

Recruiting and Managing Volunteers for Academic Libraries: Tips and Suggestions for Running Successful Programs

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The IAFOR International Conference on Education in Hawaii 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Unlike public libraries, academic libraries are not normally seen as organizations that make utilization of volunteers to help. Yet, many academic libraries do indeed use volunteers for special projects, programming such as events, and some day to day operations. Volunteering means dealing with people and it comes with multiple obligations to the library including legal and ethical implications and impacts. This paper will look at the literature that deals with libraries and how they interact with volunteers including literature specific or directly applicable to academic libraries. It will look at legal implications relating to volunteer working conditions, screening, and equal opportunity. It will review reasons people volunteer, recruitment, and how to use that in any academic library volunteer program. It will also examine training and daily management of these volunteers and how to connect volunteer service to library development efforts in fundraising.

Keywords: Academic Libraries, Higher Education, Library and Information Science, Volunteers, Diversity, Management, Fundraising

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Introduction

Although not extensively covered in the library or education literature, academic libraries in higher education have been making use of volunteers for centuries. For a variety of reasons, some individuals wish to give of their time to support the mission of an academic library. They may be students, employees or retirees of the institution, or members of the local community. Regardless of the reason, working with volunteers means working with people and that includes all of the normal rules of managing people in a library with additional considerations also being brought into the mix.

Recruiting volunteers is a big step. This is especially true when a library has no or limited volunteers engaged in the past. The smaller the library and institution, the more difficult it may be to find volunteers. However, when given the opportunity, many sign up to volunteer on their own. Learning where to look, what to look for, and how to recruit volunteers is an important skill for academic librarians to have.

In many cases, time donations are equally if not more valuable than monetary donations. Many people are willing to contribute many hours to an academic library for free, even when they would charge a high hourly rate for those same services. Although the expression differs, volunteers donate their time for the same reasons they donate their money. They want to be involved, they want to help, and/or they feel strongly about the work of the library.

Working with volunteers also opens up avenues for fundraising. If a person will volunteer, they may well be willing to donate to the library. If they have the interest in a library, and have a good working experience volunteering, cash donations may follow. Even if they do not, the good word the volunteers spread may attract other donors who may have capacity and willingness to give significant donations.

This paper will be broken into several parts. To begin, what exactly does the current literature say about recruiting and managing volunteers in libraries? More specifically, how does it address it in an academic setting? It will then look at legal considerations. In particular, this will review screening of volunteers, the eligibility of volunteers, and their working conditions. The paper will then review how an academic library would go about finding (and understand the motivation) of volunteers. It will also look at the practicalities in volunteer management. It will conclude with a look at fundraising and library volunteers.

Literature Review

The majority of library literature dealing with library volunteers focuses on public libraries. This review will begin by looking at some of this literature before moving into areas dealing more specifically with academic libraries. This paper will be kept to a reasonable size with readers encouraged to review the literature for more examples that may fit their own experiences and needs.

Schmidt (1973) provided a guide which suggested ways the public library could use volunteers to expand library services. This included a bill of rights for volunteers, a list of five libraries with successful volunteer programs, and 10 suggested readings. The author wrote, "The library should plan to its volunteer program and develop job descriptions for the volunteers. Then volunteers can be recruited through advertising or community organizations. Volunteers can

be trained through pre-service workshops, on-the-job training, or role playing. The library must make someone responsible for coordinating and supervising volunteers.” (p. 1).

One earlier author noted how volunteering was suited well for older volunteers. It gave a large potential group of library patrons library activities to support the overall mission. Adams (1979) wrote, “Library services to the elderly should consist of a needs assessment followed by collection development, and cooperative efforts with community agencies. The elderly community should be considered as library volunteers, as members of advisory groups, and as a community resource.” (p. 287).

Roy (1988) wrote about public library volunteers in Illinois. The abstract noted, “Fifty-two public libraries in Illinois were surveyed to test an instrument measuring volunteer use. Ninety-eight percent of the libraries returned completed questionnaires. Results indicate that volunteers are currently used in (57% (34) of the libraries within this group, an increase in the level reported in earlier studies. Demographic data is used to construct profiles of the libraries using volunteers and those not using volunteers. Survey findings identify reasons for using or not using volunteers, list the types of activities that volunteers perform, and describe characteristics of existing volunteer programs.” (p. 127).

Walter (1987) examined how managers in a large library system created meaning and developed roles for conducting cooperative activities with citizens for the delivery of library services. The author wrote, “The data indicates that there are a variety of roles performed by citizens which vary in how successfully they are integrated into the organization from the perspective of managers. Significant differences are found between citizens in the role of service providers and fund raisers, in whether their relationship is with the central library administration or branch libraries and in whether the style of a manager is flexible or bureaucratic.” (p. 22).

Wedel (1990) wrote of the similarities to library volunteers to other types of volunteers. The author emphasized, “Volunteers can and should be an important part of every nonprofit organization. This is not only to save money though it can do that but because it is a right of people to have an active share in those institutions which are supported by their tax or philanthropic dollars. The volunteer portion of our society is undergoing some dramatic changes today which offer new challenges and many new opportunities to all organizations which are alert to what is happening. I don't know a great deal about the detailed operations of libraries (although I worked in one at one time), but the basic principles of volunteer participation and management, I am sure, apply to libraries as they do to hospitals, school systems, and social welfare agencies. To understand these changes, we must look at what is happening to people today which has an effect on volunteering.” (p. 91).

A broader (and now into the 21st Century) was given by Nicol and Johnson (2008). They wrote, “Volunteers have had a major impact on libraries throughout U.S. history. The rapid changes in the information world of the last decade serve as a catalyst for evaluation of library programs including those for volunteers. This article offers a brief history of volunteers in libraries and discusses some of the advantages and disadvantages of instituting a volunteer program as well as implications based on library implementation of new computer technologies. The authors argue that a robust volunteer program will help a library in developing a consultation model of communication, thus providing more effective public services.” (p. 154).

School libraries also use volunteers. Snyder (2009) wrote, "Parent volunteers can be an important asset to a well-run school library. Parent volunteers are that extra pair of hands and extra eyes. Monotonous and even tedious tasks can be accomplished quickly by people searching for ways to spend a little time with adult conversation while providing a benefit to their children. And eventually they can become a sounding board as needed when district employees (faculty and administration) attempt to gain an understanding of the opinions of the general public. This article offers tips for recruiting parent volunteers." (p. 22).

Evans (2010) looked at the bigger pictures for using volunteers in any type of library. The author wrote, "There are, however, challenges regarding if, when, and where to make use of the people who volunteer. In past, a library might have been highly selective in what tasks it allowed volunteers to engage in; today there is real pressure to expand the roles they play in the daily operations. There is a vast pool of talented energetic and motivated volunteers to tap into and, hopefully, retain. Volunteers can become highly committed to a library's organizational goals, given the proper environment, even if they never worked in a library. Part of that environment is thinking about volunteers as just as important to quality service as any paid staff member."

The failure of some academic library volunteer programs was addressed by Tikam (2011). The author claimed, "The Library Volunteerism Program strengthened the library-student bond. Though the student volunteers felt satisfied about making an important contribution to the organisation, they rarely found it personally fulfilling. The volunteers expected more substantial outcomes and flexibility from the Library Volunteerism Program."

There are dozens of other quality articles dealing with public libraries and volunteers. However, the article will shift to academic libraries and volunteers. Forrest (2012) sums this up nicely. The author wrote, "Volunteers have contributed successfully to the work of public and school libraries since time immemorial and there are many examples of libraries, especially for patients in hospitals which would not function without the support of volunteers. Academic libraries on the other hand have been more selective in their use of volunteers and fewer case studies are available." (p. 1).

Most libraries have a Friends group. Reitz (2004) defined a Friends group as "an organization whose members share an interest in supporting a particular library or library system through fund-raising and promotional activities" (p. 299). While most common in public libraries, many academic libraries have them as well. They can be the source of both free volunteer time and of funds.

Schobernd, Tucker and Wetzel (2009) wrote about "Closing the Gap" which was a volunteer program started by the Student Government Association of Illinois State University, allowing the library to stay open longer hours to meet student needs. The program was a collaborative effort between Milner Library and student leaders to bring in student volunteers from across the student body. The article outlined how the program began and how it worked, including recruiting volunteers, training, and scheduling. In addition, lessons learned along the way were shared.

Anders, Graves, and German (2012) wrote about student volunteers in academia. They wrote, "The university library's orientation program has successfully leveraged student volunteers to scale a large outreach program. However, student volunteers have added more than free labor. The presence of student volunteers shows that students are at the heart of the libraries.

Furthermore, the student volunteers were able to participate in learning and leadership opportunities that tie into the educational mission of Texas A&M University and its core values. The use of student volunteers in library outreach programs has been a strategic collaboration of significant importance. We hope to continue to grow this program with more opportunities for student engagement.” (p. 29).

Another article from 2012 wrote about archival student volunteers. Leonard (2012) wrote, “Using volunteers is almost certain to remain a common practice within the archival profession. The volunteer internship, connecting the archive to students of a formal curricular program, is well established as key mechanism in training new practitioners. And volunteer labor from other sources, especially from newly minted archivists and from retirees, remains a convenient source of labor for institutions traditionally viewed as long on work and short on staff. Still, real problems relating to recruitment, scheduling, training, and security exist when trying to match volunteer labor to archival needs. Successful integration of volunteers into the archive, meaning a rewarding and productive experience for both the volunteer and the host institution, is not a chance matter of circumstance or a fortuitous alignment of compatible personalities. Forethought and careful planning—to find the best available volunteers, to match aptitudes and interests to work at hand—and appropriate training are essential to achieve positive outcomes.” (p. 320).

Roberts (2019) noted that most of the library literature was indeed geared at public libraries. However, there was still much academic libraries could contribute. This was true of work with special collections. The author noted, “With budget cuts facing most academic institutions, many collections go unprocessed and unused without adequate professional staff to process or service them. One group of manuscripts that was of interest to the library had potential interest to a particular group of people in the community. Targeted individuals in the community were solicited to assist as volunteers in processing the collection. This was a successful and creative way to help in a time of financial straits.” (p. 207).

Legal Considerations

There are many legal areas to consider with academic library volunteers. These are actually people in your library which you will have obligations. The library will have all the responsibilities of a regular employer. This means that it is up to the library to review volunteers, to provide security and work safety, to follow employment laws, and to ensure that everyone is safe and happy.

The library will need to screen volunteers as if it were intending to hire them. Many companies offer low-cost employment screening. The library can run a criminal background check for free or low cost using many of the research tools it has on hand. It might be wise to work with your institutional human resources office to see what aid they can provide. Check social media posts. If a potential volunteer for example is making questionable posts online, it may be a good indication not accept them as a volunteer.

A criminal record should not disqualify someone from working as a volunteer. However, the library should know whether that person has a criminal history that could affect their work with the library or the people you are helping. Some may not legally be able to work a volunteer job due to local laws. If someone has been involved with financial crimes, they should not handle money. If they have a history of abusive behavior, they should not work with patrons one-on-one. This is especially important when placing volunteers in jobs around children. It

also applies to those working with persons who have suffered from domestic violence or those with an intellectual disability. Some jurisdictions have special requirements for volunteers and employees in these instances. You may need to inquire with your local government body or police to verify. Again, human resources on a campus may be the best place to consult.

If you are finding volunteers to work in skilled positions, you should also ensure that they have valid references and qualifications. It is important to verify the credentials and actually check the references. Can the person do the job they are volunteering for in this case? Mistakes can be very costly and no money is saved if a job is done incorrectly.

It is the responsibility of the library to keep records of when, how, and how often volunteers and employees show up. Many volunteers are requiring to fulfill a course or licensing requirement. In addition, this will help you comply with legal requirements. Some jurisdictions have limits on how many hours a volunteer should work per week. It can also help in recognition for rewards (for example, many libraries offer certificates of volunteer hours and donor recognition events). It also is helpful for ensuring the quality of your volunteers as you can discover who is not showing up or arriving late frequently. While people can do anything they want in their free time, you are still may to place limits on how they use that time as a volunteer in your library and tracking hours helps with that.

Insurance coverage may be an issue. Most institutions of higher education have insurance that covers volunteers in the library. This is many liability or property insurance. If something happens to a volunteer, is the library covered? For example, if a volunteer working on your property were to hurt themselves while normally performing their duties in a safe way, the library might be liable. If the volunteer harms someone while volunteering, is the institution protected? The personal property of volunteers may be damaged while used in volunteering too. Does your institutional coverage apply? The library may be liable if you are not careful.

There are laws in place requiring humane and safe working environments. These apply to library volunteers. This means that your workplace must be reasonably comfortable, employees and volunteers must be able to take breaks, and must have access to food and drinks. The library must also follow all relevant safety regulations and laws. All of this is probably already in place with current employees and patrons but volunteers may create new work situations that need to be assessed.

The library will need to create a volunteer handbook with rules. This will include laying out guidelines, the chain of command, expectations, university policies, and regulations. The library is responsible to communicate this information. Having this all written down and organized in a meaningful way can be extremely helpful towards ensuring that everything goes smoothly. The library should highlight, basic necessities, regulations, diversity expectations, and policies including statements of nondiscrimination, whistle-blower, human rights (disabled, women's, parents), etc.

Finding Volunteers

There are obvious sources for volunteers in an academic setting. Students may have an interest in library work and may donate time. They also may need to volunteer to fulfill course or organizational requirements for service. Retired faculty/staff may wish to use their ample free time to do something they believe is worthwhile. This may be true for alumni and community members as well. It could be that a specific collection (like Archives) or service (fundraising)

appeals to them and they want to volunteer. Many volunteers will find the library with little prompting. Some retirees are just bored and want something productive to do.

What makes volunteers want to volunteer? Studies show that you get a sort of 'social' high from helping. This is because the brain produces dopamine and serotonin in response to altruistic behavior as reported by Skuse and Gallagher (2009). Volunteering in a community activity makes people feel good. People may want to volunteer in the library because they want to learn, they want to improve their resume, they want to build work experience, and they want to do something good. Some people want to support the library because they believe in what the library does.

A study published in *US News and World Report* (Kurtzleben, 2013) produced the following volunteer numbers:

- Women volunteer more than men – 27% of women in the US volunteer, versus 21% of men.
- 35-44-year-olds have the highest volunteer numbers by age, with 29%. The second highest are 45-54-year-olds, with 28%.
- University aged individuals (20-24) are among the lowest volunteer rates with 18%. (This doesn't seem to hold true on college campuses based on other published studies.
- Teenagers aged 16-19) have a consistently high rate of volunteering with 26.5%.
- Married people are more likely to volunteer than single people.
- Parents with children under the age of 18 were more likely to volunteer than childless individuals.
- 38% of people who earned a bachelor's degree or higher have volunteered, 15% of people with only a high school degree volunteered, and among individuals who have not earned a high school degree, only 8% volunteered.
- Employed individuals are more likely to volunteer than unemployed. Part-time employees have the highest volunteer rates.
- The majority of volunteers commit to only one organization (72%), but 18% divide their efforts between two organizations.
- The types of organizations who have the most volunteer hours worked are: religious groups (33%), education and youth related groups (25%), and community or social groups (14%).
- Among volunteers with children, 45% of women and 37% of men chose to volunteer with education/youth charities.
- The most common volunteer activity is collecting and/or distributing funds and/or resources, followed by tutoring/teaching, strictly fundraising, and general labor.
- Among volunteer activities, men were more likely to perform manual labor tasks, and are more attracted to sports related activities such as coaching, fundraising for local teams, and gathering resources. Women were more likely to tutor/teach, collect resources, and do fundraising
- The percentage of volunteers who joined an organization because they were asked is equal to the volunteers who sought out the organization on their own (41% respectively).

Obviously, the percentages of each group volunteering for any academic library are going to vary based on local conditions. But as noted, there is a spectrum of volunteers who are available even if some demographics are more likely to volunteer than others.

Recruitment will be an ongoing part of your volunteer program. It is difficult to find people who will always be there. Many people volunteer for a few months at most and then move on

to something else. There are a variety of reasons for this. It could be volunteer fatigue. A student may have completed a desired volunteer period. The volunteer may find new opportunities. It may be that simply the volunteer does not have enough time. Or, the library may decide to end the relationship with the volunteer for performance issues. While you will have some volunteers who stick around for the long-term, the library will find that they mostly work with shorter-term volunteers. They receive training, work for a few months, and then are gone.

Your goal is to offer something in return for volunteering. It could be a good reference. It could be training. The more valuable the skills you require, the more you have to offer in return. It could be the volunteer just feels good for doing the work in the library. The number one recruitment strategy is to simply ask. If you know your audience, have something to offer or pitch the benefits of volunteering for the library makes it easy for people to assist the library.

There are a variety of ways to reach potential volunteers. Posting on social media is an easy way to get volunteers. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are excellent for letting people know that you welcome volunteers in the library. Use your existing volunteers or library employees to tag friends and family who might be interested and also to share the post on their own social media pages.

Although it may sound dated and archaic, creating flyers explaining what the library needs volunteers for, why you need them, and when can be beneficial. These can be distributed in classes, left on bulletin boards, and given out by many charity organizations in the area. The human resources department on campus may be willing to add this to a list of volunteer activities available to employees on campus as well.

Hosting a volunteer event can help you to meet prospective volunteer. Getting people to the event can be difficult if you don't have a large reach. However, other library events being held like speaker series, book readings, donor events, etc. can allow you to bring up volunteering to a receptive audience.

Word of mouth works well. A library may find this delivers more volunteers than any other method. Let your employees, faculty/staff and campus, and library friends spread the word. The library can ask them to ask around to see if anyone else would be interested, and then ask those people to do the same. Word of mouth is a powerful social motivator.

Organizations vary a great deal from area to area but you can likely easily find a website, organization, or council dedicated to volunteers. For example, many areas have a senior volunteer organization. Just find organizations that look for and recruit volunteers and get your library added to the list.

While the recruitment strategy will help you to reach people who might volunteer, it will be the pitch that convinces them. Be ready to sell the library volunteer program. It might be social media posting or a professor encouraging students but eventually you have to convince the person that they want to volunteer.

Volunteer Management

It is the responsibility of the library to provide adequate training so that the volunteers can safely and efficiently perform the job you are asking them to do. Even if you are bringing in skilled, paid labor such as a mechanic, you should take the time to train them to your computer

system, software, building, etc. While training is time consuming, it will improve the quality of the assistance you receive, especially from volunteers. It will also allow the volunteer to feel more like part of the broader library team.

If your library volunteer program is focused on a specialized aspect of the library (such as archives and special collections), training will eventually focus on that area. You should also provide training on the library culture, image, and goals so they may become good ambassadors for the library. Remember, the volunteers will be talking about the library, library staff, and the work being done to family, friends, on social media, and other areas. You want them to be informed. The library needs them to do a good job representing your brand.

The library must regularly communicate with volunteers. This includes training, role clarification, and directing people in a meaningful way. This is an essential skill for teams and for leaders. The library should be sharing ideas, discussing things in a logical way, and giving instructions. Volunteers should never have to wonder what is going on. Pay attention to the volunteers. Listen when they have problems. Take the time to try to listen to advice and suggestions. This will enable you to make better decisions for the library and to show yourself as a better leader. Listening ensures you can understand the situation, who or what is responsible, and sometimes what you can do about it.

It is important that the library gets to know the members of the volunteer team. Most teams are made up of a diverse range of people with different backgrounds and histories. It is important to take the time to get to know all of the individuals involved. Some people are aggressive go-getters and self-motivated. Others lack motivation and need a great deal of direction. Be sure to understand the psychological and skill capabilities of your volunteers will enable you to make better decisions when assigning responsibilities, when creating leadership roles, and when assigning volunteers or staff to work together. It is OK to even have an informal social event to allow everyone to know each other better. Knowing each other builds trust, which eventually results in working better together as a library volunteer team.

Make sure to put people into the volunteer work environment they enjoy and fit best. People are good at different things. Some people enjoy working alone. Others like to work with teams. Learn how the volunteer team members work best and try to facilitate it wherever possible. This is especially important for volunteer roles. In most cases, you can try switching up unpleasant tasks, ensuring that the library is as comfortable as possible, and pairing employees up so that no one is alone.

Volunteers and employees in libraries often put a lot into helping. The library should take the time to thank everyone who pitches in. Taking a few minutes to thank people for their help while they are working. Hold formal recognition at events or to hold small events to thank volunteers can go a long way towards producing the goodwill that keeps volunteers onboard and at the library. Showing appreciation and recognition of a job well done reinforces the library as a good environment while making volunteers feel better about their time spent working.

Fundraising and Volunteers

As a result of the decline in public support and increasing costs, many institutions of higher education are seeking increased private funding. Turning to private money to supplement other sources of income is a reasonable strategy for higher education as state governments cannot be

relied upon to fund at the same levels they did in the past. Evidence indicates that there is private funding to be found. According to Summers (2006), "By several measures, well over \$100-trillion will exchange hands in the next decades as baby-boomer wealth passes to the next generation" (p. 22). Thus, institutions of higher education in the United States of America are seeking supplementary new sources of revenue from private donors just as one of the largest transfer of wealth is about to occur between generations (Lorenzen, 2009).

Raising funds for a library is closely tied to marketing a library. Donors are unlikely to give to a library if they are unaware of it or if they do not think highly of it. Past experience strongly suggests that it is not enough for potential donors to simply "like" libraries. A general knowledge and appreciation of libraries often does not make libraries a high priority for donors. How can donors be made aware that a library is a worthwhile beneficiary of a gift? One way is by encouraging them to volunteer to help the library.

This is not a new idea for academic libraries. Academic libraries have long used volunteer boards as a form of donor cultivation that will get prospective or current donors to start or continue giving. Every participant in a 2009 study mentioned volunteer boards in some capacity during the interviews either relating to identifying donors or in cultivating donors. Lorenzen (2009) wrote, "Library boards of all kinds (friends, advisory, foundation, etc.) can be used to find new donors and keep current donors actively engaged with the library. As a study participant said, 'Our strongest continual large donors are those that have been here and understand us and many of them have become board members.' This appears to be a very successful practice in soliciting donations." (p. 102).

Academic libraries have run into a major problem regarding fund raising. Quite simply, they have no built-in constituency. "No one graduated from the library; there is a perception that it is difficult to raise funds for a library" (Martin, 1998, p. 3). To help resolve this problem, Martin (2000) argued that libraries must be part of larger campus-wide development efforts. However, one problematic result of simply relying on a broader campus-wide effort is that libraries often are given lists of donors from central development offices on a campus of donors who have proven in the past to be unresponsive to fund raising appeals and unlikely to contribute (Ruggerio & Zimmerman, 2004). Such lists are not effective starting points for a library campaign. There is an easy solution to this problem. If a library can get potential donors involved in library volunteering, they become part of the libraries pool of potential donors.

As such, it is very important for academic libraries to treat volunteers as either near term or long-term potential donors. The experience the volunteers have in the library may result in cash or other tangible gifts in the future. It gives the library an opportunity a way to appeal to donors the library might not otherwise be able to reach.

Conclusions

Although not as common as in public libraries, academic libraries do sometimes make utilization of volunteers to help. Many academic libraries use volunteers for special projects, programming such as events, and some day to day operations. Volunteers means dealing with people and it comes with multiple obligations to the library including legal and ethical implications and impacts. This paper looked at the literature that deals with libraries and how they interact with volunteers including literature specific or directly applicable to academic libraries. It looked at legal implications relating to volunteer working conditions, screening, and equal opportunity. It reviewed reasons people volunteer, recruitment, and how to use that

in any academic library volunteer program. It also examined training and daily management of these volunteers and how to connect volunteer service to library development efforts in fundraising.

Having a successful academic library volunteer program will require a lot of work. It can be done and has been done successfully by many institutions. If a library commits to doing this well, the rewards make it worthwhile.

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