

Professional Standards

Should you be looking for a
certified volunteer administrator?

It is common to speak of volunteer administration as an emerging profession because it is still evolving in many ways. One discouraging factor is a high turnover rate for people in director of volunteer positions, due often to being seen as job and not a career by both employee and employer. How have you filled the position of director of volunteers?

When any position is perceived as professional or even technical, wise administrators set their sights on finding the most qualified person to fill it. They carefully define the necessary qualifications and expect to find someone with expertise—both training and experience. This standard procedure is frequently discarded when it comes to seeking a new director of volunteers. Instead, it seems as if administrators cast about looking for someone with only two assets: the ability to work well with people and personal experience as a volunteer.

The logic that having been a volunteer gives someone the skills to coordinate other volunteers is akin to reasoning, "I've had brain surgery, so I suppose I can do brain surgery." By all means ask candidates about their own volunteer work because it is relevant to their world view and commitment to volunteerism. But handling a front line volunteer job is insufficient to running an entire volunteer program.

As to personality, while it certainly makes sense to hire someone personable for a position requiring so much interaction, the inability to articulate specific expectations of candidates for the job of director of volunteers makes me suspect that most administrators simply don't know what to expect.

Certificate Programs

Some of this vagueness is understandable. A few colleges and universities offer single courses on volunteer management, but there is no ongoing degree program in this field. So the prospective employer can-

not begin by contacting a "School of Volunteer Administration" as is possible in hiring social workers, librarians, teachers, and other professionals.

On the other hand, a growing number of institutions of higher education are now offering certificate programs in volunteer management. These vary widely. Some are in the form of periodic, intensive "institutes" as led by the well-established three-level program out of the University of Colorado in Boulder. Others run courses throughout the year, usually in the evening to accommodate practitioners. Most give continuing education credits. But a few also grant academic credit, either on the baccalaureate or graduate level. What these programs have in common is that students completing the course work receive a certificate from the school recognizing the satisfactory completion of the curriculum.

If your area has such a certificate program in volunteer management, this is an excellent starting point to search for someone to become the director of volunteers at your agency. The certificate does not tell you anything about the experience of the candidate, but it does assure you that the person has a knowledge base covering the essentials of coordinating a volunteer effort.

The Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA), as the professional society for those in the field of volunteerism, has been working to identify and publicize existing certificate programs in the U.S. and Canada.

Professional Certification

These academic programs and certificates are important but will always be based on classroom learning. In contrast, AVA has developed a certification program designed to recognize the experiential knowledge demonstrated by competent practitioners. The designation "CVA" (Certified in Volunteer Administration) is awarded

by an independent assessment panel to applicants who meet AVA professional standards and certification criteria. Applicants must have a minimum of two years of administrative experience in volunteer management. The rather lengthy certification process involves the completion of a self-assessment portfolio, for which applicants prepare narratives about their philosophy of volunteerism, consider trends and issues in the field, and document their performance-based competencies.

An important aspect of advancing the certification program is that AVA has carefully defined the basic competencies necessary to be successful in developing and running a volunteer effort (these are available in a booklet from the AVA that describes the profession, including ethical standards for volunteer management). AVA supports certification candidates by offering workshops and forming local networks.

It has taken more than a decade for AVA to develop and refine its certification program, but it has steadily gained support from those who want to demonstrate their commitment to volunteer management as a profession. Each year more applicants begin the portfolio process and several hundred practitioners have already earned the right to place "CVA" after their names.

In truth, the majority of people attempting certification today do so for personal development reasons. They have found the process excellent for refining career goals and expanding their knowledge of volunteerism issues, ethics, and practices. However, the CVA designation will become more important when more employers realize that professional skills in volunteer administration are indeed attainable and demonstrable. AVA describes the Certification program as a way to "promote wider respect and recognition for the high level of professionalism in volunteer services administration." If you interview someone with the CVA designation, you can be assured that person has a commitment to volunteerism as a profession.

For more information about certification, contact AVA at P.O. Box 4584, Boulder, Colorado 80306 (303-541-0238). Note also that introductory certification workshops are offered AVA's annual International Conference on Volunteer Admin-

istration, to be held this year in Anaheim, California, October 5 to 8. Ask for a conference brochure.

Certification: The Challenge

A unique quality of volunteer management is that its skills cut across many different settings. When you consider that volunteers are integral to organizations as diverse as human services, the arts, and political action—you can see how difficult it is to anticipate the demands of each possible volunteer management setting. The advocates of certification are trying to find the best way to codify the generic and necessary skills of volunteer services administration while also accommodating flexibility in how such skills might be applied.

This is another reason why prospective employers are confused. Should you seek a candidate who knows your setting but has to learn how to work with volunteers, or should you look for someone experienced in the demands of managing a volunteer program but who will need to be trained in the issues of this new setting? Increasingly, the right answer is to find someone who understands volunteer management and really wants to pursue it as a career.

Another balancing act is the respect many have for the history of the profession of volunteer administration. Traditionally—before there were any academic or professional certifying options—people came to the field from every conceivable direction. Some of the best practitioners have no college degrees. Every well-respected writer, consultant, and trainer in the field today has a degree in an academic field tangential if not downright unrelated to volunteerism.

The hallmarks of achievement for volunteers are often change and revolution. Can a leader of such volunteers be constrained by the “do’s and don’ts” of the majority? The debate over certification and standardization is legitimate. It remains to be seen whether volunteer administration can find a unique way to define its core of standards while encouraging innovation.

Today it is possible to seek and find job candidates with proven experience in mobilizing active volunteers. AVA is leading the way at the national level, but you can also contact state and local resources to

conduct your search for the most qualified applicants. See if you have a state office of volunteerism, a volunteer center, or a state association for volunteerism. If you have trouble finding these resources, call the director of volunteers at any large, volunteer-involving facility in your community. And if you interview any candidate who has no idea what these resources are, keep looking.

NPT

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, a Philadelphia-based training, publishing, and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism.
