

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Educating Other Professions about Volunteers:

Starting at the Source

Educating Other Professions about Volunteers: Starting at the Source

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

November

2003

Without question, training on how to deal with tension between volunteers and paid staff is the topic most requested of those of us who do international training in this field. No matter what type of setting or service provided, or in which country, there is universal concern about building better relationships and creating teamwork between employees and volunteers at all levels.

One reason for this problem is the invisibility of the subject of volunteer involvement in the formal education of just about every profession, both within university curricula and at continuing education opportunities such as conferences. Here are a few examples:

- Although hospitals, nursing homes, hospices, and clinics are some of the most traditional settings for volunteer work, nursing students and those studying to be physical therapists or activity directors receive no information on how to work with volunteers.
- Teachers are expected to welcome parent and citizen volunteers into their classrooms, be part of parent/teacher organizations, and even teach the value of community service, yet how many Schools of Education include a course on volunteer supervision? This lack extends even to those studying adult basic education or school administration.
- Social workers long the group most likely to be resistant to volunteers as non-professional are taught that their profession began as unpaid friendly visitors in the late 1800's and that they fought to be recognized as trained specialists, separating themselves from their early roots. The problem is that a hundred years have passed but most social work courses haven't updated their information about volunteering. Or, those studying in the administration track may be taught about community organizing and volunteer service, but those pursuing clinical social work are not.
- Seminary students (of all faiths), while facing a lifetime of urging congregational participation and service, do not have the opportunity to learn about working with volunteers before they

become clergy. This can be called the God-will-provide method of volunteer management (pray a lot, live a moral life, and volunteers will materialize).

If these four professions leave school unaware of volunteers, just imagine how uninformed people in jobs just a little less likely to work with volunteers (but find themselves asked to do so) might be: park rangers, probation officers, curators, environmentalists, theater managers, athletic coaches, librarians, etc., etc.

Leaving out any discussion of volunteers in professional curricula obviously means many of our colleagues are unprepared to team with volunteers successfully. But the absence of the topic also sends an insidious message: either there is nothing to say about volunteer, or, volunteers don't matter. By the time volunteer program managers encounter staff members who are resistant to volunteers, it's too late. We have to face and undo the consequences of the invisibility of volunteers to our highly-educated colleagues.

What Can We Do?

The good news is that, collectively, we can address this problem by going back to the source. What we need to do is get the attention of: 1) faculty in schools of professional education, 2) conference planners for related professions, and 3) other professional societies. In an ideal world, this effort would be coordinated, monitored, and funded. But we can start to have an impact now in small ways, hoping that the cumulative effect of fighting the battle on many fronts will produce lasting results. Let's discover how.

University Faculty

Infiltrate! We may need to tackle university professors one by one. Eventually we'll reach critical mass. Here are a few starter ideas:

- If you became a volunteer program manager by moving out of another profession (which means most of us!), why not write a letter to your old instructors explaining what you do now and how helpful it would be to have learned about volunteers while still in school? Offer to guest lecture in a class, explaining both the role of the volunteer program manager and the principles of working with volunteers. Send a bibliography of books and/or a list of volunteerism Web sites (teachers are readers).
- Identify those colleagues in different professions who are excellent in working with volunteers (having learned informally over the years) and ask them to write to their old faculty, too.
- Get your association of volunteer managers to purchase a few volunteer management books and give them as gifts to key faculty at area schools, along with the bibliography/Web site list. Invite some of these faculty to be speakers at one of your meetings and engage them in a

discussion of the issue of invisibility of volunteers. Give an award to any teacher already including volunteer management as a subject in professional education.

- On a grander scale, it would be lovely if some national group were to work on curriculum materials that can be provided to interested faculty, particularly one or two session modules about working with volunteers that could be inserted into existing courses.

Conference Planners

Every profession has its own conferences and other continuing education events, from international gatherings to locally-sponsored workshops. We ought to get booked as speakers! The larger the event, the more the program committee will be seeking new and different topics to add to the breakout session schedule. Offer to conduct a session on working with volunteers chances are it's never been done before.

Professional Societies

Every profession in the world is organized into societies and associations. And their members pay attention to information shared by these networks. So let's get the endorsement or validation from these groups for the importance of learning how to work with volunteers. Again, a few possibilities:

- Write articles for society newsletters and journals. An article in a magazine for social workers that talks specifically about volunteers in social work settings will be read by the right people we want to reach.
- Offer to speak at a meeting of the local chapter of the society. Or propose a joint meeting of the chapter and your local DOVIA. Discuss the issues and listen to both perspectives.
- Give an award to someone for their excellent supervision of volunteers and ask to present it at a meeting of their professional society. Give handouts to the audience explaining why the award is important and including references for further reading and other education about volunteer management.

The ideas above require attention at all levels and for all professions. But we need to work from all these directions at once and each of us can take a role, individually and through our volunteerism networks. If we succeed, we may wipe out resistance to volunteers by preventing it from taking root in the first place. Wouldn't it be lovely to find prepared, educated staff members on board eager for our help in involving community volunteers?

What do you think? What have you and/or your colleagues done? What else can we do?

Related Topics: [Employee/Volunteer Relations](#) | [Training](#) | [Infrastructure to Support Volunteering](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Submitted on 25Nov2003 anonymously

I think it is definitely time professionals get educated on using volunteer resources. Another glaring oversight is in public libraries. Very few library staff, librarians or administrators have any formal education in working with volunteers. I have not found a Master in Library Sciences and Information program at a university that educates students on working with volunteers inside and outside the library walls.

Submitted on 13Nov2003 by Richard Potter, VP, American Humanics, Missouri, USA

There is a growing movement in higher education that recognizes the need for "nonprofit studies" and primary to this course of study is volunteer management. At the undergraduate level this is being taught through American Humanics (www.humanics.org). A list of colleges that offer the program and nonprofit partners that support it can be found on the web site.

Submitted on 11Nov2003 by Liz Adamshick, Columbus AIDS Task Force, Columbus OH USA

I agree with [Jennifer Fitzpatrick](#) that we need to serve as consultants in volunteer management to the various professions that utilize volunteer staff. In my current position, I have the amazing opportunity to make this educational process a two-way street---what do I need to know about a day in the life of a case manager before I can engage them in the challenges and rewards of working with volunteers? I claim my role as an internal consultant for volunteer management, and also know that professional ethics require me to advocate for the profession beyond the walls of my organization. I suspect that the competencies required to deliver high quality health care might, in spots, overlap or match those required to manage a volunteer workforce, or administer its systems. A side by side comparison of key responsibilities and qualifications for this and the other professions Susan included might be wonderfully revealing he re...

Thanks, Susan, for excellent food for thought.

Submitted on 10Nov2003 by Colleen Kelly, Volunteer Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

I read this hot topic with interest as we have attempted to have all paid staff at our volunteer centre become managers of their own volunteer program. We believe this is critical - in order to model what we teach. However, I have learned that all paid staff do not have the capacity to manage a volunteer program. Paid staff have to recruit, train, coach, motivate, supervise, evaluate volunteers - and not everyone has the capacity to do that! Is it only about receiving training? Or do we often ask paid staff to do this that do not have that capacity? I've also learned that many Executive Directors do not have that capacity, or even realize that is what they're doing. Thus they do a less than adequate job of working with their Volunteer Board of Directors. Is there training for Executive Directors? And is it possible to manage the volunteer that is your boss? Although, as managers of volunteer programs, we think about other staff in "our organization" and "our volunteers" - in fact, the challenge is much more essential and integral to our organization's operational capacity than we often realize.

Submitted on 7Nov2003 by Laurie Eytel, Volunteer Services Manager, Children, Youth and Family Section, Fairfax County Dept. of Family Services, Virginia, USA

I am a Volunteer Manager with social services. I have been working on educating our staff on the value of volunteers, for as you point out, this is not covered in schools. Here are some ideas that have worked (so far) for me.

A presentation was made to upper management on the value of volunteers. Buy-in is important, so I first asked how many in the room were volunteers and if they felt what they did was important and that they did their vol. job in a profession manner. Almost everyone of about 30 people in the room raised their hands. I tied this in to the fact that our volunteers fall in that category too.

Then I asked for job tasks that they would like help with, and I had a long list of possibilities. This ranged from working directly with clients, to admin. or graphic or research help. Organizational help in the office was very popular. I have a "Volunteer Request" form that they fill out, and I then recruit for them. I also offer a training session on working with volunteers, and have a "cheat sheet" so to speak of how to work with volunteers. Usually, it is one-on-one consultation, but I've had a good response so far.

I also recruit for "set" programs such as our mentoring programs, but these other individual requests have increased the awareness of volunteers value in our dept. I've also started to put out bi-weekly updates about the volunteer program on our in-house e-mail system, and I publish a volunteer newsletter that many staff receive as well. Increasing awareness, PLUS showing appreciation to the staff who use volunteers well are all part of increasing the awareness and value that volunteers provide.

Submitted on 7Nov2003 by Miriam Leslie, Volunteer Coordinator, Alberta, Canada

Another fascinating Hot Topic! I can relate to Susan's comment about ministry students not being properly trained to work with volunteers during seminary. In my former life as a pastor, we did not receive specific training in this area. Ironic, as ministry in the denomination to which I belonged, is a very volunteer-driven organization. Sadly, as my career progressed, more specific training was offered and I did not avail myself of it. The "school of hard knocks", experience and now College courses is making a difference, fortunately.

Submitted on 5Nov2003 by Elizabeth Lowenger, Guelph, Ontario Given the large number of volunteers in the health care sector, another approach is to use internal documentation, such as staff newsletters, to profile the impact of the volunteers AND talk about the role of volunteering on the health of the volunteer. Volunteering then becomes a form of prevention and may even be included in a treatment plan. There are many studies that support the health benefits of volunteering.

Submitted on 5Nov2003 by Don Morgan, Consultant Visitor / Customer Service, Kentucky USA

I just met with a client yesterday and one of their big problems was staff dealing with volunteers/ Docents. One thing I detected very early was there were no ground rules for the Docents. The Docents give tours of a historic house but they run their own show. To train other Docents, there is not a written script and one Docent trains the new Docent as they see fit. Each Docent has their own

version of the tour and some leave out entire areas of the house. I have a number of issues to deal with between the staff, Docents and the Board committee members. Each one has a different idea of how things should go. My experience is that most institutions; museums, historic homes etc could not exist without Volunteers and you have to treat them right or they won't stay.

Submitted on 4Nov2003 by Nancy S. Heilman, Coordinator of Tutoring and Volunteer Services Sandhills Community College, North Carolina, USA

This article had some good ideas for me to implement. As Coordinator of Tutoring and Volunteer Services at Sandhills Community College, I am always looking for new ideas to improve relations between instructors and volunteers. Currently, I have two major tools which I use to incorporate better relations between instructors and volunteers. I require all potential volunteers to audit a class in which they have an interest to tutor. This has worked well because the volunteer is introduced to the student population, the curriculum and the teaching style of a particular instructor. At the end of the semester, the volunteer is more confident in approaching the subject matter as a tutor. In addition, the instructor has experienced the older citizen in the classroom and has forged a relationship with that person which will benefit the students if the volunteer becomes a classroom assistant. Secondly, I speak at department meetings at the beginning of every semester at which I give some tips on the utilization of volunteer classroom assistants. I only place volunteers in classrooms where the instructor is comfortable having one. Having the text on hand for the volunteer to peruse before a semester begins is also helpful.

Submitted on 4Nov2003 by Jennifer Fitzpatrick, Manager of Volunteers, Mercy Health System of Maine

I feel that we administrators of volunteer programs need to be available to schools and universities as consultants in volunteer management. Whether that is leading workshops or teaching courses, we need to get the message across to all professions that volunteer management is comprised of professional skill development. I recently had the opportunity to teach a 'nuts and bolts' course to a professional group of Librarians. They were like sponges soaking up every word. I also taught a course "Recognizing and Rewarding Volunteers" for the University as part of its Non-profit certificate program. I believe there are many of us out in the field providing this training. Every little bit of education helps us all.

Submitted on 4Nov2003 by Diane L. Hennessy, Director of Volunteers, South Florida Science Museum, West Palm Beach, Florida

Thank you for this month's hot topic! Of all the goals I have set for my program, this one is the most important. I am a director of volunteers, not slaves! Much of our success needs to start at the top of the organization, with ground rules in dealing with PEOPLE set down from the start. I have come a long way in my job of matching the right volunteer to the right department. One educator at our facility used to make the "eers" in volunteers go downward when he said the word "volunteers". It was really easy to know his feelings. I have volunteers who used to be professors at Harvard, George Washington University, and a couple who have started their own schools overseas! I know I'm starting to make a difference when we ALL feel the grief when one dies. Also, I have managed to combine the talents of my oldest volunteer (93) and my youngest (14) to work together. This could

easily be another hot topic! Count on me to spread the word about working with volunteers! What an excellent DOVS topic as well!

PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025