

PROFESSIONALIZATION OF VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION

By Mildred Katz

"It is always controversial," wrote Morris Cogan in 1955, "to try to define the word professional."¹ Since then the literature dealing with "profession," "professionalization," and "professional" has proliferated. Now, as then, there appears to be no general agreement on the meaning of these words. To avoid unproductive argument about words, I define *professionalization of volunteer administration as the process which gives us (the practitioners) competence, creativity, commitment and credibility*. Competence is based on knowledge, wisdom and skills derived from both academic and experiential learning applied in a planned and organized fashion to the tasks at hand. Creativity depends on a judicious mix of imagination and intelligence. Credibility means that our work is worthy of confidence, that it has demonstrable value and it can be judged by a meaningful system of accountability. Commitment includes adherence to a set of ethics, to a belief in democratic values and to strong personal advocacy for volunteers and volunteerism.

There is not, as Jethro Lieberman pointed out in his book, The Tyranny of the Experts, any magical point at which an occupation crosses the professional threshold.² To the degree that we are competent,

creative, credible, and committed we are professional. Certification, the 5th "C" if you will, should be only the outward and visible sign that we have achieved a high degree of competence.

We have made progress toward establishing at least some of the necessary conditions for professionalization. Education - broadly defined - is the key to competence and we have made gains in defining directions. Ethics and standards have been explored and articulated, at least to some degree. The association of practitioners and academicians, a necessary ingredient of professionalization, grows closer. Thanks to the efforts of a dedicated few, several journals exist but, alas, without either enough readers or contributors. As a group of practitioners we may be a little less fragmented.

Obviously professionalization of volunteer administration doesn't happen in a vacuum. The process is influenced by outside conditions and forces which interact with internal ones. Lieberman wrote that there must be social acceptance for there to be a profession. At the Association of Volunteer Bureau's Conference in 1974, Charna Lewis, Director of the Voluntary Action Center of Worcester, Mass., pointed out that we suffer from occupational non-recognition by the general public - whether we like it or not. This is still true and should concern us all. *But of even greater concern should be the limited acceptance we as professionals have from those much nearer*

Mildred Katz, CAVS, is Director, Volunteer Bureau, Lincoln, Nebraska.

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to us - from service volunteers, agency administrators and from administrative volunteers. A significant number of these people must recognize and support our need to be professional in the terms I have defined it - competent, creative, credible and committed.

How do volunteers view us? Have we really demonstrated that we make a significant difference in the work and attitudes of volunteers? What follows are some of my thoughts based on my experiences as a volunteer coordinator in several settings in Lincoln, Nebraska, a middle-sized, mid-western city. They also reflect some observations shared with me by half a dozen volunteers who consider themselves to be professional volunteers. Our professional status is in part the function of the attitude of volunteers toward us, just as the physician's status as a professional has through history related to the attitudes of his patients toward him. Additionally, the attitudes of the volunteers toward volunteering has significant impact on our professional development. In turn, their attitudes will in part reflect society's feelings about volunteers. My observations lead me to believe that society gives volunteers a mixed message. Sometimes they are considered saints and sometimes suckers.

As long as many volunteers see themselves as "only a volunteer" their professionalization - and ours - will suffer. There is a volunteer in my community who runs telephone answering services for two non-profit agencies. She told me that in the several years she has done this, she has never told a caller that she is a volunteer because she thinks people will feel that she is less competent than if she were paid. Her view may be only a minority one but let us not under-estimate the positive correlation given to money and value in our society.

We hold many of the keys to acceptance by volunteers of their own validity. Volunteers are telling us that some service volunteers see themselves placed in dull, dead-end jobs. They are feeling equally mis-used when they are given assignments which exceed their competency or when they are given work which they know belongs or should belong to paid staff. We often fail to reflect on the implications for our professional growth when the administrative volunteer is demeaned, as he or she is when they are selected as "token this or that" or when they are appointed to boards without adequate job descriptions, orientation and training.

Outward forms of the recognition of the value of volunteering can enhance the self-concept of the volunteer and this in turn positively affects our professional growth. Included would be space on job applications for volunteer experience, formalized programs of released time to volunteer by business and industry, income tax credit for time spent volunteering, more and better training programs for volunteers and, of course, more careful and sophisticated placement of volunteers in terms of needs and interests. *We must recognize that whatever diminishes the volunteer diminishes us professionally.*

As we strive for positive professional growth we must be conscious of the ambivalence with which the professional is viewed in our society. The word itself has been so variously defined and so frequently mis-used that its meaning is blurred. Sometimes individuals or occupational groups calling themselves professional have given the term itself a poor image. The professional volunteers with whom I visited said that they feel the term *professional* when applied to a volunteer may have the connotation of a *professional do-gooder*, or it may express to many people *dallying without commitment*. One of these women was recently asked to represent the *professional volunteer* at a meeting called by a local advertising company. The comment directed to her by the moderator was to describe the organizations and clubs she belongs to!

We also deal with a social/philosophical problem when we apply the term *professional* to the world of volunteering. In a sense, volunteering and even volunteer administration has represented one of the few relatively open avenues in our society - no rigid credentials, no union card, no license. We have a strong egalitarian strain in our society, and our people have more skepticism about experts and professionals than in many societies. Probably this is one reason we allow the volunteer to play such an important part in areas such as mental health, mental retardation, and corrections. We can all chuckle and recognize the truth in George Bernard Shaw's contention that "all professions are conspiracies against the laity."³ As we develop a profession we must be very sensitive to feelings about the term *profession* and *professional* and recognize the constraints these rather subtle factors have on our growth. *Certainly we have the opportunity to avoid standards and practices of some of the older professions whose only function was to exclude.*

Equally important to our professional growth is acceptance of us as professionals by administrators, the staffs of our agencies and by our communities' decision-makers. They almost force us to play the union card and license game, perhaps before we are ready. Their attitude toward us relates directly to their acceptance of volunteers as valid deliverers of services and policies. In many cases we have not been successful in demonstrating the credibility of either volunteers or of ourselves as volunteer administrators. Nor have we always helped them to understand the basic philosophical rationale for the involvement of volunteers.

The current budget crunch is painfully revealing. Within the last year, the community retardation programs in both Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska lost their positions for volunteer coordinators. The volunteer coordinators were cut from our state probation system. At the University of Nebraska the student volunteer program has been downgraded. A speaker at the 1976 Association of Volunteer Bureaus Conference referred to Volunteer Bureaus and Voluntary Action Centers as being "at risk". The low salaries in the field of volunteer administration hardly demonstrates great acceptance of volunteer administration. I am well aware that many positions in the human services other than those of volunteer administrators have been lost or are in jeopardy. I don't want to give the impression that I see only a bleak present and a grim future for volunteer administration as a profession. The current funding crisis forces us all to examine our basic assumptions.

If we recognize the relationship of social acceptance to the growth of volunteer administration as a profession, we should be able to work directly on many of the problems we face. If we see, for example, that our credibility as an emerging profession hinges on the credibility of the work of volunteers, we should be spurred on to better evaluative studies and documentation of the roles of volunteers. We should be able to put greater effort into helping the community, its decision-makers, and volunteers themselves, appreciate the real contribution volunteering has for the whole community and to establish tangible forms of recognizing this fact.

We should be sensitive enough to avoid the pitfalls of a narrow, restrictive professionalization policy. We should be able to concentrate on defining and continuing to develop solid educational experiences - in the classroom and out of it - upon which

our competency ultimately rests. We should be able to demonstrate to decision-makers that a competent volunteer administrator means demonstrably improved service by the agency. *And finally our credibility and commitment should attract to our emerging profession people with the imagination and creativity to see volunteer administration as one small but important way of helping to make our confused, distrustful, and fragmented society whole again.*

References:

1. Cogan, Morris L., "The Problem of Defining a Profession." The Annals of the American Academy of Political Science, Jan. 1955, p. 65
2. Lieberman, Jethro, The Tyranny of the Experts, 1970, p. 54
3. Shaw, George Bernard, Preface to The Doctor's Dilemma.