

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS
IN SCHOOL VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

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Though acts of volunteering are as old as time itself, since giving is a natural human urge which demands expression, professional recognition for paid leadership is new and becomes official this month with the publication of the Dictionary of Occupational Titles. It is only two years late, but we have been anxiously awaiting this official classification in the 800 series as a "professional and kindred" occupation since the U.S. Census Bureau in 1970 called our work "miscellaneous clerical."

One next step will require the help of OE, NEA and other education oriented organizations to communicate the need for able, dynamic leadership staff to attract and keep volunteers in educational program staffing patterns. The DOT defines us, but we need help from Schools of Education and personnel administrators, who are the people who must appreciate what a highly skilled, sensitive and crucially important function Volunteer Directors and Coordinators perform. The issue of certification as educators or as volunteer coordinators and directors is a very live one. For acceptance by our coworkers in education, the first one may loom larger. For our community work, and professional mobility, the alternative broader concept may be more important!

The Labor Department distinguishes "profession" and "professional organization" (which we don't yet have) from professional work: work which requires decisions based on complex, dynamic, unique data, decisions which cannot be standardized into one correct answer, but a choice from a range of alternatives involving conflicting values and pressures. And that we do have!

Five years ago, I prepared a speech on Volunteers in Government, and another for you in Columbus a year later, described the beginning of budget cuts, and the high expectations of consumer groups created during the 60's, and the low level of volunteer participation, such as 60% in rehabilitation facilities. Then there were two state offices of volunteers, and now there are thirty-four, largely due to ACTION seeding them at first through a project of the National Governor's Conference, and later as an important part of the program and policy development of ACTION. School volunteering has gone through

a parallel expansion during the same period, demanding better, more "professional" leadership. The word "professional" did not have the disgraceful connotation it has now with Watergate, medicaid abuses and malpractice suits abounding.

In 1972 ACTION was in its infancy as a federal agency and so were student volunteering and the area of evaluation and research in the voluntary sector. One association of professional volunteer administrators was beginning to open up its mental health ranks to practitioners from other fields, but we were fragmented by services and geography.

In 1972 there were some economic indicators on the horizon pointing toward the depression to come, and many programs involving volunteers were being developed to save money in a world of rapid inflation and high expectations from pressure groups and a cold budget approach. That perception of value still handicaps us.

The materials and training offered by ACTION's National Student Volunteer Program presumed the primary function was student volunteering, but often the same person is responsible for both sides of the coin: community volunteers to help students, and students as volunteers. The materials developed by the National School Volunteer Program dealt primarily with guidelines for coordinators for handling volunteer activities in schools for students. Having discovered the Census Bureau's low esteem for our work, I began negotiating with the Department of Labor to upgrade us.

From the voluntary sector where I sat at the time, we were very much encouraged with enrollments in state activities doubling and tripling every year. Two of our universal problems then are still with us today: money and staff resistance, due to a variety of reasons ranging from feelings of job insecurity to a sincere conviction that involving volunteers would somehow lower standards of services. Most paid people like teachers felt as many do today, that they were too busy to take time with volunteers. Instead of regarding volunteers as a resource and a help they see a whole new set of responsibilities added to an already serious overload. No one else yet educates these people for working with volunteers or the proper use of volunteering as field experience education.

Galloping inflation still pressures budgets intolerably, In all too many cases, even in Headstart, where volunteer services are part of the "soft match" to obtain federal funds, penny-wise RIFs

have hit first the Volunteer Coordinator, the goose who laid the golden egg by producing people to contribute time and effort to meet local matching funds and parent involvement requirements. Instead of investing paid staff time to obtain, train and retain unpaid staff to extend and enrich programs, administrators and teaching staff are struggling along, cutting every possible expense, doing it themselves without all the willing and able help just waiting to be asked, or turning to work for somebody else.

The issue of standards, tied to program objectives, planning and evaluation have totally inadequate data gathering methods and facts today. A baseline study such as the one being undertaken by NSVP is essential to the development of standards, or we will simply be initiating a competition for numbers, not quality of education and services.

Standards are being developed in many parts of the country, and if you want them to fit your needs, you had better get busy letting yours be known. An official of a paper corporation once told a story I'd call a parable for us: For years, the industry had been asked by conservationists and government economists to be less wasteful and polluting of natural resources. Refusing to pay attention, they are now regulated by people who do not know how to make paper, much more expensively than ways they might have worked out for themselves. Moral: self discipline is much more comfortable than regulations and standards imposed by other people! The Alliance for Volunteerism has a Task force on Accreditation, Standards and Models. Get NSVP ideas into the hopper, for fifteen other large national organizations are going to be living by the recommendations of the Alliance. Isolation from other groups with common goals and interests is less productive than collaboration in the long run!

Another major growth is in numbers and quality of the still developing profession of volunteer administration in new fields of practice. Although four salary studies in the past years still show appallingly low levels, each year more higher level jobs are created, more men are joining our forces, very frequently out of the clergy, incidentally, with a satisfying feeling they have not changed their ministry, only their institutional setting! The religious based leadership accelerated professionalization and forces attention to a value system. As David Horton Smith, eminent scholar and sociologist has observed, we have worked out techniques for recruiting, training, recording and recognizing volunteer effort. We can teach these techniques to beginners in the field, refine and experiment with theories and work out systems for technology. But we won't be

truly professional until we have focussed less on how to's and more on why's. The right to change attitudes in training carries grave responsibilities for impact meanings which underlie the behaviors we ask people to adopt.

Our burgeoning field of practice illustrates this growing maturity of the profession: the volunteers in schools leadership. First funded for three years by the Ford Foundation, this association of school coordinators has been led since its early days by strong, imaginative people, confident in their capacity to improve education through volunteer tutors, teacher aids, and career models in the classroom, in addition to traditional class mothers who gave parties and escorted youngsters on trips to the zoo. (I remember hearing an urban school system coordinator take pride that in her program, they interviewed eighteen people for every one they accepted as a school volunteer.) Working in the mental retardation field at the time, I remember wishing I could arrange to pick up her rejects who might be nice warm encouraging people, not sophisticated enough to work with gifted children in special education, but great motivators with time and patience for slower ones. Volunteering is moving toward inclusiveness as a basic right, not a privilege, but with responsibilities. We have several colleges and universities interested in vocational education for volunteer coordinators - not education schools, but other disciplines. The assumption that inhouse orientation is sufficient may satisfy one requirement, but not the needs of our profession.

By now there are an estimated five and one half million volunteers in elementary and secondary education in urban and rural settings according to an article in this month's Better Homes and Gardens about this organization. Prominent among volunteers are pupils themselves, for careful experiments like those by Isabel Besecker in Boston proved that older children with reading problems improved faster than their tutees when they were assigned to help the younger ones. Several major foundations have funded experimental education designs and the Office of Education has helped the National School Volunteer Program, (even to the extreme of supplying the person!) My guess is that this will be the first national group of professional volunteer coordinators to gain status within their field of practice to legitimate their function and attract promising young people to this new career, partly because you know those who enjoyed volunteer services as youth themselves.

Centralizing and delegating the responsibilities for this form of citizen participation will insure good job identification, placement, orientation and training of staff to work with volunteers and of

volunteers themselves to internalize the learning goals of each program. Education is under tremendous attacks from the under-educated and the so-called "over-educated" who can't find work - for irrelevancy, ineffectiveness, narrow gauge perspectives, the need for informed convinced public support is imperative. Decision-making under the new block grant concepts, now that money goes out to state and local governmental and voluntary agencies, policy planning goes on there, not in Washington!

When volunteers are stimulated by dynamic leadership, they progress through service learning opportunities into positions of advocacy for appropriate education, missionaries to the public, as it were. The truth of education as the most effective instrument of social mobility is born out in "Roots" as well as many economic surveys. Volunteering is one of the most effective methods of citizenship education through active field experience, and the citizen volunteer committed to advocacy for life long learning is the "end product" of volunteer development.

As individual practitioners, paid or not, we have a responsibility for self directed learning consistent with our recommendations for others. Change is not nearly so dangerous as inflexibility! There are seven degree programs and literally hundreds of short term non-credit or CEU learning opportunities. These offer a chance to cross fertilize the various fields of services and bring volunteer administration commonalities into focus for our becoming profession.

¹ The ACTION law (Domestic Volunteer Service Act) PL 93-113 was passed October 3, 1973.