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White Collarist Volunteerism

09.16.10 | 6 Comments

I came across a PDF put out by the Corporation for National & Community Service called “[The New Volunteer Workforce](#).” It’s a good, quick take on the current conventional wisdom on nonprofit volunteer management. It’s worth the read.

But it seems to make several assumptions that I question, some of which I’m running into elsewhere in “volunteer management literature”:

1. 66% annual retention of volunteers is a failure.
2. White collar professionals should stay “in class” when volunteering; they should not do work that doesn’t make use of their education and training. (So much for church choirs.)
3. The volunteerism of white collar professionals is more valuable than the volunteerism of other kinds of workers.
4. If a dollar value is not formally attached to each volunteer’s efforts, organizations do not value their volunteers.
5. Volunteer managers are not professional in their work unless they have formal education in volunteer management.
6. Volunteer management must be professionalized in order to be successful.
7. Generation X is not a promising pool of potential volunteers compared to Boomers and Millennials.
8. Even though the article acknowledges that more volunteers choose to serve in religious communities more than in any other type of organization, it uses a professionalized nonprofit management model as the only lens, not asking why religious volunteerism is so much more successful than its own model and modeling itself after that.

My responses:

1. Volunteer retention can almost always be improved, and sometimes should be, but at some point increasing volunteer retention starts to cost more than its costs to find new volunteers. I’d like to that point acknowledged, and also see something about how to know when you’re at that point and what to do about it. There’s no point in trying to squeeze blood out of a turnip.
2. I won’t even address the clear white collarism here. I’ll just point out that some white collar professionals want nothing to do with their professional skill set when they volunteer. And whatever you do for a living, it can be good do something completely different when you volunteer.
3. More white collarism here. Why isn’t there any talk of finding interesting volunteer roles for, say, retail workers that makes use of the skill sets they use all week at work?
4. I can see how it could be helpful to know this dollar amount, but it’s certainly not necessary.
5. Must we create masters degrees for everything? I’m sure it’s often helpful to send a couple of staff to a weekend volunteer management training conference, but it’s also possible that someone with no formal training in volunteer management would know their stuff so well that those sorts of conferences would be useless for them. When people started teaching volunteer management for the first time, none of them had any formal training in it, and yet they felt they knew enough about it to teach others.
6. See response #5.
7. Obvious ageism.
8. I’m not saying religious communities can’t do a better job with volunteers; they often can. But they’re obviously doing something right. Let’s start with appreciation of what they’re already doing well instead of starting with the assumption that they don’t know what they’re doing and need to adopt the professionalized volunteer management model wholesale in order to succeed.

It’s great when a white collar professional who is good at their work and enjoys it volunteers some of their expertise. But let’s not set that up as the end-all, be-all of volunteerism. Or call people failures if they kept “only” two out of

three volunteer RE teachers/ushers/choir/committee members from last year. I think we owe each other more grace than that.

All groups starting to formally professionalize their job roles will learn to employ rhetoric that puts them on the same level as groups that have already professionalized themselves,¹ or even rhetoric that advocates on behalf of other professionalized groups, as it to say, “Hey, we’re on your side. Why don’t you be on our side too?” The article’s placement on a pedestal of the volunteer work of white collar professionals is a clear example of this. Let’s keep in mind how this sort of rhetoric benefits those trying to professionalize volunteer management and not give it an easy equation to a benefit to nonprofit organizations, even if the two will sometimes overlap.

1. I’m told this is one of the reasons why a seminary degree, for example, is now a Master of Divinity, not a Bachelor of Divinity as it once was in many schools. [👉]

6 Comments

- On 09.16.10 [Paul Oakley](#) wrote these pithy words:

Re your footnote:

Yeah, that problem is all over. Simple degree inflation is one side of the problem – which means that what people used to be qualified for with a HS diploma now requires a Bachelor’s degree, what used to require a Bachelor’s now requires a Master’s, and so on, at least some of the time also meaning that what you used to learn in a 4-year education you now need 6 years to achieve.

And then the degrees that used to be Bachelor’s-es were artificially upgraded to something more. The M.Div. is one example, to be sure, but the even more egregious one is the Juris Doctor (JD), which used to be a Bachelor of Laws. To this day, the Master of Laws degree is a higher degree than the Juris Doctor degree.

Which is another way of saying that credentials are meaningless without a helluva lot of additional context.

- On 09.23.10 [jacqueline](#) wrote these pithy words:

I have sat in seminars where a baby boomer said the same thing as #7. I walked out. I am so sick of being passed over because of my generations name – or some other reason. Granted, I don’t have a lot of love for the baby boomer generation as a whole.

- On 09.23.10 [Paul Oakley](#) wrote these pithy words:

What on earth, jacqueline?! You don’t have a lot of love for the bb generation as a whole? Does one ever have a lot of love for any generation? Or does it perhaps make more sense to decide whether we love or hate, like or dislike individuals rather than generations?

Or are you being facetious? (It is far from clear.)

- On 09.23.10 [chutney](#) wrote these pithy words:

I have all sorts of love for the WW2 generation and respect the Silent generation. But I’ve had my fill of Baby Boomer self-congratulation for years and years.

Considering people solely as individuals isn’t the only option open to us. It is possible to make correct judgments of groups of people, just as it’s possible to make incorrect judgments of groups of people. That may be a UU heresy, but it’s true all the same.

And Baby Boomers love being judged as a generation. I just judge them differently than they judge themselves.

- On 09.23.10 [Paul Oakley](#) wrote these pithy words:

This boomer doesn’t want to be judged as a boomer but as an individual. I accept my share of the collective guilt for evils we have not individually committed but from which we have received benefits. But those benefits are, so

far as I can see, not generally limited to those of some particular generation. If I have been weighed in the balance and found wanting, I assure you it is not because of the year when I was born.

- On 12.22.15 DCH wrote these pithy words:

Thanks for this perspective, Chutney. I feel you! Important and timely. It's important to address classism, ageism, and other bias in any field, but it can be particularly condescending when it happens in "helping" fields.

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