

[News and Hot Topics](#) » The Word "Volunteer" Can Reveal, Conceal, or Confuse

# The Word "Volunteer" Can Reveal, Conceal, or Confuse

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

December  
2010

It's been ten years since the United Nations declared 2001 the International Year of Volunteers, or IYV, and they have now officially designated 2011 as IYV+10. One of the projects for this global opportunity to highlight volunteering is something called the *State of the World's Volunteerism Report* (SWVR).

SWVR is being researched and written by the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program. It builds on excellent, thoughtful documents developed for IYV in 2001, and will try to "result in major paradigm shifts in conventional thinking about volunteerism and its contribution to addressing some of the major development and peace challenges of our times." A special attempt is being made to identify the vast arena of informal volunteering that is the predominant form of community involvement in developing nations. The report is scheduled to be released on December 5, 2011 (International Volunteer Day), to culminate IYV+10.

I was privileged to participate in the "North American Consultation" stage of SWVR, during which 30 academics and a few practitioners debated elements of the first draft document. We began by raising the perpetual, nagging question: "What exactly is – or is not – *volunteering*?"

Naturally, we could not agree.

Some kept widening the definition to include almost everything; others drew arbitrary boundaries that eliminated activities meeting only some traditional characteristics. And this was a discussion only about words in English; UNV must consider the entire world and every language! One welcome by-product of the SWVR will be a lexicon of all the words used somewhere to describe what many/most/some recognize as volunteering.

## Why Vocabulary Matters

Debating the parameters of volunteering may seem like an intellectual exercise, but how someone uses the core words of our field has a strong impact on some critical, practical matters. Here are two examples – one political and the other personal:

- How government defines volunteering directly affects the funding allotted to support it, laws to limit liability, possible tax incentives, civil service job applications, and more.
- How agency executives define volunteering will determine your status in your organization, the degree of creativity and risk you can exercise, the types of community outreach you will be encouraged to do, and more. For example, would decision makers welcome your attempt to create a barter exchange among clients or a team of volunteers to speak at city council meetings on your behalf? Do they expect you to organize help but not community input or clout?

Have I got your attention?

## Denotations and Connotations

Energize is always trying to define volunteering (see our [Dimensions](#) page and the links to various existing definitions) and to use inclusive vocabulary to make many colleagues feel at home as “leaders of volunteers.” But my time with the academics surfaced a number of issues that I’d like to offer as food for thought. I’ve highlighted several below in the hope of hearing what you think – and maybe starting some conversations in your organization. There are no right answers! But discussion of the key questions can lead us closer to agreement.

### *Informal Volunteering*

Formal, or organization-based, volunteering seemed easier for the SWVR group to classify than the wide range of neighborly and friendly actions people do for each other and their communities.

Where do civility and kindness end and “volunteering” begin? When does self-help become help to others? What’s the difference between being a good neighbor or helpful person and intentionally being a “volunteer”? What actions for the common good are so ingrained in a society that they should be considered national character or strong tradition rather than a choice to serve?

Which of the following do you definitely categorize as volunteering and why (or why not)?

- Sewing in a quilting bee
- Working in a community garden
- Unpaid babysitting for your neighbor’s children
- Buying groceries for homebound neighbors when you do your own shopping
- Signing a petition
- Using your cell phone to send a picture of a pothole to the streets department
- Being part of a micro-lending cooperative

- Participating in Alcoholics Anonymous
- Remote villagers digging a well for their collective use

Right now “micro-volunteering” is getting lots of attention. Where do 60-second actions fit into the scheme of things?

Most of us would agree that informal volunteering needs to be recognized, described, and counted, but where are the boundaries?

## ***The Language of Giving***

Volunteering fits into the spectrum of activities often called “philanthropy,” yet too often philanthropy studies focus solely on fundraising. People can give time and expertise as well as money and *do both* at various times (alternatively or together) in their lives – including giving both resources to the same organization over time. In the past few years, terminology has sprung up to emphasize the interrelationship of all charitable giving, including *time donor* and *skill-anthropist* \* for the word volunteer, and *friend raising* or *people raising* to broaden fundraising.

The SWVR hopes to educate decision makers about this critical connection.

## ***Is It Always “Work”?***

Does volunteering always have to be perceived as “work”? Some at the SWVR meeting noted that a great deal of voluntary activity might be considered *serious leisure*. Much of the world depends on unpaid community members to organize sports, performing arts and fine art shows, nature appreciation, and more. And all volunteering is done in someone’s discretionary, or leisure, time.

What about political *activism*? Do we apply the word volunteering to “helping” and not to protest and advocacy? Why?

## ***Getting Paid to Serve***

Confusing things is the fact that the English word volunteer is commonly used when something is voluntary but still recompensed financially. Thus the “All-Volunteer Army” in the U.S. means *non-draft*, not non-paid. Similarly:

- We are asked to “volunteer” to give up our overbooked airplane seat for travel benefits.
- Most medical experiment “volunteers” are paid for their time and expenses.

Again, most of us understand that this is not the kind of “volunteer” we mean in our field, but what’s the public perception of this label?

Note, too, that although recently many use the term “pro bono work” as synonymous to “volunteering,” the actual Latin term *pro bono publico* translates as “for the public good” and can

include a professional helping a client at a reduced fee as well as for no fee.

Strangely enough, although corporate employees often receive their normal salaries when they are given paid release time to give their skills to community agencies, we have no trouble calling *them* “volunteers.”

## ***Service as the Default Term***

There are two factors driving the popularity of the vague term “service” to cover unpaid “volunteering” plus a variety of other types of activities. First, many people feel uncomfortable labeling court-ordered or school-mandated hours as “volunteering” because these limit free choice. So *community service* neatly describes the situation. The only problem is that the term is used *both* for offenders and for students, thereby muddying the waters. Is it volunteering or is it punishment?

Second, full-time service to the community does receive financial recompense. *Public* or *civil service* and *military service* are both career options that benefit society as a whole. *National service* was conceptualized to expand the types of things young adults might choose to do for their country as an alternative to conscripted military service. Not having universal national service in the U.S., the Peace Corps and VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) began as purely volunteer opportunities in the 1960s and provided participants little more than a living allowance.

Today, however, the Corporation for National and Community Service (note the language) has increased the compensation package for full-time service – adding together the living allowances, insurance, and after-service education grants raises the money to minimum wage equivalence. And in today’s economy with its lack of jobs, more and more young people see AmeriCorps/VISTA (or their country’s equivalent) as an entry-level employment opportunity. So it is definitely voluntary service, but is it “volunteering”?

My problem with the word “service” is that it is one-size-fits-all and therefore has no shape! Consider these everyday statements:

- *The service in the restaurant was great.*
- *That church has a meaningful Sunday service.*
- *I am looking for a silver dinner service.*
- *I have a flat tire, where’s the nearest service station?*
- *Man kills dog...gets 18 hours of community service.*

Why would we want to align with such a generic word?

## **Where Do You Stand?**

It may not be a bad thing that the definition of volunteering delineates some common elements but cannot encompass everything for everyone. This also allows us to expand our big-picture thinking to

welcome new kinds of actions into the volunteering fold. The SWVR group posed the questions: If so many people misunderstand, misuse, or simply dislike the word *volunteering*, should we try to replace it altogether? Or should we reclaim the word as distinct and valued, applied to actions that uniquely address community needs and wishes?

What do you think?

- *What is your working definition of "volunteering"?*
- *Where are your boundaries as to what you do not consider volunteering?*
- *When does neighborliness become volunteering?*
- *What do you hope the SWVR adds to the debate?*

I will make sure that the SWVR team sees your responses. Share your thoughts and contribute to our field.

---

\* See "Volunteerism: An Old Concept, A New Business Model for Scaling Microfinance and Technology-for-Development Initiatives," from Grameen Foundation (2010) about its work with Bankers Without Borders. It's the first place I've seen that proposes the term "skill-anthropist."

Related Topics: [National Service](#) | [Definitions of "Volunteer"](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Philosophy](#) | [Research on Volunteering](#) | [Trends and Issues](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

***Submitted on 5 January 2010 by Casey, Volunteer Coordinator, Mid-America Science Museum, Hot Springs, AR United States***

When I was hired as Volunteer Coordinator my Executive Director instructed me to create an "episodic volunteer" base. These are people who volunteer for limited amounts of time before moving on. They are typically college students, Work program participants, and others seeking community service hours (although I tend not to accept court ordered service, depending on the violation). These episodics are willing and able to put in a great deal of time on short term projects and bring a renewed feeling of enthusiasm to our museum. Those that get burned out quickly move on to the next organization, but those that have caught the passion continue to volunteer with us on a more permanent basis. Since I had to integrate these episodics into our current long-term volunteer program, I had to be very careful. In the eyes of our museum anyone who works/helps and does not receive a paycheck from us (even if they do get compensation from another place) is considered a volunteer. I treat all the volunteers equally because everyone deserves recognition, gratitude and respect.

***Submitted on 5 January 2010 by Dawn Barr, KFL&A Public Health, Supervisor of Volunteer Programs, Kingston, Ontario Canada***

I for one have long been a supporter of the words volunteer, volunteering, and volunteerism. My vote is simply to keep the terminology and attach it to rich conversations such as the ones being discussed here and now. The definitions are to each their own and are mere word-smithing gestures that will and should have debate and conversations surrounding them. Taking pride in the fact that research is being conducted -- new definitions are emerging -- to me indicates growth, recognition, and appreciation in the work being done by others whose passion to support something meaningful to them and others is very positive.

We like to be known in public health organizations as a magnet for volunteers -- and yes, some are helping to build their own resumes, testing the waters for career opportunities, and even contributing hours in order to graduate from high school, as well as for the simple fact and pleasure of making a difference in their community. That being said, the work our volunteers do contribute to their own personal health, as well as to the health of others. However that is defined, in my book I believe that truly is a good thing. I would like to see the "V" words (Volunteer, Volunteering, Volunteerism) cherished, expanded on, debated further, but for heavens sake- they should not be bad words that people and government agencies shy away from!

***Submitted on 16 December 2010 by Colleen Kelly, Vantage Point, Executive Director, Vancouver, BC Canada***

Ah yes, this ongoing issue of the word, "volunteer." At Vantage Point, we have moved to a place of calling the people we engage in our organization, "external talent." The word, "volunteer" seems to conjure up a person in a very traditional, altruistic role. We believe that self-sacrificing picture doesn't always serve us well. So we are always focused on an ability to "grab" external talent to really raise the bar on the quality of products we create and the work we do. These people give us their time AND their talent! That seems to work much more effectively for us to deliver our mission. As Bea Bocalandro states in her Paper, "The End of Employee Volunteering", it is much more about strategic community engagement. If we are really going to create new systems and structures, and find a way to move community organizations forward, it might be important – and easier - for us to change the words rather than try to change the mindset of people. It seem! s to be ingrained the concept of volunteering is one of sacrifice and altruism. Do we want to keep it in the win/lose realm? Or do we really want to make it win/win?

***Submitted on 16 December 2010 by Sue Hine, Independent Advocate for Managers of Volunteers, Wellington New Zealand***

Thank you Susan for your thorough review of the language we use, and abuse, in the name of 'volunteering'. I liked best your heading 'Why Vocabulary Matters'. The points you made here should get us out of all the arguments of definitions, denotations and connotations, though I notice you have

been repeating your message in various ways quite some time. I know full well how words can mean different things to different people. Yet instead of argumentation and getting bogged down in definitions I would love to see better articulation by organisations of what volunteering means to them and their services, and for managers of volunteers to understand their role more clearly and why it is important. Then, cross my fingers, we might just get a wider appreciation of the significant all-round contribution by managers of volunteers.

***Submitted on 10 December 2010 by Liz Mirzaian, Soroptimist International of Glendale, President, Glendale, CA USA***

A true “volunteer” willingly gives of his or her personal resources, i.e., time, skills and talents to assist with the needs of a local or international group or organization and its clients, members or patients; and or to assist them in performing special projects, tasks, etc., that most likely could not be completed without the volunteer assistance. In the spirit of a true volunteer, the individual who volunteers is not expecting a tangible return for their donated time, hence assisting an organization in order to complete court-ordered community service, or required hours for school, or even attempting to gain experience or job exposure is not truly volunteerism. Walking your neighbor’s dog, or picking up groceries for a sick friend, makes you a good citizen and neighbor, but it is not really volunteering. When we talk about volunteering as a “revolving door,” we really are not referring to those who come in to complete community service and school requirement or are testing the waters for a job. It’s true that they often provide a needed service during the time they “volunteer” but once they have completed their required hours, lose interest or fail to obtain employment, they leave. I would be very interested to see how this all turns out.

***Submitted on 15 December 2010 by DJ Cronin, Blogger on Volunteer Management, <http://djcronin.blogspot.com/>, Brisbane Australia***

Allow me to respectfully disagree with the sentiments posted here by Liz Mirzaian. I think we get into risky territory when we begin to use the language of “True volunteer”. I manage volunteers at a hospital and I have plenty of people volunteering in my teams who utilise the experience they get as a stepping stone into the medical field. I just see their motivation to be different to other people motivations. But I certainly see them as true volunteers. I know people who volunteer to purely escape social isolation. Are we suggesting that they are not ‘True Volunteers’? I know people who are volunteering to add to their resume. I know people who are volunteering for a myriad amount of reasons. To me they are all volunteers. And they are all doing volunteering that at the end of the day is of benefit to the community.

What dangerous road do we go down if we start judging peoples motivation for volunteering? Do we hold separate recognition events for our volunteers now – one for the “True Volunteers” and the other for the...what do we call them then....the “false Volunteers?” Do we provide a special training course for Volunteer Managers to decipher the “trueness” of volunteer applicants?

This is serious. There is a lot of debate going on about the definitions of volunteering at the moment; on this site, on blogs, at the UN and at the level of peak bodies. I urge caution as we move forward. I ask who do we risk alienating when we come up with our concrete definitions. On what basis do we come up with definitions? Are they guided by tradition, personal viewpoints, religion or morals? Whose?

What about volunteers who are excluded because of concrete definitions. Currently the peak body for volunteering in Australia states that volunteering only exists in the Not For Profit sector. They state this as though it is a fact. It is not. Hundreds if not thousands of people volunteer for private nursing homes and hospitals for example. If ones concrete statements are philosophical beliefs then name them as such. Don't mistake or confuse them with facts.

There are many people out there in our communities doing work that benefits the communities. They see themselves as volunteers. We have no right, absolutely none, to judge their motivation... period!

***Submitted on 2 December 2010 by Tim Burns, Executive Director, Volunteering New Zealand, Wellington New Zealand***

So when you volunteering you are not being a good citizen? That's I guess one of the challenges of trying to define Volunteering.

In New Zealand we talk about formal volunteering - a volunteer role through a structured organisation (the structure need not be too formal) and informal volunteering - helping the neighbours. There is a major study underway researching how people use their time - the national time use study. It will provide information about how long and where people volunteer through organisations and also measures of what we are calling informal volunteering.

The word Volunteer has a challenge for us in New Zealand in that it is an English word. Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, of course have their own language. They also have a different perspective about unpaid work within their own communities. For many of them this is done out of what they see as their cultural duty. So there is debate about whether that is time given out of personal free choice. This debate also applies to the many people living in New Zealand who have come from the other small Pacific Island nations. They have a similar concept of cultural obligation to Maori.

That is not to say that many Maori and Pacific people do not volunteer within the wider community - they do. The person who has designed publications for Volunteering NZ over the last few years has done it on a voluntary basis and certainly regards himself as a volunteer in this role.

We will be sharing this Hot Topic with others in New Zealand as I think Susan has encapsulated the different aspects to the debate very well.

***Submitted on 2 December 2010 by Deirdre Araujo, Exploratorium, Manager Volunteer Services, San Francisco USA***



I'm looking forward to reading this report!

I can imagine poster featuring a 'cloud' of words, like you see on websites noting trends - larger bolder type for commonality of use, including languages other than English, and in various colors ranging from blue hues (accepted) to red (hot button) depending on country or context to help broaden this conversation about terms.

10 years ago, one of our former Slovenian interns changed her focus from a graduate thesis on interactive museum design to a PhD dissertation on how formerly communist countries might embrace volunteerism, just from spending time in our department. I hadn't thought about the negative connotations of 'volunteering' before then.

I remember feeling a bit cranky about 15 years ago with those parents and students who likened required community service hours to 'slavery' -- but when viewed from another perch, say college admissions directors' - people are still looking for those hours performed beyond the minimum - what the students did with passion rather than pressure - when they call it volunteering.

I think community service helps open people's eyes to the many ways one can support civil society - but for me, taking in an elderly neighbor's groceries or taking them to the doctor falls into the category of "Ministry of Little Things" not volunteering per se.

***Submitted 2 December 2010 anonymously by a Volunteer Coordinator in Cleveland, Ohio USA***

Volunteerism is the act of giving your time and talents to an organization. Volunteerism is not court ordered community service and in some cases community service requirements for high school and college students should not be considered volunteerism. Neighborliness should never be equated to volunteerism because that's just being a good citizen. Since when did being a good neighbor or doing your civic duty become volunteerism? There are too many leaders looking to show donors and supporters how great their organization is by finding ways to increase their volunteer numbers. Add that to the number of individuals looking to add to their resume and the true spirit of volunteerism is lost..

---

#### PRIVACY STATEMENT

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

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025