

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Interns: The "Acceptable" Volunteers?

Interns: The "Acceptable" Volunteers?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

November

2004

Comments heard during last month's International Conference on Volunteer Administration, and also recently posted to several listservs, show that a cyclically-recurring question is once again heating up: *Are "interns" the same as or different from "volunteers"?*

What makes the current discussion critical to me, however, is the clear sense that organizations and individuals vastly prefer what they think of as interns to what they consider as volunteers. We all know the negative stereotypes about volunteers. But use the label of "interns" and the perceptions change to:

- eager learners (though inexperienced or young), generally exploring a possible career
- able to give an intensive set of hours for at least a few months
- serious about their commitment and supported by a third party, such as a university faculty member
- a professional responsibility to guide and mentor

Of course, the term intern brings its own confusion and can imply many things to different people. Of main interest to me in this Hot Topic is the vast number of students and recent graduates who seek an unpaid internship (with or without academic credit) in the same organizations that already involve volunteers. I am concerned because all too often interns are elevated above mere volunteers unjustifiably and/or the "internship program" is separated administratively from the volunteer resources office, to the detriment of both groups.

More Alike than Different

The differences between interns and other volunteers relate mainly to what assignments may be given to each and which staff members should supervise them.

It's fine to distinguish specific challenging volunteer assignments that need to be filled by qualified people with more-than-average hours available per week. But why not make these available to

anyone willing and able to meet the requirements – not just students? Think about the illogic of assuming that a student, often quite inexperienced, can fulfill an intensive role just because s/he is a student, while an adult “volunteer” who may be truly qualified is relegated to less consequential tasks simply because of being placed into a different category of worker.

Further, the skill necessary to create a meaningful “internship” is exactly the same task analysis that ought to be brought to any work designed for volunteers. It might even elicit more creativity if staff were asked to develop volunteer roles that allowed the doer to grow and learn – at any age and for any reason.

My point is that we can make all volunteering much more like the positive image of internships, but avoid a false dichotomy. A student seeking an internship (*their* term, which is fine) can be offered a choice of the two to three intensive assignments available. Without the time necessary, that student would have to consider one of the other ten less-intensive assignments, just as any other volunteer applicant.

If this is confusing, drop both terms! Become the “Community Resources Office” and put anyone to work who doesn’t go on the payroll. Who should coordinate all of these people is an administrative issue only. Here are some ways that unpaid interns and volunteers are totally alike and therefore ought to be treated as a single category of human resources:

- Although neither goes on the payroll, formal records need to be kept for both.
- Both require orientation to the agency and probably special training. Some interns may be at an educational level that allows the expectation of professional skills, but that is also true of some volunteers.
- Regardless of why individuals may *start* in service, they are likely to *continue* in service beyond their original commitment.
- Both deserve recognition and appreciation.

Supervision is the other possible area of difference. Many university programs require that a student intern work under the direction of someone in the profession for which the student is training (the nurse and teacher model). That’s why some staff members are positive about interns; they can now pass on the support given to them when they were students. This special relationship is important and any students who fall into this professionals-in-training group ought to be assigned to the best supervisor accordingly. But, again, conceptually this is no different from finding the best supervisor to match any volunteer’s needs.

Maybe it’s time to examine our own reactions to the words *volunteer* and *intern*. Both are descriptors, not job titles. Neither really tells us what the person is actually doing, nor necessarily the skills the person brings. But if one connotes *nice helper* to you and the other connotes *serious learner*, ask yourself why both can’t be both. Then ask yourself whether the distinction has been made in your

agency mainly to professionalize internships...and why that wouldn't be positive as an approach to all volunteered assistance.

What do you think?

Susan jumps in to comment about responses (16 November)

I love the responses this month because the diversity of opinion really shows why this is a "hot topic." Thanks to all who are posting. Let me reiterate that I agree that the intensity of schedule, work assignments, possible personal needs, and supervision plans for student interns DO require special attention. The questions here are: Why can't we approach *all* volunteer positions with the same care and respect as we seem to be able to do when we call them "internships"? What are the implications – to the individual and to the agency – of separating these two *forms of service* in various ways? Am I right in my observation that agencies welcome "interns" (if they do) but have reservations about "volunteers"?

Related Topics: [Internships](#) | [Students in Service](#) | [Employee/Volunteer Relations](#) | [Service-Learning](#) | [Volunteer Work Design](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#)

Submitted on 16 Sept 2013 by Jamie Hale, Volunteer Services Coordinator, Akron OH USA

My question is, do we appreciate interns and volunteers the same? We have an awards appreciation event every year. Our staff is awarded based on years of service and our volunteers based on hours accrued. Should interns be included with the volunteers? I doubt my interns are going to want the same awards that our volunteers receive...plus, they are only at our organization because they need credit to graduate or to pass a college class. After reading all these comments...I found myself being on the side of the volunteer. I know we hold our volunteers with the upmost respect. And we also love our interns but should we be awarding them for there hours of service when they are already receiving credit?

Response from Susan J. Ellis, President, Energize, Inc

Thanks for commenting, Jamie. Just a few quick thoughts:

- While I understand the rationale for thanking people for longevity, does that really mean much? Both employees and volunteers might feel more honored if the recognition focused on the impact of what they contributed, rather than the time it took to do it.*
- This is why you are reluctant to recognize "interns," because you sense their number of hours is irrelevant. However, just because they earn academic credit for their internship does not mean your organization cannot acknowledge and thank their service to you. Again, identify what they accomplished. Does all service deserve thanks?*

- *Finally, if you treat interns as if they “only...need credit...or want to pass a class,” you may be shutting off some important opportunities. The reason why the intern is devoting time may be for academic requirements, but each student choose your organization in which to do the work (other agencies were available, right?). So they must care about your mission, too. Therefore, when their official school-sanctioned internship is over, you can invite them to continue being a part of your organization in a different volunteer role. A few will be delighted to say yes.*

Submitted on 26 June 2005 by Dipti Patel, Amnesty International, Volunteer, London England, UK

I am currently volunteering in a leading international human rights NGO (Amnesty International). There is a distinction drawn in this organisation, that is between volunteers and interns. I have spoken to a person who is doing an internship there and she has said that the work is basically the same as what volunteers do. We both discussed our roles and the work we do and agreed that the work is the same. She even said that it is no point in applying for an internship when you are volunteering because of the similarities. So why the distinction? I agree that by being labeled an 'intern' more importance is given to that individual. Why I ask myself when volunteers are just as important and necessary in the workplace.

Submitted on 16 December 2004 by Sarah Best, Links Hall, Volunteer Coordinator, Chicago IL

I suppose that I am in the unique position of being an intern who coordinates volunteers. I'm not a student either, although I did plenty of internships as an undergraduate as well as as a graduate student.

In my experience the word intern can mean many different things. As an undergraduate I did internships to gain access to industries that I was unfamiliar with, to gain new sets of skills, and to gain work experience.

As a graduate student, however, and now as an individual pursuing an internship in a field that I am interested, my role as an intern has changed. While my internships still give me access to organizations and to field-specific knowledge I'd not be able to access otherwise, I now come into my internships with highly develop skills and specific goals. I've been given the freedom to act as a sort of consultant.

Submitted on 7 December 2004 by Mo Obadare, Nash College Of Further Education, Volunteer Co-ordinator, Kent United Kingdom

I think it is a great idea to offer volunteers and interns a choice of available assignments, after all most volunteers come with a lot of experiences which is overlooked sometimes. I work as the Volunteer Co-ordinator at a College and I am in charge of volunteers and anybody that is not on payroll. I do both administrative and supervision for volunteers as well as students on work experience and care placements. We have programmes in place for the different roles and assign supervisors to match any of the volunteer's needs.

Submitted on 5 December 2004 by Steve Wolfe, Probation and Court Services - 18th Circuit Intern/Volunteer Coordinator Wheaton, IL

I caught your article on the World Volunteer Web regarding "Interns: the 'Acceptable' Volunteers?"

I coordinate both interns and volunteers for our Department. Our internships are unpaid and involve students from high school through to the doctoral level.

I have been frustrated with CVMs that have distinguished between the two and reject the notion that interns are not volunteers. Much of what I do is the same for both groups. Internships involve some additional paperwork for the school and you are constantly replenishing your staff. However, we involve both interns and volunteers in any and all trainings available to paid staff.

The only distinction to me involves time. Interns have a definite schedule that is required to satisfy their class requirements. Since many students are still refining their specific career choices, we make sure they are involved in or observe a variety of positions. This is also available to volunteers, but it is not a formalized.

The distinction I make between the two groups solely is predicated on whether or not the student is receiving credit. If they are, I call it an internship.

Thank you for your perspective.

Posted on 30 November 2004 anonymously, Richmond VA

I never thought about how alike the two words are in meaning. Mainly, because if you think of the words quickly and generally think about the words "intern" and "volunteer" you are apt to think of them as being more dissimilar than alike. You relate youth, education, career progression and learning relevancy with the word "intern". And, with the word volunteer, your more immediate thought is older person (maybe retired), already experienced and/or educated but giving freely their knowledge, skill or time.

"Intern" seems to imply looking for growth and opportunity while "volunteer" seems to imply self-fulfillment. In fact, both words are the same and have the same meanings except in relation to the purpose one has sought to be either. For example: Whether you have or do not have a particular skill or knowledge, one can not go to a company and be seriously looked at by stating "I am seeking an internship position" unless they are still in school or in some type of continued education process. However, regardless to your reasoning you can always ask to be a volunteer.

Submitted on 23 November 2004 by Leon Corbett, Millennium Volunteers, MV project Caseworker, Leeds United Kingdom

Are "interns" the same as or different from "volunteers"? This is the question right? Well as far as I see it, all non-intern volunteers are treated as individuals. They either locate or ask for specific placements which suit their needs and expectations. This can be for a number of different reasons. These differences are then evaluated and a placement is located. These placements then help them

fulfill these hopes and desires while they too gain a great service from the volunteer. The same is true of interns, yes? So they are the same in essence, they just come at a placement from a different angle, and every single volunteer/intern leaves with something unique!

Susan jumps in to comment (16 November)

I love the responses this month because the diversity of opinion really shows why this is a "hot topic." Thanks to all who are posting. Let me reiterate that I agree that the intensity of schedule, work assignments, possible personal needs, and supervision plans for student interns DO require special attention. The questions here are: Why can't we approach *all* volunteer positions with the same care and respect as we seem to be able to do when we call them "internships"? What are the implications – to the individual and to the agency – of separating these two *forms of service* in various ways? Am I right in my observation that agencies welcome "interns" (if they do) but have reservations about "volunteers"?

Submitted on 16 November 2004 by Jill Wexler Greenstein, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Manager of Volunteer and Intern Services Washington, DC USA

Some points to consider:

- Interns tend to be more available for future paid employment than volunteers.
- We have no upper age limit on our interns and often have "career changers" of many ages.
- Interns generally have more hours per week to give our institution than volunteers do, so the projects are different.
- Intern salaries are currently taxed at the highest rate since they are viewed as "contractors".
- I manage "Volunteer and Intern Services" and do see a difference. Few volunteers need short-term housing information, where to get medical care or age-appropriate social events, and interns do.

Submitted on 15 November 2004 by Paul F. Goebel, Department of Aging & Disability Services, Senior Community Relations Specialist, Austin/TX USA

Interns = Volunteers. A plain and simple answer. I do not support an organizational structure or program protocols in which there is a great variance between the treatment of interns and volunteers. Interns may require advanced and specialized placement training above and beyond their fellow volunteers. In addition, the placement of interns may require placement supervisors to possess advanced or accredited degrees and certifications as determined by the affiliated university, college or accrediting body. Differential treatment of one group of volunteers over another is wrong. A simple word choice should not set a precedence by which one group of citizens interested in voluntarily serving an organization is treated differently from another. Equal treatment first, last and always.

Submitted on 11 November 2004 by Nancy J. Niebur, Illinois State University, Professional Practice Coordinator (internships) Normal, IL

I found this article/topic to be very thought provoking especially as an individual who coordinates junior and senior internships in Recreation and Park Administration. My response to are Interns the same as Volunteers is NO THEY ARE NOT THE SAME. Internships are designed to continue the educational process for students involved and/or interested in your particular professions. True internships have specific goals and objectives that are to be accomplished to meet both academic and agency requirements. Ideally, the agency has a job description for the intern, as well as someone who is volunteering. I would expect that someone who is interning is an individual who is interested in the administrative, management, operational and programmatic aspects of an agency--someone who expects/wants to attain a position in the field of volunteer management or with (non-profit/profit) agency where the individual is interning. Supervising an intern TAKES time and patience--it can place a burden on the agency intern supervisor because not all students (or employees for that matter) are exceptional.

The reason this has been "discussed" and is tossed around as an issue for so long, is that requirements for each internship from each educational institution is different--just as volunteer opportunities vary from agency to agency and seasonally.

In addition to internships there are work-study and work co-op programs. Numerous high schools across the country are requiring volunteer work (isn't that an oxymoron?) prior to being able to graduate. The idea is to get students more civically engaged in the community.

I would encourage anyone who works with interns AND volunteers from schools to speak directly with the person(s) who coordinates the volunteer program or the internship.

I truly believe this issue is not one of "semantics" but one of expectations.

Submitted on 10 November 2004 by Tracey Mallen, Providence Continuing Care Centre, Coordinator of Volunteers, Kingston, Ontario Canada

An interesting topic that I never really considered. In my organization, all 'interns' (we use the term placement student) are already treated the same as volunteers. They are required to have the same training and go through the same screening process. Once accepted, they compete for the same positions as volunteers. All vacant positions are filled with qualified applicants on a first come first serve basis. No positions are reserved for student placements. It is not uncommon for placement students to remain with us as volunteers after completing their placement. This system works very well.

Submitted on 10 November 2004 by Mary Capuzzi, Ramsey County Community Human Services, Coordinator of Volunteer Services, St. Paul, MN USA

Volunteer Coordinators working in local government for Ramsey County in Minnesota adopted the following definition on 6/14/04 to clarify who is a volunteer...[slightly edited for length]:

A volunteer is a person who has been officially enrolled by the agency and is under the direction of agency staff, who chooses to perform services without expectation of compensation beyond approved reimbursable expenses. The volunteer's role is to supplement the services of the professional staff as defined by the volunteer description. A volunteer's term of service may vary. A term of service may be "on-going" or "traditional," this volunteer provides service on a regular, scheduled basis...Conversely, a term of service may be "short-term" or "episodic"...

A volunteer's service may be categorized by his/her age, motivation, or volunteer role. These categories include:

- *Youth*: an individual who is between the ages of 12 and 18 years...
- *Student Intern*: an individual attending high school or college who receives academic credit for his/her volunteer service, and is not paid by the County beyond approved reimbursable expenses.
- *Corporate Volunteers*: an individual employee or an employee group from local businesses, these volunteers often provide assistance with a special event or project.
- *Work Experience*: an individual interested in gaining experience in a particular field. He/she may be referred through a local school, work study program, employment center, or re-entry program. He/she may receive a stipend from the referring agency.
- *National Service*: an individual from a federal program such as Americorps, Foster Grandparents, VISTA, RSVP or other service corps. He/she may receive a stipend from that program.
- *Community Service*: an individual, club, troop, or group, who as part of an assignment or program requirement needs to complete volunteer service, often a short-term project.
- *Service Learning*: an individual attending high school or college who seeks community involvement for experiential learning related to a specific course....

Submitted on 6 November 2004 by Nancy Merlock, Vista Health/Victory Memorial Hospital, Manager, Waukegan, Illinois USA

Our organization accepts only non-paid interns and they are viewed and treated as a volunteer, however there is an expectation that interns will hit the ground running. While an intern may be motivated by the opportunity to learn as opposed to "serve", both groups provide valuable support to the organization. Our volunteer department changed it's name from Volunteer Services to Volunteer Resources some time ago to more appropriately reflect our role--a resource of volunteer support to the organization .

Submitted on 5 November 2004 by John Motter, Portland Are HIV Services Planning Council, Co-Chair, Portland, OR USA

I feel that organizations would benefit by categorizing volunteers by their time commitment and job description rather than their need to gain work experience or college credit. Despite what some organizations say or write in their policies many highly qualified volunteers are lost because they are not treated as part of the team.

I graduated summa cum laude with a degree in accounting. I then went on to work as a CPA/tax manager for a national accounting firm. After going on disability, I began working about 15 hours a week for an agency. I was given advanced projects but was often cut out of the information loop because I was not an employee. Interns on the other hand, were included in all emails, all staff meetings, and all organizational trainings. I eventually left the organization because I felt that I could not provide a high quality service without the necessary support. It was a loss for that agency, but I found another agency that provides me the opportunity and support to use all of my skills.

Submitted on 4 Nov 2004 by Dave Gynn, Coleman Professional Services, Volunteer Coordinator, Kent, Ohio USA

Volunteers are critical to our operation. Interns are critical to our operation. Community volunteers work more limited hours over a long period of time completing specific tasks. Interns work longer hours over a shorter period of time doing specific tasks. We need both. We recruit, train, track, and reward everyone who works for us as a volunteer or an intern.

Submitted on 4 Nov 2004 by Deirdre Araujo, Exploratorium Manager, Volunteer Services, San Francisco, CA USA

How interesting! I had to think for a moment about how I value contributions from 'interns' as opposed to 'regular volunteers'

Last year, our board asked me to attend a special workshop hosted by accountants and labor specialists to better understand limitations, at least in California, on the way volunteer resources may be utilized. The intern title could only be applied to those coming to us from vetted organizations - schools/universities and vocational training programs. There was a time years ago when I would consider someone an intern if they were coming in to work on a specific project for an intensive period of time, often a semester, and these people tended to be in training - either transitioning from one career to another, or college-age. This was especially true of the international vols. I'm much more cautious about the designation now. But in terms of how I VALUE their contribution?

Monetarily, it is linked to the lowest step on our bargaining agreement - emotionally - it's on par with every generous offering of time and skill our community provides!

Submitted on 4 Nov 2004 by Cissy Waldron Seibel, United Rehabilitation Services (URS), Development Director, Dayton OH USA

I have to disagree on this point. Although both are managed through my office I do purposely have higher expectations of an intern. That is based on the outside requirements of that persons' internship. For example, a student in a Masters or undergraduate program has certain requirements of their course that I must incorporate into the job description if I choose to accept them. A volunteer fulfills the job description already written (with some flexible exceptions). An intern, on the other hand, is not self-directed. Outside influences usually determine position fulfillment. You say semantics, I say criteria and description delineate them just as it does employees in similar jobs-with different levels of requirements.

If your contention is that they should be treated with the same respect I agree. And, if you treat them the same you will have return as volunteers in both cases. As an adjunct professor in Volunteer Management and a professional in the field I can tell you that I have clear criteria for interns that is more learning-based; for volunteers it might be learning-based but with a touch of heart. I am more open to the personal needs and desires of the volunteer than of the intern fulfilling educational or course related requirements. I don't believe as professionals we can paint the entire picture with the same brush.

Submitted on 4 November 2004 by Tina Scaccio, Shakti Rising, Director Transformation through Service, San Diego, CA USA

In our organization our volunteers and interns (both are referred to as helping hands) receive training, coaching and are encouraged to grow through their service work. The question our organization asks is the opposite, it seems, to this article. We frequently ask, "How can we encourage our interns to become as committed and involved as our other helping hands?"

Our interns tend to focus more on school credits, advancement into graduate/career work and expanding their resumes. Their commitment is frequently limited to their semester long internship. Our other helping hands, however, are not limited to a few months of service. Our organization works to hook interns more into community involvement. It seems that college students required to fulfill internships do not hold the value for community well being and service in the same light as volunteers who are naturally compelled to give back. Shouldn't the distinction, if any at all, be one's alignment and commitment to service?

Submitted on 4 November 2004 by Cathy Minnerly, YWCA of Lancaster, Volunteer Coordinator, Lancaster PA USA

I am a volunteer coordinator who recruits, places and coordinates volunteers, interns, placements and service project groups. I have had to separate volunteers into 4 groups because of the very same confusion this article talks about. I am so glad that other volunteer coordinators and organizations recognize this problem. Hopefully someday all volunteer coordinators can come together to write up a policy manual that will help us with this tough job.

Submitted on 4 November 2004 by Denise Roncarati, Women & Infants Hospital of Rhode Island Director, Volunteer Services Department, Providence, RI USA

Touche! Our Volunteer Services Department has recently submitted to our leadership a name change to better reflect the work we do involving the community and processing all non paid staff (among other things!) who are involved in supporting the mission of our hospital. Community Network Development is our proposed name. Hopefully, we will be moving forward with the change and related education to staff about the many community partners that make up our volunteer base.

Submitted on 4 November by Heidi Walker, Natrona County Public Library, Volunteer Coordinator, Casper, WY USA

Thank you Susan! I have just been trying to find ways to get more staff buy-in at the library for really

great positions to offer volunteers. This is a way to make it more meaningful for those volunteers looking for a learning experience for a set amount of time, as well as letting the staff feel that the training they give is taken seriously. We have had paid interns who are from library schools, but you raise the important point that adults can want to learn intensely, too, and we should provide the opportunity for a different volunteer experience for them as well as the more traditional student situations. Terrific idea!

***Submitted on 4 November 2004 by Lisa Coble, Newport Hospital,
Director of Volunteer Services, Newport, RI USA***

I think the one distinction between volunteers and interns is their primary motivation. They pass the course, graduate from the program or earn college credits because they completed their volunteer hours. They are receiving something in return for their service that regular volunteers do not.

We are providing the students with an off campus classroom and teacher.

This makes interns a very reliable non-paid resource. They follow through on their commitment to your organization because they are receiving something in return.

Submitted on 4 November 2004 by Mary Jo DeNolf, Grand Rapids Civic Theatre, Director of Volunteers & Operations, Grand Rapids, MI USA

As the Director of Volunteers and Operations for a large community theatre we use many high school interns. These young people come in for one or two semesters and volunteer in our offices. This is very valuable to them and to us. For them, they are learning about what it takes to produce a production (more than just actors!) and for us we have volunteers who are committed to a certain time period. We treat these volunteers the same as every other volunteer and they probably get more feedback on their work than other volunteers because of the evaluations that are required by the schools. We also have one other intern who is paid - through a local college. His role is a little different and he is treated as a regular paid employee. Attends staff meetings and receives all information as a regular staff person. These individuals usually move on into the field - or they staff later as a volunteer for the organization.

We could not operate without our volunteers and the interns especially.

Submitted on 1 November 2004 by Deanna Cameron, Spectrum Youth & Family Services, Volunteer Coordinator, Burlington, VT USA

I completely agree with this article. I am a volunteer coordinator for a large youth service agency and I do not differentiate between interns and volunteers--they are the same thing in my eyes. I find that it is the educational institutions that will differentiate and I'm perfectly willing to call folks what ever. I keep the same records on them, they go through the same screening, training and monitoring and I tally data on all of them the same way.

PRIVACY STATEMENT

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

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025