

## Effectively Recruiting and Working With Student Volunteers Suggestions for Community-Based Organizations

### Some Questions to Consider Before Recruiting Volunteers

Before accepting students into your organization, please consider the following questions concerning how volunteers will fit into your organization and your work.

- What would be the nature of the student's role in your organization? How is it similar to or distinctive from organizational staff?
- What specific jobs, tasks or functions can a student properly handle in your organization?
- Do you or can you offer the degree of support necessary for the student to adequately and safely carry out his/her responsibilities?
- What skills, attitudes or experiences must a student have to work with your organization? Do students need to have prior experience, can they be trained to assume their role, or can they learn "on the job?"
- Are you organized in a manner to easily take on new volunteers in your organization?

### Recruiting Suggestions for Community Organizations

Over the years, community agencies have shared suggestions they feel have made their recruitment efforts more effective.

- Be clear who you are recruiting. Seniors? First years? Students with prior experience?
- For what needs are you recruiting? With what issues does your organization work?
- Articulate the goals of your organization and needs of your constituency as clearly as possible. Present students with clear position descriptions or outlines of responsibilities.
- Be clear about the support your organization provides volunteers. Some students are anxious about assuming new responsibilities with little background.

- ✦ Make clear the kind of training you require and/or offer. Alternately, some students are surprised to discover that organizations require substantial time commitments for training. Being clear from the outset can help avoid conflicts.
- ✦ Clarify the time commitment. Often, course schedules, athletic practices or other commitments can limit the time of day or number of hours a student can give to community work. Many students at Penn must work to help defray the costs of their education.
- ✦ Involve current members of your organization in recruiting efforts.
- ✦ For public “tabling events,” think about how you can catch students’ attention. Bring brochures, photos or videos that excite people about the life of your organization. Tangible resources will help students remember you after they have spoken with a number of programs. It’s also a good idea to bring help, staffing your table with more than one person will allow you to reach more students.
- ✦ Decide in advance how to follow up. Some organizations collect names and phone numbers of students and follow up. Some have a required orientation or informational meeting. Others give out information and rely on interested students to get in touch.
- ✦ Be realistic. Recruiting events are attended by hundreds of students. Students may express interest in many organizations during a recruitment event - we encourage them to talk with many people to inform their choices. Expect a fraction of the students you speak with to actually become members of your organization.
- ✦ Follow up quickly with students who express interest. If you have access to e-mail it is often the quickest way to reach Penn students.

*Portions of this section were adapted from Brown University’s Swearer Center for Public Service.*

## Expectations

In order for students, community based organizations, and Civic House staff to build effective working relationships, it is important for all parties involved to articulate basic needs and expectations.

### What Penn Students Might Expect from You:

- ✦ Written and/or verbal clarity about their responsibilities, expectations, necessary time commitment and their role within your organization.
- ✦ Knowledge about the mission and purpose of your organization.
- ✦ Knowledge of any risks associated with their community work.
- ✦ An orientation to your organization and training to appropriately assume responsibilities.
- ✦ Enough support for students to be successful in the role they are attempting to fill within your organization.

- ✦ Constructive and timely feedback about their performance including informing, students when there is a problem.
- ✦ Projects that have regular, consistent hours. Students often prefer to work at times that are compatible their schedules (e.g. afternoons/evenings, holiday flexibility, etc.).

#### What Some Students Might Find Frustrating

- ✦ No boundaries or guidelines.
- ✦ Your assuming they have the interpersonal skills, knowledge and experience to immediately undertake their role within your organization.
- ✦ Office work or busy work, if not made a clear expectation from the outset. Students often prefer projects such as opportunities to work with people, to learn new skills, and to have new experiences.
- ✦ No guidance or support. Students can better tackle challenging work when they have had appropriate training, guidance and support to be successful in that role.
- ✦ Not being notified of potential physical or personal risks (e.g. heavy lifting, contact with bodily fluids, working unsupervised in private homes, contact with clients prone to violent behavior, etc.).

Students' experience and comfort with different situations varies widely in terms of working with community agencies. Some students will be able to articulate their skills, interests and areas of growth, and others will not. Some students will be highly self-motivated and prepared to take initiative, and others will not. Therefore, is it a good idea to start with very well-defined and structured tasks and, if appropriate, to gradually move students toward increasing responsibility.

#### What You Should Expect from Penn Students:

- ✦ To be honest about the commitment they are able to make and their prior experience and skills.
- ✦ To attend orientation and training sessions to appropriately assume their role in your organization.
- ✦ Respect for the mission, policies and expectations of your organization.
- ✦ Respect for staff, members and/or clients of your organization.
- ✦ Dependability in fulfilling their hours at your organization.
- ✦ Professional behavior in carrying out the tasks assigned to them, including observance of any policies.

#### What You Can Expect from Civic House Staff:

- ✦ Consultation about potential resources available to your organization.
- ✦ Consultation about how to work with Penn students working in your organization.
- ✦ Support for students working with your organization.

- ✦ Opportunities for your student volunteers to attend general training and reflection workshops.
- ✦ Assistance in addressing any conflicts that may arise between you and Penn students.

## Site Orientation

As in any job, new people need information to understand what is required of them. An orientation is away to get the word out to potential volunteers, It should be brief and to the point and answer the basic questions: *who, what, where, when, and why* (Save “how” for the training), to help people decide whether the program would be a good fit for them.

### Topics to be covered in an Initial Site Orientation

- ✦ An explanation of program goals and objectives: It is important to articulate the philosophy and mission of your organization as well as your community work. A Handbook and other written materials can be a good method to help welcome and acclimate the student to the project; and to reinforce the points covered in the orientation.
- ✦ Staff introductions: Essential in an orientation is an introduction to agency staff members with whom the volunteers will be working. Agency staff should attend orientation and help facilitate to acquaint the student with new colleagues’ styles and approaches. These introductions will help clarify each student’s expected roles within the agency.
- ✦ An introduction to the agency: Orientation should be tailored to specific agency placements as much as possible. Students should be given a thumb-nail sketch, including a description of its philosophy, history and politics, location and the locations of offices and facilities. This overview places the agency within a context of the larger community, reflects its impact over time, and assists with basic logistical concerns.
- ✦ A description of the agency’s membership or client base: Students begin to feel committed to an agency placement when they understand its full impact on the community. Demographic information on its client base and the number of clients served can be helpful.
- ✦ A discussion of the volunteer’s role: Specific tasks and responsibilities of the placement should be carefully described for new recruits. Also, a discussion of the benefits to be gained from this service work (e.g. leadership skills, training in communication, knowledge of the community, tangible work experience, etc.) serves to strengthen the commitment to participate.
- ✦ Basic skills relevant to the placement: Students should be given descriptions of the type of work they will do on site, and the skills needed –everything from operating wheelchairs to communicating effectively with differing populations. Although general comments should be made about these issues, students should be told that ongoing training sessions will address the more complex ones.
- ✦ Jargon, concepts and language used by staff members: Each organization has its own catchphrases, ideas or words they use in everyday language, and volunteers need to understand how language is used at the agency in order to feel like a real partner.

## Volunteer Retention

The following list, prepared by student volunteer coordinators, describes why volunteers remain committed and why they might lose interest.

### Why Volunteers Remain Committed

- ✦ They feel appreciated.
- ✦ They feel capable of handling tasks assigned to them.
- ✦ They recognize that something significant is happening because of the organization's existence.
- ✦ They personally feel committed to a broader social issue.
- ✦ They can see that their efforts matter to people, contribute to an organization, or make a difference.
- ✦ There are opportunities to deepen their level of involvement.
- ✦ There are opportunities for personal growth.
- ✦ They receive private and public appreciation or recognition.
- ✦ They enjoy a sense of belonging and teamwork among colleagues.
- ✦ They are involved in the life of the organization.

## Handling Problems

Despite everyone's best efforts, problems sometimes arise. If you experience a conflict with a student volunteer, please consider the following options for handling problems:

*In the event of a problem with a student volunteer . . .*

**Address the student directly.** It is important that students become aware of any conflict that may exist with their community work. Usually, a face-to-face meeting is sufficient to address problems, clarify expectations or clear up any miscommunications. If you are working with a group of Penn students, please let the Student Coordinator know of any problems.

*If the problem persists after addressing the student directly . . .*

**Contact either the Student Coordinator (if one exists) or the Civic House staff.** Site Coordinators and Civic House staff can mediate between the student and your organization.

*Excerpts in this section adapted from Virginia Tech Service-Learning Center's Site Supervisor's Handbook.*

## How Can My Organization Work With Civic House?

Consultation. Civic House staff members are happy to speak with community-based organizations about resources available to their organizations as well as how to work more effectively with Penn student volunteers.

Facilities. Schedule permitting, Philadelphia community-based organizations have access to Civic House rooms for meetings, informational sessions or trainings. We recommend placing reservations at least one week prior to the date of your event. To make a room reservation, please submit our web form that can be found at:

[http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/civichouse/facilities\\_ch.html](http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/civichouse/facilities_ch.html).

Training and Orientation of Penn Students. Civic House offers regular training workshops and reflection sessions for students engaged in community work. Civic House staff members are happy to work with your group to better prepare students to assume their roles within your organization. If you would like to discuss specific student training needs of your organization, please contact Civic House (215) 898-4831. More information about the Civic House Service and Advocacy Education Series can be found at:

[http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/civichouse/training\\_education.html](http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/civichouse/training_education.html).

Advertising Organizational Opportunities. Civic House staff can post your volunteer opportunities, internships and events on Civic House listservs and website. With 10 days advance notice, Civic House staff will post your events as well as your volunteer or internship opportunities on our e-mail lists and website. The method of advertising is most effective for one-time service opportunities. To post your announcement, please e-mail all logistical and contact information to [civic@dolphin.upenn.edu](mailto:civic@dolphin.upenn.edu).

Database. Civic House maintains a database of volunteer requests from local community-based organizations for students who are interested in pursuing independent volunteer opportunities not currently offered by a Penn student service or advocacy organization. To enter or update information about your organization, contact Civic House at (215) 898-4831.

Mediation. Civic House staff members are available to help mediate concerns between student volunteers and community based organizations. Civic House staff is also happy to be a liaison or communicate information on behalf of your organization.

Resource Library. Civic House maintains a collection of books, articles and pamphlets pertaining to social justice issues, community economic development, community service and service-learning. You can check out our collection at:

<http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/civichouse/search/index.php>. If you are interested in borrowing any of our literature, contact us at [civic@dolphin.upenn.edu](mailto:civic@dolphin.upenn.edu).

Logistical Assistance. Civic House can help student volunteers address logistical challenges. For example, Civic House has vans available for student groups to use for travel to their community work in the Philadelphia region (they may only be used by Penn students, staff or faculty, and drivers must be van certified). We also advise students on other issues to help their community partnership activities.

QUESTIONS? Contact Sara Barclay ([sgbarcla@upenn.edu](mailto:sgbarcla@upenn.edu), TEL: 215-898-4831)