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Enhancing student leadership of volunteer organizations: A guide for new leaders

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Abstract

The importance of student participation in cocurricular activities during the college years has been drawing increasing support and empirical evidence has been presented that supports the critical, positive relationship between involvement and overall student development (Astin, 1993; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994). Theorists within the field of college student development incorporate this assertion into the models they put forth for utilization by student affairs practitioners. Chickering and Reisser (1993) maintain that an individual student's growth occurs upon mastering developmental tasks, and that it is the role of student affairs practitioners to create an environment which presents opportunities where students may encounter such tasks.

Enhancing Student Leadership

Of Volunteer Organizations:

A Guide For New Leaders

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Valerie Shapiro Eagen

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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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The importance of student participation in cocurricular activities during the college years has been drawing increasing support and empirical evidence has been presented that supports the critical, positive relationship between involvement and overall student development (Astin, 1993; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994). Theorists within the field of college student development incorporate this assertion into the models they put forth for utilization by student affairs practitioners. Chickering and Reisser (1993) maintain that an individual student's growth occurs upon mastering developmental tasks, and that it is the role of student affairs practitioners to create an environment which presents opportunities where students may encounter such tasks. As they state in the second edition of *Education and Identity:*

> We do not espouse a self-centered, narcissistic glorification of individual
> needs and desires over the hard, realistic requirements for effective careers,
> social contributions, and satisfying lives. But we believe that by taking
> developmental needs as an organizing framework, we will better prepare all
> our students, and ourselves, for the kinds of lives as workers and citizens
> required by the social changes rushing toward us. (p. xvii)

It is clear from this statement that Chickering and Reisser would advocate out of classroom experiences, in addition to in-class activities, in achieving the developmental goals of their model.

Cooper, Healy, and Simpson (1994) conclude that a review of research in this area "shows that students who are involved in cocurricular activities report more positive educational and social experiences overall, increased intellectual and leadership development, success in academic and career goals, and are more likely to graduate" (p. 98). Their study focused on the ways in which these students change over the course of their college career by measuring their responses to the

Student Development Task and Lifestyle Inventory. The participants were asked to complete the Inventory as first-year students, and again as juniors. Cooper, Healy, and Simpson (1994) then compared the scores of the students who became involved with those that did not. Their results showed that:

> As freshman, the groups differed significantly on Life Management and, thus, Developing Purpose with future organization members scoring higher than nonmembers. However, as juniors, a number of additional differences emerge. Members of student organizations now scored higher than nonmembers on Educational Involvement, Career Planning, Lifestyle Planning, Cultural Participation, and Academic Autonomy, in addition to the differences previously found on Developing Purpose and Life Management. (p. 99)

A growing area in which students are becoming involved is volunteer organizations. Examples of these organizations are student government, alumni ambassadors, or sororities/fraternities. Another example of volunteerism, which is becoming more popular, allows students to form new organizations through community service or experiential learning centers on campus. At the centers, students may come together to engage in one particular project or to participate in clubs with on-going, socially relevant concerns such as tutoring, mentoring, or planning alternative breaks (when students use their time away from school to help out in urban communities, national parks, or anywhere else they may see need).

One purpose of this paper is to articulate why volunteering can be an enriching experience for students, and how students can gain meaningful experiences in leading such organizations. A second purpose is to explain five competencies required of leaders of volunteer programs.

These are: planning; recruitment; orientation and training; supervising and empowering volunteers; and evaluation, retention, and recognition.

Why Volunteer?

Part of the mission of most colleges and universities is to assist students in becoming active members of their surrounding communities and to encourage a lifelong pattern of community service. In every community there are human service agencies that survive only with the participation of volunteers. There are also many other needs that go unmet in communities due to a lack of human and financial resources. During the time that a student attends a college or university, he/she automatically becomes a part of the surrounding community. Through volunteering a student has an opportunity to serve her/his community and satisfy one of the major educational goals defined in the school's mission statement.

Volunteering promotes the integration of theory and skills students are learning in classes, to practice. This not only enhances a student's academic experience, but also accelerates her/his personal development.

Another reason students may want to volunteer is less altruistic and more self-serving in nature. As the economy of the nation continues its general shift toward service-based employment, it would benefit students to obtain relevant experience before entering the job market. According to Cetron (1990):

> One of the trends of the 1970's and '80's that will continue throughout the
> '90's is the decline of manufacturing and the growth of service industries.
> As long ago as 1980, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, more
> than 65 million people worked in the service sector. This figure is now
> around the 84 million mark, and by the turn of the century, will have grown
> to more than 120 million, or nearly 90 percent of all American workers.
> (p. 30)

Another factor to consider is that as many companies continue to downsize their operations, competition for jobs increases, and students will be competing directly with older workers with considerable experience.

Additional advantages for volunteering rather than working in paid positions is the flexibility that is inherent in such positions. Usually the student is able to choose the hours he/she wishes to work, and adjust the level of responsibility to complement her/his class schedule. The student volunteer can usually tailor the job description to match her/his individual talents and abilities.

Finally, the most obvious, but often the most overlooked, advantage to volunteering is the availability of volunteer work. In areas where paid work is scarce, a student can usually readily find volunteer positions. It is also possible on some campuses for students who qualify financially to obtain partial work-study funding through federal financial aid programs to perform community service. Some campuses also run school-sponsored grant programs where students may submit proposals for funding.

<div align="center">Guide For New Leaders</div>

There are several theories regarding styles of leadership, and there are differing views on which leadership practices are the most effective, especially when the gender of the leader is taken into consideration. As Whitt (1994) found:

> The styles of leadership most comfortable and useful for many
> women, such as collaborative leadership or decision-making by consensus,
> may not be valued or reinforced by men . . . This also may inhibit women's
> election to, or effectiveness in, leadership positions in coeducational
> organizations. (p. 199)

On the other hand, Posner and Brodsky (1994) investigated the effectiveness of both male and female sorority and fraternity presidents, and found that:

> Effective student leaders were consistently viewed as challenging, inspiring, enabling, modeling, and encouraging more frequently than their less effective counterparts. The leadership practices used by female student leaders did not differ from those used by males within equivalent (Greek) student organizations. (pp. 118-119)

The following guide for new leaders of volunteer organizations is intended to be style and gender neutral in relation to whichever leadership practices are favored by the user. There are five areas of concentration in which a new leader needs to be aware in order to run a successful program. The five areas are: planning; recruitment; orientation and training; supervising and empowering volunteers; and, evaluation, recognition, and retention.

Planning

There are two kinds of volunteer program planning. The first kind is for a new program, put together by the student leader from scratch, while the other kind could be either an existing or a new program that is tied to an outside agency. An example of the second kind of program could be a Greek organization or a volunteer program already in place at a local hospital.

McCurley and Lynch (1989) describe four steps to the planning phase of the volunteer process. However, in the case of planning a brand new program which is independent of an outside agency, the student leader will have one additional step. The first step for both kinds of programs is to determine a rationale. Examples of a rationale for a student-initiated program could be to: help a subgroup of people, increase public awareness, or increase job contacts of volunteers.

McCurley and Lynch (1989) provide six examples of a rationale for an agency-affiliated volunteer program. These six examples are: "providing for community outreach or input, supplementing staff resources and experiences, gaining additional expertise, giving a more personal touch in services to clients, assisting in fund raising efforts, cost savings" (p. 19).

The second step in the planning process is to involve either the recipients of the volunteer efforts, or the staff members of the outside agency, in the planning.

The third step is to create policies and procedures that cover such areas as attendance/absenteeism, performance reviews, and confidentiality requirements. The student may even find it necessary to include policies and procedures regarding logistical matters such as parking, transportation, and reimbursement (McCurley & Lynch, 1989).

The fourth step in the planning process for both independent and agency-related programs is to plan for evaluation. The student leader must decide what criteria will be used, who will administer the evaluation, how often to conduct evaluations, and how the results will be used (McCurley & Lynch, 1989).

A fifth step that is essential in the planning process for independent, student-initiated programs, is to examine potential funding needs and resources of the program. Some common examples of needs might include food, transportation, and training materials. Funding resources vary greatly from one institution to another, but some potential options are fund raising, administrative grants, and appropriations from student government organizations.

Recruitment

There are two basic keys to recruiting volunteers. The first is determining the motivational needs of potential volunteers through the interview process, and the second is to design volunteer positions according to the abilities of potential volunteers.

It is very important that the new student leader realize that people volunteer for many different reasons. No one reason has more value than any other, as long as the needs of the program recipients are being met. It is possible that a volunteer has multiple reasons for volunteering, and it is also possible that those needs may change over time (McCurley & Lynch, 1989). In *Essential Volunteer Management*, McCurley and Lynch (1989) identify nine basic motivational needs of volunteers: 1) recognition, 2) achievement, 3) control, 4) variety, 5) growth (both personal and professional), 6) affiliation, 7) power, 8) fun, and 9) uniqueness.

The authors suggest that the key to keeping volunteers productive is to find out exactly what kinds of needs they bring to the job and to ask them periodically whether they feel they are getting what they need from the program. In satisfying both the individual volunteer's needs and the recipients' needs, the program needs will automatically be met, resulting in a successful program.

Interviewing may sound like a daunting task to a young, inexperienced student leader, but it should be remembered that the interview is a two-way street. The interview should be a mutual exchange of ideas, a chance for potential volunteers to examine the volunteer opportunity as well as for the student leader to examine the qualifications of the potential volunteer (Fisher & Cole, 1993). Optional tools the student leader may want to use before interviewing are a volunteer position description and/or an application form (McCurley, 1988). This would give potential volunteers initial information about the opportunity, so they

could make the decision about whether they would like to participate in an interview. Interview time could be saved as well with the use of an application. The interviewer could view the applications ahead of time to choose candidates, or use them to gain initial background information that would not need to be covered in the actual interview.

Fisher and Cole (1993) offer eight helpful guidelines which student leaders may want to consider while interviewing:

1. Let the candidate know what to expect during the interview and why certain facts or responses to questions are needed. Make sure the candidate knows the interviewer's position and role in the organization.

2. Create a non threatening, friendly yet professional atmosphere; do not take phone calls or allow other unnecessary interruptions. Give full attention to the candidate. Arrange seating so it is comfortable and encourages conversation. Because this is a private interview, conduct it in a private office. Establish a rapport with the candidate conducive to the sharing of feelings, preferences, strengths, and weaknesses.

3. Be organized. Refer to the candidate's completed application form (if one has been filled out prior to the interview) as well as other materials needed to conduct the interview.

4. Follow the same basic interview format with all candidates. When similar questions are asked, all candidates have an equal chance to present their qualifications. Explore their responses with further questions or related observations.

5. Set the candidate at ease; let each one know the interview is not a test but rather a way to discover whether the volunteer position suits the needs and interests of both parties.

6. Let the candidate do most of the talking!

7. Subtly direct the flow of the conversation with simple questions such as "Can you tell me more about that?" or " What else do you feel is important for me to know?" or " Can you give me another example?"

8. Close the interview by allowing the candidate to ask any remaining questions and informing the candidate of the next step in the selection process. (p. 47)

The entire interview and selection process should be nondiscriminatory in nature; diversity of volunteers is essential. If possible, the student leader should compose the makeup of the organization by mirroring the makeup of the student body in terms of gender and ethnicity.

Two other considerations may exist in the area of recruitment. The first is the possibility that more than one interview may be needed. If the volunteer opportunity will involve an outside agency, then a second interview with the site supervisor will be required. The second consideration has to do with the nature of the volunteer position itself. If the position is part of a one-time event such as a benefit or food fair, the student leader may want to set up a committee to oversee the event. While careful interviewing may be necessary for potential committee members, it may not be necessary for volunteers that only take part in an event when it actually occurs (Fisher & Cole, 1993). For example, volunteers who "register participants, make posters, serve food, sell tickets, direct traffic, or perform other less complicated tasks" (p. 54) may not need to go through the entire interview process.

Orientation and Training

The next area student leaders need to address is orientation and training. While many leaders realize the importance of training, they sometimes omit an

introductory orientation. However, orientation is a very important component of the training process. According to Ilsley (1990), orientation should make "volunteers aware of the organization's philosophy, history, traditions, policies, and procedures" (p. 96). It should also define the roles within the organization, and ideally, orientation should be used to confirm mutual trust and agreement of expectations (Ilsley, 1990).

After new volunteers are introduced to the organization through orientation, the next step for the student leader is to decide how much further training is needed. The answer to this question should be based upon the needs and goals of the program. While it may be sufficient for a new hospital volunteer to train by shadowing a current volunteer, it may be necessary for a new crisis line volunteer to attend numerous informational training sessions where specific legalities are covered. However, it is of the utmost importance to balance the structure of training for new volunteers. As Ilsley (1990) states:

> We can safely say, however, that training that tells volunteers a great deal more than they need to know to do their work or that bores, intimidates, or alienates most volunteers is probably excessive. Conversely, training that leaves volunteers unsure of what they are supposed to do or how they are supposed to do it is likely to be inadequate. The best training provides volunteers with all the skills and attitudes they need to accomplish their tasks successfully and offers them many chances for learning, inspiration, and personal growth. (pp. 95-96)

Supervising and Empowering Volunteers

For student leaders to be successful in managing volunteers, they must be able to create motivating environments within their programs (McCurley & Lynch, 1989). To do this well, special care must be taken throughout the entire matching

of volunteers to the tasks they perform. It is essential that the right volunteer has the right job in the first place. This is accomplished not only through the initial interviewing process as described earlier, but also through getting to know volunteers personally. Volunteers are more than likely going to be students first, volunteers second. It is important for the student leader to let them know that they are valued and that the other commitments they may have in their lives are valued as well.

Another goal in creating a motivating environment is to foster a climate that is conducive to the expression of ideas and to the continued growth and education of volunteers. Empower them by delegating decisions, not just duties. Concentrate on the goals to be met instead of always focusing on details. It is easier to get results from independent, empowered volunteers than dependent, indecisive (and slow as a result) volunteers. Empowered volunteers are also happier and more satisfied with their work (McCurley & Lynch, 1989).

As with the area of training, there is also a fine line between empowering and controlling volunteers. McCurley and Lynch (1989) recognize "that there are four degrees or levels of control a volunteer can exercise in pursuing each result" (p. 86). The four levels represent a continuum of control. The first level is when the volunteer sees what needs to be done and does it without having to check in with the supervisor at all. The authors call this stage "the authority for self-assignment." The second stage, "the authority for self-assignment provided regular progress reports are received," gives more control over the results to the supervisor. The third stage, "the authority to recommend self-assignment," gives the supervisor control over which tasks are to be done, but not necessarily how they are to be done. The last stage, "no authority for self-assignment," is when the volunteer is told exactly what tasks to pursue and how to pursue them by the

supervisor. It is obviously not desirable for any volunteers to be supervised at the
fourth level except maybe for a short time at the beginning of their volunteer term.
Fresh perspectives volunteers may have are ignored, the supervisor wastes valuable
time, and exceptional volunteers may be leave the organization (McCurley &
Lynch, 1989).

Evaluation, Recognition, and Retention

The final areas in which student leaders need to pay special attention are
evaluation of the program and evaluation of volunteers. The evaluation of the
program should have been taken into account in the initial planning stages and
throughout the administration of the program. It would be wise for the student
leader to think through the philosophy and goals of the program periodically and to
take a critical look at the results of the organization to make sure they coincide with
its original rationale.

Evaluating volunteers is often thought of in negative terms. However,
evaluation can be used as a positive tool for retention of volunteers and as a vehicle
for recognition. The key to the success of evaluation is to use it regularly.
Volunteers should know when to expect evaluations and what criteria will be used
to evaluate them. Constructive criticism should be phrased as positively as
possible, and the student leader should always ask for the perspective of the
volunteer in such situations. Exceptional work by a volunteer should also be noted
at the time of evaluation. McCurley and Lynch (1989) suggest that praise be given
frequently and publicly. It should also be sincere and consistent. It might even be
separated into two categories: formal and informal. "Formal recognition systems
compromise the awards, certificates, plaques, pins, and recognition dinners held or
presented in honor of volunteer achievement" (p. 113). Informal recognition is the
most effective and it should occur daily. Examples include saying "thank you,"

involving volunteers in decisions, asking about volunteers' families, recommending promotions, or remembering a volunteer's birthday (McCurley & Lynch, 1989).

If effective methods for evaluation and recognition are adhered to, the student leader should find a corresponding positive rate of retention. This is particularly important because student leaders do not want to be spending all their time and energy on recruitment.

Conclusion

The intention of the previous guide for new student leaders is not exhaustive, but could be used as a framework for running a volunteer organization. Variation and adaptation of the ideas presented will be necessary for any program to be successful.

It is hoped that by providing the tools for students to get involved in leading volunteer organizations, more students will become involved with social concerns on and off campus. Early involvement during a college career has been suggested as an aid to retention and degree completion, and in the personal development of students (Astin, 1993; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994). Involvement with volunteer organizations during the college years will ideally lead to a lifelong commitment of service, thereby benefiting each community in which the student belongs in the future.

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