



Retaining Student Volunteers

Quick Tips for Student Volunteer Retention

The best way to increase your student volunteer base is to retain your current volunteer leaders. Retention is a matter of making students feel good about themselves and their service. Keeping students engaged will take work throughout the entire project, and will result in more interested active volunteers, more likely to volunteer again in the future.

- **Recruiting and marketing:** From the beginning, your message to students should be inspirational and eye-catching; they'll remember how they originally got involved.
- **Before the work starts:** Ensure that everyone is excited and prepped for the experience they're about to have. Engage your volunteers in the planning process.
- **During the experience:** Keep volunteers motivated and active. An idle volunteer is one that is unengaged and less likely to want to participate in future projects
- **After they've completed a volunteer project or role:** Remind volunteers of the impact they've made and how appreciative you are of the work they have done. Thank them, recognize them, reward them for a job well done, thank them again.
- **Leading into future projects:** Reference the specific successes and accomplishments of previous tasks, projects, and assignments to keep morale boosted and keep the students invested and engaged.

Creative Ideas/Activities to Keep the Momentum Rolling:

- Get back in touch with interested volunteers within 24 hours of your initial contact to thank them for their interest and give them a heads up about important dates, but also to give them some fun, interesting details – such as some of the previous volunteer activities (both social and service), the overall goals of the organization, etc
- Don't give up on no-shows or drop-outs! Students are busy, so continue to keep them in the loop for future opportunities and ongoing developments with volunteers.
- Invite volunteers to planning and general meetings to let them know their input – and not just their labor – is important.
- Organize plenty of social, no-pressure gatherings for your volunteers. Include staff or other types of volunteers at your organization as well. This helps with team-building and helps create buy-in to your organization by the volunteers, furthering ensuring they will have too much fun to be one-timers. Picnics, surprise breakfasts, movie-nights, and silly talent shows are some ideas.
- Keep the work meaningful and impactful but not overly serious. Make real or imagined space for music, friendly chatter, snacks, outings, etc. This offers a bit of a release of the pressure of the work, and will keep the volunteers from feeling burn-out. Assign different volunteers to be in charge of snacks or the music collections on a rotating basis, for example.

- After work or major milestones have been accomplished, intentionally create a space for the volunteers to celebrate what they've accomplished and share thoughts and feelings about the work. Have a picture-sharing event or a luncheon to discuss the work accomplished, and the work yet to be completed.
- Allow volunteers to be part of the recruitment process. Let them brainstorm great ways to get others involved. Encourage creativity.

Recognition

Recognition is a key component of volunteer retention. If volunteers feel appreciated for their efforts, they are more likely to want to volunteer again. Understand your volunteers so you know how best to keep them motivated and engaged.

Individual volunteers have a variety of reasons for volunteering and thus are motivated in a variety of ways. It's important to be aware of what has motivated volunteers to serve so that you can best identify how to appropriately thank and recognize them for the work they've contributed. The following is just a sampling of reasons a student may get involved:

- To improve a resume
- To gain class credit or fill a class assignment
- To learn about a specific issue
- To learn about a specific organization or type of organization
- To gain job skills
- To gain people skills
- Because they are obligated to by:
 - court
 - school
 - religious
 - family obligation
- To be more socially active
- To get learn about their potentially new community
- To make new friends
- To spend time with existing friends already volunteering there
- Out of habit
- Out of a sense of social obligation
- Because they a passionate about a certain issue or topic
- Because they are passionate about service
- Because they are curious about volunteering in general
- To consider career options
- To have fun
- To gain leadership skills
- To feel a sense of belonging or purpose
- To begin to discover what sort of legacy they'd like to leave.
- To impress potential employers
- To meet future colleagues

You can use this list or add to it and allow your volunteers to individually rate these possible reasons for why they volunteer depending on how big of a motivator these factors may have been. This will serve as a scale for how you will begin to recognize your volunteers.

Reflection

Helping volunteers to see the connection between their service and a community issue is called **reflection**. Reflection is probably the most important part of service and volunteerism. The better able you are to connect the volunteer with the overall impact and broader meaning to the work your organization and they are doing, the more likely they are to feel a connection and make a commitment. Through effective use of reflection, you can greatly increase your volunteer retention rate.

How to get them talking:

Here are some sample questions for reflection discussion, which can and should occur at any time during the volunteer experience:

- What did you learn today – about the issue, your fellow volunteers, the service recipients or yourself?
- How do you feel about the project? Was it worthwhile? Was it time well spent?
- What would you change about the task or project you spent time on?
- Do you plan to take further action related to this issue? In what way?
- What other ideas or opinions can you offer this program or project?

Creative Pre-reflection Ideas:

Reflection isn't limited to group discussion, be creative in how you can facilitate this among your volunteers and be sure you're offering the chance to draw deeper meanings in way that is interesting and motivating for them:

- Prior to the volunteer project, have them conduct a community assessment or community map so that they have a broad picture of the community in which they will be working before they become involved.
- Let the volunteers participate in or conduct the external contacting (a.k.a. create relationships with other organizations or businesses in the area, attend appropriate meetings, and so forth - allowing them to research and identify themselves as volunteers with your organization).
- After you've described the volunteer role and what your expectations are, allow the volunteer to describe verbally or in writing what their expectations are, what their knowledge is on the subject, skill set they will be using, issue they will be working with before they get started.

Creative Ideas for in-service Reflection:

- Sounding Board: create a blog, or post an actual board in the work area where volunteers can jot down thoughts, experiences, things they've noticed or are considering as they work.
- Post service-quotes around the area the volunteers will be working or read one out loud daily or weekly. Here's a sample list:
 - "Without community service, we would not have a strong quality of life. It's important to the person who serves as well as the recipient. It's the way in which we ourselves grow and develop . . ." ~ *Dr. Dorothy I. Height, president and CEO of the National Council of Negro Women*
 - "No joy can equal the joy of serving others." ~ *Sai Baba*

- "When you give to others, you speak a silent but audible thank you. Appreciation for others and ourselves is life and spirit for each and every one of us." ~ *Submitted and written by Kara "Cherry" Whitaker, 14 years old, Ohio*
 - "You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give." ~ *Winston Churchill*
 - "A different world cannot be built by indifferent people." ~ *Horace Mann*
 - "Unless you choose to do great things, it makes no difference how much you are rewarded or how much power you have." ~ *Oprah Winfrey*
 - "If you don't like the way the world is, you change it. You have an obligation to change it. You just do it one step at a time." ~ *Marian Wright Edelman*
 - "We can only serve that which we are profoundly connected to." ~ *Sam Daly-Harris*
 - "Those of us who attempt to do things for others or for the world without deepening our own sense of self-understanding, freedom, integrity, and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others." ~ *Robert Greenleaf*
 - "We don't see things as they are; we see things as we are." ~ *Cicero*
- Host a mid-service movie night or book discussion that relates to the issue the students are working with.
 - Have another, more tenured volunteer, another staff member, or someone who has been the recipient of service meet with the volunteer to discuss how things are going, allow the volunteer to ask questions, describe experiences, etc.

Creative Ideas for Post-service Reflection:

- **Poetry:** Have volunteers write a sentence about the project. Gather these sentences. Then after a few months/weeks, compile the sentence into a poem or story.
- **Reflection in Art:** Have volunteers create a drawing, poem, dance, skit, or song about their service experience. They can illustrate what they did, what they learned, and/or what they want to do next about this community issue.
- **Service Poems:** Ask volunteers to write poems about their service experience. They can reflect on what they learned and how they will use what they learned in the future.