In "Managing Agency Relationships" in the Winter 1976 Synergist, *Dr. Ramsay discussed how directors of student volunteer programs can initiate contacts with representatives of community service agencies. In this article he presents techniques for strengthening those relationships.*

Cultivating Agency Allies

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A WILLINGNESS TO DEAL with the imperfections of community service agencies is an important characteristic of effective directors of student volunteer programs. Regardless of the excellence of your agency relationships and of your students' performance, problems can arise. Knowing this, the best way to prepare is to establish clear procedures for handling them. For example, an understanding of the procedures needed to terminate a student volunteer relationship with a community service agency is necessary, whether initiated by the volunteer or by agency staff. These situations are often highly emotional; therefore it is important to handle them quickly and professionally, without having to improvise. It is well to deal with the situation and the perceptions as they are, looking for solutions rather than someone to blame.

Dealing openly and constructively with a problem can provide an opportunity to strengthen your agency relationships. Some problems may not he so serious as they appear. If you carefully question those involved to clarify the elements of a problem, you can sometimes help to resolve it before it becomes a crisis on campus. Many reports of problems from student volunteers to program directors may not have been called to the attention of the agency supervisor. The first step in a trouble-shooting procedure is to report the prob-

lem directly to the agency supervisor. Until a volunteer has done this, your intervention is generally unwise. A next step is to arrange a meeting with all parties concerned in as non-threatening a setting as possible. You should keep all parties informed and record key information. Make sure that this record is cleared with everyone present before it passes into your files, and give everyone present a copy of it.

Feelings of Exploitation

Concern about exploitation may be one of the issues about which your students are especially sensitive. Concern for individual rights and exploitation of the poor and powerless by the "system" has received considerable attention over the past 15 years. A volunteer's feeling that the agency is exploiting him or the population it serves may threaten your agency relationships.

Of course, it is important to avoid or to remedy situations where serious exploitation of any of the parties concerned is apparent. However, an interpretation of the relationships can often put what may be perceived as "exploitation" in better perspective. In the relationship between a volunteer and an agency, each hopes to gain from and to contribute to the other. This honest trade-off is important to understand and is not a form of exploitation.

Most often a volunteer's concern is about exploitation of an agency's constituent group. This feeling may come from an oversimplified view of the problems and a strong wish to do something significant in a short time. The realization that problems are not solved so simply and require more time than the volunteer has may result in a search for someone to blame. The agency is a convenient scapegoat because it is accessible and often somewhat vulnerable. Why was support withdrawn from a program that was proving successful? Why was staff reduced when more were needed? How can agency officials spend money on travel to a conference at a resort when they claim they do not have enough funds to meet program needs?

Artistic Statesmanship

Such questions may be valid. But unless they get beyond rhetoric, they will likely serve no purpose other than to sever the relationship between student and agency. These situations call for artistic statesmanship on the part of program directors as they try to foster and encourage high hopes, standards, and ideals at the same time that they grapple with priorities and standards of conduct and performance. Agency personnel can help by avoiding a defensive posture and exhibiting patience in discussing such concerns.

It is often at the border of frustration that the most learning can occur. An enthusiastic group of volunteers building a playground for children in a slum area may find it hard to sustain momentum if they are faced with delays caused by questions of zoning, security, safety, liability, supervision, and neighborhood feelings. The recreation agency with which the students work may have many other projects of higher priority that make immediate attention to the concerns of the students impossible. Volunteers can help in these situations (with leadership from program directors) by researching and pursuing answers to some of the important questions involved.

Once you have established a good relationship with an agency, you should endeavor to raise to the highest possible levels the service and learning dimensions of your students' assignments. One good way to do this is to raise expectations. Beyond your students' expectation of doing a good job in a volunteer assignment can be the expectation of contributing to the well-being of the student volunteer program as a whole and the effectiveness of its operating procedures. Beyond your student's expectations of learning a specific task in a specific agency is the expectation of broader learning about the agency itself and about the people working in it—volunteers, staff and clients—with backgrounds and values different from his own. From this exposure your student will learn more about himself and will develop a thinking approach to service.

Interpret Volunteer Experiences

You can enhance the learning dimension if you provide for interpretation of experience. You should encourage the agency to set aside time, beyond necessary orientation, for the volunteer to talk about his observations, to hear interpretations of experienced personnel, and to understand varying perspectives. This need not be done only in formal sessions but can become part of the volunteer's day-to-day activities. It takes an understanding of the learning goals and a willingness to give time and thought to the volunteer on the part of supervisors and other agency personnel.

Interpreting negative experiences can be especially meaningful and keeps a poor experience from being viewed as a total loss. A volunteer can perform very useful services and learn very little. Conversely he can be unsuccessful in performance but learn a great deal. If a volunteer serving in a hospital emergency room finds that he faints at the sight of blood, he at least has learned something about himself which should be useful in future choices. Helping a volunteer interpret a negative experience is usually best done by a counselor outside the agency or at least apart from the immediate staff. At a more general level, however, it is important to work with agency personnel in understanding the potential value of negative experience.

A student volunteer who has undertaken to tutor an adult in basic reading, for example, may find that, after initial progress, there is a loss of interest on the part of his tutee, who may have other concerns, such as getting a job, that interfere with his motivation to learn to read. Your volunteer may be frustrated in at-

tempts to help in these areas by lack of resources, especially if he finds no interest on the part of the agency. The tutee may want to continue with the volunteer because it provides some attention and sympathy, even though the original goal of literacy is not being served. Attempts by the volunteer to persuade the tutee that finding a job can depend on literacy may be met with agreement but no additional effort.

At some point a decision may be made to drop the tutee from the program. To see this simply as a failure on the part of the adult reading program or just to write off the tutee as "no good" would be simplistic. The potential for understanding more about the cycle of poverty, motivation, and limitations of programs is considerable, and such a seemingly negative experience can contribute to improvements even though they may not be personally satisfying to the volunteer.

Techniques to Improve Learning Experiences

A variety of techniques can be used to improve the learning experience. The establishment of learning expectations has been mentioned as important. At Berea College, we are developing a learning description of an assignment to parallel the job description. Where a job description outlines duties and responsibilities, qualifications, and work environment, a learning description outlines areas of understanding to be gained, types of situations to be encountered, skills to be learned and applied, and outcomes, in terms of abilities, arising from the experience. Using this kind of learning analysis of specific jobs, a paper entitled, *Developing Personal and Interpersonal Skills in Berea's Labor Program* was prepared by George B. Thomas for CAEL (Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning), a research project based at Princeton, N.J. This paper is available from the Work-Study Development Project, Berea College, Berea, Kentucky 40403.

Keeping journals and making reports are more widely recognized tools for learning from experience. Seminars, supplementary readings, and individual consultations are also frequently used. The critical point is to provide some system that reinforces the learning side of the experience. Otherwise it tends to be secondary to the service dimension.

Educational Debriefing

The Christian College of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, and Berea College in Kentucky are exploring a new technique called "educational debriefing." Students who have participated in a specific volunteer project are organized into groups of six or eight and debriefed. A facilitator and a recorder conduct a series of debriefing sessions, usually two or three sessions of a couple hours each. The facilitator's job is to question and foster discussion so that students bring their learning to a conscious level. The basic assumption is that, "You know more than you think you know." As students express what they have learned, what they can do now that they couldn't do previously, and what new questions they have, the recorder prepares a summary of learning for each which is later given to the student as a record of learning. Debriefed volunteers continuing in an experiential situation or preparing to undertake a new one are much more alert to its learning possibilities. A monograph prepared by William Laramee on *Educational Debriefing* is available from the Work-Study Development Project at Berea College.

Performance and Conduct Standards

It is generally assumed that a volunteer will meet performance and conduct standards of the agency assignment. However, program directors and volunteers also have, and should have, their own standards of performance and conduct. Program directors should be alert to potential differences in standards between agencies and the volunteer program and between agencies and volunteers. Standards of health and cleanliness are especially important in some situations. Personal appearance and dress may be important in others. Behavior off the job is also important in a culturally different area with more rigid social customs. Your students should identify and understand standards that they are expected to meet *before assignments.*

If a conflict arises between a volunteer and an agency over whose standards should apply, the program director is usually caught in the middle. Conflicts can occur in matters of personal appearance, techniques used, and, occasionally, in basic philosophy or integrity. The key to effective handling of these situations is the separation of matters of preference from matters of principle. Usually conflicts arise over preferences that are labeled principles by one or more of the parties. If a principle is truly at issue and cannot be compromised, a change in assignment is indicated, but this is rare, and most often the conflicts can be resolved. For example, a volunteer was working with a planning commission on a survey and found that the questionnaire to be used was not, in his opinion, sound. The student took the position that he could not be associated with the survey using that questionnaire. The commission took the position that it had spent a great deal of time and effort in developing the form and, in its opinion and the opinion of its trained staff, it was adequate. How should a program coordinator respond? The volunteer could, of course, quit, but is that necessary? Is the conflict more a matter of opinion that principle? In this case it would seem that the program director should encourage the volunteer to work with the agency on its own terms. Some assistance in interpreting the situation can also be helpful for the volunteer.

Just as standards vary, so do goals. Most situations involve quite a list of goals, each valid and all seen with different priorities by the various participants. You

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should resist the tendency to insist on one overriding goal applicable to all parties. You should list the various goals of volunteer, agency, and your program and try to understand how they interrelate. It is well to review these various goals from time to time because they change in priority. Which is most important? To do a job? To gain experience? To learn something? To give a young person an opportunity? To travel or live in a certain area? To serve your fellow man? To try out a career? To be a member of a group? Obviously there is no single answer unless it is, "It depends . . . "

Take the young hospital aide who volunteered because her friend had done so yet found great fulfillment in her service. The hospital's goals are to see that services are provided to patients. The program director's reason for encouraging this volunteer was to get her involved in a wholesome activity for personal development. During the course of the volunteer experience, the girl developed an interest in a career in medicine and sought to learn more about the medical field. The hospital in turn had an opportunity to identify a potential future employee.

All of these goals and motivations are legitimate, and the interplay among them can lend vitality and reality to the volunteer experience. Allowing the "provision of service" goals of the hospital to predominate would be simple exploitation of volunteers, and the program would not last long. Meeting social and personal needs of volunteers as the exclusive goal could result in deficiencies in services performed and also would kill a program. It is up to you, as the program director, with the help of cooperating agency personnel, to integrate various goals and motivations, to identify their limits, and to manage the choices of priorities.

Lasting Relationships

Relationships are among people rather than institutions, and the opportunities for finding enjoyable and meaningful relationships through work with agency personnel are almost unlimited. This is true of the volunteers as well as program staff. A working relationship with an agency should be seen as having potential beyond the time and program limitations of the specific reasons for initiating it. This broader view is rewarding personally and adds a human dimension to your volunteer program.

Relationships between programs and institutions do continue, however, beyond the tenure of any one person. Therefore, they must be seen beyond the short-term, person-to-person ones to include the creation of attitudes, environment, procedures, and a record that will foster and sustain institutional relationships. Lasting institutional relationships are built on successful personal relationships supported by procedures, communications, and a shared record of accomplishment that comes from deliberate effort and a sense of responsibility for those who follow. This sense of responsibility should be felt and expressed in action by volunteers as well as by program staff. □

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in a cancer ward? Such a discussion could bring understanding not only of Solzhenitsyn's power as a writer, but of the need on the part of the students for greater sensitivity in community service.

To summarise some of the advantages of the curricular approach to community service:

- Not one teacher alone is concerned with enabling students to undertake community service, but a cross-section of the whole staff. Furthermore, each teacher's own interest is more likely to be engaged because the project relates to—or emerges from—his or her field of specialisation.
- The vital element of growth—and an intellectual cutting edge—is imparted to community service programmes, with 17-year-old students tackling more challenging projects than they did at 15, and 15-year-olds undertaking more demanding tasks than they did at 13.
- Not just the socially concerned minority of students participate but the whole class—without their being labelled as "do-gooders."
- The old conflict—between time spent on community service and time devoted to studies—can be more easily resolved because they are inter-related.
- Service—what Herbert Thelen, Professor of Education at the University of Chicago, calls the "exercise of humaneness"—is seen not as something separate from life or contrasted with study, but as the "humane application of knowledge." □

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