

Helping Students Get the Most Out of Volunteering

**A Manual for Schools and Voluntary
Organizations**

**S. Mark Pancer
Steven D. Brown
Ailsa Henderson
Kimberly Ellis-Hale**

**Laurier Institute for the Study of Public Opinion and
Policy (LISPOP)
Wilfrid Laurier University**

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Knowledge Development Centre
Imagine Canada
425 University Avenue, Suite 900
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M5G 1T6
Tel: 416.597.2293
Fax: 416.597.2294
e-mail: kdc@imaginecanada.ca

www.imaginecanada.ca | www.kdc-cdc.ca

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".

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Helping Students Get the Most Out of Volunteering

Introduction

Schools and school jurisdictions are increasingly requiring secondary school students to fulfill a set number of community service or volunteer hours as a condition for graduating. For example, in 1999, Ontario mandated that all high school students must complete 40 hours of community service in order to receive their diplomas. Many private schools and religious-based schools have had a community service requirement for years.

Students who must volunteer often turn to their teachers, guidance counsellors, and school administrators for guidance in finding appropriate volunteer placements. As a direct result of the community service requirement, voluntary organizations are fielding more requests from students who want to offer their services. How can schools and voluntary organizations help students fulfill their community service obligations? How can they ensure that students have positive volunteer experiences that may lead to more volunteering later in life? How can they help students gain more from volunteering than just the requisite number of mandated hours?

This manual draws on research done in 2004, when we asked 1,293 recent high school graduates how they had located a suitable volunteer placement, what made their experiences positive or negative, and what benefits they received from volunteering.

Based on what these students told us, this manual answers five questions for teachers, guidance counsellors, and school administrators, and staff in voluntary organizations who are responsible for recruiting and managing volunteers. These five questions are:

1. How can we promote the benefits of volunteering to students?
2. How can we help students find out about volunteer opportunities?
3. How can we help students decide which volunteer opportunities are best for them?
4. How can we help students get the most from their volunteer involvement?
5. Where can we get more information?

In answering each question, we provide general information and, where useful, information specific to schools and to voluntary organizations. We hope that this manual will not only help schools and voluntary organizations give guidance to student volunteers, but will also help to ensure positive experiences that will lead to life-long volunteering.

How can we promote the benefits of volunteering to students?

Many students may approach teachers, guidance counsellors, school administrators, and voluntary organizations because they *have to* volunteer, not because they *want to* volunteer. But telling students about all of the benefits of volunteers can make them more enthusiastic about community service.

We asked students what benefits they received from volunteering. Here's what they said.

They had fun.

Most of the students we talked to had a lot of fun volunteering. They enjoyed the people they worked with, got a chance to do things they liked to do, and achieved a sense of satisfaction from their volunteer activities:

"It was nice to talk to all the people that would come up, and my co-workers were all these cute little old ladies that were fun to work with...it was a good experience."
[volunteered at a hospital]

"...all the kids were pretty funny there, young kids mostly grades 3 to 6, and when you are around they treat you like you are a celebrity or something...they all know your name. It was just a lot of fun."
[coached floor hockey]

"It was cool because I got to see the air show for free, and I always love going to the air show. So going to see it for free, I kind of got behind the scenes of something."
[volunteered at an air show]

They connected with people.

Volunteering can provide students with an opportunity to connect with people in a way that they may not have done before. It can give young people a chance to work with people of all ages and from a wide variety of backgrounds. Students who volunteer often form strong relationships with the people they meet and work with through their placements. For example:

"I like the fact that the kids couldn't wait for you to come back. Just that 2 or 3 hours a week just being there meant the world to them...it just was a huge thing to them. They cried when I left."

[volunteered at a disabled children's centre]

"It was definitely a positive experience. You got to know everyone in the community...if I didn't know them, then I got to know them, and we got to be friends, and I worked in the community too, so I see them around...it's just nice to get to know everyone."

[volunteered in a homeless shelter]

"...there was a lot of networking...now I know the head of the chamber of commerce...so now when I go back to Chatham, I run into them, the mayor or the head councillor of Wallaceburg...and we'll sit and talk for a bit...[Now] that I am in co-op, I'm planning to go back and look for a job, and the first thing that I am doing is calling up the head guy at Zehrs because he's involved with all these volunteer things and in the community."

[youth representative on a city committee]

They felt appreciated.

Many of the young people we interviewed said that the people they worked with appreciated them and that they showed their appreciation:

“The people that you worked with were definitely very appreciative and constantly told you: ‘This is great because we have to give this many by this month, and you guys have already surpassed that and it’s just bringing awareness to people, which is really important.’”

[made safe sex kits to be distributed at public events]

“The children really liked me. One said he wanted to come home with me. They gave me a teddy bear. They were really nice. And when we went to animal therapy...they would jump in my arms and not let go. It was just really cute and you knew that they cared about you because you showed them you liked them.”

[volunteered with disabled children]

“They respected us a lot and they made us feel good about volunteering. They didn’t just kind of expect us to work really hard and then get anything for it. I mean, they treated us really well.”

[volunteered for Habitat for Humanity]

They felt they had made a difference in people’s lives.

One of the most powerful things that young people get from volunteering is the knowledge that they have made a difference in someone’s life. Many of the students we interviewed mentioned this and were deeply affected by what the positive feeling this gave them:

“...just the fact that I was getting involved outside of the high school community...I was actually within my St. Thomas community where I am from and I could actually see what I was doing was making a difference...that was a big deal.”

[volunteered as a literacy tutor]

“...it was just really rewarding to see with just a small amount of time from me, to make such a big difference for other people.”

[volunteered in a nursing home]

“I like the responsibility that I had in the town auctions because I really could take ownership in it, and I could see the finished product and I could be proud of it.”

[raised money by auctioning services of young people]

They learned new skills.

The young people we interviewed said that they learned new skills, such as communications skills, leadership skills, and job-related skills (e.g., customer relations skills):

“...it helped me build up my skills such as communicating better with other people.”
[volunteered at a seniors’ home]

“...it was definitely positive because [it helped] with my customer skills, and that is a good thing to put on résumés and [can help you] get jobs.”
[volunteered at a Salvation Army store]

“I learned a lot from it, and it taught me to work with younger age people as well, and I got to gain some leadership skills and also just some organizational skills because I had to develop some activities and just plan out my hours that I was working.”
[organized a Sunday School for children at church]

They became more aware of what life is like for other people.

As a result of volunteering, many of the students we interviewed gained a new sense of appreciation for what they had and a better understanding of what life is like for people who may not have very much:

“...the homeless shelter was really positive in the fact that it really makes you step back and realize what you have and what all these people don’t have.”
[volunteered at a homeless shelter in downtown Toronto]

“I just got to see the different aspects of elderly people. I actually got to see what it’s like in a retirement home and what they are experiencing and what they are feeling and the struggles they go through...it was really sad to see a lot of them kind of suffering and in pain and alone, so it just kind of made me appreciate the fact that I have a lot of people that care about me and that I have a family.”
[volunteered in a retirement home]

“I got to see how lucky I was and how misfortunate some of the others might be and then it kind of gave me a perspective into how some people lived.”
[volunteered at the food bank]

They explored job and career possibilities.

Volunteering is an excellent way to explore job and career possibilities. By volunteering for an organization that works in a specific area of interest, young people can get a sense of whether they are interested in this area. Several of the students we interviewed said that their community service activities helped them to decide what kind of career they wanted (or didn't want) to pursue:

"...what I want to get into is working with children, so it was a good experience getting to interact with the kids."

[volunteered in an after-school program for elementary school children]

"I wanted to be a doctor at one point only to realize that was not the vocation for me."

[volunteered at a hospital]

"I learned I didn't want to become a vet."

[volunteered in a veterinarian's office]

They obtained job qualifications and got jobs.

Volunteering can help students gain qualifications and experience that lead directly to training programs or jobs:

"...it was definitely positive because now I became a coach and I get paid for doing it."
[coached skating]

"...with my school here at Laurier, I need volunteer hours for my résumé to apply for co-op, and if I hadn't done any of that in high school, it would probably have been more difficult for me to get into the co-op program."

[volunteered at a food and clothing bank]

What Schools Can Do

- When explaining the community service requirement to students, stress the many benefits that come from helping others and the community.
- Ask students who have completed their community service requirement to talk to younger students about what they gained from their experiences.

What Voluntary Organizations Can Do

- When seeking to recruit student volunteers, highlight the many benefits of volunteering.
- When participating in volunteer fairs at schools or making school presentations, ask current or former student volunteers to talk about their experiences and what they gained from volunteering.

How can we help students decide which volunteer opportunities are best for them?

Many of the students we interviewed said that they or their friends had a great deal of difficulty in deciding what they wanted to do to complete their volunteer requirement. Teachers and voluntary organizations can help students think this through.

Help students think about the kinds of activities they would most enjoy.

Students who had the most positive experiences selected volunteer activities that allowed them to do things that they liked to do:

“I figured that since we had to do volunteer work, I might as well do something that I liked, so sports.”

[coached floor hockey]

What Schools Can Do

- Ask students to identify what they like to do best. Does the student like sports? Music? Art? Cooking? Building things? Working with animals? Being outside? Students can then look for organizations that need volunteers in these areas, e.g., students who like sports may enjoy coaching, students who like music may enjoy entertaining children or seniors, students who like cooking may enjoy preparing meals at a homeless shelter or for a school lunch program, etc.

What Voluntary Organizations Can Do

- Ask prospective student volunteers about their interests and accomplishments. Identify opportunities in your organization that will allow student volunteers to pursue these interests or build on their accomplishments.

Help students decide what kind of individuals they would like to work with.

Students who worked with an age group that they enjoyed and felt comfortable with tended to have a more positive volunteer experience:

“It was really good to work with kids that age in a variety of different activities. It kind of helped me realize that’s what I enjoy doing. I like working with kids a lot.”

[volunteered with children at a day camp]

On the other hand, some of the students we interviewed volunteered in situations where people were very ill or in great distress. For example, one student who had volunteered at a centre for disabled children talked about some of the more negative aspects of her placement:

“...sometimes it was quite depressing...I was put into the specific unit where kids wouldn’t typically live past childhood...it was just sad sometimes...sometimes I got scared when someone started choking or stopped breathing and apparently this was supposed to be very common but like I am holding this kid in my arms who just stopped breathing...”

Another student who volunteered at a local hospital had a similar reaction to her volunteer experience:

“...there was a lot of sick people, and you know its not that much fun to be around to work, I didn't really enjoy being around sick people that much.”

What Schools Can Do

- Ask students to give some thought to what types of people they want to work with.
- Make sure that they understand the challenges associated with volunteering to work with different types of people, e.g., it can be depressing to work with people who are seriously ill; small children can be unruly, etc.
- Tell students that they should ask the organization with which they are volunteering whether training will be provided and whether there will be someone assigned to answer their questions and help them deal with any problems that arise.

What Voluntary Organizations Can Do

- Provide a proper orientation for your volunteers. Tell them what it will be like working with your organization's clients. Let them know what some of the less positive aspects of their work might be.
- Have a supervisor available to give volunteers support and guidance in their work and to help them with any difficulties.
- Provide training in child management skills for volunteers who work with children. Help them with any problems they have managing the negative behaviour of children.

Help students think about volunteering as an opportunity to explore job and career possibilities.

Volunteering in an area that is related to the type of job or career a student is considering can help that student get a much better sense of what the job or career involves.

“I liked working with the kids actually, I want to be a teacher now because of it, so it really helped me figure out what I wanted to do.”

[helped with drama productions in an elementary school]

What Schools Can Do

- Ask students what jobs or careers they are considering after they graduate from high school and/or university.
- Help them identify organizations or volunteer opportunities that can assist them to explore these jobs or careers, e.g., a student who is considering becoming a veterinarian might consider volunteering at a humane society; a student who is considering a career in medicine or nursing might volunteer in a hospital; a student who is interested in the building trades could volunteer with Habitat For Humanity; a student who is interested in drama could volunteer with a community theatre.

What Voluntary Organizations Can Do

- When designing recruitment messages for students, stress the careers or jobs that students can explore through your organization.
- When interviewing students, ask them about their career aspirations. How do these fit with your organization and the types of volunteer positions you have to offer?

Help students think through the logistics of volunteering – how much time they have to volunteer and when they can perform their service.

How much time do students have to volunteer and when can they volunteer? Sometimes an organization needs students to volunteer at a specific time and for a fixed period, and isn't able to be flexible about scheduling. Students should choose a volunteer position that will allow them to do their schoolwork and meet other commitments:

“It was a lot of time commitment...their meetings would be during the day...because they were working their 9 to 5 schedule and I was working my school schedule so...[if] we have a meeting at 10:30 in the morning, then I have to miss a class or something.”

What Schools Can Do

- Have students identify the times of day or days of the week when they are able to volunteer. Encourage them to take their schoolwork into consideration when making this decision.
- Encourage students to look for volunteer opportunities that fit their schedules.

What Voluntary Organizations Can Do

- Be clear about the time commitment involved in your volunteer positions. If you need students to volunteer at the same time each week or for a specific period of time, tell them.
- Be sensitive to student schedules, e.g., avoid scheduling major events at exam time.
- Where possible, try to build some flexibility into the volunteer schedule to allow for school, work and family responsibilities.

How can we help students find out about volunteer opportunities?

One of the greatest difficulties students have is finding a place to do their community service:

“Some people didn’t know where to go. They didn’t have any resources to get volunteer placements. I think people that don’t have any resources might have just gone to any local place and would have not had a good time doing it, and I think in order for you to want to do it, to be motivated, you have to like what you are doing.”

What Schools Can Do

Several of the students we interviewed did not find their school very helpful in helping them find a placement or make contact:

“At my school, there wasn’t a whole lot [of] opportunities out there that they would present to you. It was basically 40 hours that you need to get, go find them...and that was it. So you know grade 9 students thinking how the heck am I suppose to do this? The[n] odd things would pop up you know.. Volunteer at this dance, or help out with this assembly. But those were like an hour, half an hour, out of 40 hours, not really getting a whole lot and there is tons of students. So you are not going to be the only one who is doing the same ones over and over, so I don’t think there is a whole lot of direction... um on behalf of the guidance, I think the guidance counsellors need to realize their goal in this program and they need to step up and maybe help out the students a little bit more.”

Some students, however, found their teachers and guidance counsellors to be very helpful in finding an appropriate volunteer setting and making contact with that setting:

“Either our teachers would help set us up with phone numbers or call organizations themselves and say they had student interested in maybe helping out there.”

The students we talked to had a number of excellent suggestions about how schools could help students find an appropriate volunteer placement and make contact with voluntary organizations:

1. Schools could make announcements about volunteer opportunities.
2. Schools could post potential volunteer placements on a specially designated bulletin board or Web site.
3. Schools could hold “volunteer fairs” in which representatives of community agencies seeking volunteers could come and describe potential placements.
4. Schools could establish a volunteer resource centre or designate a teacher as a volunteer resource person to whom students could go for help in finding or making contact with volunteer settings.
5. A teacher, guidance counsellor, or adult volunteer could sit down with each grade 9 student at some point during the year and talk about what kind of volunteer position would be most suited to that student’s interests, skills, and career aspirations.

In addition, schools could provide students with lists of volunteer options and possibilities. The kinds of things that our student interviewees did to complete their volunteer requirement included activities at schools, through their place of worship, at retirement homes, in sports clubs, and through charitable organizations. Typical activities included:

At High Schools

- Participated on committees such as yearbook committee, athletic council, prom committee, student council.
- Organized fundraisers at school (e.g., fashion shows).
- Volunteered as peer mediators, helping settle arguments, and disputes among fellow students.
- Coached and managed sports teams.
- Volunteered as linesmen, referees, score-keepers at school sporting events.
- Tutored other students.
- Gave tours of the school.

At Elementary Schools

- Helped out in the library.
- Read books to children.
- Helped coach sports teams.
- Helped teachers with photocopying, laminating, and marking assignments.
- Helped children with assignments, grammar exercises, and proofreading.
- Helped out in school office.
- Helped prepare breakfasts and snacks for nutrition programs.

At or Through Their Place of Worship

- Taught Sunday school.
- Planned children's activities.
- Volunteered with youth groups.
- Renovated rooms and buildings.
- Acted as a youth representative for a church.
- Served as an usher for religious services.
- Volunteered at church camps and bible schools.
- Helped organize and staff events such as festivals and Christmas parties.

At Retirement Homes

- Helped serve drinks, snacks, and meals to residents.
- Entertained and spent time talking with residents.
- Helped organize and staff events such as Canada Day and activity days.
- Helped decorate and prepare for special events.

Sports Clubs

- Coached sports teams.
- Led training programs.
- Set up equipment.
- Delivered children to practices and games.
- Accompanied teams on trips.
- Kept score at games, refereed, and judged competitions.

With Children

- Volunteered as a counsellor at a day camp or overnight camp.
- Volunteered with a youth group.
- Served as a Big Brother or Big Sister.
- Acted as a Cub or Girl Guide leader.
- Taught swimming lessons.
- Volunteered at a day care.
- Volunteered at a horseback riding program for developmentally challenged children.

In the Community

- Volunteered with organizations such as the Epilepsy Foundation, Canadian Cancer Society, or Heart and Stroke Foundation.
- Volunteered at YMCA or YWCA
- Painted, set up equipment, helped at building sites for Habitat for Humanity.
- Helped out at community events such as fairs, picnics, and parades.
- Volunteered at museums, science centres, and public libraries.
- Served food, entertained, and talked to patients, and organized materials at a local hospital.
- Walked dogs, cleaned cages, fed animals at the Humane Society, Animal Aid, or veterinary clinics.

With Charity Organizations

- Sorted, boxed, and packaged food at a food bank.
- Prepared and served meals at soup kitchens.
- Talked to people and served meals at a homeless shelter.
- Canvassed for funds.
- Helped organize and staff fundraising events such as golf tournaments, dance-a-thons, walk-a-thons, and yard sales

These were only some of the activities that the students we interviewed did to complete their volunteer requirements. Schools could easily compile a list of potential volunteer placements by simply asking their students what volunteer activities they have done. Such a list would be even more helpful if it contained contact information, a description of the duties involved, and some evaluative comments about the setting from students who had volunteered there.

What Voluntary Organizations Can Do

The students we interviewed said that their school was their most important source of information on volunteering. Other sources of information included local newspapers, Web sites, places of worship, and family members and others who volunteer or work with voluntary organizations. This suggests a number of steps that community agencies and organizations can take to let students know about volunteer opportunities:

- Participate in volunteer fairs and presentations at local schools.
- Post notices about volunteer opportunities in schools and in other places where young people gather (e.g., places of worship, youth organizations) and on school Web sites and other youth-oriented Web sites.
- Inform school guidance counsellors of your volunteer opportunities.
- Inform local places of worship of your volunteer opportunities.
- Let individuals who currently volunteer or work with the organization know that family members and friends who are seeking volunteer opportunities would be welcome.

How can we help students get the most from their volunteer involvement?

The benefits of volunteering for both our communities and for the youth themselves, are substantial.

Research shows that young people who volunteer are less likely to use drugs and alcohol, get pregnant, be involved in any kind of criminal activity, or drop out of school. Youth who volunteer are more likely to go on to college or university, develop a sense of civic and social responsibility, and volunteer as adults. The research literature also tells us that the young people who derive the greatest benefit from volunteering are those who have had a positive experience in their volunteer placements and those who have a chance to reflect on their experience and what they have learned from it.

What Schools Can Do

Monitor student volunteering activity.

1. Several of our interview respondents said that they knew of many people who did not complete their volunteer requirement and had fabricated the documentation they submitted. Students who were conscientious in completing their volunteer hours resented those who got away without doing anything:

“Teachers should pay closer attention to where the kids are getting their sheets signed. I know a lot of kids who lied and cheated so they didn’t have to do all the required hours.”

“I know personally people who didn’t do it [their 40 hours of volunteer work] but got away with it...like people who worked for

their jobs where they got paid, and then would somehow manipulate it so it would look like it was volunteer. So I think there needs to be a little tighter control on how you record the hours and make sure they are well documented. Because I think there was a lot of people who got away with doing nothing.”

2. Schools should contact the voluntary organizations where students volunteered to verify that the service was actually performed. Given the limited amount of time that teachers have, this is a task that could be given to a parent volunteer.

Help students learn from their volunteer experience.

Help students reflect on what they have learned from their volunteer efforts:

1. Ask students to keep a log of what they have done to complete their volunteer hours and what they have learned through volunteering.
2. Bring students together in groups to discuss their volunteer experiences and what they have learned from them with one another.
3. Have students who have completed their community service requirement give talks to other students about their volunteer experiences.
4. Ask students who have completed their community service requirements to be a resource for other students.

What Voluntary Organizations Can Do

Encourage and support student volunteers.

1. Encourage students to keep a log of their volunteer activities and accomplishments.
2. Explain how their volunteer activity is making a concrete difference in people's lives.
3. At the end of the placement (or regularly, if the placement is ongoing), do evaluations with student volunteers, stressing what they have learned and what new skills they have acquired.
4. Make sure that students spend at least some of their time working in direct contact with clients. Show that you appreciate what they are doing by offering positive feedback.
5. Hold volunteer appreciation events. Invite students to speak about what volunteering has meant to them and what they have learned from the experience.

Where can we get more information?

Organizations can consult the following Web resources to learn more about providing volunteering opportunities for young people. All Web sites listed below were last accessed on August 19, 2005.

Web sites to post volunteering opportunities:

Volunteer centres in Ontario: http://www.volunteer.ca/volcan/eng/content/vol-centres/province_results.php?p=11

Youth volunteering in Greater Toronto Area: <http://www.volunteertoronto.on.ca/yintro.asp>

Charity Village listing of volunteer opportunities: <http://www.charityvillage.ca/applicant/volunteer.asp>

United Way: <http://www.unitedway.ca/>

Go Volunteer: <http://www.govolunteer.ca/>

Web sites to learn more about volunteering:

Ontario Secondary School Diploma Requirement: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/124a.html>

Ontario School Counsellors' Association (voluntary sector): <http://www.osca.ca/volsector.htm>

Imagine Canada: <http://www.imaginecanada.ca/>

Canadian Volunteerism Initiative (Ontario): <http://www.volunteer.on.ca/>

Association of Voluntary Service Organizations: <http://www.avso.org/>

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