

Young Volunteers in Action: A High School Community Service Education and Placement Model

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Young Volunteers in Action is a successful education and placement program for Rhode Island high school students. It is a part of the comprehensive services of Volunteers in Action, a statewide voluntary action center. After six years of trial, the program was formalized in 1987. The goal is to involve more young people in community service or, at least, to make them more aware of the concept. At the same time, a new source of volunteers is made available to Rhode Island public and private nonprofit agencies.

BACKGROUND

Although the 1985 Gallup Poll indicated that 52% of the population of the United States between 14 and 17 years of age volunteered, Volunteers in Action statistics for 1984 showed that only 14% of our placements were in that age group. Therefore, we concluded that the majority of the student volunteers were involved on an informal basis, helping family or friends, or were engaged in one-time or short term activities, often under the auspices of an organized group such as the Scouts or church. In fact, teens were volunteering but still represented an untapped resource for most of the ongoing programs using our recruitment services.

A study of federal support to nonprofit agencies in Rhode Island in fiscal year 1981-1982 had substantiated what most of us already knew—area agencies had experienced significant cutbacks in funding and increased demand for services. During that period, the level of government support had dropped 8.8% compared to a national drop of 6.3%. At the same time, 40% of Rhode Island nonprofits were facing increased demand for

service. Nonprofit agencies were painfully coping with these conditions and needed more volunteers to supplement overburdened staff. By necessity, volunteer coordinators were becoming more flexible in designing their assignments, both in terms of hours and job requirements. Many were quickly realizing that an eighteenth birthday did not make the difference between an acceptable and an unacceptable volunteer.

It was also felt that there were several factors in the Rhode Island economic and political environment which could provide incentive for student volunteer programs. In 60% of the Rhode Island cities and towns, the actual school budget is subject to voter approval at a town meeting. Voter support of the school budget, or school committee members proposing it, would seem to indicate approval of what the students are learning and doing in the community. If the students are seen as exercising some community responsibility, their image and that of the school should be improved. Perhaps the taxpayers might not feel any better about increasing budgets and taxes but they would not feel any worse.

Foundation reports, professional journals, and newspaper articles were emphasizing that all learning does not take place in the classroom. Although few in number, ongoing student community service programs in Rhode Island were receiving very favorable publicity. Credibility was improving.

The Roman Catholic Church also helped pave the way for a student program. Rhode Island is a predominantly Roman Catholic state, and the Church has had community service as part of its con-

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firmation requirement for 20 years. Most confirmation leaders had involved their classes in projects in the community as well as within the church. Thus many high school students already had some exposure to a more broadly based volunteerism.

Most importantly for the initiation of the program, the State of Rhode Island provided seed money for development, allowing staff time to work out some of the early problems.

Volunteers in Action had always made a strong commitment to student volunteers, but the time was right to launch a more formal program.

PHILOSOPHY

The Young Volunteers in Action program is based on the belief that altruism needs a heavy infusion of pragmatism. Students need to know what personal benefits they can get from volunteering—career exploration, job experience, self-confidence, social skills, community awareness and recognition, letters of recommendation and new contacts. In the words of a South Brunswick (NJ) High School student quoted in the 1987 Carnegie Foundation Special Report, *Student Service*: "In any experience, the kids need to get something out of it." Our program was designed to help students understand what a volunteer job could mean for them.

Another basic premise of the program is that each student should be volunteering for a unique reason or reasons which must be carefully considered in selecting placement. Although this is true of all volunteer placements, encouraging greater self-awareness and goal direction often requires more skill, understanding, and patience on the part of those interviewing students. Before committing time and effort, students need careful guidance as they match their needs with those of the community.

The program also requires that agencies using students provide the best possible program for the growth of the volunteer. Certain basic program principles, training and supervision most especially, are necessary to provide a satisfactory experience. Students have less experience

and often need more structure in their assignments. They also tend to be less confident and need more support and recognition. Using students in a volunteer program requires extra time and effort, and unless the agency can give this to students they are not encouraged to become involved.

PROGRAM

The format of the program is quite simple. First, convince high school administrators that their schools can benefit from community involvement and then also convince the students. Second, provide those students who can make a volunteer commitment with the best possible placement to meet their needs and provide a greater awareness of the value of community service to those students who can't commit to volunteering.

School principals are contacted and, if they are receptive, a volunteer awareness and recruiting program is arranged for a school assembly, a classroom, or small group setting.

The surest way to get students to listen to the "pitch" is to have their classmates discuss their own volunteer experiences. In each school, at least four students who volunteer and are willing to talk about their placements are identified with the help of the faculty. In an informal panel presentation they discuss their particular job, what was learned from the placement, and how it met their personal needs. Being on the panel can be quite intimidating for students, especially when the program is done in a school assembly. The Young Volunteers in Action staff gives considerable guidance and support in preparing the students and meets with them to talk about the content and presentation of the material.

The panel is moderated by a staff member who also discusses volunteer opportunities in the particular community and arranges to interview students who are interested in a placement. The interview takes place in the school or the local Volunteers in Action office.

However, before any school program is done, selected agencies in the area are carefully screened and a site visit is made to determine suitability for student place-

ments. Certain criteria are used for the determination:

- Ease of access—Agency is on a bus route or within walking distance of school. Protected parking and walking if the assignment is after dark.
- Job descriptions—Well structured and detailed. Interesting and diverse assignments, not the jobs that adults won't do.
- Peer involvement—Opportunities to meet other students.
- Training and supervision—Staff available to train students and a designated supervisor available for them to report to on a regular basis.
- Volunteer/Staff Relationships—Enthusiastic staff that likes working with young people and is not too busy to provide adequate support.
- Recognition—Reassurance that the student is doing the job well. A letter for his/her job or college file.

Agency volunteer coordinators are called every three months to check on the progress of individual students and the number of hours they have contributed.

For those students who are placed, the Young Volunteers in Action program provides tangible rewards. They can be reimbursed for travel expenses, they are covered by liability insurance while on the job, they receive sweatshirts and certificates after 20 hours of service, and they're invited to a yearly recognition event. These incentives were made possible by a grant from the federal agency, ACTION. The students are also called on a regular basis by Young Volunteers in Action staff to check progress and offer assistance with any problems.

RESULTS

In 1987 the peer presentation program was given in five schools with a cumulative audience of approximately 500 students. In the first year of the formalized Young Volunteers in Action program 193 teens were interviewed and 105 were placed. The 88 students who were not placed did not make the agency contact. The students who did volunteer con-

buted 2400 hours of community service.

One hundred agencies were selected for referrals. Students were placed in 40 of them.

Both students and agencies expressed general satisfaction with the program. However, several students reported that their volunteer jobs were not what had been described. Four agencies complained about students terminating without notice. Two complained of a lack of dependability and one of a poor performance.

Volunteers in Action, the State of Rhode Island, and ACTION have been very satisfied with the program. Although the number of volunteers is small, the quality and quantity of contribution is high. Staff time and commitment have been well spent.

DISCUSSION

The importance of carefully interviewing the prospective volunteer cannot be emphasized too strongly. Aside from helping students to articulate their reasons for wanting to volunteer, great care must be exercised to help them work out the logistics of a placement. Aside from academic and extra-curricular activities, an increasing number of students have after school jobs. They attempt to fit a volunteer job where none can fit. Many also have transportation problems and are counting on busy parents to get them to an assignment. Some are from families where this is an impossibility or where parents are not supportive. Their enthusiasm sometimes clouds their common sense and they have to be discouraged—for the time being.

The interview also affords an excellent opportunity to emphasize the need for dependability and confidentiality. Many students have had little job experience and do not realize the importance of these factors. Care in interviewing students eliminates many potential problems.

The students like particular placements; hospitals are the first choice followed by day care centers, community centers, libraries, and environmental agencies. This information is very important to the Young Volunteers in Action

program which serves the entire state. Now agencies can be specifically targeted for participation with more assurance that students will actually be recruited for their volunteer programs. This cuts down on staff time needed for site visits and results in better relationships with participating agencies.

Young Volunteers in Action has made some Rhode Island schools more aware of the importance of community service as a part of the learning process. Favorable publicity has resulted in schools calling Young Volunteers in Action to participate. Administrators have also been encouraged to consider giving academic credit to students who choose to participate. Thus far, this has not happened, but two schools, one public and one private, are giving this idea serious consideration.

PROBLEMS

School contacts are very difficult to make. In developing and refining the program over six years, it has been impossible to introduce the program in one-third of the schools which have been approached. Without a personal contact, whether it be teacher, parent, or fellow staff member, it is almost impossible to gain access to the proper school administrators. They are busy and feel that the program would be added work for themselves and their faculty. Experience has shown that the program always needs the approval of the principal and that it saves time if this is where the original contact is made. If approval is gained, the principal is encouraged to designate a classroom or guidance faculty member to work out the details, specifically making the physical arrangements and helping select the students for the peer presentation.

The placement rate, generally about 50%, has been disappointing in view of the amount of time spent by staff interviewing the students and selecting appropriate placements. However, this placement percentage compares favorably with that of the whole agency. Many students leave our interview full of enthusiasm, yet never make the agency contact. Follow-up has shown that these students go home and consider the commitment; they simply cannot make the hours

available or cannot arrange the transportation. Perhaps at some later time these students will be able to volunteer and will remember that there is an agency available to help them find suitable placement.

Overenthusiasm causes some students to commit themselves to too many hours and rapid burn-out. Students are encouraged to start slowly and increase their hours if their schedule permits. The abrupt termination of some volunteers can be because of this factor. The students find it difficult to explain their scheduling problems to the supervisors and sometimes leave without notice. This problem is now being directly addressed in the interview process. Role playing helps students to express themselves more effectively should a problem arise.

Some students lack the confidence to try an assignment without peer support. When this is a factor, an attempt is made to also match them up with another student from their school. However, every effort is made to make sure that both students have a commitment to the placement and not just to each other.

Some students make short term commitments, less than 15 hours. They are generally fulfilling class or confirmation requirements. This may also be all the time the student has available. These placements have merit in that some jobs, especially one-time group projects, can be done. There is exposure to the community but less chance for individual growth. Agencies participating in the Young Volunteers in Action program simply do not have time to do the necessary training for short term commitments. Teachers and churches are encouraged to increase their requirements to at least 20 hours and students are encouraged to continue in their placement after the requirement is fulfilled. Agencies which have one-time group projects are asked to recruit their own volunteers, but Young Volunteers in Action staff suggests possible resources.

Agencies also present some problems, primarily caused by staff turnover. Staff seems to terminate as abruptly as volunteers, resulting in program inconsistency. We are frequently not notified of changes.

A conference will be held in 1989 for participating agencies in an effort to more thoroughly familiarize coordinators with the Young Volunteers in Action program and hopefully improve communications.

CONCLUSION

Young Volunteers in Action is really an educational program with a community service component. The program's sponsors would like to see this component grow to its full potential but are not very optimistic unless students are offered greater incentive within their own schools. There are simply too many demands on their time and interests. Community service must be enhanced to give it a competitive edge.

School administrators can make community service programs effective by offering credit for involvement. This can take the form of a specific course or credit for volunteer work. It does take time, effort, and risk to develop a successful program, but it has been done in schools where the administration recognizes the significance of community service in the learning process. Until there is more open recognition of what student involvement can do for the individual, the school's public image, and the community, there will be reluctance to include it in the curriculum; until it can be, students will continue to struggle to find the time and energy to get involved. Young Volunteers in Action is committed to the development of a successful model which can be used to broaden the acceptance of student community service and its inclusion in the high school curriculum.

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