
The New Wave of Volunteerism in Museums: Practical Tips and a Glance Toward the Future

Volunteer service is more popular and visible than ever, promoted to all and encouraged at every level. Even President Barak Obama introduced a nationwide service initiative intended to help meet community needs and make service a way of life for all Americans. Museums have benefited from this movement with the number of individuals wanting to lend a helping hand increasing exponentially in recent years. This article offers practical suggestions that help make the volunteer experience positive and productive for all concerned. It also raises questions about the role of the museum volunteer in the future and what the implications of this may be.

The following comments are based on the volunteer program at the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), which is a relatively large, complex institution. The suggestions, however, can be applied to institutions of any size, including very small ones with minimal resources. Although the following comments apply to all areas of museum operations, the examples focus primarily on collections care, one of the many behind-the-scenes areas of museum work especially hard-hit by the recent economic downturn.

MHS has made use of volunteers from its beginning. It was established in 1849 by the founding fathers of the state who gave their services, along with other leaders in the area, to organize it, find a location for it, help it begin to acquire collections, and promote it to the public. Volunteers managed MHS until 1867 when the first staff member was hired. Volunteers continued to be instrumental over the years, and in 1992 a formal Volunteer Services Department was established to coordinate activities throughout the institution. Last year 2,250 volunteers gave 44,500 hours of their time. This is a valuable resource upon which MHS is increasingly dependent to sustain its programs.

Who volunteers?

Knowing something about the type of people who volunteer is helpful when you want to recruit them. We have found that people give for different reasons and at different times in their life. Students want to explore career options and learn what types of jobs exist and what skills the jobs require. Post graduates often see volunteering as a way to enter the museum field or to bolster their resume to apply for entrance to a graduate program. Mid-career volunteers frequently are looking for a different type of work or a new career to pursue. Individuals between jobs want to keep busy doing substantive work until they are re-employed. Aging baby boomers are life-long learners seeking to broaden their knowledge base while having a meaningful experience. And retirees want to make a worthwhile contribution to their community in a social setting that enables them to connect with others.

How do you get volunteers?

Often potential volunteers will come to you, looking for a project. But if not, one way to recruit them is to advertise. Note prominently on your institution's web site that you

welcome volunteers. Give tours of your institution. State the important role that volunteers play, and introduce your visitors to them. Solicit students by contacting the heads of college and university art, history, chemistry, and biology departments. Publicize projects with which volunteers have assisted by publishing articles in your institutional newsletters, on your web site, and in local newspapers. And always include the names and numbers of people to contact for information. In general, spread the word whenever and wherever you can.

How do you keep volunteers?

Certain types of volunteer projects, particularly those in collections care, require substantial time for training, so you will want your volunteers to stay. How can you keep them happy and on the job? Begin by providing a warm, open, and inclusive environment. Be welcoming and friendly. Treat them as valued members of your team and make them feel a part of the institution. Always show your volunteers respect. Take a personal interest in who they are, determine their goals, and try to give them what they want.

In collections care, make sure they have contact with artifacts. Work with them on a one-to-one basis, and take the time to teach them about proper artifact handling techniques and provide other background information, such as how their work fits into the overall organization. We found that collections care volunteers enjoy gaining knowledge of behind-the-scenes activities that they cannot learn about from a book or on-line. For example, procedures for documentation and the multi-faceted duties of conservators are of particular interest. They also like having free access to the institution's resources. Our conservation library is especially popular with them, and they appreciate staff advice on how to care for their own family heirlooms.

Be sure to give people what they need, such as free, convenient parking. Be prepared to provide letters of recommendation and to arrange meetings with colleagues. Make your volunteers feel useful and appreciated. When we asked ours how they would like to be recognized, their top three choices were: exhibit previews, museum store discounts, and behind-the-scene tours. Also, supplying treats, giving occasional small gifts, and remembering them on holidays are appreciated. The key is to provide a quality experience in a pleasant environment that is warm, welcoming, and fun.

How do you make the volunteer experience work smoothly?

Employ measures from the outset that help avoid problems. Be sure to place people well-suited to the type of work you plan to ask them to do. We take volunteer positions as seriously as staff positions. We have a thorough screening process through which all volunteers pass. We ask individuals to provide written information on an application form, we conduct extensive reference checks, and we recently implemented background checks. Applicants are interviewed

by the staff of Volunteer Services as well as the person who will be supervising them. By the time applicants complete all the steps, we usually know if they are committed and a comfortable fit, or a possible problem.

Have high standards and clear expectations and convey these to applicants. A written position description that clearly defines roles and responsibilities is especially useful in this. The interview also is important. For example, in conservation work, we look for the same thing in a volunteer that we look for in a conservator or other collections care applicant: caution, respect for the artifact, patience, attention to detail, tolerance for repetition, willingness to ask questions, and hand skills.

We ask to see examples of some kind of hand craft, such as needlework or art. Occasionally we test skills. For example, we may demonstrate sewing stitches and ask the applicant to repeat them. We always hire on a temporary basis, and we re-evaluate periodically to be sure the experience is working for everyone concerned.

Another key to a smooth experience is providing good training. Putting staff time into training volunteers who may leave is difficult but necessary. You need to provide personal instruction, allow adequate time for volunteers to learn and practice, and then follow up. For some volunteers in collections care a period of immersion at the beginning is advisable, such as all day for several days. Be closely involved so you know if what you're asking them to do is too easy or too difficult, and then ramp up or down accordingly.

For this reason, choose initial projects that are flexible and have both easier and more difficult components. When working with collections care volunteers, providing training in safety procedures is especially important, such as equipment handling and, for those few who work with chemicals, in the use and disposal of chemicals. Workers compensation is a concern, and you'll want to check the laws in your state and with your insurance company about liability insurance. You may find that you need to limit what volunteers do or where in the building they work.

Good supervision goes hand in hand with good training. Provide clear instructions about what specifically needs to be done, what the final product is, and how it fits into the full organizational picture. Volunteers need flexible creative supervisors who can think on their feet, answer questions, and solve problems on demand.

Scheduling is an important concern. Volunteers usually have a lot going on, so they often like a set, regular schedule. Nevertheless, you need to be flexible and accommodate occasional irregularities in their schedule. On the other hand, some people are not able to set a regular schedule at all, and you will need to decide if you can accommodate this or not and let them know initially.

It is especially important to be aware of a volunteer's arrival time and be prepared. Have a project chosen and materials and instructions ready. The volunteer has arranged the day around helping you, and if there is nothing to do when he or she arrives, and this happens more than once, it can be off-putting. Another key to a smooth volunteer experience is pre-planning. Ask yourself what things you never have time to do and then ask if a volunteer can do them for you. If the answer is yes, match up the appropriate person and project. We have a long-range preservation plan that lists dozens of potential projects in priority order. We often consult this.

Also, be aware that volunteering can provide an important, sometimes vital, social connection for individuals, one that you should not end abruptly. If staff are no longer able to work with a volunteer because of lack of time or other resource limitations, the volunteer's services should not be ended without prior notice and a considerate explanation. Otherwise this can appear to the volunteer to be a lay-off or termination resulting in surprise, distress, and negative feelings. This, in turn, can prove to reflect negatively and possibly harmfully on the institution.

What if a volunteer does not work out?

Sometimes no matter how hard you try, you take on a volunteer who does not work out. Hopefully the screening will prevent this, but occasionally it does not. Deal with the situation immediately. Do not let it linger. Talk with the person, let him or her know your expectations, and state specifically what is not working. Referring back to the position description may be helpful with this. Speak privately and in a sensitive manner.

The conversation is never an easy one, and clear communication is essential. Make the situation as positive as possible. Try to find other areas in which the person can work, and give options. Before he or she moves on, have a recognition event, such as special treats at break, to celebrate accomplishments and contributions.

Issues

With volunteerism on the rise and the economy down, not only do more people than ever want to volunteer, they are more skilled than ever. This presents challenges as well as advantages. We need to think broadly and creatively to tap into the wealth of skills that are suddenly available to us. We need to think outside our comfort zone and take risks with volunteers.

For example, some volunteers have credentials that can be very intimidating to a supervisor. We cannot be afraid to take on individuals who know more than we do even though they may ask questions we cannot answer, or suggest good ways of doing things that are unfamiliar to us. Also, we have to take the chance that they may quit tomorrow because of an unexpected opportunity, or that it simply may not work.

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Three former volunteers provide good examples. One has bachelor's degrees in both chemistry and art history along with a master's in art history and work experience in materials characterization and chemical sales. She recently entered a PhD program at the University of Minnesota to study clinical pharmacology with a team researching chronic pain. She worked on two projects for us. One was a wet cleaning experiment to test various textile cleaning solutions to determine their efficacy under different conditions. This enabled us to wet clean some of our more delicate textiles at lower temperatures more effectively. She also conducted research on a nineteenth-century chair in our collection to identify the organic reaction that was causing a waxy precipitate to continually reform after removal.

Another volunteer has a bachelor's degree in biology and a PhD in cellular and molecular biology and pathology from Duke University. She is a tenured professor at St. Thomas University and is interested in textile conservation as a second career. Since all her knowledge of conservation was theoretical, she came to us to gain direct practical experience. She assisted us with several projects, including the very tedious task of fabricating by hand reproduction lace curtains for a period room in one of our historic sites. This is a project that our staff would never have had the time to do.

The other volunteer holds a bachelor's degree in psychology, a master's degree in communications, and a certificate in small business management. She is a doll restoration artist who ran her own repair business for fourteen years and came to us with extensive experience and knowledge of the history and repair of dolls. She wanted to learn more about the materials, tools, and techniques that conservators use to perform their work. This volunteer experience was of mutual benefit. We taught her the basic tenets of conservation, and she taught us about the history of dolls and how to repair them in ways with which we were unfamiliar. Recently she and our objects conservator jointly gave a Connecting to Collections Community Webinar on the Care of Dolls of Different Mediums and Eras.

Re-thinking the Role of the Volunteer

Looking at the important and wide-ranging assistance provided by volunteers today causes one to speculate about their role in the future.

Demographers tell us that in the next few years the United States will have more retirees than ever before. As stated in *Museums & Society 2034: Trends And Potential Futures*, "the Boomers constitute a large talent pool working its way towards the golden years of volunteerism." Indications are that, as a group, they are more highly educated than any before them. Also, they are the product of a competitive workplace characterized by clearly defined jobs that are in almost constant flux due to changing technology.

As a result, many are high-powered, multi-talented, flexible, disciplined workers. They are responsible and reliable, can work independently and manage projects, and have a strong work ethic. Referring again to *Museums & Society 2034*, "perhaps one of the most important things to consider is how museums can reinvent the role of the post-retirement volunteer." How can we make the best use of this resource in a way that is fulfilling to them?

In all probability, museums will continue to struggle for resources to carry out their operations. This is where the role of the future volunteer comes into play. Volunteers now are essential in assisting museum staff in carrying out their jobs. Is there a way that volunteers can be integrated more fully into museum work? It must be stressed that never may volunteers be exploited nor labor laws ignored or broken. Nor may employees ever be laid off and replaced by volunteers. But if we have projects we want to undertake and funds are not available to pay qualified staff, why not give the work to qualified volunteers, especially if this would avoid having to give up the projects?

Additionally, many post-retirement volunteers today want challenging compelling work with problem-solving components and responsibility similar to that which they had when employed. The museum arena needs to respond to new skill sets in volunteers. It needs to provide an experience that is meaningful and integrates them more fully and equally into the museum environment.

Closing

To conclude, this author encourages museum staff to welcome volunteers at all levels. I have worked with them extensively, and the experience has been positive, productive, and fulfilling. I have learned an enormous amount, gained wonderful friendships, and had a richer professional and personal life thanks to them.

Also, I have been able to accomplish far more work with them than I could have without them. As museums evolve with changing times, we need to challenge ourselves to explore new ways of accomplishing our goals and making the best use of the rich human resource volunteers represent. We all stand only to benefit.

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