

What's The Difference?

Using student interns and volunteers

The subject of vocabulary has frequently surfaced in this column over the years because of the many stereotypes evoked by the word "volunteer." When it comes to the involvement of students in agency work, choosing what to call them moves from an issue of semantics to implications for management.

There was a time when the only university student internships were those in medicine, nursing, teaching and social work, and the type of placement and professional expertise of the required supervisor were clearly defined. Today, there are graduate and undergraduate "internships" in a wide variety of subjects ranging from geography to communications. These newer internships are not always so definitive in requiring that a supervisor offer a fixed professional background.

Note, too, that the term "intern" is applied both to unpaid and stipended positions, though the majority of students serve without monetary compensation.

Adding further complexity, college-level student placements have been joined by "community service" programs at high schools and even lower schools. These range from curriculum-based, "service-learning" activities to completely optional volunteer work coordinated through the school. Of course, there's also the continuing trend to mandate a set number of hours as a requirement for graduation.

There is nothing new about young volunteers, but debate regarding whether such students are, in fact, "volunteers" may surface. Educators and even some agency staff may still perceive traditional volunteering as low-level help and, in an effort to distinguish and elevate service-learning, prefer to identify students as "interns."

The label of intern does indeed seem weightier – and more attractive – than that of volunteer. But be cautious that you do not create a false dichotomy in which student interns become a separate work force. No matter what you call the contributions of students, the volunteer program office has a clear and supportive role to play in the effectiveness of internships and is still your agency's best vehicle for screening applicants and determining suitable assignments.

Students as volunteers

Academic credit cannot be negotiated at the store for a loaf of bread. Just as other volunteers, student interns do not go on your payroll and work in the agency for benefits other than financial reward. Further, many student interns contribute far more hours to the agency than the minimum required by the school. Is this extra time not "volunteering" in its purest sense?

If it is true that people labeled volunteers in your agency are given only ancillary or clerical roles, it is time to reassess all volunteer assignments, not just those intended for student interns. Creating positions that truly contribute to the direct service of the agency and allow for learning, growth and development is clearly in the best interest of everyone – and will attract a higher caliber of adult volunteer, too.

Even if you wish to create special student intern assignments, the basic considerations mirror good volunteer work design. This means tasks or projects that can be:

- Accomplished within various, limited schedules;
- Handled by someone inexperienced (even if knowledgeable);
- Supervised by a staff member without being a burden; and
- Passed on to successors with minimal interruption.

It takes skill to design good individual assignments, to which too many students left with little to do can attest.

Once student-focused work has been identified, the volunteer office can maintain the list of all internship descriptions throughout the organization and do initial screening and matching of all applicants. By centralizing internship applications, you save staff time in contact with the various colleges and you make sure that any applicant is told of every available opening.

If individual staff supervisors make the first contact, they will only be aware of what is available in their one particular unit and will not offer the prospective intern the full range of assignment options. The staff supervisor makes the final decision on acceptance of the intern, just as with any volunteer candidate referred to a unit.

But, if a student is not right for one unit, only the volunteer program manager has the overview necessary to see if there is another possible placement that would be more appropriate.

Every newcomer to the agency deserves an orientation. If interns bypass the volunteer office and go directly to their line supervisors, they will not get an overview of the entire organization. The volunteer program is already set up to offer orientation and students should have access to it. Training for the specific task to be done will then be given by the supervisor (the member of the profession involved), as is appropriate.

From a public relations standpoint, if you do not centralize the coordination of internships in the volunteer office, you are expecting the various schools and colleges to track down as many staff supervisors as necessary to place what may be several students. Working through the volunteer office allows the faculty to make one contact a semester, referring all the student internship candidates at one time.

Similarly, requests for end-of-placement evaluations can be channeled through the volunteer office (one call for the school), so that the volunteer program manager can monitor whether all forms have been submitted as required. Copies of such evaluations can then be kept in the volunteer office with the student intern's other records, so that future references can easily be made.

If you do not utilize the volunteer office, where will records be kept on student interns? Is anyone keeping such records at all now? Don't you want to know how much staff time is being spent on interns, how many students you have assisted, or what the performance level of interns has been? If for no other reason, it may be necessary to document the work of interns to meet insurance requirements, since, as with all volunteers, there are accident and liability considerations for interns.

Transitioning from an internship

Student interns separated from agency volunteers rarely receive formal recognition of their accomplishments during their internships. Completing required school evaluations is important feedback, but not necessarily a thank you for work contributed. Only the volunteer office can represent the entire agency in expressing the appreciation most students have earned.

It is common for a percentage of students to want to remain active with the agency after the official end of their internships. Are they then expected to "transfer" to the volunteer program – or will they remain undocumented (and, essentially, unauthorized) in an unclassified state?

A participant at a recent workshop admitted that she knew of at least three students who had kept right on with their work for more than a year after their school ties had ended, but no one reported it until she asked why the young people were still around. Some of their co-workers in the unit were not even aware that the official internship had ended.

Parenthetically, is this the best way to help students with their education? Maybe these students were ready to move on to more challenging assignments in another part of the organization, but no one was responsible for making this offer to them.

As so often happens, there is a ripple effect to doing the right thing for student interns. Not only do students get a more meaningful work experience with greater benefits to the agency, but all volunteer involvement is strengthened. Internships may appeal to a wider audience than simply students, staff raises their expectations of unpaid help, and all volunteer assignments are fully integrated into the organization. ■

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