



Community Radio Show

“The Challenges & Opportunities of College Students as Volunteers at Community Agencies”

Community Radio Show Text

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TODD: Welcome to “The Challenges & Opportunities of College Students as Volunteers at Community Agencies.” For the first half of our show or so, Joy Usner, a student activities specialist at the University of Chicago will share with us her insights into how community agencies can best engage college students in service. Since 2000, she has worked with college students to connect them to meaningful volunteer experiences. Joy is also an alumnus of the Public Allies Cincinnati program.

First, though, to eliminate background noise, use your 'mute' or 'mic' button so that you can continue to hear today's speaker. If these are not working, you can also press *6 on your phone during the call to mute your phone. You press *6 again to un-mute your phone.

Joy, welcome to the show.

TODD: How do you know you've created a good experience for a college student?

JOY: It depends on how passionate they are. They often have ideas of what they already want to do—and they often learn more from the process of knowing how to implement the experience and not necessarily the doing of it.

TODD: So, it's important to understand that the reason college students are doing service is often about learning and not about a community outcome?

JOY: It's for exploring an academic interest that students have. I'll get a student saying I want to volunteer at an after school program to work with kids because my parents wanted me in business, but I want to explore other interests, too. So, yes, it is about what the college student gets out of the process and the community impact.

TODD: Can you talk about how college students doing service in this mentality is different from someone waking up one day and saying I want to do service that will look good on my resume or will make me feel good?

JOY: The students like that are usually the students who will do the one-time day of service activities. There are others who find the experience valuable and life changing and will end up committing over time to work with a mentoring program or a soup kitchen. Students do move across these groups, but people



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looking for volunteers should know that the motivation of a student will affect the level of passion and commitment. We find in our office that if there are four staff members trying to place 200 students in service that we can't always ensure if a person is just doing it for a requirement or he or she is actually engaged in the service.

TODD: What most of the students have in common, though, is that they are not from the communities in which they are volunteering. Some of them are, we know, but let's assume this as a constant just for now. With this mind, whether or not the student is dedicated or a one-time person, which we know can also include dedicated people, what is the main concern that you see from community groups due to the fact that the students are outsiders?

JOY: Community groups are accurately perceiving that there is a new generation of students who want to be doing community service and are very active about getting involved. The piece that the students are missing is that agencies are saying "That's nice, but what do you really know about this place? How does your semi-permanence affect your service? Are your intentions good or have you students just labeled this area as in need and think you have something to offer because you're from a privileged background?"

TODD: How do you manage to engage a student then who is so excited but you know is trying to go into someone else's community with an "I'm going to fix this place" mentality?

JOY: First, you have to understand that the student is in a new place and is in a generation that has been told how important service is. The student may also have come from a homogenous background and doesn't understand that different places are not necessarily to be fixed. It is important to help the student learn more about the positive qualities of the neighborhood and then connect the student's passion to getting to know the neighborhood and residents—and whether or not that neighborhood actually wants that student's help. It's about helping the student realize that neighborhoods known and poor and broken have all the positive qualities within it—it's just that the neighborhoods haven't been told this—in fact, those places have been told they are broken for a long time.

TODD: What are some of the challenges in doing this?

JOY: Students are trying to figure out how to their own laundry and their future careers and how they are involved in the communities. We also don't know how they are applying the information or experiences, but we have to believe that they are having great conversations and they are trying to manage their learning experience. If they are in class and they hear about community policy, they are able to bring lessons learned into the classroom.

TODD: We've been talking about the volunteer pool, in a way, for community groups. What cooperative roles does an office like yours have with the community groups? I know I asked you to think about this a little earlier—so could you share your thoughts as a tool or a list of actions for our listeners?

JOY: The first step is if it's the community agency starting the initiative, there are specific people to talk to so as to have the best experience. Someone like me, likewise, needs to know that this is about establishing a relationship with a specific person at an agency and not just treating a community group as number 457. Let's assume, though, that it is the community agency looking for volunteers. Colleges and



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university work in their own unique ways. One way is that there is a specific liaison person or office that is dedicated to it. These people take community agency requests and keep a database for students to search. This office is usually the community involvement or service office. Other times professors might be the right person to outreach to because course topics align well. For example, a computer science class might be developing websites and a community agency may need a website. Another example is an agency approaching an accounting class to help participants during tax season. A third way is trying to rally around a specific service day that students already plan to attend. Each, of course, have their own challenges.

The second step I would offer is that our offices, for example, and the community agency should talk about who these students are and that their desire to help is good but that they most likely will benefit from some refining about how to engage in successful activity. One thing we talk about is the concept of a ladder with multiple rungs. Traditionally, a college student would come in and be at the top of the ladder and be happy because he or she would be distributing food or services to clients, who in our model happen to be at the bottom of the ladder. We believe that more sustainable service, in simple terms, would be if the college students are actually helping those who are clients eventually be the ones at the top of the ladder so that the project can become self sustaining.

Third, we encourage the community group to develop volunteer profiles that do two things. One, to follow the idea of the power ladder so that college students are not just doing service at or to people. Two, to base the job description of the profile on the gifts and talents of the college student—instead of trying to squeeze the college student into a predetermined list of requirements. We find that agencies are pleasantly surprised by unexpected gifts and that the college students are more engaged because they are utilizing their passions every day.

Fourth, critical reflection has to be a major part of community service. Someone needs to create a managed space in which this occurs. This is important always, but especially for college students because they are, right or wrong, at some level doing the service to learn more about themselves. Engaging this fact leads to more engaged volunteers. An example of how to do critical reflection is to have each person split a piece of paper into quadrants. Each person then labels the quadrants as follows: Things to start, things to stop, things to do more of, and things to do less of. Each person completes each quadrant while thinking about the experiences garnered from the volunteer service.

TODD: This sounds like it would create a great experience for any volunteer. What happens, though, when college students do not successfully navigate scheduling or other expectations of a community agency?

JOY: Oh, I see that all the time. This concern especially happens around finals time. A fifth step then really should be creating a very measurable set of successes for the college student that includes dates and times. Again, this gets around the rightness or wrongness of the fact that a college student's priority is being in college—and it creates an agreement that takes into account that the student will not be around during finals week, for example. What this also does is really prep the student for everything from general professionalism in his or her future career to something as specific as individual performance management processes. Even if the student doesn't know he or she is learning this.

TODD: Joy, tell us about a time when there was a successful experience with a college student and a community agency?



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JOY: [STORY]

TODD: Thank you, Joy. We're going to go to audience questions now. Because we have limited time, please focus on asking Joy questions about today's topic rather than sharing best practice and stories. Remember, if you have a question for Joy state your name, organization, and location.

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This text serves as a summarized reference for the Community Radio Show.

It does not serve as an official transcript of the recording.