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**Volunteering in Cultural Institutions:  
A Comparison Between the United States and Germany**

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**Abstract**

*While volunteering in the arts in the United States is already a very important factor for the arts sector, this development has just started in Germany. This research is the first to take a look at the standard of volunteer activities and volunteer management in the arts not only in the United States, but also in Germany. A quite important factor is the different history of volunteerism and the founding of the arts institutions in both countries. Negative and positive potentials as well as strengths and weaknesses of volunteer activities in the arts are focused in comparison between the United States and Germany.*

**Keywords:**

cultural institutions, arts sector, volunteers, Germany, volunteer management

**Introduction**

Volunteering in the arts is only a small portion of the voluntary sector, but a very vital one for cultural institutions in the United States. In Germany there is a strong tradition of volunteering, mostly though in the social or socio-cultural field. There is also a high rate of volunteers in small arts institutions in rural areas. But very few of the higher level arts institutions in Germany utilise volunteers. The following research results aim to show the actual standard of volunteer effort in the arts in the United States and in Germany, and to describe the chances and risks of these activities for the institutions and the volunteers.

**Historical Background**

The history of volunteering in the United States and in Germany is paradoxically very different and very similar at the same time. Many of the developments that resulted in the strong communitarianism in the United States arrived with European immigrants.

In Germany and in all of Europe there, is a very long tradition of taking responsibility for the community one lives in-to take responsibility in political and social fields. In the late 18th century, many registered societies and charities were founded, most whose sole purpose was to educate their members. A multitude of music and literature societies were founded as well as amateur choirs (Gall, 1989:196). Since then, Germany has maintained a very strong network of registered societies for the recreation

and education of its citizens. In these societies there always has been and still is a lot of volunteering. Though Germany has a strong tradition in volunteering in the amateur arts field and the sociocultural field, major arts institutions have almost no volunteers. A reason for this might be that in the early days the ruling aristocracy founded most of the arts institutions in Germany (Birnkraut, 2003:80). Every noble court had its own musicians, painters and actors. But in the 19th century there were also a lot of initiatives originated by interested citizens who founded theatres and financed opera houses. After a while, the city government partly or wholly financed these institutions. In 1918-after the First World War-all noble court institutions were transferred into the hands of the state. This development has continued today where most of the major German arts institutions are heavily subsidized by the state. German arts institutions still have concerns about private money and the influence of private donors on the arts, so the government took over much of the responsibility of the single citizen for the arts. This had a strong influence on the attitude of institutions towards volunteerism but also on the attitude of the single citizen regarding volunteering for arts institutions.

In the United States there has been, from the beginning, a very strong tradition to help the community. It was a vital part of the Puritan religion to take charge of one's own life but also to give back to the community. Americans are more or less still educated in this sense: "You are going to get a lot in this life but you have to give a lot back, too." (S. Stevens, personal communication, 2001). Donating money shows this, as does spending time for the institutions one cares for. This illustrates differences between the founding of arts institutions in the United States and Germany. Devoted citizens not only donated the first funds but also initiated the support of the community and founded most of the arts institutions (Dobkin Hall, 1992:39). As for most arts institutions in the United States, first there was the community's wish to found it symphony

orchestra and then they started raising money and hired professional artists. Support and financing of these arts institutions remained in the hands of citizens and were not handed over to the government. To this day, the citizens still have the responsibility for arts institutions; without citizen support, they could not exist.

### **The Research Outline**

A qualitative design was used for the research. More than 60 interviews, each about one hour in length, were conducted with volunteers from arts institutions. The qualitative research was aimed at recording the engagement of volunteers in cultural institutions in the United States and Germany. The research focused on the attitude of the institutions and their volunteers to specified problem areas. It also concentrated on the evaluation of the volunteers and their integration into the organizations. The interviews were held with partially standardized interview guidelines. The main topics of the interview guideline focused on the following questions:

- the collection of data and facts, the organization and content of the individual programs
- the recruiting process
- the relationship between employees and volunteers, especially volunteers and artists
- threat of loss of positions, professionalism and responsibility
- results of volunteer activity
- introduction of management theories
- basic advantages and disadvantages of the engagement of volunteers, and,
- motivation of the volunteers.

Further interesting topics that occurred during the interviews involved the profession of manager of volunteers, corporate volunteering and the general trend of volunteerism.

The research concentrated on four types of cultural institutions: symphony orchestras, art museums, operas and theatre. In each city the institutions with the highest profiles were interviewed, i.e., in Chicago, interviews were conducted with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Lyric Opera, the Goodman theatre and the Arts Institute.

The interviewees were always managers of volunteers. In Germany, in institutions without volunteers, the person who would be most likely responsible for a yet to be founded volunteer program was interviewed. In most cases this was the head of communication or the marketing manager. In each institution volunteers were also interviewed.

**Results**

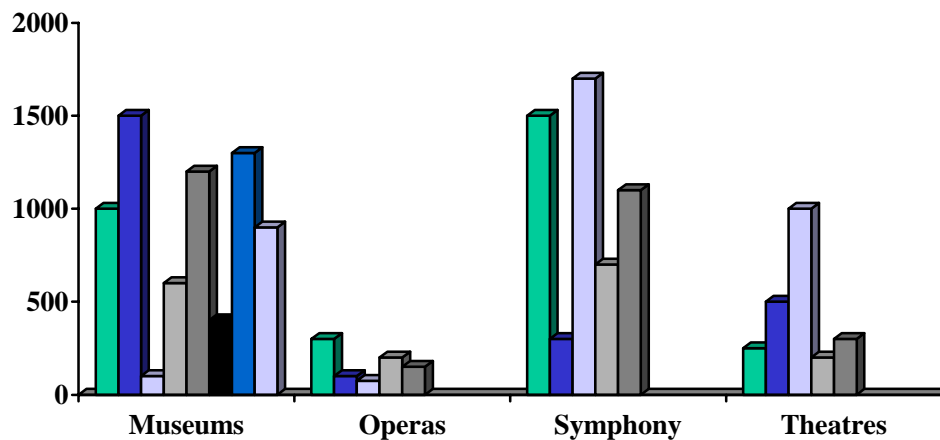
Based on the interviews, a variety of results has been found--some of them self-explanatory and some of them surprising. In this article, a broad overview of the general results are given.

*Who has volunteer programs?* While all 26 interviewed institutions in the United States engaged volunteers, only eight out of twenty institutions in Germany had a volunteer

program, with six being museums.

*How many volunteers were involved?* In the United States, the number of volunteers ranged from 70 up to 1,600, The German institutions had between 1 and 170 volunteers. Figure 1 shows that there is no clear pattern between what kind of arts institution uses how many volunteers. Museums and symphony orchestras in the United States tend to have more volunteers than do theatres and opera houses. The figure includes all 26 American institutions that were interviewed (Museums: Seattle Art Museum, Denver Museum for Nature and History, Dallas Museum of Art, National Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Arts Institute of Chicago. Opera houses: San Francisco Opera, Washington Opera, Metropolitan Opera, New York City Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago. Symphony orchestras: San Francisco Symphony, Seattle Symphony, Dallas Symphony, Philadelphia Symphony, Chicago Symphony). There was no significant relation between the number of staff and the number of volunteers.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Number of volunteers in the different programs of the interviewed institutions**

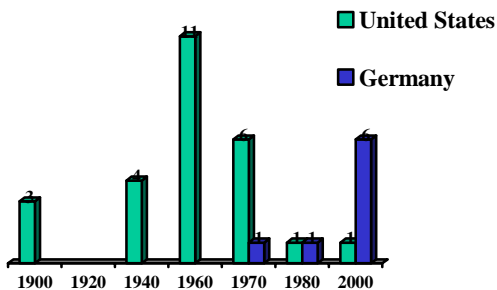


*When were the programs founded?* The programs in the United States were founded mostly in the 60s and 70s, but there were some that were as old as 98 years, founded in 1904. The existing volunteer programs in Germany were mostly founded in the 90s, the oldest founded in 1976 (Figure 2).

There are parallel phenomena here, because both countries went through hard economic times in the described periods, suggesting that volunteering often has its origins, in difficult economic times.

*Profile of the volunteers.* In United States institutions the average volunteer is female, in her sixties and with a fairly well established background, education and financial situation.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Number of volunteer programs founded over the years**



*Fields of volunteer work.* Volunteers in arts institutions in the United States work in a wide variety of jobs, including

- fundraising
- archiving
- guiding or giving pedagogical lectures, helping the curator
- doing translations
- selling tickets
- ushering.

A clear role of the manager of volunteers

is finding the appropriate job for every volunteer and not the other way around.

The research shows that American art institutions have specialized their volunteer programs in different areas:

- In theatres and operas volunteer work is concentrated on admissions and ushering. This, however, is only the case in institutions that are not unionized. Volunteers are frequently given free admission as a reward.
- The symphony orchestras engage most of their volunteers in fundraising, and in the last few years also in education. Symphony orchestras in the United States use education programs as an active tool to strengthen the bonds with the community.

Museums focus on informational guest services and also develop broad educational activities with the help of volunteers. Volunteer guides are a special type of volunteer because of the long and rigorous training they have to go through before they start working. Guides often go through one or even two years of training including weekly lectures by curators, one to two days of library work per week, and written and oral exams. For these positions volunteers have to sign long-term commitments (for example, a three-year contract at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City). Despite the difficult requirements and the long training period, there are waiting lists for these positions.

The six institutions in Germany that work with volunteers are museums. They engage volunteers in museum shops, at information desks and for guided tours.

*Integration into the organization.* Volunteer programs are integrated into cultural institutions in the United States in a variety of ways. Some are subsumed under the personnel department (Seattle Symphony),

some belong to the development department (Philadelphia Orchestra, Chicago Symphony). Some have their own department directly under senior management (Metropolitan Museum of Art). Sometimes the volunteer activities are included in the organization as special events (Oregon Shakespeare Festival, San Francisco Symphony) or in the sales activities of the shops (New York City Opera). There are many different possibilities that have developed over the years, which are not always favored by the acting managers. It is the person who initiated the volunteer program in the institution who almost always made the initial decision. Interestingly enough, once a decision about the organizational setting is made it does not change even if the initiator is no longer part of the organization and/or the management feels that their volunteer program is not located adequately in the organization.

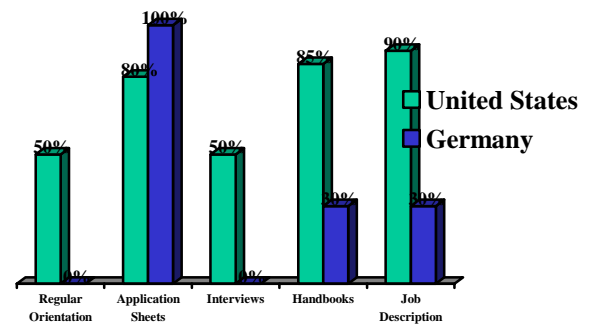
The German institutions also do not have uniform prerequisites. Only the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart has a job description characterizing the duties as volunteer coordination. All the others belong to the first generation that has initiated volunteer programs and are thus the precursors of these projects.

*Structure of volunteer programs.* The structure of volunteer programs plays a very important role in their success. The bigger a program gets, the better the organizational aspect has to be; the clearer the needs of the institution and the needs of the volunteers are identified, the more efficient the program is. Figure 3 shows the various instruments/processes that are used by American and German institutions. In Germany, however, these structures are often not used for the management of volunteers.

*Attitudes about volunteerism.* In Germany there is a general concern that the work to

operate a volunteer program is greater than the benefit. Most of the institutions do not see any potential areas of work for volunteers-which clearly illustrates that the major arts institutions in Germany are still quite well staffed. Moreover, there is a concern that the volunteers will not represent the institution properly.

**FIGURE 3**  
**Percentage of volunteer programs using the described instruments**



An impressive result from the research was the trust American institutions have in their volunteers. Most of the managers of volunteers interviewed-especially in the education and the guide programs-have their volunteers represent their institutions to all of their visitors, potential donors and customers.

In Germany, the institutions do not see potential work fields for volunteers and thus do not see any potential volunteers either.

The institutions already working with volunteers in Germany experienced an enthusiastic response to their first call for volunteers. While expecting no more than 20-30 people, the actual turnout was 200-300 people.

Arts institutions in the United States gave no reasons against volunteerism. Most of the American institutions stated that the programs executed and supervised by

volunteers simply would not exist without their support.

*Advantages and disadvantages of volunteer programs.* Two main advantages were named by the American institutions:

- volunteers are their ambassadors in the community and with potential sponsors
- volunteers serve as motivators of a multitude of programs that only exist because of them

Of course, the advantage of the massive financial gain of having 1,500 volunteers working for the institution without raising the personnel expenses can not be denied.

The disadvantages were that founding a volunteer program requires an investment in time and money. There is a certain dependence on the volunteers. If volunteers stop working on a project, this results in additional work for the staff. Sometimes it appears to be easier to work with paid employees than to work with a volunteer.

In general, German institutions that already work with volunteers named the same disadvantages. They explicitly stressed the fact that time and money have to be invested in a volunteer program before it pays off.

*Volunteer manager as a profession.* In the United States, the profession of manager of volunteers has been fighting for acceptance since its beginnings 40 years ago. Many of the managers of volunteers found themselves in this job either because it was vacant or because it was the only way to be promoted. The acceptance, importance, and interpretation of the position varies greatly in different institutions. The reasons for this probably lie in the many important personal attributes that are necessary for the position of manager of volunteers:

*Creating and communicating a shared vision; embracing diversity while nurturing pluralism; accepting change and managing ambiguity; acting within shared values and championing ethical behavior; linking effective management to personal leadership; reflecting.* (Safrit & Merrill 1999:28-43)

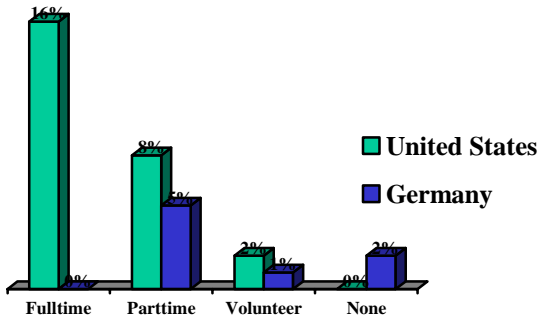
Many managers of volunteers in the United States are aware of a wide field of professional training but don't see the necessity to participate in special training. (Pirtle, 2001) Networking between managers of volunteers in different cultural institutions is a fairly recent development thanks to the initiative of a few.

In all the American institutions that were interviewed there was a special, permanent manager whom volunteers could address. The positions differ, however, in the paid status of the manager, the number of staff in their division, and whether the management of volunteers is only a part of their job (Figure 4).

Only two institutions had a "volunteer" coordinator of volunteers. In the case of six coordinators, their work with volunteers constitutes only a small part of their position, and there were two half-time positions. All others devoted themselves full-time to working with volunteers, and had up to seven additional paid staff in their division (four institutions had over five employees, and five institutions had up to three co-workers).

The manager of volunteers position has existed in the interviewed institutions from 36 years to less than five years. Seven institutions have had the position for more than 20 years.

**FIGURE 4**  
**Percentage of institutions that employ managers of volunteers.**



Three reported having the position from ten to 20 years, six have had a manager from five to ten years, and three have had the position for less than five years. These facts illustrate the long tradition and importance of the position in cultural institutions in the United States; they also show that compared to the social sector, i.e. hospitals, in the United States the profession of manager of volunteers in the arts in Germany is fairly young (Ellis). One can also see the different attitude of management towards volunteer work in the United States compared to Germany.

Only one of the institutions interviewed in Germany had a part-time employee working exclusively with the volunteers. This half-time position at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart was initially financed by the Robert Bosch foundation and was limited to three years (the end of 2002). At that time the museum integrated the position into their financial budget. Other institutions that work with volunteers have similar structures as in the United States. They have "volunteer" managers of volunteers and part-time positions. If you regard the newness of working with volunteers in big arts institutions, it is impressive that the few institutions actually working with volunteers also see the necessity to have at least part-

time staff that are concerned with the management of volunteers.

### Implications and Follow-Ups

Arts institutions in the United States are part of a much more economic market than is the case in Germany. Most institutions are dependent on the relationship with the community: on their visitors through ticket sales but also on private funding through time and/or money. Volunteers are seen as a vital part of the activities of the institutions. They are the ambassadors of the institution to the community. Volunteers are part of the unique selling point that each institution has to display in the United States market in order to survive the competition. Institutions and citizens both want volunteer activities as part of their life and both sides appreciate taking on responsibilities.

The German institutions still have a long way to go. As they are still being subsidized by the government, they might be in a better financial situation than United States arts institutions. But with budgets stagnating and/or sinking, and a rough economic situation that also affects ticket sales, the institutions have to find new ways of connecting with their audience. Volunteerism might be a way for them to change old habits. Another argument is that fundraising and education programs still are not developed as much as possible. Here is yet another chance to enhance existing or create new activities, possibly with the help of volunteers.

Volunteer effort can be most effective if a strong structure is implemented before starting to utilize volunteers. It is necessary to find the right place within the organization and to have a maximum backup by the senior management of the institution.

For American institutions, this research allows a different perspective and shows that apart from all the success volunteer programs have, there still is the need for

even more professionalism and improved networking. Long range and strategic planning still have to be implemented as normal instruments for volunteer programs. The level of volunteering in the arts accomplished so far has to be the starting point for even higher efforts.

*Note: The author thanks Susan Ellis, Connie Pirtle and Sydney Stevens for their input through personal interviews in 2001.*

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### About the Author

Dr. Gesa Birnkrant earned a masters in Business Administration and Arts Management and researched the topic of volunteering in arts institutions, comparing the United States and Germany in her doctoral dissertation. She was general manager of the Institute for Arts and Media Management in Hamburg, Germany and launched her own consulting company for arts management and volunteer management in 2004.