

This article is written to help students select volunteer placements that will be rewarding, both for the student and for the placement. Tim Wernette, formerly the coordinator of volunteer programs at Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa, offers some tips to help high school and college students match their own needs and interests with volunteer opportunities in the community.

## What to Look For In a Volunteer Experience

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**VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES** can be rewarding or frustrating, depending on how well prepared you are to meet the challenges they offer. Before you enter into a volunteer commitment, it is important for you to think through your own personal and academic goals for such an experience, the kinds of people you want to work with, the time commitment involved, and the expectations of the agency where you will work. Here are some suggestions to help you in selecting the most appropriate placement for you.

### **Step 1: Choosing the Right Program**

Choosing the best volunteer experience for you is an important decision. The goal is to meet as many of your needs and interests as possible. This requires that you think about what you want to get from volunteering. Some factors that you may want to consider as you select a volunteer experience are:

**Academic and Vocational Interests**—Many students select a volunteer program to explore an academic major or a future career direction. You may want to choose a program that is directly or indirectly related to your present studies. You might choose a placement related to a subject that you plan to explore in the future, either professionally or in class. Instructors at your school often can help you relate your volunteer experience to your present or future education. You also

may want to inquire about academic credit for your off-campus learning experience.

**Type of Activity**—Think about what you like to do in your free time. You may want to choose a program in which you will do things you enjoy, such as recreation, visiting or counseling, arts and crafts, or problem-solving. Your hobbies and leisure activities may help you to choose a program that is right for you.

**People With Whom You Will Work**—Make sure that the people with whom you choose to work are compatible with your interests and personality. Age may be a factor. Do you prefer working and being with children, adolescents, adults, or the elderly? Can you cope with a person who has a physical, mental, or emotional handicap? Cultural and racial factors are also important. Differences between you and the people with whom you work may cause problems, but they can also contribute to new learning experience.

**Time Commitment**—Look carefully at the amount of time that a volunteer program asks you to commit. Consider both the hours per week and the length of time (weeks, months). It is important that you be dependable and consistent in your volunteer service. It is better to begin with a limited commitment and increase it, rather than overcommitting yourself and later dropping out. Volunteering is voluntary before you sign up; after you sign up it is a commitment.

**Experiences and Skills**—You may have had experiences from which you have gained valuable knowledge and skills. These might include part-time jobs or past volunteer work. Consider these as you look at new volunteer opportunities.

**Supervision**—When you get involved in a new experience, do you generally enjoy close supervision? Or do you prefer to be independent and work on your own? Your own style and needs should match the program you choose.

**New Learnings and Personal Growth**—What would you like to learn from your volunteer experience? Are there certain skills, ideas, or attitudes that you want to acquire? Are you interested in future references and experiences for resumes? If these are important to you, you may want to choose a program that includes training or close contact with professional staff.

**Service to Others**—Volunteer opportunities differ both in the kind and the intensity of the human needs to be met. How important to you is helping other people? Is it important that you be able to see significant progress? How much appreciation and positive feedback do you need to receive? How do you react to frustrating experiences? These factors are important in selecting a program that will be rewarding for both you and the people you serve.

You may want to think about these considerations as you choose a volunteer experience. There are two primary components of a good decision: awareness of your needs and interests, and accurate, complete information regarding available volunteer opportunities.

### **Step 2: Volunteer Job Information**

You have the right to specific, accurate, and complete job information before you make any commitment. You should have:

**Description of Agency**—The agency or program in which you will work should be described. Agency goals, services, and clientele should be included, as well as organizational structure and your specific responsibilities. Other information, such as the agency's history and sources of funds, also may be presented.

**Volunteer Job Description**—The job description should include your specific responsibilities and duties. You should know the kind of people with whom you will work, whether one-to-one or a group, and whether your clients will remain the same or change frequently. The job description should include the specific times that the agency needs volunteers and where you will work. In addition, the job description should include information about:

- **Supervision**—The name of your supervisor, the kind of supervision you will receive, and how it is managed should be stated. For example, will you meet once a week with your supervisor?

- **Time commitment**—How many hours per week will you be expected to work? How many weeks or

months will you be expected to serve?

- **Volunteer qualifications or preferences**—Requirements or preferences regarding volunteer traits, skills, or past training and education should be stated.

- **Orientation and training**—Information about the content or orientation and training for volunteers should be provided, as well as dates and times.

- **Transportation**—Where is the agency or program located? Who is responsible for your transportation? Is convenient public transportation available?

- **Agency policies**—You should receive additional information about policies directed to volunteer staff members, such as dress codes.

### **Step 3: Setting Personal Goals**

Everything we do, we do for a reason. Often we do not stop to think about why we act as we do. Clarifying personal interests, needs, and goals is important for two reasons: you are more likely to get what you want if you know what your goals are, and clear goals and needs can help to identify and solve problems when they arise. Take a few minutes and write down some of the reasons why you are volunteering and why you have selected the program you have. This will help you to have a much more rewarding experience.

Write down three or four personal goals that you have for your volunteer experience. Be as specific as possible. The more specific you are, the more useful this exercise will be. One example might be, "I want to learn whether or not I enjoy teaching and working with children. I want to work at least four hours per week, both one-to-one and with groups of children."

Another example might be, "I want to learn two new skills for helping an adolescent to deal with personal problems. I shall accomplish this goal by counseling teenagers at a drop-in center three hours per week and attending one training program per month. I shall also read two books on adolescent psychology."

### **Step 4: Orientation and Making a Contract**

Now that you have developed some goals, you are prepared to have a valuable learning experience. You have an idea of what you want and how to go about achieving it. You are ready to visit the agency and meet the people with whom you will work.

You have the right to some kind of orientation before you make a final commitment. This is an opportunity to clarify the job description, to understand what the agency expects of you, and to get a feel for what you will be doing. You may want to look around the area in which you will work, meet the staff and the people they serve. This is your opportunity to ask questions and clarify what the agency expects of you.

Orientation is the time to share your goals, your needs, and your interests. You have the right to have your expectations acknowledged and respected. If the agency or program does not have a formal orientation,

you may want to take a few minutes with your supervisor on the first day to exchange information.

After you and your supervisor have shared expectations, you are ready to make a contract. It does not need to be a formal, written agreement, but a good contract—the result of mutual understanding and agreement—is specific. It requires flexibility and compromise from both you and the agency staff member.

For example, suppose you and your prospective supervisor discuss your expectations and discover that they are not identical. Suppose that the teacher tells you that he needs a volunteer to help correct tests and to prepare visual materials for classroom presentation. You tell him that you are seeking a variety of experiences. You want to tutor on a one-to-one basis, you want a chance to work with a group of students, and you want to help him make a presentation to the class.

The compromise that you work out together constitutes the contract. In this example, the contract might state that the volunteer will spend two two-hour periods each week in the class, one in tutoring on a one-to-one basis. During the other, the volunteer is to work with groups and assist the teacher in preparing visual materials. The volunteer will help in making a presentation to the entire class at the end of the semester. The contract would also state that the volunteer will not correct tests.

#### **Step 5: Committing Yourself**

Volunteering is an adult commitment. You will be working with professionals who take their work seriously. You will be serving people with important needs. Volunteering is different from classroom learning. You may skip classes on a beautiful day, or you may put off a term paper after an evening of partying, but you are expected to meet all of your volunteer commitments.

Why is it so important for you to be consistent and dependable in your volunteer service? If you don't fulfill your commitment, here's what is likely to happen:

- You will hurt and disappoint the people you are serving. Whether you are tutoring, counseling, or just being with a person who needs someone, those people trust you. Every time you miss your commitment, you become another disappointment in their lives.

- You will anger your supervisor and the agency staff. They are taking part of their time to work with you, and they expect you to be dependable. If you do not come regularly, they may not want you to work with them any longer. They may also reject future volunteer assistance, thus spoiling opportunities for others.

- You will cheat yourself. Serving others means going when you are tired, when you are under pressure, and when you do not want to go. You may find that your most valuable learning experiences occur when you really do not feel like doing your job.

To summarize, some reasons for missing your volunteer commitment might be:

- You just died.
- The place you work burned down.
- There was a death in your immediate family.
- Two feet of snow has paralyzed the city.

Some reasons for not missing your volunteer commitment might be:

- You have a test and term paper due tomorrow.
- It is a beautiful day outside.
- You are tired.
- You are frustrated with your volunteer work.

#### **Step 6: Some Common Problems**

*Frustration*—An inevitable by-product of working with people and their problems is a feeling of frustration. Many people deal with frustration by running away from the problems that cause it. This may eliminate the immediate frustration, but it is not a mature way to help people with problems. It also prevents you from learning from your experience.

To reduce frustration you must first identify the source or cause of your frustration. Then you should discuss your feelings first with your agency supervisor and then with your campus volunteer program staff. They are there to help make your volunteer work a positive experience.

*Unrealistic Expectations*—Most of our education is isolated from real, concrete problems. This encourages us to think that problems are easily solved. You may expect too much change or perhaps you expect change in too short a period of time. Evaluate the assistance you have been giving. Perhaps the changes and progress of your client have been too subtle for you to observe. Perhaps the progress you wish to see requires a longer period of time. Your supervisor can help to make your expectations more realistic.

*Inadequate Training*—The problems you are experiencing may require skills that you have not yet learned. If there are skills which you need but do not have, discuss the possibility of training with your agency supervisor. Perhaps you can participate in an in-service training program for agency staff. You may also want to discuss the possibility of training and developing new skills with faculty at your college.

*Incompatibility of Client*—You and the person whom you are helping may have personality differences and conflicts that prevent you from helping. Conflicts and personality differences can be discussed with your supervisor and often resolved. It is important for you to understand why the client acts and feels the way he or she does, and this can be a valuable learning experience for you. You may want to try different approaches. If you feel that none of your approaches is getting results, you may want to consider working with another client.

*Boredom and Disinterest*—After you have worked awhile as a volunteer, you may begin to experience

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boredom and disinterest. If you choose not to run away from this problem, it is another opportunity for you to learn something important about yourself and about people. Again, the first step is to identify the source or cause of your boredom, the second step is to discuss your feelings with your agency supervisor and the third step is to discuss your feelings with your campus volunteer program staff.

*Repetition*—Perhaps you are doing the same things over and over again. This may be a result of restrictions placed upon you by the agency or your own lack of imagination. You may want to try out different activities or resources. If repetition is a problem, discover what other kinds of work you can do to help the agency and the people with whom you are working. Perhaps you can plan some new and different activities for the people you are helping. You may want to try two or three new kinds of work.

*Incompatibility of Interest*—Perhaps you are not interested in the type of work that you are doing.

Think about what you like and dislike about the job. You may want to return to Step 1, "Choosing the Right Program," and determine what other interests you have. After you have clarified your other interests, discuss with your supervisor the possibility of other kinds of work at the agency which might meet those interests. If you really need to change into another volunteer program, discuss this with your agency supervisor. Explaining why you need to change can help maintain good relations between student volunteers and the agency.

We make time for those things that are important to us, such as close friendships, classes, parties, or just having fun. We ask that you make a commitment to volunteering. If it ceases to be important to you, perhaps you are experiencing one of the problems mentioned above. We want to help you resolve these or any other problems.

You have made a commitment to other people. You'll find that if you work on the problems you encounter, rather than search for excuses to drop out, you will learn from your experience and it will be a valuable part of your education. □