

# An End to the "Me" Generation: Getting Students to Volunteer

Wayne W. Meisel

## INTRODUCTION

How can you get today's young people involved in community service? Aren't they all apathetic, too busy or too career-minded to think about things like service?

It is true that if you look at a student body as a whole it may seem uninvolved and uninterested in such issues as illiteracy, homelessness, hunger, or the environment. But get people alone or in small groups and you find that they are interested, concerned, worried and wondering what they can do to help, do something that will make a difference.

The following is a collection of thoughts on how to get students to volunteer, to get students working in after-school programs, meal programs, shelters, hospitals, nursing homes, day care centers, elementary schools, or to act as a tutor, a big brother or a big sister, a coach, or an instructor. Many of the observations presented in this article come from workshops and visits to campuses around the country.

If there is one essential thing to remember when recruiting, it is that you care about the young people with whom you are working. Care enough to listen, to respect their fears, to understand their situations, and to place them in experiences where they can be both successful and challenged.

Too often we scold students for not getting involved. If you understand the economic, social and political pressures and fears students face, you will understand that to scold them will not result in participation but instead will make them run away even farther.

Recruiting is not just a matter of having a couple of gimmicks that draw attention

to you and your volunteer program, nor does good recruiting rest in slick advertisements or fancy endorsements. It occurs when you have all the pieces together. It occurs

- when you understand why people do not get involved;
- when you support and encourage students rather than scold them and make them feel guilty;
- when you, the students, and the society as a whole stop reading student inactivity as apathy and begin to understand the need to establish and maintain effective community service programs that will effectively tap and channel student energy and idealism;
- when you present service as something that is exciting and challenging, not boring and dull;
- when you demonstrate to the individual student the importance and the impact of his or her service;
- when each school develops and maintains a comprehensive broad-based community outreach program which supports an effective and efficient structure, effective leadership, and a powerful and exciting challenge.

The bad news is that there are no short cuts. The good news is that if you do these things, you will be successful.

## WHY DON'T STUDENTS GET INVOLVED?

In order to figure out how to get students involved we have to ask ourselves why young people do not get involved. Is it that they consciously choose not to get involved, or are there barriers which keep them from being active in the com-

---

Wayne W. Meisel is director of Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) located at the University of Minnesota (St. Paul). COOL is a national organization designed to increase the number of young people involved in public service. While at Harvard University, Meisel designed and directed a housing and neighborhood development program involving more than 350 volunteers. In 1983, he participated in a 1500 mile Walk for Action to promote, support, and give direction to community service programs.

munity? If we understand that, then we can begin to develop a recruitment strategy. Students tell us that they are not involved because they

- are not asked.
- do not know about the needs of a community.
- do not know about service opportunities
- are not connected/affiliated with the community.
- are afraid of failure when working with people different from themselves.
- lack confidence in their skills and talents—they ask, "What can I do?"
- are overwhelmed by the complexity and size of the issues—they wonder "What difference can I make? What's the point?"
- have a difficult time with transportation.
- think they have no time.
- have a need to work for a salary.
- do not see it as a "cool" thing to do.
- report that there is no program at their school or "If there is, I don't know about it."
- do not like the projects that the service program offers.

The prevailing myth about students is that they are apathetic. Yet the above responses have little or nothing to do with apathy; they tend to indicate mechanical or structural problems. Rather than needing to develop a philosophy and value system, we need to develop a structure. We need to develop and support a leadership and present an effective and exciting challenge to bring the existing student idealism to the surface.

#### APATHY: BREAKING THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

The most important thing to establish for yourself, for others with whom you are working, for the general public, and for students themselves is that young people are not apathetic. O.K., maybe there are a few people out there who do not care about anything but themselves and could care less about their communities or anyone else but themselves. But they are a small minority, and they should not set

the tone for the vast majority of the people who are concerned but often anxious, confused, and at a loss as to what to do.

If organizers or volunteer coordinators are allowed to subscribe to the notion that students are apathetic, then there will always be excuses for program's not being able to attract many young people; students are blamed for not being interested because "everyone knows that young people are not interested these days in community service."

Getting a majority of a student population to perform some kind of service during the school term takes work. It means getting the challenge out there, putting fear and shyness aside and approaching people. It may mean doing some outrageous things to attract attention. It also means having a solid program which is well-run and efficient, one that develops and depends on student leadership, and one which generates a supportive community for the young volunteers. Students respond to these things.

The following is some ammunition for you the next time you hear people talking about apathetic students.

#### *Apathy is the wrong word.*

Vegetables are apathetic, people aren't. When we say someone is apathetic it usually means that we have not taken the time to look at the issues that he or she is dealing with and to figure out what is actually going on.

#### *Apathy is an easy word.*

Apathy is a convenient word for people to use when talking about students. It takes the responsibility off the organizer, the program or the school and places blame on the students. Students will respond to a good community service program.

#### *Apathy is a bad word.*

The biggest problem with using the term "apathetic" is that it is a very disempowering word. If people are told they are apathetic, they will act that way and thus a self-fulfilling prophecy is born. Stereotypes are very damaging and have

a multiplier effect; they are very difficult to change.

Idealism is a condition of youth, the nature of youth. If idealism among young people is not apparent these days, it is because we are not drawing it out, encouraging it, and supporting it. Too often we are failing to capture the imagination of young people and connect it with community service.

This is not a problem of a lack of values or idealism. A better description of what we are faced with is "structural apathy," a situation in which the weakness of the leadership, structure, and challenge in a program leans on student apathy as a scapegoat.

#### HOW DO WE PERCEIVE AND PRESENT SERVICE?

In order to effectively recruit students to volunteer, we have to look at what type of image and presence service has at a school. Think about how schools and colleges present the challenge of service to students today.

*Question: What are students' attitudes about service?*

*Students respond: Community service is . . .*

- boring.
- something you do when you can't do anything else.
- something you do when you feel guilty.
- what you do when you get in trouble.
- something for good students.
- something that is always in the back of your mind.
- nice but I have other interests.

*Community Service is exciting and challenging*

There is nothing boring about community service. There is nothing boring about feeding hungry people, comforting those who are sick, or teaching a young (or old) person to read his or her first book.

*Community Service is for everyone*

We often present service as if only certain people should do it and when a few get involved that means there is an adequate service program on a campus. Sometimes this is due both to intentional and unintentional design. Some schools will not allow students to participate unless they are honor students. Others offer

service for everyone but then create placement opportunities only for those who are interested in more academic type of activities.

Too often we say "Oh, those people would never help out." People often do not even bother asking the athletes, or the computer whizzes, or the artists. People have stereotypes about them and often think that they would never want to get involved. They need to be asked and asked in such a way that they feel welcome and needed.

*Community Service offers special opportunities for everyone*

There are those who say service is only for those who cannot do anything else. This is not true. You can, however, make a great meal out of leftovers. So, too, can you build a great community service program out of those who have tried for a team, a play or an organization and not made it. One recruiting tactic is to go to all the organizations at a school or a college that makes cuts and get the cut list. Contact the people who have heard the disappointing news. Console them and offer them an opportunity to do something with the interests, talents and time that they have. Ask a cut soccer player to coach, a cast-off director to direct a community play, a rejected actor to give acting classes or to act in a children's theater production, or an abandoned journalist to help start a junior high newspaper.

#### DEALING WITH THE EXCUSES

People are frequently programmed so that when you ask them to do something, they automatically respond with reasons why they cannot. This often is a defense mechanism, a way to protect oneself from all the people asking one to do this or give that. While some of the excuses are valid and should be respected, more often people use them without much thought.

Students always have excuses. Many feel they are too busy. While students do have busy schedules, few students have their weekly calendars completely filled.

It is important to hear students out and respond positively yet firmly. We often times give too much validity to an excuse.

*Excuse #1: I have no talents.*

Students seriously wonder what it is they can do to help address community issues. If they respond, "I can't do anything," ask them: "What do you put on a job or college application? Certainly, you don't insist that you have no talents."

The listening ear will quickly find out what the student has done or does well. You will find that people can play the guitar or the piano, or were soccer players or camp counselors, know origami or enjoy being around older people. All these talents can be effectively used in the community and will give students outlets to express their skills and talents. They will feel fulfilled and affirmed.

*Response by the recruiter;*

The job of the recruiter is to draw out the skills of a young person, show how he or she can be useful in a service context and then work with that person on developing a placement where the skill and the need can be matched.

*Excuse #2: I have no time.*

Students' favorite excuse is that they do not have any time. All they have to do is produce a long reading list or a tuition bill they must finance by working long hours to show you how much responsibility they have.

People are afraid that if they get involved in any kind of community work, it is going to take up all their time. Perhaps they get this notion from some of the super-volunteers who are always involved in community service and have little time for anything else. Just because these people may have chosen to completely commit to volunteerism doesn't mean that everyone who volunteers has to be that way.

*Response by the recruiter:*

When students tell you they have no time, ask them to tell you what their week was like. Inevitably there are gaps in a person's schedule. People often think they are busier than they really are. By encouraging them to go through their schedule, you can usually get them to see that they have some free time during the week.

Show students that one or two hours a week can be a meaningful contribution to an agency or a particular person. It is also important to show students that they can get involved in service and still be able to do their homework, have friends, and feel a part of activities that are going on at school. Service programs must provide opportunities for all kinds of students and all types of time commitment. While most everyone can serve, not everyone has the same amount of time.

*Excuse #3: I am busy in the afternoons.*

Often people think that the only time they can serve is in the afternoon after classes are out. That leaves students with the hours between 2:00 and 6:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. Students say that they cannot get involved because they are busy at those times.

*Response by the recruiter:*

What is wrong with mornings, evenings, or how about the weekend? Many students, particularly upperclass high school and college students, do not have classes on a particular morning during the week and some do not have any classes on a given day. Yet many do not see these occasions as times when students can volunteer. Part of the blame belongs to the programs that do not offer placements at all times throughout the week. There is a need for people to provide services 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Create opportunities for students to get involved at any time. Do not let them get away with the excuse that they cannot help because it does not fit into their schedule.

If we want young people to serve, we must create space for them to get involved. While some students have free time, many are programmed every minute of the day. Therefore it is important to create opportunities where they can volunteer without having to stop doing their homework, taking the courses they want, or being involved in other school activities. This can be accomplished by having service tied in to course work; creating summer opportunities; getting the clubs, organizations or teams of which they are already a part (student govern-

ment, chess club, baseball team, *etc.*) to do some kind of service program.

Athletes are particularly prone to this excuse or problem. Athletics is greatly valued at both the high school and college level. Because athletes are very visible people and have a high leadership potential, it is all the more important to try to get them to volunteer. Their participation validates service, makes it "cool" to do, and encourages other students to get involved. Athletes should not have to make the choice between athletics and service.

### THE CHALLENGE OF SERVICE

There are those who would lead students to believe that service is something that is boring or something done because it is required. Some go so far as to suggest that it is not enjoyable. This is a grave misconception. There is a joy that comes with service. More often than not this joy is fun-filled. For example, some may consider it fun having a dozen kids hanging all over them, looking up to them, and looking forward to their return.

But service work is not always fun. Oftentimes students find themselves in desperate situations where there is violence, abuse, and little hope. It is important to note that there is a certain joy that comes even when serving in these situations. It is the joy that goes with helping out just a little, doing what one can and being there. In these cases one's service is not going to solve the situation but may bring temporary relief, support, encouragement, and hope.

Some people are afraid that students will volunteer for the wrong reasons. Actually we spend too much time worrying whether someone is doing something for the right reasons. Who are we to judge? People get interested for all kinds of reasons, some more altruistic than others. Young people initially get involved for any number of reasons including the desire

- to learn about a particular issue,
- to do something worthwhile,
- to escape boredom,
- to make someone happy,
- to get a break from classes,

- to get their pictures in the paper,
- to make a difference,
- to put something on their college application resumes,
- to develop job skills.

They want to get involved

- because of their religious faith,
- because of their family backgrounds,
- because they want to serve their country,
- to be a part of things,
- to meet people,
- to feel they are valuable,
- to be a part of a community.

What attracts people to volunteer initially is not always the reason they stay with it. Thus if someone signs up to volunteer in a soup kitchen because it will look good on an application, the chances are that person will enjoy him/herself, get to meet some of the people, and begin to get interested and actively involved in the issue of homelessness.

Believe in the value of what we do and have faith that people who first got involved for a possibly questionable motive will remain involved for more valid reasons. Those who do it just for their résumé will not last long.

In presenting the challenge of service, people are often too afraid of taking the high ground. They think it will be a turnoff for students to hear that service is something important or that there is value in service both to themselves and to others. It is O.K. to underscore the fact that there are many benefits to and rewards for doing service, including job experience, or résumé building.

But there is a more powerful message in all this—that young people can make a difference, that they are a vital part of our society, and that their skills are needed now not only to address human needs but to provide an example and leadership for the rest of society. That is the most powerful message we can present and share, and it is one that everyone can understand regardless of race, religion, or culture.

Some people feel badly if there is self-interest involved when one is in a serving

capacity. Certainly there is self-interest in service. Joy, fun, doing something worthwhile, feeling important, giving of yourself, finishing a task, meeting good people, feeling a part of something other than your school work, learning a skill, learning about different individuals (and finding out they are not all that different), learning about an issue and what can be done about it, making friends—all these are in one's best self-interest. Do not worry so much about self-interest. If there were no self-interest, nothing personally at stake, then not many people would stay involved.

#### *Complementary needs: creating a win-win situation*

There is very much a sense of complementary needs when you are talking about students and the local community. Students have a need to go beyond the isolation and alienation they often feel while they are in school. The community has needs involving time, creativity, and human energy. These are resources and skills that young people have to offer. The match can be solid for both.

#### *Meeting students' needs*

When you're recruiting, you have to know your audience, you have to know what students want. It is not enough to know that community service is a good thing and it is something that we all should do.

People have a limited amount of time and have many ways to spend it (not necessarily good ones). If we want to get students excited and commit themselves to service, then we have to meet some of their needs in turn.

An organizer of a community service program has a responsibility to make certain that the community is well served by volunteer efforts. An organizer also has the responsibility to meet the needs of the volunteer. When both needs are met, you will have a strong and healthy program.

Any community service program worth its salt should be able to fill both needs. Too often we find our community service programs are based on internships

whereby students go off one by one to different community agencies. In most cases the students never get together. They may never know who else is involved. They may not share, get a chance to work together, or meet the needs listed above. So what will happen? They will continue to do their internships but then they may get involved in something other than service to fulfill their needs as young people. A successful, comprehensive service program which establishes and maintains a community of students could fulfill those needs.

Even though community service usually means that students must go off campus, it can be thought of as a school or campus activity. It should be seen as something done by a member of a student body, not as something done outside school experience. Make it so rewarding that if students are not involved, they are missing out on something in their school experience.

#### MECHANICS/STRUCTURE AND HOW IT AFFECTS RECRUITING

Throughout education we place a high value on excellence. We demand it on the football field. We demand it in the English department. But when it comes to community service and student volunteer programs, we have an attitude of "come what may," "some years it's up, other years it's down," and "we can't push it, it has to come from the students."

We can and must demand excellence in our community service programs. Community service does not just happen. Imagine the level of play of a football team if it did not have any coaches, any recruiting, or an athletic department to back it up. Imagine if the players had to fundraise so that they could arrange their own transportation. We need to present and push such analogies.

Community service often suffers from the "Something is better than the nothing" complex. Schools with a population of 1,500 students will have 30 students volunteering and think they have all the program they need. What about the other 1,470 students? What kind of opportunities and challenge are they being given?

### *The 75% Solution*

There is a need to set a standard, a standard whereby everyone is challenged to get involved. An ambitious yet realistic challenge is to have over half the student body involved on a regular basis and another quarter involved occasionally throughout the term—thus the 75% solution.

It is not enough to set up shop in an office somewhere on campus, put a sign on the door, run a couple of ads, put up a couple of posters, fill up a file cabinet, and sit and wait for the people to come. If you are interested in recruiting you need to think not only about posters and ads but how your program is organized. There is a need to run a complete, comprehensive program that is appealing, attractive, that taps into students interests, that aggressively seeks students much the same way a development office will go after alumni. Again and again and again, first with a letter, then with a phone call, then a visit and then a function to attend.

### *Poor organization impedes recruiting efforts*

Community service suffers from an inferiority complex. How many times have you heard the phrase, "I am *just* a volunteer"? Volunteer organizations often suffer from this same sense of inferiority.

Often the problem in recruiting lies in how the program is organized. Some of the problems that arise because of poor management and organization include:

- students who sign up but are never contacted,
- information that never gets out,
- students' names are lost,
- the long time lag between when a student expresses interest and when a student gets placed,
- not being organized at the beginning of school, thus launching a recruitment campaign several weeks after school has started; by that time, students have already signed up for other activities when the pitch to get involved in service is made.

Community service programs should be well run. Every student should be contacted and every student who signs up

should certainly be called and placed. Too often people get excited about doing community work but then, because the group is poorly organized and no calls come, they lose interest or figure they were not needed and go off to do something else.

At one school in Hartford, CT, 200 students signed up at registration to get involved in the new community service program. The organizers were all very hopeful. At the first meeting 125 people showed up, at the second 50, and by the third only 30. Only 25 students ended up volunteering that term. The leaders of the organization were discouraged and convinced that the students at their school really did not care about community service.

That was not the case at all. In reality the students were interested but often did not hear about the subsequent meetings or did not care for the meetings they attended. They were poorly run and placements were not made quickly enough to maintain the initial level of interest and excitement.

The fact is that the organizers did not know how to run a meeting. Not only that, but they relied too much on the meeting itself. If people do not show up for a meeting, it does not necessarily mean that they are not interested. They may need only a personal visit or a phone call. Reasons students did not show up were because of conflicts, they didn't hear about it, or they got tired of coming to meetings where nothing happened.

### *The need for a daily challenge*

Too often the challenge of service is issued only once or twice a year. This is usually done in the form of an announcement, ads in the newspaper, the calling of an organizational meeting, or a fair where community people come and talk to students about getting involved. All these efforts are effective and necessary.

Recruiting, however, does not stop at the end of recruitment week or the end of an event such as a volunteer fair. There is a need to present a constant challenge to students to get involved.

- Every week in the school paper list new volunteer opportunities for students,

highlight specific volunteers and service programs.

- Get clubs, dorms and other organizations to take on specific projects and have the coordinator from each group make recruitment pitches weekly.
- Develop a newsletter that can be posted in homerooms or in dorms listing volunteer opportunities.
- Get classroom or dorm reps to make a weekly pitch or specific request at regular meetings of the class or dorm.
- Ask teachers and professors to recruit students from their classes.
- Have community leaders participate in classroom discussions and school forums.

One college linked each dorm with a neighborhood in the surrounding city. Because most of the students lived in the dorms, it followed that every student was involved in one way or another. Students would not only see volunteer advertisements in the school paper, but they would hear stories at dinner about the kids with whom members of the dorm were working. By bringing community service so close to home it became visible, available, and personal. When a specific request came up, people could make a special appeal to their dorm at breakfast, lunch or dinner and usually there was someone or a group of people willing to help.

#### STUDENT LEADERSHIP AND RECRUITING

Recruiting places a constant demand on every service organization. Many assume that if they had only a few more posters, a couple more ads in the right places, they would capture the imagination of students and more would come and serve. While such efforts can help, they are not the answer to effective recruiting.

What may look like a recruiting issue is better described as a leadership issue. People are your best recruiters; in this area the students excel. They are walking, talking billboards.

We often fail to get students actively involved in the recruiting process. It is not enough to get students to post signs

or make presentations in class. Involving students in recruiting helps give them ownership in the program and an opportunity to provide leadership both to the program and to other students.

For many it is enough to do their service work and to let it go at that. We need to tap their potential as recruiters.

The most effective way to recruit is to have students who are involved in a program recruit other students to get involved in that same program. Effective community service programs have student project heads who are in charge of running a specific program. For example, one or two students will head up a literacy project. Their responsibilities include initiating and maintaining contacts with the community, organizing orientation and training sessions, and keeping track of volunteer placements. Another responsibility is to recruit other students.

Student recruiters know what's good and what's not. They can break down the excuses and empathize with the fears. Because so much of recruiting is just "being there," students can be in more places than one full-time staff person.

It is important for people to be walking billboards. The message, the smile, and the joy that a person can convey is the most powerful recruiting device. Recruit with a grin. People will want to know the reason for the smile.

Creating strong leadership positions for students not only gets them involved in recruiting but allows them to be identified as community service leaders by their peers. When other students have a question or want to get involved, they do not have to wait until the next community service fair or for some serendipitous event to occur. They can approach the student directly.

As a junior in college, Maria Garcia decided she wanted to start a tutoring program. She needed the tutors. She set a goal for herself that each day over the course of a month she would recruit at least one person in order to reach the goal of 40. She would sit with different groups of people at meals, make a conscious effort to go to different kinds of events so that she would meet new people whom she could tell about her

program. At the end of the month she had her 40 and more.

All this is to suggest that when we think of recruiting, we should not just think of a few gimmicks. The gimmicks are essential, but it is important that behind your recruiting efforts you have a solid program. In the end, that will be your most effective recruiting tool. To put it in equation form:

"solid program = good experience for those involved = returning students = returning students with friends."

## CONCLUSION

*A closing precaution: All revved up and no place to go*

Do not make your recruiting better than your program. Some organizers, in their excitement, realize that there is a great deal of student interest, dash off with a handful of new recruiting ideas and begin a massive recruiting blitz. Beware.

Get your house in order before you recruit, otherwise you may well get an onslaught of volunteers and not be ready to place them. Do your homework and take the proper steps. Establish your leadership, make your contact with the community, know how to get your student volunteers placed. For help on this refer to *Building a Movement* and *On Your Mark, Go, Get Set*, both published by COOL (Campus Outreach Opportunity League).

### *A Reminder*

There is a need to establish a strong presence on campus that validates service, makes it attractive and easy for students to get involved, and insures that there is quality associated with the service opportunities provided. Students often live with a herd mentality. For many there is a great fear of stepping out of line, being different and missing out. Therefore many people just go along with the crowd. Understand this about students and use it. Get the herd involved in service. In order to accomplish this, you must present a clear, united, and powerful message to all students, every day in a creative and effective way.

Apathy is not something you chip away at. With apathy come negative

stereotypes, the indifferent chic that some students think is cool. Challenge those stereotypes and create more positive and empowering ones.

### *Four points to remember*

If you do not remember anything else from this article, remember these four things:

- 1) Students are not apathetic.
- 2) Community service is not boring, but instead it is exciting, joyous and for everyone.
- 3) You have colleagues across the country. Call on each other for ideas, support and joint programming. You are the best resource for each other.

And finally:

- 4) be outrageous, it is contagious . . . it is the key to recruiting . . . especially when working with students.

---

*Editor's Note:* This article is part of a work in process and is published with the permission of the author. For more information about his new publication, contact Wayne W. Meisel, Director, Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL), 386 McNeal Hall, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108.