

Interns And Volunteers

Are these two workers really the same?

Bring together a group of volunteer program managers and it won't be long before someone says, "well, that applies to the student interns, not the volunteers." And somehow everyone understands the difference. Or, do they? Are "interns" the same as, or different from, "volunteers?" And, does it matter?

The vast number of students and recent graduates who seek an unpaid internship (with or without academic credit) apply to exactly the same organizations that already involve volunteers. From observation, however, both these applicants and the organizations considering them vastly prefer what they think of as an internship to what they consider traditional volunteering.

We all know the limiting stereotypes about volunteers, yet when people hear about "interns," perceptions and expectations change to:

- Eager learners (though inexperienced or young), generally exploring a possible career;
- Able to give an intensive set of hours for at least a few months;
- Serious about their commitment and supported by a third party, such as a university faculty member;
- A professional responsibility to guide and mentor.

Of course, the word intern brings its own confusion and can imply many things to different people, starting with the very specific meaning of the word

when applied to medical students. Outside of medicine, dozens of academic disciplines today require or offer the option of an internship, too. But the term can mean a paid position, supported with a stipend, or totally unpaid except for expenses. In fact, sometimes it's the student who pays tuition for the opportunity to give service through an internship.

In the opinion of many, a fully-paid intern is a temporary employee and should be treated as such (including paying payroll taxes, which some nonprofits sidestep by calling the wage a "stipend").

Another issue is whether a student intern receives academic credit or not. All of these variables depend on each situation, but there is no way to tell without probing, as all the variations are still called an internship. Note, too, that for-profit businesses and government also put unpaid interns to work, even if they would never consider themselves as a volunteer placement site.

More alike than different

The differences between interns and other volunteers relate mainly to what assignments are given to each, the involvement of an outside contact, and which staff members supervise them. Yet, many organizations elevate interns above mere volunteers unjustifiably and even separate the "internship program" administratively from the volunteer resources office, to the detriment of both groups. What are the

implications - to the individual and to the agency - of separating these two forms of service in various ways?

Assignments

Student interns do want and deserve interesting, meaningful work assignments that allow them to test and demonstrate what they've learned in the classroom. So the real question is: why isn't all volunteer work already interesting and meaningful?

The skill necessary to create a meaningful "internship" is exactly the same task analysis that ought to be brought to any work designed for volunteers. It might even elicit more creativity if staff were asked to develop volunteer roles that allowed the doer to grow and learn - at any age and for any reason.

It's fine to craft challenging volunteer assignments that offer the doer the chance to learn something of consequence. Why not then make these available to anyone willing and able to meet the requirements - not just students?

Think about the illogic of assuming that a student, often quite inexperienced, can fulfill an intensive role just because the person is a student, while an adult "volunteer" who might be truly qualified is relegated to less consequential tasks simply because of being placed into a different category of worker. You can and should approach all volun-

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teer position descriptions with the same mindset reserved for student interns, ending up with roles that are attractive and motivating for any volunteer.

Time available is also a false dichotomy. A student with an intensive internship period of several days a week or more can be offered a choice of any substantial assignments open. But some students, who might still call themselves interns, actually have far less time available. Without the needed duration of time, a student would have to consider any of the less intensive assignments open, just as any other volunteer applicant.

Outside contact

When an internship is a formal educational requirement, site visits could be done by school faculty, the student might need to submit a written report on the experience, and the agency supervisor might be asked to evaluate (even grade) the intern's work. These are, indeed, extra elements. But there are similar sorts of requirements for placement programs such as RSVP, court-ordered workers, welfare-to-work participants, and even corporate employee volunteer projects. Building relationships with the third party or sponsor is an ongoing process and needs central coordination to maximize the potential of future placements.

Supervision

Supervision is the other possible area of difference. Many university programs require that a student intern work under the direction of someone in the profession for which the student is training (the nurse and teacher model). That's why some staff members are positive about interns. They can now pass on the support given to them when they were students. This special relationship is important and any students who fall into this professionals-in-training group ought to be assigned to the best appropriate supervisor. But conceptually, this is no different from finding the best supervisor to match any volunteer's needs.

Administration

If the vocabulary is confusing, drop both terms. Evolve the volunteer services office into a "Community Resources Office" that becomes the entry point for anyone to serve the organization but who doesn't go on the payroll. Here are some ways that unpaid interns and volunteers are completely alike and therefore ought to be treated as a single category of human resources:

- Although neither goes on the payroll, formal records need to be kept for both;
- Both require orientation to the agency and probably special training. Some interns may

be at an educational level that allows the expectation of professional skills, but that is also true of some volunteers;

- Regardless of why individuals may start in service, they are likely to continue in service beyond their original commitment – but only if someone issues the invitation and is able to adapt the ongoing or new assignment to their changing schedule and other needs;
- Both deserve recognition and appreciation for what they contributed to the organization.

Examine your own reactions to the words volunteer and intern. Consider them both as descriptors, not job titles. Neither tells us what the person is actually doing, nor necessarily the skills the person brings. But if one connotes nice helper to you and the other connotes serious learner, ask yourself why both can't be both. Then ask yourself whether the distinction has been made in your agency mainly to professionalize internships...and why that wouldn't be positive as an approach to all volunteered service. *NPT*

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