

# Academic Credit for Volunteer Work

by Kathryn L. Corbett

Recognition of volunteers by appropriate means is currently part of any volunteer management program, but why not get some academic help with a spin-off to the volunteer? It is common practice in institutions of higher learning to have student placements in many volunteer agencies. In educational jargon, this is termed "sponsored experiential learning" when carried under the aegis of the institution. Such courses were designed to give students experience with the "real world beyond the walls of academe" and to allow them the opportunity of applied theory.

Higher education in America is historically built upon the premise that the entering student is a high school graduate who is relatively inexperienced in the world and who, after the theory classes, is ready for applied courses before graduation, particularly in the helping professions. Social work and psychology with counseling emphasis have traditionally used supervised field work before the student is considered ready for graduation. Most teacher training curricula which leads to credentials has a mandatory requirement of actual teaching in a classroom with live students. These experiences take place near the end of the student's academic program, just before graduation.

In contrast, the adult desiring an earned degree in higher education often comes to the institution with a background of experience in the field, and is in need of the theory courses. The returning adult also must meet a degree pattern of prescribed courses and completion of specified credit units. Often when returning adults take the required field work courses, we see a perversion of the intent of these courses (designed for younger students) into required courses for the returnee in order to accumulate the necessary number of credits. Curricula designed for meeting the needs of older persons are sometimes termed "upside-down education." What is really upside-down is the institutional approach which requires all students to take the same courses without regard for life experience gained before the student entered the degree program.

In fact, the very reason many adults decide to return to school for a degree is past participation in volunteer work which led to the interest in certification and credentialing. It seems unjust that experiential courses sponsored by a university are legitimate credit toward degrees, while prior learning not under the

University aegis is untranslatable into credit for advancement into professional degrees. Many adults find the situation so discouraging to goals and finances—after all, those credits cost money—that they do not pursue academic aims to further their development.

Since the early 1970's, there has been a steady growth in recognition and granting of academic credit for prior learning. Termed "credit for experiential learning," the leading organization working on the program is the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL).<sup>1</sup> In addition, there are other sources of credit, such as acceptance of credit for non-collegiate courses, which have been recommended by the American Council on Education (ACE)<sup>2</sup> and the College Level Examination Program (CLEP). Other variations exist, but the primary purpose of this article is to discuss academic credit for volunteer experience. In this regard, CAEL is the accepted source of academic guidance in the assessment of prior learning.

The essential for establishing credit for experience not under the official, current, on-going program of courses, professors, agency placements, term time periods, etc., is demonstration of learning to correspond with learning outcomes of the courses offered by the institution. Merely having verified volunteer experience does not guarantee credit, nor is credit granted by a measure of the actual time spent in the activity. It is not comparable to work experience as such, although evaluative methods of assessment of prior learning could be utilized in work experience assessment. In other words, "seat time" in the traditional classroom and time spent in the field are not evaluated by the same yardsticks. It is the proverbial "apples and oranges" argument.

What is used predominantly for prior learning is the portfolio method, for which CAEL has provided the "how to do it" book.<sup>3</sup> The portfolio is rather complex and takes time to do, but the consensus of both doers and evaluators is that the exercise is well worth the time and effort. But preparation of the portfolio is not the main block to credit. Besides the unwillingness of academics to believe that anyone could really learn anywhere except in "my" class, the unstated objections include load credit, student credit, and what tends to be viewed as an overload of faculty. This can be solved to everyone's mutual benefit by the following steps:

ONE: Thoroughly examine the catalogue of the institution and decide what courses appear to be the area of learning covered by the life experience. Catalogues are notorious for obscurity, so read carefully and with imagination. Do not get discouraged by the groupings of learnings into courses and specific areas of coverage as determined by the faculty. Academic courses are only bins of knowledge which some professor once talked the curriculum committee into making into a course. They are not

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based upon divine guidance, witchcraft or otherwise, although at times one suspects they might be. By its very nature, prior learning outside the ivied walls will not be arranged in the same bins. But the learning goals of the course for the student may well be similar to those of the volunteer. Therein lies the approach.

**TWO:** Find out the unit value of the courses, how often they are offered, and who teaches them. Let us hope that the latter is one of the pillars of the faculty, has tenure and loves volunteers.

**THREE:** Set up a meeting with the professor and some volunteers who are interested in academic credit and possibly a long-term academic career program. Go prepared with knowledge of the catalogue, the professor's involvement with the program and material from CAEL. At the meeting, come up with a plan which embodies these ideas:

- a. It is assumed that persons submitting portfolios will be matriculating in the institution. This assures student count.
- b. The person will enroll in the professor's class but will complete the course work by portfolio. This gives the professor class enrollment and load credit.
- c. Get the faculty to offer a course in Portfolio Preparation. (This is not an English course, nor is it a course in resume writing.) Call the course something like "Conceptualizing Prior Learning." Rely on CAEL literature for guidance in preparing the course outline, and make the course mandatory CREDIT/NO CREDIT. Portfolios are not designed to raise grade point averages.
- d. Encourage faculty to attend a CAEL workshop or conference. These are excellent in content and indispensable in setting up programs.
- e. Openly discuss possible credit units. It is possible to receive undifferentiated, ungraded credit—sort of lump credit for portfolio work. Many schools prefer this way. However, academic credit must have a base, so the axiom of starting with a professor is a must. Good luck in finding the friendliest professor of all.
- f. Request information on the method of assessment of portfolios. The assessment of learning is a profes-

social responsibility, and clearly within the province of the faculty. However, all students have the right to know the standards and methods of assessment as well as the person designated to assess.

The tone of this article has been optimistic, projecting that both the volunteer and the institution will welcome this idea. From my experience, sometimes yes, sometimes no, from either source. Many faculty are "gun shy" and often think it would be easier and more respectable among their colleagues to continue the status quo, with its keystone arch of academic credit for learning within the institution. The answer lies in CAEL, which employs the most respected of academics and whose literature is highly regarded. The basic book is Keeton's Experiential Learning<sup>4</sup> and this publication has been followed by a series of excellent books, all issued under sponsorship of CAEL.

The other stone unturned is the definition of the position of the Volunteer Administrator. It should be that of catalyst. This is not an attempt of the Volunteer Administrator to be a field work instructor. Indeed, many of the volunteers' experiences may not have taken place in the administrator's agency. What volunteers need is assistance in approaching the institution and belief in themselves as persons whose work and life experience deserve academic recognition. The Volunteer Administrator is the pivotal person to put it together for the volunteers. By so doing, not only is volunteer work in the agency given recognition, but the volunteer is given tangible proof of the worth of his or her contributions. Such is the stuff of which good volunteers are made.

The important step is to get started. Volunteer Administrators can take important leadership roles in acting as catalysts. This is a growing area of academe and what better way to assert the worth of the volunteer than to get him/her into a situation wherein the learnings in volunteering are organized, presented and accorded academic credit?

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#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Council for Advancement of Experiential Learning  
American City Building, Suite 212  
Columbia, MD 21044

<sup>2</sup>American Council on Education  
Office of Educational Credit  
One Dupont Circle N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

<sup>3</sup>Forrest, Aubrey, Assessing Prior Learning—A CAEL Student Guide. 1977. CAEL Publication.

<sup>4</sup>Keeton, Morris T. and Associates, Experiential Learning, Jossey-Bass, 1976.