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# Handle with Care: Benefits and Drawbacks of Volunteers in the Library

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## New and Noteworthy

### Handle with Care: Benefits and Drawbacks of Volunteers in the Library

Jennifer Bartlett

One of the many challenges of managing an academic, public, school, or special library is making the most of limited personnel budgets. One tempting answer to this perennial problem is the library volunteer. What better solution to shrinking funding than enthusiastic, committed (not to mention free) members of the community who appreciate and support your organization and its mission? Of course, things are never quite that simple. While volunteers can indeed be a valuable supplement to professional library staff in many situations, managers should be aware of potential issues both within and outside their libraries.

Alan Jacobson, volunteer coordinator and librarian at Oak Park (Ill.) Public Library, paints an overwhelmingly positive image of the volunteer in his introductory 2010 *American Libraries* article, "Those Who Can, Do: Those Who Can Do More, Volunteer."<sup>1</sup> Jacobson offers general practical tips on managing the valuable asset volunteers can represent to cash-strapped libraries, including screening, orientation, and training. He also includes several examples of successful best practices in his own library. Although Jacobson does mention that volunteers cannot replace permanent staff, "they merely add to what we are able to **do**" (41), he does not address the possible perception from those outside the library environment that volunteers are viable replacements for librarians and staff.<sup>2</sup> His perception of the volunteer experience on both sides is positive, and ranges from the practical to the philosophical. Not only do volunteers deliver materials to the homebound, work at events, give programs, run reports, and so forth; volunteerism is "all about selflessness, but in a quiet, subtle, beautiful way where by serving each other, we serve something greater than ourselves: the community" (41).<sup>3</sup>

Serving the community is the focus of an interesting 2008 article from Erica A. Nicol and Corey M. Johnson of Washington State University Libraries – Pullman.<sup>4</sup> "Volunteers in Libraries: Program Structure, Evaluation, and Theoretical Analysis" offers a brief history of library volunteerism, from assistance to western homesteaders before 1930 to the establishment of formalized library volunteer programs in the 1970s and 1980s. Since then, the rapid development of computer and Internet technologies has increased the opportunities for volunteers to make valuable contributions. The authors also balance the benefits of volunteer utilization against the problems it can present; however, they posit that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. An important service that volunteers enable is a "consultation model of communication." Volunteers can help facilitate a more in-depth level of reference service from librarians by freeing them to spend more time and concentration with each patron: "Commitment to the consultation model is needed because it takes time and resources to

building long-term relationships with clients. Volunteers open time for professionals to do consultation and they could certainly be trained to provide the listening ear patrons desire” (161).

How do we tap into all this volunteer talent? For a thorough, comprehensive how-to-do-it manual on volunteer management, Preston Driggers’ and Eileen Dumas’ *Managing Library Volunteers* is hard to beat.<sup>5</sup> Published in 2011, this second edition of the popular 2002 book frames volunteer management as a “program cycle,” from recruitment to orientation to recognition, with every step in between. The authors, both with extensive experience in this area, clearly articulate the time and commitment necessary to run a successful volunteer program. The book features discussions on legal issues and risk management, job design and descriptions, interviewing and selection, training and testing, recognition policies, corrective action, exit interviews and more. A variety of sample documents illustrate the chapters, and include policy statements, position descriptions, application forms, sign-in sheets, planning checklists, and separation forms. Throughout, the success of a program both inside and outside the library rests with the manager: “In the day-to-day operation of the library, the role of the volunteer services manager is to find ways that volunteers can enhance library services. When the role of volunteer services manager is externally focused, the position becomes an integral part of library community relations” (p. xviii). With its emphasis on the needs of the library patron and volunteer, *Managing Library Volunteers* is an excellent addition to other primers on library volunteerism.<sup>6</sup>

Given the prevalence of positive books and articles about library volunteerism, Herb White’s 1993 opinion piece in *Library Journal* provides some needed balance and should be required reading for every manager interested in this topic.<sup>7</sup> Volunteerism, in White’s view, is a double-edged sword: “While the role of volunteers is crucial and deserves respect, it also requires a clear understanding of what volunteers do and, just as importantly, what they cannot do” (66). Citing the example of a California school library that staffed all its 17 elementary school libraries in 1992 with parent volunteers and no paid librarians, White argues that those citizens who support such arrangements, while well-meaning, are completely unaware of what defines a library.<sup>8</sup> Real libraries, in White’s view, are much more than a room with books and a checkout desk. Further, part of the responsibility for such decisions lies with us, library leaders: “Under constant financial pressures that force choices, the services of professional librarians who are unwilling to define and defend themselves will get worse and worse and may ultimately disappear, to be replaced by the services of book guardians and book menders” (67).

Although volunteers are most prevalent in public and school libraries,<sup>9</sup> academic and some special libraries (for example, hospital libraries) may be able to benefit from them as well. College and university libraries, with their ready workforce of work-study and minimum wage students, are not generally first on the list for volunteer opportunities. However, high school students may be recruited to work in community college libraries to fulfill school or court-mandated community service requirements. Kay Shelton offers tips for starting such a volunteer program in a 2008 *Community & Junior College Libraries* article.<sup>10</sup> Also, Margaret Forrest at the University of Edinburgh explores the opportunities afforded by university student help in her 2012 editorial, “Student Volunteers in Academic Libraries.”<sup>11</sup> As with public libraries, according to Forrest, it is important to differentiate between paid staff and volunteers. She quotes a 2010 policy from the National Library of Australia’s volunteer policy:

“Volunteers are only engaged in tasks that, without their assistance, would not be undertaken or would not be completed for a considerable period of time” (1). Lastly, special collections and archives are another area in which volunteer labor can be useful. Northwestern University Archivist Kevin B. Leonard outlines basic considerations surrounding unpaid labor, whether it be apprenticeships, internships, or volunteer opportunities, in a 2012 article in the *Journal of Library Administration*.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to books and articles about volunteerism, the Web abounds with useful material. Especially relevant to library and information center managers is the “Volunteers” wiki from the American Library Association.<sup>13</sup> This resource includes overviews and key selected readings, both print and online, as well as sample programs and a short list of libraries staffed completely by volunteers. Of particular interest is the ALA’s “Guidelines for Using Volunteers in Libraries,” originally approved in 1971 but still cited frequently today.

To use volunteers, or not? Overall, the literature suggests that such endeavors can be worthwhile, and ultimately beneficial to library institutions and their communities. However, as with so many other management issues in libraries, care needs to be taken that volunteer programs are handled with thoughtfulness, professionalism, and care.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobson, A. Those Who Can, Do. Those Who Can Do More, Volunteer. *American Libraries* 41:5 (2010): 39-41.

<sup>2</sup> Responding to Jacobson’s article in a subsequent issue of *American Libraries* (“Volunteer Article Hurts,” *American Libraries*, 41.9, 2010), reader Brenda Knutson observes, “Because of articles like these, the city council has decided to let people like me go and use the money that pays our salaries to research starting a volunteer program to replace employees... Volunteers can be used in addition to the employees already working, but should never be used to replace them. There is still plenty to do at any library for volunteers” (p. 7).

<sup>3</sup> Serving the community can also mean librarians volunteering in local organizations themselves. Writing in the March 1, 2012 issue of *Arkansas Libraries*, Director of the Mid-Arkansas Regional Library/Malvern-Hot Spring County Library Ashley Parker suggests that librarians can foster positive community partnerships through volunteering at local food pantries, chambers of commerce, schools and other groups (“Community Activism... Yes, You Should,” *Arkansas Libraries* 69.1, p. 6). Melinda Matthews offers a similar perspective from the academic

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library side in her article "Academic Librarians and Volunteerism: Applying Valuable Talents to Community Service" (*Codex* 1.3 (2011), p. 37-56).

<sup>4</sup> Nicol, Erica A. and Corey M. Johnson. Volunteers in Libraries: Program Structure, Evaluation, and Theoretical Analysis. *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 48.2 (2008): 154-163.

<sup>5</sup> Driggers, Preston and Eileen Dumas. *Managing Library Volunteers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Other valuable library volunteer management manuals include Todaro, Julie Beth and Mark Smith, *Training Library Staff and Volunteers to Provide Extraordinary Customer Services*, London: Facet (2006); Gillespie, Kellie M. *Teen Volunteer Services in Libraries*, Lanham, Md.: VOYA Books (2004); Karp, Rashelle S., *Volunteers in Libraries*, Chicago: American Library Association (1993); and Reed, Sally Gardner, *Library Volunteers -- Worth the Effort!: A Program Manager's Guide*, Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co. (1994).

<sup>7</sup> White, H.S. The Double-Edged Sword of Library Volunteerism. *Library Journal* 118.7 (April 15, 1993): 66-67.

<sup>8</sup> White would receive an argument from author Linda S. Fox, whose 1999 book *The Volunteer Library: A Handbook* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company) offers guidelines for concerned, non-MLS-holding citizens interested in starting their own community library. Writes Fox, "I strongly believe (because I have seen) that if a dedicated and cooperative group of people is given basic explanations, guidelines, lists, samples and directions to further information (along with pep talks), it can succeed in creating a real library" (2).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Gayle Bogel's "The Art of Managing Volunteers in the School Library" (*School Library Monthly* 29:4 (2013): 26-28), which offers a good introduction to recruiting and managing library volunteers among parents, students, and especially community groups.

<sup>10</sup> Shelton, Kay. Starting a Volunteer Program in a Community College Library. *Community & Junior College Libraries* 14.3 (2008): 161-177.

<sup>11</sup> Forrest, Margaret. Student Volunteers in Academic Libraries. *New Review of Academic Librarianship* (2012, April): 1-6.

<sup>12</sup> Leonard, Kevin B. Volunteers in Archives: Free Labor, But Not Without Cost. *Journal of Library Administration* 52:3/4 (2012): 313-320.

<sup>13</sup> "Volunteers," American Library Association, accessed April 19, 2013, <http://wikis.ala.org/professionaltips/index.php?title=Volunteers>.