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## Keeping an Eye on Things in the Year Ahead

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

January  
2005

What is percolating in our field as this new year of 2005 starts? As always, my crystal ball is not necessarily more accurate than anyone else's, so I shy away from making actual predictions. But I'm willing to peer into the future and share the things that I plan to watch carefully in the coming months – sort of the “trends in the making” from my perspective. The following list is not in order of importance, but does include some possibly big issues and some tiny items of note that might, like the proverbial butterfly flapping its wings on the other side of the earth, evolve into something unexpectedly important.

### Volunteer Vacations

More news stories seemed to appear this past year than ever before about the concept of “volunteer vacations,” though the idea has been around for a long time. In some ways this seems a logical extension of episodic volunteering, coupled with the continuing reality of large numbers of single people (of all ages) looking for innovative ways to spend their free time.

With baited breath I await the planned reality TV show (I'm not kidding!) called *Voluntouring*, self-described as “an inspirational television series that documents the challenges, successes and failures of a small group of adventuresome volunteers, who will travel to Cusco, Peru to donate their time and considerable energy to teach life skills

to and care for deaf orphans. This show is about everyday people seeking to put meaning back into their lives by helping other global citizens in need.”

Then there are two new organizations with very similar names: Voluntours, offering “travel with purpose,” and VolunTours, which ambitiously is mobilizing the travel industry (tour operators, travel planners, and convention bureaus) to partner with nonprofits and service-learning programs. A major Voluntourism Forum is scheduled for February 2 in Washington, DC.

### Backlash to Community Service Requirements

Thanks to Google Alerts, I track Web postings (including online versions of newspapers) that contain the term “community service.” What’s hilarious (or depressing) is the mixture of news stories this term presents. Just a few recent headlines alongside the usual *Lifelong Volunteer Gets Community Service Award* sort of thing were:

*Polygamist Gets Community Service Sentence*

*Drunk Taxi Drivers [in Paris ] Required to Help the Community*

*Man Kills Dog; Must Do Community Service*

And we wonder why people don’t understand what we do. The general public all too often remembers these applications of community service and consider the concept as punishment – and as easy punishment, at that.

Further, my antennae sense a slow change in attitude about the value of student service graduation requirements and the costs of running programs such as alternative sentencing. Just a few examples of what’s percolating out there can be read by [clicking here](#). Some of the issues are:

- Parents really disliking the student community service requirement for graduation, largely because they see it as time-consuming without much educational value.
- Too many school systems watering down the concept to include “service to the school” as “community service” – so things that used to be considered student government, extra-curricular club projects, and other activities focusing only on students themselves are being accepted as fulfilling the requirement.
- Nonprofit agencies offering only limited (boring) roles to students and still resistant to working with court-referred or public assistance placements.
- Attempts to charge a fee to either the mandated worker or the unit of government requiring the service, to cover the costs of administering these programs.
- Giving offenders the option to “pay their way out” of community service labor by donating cash to charities instead.

Just this past week I saw the quirky new Bill Murray movie, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. In it, a marine scientist goes on an expedition with very little funding and so recruits student interns as free labor. He never uses their names (“hey, intern”) and asks them to do things like steal equipment from a rival. After being attacked by pirates (this IS a comedy), the interns want to leave. He lets them, but says goodbye like this: “I’m disappointed in you interns for leaving. I can’t give you credit for this time. I won’t give you a failing grade, but I will give you incompletes.”

Ridicule of internships in popular media is not a good sign.

**New Vocabulary**

A colleague in London directed me to a new publication titled *The Pro-Am Revolution: How Enthusiasts Are Changing Our Economy and Society* by Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller (Demos, UK, 70 page PDF, 2004). It's available for free download at <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/proameconomy> (link updated 2014). These English authors take the sports concept of pro-am, in which professional athletes and amateurs compete and also work together, and extend it to what they call a "new" approach to social improvement. They want to encourage more "enthusiasts" with strong expertise and time to give to work side-by-side with a wide range of paid professionals.

While they use the term "volunteering" freely in their book, they clearly want to convey Pro-Am work as something innovative. They may well attract more men and business people that way, too.

Yet another approach to grabbing the attention of prospective volunteers – this time youth – is also British. YouthNet's "Attract-o-Meter" (<http://www.attract-o-meter.com>, no longer available 2014/) poses real and silly questions in a short quiz and concludes that someone is more attractive to the opposite sex if he or she volunteers! Then it links to [doit.org.uk](http://doit.org.uk), the volunteer opportunity registry.

## Unanswered Questions

Finally, we start 2005 with many pending situations, all of which can have an impact on volunteerism. I'll give you my list and you can share yours in response:

- What will be the effect of the second Bush administration? Will it mean more or less volunteering...and the need for it? Will faith-based service emerge as something new? Will the perceived equipment lacks of the US military in Iran promote even more private fundraising projects to send over things like body armor?
- The divisive presidential election drained many long-time and newly-recruited volunteers of all political persuasions. What's the fallout of burnout? (And this may repeat itself in the UK later this year.)
- Will anything concrete happen in response to the UPS study concluding that volunteer program managers are vital to the success of nonprofit organizations? Will AmeriCorps train their young people to do volunteer coordination? Will funders offer grant money for volunteer management positions? Will academic take volunteer management seriously as a field of study?
- What will the Year of Volunteers 2005 bring about in the UK?

So I better polish my glasses and keep the lights on. The new year, as always, is ripe with possibilities. The only safe prediction is that volunteers will be where the action is.

***What are YOU keeping your eye on this year?***

## ***What unanswered questions do you have about future events and volunteering?***

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***Submitted on 21 January 2005 by Cissy Waldron Seibel, United Rehabilitation Services (UCP), Director, Development & Communications, Dayton, OH USA***

Well, this topic certainly brought a wealth of responses! Perception is reality and we professionals do a poor job of changing the existing perception of Volunteer Management/ Administration not being a career. Typically, we don't aggressively tell our Executive Director that we expect a line item in the budget, want to present our story to the NPO Board, expect to be involved in the Strategic Plan for our NPO...the list goes on. I teach *Urban Issue: Volunteer Administration* in the undergraduate & MPA program for a local University and this poor perception of Volunteer Administration still applies in the next generation...until we change it through teaching. Susan is right. We must be our own best advocates, take responsibility for our profession or spend more time talking about our sad-case. We are THE force that is key at every disaster in the world, from birthing centers to hospices. Just think of the real dollar and person impact YOUR position reaps for your organization. But, if we never point that out, how will people or generations know and value our impact?

***Submitted on 11 January 2005 by Dave Gynn, Coleman Professional Services, Volunteer Coordinator, Kent, Ohio USA***

Volunteers in 2005 are looking for quick, meaningful activities. Folks who are willing to volunteer for the same activity one day a week forever are not around anymore. We need to organize our volunteer requests around specific short-term activities. It takes more time, more volunteers, more training, more staff buy-in; but it is what volunteers are looking for.

***Submitted on 7 January 2005 by Pam Bell***

"Will faith based volunteering emerge as the new volunteerism?" I think you miss the point. It's not whether it is a major section of volunteer work, but will it continue to be seen as "religious" and thereby not considered "community" volunteerism. For decades, the "religious" institutions have volunteered. In fact, most religions see this as the act of bringing God's compassion and love to the world, not as the evangelism of conversion. In this country we have always classified religious institutions as somehow maligning or tainting true community volunteerism, when in fact they are community driven and community based. True, there are some religious communities investing a heavy evangelistic message with their outreach, but these are a minority of religious groups volunteering to make the world a better place to live. Even so, they bring all the elements of compassion and positive change into communities across the world. So, it's not whether religious community service is the new volunteerism, it's whether the country will recognize the contribution as part of the societal mainstream of volunteerism.

***Submitted on 7 Jan 2005 by Arlene Stepputat, Integrity International, Author/Consultant, Santa Barbara CA***

The area of service and volunteerism that I am exploring at a deeper level for myself and I hope for

others is what I might call, "the consciousness of service." I am looking at what inner skills really make the difference between being a true servant to others versus a do-gooder or worse a "fixer." I am looking at how to close the gap between the sense of us and them and look at how to experience it from a real place as just us. Revisiting the classic, *How Can I Help* by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman and asking that at a deeper level. To this end I am leading a class through community college and hope to dialogue with others to explore the heart of service from an ethical, psychological, and spiritual place. Using my book, *The Caring Heart*, too.

***Submitted on 5 January 2005 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA***

"What are YOU keeping your eye on this year?"

Self-education that includes informed decision making, priority to industry research, and a community of commitment to SHARE accurate results. 2) the promotion of professional certification becomes a industry standard, and 3) will the industry welcome newcomers eager to meld the head spinning advances in communication technology with the sophisticated practice of goal oriented global results.

"What unanswered questions do you have about future events and volunteering?"

1. Will agencies learn to partner time, talents, funding and missions to better serve their local "village"?
2. Will experienced nonprofit professionals mentor newcomers utilizing new and innovative methods?
3. Will this sector collaborate on one definitive text, a master handbook if you will, on the awesome topic of nonprofit culture.
4. Who will the new players be during this exciting time in nonprofit?
5. Followship-an under utilized management style that encourages professionalism from volunteers and assists the goals and motivations of those VM's clearly wish to attract.

After five years of self education, certification, volunteer management and exciting partnerships, I have come to the realization that the non profit industry all too often shoots itself in the foot. Those innovators, mavericks and futurists we meet and read about need to be encouraged; in real time on hot issues.

CHANGE will come. Inclusion in the process begins with each of us. When we open our hearts, we must remember to open our minds.

To quote a smart man, "BE the change you want to see in this world."

***Submitted on 5 January 2005 by Mary Rose McCarthy, St. Patrick's Hospital/Marymount Hospice, Co-ordinator of Volunteers, Cork Ireland***

A big challenge facing volunteering in Cork is the requirement that students demonstrate volunteering experience in order to get a university place to study medicine. As these are final year

students already pressured with looming final year exams the focus of their attention is on fulfilling an entry requirement not on volunteering.

Can we as an organisation respond to this student need without diluting the concept of volunteering? Is it possible to make it a meaningful experience for an already overburdened student? Can the organisation benefit without risking patients or organisation ethos? From the point of view of the colleges it is just another box on application form. Doing a few hours voluntary work will not determine the potential of a student to become a good doctor. It is a co-ordinators nightmare to find roles and times for students who would wish to be somewhere else. And yet there is that nagging voice that says make this a meaningful valid experience and who knows they may return to volunteering many times again over the coming years.

It will be interesting how this will develop over the next few months both locally, nationally and in the UK.

***Comment from Susan Ellis on 5 January 2005:***

Glad to see the quick responses below, thank you. But since the "community service debate" has been waged often before, I'd like to encourage everyone to focus on the two questions I posed at the end of my essay this month:

- *What are YOU keeping your eye on this year?*
- *What unanswered questions do you have about future events and volunteering?*

***Submitted on 5 January 2005 by Loy Thomas, Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, Director, Volunteer Resources, Chicago, Illinois USA***

I have a couple of comments regarding the Community Service -- I refer to these programs as "Service Learning or Educational Service Learning" programs to distinguish from "punishment/court referral" placements. I have been working with students for the last 20 years in these programs and it is been great. What is important is that the school compliment the actual volunteering with educational seminars in the school system. We also ask our students to write about what they have learned. Some schools ask that they pick a topic area that relates to their assigned volunteer placement and research information and write a paper or give a presentation. This helps them to learn about something they didn't know, provides meaningful writing experience, research experience and potentially public speaking. It's up to the Volunteer Directors to work with the schools to improve this most important opportunity for learning.

***Submitted on 5 January 2005 by Kris Martinson, American Red Cross, Youth & Volunteer Coordinator, Rochester, MN***

I have a wonderful relationship with our local community corrections office, and have had great luck with that collaboration. Our office has had a variety of community service volunteers that range in age from 9 to 87. In many cases youth are referred to us and once they realize that the projects they are working on really benefit our programs and that we will treat them with respect, things are great! I strongly believe that for many of the young participants, community service gives them their first chance to feel good about themselves and hopefully a glimpse that they can make a difference!

I also have several high school youth that participate in school organized "community service" volunteering. They are also an awesome source of help to us!

I agree it is confusing that both programs use the term community service...but isn't volunteering simply volunteering? I work hard to educate my staff not to treat volunteers differently no matter how they are referred.

***Submitted on 4 January 2004 by Mary T. McGuire, Volunteer Interfaith Caregivers-SW, Faith in Action, Director, Houston, TX USA***

I guess I wasted the 2 trips I made to Peru with Prison Fellowship. The experiences would have made a great show, the first was full of anxiety about being locked in with armed guards, trash and dead cats; the second trip with prison riots shutting down our destination, long bus trips to a backup site packed into a 12 passenger van (we had 16 plus the driver), being Presbyterian and staying in a Catholic nunnery. Yet the changes from the first trip to my second 4 years later showed that we made a difference in just being there and caring. Maybe we didn't get the roof fixed, but we empowered the women prisoners with our demonstration of caring without strings so that they would care for themselves.

***Submitted on 4 January 2005 by Suellen Carlson, Lutheran Social Services, Director of Volunteers, Jamestown, NY USA***

First, the judge who sentences me to dealing with individuals who have to do community service does not have a clue about how much work it adds to my life, not to mention the aggravation. I stay out of the situation unless the individual is closely related to one of our staff members and I am feeling particularly beneficent at the time.

Secondly, I have flown under the radar regarding the high school which states that to graduate you have to have 70 hours of "volunteer" time. Give me those middle school kids anytime! The high school kids are too busy, too overloaded, and in many cases looking for a real job (or working at a job) where they can make money to go to school, etc. Spare me from surly teenagers who just have to put in their time. Whoever comes up with these ideas about "volunteering" needs to involve those of us who are actually in the trenches. I have high school volunteers, but they all either started when they were younger and I know they are committed to our facility, or in many cases they were referred by another teenager who volunteers here. The young people know that we are serious about their time, that they are needed here, and that we don't just take anyone. The only way we will make an impression on the folks who come up with the mandatory "volunteering" plan, is to close off their avenues. In addition, it's important to take every opportunity to educate the public about volunteers and volunteering.

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