

Volunteers in the Nineties

From the Director's Viewpoint

By John R. Brumgardt, Director, The Charleston Museum

(Presented by Beverly Littlejohn at AAM Annual Meeting, 1989. Session chaired by Mrs. William T. Clarke, President, AAMV.)

The Volunteer has been highly regarded in America since the country's inception. Today, volunteers continue to perform valuable services in the behalf of the varied causes they support.

Museums, thankfully, benefit significantly from volunteer assistance. Working without remuneration, volunteers help to expand institutional capabilities and stretch the ever-restricted dollar. Few of us in the museum profession are not obliged to volunteers whose efforts have made possible accomplishments which, without their participation, could have been realized only with difficulty if at all. Besides the activities in which they engage, from fund-raising to curatorial assistance to special events, volunteers serve as museum advocates in the community, helping to extend the museum's presence to groups and activities with which they are involved. Volunteers thus provide benefits beyond the activities in which they regularly participate.

There is little value for museums in volunteer efforts which serve principally to meet the needs and purposes of the volunteers themselves. As with any human endeavor, personal satisfaction is naturally important. However, museum efforts and resources must be dedicated to accomplishing the organizational mission; volunteers would be included—and include themselves—in this focus. Volunteer efforts must functionally assist the museum. Good intentions and the creation of good feelings are not enough; nor should the museum serve—or be expected to serve—primarily as a place for volunteers to have “something to do.”

While “payback” to volunteers, in whatever form this might take—whether public recognition, personal satisfaction, etc.—is important, the compelling reason for volunteering, and for soliciting volunteers, must be to enhance the museum's performance. But positive accomplishment, definite purpose, and continued practical assistance on the part of volunteers proceeds at least in part from appropriate mechanisms including factors such as selection, training, and communications. All are fundamental to providing a context of guidance within which volunteer activities—whether group or individual—can be constructively channeled. These must be established and maintained on a mutually

agreeable basis by professional staff working in close concert with volunteers. One cannot simply “volunteer” and, without proper guidance, be expected to perform adequately. Support and preparation are essential, and both staff and volunteers must participate in this process. The needs, the job (its scope and limits), the time involved, organizational expectations, and individual responsibilities must be clear, and communications must be ongoing. Unfortunately, this process in many instances does not occur. It is accordingly not surprising that volunteer efforts in such circumstances are often beset by assorted problems, that staff-volunteer relations are then tenuous, and that some museum professionals—having endured such experiences—prefer not to work with volunteers at all.

Such situations are unfortunate. They mute or negate the potential advantage to institutions which effective volunteer efforts could provide, and essentially waste the talent which could be of such value. This is a loss to the museum.

The purpose of today's panel is to discuss the role of museum volunteers in coming years—a role which doubtless will expand for several reasons, including the progressive impact of federal legislation (such as Section 89) on personnel costs, and the increasing number of active post-retirement individuals. I have been asked to address the problem areas which frequently occur with volunteer programs. To help facilitate the positive involvement of volunteers now and in the future, and to extend the base of support for the nation's museums as time proceeds, it is useful to discuss in objective terms some of the problems which are common to volunteer efforts and point the way to effective solutions.

While particular experiences differ, some basic difficulties with museum volunteers are common to many museums. For example, how many museum professionals here today have not experienced situations similar to those with volunteers or volunteer groups who:

1. Undertake a task—sometimes a special one, involving substantial staff preparation—lose interest and quit before the job is finished?

2. Insist upon pursuing a project or agenda dissimilar to those needed and rec-

ommended by the museum, sometimes expressing vocal discontent when the Director or staff attempt to persuade them otherwise?

3. Ignore museum safety rules and policies, since “I've done this all my life and never had an accident,” and refuse to recognize museum legal liabilities, particularly with special events, sometimes making arrangements despite advance staff warnings and expressing dismay when the Director must require last minute changes?

4. Assist a curator with collections care and, despite museum policies and requests not to do so, bring food into restricted workrooms and are offended when asked not to return?

5. Delight in bringing sweets, cookies, etc. and having a “social time” during work hours, thus diverting staff from their responsibilities?

6. Become attached to a particular museum department or staff member and become defensive in that department's or person's behalf, sometimes to the point of being inconsiderate to the administration?

7. Insist on doing only high-visibility or “important” tasks when the museum really needs help in other areas?

8. With little or no advance notice, and despite apparently firm scheduling, fail to appear for work, despite the fact that the museum has relied upon their presence?

9. Raise funds in the museum's name, then acquire a possessory attitude, requiring that the Director submit proposals for consideration, and providing funds only for projects in which they have a particular interest?

10. Become so successful that they constitute an alternate governing agency to which the Director must report?

These are simply examples of problem areas, and individuals here today could probably expand significantly upon them—as well as upon solutions which they have devised to offset such difficulties. While each circumstance has individual peculiarities, it is possible to mitigate or solve the majority of them. It is necessary to solve them because situations such as those above create a range of problems which intrude upon staff time, cause administrative difficulties, damage staff support levels for volunteers, interrupt operations, sour the individual volunteer's experience, and create sometimes extensive public relations difficulties.

On the volunteer side, causes for these problems may be several, including improperly-channeled personal motivation; an overriding desire for recognition, reputation, or identification with a prominent group or institution; a placement of personal interest above that of the museum; lack of concern for institutional needs; and

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Museum Volunteers in the Nineties — A Look at the Future

By Winfred Brown, Executive Director Of
Mayor's Voluntary Action Center of New York City
Chaired by Mitzi Bhavnani CVA

Winfred Brown, Executive Director of the Mayor's Voluntary Action Center of New York City, talked about the growing profession of volunteer administration, and its impact on the future. She sees volunteer administration as enabling leadership expressed through a number of competencies and skills. She stressed that volunteer administrators must be actors, not reactors, and should "articulate the questions" and play an advocacy role in volunteerism.

She spoke of the need for institutions to dialogue within on "what does our institution mean by volunteerism?" She mentioned the impact that a national volunteer service corp will have on volunteerism, and how institutions collectively will have to deal at the highest levels with its implications. When implemented nationally, our institutions will be flooded with volunteer applicants, and we must be prepared.

She talked of the need of cultural institutions to develop a philosophy of volunteerism indicating that each institution might arrive at a different definition. The philosophy statement should deal with why the institution believes in volunteers, and how it perceives the role of the volunteer administrator.

She believes there is a need to help the volunteer and the administration of the institution see the bigger picture and be aware of volunteer issues being discussed at national and state levels that impact on society. She said that cultural institutions should balance their internal operation with external issues and that volunteers working in cultural institutions should reflect the community within which the institution operates. Reaching minority communities and employed people may require a change in supervisory work hours. She believes that the problem of finding enough volunteers is not a recruitment issue, but rather one of job development.

She posed the question "if there was enough money to support all current programs in the arts, would there be a need for volunteers?" Her reply was "yes", that the concept of volunteerism goes beyond saving money to the issue of commitment to democratic values in a free society and valuing the worth of the individual. The

volunteer can make a difference.

In closing, she spoke of the universality of issues facing volunteers in all settings, and the need to meet the highest standards in volunteer administration. She spoke of the value of Certification in Volunteer Administration developed by the Association for Volunteer Administration. She stressed networking within the field, and the opportunity to learn something new everyday. She feels that the volunteer administrator now and in the future should strive for self-awareness and take advantage of opportunities for training, and be organized for accountability. She feels that volunteer administrators will be among the most forward looking and outstanding professionals in the country, and will help to shape the future of a democratic society.

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so forth. But there are other contributing factors as well. Although where human beings interact, difficulties of some sort will always be experienced, such problems are frequently generated and exacerbated by lack of proper volunteer management, organization, training and oversight, compounded by inadequate preparation of and for volunteers, unrealistic expectations by the administration and staff concerning volunteer activity, improper staff example, lack of proper staff-volunteer communications and insufficient consideration for volunteers' need to be fully apprised of the reasons for museum requirements.

Positive volunteer accomplishment is a combination of several factors, including: volunteer commitment and ability; the matching of clearly-defined institutional needs with volunteer interests; conceptual and functional incorporation of volunteers into the organizational framework, and

recognition of them as integral elements of the institution and staff; and staff cooperation and support. An effective volunteer program - be it a simple means of communication adequate in a small organization to accommodate only few individuals or, in a larger institution, a formal organization adequate to facilitating the endeavors of volunteers in various operational areas - is necessary.

If volunteers need to demonstrate commitment, the professional staff must demonstrate a commitment to them by helping to provide the mechanism through which volunteer tasks are accomplished, and by committing the time necessary. Working with volunteers requires a substantial amount of time, and staff must recognize this. If volunteers are to perform to adequate standards, appropriate training and monitoring must be provided. If volunteers must be aware of museum needs, the museum must define and communicate them. If volunteers are to follow established rules and policies, the museum must make these clear and staff must lead by example. And if volunteers are to be sensitive to museum concerns, these must be communicated on a regular basis. An effective volunteer program, then, requires a two-way commitment, involving both volunteers and professional staff.

A basic difference between paid staff and volunteers, from the standpoint of administration, is that paid staff are directly accountable while volunteers are not. The presence of a volunteer organization, governing and overseeing volunteer efforts and providing a mechanism for volunteer accountability, is a definite blessing. So, too, is a paid staff person responsible solely for monitoring and organizing volunteer efforts. Where these exist, difficulties are normally fewer than in situations where volunteers participate on a sporadic or informal basis. Even then, however, volunteer effectiveness can be facilitated by genuine staff commitment to defining and overseeing the tasks which are to be performed. In essence, as is true with paid staff positions, the expectations of the organization, the needs of the organization, and the scope of the task to be performed need to be clearly defined and understood by the volunteer, and the talents, interest, abilities and time constraints of the volunteer need to be recognized by staff.

It is our responsibility, as professionals, to work intelligently with volunteers and to cultivate opportunities for continuing benefits to everyone involved.