The great debate of community service vocabulary continues

A few weeks ago, one of my staff members was talking with a class of fourth graders about volunteering. Knowing that it is in vogue to refer to school-based volunteering as "community service," she asked the students what they thought of when they heard this terminology. One boy, in all seriousness, responded, "Community service is when you order a pizza and they deliver it to your house."

Although everyone who has heard this anecdote gets a chuckle from it, it does highlight the fact that vocabulary debates tend to be irrelevant to those directly involved in doing the activities being labelled. The fourth grader was not wrong in his definition. He simply heard the words "community service" from one point of view.

The question of "What is volunteering?" has been posed for a long time. Quite a long list of words and phrases have been used somewhat interchangeably with volunteerism: service learning; citizen participation; pro bono publico work; community service; public service; community involvement; points of light; lay ministry; internships; corporate social responsibility; neighborliness; and self help.

Some of these terms were developed in specific contexts and mean something special in certain fields or settings. But the most controversy has been over the word "volunteer."

Some relevant history

In the 1970s, the hot topic was whether or not someone could truly be a volunteer if any form of payment was received—academic credit, reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses, a living allowance such as the stipends given to those in the Peace Corps. A great division was perceived between the pure volunteer (no reimbursement whatsoever) and the person who was enabled to volunteer (an impure volunteer?). The debate cooled as formal volunteer programs found that enabling funds encourage participation by more diverse people.

In the 1980s, court-referred volunteers became the contested issue. Is someone who works for a set number of hours in an agency as an alternative to jail or a fine a volunteer? Can anyone who is mandated to do something ever be a voluntary worker? What are pure volunteers suppose to feel when a lawbreaker is working side by side with them in the same program? A significant number of alternative-sentencing projects adopted the terminology "community service" and sidestepped these questions.

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The goal is not to adopt the word "volunteer" as the most universal term, but rather to recognize that it is the umbrella concept connecting all of the other words. What we all want is to tap the widest variety of people resources in our communities to solve problems. The common denominator is that these people serve without cash profit. If they derive a personal benefit (intangible or credit of some sort), so much the better. NPT