

NATIONAL SCHOOL VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

New Orleans, LA April 5, 1977

Five years ago, when I prepared a speech for ASPA on Volunteers in Government, it was a different world we were living in. I was describing the beginning of budget cuts, and the high expectations of pressure groups created during the 60's, and the low level of volunteer participation, such as 60% in rehabilitation facilities. Then there were two state offices of volunteers, and now there are thirty-four, largely due to ACTION seeding them at first through a project of the National Governor's Conference, and later as an important part of the program and policy development of ACTION. The school volunteering has gone through a parallel expansion during the same period.

In 1972 ACTION was in its infancy as a federal agency, having been created by an Executive Order (and later legitimized by Congress)¹ which brought many federal volunteer programs under one roof out of their parent departments: State, OEO, Administration on Aging, Small Business Administration in Commerce and its own National Student Volunteer Program, grown out of the experimentation on many campuses, most particularly Michigan State.

In 1972, there were some economic indicators on the horizon pointing toward the depression to come, and many programs involving volunteers were being developed to save money in a world of rapid inflation and high expectations from pressure groups and a cold budget approach. The volunteer sector was fearsome about ACTION and ACTION felt little in common with traditional volunteering.

From the voluntary sector where I sat at the time, we were very much encouraged with enrollments in state activities doubling and tripling every year. Two of our universal problems then are still with us today: money and staff resistance, due to a variety of reasons ranging from feelings of job insecurity to a sincere conviction that involving volunteers would somehow lower standards of services. Mostly paid people like teachers felt as many do today, that they were too busy to take time with volunteers. Instead of regarding volunteers as a resource and a help they see a whole new set of responsibilities added to an already serious overload, and as one state hospital superintendent had recently said to me, "We don't need any spies poking around here, either."

Galloping inflation still pressures budgets intolerably. In all too many cases, even in Headstart, where volunteer services are part of the "soft match" to obtain federal funds, penny-wise RIFs have hit first the Volunteer Coordinator, the goose who laid the golden egg by producing people to contribute time and effort to meet the local matching funds and parent involvement requirements. Instead of investing paid staff time to obtain, train and retain unpaid staff to extend and enrich programs, administrators and teaching staff are struggling along, cutting every possible expense, doing it themselves without all the willing and able help just waiting to be asked, or turning to work for somebody else.

Another major difference is the growth in numbers and quality of the still developing profession of volunteer administration. Although four salary studies in the past years still show appallingly low levels, each year more higher level jobs are created, more men are joining our forces, very frequently out of the clergy, incidentally, with a satisfying feeling they have not changed their ministry, only their institutional setting! The religious based leadership accelerates professionalization and forces attention to a value system. As David Horton Smith, eminent scholar and sociologist has observed, we have worked out techniques for recruiting, training, recording and recognizing volunteer effort. We can teach these techniques to beginners in the field, refine and experiment with theories and work out systems for technology. But we won't be truly professional until we have focussed less on how to's and more on why's. The right to change attitudes in training carries grave responsibilities for impact meanings which underlie the behaviors we ask people to adopt.

Our burgeoning field of practice illustrates this growing maturity of the profession: the volunteers in schools leadership. First funded for three years by the Ford Foundation, an association of school coordinators has been led since its early days by strong, imaginative people, confident in their capacity to improve education through volunteer tutors, teacher aids, and career models in the classroom, in addition to traditional class mothers who gave parties and escorted youngsters on trips to the zoo. (I remember hearing an urban school system coordinator take pride that in her program, they interviewed eighteen people for every one they accepted as a school volunteer.) I was working in the mental retardation field at the time, and I remember wishing I could arrange to pick up her rejects who might be nice warm encouraging people, not sophisticated enough to work with the gifted children in special education, but great motivators through the time and patience they might have with the slower ones.

By now there are an estimated five million volunteers in elementary and secondary education in urban and rural settings. Prominent among volunteers are pupils themselves, for careful experiments by Isabel Besecker in Boston proved that older children with reading problems improved faster than their tutees when they were assigned to help the younger ones. Several major foundations have funded experimental education designs and the Office of Education has helped the National School Volunteer Program, (even to the extreme of supplying the person!) My guess is that this will be the first national group of professional volunteer coordinators to gain status within their field of practice to legitimate their function and attract promising young people to this new career who enjoyed volunteer services as youth.

Though acts of volunteering are as old as time itself, since it is a natural human urge which demands expression, professional recognition for paid leadership is new and becomes official this month with the publication of the Dictionary of Occupational Titles. It is only two years late, but we have been anxiously awaiting this official classification in the 800 series as a "professional and kindred" occupation since the U.S. Census Bureau in 1970 called our work "miscellaneous clerical."

The next step will require the help of NEA and other education oriented organizations to communicate the need for able, dynamic leadership staff to attract and keep volunteers in educational program staffing patterns. The DoT defines us, but we need help with Civil Service and personnel administrators, who are the people who must appreciate what a highly skilled, sensitive and crucially important function Volunteer Directors and Coordinators perform.

Centralizing and delegating the responsibilities for this form of citizen participation will insure good job identification, placement, orientation and training of staff to work with volunteers and of volunteers themselves to internalize the learning goals of each program.

When volunteers are stimulated by dynamic leadership, they progress through service learning opportunities into positions of advocacy for appropriate education, missionaries to the public, as it were. The truth of education as the most effective instrument of social mobility is born out in "Roots" as well as many economic surveys. Volunteering is one of the most effective methods of citizenship

education through active field experience, and the citizen volunteer committed to advocacy for life long learning is the "end product" of volunteer development.

The Labor Department distinguishes the profession and the professional organization (which we don't yet have) from professional work: work which requires decisions based on complex, dynamic, unique data, decisions which cannot be standardized into one correct answer, but a choice from a range of alternatives involving conflicting values and pressures.

As individual practitioners, paid or not, we have a responsibility for self directed learning consistent with our recommendations for others. This conference is an excellent beginning for the rest of our lives!

¹ The ACTION law (Domestic Volunteer Service Act) PL 93-113 was passed October 3, 1973.