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**PART OF THE MANAGEMENT** job of a director or coordinator of a student volunteer program is the establishment and maintenance of productive agency relations. A variety of agencies, situations, and personalities may call for different approaches, but all require attention if effective assignments are to result. This article raises questions, makes observations, and provides examples which may be helpful in managing agency relationships.

The comments are directed primarily to directors, coordinators or counselors of student volunteer programs. The agencies discussed are assumed to fit the general definition of community service, be they governmental or nongovernmental, large or small. It is also assumed that the student volunteer program has both service and learning goals. Student volunteers are expected to perform services that are real and important, rather than simply observing or pursuing an academic exercise. At the same time, conscious learning is also expected of the student volunteers in their community placements.

In working with agencies it is essential to understand the realities of the world in which they operate. One of these realities is imperfection. The agency, its personnel, its programs, and its clients will sometimes be incompetent, wrong, and unfair, but simply to discover this is not enough for either the program director or the student volunteer.

A willingness to work with imperfection is basic to effective agency relationships. Nothing closes an agency

door faster than unconstructive criticism, however justified, given in a condescending way by a self-satisfied program director. Problems that agencies face generally are complex. They are not served by simple answers or settled within a short time. Community service agencies usually have limited resources—one good reason why they use student volunteers.

#### **Preparing for Agency Contact**

Before contacting an agency, it is best to prepare yourself. Program directors who pick up the phone and call an agency without preparation are apt either to ask the wrong questions or to be asked questions they can't answer. A first step is to *know your objectives*. Be able to articulate concisely your program's goals, service objectives, and learning expectations.

*Knowing your students* is also critical. It is helpful if you are prepared to give information about the types, range, interests, limitations, and talents of your students, along with examples of what they can do. Whether your students are of urban or rural experience, graduates or undergraduates, local or out-of-state, experienced or new to voluntarism, this information will be of interest to the agency you call.

Your program may have other resources important to a potential assignment. Access to a library, campus research bureau, or technical resource is important. Transportation, duplication, or publicity services may be of interest to small agencies without them. It is useful to describe in package format, in a simple brochure

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or single sheet, *all* your program resources, including your student volunteers, their pre-assignment training, and your campus resources.

Of course, a *list of resources* implies the absence of others, and this information can also be useful to an agency. The director of a day care center came in recently and said, "I've taken 13 of your students, but I need a way of duplicating notices and training materials for them. Can you help?" Such simple things loom large in day-to-day agency operations.

Prepare for an agency contact by doing *preliminary research* on the agency and its programs. It helps if you know the agency's structure, mission, and activities—at least well enough to ask intelligent questions. Familiarity with legislative or administrative provisions governing a public agency (or the board and corporate structure of a private one) can make volunteer assignments easier for all concerned. In dealing with governmental agencies, knowledge of this sort can keep you from getting an automatic "no" because you asked the wrong question of the wrong person in the wrong way. Bureaucracies are full of "no sayers," but they are also populated with positive public servants. Researching an agency in advance can result in your reaching quickly those administrators who can help you.

In addition to preliminary research, it is important to *be prepared administratively* before contacting an agency. Prepare in advance your answers to questions about administrative relationships between the student volunteer, the agency, and your program. Who will

make the final selection? Who will notify the student? What reports will be needed? What records must be kept? Appropriate forms, instructions, and information on procedures should be prepared in advance.

If possible, the student volunteer himself should be involved in approaching an agency. In some programs the student volunteer has the chief responsibility for finding his own placement, with support from the campus volunteer office in the form of literature and counseling. In many cases, agency identification and contact occur before a specific student volunteer has been identified, but as a general rule a volunteer should become involved in his prospective assignment as early as possible.

The sum of these observations on preparation for approaching an agency is that an agency representative will appreciate and respond better to your approach if it is obvious that you have done your homework. Time has been saved. The agency's first impression of the student volunteer program is one of competence. A solid basis for building effective relationships has been established.

## **Initial Contacts**

Being well prepared does not mean going to an agency with a complete plan of what you think it should do. Knowing in advance your program and resources and something about the agency, you are now ready to *listen effectively* as well as to inform. On first contact, enough time will be needed for more than superficial

communication. In discussing the agency's structure, programs, and problems, a good listener can pick up important clues to potential assignments for student volunteers. One is not likely to find an agency that feels overstaffed or a professional person who doesn't have a list of unmet needs. A gold mine of possible projects can often be discovered among these unmet needs.

### **Avoid Misunderstandings**

Unless you take care to listen well and creatively, time will be lost or misunderstandings will arise. Unless you make deliberate efforts, it generally takes three contacts to begin to communicate. At first contact people tend to jump to conclusions and respond to the image they have quickly formed about what the other is saying. At a second meeting, the differences between these initial impressions and what was really meant come to light and it takes a third session to start hearing what is really being said. If you listen carefully, question creatively, and make sure that your responses are genuinely responsive, you will be on your way to a good agency relationship.

Many agencies have a need for student volunteers to fill "positions." Manning a station in a bloodmobile, answering a phone for a consumer agency, or playing with children in a day care center are examples of positions where a specific operation is carried out by a student volunteer. Often a problem-solving approach, where the volunteer is given a task defined by objective or need, may be coupled with a specific service-learning position. *Identifying agency needs* (for both filling positions and solving problems) and then relating these needs to your manpower resources is a basic task of fostering agency relationships.

As new needs which might be served by student volunteers are identified, they should be organized into general descriptions. The description at this point needs to be enough to give a possible assignment form and direction, but should not be very detailed. Knowledge of the volunteers, program resources, and time limits is important.

It helps to have a simple form on which to record potential assignments. The position should be described by a general title and include basic information on location, names and addresses, and telephone numbers. Three simple questions can serve to develop a preliminary outline for an agency assignment.

1. How does the general need or goal of the assignment relate to the purposes of the agency?
2. What are the specific objectives (outcomes) of the assignment?
3. What are the first steps in its accomplishment?

With this kind of preliminary statement, a student volunteer, agency representative, and program coordinator can move toward getting an agency relationship and a particular student volunteer assignment off to a good start.

As you discuss goals and purposes of your student volunteer program, the agency, and specific assignments, you will be making assumptions about values. It is helpful, exciting, and most often appreciated when these values are discussed rather than just assumed. Most agency personnel who participate in student volunteer programs share with the volunteers and their coordinator a commitment to service, a sense of duty, a feeling of brotherhood, and ideals of integrity and human worth.

Too often these sentiments are expressed only in the rhetoric of speeches and publicity. They tend to be pushed aside in day-to-day routines by the also important matters of efficiency, economy, skill, and accountability. Agency personnel are as eager as student volunteers and program directors to find kindred spirits who share values and commitments which underlie their motivations. *Keeping shared values alive* adds meaning to assignments and enriches agency relationships.

During initial contacts with an agency, the roles and objectives of the various parties concerned need to be reviewed in a general way. The material on the student volunteer program should be highlighted in conversation about the program and the agency's prospective relationship with it. The fact that program, agency, and student volunteer objectives are somewhat different, or at least vary in emphasis, is important to discuss. Varying objectives should be expected, acknowledged, and respected. They are usually not incompatible, and in fact lend vitality and realism to a program. Likewise the roles of student volunteer, agency supervisor, and program director are different and should be understood, at least generally, from the time of first contact.

### **Establish Procedures**

Assuming that a general understanding has been reached that an agency is interested in cooperating with your student volunteer program and potential assignments are feasible, the final step of the initial contact is to arrange the next meeting. Both agency and program considerations are involved in establishing procedures. Who will serve as the primary contact person? What written confirmation of relationships and records is needed? Is further approval needed from the personnel within the agency?

Getting and giving accurate and complete information on names, titles, addresses, telephone numbers, and schedules will save time later on. Also, a calendar is important. If at all possible, dates for the next meeting or other follow-up action should be set. *In general the initiative for next steps should be assumed by the representative of the student volunteer program.* A budding relationship can die very quickly if the agency finds that it has been asked to take responsibility for another set of initiatives.

In summary, the initial contact with an agency should attempt to establish a relationship of mutual under-

standing of missions and resources, possible assignments, value assumptions, roles and objectives, and follow-up procedures. This requires advance preparation. Set aside time to give your undivided attention to these matters because they will be the basis of future relationships.

### **Establishing Relationships**

The most critical point in establishing and maintaining effective agency relationships is the need for *clarity of expectations*. Knowing what is expected is essential in knowing how to respond and in evaluating responses. This is true of agency personnel, student volunteers, and program directors.

As suggested above, the objectives and motivations of the various parties will likely be different, and tensions can develop if these differences are not understood. The agency is apt to be primarily concerned with accomplishing a task or perhaps looking over a future employee. Student volunteers want to learn, as well as to express themselves in service. They are apt to ask questions which may seem to agency personnel impertinent or annoying if learning objectives are not appreciated.

While understanding the objectives and roles of others is important, it is also important for each party to execute his or her assigned role. Sometimes agency supervisors, in deference to learning objectives, are lax in performance requirements, with the excuse that the volunteer is "just a student." Likewise a program counselor whose primary role is to help a student volunteer interpret a service experience may overplay the supervisory role by giving directions rather than making observations.

*Clarity about scheduling and administration* is also essential. An effective agency relationship rests on the confidence that each party knows what commitments he has made and the degree to which he can be counted on to meet them. After a schedule and administrative responsibilities have been established, any changes must be cleared with all parties. Effective internal communications within an agency should not be assumed. If more than one agency person is involved, as is often the case, schedules, arrangements, and changes should be coordinated with all. It is particularly important to keep the agency head or primary contact person up-to-date on progress and changes, even though your day-to-day work may be with another person.

Placement, another important function of establishing a relationship, involves more than placing a volunteer in an assignment. Ideally, placement means matching the "right" person with the "right" situation. A *professional personnel approach* should be used to analyze both the student volunteer's qualifications and the position. The tools of job analysis can identify duties, levels of supervision, working conditions, skills and experience needed, and other technical aspects of

a placement. Professional personnel techniques, such as interview, reference, and review of application, can help program director and agency representative select a qualified student volunteer. Personnel techniques can also help to work out a procedure for supervision.

This process of review of person and of position can also be of value to the student volunteer as he participates in an assessment of his abilities, interests, and potentials in relation to specific tasks to be done. Agencies appreciate a professional personnel approach to placement and take student volunteers more seriously if their program director assumes the initiative.

In establishing agency relationships, questions about legal responsibility, financial demands, and administrative relationships, are often the most difficult. These will range from who is liable for an injury to a student volunteer to who must approve news releases regarding a volunteer's activity. Here again the more professional the student volunteer program director is, the greater the respect agency personnel will have for the program.

These questions and answers will depend on many individual factors, and each agency relationship should be examined individually in light of these matters. If transportation is involved, who carries the insurance? Can a student volunteer commit his host agency by acting as its agent? Should an agency that uses a number of student volunteers report this fact to their liability insurer?

### **Identifying Administrative Questions**

Lawyers, insurance agents, personnel officers, and other professionals in cooperating agencies can often be helpful in identifying the questions. Student volunteers can help research these questions. As experience builds, the basic questions and answers become known, and only exceptions and variations caused by unusual circumstances will need research and decision.

These matters become important if an incident occurs and no agreement had been reached in advance. For example, a student volunteer from one institution was assigned by an agency to a program of another institution supported by contract with the second agency. The student fell and injured his back. Who was liable? In this particular case, one of the agencies assumed responsibility without answering these questions, but immediate steps were taken to establish policies and procedures to govern future incidents.

Some of the questions raised are answered by paper instruments such as contracts, agreements, forms, published policies and procedures, reports, and records. While many student volunteer arrangements are informal, most continuing agency relationships involve an exchange and maintenance of written records. A simple exchange of letters may be sufficient to record the basic conditions of cooperation agreed upon between a student volunteer program and an agency. Larger programs may involve formal contracts. Legal

phrasing need not be used for most agreements, but *clarity about basic responsibilities and procedures* is important. In general it is well to have even a letter agreement signed by both parties, with copies retained by each, so that if questions should arise later the document can serve as a reference point. If attachments of printed policies and procedures of either party (the agency or the student volunteer program) are included as part of an agreement, it is well to refer to them in the agreement itself.

A *reporting system* is a useful tool in agency-program relationships. Deciding what information is significant, how it will be collected and reported, and when reporting should be shared between agency staff and student volunteer program directors is a preliminary task. A reporting system tailored to each agency is preferable to a standardized system, but in any case set up a reporting timetable that is mutually acceptable to all parties concerned.

In the establishment of good relationships with an agency, the student volunteer himself can play a significant role. The definition of roles, placement, legal, financial and administrative questions, contracts, and reports all relate to the individual volunteer. His involvement in these matters can help him and help the relationships necessary to the volunteer program. If a number of volunteers are involved, a group meeting with agency personnel is useful. The more each volunteer knows of the relationships between the program and the agency, the better he will represent one to the other. He is surely the person with the greatest stake in those relationships.

### **Orientation**

Another important task in establishing good agency relationships is the development of an orientation that will serve the program and the agency equally well. Every student volunteer program is eager to give its volunteers an orientation. An agency also wants a student volunteer to know something about programs and policies. In addition the student volunteer must be oriented to the specifics of his assignment.

A *joint effort at planning orientation* is called for, although too seldom done. If the volunteer can be involved in the development of his assignment and the administrative issues between program and agency, his orientation will be well along. The earlier and greater the involvement of the student volunteer, the better.

If a student volunteer cannot be involved in advance, it is well to divide orientation to the agency and assignment into two steps. Volunteers new to an assignment need basic information such as where and when to report, office procedures, and other immediate concerns. Orientation to general goals, purposes, and agency history is apt to be more effective if it comes after the immediate questions have been answered and the volunteer is somewhat settled in his placement.

General orientation, most often seen as the first thing on the agenda, may be more effective if parts of it are deliberately delayed. In any case, it is important to work out a plan for orientation as a joint activity with an agency.

### **Cultivating Relationships**

Once established, an agency relationship needs to be cultivated. Basic to sustaining a good relationship is *student volunteer performance*. No matter what techniques are used to establish and maintain cooperation with an agency, the relationship will lose meaning unless the volunteers produce positive results with reasonable consistency. Accordingly, primary attention is needed to those policies and services which bear most directly on volunteer performance. The volunteer needs to be aware of the importance of his performance in relation not only to his assignment but to the continuity of the entire program. Success in new volunteer assignments with an agency is especially vital. Therefore, it is best to start with well developed assignments and mature volunteers, leaving higher risk situations for the future.

Many agency assignments are worthy of *publicity*. Agencies, as well as student volunteer programs, can benefit from public knowledge and understanding of their activities and can thereby spread their impact to a larger population. In addition, recognition of agency-volunteer projects by elected officials, agency directors, and other leaders can strengthen the volunteer effort and the agency commitment. A procedure for publicity and information flow should be worked out with an agency to assure coordination, accuracy, and effectiveness of reporting. Some programs use a regular news format for releases sent to a student's home town newspaper and another format for releases sent to newspapers in the area of assignment. Including agency information and names can be very helpful in strengthening cooperation.

Established relationships tend to be taken for granted. This can be true in marriages, in friendships, in organizations, and in volunteer program-agency relations. If the relationship is remembered only when a need arises or a problem occurs, it will not be as vital or productive or able to survive difficulties as one which has been maintained more positively.

The importance of "visiting" has been stressed by some leaders in public administration. It also applies to agency relations. Taking time to visit by phone or in person without an agenda can lead to much stronger relationships and can uncover concerns before they become problems. Visiting also increases the enjoyment of both agency and student volunteer program personnel and is worth doing for itself. Publicity and visiting are management techniques that serve to strengthen the interpersonal relationships upon which student volunteer programs fail, survive, or flourish. □