

Nov 1, 2001  
NonProfit Times

# What's In A Name?

## A volunteer by any other name

One of the few silver linings in the cloud of disaster, be it natural or terrorist, is that volunteers are always on the scene to help. In an emergency, no one minds being called a "volunteer." In fact, the word becomes a badge of honor, synonymous with "hero."

But in ordinary situations, the word carries some pretty negative baggage. The stereotype of a "volunteer" as the little old lady in tennis shoes and

gloves, well-meaning but unskilled, is still widely held. So, over time, a large number of terms and phrases that substitute for the sometimes uncomfortable label of "volunteer" have evolved.

The most common words or phrases used as synonyms for volunteer include:

- Unpaid staff;
- Intern (though this may also be a

paid position);

- Member;
- Auxilian;
- Friend (as in "Friends of \_\_\_\_\_"

groups);

- Community resource;
- Good neighbor;
- Good Samaritan.

There are also certain titles that are used so regularly that it takes some reminding to recognize that the people filling these roles are almost always volunteers. Most notable are "board member" or "trustee." The jury is out on whether or not "donor" and "volun-

teer," ought to be considered, too.

Let's move into the vocabulary of various sectors of society, special settings, or social circles. Consider, for example, the word choice of those engaged in social change. This involves all of the following:

- Activism;
- Community involvement;
- Historical movements;
- Neighborliness;
- Mutual aid.

Students of history are taught all about the great social movements -- abolition, temperance, peace, civil rights -- with only rare mention of the salient fact that movements are the cumulative effect of the efforts of countless citizens, above and beyond what they do to earn a living, on behalf of causes on which they burn. After all, what did Paul Revere do as an occupation? He was a silversmith. But he is remembered more as a revolutionary.

It may be illuminating to share an exchange to a posting on a newsgroup from a member who requested books on neighborhood organizing. Some volunteer management books that might prove useful were suggested, along with the books others had recommended. The next day, another newsgroup member, writing her email in capital letters to emphasize her anger, wrote: "How dare you imply that activists and volunteers are the same thing! Volunteers help out, but activists get things done."

That's a fascinating perspective.

That brings us to schools and students who, these days, much prefer the term community service compared to volunteering. This is partially rooted in another unfair attempt to separate the meaningful service contributed by students from the so-called nice help of volunteers.

The debate continues over whether or not mandated service required for a course or graduation is voluntary at all, but certainly the recipient organization does not put the student on the payroll. Besides, there is growing data that shows students who start in an agency because they are fulfilling a requirement frequently stay much longer than the original period. Do they somehow transmute into pure volunteers after the mandated time is up?

In addition to the term "community service," educators also use key vocabulary such as:

- Service-learning;
- Curriculum-based service;
- Experiential learning;
- Internships (again, sometimes

this is paid work).

While these terms convey specific meaning in school circles, the result of all these activities is students working in the field without financial remuneration. They seem like volunteers to me.

Students' preference for the term

*continued on page 26* ►

## On Volunteers

*continued from page 18*

"community service" is particularly ironic because the justice field has used those very words for more than 25 years to apply to alternative sentencing programs. They first adopted the phrase because, although unpaid work, when the court orders community service it is hardly voluntary. On the other hand, well-run court programs give offenders a wide range of choice as to where their service can be done and, again, from the perspective of the recipient agency, these workers are volunteers both in pay and in how they need to be assigned and oriented to the setting.

In the business world you're likely to hear terms such as corporate social responsibility, work-release time or donated professional services. And don't forget that doctors, lawyers, and other professions do not do volunteering, they do pro bono work.

Faith communities, which are well aware of volunteering and its importance, prefer a variety of words:

- Lay ministry;
- Social concerns (Quaker);
- Tzedakah (Jewish);
- Sadaqa (Islamic);
- Charity.

Every religion in the world urges benevolence and efforts for the common good or the aid of those in need. When there's a Heavenly reward, however, some prefer a label other than "volunteer."

There are a number of activities that can be clustered under the concept of "mutuality." These are situations in which the lines between giver and recipient blur because all belong to the same group. The vocabulary includes:

- Self-help;
- Client-participant (such as a resident in a nursing home who also helps in the garden);
- Stakeholder;
- Neighborhood action;
- Individual barter exchanges (of service for service).

Sometimes these volunteers consider their work simple citizenship or even self-serving, but their efforts

help others beyond themselves. This is being formalized in some communities through "time dollar" projects, in which an hour served helping others can be banked to draw out an equivalent hour of service later.

In the last decade or so, academics and politicians have coined some new vocabulary with clear relevance to volunteering:

- Civil society;
- "The Commons";
- Community assets;
- Civic engagement.

Such terms encompass volunteering as well as other sorts of personal/communal interactions. Too frequently, however, the people using these terms act as if they mean something totally new and different from old community involvement activities. This is because they tend to use too narrow a definition of the word "volunteer" and fail to connect it to activism (see above).

Finally, there are government programs that deal with volunteer-related issues although the language may not always give a clue. Welfare-to-Work legislation in many states allows the option for someone to do volunteer work and remain on public assistance. National Service, when done for the military, is well paid. When done for a full-time service program such as AmeriCorps or the Peace Corps, the stipend paid is considered "enabling funds" for a volunteer.

No matter how much time is spent educating the public about the value of volunteering, some hear the word volunteer and still think: slave, relative, or sucker. Given that our now All-Volunteer Army (they mean non-draft, not non-paid) taught generations of recruits to never volunteer, or that, to a gardener, a volunteer is a plant that grows where it chooses, it's not surprising that mixed messages confuse everyone.

*Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, a Philadelphia-based training, publishing and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism. She can be reached via email at [susan@energizeinc.com](mailto:susan@energizeinc.com). Her Web site is [www.energizeinc.com](http://www.energizeinc.com)*