

GOVERNOR'S OFFICE OF VOLUNTEER SERVICE
SPECIAL PROJECT SUMMARY
ACADEMIC CREDIT FOR VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

The purpose of this study was to gather information from colleges and universities within the State of Minnesota concerning their recognition of volunteer experience towards the attainment of a degree and/or academic credit.

Colleges and universities, until fairly recently, have used traditional measures to validate educational processes for students. These were based on formal education conducted in an academic setting. In recent years, many educators and colleges and universities have been giving recognition to learning that occurs outside of the classroom, including the skills acquired through volunteer work. A new emphasis on 'learning by doing' has resulted. An increasing number of educational institutions are allowing volunteers to apply the learning that has resulted from volunteer work toward credits or degree work.

In order to compile the information, the Governor's Office of Volunteer Service sent questionnaires to all colleges under the state university system; all colleges under the community college system; and the majority of private colleges within the State of Minnesota. Follow-up phone calls were made to ensure returns. Also, interviews were conducted where detail was desirable.

The Governor's Office of Volunteer Services' study resulted in the following information:

At the University of Minnesota there are several colleges and departments that do recognize the volunteer experience of students when considering qualifications toward admission, credit or degrees. Because of the variety of admittance qualifications that are used at the University of Minnesota, and because of the many departments involved, there is no uniform policy. Every department at the University deals differently with regard to recognizing volunteer experience.

Generally, within the University of Minnesota, there is a limited recognition of prior volunteer experience. Most admissions bulletins do not refer to volunteer experience at all. When volunteer experience is considered, it usually is in the form of a field experience for a student currently registered. Volunteer activity for academic or course credit must be evaluated by faculty.

In the State University System, there is recognition of prior volunteer experience. Metropolitan State University, a nontraditional university established to provide alternative educational programs to citizens in the metro area, grants college credit for learning from experience, including volunteer service, and its students regularly use such credit in the completion of degree programs. When a student claims competence or learning that was gained outside the classroom, he or she is evaluated by at least two qualified evaluators, who verify the level or extent of competence. A narrative transcript describes this learning and the academic credit given for it.

Metropolitan State University is among the ten original colleges and universities funded jointly with Educational Testing Service to initiate research and to provide models for educationally sound practices in the assessment of experiential learning. The Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL) is a national educational association of 260 member institutions of higher education and other educational organizations. Its purpose is to foster experiential learning and the valid and reliable assessment of learning outcomes. CAEL began in March, 1974, as a research and development project. Its main goal was to develop improved methods of assessing experiential learning at the college level. The intention of the project was not to produce standardized assessment techniques or tests, but to develop general guidelines and principles that could be adapted to local circumstances and individual learning.

Private colleges generally do not recognize volunteer experience. A few private colleges are doing some experiential learning testing and interest is growing in this area.

Most community colleges encourage those who are entering their institutions to utilize their previous and current vocational, professional and volunteer experience toward credits and degree programs. These institutions in cooperation with Metropolitan State University, established competency-based educational programs to provide greater access to higher education in Minnesota. It is possible in these educational institutions to use a variety of learning strategies, such as internship, on-the-job training, independent studies, assessment of life experiences, past and present volunteer experiences toward college credit and completion of degrees. These programs are flexible; however, they vary according to the specific community college. The college level learning that is the result of volunteer experience must be documented; effectively presented; and must be evaluated in order for the colleges to recognize the validity of these experiences.

Summary

As a result of the survey in Minnesota, it is apparent that there are still some difficulties and differences in recognizing and assessing volunteer experience. Colleges and universities are becoming more involved with older, non-traditional students who are seeking admission, many of whom have had extensive volunteer experience. However, it must be remembered that it is a must for any student entering the system to present a clear log of specific volunteer background and an evaluation, in order for the admissions personnel to assess past volunteer experience. Volunteer experience must, in addition, be evaluated by faculty, for very often they must decide whether any of the volunteer experience is valid at all. The student should be able to adequately present the appropriateness of recognizing his or her volunteer experience toward academic degrees.

The transferability of volunteer work to an academic setting leading to further education, a degree, or a profession, is an exciting new dimension and by-product of volunteerism. It recognizes and adds further credibility to the important jobs carried out by volunteers and the responsibilities they assume. It further documents that the 'learning by doing' process is, in fact, a valuable educational experience.

As a result of the study findings, the following suggestions are made for follow-up action:

1. The Governor's Office of Volunteer Service should maintain contact with institutional members of CAEL, and especially with Metropolitan State University and the University of Minnesota, and should participate in CAEL activities in order to provide information and assistance to volunteers in the assessment of experiential learning for admission requirements and degree attainment.
2. Since a volunteer's activity and learning must be evaluated by faculty, the volunteer work experience should be appropriately documented. Information and educational opportunities should be made available to volunteers, volunteer administrators and agency staff to assist them in:
 - a. keeping records that document volunteer experience and skills developed;
 - b. translating the skills developed in volunteer work to competencies for academic credit; and
 - c. preparing functional resumes based on volunteer work.

3. Information and assistance should be made available to admission committees and faculties of universities and colleges to increase their understanding of the many areas of volunteer work, the kinds of skills and knowledges volunteers gain and how these may relate to the student's field of study.

For copies of the full report, or further information, contact:

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