunteering and citizenship? Can we attend conferences that never mention the word "volunteer," but clearly mean what we do? Can we speak at these events? Can we invite proponents of "civic engagement" to speak to us at our conferences?

Regarding the White House conference, if anyone knows of someone in the volunteer field who has been invited, please let us know. However, waiting to be invited will not work. Since we all self-

evidently believe that a civil society is a worthwhile vision, how do we take action to make volunteering a part of the discussion (at the White House and elsewhere)?

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Submitted by Karen Spiess, Coordinator, Resource Centre for Voluntary Organizations, Alberta, Canada

I've recently been involved in a project in Ukraine "Civil Society Community Roots". This involves the development of a educational certificate program in Management of Volunteers. As I view the struggle to establish a Voluntary Sector where one did not exist I see more clearly the lack of securing a civil society here in Canada and in the United States. How do we live up the civic responsibility to the next generation. Do we still offer good citizenship classes in our educational systems? Are we working hard enough to include youth and families in our volunteer programs? And your question, are we at the table in the very important discussions that take part in both our countries? I believe that we must advocate for our programs and for our profession as well. Directors of Volunteers are managing millions of people across both countries everyday and the political powers that be just don't (or choose not to) see the importance of our involvement in the debates in the continued development of the civil society. We hold up both of our countries as examples for the rest of the world. I believe we have a lot of work to do at home before we blow our horns too loudly.

Submitted by Rob Jackson, Volunteer Development Officer, RNIB, London, England

An overseas perspective. Here in the UK the government is talking of creating an Active Community, part of a Giving Age. This is the spin they give civil society. The volunteer sector seems to be doing fairly well in engaging with government in this policy agenda. See this link to the Home Office's Voluntary Sector Compact (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/vcu/compact.pdf>) and its emphasis on volunteering. We also have a strategy group led by Lord Warner which, it is rumoured, is going to recommend steps to strengthen the skills of VPMs!

What is interesting given this month's Hot Topic is that, whilst we in the UK seem to be making a good job of engaging with government, that in itself is bringing problems. People are questioning the government's sincerity in taking such an interest in volunteering. People question what control the government is seeking to have over volunteering given that it is putting up such large amounts of money (6.5 million announced in September). So whilst you think about how you can get volunteering on the political agenda also think about how to make sure you stay firmly in control of the ship without handing the helm over to the very policy makers who don't understand volunteering.

Submitted by Rick Hyman, V.P. Marketing / C. D. & M., Inc., USA

It is even more of "a sin" that the political sector has such a non-awareness of volunteers since their very election and appointment depends on the efforts of thousands of volunteers to get them where they are. Shame!

Submitted by Liz Weaver , Executive Director, Volunteer Centre of Hamilton & District, Hamilton, Ontario Canada

A number of years ago I came across a resource from the Mellon Bank - Discover Total Resources - which identified that every organization has access to four types of resources - money, good, services and people. In fact, they identified the 'people' resource as the most critical because it is people that link to money, to goods and to services. In the volunteer profession - we have access to this most integral and important human resource. And yet, do we do those things that acknowledge this power? As we move toward 2001 - this is the time to acknowledge the important linking of human resources - volunteers - to the successful achievement of mission within organizations. At least that's my quest.

Submitted by Marsha B. Riddle, Volunteer Program Director, Western Carolina Center, North Carolina USA

Things change slowly in all fields including our profession. As usual the practitioners in the field are seldom offered the opportunity to come to the table to be a part of the discussion or the creation of programs and directions which impact the profession and the field. As usual government looks to the higher education community, the powerful people, businesses or corporations with money, and the organizations which are leaders in the sector for direction. This profession is suffering from lack of recognition at all levels.

A multifaceted approach is needed if we are to ever be at the table and be recognized as holding one of the keys to making a difference in a more civil society. We do understand volunteerism and philanthropy where we are and that is where a more caring and civil society begins. Believe me, we must begin individually at home in our own organization, to sit at the decision making tables. We must be proactive in supporting organizations to reach their goal through the involvement of the volunteer and the resources that the volunteer has to offer, whether money, materials or their time. We must support and recognize together all persons who share in our organizations reaching their goals. Perhaps we cannot all be at the White House, but we can make a difference in our own House. Lets all start there.....Then on to other levels.

Submitted by Anne Honer, volunteer, North Carolina

I've been on both sides of the question, having had professional positions in volunteer management and fund raising. Whenever I work in fund raising, God help the person who belittles the volunteer resources, including themselves! I think I have helped in the communities where I have been to increase the respect for volunteers. I also think that our society's mobility and two income families add to the problem. Since it is difficult for families to find time for family activities, it is understandable that it would be difficult for family members to find time to volunteer. In addition, youngsters are seeing fewer and fewer models in their families to give them the idea. As families move around, it's easy to give up the volunteer activities on the premise that we don't know the agencies in the new communities. We should promote the idea that volunteering is a wonderful way to get to know the new communities!!

Submitted by Linda L. Graff, Senior Associate

In a few months I will celebrate my 20th anniversary in this field of volunteerism and it is with a great deal of regret and wonder that I observe how little has changed with respect to how this field is regarded by those "from away." I would add that in the same twenty year span I have observed and contributed to an enormous amount of whining about the absence of recognition accorded volunteerism, volunteering, and managers of volunteers. That we are not acknowledged appropriately is old news. With all due respect, I think we need to stop the whining and start strategizing about what we're gonna do.

Look at it as a problem that needs to be solved. Attack it deliberately. Stop complaining that you're not invited to the table and start being very explicitly about what you can bring to the table. Make yourself indispensable. Present yourself as a dispenser of important information and great wisdom, as a valuable broker of vast connections among those who really count in this field. After all, you are. I am often reminded of Lorraine Street's comment which is perfect in its simplicity. We need to learn to "sharpen our elbows" and get ourselves to the table. Clearly all the whining in the world won't do it.

Let's try something else. This is the key message I absorbed from a National Convention in Halifax a few years back. I have, myself, been personally and publicly lamenting the public policy void in Canada with respect to voluntary action. I recognized that instead of waiting for politicians and bureaucrats to write some policy (which would undoubtedly be bad policy) we who know volunteering should do it ourselves. I invited some friends and colleagues to join me, we voluntarily, and at our own expense (which for some involved plane fares) met several times and collectively created a draft. It wasn't perfect and it wasn't complete, but it was a start. We found an opportunity to send it to some politicians who were starting to pursue policy development, and two years later the kernels of our work are beginning to pay off.

Submitted by Sarah H. Elliston, Professional Development Associate, Cincinnati, Ohio

Rick Lynch was recently here in Cincinnati and he suggested that we start calling "volunteering" by a new name, "Pro Bono Work" And that Volunteer Resource Centers start calling themselves, "Centers for Pro Bono Resources" in order to get away from the word "volunteer." This is a lot closer to Susan's comment that what we are about as managers of volunteer efforts, is to develop peer relationships, not the "haves" giving to the "have nots," right? Maybe if we approached the government and others with the concept that we organize and facilitate people who are doing pro-bono work, maybe they'd hear us differently. Pro Bono is MUCH more respectable than "volunteer" with politicians. A Pro Bono donor has the skill to do something without charging for it - we know all volunteers fit that category but politicians don't. I think it's a brilliant idea - what do you think? As to the second point, that large, traditional organizations have to keep up with the times, I suggest using the Red Cross as an example of a forward-looking organization. They still have traditional jobs but they are always looking for new ideas and new methods of involving people.

Submitted by Lesley Dunn, Executive Director, Volunteer Resource Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia

It is always interesting to hear that discussions regarding the voluntary sector continue to take place

without the sector actually being invited to the table. In Nova Scotia, our government both Provincial and Municipal are seeking ways to best support the Voluntary Sector. Are we as administrators, coordinators or volunteers invited to share our views. No. Why? They are not ready to talk to us yet. I continually feel frustrated when I hear the talk to us part. One would think that after all these years government officials would recognize that you no longer talk to, but talk with. It's far more productive. Some of our greatest challenges here in Nova Scotia relate simply to the definition of the word volunteer. We have found that for those of working in the sector, and for many in government it means two different things. At best the key person, the citizen engaging in voluntary action gets left out of the discussion. Despite the challenges we do have some key champions in government (those that have extensive volunteer backgrounds themselves), that are seeking to afford us an opportunity to share our thoughts at the bureaucratic table. Change will happen, but as one government friend said to me today, its unfortunate that change is always slow, as we made headway on an issue that the Volunteer Centre raised 11 years ago. Resources (financial, and human) are always welcome, but it is a good thing that we are committed to the causes we support and not the dollars we receive, or the quality of life for many citizens of this world would be negatively impacted. If I had to do it all again, knowing what I do now about the lack of support and respect I receive as a volunteer, would I? You bet! The end result of a cause is far more important than the nonsense that often inhibits me from achieving my goals. Perhaps in 2001 things will change, perhaps the road tomorrow will be easier than today.

Submitted by Judi Reed, Director, Volunteer Resources,

I too am very discouraged when I find that "philanthropy" usually means giving dollars, not time. It seems that giving time - whether or not its connected to fund raising - is not nearly as valuable as giving dollars. Our society is so economically focused! I manage a volunteer program in a large health organization. I'm always struggling to obtain visibility for the volunteer program. Fund raising is easily elevated in our promotional activity, but not 'just volunteering'!

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