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Still Tilting at Windmills

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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I had some trouble focusing on a single Hot Topic this month because my career was sort of flashing before my eyes. You see, this month it's 34 years that I first became involved in this field. Further, I'm in the final stages of sending the 3rd edition of *By The People: A History of Americans as Volunteers* to press, which also makes me philosophical and retrospective, as Katie Campbell and I began work on the original edition back in 1975.

My major reflection is: *The more things change, the more they stay the same.* While I have witnessed huge and exciting developments in volunteerism in these decades, many of the challenges are still looming windmills to fight. Also, the most stimulating activities right now are occurring far outside the United States, while here it is harder to find innovators or leaders.

Here's a grab bag of three areas, among many, that have me thinking back and wondering about what lies ahead.

Resistance Redux

Many of you have heard Marlene Wilson tell the story of the 1973 conference about volunteers in Ann Arbor, Michigan that was picketed by labor unions because they were angry at "volunteers who take jobs." Typical of volunteerism folks, the leaders were invited in to talk openly to conferees. During a somewhat heated discussion in a room of about 300 people, Marlene remembers a young person raising her hand and, when recognized, asking the union rep: "Are you getting paid to be here picketing today?" It changed the tone of the debate – although not the opinions. The punch line, of course, is that I was the young woman, doing my very first conference workshop on about justice volunteering, as a representative of the Family Court.

Now look at the following e-mail we received this week from a Web site visitor:

While volunteers have their place, the idea that anyone should work for free is inimical to labor organizing to begin with. Volunteers and social justice types will tell themselves, "I'm not in it for the

money", but they will quickly find out that it is hypocritical and contradictory. If labor unions don't pay their workers (and pay them decently), then they have no moral authority on the matter. Likewise, if someone works for free in a setting where other people are trying to make a living, they are being a scab (regardless of the for-profit or non-profit orientation).

Interestingly, the person requested that the comment be posted anonymously, but what's important is that he said he's "a student in Maryland." I answered him in some detail, but it all felt very déjà vu.

Are we growing yet another generation of young people who, despite years of "community service" and "service-learning" requirements, are still ignorant of the power of volunteering and its role in our societies?

Invisibility within Philanthropy

About fifteen years ago, because I was already coming to Cleveland to do a workshop, colleagues there approached the Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Case Western University (one of the first such programs in the country) about having me do a presentation on volunteerism for their students and faculty. It took months of persuasion and finally they allowed me to do a "brown bag lunch talk," a periodic informal gathering as opposed to their publicized and more prestigious "guest lecturer" series. The session was standing room only and went extremely well. When it was over, the director of the Center said to me: "This was much more interesting than I expected it to be." He promised to consider giving more serious attention to the subject as they developed their curricula. Today, however, volunteer management is still buried in one course titled "Managing Human Resources in Nonprofit Organizations." Which I guess is better than a course on human resources that *doesn't* mention volunteers!

The absence of the subject of volunteers in academic programs professing to train agency administrators continues to frustrate me. While I think it's silly (since checks need a human hand to write them out), I don't mind when a program that calls itself "fundraising" ignores volunteer management. But the more common terminology today is "Nonprofit Management" or the broader "Philanthropy," and then I very much mind volunteer engagement being off the radar screen:

- A search on the term "volunteer management" at the Center for Philanthropy at Indiana University Web site turns up one lonely reference within a nursing and philanthropy degree.
- The Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society at City College of New York turned up *zero* matches (although they are publishing some research on giving money and volunteering by different ethnic groups).
- The Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy of the University of Southern California claims in its formal description that it "conducts research on philanthropy, volunteerism, and the role of the nonprofit sector in America's communities," but there is absolutely no evidence of the second topic to be found in their material.
- The Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Harvard does mention volunteers in much of its literature, but only includes "volunteer management" as one of many subjects in one

course in its 2001-2 catalog provided online (out of 80 pages of courses).

On the positive side, Sarah Jane Rehnborg is valiantly working at making the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at the University of Texas-Austin a major presence for volunteer-related studies (<http://rgkcenter.utexas.edu>).

Of course, even if these schools suddenly discovered our field, they'd have no one on faculty qualified to teach it! How do we break this cycle?

Our Professional Associations

It's been a true joy to act as "midwife" over the years as new professional associations get started around the world. I've been privileged to be at first-ever (or at least seminal) conferences in Ecuador, Japan, Finland, Sweden, Singapore, and various sites for Volonteurope. There is palpable enthusiasm overseas when colleagues meet together and share resources.

Yet in my own home state, both the Pennsylvania Association for Volunteerism and the local, Delaware Valley Association for Volunteer Administrators have been forced to cancel their annual conferences two years in a row for lack of interest – not to mention the difficulty of getting colleagues to accept leadership positions to move the associations forward. And we are not alone. In the past two years I've heard of a number of other professional networks struggling to stay alive.

I was actually the person who made the motion almost twenty years ago at an annual meeting of the Association for Volunteer Administration to add "International" to the name of the "Conference on Volunteer Administration." Clearly I believe in international exchange. But in the past few years AVA has become so focused on reaching other parts of the world that its still mainly American members effectively have lost a national network. Where can we go to discuss issues that legitimately matter only to the US or need an American perspective or plan?

This is not meant to be a rant, although it does have some depressing themes. That's because I do worry about the future for our field in the US. On the other hand, there's always the rest of the globe.

In addition to the questions I posed above as I went along, please respond to these:

Have you been in the field for some time? What changes and/or continuing challenges do you see?

What do you feel *positive* about in our field right now?

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Posted on 24 August 2005 by Janet Tanner, Volunteer Centre Warrington, Year Of The Volunteer Development Worker Cheshire England

Today I have posted a response on our local volunteer managers eforum - the hot topic related to

how volunteers and those that manage them are perceived by the organisations they support. Generally speaking low down the list !! I have recently left a job where I managed a team of over thirty volunteers. I was only given part time hours and earned considerably less than my "professional" colleagues, none of whom had any managerial responsibilities! It is still the case in England that the majority of people who manage volunteers are expected to do so as an add on to their "real" jobs!! In my opinion, if the role isn't valued than neither are the volunteers!!

Posted on 16 August 2005 by Jeff Brudney, University of Georgia, Professor, Athens, GA USA

I thank Susan Ellis for raising this provocative topic. I also appreciate Beth Gazley's commentary (see Beth's commentary [below](#)): Beth and I have been teaching in the area of volunteer administration at the university level for some time. The only study that I know of that has examined systematically the extent of instruction in volunteer administration at the university level is by Jeffrey L. Brudney and Gretchen E. Stringer, "Higher Education in Volunteer Administration: Exploring -- and Critiquing -- the State of the Art," pages 95-109 in Michael O'Neill and Kathleen Fletcher (eds.) *Nonprofit Management Education: U.S. and World Perspectives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood/Praeger, 1998). The article shows that instructional coverage of volunteer administration even in universities with a program/reputation for nonprofit sector management can vary dramatically.

Submitted on 15 August 2005 by Beth Gazley, Ph.D., School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University - Bloomington

A couple of corrections regarding the volunteer management curriculum: My introduction to volunteer management in the university curriculum was at the University of Georgia in the MPA and MNPO degree programs. The course, taught by volunteer expert Jeff Brudney, is devoted exclusively to recruiting and managing volunteers in the public and nonprofit sectors. This is an outstanding example of Susan Ellis' point and should be recognized in this column.

Readers might also note that volunteer management is indeed covered in various public and nonprofit human resources courses, and sometimes to a much greater extent than a course title might indicate. Certainly, volunteerism is not always covered to the extent that it could be. Some courses devote no more than a day to the topic, while others place much more emphasis on volunteerism. Susan mentions the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University. Both the human resources courses at IU's Indianapolis and Bloomington campuses extensively cover volunteerism in their graduate curriculum. Various courses address management of volunteers, volunteerism policy, and civic engagement and volunteerism on a global scale. The Bloomington course, which I teach, gives equal emphasis to paid and unpaid personnel issues. This course was developed specifically because faculty agreed that volunteer management required more emphasis in the curriculum.

Submitted on 11 August 2005 by Loretta Bacon, Human Services Department, City of Phoenix Volunteer Coordinator AZ USA

In reading the responses about change and the challenges of welcoming new blood into our programs, it seems we sometimes beat ourselves up for being too comfortable and resisting change.

But sometimes the problem is not us and our only failing is we are too close to the issue and don't recognize it.

A number of years ago, a new volunteer coordinator in the area asked me to consult and give "tips" on managing a program. She was new to the field, enthusiastic, inherited an existing program, and had brought in new people but was having an incredibly bad experience with retention. They came for a while and left.

While talking, it became more clear that the issue wasn't the VC or the program design, it was the volunteers!

In this program, for a heart association with docents that gave tours through the heart education center, the volunteers had established a hidden, unspoken criteria: you needed to be a heart attack survivor to be a docent.

Never stated, it was expressed in the attitude of the volunteers, their helpfulness to the new person, and by excluding the new person to the degree of almost shunning.

What was clear to me was not apparent to the VC struggling with this issue.

So, it is sometimes the hidden issues that affect our ability to impact our programs, not our own skills, abilities, and willingness to change.

Submitted on 8 August 2005 by Lynn Brooks, Salinas Valley Memorial Healthcare System, Director of Volunteer and Health Career Services, Salinas, CA USA

I have been a DVS for 22 years at a 266 bed hospital in a growing city in California on the Central Coast. We are a regional heart center with several areas of excellence and have top 100 Hospital Status from AHA. We have a traditional auxiliary (Service League) which was in place when the hospital opened in 1952.

At a recent Northern California Association meeting, I was shocked to hear how many hospitals are letting their Auxiliaries die out. It makes me sad that change has come so slowly to these organizations that were once so vital. Most of us have had to work around their structure while meeting the current needs of our hospitals.

Our program is very oriented on community outreach programs and student programs. We have developed more workforce advocacy/training programs and now see to the R.O.P. and Intern programs for the hospital. It is my feeling that Hospital State Volunteer Organizations have been slow in presenting or discussing more modern models that would attract the new type of retired volunteer today. So many of us are stuck in the old boxed models of yesterday and when these new volunteers present they are put off with not having more responsibilities and training.

Hospital auxiliaries have traditionally NOT sought out members because of their life experiences and what they can bring to their organizations. We need new blood and the hope of our future is most definitely with our youth and their exposure to our industry and volunteerism through their training/workforce advocacy programs.

Submitted on 4 August 2005 by Liana Sommerhauser, The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, Special Event Coordinator, St. Louis, MO US

Regarding the state of volunteer conferences, is it possible that these conferences are breaking down into smaller and area-specific meetings? St. Louis will host CAVORT (Conference About Volunteers of Regional Theatre) in April of '06. This is a small (approx. 150 attendees) group, but it has sustained its attendance for several years. Due to the average age of our attendees, I do see a strong possibility of our numbers declining in the future. The volunteers tend to be 50+ and the staff attendees 30 - 50 yrs. old.

Submitted on 4 August 2005 by Todd Martin, University of Illinois, Medical Center, Volunteer Coordinator, Chicago, IL US

I haven't been in the field long (3 years), but I still feel super energized. (Maybe because I am taking my first real vacation next week). I have 20+ years of life/professional experience that I bring to managing volunteers, so I seem know when to turn left or right about 80% of the time. What I'm finding most exciting right now are three things:

1. The exploration of "authenticity" in how we do volunteerism
2. The elevation of volunteers into ownership/leadership positions so that we can develop a feeling of structured collaboration with them
3. The deeper moral/spiritual imperatives that volunteerism addresses and how attractive this is to today's young people

Submitted on 3 August 2005 by Cissy Seibel, United Rehabilitation Services (URS), Development Director, Dayton, OH USA

I empathize with the feeling that overwhelms us all at some point in our career. But, if you will allow me, I'd like to present another point of view and some facts that make for discomfort.

Remains the same you say? Maybe, but could that be because we fail miserably at changing our own paradigm?

I agree with the first responder. The teenage/ college age generation, the generation that began younger than any previous generation as volunteers come to our facilities/agencies and WE (VM professionals) continue to discount them. It is far easier for us to 'manage' our older generation or same-age volunteers...then it is these youth. So we, consciously or not, shuffle them off to certain jobs. No, not all of us...but with soul-searching, many who read this already know they are the practicing this self-defeating action.

Remain the same? Maybe true but do we look at the changes we can make and ...find them 'not what we are used to doing'? Do we know about the Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership that rewards/acknowledges/ encourages volunteerism? Do we go to schools to recruit? Do we mentor and work along side youth volunteers? Are we doing all we can to leave our comfort zone?

If you always do the same thing, you always get the same result. Do we have an invisible shield we use to deflect changes we don't like? Just thoughts from the other side.

Wright State University -Dayton, OH 2005, taught a (Grad(MPA/undergrad) course in " Urban Issues: Volunteer Management for NPO Executive". It is a 100% volunteer management course.

As an Adjunct for this recent course I was thrilled with the enthusiasm these youth had for volunteerism. Yet, each of them had many stories of how 'sadly' they were valued because of their age, their experience as a volunteer and more.

As professionals....if we can't change your mind--we can't change anything.

Submitted on 1 August 2005 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA

You ask: What do you feel positive about in our field right now?




With seven years of field experience and a decided lifetime commitment to service, I'm positive about young people shaking up the volunteer sector. Hundreds of school age volunteers have contacted PLNJ and impact our programming ideas.

I'll leave the 'why' to others but clearly the media is interested in stories about young people spearheading community projects. Dozens of inspirational articles appear in print, on the web and have created a youthful buzz. Countless sites exist specifically geared to inform, engage and praise young people making a difference...and they are!

I agree that change at the experienced adult level is slow. Perhaps a sign of exhaustion because it takes relentless focus to keep non-profit programs vital, funded and attractive to the general population. Young people curious about charity work or fortunate to have had the team volunteer experience are eager to take new leaps of faith and create projects that address need and often transition into social change.

In 2004, PLNJ donated 100 blankets in honor of one such young lady, Alexandra Scott. Alex's Lemonade Stand <http://www.alexlemonade.org> which began with one child battling cancer became the community project around her state, then around the country and this year a VOLVO grant recipient. One cup at a time, Alex dared to dream. A lofty goal of 5 million dollars for cancer research. Stand back proudly and give our young people your respect!

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