Understanding Youth as Volunteers:
Implications for Volunteer Resource Managers

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Abstract

With the increased need for volunteers, volunteer resource managers are becoming more creative about recruitment. As such, there has been a marked increase in youth volunteers during the past two decades (Cooperation for National and Community Service, 2005). Working with youth as volunteers brings unique opportunities and challenges. This article provides information for volunteer resource managers to better understand the developmental and generational norms of adolescents and provides insights and tips for working with youth volunteers.

Key Words: adolescent, teens, volunteers, development, implications

Working with Youth Volunteers

Finding and keeping volunteers is a critical task for volunteer resource managers. Perhaps that is one reason why volunteer administrators are increasingly utilizing youth as volunteers. Nation wide, over 15 million youth ages 12-18 volunteer (Cooperation for National and Community Service, 2005). That is over 55% of all youth, and that number is on the rise. Volunteer rates for older youth, ages 16-19 have doubled over the past two decades (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006) and the impact of youth volunteerism is valued at $170 million.

Employing youth volunteers can be a win-win situation. For an organization, youth bring a fresh perspective, energy and potential for life long service. For youth, volunteering leads to positive effects on social, emotional and cognitive development.

In fact, a new line of research suggests that volunteerism improves wellbeing, including self-esteem, self-acceptance, and moral development (Primavera, 1999 & Yates and Youniss, 1999).

When working with youth volunteers, it is valuable for an organization to have a clear understanding of the unique talents, motivators and characteristics of youth. Ideally, volunteer resource managers would be able to know the individual characteristics of each volunteer and cater training and resources to each person. Realistically, however, resource managers often lack the time or resources to evaluate each individual volunteer. Thus, managers might benefit from a framework for recruiting and supporting volunteers according to developmental and generational stages. Understanding human seasons of service can be helpful when recruiting and supporting volunteers (Edwards, Safrit

and Allen, 2011). For example, understanding a youth volunteer's stage of development and their generational cohort may provide enough information to the guide managers' decisions on recruitment and supporting activities.

Youth Development and Generational Cohorts

According to Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1986), youth are greatly impacted by various systems in their lives. Most people understand the three dominant domains of youth development-- physical, social/emotional and cognitive development. As former teenagers, most adults recognize that adolescence is a time of physical growth, emotional ups and downs, and a time when learning is a critical task. It is important for volunteer resource managers to also understand the impact of various social systems on youth behaviors, including the influence of family, peers, community and society.

Adolescence is time of maturation and growth, and a crucial period for prosocial development (Erikson, 1963) and teens tend to think about the impact of real world issues on themselves and their society (Piaget, 1964). Developmentally, teens tend gravitate towards idealism, and dream about creating a better world (Crain, 2011). Adolescent behaviors focus on social interaction and interpersonal relationships; their lives revolve around peer groups and identity development. In adolescence, cognitive abilities become highly operational; adolescents are able to think logically and systematically so long as their thoughts are connected to a real activity or object (Piaget, 1964). This means that youth can be given a task that requires them to be critical thinkers, but they still need specific guidance and context from the adults in their lives.

The research on social learning is clear; youth learn by watching others (Bandura, 1977). This means that volunteer resource managers can model desired behaviors to youth. Positive reinforcement of desired behaviors is key for retention and forward growth. When working with adolescents, volunteer resource managers will get the best results if they allow youth to observe a behavior, try the behavior themselves, and then offer positive feedback.

In addition to individual youth development, it is useful to understand the impact of generational cohorts on adolescent social development. Generation Y, also known as Millennials, were born between 1983 and 2000. Born during a technical revolution, these youth have spent their whole lives connected to technology. As such, they would be excellent resources for technological volunteer opportunities. These youth have very busy lives and want to serve with projects that are enjoyable and flexible (Kehl, 2010).

Soon it will be time for generation Z, otherwise known as the Internet Generation, to become volunteers. In fact, many Gen Z's have already began to volunteer. Like Generation Y youth, the youth born after the year 2000 are growing up with unlimited access to technology and they are growing up in times of war and economic difficulties. These youth see technology as an integral part of their lives and often prefer to be online rather than engaged in face-to-face activities (Posnick-Goodwin, 2010). Although we still have much to learn about this Generation Z, it appears that they will be collaborative

and creative in their approach to problem solving.

Motivation

To increase volunteer retention and productivity, volunteer resource managers must understand what motivates teens to become and remain volunteers. Youth motivation to volunteer has many similarities with adult motivation, including the joy experienced when helping others, social interaction, and recognition (Fitch, 1987). Two common motivational themes for youth volunteers are social interest and a need for affirmation (Schondel & Boehm, 2000). Social interest and responsibility has been long identified in the field as a motivation for volunteerism (Trudeau & Devlin, 1996). A need for affirmation is also directly related to the developmental needs of youth.

These motivational factors are compatible with the developmental processes of adolescence. Developmentally, adolescents are working on identity formation (Erickson, 1963), moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984) and teens have an innate need for social interest (Adler, 1959). Social interest is defined as an aptitude, attitude and ability for cooperation; a need to belong and contribute (Ansbacher, 1991). People who exhibit social interest tend to do better in life; they feel better, have a higher sense of self-efficacy, and they volunteer more often than people who do not exhibit social interest (Bass, Curlette, Kern, McWilliams, 2002).

Developmentally, adolescents are transitioning from a state of egocentrism and are developing a keen interest in connection to others through positive social behaviors (Bar-Tal, 1982). New research suggests that adolescents with high levels of social interest, like those willing to volunteer, reap many physical and emotional rewards. Gilman (2001), for example, determined that youth who view themselves as socially interested identified that they have much higher life satisfaction rates, and have higher satisfaction with friends and family members than youth who did not view themselves as socially interested.

The need for affirmation or social approval, a motivational theme identified in the work of Schondel & Boehm (2000), provides youth with positive reinforcement for helping others. Many youth report that they like the feeling that comes from helping others; that it feels good to give back because it makes others feel good. Among youth surveyed, 73% reported that their efforts positively impact their communities and volunteering is one of the top 3 activities teens identify as cool (Dosomething.org, 1998). Youth want to make a contribution; they want to set an example for others and be recognized for their contribution (Barnett & Brennan, 2008).

Providing tangible rewards, such as financial incentives or exchange for extra credit, is another motivation that attracts youth to volunteerism (Suden & Raskoff, 2000). Some youth say that in addition to meeting school requirements, they want volunteer experiences that prepare them for future careers and allow them to develop leadership skills (Safrit, Gliem, & Gliem, 2004).

To put theory into practice, volunteer resource managers need to know that developmentally, teens prefer mixed gender groups that allow personal responsibility and decision-making opportunities. Youth perform best in volunteer positions which provide direct interaction with people and provide

opportunities to learn, explore and grow (Nassar & Talaat, 2009). Bringing youth together around a common goal that includes opportunities to socialize matches well with their developmental abilities and needs as well with the generational cohort.

Recruitment

Volunteer resource managers that want to engage youth as volunteers must actively recruit youth. Clearly, youth want to be involved and over half of them already are involved in volunteer efforts. Youth are likely to become involved in volunteering in response to external encouragement from a significant adult in their lives, such as a role model that volunteers or a teacher that recommends volunteering (Schondel & Boehm, 2000). In a study by Suden & Raskoff, (2000), it was discovered that 40% of youth begin to volunteer simply because someone asked them. However, that same study revealed that non-volunteer youth overwhelmingly reported that no one asked them to volunteer. Most often, friends, families and teachers are the ones asking. In fact, the same study showed that 34% of youth had someone they knew already involved in the volunteering project, either as a recipient of services or as a fellow volunteer and 32% volunteered as part of an organization.

Schools, faith based groups and youth development organizations such as 4-H are among the top recruitment locations. In fact, many youth organizations, such as public schools and youth development programs require volunteer participation. Nearly 25% of school personnel view service learning and volunteerism as an important part of education and 35% of all high schools require service learning for graduation (Spring, Grimm, & Dietz, 2009). Volunteer resource managers might do well to contact local school districts or youth development programs when they need volunteers.

There are barriers to volunteerism for some youth, such as a lack of transportation, time, and limited access to opportunities for volunteerism. Most often, youth volunteers come from networks through which youth are invited to participate. Many youth, particularly youth from lower resource groups, lack access to volunteerism opportunities or networks of support to guide them toward volunteer opportunities (Suden & Raskoff, 2000). These teens often do not know how to be involved or do not have the resources such as transportation to become involved. This puts under resourced youth at a major disadvantage to all the benefits of volunteerism. Volunteer resource managers could make a critical change in this pattern by seeking out youth volunteers from vulnerable populations.

One example of a way to utilize low-recourse volunteers is through virtual volunteering. Most youth have access to technology, either through their school, the public library or in their home. These youth could become volunteers by engaging electronically. For example, the North Carolina Youth and Families with Promise program works with under-resourced Latino middle school youth in two rural counties. These youth are paired with youth mentors that are in high school or early college. The mentor youth, many of whom are also from low resource families from neighboring communities, spend about half of their time doing virtual mentoring. Students can log onto their computers at their individual school

libraries and communicate. All youth were asked to participate in the program by partnership with community groups (4-H) and local schools (middle, senior and early colleges).

Developmentally Appropriate Volunteer Opportunities

Although there is an endless array of volunteer opportunities that are appropriate for youth, finding the right position is key for recruitment and retention. Volunteer resource administrators can think about the developmental and generational abilities of youth when planning volunteer activities. For example, activities appropriate for youth need to include opportunities for social connections. Activities need to be interesting for youth to volunteer, should provide the youth with a sense of making the world a better place, and should improve the youth's life. Activities could include delivery services, planning and completing a community cleanup day, or organizing a voter registration drive. The literature tends to document peer education and service learning as two highly effective volunteer arenas, perhaps because they meet the developmental and generational needs of youth.

Service Learning

The philosophy of service learning is based on John Dewey's work and his emphasis on an applied learning approach to education. Dewey (1938) created a theoretical model in which experience was a critical element of education including principles of experience, inquiry, and reflection as critical to service learning. He also suggested that project-based learning must be interesting and worthwhile to the learner, must increase the learner's curiosity and must include time for the learner to mentally process the work being done (Dewey, 1933). Dewey's original work also focused on the importance of community and citizenship, which led to the concept of service learning (Giles & Eyler, 1994).

Modern day service learning philosophy suggests that "young people are contributors who bring assets to any learning situation; they have the right to contribute to the improvement of society, to make this world a more fraternal and more habitable place" (Battle, 2009, p 2). This philosophy implies that volunteerism in youth is ideal; that both community and the child mutually benefit from each other (Kielsmeier, 2011).

It is clear to see how volunteer resource managers can benefit from the philosophy of service learning. Administrators who view youth as contributors find that working with youth provides a win-win situation with the assets that youth bring to the table providing strength and support in service-learning activities and adults providing mentorship. Service learning activities are embraced by school administrators around the world. Approximately 30% of classroom teachers and many youth serving organizations utilize service learning (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2005). Schools and youth groups need projects; projects need volunteers; a perfect match.

Peer Education

Teens Reaching Youth is a peer education model that provides older youth with skills and training to teach younger youth. Peer education is similar to service learning in that youth perform

a service as part of an educational experience. However, peer education focuses specifically on teens as teachers. Peer education has grown in popularity and use over the past few decades. Perhaps one reason for the increase in peer education is its natural fit with the developmental and generational needs of youth. In order to effectively implement a peer education model, however, there must be an intensive training program as well as a strong youth-adult partnership (Orme & Starkey, 1999).

In peer education, adults are responsible for not only training the youth, but also to be available as youth implement the program. Research shows the critical importance of the quality of youth-adult partnerships in youth engagement (Orme & Starkey, 1999). Furthermore, youth engagement, or having youth involved in decision making on projects that truly impact the community, is built on the premise of mutually respectful relationships between the adults and youth. Safrit, (2002) identified four essential elements of youth-adult partnerships; the 4-E's of youth-adult partnerships are empathy, engagement, empowerment and enrichment.

Adolescents possess the capacity to empathize and see the world from another's point of view. Adult partners must also make every effort to empathize with youth volunteers in order to understand their experiences and decisions. Developmentally, teens have goals to make the world a better place and adult partners must engage youth in activities to help them feel that they will attain those goals.

Empowerment, or giving youth the opportunity to be responsible, is not always natural or easy for volunteer administrators. However, adults must challenge themselves to allow the youth to make decisions—and possibly even make mistakes. As a result, their lives will be enriched; will be improved. This is where learning happens, and where youth find an identity of contribution that can last a lifetime.

Conclusion

Volunteer resource managers that engage youth in ways that are meaningful to both the organization and the youth are likely to see great success with young volunteers. Once again, reciprocation is at play, creating a win/win situation for all. The organization has extra help reaching its mission and youth gain skills and developmental benefits. Furthermore, when youth know they will be actively engaged, they are more likely to be actively involved with an organization (Barnett & Brennan, 2008). The key to success is to have an understanding of the developmental and generational norms of youth, and use that knowledge when recruiting and placing your in volunteer positions.

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