

*The work of the Commission on Voluntary Service
and Action affords perspectives on the problems
that agencies face in using student volunteers.*

service-learning from the agency's perspective

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Many college-age persons are involved in volunteer service, although their time commitment, motivation, and type of service varies widely. Some may serve part-time or full-time; for as long as several years or only for part of a term. Some are involved in college or university programs that give credit for such service, while others look to this service as an alternative to formal education—a time out to collect oneself before plunging back into school or entering a career. Despite this diversity, there are some generalizations that can be made, based on thirty years' experience of the Commission on Voluntary Service and Action, that may help make volunteer service and learning more effective.

The Commission on Voluntary Service and Action is a coordinating agency for approximately 120 voluntary groups who recruit and place volunteers. Many of these organizations are grass-roots community groups dealing with problems of unemployment, medical care, education, nutrition, housing, and justice on a local level, but approximately one half of the agencies that list specific project placement opportunities in the commission's yearly catalogue, *Invest Yourself*, are involved in serving the needs of communities all over the world. The function of the commission is not

only to assist in the recruitment and placement of volunteers, but also to upgrade the quality of training and use of volunteers. In this capacity, we have become involved with the question of volunteers and their education, and, as executive director of the commission, I would like to identify some of the problems that are typical when agencies use college-age volunteers.

attitudes of students

The experience of Cross-Lines Cooperative Council—an inner-city interracial, interdenominational social service agency in Kansas City, Kansas—provides a good illustration of the most common difficulty: the attitudes of students. Don Bakely, the Director of Cross-Lines, has written (1977):

When people come to us to work full-time we need two specific things. (1) We need the technical skill which will help us to answer some of the problems in the poverty community. (2) We need a proper attitude toward the work and the people that they will serve. We find that the educational institutions are able to give them some of those technical skills, but very seldom are they able to give them the proper attitudes.

For instance, when we first began hiring, we made the mistake of hiring people with degrees in those skills which we needed. We quickly found that many of them were ill prepared for the task and came with a lofty attitude about their abilities. The thought of learning anything new was difficult for them insofar as they felt they had already learned and that they had now come to give their learning to others. We found almost immediately that it was a lot easier to hire people with a proper attitude, such as the poor themselves, and train them in the needed skills than it was to hire people with the needed skills and then try to train them in the proper attitudes.

Many field placement people in volunteer organizations who have given thought to this problem place partial responsibility for it on the type of training (or lack of it) at the college level. Many students come to college with a sense of commitment toward service. As they learn to be professional, that sense of commitment

changes somewhat. It too often becomes a commitment to the profession rather than a commitment to the people who need their skills.

inadequate preparation

Some student commitment becomes distorted because the student has no contact with reality. Many college students, as they talk about using their skills after graduation, tend to hope that they can make massive changes in the systems through which they will work or in the systems they will have to fight to get their job done. Often they arrive at the doorstep of a volunteer agency with a high opinion of what they can accomplish, and often that opinion is exaggerated and unrealistic. They seldom find the exciting freedom to change conditions for which they had hoped. Instead of moving into change-oriented situations, they move into a maze of bureaucratic "no's." They find themselves thwarted on every side when they attempt to make changes in the system in order to answer the problems of their clients. For example, it is very frustrating for a person with a sense of commitment to end up in a social welfare program where 70 percent of one's time is spent doing paper work, leaving twelve hours per week to deal with 150 client families. The fact is that nowhere in college are students prepared for this reality. It may be alluded to in one or another course, and they may have had lectures on forms and paper work; but they are not taught how to deal with frustration—how to use those twelve hours to actually do curative things or how to change or get around the system that stymies them.

gulf between innovation and classroom

Field placement people also cite college work programs that are often far out of touch with the practices of innovative agencies. Usually if a college participates in a work program, it deals with United Fund or well-established agencies rather than with small and innovative agencies doing curative work with a minimum of bureaucratic blocks. Because of their size and/or experimental practices, these creative agencies are sometimes not looked on with favor or approached with enthusiasm by college educators, particularly those professors using notes for classes written years ago and far behind the most innovative practices. The people who are doing the

innovating seldom have time to do the writing that is needed to educate others not in the field, and seldom are they able to get their ideas and knowledge across to the academic community.

Preprofessional service-learning is a partial way to overcome this distance between what is happening in the field and what is being taught on the campuses and to involve the student and the faculty in a widened form of service. I, personally, would like to see the four-year course in most human services extended to five years, with students leaving the college campus for one year after completing the junior year. By this time, students have picked up many of the basic skills needed in practice. If they then spent one year in the field, learning the frustrations, the pitfalls, the joys, the agonies, and the skills needed in order to accomplish their desired goals, they could approach the senior year with much more sensitivity, knowledge, and practical experience. They would be better prepared to pick and shape the courses in their senior year. They would be far more able to deal intelligently with their professors. They would have facts with which to back up their request for more useful information. And during their senior year, they would not just be recipients of information (which may or may not be good information); they could participate in giving information. Those professors who had not updated their material would soon find that their material needs to be changed.

In addition, if all students in service-related fields spent one year in volunteer service, colleges would soon find that they could not place them all in traditional agencies. Some would have to find ways to get their students into nontraditional agencies, and their students would be able to bring new information and experience back to class. By involving students in such service during their training, they can ensure that their graduates will have the skills and attitudes needed in curing some of the problems of our nation.

length of service

Finally, receiving agencies often find that one term or semester is too short for much service. Many, of course, will work with students for that short a period or even for less. Even in one month an agency can give the student valuable and important information about some of the realities of service and help the student understand some of the varieties of help available in doing a job. The agency can teach students ways to go around, through, over, and

under the bureaucracies that will try to block them as helpful people, and it can give them inklings of the problems and the pain involved as well as the ways of getting other agencies, groups, and individuals to cooperate in getting the task done.

But most agencies need to spend that amount of time finding out who the student is, what the student can do, and consequently how the student can be used—and few small agencies can give students that investment of time without getting some service in return. Also, very few curative things can happen in less than a year. The student should be involved in Band-Aid approaches long enough to document the need for significant change as well as to gain the respect and the trust of other staff members and of clients in such a way that they can insist on and work for change and be taken seriously.

conclusions

Student volunteers need proper attitudes as well as technical skills in order to provide truly productive service through the agencies with which they serve. Specifically, academic preparation of student volunteers needs to include practical information on how to effectively deal with paperwork and how to maximize the time actually spent with clients. Persons responsible for college work programs need to reach out to innovative agencies who can share their hard-won knowledge of workable practices.

Somehow we must narrow the time lag between what is happening in the field today and what is being in the field today and what is being taught in the college classroom. Certainly a year of pre-professional service training after the completion of the junior year would bring these two spheres closer together and provide a mutual benefit to volunteer and agency. A one year term of service is long enough for the agency to become aware of the best way to use the student's interest and skills and long enough for the student to get a realistic perspective of the problems that are encountered in all aspects of community service.

In order to develop the resource of student volunteers to its fullest potential, we *must* change our pre-training in these directions. If we move in this way, we may develop fewer volunteers whose high expectations are quickly disappointed and more students with that rare blend of realism and optimism that will see them through many years of rewarding service.

references

Bakely, D. Presentation to the Commission on Voluntary Service and Action, New York City, February 24, 1977.

Sherry Noley has been executive director of The Commission on Voluntary Service and Action (formerly The Commission on Youth Service Projects) since 1975. Previously she was involved in inner-city work in Omaha through Neighborhood House and the Douglas County Juvenile Court as well as in international cultural exchange, infant stimulation for the retarded, work camps for the blind, and church-related youth programs. Information about the work of the Commission and copies of the Commission's catalog of volunteer service opportunities, Invest Yourself (\$2), are available from the Commission at Room 1700A, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, New York 10027.