

Special Considerations in Engaging Students as Volunteers

By Susan J. Ellis

Every volunteer program welcomes students of all ages as volunteers and therefore we know that all students are not alike in their expectations and needs. Apart from the obvious differences in ages ranging from primary school through university graduate school, we can have several categories of students:

- Assigned by a teacher to do some sort of fieldwork to apply classroom learning to the real world. This type of curriculum-based volunteering is most often called "service-learning" as an activity and, especially at the university and graduate levels, often framed as an "internship."
- Participating in volunteering through an extra-curricular activity or group, such as a youth club, a fraternity or sorority, or a group from a faith community.
- Independent volunteering simply because the young person is interested in the cause or the organization, often connected to career exploration.
- Meeting a requirement of graduation, where a certain number of hours of service in a community agency is mandated.

The important thing to remember is that a student might move from one category to another at different times of the school year. There's lots of evidence that if a student has a great school-based volunteering experience, she or he will remain with your organization independently for a long time after the official requirement ends.

The focus of this [article] is considering some of the questions that need to be clarified whenever a student applies to become a volunteer - questions that are not applicable to adults. See if the following is helpful as a checklist to cover during a screening interview.

- Are you seeking volunteer work solely on your own or as part of an academic or other requirement?
- Is there a minimum number of hours of service or other responsibility that you must complete? Are you prepared to give more time, if necessary? When is your official placement over?
- To whom must you report your experiences, submit a paper, etc.? When or how often?
 - Will this faculty member or group leader be visiting you on site? By appointment or unannounced?
 - What role is the organization expected to play in working with this supervisor or advisor?
 - Will we be asked to evaluate or grade you at the end of the term?
- Are you hoping to do or learn something through your volunteering here that will allow you to explore a possible future career?
- *If fulfilling a requirement:* Why are you choosing to complete your required service here? How do you feel about this mandate? Are you prepared to be enthusiastic and committed to providing genuine service here, regardless of why you originally became a "volunteer"?

- *If the student is under age 18:* Do your parents know that you are applying to be a volunteer? Do we need to get them to sign a parental permission form?
- Is the address on the application form your permanent address or where you live during the school year? Please provide us with both.
- Will you need to change your volunteer work schedule during exams or school breaks?

None of these interview questions should come as a surprise, but each represents an important discussion topic. Getting clear answers with specific details will lead to greater success for both the student and the agency.

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