Having a student volunteer program is a win-win

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Abstract:

Purpose – This paper aims to focus on the use of a formal student volunteer program to offset budgetary shortfalls as well as provide opportunities for student learning.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper builds the case by citing findings from case studies in the field.

Findings – This paper concludes that a formal strategic program along with identified learning outcomes for the student volunteers will be of benefit to both parties.

Originality/value – The paper is the foundation for the development of the author's own formal program

Keywords: Students | Volunteer | Learning | Experiential

Article:

The impetus for this article is related to the continued decline in financial support for institutions of higher education, as well as complications or changes brought about by the sequestration of government funds in the current economic climate. In many libraries, funding for material needs have already been reduced or limited, so finding ways to further reduce spending has to take creative and different approaches. Most academic libraries and many public libraries utilize student volunteers to supplement a paid workforce and this article will cite some great recent examples that have been shared. Having a formal program, with structure is the key element offered in any workplace, and can not only provide a boast for addressing manpower needs but

can also offer students solid, tangible credentials that can equate into experience and a broader perspective for their future needs.

Traditional student relationships for working in libraries include internships, class related projects, practicums (working for course credit) and of course volunteering for various reasons. Some of those reasons are not related to an interest or desire to be in a library environment, but can be for situations such as court order community service, social or service organizations project or credits for efforts made or fulfilling a debt, such as paying off library fines with service. Those students possess skills and knowledge that can be useful for certain work activities. The great value here for the student is the opportunity to participate in experiential learning or learning through work actions and on the job training.

The current literature regarding use of student volunteers has three very good examples of establishing a productive program that is formal, goal oriented and serves the needs of the library. Schobernd et al. (2009) write of their experiences with using student volunteers, driven by an earlier financial crisis, in which student leaders on campus helped facilitate a collaborative working solution to supplement staffing the library with student volunteers. Their program called "Closing the Gap", allowed the library to stay open and functioning longer than the proposed cutback of hours and services as required by budget cuts.

Student volunteers were coordinated and vetted by the organization created to run the program, driven by a variety of student organizations and established a program coordinator that provided guidance and consistency in the recruiting and workflow efforts. The win-win; the library was able to reach beyond budget limitations and students gained a deeper appreciation for the library and the infrastructure needed to support the academic needs for the campus.

Another good example comes from India and Madhuri Tikam who studied and wrote about the positive outcomes associated with having a student volunteer program at the library. In Tikam's (2011) article he outlines the basic components for a Model Volunteer Program in which determining desired outcomes are part of the strategic planning process. This includes identifying the library's needs such as special projects, event or exhibit support or use of other skills related to marketing or promotional efforts. This process also encourages buy-in from library staff that must support the program by investing their time an effort in the training and mentoring parts.

Students are also vetted in the process to match those willing to spend their time unpaid with the gains made from learning in a real work environment and a chance to demonstrate skills that will be useful after graduation. The win-win in this case is somewhat more complex; the library's use of volunteers is expanded into other areas of use, with a wider scope of support by library staff, and students are utilized in more creative ways to gain a deeper experience for their time. Tikam's (2011) model emphasizes a strategic approach to making this work effectively.

Margaret Forrest (2012) refers to both of these cases in her article, "Student volunteers in academic libraries", in which she expands upon the traditional concepts of library volunteers to include examples of broader uses for volunteers within the academic environment. She cites many examples, mostly in the UK, in which traditional uses of volunteers are expanded to accommodate both a more detailed need by the institution, but also a more meaningful match for the volunteer's skills set. Forrest (2012) also addresses the financial gains made by investing in a proper, formal program by encouraging the use of analytics in showing those gains. In other words if you track the investment that library staff make in training, mentoring and supporting volunteers compared to the gains of having volunteers over paid staff, a data set can be produced to further tweak the program to ensure and measure that gains are met.

In the USA there is a current trend to request background checks on volunteers as part of the vetting process. This additional financial expense must be part of the equation, but should not be discouraged. Instead it should be part of the strategic planning process in determining what to invest in order to make overall gains financially. What will be hard to include with monetary value will be the experience gained by the volunteer and how it will impact their future experiences.

Contributing to experiential learning

Within the volunteer environment there are other forces to consider. In some cases, especially in academic libraries, volunteers may be working side by side with paid staff or student workers, students who are receiving course credit or time-limited, project oriented situations. Strategically the focus, or win, for volunteers here needs to be about the learning experience and the skills that can be gained for future use. Sometimes these are called internships or apprenticeships but the idea is that the volunteer is learning employable skills within the profession for future utilization.

Several studies have been conducted that point to experiential learning opportunities as critical to career success. These earlier studies by Argyris and Schon, Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness, and Dewey's Experience and Education, confirm and support the notion that applying practical experience or application of skills to a learning environment reinforces the theoretical learning that takes place in the classroom. And Kolb in his Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development, states that the learner must be willing to be actively involved in the experience, be able to reflect on the experience, and possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience. These traits support the motivation of a volunteer and a student volunteer has even greater motivation by considering future employment opportunities.

A good example related to these interests is from Marian Hoy (2011) and her study of using students to work with collections specifically. In her article "Building pathways to working with collections: can internships and student work experience help?", she researches three forms of practical work experience and the impact on learning. Her research explored the investment that the libraries or employers had to make in order to utilize students in this way. She concludes that creating the opportunities for students to work or volunteer, in meaningful and useful field activity and builds stronger learning and stronger relationships between students and potential employers.

Conclusion

Having a volunteer program in your library can be considered risky and potentially costly to maintain but it also can be a win-win. If the library creates a program with a strategic purpose, identifying goals and objectives, as well as investments needed, such as staff time, administrative costs; like background checks and work spaces and equipment, then a financial gain can be made that will offset budgetary shortfalls. Part of the strategic planning should include those financial goals in order to demonstrate ROI and as well as a list of intangible gains. This is definitely a win!

Volunteers win as well in many ways but most effectively by gaining valuable experience and contributing to library as community or cultural institution. Student volunteers also have the opportunity to reinforce their theoretical learning with practical application of the skills needed to perform real work. This can also be identified and measured through learning outcomes and longer range assessments.

The better organized and scripted in which a formal program is developed and the better quality of work provided to students in the volunteering effort the greater the wins on both sides. And do not forget to celebrate the accomplishments of both a fiscally efficient organization and a highly motivated and educated student support group.

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