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The Implications of History

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Last month Katie Campbell and I finally held the new edition of [By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers](#) in our hands – with great relief, as this 3rd (or “New Century”) edition took much longer to finish than we had hoped. Why have we tried so hard for almost 30 years to keep this book available? It certainly isn’t for financial gain, as the ordinarily limited volunteerism market is sliced even thinner when the subject is history. It’s because we feel so strongly that understanding the roots and traditions of volunteering is key to recognizing the context of the present and the potential of the future.

Though all the historical facts of the book are about the United States, the implications are more universal. So, as we start a new year and think about what is to come, I thought I’d share some lessons we can learn from the past.

- All population groups have a long history of volunteering, even if they use different vocabulary to describe their service to others. Stereotypes about volunteering as white, wealthy women’s work are flatly false. Drop the word “volunteer” as a label and every individual, regardless of gender, race, religion, creed, or background has the potential to be engaged in making a difference about something that matters to him or her.
- Volunteerism is both reactive and proactive. It is a response to current events, social problems, and community needs that volunteers are often the first to identify. Volunteers can take action before institutions and government are able or willing to offer services. As such, volunteers are pioneers and experimenters, unlimited by the restrictions of tradition, public statutes, need to make a profit, or availability of initial funds.
- Volunteering is inherently political. By creating or urging others to create programs, volunteering challenges the status quo. The irony is that pressure in one direction elicits pressure in the other; whenever one group of volunteers works toward change, another group often reacts to preserve tradition or advocate yet another alternative. Volunteers are found on both sides of an issue – and at all points along the political spectrum.

- Volunteer effort works in predictable cycles -- still repeated today in most parts of the world. Maverick individual volunteers see a need and eventually gather a small group of volunteers to take action on a cause. Once the activity gains momentum, the group seeks funding for expenses. Employees become necessary as the group evolves, not because volunteers could not do the job, but because the magnitude of the work grows beyond what part-time volunteers can handle. Employees provide continuity and coordination, and so, at some stage of growth, volunteers are displaced as primary service providers, relegated mainly to policy making (boards), fundraising, and limited support roles. Ironically, as organizations mature, they lose the ability to react quickly and take risks – the very hallmarks of their founding volunteers, who may well have moved on to start the cycle anew.
- The cycle shows that, historically, volunteers *create paid jobs*, directly contradicting the myth that volunteers replace employee; history proves that the greater the number of volunteers who become involved in services, the greater the chance that stable financial resources will be developed.
- Not all people are inclined to be pioneers and founders; some prefer the volunteer role of supporter and assistant. Those whose talents make them reformers and innovators move on to other causes once they have seen the cycle pass its initial phases. At that point, new people come in to volunteer in support roles because they are more comfortable in maintaining services than in initiating them. Society needs *both* types of volunteers.
- There are also limitations to volunteer efforts. Not all volunteering is effective, appropriate, or successful. As with any human endeavor, there have been some regrettable episodes, examples of poor judgment, and outright failures. Not all volunteers have been equally skilled, and some well-intentioned efforts may have backfired.
- Volunteering is often exclusionary. Self-help and religiously-affiliated groups, in particular, are inherently limited in membership and in who is served. This is an argument in favor of government involvement in the provision of basic services. Only the government is mandated to be nondiscriminatory and all-inclusive; it is the right of volunteer groups to focus on a narrower constituency.
- Competition and duplication are also part of volunteerism. The freedom to create any type of project leads to many variations. Only time can weed out the less effective or less popular ideas and methods. There are periods in which people's energies are diffused and resources are wasted. But this is the price to be paid for social innovation.
- Benjamin Franklin declared: "He that is of the opinion money will do everything may well be suspected of doing everything for money." Americans are often seen – by others and by ourselves – as valuing the making of money above all else. The history of volunteering

demonstrates the power of taking action out of belief in a cause, as a free agent without obligation to (or compromise for) an employer.

- As diverse people and groups work together to improve their communities, the lines between “givers” and “receivers” blur. The model of financial charity is often “we who have so much, give to those who have so little.” By valuing time and talent – apart from money – volunteering is a way that everyone can contribute with some equality.

History teaches that Americans get involved. Maybe not everyone, all the time. And often it is not called “volunteering.” But it is one of the most powerful ways to stand up and be counted.

How can we use the lessons of the past in our programs today?

What does the history of your organization teach you about the impact of volunteers then and now?

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Submitted on 23 January 2006 by Sister Mary Ignatius O.C.D., Santa Teresita Medical Center, Director of Volunteers, Duarte, CA USA

Thank you for your insightful remarks. Your explanation of the various terms that are synonyms for volunteers and their service are helpful in understanding the wide levels service that are volunteering in such various areans. As I am preparing a presentation for a group of potential volunteers next month your information has proved very helpful to me. God Bless, Sister Mary Ignatius O.C.D.

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