

# **Forming a Partnership with Education: Corporate Volunteers and the Volunteer Center**

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## **BACKGROUND**

According to the authors of *A New Competitive Edge: Volunteers from the Workplace*,<sup>1</sup> American companies rank education as their primary volunteer involvement. The Conference Board, in a 1985 report, cites education as the second most pressing issue of concern (following local economic development) of the business community. In the Northeast, the region in which the project described here was conducted, concern for elementary and secondary education is actually ranked first. It is not surprising then that corporate community affairs representatives should have succeeded in teaming up with a local Board of Education and a Voluntary Action Center to obtain federal money in support of a business-education partnership project.<sup>2</sup>

The Corporate Volunteers of New York (CVNY), in consultation with the Mayor's Voluntary Action Center (MCAV) initiated the concept of the project and created the partnership by recruiting the participation of the New York City Board of Education. Motivation to begin the project stemmed from the experiences of individuals within CVNY member companies who had found that high school interns and job applicants had an unrealistic view of the world of work and were ill-prepared to participate successfully. There was some indication that students' misconceptions were attributable to their teachers' misinformation. A proposal was submitted to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that outlined four project objectives:

1. to provide a training experience for teachers and guidance counselors in

the current world of work, especially in areas which offer entry-level employment for high school graduates;

2. to offer corporations and corporate volunteers an opportunity to become directly and personally involved in preparing teachers and their students for the modern work environment;
3. to utilize the resources of the Mayor's Voluntary Action Center, the Corporate Volunteer network and the New York City Board of Education to reach out to high schools in target areas in all five New York City boroughs;
4. to acquaint participating youth with volunteer opportunities that would help them develop employment-related skills.

The proposal was accepted and a grant of \$79,963 was awarded to the partnership to conduct a one-year demonstration project. A project director and secretary were hired as full-time employees of the project.

From April through November, 1986, the project succeeded in training nearly 100 high school faculty from seventeen public high schools. The "Orientation to Entry-Level Jobs in Business Settings" was conducted ten times during that period at seven corporate worksites and two New York City government agencies (one company repeated the workshop). During each workshop corporate personnel recruiters spoke to high school faculty about current hiring procedures, managers discussed their departments' employment needs (specific skills and appropriate work attitudes, dress, and

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speech), and entry-level employees were observed working with the latest in office technology.

## PARTNERSHIP COMPONENTS

The project was conceived as a joint activity of the thirty-four-member CVNY in collaboration with the New York City Board of Education and the Mayor's Voluntary Action Center. This provided the project director with two ready-made constituencies from which to recruit participants—a network of corporations to host teacher workshops and an urban school system composed of 111 high schools. Inherent in such a collaboration was the assumption that both constituencies had agreed to devote themselves to the successful implementation of the project within the one-year timeframe, but it was an assumption that had to be clarified and reinforced as the project proceeded.

The school system, and specifically the Office of Career and Occupational Education, was anxious to expand its network of linkages with business and industry as part of its responsibilities to provide career orientation and preparation to New York City high school students. The Office was also charged with the provision of staff development opportunities especially in those areas related to innovative career and occupational practices. Since New York is a city with a fast-growing service industry (*New York Times*, 12/4/86), and with an equally fast-growing mismatch of entry-level jobs to high school graduate job candidates, the Office of Career and Occupational Education seized upon any opportunity to contribute to the closing of the gap.

Early on in the project, the Office identified ten high schools in target areas that it felt could benefit from exposure to the business world. The office notified the principals of each of the schools that they had been selected to participate in the project and requested that eight faculty be chosen from pre-determined subject areas to be released for an on-site corporate visit. Most principals endorsed the project and moved immediately to appoint faculty representatives.

The corporations, on the other hand, were not able to act in such a united fashion primarily because, as independent

businesses, each had its own community affairs agenda. Some ranked education as an issue of primary concern, especially if they were closely linked to the local community as in the case of banks or the telephone company. Others did not consider local educational concerns to be of great importance. Consequently, although CVNY served as the "corporate" body which was co-sponsoring the project, it could not function in the role of centralized power of authority and responsibility in the same way the Board of Education's Office of Career and Occupational Education could. The CVNY executive committee could recommend and encourage corporate involvement in the project but had no prerogative to mandate participation.

The role of the Voluntary Action Center was to house the project director and any other project staff, serve as a conduit for the federal funds, provide back-up support (both human and technical), and assure the inclusion of a component on student volunteerism in the project plan.

## INITIAL STEPS

Within the first month of the project the Board of Education identified the participating schools which in turn selected appropriate faculty for worksite visits and Advisory Council representation. However, another two months passed before commitments were received from any of the CVNY's member companies. During that time, the project director made presentations at CVNY's monthly meetings, sent mailings to all CVNY members, and followed the mailings with phone calls.

Several companies expressed interest in the goals of the project, but were still reluctant to step forward. This reluctance may have stemmed from a lack of understanding concerning the roles and responsibilities of the corporate hosts. Although the goals of the project were clear—to provide a training experience for educators, to offer corporations a chance to have an impact on career preparation, and to acquaint students with volunteer opportunities—by what means the goals were to be achieved was still undecided. Questions concerning specifics remained unanswered: how long would the teachers' visit be, how many

would come, which school(s) would they come from, what would be the topics of discussion, who would speak to the teachers?

In order to help corporate hosts visualize their roles and responsibilities, the project director drafted Guidelines for Hosting (see Appendix) which identified the workshop audience, outlined its objectives, described the setting, and suggested a schedule for the day. The guidelines also recommended various resources that were available to the corporate host including films and videos, in-house human resources, and speakers from MVAC.

At the same time the guidelines were distributed, a letter was also sent to solicit commitments. The letter included a series of deadlines that were meant to assist corporations in planning their workshop. The first deadline was to obtain approval from a supervisor to proceed with the project. Subsequent deadlines instructed corporate hosts to identify employees who could participate in the workshop, schedule a date for the workshop, make logistical arrangements, finalize activities, conduct the workshop, and participate in follow-up and evaluation.

Once the specifics were laid out and corporate hosts had an outline they could follow and adapt to their particular situation, it became easier for them to visualize its implementation. By the end of February (four months after the project was begun), three of the CVNY members had agreed to hold a workshop. They each set a date for late April which gave them enough time to plan but which did not consign the workshop to the final busy weeks of the school term. The project director oversaw the development of each workshop can plan exercising a kind of "quality control" to make sure that each included the essentials that had been identified by corporate and school personnel.

The three companies conducted their workshops in the spring and were prepared by early summer to share their experiences with their colleagues. During a June meeting, they presented their planning and implementation strategies to other CVNY members and several invited

guests. That same day six companies and two city agencies agreed to hold fall workshops. Ultimately five companies executed their plans. One company was subject to a strike and was unable to implement a workshop.

#### DEPARTURE FROM ORIGINAL PROPOSAL

At this point, it is important to note that all corporate interest focussed on workshops for high school faculty even though the proposal had made provision for visits by students. The CVNY/MVAC team that had written the proposal had envisioned a one-to-one career shadowing experience for selected students. Each of the eight teachers invited to the workshops would choose up to five students who would be paired with corporate mentors. In other words, the corporations would have to find 400 employees who could take the better part of a day to show a young student around the company.

The corporations objected to the student visits because the number of young people who would need to be accommodated for a day, possibly as many as forty per corporate worksite, was potentially disruptive to the work environment. They were quite sure, in some cases, they they could not garner support for such an activity.

It was, thus, agreed that the project would concentrate on providing a professional development experience for teachers and guidance counselors. This focus was never a result of a clear-cut decision to choose teacher visits over student visits. Rather, it seemed to develop as a result of concerns voiced by the corporations about the student visits and their subsequent embrace of the teacher visits as the component they could execute successfully. In reality, two corporations did follow up teacher visits by inviting back several teachers with a handful of students. The student visit then took on the shape of the original teacher visit rather than the individual career shadowing originally proposed.

Although it appeared as though the student component had been practically eliminated from the project, it had, in reality, only been altered. Students did not go in great numbers to company worksites

but over 500 of them heard about career preparation as a result of their teachers' participation.

Each workshop included a half-hour presentation by MVAC's Coordinator of Recruitment and Training whose special assignment is student volunteerism. Her presentation centered on the benefits of volunteering, most notably: career exploration, skill development, acquaintance with potential job references, and entrance into a network of possible job opportunities. Many teachers and guidance counselors felt their students, coming from economically depressed areas of the city, had to have paying jobs which would limit their interest in and acceptance of volunteer work. Nevertheless, a few saw the importance of a volunteer assignment and invited the MVAC Coordinator to speak to their classes.

One very enthusiastic business education teacher enlisted the support of her assistant principal who in turn went to the Parents' Association to inform parents of this opportunity for their children to get work experience. Another arranged for her class to be interviewed for volunteer jobs in a city agency which gave them all the interview experience. MVAC has reported an increase in requests and job placements from students from the high schools the coordinator visited.

Once the first three corporations had decided to conduct a teacher workshop, work began on the logistics. Each of the three, McGraw-Hill, Honeywell, and IBM, agreed to host teachers from one or several of the schools that had been selected by the Board of Education, but each was also interested in involving teachers from schools with which they already had a working relationship. McGraw-Hill and IBM had adopted schools that were not on the Board of Education list and invited teachers from those schools. Honeywell had a well-developed job training program for students and wanted to include several teachers of the students with whom they were working.

Initially, including teachers from schools other than those selected by the Board of Education posed a budgetary problem for the project director. The grant had allocated approximately 15% of its budget to reimburse the schools for

substitutes who would be hired to cover the classes of those teachers released to attend the corporate workshops. Without knowing how extensively this reimbursement money would be requested by the schools, the director was reluctant to overcommit the funds by including schools that were not part of the Board of Education selection. In this initial phase, the corporations agreed to cover the expenses of the schools they invited.

As it turned out, the demand for reimbursement was not heavy. When guidance counselors, assistant principals, or program coordinators were included in the group that made the corporate visit, requests for substitute reimbursements were minimal. Guidance counselors have no classes to be covered and other personnel may have only one or two classes. In addition, some schools simply did not take advantage of the reimbursement offer, for reasons unknown at this time to the project director. Later in the project, the director was able to offer reimbursement to any schools invited to participate.

The schools themselves had some problems with the project as originally conceived. Eight educators were to be selected from each of ten schools (two from guidance, two from special education, etc.) and invited to attend a corporate workshop. In only one instance was a principal able to release eight faculty members on one day. One principal, in fact, did not want to release anyone on a school day. He preferred that faculty participate in any outside staff development activity on their own time which would have restricted the workshops to holiday periods. Following consultation with the Office of Career and Occupational Education, he agreed to release teachers on school days provided only two were released at a time.

Most schools agreed to between two and four faculty to be released on any given day. This meant that the original plan to match one school with one corporation had to be revised (except in the case of the Equitable Life Assurance Company which had adopted a school in Queens; the principal there agreed to release all eight participants on the same day). The director made every effort to match corporations with schools in which

they had an interest and then added faculty from additional schools. This resulted in a mix of from two to five schools represented at each corporate workshop. Ultimately, this mixture worked to the advantage of the project since faculty from different schools were able to share experiences across the boroughs.

### PLANNING THE WORKSHOPS

As mentioned earlier, momentum for the project accelerated once the first three corporations had successfully conducted their teacher workshops in April, 1986. Their experiences provided proof that the workshop could be planned and implemented with very little effort. The work involved recruiting presenters from other departments or divisions since the coordinators of the workshops found that they needed people from personnel to explain application, interviewing, and hiring procedures; trainers to share techniques they used in training entry-level employees; or line managers to discuss their specific departmental needs.

Coordinators also found that it was beneficial for faculty to speak with high school work-study students, employees who were recently hired out of high school, or employees who had started in entry-level positions and had been promoted several times. All of this required some investigatory work on the part of the coordinators and in some cases asking favors of people outside their own departments. However, most agreed that it was not as much work as they had anticipated and frequently resulted in more open communication between departments and in unexpected discoveries, such as the realization that the personnel department regularly conducted on-site tours and was prepared with a great deal of information and answers to questions.

Assisting the second group of workshop hosts, five corporations and two New York City government agencies, to plan their day's activities was subsequently a much easier task. The experience of the first three companies served to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the corporate host coordinators and the project director, to verify the usefulness (with a few alterations) of the workshop guidelines,

and to obtain preliminary feed-back from faculty participants.

### EVALUATION

Plans for a final evaluation of the project took shape early in the fall of 1986 as the second round of workshops commenced. A formal evaluation was seen as important primarily for purposes of re-funding, and so an outside evaluation team, the Academy for Educational Development, was hired to design and implement an evaluation plan. Funds for an evaluation had not been initially included in the budget proposal, but were available under the line which had been allocated for substitute teacher reimbursement. It was decided that hiring an experienced reputable evaluation team was a legitimate use of some of the remaining funds.

As it turned out, the decision to use an external evaluation team proved sound. Following participation in one of the fall workshops, the team developed two questionnaires which were distributed among corporate hosts and school participants, respectively. The questionnaires elicited information about the usefulness of the workshops to all involved, the potential for further business/school cooperation, the transferability of learning from worksite to classroom, and the attitude changes that may have occurred as a result of the interaction between business people and educators. Responses to the questionnaires were collected by representatives in each corporation and school and discussed at a day-long evaluation session attended by the representatives and conducted by the evaluation team.

The result was a report submitted by the evaluation team at the end of the project which summarized the discussions at the evaluation session, synthesized discussion summaries with information collected from the questionnaires, and made recommendations for continuing the project. As hoped, the evaluation report was an impartial assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the project as it had been piloted. Fortunately, its recommendations coincided with many of the unsubstantiated beliefs that the par-

ticipants had developed over the months about the validity of this type of staff development activity. The report could thus be used to promote the project's continuance in specific ways that the participants themselves deemed necessary, beneficial, and workable.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REPLICATION

The experiences of the participants during the demonstration phase of the Corporate Volunteer Involvement Project suggest several features which may contribute to successful replication of the model:

1. Enlist participation of both corporate hosts and visiting teachers with the aid of a model plan, preferably in writing. The plan should include as many specifics as possible so that participants know from the start what they are expected to do and what they can expect to gain from participation.
2. Appoint contact people in both company and school who will serve as liaisons to superiors (department directors, principals), take on the responsibility of seeing that peers are prepared for the workshop, and be available following the workshop for evaluation activities and other follow-up that develops.
3. Budget for reimbursement of substitutes realizing that some schools will not need full reimbursement. Funds may later be directed to follow-up activities that stretch the life of the program.
4. Enlist the support of a good external evaluation team which can objectively assess workshop outcomes and lend credibility to your claims of success.
5. If a whole school system is involved rather than one single high school, see that a project director is hired to coordinate workshop schedules, recruit business participation, work with the evaluation team, assist with program development, and work on

promotion of the project within the community.

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Vissa, C., K. Allen, and S. Keller. *A New Competitive Edge: Volunteers From The Workplace*. Arlington, VA: Volunteer: The National Center, 1986, p. 186.

<sup>2</sup>The project described in this article is the recipient of a 1987 President's Volunteer Action Award Citation.

# Appendix

## Guidelines for Hosting

### Orientation to Entry-Level Jobs in Business Settings

#### AUDIENCE

High school faculty—guidance counselors, teachers of business subjects, coordinators of bilingual, special education, and cooperative work programs—10-15 in a group.

#### OBJECTIVES

- 1) to expose high school faculty to current business practices especially related to the entry-level jobs their students will be seeking;
- 2) to initiate a dialogue between the corporate sector and high school personnel;
- 3) to introduce high school personnel to volunteer opportunities for students that will enable them to explore career choices and develop job skills.

#### WORKSHOP SCHEDULE

One day-long session.

#### SETTING

Business worksite—conference room for presentations and discussions, whole site available for observation.

#### *Suggested Plan*

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| 9:00  | Welcome and introductions.   |
| 9:20  | Presentation by personnel recruiter of qualifications required for entry-level positions; application and interview procedures; current salaries and fringe benefits; opportunities for promotion; most common problems with poorly prepared applicants; and trends affecting future entry-level positions (computerization, sex equity).  |
| 10:20 | Break.   |
| 10:30 | Office skills trainer shares methods of training office personnel or panel of managers from different departments discusses specific entry-level employment needs.   |
| 11:30 | Discussion of student volunteerism. Invite speaker from the Mayor's Voluntary Action Center.   |
| 12:00 | Screening of films/videos produced for youth employment training (see Resources).  |
| 12:30 | Lunch with management.   |
| 1:30  | Tour of facility concentrating on areas where entry-level positions may be clustered. Discuss company policy regarding tardiness and absenteeism. Note standards of dress, manner, and speech at various stations. Introduce teachers to equipment the entry-level positions may use (word processors, duplicators, etc.). If possible, ask 2 or 3 people at various stations to discuss own background from high school graduation to present position. |

2:30 Open discussion: evaluation of day's program, optional second session at corporate site or at school, application to classroom, follow-up contact between school and corporation, etc.

3:30 End.

#### RESOURCES

In-house: personnel department, trainers, training films, volunteers, entry-level employees with good presentation skills.

Mayor's Voluntary Action Center, (212) 566-5956

Project Director, Kimerly Miller, will assist with design of program and speak about volunteer experience as work experience.

Coordinator of Recruitment and Training, Elyse Weisberg, will speak about student volunteer experience as work experience.

The Black Filmmaker Distribution Service, P.O. Box 315, Franklin Lakes, NJ 07417, (201) 891-8240, Get A Job film or video.

Metropolitan Life, Bruce Lentini, (212) 578-3737, or Time, Inc., Taiga Ermansons, (212) 484-1453 for a copy of the *Working* video.

Creative Arts Team, Lynda Zimmerman, Executive Director, (212) 598-2360, for *Youth Employment Video Series*.