

Using Volunteers in a College Program

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INTRODUCTION

Society's organizations and institutions agree that volunteers provide invaluable services. In public schools, for example, volunteers help children with their reading and arithmetic while their teachers are with other students. Volunteers, therefore, save institutions time and money while providing services that might not otherwise be available. But while it is common to see them in public schools and adult literacy programs, it is rare to see volunteers in institutions of higher learning. Volunteers, therefore, are an untapped and valuable resource for colleges and universities.

Volunteerism at a Small College

Beaver College, a small liberal arts college in suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, like most colleges, has had little experience with volunteers. Until recently, volunteers were usually alumni who helped with fund raising or recruiting activities. However, in the fall of 1981, I began to use volunteers to design and manage a non-credit program for the community.

For a minimal fee, the College had been permitting men and women over 62 to audit (sit in on) classes, with verbal participation at the discretion of the instructor. The number of auditors had grown steadily; their enjoyment of the experience was evidenced by many positive comments and letters. The only negatives were that some auditors had already taken all the courses open to them and wanted the chance to take other classes; and they wished the opportunity to participate more fully in class discussion.

Beaver administrators were supportive of the auditing program because while

the income generated was small, the program expenses were minimal and the free publicity in the community was a bonus. Therefore, when I suggested that there might be a community interest in an additional program for senior citizens, I was told to pursue the idea. Because of budgetary constraints, however, I was cautioned that if I started a new program, it must be self-supporting from its inception.

Undaunted by this qualified mandate, I decided to pursue the matter further and worry about financing a program later. To be certain I had an audience and to get some ideas about the direction the program might take, I mailed a questionnaire to the 150 senior citizens who had, in the past, audited Beaver College courses. In the questionnaire, I asked for demographic data, names of courses audited, and opinions about a possible program. While the response rate was only 35%, 92% of the people who completed the forms were interested in attending a non-credit daytime program at Beaver College.

The questionnaires proved to be an invaluable source of information. They contained suggestions about the kind of courses people were interested in taking and potential volunteers to help me start a program. From the respondents, I selected 15 men and women who, based on their past business, professional, and volunteer experiences, appeared to have the backgrounds to help develop an educational program.

I invited these men and women to attend a coffee-discussion; all but two of the 15 attended. At the meeting, I shared the results of the questionnaires; the attendees were very excited about the idea

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of a college-level non-credit program. It was decided to "test the waters," as one retired business executive said, by offering a summer mini-series. The rest of this first session was devoted to generating ideas for courses and instructors. I told them that Beaver was unable to help with program expenses. Undismayed, the group agreed that if they shared the work, the only program expenses would be faculty salaries and brochures, both of which could be paid for with the tuition collected.

This group of senior citizens, which named itself the Advisory Group, met frequently during the next three months to plan the mini-series, selecting and staffing five courses and writing publicity and a brochure. Sometimes they worked as a whole; other times they worked in committees. At this time, no formal committee structure was established. After the final trial class had met, the group evaluated the series and determined that it had paid its way. They decided unanimously to continue but expand the non-credit program which they named Community Scholars, offering liberal arts courses taught, whenever possible, by Beaver faculty.

Through the summer, the Advisory Group met to plan the first fall semester. On recommendation of the original members, a few new people were added to the Advisory Group, making a total of eighteen. As the group enlarged, I guided its members to determine the different tasks and develop a committee structure. The Advisory Group decided that each committee should have a chair who is a member of the Advisory Group but that non-advisory people could serve on committees. My role as program director was advisor, mediator, and college-policy representative.

At the time of this writing, Community Scholars is completing its sixth year. Each fall and spring, approximately fifteen courses are offered. Courses range from "The Wonderful World of Ancient Greece and Rome" and "Shakespeare: Humanistic Ideal of the Renaissance" to "Update on Developments in Psychology" and "Picasso . . . Picasso . . . Picasso." Although organized and designed by senior citizens, low-cost courses are open to men

and women in the community regardless of age. Inexpensive trips and free concerts round out the program.

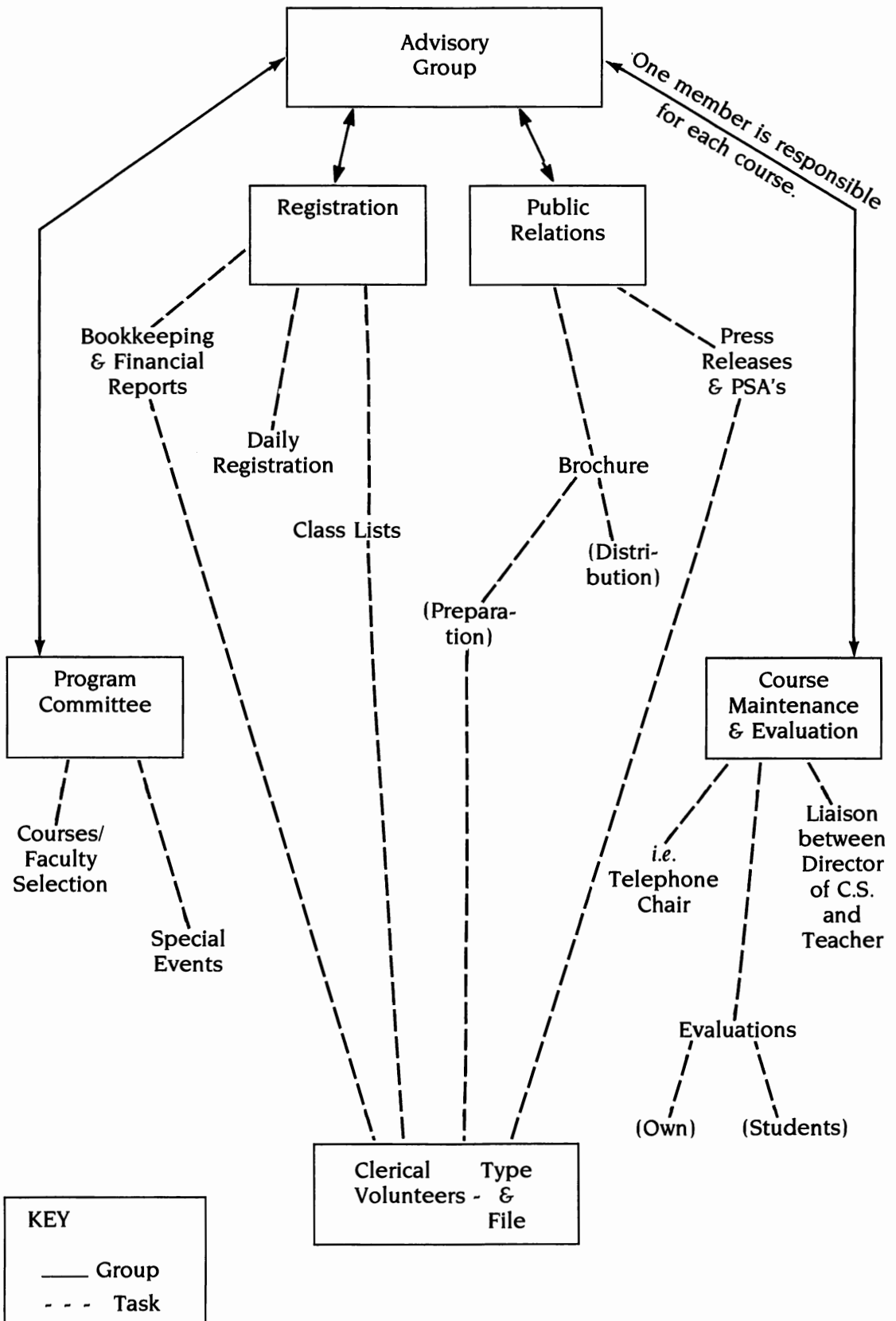
The Advisory Group, composed exclusively of volunteers, continues to be the program planners and implementers. It meets at regular intervals, usually once a month, to plan, share committee reports, evaluate courses and instructors, and participate in long-range planning activities. Committees met when necessary, frequently evaluating their procedures to help them become more efficient and effective. Once each semester, the need for volunteers is advertised in the Community Scholars' newsletter. As a result, the number of volunteers has grown; the Advisory Group now stays at twenty.

Because of the work of the volunteers, Community Scholars has been able to operate on a low-cost budget. The only paid employee is its part-time director and a student-helper. Other costs include instructors' salaries, layout and printing of the brochure, postage, and overhead. Each course generates sufficient tuition to cover the instructor's salary or it is cancelled. Most courses generate a surplus which, combined with money from a variety of fund-raising activities, helps Community Scholars be self-sufficient.

The volunteer system has been responsible for the rapid growth of Community Scholars. The members of the Advisory Group and its committees are typical of the people in the community who enroll in the courses. They not only know the interests of others in their age group but also register for courses themselves and bring their friends, spouses, and relatives. In the six years since its inception, the number of program participants has grown from fifty to five hundred; seldom, if ever, is a course cancelled for lack of enrollment—a record few programs can show.

Responsible and hardworking, the volunteers freely give their time and energy. There are, however, a few vital ingredients that have made the system function effectively. Primarily, Community Scholars' Advisory Group has had the autonomy to make the important decisions. As the College's representative, it is the director's role to offer advice about relevant college policies and procedures; members of the

COMMITTEE STRUCTURE – COMMUNITY SCHOLARS



Advisory Group function as decision-makers rather than as advisors.

Another important ingredient in the successful operation of this volunteer system is the decision-making process used. Decisions come from a consensus. While discussions can get heated at times, Advisory Group members know that ultimately a vote will be taken and the majority opinion will hold.

The availability of information is another important factor in the day-by-day operation of the volunteer system. Committee members need to understand their functions, responsibilities, and time lines. Advisory Group members need to have available to them data about the program and the college to help them make decisions. Therefore, it is the responsibility of Community Scholars' director to provide information and guidance, as requested. Full financial reporting provides important information that the Advisory Group needs if it is to be able to make decisions about the program's future.

Finally, as with all programs that use volunteers, all volunteers are recognized for their efforts and dedication. Volunteers are thanked frequently for their contributions to Community Scholars with thank you notes, individual recognition at meetings, volunteer luncheons, special events (concerts and trips), and mention in the newsletter.

There are some difficulties that have arisen with a program that depends too heavily on senior citizen volunteers. Bad weather disrupts meetings; errors result from weakened hearing and vision; arguments arise because of inflexibility or outspokenness. Several members have left the Advisory Group because of illness or death. But an important lesson was learned as several key Advisory Group members were no longer active participants and I left Community Scholars after four years as director: a strong group of dedicated volunteers can maintain a strong program.

The benefits of the Community Scholars' volunteer program have greatly outweighed the difficulties. The volunteers have had an opportunity to use their talents and intelligence in a life period not usually associated with opportunities for

innovation. They are valued and needed, for without the senior citizens who volunteer, Community Scholars could not function. The program's participants enjoy a college-level program that meets at convenient times and locations. They are able to participate in a learning experience planned by their peers without having to take exams or write papers. And lastly, Community Scholars benefits Beaver College. The community has seen that Beaver College is committed to lifelong learning; the younger students have learned to appreciate the vitality of the older student; and the visibility and creativity of the institution have expanded. None of these benefits would have been possible without volunteerism.

A POST SCRIPT

If my description of how a group of senior citizen volunteers created a successful program has motivated you to consider a similar program, let me discourage you. Community Scholars was successful because the volunteers designed the program they wanted. I would suggest that you do not start with an outline for a program and look for interested people to help you develop it. Instead, I recommend that you look for a group of interesting people and let them determine what kind of program they want.

Every community is different. A program of liberal arts courses like Community Scholars, while appealing to you or your institution, might not be what your community wants. Seek out representatives of the community and let them determine what direction a program should take. Volunteers are easier to attract and maintain if they work with something they want.