Utilization of Volunteers in Cultural Institutions

By Miriam Johnson and Paul Kane

Like social service and community agencies, many if not most of our cultural institutions started essentially as volunteer enterprises. As they grew, their staffs became more professional and volunteers were excluded gradually from meaningful activity. But in the last ten years, with a combination of social and community trends and needs - and the current fiscal crunch - volunteers are very much in the picture. The management of these volunteers is becoming more and more professional. In New York City for example, we have over 100 cultural institutions and about 58 per cent of them use volunteers - over 3,300 individuals who contributed 436,000 hours during 1978. Almost 80 per cent use a paid professional coordinator coordinator or an employee who, as an important duty, coordinates the volunteers.

Most volunteer programs involve just a few people. (Two-thirds of the New York cultural institutions have less that twenty-five). But at every level of participation, the need for planned management of volunteers becomes more apparent.

We believe that the principles of volunteer administration are essentially the same whether the institution is a cultural or social service agency. There are differences in emphasis if the institution is a natural history museum, an art gallery, a historic home, national monument, botanical garden or zoo rather than a hospital or community organization. These differences are important in the way they shape the responsibilities and the managerial skills needed by a Volunteer Coordinator.

The present volunteer program at the American Museum of Natural History started in 1968. We are relative newcomers compared with Social Service volunteer efforts. In the New York area we have had a organization of Directors of Volunteers in cultural institutional since 1974. It meets three times a year and has been invaluable. We have been able to take advantage of the pioneer work of the other institutions. For example, our system for keeping track of volunteer hours and assignments was adapted from that

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of Bellevue Hospital where a well-administered volunteer program has existed for a number of years.

We see the differences between the way we as a representative cultural institution operate compared to other types of volunteer programs in three areas:

> Emphasis on volunteers as the principal contact the Museum has with the visiting public, thus forming the first impression.
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> The need for screening and induction procedures rather than recruiting. We seldom need to recruit actively since we usually have as many volunteers as we need.
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> Attention to training of volunteers because of these two factors.

These differences make for an easier job in some ways, compared to other types of volunteering, and for a most interesting and challenging effort in others.

To illustrate the differences, some discussion of the details of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) Volunteer Program will help.

AMNH was founded over 111 years ago. It is among the largest and most prestigious institutions of its kind in the world. The museum welcomes over two and a half million visitors a year. Its Education Department - the largest of any American or European museum - serves hundreds of thousands of school children and adults in pre-arranged classes, lectures, gallery talks, concerts and demonstration. Its educational activities are part of the New York City School system.

The Museum employs about 600 full time Curators, preparators, teachers, exhibit specialists and support and administrative people. It also has about 300 term employees. These are people on grants and funds here for specific studies and projects. They are treated as employees but do not receive employee fringe benefits. Coordinators will recognize this category as "soft money". We also have a group of "Research Associates" who are in the Museum to study, write, assist with the collection. About 100 of these Associates are listed by name as Staff Members in our annual reports. We also are host to Visiting Scientists who belong to their home institutions but who may be here for weeks or months for special study or research.

Woven into the fabric of the Museum is an average of 390 volunteers. In 1979 they contributed over 96,000 hours. We have seasonal patterns. In May and June of 1979 we had 530 volunteers, many of whom were "Facilitators" for our major exhibit on Pompeii. In August of 1979, we used only 235.

On weekends our volunteers tend to be mid-career business professionals. Summer volunteers tend to be younger - usually college age.

Over 40 per cent of the volunteers are male and over 59 per cent have college experience. We do attract retirees, as do most volunteer programs, but they represent only about 11 per cent of the total. Of the young people who volunteer, about 20 per cent go to school. Some of these people are so young that they need New York State working papers and are restricted in the type of assignments they can undertake.

THE ASSIGNMENTS

The Museum provides a wide range of assignments, from very elementary tasks that can be performed by people with learning disabilities, to highly technical assignments performed by volunteers who may be renowned within that specialty.

There are two general classes of assignment: "BEHIND THE SCENES"

that in 1979 involved 52,000 hours, and "UP FRONT" assignments that used 40,000 hours. We provided 4,000 hours of training for the volunteers who worked with the public.

BEHIND THE SCENES ASSIGNMENTS

The Behind the Scenes assignments are those in the scientific and support activities and Departments. Most often these are one-person assignments, such as for textile restoration. But we also have group activities such as the project to reproduce a Triceratops (a huge, prehistoric reptile) skeleton for sale to another museum. A small team of volunteers has restored, very painstakingly, an ancient Chinese wedding chair that will be exhibited in our soon to be opened Hall of Asian Peoples.

Ornithology volunteers camp at Gull Island, a Museum field station for a continuing study of Terns. The living conditions are primitive. This type of assignment attracts college students but one of the volunteers is in his 70's.

Volunteers in the Photo Collections refurbish sales stock, help process and catalog slide acquisitions and do the clerical work related to a Nitrate Film Conversion Project. A number of people are sorting and reclassifying records of early field, laboratory and research work in animal fossils since 1891 for the Vertebrate Paleontology Department.

Anthropology uses the largest number of volunteer hours. Dozens of men and women work on a variety of temporary projects and permanent assignments of varying degrees of sophistication. For example, some people translate writings by South American archaeologists from Spanish to English. Others classify pre-historic weapons. There is very little turnover of volunteers from the Anthropology assignments and there is a volunteers waiting list for any opening.

Of course clerical skills always are in demand. The placement problem lies in the fact that volunteers with clerical skills often are volunteering to excape from daily clerical responsibilities.

"UP FRONT" ASSIGNMENTS

Volunteers are the Museum's prime link to the visiting public. Except for guards and cafeteria employees, they are usually the only contact that a visitor has with a Museum representative while seeing our exhibits. It is important to us that this contact be favorable. Our "Up Front" assignments vary from duty at the Information Desks, to teaching volunteers in the Education Department. Projects such as demonstrating Origami techniques at holiday time, hosting at Receptions, and serving Museum Highlights Tour Guides are carried out by volunteers.

Information Desks: We have three Information Desks staffed by volunteers. These people have perhaps the most demanding and interesting assignment - one that requires an extensive knowledge of the Museum, its staff, collections, history and policies. They also answer questions about transportation, tourist attractions, and neighborhood restaurants. They explain the layout of over 27 acres of floor space, about half of which is behind the scenes libraries and laboratories, offices and support functions. They know which of these areas require security passes, and they know the names and faces of the key people of the Museum organization. They wear badges indentifying the languages they speak, for special assistance to foreign visitors.

These volunteers must be aware of present and future exhibits and often are questioned about artifacts that were displayed during a visitor's distant childhod visit. They also sell merchandise and

enroll new members.

The Museum has several major sales areas staffed by paid employees. But our satellite sales areas at the Information Desks generate over a hundred thousand dollars a year in sales of merchandise and enrollment of new members. Volunteers must know how to handle these transactions and operate the electronic cash registers.

All of these responsibilities of the Information Desk people mean that training is very important.

Information Desk Volunteers also are used as "Pool" from which they can be assigned to any temporary project that comes along. These projects range from wrapping fish specimens for shipment to another museum for study, to playing host for a members' reception in the evening. Most volunteers accept these assignments as a chance to become familiar with areas of the Museum or to have variety in assignments. Some like to stay on tap just for these casual assignment and do not want regular duties.

Museum Highlights Tour Guides: Our Education Departments' professional staff conducts classes and tours for hundreds of registered classes and groups that visit the Museum. But we identified a need for a tour of Museum Highlights designed for the casual visitor and for informal family groups. These people want to get an idea of the scope and nature of the institution in a short time. One of our volunteers developed a tour that in an hour traverses the four floors of exhibits, visits six of the most interesting permanent halls and typical galleries and even notes the fossil shells in the stone of the hallways of our building! These tours have become very popular. Started only two years ago, they attracted over 49,000 visitors from 98 countries in 1979. The groups usually include about 25 people.

To be a guide for these tours requires thorough and continuing study that we will discuss later in this article.

TURNOVER--A FACT OF VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

As all who work with volunteers know, turnover is a fact of life. We have a solid core of volunteers who stay with us for months and years and provide continuity. Others move in and out of the system. We encourage them to stay for a long enough time to fulfill our role as interpreter of the institution to the public and require that they give us a working schedule commitment. We need four or five hours each week. Most of the "fringe benefits" of volunteering come after 50 or more hours have been contributed.

The turnover is not a negative factor. The volunteer group is forever being renewed and enlivened by new blood. It enables many students to become acquainted with a great institution. We encourage the colleges in the area to refer students to us as volunteers. We even plan some activities and projects for times during which students can give us hours or days. The opportunities and problems created by this turnover are many and are centered around selection and training - both continuous processes here.

SCREENING AND SELECTION

We generally have no trouble attracting volunteers. Our impression is that we resemble other cultural institutions in this respect. At times we have more volunteer applicants than we can use. When we do need to recruit, it is for special exhibit and the Metroplitan Museum of Art gave us its list of volunteers who had helped with "King Tut". We also used many of Educational Televisions' (Channel 13) volunteers. These sources provided an unusually interested and knowledgeable group

of people.

Several factors attract volunteers to cultural institutions. The artifacts and exhibits are an attraction for many with a lifelong interest in one or more areas, or a potential career interest. Also there is the chance to meet professionals in particular disciplines. The large scale of our volunteer effort affords additional opportunity for developing personal friendships.

Over 30 per cent of our volunteers apply here because they know other volunteers. Even more come from schools and colleges in our area. Many schools now require community service as part of their programs. Our Curators who teach in local universities encourage students to volunteer for experience in collections management or ment or in the labs. Several of our Departments schedule special projects during vacations so that students can have some experience while we can use their muscles and enthusiasm. For example, a group of students moved an anthropological collection to a new location during a Spring vacation break.

Community referral agencies account for perhaps five per cent of the volunteers. We have been pleased with the results of some of the young people with learning disabilities in some behind the scenes tasks. With careful supervision they can make very real contributions in return for gaining work experience and confidence.

Our participation in community and national organizations concerned with volunteer management pays off in many ways. Not only have we been able to profit by the experiences of others but even more important are the referrals. As volunteer organizations get acquainted with and learn about each other's needs, they refer potential volunteers with special interests and skills. Some of our very best people have come to us by that route.

Ease in acquiring volunteer applicants makes it very important that we screen and select very carefully. A danger is that we can develop a group that is ingrown, too homogenous and a "clique". Our visitors represent all elements of the world community - every race and culture. Our local community is multi-racial and multi-lingual. Our volunteers need to represent as much of the range of the racial, language and ethnic elements as possible. In fact, at Information Desks, our qualified volunteers wear badges showing what languages they speak - and have plenty of opportunity to use those languages.

We reach out in several ways to acquire applicants who will give us the variety we need. Museum Member publications often discuss volunteers and their activities. We participate in the Mayor's Awards for volunteers. This gives welcome publicity and all volunteers appear to be pleased by an award to one of their number. We have sent letters to members of the Museum who live in the immediate neighborhood to point out needs and opportunities for volunteering.

The results of this selective acceptance of volunteers is quite visible. Although some of the behind the scenes assignments are most attractive and are prized by the college age volunteers, a glance at any of our Information Desks will show an interesting mixture of age, race, sex and languages - of people obviously enjoying their work and the company.

One important point: The Museum does not accept everyone who applies as a volunteer. The screening is careful. The benefits of the Museum experience to the college or high school students heading for a scientific or art career mean that we can concentrate on the most highly motivated. The Museum staff, being educators and

scientists, is quite conscious of the educational value to the volunteers and one notices a great amount of counseling and on the job teaching.

We do not retain volunteers who prove to be unsuitable. All volunteers are on a three month probation period before they receive their permanent Museum Badge. After that, our termination procedures are much like those of other responsible employers - and they are applied.

TRAINING

Even though the mixture of volunteers make for a very interesting group, the real key to success of the volunteer program is TRAINING. We train in a number of ways, formal and informal. Some of the training is very challenging, even tough, with much followup to insure retention of the training. It is carefully planned for the different occupations the volunteers will follow. An indication of the importance we give to training is the fact that in 1979, volunteers working with the Public attended one hour of training for every ten hours of service.

WRITTEN INFORMATION

Everyone who is accepted receives a copy of our volunteer policies guide at the time of their first interview. The policies make clear the relationship of the individual to the Museum. They give notice that we can and often do ask for references and discuss requiremtnts for Working Papers for students under the age of 18. They establish termination procedures if and when assignments are not available and also the fact that termination for cause is possible. We discuss Identification Badge requirements and other security arrangements - very important in a museum.

We detail sign in and out requirements, reporting absence or tardiness, removal of Museum property, dress codes, telephone calls - all of the things one would establish with paid employees. We also discuss benefits. These include discounts at Museum shops, lectures, members programs and employee activities. We treat volunteers as employees and not as a separate group.

The policy statement is given to the volunteer before he or she actually starts work and implies acceptance of the conditions and committment to the Museum. Each individual also receives a booklet that tells some procedures, how to handle certain problems such as requests for identification of artifacts, how to locate certain offices and laboratories, and other facts he or she may need. Volunteers who work at the Information Desks read a clipboard that details the daily and weekly schedule for all Museum activities that concern the public.

Volunteers must sign in an sign out so we place notices at the sign out area. A Museum Newsletter designed for employees is sent to all volunteers and discusses volunteer activities along with employee news. NATURAL HISTORY magazine is distributed to volunteers. Thus we try to insure that they have the opportunity to read everything that can help them understand Museum policies, procedures and plans.

But our main emphasis is on a more formal training. Those who work behind the scenes usually bring technical experience or formal study to the assignment, with the immediate supervisor responsible for evaluating the skills and knowledge and designing on the job measures to fill in the gaps. All other volunteers attend formal traning sessions.

MUSEUM HIGHLIGHTS TOUR GUIDES

One of the most interesting aspects of our formal training activity is the Museum Highlights

Tour Guides program. It has taught us much about the limits and the responsibilities we can impose on the volunteers. It is a tough program with strong requirements for factual knowledge and continuing accuracy in a number of scientific and anthropological areas. The investment of time and energy in the guide training requires that we have and enforce high standards of attendance, responsibility, extra study and outside reading.

We have found that the volunteers who are invited to become guides appear to welcome this tough approach and contribute more than we actually demand in reading, research and "hall study'. (Hall study is reading labels of exhibits and relating other printed information to the displays).

Any individual invited to become a guide already has completed the basic orientation for all "up-front" volunteers and has worked at least 20 hours at an Information Disk. He or she also has taken a Museum Highlights Tour. There are 12 hours of formal training concerned with the details of the contents of six major exhibit halls as well as with the history of the Museum, its buildings and its collections. While this formal training is being conducted, the volunteer must spend at least three hours a week in hall study. During this formal training only one absence is permitted and that absence must be made up.

When an individual completes for formal sessions, he or she is expected to spend an additional 12 hours in hall study. At the end of four to six weeks, the trainee must take the tour supervisor on a sample tour of three halls. At the end of six weeks the tour is of all six halls. Only after this training do the volunteers conduct tours for visitors. After three tours, a supervisor will monitor the tour. There is constant monitoring, formal and informal. We encourage interested Curators to drop in on tours and give us feedback. Sometimes a guide will tape a tour so it can be reviewed.

INFORMATION DESK AND POOL VOLUNTEER TRAINING

Typical of the basic orientation for Information Desk and Pool Volunteers was the series we conducted in February, 1980. The students met in a class room two afternoons a week for four weeks. The formal part of each meeting usually lasted about 30 minutes, followed by a tour behind the scenes. At the class room portion a Curator, Administrator, or Museum staff member explained his or her area. For example, Building Services, Maintenance and Security Manager explained his cluster of responsibilities and the responsibility of Desk personnel for issuing passes for behind the scenes visits by messengers as well as visiting scholars. The Curator of Education and key members of his staff explained their programs. The Membership Secretary explained how volunteers can help process memberships and participate in the Members Receptions and behind the scenes tours that are so important of our members activities. Each session included a tour behind the scenes to parts of the Museum that visitors do not see but that volunteers must know about.

This type of training is interesting but is physically tiring but few ever drop out. The Museum is so vast in scope that without this training and the long walks volunteers would have difficulty in grasping the full picture. At the same time the training is so interesting that it has been used as a reason for becoming a volunteer.

Volunteers participate in skills training where it is appropriate. The introduction of new electronic cash registers for example, required training as did a special survey program that involved inter-

viewing.

One measure of the acceptance of volunteers as an essential part of the Museum is the fact that they are included in regular staff training. Currently, volunteers are attending human relations workshops along with the paid staff.

SUMMARY

Cultural Institution Volulnteer Coordinators will notice that we do not use the word "docent" to describe our teachers, instructors and gallery tour guides. Most are staff members in the Education Department. Only about five per cent of the volunteers time is in our Education Department.

Nonetheless, the volunteers are the principal means we have of shaping the visiting publics perception of the Museum and its "personality". The work at the Information Desks, with the Highlights Tours and with other "up front" assignments has great impact. Careful selection, sound training and businesslike follow-up of those selected makes the difference.

Many coordinators will envy our ease in attracting a more than sufficient number of volunteers and also the very wide variety of assignments that we can offer them. We attract volunteers because we are so well known. Also the fact that we are a cultural institution gives us a certain amount of glamour. But the wide range of assignments and the way our volunteers are accepted as an essential part of the organization is due in great part to the training and the attitudes the training encourages. Our volunteers have very strong support from Museum top management - absolutely essential to any volunteer program. This support results from a management that is pleased with its experience with well-selected and well trained volunteers.

Our experience with the intensive training, the extensive follow-up and refreshers required for the Museum Highlights Tour Guides, along with the strict attendance and other requirements leads us to generalize that volunteers are not scared off by difficult assignments and requirements for training and attendance. We sense that very often this is welcome and develops a very positive attitude.

We acknowledge the value of cooperating with other volunteers organizations. We welcome the experience of those who manage volunteers in the other than cultural organizations. They have struggled and found solutions before we, with the newer programs, had identified many of the problems.

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