

# THE FIELD WORK STUDENT AS A VOLUNTEER: AN ADDED DIMENSION IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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## THE EXPERIMENT

An experiment involving students from three schools of social work in the Washington, D. C. area has increased professional competence in the understanding of direct service volunteering without substantially increasing the student's academic load.

This goal was accomplished by allowing the students to use one half-day a week of their field work time to participate in a volunteer program as a volunteer.

Three students were involved in the project, one each from Catholic University, Howard University, and the University of Maryland. All three were second year, community organization majors,

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placed at the National Institute of Mental Health in the Citizen Participation Branch.

The project was begun as an attempt to permit each student to experience first-hand, voluntary citizen participation and to add the knowledge gained from such an experience to the total field work program. The project was not predicated on the assumption that the students had no prior volunteer experience, but rather that such an experience, in the shadow of professional training, might cast a new light on their concept of the role of the volunteer and the role of the professional who deals with volunteers.

#### FIELDS OF VOLUNTEER SERVICE

Each student chose a different setting within the mental health field for his volunteer work in order to provide maximum exchange and comparison of experiences. One student chose to volunteer in a back-ward of a large, public mental hospital. Another decided to work in a rehabilitation center for mental patients returning to the community. The third student chose a social club for former mental patients run by a mental health association in a large city.

Each student brought to the particular setting his or her enthusiasm and skill as an interested citizen rather than as a prospective social worker. In this way, it was hoped that a fresh perspective would be gained by the student as to how a volunteer feels and is treated in given situations.

The values of this experimental dimension in social work education are seen in the response of the participating students. All were enthusiastic about their experiences and felt that

volunteering had added substantially to their professional knowledge and understanding.

For one student, volunteering lent particular relevance to the casework principle of "starting where the client is." Being directly involved with chronic mental patients on a one-to-one, nonprofessional level, he was able to begin to grasp the serious dimensions of mental illness from the patient's point of view. In turn, this experience widened his understanding of the problems facing those attempting to plan and implement services for the mentally ill.

For another student, volunteering increased insight into the problems faced by volunteers themselves. From her own experience, as well as observation of other volunteers in a rehabilitation center for former mental patients, she was able to sort out and clarify specific problem areas. She experienced the anxiety of the beginning volunteer thrust into a program lacking orientation and felt, first hand, the need for training and supervision at this crucial stage of volunteering. She also was provided with a poignant example of the need for staff reinforcement when another volunteer came to her with serious doubts about whether she was doing a good job and whether or not she should continue volunteering. Through these personal observations, she was able to view problems as they face both the professional and the volunteer.

For a third student, volunteering helped her to draw the distinction between the satisfaction gained from professional social work and from unpaid volunteer work. She came to understand that for volunteers, satisfaction is measured in terms of the value placed on them as individuals. It is through their personal

worth, rather than professional competence, that they derive the reinforcement that keeps them on the job. This student felt she was able to clearly differentiate these two types of satisfaction because she was allowed the unique experience as a professional student of being held accountable for who she was.

#### STUDENT REACTIONS TO VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

This sense of personal worth seemed to dominate each of the students' encounters with volunteering. The significance of this is two-fold: first, it indicates that the students came to truly understand how the volunteer feels as he attempts to make a contribution to his society through citizen participation; and, secondly, it indicates that the experience made a valuable contribution to a priority area of graduate training - namely, self-awareness.

As prospective professionals, the students also gained valuable insight into the ways social workers and other professionals see and treat the volunteer. They saw that the attitude of the professional person has a direct bearing on the attitude and effectiveness of the volunteer. They were able to compare the experiences of volunteers who were made to feel a part of the professional team with those who were left to fend pretty much for themselves.

The field work student acting as a volunteer does add a dimension to social work education heretofore unattainable. Such a program "starts where the student is" and proceeds to build his knowledge and competence in the volunteer field by offering each student as emphatic a view as possible of the client, the volunteer, and the professional.

Citizen participation is on the rise in both public and private agencies meeting health and social welfare needs. As the number of volunteers continues to increase, so will attending professional concerns. Not the least of these is the social worker's own attitude toward the volunteers engaged in activities in his agency. Whether he is directly involved or not, the caseworker, group worker, or community organizer needs to be aware of the value of the volunteer. He also needs to be sensitive to the individual motivations that the unpaid citizen brings to his work.

Despite the amount of training crowded into the two-year master's program in social work, some experience in volunteering could be provided so as not to slight this vital component of the professional repertoire. The foregoing experiment represents one possibility.

#### QUESTIONS RAISED

A number of questions, however, need careful consideration before this idea can be incorporated into the master's program. How, for example, could such a program be made applicable for any student in any method? Should the initiation and development of volunteer experiences be a prime responsibility of the school or the field agency? While the project described here originated with the field instructor, the relevance of this particular volunteer experience to the field placement and the students' academic program was discussed with the schools. What modification of existing patterns of supervision is indicated? Since direct supervision of the student's performance is not applicable in most volunteer circumstances, the field instructor or faculty member may be able to provide consul-

tation to the student around the integration of volunteering into the total training program. Perhaps this successful integration also adds a unique contribution to the total evaluation process.

If some of these issues can be resolved, social work could begin to add a creative new dimension to the graduate program.